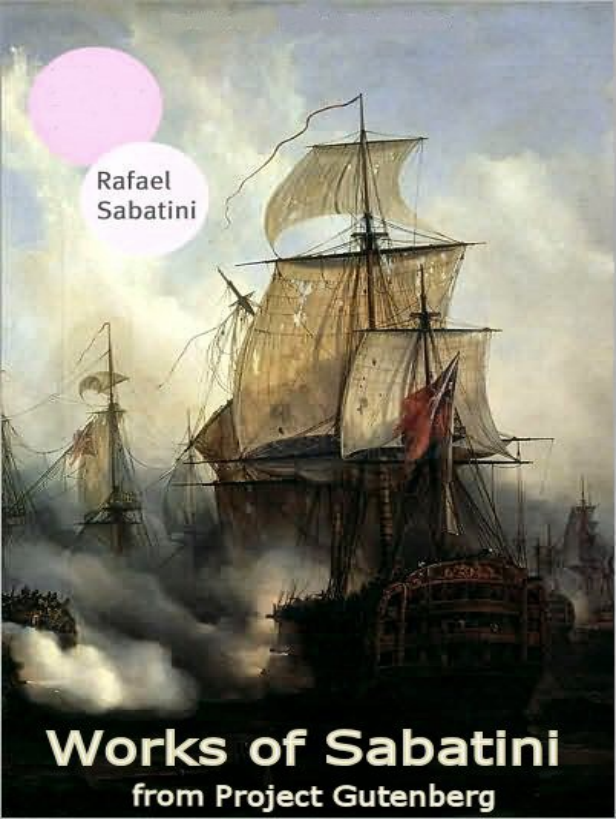




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RAFAEL SABATINI

AN INDEX

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CONTENTS

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[Historical Night's Entertainment-1](#)

[Historical](#)

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Entertainment-2

St. Martin's
Summer

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Yvonne**

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MISTRESS WILDING

By Rafael Sabatini

Contents

<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	POT-VALIANCE
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	SIR ROWLAND TO THE RESCUE
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	DIANA SCHEMES
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	TERMS OF SURRENDER
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	THE ENCOUNTER
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	THE CHAMPION
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	THE NUPTIALS OF RUTH WESTMACOTT
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	BRIDE AND GROOM
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	MR. TRENCHARD'S COUNTERSTROKE
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	THEIR OWN PETARD
<u>CHAPTER XI.</u>	THE MARPLOT
<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	AT THE FORD
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	"PRO RELIGIONE ET LIBERTATE"
<u>CHAPTER XIV.</u>	HIS GRACE' IN COUNSEL
<u>CHAPTER XV.</u>	LYME OF THE KING

<u>CHAPTER XVI.</u>	PLOTS AND PLOTTERS
<u>CHAPTER XVII.</u>	MR. WILDING'S RETURN
<u>CHAPTER XVIII.</u>	BETRAYAL
<u>CHAPTER XIX.</u>	THE BANQUET
<u>CHAPTER XX.</u>	THE RECKONING
<u>CHAPTER XXI.</u>	THE SENTENCE
<u>CHAPTER XXII.</u>	THE EXECUTION
<u>CHAPTER XXIII.</u>	MR. WILDING'S BOOTS
<u>CHAPTER XXIV.</u>	JUSTICE

CHAPTER I. POT-VALIANCE

Then drink it thus, cried the rash young fool, and splashed the contents of his cup full into the face of Mr. Wilding even as that gentleman, on his feet, was proposing to drink to the eyes of the young fool's sister.

The moments that followed were full of interest. A stillness, a brooding, expectant stillness, fell upon the company—and it numbered a round dozen—about Lord Gervase's richly appointed board. In the soft candlelight the oval table shone like a deep brown pool, in which were reflected the gleaming silver and sparkling crystal that seemed to float upon it.

Blake sucked in his nether-lip, his florid face a thought less florid than its wont, his prominent blue eyes a thought more prominent. Under its golden periwig old Nick Trenchard's wizened countenance was darkened by a scowl, and his fingers, long, swarthy, and gnarled, drummed fretfully upon the table. Portly Lord Gervase Scoresby—their host, a benign and placid man of peace, detesting turbulence—turned crimson now in wordless rage. The others gaped and stared—some at young Westmacott, some at the man he had so grossly affronted—whilst in the shadows of the hall a couple of lacqueys looked on amazed, all teeth and eyes.

Mr. Wilding stood, very still and outwardly impassive, the wine trickling from his long face, which, if pale, was no paler than its habit, a vestige of the smile with which he had proposed the toast still lingering on his thin lips, though departed from his eyes. An elegant gentleman was Mr. Wilding, tall, and seeming even taller by virtue of his exceeding slenderness. He had the courage to wear his own hair,

which was of a dark brown and very luxuriant; dark brown too were his sombre eyes, low-lidded and set at a downward slant. From those odd eyes of his, his countenance gathered an air of superciliousness tempered by a gentle melancholy. For the rest, it was scored by lines that stamped it with the appearance of an age in excess of his thirty years.

Thirty guineas' worth of Mechlin at his throat was drenched, empurpled and ruined beyond redemption, and on the breast of his blue satin coat a dark patch was spreading like a stain of blood.

Richard Westmacott, short, sturdy, and fair-complexioned to the point of insipidity, watched him sullenly out of pale eyes, and waited. It was Lord Gervase who broke at last the silence—broke it with an oath, a thing unusual in one whose nature was almost woman-mild.

"As God's my life!" he spluttered wrathfully, glowering at Richard. "To have this happen in my house! The young fool shall make apology!"

"With his dying breath," sneered Trenchard, and the old rake's words, his tone, and the malevolent look he bent upon the boy increased the company's malaise.

"I think," said Mr. Wilding, with a most singular and excessive sweetness, "that what Mr. Westmacott has done he has done because he apprehended me amiss."

"No doubt he'll say so," opined Trenchard with a shrug, and had caution dug into his ribs by Blake's elbow, whilst Richard made haste to prove him wrong by saying the contrary.

"I apprehended you exactly, sir," he answered, defiance in his voice and wine-flushed face.

"Ha!" clucked Trenchard, irrepressible. "He's bent on self-

destruction. Let him have his way, in God's name."

But Wilding seemed intent upon showing how long-suffering he could be. He gently shook his head. "Nay, now," said he. "You thought, Mr. Westmacott, that in mentioning your sister, I did so lightly. Is it not so?"

"You mentioned her, and that is all that matters," cried Westmacott. "I'll not have her name on your lips at any time or in any place—no, nor in any manner." His speech was thick from too much wine.

"You are drunk," cried indignant Lord Gervase with finality.

"Pot-valiant," Trenchard elaborated.

Mr. Wilding set down at last the glass which he had continued to hold until that moment. He rested his hands upon the table, knuckles downward, and leaning forward he spoke impressively, his face very grave; and those present—knowing him as they did—were one and all lost in wonder at his unusual patience.

"Mr. Westmacott," said he, "I do think you are wrong to persist in affronting me. You have done a thing that is beyond forgiveness, and yet, when I offer you this opportunity of honourably retrieving..." He shrugged his shoulders, leaving the sentence incomplete.

The company might have spared its deep surprise at so much mildness. There was but the semblance of it. Wilding proceeded thus of purpose set, and under the calm mask of his long white face his mind worked wickedly and deliberately. The temerity of Westmacott, whose nature was notoriously timid, had surprised him for a moment. But anon, reading the boy's mind as readily as though it had been a scroll unfolded for his instruction, he saw that Westmacott, on the strength of his position as his sister's brother, conceived himself immune. Mr. Wilding's avowed courtship of the lady, the hopes he still entertained of winning her, despite the aversion she was at pains to

show him, gave Westmacott assurance that Mr. Wilding would never elect to shatter his all too slender chances by embroiling himself in a quarrel with her brother. And—reading him, thus, aright—Mr. Wilding put on that mask of patience, luring the boy into greater conviction of the security of his position. And Richard, conceiving himself safe in his entrenchment behind the bulwarks of his brothership to Ruth Westmacott, and heartened further by the excess of wine he had consumed, persisted in insults he would never otherwise have dared to offer.

"Who seeks to retrieve?" he crowed offensively, boldly looking up into the other's face. "It seems you are yourself reluctant." And he laughed a trifle stridently, and looked about him for applause, but found none.

"You are overrash," Lord Gervase disapproved him harshly.

"Not the first coward I've seen grow valiant at a table," put in Trenchard by way of explanation, and might have come to words with Blake on that same score, but that in that moment Wilding spoke again.

"Reluctant to do what?" he questioned amiably, looking Westmacott so straightly between the eyes that the boy shifted uneasily on his high-backed chair.

Nevertheless, still full of confidence in the unassailability of his position, the mad youth answered, "To cleanse yourself of what I threw at you."

"Fan me, ye winds!" gasped Nick Trenchard, and looked with expectancy at his friend Wilding.

Now there was one factor with which, in basing with such craven shrewdness his calculations upon Mr. Wilding's feelings for his sister, young Richard had not reckoned. He was not to know that Wilding,

bruised and wounded by Miss Westmacott's scorn of him, had reached that borderland where love and hate are so merged that they are scarce to be distinguished. Embittered by the slights she had put upon him—slights which his sensitive, lover's fancy had magnified a hundredfold—Anthony Wilding's frame of mind was grown peculiar. Of his love she would have none; his kindness she seemingly despised. So be it; she should taste his cruelty. If she scorned his wooing and forbade him to pursue it, at least it was not hers to deny him the power to hurt; and in hurting her that would not be loved by him some measure of fierce and bitter consolation seemed to await him.

He realized, perhaps, not quite all this—and to the unworthiness of it all he gave no thought. But he realized enough as he toyed, as cat with mouse, with Richard Westmacott, to know that in striking at her through the worthless person of this brother whom she cherished—and who persisted in affording him this opportunity—a wicked vengeance would be his.

Peace-loving Lord Gervase had heaved himself suddenly to his feet at Westmacott's last words, still intent upon saving the situation.

"In Heaven's name..." he began, when Mr. Wilding, ever calm and smiling, though now a trifle sinister, waved him gently into silence. But that persisting calm of Mr. Wilding's was too much for old Nick Trenchard. He rose abruptly, drawing all eyes upon himself. It was time, he thought, he took a hand in this.

In addition to his affection for Wilding and his contempt for Westmacott, he was filled with a fear that the latter might become dangerous if not crushed at once. Gifted with a shrewd knowledge of men, acquired during a chequered life of much sour experience, old Nick instinctively mistrusted Richard. He had known him for a fool, a weakling, a babbler, and a bibber of wine. Out of such elements a villain is soon compounded, and Trenchard had cause to fear the

form of villainy that lay ready to Richard's hand. For it chanced that Mr. Trenchard was second cousin to that famous John Trenchard, so lately tried for treason and acquitted to the great joy of the sectaries of the West, and still more lately—but yesterday, in fact—fled the country to escape the rearrest ordered in consequence of that excessive joy. Like his more famous cousin, Nick Trenchard was one of the Duke of Monmouth's most active agents; and Westmacott, like Wilding, Vallancey, and one or two others at that board, stood, too, committed to the cause of the Protestant Champion.

Out of his knowledge of the boy Trenchard was led to fear that if he were leniently dealt with now, tomorrow, when, sober, he came to realize the grossness of the thing he had done and the unlikelihood of its being forgiven him, there was no saying but that to protect himself he might betray Wilding's share in the plot that was being hatched. That in itself would be bad enough; but there might be worse, for he could scarcely betray Wilding without betraying others and—what mattered most—the Cause itself. He must be dealt with out of hand, Trenchard opined, and dealt with ruthlessly.

"I think, Anthony," said he, "that we have had words enough. Shall you be disposing of Mr. Westmacott to-morrow, or must I be doing it for you?"

With a gasp of dismay young Richard twisted in his chair to confront this fresh and unsuspected antagonist. What danger was this that he had overlooked? Then, even as he turned, Wilding's voice fell on his ear, and each word of the few he spoke was like a drop of icy water on Westmacott's overheated brain.

"I protest you are vastly kind, Nick. But I intend, myself, to have the pleasure of killing Mr. Westmacott." And his smile fell now in mockery upon the disillusioned lad.

Crushed by that bolt from the blue, Richard sat as if stunned, the

flush receding from his face until his very lips were livid. The shock had sobered him, and, sobered, he realized in terror what he had done. And yet even sober he was amazed to find that the staff upon which with such security he had leaned should have proved rotten. True he had put much strain upon it; but then he had counted that it would stand much strain.

He would have spoken, but he lacked words, so stricken was he. And even had he done so it is odds none would have heard him, for the late calm was of a sudden turned to garboil. Every man of that company—with the sole exception of Richard himself—was on his feet, and all were speaking at once, in clamouring, excited chorus.

Wilding alone—the butt of their expostulations—stood quietly smiling, and wiped his face at last with a kerchief of finest lawn. Dominating the others in the Babel rose the voice of Sir Rowland Blake—impecunious Blake; Blake lately of the Guards, who had sold his commission as the only thing remaining him upon which he could raise money; Blake, that other suitor for Miss Westmacott's hand, the suitor favoured by her brother.

"You shall not do it, Mr. Wilding," he shouted, his face crimson. "No, by God! You were shamed forever. He is but a lad, and drunk."

Trenchard eyed the short, powerfully built man beside him, and laughed unpleasantly. "You should get yourself bled one of these days, Sir Rowland," he advised. "There may be no great danger yet; but a man can't be too careful when he wears a narrow neckcloth."

Blake—a short, powerfully built man—took no heed of him, but looked straight at Mr. Wilding, who, smiling ever, calmly returned the gaze of those prominent blue eyes.

"You will suffer me, Sir Rowland," said he sweetly, "to be the judge of whom I will and whom I will not meet."

Sir Rowland flushed under that mocking glance and caustic tone. "But he is drunk," he repeated feebly.

"I think," said Trenchard, "that he is hearing something that will make him sober."

Lord Gervase took the lad by the shoulder, and shook him impatiently. "Well?" quoth he. "Have you nothing to say? You did a deal of prating just now. I make no doubt but that even at this late hour if you were to make apology..."

"It would be idle," came Wilding's icy voice to quench the gleam of hope kindling anew in Richard's breast. The lad saw that he was lost, and he is a poor thing, indeed, who cannot face the worst once that worst is shown to be irrevocable. He rose with some semblance of dignity.

"It is as I would wish," said he, but his livid face and staring eyes belied the valour of his words. He cleared his huskiness from his throat. "Sir Rowland," said he, "will you act for me?"

"Not I!" cried Blake with an oath. "I'll be no party to the butchery of a boy unfledged."

"Unfledged?" echoed Trenchard. "Body o' me! 'Tis a matter Wilding will amend to-morrow. He'll fledge him, never fear. He'll wing him on his flight to heaven."

Of set purpose did Trenchard add this fuel to the blazing fire. It was no part of his views that this encounter should be avoided. If Richard Westmacott were allowed to live after what had passed, there were too many tall fellows might go in peril of their lives.

Richard, meanwhile, had turned to the man on his left—young Vallancey, a notorious partisan of the Duke of Monmouth's, a hair-brained gentleman who was his own worst enemy.

"May I count on you, Ned?" he asked.

"Aye—to the death," said Vallancey magniloquently.

"Mr. Vallancey," said Trenchard with a wry twist of his sharp features, "you grow prophetic."

CHAPTER II. SIR ROWLAND TO THE RESCUE

From Scoresby Hall, near Weston Zoyland, young Westmacott rode home that Saturday night to his sister's house in Bridgwater, a sobered man and an anguished. He had committed a folly which was like to cost him his life to-morrow. Other follies had he committed in his twenty-five years—for he was not quite the babe that Blake had represented him, although he certainly looked nothing like his age. But to-night he had contrived to set the crown to all. He had good cause to blame himself and to curse the miscalculation that had emboldened him to launch himself upon a course of insult against this Wilding, whom he hated with all the currish and resentful hatred of the worthless for the man of parts.

But there was more than hate in the affront that he had offered; there was calculation—to an even greater extent than we have seen. It happened that through his own fault young Richard was all but penniless. The pious, nonconformist soul of Sir Geoffrey Lupton—the wealthy uncle from whom he had had great expectations—had been so stirred to anger by Richard's vicious and besotted ways that he had left every guinea that was his, every perch of land, and every brick of edifice to Richard's half-sister Ruth. At present things were not so bad for the worthless boy. Ruth worshipped him. He was a sacred charge to her from their dead father, who, knowing the stoutness of her soul and the feebleness of Richard's, had in dying imposed on her the care and guidance of her graceless brother. But Ruth, in all things strong, was weak with Richard out of her very fondness for him. To what she had he might help himself, and thus it was that things were not so bad with him at present. But when Richard's calculating mind

came to give thought to the future he found that this occasioned him some care. Rich ladies, even when they do not happen to be equipped in addition with Ruth's winsome beauty and endearing nature, are not wont to go unmarried. It would have pleased Richard best to have had her remain a spinster. But he well knew that this was a matter in which she might have a voice of her own, and it behoved him betimes to take wise measures where possible husbands were concerned.

The first that came in a suitor's obvious panoply was Anthony Wilding, of Zoyland Chase, and Richard watched his advent with foreboding. Wilding's was a personality to dazzle any woman, despite—perhaps even because of—the reputation for wildness that clung to him. That he was known as Wild Wilding to the countryside is true; but it were unfair—as Richard knew—to attach to this too much importance; for the adoption of so obvious an alliteration the rude country minds needed but a slight encouragement.

From the first it looked as if Ruth might favour him, and Richard's fears assumed more definite shape. If Wilding married her—and he was a bold, masterful fellow who usually accomplished what he aimed at—her fortune and estate must cease to be a pleasant pasture land for bovine Richard. The boy thought at first of making terms with Wilding; the idea was old; it had come to him when first he had counted the chances of his sister's marrying. But he found himself hesitating to lay his proposal before Mr. Wilding. And whilst he hesitated Mr. Wilding made obvious headway. Still Richard dared not do it. There was a something in Wilding's eye that cried him danger. Thus, in the end, since he could not attempt a compromise with this fine fellow, the only course remaining was that of direct antagonism—that is to say, direct as

Richard understood directness. Slander was the weapon he used in that secret duel; the countryside was well stocked with stories of Mr. Wilding's many indiscretions. I do not wish to suggest that these were unfounded. Still, the countryside, cajoled by its primitive sense of humour into that alliteration I have mentioned, found that having given this dog its bad name, it was under the obligation of keeping up his reputation. So it exaggerated. Richard, exaggerating those exaggerations in his turn, had some details, as interesting and unsavoury as they were in the main untrue, to lay before his sister.

Now established love, it is well known, thrives wondrously on slander. The robust growth of a maid's feelings for her accepted suitor is but further strengthened by malign representations of his character. She seizes with joy the chance of affording proof of her great loyalty, and defies the world and its evil to convince her that the man to whom she has given her trust is not most worthy of it. Not so, however, with the first timid bud of incipient interest. Slander nips it like a frost; in deadliness it is second only to ridicule.

Ruth Westmacott lent an ear to her brother's stories, incredulous only until she remembered vague hints she had caught from this person and from that, whose meaning was now made clear by what Richard told her, which, incidentally, they served to corroborate. Corroboration, too, did the tale of infamy receive from the friendship that prevailed between Mr. Wilding and Nick Trenchard, the old ne'er-dowell, who in his time—as everybody knew—had come so low, despite his gentle birth, as to have been one of a company of strolling players. Had Mr. Wilding been other than she now learnt he was, he would surely not cherish an attachment for a person so utterly unworthy. Clearly, they were birds of a plumage.

And so, her maiden purity outraged at the thought that she had been in danger of lending a willing ear to the wooing of such a man,

she had crushed this love which she blushed to think was on the point of throwing out roots to fasten on her soul, and was sedulous thereafter in manifesting the aversion which she accounted it her duty to foster for Mr. Wilding.

Richard had watched and smiled in secret, taking pride in the cunning way he had wrought this change—that cunning which so often is given to the stupid by way of compensation for the intelligence that has been withheld them.

And now what time discountenanced, Wilding fumed and fretted all in vain, Sir Rowland Blake, fresh from London and in full flight from his creditors, flashed like a comet into the Bridgwater heavens. He dazzled the eyes and might have had for the asking the heart and hand of Diana Horton—Ruth's cousin. Her heart, indeed, he had without the asking, for Diana fell straightway in love with him and showed it, just as he showed that he was not without response to her affection. There were some tender passages between them; but Blake, for all his fine exterior, was a beggar, and Diana far from rich, and so he rode his feelings with a hard grip upon the reins. And then, in an evil hour for poor Diana, young Westmacott had taken him to Lupton House, and Sir Rowland had his first glimpse of Ruth, his first knowledge of her fortune. He went down before Ruth's eyes like a man of heart; he went down more lowly still before her possessions like a man of greed; and poor Diana might console herself with whom she could.

Her brother watched him, appraised him, and thought that in this broken gamester he had a man after his own heart; a man who would be ready enough for such a bargain as Richard had in mind; ready enough to sell what rags might be left him of his honour so that he came by the wherewithal to mend his broken fortunes.

The twain made terms. They haggled like any pair of traders out of Jewry, but in the end it was settled—by a bond duly engrossed and

sealed—that on the day that Sir Rowland married Ruth he should make over to her brother certain values that amounted to perhaps a quarter of her possessions. There was no cause to think that Ruth would be greatly opposed to this—not that that consideration would have weighed with Richard.

But now that all essentials were so satisfactorily determined a vexation was offered Westmacott by the circumstance that his sister seemed nowise taken with Sir Rowland. She suffered him because he was her brother's friend; on that account she even honoured him with some measure of her own friendship; but to no greater intimacy did her manner promise to admit him. And meanwhile, Mr. Wilding persisted in the face of all rebuffs. Under his smiling mask he hid the smart of the wounds she dealt him, until it almost seemed to him that from loving her he had come to hate her.

It had been well for Richard had he left things as they were and waited. Whether Blake prospered or not, leastways it was clear that Wilding would not prosper, and that, for the season, was all that need have mattered to young Richard.

But in his cups that night he had thought in some dim way to precipitate matters by affronting Mr. Wilding, secure, as I have shown, in his belief that Wilding would perish sooner than raise a finger against Ruth's brother. And his drunken astuteness, it seemed, had been to his mind as a piece of bottle glass to the sight, distorting the image viewed through it.

With some such bitter reflection rode he home to his sleepless couch. Some part of those dark hours he spent in bitter reviling of Wilding, of himself, and even of his sister, whom he blamed for this awful situation into which he had tumbled; at other times he wept from self-pity and sheer fright.

Once, indeed, he imagined that he saw light, that he saw a way out

of the peril that hemmed him in. His mind turned for a moment in the direction that Trenchard had feared it might. He bethought him of his association with the Monmouth Cause—into which he had been beguiled by the sordid hope of gain—and of Wilding's important share in that same business. He was even moved to rise and ride that very night for Exeter to betray to Albemarle the Cause itself, so that he might have Wilding laid by the heels. But if Trenchard had been right in having little faith in Richard's loyalty, he had, it seems, in fearing treachery made the mistake of giving Richard credit for more courage than was his endowment. For when, sitting up in bed, fired by his inspiration, young Westmacott came to consider the questions the Lord-Lieutenant of Devon would be likely to ask him, he reflected that the answers he must return would so incriminate himself that he would be risking his own neck in the betrayal. He flung himself down again with a curse and a groan, and thought no more of the salvation that might lie for him that way.

The morning of that last day of May found him pale and limp and all a-tremble. He rose betimes and dressed, but stirred not from his chamber till in the garden under his window he heard his sister's voice, and that of Diana Horton, joined anon by a man's deeper tones, which he recognized with a start as Blake's. What did the baronet here so early? Assuredly it must concern the impending duel. Richard knew no mawkishness on the score of eavesdropping. He stole to his window and lent an ear, but the voices were receding, and to his vexation he caught nothing of what was said. He wondered how soon Vallancey would come, and for what hour the encounter had been appointed. Vallancey had remained behind at Scoresby Hall last night to make the necessary arrangements with Trenchard, who was to act for Mr. Wilding.

Now it chanced that Trenchard and Wilding had business—business of Monmouth's—to transact in Taunton that morning; business which might not be delayed. There were odd rumours afloat

in the West; persistent rumours which had come fast upon the heels of the news of Argyle's landing in Scotland; rumours which maintained that Monmouth himself was coming over from Holland. These tales Wilding and his associates had ignored. The Duke, they knew, was to spend the summer in retreat in Sweden, with (it was alleged) the Lady Henrietta Wentworth to bear him company, and in the mean time his trusted agents were to pave the way for his coming in the following spring. Of late the lack of direct news from the Duke had been a source of mystification to his friends in the West, and now, suddenly, the information went abroad—it was something more than rumour this time—that a letter of the greatest importance had been intercepted. From whom that letter proceeded or to whom it was addressed, could not yet be discovered. But it seemed clear that it was connected with the Monmouth Cause, and it behoved Mr. Wilding to discover what he could. With this intent he rode with Trenchard that Sunday morning to Taunton, hoping that at the Red Lion Inn—that meeting-place of dissenters—he might cull reliable information.

It was in consequence of this that the meeting with Richard Westmacott was not to take place until the evening, and therefore Vallancey came not to Lupton House as early as Richard thought he should expect him. Blake, however—more no doubt out of a selfish fear of losing a valued ally in the winning of Ruth's hand than out of any excessive concern for Richard himself—had risen early and hastened to Lupton House, in the hope, which he recognized as all but forlorn, of yet being able to avert the disaster he foresaw for Richard.

Peering over the orchard wall as he rode by, he caught a glimpse, through an opening between the trees, of Ruth herself and Diana on the lawn beyond. There was a wicket gate that stood unlatched, and availing himself of this Sir Rowland tethered his horse in the lane and threading his way briskly through the orchard came suddenly upon the girls. Their laughter reached him as he advanced, and told him they could know nothing yet of Richard's danger.

On his abrupt and unexpected apparition, Diana paled and Ruth flushed slightly, whereupon Sir Rowland might have bethought him, had he been book-learned, of the axiom, "Amour qui rougit, fleurette; amour qui plit, drame du coeur."

He doffed his hat and bowed, his fair ringlets tumbling forward till they hid his face, which was exceeding grave.

Ruth gave him good morning pleasantly. "You London folk are earlier risers than we are led to think," she added.

"'Twill be the change of air makes Sir Rowland matutinal," said Diana, making a gallant recovery from her agitation.

"I vow," said he, "that I had grown matutinal earlier had I known what here awaited me."

"Awaited you?" quoth Diana, and tossed her head archly disdainful. "La! Sir Rowland, your modesty will be the death of you." Archness became this lady of the sunny hair, tip-tilted nose, and complexion that outvied the apple-blossoms. She was shorter by a half-head than her darker cousin, and made up in sprightliness what she lacked of Ruth's gentle dignity. The pair were foils, each setting off the graces of the other.

"I protest I am foolish," answered Blake, a shade discomfited. "But I want not for excuse. I have it in the matter that brings me here." So solemn was his air, so sober his voice, that both girls felt a premonition of the untoward message that he bore. It was Ruth who asked him to explain himself.

"Will you walk, ladies?" said Blake, and waved the hand that still held his hat riverwards, adown the sloping lawn. They moved away together, Sir Rowland pacing between his love of yesterday and his love of to-day, pressed with questions from both. He shaded his eyes to look at the river, dazzling in the morning sunlight that came over

Polden Hill, and, standing thus, he unburdened himself at last.

"My news concerns Richard and—Mr. Wilding." They looked at him. Miss Westmacott's fine level brows were knit. He paused to ask, as if suddenly observing his absence, "Is Richard not yet risen?"

"Not yet," said Ruth, and waited for him to proceed.

"It does credit to his courage that he should sleep late on such a day," said Blake, and was pleased with the adroitness wherewith he broke the news. "He quarrelled last night with Anthony Wilding."

Ruth's hand went to her bosom; fear stared at Blake from out her eyes, blue as the heavens overhead; a grey shade overcast the usual warm pallor of her face.

"With Mr. Wilding?" she cried. "That man!" And though she said no more her eyes implored him to go on, and tell her what more there might be. He did so, and he spared not Wilding. The task, indeed, was one to which he applied himself with a certain zest; whatever might be the outcome of the affair, there was no denying that he was by way of reaping profit from it by the final overthrow of an acknowledged rival. And when he told her how Richard had flung his wine in Wilding's face when Wilding stood to toast her, a faint flush crept to her cheeks.

"Richard did well," said she. "I am proud of him."

The words pleased Sir Rowland vastly; but he reckoned without Diana. Miss Horton's mind was illumined by her knowledge of herself. In the light of that she saw precisely what capital this tale-bearer sought to make. The occasion might not be without its opportunities for her; and to begin with, it was no part of her intention that Wilding should be thus maligned and finally driven from the lists of rivalry with Blake. Upon Wilding, indeed, and his notorious masterfulness did she found what hopes she still entertained of winning back Sir Rowland.

"Surely," said she, "you are a little hard on Mr. Wilding. You speak as if he were the first gallant that ever toasted lady's eyes."

"I am no lady of his, Diana," Ruth reminded her, with a faint show of heat.

Diana shrugged her shoulders. "You may not love him, but you can't ordain that he shall not love you. You are very harsh, I think. To me it rather seems that Richard acted like a boor."

"But, mistress," cried Sir Rowland, half out of countenance, and stifling his vexation, "in these matters it all depends upon the manner."

"Why, yes," she agreed; "and whatever Mr. Wilding's manner, if I know him at all, it would be nothing but respectful to the last degree."

"My own conception of respect," said he, "is not to bandy a lady's name about a company of revellers."

"Bethink you, though, you said just now, it all depended on the manner," she rejoined. Sir Rowland shrugged and turned half from her to her listening cousin. When all is said, poor Diana appears—despite her cunning—to have been short-sighted. Aiming at a defined advantage in the game she played, she either ignored or held too lightly the concomitant disadvantage of vexing Blake.

"It were perhaps best to tell us the exact words he used, Sir Rowland," she suggested, "that for ourselves we may judge how far he lacked respect."

"What signify the words!" cried Blake, now almost out of temper. "I don't recall them. It is the air with which he pledged Mistress Westmacott."

"Ah yes—the manner," quoth Diana irritatingly. "We'll let that be. Richard threw his wine in Mr. Wilding's face? What followed then?"

What said Mr. Wilding?"

Sir Rowland remembered what Mr. Wilding had said, and bethought him that it were impolitic in him to repeat it. At the same time, not having looked for this cross-questioning, he was all unprepared with any likely answer. He hesitated, until Ruth echoed Diana's question.

"Tell us, Sir Rowland," she begged him, "what Mr. Wilding said."

Being forced to say something, and being by nature slow-witted and sluggish of invention, Sir Rowland was compelled, to his unspeakable chagrin, to fall back upon the truth.

"Is not that proof?" cried Diana in triumph. "Mr. Wilding was reluctant to quarrel with Richard. He was even ready to swallow such an affront as that, thinking it might be offered him under a misconception of his meaning. He plainly professed the respect that filled him for Mistress Westmacott, and yet, and yet, Sir Rowland, you tell us that he lacked respect!"

"Madam," cried Blake, turning crimson, "that matters nothing. It was not the place or time to introduce your cousin's name."

"You think, Sir Rowland," put in Ruth, her air grave, judicial almost, "that Richard behaved well?"

"As I would like to behave myself, as I would have a son of mine behave on the like occasion," Blake protested. "But we waste words," he cried. "I did not come to defend Richard, nor just to bear you this untoward news. I came to consult with you, in the hope that we might find some way to avert this peril from your brother."

"What way is possible?" asked Ruth, and sighed. "I would not... I would not have Richard a coward."

"Would you prefer him dead?" asked Blake, sadly grave.

"Sooner than craven—yes," Ruth answered him, very white.

"There is no question of that," was Blake's rejoinder. "The question is that Wilding said last night that he would kill the boy, and what Wilding says he does. Out of the affection that I bear Richard is born my anxiety to save him despite himself. It is in this that I come to seek your aid or offer mine. Allied we might accomplish what singly neither of us could."

He had at once the reward of his cunning speech. Ruth held out her hands. "You are a good friend, Sir Rowland," she said, with a pale smile; and pale too was the smile with which Diana watched them. No more than Ruth did she suspect the sincerity of Blake's protestations.

"I am proud you should account me that," said the baronet, taking Ruth's hands and holding them a moment; "and I would that I could prove myself your friend in this to some good purpose. Believe me, if Wilding would consent that I might take your brother's place, I would gladly do so."

It was a safe boast, knowing as he did that Wilding would consent to no such thing; but it earned him a glance of greater kindness from Ruth—who began to think that hitherto perhaps she had done him some injustice—and a look of greater admiration from Diana, who saw in him her beau-ideal of the gallant lover.

"I would not have you endanger yourself so," said Ruth.

"It might," said Blake, his blue eyes very fierce, "be no great danger, after all." And then dismissing that part of the subject as if, like a brave man, the notion of being thought boastful were unpleasant, he passed on to the discussion of ways and means by which the coming duel might be averted. But when they came to grips with facts, it seemed that Sir Rowland had as little idea of what might be done as had the ladies. True, he began by making the obvious

suggestion that Richard should tender Wilding a full apology. That, indeed, was the only door of escape, and Blake shrewdly suspected that what the boy had been unwilling to do last night—partly through wine, and partly through the fear of looking fearful in the eyes of Lord Gervase Scoresby's guests—he might be willing enough to do to-day, sober and upon reflection. For the rest Blake was as far from suspecting Mr. Wilding's peculiar frame of mind as had Richard been last night. This his words showed.

"I am satisfied," said he, "that if Richard were to go to-day to Wilding and express his regret for a thing done in the heat of wine, Wilding would be forced to accept it as satisfaction, and none would think that it did other than reflect credit upon Richard."

"Are you very sure of that?" asked Ruth, her tone dubious, her glance hopefully anxious.

"What else is to be thought?"

"But," put in Diana shrewdly, "it were an admission of Richard's that he had done wrong."

"No less," he agreed, and Ruth caught her breath in fresh dismay.

"And yet you have said that he did as you would have a son of yours do," Diana reminded him.

"And I maintain it," answered Blake; his wits worked slowly ever. It was for Ruth to reveal the flaw to him.

"Do you not understand, then," she asked him sadly, "that such an admission on Richard's part would amount to a lie—a lie uttered to save himself from an encounter, the worst form of lie, a lie of cowardice? Surely, Sir Rowland, your kindly anxiety for his life outruns your anxiety for his honour."

Diana, having accomplished her task, hung her head in silence,

pondering.

Sir Rowland was routed utterly. He glanced from one to the other of his companions, and grew afraid that he—the town gallant—might come to look foolish in the eyes of these country ladies. He protested again his love for Richard, and increased Ruth's terror by his mention of Wilding's swordsmanship; but when all was said, he saw that he had best retreat ere he spoiled the good effect which he hoped his solicitude had created. And so he spoke of seeking counsel with Lord Gervase Scoresby, and took his leave, promising to return by noon.

CHAPTER III. DIANA SCHEMES

Notwithstanding the brave face Ruth Westmacott had kept during his presence, when he departed Sir Rowland left behind him a distress amounting almost to anguish in her mind. Yet though she might suffer, there was no weakness in Ruth's nature. She knew how to endure. Diana, bearing Richard not a tenth of the affection his sister consecrated to him, was alarmed for him. Besides, her own interests urged the averting of this encounter. And so she held in accents almost tearful that something must be done to save him.

This, too, appeared to be Richard's own view, when presently—within a few minutes of Blake's departure—he came to join them. They watched his approach in silence, and both noted—though with different eyes and different feelings—the pallor of his fair face, the dark lines under his colourless eyes. His condition was abject, and his manners, never of the best—for there was much of the spoiled child about Richard—were clearly suffering from it.

He stood before his sister and his cousin, moving his eyes shiftily from one to the other, rubbing his hands nervously together.

"Your precious friend Sir Rowland has been here," said he, and it was not clear from his manner which of them he addressed. "Not a doubt but he will have brought you the news." He seemed to sneer.

Ruth advanced towards him, her face grave, her sweet eyes full of pitying concern. She placed a hand upon his sleeve. "My poor Richard..." she began, but he shook off her kindly touch, laughing angrily—a mere cackle of irritability.

"Odso!" he interrupted her. "It is a thought late for this mock

kindliness!"

Diana, in the background, arched her brows, then with a shrug turned aside and seated herself on the stone seat by which they had been standing. Ruth shrank back as if her brother had struck her.

"Richard!" she cried, and searched his livid face with her eyes
"Richard!"

He read a question in the interjection, and he answered it. "Had you known any real care, any true concern for me, you had not given cause for this affair," he chid her peevishly.

"What are you saying?" she cried, and it occurred to her at last that Richard was afraid. He was a coward! She felt as she would faint.

"I am saying," said he, hunching his shoulders, and shivering as he spoke, yet, his glance unable to meet hers, "that it is your fault that I am like to get my throat cut before sunset."

"My fault?" she murmured. The slope of lawn seemed to wave and swim about her. "My fault?"

"The fault of your wanton ways," he accused her harshly. "You have so played fast and loose with this fellow Wilding that he makes free of your name in my very presence, and puts upon me the need to get myself killed by him to save the family honour."

He would have said more in this strain, but something in her glance gave him pause. There fell a silence. From the distance came the melodious pealing of church bells. High overhead a lark was pouring out its song; in the lane at the orchard end rang the beat of trotting hoofs. It was Diana who spoke presently. Just indignation stirred her, and, when stirred, she knew no pity, set no limits to her speech.

"I think, indeed," said she, her voice crisp and merciless, "that the family honour will best be saved if Mr. Wilding kills you. It is in danger

while you live. You are a coward, Richard."

"Diana!" he thundered—he could be mighty brave with women—whilst Ruth clutched her arm to restrain her.

But she continued, undeterred: "You are a coward—a pitiful coward," she told him. "Consult your mirror. It will tell you what a palsied thing you are. That you should dare so speak to Ruth..."

"Don't!" Ruth begged her, turning.

"Aye," growled Richard, "she had best be silent."

Diana rose, to battle, her cheeks crimson. "It asks a braver man than you to compel my obedience," she told him. "La!" she fumed, "I'll swear that had Mr. Wilding overheard what you have said to your sister, you would have little to fear from his sword. A cane would be the weapon he'd use on you."

Richard's pale eyes flamed malevolently; a violent rage possessed him and flooded out his fear, for nothing can so goad a man as an offensive truth. Ruth approached him again; again she took him by the arm, seeking to soothe his over-troubled spirit; but again he shook her off. And then to save the situation came a servant from the house. So lost in anger was all Richard's sense of decency that the mere supervision of the man would not have been enough to have silenced him could he have found adequate words in which to answer Mistress Horton. But even as he racked his mind, the footman's voice broke the silence, and the words the fellow uttered did what his presence alone might not have sufficed to do.

"Mr. Vallancey is asking for you, sir," he announced.

Richard started. Vallancey! He had come at last, and his coming was connected with the impending duel. The thought was paralyzing to young Westmacott. The flush of anger faded from his face; its

leadened hue returned and he shivered as with cold. At last he mastered himself sufficiently to ask:

"Where is he, Jasper?"

"In the library, sir," replied the servant. "Shall I bring him hither?"

"Yes—no," he answered. "I will come to him." He turned his back upon the ladies, paused a moment, still irresolute. Then, as by an effort, he followed the servant across the lawn and vanished through the ivied porch.

As he went Diana flew to her cousin. Her shallow nature was touched with transient pity. "My poor Ruth..." she murmured soothingly, and set her arm about the other's waist. There was a gleam of tears in the eyes Ruth turned upon her. Together they came to the granite seat and sank to it side by side, fronting the placid river. There Ruth, her elbows on her knees, cradled her chin in her hands, and with a sigh of misery stared straight before her.

"It was untrue!" she said at last. "What Richard said of me was untrue."

"Why, yes," Diana snapped, contemptuous. "The only truth is that Richard is afraid."

Ruth shivered. "Ah, no," she pleaded—she knew how true was the impeachment. "Don't say it, Diana."

"It matters little that I say it," snorted Diana impatiently. "It is a truth proclaimed by the first glance at him."

"He is in poor health, perhaps," said Ruth, seeking miserably to excuse him.

"Aye," said Diana. "He's suffering from an ague—the result of a lack of courage. That he should so have spoken to you! Give me

patience, Heaven!"

Ruth crimsoned again at the memory of his words; a wave of indignation swept through her gentle soul, but was gone at once, leaving an ineffable sadness in its room. What was to be done? She turned to Diana for counsel. But Diana was still whipping up her scorn.

"If he goes out to meet Mr. Wilding, he'll shame himself and every man and woman that bears the name of Westmacott," said she, and struck a new fear with that into the heart of Ruth.

"He must not go!" she answered passionately. "He must not meet him!"

Diana flashed her a sidelong glance. "And if he doesn't, will things be mended?" she inquired. "Will it save his honour to have Mr. Wilding come and cane him?"

"He'd not do that?" said Ruth.

"Not if you asked him—no," was Diana's sharp retort, and she caught her breath on the last word of it, for just then the Devil dropped the seed of a suggestion into the fertile soil of her lovesick soul.

"Diana!" Ruth exclaimed in reproof, turning to confront her cousin. But Diana's mind started upon its scheming journey was now travelling fast. Out of that devil's seed there sprang with amazing rapidity a tree-like growth, throwing out branches, putting forth leaves, bearing already—in her fancy—bloom and fruit.

"Why not?" quoth she after a breathing space, and her voice was gentle, her tone innocent beyond compare. "Why should you not ask him?" Ruth frowned, perplexed and thoughtful, and now Diana turned to her with the lively eye of one into whose mind has leapt a sudden inspiration. "Ruth!" she exclaimed. "Why, indeed, should you not ask

him to forgo this duel?"

"How, how could I?" faltered Ruth.

"He'd not deny you; you know he'd not."

"I do not know it," answered Ruth. "But if I did, how could I ask it?"

"Were I Richard's sister, and had I his life and honour at heart as you have, I'd not ask how. If Richard goes to that encounter he loses both, remember—unless between this and then he undergoes some change. Were I in your place, I'd straight to Wilding."

"To him?" mused Ruth, sitting up. "How could I go to him?"

"Go to him, yes," Diana insisted. "Go to him at once—while there is yet time."

Ruth rose and moved away a step or two towards the water, deep in thought. Diana watched her furtively and slyly, the rapid rise and fall of her maiden breast betraying the agitation that filled her as she waited—like a gamester—for the turn of the card that would show her whether she had won or lost. For she saw clearly how Ruth might be so compromised that there was something more than a chance that Diana would no longer have cause to account her cousin a barrier between herself and Blake.

"I could not go alone," said Ruth, and her tone was that of one still battling with a notion that is repugnant.

"Why, if that is all," said Diana, "then I'll go with you."

"I can't! I can't! Consider the humiliation."

"Consider Richard rather," the fair temptress made answer eagerly. "Be sure that Mr. Wilding will save you all humiliation. He'll not deny you. At a word from you, I know what answer he will make."

He will refuse to push the matter forward—acknowledge himself in the wrong, do whatever you may ask him. He can do it. None will question his courage. It has been proved too often." She rose and came to Ruth. She set her arm about her waist again, and poured shrewd persuasion over her cousin's indecision. "To-night you'll thank me for this thought," she assured her. "Why do you pause? Are you so selfish as to think more of the little humiliation that may await you than of Richard's life and honour?"

"No, no," Ruth protested feebly.

"What, then? Is Richard to go out and slay his honour by a show of fear before he is slain, himself, by the man he has insulted?"

"I'll go," said Ruth. Now that the resolve was taken, she was brisk, impatient. "Come, Diana. Let Jerry saddle for us. We'll ride to Zoyland Chase at once."

They went without a word to Richard who was still closeted with Vallancey, and riding forth they crossed the river and took the road that, skirting Sedgemoor, runs south to Weston Zoyland. They rode with little said until they came to the point where the road branches on the left, throwing out an arm across the moor towards Chedzoy, a mile or so short of Zoyland Chase. Here Diana reined in with a sharp gasp of pain. Ruth checked, and cried to know what ailed her.

"It is the sun, I think," muttered Diana, her hand to her brow. "I am sick and giddy." And she slipped a thought heavily to the ground. In an instant Ruth had dismounted and was beside her. Diana was pale, which lent colour to her complaint, for Ruth was not to know that the pallor sprang from her agitation in wondering whether the ruse she attempted would succeed or not.

A short stone's-throw from where they had halted stood a cottage back from the road in a little plot of ground, the property of a kindly old

woman known to both. There Diana expressed the wish to rest awhile, and thither they took their way, Ruth leading both horses and supporting her faltering cousin. The dame was all solicitude. Diana was led into her parlour, and what could be done was done. Her corsage was loosened, water drawn from the well and brought her to drink and bathe her brow.

She sat back languidly, her head lolling sideways against one of the wings of the great chair, and languidly assured them she would be better soon if she were but allowed to rest awhile. Ruth drew up a stool to sit beside her, for all that her soul fretted at this delay. What if in consequence she should reach Zoyland Chase too late—to find that Mr. Wilding had gone forth already? But even as she was about to sit, it seemed that the same thought had of a sudden come to Diana. The girl leaned forward, thrusting—as if by an effort—some of her faintness from her.

"Do not wait for me, Ruth," she begged.

"I must, child."

"You must not;" the other insisted. "Think what it may mean—Richard's life, perhaps. No, no, Ruth, dear. Go on; go on to Zoyland. I'll follow you in a few minutes."

"I'll wait for you," said Ruth with firmness.

At that Diana rose, and in rising staggered. "Then we'll push on at once," she gasped, as if speech itself were an excruciating effort.

"But you are in no case to stand!" said Ruth. "Sit, Diana, sit."

"Either you go on alone or I go with you, but go at once you must. At any moment Mr. Wilding may go forth, and your chance is lost. I'll not have Richard's blood upon my head."

Ruth wrung her hands in her dismay, confronted by a parlous

choice. Consent to Diana's accompanying her in this condition she could not; ride on alone to Mr. Wilding's house was hardly to be thought of, and yet if she delayed she was endangering Richard's life. By the very strength of her nature she was caught in the mesh of Diana's scheme. She saw that her hesitation was unworthy. This was no ordinary cause, no ordinary occasion. It was a time for heroic measures. She must ride on, nor could she consent to take Diana.

And so in the end she went, having seen her cousin settled again in the high chair, and took with her Diana's feeble assurances that she would follow her in a few moments, as soon as her faintness passed.

CHAPTER IV. TERMS OF SURRENDER

"MR. WILDING rode at dawn with Mr. Trenchard, madam," announced old Walters, the butler at Zoyland Chase. Old and familiar servant though he was, he kept from his countenance all manifestation of the deep surprise occasioned him by the advent of Mistress Westmacott, unescorted.

"He rode... at dawn?" faltered Ruth, and for a moment she stood irresolute, afraid and pondering in the shade of the great pillared porch. Then she took heart again. If he rode at dawn, it was not in quest of Richard that he went, since it had been near eleven o'clock when she had left Bridgwater. He must have gone on other business first, and, doubtless, before he went to the encounter he would be returning home. "Said he at what hour he would return?" she asked.

"He bade us expect him by noon, madam."

This gave confirmation to her thoughts. It wanted more than half an hour to noon already. "Then he may return at any moment?" said she.

"At any moment, madam," was the grave reply.

She took her resolve. "I will wait," she announced, to the man's increasing if undisplayed astonishment. "Let my horse be seen to."

He bowed his obedience, and she followed him—a slender, graceful figure in her dove-coloured riding-habit laced with silver—across the stone-flagged vestibule, through the cool gloom of the great hall, into the spacious library of which he held the door.

"Mistress Horton is following me," she informed the butler. "Will you bring her to me when she comes?"

Bowing again in silent acquiescence, the white-haired servant closed the door and left her. She stood in the centre of the great room, drawing off her riding-gloves, perturbed and frightened beyond all reason at finding herself for the first time under Mr. Wilding's roof. He was most handsomely housed. His grandfather, who had travelled in Italy, had built the Chase upon the severe and noble lines which there he had learnt to admire, and he had embellished its interior, too, with many treasures of art which with that intent he had there collected.

She dropped her whip and gloves on to a table, and sank into a chair to wait, her heart fluttering in her throat. Time passed, and in the silence of the great house her anxiety was gradually quieted, until at last through the long window that stood open came faintly wafted to her on the soft breeze of that June morning the sound of a church clock at Weston Zoyland chiming twelve. She rose with a start, bethinking her suddenly of Diana, and wondering why she had not yet arrived. Was the child's indisposition graver than she had led Ruth to suppose? She crossed to the windows and stood there drumming impatiently upon the pane, her eyes straying idly over the sweep of elm-fringed lawns towards the river gleaming silvery here and there between the trees in the distance.

Suddenly she caught a sound of hoofs. Was this Diana? She sped to the other window, the one that stood open, and now she heard the crunch of gravel and the champ of bits and the sound of more than two pairs of hoofs. She caught a glimpse of Mr. Wilding and Mr. Trenchard.

She felt the colour flying from her cheeks; again her heart fluttered in her throat, and it was in vain that with her hand she sought to repress the heaving of her breast. She was afraid; her every instinct

bade her slip through the window at which she stood and run from Zoyland Chase. And then she thought of Richard and his danger, and she seemed to gather courage from the reflection of her purpose in this house.

Men's voices reached her—a laugh, the harsh cawing of Nick Trenchard.

"A lady!" she heard him cry. "'Od's heart, Tony! Is this a time for trafficking with doxies?" She crimsoned an instant at the coarse word and set her teeth, only to pale again the next. The voices were lowered so that she heard not what was said; one sharp exclamation she recognized to be in Wilding's voice, but caught not the word he uttered. There followed a pause, and she stirred uneasily, waiting. Then came swift steps and jangling spurs across the hall, the door opened suddenly, and Mr. Wilding, in a scarlet riding-coat, his boots white with dust, stood bowing to her from the threshold.

"Your servant, Mistress Westmacott," she heard him murmur. "My house is deeply honoured."

She dropped him a half-curtsy, pale and tongue-tied. He turned to deliver hat and whip and gloves to Walters, who had followed him, then closed the door and came forward into the room.

"You will forgive that I present myself thus before you," he said, in apology for his dusty raiment. "But I bethought me you might be in haste, and Walters tells me that already have you waited nigh upon an hour. Will you not sit, madam?" And he advanced a chair. His long white face was set like a mask; but his dark, slanting eyes devoured her. He guessed the reason of her visit. She who had humbled him, who had driven him to the very borders of despair, was now to be humbled and to despair before him. Under the impassive face his soul exulted fiercely.

She disregarded the chair he proffered. "My visit... has no doubt surprised you," she began, tremulous and hesitating.

"I faith, no," he answered quietly. "The cause, after all, is not very far to seek. You are come on Richard's behalf."

"Not on Richard's," she answered. "On my own." And now that the ice was broken, the suspense of waiting over, she found the tide of her courage flowing fast. "This encounter must not take place, Mr. Wilding," she informed him.

He raised his eyebrows—fine and level as her own—his thin lips smiled never so faintly. "It is, I think," said he, "for Richard to prevent it. The chance was his last night. It shall be his again when we meet. If he will express regret..." He left his sentence there. In truth he mocked her, though she guessed it not.

"You mean," said she, "that if he makes apology...?"

"What else? What other way remains?"

She shook her head, and, if pale, her face was resolute, her glance steady.

"That is impossible," she told him. "Last night—as I have the story—he might have done it without shame. To-day it is too late. To tender his apology on the ground would be to proclaim himself a coward."

Mr. Wilding pursed his lips and shifted his position. "It is difficult, perhaps," said he, "but not impossible."

"It is impossible," she insisted firmly.

"I'll not quarrel with you for a word," he answered, mighty agreeable. "Call it impossible, if you will. Admit, however, that it is all I can suggest. You will do me the justice, I am sure, to see that in

expressing my willingness to accept your brother's expressions of regret I am proving myself once more your very obedient servant. But that it is you who ask it—and whose desires are my commands—I should let no man go unpunished for an insult such as your brother put upon me."

She winced at his words, at the bow with which he had professed himself once more her servant.

"It is no clemency that you offer him," she said. "You leave him a choice between death and dishonour."

"He has," Wilding reminded her, "the chance of combat."

She flung back her head impatiently. "I think you mock me," said she.

He looked at her keenly. "Will you tell me plainly, madam," he begged, "what you would have me do?"

She flushed under his gaze, and the flush told him what he sought to learn. There was, of course, another way, and she had thought of it; but she lacked—as well she might, all things considered—the courage to propose it. She had come to Mr. Wilding in the vague hope that he himself would choose the heroic part. And he, to punish for her scorn of him this woman whom he loved to hating-point, was resolved that she herself must beg it of him. Whether, having so far compelled her, he would grant her prayer or not was something he could not just then himself have told you. She bowed her head in silence, and Wilding, that faint smile, half friendliness, half mockery, hovering ever on his lips, turned aside and moved softly towards the window. Her eyes, veiled behind the long lashes of their drooping lids, followed him furtively. She felt that she hated him in very truth. She marked the upright elegance of his figure, the easy grace of his movements, the fine aristocratic mould of the aquiline face, which she

beheld in profile; and she hated him the more for these outward favours that must commend him to no lack of women. He was too masterful. He made her realize too keenly her own weakness and that of Richard. She felt that just now he controlled the vice that held her fast—her affection for her brother. And because of that she hated him the more. "You see, Mistress Westmacott," said he, his shoulder to her, his tone sweet to the point of sadness, "that there is nothing else." She stood, her eyes following the pattern of the parquetry, her foot unconsciously tracing it; her courage ebbed, and she had no answer for him. After a pause he spoke again, still without turning. "If that was not enough to suit your ends"—and though he spoke in a tone of ever-increasing sadness, there glinted through it the faintest ray of mockery—"I marvel you should have come to Zoyland—to compromise yourself to so little purpose."

She raised a startled face. "Com... compromise myself?" she echoed. "Oh!" It was a cry of indignation.

"What else?" quoth he, and turned abruptly to confront her.

"Mistress Horton was.., was with me," she panted, her voice quivering as on the brink of tears.

"'Tis unfortunate you should have separated," he consoled.

"But.., but, Mr. Wilding, I... I trusted to your honour. I accounted you a gentleman. Surely... surely, sir, you will not let it be known that... I came to you? You will keep my secret?"

"Secret!" said he, his eyebrows raised. "'Tis already the talk of the servants' hall. By to-morrow 'twill be the gossip of Bridgwater."

Air failed her Her blue eyes fixed him in horror out of her stricken face. Not a word had she wherewith to answer him.

The sight of her, thus, affected him oddly. His passion for her

surged up, aroused by pity for her plight, and awakened in him a sense of his brutality. A faint flush stirred in his cheeks. He stepped quickly to her, and caught her hand. She let it lie, cold and inert, within his nervous grasp.

"Ruth, Ruth!" he cried, and his voice was for once unsteady. "Give it no thought! I love you, Ruth. If you'll but heed that, no breath of scandal can hurt you."

She swallowed hard. "As how?" she asked mechanically.

He bowed low over her hand—so low that his face was hidden from her.

"If you will do me the honour to become my wife..." he began, but got no further, for she snatched away her hand, her cheeks crimsoning, her eyes aflame with indignation. He stepped back, crimsoning too. She had dashed the gentleness from his mood. He was angered now and tigerish.

"Oh!" she panted. "It is to affront me! Is this the time or place..."

He cropped her flow of indignant speech ere it was well begun. He caught her in his arms, and held her tight, and so sudden was the act, so firm his grip that she had not the thought or force to struggle.

"All time is love's time, all places are love's place," he told her, his face close to her own. "And of all time and places the present ever preferable to the wise—for life is uncertain and short at best. I bring you worship, and you answer me with scorn. But I shall prevail, and you shall come to love me in very spite of your own self."

She threw back her head, away from his as far as the bonds he had cast about her would allow. "Air! Air!" she panted feebly.

"Oh, you shall have air enough anon," he answered with a half-strangled laugh, his passion mounting ever. "Hark you, now—hark

you, for Richard's sake, since you'll not listen for my own nor yours. There is another course by which I can save both Richard's life and honour. You know it, and you counted upon my generosity to suggest it. But you overlooked the thing on which you should have counted. You overlooked my love. Count upon that, my Ruth, and Richard shall have naught to fear. Count upon that, and when we meet this evening Richard and I, it is I who will tender the apology, I who will admit that I was wrong to introduce your name into that company last night, and that what Richard did was a just and well-deserved punishment upon me. This will I do if you'll but count upon my love."

She looked up at him fearfully, yet with flutterings of hope. "What is't you mean?" she asked him faintly.

"That if you'll promise to be my wife..."

"Your wife!" she interrupted him. She struggled to free herself, released one arm and struck him in the face. "Let me go, you coward!"

He was answered. His arms melted from her. He fell back a pace, very white and even trembling, the fire all gone from his eye, which was now turned dull and deadly.

"So be it," he said, and strode to the bell-rope. "I'll not offend again. I had not offended now"—he continued, in the voice of one offering an explanation cold and formal—"but that when first I came into your life you seemed to bid me welcome." His fingers closed upon the crimson bell-cord. She guessed his purpose.

"Wait!" she gasped, and put forth her hand. He paused, the rope in his, his eye kindling anew. "You... you mean to kill Richard now?" she asked him.

A swift lifting of his brows was his only answer. He tugged the cord. From the distance the peal of the bell reached them faintly.

"Oh, wait, wait!" she begged, her hands pressed against her cheeks. He stood impassible—hatefully impassible. "..... if I were to consent to... this... how... how soon...?" He understood the unfinished question. Interest warmed his face again. He took a step towards her, but by a gesture she seemed to beg him come no nearer.

"If you will promise to marry me within the week, Richard shall have no cause to fear either for his life or his honour at my hands."

She seemed now to be recovering her calm. "Very well," she said, her voice singularly steady. "Let that be a bargain between us. Spare Richard's life and honour—both, remember!—and on Sunday next..." For all her courage her voice quavered and faltered. She dared add no more, lest it should break altogether.

Mr. Wilding drew a deep breath. Again he would have advanced. "Ruth!" he cried, and some repentance smote him, some shame shook him in his purpose. At that moment it was in his mind to capitulate unconditionally; to tell her that Richard should have naught to fear from him, and yet that she should go free as the winds. Her gesture checked him. It was so eloquent of aversion. He paused in his advance, stifled his better feelings, and turned once more, relentless. The door opened and old Walters stood awaiting his commands.

"Mistress Westmacott is leaving," he informed his servant, and bowed low and formally in farewell before her. She passed out without another word, the old butler following, and presently through the door that remained open came Trenchard, in quest of Mr. Wilding who stood bemused.

Nick sauntered in, his left eye almost hidden by the rakish cock of his hat, one hand tucked away under the skirts of his plum-coloured coat, the other supporting the stem of a long clay pipe, at which he was pulling thoughtfully. The pipe and he were all but inseparable;

indeed, the year before in London he had given appalling scandal by appearing with it in the Mall, and had there remained him any character to lose, he must assuredly have lost it then.

He observed his friend through narrowing eyes—he had small eyes, very blue and very bright, in which there usually abode a roguish gleam.

"My sight, Anthony," said he, "reminds me that I am growing old. I wonder did it mislead me on the score of your visitor?"

"The lady who left," said Wilding with a touch of severity, "will be Mistress Wilding by this day se'night."

Trenchard took the pipe from his lips, audibly blew out a cloud of smoke and stared at his friend. "Body o' me!" quoth he. "Is this a time for marrying?—with these rumours of Monmouth's coming over."

Wilding made an impatient gesture. "I thought to have convinced you they are idle," said he, and flung himself into a chair at his writing-table.

Nick came over and perched himself upon the table's edge, one leg swinging in the air. "And what of this matter of the intercepted letter from London to our Taunton friends?"

"I can't tell you. But of this I am sure, His Grace is incapable of anything so rash. Certain is it that he'll not stir until Battiscomb returns to Holland, and Battiscomb is still in Cheshire sounding the Duke's friends."

"Yet were I you, I should not marry just at present."

Wilding smiled. "If you were me, you'd never marry at all."

"Faith, no!" said Trenchard. "I'd as soon play at 'hot-cockles,' or 'Parson-has-lost-his-cloak.' 'Tis a mort more amusing and the sooner

done with."

CHAPTER V. THE ENCOUNTER

Ruth Wesmacott rode back like one in a dream, with vague and hazy notions of what she saw or did. So overwrought was she by the interview from which she came, her mind so obsessed by it, that never a thought had she for Diana and her indisposition until she arrived home to find her cousin there before her. Diana was in tears, called up by the reproaches of her mother, Lady Horton—the relict of that fine soldier Sir Cholmondeley Horton, of Taunton.

The girl had arrived at Lupton House a half-hour ahead of Miss Westmacott, and upon her arrival she had expressed surprise, either feigned or real, at finding Ruth still absent. Detecting the alarm that Diana was careful to throw into her voice and manner, her mother questioned her, and elicited the story of her faintness and of Ruth's having ridden on alone to Mr. Wilding's. So outraged was Lady Horton that for once in a way this woman, usually so meek and ease-loving, was roused to an energy and anger with her daughter and her niece that threatened to remove Diana at once from the pernicious atmosphere of Lupton House and carry her home to Taunton. Ruth found her still at her remonstrances, arrived, indeed, in time for her share of them.

"I have been sore mistaken in you, Ruth!" the dame reproached her. "I can scarce believe it of you. I have held you up as an example to Diana, for the discretion and wisdom of your conduct, and you do this! You go alone to Mr. Wilding's house—to Mr. Wilding's, of all men!"

"It was no time for ordinary measures," said Ruth, but she spoke without any of the heat of one who defends her conduct. She was, the

stily watchful Diana observed, very white and tired. "It was no time to think of nice conduct. There was Richard to be saved."

"And was it worth ruining yourself to do that?" quoth Lady Horton, her colour high.

"Ruining myself?" echoed Ruth, and she smiled never so weary a smile. "I have, indeed, done that, though not in the way you mean."

Mother and daughter eyed her, mystified. "Your good name is blasted," said her aunt, "unless so be that Mr. Wilding is proposing to make you his wife." It was a sneer the good woman could not, in her indignation, repress.

"That is what Mr. Wilding has done me the honour to propose," Ruth answered bitterly, and left them gaping. "We are to be married this day se'night."

A dead silence followed the calm announcement. Then Diana rose. At the misery, the anguish that could impress so strange and white a look on Ruth's winsome face, she was smitten with remorse, her incipient satisfaction dashed. This was her work; the fruit of her scheming. But it had gone further than she had foreseen; and for all that no result could better harmonize with her own ambitions and desires, for the moment—under the first shock of that announcement—she felt guilty and grew afraid.

"Ruth!" she cried, her voice a whisper of stupefaction. "Oh, I wish I had come with you!"

"But you couldn't; you were faint." And then—recalling what had passed—her mind was filled with sudden concern for Diana, even amid her own sore troubles. "Are you quite yourself again, Diana?" she inquired.

Diana answered almost fiercely, "I am quite well." And then, with a

change to wistfulness, she added, "Oh, I would I had come with you!"

"Matters had been no different," Ruth assured her. "It was a bargain Mr. Wilding drove. It was the price I had to pay for Richard's life and honour." She swallowed hard, and let her hands fall limply to her sides. "Where is Richard?" she inquired.

It was her aunt who answered her. "He went forth half an hour ago with Mr. Vallancey and Sir Rowland."

"Sir Rowland had returned, then?" She looked up quickly.

"Yes," answered Diana. "But he had achieved nothing by his visit to Lord Gervase. His lordship would not intervene; he swore he hoped the cub would be flayed alive by Wilding. Those were his lordship's words, as Sir Rowland repeated them. Sir Rowland is in sore distress for Richard. He has gone with them to the meeting."

"At least, he has no longer cause for his distress," said Miss Westmacott with her bitter smile, and sank as one exhausted to a chair. Lady Horton moved to comfort her, her motherliness all aroused for this motherless girl, usually so wise and strong, and seemingly wiser and stronger than ever in this thing that Lady Horton had deemed a weakness and a folly.

Meanwhile, Richard and his two friends were on their way to the moors across the river to the encounter with Mr. Wilding. But before they had got him to ride forth, Vallancey had had occasion to regret that he stood committed to a share in this quarrel, for he came to know Richard as he really was. He had found him in an abject state, white and trembling, his coward's fancy anticipating a hundred times a minute the death he was anon to die.

Vallancey had hailed him cheerily.

"The day is yours, Dick," he had cried, when Richard entered the

library where he awaited him. "Wild Wilding has ridden to Taunton this morning and is to be back by noon. Odsbud, Dick!—twenty miles and more in the saddle before coming on the ground. Heard you ever of the like madness? He'll be stiff as a broom-handle—an easy victim."

Richard listened, stared, and, finding Vallancey's eyes fixed steadily upon him, attempted a smile and achieved a horrible grimace.

"What ails you, man?" cried his second, and caught him by the wrist. He felt the quiver of the other's limb. "Stab me!" quoth he, "you are in no case to fight. What the plague ails you?"

"I am none so well this morning," answered Richard feebly. "Lord Gervase's claret," he added, passing a hand across his brow.

"Lord Gervase's claret?" echoed Vallancey in horror, as at some outrageous blasphemy. "Frontignac at ten shillings the bottle!" he exclaimed.

"Still, claret never does lie easy on my stomach," Richard explained, intent upon blaming Lord Gervase's wine—since he could think of nothing else—for his condition.

Vallancey looked at him shrewdly. "My cock," said he, "if you're to fight we'll have to mend your temper." He took it upon himself to ring the bell, and to order up two bottles of Canary and one of brandy. If he was to get his man to the ground at all—and young Vallancey had a due sense of his responsibilities in that connection—it would be well to supply Richard with something to replace the courage that had oozed out overnight. Young Richard, never loath to fortify himself, proved amenable enough to the stiffly laced Canary that his friend set before him. Then, to divert his mind, Vallancey, with that rash freedom that had made the whole of Somerset know him for a rebel, set

himself to talk of the Protestant Duke and his right to the crown of England.

He was still at his talk, Richard listening moodily what time he was slowly but surely befuddling himself, when Sir Rowland—returning from Scoresby Hall—came to bring the news of his lack of success. Richard hailed him noisily, and bade him ring for another glass, adding, with a burst of oaths, some appalling threats of how anon he should serve Anthony Wilding. His wits drowned in the stiff liquor Vallancey had pressed upon him, he seemed of a sudden to have grown as fierce and bloodthirsty as any scourer that ever terrorized the watch.

Blake listened to him and grunted. "Body o' me!" swore the town gallant. "If that's the humour you're going out to fight in, I'll trouble you for the eight guineas I won from you at Primero yesterday before you start."

Richard reared himself, by the help of the table, and stood a thought unsteadily, his glance laboriously striving to engage Blake's.

"Damn me!" quoth he. "Your want of faith dishgraces me—and 't 'shgraces you. Shalt ha' the guineas when we're back—and not before."

"Hum!" quoth Blake, to whom eight guineas were a consideration in these bankrupt days. "And if you don't come back at all upon whom am I to draw?"

The suggestion sank through Dick's half-fuddled senses, and the scare it gave him was reflected on his face.

"Damn you, Blake!" swore Vallancey between his teeth. "Is that a decent way to talk to a man who is going out? Never heed him, Dick! Let him wait for his dirty guineas till we return."

"Thirty guineas?" hiccoughed Richard. "It was only eight. Anyhow—wait'll I've sli' the gullet of's Mr. Wilding." He checked on a thought that suddenly occurred to him. He turned to Vallancey with a ludicrous solemnity. "'Sbud!" he swore. "'S a scurvy trick I'm playing the Duke. 'S treason to him—treason no less." And he smote the table with his open hand.

"What's that?" quoth Blake so sharply, his eyes so suddenly alert that Vallancey made haste to cover up his fellow rebel's indiscretion.

"It's the brandy-and-Canary makes him dream," said he with a laugh, and rising as he spoke he announced that it was high time they should set out. Thus he brought about a bustle that drove the Duke's business from Richard's mind, and left Blake without a pretext to pursue his quest for information. But the mischief was done, and Blake's suspicions were awake. He bethought him now of dark hints that Richard had let fall to Vallancey in the past few days, and of hints less dark with which Vallancey—who was a careless fellow at ordinary times—had answered. And now this mention of the Duke and of treason to him—to what Duke could it refer but Monmouth?

Blake was well aware of the wild tales that were going round, and he began to wonder now was aught really afoot, and was his good friend Westmacott in it?

If there was, he bethought him that the knowledge might be of value, and it might help to float once more his shipwrecked fortunes. The haste with which Vallancey had proffered a frivolous explanation of Richard's words, the bustle with which upon the instant he swept Richard and Sir Rowland from the house to get to horse and ride out to Bridgwater were in themselves circumstances that went to heighten those suspicions of Sir Rowland's. But lacking all opportunity for investigation at the moment, he deemed it wisest to say no more just then lest he should betray his watchfulness.

They were the first to arrive upon the ground—an open space on the borders of Sedgemoor, in the shelter of Polden Hill. But they had not long to wait before Wilding and Trenchard rode up, attended by a groom. Their arrival had an oddly sobering effect upon young Westmacott, for which Mr. Vallancey was thankful. For during their ride he had begun to fear that he had carried too far the business of equipping his principal with artificial valour.

Trenchard came forward to offer Vallancey the courteous suggestion that Mr. Wilding's servant should charge himself with the care of the horses of Mr. Westmacott's party, if this would be a convenience to them. Vallancey thanked him and accepted the offer, and thus the groom—instructed by Trenchard—led the five horses some distance from the spot.

It now became a matter of making preparation, and leaving Richard to divest himself of such garments as he might deem cumbrous, Vallancey went forward to consult with Trenchard upon the choice of ground. At that same moment Mr. Wilding lounged forward, flicking the grass with his whip in an absent manner.

"Mr. Vallancey," he began, when Trenchard turned to interrupt him.

"You can leave it safely to me, Tony," he growled. "But there is something I wish to say, Nick," answered Mr. Wilding, his manner mild. "By your leave, then." And he turned again to Vallancey. "Will you be so good as to call Mr. Westmacott hither?"

Vallancey stared. "For what purpose, sir?" he asked.

"For my purpose," answered Mr. Wilding sweetly. "It is no longer my wish to engage with Mr. Westmacott.

"Anthony!" cried Trenchard, and in his amazement forgot to swear.

"I propose," added Mr. Wilding, "to relieve Mr. Westmacott of the

necessity of fighting."

Vallancey in his heart thought this might be pleasant news for his principal. Still, he did not quite see how the end was to be attained, and said so.

"You shall be enlightened if you will do as I request," Wilding insisted, and Vallancey, with a lift of the brows, a snort, and a shrug, turned away to comply.

"Do you mean," quoth Trenchard, bursting with indignation, "that you will let live a man who has struck you?"

Wilding took his friend affectionately by the arm. "It is a whim of mine," said he. "Do you think, Nick, that it is more than I can afford to indulge?"

"I say not so," was the ready answer; "but..."

"I thought you'd not," said Mr. Wilding, interrupting. "And if any does—why, I shall be glad to prove it upon him that he lies." He laughed, and Trenchard, vexed though he was, was forced to laugh with him. Then Nick set himself to urge the thing that last night had plagued his mind: that this Richard might prove a danger to the Cause; that in the Duke's interest, if not to safeguard his own person from some vindictive betrayal, Wilding would be better advised in imposing a reliable silence upon him.

"But why vindictive?" Mr. Wilding remonstrated. "Rather must he have cause for gratitude."

Mr. Trenchard laughed short and contemptuously. "There is," said he, "no rancour more bitter than that of the mean man who has offended you and whom you have spared. I beg you'll ponder it." He lowered his voice as he ended his admonition, for Vallancey and Westmacott were coming up, followed by Sir Rowland Blake.

Richard, although his courage had been sinking lower and lower in a measure as he had grown more and more sober with the approach of the moment for engaging, came forward now with a firm step and an arrogant mien; for Vallancey had given him more than a hint of what was toward. His heart had leapt, not only at the deliverance that was promised him, but out of satisfaction at the reflection of how accurately last night he had gauged what Mr. Wilding would endure. It had dismayed him then, as we have seen, that this man who, he thought, must stomach any affront from him out of consideration for his sister, should have ended by calling him to account. He concluded now that upon reflection Wilding had seen his error, and was prepared to make amends that he might extricate himself from an impossible situation, and Richard blamed himself for having overlooked this inevitable solution and given way to idle panic.

Vallancey and Blake watching him, and the sudden metamorphosis that was wrought in him, despised him heartily, and yet were glad—for the sake of their association with him—that things were as they were.

"Mr. Westmacott," said Wilding quietly, his eyes steadily set upon Richard's own arrogant gaze, his lips smiling a little, "I am here not to fight, but to apologize."

Richard's sneer was audible to all. Oh, he was gathering courage fast now that there no longer was the need for it. It urged him to lengths of daring possible only to a fool.

"If you can take a blow, Mr. Wilding," said he offensively, "that is your own affair."

And his friends gasped at his temerity and trembled for him, not knowing what grounds he had for counting himself unassailable.

"Just so," said Mr. Wilding, as meek and humble as a nun, and

Trenchard, who had expected something very different from him, swore aloud and with some circumstance of oaths. "The fact is," continued Mr. Wilding, "that what I did last night, I did in the heat of wine, and I am sorry for it. I recognize that this quarrel is of my provoking; that it was unwarrantable in me to introduce the name of Mistress Westmacott, no matter how respectfully; and that in doing so I gave Mr. Westmacott ample grounds for offence. For that I beg his pardon, and I venture to hope that this matter need go no further."

Vallancey and Blake were speechless in astonishment; Trenchard livid with fury. Westmacott moved a step or two forward, a swagger unmistakable in his gait, his nether-lip thrust out in a sneer.

"Why," said he, his voice mighty disdainful, "if Mr. Wilding apologizes, the matter hardly can go further." He conveyed such a suggestion of regret at this that Trenchard bounded forward, stung to speech.

"But if Mr. Westmacott's disappointment threatens to overwhelm him," he snapped, very tartly, "I am his humble servant, and he may call upon me to see that he's not robbed of the exercise he came to take."

Mr. Wilding set a restraining hand upon Trenchard's arm.

Westmacott turned to him, the sneer, however, gone from his face.

"I have no quarrel with you, sir," said he, with an uneasy assumption of dignity.

"It's a want that may be soon supplied," answered Trenchard briskly, and, as he afterwards confessed, had not Wilding checked him at that moment, he had thrown his hat in Richard's face.

It was Vallancey who saved the situation, cursing in his heart the bearing of his principal.

"Mr. Wilding," said he, "this is very handsome in you. You are of the happy few who may tender such an apology without reflection upon your courage."

Mr. Wilding made him a leg very elegantly. "You are vastly kind, sir," said he.

"You have given Mr. Westmacott the fullest satisfaction, and it is with an increased respect for you—if that were possible—that I acknowledge it on my friend's behalf."

"You are, sir, a very mirror of the elegancies," said Mr. Wilding, and Vallancey wondered was he being laughed at. Whether he was or not, he conceived that he had done the only seemly thing. He had made handsome acknowledgment of a handsome apology, stung to it by the currishness of Richard.

And there the matter ended, despite Trenchard's burning eagerness to carry it himself to a different consummation. Wilding prevailed upon him, and withdrew him from the field. But as they rode back to Zoyland Chase the old rake was bitter in his inveighings against Wilding's folly and weakness.

"I pray Heaven," he kept repeating, "that it may not come to cost you dear."

"Have done," said Mr. Wilding, a trifle out of patience. "Could I wed the sister having slain the brother?"

And Trenchard, understanding at last, accounted himself a numskull that he had not understood before. But he none the less deemed it a pity Richard had been spared.

CHAPTER VI. THE CHAMPION

As vainglorious was Richard Westmacott's retreat from the field of unstricken battle as his advance upon it had been inglorious. He spoke with confidence now of the narrow escape that Wilding had had at his hands, of the things he would have done to Wilding had not that gentleman grown wise in time. Sir Rowland, who had seen little of Richard's earlier stricken condition, was in a measure imposed upon by his blustering tone and manner; not so Vallancey, who remembered the steps he had been forced to take to bolster up the young man's courage sufficiently to admit of his being brought to the encounter. Richard so disgusted him that he felt if he did not quit his company soon, he would be quarrelling with him himself. So, congratulating him, in a caustic manner that Richard did not relish, upon the happy termination of the affair, Vallancey took his leave of him and Blake at the cross-roads, pleading business with Lord Gervase, and left them to proceed without him to Bridgwater.

Blake, whose suspicions of some secret matter to which Vallancey and Richard were wedded, had been earlier excited by Westmacott's indiscretions, was full of sly questions now touching the business which might be taking Vallancey to Scoresby. But Richard was too full of the subject of the fear he had instilled into Wilding to afford his companion much satisfaction on any other score. Thus they came to Lupton House, and as Richard swaggered down the lawn into the presence of the ladies—Ruth and her aunt were occupying the stone bench, Diana the circular seat about the great oak in the centre of the lawn—he was a very different person from the pale, limp creature they had beheld there some few hours earlier. Loud and offensive was he now in self-laudation, and so indifferent to all else that he left unobserved the little smile, half wistful, half scornful, that visited his

sister's lips when he sneeringly told how Mr. Wilding had chosen that better part of valour which discretion is alleged to be.

It needed Diana, who, blinded by no sisterly affection, saw him exactly as he was, and despised him accordingly, to enlighten him. It may also be that in doing so at once she had ends of her own to serve; for Sir Rowland was still of the company.

"Mr. Wilding afraid?" she cried, her voice so charged with derision that it inclined to shrillness. "La! Richard, Mr. Wilding was never afraid of any man."

"Faith!" said Rowland, although his acquaintance with Mr. Wilding was slight and recent. "It is what I should think. He does not look like a man familiar with fear."

Richard struck something of an attitude, his fair face flushed, his pale eyes glittering. "He took a blow," said he, and sneered.

"There may have been reasons," Diana suggested darkly, and Sir Rowland's eyes narrowed at the hint.

Again he recalled the words Richard had let fall that afternoon. Wilding and he were fellow workers in some secret business, and Richard had said that the encounter was treason to that same business, whatever it might be. And of what it might be Sir Rowland had grounds upon which to found at least a guess. Had perhaps Wilding acted upon some similar feelings in avoiding the duel? He wondered; and when Richard dismissed Diana's challenge with a fatuous laugh, it was Blake who took it up.

"You speak, ma'am," said he, "as if you knew that there were reasons, and knew, too, what those reasons might be."

Diana looked at Ruth, as if for guidance before replying. But Ruth sat calm and seemingly impassive, looking straight before her. She was, indeed, indifferent how much Diana said, for in any case the matter could not remain a secret long. Lady Horton, silent too and listening, looked a question at her daughter.

And so, after a pause: "I know both," said Diana, her eyes straying again to Ruth; and a subtler man than Blake would have read that glance and understood that this same reason which he sought so diligently sat there before him.

Richard, indeed, catching that sly look of his cousin's, checked his assurance, and stood frowning, cogitating. Then, quite suddenly, his voice harsh:

"What do you mean, Diana?" he inquired.

Diana shrugged and turned her shoulder to him. "You had best ask Ruth," said she, which was an answer more or less plain to both the men.

They stood at gaze, Richard looking a thought foolish. Blake, frowning, his heavy lip caught in his strong, white teeth.

Ruth turned to her brother with an almost piteous attempt at a smile. She sought to spare him pain by excluding from her manner all suggestion that things were other than she desired.

"I am betrothed to Mr. Wilding," said she.

Sir Rowland made a sudden forward movement, drew a deep breath, and as suddenly stood still. Richard looked at his sister as she were mad and raving. Then he laughed, between unbelief and derision.

"It is a jest," said he, but his accents lacked conviction.

"It is the truth," Ruth assured him quietly.

"The truth?" His brow darkened ominously—stupendously for one so fair. "The truth, you baggage...?" He began and stopped in very fury.

She saw that she must tell him all.

"I promised to wed Mr. Wilding this day se'night so that he saved your life and honour," she told him calmly, and added, "It was a bargain that we drove." Richard continued to stare at her. The thing she told him was too big to be swallowed at a mouthful; he was absorbing it by slow degrees.

"So now," said Diana, "you know the sacrifice your sister has made to save you, and when you speak of the apology Mr. Wilding tendered you, perhaps you'll speak of it in a tone less loud."

But the sarcasm was no longer needed. Already poor Richard was very humble, his make-believe spirit all snuffed out. He observed at last how pale and set was his sister's face, and he realized something of the sacrifice she had made. Never in all his life was Richard so near to lapsing from the love of himself; never so near to forgetting his own interests, and preferring those of Ruth. Lady Horton sat silent, her heart fluttering with dismay and perplexity. Heaven had not equipped her with a spirit capable of dealing with a situation such as this. Blake stood in make believe stolidity dissembling his infinite chagrin and the stormy emotions warring within him, for some signs of which Diana watched his countenance in vain.

"You shall not do it!" cried Richard suddenly. He came forward and laid his hand on his sister's shoulder. His voice was almost gentle. "Ruth, you shall not do this for me. You must not."

"By Heaven, no!" snapped Blake before she could reply. "You are right,

Richard. Mistress Westmacott must not be the scapegoat. She shall not play the part of Iphigenia."

But Ruth smiled wistfully as she answered him with a question, "Where is the help for it?"

Richard knew where the help for it lay, and for once—for just a moment—he contemplated danger and even death with equanimity.

"I can take up this quarrel again," he announced. "I can compel Mr. Wilding to meet me."

Ruth's eyes, looking up at him, kindled with pride and admiration. It warmed her heart to hear him speak thus, to have this assurance that he was anything but the coward she had been so disloyal as to deem him; no doubt she had been right in saying that it was his health was the cause of the palsy he had displayed that morning; he was a little wild, she knew; inclined to sit over-late at the bottle; with advancing manhood, she had no doubt, he would overcome this boyish failing. Meanwhile it was this foolish habit—nothing more—that undermined the inherent firmness of his nature. And it comforted her generous soul to have this proof that he was full worthy of the sacrifice she was making for him. Diana watched him in some surprise, and never doubted but that his offer was impulsive, and that he would regret it when his ardour had had time to cool.

"It were idle," said Ruth at last—not that she quite believed it, but that it was all-important to her that Richard should not be imperilled. "Mr. Wilding will prefer the bargain he has made."

"No doubt," growled Blake, "but he shall be forced to unmake it." He advanced and bowed low before her. "Madam," said he, "will you grant me leave to champion your cause and remove this troublesome Mr. Wilding from your path?"

Diana's eyes narrowed; her cheeks paled, partly from fear for Blake, partly from vexation at the promptness of an offer that afforded a fresh and so eloquent proof of the trend of his affections.

Ruth smiled at him in a very friendly manner, but gently shook her head.

"I thank you, sir," said she. "But it were more than I could permit. This has become a family affair."

There was in her tone something which, despite its friendliness, gave Sir Rowland his dismissal. He was not at best a man of keen sensibilities; yet even so, he could not mistake the request to withdraw that was implicit in her tone and manner. He took his leave, registering, however, in his heart a vow that he would have his way with Wilding. Thus must he—through her gratitude—assuredly come to have his way with Ruth.

Diana rose and turned to her mother. "Come," she said, "we'll speed Sir Rowland. Ruth and Richard would perhaps prefer to remain alone."

Ruth thanked her with her eyes. Richard, standing beside his sister with bent head and moody gaze, did not appear to have heard. Thus he remained until he and his half-sister were alone together, then he flung himself wearily into the seat beside her, and took her hand.

"Ruth," he faltered, "Ruth!"

She stroked his hand, her honest, intelligent eyes bent upon him in a look of pity—and to indulge this pity for him, she forgot how much herself she needed pity.

"Take it not so to heart," she urged him, her voice low and crooning—as that of a mother to her babe. "Take it not so to heart, Richard. I should have married some day, and, after all, it may well be that Mr.

Wilding will make me as good a husband as another. I do believe," she added, her only intent to comfort Richard; "that he loves me; and if he loves me, surely he will prove kind."

He flung himself back with an exclamation of angry pain. He was white to the lips, his eyes bloodshot. "It must not be—it shall not be—I'll not endure it!" he cried hoarsely.

"Richard, dear..." she began, recapturing the hand he had snatched from hers in his gust of emotion.

He rose abruptly, interrupting her. "I'll go to Wilding now," he cried, his voice resolute. "He shall cancel this bargain he had no right to make. He shall take up his quarrel with me where it stood before you went to him."

"No, no, Richard, you must not!" she urged him, frightened, rising too, and clinging to his arm.

"I will," he answered. "At the worst he can but kill me. But at least you shall not be sacrificed."

"Sit here, Richard," she bade him. "There is something you have not considered. If you die, if Mr. Wilding kills you..." she paused.

He looked at her, and at the repetition of the fate that would probably await him if he persevered in the course he threatened, his purely emotional courage again began to fail him. A look of fear crept gradually into his face to take the room of the resolution that had been stamped upon it but a moment since.

He swallowed hard. "What then?" he asked, his voice harsh, and, obeying her command and the pressure on his hand, he resumed his seat beside her.

She spoke now at length and very gravely, dwelling upon the circumstance that he was the head of the family, the last Westmacott of his line, pointing out to him the importance of his existence, the insignificance of her own. She was but a girl, a thing of small account where the perpetuation of a family was at issue. After all, she must marry somebody some day, she repeated, and perhaps she had been foolish in attaching too much importance to the tales she had heard of Mr. Wilding. Probably he was no worse than other men, and after all he was a gentleman of wealth and position, such a man as half the women in Somerset might be proud to own for husband.

Her arguments and his weakness—his returning cowardice, which made him lend an ear to those same arguments—prevailed with him; at least they convinced him that he was far too important a person to risk his life in this quarrel upon which he had so rashly entered. He did not say that he was convinced; but he said that he would give the matter thought, hinting that perhaps some other way might present itself of cancelling the bargain she had made. They had a week before them, and in any case he promised readily in answer to her entreaties—for her faith in him was a thing unquenchable—that he would do nothing without taking counsel with her.

Meanwhile Diana had escorted Sir Rowland to the main gates of Lupton House, in front of which Miss Westmacott's groom was walking his horse, awaiting him.

"Sir Rowland," said she at parting, "your chivalry makes you take this matter too deeply to heart. You overlook the possibility that my cousin may have good reason for not desiring your interference."

He looked keenly at this little lady to whom a month ago he had been on the point of offering marriage. His coxcombry might readily have suggested to him that she was in love with him, but that his conscience and inclinations urged him to assure himself that this was not the case.

"What shall that mean, madam?" he asked her.

Diana hesitated. "What I have said is plain," she answered, and it was clear that she held something back.

Sir Rowland flattered himself upon the shrewdness with which he read her, never dreaming that he had but read just what she intended he should.

He stood squarely before her, shaking his great head. "Not plain enough for me," he said. Then his tone softened to one of prayer. "Tell me," he besought her.

"I can't! I can't!" she cried in feigned distress. "It were too disloyal."

He frowned. He caught her arm and pressed it, his heart sick with jealous alarm. "What do you mean? Tell me, tell me, Mistress Horton."

Diana lowered her eyes. "You'll not betray me?" she stipulated.

"Why, no. Tell me."

She flushed delicately. "I am disloyal to Ruth," she said, "and yet I am loath to see you cozened."

"Cozened?" quoth he hoarsely, his egregious vanity in arms. "Cozened?"

Diana explained. "Ruth was at his house to-day," said she, "closeted alone with him for an hour or more."

"Impossible!" he cried.

"Where else was the bargain made?" she asked, and shattered his last doubt. "You know that Mr. Wilding has not been here."

Yet Blake struggled heroically against conviction.

"She went to intercede for Richard," he protested. Miss Horton looked up at him, and under her glance Sir Rowland felt that he was a man of unfathomable ignorance. Then she turned aside her eyes and shrugged her shoulders 'very eloquently. "You are a man of the world, Sir Rowland. You cannot seriously suppose that any maid would so imperil her good name in any cause?"

Darker grew his florid countenance; his bulging eyes looked troubled and perplexed.

"You mean that she loves him?" he said, between question and assertion.

Diana pursed her lips. "You shall draw your own inference," quoth she.

He breathed heavily, and squared his broad shoulders, as one who braces himself for battle against an element stronger than himself.

"But her talk of sacrifice?" he cried.

Diana laughed, and again he was stung by her contempt of his perceptions. "Her brother is set against her marrying him," said she. "Here was her chance. Is it not very plain?"

Doubt stared from his eyes. "Why do you tell me this?"

"Because I esteem you, Sir Rowland," she answered very gently. "I would not have you meddle in a matter you cannot mend."

"Which I am not desired to mend, say rather," he replied with heavy sarcasm. "She would not have my interference!" He laughed angrily. "I think you are right, Mistress Diana," he said, "and I think that more than ever is there the need to kill this Mr. Wilding."

He took his departure abruptly, leaving her scared at the mischief she had made for him in seeking to save him from it, and that very

night he sought out Wilding.

But Wilding was from home again. Under its placid surface the West Country was in a ferment. And if hitherto Mr. Wilding had disdained the insistent rumours of Monmouth's coming, his assurance was shaken now by proof that the Government, itself, was stirring; for four companies of foot and a troop of horse had been that day ordered to Taunton by the Deputy-Lieutenant. Wilding was gone with Trenchard to White Lackington in a vain hope that there he might find news to confirm his persisting unbelief in any such rashness as was alleged on Monmouth's part.

So Blake was forced to wait, but his purpose suffered nothing by delay.

Returning on the morrow, he found Mr. Wilding at table with Nick Trenchard, and he cut short the greetings of both men. He flung his hat—a black castor trimmed with a black feather—rudely among the dishes on the board.

"I have come to ask you, Mr. Wilding," said he, "to be so good as to tell me the colour of that hat."

Mr. Wilding raised one eyebrow and looked aslant at Trenchard, whose weather-beaten face was suddenly agrin with stupefaction.

"I could not," said Mr. Wilding, "deny an answer to a question set so courteously." He looked up into Blake's flushed and scowling face with the sweetest and most innocent of smiles. "You'll no doubt disagree with me," said he, "but I love to meet a man halfway. Your hat, sir, is as white as virgin snow."

Blake's slow wits were disconcerted for a moment. Then he smiled viciously. "You mistake, Mr. Wilding," said he. "My hat is black."

Mr. Wilding looked more attentively at the object in dispute. He was

in a trifling mood, and the stupidity of this runagate debtor afforded him opportunities to indulge it. "Why, true," said he, "now that I come to look, I perceive that it is indeed black."

And again was Sir Rowland disconcerted. Still he pursued the lesson he had taught himself.

"You are mistaken again," said he, "that hat is green."

"Indeed?" quoth Mr. Wilding, like one surprised and he turned to Trenchard, who was enjoying himself. "What is your own opinion of it, Nick?"

Thus appealed to, Trenchard's reply was prompt. "Why, since you ask me," said he, "my opinion is that it's a noisome thing not meet for a gentleman's table." And he took it up, and threw it through the window.

Sir Rowland was entirely put out of countenance. Here was a deliberate shifting of the quarrel he had come to pick, which left him all at sea. It was his duty to himself to take offence at Mr. Trenchard's action. But that was not the business on which he had come. He became angry.

"Blister me!" he cried. "Must I sweep the cloth from the table before you'll understand me?"

"If you were to do anything so unmannerly I should have you flung out of the house," said Mr. Wilding, "and it would distress me so to treat a person of your station and quality. The hat shall serve your purpose, although Mr. Trenchard's concern for my table has removed it. Our memories will supply its absence. What colour did you say it was?"

"I said it was green," answered Blake, quite ready to keep to the point.

"Nay, I am sure you were wrong," said Wilding with a grave air. "Although I admit that since it is your own hat, you should be the best judge of its colour, I am, nevertheless, of opinion that it is black."

"And if I were to say that it is white?" asked Blake, feeling mighty ridiculous.

"Why, in that case you would be confirming my first impression of it," answered Wilding, and Trenchard let fly a burst of laughter at sight of the baronet's furious and bewildered countenance. "And since we are agreed on that," continued Mr. Wilding, imperturbable, "I hope you'll join us at supper."

"I'll be damned," roared Blake, "if ever I sit at table of yours, sir."

"Ah!" said Mr. Wilding regretfully. "Now you become offensive."

"I mean to be," said Blake.

"You astonish me!"

"You lie! I don't," Sir Rowland answered him in triumph. He had got it out at last.

Mr. Wilding sat back in his chair, and looked at him, his face inexpressibly shocked.

"Will you of your own accord deprive us of your company, Sir Rowland," he wondered, "or shall Mr. Trenchard throw you after your hat?"

"Do you mean..." gasped the other, "that you'll ask no satisfaction of me?"

"Not so. Mr. Trenchard shall wait upon your friends to-morrow, and I hope you'll afford us then as felicitous entertainment as you do now."

Sir Rowland snorted, and, turning on his heel, made for the door.

"Give you a good night, Sir Rowland," Mr. Wilding called after him. "Walters, you rascal, light Sir Rowland to the door."

Poor Blake went home deeply vexed; but it was no more than the beginning of his humiliation at Mr. Wilding's hands—for what can be more humiliating to a quarrel-seeking man than to have his enemy refuse to treat him seriously? He and Mr. Wilding met next morning, and before noon the tale of it had run through Bridgwater that Wilding was at his tricks again. It made a pretty story how twice he had disarmed and each time spared the London beau, who still insisted—each time more furiously—upon renewing the encounter, till Mr. Wilding had been forced to run him through the sword-arm and thus put him out of all case of continuing. It was a story that heaped ridicule upon Sir Rowland and did credit to Mr. Wilding.

Richard heard it, and trembled, enraged and impotent. Ruth heard it, and was stirred despite herself to a feeling of gratitude towards Wilding for the patience and toleration he had displayed.

There for a while the matter rested, and the days passed slowly. But Sir Rowland's nature—mean at bottom—was spurred to find him some other way of wiping out the score that lay 'twixt him and Mr. Wilding, a score mightily increased by the shame that Mr. Wilding had put upon him in that encounter from which—whatever the issue—he had looked to cull great credit in Ruth's eyes.

He had been thinking constantly of the incautious words that Richard had let fall, thinking of them in conjunction with the startling rumours that were now the talk of the whole countryside. He laid two and two together, and the four he found them make afforded him some hope. Then he realized—as he might have realized before had he been shrewder—that Richard's mood was one that made him ripe for any villainy. He thought that he was much in error if a treachery existed so black that Richard would quail before it, if it but afforded

him the means of ridding himself and the world of Mr. Wilding. He was considering how best to approach the subject, when it happened that one night when Richard sat at play with him in his own lodging, the boy grew talkative through excess of wine. It happened naturally enough that Richard sought an ally in Blake, just as Blake sought an ally in Richard. Indeed, their fortunes—so far as Ruth was concerned—were bound up together. The baronet saw that Richard, half-fuddled, was ripe for any confidences that might aim at the destruction of his enemy. He questioned him adroitly, and drew from him the story of the rising that was being planned, and of the share that Mr. Wilding—one of the Duke of Monmouth's chief movement-men—bore in the business that was toward.

When, towards midnight, Richard Westmacott went home, he left in Sir Rowland's hands an instrument which the latter accounted potential not only for the destruction of Anthony Wilding, but perhaps also for laying the foundations to the building of his own fortunes anew.

CHAPTER VII. THE NUPTIALS OF RUTH WESTMACOTT

Here was Sir Rowland Blake in high fettle at knowing himself armed with a portentous weapon for the destruction of Anthony Wilding. Upon closer inspection of it, however, he came to realize—as Richard had realized earlier—that it was double-edged, and that the wielding of it must be fraught with as much danger for Richard as for their common enemy. For to betray Mr. Wilding and the plot would scarce be possible without betraying young Westmacott, and that was unthinkable, since to ruin Richard—a thing he would have done with a light heart so far as Richard was himself concerned—would be to ruin his own hopes of winning Ruth.

Therefore, during the days that followed, Sir Rowland was forced to fret in idleness what time his wound was healing; but if his arm was invalided, his eyes and ears were sound, and he remained watchful for an opportunity to apply the knowledge he had gained. Richard mentioned the subject no more, so that Blake almost came to wonder whether the boy remembered what in his cups he had betrayed.

Meanwhile Mr. Wilding moved serene and smiling on his way. Daily there were great armfuls of flowers deposited at Lupton House—his lover's offering to his mistress—and no day went by but that some richer gift accompanied them. Now it was a collar of brilliants, anon a rope of pearls, again a priceless ring that had been Mr. Wilding's mother's. Ruth received with reluctance these pledges of his undesired affection. It were idle to reject them, considering that she was to marry him; yet it hurt her sorely to retain them. On her side she made no dispositions for the marriage, but went about her daily tasks

as though she were to remain a maid at Lupton House for a time as yet indefinite.

In Diana, Wilding had—though he was far from guessing it—an entirely exceptional ally. Lady Horton, too, was favourably disposed towards him. A foolish, worldly woman, who never probed beneath life's surface, nor indeed dreamed that anything existed in life beyond that to which her five senses testified, she was content placidly to contemplate the advantages that must accrue to her niece from this alliance.

And so mother and daughter in Mr. Wilding's absence pleaded his cause with his refractory bride-elect. But they pleaded it to little real purpose. Something perhaps they achieved in that Ruth grew more or less resigned to the fate that awaited her. By repeating to herself the arguments she had employed to Richard—that she must wed some day, and that Mr. Wilding would prove no doubt as good a husband as another—she came in a measure to believe them.

Richard meanwhile appeared to avoid her. Lacking the courage to adopt the heroic measures which at first he had promised, yet had he grace enough to take shame at his inaction. But if he was idle so far as Mr. Wilding was concerned, there was no lack of work for him in other connections. The clouds of war were gathering in that summer sky, and about to loose the storm gestating in them upon that fair country of the West, and young Westmacott, committed as he stood to the Duke of Monmouth's party, was forced to take his share in the surreptitious bustle that was toward. He was away two days in that week, having been summoned to a meeting of the leading gentlemen of the party at White Lackington, where he was forced into the unwelcome company of his future brother-in-law, to meet with courteous, deferential treatment from that imperturbable gentleman.

Wilding, indeed, seemed to have forgotten that any quarrel had ever existed between them. For the rest, he came and went,

supremely calm, as if he were, and knew himself to be, most welcome at Lupton House. Thrice in the course of that week of waiting he rode over from Zoyland Chase to pay his duty to Mistress Westmacott, and Ruth was persuaded on each occasion by her aunt and cousin to receive him. Indeed, how could she well refuse?

His manner was ever all that could be desired. Gallant, affectionate, deferential. He was in word and look and tone Ruth's most obedient servant. Had she been less prejudiced she must have admired the admirable restraint with which he kept all exultation from his manner, for, after all, it is difficult to force a victory as he had forced his, and not to triumph.

It is to be feared that during that week he neglected a good deal of his duty to the Duke, leaving Trenchard to supply his place and undertake tasks of a seditious nature that should have been his own.

At heart, however, in spite of the stories current and the militia at Taunton, Wilding remained convinced—as did most of the other leading partisans of the Protestant Cause—that no such madness as this premature landing could be in contemplation by the Duke. Besides, were it so, they must unfailingly have definite word of it; and they had none.

Trenchard was less assured, but Wilding laughed at the old rake's forebodings, and serenely went about the business of his marriage.

On the eve of the wedding he paid Ruth his last visit in the quality of a lover, and was received by her in the garden. He found her looking paler than her wont, and there was a cloud of sadness on her brow, a haunting sadness in her eyes. It touched him to the soul, and for a moment he wavered in his purpose. He stood beside her—she seated on the old lichened seat—and a silence fell between them, during which Mr. Wilding's conscience wrestled with his stronger

passion. It was his habit to be glib, talking incessantly what time he was in her company, and seeing to it that his talk was shallow and touched at nothing belonging to the deeps of human life. Thus was it, perhaps, that this sudden and enduring silence affected her most oddly; it was as if she had absorbed some notion of what was passing in his mind. She looked up suddenly into his face, so white and so composed. Their eyes met, and he stooped to her suddenly, his long brown ringlets tumbling forward. She feared his kiss, yet never moved, staring up with fixed, dilated eyes as if fascinated by his dark, brooding gaze. He paused, hovering above her upturned face as hovers the hawk above the dove.

"Child," he said at last, and his voice was soft and winning from very sadness, "child, why do you fear me?"

The truth of it went home to her. She feared him; she feared the strength that lay behind that calm; she feared the masterfulness of his wild but inscrutably hidden nature; she was afraid to surrender to such a man as this, afraid that in the hot crucible of his love her own nature would be dissolved, transmuted, and rendered part of his. Yet, though the truth was now made plain to her, she thrust it from her.

"I do not fear you," said she, and her voice at least rang fearlessly.

"Do you hate me, then?" he asked. Her glance grew troubled and fell away from his; it sought the calm of the river, gleaming golden in the sunset. There was a pause. Wilding sighed heavily, and straightened himself from his bending posture.

"You should not have sought thus to compel me, she said presently.

"I own it," he answered a thought bitterly. "I own it. Yet what hope had I but in compulsion?" She returned him no answer. "You see," he said, with increasing bitterness, "you see, that had I not seized the chance that was mine to win you by compulsion I had not won you at

all."

"It might," said she, "have been better so for both of us."

"Better for neither," he replied. "Ah, think it not! In time, I swear, you shall not think it. For you shall come to love me, Ruth," he added with a note of such assurance that she turned to meet again his gaze. He answered the wordless question of her eyes. "There is," said he, "no love of man for woman, so that the man be not wholly unworthy, so that his passion be sincere and strong, that can fail in time to arouse response." She smiled a little pitiful smile of unbelief. "Were I a boy," he rejoined, his earnestness vibrating now in a voice that was usually so calm and level, "offering you protestations of a callow worship, you might have cause to doubt me. But I am a man, Ruth—a tried, and haply a sinful man, alas!—a man who needs you, and who will have you at all costs."

"At all costs?" she echoed, and her lip took on a curl. "And you call this egotism by the name of love! No doubt you are right," she continued with an irony that stung him, "for love it is—love of yourself."

"And is not all love of another founded upon the love of self?" he asked her, startling her with a question that revealed to her clear-sighted mind a truth undreamed of. "When some day—please Heaven—I come to find favour in your eyes, and you come to love me, what will it mean but that you have come to find me necessary to yourself and to your happiness? Would you deny me now your love if you felt that you had need of mine? I love you because I love myself, you say. I grant it you. But you'll confess that if you do not love me yet, it is for the same reason, and that when you do come to love me the reason will be still the same."

"You are very sure that I shall come to love you," said she, shifting woman-like the ground of argument now that she found insecure the place on which at first she had taken her stand.

"Were I not, think you I should compel you to the church to-morrow?"

She trembled at his calm assurance. It was as if she almost feared that what he said might come to pass.

"Since you bear such faith in your heart," said she, "were it no nobler, more generous, that you should set yourself to win me first and wed me afterwards?"

"It is the course I should, myself, prefer," he answered quietly. "But it is a course denied me. I was viewed here with disfavour, almost denied your house. What chance had I whilst I might not come near you, whilst your mind was poisoned against me by the idle, vicious prattle that goes round and round the countryside, increasing ever in bulk from constant repetition?"

"Do you say that these tales are groundless?" she asked, with a sudden lifting of the eyes, a sudden keen eagerness that did not escape him.

"I would to God I could," he cried, "since from your manner I see that would improve me in your sight. But there is just sufficient truth in them to forbid me, as I am, I hope, a gentleman, from giving them a full denial. Yet in what am I worse than my fellows? Are you of those who think a husband should come to them as one whose youth has been the youth of cloistered nun? Heaven knows, I am not one to draw parallels 'twixt myself and any other, yet you compel me. Whilst you deny me, you receive this fellow Blake—a London night-scourer, a broken gamester who has given his creditors leg-bail, and who woos you that with your fortune he may close the doors of the debtor's gaol that's open to receive him."

"This is unworthy in you," she exclaimed, her tone indignant—so indignant that he experienced his first pang of jealousy.

"It would be were I his rival," he answered quietly. "But I am not. I have saved you from becoming the prey of such as he by forcing you to marry me."

"That I may become the prey of such as you, instead," was her retort.

He looked at her a moment, smiling sadly. Then, with pardonable self-esteem when we think of what manner of man it was with whom he now compared himself, "Surely," said he, "it is better to become the prey of the lion than the jackal."

"To the victim it can matter little," she answered, and he saw the tears gathering in her eyes.

Compassion moved him. It rose in arms to batter down his will, and in a weaker man had triumphed. Mr. Wilding bent his knee and went down beside her.

"I swear," he said impassionedly, "that as my wife you shall never count yourself a victim. You shall be honoured by all men, but by none more deeply than by him who will ever strive to be worthy of the proud title of your husband." He took her hand and kissed it reverentially. He rose and looked at her. "To-morrow," he said, and bowing low before her went his way, leaving her with emotions that found their vent in tears, but defied her maiden mind to understand them.

The morrow came her wedding-day—a sunny day of early June, and Ruth—assisted by Diana and Lady Horton—made preparation for her marriage as spirited women have made preparation for the scaffold, determined to show the world a brave, serene exterior. The sacrifice was necessary for Richard's sake. That was a thing long since determined. Yet it would have been some comfort to her to have had Richard at her side; it would have lent her strength to have had his kiss of thanks for the holocaust which for him she was making of

all that a woman holds most dear and sacred. But Richard was away—he had been absent since yesterday, and none could tell her where he tarried.

With Lady Horton and Diana she took her way to Saint Mary's Church at noon, and there she found Mr. Wilding—very fine in a suit of sky-blue satin, laced with silver—awaiting her. And with him was old Lord Gervase Scoresby, his friend and cousin, the very incarnation of benignity and ruddy health.

For a wonder Nick Trenchard was not at Mr. Wilding's side. But Nick had definitely refused to be of the party, emphasizing his refusal by certain choice reflections wholly unflattering to the married state.

Some idlers of the town were the only witnesses—and little did they guess the extent of the tragedy they were witnessing. There was no music, and the ceremony was brief and soon at an end. The only touch of joy, of festiveness, was that afforded by the choice blooms with which Mr. Wilding had smothered nave and choir and altar-rails. Their perfume hung heavy as incense in the temple.

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" droned the parson's voice, and Wilding smiled defiantly a smile which seemed to answer him, "No man. I have taken her for myself."

Lord Gervase stood forward as her sponsor, and as in a dream Ruth felt her hand lying in Mr. Wilding's cool, firm grasp.

The ecclesiastic's voice droned on, his voice hanging like the hum of some great insect upon the scented air. It was accomplished, and they were welded each to the other until death should part them.

Down the festooned nave she came on his arm, her step unflinching, her face calm; black misery in her heart. Behind followed her aunt and cousin and Lord Gervase. On Mr. Wilding's aquiline face a pale smile glimmered, like a beam of moonlight upon tranquil

waters, and it abode there until they reached the porch and were suddenly confronted by Nick Trenchard, red of face for once, perspiring, excited, and dust-stained from head to foot.

He had arrived that very instant; and, urged by the fearful news that brought him, he had come resolved to pluck Wilding from the altar be the ceremony done or not. But in that he reckoned without Mr. Wilding—for he should have known him better than to have hoped to succeed. He stepped forward now, and gripped him with his dusty glove by the sleeve of his shimmering bridegroom's coat. His voice came harsh with excitement and smouldering rage.

"A word with you, Anthony!"

Mr. Wilding turned placidly to regard him. "What now?" he asked, his bride's hand retained in the crook of his elbow.

"Treachery!" snapped Trenchard in a whisper. "Hell and damnation! Step aside, man."

Mr. Wilding turned to Lord Gervase, and begged of him to take charge of Mistress Wilding. "I deplore this interruption," he told her, no whit ruffled by what he had heard. "But I shall rejoin you soon. Meanwhile, his lordship will do the honours for me." This last he said with his eyes moving to Lady Horton and her daughter.

Lord Gervase, in some surprise, but overruled by his cousin's calm, took the bride on his arm and led her from the churchyard to the waiting carriage. To this he handed her, and after her her aunt and cousin. Then, mounting himself, they drove away, leaving Wilding and Trenchard among the tombstones, whither the messenger of evil had meanwhile led his friend. Trenchard rapped out his story briefly.

"Shenke," said he, "who was riding from Lyme with letters for you from the Duke, was robbed of his dispatches late last night a mile or so this side Taunton."

"Highwaymen?" inquired Mr. Wilding, his tone calm, though his glance had hardened.

"Highwaymen? No! Government agents belike. There were two of them, he says—for I have the tale from himself—and they met him at the Hare and Hounds at Taunton, where he stayed to sup last night. One of them gave him the password, and he conceived him to be a friend. But afterwards, growing suspicious, he refused to tell them too much. They followed him, it appears, and on the road they overtook and fell upon him; they knocked him from his horse, possessed themselves of the contents of his wallet, and left him for dead—with his head broken."

Mr. Wilding drew a sharp breath. His wits worked quickly. He was, he realized, in deadly peril. One thought he gave to Ruth. If the worst came to pass here was one who would rejoice in her freedom. The reflection cut through him like a sword. He would be loath to die until he had taught her to regret him. Then his mind returned to what Trenchard had told him.

"You said a Government agent," he mused slowly. "How would a Government agent know the password?"

Trenchard's mouth fell open. "I had not thought..." he began. Then ended with an oath. "'Tis a traitor from inside."

Wilding nodded. "It must be one of those who met at White Lackington three nights ago," he answered.

Idlers—the witnesses of the wedding—were watching them with interest from the path, and others from over the low wall of the churchyard, as well they might, for Mr. Wilding's behaviour was, for a bridegroom, extraordinary. Trenchard did not relish the audience.

"We had best away," said he. "Indeed," he added, "we had best

out of England altogether before the hue and cry is raised. The bubble's pricked."

Wilding's hand fell on his arm, and its grasp was steady. Wilding's eyes met his, and their gaze was calm.

"Where have you bestowed this messenger?" quoth he.

"He is here in Bridgwater, in bed, at the Bell Inn, whence he sent for you to Zoyland Chase. Suspecting trouble, I rode to him at once myself."

"Come, then," said Wilding. "We'll go talk with him. This matter needs probing ere we decide on flight. You do not seem to have sought to discover who were the thieves, nor other matters that it may be of use to know."

"Rat me!" swore Trenchard. "I was in haste to bring you news of it. Besides, there were other things to talk of. There is news that Albemarle has gone to Exeter, and that Sir Edward Phelips and Colonel Luttrell have been ordered to Taunton by the King."

Mr. Wilding stared at him with sudden dismay.

"Odso!" he exclaimed. "Is King James taking fright at last?" Then he shrugged his shoulders and laughed; "Pshaw!" he cried. "They are starting at a shadow."

"Heaven send," prayed Trenchard, "that the shadow does not prove to have a substance immediately behind it."

"Folly!" said Wilding. "When Monmouth comes, indeed, we shall not lack forewarning. Come," he added briskly. "We'll see this messenger and endeavour to discover who were these fellows that beset him." And he drew Trenchard from among the tombstones to the open path, and thus from the churchyard and the eyes of the gaping onlookers.

CHAPTER VIII. BRIDE AND GROOM

And so the bridegroom, in all his wedding finery, made his way with Trenchard to the Bell Inn, in the High Street, whilst his bride, escorted by Lord Gervase, was being driven to Zoyland Chase, of which she was now the mistress.

But she was not destined just yet to cross its threshold. For scarcely were they over the river when a horseman barred their way, and called upon the driver to pull up. Lady Horton, in a panic, huddled herself in the great coach and spoke of tobymen, whilst Lord Gervase thrust his head from the window to discover that the rider who stayed their progress was Richard Westmacott. His lordship hailed the boy, who, thereupon, walked his horse to the carriage door.

"Lord Gervase," said he, "will you bid the coachman put about and drive to Lupton House?"

Lord Gervase stared at him in hopeless bewilderment. "Drive to Lupton House?" he echoed. The more he saw of this odd wedding, the less he understood of it. It seemed to the placid old gentleman that he was fallen among a parcel of Bedlamites. "Surely, sir, it is for Mistress Wilding to say whither she will be driven," and he drew in his head and turned to Ruth for her commands. But, bewildered herself, she had none to give him. It was her turn to lean from the carriage window to ask her brother what he meant.

"I mean you are to drive home again," said he. "There is something I must tell you. When you have heard me it shall be yours to decide whether you will proceed or not to Zoyland Chase."

Hers to decide? How was that possible? What could he mean? She pressed him with some such questions.

"It means, in short," he answered impatiently, "that I hold your salvation in my hands. For the rest, this is not the time or place to tell you more. Bid the fellow put about."

Ruth sat back and looked once more at her companions. But from none did she receive the least helpful suggestion. Lady Horton made great prattle to little purpose; Lord Gervase followed her example, whilst Diana, whose alert if trivial mind was the one that might have offered assistance, sat silent. Ruth pondered. She bethought her of Trenchard's sudden arrival at Saint Mary's, his dust-stained person and excited manner, and of how he had drawn Mr. Wilding aside with news that seemed of moment. And now her brother spoke of saving her; it was a little late for that, she thought. Outside the coach his voice still urged her, and it grew peevish and angry, as was usual when he was crossed. In the end she consented to do his will. If she were to fathom this mystery that was thickening about her there seemed to be no other course. She turned to Lord Gervase.

"Will you do as Richard says?" she begged him.

His lordship blew out his chubby cheeks in his astonishment; he hesitated a moment, thinking of his cousin Wilding; then, with a shrug, he leaned from the window and gave the order she desired. The carriage turned about, and with Richard following lumbered back across the bridge and through the town to Lupton House. At the door Lord Gervase took his leave of them. He had acted as Ruth had bidden him; but he had no wish to be further involved in this affair, whatever it might portend. Rather was it his duty at once to go acquaint Mr. Wilding—if he could find him—with what was taking

place, and leave it to Mr. Wilding to take what measures might seem best to him. He told them so, and having told them, left them.

Richard begged to be alone with his sister, and alone they passed together into the library. His manner was restless; he trembled with excitement, and his eyes glittered almost feverishly.

"You may have thought, Ruth, that I was resigned to your marriage with this fellow Wilding," he began; "or that for other reasons I thought it wiser not to interfere. If you thought that you wronged me. —Blake and I—have been at work for you during these last days, and I rejoice to say our labours have not been idle." His manner grew assertive, boastful, as he proceeded.

"You know, of course," said she, "that I am married."

He made a gesture of disdain. "No matter," said he exultantly.

"It matters something, I think," she answered. "O Richard, Richard, why did you not come to me sooner if you possessed the means of sparing me this thing?"

He shrugged impatiently; her remonstrance seemed to throw him out of temper. "Oons!" he cried; "I came as soon as was ever possible, and, depend upon it, I am not come too late. Indeed, I think I am come in the very nick of time." He drew a sheet of paper from an inside pocket of his coat and slapped it down upon the table. "There is the wherewithal to hang your fine husband," he announced in triumph.

She recoiled. "To hang him?" she echoed. With all her aversion to Mr. Wilding it was plain she did not wish him hanged.

"Aye, to hang him," Richard repeated, and drew himself to the full height of his short stature in pride at the thing he had achieved. "Read it."

She took the paper almost mechanically, and for some moments she studied the crabbed signature before realizing whose it was. Then she started.

"From the Duke of Monmouth!" she exclaimed.

He laughed. "Read it," he bade her again, though there was no need for the injunction, for already she was deciphering the crabbed hand and the atrocious spelling—for His Grace of Monmouth's education had been notoriously neglected. The letter, which was dated from The Hague, was addressed "To my good friend W., at Bridgwater." It began, "Sir," spoke of the imminent arrival of His Grace in the West, and gave certain instructions for the collection of arms and the work of preparing men for enlistment in his Cause, ending with protestations of His Grace's friendship and esteem.

Ruth read the epistle twice before its treasonable nature was made clear to her; before she understood the thing that was foreshadowed. Then she raised troubled eyes to her brother's face, and in answer to the question of her glance he made clear to her the shrewd means by which they had become possessed of this weapon that should destroy their enemy Mr. Wilding.

Blake and he, forewarned—he said not how—of the coming of this messenger, had lain in wait for him at the Hare and Hounds, at Taunton. They had sought at first to become possessed of the letter without violence. But, having failed in this through having aroused the messenger's suspicions, they had been forced to follow and attack him on a lonely stretch of road, where they had robbed him of the contents of his wallet. Richard added that the letter was, no doubt, one of several sent over by Monmouth to some friend at Lyme for distribution among his principal agents in the West. It was regrettable that they should have endeavoured to take gentle measures with the courier, as this had forewarned him, and he had apparently been led to remove the letter's outer wrapper—which, no doubt, bore Wilding's

full name and address—against the chance of such an attack as they had made upon him. Nevertheless, as it was, that letter "to my good friend W.," backed by Richard's and Blake's evidence of the destination intended for it, would be more than enough to lay Mr. Wilding safely by the heels.

"I would to Heaven," he repeated in conclusion, "I could have come in time to save you from becoming his wife. But at least it is in my power to make you very speedily his widow."

"That," said Ruth, still retaining the letter, "is what you propose to do?"

"What else?"

She shook her head. "It must not be, Richard," she said. "I'll not consent to it."

Taken aback, he stared at her; then laughed unpleasantly. "Odds my life! Are you in love with the man? Have you been fooling us?"

"No," she answered. "But I'll be no party to his murder."

"Murder, quotha! Who talks of murder?" Her shrewd eyes searched his face. "How came you by your knowledge that this courier rode to Mr. Wilding?" she asked him suddenly, and the swift change that overspread his countenance showed her that she had touched him in a tender spot, assured her of the thing she had suddenly come to suspect—a suspicion which at the same time started from and explained much that had been mysterious in Richard's ways of late. "You had knowledge of this conspiracy," she pursued, answering her own question before he had time to speak, "because you were one of the conspirators."

"At least I am so no longer," he blurted out. "I thank Heaven for that, Richard; for your life is very dear to me. But it would ill become you to

make such use as this of the knowledge you came by in that manner. It were a Judas's act." He would have interrupted her, but her manner dominated him. "You will leave this letter with me, Richard," she continued.

"Damn me! no..." he began.

"Ah, yes, Richard," she insisted. "You will give it to me, and I shall thank you for the gift. It shall prove a weapon for my salvation, never fear."

"It shall, indeed," he cried, with an ugly laugh; "when I have ridden to Exeter to lay it before Albemarle."

"Not so," she answered him. "It shall be a weapon of defence—not of offence. It shall stand as a buckler between me and Mr. Wilding. Trust me, I shall know how to use it."

"But there is Blake to consider," he expostulated, growing angry. "I am pledged to him."

"Your first duty is to me..."

"Tut!" he interrupted. "Blake feels that he owes it to his loyalty to lay this letter before the Lord-Lieutenant, and, for that matter, so do I."

"Sir Rowland would not cross my wishes in this, she answered him.

"Folly!" he cried, now thoroughly aroused. "Give me that letter."

"Nay, Richard," she answered, and waved him back.

But he advanced nevertheless.

"Give it me," he bade her, waxing fierce. "Gad! It was folly to have told you of it. I had not done so but that I never thought you such a fool as to oppose yourself to the thing we intend."

"Listen, Richard..." she besought him.

But he was grown insensible to pleadings.

"Give me that letter," he insisted, and caught her wrist. Her other hand, however—the one that held the sheet—was already behind her back.

The door was suddenly thrust open, and Diana appeared. "Ruth," she announced, "Mr. Wilding is here."

At the mention of that name, Richard let her free. "Wilding!" he ejaculated, his fierceness all blown out of him. He had imagined that already Mr. Wilding would be in full flight. Was the fellow mad?

"He is following me," said Diana, and, indeed, a step could be heard in the passage.

"The letter!" growled Richard in a frenzy, between fear and anger now. "Give it me! Give it me do you hear?"

"Sh! You'll betray yourself," she cried. "He is here."

And at that same moment Mr. Wilding's tall figure, still arrayed in his bridegroom's finery of sky-blue satin, loomed in the doorway. He was serene and calm as ever. Neither the discovery of the plot by the abstraction of the messenger's letter, nor Ruth's strange conduct—of which he had heard from Lord Gervase—had sufficed to ruffle, outwardly at least, the inscrutable serenity of his air and manner. He paused to make his bow, then advanced into the room, with a passing glance at Richard still spurred and booted and all dust-stained.

"You appear to have ridden far, Dick," said he, smiling, and Richard shivered in spite of himself at the mocking note that seemed to ring faintly at the words. "I saw your friend, Sir Rowland, in the

garden," he added. "I think he waits for you."

Though Richard could not fail to apprehend the implied dismissal, he was minded at first to disregard it. But Mr. Wilding, turning, held the door, addressing Diana.

"Mistress Horton," said he, "will you give us leave?"

Diana curtsied and passed out, and Mr. Wilding's eye falling upon the lingering Richard at that moment, Richard thought it best to follow her example. But he went with rage in his heart at being forced to leave that precious document behind him.

As Mr. Wilding, his back to her a moment, closed the door, Ruth slipped the paper hurriedly into the bosom of her low-necked gown. He turned to her, calm but very grave, and his dark eyes seemed to reproach her.

"This is ill done, Ruth," said he.

"Ill done, or well done," she answered him, "done it is, and shall so remain."

He raised his brows. "Ah," said he, "I appear, then, to have misapprehended the situation. From what Gervase told me, I understood it was your brother forced you to return."

"Not forced, sir," she answered him.

"Induced, then," said he. "It but remains me to induce you to repair what I think was a mistake."

She shook her head. "I have returned home for good," said she.

"You'll pardon me," said he, "that I am so egotistical as to prefer Zoyland Chase to Lupton House. Despite the manifold attractions of the latter, I do not intend to take up my abode here."

"You are not asked to."

"What, then?"

She hated him for the smile, for his masterful air, which seemed to imply that he humoured her because he scorned to use authority, but that when he did use it, hers must it be to obey him. Again she felt that everlasting calm, arguing such latent forces, was the thing she hated most in him.

"I think I had best be plain with you," said she. "I have fulfilled my part of the bargain that we made. I intend to do no more. I promised that if you spared my brother, I would go to the altar with you to-day. I have carried out my contract to the letter. It is at an end."

"Indeed," said he; "I think it has not yet begun." He advanced towards her, and took her hand. She yielded it, unwilling though she was. "This is unworthy of you, madam," said he, his tone grave and deferential. "You think to escape fulfilling the spirit of your bargain by adhering to the letter of it. Not so," he ended, and shook his head, smiling gently. "The carriage is still at your door. You return with me to Zoyland Chase to take possession of your home."

"You mistake," said she, and tore her hand from his. "You say that what I have done is unworthy. I admit it; but it is with unworthiness that we must combat unworthiness. Was your attitude towards me less unworthy?"

"I'll make amends for it if you'll come home," said he.

"My home is here. You cannot compel me."

"I should be loath to," he admitted, sighing.

"You cannot," she insisted.

"I think I can," said he. "There is a law.."

"A law that will hang you if you invoke it," she cut in quickly. "This much can I safely promise you."

She had need to say no more to tell him everything. At all times half a word was as much to Mr. Wilding as a whole sentence to another. She saw the tightening of his lips, the hardening of his eyes, beyond which he gave no other sign that she had hit him.

"I see," said he. "It is another bargain that you make. I do suspect there is some trader's blood in the Westmacott veins. Let us be clear. You hold the wherewithal to ruin me, and you will use it if I insist upon my husband's rights. Is it not so?"

She nodded in silence, surprised at the rapidity with which he had read the situation.

"I admit," said he, "that you have me between sword and wall." He laughed shortly. "Let me know more," he begged her. "Am I to understand that so long as I leave you in peace—so long as I do not insist upon your becoming my wife in more than name—you will not wield the weapon that you hold?"

"You are to understand so," she answered.

He took a turn in the room, very thoughtful. Not of himself was he thinking now, but of the Duke of Monmouth. Trenchard had told him some ugly truths that morning of how in his love-making he appeared to have shipwrecked the Cause ere it was well launched. If this letter got to Whitehall there was no gauging—ignorant as he was of what was in it—the ruin that might follow; but they had reason to fear the worst. He saw his duty to the Duke most clearly, and he breathed a prayer of thanks that Richard had chosen to put that letter to such a use as this. He knew himself checkmated; but he was a man who knew how to bear defeat in a becoming manner. He turned suddenly.

"The letter is in your hands?" he inquired.

"It is," she answered.

"May I see it?" he asked.

She shook her head—not daring to show it or betray its whereabouts lest he should use force to become possessed of it—a thing, indeed, that was very far from his purpose.

He considered a moment, his mind intent now rather upon the Duke's interest than his own.

"You know," quoth he, "the desperate enterprise to which I stand committed. But it is a bargain between us that you do not betray me nor that enterprise so long as I leave you rid of my presence.

"That is the bargain I propose," said she.

He looked at her a moment with hungry eyes, and she found his glance almost more than she could bear, so strong was its appeal. Besides, it may be that she was a thought beglamoured by the danger in which he stood, which seemed to invest him with a certain heroic dignity.

"Ruth," he said at length, "it may well be that that which you desire may speedily come to pass; it may well be that in the course of this rebellion that is hatching you may be widowed. But at least I know that if my head falls it will not be my wife who has betrayed me to the axe. For that much, believe me, I am supremely grateful."

He advanced. He took her unresisting hand again and bore it to his lips, bowing low before her. Then erect and graceful he turned on his heel and left her.

CHAPTER IX. MR. TRENCHARD'S COUNTERSTROKE

Now, however much it might satisfy Mr. Wilding to have Ruth's word for it that so long as he left her in peace neither he nor the Cause had any betrayal to fear from her, Mr. Trenchard was of a very different mind.

He fumed and swore and worked himself into a very passion. "Zoons, man!" he cried, "it would mean utter ruin to you if that letter reached Whitehall."

"I realize it; but my mind is easy. I have her promise."

"A woman's promise!" snorted Trenchard, and proceeded with great circumstance of expletives to damn "everything that dagged a petticoat."

"Your fears are idle," Wilding assured him. "What she says, she will do."

"And her brother?" quoth Trenchard. "Have you bethought you of that canary-bird? He'll know the letter's whereabouts. He has cause to fear you more than ever now. Are you sure he'll not be making use of it to lay you by the heels?"

Mr. Wilding smiled upon the fury provoked by Trenchard's concern and love for him. "She has promised," he said with an insistent faith that was fuel to Trenchard's anger, "and I can depend her word."

"So cannot I," snapped his friend.

"The thing that plagues me most," said Wilding, ignoring the remark, "is that we are kept in ignorance of the letter's contents at a time when we most long for news. Not a doubt but it would have enabled us to set our minds at ease on the score of these foolish rumours."

"Aye—or else confirmed them," said pessimistic Trenchard. He wagged his head. "They say the Duke has put to sea already."

"Folly!" Wilding protested.

"Whitehall thinks otherwise. What of the troops at Taunton?"

"More folly."

"Well—I would you had that letter."

"At least," said Wilding, "I have the superscription, and we know from Shenke that no name was mentioned in the letter itself."

"There's evidence enough without it," Trenchard reminded him, and fell soon after into abstraction, turning over in his mind a notion with which he had suddenly been inspired. That notion kept Trenchard secretly occupied for a couple of days; but in the end he succeeded in perfecting it.

Now it befell that towards dusk one evening early in the week Richard Westmacott went abroad alone, as was commonly his habit, his goal being the Saracen's Head, where he and Sir Rowland spent many a night over wine and cards—to Sir Rowland's moderate profit, for he had not played the pigeon in town so long without having acquired sufficient knowledge to enable him to play the rook in the country. As Westmacott was passing up the High Street, a black shadow fell athwart the light that streamed from the door of the Bell Inn, and out through the doorway lurched Mr. Trenchard a thought

unsteadily to hurtle so violently against Richard that he broke the long stem of the white clay pipe he was carrying. Now Richard was not to know that Mr. Trenchard—having informed himself of Mr. Westmacott's evening habits—had been waiting for the past half-hour in that doorway hoping that Mr. Westmacott would not depart this evening from his usual custom. Another thing that Mr. Westmacott was not to know—considering his youth—was the singular histrionic ability which this old rake had displayed in those younger days of his when he had been a player, and the further circumstance that he had excelled in those parts in which ebriety was to be counterfeited. Indeed, we have it on the word of no less an authority on theatrical matters than Mr. Pepys that Mr. Nicholas Trenchard's appearance as Pistol in "Henry IV" in the year of the blessed Restoration was the talk alike of town and court.

Mr. Trenchard steadied himself from the impact, and, swearing a round and awful Elizabethan oath, accused the other of being drunk, then struck an attitude to demand with truculence, "Would ye take the wall o' me, sir?"

Richard hastened to make himself known to this turbulent roysterer, who straightway forgot his grievance to take Westmacott affectionately by the hand and overwhelm him with apologies. And that done, Trenchard—who affected the condition known as maudlin drunk—must needs protest almost in tears how profound was his love for Richard, and insist that the boy return with him to the Bell Inn, that they might pledge each other.

Richard, himself sober, was contemptuous of Trenchard so obviously obfuscated. At first it was his impulse to excuse himself, as possibly Blake might be already waiting for him; but on second thoughts, remembering that Trenchard was Mr. Wilding's most intimate famulus, it occurred to him that by a little crafty questioning he might succeed in smoking Mr. Wilding's intentions in the matter of that

letter—for from his sister he had failed to get satisfaction. So he permitted himself to be led indoors to a table by the window which stood vacant. There were at the time a dozen guests or so in the common-room. Trenchard bawled for wine and brandy, and for all that he babbled in an irresponsible, foolish manner of all things that were of no matter, yet not the most adroit of pumping could elicit from him any such information as Richard sought. Perforce young Westmacott must remain, plying him with more and more drink—and being plied in his turn—to the end that he might not waste the occasion.

An hour later found Richard much the worse for wear, and Trenchard certainly no better. Richard forgot his purpose, forgot that Blake waited for him at the Saracen's Head. And now Trenchard seemed to be pulling himself together.

"I want to talk to you, Richard," said he, and although thick, there was in his voice a certain impressive quality that had been absent hitherto. "'S a rumour current." He lowered his voice to a whisper almost, and, leaning across, took his companion by the arm. He hiccoughed noisily, then began again. "'S a rumour current, sweetheart, that you're disaffected."

Richard started, and his mind flapped and struggled like a trapped bird to escape the meshes of the wine, to the end that he might convincingly defend himself from such an imputation—so dangerously true.

"'S a lie!" he gasped.

Trenchard shut one eye and owlishly surveyed his companion with the other. "They say," he added, "that you're for forsaking 'Duke's party."

"Villainous!" Richard protested. "I'll sli' throat of any man 't says so." And draining the pewter at his elbow, he smashed it down on the

table to emphasize his seriousness.

Trenchard replenished it with the utmost promptness, then sat back in his tall chair and pulled a moment at the fresh pipe with which he had equipped himself.

"I think I espy," he quoted presently, "'virtue and valour crouched in thine eye.' And yet..., and yet... if I had cause to think it true, I'd... I'd run you through the vitals—jus' so," and he prodded Richard's waistcoat with the point of his pipe-stem. His swarthy face darkened, his eyes glittered fiercely. "Are ye sure ye're norrer foul traitor?" he demanded suddenly. "Are y' sure, for if ye're not..."

He left the terrible menace unuttered, but it was none the less understood. It penetrated the vinous fog that beset the brain of Richard, and startled him.

"Swear I'm not!" he cried. "Swear mos' solemnly I'm not."

"Swear?" echoed Trenchard, and his scowl grew darker still. "Swear? A man may swear and yet lie—'a man may smile and smile and be a villain.' I'll have proof of your loyalty to us. I'll have proof, or as there's a heaven above and a hell below, I'll rip you up."

His mien was terrific, and his voice the more threatening in that it was not raised above a whisper.

Richard sat back appalled, afraid.

"Wha'... what proof'll satisfy you?" he asked.

Trenchard considered it, pulling at his pipe again. "Pledge me the Duke," said he at length. "Ther's truth 'n wine. Pledge me the Duke and confusion to His Majesty the goldfinch." Richard reached for his pewter, glad that the test was to be so light. "Up on your feet, man," grumbled Trenchard. "On your feet, and see that your words have a ring of truth in them."

Richard did as he was bidden, the little reason left him being concentrated wholly on the convincing of his fellow tippler. He rose to his feet, so unsteadily that his chair fell over with a bang. He never heeded it, but others in the room turned at the sound, and a hush fell in the chamber. Dominating this came Richard's voice, strident with intensity, if thick of utterance.

"Down with Popery, and God save the Protestant Duke!" he cried. "Down with Popery!" And he looked at Trenchard for applause, and assurance that Trenchard no longer thought there was cause to quarrel with him.

Behind him there was a stir in the room that went unheeded by the boy. Men nudged their neighbours; some looked frightened and some grinned at the treasonable words.

A swift change came over Trenchard. His drunkenness fell from him like a discarded mantle. He sat like a man amazed. Then he heaved himself to his feet in a fury, and smashed down his pipestem on the wooden table, sending its fragments flying.

"Damn me!" he roared. "Have I sat at table with a traitor?" And he thrust at Richard with his open palm, lightly yet with sufficient force to throw Richard off his precarious balance and send him sprawling on the sanded floor. Men rose from the tables about and approached them, some few amused, but the majority very grave. Dodsley, the landlord, came hurrying to assist Richard to his feet.

"Mr. Westmacott," he whispered in the rash fool's ear, "you were best away."

Richard stood up, leaning his full weight upon the arm the landlord had about his waist. He passed a hand over his brow, as if to brush aside the veil that obscured his wits. What had happened? What had he said? What had Trenchard done? Why did these fellows stand and

gape at him? He heard his companion's voice, raised to address the company.

"Gentlemen," he heard him say, "I trust there is none present will impute to me any share in such treasonable sentiments as Mr. Westmacott has expressed. But if there is any who questions my loyalty, I have a convincing argument for him—in my scabbard." And he struck his sword-hilt with his fist.

Then he clapped on his hat, aslant over the locks of his golden wig, and, taking up his whip, he moved with leisurely dignity towards the door. He looked back with a sardonic smile at the ado he was leaving behind him, listened a moment to the voices that already were being raised in excitement, then closed the door and made his way briskly to the stable-yard, where he called for his horse. He rode out of Bridgwater ten minutes later, and took the road to Taunton as the moon was rising big and yellow over the hills on his left. He reached Taunton towards ten o'clock that night, having ridden hell-to-leather. His first visit was to the Hare and Hounds, where Blake and Westmacott had overtaken the courier. His next to the house where Sir Edward Phelips and Colonel Luttrell—the gentlemen lately ordered to Taunton by His Majesty—had their lodging.

The fruits of Mr. Trenchard's extraordinary behaviour that night were to be seen at an early hour on the following day, when a constable and three tything-men came with a Lord-Lieutenant's warrant to arrest Mr. Richard Westmacott on a charge of high treason. They found the young man still abed, and most guilty was his panic when they bade him rise and dress himself—though little did he dream of the full extent to which Mr. Trenchard had enmeshed him, or indeed that Mr. Trenchard had any hand at all in this affair. What time he was getting into his clothes with a tything-man outside his door and another on guard under his window, the constable and his third myrmidon made an exhaustive search of the house. All they found of interest was a

letter signed "Monmouth," which they took from the secret drawer of a secretary in the library; but that, it seemed, was all they sought, for having found it, they proceeded no further with their reckless and destructive ransacking.

With that letter and the person of Richard Westmacott, the constable and his men took their departure, and rode back to Taunton, leaving alarm and sore distress at Lupton House. In her despair poor Ruth was all for following her brother, in the hope that at least by giving evidence of how that letter came into his possession she might do something to assist him. But knowing, as she did, that he had had his share in the treason that was hatching, she had cause to fear that his guilt would not lack for other proofs. It was Diana who urged her to repair instead to the only man upon whose resource she might depend, provided he were willing to exert it. That man was Anthony Wilding, and whether Diana urged it from motives of her own or out of concern for Richard, it would be difficult to say with certainty.

The very thought of going to him for aid, after all that had passed, was repugnant to Ruth. And yet what choice had she? Convinced by her cousin and urged by her affection and duty to Richard, she repressed her aversion, and, calling for a horse, rode out to Zoyland Chase, attended by a groom. Wilding by good fortune was at home, hard at work upon a mass of documents in that same library where she had talked with him on the occasion of her first visit to his home—to the home of which she remembered that she was now, herself, the mistress. He was preparing for circulation in the West a mass of libels and incendiary pamphlets calculated to forward the cause of the Protestant Duke.

Dissembling his surprise, he bade old Walters—who left her waiting in the hall whilst he went to announce her—to admit her instantly, and he advanced to the door to receive and welcome her.

"Ruth," said he, and his face was oddly alight, "you have come at

last."

She smiled a wan smile of self-pity. "I have been constrained," said she, and told him what had happened; that her brother had been arrested for high treason, and that the constable in searching the house had come upon the Monmouth letter she had locked away in her desk.

"And not a doubt," she ended, "but it will be believed that it was to Richard the letter was indited by the Duke. You will remember that its only address was 'to my good friend, W.,' and that will stand for Westmacott as well as Wilding."

Mr. Wilding was fain to laugh at the irony of this surprising turn of things of which she brought him news; for he had neither knowledge nor suspicion of the machinations of his friend Trenchard, to which these events were due. But noting and respecting her anxiety for her brother, he curbed his natural amusement.

"It is a judgment upon you," said he, nevertheless.

"Do you exult?" she asked indignantly.

"No; but I cannot repress my admiration for the ways of Divine Justice. If you are come to me for advice, I can but suggest that you should follow your brother's captors to Taunton, and inform the lieutenants of how the letter came into your power."

She looked at him in anger almost at what seemed a callousness. "Would he believe me, think you?"

"Belike he would not," said Mr. Wilding. "You can but try."

"If I told them it was addressed to you," she said, eyeing him sternly, "does it not occur to you that they would send for you to question you, and that if they did so, as you are a gentleman you could not lie away my brother's life."

"Why, yes," said he quite calmly, "it does occur to me. But does it not occur to you that by the time they came here they would find me gone?" He laughed at her dismay. "I thank you, madam, for this warning," he added. "I think I'll bid them saddle for me without delay. Too long already have I tarried."

"And must Richard hang?" she asked him fiercely.

Mr. Wilding produced a snuffbox of tortoise shell and gold. He opened it deliberately. "If he does, you'll admit that he will hang on the gallows that he has built himself—although intended for another. Faith! He's not the first booby to be caught in his own spring. There is in this a measure of poetic justice. Poetry and justice! Do you know, Ruth, they are two things I have ever loved?" And he took a pinch of choice Bergamot.

"Will you be serious?" she demanded.

"Trenchard would tell you that it were to make an exception from the rule of my life," he assured her, smiling. "Yet even that might I do at your bidding."

"But this is a serious matter," she told him angrily. "For Richard," he acknowledged, closing his snuffbox with a snap. "Tell me, what would you have me do?"

Since he asked her thus, she answered him in two words. "Save him."

"At the cost of my own neck?" quoth he. "The price is high," he reminded her. "Do you think that Richard is quite worth it?"

"And are you to save yourself at the cost of his?" she counter-questioned. "Are you capable of such a baseness?"

He looked at her thoughtfully a moment. "You have not reflected,"

said he slowly, "that in this affair is involved more than mine or Richard's life. There is a great cause weighing in the balance against all personal considerations. If I accounted Richard of more value to Monmouth than I am myself, I should not hesitate in riding to set him free by taking his place. As it is, however, I think I am of the greatest conceivable importance to His Grace, whilst if twenty Richards perished—frankly—their loss would be something of a gain, for Richard has played a traitor's part already. That is with me the first of all considerations."

"Am I of no consideration to you?" she asked him. And in an agony of terror for her brother she now approached him, and, obeying a sudden impulse, cast herself upon her knees before him. "Listen!" she cried.

"Not thus," said he, a frown between his eyes. He took her by the elbows and gently but very firmly brought her to her feet again. "It is not fitting you should kneel save at your prayers."

She was standing now, and very close to him, his hands still held her elbows, though their touch was so light that she scarce felt it. To release them was easy, and the next second her hands were on his shoulders, her brave eyes raised to him.

"Mr. Wilding," she implored him, "you'll not let Richard be destroyed?"

He looked down at her with kindling glance, his arms slipped round her lissom waist. "It is hard to deny you, Ruth," said he. "Yet not my love of my own life compels me; but my duty, my loyalty to the cause to which I am pledged. I were a traitor were I now to place myself in peril."

She pressed against him, her face so close to his that her breath fanned his cheek, whither a faint colour crept in quick response.

Despite herself almost, instinctively, unconsciously, she exerted the weapons of her sex to bend him to her will.

"You say you love me," she whispered. "Prove it me now, and I will believe you.

"Ah!" he sighed. "And believing me? What then?"

He had himself grimly in hand, yet feared he should not prove strong enough to hold himself for long.

"You.., you shall find me your... dutiful wife," she faltered, crimsoning.

His arms tightened about her; he crushed her to him, he bent his head to hers and his lips burnt the lips she yielded to him as though they had been living fire.

Anon, she was to weep in shame—in shame and in astonishment—at that instant of surrender, but for the moment she had no thought save for her brother. Exultation filled her. She accounted that she had conquered, and she gloried in the power her beauty gave her, a power that had sufficed to melt to water the hard-frozen purposes of this self-willed man. The next instant, however, she was cold again with dismay and newborn terror. He unclasped her arms, he drew back, shaking off the hands she had rested upon his shoulders. His white face—the flush had faded from it again—smiled a thought disdainfully.

"You bargain with me," he said. "But I have some knowledge of your ways of trading. They are overshrewd for an honest gentleman."

"You mean," she gasped, her hand pressed to her heart, her face a deathly white, "you mean that you'll not save him?"

"I mean," said he, "that I will have no further bargains with you."

There was such hard finality in his tone that she recoiled, beaten and without power, to return to the assault. She had played and lost. She had yielded her lips to his kisses, and—husband though he might be in name—shame was her only guerdon.

One look she gave him from out of that face so white and pitiful, then with a shudder turned from him and fled his presence. He sprang after her as the door closed, then checked and stood in thought, very grim for one who professed to bestow no seriousness on the affairs of life. Then he returned slowly to his writing-table, and rummaged there among the papers with which it was encumbered, seeking something of which he now had need. Through the open window he heard the retreating beat of her horse's hoofs. He sighed and sat down heavily, to take his long square chin in his hand and stare before him at the sunlight on the lawn outside.

And whilst he sat thus, Ruth made all haste back to Lupton House to tell of the failure that had attended her. There was nothing left her now but to embark upon the forlorn hope of following Richard to Taunton, to offer her evidence of how the incriminating letter had come to be locked in the drawer in which the constable had discovered it. Diana met her with a face as white as her own and infinitely more startled. She had just learnt that Sir Rowland Blake had been arrested also and that he had been carried to Taunton together with Richard, and, as a consequence, she was as eager now that Ruth should repair to Albemarle as she had erstwhile been earnest in urging her to seek out Mr. Wilding; indeed, Diana went so far as to offer to accompany her, an offer that Ruth gladly, gratefully accepted.

Within an hour Ruth and Diana—in spite of all that poor, docile Lady Horton had said to stay them—were riding to Taunton, attended by the same groom who had so lately accompanied his mistress to Zoyland Chase.

CHAPTER X. THEIR OWN PETARD

In a lofty, spacious room of the town hall at Taunton sat Sir Edward Phelps and Colonel Luttrell to dispense justice, and with them, flanked by one of them on either side of him, sat Christopher Monk, Duke of Albemarle, Lord-Lieutenant of Devonshire, who had been summoned in all haste from Exeter that he might be present at an examination which promised to be of so vast importance. The three sat at a long table at the room's end, attended by two secretaries.

Before them, guarded by constable and tything-men, weaponless, their hands pinioned behind them—Blake's arm was healed by now—stood Mr. Westmacott and his friend Sir Rowland to answer this grave charge.

Richard, not knowing who might have betrayed him and to what extent, was very fearful—having through his connection with the Cause every reason so to be. Blake, on the other hand, conscious of his innocence of any plotting, was impatient of his position, and a thought contemptuous. It was he who, upon being ushered by the constable and his men into the august presence of the Lord-Lieutenant, clamoured to know precisely of what he was accused that he might straightway clear himself.

Albemarle reared his great massive head, smothered in a mighty black peruke, and scowled upon the florid London beau. A black-visaged gentleman was Christopher Monk. His pendulous cheeks, it is true, were of a sallow pallor, but what with his black wig, black eyebrows, dark eyes, and the blue-black tint of shaven beard on his

great jaw and upper lip, he presented an appearance sombrely sinister. His netherlip was thick and very prominent; deep creases ran from the corners of his mouth adown his heavy chin; his eyes were dull and lack-lustre, with great pouches under them. In the main, the air of this son of the great Parliamentary general was stupid, dull, unprepossessing.

The creases of his mouth deepened as Blake protested against what he termed this outrage that had been done him; he sneered ponderously, thrusting further forward his heavily undershot jowl.

"We are informed, sir, of your antecedents," he staggered Blake by answering. "We have learnt the reason why you left London and your creditors, and in all my life, sir, I have never known a man more ready to turn his hand to treason than a broken gamester. Your kind turns by instinct to such work as this, as a last resource for the mending of battered fortunes."

Blake crimsoned from chin to brow. "I'm forejudged, it, seems," he made answer haughtily, tossing his fair locks, his blue eyes glaring upon his judges. "May I, at least, know the name of my accuser?"

"You shall receive impartial justice at our hands," put in Phelips, whose manner was of a dangerous mildness. "Depend on that. Not only shall you know the name of your accuser, but you shall be confronted by him. Meanwhile, sirs"—and his glance strayed from Blake's flushed and angry countenance to Richard's, pale and timid—"meanwhile, are we to understand that you deny the charge?"

"I have heard none as yet," said Sir Rowland insolently.

Albemarle turned to one of the secretaries. "Read them the indictment," said he, and sank back in his chair, his dull glance upon the prisoners, whilst the clerk in a droning voice read from a document which he took up. It impeached Sir Rowland Blake and Mr.

Richard Westmacott of holding treasonable communication with James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, and of plotting against His Majesty's life and throne and the peace of His Majesty's realms.

Blake listened with unconcealed impatience to the farrago of legal phrases, and snorted contemptuously when the reading came to an end.

Albemarle looked at him darkly. "I do thank God," said he, "that through Mr. Westmacott's folly has this hideous plot, this black and damnable treason, been brought to light in time to enable us to stamp out this fire ere it is well kindled. Have you aught to say, sir?"

"I have to say that the whole charge a foul and unfounded lie," said Sir Rowland bluntly: "I never plotted in my life against anything but my own prosperity, nor against any man but myself."

Albemarle smiled coldly at his colleagues, then turned to Westmacott. "And you, sir?" he said. "Are you as stubborn as your friend?"

"I incontinently deny the charge," said Richard, and he contrived that his voice should ring bold and resolute.

"A charge built on air," sneered Blake, "which the first breath of truth should utterly dispel. We have heard the impeachment. Will Your Grace with the same consideration permit us to see the proofs that we may lay bare their falseness? It should not be difficult."

"Do you say there is no such plot as is here alleged?" quoth the Duke, and smote a paper sharply.

Blake shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know?" he asked. "I say I have no share in any, that I am acquainted with none."

"Call Mr. Trenchard," said the Duke quietly, and an usher who had stood tamely by the door at the far end of the room departed on the

errand.

Richard started at the mention of that name. He had a singular dread of Mr. Trenchard.

Colonel Luttrell—lean and wiry—now addressed the prisoners, Blake more particularly. "Still," said he, "you will admit that such a plot may, indeed, exist?"

"It may, indeed, for aught I know—or care," he added incautiously.

Albemarle smote the table with a heavy hand. "By God!" he cried in that deep booming voice of his, "there spoke a traitor! You do not care, you say, what plots may be hatched against His Majesty's life and crown! Yet you ask me to believe you a true and loyal subject."

Blake was angered; he was at best a short-tempered man. Deliberately he floundered further into the mire.

"I have not asked Your Grace to believe me anything," he answered hotly. "It is all one to me what Your Grace believes me. I take it I have not been fetched hither to be confronted with what Your Grace believes. You have preferred a lying charge against me; I ask for proofs, not Your Grace's beliefs and opinions."

"By God, sir, you are a daring rogue!" cried Albemarle.

Sir Rowland's eyes blazed. "Anon, Your Grace, when, having failed of your proofs, you shall be constrained to restore me to liberty, I shall ask Your Grace to unsay that word."

Albemarle stared, confounded, and in that moment the door opened, and Trenchard sauntered in, cane in hand, his hat under his arm, a wicked smile on his wizened face.

Leaving Blake's veiled threat unanswered, the Duke turned to the old rake. "These rogues," said he, pointing to the prisoners, "demand

proofs ere they will admit the truth of the impeachment."

"Those proofs," said Trenchard, "are already in Your Grace's hands."

"Aye, but they have asked to be confronted with their accuser."

Trenchard bowed. "Is it your wish, then, that I recite for them the counts on which I have based the accusation I laid before Your Grace?"

"If you will condescend so far," said Albemarle.

"Blister me...!" roared Blake, when the Duke interrupted him.

"By God, sir!" he cried, "I'll have no such disrespectful language here. You'll observe the decency of speech and forbear from profanities, you damned rogue, or by God! I'll commit you forthwith."

"I will endeavour," said Blake, with a sarcasm lost on Albemarle, "to follow Your Grace's lofty example."

"You will do well, sir," said the Duke, and was shocked that Trenchard should laugh at such a moment.

"I was about to protest, sir," said Blake, "that it is monstrous I should be accused by Mr. Trenchard. He has but the slightest acquaintance with me."

Trenchard bowed to him across the chamber. "Admitted, sir," said he. "What should I be doing in bad company?" An answer this that set Albemarle bawling with laughter. Trenchard turned to the Duke. "I will begin, an it please Your Grace, with the expressions used last night in my presence at the Bell Inn at Bridgwater by Mr. Richard Westmacott, and I will confine myself strictly to those matters on which my testimony can be corroborated by that of other witnesses."

Colonel Luttrell interrupted him to turn to Richard. "Do you recall those expressions, sir?" he asked him.

Richard winced under the question. Nevertheless, he braced himself to make the best defence he could. "I have not yet heard," said he, "what those expressions were; nor when I hear them must it follow that I recognize them as my own. I must admit to having taken more wine, perhaps, than... than..." Whilst he sought the expression that he needed Trenchard cut in with a laugh. "In vino veritas, gentlemen," and His Grace and Sir Edward nodded sagely; Luttrell preserved a stolid exterior. He seemed less prone than his colleagues to forejudging.

"Will you repeat the expressions used by Mr. Westmacott?" Sir Edward begged.

"I will repeat the one that, to my mind, matters most." Mr. Westmacott, getting to his feet and in a loud voice, exclaimed, "God save the Protestant Duke!"

"Do you admit it, sir?" thundered Albemarle, his eyes glowering upon Richard hesitated a moment, pale and trembling.

"You will waste breath in denying it," said Trenchard suavely, "for I have a drawer from the Bell Inn, and two gentlemen who overheard you waiting outside."

"Ifaith, sir," cried Blake, "what treason was therein that? If he..."

"Silence!" thundered Albemarle. "Let Mr. Westmacott speak for himself."

Richard, inspired by the defence Blake had begun, took the same line of argument. "I admit that in the heat of wine I may have used such words," said he. "But I deny their intent to be treasonable. There are many men who drink to the prosperity of the late Kings's son..."

"Natural son, sir; natural son," Albemarle amended. "It is treason to speak of him otherwise."

"It will be a treason presently to draw breath," sneered Blake.

"If it be," said Trenchard, "it is a treason you'll not be long committing."

"Faith, you are right, Mr. Trenchard," said the Duke with a laugh. Indeed, he found Mr. Trenchard a most pleasant and facetious gentleman.

"Still," insisted Richard, endeavouring in spite of these irrelevancies to make good his point, "there be many men who drink daily to the prosperity of the late King's natural son."

"Aye, sir," answered Albemarle; "but not his prosperity in horrid plots against the life of our beloved sovereign."

"True, Your Grace; very true," purred Sir Edward. "It was not so I meant to toast him," cried Richard. Albemarle made an impatient gesture, and took up a sheet of paper. "How, then," he asked, "comes this letter—this letter which makes plain the treason upon which the Duke of Monmouth is embarked, just as it makes plain your participation in it—how comes this letter to be found in your possession?" And he waved the letter in the air.

Richard went the colour of ashes. He faltered a moment, then took refuge in the truth, for all that he knew beforehand that the truth was bound to ring more false than any lie he could invent.

"That letter was not addressed to me," he stammered.

Albemarle read the subscription, "To my good friend W., at Bridgwater." He looked up, a heavy sneer thrusting his heavy lip still further out. "What do you say to that? Does not 'W' stand for

Westmacott?"

"It does not."

"Of course not," said Albemarle with heavy sarcasm. "It stands for Wilkins, or Williams, or...or... What-not."

"Indeed, I can bear witness that it does not," exclaimed Sir Rowland.

"Be silent, sir, I tell you!" bawled the Duke at him again. "You shall bear witness soon enough, I promise you. To whom, then," he resumed, turning again to Richard, "do you say that this letter was addressed?"

"To Mr. Wilding—Mr. Anthony Wilding," Richard answered.

"I would have Your Grace to observe," put in Trenchard quietly, "that Mr. Wilding, properly speaking, does not reside in Bridgwater."

"Tush!" cried Albemarle; "the rogue but mentions the first name with a 'W' that occurs to him. He's not even an ingenious liar. And how, sir," he asked Richard, "does it come to be in your possession, having been addressed, as you say, to Mr. Wilding?"

"Aye, sir," said Sir Edward, blinking his weak eyes. "Tell us that."

Richard hesitated again, and looked at Blake. Blake, who by now had come to realize that his friend's affairs were not mended by his interruptions, moodily shrugged his shoulders, scowling.

"Come, sir," said Colonel Luttrell, engagingly, "answer the question."

"Aye," roared Albemarle; "let your invention have free rein."

Again poor Richard sought refuge in the truth. "We—Sir Rowland here and I—had reason to suspect that he was awaiting such a letter."

"Tell us your reasons, sir, if we are to credit you," said the Duke, and it was plain he mocked the prisoner. It was, moreover, a request that staggered Richard. Still, he sought to find a reason that should sound plausible.

"We inferred it from certain remarks that Mr. Wilding let fall in our presence."

"Tell us the remarks, sir," the Duke insisted.

"Indeed, I do not call his precise words to mind, Your Grace. But they were such that we suspicioned him."

"And you would have me believe that hearing words which awoke in you such grave suspicions, you kept your suspicions and straightway forgot the words. You're but an indifferent liar."

Trenchard, who was standing by the long table, leaned forward now.

"It might be well, an it please Your Grace," said he, "to waive the point, and let us come to those matters which are of greater moment. Let him tell Your Grace how he came by the letter."

"Aye," said Albemarle. "We do but waste time. Tell us, then, how came the letter into your hands?"

"With Sir Rowland, here, I robbed the courier as he was riding from Taunton to Bridgwater."

Albemarle laughed, and Sir Edward smiled. "You robbed him, eh?" said His Grace. "Very well. But how did it happen that you knew he had the letter upon him, or was it that you were playing the hightobymen, and that in robbing him you hoped to find other matters?"

"Not so, sir," answered Richard. "I sought but the letter."

"And how knew you that he carried it? Did you learn that, too, from Mr. Wilding's indiscretion?"

"Your Grace has said it."

"Slife! What an impudent rogue have we here!" cried the angry Duke, who conceived that Richard was purposely dealing in effrontery. "Mr. Trenchard, I do think we are wasting time. Be so good as to confound them both with the truth of this matter."

"That letter," said Trenchard, "was delivered to them at the Hare and Hounds, here at Taunton, by a gentleman who put up at the inn, and was there joined by Mr. Westmacott and Sir Rowland Blake. They opened the conversation with certain cant phrases very clearly intended as passwords. Thus: the prisoners said to the messenger, as they seated themselves at the table he occupied, 'You have the air, sir, of being from overseas,' to which the courier answered, 'Indeed, yes. I am from Holland. 'From the land of Orange,' says one of the prisoners. 'Aye, and other things,' replies the messenger. 'There is a fair wind blowing,' he adds; to which one of the prisoners, I believe it was Sir Rowland, makes answer, 'May it prosper the Protestant Duke and blow Popery to hell.' Thereupon the landlord caught some mention of a letter, but these plotters, perceiving that they were perhaps being overheard, sent him away to fetch them wine. A half-hour later the messenger took his leave, and the prisoners followed a very few minutes afterwards."

Albemarle turned to the prisoners. "You have heard Mr. Trenchard's story. How do you say—is it true or untrue?"

"You will waste breath in denying it," Trenchard took it again upon himself to admonish them. "For I have with me the landlord of the Hare and Hounds, who will corroborate, upon oath, what I have said."

"We do not deny it," put in Blake. "But we submit that the matter is susceptible to explanation."

"You can keep your explanations till your trial, then," snapped Albemarle. "I have heard more than enough to commit the pair of you to gaol."

"But, Your Grace," cried Sir Rowland, so fiercely that one of the tything-men set a restraining hand upon his shoulder, "I am ready to swear that what I did, and what my friend Mr. Westmacott did, was done in the interests of His Majesty. We were working to discover this plot."

"Which, no doubt," put in Trenchard slyly, "is the reason why, having got the letter, your friend Mr. Westmacott locked it in a desk, and you kept silence on the matter."

"You see," exclaimed Albemarle, "how your lies do but serve further to bind you in the toils. It is ever thus with traitors."

"I do think you are a damned traitor, Trenchard," began Blake; "a foul..."

But what more he would have said was checked by Albemarle, who thundered forth an order for their removal, and then, scarce were the words uttered than the door at the far end of the hall was opened, and through it came a sound of women's voices. Richard started, for one was the voice of Ruth.

An usher advanced. "May it please Your Grace, there are two ladies here beg that you will hear their evidence in the matter of Mr. Westmacott and Sir Rowland Blake."

Albemarle considered a moment. Trenchard stood very thoughtful.

"Indeed," said the Duke, at last, "I have heard as much as I need hear," and Sir Phelips nodded in token of concurrence.

Not so, however, Colonel Luttrell. "Still," said he, "in the interests of His Majesty, perhaps, we should be doing well to receive them."

Albemarle blew out his cheeks like a man wearied, and stared an instant at Luttrell. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Admit them, then," he commanded almost peevishly, and Ruth and Diana were ushered into the hall. Both were pale, but whilst Diana was fluttered with excitement, Ruth was calm and cool, and it was she who spoke in answer to the Duke's invitation. The burden of her speech was a clear, succinct recitation—in which she spared neither Wilding nor herself—of how the letter came to have remained in her hands and silence to have been preserved regarding it. Albemarle heard her very patiently.

"If what you say is true, mistress," said he, "and God forbid that I should be so ungallant as to throw doubt upon a lady's word, it certainly explains—although most strangely—how the letter was not brought to us at once by your brother and his friend Sir Rowland. You are prepared to swear that this letter was intended for Mr. Wilding?"

"I am prepared to swear it," she replied.

"This is very serious," said the Duke.

"Very serious," assented Sir Edward Phelips.

Albemarle, a little flustered, turned to his colleagues. "What do you say to this? Were it perhaps well to order Mr. Wilding's apprehension, and to have him brought hither?"

"It were to give yourselves useless trouble, gentlemen," said Trenchard, with so much assurance that it was plain Albemarle hesitated.

"Beware of Mr. Trenchard, Your Grace," cried Ruth. "He is Mr.

Wilding's friend, and if there is a plot he is sure to be in it."

Albemarle, startled, looked at Trenchard. Had the accusation come from either of the men the Duke would have silenced him and abused him; but coming from a woman, and so comely a woman, it seemed to His Grace worthy at least of consideration. But nimble Mr. Trenchard was easily master of the situation.

"Which, of course," he answered, with fine sarcasm, "is the reason why I have been at work for the past four-and-twenty hours to lay proofs of this plot before Your Grace."

Albemarle was ashamed of his momentary hesitation.

"For the rest," said Trenchard, "it is perfectly true that I am Mr. Wilding's friend. But the lady is even more intimately connected with him. It happens that she is his wife."

"His... his wife!" gasped the Duke, whilst Phelips chuckled, and Colonel Luttrell's face grew dark.

Trenchard's wicked smile flickered upon his mobile features. "There are rumours current of court paid her by Sir Rowland, there. Who knows?" he questioned most suggestively, arching his brows and tightening his lips. "Wives are strange kittle-kattle, and husbands have been known before to grow inconvenient. Upon reflection, Your Grace will no doubt discern the precise degree of faith to attach to what this lady may tell you against Mr. Wilding."

"Oh!" exclaimed Ruth, her cheeks flaming crimson. "But this is monstrous!"

"Tis how I should myself describe it," answered Trenchard without shame.

Spurred to it thus, Ruth poured out the entire story of her marriage, and so clear and lucid was her statement that it threw upon the affair a

flood of light, whilst so frank and truthful was her tone, her narrative hung so well together, that the Bench began to recover from the shock to its faith, and was again in danger of believing her. Trenchard saw this and trembled. To save Wilding for the Cause he had resorted to this desperate expedient of betraying that Cause. It must be observed, however, that he had not done so save under the conviction that betrayed it was bound to be, and that since that was inevitable the thing had better come from him—for Wilding's sake—than from Richard Westmacott. He had taken the bull by the horns in a most desperate fashion when he had determined to hoist Richard and Blake with their own petard, hoping that, after all, the harm would reach no further than the destruction of these two—a purely defensive measure. But now this girl threatened to wreck his scheme just as it was being safely steered to harbour. Suddenly he swung round, interrupting her.

"Lies, lies, lies!" he clamoured, and his interruption coming at such a time served to impress the Duke most unfavourably—as well it might.

"It is our wish to hear this lady out, Mr. Trenchard," the Duke reproved him.

But Mr. Trenchard was undismayed. Indeed, he had just discovered a hitherto neglected card, which should put an end to this dangerous game.

"I do abhor to hear Your Grace's patience thus abused," he exclaimed with some show of heat. "This lady makes a mock of you. If you'll allow me to ask two questions—or perhaps three—I'll promise finally to prick this bubble for you. Have I Your Grace's leave?"

"Well, well," said Albemarle. "Let us hear your questions." And his colleagues nodded.

Trenchard turned airily to Ruth. Behind her Diana sat—an attendant had fetched a chair for her—in fear and wonder at what she saw and heard, her eyes ever and anon straying to Sir Rowland's back, which was towards her.

"This letter, madam," said he, "for the possession of which you have accounted in so... so... picturesque a manner, was intended for and addressed to Mr. Wilding, you say. And you are prepared to swear to it?"

Ruth turned indignantly to the Bench. "Must I answer this man's questions?" she demanded.

"I think, perhaps, it were best you did," said the Duke, still showing her all deference.

She turned to Trenchard, her head high, her eyes full upon his wrinkled, cynical face. "I swear, then..." she began, but he—consummate actor that he was and versed in tricks that impress an audience—interrupted her, raising one of his gnarled, yellow hands.

"Nay, nay," said he. "I would not have perjury proved against you. I do not ask you to swear. It will be sufficient if you pronounce yourself prepared to swear."

She pouted her lip a trifle, her whole expression manifesting her contempt of him. "I am in no fear of perjuring myself," she answered fearlessly. "And I swear that the letter in question was addressed to Mr. Wilding."

"As you will," said Trenchard, and was careful not to ask her how she came by her knowledge. "The letter, no doubt, was in an outer wrapper, on which there would be a superscription—the name of the person to whom the letter was addressed?" he half questioned, and Luttrell, who saw the drift of the question, nodded gravely.

"No doubt," said Ruth.

"Now you will acknowledge, I am sure, madam, that such a wrapper would be a document of the greatest importance, as important, indeed, as the letter itself, since we could depend upon it finally to clear up this point on which we differ. You will admit so much, I think?"

"Why, yes," she answered, but her voice faltered a little, and her glance was not quite so fearless. She, too, saw at last the pit he had dug for her. He leaned forward, smiling quietly, his voice impressively subdued, and launched the bolt that was to annihilate the credibility of the story she had told.

"Can you, then, explain how it comes that that wrapper has been suppressed? Can you tell us how—the matter being as you state it—in very self-defence against the dangers of keeping such a letter, your brother did not also keep that wrapper?"

Her eyes fell away from his face, they turned to Albemarle, who sat scowling again, and from him they flickered unsteadily to Phelps and Luttrell, and lastly, to Richard, who, very white and with set teeth, stood listening to the working of his ruin.

"I... I do not know," she faltered at last.

"Ah!" said Trenchard, drawing a deep breath. He turned to the Bench. "Need I suggest what was the need—the urgent need—for suppressing that wrapper?" quoth he. "Need I say what name was inscribed upon it? I think not. Your Grace's keen insight, and yours, gentlemen, will determine what was probable."

Sir Rowland now stood forward, addressing Albemarle. "Will Your Grace permit me to offer my explanation of this?"

Albemarle banged the table. His patience was at an end, since he came now to believe—as Trenchard had earlier suggested—that he

had been played upon by Ruth.

"Too many explanations have I heard already, sir," he answered. He turned to one of his secretaries. In his sudden access of choler he forgot his colleagues altogether. "The prisoners are committed for trial," said he harshly, and Trenchard breathed freely at last. But the next instant he caught his breath again, for a ringing voice was heard without demanding to see His Grace of Albemarle at once, and the voice was the voice of Anthony Wilding.

CHAPTER XI. THE MARPLOT

Mr. Wilding's appearance produced as many different emotions as there were individuals present. He made the company a sweeping bow on his admission by Albemarle's orders, a bow which was returned by a stare from one and all. Diana eyed him in amazement, Ruth in hope; Richard averted his glance from that of his brother-in-law, whilst Sir Rowland met it with a scowl of enmity—they had not come face to face since the occasion of that encounter in which Sir Rowland's self-love had been so rudely handled. Albemarle's face expressed a sort of satisfaction, which was reflected on the countenances of Phelips and Luttrell; whilst Trenchard never thought of attempting to dissemble his profound dismay. And this dismay was shared, though not in so deep a measure, by Wilding himself. Trenchard's presence gave him pause; for he had been far, indeed, from dreaming that his friend had a hand in this affair. At sight of him all was made clear to Mr. Wilding. At once he saw the role which Trenchard had assumed on this occasion, saw to the bottom of the motives that had inspired him to take the bull by the horns and level against Richard and Blake this accusation before they had leisure to level it against himself.

His quick wits having fathomed Trenchard's motive, Mr. Wilding was deeply touched by this proof of friendship, and for a second, as deeply nonplussed, at loss now how to discharge the task on which he came.

"You are very choicely come, Mr. Wilding," said Albemarle. "You will be able to resolve me certain doubts which have been set on foot by these traitors."

"That," said Mr. Wilding, "is the purpose for which I am here. News reached me of the arrest that had been made. May I beg that Your Grace will place me in possession of the facts that have so far transpired."

It was one of his secretaries who, at Albemarle's bidding, gave Wilding the information that he craved. He listened gravely; then, before Albemarle had time to question him on the score of the name that might have been upon the enfolding wrapper of the letter, he begged that he might confer apart a moment with Mr. Trenchard.

"But Mr. Wilding," said Colonel Luttrell, surprised not to hear the immediate denial of the imputation they had expected, "we should first like to hear..."

"By your leave, sirs," Wilding interrupted, "I should prefer that you ask me nothing until I have consulted with Mr. Trenchard." He saw Luttrell's frown, observed Sir Edward shift his wig to scratch his head in sheer perplexity, and caught the fore-shadowing of denial on the Duke's face. So, without giving any of them time to say him nay, he added quickly and very seriously, "I am begging this in the interests of justice. Your Grace has told me that some lingering doubt still haunts your mind upon the subject of this letter—the other charges can matter little, apart from that treasonable document. It lies within my power to resolve such doubts most clearly and finally. But I warn you, sirs, that not one word will I utter in this connection until I have had speech with Mr. Trenchard."

There was about his mien and voice a firmness that forewarned Albemarle that to insist would be worse than idle. A slight pause followed his words, and Luttrell leaned across to whisper in His Grace's ear; from the Duke's other side Sir Edward bent his head forward till it almost touched those of his companions. Blake watched, and was most foolishly impatient.

"Your Grace will never allow this!" he cried.

"Eh?" said Albemarle, scowling at him.

"If you allow those two villains to consort together we are all undone," the baronet protested, and ruined what chance there was of Albemarle's not consenting.

It was the one thing needed to determine Albemarle. Like the stubborn man he was, there was naught he detested so much as to have his course dictated to him. More than that, in Sir Rowland's anxiety that Wilding and Trenchard should not be allowed to confer apart, he smoked a fear on Sir Rowland's part, based upon the baronet's consciousness of his own guilt. He turned from him with a sneering smile, and without so much as consulting his associates he glanced at Wilding and waved his hand towards the door.

"Pray do as you suggest, Mr. Wilding," said he. "But I depend upon you not to tax our patience."

"I shall not keep Mr. Trenchard a moment longer than is necessary," said Wilding, giving no hint of the second meaning in his words.

He stepped to the door, opened it himself, and signed to Trenchard to pass out. The old player obeyed him readily, if in silence. An usher closed the door after them, and in silence they walked together to the end of the passage.

"Where is your horse, Nick?" quoth Wilding abruptly.

"What a plague do you mean, where is my horse?" flashed Trenchard. "What midsummer frenzy is this? Damn you for a marplot, Anthony! What a pox are you thinking of to thrust yourself in here at such a time?"

"I had no knowledge you were in the affair," said Wilding. "You should have told me." His manner was brisk to the point of dryness.

"However, there is still time to get you out of it. Where is your horse?"

"Damn my horse!" answered Trenchard in a passion. "You have spoiled everything!"

"On the contrary," said Mr. Wilding tartly, "it seems you had done that very thoroughly before I arrived. Whilst I am touched by the regard for me which has misled you into turning the tables on Blake and Westmacott, yet I do blame you for this betrayal of the Cause."

"There was no help for it."

"Why, no; and that is why you should have left matters where they stood."

Trenchard stamped his foot; indeed, he almost danced in the excess of his vexation. "Left them where they stood!" he echoed. "Body o' me! Where are your wits? Left them where they stood! And at any moment you might have been taken unawares as a consequence of this accusation being lodged against you by Richard or by Blake. Then the Cause would have been betrayed, indeed."

"Not more so than it is now."

"Not less, at least," snapped the player. "You give me credit for no more wit than yourself. Do you think that I am the man to do things by halves? I have betrayed the plot to Albemarle; but do you imagine I have made no provision for what must follow?"

"Provision?" echoed Wilding, staring.

"Aye, provision. God lack! What do you suppose Albemarle will do?"

"Dispatch a messenger to Whitehall with the letter within an hour."

"You perceive it, do you? And where the plague do you think Nick

Trenchard'll be what time that messenger rides?"

Mr. Wilding understood. "Aye, you may stare," sneered Trenchard. "A letter that has once been stolen may be stolen again. The courier must go by way of Walford. I had in my mind arranged the spot, close by the ford, where I should fall upon him, rob him of his dispatches, and take him—bound hand and foot if necessary—to Vallancey's, who lives close by; and there I'd leave him until word came that the Duke had landed."

"That the Duke had landed?" cried Wilding. "You talk as though the thing were imminent."

"And imminent it is. For aught we know he may be in England already."

Mr. Wilding laughed impatiently. "You must forever be building on these crack-brained rumours, Nick," said he.

"Rumours!" roared the other. "Rumours? Ha!" He checked his wild scorn, and proceeded in a different key. "I was forgetting. You do not know the Contents of that stolen letter."

Wilding started. Underlying his disbelief in the talk of the countryside, and even in the military measures which by the King's orders were being taken in the West, was an uneasy dread lest they should prove to be well founded, lest Argyle's operations in Scotland should be but the forerunner of a rash and premature invasion by Monmouth. He knew the Duke was surrounded by such reckless, foolhardy counsellors as Grey and Ferguson—and yet he could not think the Duke would ruin all by coming before he had definite word that his friends were ready. He looked at Trenchard now with anxious eyes.

"Have you seen the letter, Nick?" he asked, and almost dreaded the reply.

"Albemarle showed it me an hour ago," said Trenchard.

"And it contains?"

"The news we fear. It is in the Duke's own hand, and intimates that he will follow it in a few days—in a few days, man in person."

Mr. Wilding clenched teeth and hands. "God help us all, then!" he muttered grimly.

"Meanwhile," quoth Trenchard, bringing him back to the point, "there is this precious business here. I had as choice a plan as could have been devised, and it must have succeeded, had you not come blundering into it to mar it all at the last moment. That fat fool Albemarle had swallowed my impeachment like a draught of muscadine. Do you hear me?" he ended sharply, for Mr. Wilding stood bemused, his thoughts plainly wandering.

He let his hand fall upon Trenchard's shoulder. "No," said he, "I wasn't listening. No matter; for even had I known the full extent of your scheme I still must have interfered."

"For the sake of Mistress Westmacott's blue eyes, no doubt," sneered Trenchard. "Pah! Wherever there's a woman there's the loss of a man."

"For the sake of Mistress Wilding's blue eyes," his friend corrected him. "I'll allow no brother of hers to hang in my place."

"It will be interesting to see how you will rescue him."

"By telling the truth to Albemarle."

"He'll not believe it."

"I shall prove it," said Wilding quietly. Trenchard swung round upon him in mingled anger and alarm for him. "You shall not do it!" he

snarled. "It is nothing short of treason to the Duke to get yourself laid by the heels at such a time as this."

"I hope to avoid it," answered Wilding confidently.

"Avoid it? How?" "Not by staying longer here in talk. That will ruin all. Away with you, Trenchard!"

"By my soul, no!" answered Trenchard. "I'll not leave you. If I have got you into this, I'll help to get you out again, or stay in it with you."

"Bethink you of Monmouth?" Wilding admonished him.

"Damn Monmouth!" was the vicious answer. "I am here, and here I stay."

"Get to horse, you fool, and ride to Walford as you proposed, there to ambush the messenger. The letter will go to Whitehall none the less in spite of what I shall tell Albemarle. If things go well with me, I shall join you at Vallancey's before long."

"Why, if that is your intention," said Trenchard, "I had better stay, and we can ride together. It will make it less uncertain for you."

"But less certain for you."

"The more reason why I should remain."

The door of the hall was suddenly flung open at the far end of the corridor, and Albemarle's booming voice, impatiently raised, reached them where they stood.

"In any case," added Trenchard, "it seems there is no help for it now."

Mr. Wilding shrugged his shoulders, but otherwise dissembled his vexation. Up the passage floated the constable's voice calling them.

Side by side they moved down, and side by side they stepped once more into the presence of Christopher Monk and his associates.

"Sirs, you have not been in haste," was the Duke's ill-humoured greeting.

"We have tarried a little that we might make an end the sooner," answered Trenchard dryly, and this was the first indication he gave Mr. Wilding of how naturally—like the inimitable actor that he was—he had slipped into his new role.

Albemarle waved the frivolous rejoinder aside. "Come, Mr. Wilding," said he, "let us hear what you may have to say. You are not, I take it, about to urge any reasons why these rogues should not be committed?"

"Indeed, Your Grace," said Wilding, "that is what I am about to urge."

Blake and Richard looked at him suddenly, and from him to Trenchard; but it was only Ruth whose eyes were shrewd enough to observe the altered demeanour of the latter. Her hopes rose, founded upon this oddly assorted pair. Already in anticipation she was stirred by gratitude towards Wilding, and it was in impatient and almost wondering awe that she waited for him to proceed.

"I take it, sir," he said, without waiting for Albemarle to express any of the fresh astonishment his countenance manifested, "that the accusation against these gentlemen rests entirely upon the letter which you have been led to believe was addressed to Mr. Westmacott."

The Duke scowled a moment before replying. "Why," said he, "if it could be shown—irrefutably shown—that the letter was not addressed to either of them, that would no doubt establish the truth of what they

say—that they possessed themselves of the letter in the interests of His Majesty." He turned to Luttrell and Phelps, and they nodded their concurrence with his view of the matter. "But," he continued, "if you are proposing to prove any such thing, I think you will find it difficult."

Mr. Wilding drew a crumpled paper from his pocket. "When the courier whom they robbed, as they have correctly informed you," said he quietly, "suspected their design upon the contents of his wallet, he bethought him of removing the wrapper from the letter, so that in case the letter were seized by them it should prove nothing against any man in particular. He stuffed the wrapper into the lining of his hat, preserving it as a proof of his good faith against the time when he should bring the letter to its destination, or come to confess that it had been taken from him. That wrapper the courier brought to me, and I have it here. The evidence it will give should be more than sufficient to warrant your restoring these unjustly accused gentlemen their liberty."

"The courier took it to you?" echoed Albemarle, stupefaction in his glance. "But why to you?"

"Because," said Wilding, and with his left hand he placed the wrapper before Albemarle, whilst his right dropped again to his pocket, "the letter, as you may see, was addressed to me."

The quiet manner in which he made the announcement conveyed almost as great a shock as the announcement itself.

Albemarle took up the wrapper; Luttrell and Phelps craned forward to join him in his scrutiny of it. They compared the two, paper with paper, writing with writing. Then Monk flung one and the other down in front of him.

"What lies have I been hearing, then?" he demanded furiously of Trenchard. "'Slife I'll make an example of you. Arrest me that rogue—arrest them both," and he half rose from his seat, his trembling hand

pointing to Wilding and Trenchard.

Two of the tything-men stirred to do his bidding, but in the same instant Albemarle found himself looking into the round nozzle of a pistol.

"If," said Mr. Wilding, "a finger is laid upon Mr. Trenchard or me I shall have the extreme mortification of being compelled to shoot Your Grace."

His pleasantly modulated voice was as deliberate and calm as if he were offering the Bench a pinch of snuff. Albemarle's dark visage crimsoned; his eyes became at once wicked and afraid. Sir Edward's cheeks turned pale, his glance grew startled. Luttrell alone, vigilant and dangerous, preserved his calm. But the situation baffled even him.

Behind the two friends the tything-men had come to a terror-stricken halt. Diana had risen from her chair in the excitement of the moment and had drawn close to Ruth, who looked on with parted lips and bosom that rose and fell. Even Blake could not stifle his admiration of Mr. Wilding's coolness and address. Richard, on the other hand, was concerned only with thoughts for himself, wondering how it would fare with him if Wilding and Trenchard succeeded in getting away.

"Nick," said Mr. Wilding, "will you desire those catchpolls behind us to stand aside? If Your Grace raises your voice to call for help, if, indeed, any measures are taken calculated to lead to our capture, I can promise Your Grace—notwithstanding my profound reluctance to use violence—that they will be the last measures you will take in life. Be good enough to open the door, Nick, and to see that the key is on the outside."

Trenchard, who was by way of enjoying himself now, stepped

briskly down the hall to do as his friend bade him, with a wary eye on the tything-men. But never so much as a finger did they dare to lift. Mr. Wilding's calm was too deadly; they had seen a man in earnest before this, and they knew his appearance now. From the doorway Trenchard called Mr. Wilding.

"I must be going, Your Grace," said the latter very courteously, "but shall not be so wanting in deference to His Majesty's august representatives as to turn my back upon you." Saying which, he walked backwards, holding his pistol level, until he had reached Trenchard and the door. There he paused and made them a deep bow, his manner the more mocking in that there was no tinge of mockery perceptible. "Your very obedient servant," said he, and stepped outside. Trenchard turned the key, withdrew it from the lock, and, standing on tiptoe, thrust it upon the ledge of the lintel.

Instantly a clamour arose within the chamber. But the two friends never stayed to listen. Down the passage they sped at the double, and out into the courtyard. Here Ruth's groom, mounted himself, was walking his mistress's and Diana's horses up and down whilst he waited; yonder one of Sir Edward's stable-boys was holding Mr. Wilding's roan. Two or three men of the Somerset militia, in their red and yellow liveries, lounged by the gates, and turned uninterested eyes upon these newcomers.

Wilding approached his wife's groom. "Get down," he said, "I need your horse—on the King's business. Get down, I say," he added impatiently, upon noting the fellow's stare, and, seizing his leg, he helped him to dismount by almost dragging him from the saddle. "Up with you, Nick," said he, and Nick very promptly mounted. "Your mistress will be here presently," Wilding told the groom, and, turning on his heel, strode to his own mare. A moment later Trenchard and he vanished through the gateway with a tremendous clatter, just as the Lord-Lieutenant, Colonel Luttrell, Sir Edward Phelips, the constable,

the tything-men, Sir Rowland, Richard, and the ladies made their appearance.

Ruth pushed her way quickly to the front. She feared lest her horse and her cousin's being at hand might be used for the pursuit; so urging Diana to do the same, she snatched her reins from the hands of the dumbfounded groom and leapt nimbly to the saddle.

"After them!" roared Albemarle, and the constable with two of his men made a dash for the gateway to raise the hue and cry, whilst the militiamen watched them in stupid, inactive wonder. "Damnation, mistress!" thundered the Duke in ever-increasing passion, "hold your nag! Hold your nag, woman!" For Ruth's horse had become unmanageable, and was caracoling about the yard between the men and the gateway in such a manner that they dared not attempt to win past her.

"You have scared him with your bellowing," she panted, tugging at the bridle, and all but backed into the constable who had been endeavouring to get round behind her. The beast continued its wild prancing, and the Duke abated nothing in his furious profanity, until suddenly the groom, having relinquished to Diana the reins of the other horse, sprang to Ruth's assistance and caught her bridle in a firm grasp which brought the animal to a standstill.

"You fool!" she hissed at him, and half raised her whip to strike, but checked on the impulse, bethinking her in time that, after all, what the poor lad had done he had done thinking her distressed.

The constable and a couple of his fellows won through; others were rousing the stable and getting to horse, and in the courtyard all was bustle and commotion. Meanwhile, however, Mr. Wilding and Trenchard had made the most of their start, and were thundering through the town.

CHAPTER XII. AT THE FORD

As Mr. Wilding and Nick Trenchard rode hell-to-leather through Taunton streets they never noticed a horseman at the door of the Red Lion Inn. But the horseman noticed them. He looked up at the sound of their wild approach, started upon recognizing them, and turned in his saddle as they swept past him to call upon them excitedly to stop.

"Hi!" he shouted. "Nick Trenchard! Hi! Wilding!" Then, seeing that they either did not hear or did not heed him, he loosed a volley of oaths, wheeled his horse about, drove home the spurs, and started in pursuit. Out of the town he followed them and along the road towards Walford, shouting and clamouring at first, afterwards in a grim and angry silence.

Now, despite their natural anxiety for their own safety, Wilding and Trenchard had by no means abandoned their project of taking cover by the ford to await the messenger whom Albemarle and the others would no doubt be sending to Whitehall; and this mad fellow thundering after them seemed in a fair way to mar their plan. As they reluctantly passed the spot they had marked out for their ambush, splashed through the ford and breasted the rising ground beyond, they took counsel. They determined to stand and meet this rash pursuer. Trenchard calmly opined that if necessary they must shoot him; he was, I fear, a bloody-minded fellow at bottom, although, it is true he justified himself now by pointing out that this was no time to hesitate at trifles. Partly because they talked and partly because the gradient was steep and their horses needed breathing, they slackened rein, and the horseman behind them came tearing through the water of the ford and lessened the distance considerably in the next few minutes.

He bethought him of using his lungs once more. "Hi, Wilding! Hold, damn you!"

"He curses you in a most intimate manner," quoth Trenchard.

Wilding reined in and turned in the saddle. "His voice has a familiar sound," said he. He shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked down the slope at the pursuer, who came on crouching low upon the withers of his goaded beast.

"Wait!" the fellow shouted. "I have news—news for you!"

"It's Vallancey!" cried Wilding suddenly. Trenchard too had drawn rein and was looking behind him. Instead of expressing relief at the discovery that this was not an enemy, he swore at the trouble to which they had so needlessly put themselves, and he was still at his vituperations when Vallancey came up with them, red in the face and very angry, cursing them roundly for the folly of their mad career, and for not having stopped when he bade them.

"It was no doubt discourteous," said Mr. Wilding "but we took you for some friend of the Lord-Lieutenant's."

"Are they after you?" quoth Vallancey, his face of a sudden very startled.

"Like enough," said Trenchard, "if they have found their horses yet."

"Forward, then," Vallancey urged them in excitement, and he picked up his reins again. "You shall hear my news as we ride."

"Not so," said Trenchard. "We have business here down yonder at the ford."

"Business? What business?"

They told him, and scarce had they got the words out than he cut in

impatiently. "That's no matter now.

"Not yet, perhaps," said Mr. Wilding; "but it will be if that letter gets to Whitehall."

"Odso!" was the impatient retort, "there's other news travelling to Whitehall that will make small-beer of this—and belike it's well on its way there already."

"What news is that?" asked Trenchard. Vallancey told them. "The Duke has landed—he came ashore this morning at Lyme."

"The Duke?" quoth Mr. Wilding, whilst Trenchard merely stared. "What Duke?"

"What Duke! Lord, you weary me! What dukes be there? The Duke of Monmouth, man."

"Monmouth!" They uttered the name in a breath. "But is this really true?" asked Wilding. "Or is it but another rumour?"

"Remember the letter your friends intercepted," Trenchard bade him.

"I am not forgetting it," said Wilding.

"It's no rumour," Vallancey assured them. "I was at White Lackington three hours ago when the news came to George Speke, and I was riding to carry it to you, going by way of Taunton that I might drop word of it for our friends at the Red Lion."

Trenchard needed no further convincing; he looked accordingly dismayed. But Wilding found it still almost impossible—in spite of what already he had learnt—to credit this amazing news. It was hard to believe the Duke of Monmouth mad enough to spoil all by this sudden and unheralded precipitation.

"You heard the news at Whitp Lackington?" said he slowly. "Who carried it thither?"

"There were two messengers," answered Vallancey, with restrained impatience, "and they were Heywood Dare—who has been appointed paymaster to the Duke's forces—and Mr. Chamberlain."

Mr. Wilding was observed for once to change colour. He gripped Vallancey by the wrist. "You saw them?" he demanded, and his voice had a husky, unusual sound. "You saw them?"

"With these two eyes," answered Vallancey, "and I spoke with them."

It was true, then! There was no room for further doubt.

Wilding looked at Trenchard, who shrugged his shoulders and made a wry face. "I never thought but that we were working in the service of a hairbrain," said he contemptuously.

Vallancey proceeded to details. "Dare and Chamberlain," he informed them, "came off the Duke's own frigate at daybreak to-day. They were put ashore at Seatown, and they rode straight to Mr. Speke's with the news, returning afterwards to Lyme."

"What men has the Duke with him, did you learn?" asked Wilding.

"Not more than a hundred or so, from what Dare told us."

"A hundred! God help us all! And is England to be conquered with a hundred men? Oh, this is midsummer frenzy."

"He counts on all true Protestants to flock to his banner," put in Trenchard, and it was not plain whether he expressed a fact or sneered at one.

"Does he bring money and arms, at least?" asked Wilding.

"I did not ask," answered Vallancey. "But Dare told us that three vessels had come over, so that it is to be supposed he brings some manner of provision with him."

"It is to be hoped so, Vallancey; but hardly to be supposed," quoth Trenchard, and then he touched Wilding on the arm and pointed with his whip across the fields towards Taunton. A cloud of dust was rising from between tall hedges where ran the road. "I think it were wise to be moving. At least, this sudden landing of James Scott relieves my mind in the matter of that letter."

Wilding, having taken a look at the floating dust that announced the oncoming of their pursuers, was now lost in thought. Vallancey, who, beyond excitement at the news of which he was the bearer, seemed to have no opinion of his own as to the wisdom or folly of the Duke's sudden arrival, looked from one to the other of these two men whom he had known as the prime secret agents in the West, and waited. Trenchard moved his horse a few paces nearer the hedge, whence he "Whither now, Anthony?" he asked suddenly.

"You may ask, indeed!" exclaimed Wilding, and his voice was as bitter as ever Trenchard had heard it. "'S heart! We are in it now! We had best make for Lyme—if only that we may attempt to persuade this crack-brained boy to ship back to Holland again, and ship ourselves with him."

"There's sense in you at last," grumbled Trenchard. "But I misdoubt me he'll turn back after having come so far. Have you any money?" he asked. He could be very practical at times.

"A guinea or two. But I can get money at Ilminster."

"And how do you propose to reach Ilminster with these gentlemen by way of cutting us off?"

"We'll double back as far as the cross-roads," said Wilding promptly, "and strike south over Swell Hill for Hatch. If we ride hard we can do it easily, and have little fear of being followed. They'll naturally take it we have made for Bridgwater."

They acted on the suggestion there and then, Vallancey going with them; for his task was now accomplished, and he was all eager to get to Lyme to kiss the hand of the Protestant Duke. They rode hard, as Wilding had said they must, and they reached the junction of the roads before their pursuers hove in sight. Here Wilding suddenly detained them again. The road ahead of them ran straight for almost a mile, so that if they took it now they were almost sure to be seen presently by the messengers. On their right a thickly grown coppice stretched from the road to the stream that babbled in the hollow. He gave it as his advice that they should lie hidden there until those who hunted them should have gone by. Obviously that was the only plan, and his companions instantly adopted it. They found a way through a gate into an adjacent field, and from this they gained the shelter of the trees. Trenchard, neglectful of his finery and oblivious of the ubiquitous brambles, left his horse in Vallancey's care and crept to the edge of the thicket that he might take a peep at the pursuers.

They came up very soon, six militiamen in lobster coats with yellow facings, and a sergeant, which was what Mr. Trenchard might have expected. There was, however, something else that Mr. Trenchard did not expect; something that afforded him considerable surprise. At the head of the party rode Sir Rowland Blake—obviously leading it—and with him was Richard Westmacott. Amongst them went a man in grey clothes, whom Mr. Trenchard rightly conjectured to be the messenger riding for Whitehall. He thought with a smile of what a handful he and Wilding would have had had they waited to rob that messenger of the incriminating letter that he bore. Then he checked his smile to consider again how Sir Rowland Blake came to head that party. He abandoned the problem, as the little troop swept unhesitatingly round

to the left and went pounding along the road that led northwards to Bridgwater, clearly never doubting which way their quarry had sped.

As for Sir Rowland Blake's connection with this pursuit, the town gallant had by his earnestness not only convinced Colonel Luttrell of his loyalty and devotion to King James, but had actually gone so far as to beg that he might be allowed to prove that same loyalty by leading the soldiers to the capture of those self-confessed traitors, Mr. Wilding and Mr. Trenchard. From his knowledge of their haunts he was confident, he assured Colonel Luttrell, that he could be of service to the King in this matter. The fierce sincerity of his purpose shone through his words; Luttrell caught the accent of hate in Sir Rowland's tense voice, and, being a shrewd man, he saw that if Mr. Wilding was to be taken, an enemy would surely be the best pursuer to accomplish it. So he prevailed, and gave him the trust he sought, in Spite of Albemarle's expressed reluctance. And never did bloodhound set out more relentlessly purposeful upon a scent than did Sir Rowland follow now in what he believed to be the track of this man who stood between him and Ruth Westmacott. Until Ruth was widowed, Sir Rowland's hopes of her must lie fallow; and so it was with a zest that he flung himself into the task of widowing her.

As the party passed out of view round the angle of the white road, Trenchard made his way back to Wilding to tell him what he had seen and to lay before him, for his enucleation, the problem of Blake's being the leader of it. But Wilding thought little of Blake, and cared little of what he might be the leader.

"We'll stay here," said he, "until they have passed the crest of the hill."

This, Trenchard told him, was his own purpose; for to leave their concealment earlier would be to reveal themselves to any of the troopers who might happen to glance over his shoulder.

And so they waited some ten minutes or so, and then walked their horses slowly and carefully forward through the trees towards the road. Wilding was alongside and slightly ahead of Trenchard; Vallancey followed close upon their tails. Suddenly, as Wilding was about to put his mare at the low stone wall, Trenchard leaned forward and caught his bridle.

"Ss!" he hissed. "Horses!"

And now that they halted they heard the hoofbeats clear and close at hand; the crackling of undergrowth and the rustle of the leaves through which they had thrust their passage had deafened their ears to other sounds until this moment. They checked and waited where they stood, barely screened by the few boughs that still might intervene between them and the open, not daring to advance, and not daring to retreat lest their movements should draw attention to themselves. They remained absolutely still, scarcely breathing, their only hope being that if these who came should chance to be enemies they might ride on without looking to right or left. It was so slender a hope that Wilding looked to the priming of his pistols, whilst Trenchard, who had none, loosened his sword in its scabbard. Nearer came the riders.

"There are not more than three," whispered Trenchard, who had been listening intently, and Mr. Wilding nodded, but said nothing.

Another moment and the little party was abreast of those watchers; a dark brown riding-habit flashed into their line of vision, and a blue one laced with gold. At sight of the first Mr. Wilding's eyelids flickered; he had recognized it for Ruth's, with whom rode Diana, whilst some twenty paces or so behind came Jerry, the groom. They were returning to Bridgwater.

They came along, looking neither to right nor to left, as the three men had hoped they would, and they were all but past, when suddenly

Wilding gave his roan a touch of the spur and bounded forward. Diana's horse swerved so that it nearly threw her. Ruth, slightly ahead, reined in at once; so, too, did the groom in the rear, and so violently in his sudden fear of highwaymen that he brought his horse on to its hind legs and had it prancing and rearing madly about the road, so that he was hard put to it to keep his seat.

Ruth looked round as Mr. Wilding's voice greeted her.

"Mistress Wilding," he called to her. "A moment, if I may detain you."

"You have eluded them!" she cried, entirely off her guard in her surprise at seeing him, and there echoed through her words a note of genuine gladness that almost disconcerted her husband for a moment. The next instant a crimson flush overspread her pale face, and her eyes were veiled from him, vexation in her heart at having betrayed the lively satisfaction it afforded her to see him safe when she feared him captured already or at least upon the point of capture.

She had admired him almost unconsciously for his daring at the town hall that day, when his strong calm had stood out in such sharp contrast to the fluster and excitement of the men about him; of them all, indeed, it had seemed to her in those stressful moments that he was the only man, and she was—although she did not realize it—in danger of being proud of him. Then again the thing he had done. He had come deliberately to thrust his head into the lion's maw that he might save her brother. It was possible that he had done it in answer to the entreaties which she had earlier feared she had poured into deaf ears; or it was possible that he had done it spurred by his sense of right and justice, which would not permit him to allow another to suffer in his stead—however much that other might be caught in the very toils that he had prepared for Mr. Wilding himself. Her admiration, then, was swelled by gratitude, and it was a compound of these that had urged her to hinder the tything-men from winning past

her until he and Trenchard should have got well away.

Afterwards, when with Diana and her groom—on a horse which Sir Edward Phelps insisted upon lending them—she rode homeward from Taunton, there was Diana to keep alive the spark of kindness that glowed at last for Wilding in Ruth's breast. Miss Horton extolled his bravery, his chivalry, his nobility, and ended by expressing her envy of Ruth that she should have won such a man amongst men for her husband, and wondered what it might be that kept Ruth from claiming him for her own as was her right. Ruth had answered little, but she had ridden very thoughtful; there was that in the past she found it hard to forgive Wilding. And yet she would now have welcomed an opportunity of thanking him for what he had done, of expressing to him something of the respect he had won in her eyes by his act of selfdenunciation to save her brother. This chance, it seemed, was given her, for there he stood, with head bared before her; and already she thought no longer of seizing the chance, vexed as she was at having been surprised into a betrayal of feelings whose warmth she had until that moment scarce estimated.

In answer to her cry of "You have eluded them!" he waved a hand towards the rising ground and the road to Bridgwater.

"They passed that way but a few moments since," said he, "and by the rate at which they were travelling they should be nearing Newton by now. In their great haste to catch me they could not pause to look for me so close at hand," he added with a smile, "and for that I am thankful."

She sat her horse and answered nothing, which threw her cousin out of all patience with her. "Come, Jerry," Diana called to the groom. "We will walk our horses up the hill."

"You are very good, madam," said Mr. Wilding, and he bowed to the withers of his roan.

Ruth said nothing; expressed neither approval nor disapproval of Diana's withdrawal, and the latter, with a word of greeting to Wilding, went ahead followed by Jerry, who had regained control by now of the beast he bestrode. Wilding watched them until they turned the corner, then he walked his mare slowly forward until he was alongside Ruth.

"Before I go," said he, "there is something I should like to say." His dark eyes were sombre, his manner betrayed some hesitation.

The diffidence of his tone proved startling to her by virtue of its unusualness. What might it portend, she wondered, and sought with grave eyes to read his baffling countenance; and then a wild alarm swept into her and shook her spirit in its grip; there was something of which until this moment she had not thought—something connected with the fateful matter of that letter. It had stood as a barrier between them, her buckler, her sole defence against him. It had been to her what its sting is to the bee—a thing which if once used in self-defence is self-destructive. Not, indeed, that she had used it as her sting; it had been forced from her by the machinations of Trenchard; but used it had been, and was done with; she had it no longer that with it she might hold him in defiance, and it did not occur to her that he was no longer in case to invoke the law.

Her face grew stony, a dry glitter came to her blue eyes; she cast a glance over her shoulder at Diana and her servant. Wilding observed it and read what was passing in her mind; indeed, it was not to be mistaken, no more than what is passing in the mind of the recruit who looks behind him in the act of charging. His lips half smiled.

"Of what are you afraid?" he asked her.

"I am not afraid," she answered in husky accents that belied her.

Perhaps to reassure her, perhaps because he thought of his companions lurking in the thicket and cared not to have them for his

audience, he suggested they should go a little way in the direction her cousin had taken. She wheeled her horse, and, side by side, they ambled up the dusty road.

"The thing I have to tell you," said he presently, "concerns myself."

"Does it concern me?" she asked him coldly, and her coolness was urged partly by her newborn fears, partly to counterbalance such impression as her illjudged show of gladness at his safety might have made upon his mind. He flashed her a sidelong glance, the long white fingers of his right hand toying thoughtfully with a ringlet of the dark brown hair that fell upon the shoulders of his scarlet coat.

"Surely, madam," he answered dryly, "what concerns a man may well concern his wife."

She bowed her head, her eyes upon the road before her. "True," said she, her voice expressionless. "I had forgot."

He reined in and turned to look at her; her horse moved on a pace or two, then came to a halt, apparently of its own accord.

"I do protest," said he, "you treat me less kindly than I deserve." He urged his mare forward until he had come up with her again, and then drew rein once more. "I think that I may lay some claim to—at least—your gratitude for what I did to-day."

"It is my inclination to be grateful," said she. She was very wary of him. "Forgive me, if I am still mistrustful."

"But of what?" he cried, a thought impatiently.

"Of you. What ends did you seek to serve? Was it to save Richard that you came?"

"Unless you think that it was to save Blake," he said ironically. "What other ends do you conceive I could have served?" She made

him no answer, and so he resumed after a pause. "I rode to Taunton to serve you for two reasons; because you asked me, and because I would have no innocent men suffer in my stead—not even though, as these men, they were but caught in their own toils, hoist with the petard they had charged for me. Beyond these two motives, I had no other thought in ruining myself."

"Ruining yourself?" she cried. Yes, it was true; but she had not thought of it until this moment; there had been so much to think of.

"Is it not ruin to be outlawed, to have a price set upon your head, as will no doubt a price be set on mine when Albemarle's messenger shall have reached Whitehall? Is it not ruin to have my lands and all I own made forfeit to the State, to find myself a beggar, hunted and proscribed? Forgive me that I harass you with this catalogue of my misfortunes. You'll say, no doubt, that I have brought them upon myself by compelling you against your will to marry me.

"I'll not deny that it is in my mind," said she, and of set purpose stifled pity.

He sighed and looked at her again, but she would not meet his eye, else its whimsical expression might have intrigued her. "Can you deny my magnanimity, I wonder?" said he, and spoke almost as one amused. "All I had I sacrificed to do your will, to save your brother from the snare of his own contriving against me. I wonder do you yet realize how much I sacrificed to-day at Taunton! I wonder!" And he paused, looking at her and waiting for some word from her; but she had none for him.

"Clearly you do not, else I think you would show me if only a pretence of kindness." She was looking at him at last, her eyes less hard. They seemed to ask him to explain. "When you came this morning with the tale of how the tables had been turned upon your brother, of how he was caught in his own springe, and the letter found

in his keeping was before the King's folk at Taunton with every appearance of having been addressed to him, and not a tittle of evidence to show that it had been meant for me, do you know what news it was you brought me?" He paused a second, looking at her from narrowing eyes. Then he answered his own question. "You brought me the news that you were mine to take whensoever I pleased. Whilst that letter was in your hands it gave you the power to make me your obedient slave. You might blow upon me as you listed whilst you held it, and I was a vane that must turn to your blowing for my honour's sake and for the sake of the cause in which I worked. Through no rashness of mine must that letter come into the hands of the King's friends, else was I dishonoured. It was an effective barrier between us. So long as you possessed that letter you might pipe as you pleased, and I must dance to the tune you set. And then this morning what you came to tell me was that things were changed; that it was mine to call the tune. Had I had the strength to be a villain, you had been mine now, and your brother and Sir Rowland might have hanged on the rope of their own weaving."

She looked at him in a startled, almost shamefaced manner. This was an aspect of the case she had not considered.

"You realize it, I see," he said, and smiled wistfully. "Then perhaps you realize why you found me so unwilling to do the thing you craved. Having treated me ungenerously, you came to cast yourself upon my generosity, asking me—though I scarcely think you understood—to beggar myself of life itself with all it held for me. God knows I make no pretence to virtue, and yet I think I had been something more than human had I not refused you and the bargain you offered—a bargain that you would never be called upon to fulfil if I did the thing you asked."

At last she interrupted him; she could bear it no longer.

"I had not thought of it!" she cried. It was a piteous wail that broke

from her. "I swear I had not thought of that. I was all distraught for poor Richard's sake. Oh, Mr. Wilding," she turned to him, holding out a hand; her eyes shone, filmed with moisture, "I shall have a kindness for you..., all my days for your... generosity to-day." It was lamentably weak, far from the hot expressions which she forced it to replace.

"Yes, I was generous," he admitted. "We will move on as far as the cross-roads." Again they ambled gently forward. Up the slope from the ford Diana and Jerry were slowly climbing; not another human being was in sight ahead or behind them. "After you left me," he continued, "your memory and your entreaties lingered with me. I gave the matter of our position thought, and it seemed to me that all was monstrously ill-done. I loved you, Ruth, I needed you, and you disdained me. My love was aster of me. But 'neath your disdain it was transmuted oddly." He checked the passion that was vibrating in his voice and resumed after a pause, in the calm, slow tones, soft and musical, that were his own. "There is scarce the need for so much recapitulation. When the power was mine I bent you unfairly to my will; you did as much by me when the power suddenly became yours. It was a strange war between us, and I accepted its conditions. To-day, when the power was mine again, mine to bring you at last to subjection, behold, I have capitulated at your bidding, and all that I held—including your own self—have I relinquished. It is perhaps fitting. Haply I am punished for having wed you before I had wooed you." Again his tone changed, it grew more cold, more matter-of-fact. "I rode this way a little while ago a hunted man, my only hope to reach home and collect what moneys and valuables I could carry, and make for the coast to find a vessel bound for Holland. I have been engaged, as you know, in stirring up rebellion to check the iniquities and persecutions that are toward in a land I love. I'll not weary you with details. Time was needed for this as for all things, and by next spring, perhaps, had matters gone well, this vineyard that so carefully and secretly I have been tending, would have been, maybe, in condition to bear fruit. Even now, in the hour of my flight, I learn that others have

come to force this delicate growth into sudden maturity. There! Soon ripe, soon rotten. The Duke of Monmouth has landed at Lyme this morning. I am riding to him."

"To what end?" she cried, and he saw in her face a dismay that amounted almost to fear, and he wondered was it for him.

"To place my sword at his service. Were I not encompassed by this ruin, I should not have stirred a foot in that direction—so rash, so foredoomed to failure is this invasion. As it is,"—he shrugged and laughed—"it is the only hope—all forlorn though it may be—for me."

The trammels she had imposed upon her soul fell away at that like bonds of cobweb. She laid her hand upon his wrists, tears stood in her eyes; her lips quivered.

"Anthony, forgive me," she besought him. He trembled under her touch, under the caress of her voice, and at the sound of his name for the first time upon her lips.

"What have I to forgive?" he asked.

"The thing that I did in the matter of that letter."

"You poor child," said he, smiling gently upon her, "you did it in self-defence."

"Yet say that you forgive me—say it before you go!" she begged him.

He considered her gravely a moment. "To what end," he asked, "do you imagine that I have talked so much? To the end that I might show you that however I may have wronged you I have at the last made some amends; and that for the sake of this, the truest proof of penitence, I may have your forgiveness ere I go."

She was weeping softly. "It was an ill day on which we met," she

sighed.

"For you—aye."

"Nay—for you."

"We'll say for both of us, then," he compromised. "See, Ruth, your cousin grows weary, and I have a couple of comrades who are no doubt impatient to be gone. It may not be good for us to tarry in these parts. Some amends I have made; but there is one crowning wrong which I have done you for which there is but one amend to make." He paused. He steadied himself before continuing. In his attempt to render his voice cold and commonplace he went near to achieving harshness. "It may be that this crackbrained rebellion of which the torch is already alight will, if it does no other good in England, at least make a widow of you. When that has come to pass, when I have thus repaired the wrong I did you, I hope you'll bear me as kindly as may be in your thought. Good-bye, my Ruth! I would you might have loved me. I sought to force it." He smiled ever so wanly. "Perhaps that was my mistake. It is an ill thing to eat one's hay while it is grass." He raised to his lips the little gloved hand that still rested on his wrist. "God keep you, Ruth!" he murmured.

She sought to answer him, but something choked her; a sob was all she achieved. Had he caught her to him in that moment there is little doubt but that she had yielded. Perhaps he knew it; and knowing it kept the tighter rein upon desire. She was as metal molten in the crucible, to be moulded by his craftsman's hands into any pattern that he chose. But the crucible was the crucible of pity, not of love; that, too, he knew, and, knowing it, forbore.

He dropped her hand, doffed his hat, and, wheeling his horse about, touched it with the spur and rode back towards the thicket where his friends awaited him. As he left her, she too wheeled about, as if to follow him. She strove to command her voice that she might

recall him; but at that same moment Trenchard, hearing his returning hoofs, thrust out into the road with Vallancey following at his heels. The old player's harsh voice reached her where she stood, and it was querulous with impatience.

"What a plague do you mean, dallying here at such a time, Anthony?" he cried, to which Vallancey added: "In God's name, let us push on."

At that she checked her impulse—it may even be that she mistrusted it. She paused, lingering undecided for an instant; then, turning her horse once more, she ambled up the slope to rejoin Diana.

CHAPTER XIII. "PRO RELIGIONE ET LIBERTATE"

The evening was far advanced when Mr. Wilding and his two companions descended to Uplyme Common from the heights whence as they rode they had commanded a clear view of the fair valley of the Axe, lying now under a thin opalescent veil of evening mist.

They had paused at Ilminster for fresh horses, and there Wilding had paid a visit to one of his agents from whom he had procured a hundred guineas. Thence they had come south at a sharp pace, and with little said. Wilding was moody and thoughtful, filled with chagrin at this unconscionable rashness of the man upon whom all his hopes were centred. As they cantered briskly across Uplyme Common in the twilight they passed several bodies of countrymen, all heading for the town, and one group sent up a shout of "God save the Protestant Duke!" as they rode past him.

"Amen to that," muttered Mr. Wilding grimly, "for I am afraid that no man can."

In the narrow lane by Hay Farm a horseman, going in the opposite direction, passed them at the gallop; but they had met several such since leaving Ilminster, for indeed the news was spreading fast, and the whole countryside was alive with messengers, some on foot and some on horseback, but all hurrying as if their lives depended on their haste.

They made their way to the Market-Place where Monmouth's declaration—that remarkable manifesto from the pen of Ferguson—

had been read some hours before. Thence, having ascertained where His Grace was lodged, they made their way to the George Inn.

In Coombe Street they found the crowd so dense that they could but with difficulty open out a way for their horses through the human press. Not a window but was open, and thronged with sight-seers—mostly women, indeed, for the men were in the press below. On every hand resounded the cries of "A Monmouth! A Monmouth! The Protestant Religion! Religion and Liberty," which latter were the words inscribed on the standard Monmouth had set up that evening on the Church Cliffs.

In truth, Wilding was amazed at what he saw, and said as much to Trenchard. So pessimistic had been his outlook that he had almost expected to find the rebellion snuffed out by the time they reached Lyme-of-the-King. What had the authorities been about that they had permitted Monmouth to come ashore, or had Vallancey's information been wrong in the matter of the numbers that accompanied the Protestant Champion? Wilding's red coat attracted some attention. In the dusk its colour was almost all that could be discerned of it.

"Here's a militia captain for the Duke!" cried one, and others took up the cry, and if it did nothing else it opened a way for them through that solid human mass and permitted them to win through to the yard of the George Inn. They found the spacious quadrangle thronged with men, armed and unarmed, and on the steps stood a tall, well-knit, soldierly man, his hat rakishly cocked, about whom a crowd of townsmen and country fellows were pressing with insistence. At a glance Mr. Wilding recognized Captain Venner—raised to the rank of colonel by Monmouth on the way from Holland.

Trenchard dismounted, and taking a distracted stable-boy by the arm, bade him see to their horses. The fellow endeavoured to swing himself free of the other's tenacious grasp.

"Let me go," he cried. "I am for the Duke!"

"And so are we, my fine rebel," answered Trenchard, holding fast.

"Let me go," the lout insisted. "I am going to enlist."

"And so you shall when you have stabled our nags. See to him Vallancey; he is brainsick with the fumes of war."

The fellow protested, but Trenchard's way was brisk and short; and so, protesting still, he led away their cattle in the end, Vallancey going with him to see that he performed this last duty as a stable-boy ere he too became a champion militant of the Protestant Cause. Trenchard sped after Wilding, who was elbowing his way through the yokels about the steps. The glare of a newly lighted lamp from the doorway fell full upon his long white face as he advanced, and Venner espied and recognized him.

"Mr. Wilding!" he cried, and there was a glad ring in his voice, for though cobblers, tailors, deserters from the militia, pot-boys, stable-boys, and shuffling yokels had been coming in in numbers during the past few hours since the Declaration had been read, this was the first gentleman that arrived to welcome Monmouth. The soldier stretched out a hand to grasp the newcomer's. "His Grace will see you this instant, not a doubt of it." He turned and called down the passage. "Cragg!" A young man in a buff coat came forward, and to him Venner delivered Wilding and Trenchard that he might announce them to His Grace.

In the room that had been set apart for him abovestairs, Monmouth still sat at table. He had just supped, with but an indifferent appetite, so fevered was he by the events of his landing. He was excited with hope—inspired by the readiness with which the men of Lyme and its neighbourhood had flocked to his banner—and fretted by anxiety that none of the gentry of the vicinity should yet have followed the example

of the meaner folk, in answer to the messages dispatched at dawn from Seaton. The board at which he sat was still cumbered with some glasses and platters and vestiges of his repast. Below him on his right sat Ferguson—that prince of plotters—very busy with pen and ink, his keen face almost hidden by his great periwig; opposite were Lord Grey, of Werke, and Andrew Fletcher, of Saltoun, whilst, standing at the foot of the table barely within the circle of candlelight from the branch on the polished oak, was Nathaniel Wade, the lawyer, who had fled to Holland on account of his alleged complicity in the Rye House plot and was now returned a major in the Duke's service. Erect and soldierly of figure, girt with a great sword and with the butt of a pistol protruding from his belt, he had little the air of a man whose methods of contention were forensic.

"You understand, then, Major Wade," His Grace was saying, his voice pleasant and musical. "It is decided that the guns had best be got ashore forthwith and mounted."

Wade bowed. "I shall set about it at once, Your Grace. I shall not want for help. Have I Your Grace's leave to go?"

Monmouth nodded, and as Wade passed out, Ensign Cragg entered to announce Mr. Wilding and Mr. Trenchard. The Duke rose to his feet, his glance suddenly brightening. Fletcher and Grey rose with him; Ferguson paid no heed, absorbed in his task, which he industriously continued.

"At last!" exclaimed the Duke. "Admit them, sir."

When they entered, Wilding coming first, his hat under his arm, the Duke sprang to meet him, a tall young figure, lithe and slender as a blade of steel, and of a steely strength for all his slimness. He was dressed in a suit of purple that became him marvellously well, and on his breast a star of diamonds flashed and smouldered like a thing of fire. He was of an exceeding beauty of face, wherein he mainly

favoured that "bold, handsome woman" that was his mother, without, however, any of his mother's insipidity; fine eyes, a good nose, straight and slender, and a mouth which, if sensual and indicating a lack of strength, was beautifully shaped. His chin was slightly cleft, the shape of his face a delicate oval, framed now in the waving masses of his brown wig. Some likeness to his late Majesty was also discernible, in spite of the wart, out of which his uncle James made so much capital.

There was a slight flush on his cheeks, an added lustre in his eye, as he took Wilding's hand and shook it heartily before Wilding had time to kiss His Grace's.

"You are late," he said, but there was no reproach in his voice. "We had looked to find you here when we came ashore. You had my letter?"

"I had not, Your Grace," answered Wilding, very grave. "It was stolen."

"Stolen?" cried the Duke, and behind him Grey pressed forward, whilst even Ferguson paused in his writing to raise his piercing eyes and listen.

"It is no matter," Wilding reassured him. "Although stolen, it has but gone to Whitehall to-day, when it can add little to the news that is already on its way there."

The Duke laughed softly, with a flash of white teeth, and looked past Wilding at Trenchard. Some of the light faded out of his eyes. "They told me Mr. Trenchard..." he began, when Wilding, half turning to his friend, explained.

"This is Mr. Nicholas Trenchard—John Trenchard's cousin.

"I bid you welcome, sir," said the Duke, very agreeably, "and I trust

your cousin follows you."

"Alas," said Trenchard, "my cousin is in France," and in a few brief words he related the matter of John Trenchard's home-coming on his acquittal and the trouble there had been connected with it.

The Duke received the news in silence. He had expected good support from old Speke's son-in-law. Indeed, there was a promise that when he came, John Trenchard would bring fifteen hundred men from Taunton. He took a turn in the room deep in thought, and there was a pause until Ferguson, rubbing his great Roman nose, asked suddenly had Mr. Wilding seen the Declaration. Mr. Wilding had not, and thereupon the plotting parson, who was proud of his composition, would have read it to him there and then, but that Grey sourly told him the matter would keep, and that they had other things to discuss with Mr. Wilding.

This the Duke himself confirmed, stating that there were matters on which he would be glad to have their opinion.

He invited the newcomers to draw chairs to the table; glasses were called for, and a couple of fresh bottles of Canary went round the board. The talk was desultory for a few moments, whilst Wilding and Trenchard washed the dust from their throats; then Monmouth broke the ice by asking them bluntly what they thought of his coming thus, earlier than was at first agreed.

Wilding never hesitated in his reply. "Frankly, Your Grace," said he, "I like it not at all."

Fletcher looked up sharply, his clear intelligent eyes full upon Wilding's calm face, his countenance expressing as little as did Wilding's. Ferguson seemed slightly taken aback. Grey's thick lips were twisted in a sneering smile.

"Faith," said the latter with elaborate sarcasm, "in that case it only

remains for us to ship again, heave anchor, and back to Holland."

"It is what I should advise," said Wilding slowly and quietly, "if I thought there was a chance of my advice being taken." He had a calm, almost apathetic way of uttering startling things which rendered them doubly startling. The sneer seemed to freeze on Lord Grey's lips; Fletcher continued to stare, but his eyes had grown more round, Ferguson scowled darkly. The Duke's boyish face—it was still very youthful despite his six-and-thirty years—expressed a wondering consternation. He looked at Wilding, and from Wilding to the others, and his glance seemed to entreat them to suggest an answer to him. It was Grey at last who took the matter up.

"You shall explain your meaning, sir, or we must hold you a traitor," he exclaimed.

"King James does that already," answered Wilding with a quiet smile.

"D'ye mean the Duke of York?" rumbled Ferguson's Scottish accent with startling suddenness, and Monmouth nodded approval of the correction. "If ye mean that bloody papist and fratricide, it were well so to speak of him. Had ye read the Declaration..."

But Fletcher cropped his speech in mid-growth. He was ever a short-tempered man, intolerant of irrelevancies.

"It were well, perhaps," said he, his accent abundantly proclaiming him a fellow countryman of Ferguson's, "to keep to the matter before us. Mr. Wilding, no doubt, will state the reasons that exist, or that he fancies may exist, for giving advice which is hardly worthy of the cause to which he stands committed."

"Aye, Fletcher," said Monmouth, "there is sense in you. Tell us what is in your mind, Mr. Wilding."

"It is in my mind, Your Grace, that this invasion is rash, premature, and ill-advised."

"Odds life!" cried Grey, and he swung angrily round fully to face the Duke, the nostrils of his heavy nose dilating. "Are we to listen to this milksop prattle?"

Nick Trenchard, who had hitherto been silent, cleared his throat so noisily that he drew all eyes to himself.

"Your Grace," Mr. Wilding pursued, his air calm and dignified, and gathering more dignity from the circumstance that he proceeded as if there had been no interruption, "when I had the honour of conferring with you at The Hague two months ago, it was agreed that you should spend the summer in Sweden—away from politics and scheming, leaving the work of preparation to your accredited agents here. That work I have been slowly but surely pushing forward. It was not to be hurried; men of position are not to be won over in a day; men with anything to lose need some guarantee that they are not wantonly casting their possessions to the winds. By next spring, as was agreed, all would have been ready. Delay could not have hurt you. Indeed, with every day by which you delayed your coming you did good service to your cause, you strengthened its prospects of success; for every day the people's burden of oppression and persecution grows more heavy, and the people's temper more short; every day, by the methods that he is pursuing, King James brings himself into deeper hatred. This hatred is spreading. It was the business of myself and those others to help it on, until from the cottage of the ploughman the infection of anger should have spread to the mansion of the squire. Had Your Grace but given me time, as I entreated you, and as you promised me, you might have marched to Whitehall with scarce the shedding of a drop of blood; had Your Grace but waited until we were ready, England would have so trembled at your landing that your uncle's throne would have toppled

over 'neath the shock. As it is..." He shrugged his shoulders, sighed and spread his hands, leaving his sentence uncompleted.

Monmouth sat sobered by these sober words; the intoxication that had come to him from the little measure of success that had attended the opening of the listing on Church Cliffs, deserted him now; he saw the thing stark and in its true proportions, and not even the shouting of the folk in the streets below, crying his name and acclaiming him their champion, served to lighten the gloom that Wilding's words cast like a cloud over his volatile heart. Alas, poor Monmouth! He was ever a weathercock, and even as Wilding's words seemed to strike the courage out of him, so did Grey's short contemptuous answer restore it.

"As it is, we'll thrust that throne over with our hands," said he after a moment's pause.

"Aye," cried Monmouth. "We'll do it, God helping us!"

"Our dependence and trust is in the Lord of Hosts, in Whose Name we go forth," boomed the voice of Ferguson, quoting from his precious Declaration. "The Lord will do that which seemeth good unto Him."

"An unanswerable argument," said Wilding, smiling. "But the Lord, I am told by the gentlemen of your cloth, works in His own good time, and my fears are all lest, finding us unprepared of ourselves, the Lord's good time be not yet."

"Out on ye, sir," cried Ferguson. "Ye want for reverence!"

"Common sense will serve us better at the moment," answered Wilding with a touch of sharpness. He turned to the frowning and perplexed Duke—whose mind was being tossed this way and that, like a shuttlecock upon the battledore of these men's words. "Your Grace," he said, "forgive me that I speak it if hear it you will, or forbid

me to say it if your resolve is unalterable in this matter."

"It is unalterable," answered Grey for the Duke.

But Monmouth gently overruled him for once.

"Nevertheless, speak by all means, Mr. Wilding. Whatever you may say, you need have no fear that any of us can doubt your good intentions to ourselves."

"I thank Your Grace. What I have to say is but a repetition of the first words I uttered at this table. I would urge Your Grace even now to retreat."

"What? Are you mad?" It was Lord Grey who asked the impatient question.

"I doubt it's over-late for that," said Fletcher slowly.

"I am not so sure," answered Wilding. "But I am sure that to attempt it were the safer course—the surer in the end. I myself may not linger to push forward the task of stirring up the people, for I am already something more than under suspicion. But there are others who will remain to carry on the work after I have departed with Your Grace, if Your Grace thinks well. From the Continent by correspondence we can mature our plans. In a twelvemonth things will be very different, and we can return with confidence."

Grey shrugged and turned his shoulder upon Wilding, but said no word. There was silence of some few moments. Andrew Fletcher leaned his elbow on the table and took his brow in his great bony hand. Wilding's words seemed an echo of those he himself had spoken a week or two ago, only to be overruled by Grey, who swayed the Duke more than did any other—and that he did not do so of fell purpose, and seeking deliberately to work Monmouth's ruin, no man will ever be able to say with certainty.

Ferguson rose, a tall, spare, stooping figure, and smote the board with his fist. "It is a good cause," he cried, "and God will not leave us unless we leave Him."

"Henry the Seventh landed with fewer men than did Your Grace," said Grey, "and he succeeded."

"True," put in Fletcher. "But Henry the Seventh was sure of the support of not a few of the nobility, which does not seem to be our case."

Ferguson and Grey stared at him in horror; Monmouth sat biting his lip, more bewildered than thoughtful.

"O man of little faith!" roared Ferguson in a passion. "Are ye to be swayed like a straw in the wind?"

"I am no' swayed. Ye ken this was ever my own view. I feel, in my heart, that what Mr. Wilding says is right. It is but what I said myself, and Captain Matthews with me, before we embarked upon this expedition. We were in danger of ruining all by a needless precipitancy. Nay, man, never stare so," he said to Grey, "I am in it now and I am no' the man to draw back, nor do I go so far as Mr. Wilding in counselling such a course. We've set our hands to the plough; let us go forward in God's name. Yet I would remind you that what Mr. Wilding says is true. Had we waited until next year, we had found the usurper's throne tottering under him, and, on our landing, it would have toppled o'er of itself."

"I have said already that we'll overset it with our hands," Grey answered.

"How many hands have you?" asked a new voice, a crisp, discordant voice, much steeped in mockery. It was Nick Trenchard's.

"Have we another here of Mr. Wilding's mind?" cried Grey, staring

at him.

"I am seldom of any other," answered Trenchard. "We shall not want for hands," Ferguson assured him. "Had ye arrived earlier ye might have seen how readily men enlisted." He had risen and approached the window as he spoke; he pulled it open, to let in the full volume of sound that rose from the street below.

"A Monmouth! A Monmouth!" voices shouted.

Ferguson struck a theatrical posture, one long, lean arm stretched outward from the shoulder.

"Ye hear them, sirs," he cried, and there was a gleam of triumph in his eye. "That is answer enough to those who want for faith, to the feckless ones that think the Lord will abandon those that have set out to serve Him," and his glance comprehended Fletcher, Trenchard, and Wilding.

The Duke stirred in his chair, stretched a hand for the bottle and filled a glass. His mercurial spirits were rising again. He smiled at Wilding.

"I think you are answered, sir," said he; "and I hope that like Fletcher there, who shared your doubts, you will come to agree that since we have set our hands to the plough we must go forward."

"I have said that which I had it on my conscience to say. Your Grace may have found me over-ready with my counsel; at least you shall find me no less ready with my sword."

"Odso! That is better." Grey applauded, and his manner was almost pleasant.

"I never doubted it, Mr. Wilding," His Grace replied; "but I should like to hear you say that you are convinced—at least in part," and he waved his hand towards the window. It was almost as if he pleaded

for encouragement. In common with most men who came in contact with Wilding, he had felt the latent force of this man's nature, the strength that was hidden under that calm surface, and the acuteness of the judgment that must be wedded to it. He longed to have the word of such a man that his enterprise was not as desperate as Wilding had seemed at first to paint it. But Wilding made no concession to hopes or desires when he dealt with facts.

"Men will flock to you, no doubt; persecution has wearied many of the country-folk, and they are ready for revolt. But they are all untrained in arms; they are rustics, not soldiers. If any of the men of position were to rally round your standard they would bring the militia, and others in their train; they would bring arms, horses, and money, all of which Your Grace must be sorely needing."

"They will come," answered the Duke.

"Some, no doubt," Wilding agreed; "but had it been next year, I would have answered for it that it would have been no handful had ridden in to welcome you. Scarce a gentleman of Devon or Somerset, of Dorset or Hampshire, of Wiltshire or Cheshire but would have hastened to your side."

"They will come as it is," the Duke repeated with an almost womanish insistence, persisting in believing what he hoped, all evidence apart.

The door opened and Ensign Cragg made his appearance. "May it please Your Grace," he announced, "Mr. Battiscomb has just arrived, and asks will Your Grace receive him to-night?"

"Battiscomb!" cried the Duke. Again his cheek flushed and his eye sparkled. "Aye, in Heaven's name, show him up."

"And may the Lord refresh us with good tidings!" prayed Ferguson devoutly.

Monmouth turned to Wilding. "It is the agent I sent ahead of me from Holland to stir up the gentry from here to the Mersey."

"I know," said Wilding; "we conferred together some weeks since."

"Now you shall see how idle are your fears," the Duke promised him.

And Wilding, who was better informed on that score, kept silence.

CHAPTER XIV. HIS GRACE' IN COUNSEL

Mr. Christopher Battiscomb, that mild-mannered Dorchester gentleman, who, like Wade, was by vocation a lawyer, was ushered into the Duke's presence. He was dressed in black, and, like Ferguson, was almost smothered in a great periwig, which he may have adopted for purposes of disguise rather than adornment. Certainly he had none of that air of the soldier of fortune which distinguished his brother of the robe. He advanced, hat in hand, towards the table, greeting the company about it, and Wilding observed that he wore silk stockings and shoes, upon which there rested not a speck of dust. Mr. Battiscomb was plainly a man who loved his ease, since on such a day he had travelled to Lyme in a coach. The lawyer bent low to kiss the Duke's hand, and scarce was that formal homage paid than questions poured upon him from Grey, from Fletcher, and from Ferguson.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," the Duke entreated them, smiling; and remembering their manners they fell silent.

As Wilding afterwards told Trenchard, they reminded him of a parcel of saucy lacqueys who take liberties with an upstart master for whom they are wanting in respect.

"I am glad to see you, Battiscomb," said Monmouth, when quiet was restored, "and I trust I behold in you a bearer of good tidings."

The lawyer's full face was usually pale; to-night it was, in addition, solemn, and the smile that haunted his lips was a courtesy smile that expressed neither mirth nor satisfaction. He cleared his throat, as if

nervous. He avoided the Duke's question as to the quality of the news he brought by answering that he had made all haste to come to Lyme upon hearing of His Grace's landing. He was surprised, he said; as well he might be, for the arrangement was that having done his work he was to return to Holland and report to Monmouth upon the feeling of the gentry.

"But your news, Battiscomb," the Duke insisted. "Aye," put in Grey; "in Heaven's name, let us hear that."

Again there was the little nervous cough from Battiscomb. "I have scarce had time to complete my round of visits," he temporized. "Your Grace has taken us so by surprise. I... I was with Sir Walter Young at Colyton when the news of your landing came some few hours ago." His voice faltered and seemed to die away.

"Well?" cried the Duke. His brows were drawn together. Already he realized that Battiscomb's tidings were not good, else would he be hesitating less in uttering them. "Is Sir Walter with you, at least?"

"I grieve to say that he is not."

"Not?" It was Grey who spoke, and he followed the ejaculation by an oath. "Why not?"

"He is following, no doubt?" suggested Fletcher.

"We may hope, sirs," answered Battiscomb, "that in a few days—when he shall have seen the zeal of the countryside—he will be cured of his present luke-warmness." Thus, discreetly, did the man of law break the bad news he bore.

Monmouth sank back into his chair like one who has lost some of his strength. "Lukewarmness?" he repeated dully. "Sir Walter Young lukewarm!"

"Even so, Your Grace—alas!" and Battiscomb sighed audibly.

Ferguson's voice boomed forth again to startle them. "The ox knoweth his owner," he cried, "the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider."

Grey pushed the bottle contemptuously across the table to the parson. "Drink, man, and get sense, said he, and turned aside to question Battiscomb touching others of the neighbourhood upon whom they had depended.

"What of Sir Francis Rolles?" he inquired.

Battiscomb answered the question, addressing himself to the Duke.

"Alas! Sir Francis, no doubt, would have been faithful to Your Grace, but, unfortunately, Sir Francis is in prison already."

Deeper grew Monmouth's frown; his fingers drummed the table absently. Fletcher poured himself wine, his face inscrutable. Grey threw one leg over the other and in a voice that was carefully careless he inquired, "And what of Sidney Clifford?"

"He is considering," said Battiscomb. "I was to have seen him again at the end of the month; meanwhile, he would take no resolve."

"Lord Gervase Scoresby?" questioned Grey, less carelessly.

Battiscomb half turned to him, then faced the Duke again as he made answer, "Mr. Wilding there, can tell you more concerning Lord Gervase."

All eyes swept round to Wilding who sat in silence, listening; Monmouth's were laden with inquiry and some anxiety. Wilding shook his head slowly, sadly. "You must not depend upon him," he answered; "Lord Gervase was not yet ripe. A little longer and I think I must have won him for Your Grace."

"Heaven help us!" exclaimed the Duke in petulant vexation. "Is no one coming in?"

Ferguson swung a hand towards the still open window, drawing attention to the sounds without.

"Does Your Grace not hear, that ye can ask?" he cried, almost reproachfully; but they scarce heeded him, for Grey was inquiring if Mr. Strode might be depended upon to join, and that was a matter that claimed the greater attention.

"I think," said Battiscomb, "that he might have been depended upon."

"Might have been?" questioned Fletcher, speaking now for the first time since Battiscomb's arrival.

"Like Sir Francis Rolles, he is in prison," the lawyer explained.

Monmouth leaned forward, and his young face looked Careworn now; he thrust a slender hand under the brown curls upon his brow. "Will you tell us, Mr. Battiscomb, upon what friends you think that we may count?" he said.

Battiscomb pursed his lips a second, pondering. "I think," said he, "that you may count upon Mr. Legge and Mr. Hooper, and possibly upon Colonel Churchill, though I cannot say what following they will bring, if any. Mr. Trenchard, upon whom we counted for fifteen hundred men of Taunton, has been obliged to fly the country to escape arrest."

"We have heard that from Mr. Trenchard's cousin," answered the Duke. "What of Prideaux, of Ford? Is he lukewarm?"

"I was unable to elicit a definite promise from him. But he was favourably disposed to Your Grace."

His Grace made a gesture that seemed to dismiss Prideaux from their calculations. "And Mr. Hucker, of Taunton?"

Battiscomb's manner grew yet more ill at ease. "Mr. Hucker himself, I am sure, would place his sword at your disposal. But his brother is a red-hot Tory."

"Well, well," sighed the Duke, "I take it we must not make certain of Mr. Hucker. Are there any others besides Legge and Hooper upon whom you think that we may reckon?"

"Lord Wiltshire, perhaps," said Battiscomb, but with a lack of assurance.

"A plague on perhaps!" exclaimed Monmouth, growing irritable; "I want you to name the men of whom you are certain."

Battiscomb stood silent for a moment, pondering. He looked almost foolish, like a schoolboy who hesitates to confess his ignorance of the answer to a question set him.

Fletcher swung round, his grey eyes flashing angrily, his accent more Scottish than ever.

"Is it that ye're certain o' none, Mr. Battiscomb?" he exclaimed.

"Indeed," said Battiscomb, "I think we may be fairly certain of Mr. Legge and Mr. Hooper."

"And of none besides?" questioned Fletcher again. "Be these the only representatives of the flower of England's nobility that is to flock to the banner of the cause of England's freedom and religion?" Scorn was stamped on every word of his question.

Battiscomb spread his hands, raised his brows, and said nothing.

"The Lord knows I do not say it exulting," said Fletcher; "but I told

Your Grace yours was hardly the case of Henry the Seventh, as my Lord Grey would have you believe."

"We shall see," snapped Grey, scowling at the Scot. "The people are coming in hundreds—aye, in thousands—the gentry will follow; they must."

"Make not too sure, Your Grace—oh, make not too sure," Wilding besought the Duke. "As I have said, these hinds have nothing to lose but their lives."

"Faith, can a man lose more?" asked Grey contemptuously. He disliked Wilding by instinct, which was but a reciprocation of the feeling with which Wilding was inspired by him.

"I think he can," said Mr. Wilding quietly. "A man may lose honour, he may plunge his family into ruin. These are things of more weight with a gentleman than life."

"Odds death!" blazed Grey, giving a free rein to his dislike of this calm gentleman. "Do you suggest that a man's honour is imperilled in His Grace's service?"

"I suggest nothing," answered Wilding, unmoved. "What I think, I state. If I thought a man's honour imperilled in this service, you would not see me at this table now. I can make you no more convincing answer."

Grey laughed unpleasantly, and Wilding, a faint tinge on his cheek-bones, measured him with a stern, intrepid look before which his lordship's shifty glance was observed to fall. Wilding's eye, having achieved that much, passed from him to the Duke, and its expression softened.

"Your Grace sees," said he, "how well founded were the fears I expressed that your coming has been premature."

"In God's name, what would you have me do?" cried the Duke, and petulance made his voice unsteady.

Mr. Wilding rose, moved out of his habitual calm by the earnestness that pervaded him. "It is not for me to say again what I would have Your Grace do. Your Grace has heard my views, and those of these gentlemen. It is for Your Grace to decide."

"You mean whether I will go forward with this thing? What alternative have I?"

"No alternative," put in Grey with finality. "Nor is alternative needed. We'll carry this through in spite of timorous folk and birds of ill-omen that croak to a fright us."

"Our service is the service of the Lord," cried Ferguson, returning from the window in the embrasure of which he had been standing; "the Lord cannot but destine it to prevail."

"Ye said so before," quoth Fletcher testily. "We need here men, money, and weapons—not divinity."

"You are plainly infected with Mr. Wilding's disease," sneered Grey.

"Ford," cried the Duke, who saw Wilding's eyes flash fire; "you go too fast. Mr. Wilding, you will not heed his lordship."

"I should not be likely to do so, Your Grace," answered Wilding, who had resumed his seat.

"What shall that mean?" quoth Grey, leaping to his feet.

"Make it quite clear to him, Tony," whispered Trenchard coaxingly; but Mr. Wilding was not as lost as were these immediate followers of the Duke's to all sense of the respect due to His Grace.

"I think," said Wilding quietly, "that you have forgotten something."

"Forgotten what?" bawled Grey.

"His Grace's presence."

His lordship turned crimson, his anger swelled to think that the very terms of the rebuke precluded his allowing his feelings a free rein.

Monmouth leaned forward. "Sit down," he said to Grey, and Grey, so lately called to the respect he owed His Grace, obeyed him. "You will both promise me that this affair shall go no further. I know you will do it if I ask you, particularly when you remember how few are the followers upon whom I may depend. I am not in case to lose either of you through foolish words uttered in a heat which, in both your hearts, is born, I know, of your loyalty to me."

Grey's coarse, elderly face took on a sulky look, his heavy lips were pouted, his glance sullen. Mr. Wilding, on the contrary, smiled across the table.

"For my part I very gladly give Your Grace the undertaking," said he, and took care not to observe the sneer that altered the line of Lord Grey's lips. His lordship, too, was forced to give the same pledge, and he followed it up by inveighing sturdily against the suggestion that they should retreat.

"I do protest," he exclaimed, "that those who advise Your Grace to do anything but go forward boldly now, are evil counsellors. If you put back to Holland, you may leave every hope behind. There will be no second coming for you. Your influence will have been dissipated. Men will not trust you another time. I do not think that even Mr. Wilding can deny the truth of this."

"I am by no means sure," said Wilding, and Fletcher looked at him with eyes that were full of understanding. This sturdy Scot, the only soldier worthy of the name in the Duke's following, who, ever since the project had first been mooted, had held out against it, counselling

delay, was in sympathy with Mr. Wilding.

Monmouth rose, his face anxious, his voice fretful. "There can be no retreat for me, gentlemen. Though many that we depended upon are not here to join us, yet let us remember that Heaven is on our side, and that we are come to fight in the sacred cause of religion and a nation's emancipation from the thralldom of popery, oppression, and superstition. Let this dispel such doubts as yet may linger in our minds."

His words had a brave sound, but, when analysed, they but formed a paraphrase of what Grey and Ferguson had said. It was his destiny to be a mere echo of the minds of other men, just as he was now the tool of these two, one of whom plotted, seemingly, because plotting was a disease that had got into his blood; the other for reasons that may have been of ambition or of revenge—no man will ever know for certain.

In the chamber they shared, Trenchard and Mr. Wilding reviewed that night the scene so lately enacted, in which one had taken an active part, the other been little more than a spectator. Trenchard had come from the Duke's presence entirely out of conceit with Monmouth and his cause, contemptuous of Ferguson, angry with Grey, and indifferent towards Fletcher.

"I am committed, and I'll not draw back," said he; "but I tell you, Anthony, my heart is not confederate with my hand in this. Bah!" he railed. "We serve a man of straw, a Perkin, a very pope of a fellow."

Mr. Wilding sighed. "He's scarce the man for such an undertaking," said he. "I fear we have been misled."

Trenchard was drawing off his boots. He paused in the act. "Aye," said he, "misled by our blindness. What else, after all, should we have expected of him?" he cried contemptuously. "The Cause is good; but

its leader—Pshaw! Would you have such a puppet as that on the throne of England?"

"He does not aim so high."

"Be not so sure. We shall hear more of the black box anon, and of the marriage certificate it contains. 'Twould not surprise me if they were to produce forgeries of the one and the other to prove his father's marriage to Lucy Walters. Anthony, Anthony! To what a business are we wedded?"

Mr. Wilding, already abed, turned impatiently. "Things cried aloud to be redressed; a leader was necessary, and none other offered. That is the whole story. But our chance is slender, and it might have been great."

"That rake-hell, Ford, Lord Grey has made it so," grumbled Trenchard, busy with his stockings. "This sudden coming is his work. You heard what Fletcher said—how he opposed it when first it was urged." He paused, and looked up suddenly. "Blister me!" he cried, "is it his lordship's purpose, think you, to work the ruin of Monmouth?"

"What are you saying, Nick?"

"There are certain rumours current touching His Grace and Lady Grey. A man like Grey might well resort to some such scheme of vengeance."

"Get to sleep, Nick," said Wilding, yawning; "you are dreaming already. Such a plan would be over elaborate for his lordship's mind. It would ask a villainy parallel with your own."

Trenchard climbed into bed, and settled himself under the coverlet.

"Maybe," said he, "and maybe not; but I think that were it not for that cursed business of the letter Richard Westmacott stole from us, I should be going my ways to-morrow and leaving His Grace of

Monmouth to go his."

"Aye, and I'd go with you," answered Wilding. "I've little taste for suicide; but we are in it now."

"'Twas a sad pity you meddled this morning in that affair at Taunton," mused Trenchard wistfully. "A sadder pity you were bitten with a taste for matrimony," he added thoughtfully, and blew out the rushlight.

CHAPTER XV. LYME OF THE KING

On the next day, which was Friday, the country folk continued to come in, and by evening Monmouth's forces amounted to a thousand foot and a hundred and fifty horse. The men were armed as fast as they were enrolled, and scarce a field or quiet avenue in the district but resounded to the tramp of feet, the rattle of weapons, and the sharp orders of the officers who, by drilling, were converting this raw material into soldiers. On the Saturday the rally of the Duke's standard was such that Monmouth threw off at last the gloomy forebodings that had burdened his soul since that meeting on Thursday night. Wade, Holmes, Foulkes, and Fox were able to set about forming the first four regiments—the Duke's, and the Green, the White, and the Yellow. Monmouth's spirits continued to rise, for he had been joined by now by Legge and Hooper—the two upon whom Battiscomb had counted—and by Colonel Joshua Churchill, of whom Battiscomb had been less certain. Captain Matthews brought news that Lord Wiltshire and the gentlemen of Hampshire might be expected if they could force their way through Albemarle's militia, which was already closing round Lyme.

Long before evening willing fellows were being turned away in hundreds for lack of weapons. In spite of Monmouth's big talk on landing, and of the rumour that had gone out, that he could arm thirty thousand men, his stock of arms was exhausted by a mere fifteen hundred. Trenchard, who now held a Major's rank in the horse attached to the Duke's own regiment, was loud in his scorn of this state of things; Mr. Wilding was sad, and his depression again spread to the Duke after a few words had passed between them

towards evening. Fletcher was for heroic measures. He looked only ahead now, like the good soldier that he was; and, already, he began to suggest a bold dash for Exeter, for weapons, horses, and possibly the militia as well, for they had ample evidence that the men composing it might easily be induced to desert to the Duke's side.

The suggestion was one that instantly received Mr. Wilding's heartiest approval. It seemed to fill him suddenly with hope, and he spoke of it, indeed, as an inspiration which, if acted upon, might yet save the situation. The Duke was undecided as ever; he was too much troubled weighing the chances for and against, and he would decide upon nothing until he had consulted Grey and the others. He would summon a council that night, he promised, and the matter should be considered.

But that council was never to be called, for Andrew Fletcher's association with the rebellion was drawing rapidly to its close, and there was that to happen in the next few hours which should counteract all the encouragement with which the Duke had been fortified that day. Towards evening little Heywood Dare, the Taunton goldsmith, who had landed at Seatown and gone out with the news of the Duke's arrival, rode into Lyme with forty horse, mounted, himself, upon a beautiful charger which was destined to be the undoing of him.

News came, too, that the Dorset militia were at Bridport, eight miles away, whereupon Wilding and Fletcher postponed all further suggestion of the dash for Exeter, proposing that in the mean time a night attack upon Bridport might result well. For once Lord Grey was in agreement with them, and so the matter was decided. Fletcher went down to arm and mount, and all the world knows the story of the foolish, ill-fated quarrel which robbed Monmouth of two of his most valued adherents. By ill-luck the Scot's eyes lighted upon the fine horse that Dare had brought from Ford Abbey. It occurred to him that nothing could be more fitting than that the best man should sit upon

the best horse, and he forthwith led the beast from the stables and was about to mount when Dare came forth to catch him in the very act. The goldsmith was a rude, peppery fellow, who did not mince his words.

"What a plague are you doing with that horse?" he cried.

Fletcher paused, one foot in the stirrup, and looked the fellow up and down. "I am mounting it," said he, and proceeded to do as he said.

But Dare caught him by the tails of his coat and brought him back to earth.

"You are making a mistake, Mr. Fletcher," he cried angrily. "That horse is mine."

Fletcher, whose temper was by no means of the most peaceful, kept himself with difficulty in hand at the indignity Dare offered him.

"Yours?" quoth he.

"Aye, mine. I brought it from Ford Abbey myself."

"For the Duke's service," Fletcher reminded him. "For my own, sir; for my own I would have you know." And brushing the Scot aside, he caught the bridle, and sought to wrench it from Fletcher's hand.

But Fletcher maintained his hold. "Softly, Mr. Dare," said he. "Ye're a trifle o'er true to your name, as you once told his late Majesty yourself."

"Take your hands from my horse," Dare shouted, very angry.

Several loiterers in the yard gathered round to watch the scene, culling diversion from it and speculating upon the conclusion it might have. One rash young fellow offered audibly to lay ten to one that

Paymaster Dare would have the best of the argument.

Dare overheard, and was spurred on.

"I will, by God!" he answered. "Come, Mr. Fletcher!" And he shook the bridle again.

There was a dull flush showing through the tan of Fletcher's skin. "Mr. Dare," said he, "this horse is no more yours than mine. It is the Duke's, and I, as one o' the leaders, claim it in the Duke's service."

"Aye, sir," cried an onlooker, encouraging Fletcher, and did the mischief. It so goaded Dare to have his antagonist in this trifling matter supported that he utterly lost his head.

"I have said the horse is mine, and I repeat it. Let go the bridle—let it go!" Still, Fletcher, striving hard to keep his calm, clung to the reins. "Let it go, you damned, thieving Scot!" screamed Dare in a fury, and struck Fletcher with his whip.

It was unfortunate for them both that he should have had that switch in his hand at such a time, but more unfortunate still was it that Fletcher should have had a pistol in his belt. The Scot dropped the bridle at last; dropped it to pluck forth the weapon.

"Hi! I did not..." began Dare, who had stood appalled by what he had done in the second or two that had passed since he had delivered the blow. The rest of his sentence was drowned in the report of Fletcher's pistol, and Dare dropped dead on the rough cobbles of the yard.

Ferguson has left it on record—and, presumably, he had Fletcher's word for it—that it was no part of the Scot's intent to do Mr. Dare a mischief. He had but drawn the pistol to intimidate him into better manners, but in his haste he accidentally pulled the trigger.

However that may be, there was Dare as dead as the stones on

which he lay, and Fletcher with a smoking pistol in his hand.

After that all was confusion. Fletcher was seized by those who had witnessed the deed; there was none thought it an accident; indeed, they were all ready enough to say that Fletcher had received excessive provocation. He was haled to the presence of the Duke with whom were Grey and Wilding at the time; and old Dare's son—an ensign in Goodenough's company—came clamouring for vengeance backed by such goodly numbers that the distraught Duke was forced to show at least the outward seeming of it.

Wilding, who knew the value of this Scottish soldier of fortune who had seen so much service, strenuously urged his enlargement. It was not a time to let the fortunes of a cause suffer through such an act as this, deplorable though it might be. The evidence showed that Fletcher had been provoked; he had been struck, a thing that might well justify the anger in the heat of which he had done this thing. Grey was stolid and silent, saying nothing either for or against the man who had divided with him under the Duke the honours of the supreme command.

Monmouth, white and horror-stricken, sat and listened first to Wilding, then to Dare, and lastly to Fletcher himself. But it was young Dare—Dare and his followers, who prevailed. They were too numerous and turbulent, and they must at all costs be conciliated, or there was no telling to what extremes they might not go. And so there was an end to the share of Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun in this undertaking—the end of the only man who was of any capacity to pilot it through the troubled waters that lay before it. Monmouth placed him under arrest and sent him aboard the frigate again, ordering her captain to sail at once. That was the utmost Monmouth could do to save him.

Wilding continued to plead with the Duke after Fletcher's removal, and to such good purpose that at last Monmouth determined that

Fletcher should rejoin them later, when the affair should have blown over, and he sent word accordingly to the Scot. Even in this there were manifestations of antagonism between Mr. Wilding and Lord Grey, and it almost seemed enough that Wilding should suggest a course for Lord Grey instantly to oppose it.

The effects of Fletcher's removal were not long in following. On the morrow came the Bridport affair, and Grey's shameful conduct when, had he stood his ground, victory must have been assured the Duke's forces instead of just that honourable retreat by which Colonel Wade so gallantly saved the situation. Mr. Wilding did not mince his words in putting it that Grey had run away.

In his room at the George Inn, Monmouth, deeply distressed, asked Wilding and Colonel Matthews what action he should take in the matter—how deal with Grey.

"There is no other general in Europe would ask that, Your Grace," answered Matthews gravely, and Mr. Wilding added without an instant's hesitation that His Grace's course was plain.

"It would be an unwise thing to expose the troops to the chance of more such happenings."

Monmouth dismissed them and sent for Grey, and he seemed resolved to deal with him as he deserved. Yet an hour later, when Wilding, Matthews, Wade, and the others were ordered to attend the Duke in council, there was his lordship seemingly on as good terms as ever with His Grace.

They were assembled to discuss the next step which it might be advisable to take, for the militia was closing in around them, and to remain longer in Lyme would be to be caught there as in a trap. It was Grey who advanced the first suggestion, his assurance no whit abated by the shameful thing that had befallen, by the cowardice

which he had betrayed.

"That we must quit Lyme we are all agreed," said he. "I would propose that Your Grace march north to Gloucester, where our Cheshire friends will assemble to meet us."

Colonel Matthews reminded the Duke of Andrew Fletcher's proposal that they should make a raid upon Exeter with a view to seizing arms, of which they stood so sorely in need.

This Mr. Wilding was quick to support. "Not only that, Your Grace," he said, "but I am confident that with very little inducement the greater portion of the militia will desert to us as soon as we appear."

"What assurance can you give of that?" asked Grey, his heavy lip protruded.

"I take it," said Mr. Wilding, "that in such matters no man can give an assurance of anything. I speak with knowledge of the country and the folk from which the militia is enlisted. I offer it as my opinion that the militia is favourably disposed to Your Grace. I can do no more."

"If Mr. Wilding says so, Your Grace," put in Matthews, "I have no doubt he has sound reasons upon which to base his opinion."

"No doubt," said Monmouth. "Indeed, I had already thought of the step that you suggest, Colonel Matthews, and what Mr. Wilding says causes me to look upon it still more favourably."

Grey frowned. "Consider, Your Grace," he said earnestly, "that you are in no case to fight at present."

"What fighting do you suggest there would be?" asked the Duke.

"There is Albemarle between us and Exeter."

"But with the militia," Wilding reminded him; "and if the militia

deserts him for Your Grace, in what case will Albemarle find himself?"

"And if the militia does not desert? If you should be proven wrong, sir? What then? What then?" asked Grey.

"Aye—true—what then, Mr. Wilding?" quoth the Duke, already wavering.

Wilding considered a moment, all eyes upon him. "Even then," said he presently, "I do maintain that in this dash for Exeter lies Your Grace's greatest chance of success. We can deliver battle if need be. Already we are three thousand strong..."

Grey interrupted him rudely. "Nay," he insisted. "You must not presume upon that. We are not yet fit to fight. It is His Grace's business at present to drill and discipline his troops and induce more friends to join him."

"Already we are turning men away because we have no weapons to put into their hands," Wilding reminded them, and a murmur of approval ran round, which but served to anger Grey the more, to render more obstinate his opposition.

"But all that come in are not unprovided," was his lordship's retort. "There are the Hampshire gentry and their friends. They will come armed, and so will others if we have patience."

"Aye," said Wilding, "and if you have patience enough there will be troops the Parliament will send against us. They, too, will be armed, I can assure your lordship."

"In God's name let us keep from wrangling," the Duke besought them. "It is difficult enough to determine for the best. If the dash to Exeter were successful..."

"It cannot be," Grey interrupted again.

The liberties he took with Monmouth and which Monmouth permitted him might well be a source of wonder to all who heard them. Monmouth paused now in his interrupted speech and looked about him a trifle wearily.

"It seems idle to insist," said Mr. Wilding; "such is the temper of Your Grace's counsellors, that we get no further than contradictions." Grey's bold eyes were upon Wilding as he spoke. "I would remind Your Grace, and I am sure that many present will agree with me, that in a desperate enterprise a sudden unexpected movement will often strike terror."

"That is true," said Monmouth, but apparently without enthusiasm, and having approved what was urged on one side, he looked at Grey, as if waiting to hear what might be said on the other. His indecision was pitiful—tragical, indeed, in the leader of so bold an enterprise.

"We should do better, I think," said Grey, "to deal with the facts as we know them."

"It is what I am endeavouring to do, Your Grace," protested Wilding, a note of despair in his voice. "Perhaps some other gentleman will put forward better counsel than mine."

"Aye! In Heaven's name let us hope so," snorted Grey; and Monmouth, catching the sudden flash of Mr. Wilding's eye, set a hand upon his lordship's arm as if to urge him to be gentler. But he continued, "When men talk of striking terror by sudden movements they build on air."

"I had hardly thought to hear that from your lordship," said Mr. Wilding, and he permitted himself that tight-lipped smile that gave his face so wicked a look.

"And why not?" asked Grey, stupidly unsuspecting.

"Because I had thought you might have concluded otherwise from your own experience at Bridport this morning."

Grey got angrily to his feet, rage and shame flushing his face, and it needed Ferguson and the Duke to restore him to some semblance of calm. Indeed, it may well be that it was to complete this that His Grace decided there and then that they should follow Grey's advice and go by way of Taunton, Bridgwater, and Bristol to Gloucester. He was, like all weak men, of conspicuous mental short-sightedness. The matter of the moment was ever of greater importance to him than any result that might attend it in the future.

He insisted that Wilding and Grey should shake hands before the breaking up of that most astounding council, and as he had done last night, he now again imposed upon them his commands that they must not allow this matter to go further.

Mr. Wilding paved the way for peace by making an apology within limitations.

"If, in my zeal to serve Your Grace to the best of my ability, I have said that which Lord Grey thinks fit to resent, I would bid him consider my motive rather than my actual words."

But when all had gone save Ferguson, the chaplain approached the preoccupied and distressed Duke with counsel that Mr. Wilding should be sent away from the army.

"Else there'll be trouble 'twixt him and Grey," the plotting parson foretold. "We'll be having a repetition of the unfortunate Fletcher and Dare affair, and I think that has cost Your Grace enough already."

"Do you suggest that I dismiss Wilding?" cried the Duke. "You know his influence, and the bad impression his removal would leave."

Ferguson stroked his long lean jaw. "No, no," said he; "all I suggest

is that you find Mr. Wilding work to do elsewhere."

"Elsewhere?" the Duke questioned. "Where else?"

"I have thought of that, too. Send him to London to see Danvers and to stir up your friends there. And," he added, lowering his voice, "give him discretion to see Sunderland if he thinks well."

The proposition pleased Monmouth, and it seemed to please Mr. Wilding no less when, having sent for him, the Duke communicated it to him in Ferguson's presence.

Upon this mission Mr. Wilding set out that very night, leaving Nick Trenchard in despair at being separated from him at a time when there seemed to be every chance that such a separation might be eternal.

Monmouth and Ferguson may have conceived they did a wise thing in removing a man who was instinctively spoiling for a little sword-play with my Lord Grey. It is odds that had he remained, the brewing storm between the pair would have come to a head. Had it done so, it is more than likely, from what we know of Mr. Wilding's accomplishments, that he had given Lord Grey his quietus. And had that happened, it is to be inferred from history that it is possible the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion might have had a less disastrous issue.

CHAPTER XVI. PLOTS AND PLOTTERS

Mr. Wilding left Monmouth's army at Lyme on Sunday, the 14th of June, and rejoined it at Bridgwater exactly three weeks later. In the meanwhile a good deal had happened, yet the happenings on every hand had fallen far short of the expectations aroused in Mr. Wilding's mind, now by one circumstance, now by another. In reaching London he had experienced no difficulty. Men travelling in that direction were not subjected to the scrutiny that fell to the share of those travelling from it towards the West, or, rather, to the scrutiny ordained by the Government; for Wilding had more than one opportunity of observing how very lax and indifferent were the constables and tything-men—particularly in Somerset and Wiltshire—in the performance of this duty. Wayfarers were questioned as a matter of form, but in no case did Wilding hear of any one being detained upon suspicion. This was calculated to raise his drooping hopes, pointing as it did to the general favouring of Monmouth that was toward. He grew less despondent on the score of the Duke's possible ultimate success, and he came to hope that the efforts he went to exert would not be fruitless.

But rude were the disappointments that awaited him in town. London, like the rest of the country, was not ready. There were not wanting men who favoured Monmouth; but no rising had been organized, and the Duke's partisans were not disposed to rashness.

Wilding lodged at Covent Garden, in a house recommended to him by Colonel Danvers, and there—an outlaw himself—he threw himself with a will into his task. He heard of the burning of Monmouth's

Declaration by the common hangman at the Royal Exchange, and of the bill passed by the Commons to make it treason for any to assert that Lucy Walters was married to the late King. He attended meetings at the "Bull's Head," in Bishopsgate, where he met Disney and Danvers, Payton and Lock; but though they talked and argued at prodigious length, they did naught besides. Danvers, who was their hope in town, definitely refused to have a hand in anything that was not properly organized, and in common with the others urged that they should wait until Cheshire had risen, as was reported that it must.

Meanwhile, troops had gone west under Kirke and Churchill, and the Parliament had voted nearly half a million for the putting down of the rebellion. London was flung into a fever of excitement by the news that was reaching it. The position was not quite as Monmouth's advisers—before coming over from Holland—had represented that it would be. They had thought that out of fear of tumults about his own person, King James would have been compelled to keep near him what troops he had, sparing none to be sent against Monmouth. This, King James had not done; he had all but emptied London of soldiery, and, considering the general disaffection, no moment could have been more favourable than this for a rising in London itself. The confusion that must have resulted from the recalling of troops would have given Monmouth not only a mighty grip of the West, but would have heartened those who—like Sunderland himself—were sitting on the wall, to declare themselves for the Protestant Champion. This Wilding saw, and almost frenziedly did he urge it upon Danvers that all London needed at the moment was a resolute leader. But the Colonel still held back; indeed, he had neither truth nor valour; he was timid, and used deceit to mask his timidity; he urged frivolous reasons for inaction, and when Wilding waxed impatient with him, he suggested that Wilding himself should head the rising if he were so confident of its success. And Wilding would have done it but that, being unknown in London, he had no reason to suppose that men would flock to him if he raised the Duke's banner.

Later, when the excitement grew and rumours ran through town that Monmouth had now a following of twenty thousand men and that the King's forces were falling back before him, and discontent was rife at the commissioning of Catholic lords to levy troops, Wilding again pressed the matter upon Danvers. Surely no moment could be more propitious. But again he received the same answer, that Danvers had lacked time to organize matters sufficiently; that the Duke's coming had taken him by surprise.

Lastly came the news that Monmouth had been crowned at Taunton amid the wildest enthusiasm, and that there were now in England two men each of whom called himself King James the Second. This was the excuse that Danvers needed to be rid of a business he had not the courage to transact to a finish. He swore that he washed his hands of Monmouth's affairs; that the latter had broken faith with him and the promise he had made him in having himself proclaimed King. He protested that Monmouth had done ill, and prophesied that his act would alienate from him the numerous republicans who, like Danvers, had hitherto looked to him for the country's salvation. Wilding himself was appalled at the news for Monmouth was indeed going further than men had been given to understand. Nevertheless, for his own sake, in very self-defence now, if out of no motives of loyalty to the Duke, he must urge forward the fortunes of this man. He had high words with Danvers, and the two might have quarrelled before long but for the sudden arrest of Disney, which threw Danvers into such a panic that he fled incontinently, abandoning in body, as he already appeared to have abandoned in spirit, the Monmouth Cause.

The arrest of Disney struck a chill into Wilding. From his lodging at Covent Garden he had communicated cautiously with Sunderland a few days after his arrival, building upon certain information he had received from the Duke at parting as to Sunderland's attachment to the Cause. He had carefully chosen his moment for making this

communication, having a certain innate mistrust of a man who so obviously as Sunderland was running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. He had sent a letter to the Secretary of State when London was agog with the Axminster affair, and the tale—of which Sir Edward Phelips wrote to Colonel Berkeley as "the shamefullest story that you ever heard"—of how Albemarle's forces and the Somerset militia had run before Monmouth in spite of their own overwhelming numbers. This promised ill for James, particularly when it was perceived as perceived it was—that this running away was not all cowardice, not all "the shamefullest story" that Phelips accounted it. It was an expression of good-will towards Monmouth on the part of the militia of the West, and it was confidently expected that the next news would be that these men who had decamped before him would presently be found to have ranged themselves under his banner.

Sunderland had given no sign that he had received Wilding's communication. And Wilding drew his own contemptuous conclusions of the Secretary of State's cautious policy. It was a fortnight later—when London was settling down again from the diversion of excitement created by the news of Argyle's defeat in Scotland—before Mr. Wilding attempted to approach Sunderland again. He awaited a favourable opportunity, and this he had when London was thrown into consternation by the alarming news of the Duke of Somerset's urgent demand for reinforcements. Unless he had them, he declared, the whole country was lost, as he could not get the militia to stand, whilst Lord Stawell's regiment were all fled and mostly gone over to the rebels at Bridgwater.

This was grave news, but it was followed in a few days by graver. The affair at Philips Norton was exaggerated by report into a wholesale defeat of the loyal army, and it was reported—on, apparently, such good authority that it received credence in quarters that might have waited for official news—that the Duke of Albemarle had been slain by the militia which had mutinied and deserted to

Monmouth.

It was while this news was going round that Sunderland—in a moment of panic—at last vouchsafed an answer to Mr. Wilding's letters, and he vouchsafed it in person, just as Wilding—particularly since Disney's arrest—was beginning to lose all hope. He came one evening to Mr. Wilding's lodgings in Covent Garden, unattended and closely muffled, and he remained closeted with the Duke's ambassador for nigh upon an hour, at the end of which he entrusted Mr. Wilding with a letter for the Duke, very brief but entirely to the point, which expressed him Monmouth's most devoted servant.

"You may well judge, sir," he had said at parting, "that this is not such a letter as I should entrust to any man."

Mr. Wilding had bowed gravely, and gravely he had expressed himself sensible of the exceptional honour his lordship did him by such a trust.

"And I depend upon you, sir, as you are a man of honour, to take such measures as will ensure against its falling into any but the hands for which it is intended."

"As I am a man of honour, you may depend upon me," Mr. Wilding solemnly promised. "Will your lordship give me three lines above your signature that will save me from molestation; thus you will facilitate the preservation of this letter."

"I had already thought of that," was Sunderland's answer, and he placed before Mr. Wilding three lines of writing signed and sealed which enjoined all, straitly, in the King's name to suffer the bearer to pass and repass and to offer him no hindrance.

On that they shook hands and parted, Sunderland to return to Whitehall and his obedience to the King James whom he was ready to betray as soon as he saw profit for himself in the act, Mr. Wilding to

return to Somerset to the King James in whom his faith was scant, indeed, but with whom his fortunes were irrevocably bound up.

Meanwhile, Monmouth was back in Bridgwater, his second occupation of which town was not being looked upon with unmixed favour. The inhabitants had suffered enough already from his first visit; his return there, after the Philips Norton affair of which such grossly exaggerated reports had reached London, and which, in point of fact, had been little better than a drawn battle—had been looked upon with dread by some, with disfavour by others, and with dismay by not a few who viewed in this an augury of failure.

Now Sir Rowland Blake, who since his pursuit of Mr. Wilding and Trenchard on the occasion of their flight from Taunton had—in spite of his failure on that occasion—been more or less in the service of Albemarle and the loyal army, saw in this indisposition towards Monmouth of so many of Bridgwater's inhabitants great possibilities of profit to himself.

He was at Lupton House, the guest of his friend Richard Westmacott, and the open suitor of Ruth, entirely ignoring the circumstance that she was nominally the wife of Mr. Wilding—this to the infinite chagrin of Miss Horton, who saw all her scheming likely to go for nothing.

In his heart of hearts it was a matter of not the slightest consequence to Sir Rowland whether James Stuart or James Scott occupied the throne of England. His own affairs gave him more than enough to think of, and these disturbances in the West were very welcome to him, since they rendered difficult any attempt to trace him on the part of his London creditors. It happens, however, very commonly that enmity to an individual will lead to enmity to the cause which that individual espouses. Thus may it have been with Sir Rowland. His hatred of Wilding and his keen desire to see Wilding destroyed had made him a zealous partisan of the loyal cause.

Richard Westmacott, easily swayed and overborne by the town rake, whose vices made him seem to Richard the embodiment of all that is splendid and enviable in man, had become practically the baronet's tool, now that he had abandoned Monmouth's Cause. Sir Rowland had not considered it beneath the dignity of his name and station to discharge in Bridgwater certain functions that made him more or less a spy. And so reliable had been the information he had sent Feversham and Albemarle during Monmouth's first occupation of the town, that he had won by now their complete confidence.

The second occupation and its unpopularity with many of those who earlier—if lukewarm—had been partisans of the Duke, swelled the number of loyally inclined people in Bridgwater, and suddenly inspired Sir Rowland with a scheme by which at a blow he might snuff out the rebellion.

This scheme involved the capture of the Duke, and the reward of success should mean far more to Blake than the five thousand pounds at which the value of the Duke's head had already been fixed by Parliament. He needed a tool for this, and he even thought of Westmacott and Lupton House, but afterwards preferred a Mr. Newlington, who was in better case to assist him. This Newlington, an exceedingly prosperous merchant and one of the richest men perhaps in the whole West of England, looked with extreme disfavour upon Monmouth, whose advent had paralyzed his industries to an extent that was costing him a fine round sum of money weekly.

He was now in alarm lest the town of Bridgwater should be made to pay dearly for having harboured the Protestant Duke—he had no faith whatever in the Protestant Duke's ultimate prevailing—and that he, as one of the town's most prominent and prosperous citizens, might be amongst the heaviest sufferers in spite of his neutrality. This neutrality he observed because it was hardly safe in that disaffected town for a man to proclaim himself a loyalist.

To him Sir Rowland expounded his audacious plan... He sought out the merchant in his handsome mansion on the night of that Friday which had witnessed Monmouth's return, and the merchant, honoured by the visit of this gallant—ignorant as he was of the gentleman's fame in town—placed himself entirely and instantly at his disposal, though the hour was late. Sounding him carefully, and finding the fellow most amenable to any scheme that should achieve the salvation of his purse and industries, Blake boldly laid his plan before him. Startled at first, Mr. Newlington upon considering it became so enthusiastic that he hailed Sir Rowland as his deliverer, and heartily promised his cooperation. Indeed, it was Mr. Newlington who was, himself, to take the first step.

Well pleased with his evening's work, Sir Rowland went home to Lupton House and to bed. In the morning he broached the matter to Richard. He had all the vanity of the inferior not only to lessen the appearance of his inferiority, but to clothe himself in a mantle of importance; and it was this vanity urged him to acquaint Richard with his plans in the very presence of Ruth.

They had broken their fast, and they still lingered in the dining-room, the largest and most important room in Lupton House. It was cool and pleasant here in contrast to the heat of the July sun, which, following upon the late wet weather, beat fiercely on the lawn, the window-doors to which stood open. The cloth had been raised, and Diana and her mother had lately left the room. Ruth, in the window-seat, at a small oval table, was arranging a cluster of roses in an old bronze bowl. Sir Rowland, his stiff short figure carefully dressed in a suit of brown camlet, his fair wig very carefully curled, occupied a tall-backed armchair near the empty fireplace. Richard, perched on the table's edge, swung his shapely legs idly backwards and forwards and cogitated upon a pretext to call for a morning draught of last October's ale.

Ruth completed her task with the roses and turned her eyes upon her brother.

"You are not looking well, Richard," she said, which was true enough, for much hard drinking was beginning to set its stamp on Richard, and young as he was, his insipidly fair face began to display a bloatedness that was exceedingly unhealthy.

"Oh, I am well enough," he answered almost peevishly, for these allusions to his looks were becoming more frequent than he savoured.

"Gad!" cried Sir Rowland's deep voice, "you'll need to be well. I have work for you to-morrow, Dick."

Dick did not appear to share his enthusiasm. "I am sick of the work you discover for us, Rowland," he answered ungraciously.

But Blake showed no resentment. "Maybe you'll find the present task more to your taste. If it's deeds of derring-do you pine for, I am the man to satisfy you." He smiled grimly, his bold grey eyes glancing across at Ruth, who was observing him, listening.

Richard sneered, but offered him no encouragement to proceed.

"I see," said Blake, "that I shall have to tell you the whole story before you'll credit me. Shalt have it, then. But..." and he checked on the word, his face growing serious, his eye wandering to the door, "I would not have it overheard—not for a king's ransom," which was more literally true than he may have intended it to be.

Richard looked over his shoulder carelessly at the door.

"We have no eavesdroppers," he said, and his voice bespoke his contempt of the gravity of this news of which Sir Rowland made so much in anticipation. He was acquainted with Sir Rowland's ways,

and the importance of them. "What are you considering?" he inquired.

"To end the rebellion," answered Blake, his voice cautiously lowered.

Richard laughed outright. "There are several others considering that—notably His Majesty King James, the Duke of Albemarle, and the Earl of Feversham. Yet they don't appear to achieve it."

"It is in that particular," said Blake complacently, "that I shall differ from them." He turned to Ruth, eager to engage her in the conversation, to flatter her by including her in the secret. Knowing the loyalist principles she entertained, he had no reason to fear that his plans could other than meet her approval. "What do you say, Mistress Ruth?" Presuming upon his friendship with her brother, he had taken to calling her by that name in preference to the other which he could not bring himself to give her. "Is it not an object worthy of a gentleman's endeavour?"

"If you can save so many poor people from encompassing their ruin by following that rash young man the Duke of Monmouth, you will indeed be doing a worthy deed."

Blake rose, and made her a leg. "Madam," said he, "had aught been wanting to cement my resolve, your words would supply it to me. My plan is simplicity itself. I propose to capture Monmouth and his principal agents, and deliver them over to the King. And that is all."

"A mere nothing," croaked Richard.

"Could more be needed?" quoth Blake. "Once the rebel army is deprived of its leaders it will melt and dissolve of itself. Once the Duke is in the hands of his enemies there will be nothing left to fight for. Is it not shrewd?"

"You are telling us the object rather than the plan," Ruth reminded

him. "If the plan is as good as the object..."

"As good?" he echoed, chuckling. "You shall judge." And briefly he sketched for her the springe he was setting with the help of Mr. Newlington. "Newlington is rich; the Duke is in straits for money. Newlington goes to-day to offer him twenty thousand pounds; and the Duke is to do him the honour of supping at his house to-morrow night to fetch the money. It is a reasonable request for Mr. Newlington to make under the circumstances, and the Duke cannot—dare not refuse it."

"But how will that advance your project?" Ruth inquired, for Blake had paused again, thinking that the rest must be obvious.

"In Mr. Newlington's orchard I propose to post a score or so of men, well armed. Oh! I shall run no risks of betrayal by engaging Bridgwater folk. I'll get the fellows I need from General Feversham. We take Monmouth at supper, as quietly as may be, with what gentlemen happen to have accompanied him. We bind and gag the Duke, and we convey him with all speed and quiet out of Bridgwater. Feversham shall send a troop to await me a mile or so from the town on the road to Weston Zoyland. We shall join them with our captive, and thus convey him to the Royalist General. Could aught be simpler or more infallible?"

Richard had slipped from the table. He had changed his mind on the subject of the importance of the business Blake had in view. Excited by it, he clapped his friend on the back approvingly.

"A great plan!" he cried. "Is it not, Ruth?"

"It should be the means of saving hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives," said she, "and so it deserves to prosper. But what of the officers who may be with the Duke?" she inquired.

"There are not likely to be many—half a dozen, say. We shall have

to make short work of them, lest they should raise an alarm." He saw her glance clouding. "That is the ugly part of the affair," he was quick to add, himself assuming a look of sadness. He sighed. "What help is there?" he asked. "Better that those few should suffer than that, as you yourself have said, there should be some thousands of lives lost before this rebellion is put down. Besides," he continued "Monmouth's officers are far-seeing, ambitious men, who have entered into this affair to promote their own personal fortunes. They are gamesters who have set their lives upon the board against a great prize, and they know it. But these other poor misguided people who have gone out to fight for liberty and religion—it is these whom I am striving to rescue."

His words sounded fervent, his sentiments almost heroic. Ruth looked at him, and wondered had she misjudged him in the past. She sighed. Then she thought of Wilding. He was on the other side, but where was he? Rumour ran that he was dead; that he and Grey had quarrelled at Lyme, and that Wilding had been killed as a result. Had it not been for Diana, who strenuously bade her attach no credit to these reports, she would readily have believed them. As it was she waited, wondering, thinking of him always as she had seen him on that day at Walford when he had taken his leave of her, and more than once, when she pondered the words he had said, the look that had invested his drooping eyes, she found herself with tears in her own. They welled up now, and she rose hastily to her feet.

She looked a moment at Blake who was watching her keenly, speculating upon this emotion of which she betrayed some sign, and wondering might not his heroism have touched her, for, as we have seen, he had arrayed a deed of excessive meanness, a deed worthy, almost, of the Iscariot, in the panoply of heroic achievement.

"I think," she said, "that you are setting your hand to a very worthy and glorious enterprise, and I hope, nay, I am sure, that success must

attend your efforts." He was still bowing his thanks when she passed out through the open window-doors into the sunshine of the garden.

Sir Rowland swung round upon Richard. "A great enterprise, Dick," he cried; "I may count upon you for one?"

"Aye," said Dick, who had found at last the pretext that he needed, "you may count on me. Pull the bell, we'll drink to the success of the venture."

CHAPTER XVII. MR. WILDING'S RETURN

The preparations to be made for the momentous coup Sir Rowland meditated were considerable. Mr. Newington was yet to be concerted with and advised, and, that done, Sir Rowland had to face the difficulty of eluding the Bridgwater guards and make his way to Feversham's camp at Somerton to enlist the general's cooperation to the extent that we have seen he looked for. That done, he was to return and ripen his preparations for the business he had undertaken. Nevertheless, in spite of all that lay before him, he did not find it possible to leave Lupton House without stepping out into the garden in quest of Ruth. Through the window, whilst he and Richard were at their ale, he had watched her between whiles, and had lingered, waiting; for Diana was with her, and it was not his wish to seek her whilst Diana was at hand. Speak with her, ere he went, he must. He was an opportunist, and now, he fondly imagined, was his opportunity. He had made that day, at last, a favourable impression upon Richard's sister; he had revealed himself in an heroic light, and egregiously misreading the emotion she had shown before withdrawing, he was satisfied that did he strike now victory must attend him. He sighed his satisfaction and pleasurable anticipation. He had been wary and he had known how to wait; and now, it seemed to him, he was to be rewarded for his patience. Then he frowned, as another glance showed him that Diana still lingered with her cousin; he wished Diana at the devil. He had come to hate this fair-haired doll to whom he had once paid court. She was too continually in his way, a constant obstacle in his path, ever ready to remind Ruth of Anthony Wilding when Sir Rowland most desired Anthony Wilding to be

forgotten; and in Diana's feelings towards himself such a change had been gradually wrought that she had come to reciprocate his sentiments—to hate him with all the bitter hatred into which love can be by scorn transmuted. At first her object in keeping Ruth's thoughts on Mr. Wilding, in pleading his cause, and seeking to present him in a favourable light to the lady whom he had constrained to become his wife, had been that he might stand a barrier between Ruth and Sir Rowland to the end that Diana might hope to see revived—faute de mieux, since possible in no other way—the feelings that once Sir Rowland had professed for herself. The situation was rich in humiliations for poor, vain, foolishly crafty Diana, and these humiliations were daily rendered more bitter by Sir Rowland's unwavering courtship of her cousin in despite of all that she could do.

In the end the poison of them entered her soul, corroded her sentiments towards him, dissolved the love she had borne him, and transformed it into venom. She would not have him now if he did penitence for his disaffection by going in sackcloth and crawling after her on his knees for a full twelvemonth. But neither should he have Ruth if she could thwart his purpose. On that she was resolved.

Had she but guessed that he watched them from the windows, waiting for her to take her departure, she had lingered all the morning, and all the afternoon if need be, at Ruth's side. But being ignorant of the circumstance—believing that he had already left the house—she presently quitted Ruth to go indoors, and no sooner was she gone than there was Blake replacing her at Ruth's elbow. Mistress Wilding met him with unsmiling, but not ungentle face.

"Not yet gone, Sir Rowland?" she asked him, and a less sanguine man had been discouraged by the words.

"It may be forgiven me that I tarry at such a time," said he, "when we consider that I go, perhaps—to return no more." It was an

inspiration

on his part to assume the role of the hero going forth to a possible death. It invested him with noble, valiant pathos which could not, he thought, fail of its effect upon a woman's mind. But he looked in vain for a change of colour, be it never so slight, or a quickening of the breath. He found neither; though, indeed, her deep blue eyes seemed to soften as they observed him.

"There is danger in this thing that you are undertaking?" said she, between question and assertion.

"It is not my wish to overstate it; yet I leave you to imagine what the risk may be."

"It is a good cause," said she, thinking of the poor, deluded, humble folk that followed Monmouth's banner, whom Blake's fine action was to rescue from impending ruin and annihilation, "and surely Heaven will be on your side."

"We must prevail," cried Blake with kindling eye, and you had thought him a fanatic, not a miserable earner of blood-money. "We must prevail, though some of us may pay dearly for the victory. I have a foreboding..." He paused, sighed, then laughed and flung back his head, as if throwing off some weight that had oppressed him.

It was admirably played; Nick Trenchard, had he observed it, might have envied the performance; and it took effect with her, this adding of a prospective martyr's crown to the hero's raiment he had earlier donned. It was a master-touch worthy of one who was deeply learned—from the school of foul experience—in the secret ways that lead to a woman's favour. In a pursuit of this kind there was no subterfuge too mean, no treachery too base for Sir Rowland Blake.

"Will you walk, mistress?" he said, and she, feeling that it were an unkindness not to do his will, assented gravely. They moved down the

sloping lawn, side by side, Sir Rowland leaning on his cane, bareheaded, his feathered hat tucked under his arm. Before them the river's smooth expanse, swollen and yellow with the recent rains, glowed like a sheet of copper, so that it blurred the sight to look upon it long.

A few steps they took with no word uttered, then Sir Rowland spoke. "With this foreboding that is on me," said he, "I could not go without seeing you, without saying something that I may never have another chance of saying; something that—who knows?—but for the emprise to which I am now wedded you had never heard from me."

He shot her a furtive, sidelong glance from under his heavy, beetling brows, and now, indeed, he observed a change ripple over the composure of her face like a sudden breeze across a sheet of water. The deep lace collar at her throat rose and fell, and her fingers toyed nervously with a ribbon of her grey bodice. She recovered in an instant, and threw up entrenchments against the attack she saw he was about to make.

"You exaggerate, I trust," said she. "Your forebodings will be proved groundless. You will return safe and sound from this venture, as indeed I hope you may."

That was his cue. "You hope it?" he cried, arresting his step, turning, and imprisoning her left hand in his right. "You hope it? Ah, if you hope for my return, return I will; but unless I know that you will have some welcome for me such as I desire from you, I think..." his voice quivered cleverly, "I think, perhaps, it were well if... if my forebodings were not as groundless as you say they are. Tell me, Ruth..."

But she interrupted him. It was high time, she thought. Her face he saw was flushed, her eyes had hardened somewhat. Calmly she disengaged her hand.

"What is't you mean?" she asked. "Speak, Sir Rowland, speak plainly, that I may give you a plain answer."

It was a challenge in which another man had seen how hopeless was his case, and, accepting defeat, had made as orderly a retreat as still was possible. But Sir Rowland, stricken in his vanity, went headlong on to utter rout.

"Since you ask me in such terms I will be plain, indeed," he answered her. "I mean..." He almost quailed before the look that met him from her intrepid eyes. "Do you not see my meaning, Ruth?"

"That which I see," said she, "I do not believe, and as I would not wrong you by any foolish imaginings, I would have you plain with me."

Yet the egregious fool went on. "And why should you not believe your senses?" he asked her, between anger and entreaty. "Is it wonderful that I should love you? Is it...?"

"Stop!" She drew back a pace from him. There was a moment's silence, during which it seemed she gathered her forces to destroy him, and, in the spirit, he bowed his head before the coming storm. Then, with a sudden relaxing of the stiffness her lissom figure had assumed, "I think you had better leave me, Sir Rowland," she advised him. She half turned and moved a step away; he followed with lowering glance, his upper lip lifting and laying bare his powerful teeth. In a stride he was beside her.

"Do you hate me, Ruth?" he asked her hoarsely.

"Why should I hate you?" she counter-questioned, sadly. "I do not even dislike you," she continued in a more friendly tone, adding, as if by way of explaining this phenomenon, "You are my brother's friend. But I am disappointed in you, Sir Rowland. You had, I know, no intention of offering me disrespect; and yet it is what you have done."

"As how?" he asked.

"Knowing me another's wife..."

He broke in tempestuously. "A mock marriage! If it is but that scruple stands between us..."

"I think there is more," she answered him. "You compel me to hurt you; I do so as the surgeon does—that I may heal you."

"Why, thanks for nothing," he made answer, unable to repress a sneer. Then, checking himself, and resuming the hero-martyr posture, "I go, mistress," he told her sadly, "and if I lose my life to-night, or to-morrow, in this affair..."

"I shall pray for you," said she; for she had found him out at last, perceived the nature of the bow he sought to draw across her heart-strings, and, having perceived it, contempt awoke in her. He had attempted to move her by unfair, insidious means.

He fell back, crimson from chin to brow. He stifled the wrath that welled up, threatening to choke him. He was a short-necked man, of the sort—as Trenchard had once reminded him—that falls a prey to apoplexy, and surely he was never nearer it than at that moment. He made her a profound bow, bending himself almost in two before her in a very irony of deference; then, drawing himself up again, he turned and left her.

The plot which with some pride he had hatched and the reward he looked to cull from it, were now to his soul as ashes to his lips. What could it profit him to destroy Monmouth so that Anthony Wilding lived? For whether she loved Wilding or not, she was Wilding's wife. Wilding, nominally, at least, was master of that which Sir Rowland coveted; not her heart, indeed, but her ample fortune. Wilding had been a stumbling-block to him since he had come to Bridgwater; but for Wilding he might have run a smooth course; he was still fool

enough to hug that dear illusion to his soul. Somewhere in England—if not dead already—this Wilding lurked, an outlaw, whom any might shoot down at sight. Sir Rowland swore he would not rest until he knew that Anthony Wilding cumbered the earth no more—leastways, not the surface of it.

He went forth to seek Newlington. The merchant had sent his message to the rebel King, and had word in answer that His Majesty would be graciously pleased to sup at Mr. Newlington's at nine o'clock on the following evening, attended by a few gentlemen of his immediate following. Sir Rowland received the news with satisfaction, and sighed to think that Mr. Wilding—still absent, Heaven knew where—would not be of the party. It was reported that on the Monday Monmouth was to march to Gloucester, hoping there to be joined by his Cheshire friends, so that it seemed Sir Rowland had not matured his plan a day too soon. He got to horse, and contriving to win out of Bridgwater, rode off to Somerton to concert with Lord Feversham concerning the men he would need for his undertaking.

That night Richard made free talk of the undertaking to Diana and to Ruth, loving, as does the pusillanimous, to show himself engaged in daring enterprises. Emulating his friend Sir Rowland, he held forth with prolixity upon the great service he was to do the State, and Ruth, listening to him, was proud of his zeal, the sincerity of which it never entered her mind to doubt.

Diana listened, too, but without illusions concerning Master Richard, and she kept her conclusions to herself.

During the afternoon of the morrow, which was Sunday, Sir Rowland returned to Bridgwater, his mission to Feversham entirely successful, and all preparations made. He completed his arrangements, and towards eight o'clock that night the twenty men sent by Feversham—they had slipped singly into the town—began to muster in the orchard at the back of Mr. Newlington's house.

It was just about that same hour that Mr. Wilding, saddle-worn and dust-clogged in every pore, rode into Bridgwater, and made his way to the sign of The Ship in the High Street, overlooking the Cross where Trenchard was lodged. His friend was absent—possibly gone with his men to the sermon Ferguson was preaching to the army in the Castle Fields. Having put up his horse, Mr. Wilding, all dusty as he was, repaired straight to the Castle to report himself to Monmouth.

He was informed that His Majesty was in council. Nevertheless, urging that his news was of importance, he begged to be instantly announced. After a pause, he was ushered into a lofty, roomy chamber where, in the fading daylight, King Monmouth sat in council with Grey and Wade, Matthews, Speke, Ferguson, and others. At the foot of the table stood a sturdy country-fellow, unknown to Wilding. It was Godfrey, the spy, who was to act as their guide across Sedgemoor that night; for the matter that was engaging them just then was the completion of their plans for the attack that was to be made that very night upon Feversham's unprepared camp—a matter which had been resolved during the last few hours as an alternative preferable to the retreat towards Gloucester that had at first been intended.

Wilding was shocked at the change that had been wrought in Monmouth's appearance during the few weeks since last he had seen him. His face was thin, pale, and haggard, his eyes were more sombre, and beneath them there were heavy, dark stains of sleeplessness and care, his very voice, when presently he spoke, seemed to have lost the musical timbre that had earlier distinguished it; it was grown harsh and rasping. Disappointment after disappointment, set down to ill-luck, but in reality the fruit of incompetence, had served to sour him. The climax had been reached in the serious desertions after the Philips Norton fight, and the flight of Paymaster Goodenough with the funds for the campaign. The

company sat about the long oak table on which a map was spread, and Colonel Wade was speaking when Wilding entered.

On his appearance Wade ceased, and every eye was turned upon the messenger from London. Ferguson, fresh from his sermon, sat with elbows resting on the table, his long chin supported by his hands, his eyes gleaming sharply under the shadow of his wig which was pulled down in front to the level of his eyebrows.

It was the Duke who addressed Mr. Wilding, and the latter's keen ears were quick to catch the bitterness that underlay his words.

"We are glad to see you, sir; we had not looked to do so again."

"Not looked to do so, Your Gr... Majesty!" he echoed, plainly not understanding, and it was observed that he stumbled over the Duke's new title.

"We had imagined that the pleasures of the town were claiming your entire attention."

Wilding looked from one to the other of the men before him, and on the face of all he saw a gravity that amounted to disapproval of him.

"The pleasures of the town?" said he, frowning, and again—"the pleasures of the town? There is something in this that I fear I do not understand."

"Do you bring us news that London has risen?" asked Grey suddenly.

"I would I could," said Wilding, smiling wistfully. "Is it a laughing matter?" quoth Grey angrily.

"A smiling matter, my lord," answered Wilding, nettled. "Your lordship will observe that I did but smile."

"Mr. Wilding," said Monmouth darkly, "we are not pleased with you."

"In that case," returned Wilding, more and more irritated, "Your Majesty expected of me more than was possible to any man."

"You have wasted your time in London, sir," the Duke explained "We sent you thither counting upon your loyalty and devotion to ourselves. What have you done?"

"As much as a man could..." Wilding began, when Grey again interrupted him.

"As little as a man could," he answered. "Were His Grace not the most foolishly clement prince in Christendom, a halter would be your reward for the fine things you have done in London."

Mr. Wilding stiffened visibly, his long white face grew set, and his slanting eyes looked wicked. He was not a man readily moved to anger, but to be greeted in such words as these by one who constituted himself the mouthpiece of him for whom Wilding had incurred ruin was more than he could bear with equanimity; that the risks to which he had exposed himself in London—where, indeed, he had been in almost hourly expectation of arrest and such short shrift as poor Disney had—should be acknowledged in such terms as these, was something that turned him almost sick with disgust. To what manner of men had he leagued himself? He looked Grey steadily between the eyes.

"I mind me of an occasion on which such a charge of foolish clemency might, indeed—and with greater justice—have been levelled against His Majesty," said he and his calm was almost terrible.

His lordship grew pale at the obvious allusion to Monmouth's mild treatment of him for his cowardice at Bridport, and his eyes were as

baleful as Wilding's own at that moment. But before he could speak, Monmouth had already answered Mr. Wilding.

"You are wanting in respect to us, sir," he admonished him.

Mr. Wilding bowed to the rebuke in a submission that seemed ironical. The blood mounted slowly to Monmouth's cheeks.

"Perhaps," put in Wade, who was anxious for peace, "Mr. Wilding has some explanation to offer us of his failure."

His failure! They took too much for granted. Stitched in the lining of his boot was the letter from the Secretary of State. To have achieved that was surely to have achieved something.

"I thank you, sir, for supposing it," answered Wilding, his voice hard with self-restraint; "I have indeed an explanation."

"We will hear it," said Monmouth condescendingly, and Grey sneered, thrusting out his bloated lips.

"I have to offer the explanation that Your Majesty is served in London by cowards; self-sufficient and self-important cowards who have hindered me in my task instead of helping me. I refer particularly to Colonel Danvers."

Grey interrupted him. "You have a rare effrontery, sir—aye, by God! Do you dare call Danvers a coward?"

"It is not I who so call him; but the facts. Colonel Danvers has run away.

"Danvers gone?" cried Ferguson, voicing the consternation of all.

Wilding shrugged and smiled; Grey's eye was offensively upon him. He elected to answer the challenge of that glance. "He has followed the illustrious example set him by other of Your Majesty's devoted

followers," said Wilding.

Grey rose suddenly. This was too much. "I'll not endure it from this knave!" he cried, appealing to Monmouth.

Monmouth wearily waved him to a seat; but Grey disregarded the command.

"What have I said that should touch your lordship?" asked Wilding, and, smiling sardonically, he looked into Grey's eyes.

"It is not what you have said. It is what you have inferred."

"And to call me knave!" said Wilding in a mocking horror.

The repression of his anger lent him a rare bitterness, and an almost devilishly subtle manner of expressing wordlessly what was passing in his mind. There was not one present but gathered from his utterance of those five words that he did not hold Grey worthy the honour of being called to account for that offensive epithet. He made just an exclamatory protest, such as he might have made had a woman applied the term to him.

Grey turned from him slowly to Monmouth. "It might be well," said he, in his turn controlling himself at last, "to place Mr. Wilding under arrest."

Mr. Wilding's manner quickened on the instant from passive to active anger.

"Upon what charge, sir?" he demanded sharply. In truth it was the only thing wanting that, after all that he had undergone, he should be arrested. His eyes were upon the Duke's melancholy face, and his anger was such that in that moment he vowed that if Monmouth acted upon this suggestion of Grey's he should not have so much as the consolation of Sunderland's letter.

"You have been wanting in respect to us, sir," the Duke answered him. He seemed able to do little more than repeat himself. "You return from London empty-handed, your task unaccomplished, and instead of a becoming contrition, you hector it here before us in this manner." He shook his head. "We are not pleased with you, Mr. Wilding." "But, Your Grace," exclaimed Wilding, "is it my fault that your London agents had failed to organize the rising? That rising should have taken place, and it would have taken place had Your Majesty been more ably represented there."

"You were there, Mr. Wilding," said Grey with heavy sarcasm.

"Would it no' be better to leave Mr. Wilding's affair until afterwards?" suggested Ferguson at that moment. "It is already past eight, Your Majesty, and there be still some details of this attack to settle that your officers may prepare for it, whilst Mr. Newlington awaits Your Majesty to supper at nine."

"True," said Monmouth, ever ready to take a solution offered by another. "We will confer with you again later, Mr. Wilding."

Wilding bowed, accepting his dismissal. "Before I go, Your Majesty, there are certain things I would report..." he began.

"You have heard, sir," Grey broke in. "Not now. This is not the time."

"Indeed, no. This is not the time, Mr. Wilding," echoed the Duke.

Wilding set his teeth in the intensity of his vexation.

"What I have to tell Your Majesty is of importance, he exclaimed, and Monmouth seemed to waver, whilst Grey looked disdainful unbelief of the importance of any communication Wilding might have to make.

"We have little time, Your Majesty," Ferguson reminded Monmouth.

"Perhaps," put in friendly Wade, "Your Majesty might see Mr. Wilding at Mr. Newlington's."

"Is it really necessary?" quoth Grey.

This treatment of him inspired Mr. Wilding with malice. The mere mention of Sunderland's letter would have changed their tone. But he elected by no such word to urge the importance of his business. It should be entirely as Monmouth should elect or be constrained by these gentlemen about his council-table.

"It would serve two purposes," said Wade, whilst Monmouth still considered. "Your Majesty will be none too well attended, your officers having this other matter to prepare for. Mr. Wilding would form another to swell your escort of gentlemen."

"I think you are right, Colonel Wade," said Monmouth. "We sup at Mr. Newlington's at nine o'clock, Mr. Wilding. We shall expect you to attend us there. Lieutenant Cragg," said His Grace to the young officer who had admitted Wilding, and who had remained at attention by the door, "you may reconduct Mr. Wilding."

Wilding bowed, his lips tight to keep in the anger that craved expression. Then, without another word spoken, he turned and departed.

"An insolent, overbearing knave!" was Grey's comment upon him after he had left the room.

"Let us attend to this, your lordship," said Speke, tapping the map. "Time presses," and he invited Wade to continue the matter that Wilding's advent had interrupted.

CHAPTER XVIII. BETRAYAL

Still smarting under the cavalier treatment he had received, Mr. Wilding came forth from the Castle to find Trenchard awaiting him among the crowd of officers and men that thronged the yard.

Nick linked his arm through his friend's and led him away. They quitted the place in silence, and in silence took their way south towards the High Street, Nick waiting for Mr. Wilding to speak, Mr. Wilding's mind still in turmoil at the things he had endured. At last Nick halted suddenly and looked keenly at his friend in the failing light.

"What a plague ails you, Tony?" said he sharply. "You are as silent as I am impatient for your news."

Wilding told him in brief, disdainful terms of the reception they had given him at the Castle, and of how they had blamed him for the circumstance that London had failed to proclaim itself for Monmouth.

Trenchard snarled viciously. "'Tis that mongrel Grey," said he. "Oh, Anthony, to what an affair have we set our hands? Naught can prosper with that fellow in it." He laid his hand on Wilding's arm and lowered his voice. "As I have hinted before, 'twould not surprise me if time proved him a traitor. Failure attends him everywhere, and so unfailingly that one wonders is not failure invited by him. And that fool Monmouth! Pshaw! See what it is to serve a weakling. With another in his place and the country disaffected as it is, we had been masters of England by now."

Two ladies passed them at that moment, cloaked and hooded, walking briskly. One of them turned to look at Trenchard, who, waving his arms in wild gesticulation, was a conspicuous object. She

checked in her walk, arresting her companion.

"Mr. Wilding!" she exclaimed. It was Lady Horton.

"Mr. Wilding!" cried Diana, her companion.

Wilding doffed his hat and bowed, Trenchard following his example.

"We had scarce looked to see you in Bridgwater again," said the mother, her mild, pleasant countenance reflecting the satisfaction it gave her to behold him safe and sound.

"There have been moments," answered Wilding, "when myself I scarce expected to return. Your ladyship's greeting shows me what I had lost had I not done so."

"You are but newly arrived?" quoth Diana, scanning him in the gloaming.

"From London, an hour since."

"An hour?" she echoed, and observed that he was still booted and dust-stained. "You will have been to Lupton House?"

A shadow crossed his face, his glance seemed to grow clouded, all of which watchful Diana did not fail to observe. "Not yet," said he.

"You are a laggard," she laughed at him, and he felt the blood driven back upon his heart. What did she mean? Was it possible she suggested that he should be welcome, that his wife's feelings towards him had undergone a change? His last parting from her on the road near Walford had been ever in his mind.

"I have had weighty business to transact, he replied, and Trenchard snorted, his mind flying back to the council-room at the Castle, and what his friend had told him.

"But now that you have disposed of that you will sup with us," said Lady Horton, who was convinced that since Ruth had gone to the altar with him he was Ruth's lover in spite of the odd things she had heard. Appearances with Lady Horton counted for everything, and all that glittered was gold to her.

"I would," he answered, "but that I am to sup at Mr. Newlington's with His Majesty. My visit must wait until to-morrow."

"Let us hope," said Trenchard, "that it waits no longer." He was already instructed touching the night attack on Feversham's camp on Sedgemoor, and thought it likely Wilding would accompany them.

"You are going to Mr. Newlington's?" said Diana, and Trenchard thought she had turned singularly pale. Her hand was over her heart, her eyes wide. She seemed about to add something, but checked herself. She took her mother's arm. "We are detaining Mr. Wilding, mother," said she, and her voice quivered as if her whole being were shaken by some gusty agitation. They spoke their farewells briefly, and moved on. A second later Diana was back at their side again.

"Where are you lodged, Mr. Wilding?" she inquired.

"With my friend Trenchard—at the sign of The Ship, by the Cross."

She briefly acknowledged the information, rejoined her mother, and hurried away with her.

Trenchard stood staring after them a moment. "Odd!" said he; "did you mark that girl's discomposure?"

But Wilding's thoughts were elsewhere. "Come, Nick! If I am to render myself fit to sit at table with Monmouth, we'll need to hasten."

They went their way, but not so fast as went Diana, urging with her protesting and short-winded mother.

"Where is your mistress?" the girl asked excitedly of the first servant she met at Lupton House.

"In her room, madam," the man replied, and to Ruth's room went Diana breathlessly, leaving Lady Horton gaping after her and understanding nothing.

Ruth, who was seated pensive by her window, rose on Diana's impetuous entrance, and in the deepening twilight she looked almost ghostly in her gown of shimmering white satin, sewn with pearls about the neck of the low-cut bodice.

"Diana!" she cried. "You startled me."

"Not so much as I am yet to do," answered Diana, breathing excitement. She threw back the wimple from her head, and pulling away her cloak, tossed it on to the bed. "Mr. Wilding is in Bridgwater," she announced.

There was a faint rustle from the stiff satin of Ruth's gown. "Then..." her voice shook slightly. "Then... he is not dead," she said, more because she felt that she must say something than because her words fitted the occasion.

"Not yet," said Diana grimly.

"Not yet?"

"He sups to-night at Mr. Newlington's," Miss Horton exclaimed in a voice pregnant with meaning.

"Ah!" It was a cry from Ruth, sharp as if she had been stabbed. She sank back to her seat by the window, smitten down by this sudden news.

There was a pause, which fretted Diana, who now craved knowledge of what might be passing in her cousin's mind. She

advanced towards Ruth and laid a trembling hand on her shoulder, where the white gown met the ivory neck. "He must be warned," she said.

"But.., but how?" stammered Ruth. "To warn him were to betray Sir Rowland."

"Sir Rowland?" cried Diana in high scorn.

"And... and Richard," Ruth continued.

"Yes, and Mr. Newlington, and all the other knaves that are engaged in this murderous business. Well?" she demanded. "Will you do it, or must I?"

"Do it?" Ruth's eyes sought her cousin's white, excited face in the quasi-darkness. "But have you thought of what it will mean? Have you thought of the poor people that will perish unless the Duke is taken and this rebellion brought to an end?"

"Thought of it?" repeated Diana witheringly. "Not I. I have thought that Mr. Wilding is here and like to have his throat cut before an hour is past."

"Tell me, are you sure of this?" asked Ruth.

"I have it from your husband's own lips," Diana answered, and told her in a few words of her meeting with Mr. Wilding.

Ruth sat with hands folded in her lap, her eyes on the dim violet after-glow in the west, and her mind wrestling with this problem that Diana had brought her.

"Diana," she cried at last, "what am I to do?"

"Do?" echoed Diana. "Is it not plain? Warn Mr. Wilding."

"But Richard?"

"Mr. Wilding saved Richard's life..."

"I know. I know. My duty is to warn him."

"Then why hesitate?"

"My duty is also to keep faith with Richard, to think of those poor misguided folk who are to be saved by this," cried Ruth in an agony. "If Mr. Wildin is warned, they will all be ruined."

Diana stamped her foot impatiently. "Had I thought to find you in this mind, I had warned him myself;" said she.

"Ah! Why did you not?"

"That the chance of doing so might be yours. That you might thus repay him the debt in which you stand."

"Diana, I can't!" The words broke from her in a sob.

But whatever her interest in Mr. Wilding for her own sake, Diana's prime intent was the thwarting Sir Rowland Blake. If Wilding were warned of what manner of feast was spread at Newington's, Sir Rowland would be indeed undone.

"You think of Richard," she exclaimed, "and you know that Richard is to have no active part in the affair—that he will run no risk. They have assigned him but a sentry duty that he may warn Blake and his followers if any danger threatens them."

"It is not of Richard's life I am thinking, but of his honour, of his trust in me. To warn Mr. Wilding were... to commit an act of betrayal."

"And is Mr. Wilding to be slaughtered with his friends?" Diana asked her. "Resolve me that. Time presses. In half an hour it will be too late."

That allusion to the shortness of the time brought Ruth an inspiration. Suddenly she saw a way. Wilding should be saved, and yet she would not break faith with Richard nor ruin those others. She would detain him, and whilst warning him at the last moment, in time for him to save himself; not do so until it must be too late for him to warn the others. Thus she would do her duty by him, and yet keep faith with Richard and Sir Rowland. She had resolved, she thought, the awful difficulty that had confronted her. She rose suddenly, heartened by the thought.

"Give me your cloak and wimple," she bade Diana, and Diana flew to do her bidding. "Where is Mr. Wilding lodged?" she asked.

"At the sign of The Ship—overlooking the Cross, with Mr. Trenchard. Shall I come with you?"

"No," answered Ruth without hesitation. "I will go alone." She drew the wimple well over her head, so that in its shadows her face might lie concealed, and hid her shimmering white dress under Diana's cloak.

She hastened through the ill-lighted streets, never heeding the rough cobbles that hurt her feet, shod in light indoor wear, never heeding the crowds that thronged her way. All Bridgwater was astir with Monmouth's presence; moreover, there had been great incursions from Taunton and the surrounding country, the women-folk of the Duke-King's followers having come that day to Bridgwater to say farewell to father and son, husband and brother, before the army marched—as was still believed—to Gloucester.

The half-hour was striking from Saint Mary's—the church in which she had been married—as Ruth reached the door of the sign of The Ship. She was about to knock, when suddenly it opened, and Mr. Wilding himself, with Trenchard immediately behind him, stood confronting her. At sight of him a momentary weakness took her. He

had changed from his hard-used riding-garments into a suit of roughly corded black silk, which threw into relief the steely litheness of his spare figure. His dark brown hair was carefully dressed, diamonds gleamed in the cravat of snowy lace at his throat. He was uncovered, his hat under his arm, and he stood aside to make way for her, imagining that she was some woman of the house.

"Mr. Wilding," said she, her heart fluttering in her throat. "May I... may I speak with you?"

He leaned forward, seeking to pierce the shadows of her wimple; he had thought he recognized the voice, as his sudden start had shown; and yet he disbelieved his ears. She moved her head at that moment, and the light streaming out from a lamp in the passage beat upon her white face.

"Ruth!" he cried, and came quickly forward. Trenchard, behind him, looked on and scowled with sudden impatience. Mr. Wilding's philanderings with this lady had never had the old rake's approval. Too much trouble already had resulted from them.

"I must speak with you at once. At once!" she urged him, her tone fearful.

"Are you in need of me?" he asked concernedly.

"In very urgent need," said she.

"I thank God," he answered without flippancy. "You shall find me at your service. Tell me."

"Not here; not here," she answered him.

"Where else?" said he. "Shall we walk?"

"No, no." Her repetitions marked the deep excitement that possessed her. "I will go in with you." And she signed with her head

towards the door from which he was barely emerged.

"Twere scarce fitting," said he, for being confused and full of speculation on the score of her need, he had for the moment almost overlooked the relations in which they stood. In spite of the ceremony through which they had gone together, Mr. Wilding still mostly thought of her as of a mistress very difficult to woo.

"Fitting?" she echoed, and then after a pause, "Am I not your wife?" she asked him in a low voice, her cheeks crimsoning.

"Ha! 'Pon honour, I had almost forgot," said he, and though the burden of his words seemed mocking, their tone was sad.

Of the passers-by that jostled them a couple had now paused to watch a scene that had an element of the unusual in it. She pulled her wimple closer to her face, took him by the arm, and drew him with her into the house.

"Close the door," she bade him, and Trenchard, who had stood aside that they might pass in, forestalled him in obeying her. "Now lead me to your room, said she, and Wilding in amaze turned to Trenchard as if asking his consent, for the lodging, after all, was Trenchard's.

"I'll wait here," said Nick, and waved his hand towards an oak bench that stood in the passage. "You had best make haste," he urged his friend; "you are late already. That is, unless you are of a mind to set the lady's affairs before King Monmouth's. And were I in your place, Anthony, faith I'd not scruple to do it. For after all," he added under his breath, "there's little choice in rotten apples."

Ruth waited for some answer from Wilding that might suggest he was indifferent whether he went to Newlington's or not; but he spoke no word as he turned to lead the way above-stairs to the indifferent parlour which with the adjoining bedroom constituted Mr. Trenchard's

lodging—and his own, for the time being.

Having assured herself that the curtains were closely drawn, she put by her cloak and hood, and stood revealed to him in the light of the three candles, burning in a branch upon the bare oak table, dazzlingly beautiful in her gown of ivory-white.

He stood apart, cogitating her with glowing eyes, the faintest smile between question and pleasure hovering about his thin mouth. He had closed the door, and stood in silence waiting for her to make known to him her pleasure.

"Mr. Wilding..." she began, and straightway he interrupted her.

"But a moment since you did remind me that I have the honour to be your husband," he said with grave humour. "Why seek now to overcloud that fact? I mind me that the last time we met you called me by another name. But it may be," he added as an afterthought, "you are of opinion that I have broken faith with you."

"Broken faith? As how?"

"So!" he said, and sighed. "My words were of so little account that they have been, I see, forgotten. Yet, so that I remember them, that is what chiefly matters. I promised then—or seemed to promise—that I would make a widow of you, who had made a wife of you against your will. It has not happened yet. Do not despair. This Monmouth quarrel is not yet fought out. Hope on, my Ruth."

She looked at him with eyes wide open—lustrous eyes of sapphire in a face of ivory. A faint smile parted her lips, the reflection of the thought in her mind that had she, indeed, been eager for his death she would not be with him at this moment; had she desired it, how easy would her course have been.

"You do me wrong to bid me hope for that," she answered him, her

tones level. "I do not wish the death of any man, unless..." She paused; her truthfulness urged her too far.

"Unless?" said he, brows raised, polite interest on his face.

"Unless it be His Grace of Monmouth."

He considered her with suddenly narrowed eyes. "You have not by chance sought me to talk politics?" said he. "Or..." and he suddenly caught his breath, his nostrils dilating with rage at the bare thought that leapt into his mind. Had Monmouth, the notorious libertine, been to Lupton House and persecuted her with his addresses? "Is it that you are acquainted with His Grace?" he asked.

"I have never spoken to him!" she answered, with no suspicion of what was in his thoughts.

In his relief he laughed, remembering now that Monmouth's affairs were too absorbing just at present to leave him room for dalliance.

"But you are standing," said he, and he advanced a chair. "I deplore that I have no better hospitality to offer you. I doubt if I ever shall again. I am told that Albemarle did me the honour to stable his knackers in my hall at Zoyland."

She took the chair he offered her, sinking to it like one physically weary, a thing he was quick to notice. He watched her, his body eager, his soul trammelling it with a steely restraint. "Tell me, now," said he, "in what you need me."

She was silent a moment, pondering, hesitation and confusion seeming to envelop her. A pink flush rose to colour the beautiful pillar of neck and overspread the delicate half-averted face. He watched it, wondering.

"How long," she asked him, her whole intent at present being to delay him and gain time. "How long have you been in Bridgwater?"

"Two hours at most," said he.

"Two hours! And yet you never came to... to me. I heard of your presence, and I feared you might intend to abstain from seeking me."

He almost held his breath while she spoke, caught in amazement. He was standing close beside her chair, his right hand rested upon its tall back.

"Did you so intend?" she asked him.

"I told you even now," he answered with hard-won calm, "that I had made you a sort of promise."

"I... I would not have you keep it," she murmured. She heard his sharply indrawn breath, felt him leaning over her, and was filled with an unaccountable fear.

"Was it to tell me this you came?" he asked her, his voice reduced to a whisper.

"No... yes," she answered, an agony in her mind, which groped for some means to keep him by her side until his danger should be overpast. That much she owed him in honour if in nothing else.

"No—yes?" he echoed, and he had drawn himself erect again. "What is't you mean, Ruth?"

"I mean that it was that, yet not quite only that."

"Ah!" Disappointment vibrated faintly in his clamoration. "What else?"

"I would have you abandon Monmouth's following," she told him.

He stared a moment, moved away and round where he could confront her. The flush had now faded from her face. This he observed and the heave of her bosom in its low bodice. He knit his brows,

perplexed. Here was surely more than at first might seem.

"Why so?" he asked.

"For your own safety's sake," she answered him.

"You are oddly concerned for that, Ruth."

"Concerned—not oddly." She paused an instant, swallowed hard, and then continued. "I am concerned too for your honour, and there is no honour in following his banner. He has crowned himself King, and so proved himself a self-seeker who came dissembled as the champion of a cause that he might delude poor ignorant folk into flocking to his standard and helping him to his ambitious ends."

"You are wondrously well schooled," said he. "Whose teachings do you recite me? Sir Rowland Blake's?"

At another time the sneer might have cut her. At the moment she was too intent upon gaining time. The means to it mattered little. The more she talked to no purpose, the more at random was their discourse, the better would her ends be served.

"Sir Rowland Blake?" she cried. "What is he to me?"

"Ah, what? Let me set you the question rather."

"Less than nothing," she assured him, and for some moments afterwards it was this Sir Rowland who served them as a topic for their odd interview. On the overmantel the pulse of time beat on from a little wooden clock. His eyes strayed to it; it marked the three-quarters. He bethought him suddenly of his engagement. Trenchard, below-stairs, supremely indifferent whether Wilding went to Newington's or not, smoked on, entirely unconcerned by the flight of time.

"Mistress," said Wilding suddenly, "you have not yet told me in what

you seek my service. Indeed, we seem to have talked to little purpose. My time is very short."

"Where are you going?" she asked him, and fearfully she shot a sidelong glance at the timepiece. It was still too soon, by at least five minutes.

He smiled, but his smile was singular. He began to suspect at last that her only purpose—to what end he could not guess—was to detain him.

"'Tis a singularly sudden interest in my doings, this," said he quietly. "What is't you seek of me?" He reached for the hat he had cast upon the table when they had entered. "Tell me briefly. I may stay no longer."

She rose, her agitation suddenly increasing, afraid that after all he would escape her. "Where are you going?" she asked. "Answer me that, and I will tell you why I came."

"I am to sup at Mr. Newlington's in His Majesty's company.

"His Majesty's?"

"King Monmouth's," he explained impatiently. "Come, Ruth. Already I am late."

"If I were to ask you not to go," she said slowly, and she held out her hands to him, her glance most piteous—and that was not acting—as she raised it to meet his own, "would you not stay to pleasure me?"

He considered her from under frowning eyes. "Ruth," he said, and he took her hands, "there is here something that I do not understand. What is't you mean?"

"Promise me that you will not go to Newlington's, and I will tell you."

"But what has Newlington to do with...? Nay, I am pledged already to go."

She drew closer to him, her hands upon his shoulders. "Yet if I ask you—I, your wife?" she pleaded, and almost won him to her will.

But suddenly he remembered another occasion on which, for purposes of her own, she had so pleaded. He laughed softly, mockingly.

"Do you woo me, Ruth, who, when I wooed you, would have none of me?"

She drew back from him, crimsoning. "I think I had better go," said she. "You have nothing but mockery for me. It was ever so. Who knows?" she sighed as she took up her mantle. "Had you but observed more gentle ways, you... you..." She paused, needing to say no more. "Good-night!" she ended, and made shift to leave. He watched her, deeply mystified. She had gained the door when suddenly he moved.

"Wait!" he cried. She paused, and turned to look over her shoulder, her hand apparently upon the latch. "You shall not go until you have told me why you besought me to keep away from Newlington's. What is it?" he asked, and paused suddenly, a flood of light breaking in upon his mind. "Is there some treachery afoot?" he asked her, and his eye went wildly to the clock. A harsh, grating sound rang through the room. "What are you doing?" he cried. "Why have you locked the door?" She was tugging and fumbling desperately to extract the key, her hands all clumsy in her nervous haste. He leapt at her, but in that moment the key came away in her hand. She wheeled round to face him, erect, defiant almost.

"Here is some devilry!" he cried. "Give me that key."

He had no need for further questions. Here was a proof more

eloquent than words to his ready wit. Sir Rowland or Richard, or both, were in some plot for the Duke's ruin—perhaps assassination. Had not her very words shown that she herself was out of all sympathy with Monmouth? He was out of sympathy himself. But not to the extent of standing by to see his throat cut. She would have the plot succeed—whatever it might be and yet that he himself be spared. There his thoughts paused; but only for a moment. He saw suddenly in this, not a proof of concern born of love but of duty towards him who had imperilled himself once—and for all time, indeed—that he might save her brother and Sir Rowland.

He told her what had been so suddenly revealed to him, taxing her with it. She acknowledged it, her wits battling to find some way by which she might yet gain a few moments more. She would cling to the key, and though he should offer her violence, she would not let it go without a struggle, and that struggle must consume the little time yet wanting to make it too late for him to save the Duke, and—what imported more—thus save herself from betraying her brother's trust. Another fear leapt at her suddenly. If through deed of hers Monmouth was spared that night, Blake, in his despair and rage, might slake his vengeance upon Richard.

"Give me that key," he demanded, his voice cold and quiet, his face set.

"No, no," she cried, setting her hand behind her. "You shall not go, Anthony. You shall not go."

"I must," he insisted, still cold, but oh! so determined. "My honour's in it now that I know."

"You'll go to your death," she reminded him.

He sneered. "What signifies a day or so? Give me the key."

"I love you, Anthony!" she cried, livid to the lips.

"Lies!" he answered her contemptuously. "The key!"

"No," she answered, and her firmness matched his own. "I will not have you slain."

"Tis not my purpose—not just yet. But I must save the others. God forgive me if I offer violence to a woman," he added, "and lay rude hands upon her. Do not compel me to it." He advanced upon her, but she, lithe and quick, evaded him, and sprang for the middle of the room. He wheeled about, his selfcontrol all slipping from him now. Suddenly she darted to the window, and with the hand that clenched the key she smote a pane with all her might. There was a smash of shivering glass, followed an instant later by a faint tinkle on the stones below, and the hand that she still held out covered itself all with blood.

"O God!" he cried, the key and all else forgotten. "You are hurt."

"But you are saved," she cried, overwrought, and staggered, laughing and sobbing, to a chair, sinking her bleeding hand to her lap, and smearing recklessly her spotless, shimmering gown.

He caught up a chair by its legs, and at a single blow smashed down the door—a frail barrier after all. "Nick!" he roared. "Nick!" He tossed the chair from him and vanished into the adjoining room to reappear a moment later carrying basin and ewer, and a shirt of Trenchard's—the first piece of linen he could find.

She was half fainting, and she let him have his swift, masterful way. He bathed her hand, and was relieved to find that the injury was none so great as the flow of blood had made him fear. He tore Trenchard's fine cambric shirt to shreds—a matter on which Trenchard afterwards commented in quotations from at least three famous Elizabethan dramatists. He bound up her hand, just as Nick made his appearance at the splintered door, his mouth open, his pipe, gone out, between his fingers. He was followed by a startled serving-wench, the only

other person in the house, for every one was out of doors that night.

Into the woman's care Wilding delivered his wife, and without a word to her he left the room, dragging Trenchard with him. It was striking nine as they went down the stairs, and the sound brought as much satisfaction to Ruth above as dismay to Wilding below.

CHAPTER XIX. THE BANQUET

It was striking nine. Therefore, Ruth thought that she had achieved her object, Wilding imagined that all was lost. It needed the more tranquil mind of Nicholas Trenchard to show him the fly in madam's ointment, after Wilding, in half a dozen words, had made him acquainted with the situation.

"What are you going to do?" asked Trenchard.

"Run to Newlington's and warn the Duke—if still in time."

"And thereby precipitate the catastrophe? Oh, give it thought. It is all it needs. You are taking it for granted that nine o'clock is the hour appointed for King Monmouth's butchery."

"What else?" asked Wilding, impatient to be off.

They were standing in the street under the sign of The Ship, by which Jonathan Edney Mr. Trenchard's landlord—distinguished his premises and the chandler's trade he drove there. Trenchard set a detaining hand on Mr. Wilding's arm.

"Nine o'clock is the hour appointed for supper. It is odds the Duke will be a little late, and it is more than odds that when he does arrive, the assassins will wait until the company is safely at table and lulled by good eating and drinking. You had overlooked that, I see. It asks an old head for wisdom, after all. Look you, Anthony. Speed to Colonel Wade as fast as your legs can carry you, and get a score of men. Then find some fellow to lead you to Newlington's orchard, and if only you do not arrive too late you may take Sir Rowland and his cut-throats in the rear and destroy them to a man before they realize

themselves attacked. I'll reconnoitre while you go, and keep an eye on the front of the house. Away with you!"

Ordinarily Wilding was a man of a certain dignity, but you had not thought it had you seen him running in silk stockings and silver-buckled shoes at a headlong pace through the narrow streets of Bridgwater, in the direction of the Castle. He overset more than one, and oaths followed him from these and from others whom he rudely jostled out of his path. Wade was gone with Monmouth, but he came upon Captain Slape, who had a company of scythes and musketeers incorporated in the Duke's own regiment, and to him Wilding gasped out the news and his request for a score of men with what breath was left him.

Time was lost—and never was time more precious—in convincing Slape that this was no old wife's tale. At last, however, he won his way and twenty musketeers; but the quarter-past the hour had chimed ere they left the Castle. He led them forth at a sharp run, with never a thought for the circumstance that they would need their breath anon, perhaps for fighting, and he bade the man who guided them take them by back streets that they might attract as little attention as possible.

Within a stone's-throw of the house he halted them, and sent one forward to reconnoitre, following himself with the others as quietly and noiselessly as possible. Mr. Newlington's house was all alight, but from the absence of uproar—sounds there were in plenty from the main street, where a dense throng had collected to see His Majesty go in—Mr. Wilding inferred with supreme relief that they were still in time. But the danger was not yet past. Already, perhaps, the assassins were penetrating—or had penetrated—to the house; and at any moment such sounds might greet them as would announce the execution of their murderous design.

Meanwhile Mr. Trenchard, having relighted his pipe, and set his hat

rakishly atop his golden wig, drolled up the High Street, swinging his long cane very much like a gentleman taking the air in quest of an appetite for supper. He strolled past the Cross and on until he came to the handsome mansion—one of the few handsome houses in Bridgwater—where opulent Mr. Newlington had his residence. A small crowd had congregated about the doors, for word had gone forth that His Majesty was to sup there. Trenchard moved slowly through the people, seemingly uninterested, but, in fact, scanning closely every face he encountered. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he espied in the indifferent light Mr. Richard Westmacott.

Trenchard passed him, jostling him as he went, and strolled on some few paces, then turned, and came slowly back, and observed that Richard had also turned and was now watching him as he approached. He was all but upon the boy when suddenly his wrinkled face lighted with recognition.

"Mr. Westmacott!" he cried, and there was surprise in his voice.

Richard, conscious that Trenchard must no doubt regard him as a turn-tippet, flushed, and stood aside to give passage to the other. But Mr. Trenchard was by no means minded to pass. He clapped a hand on Richard's shoulder. "Nay," he cried, between laughter and feigned resentment. "Do you bear me ill-will, lad?"

Richard was somewhat taken aback. "For what should I bear you ill-will, Mr. Trenchard?" quoth he.

Trenchard laughed frankly, and so uproariously that his hat overjauntily cocked was all but shaken from his head. "I mind me the last time we met, I played you an unfair trick," said he. His tone bespoke the very highest good-humour. He slipped his arm through Richard's. "Never bear an old man malice, lad," said he.

"I assure you that I bear you none," said Richard, relieved to find

that Trenchard apparently knew nothing of his defection, yet wishing that Trenchard would go his ways, for Richard's task was to stand sentry there.

"I'll not believe you till you afford me proof," Trenchard replied. "You shall come and wash your resentment down in the best bottle of Canary the White Cow can furnish us."

"Not now, I thank you," answered Richard.

"You are thinking of the last occasion on which I drank with you," said Trenchard reproachfully.

"Not so. But... but I am not thirsty."

"Not thirsty?" echoed Trenchard. "And is that a reason? Why, lad, it is the beast that drinks only when he thirsts. And in that lies one of the main differences between beast and man. Come on"—and his arm effected a gentle pressure upon Richard's, to move him thence. But at that moment, down the street with a great rumble of wheels, cracking of whips and clatter of hoofs, came a coach, bearing to Mr. Newlington's King Monmouth escorted by his forty life-guards. Cheering broke from the crowd as the carriage drew up, and the Duke-King as he alighted turned his handsome face, on which shone the ruddy glow of torches, to acknowledge these loyal acclamations. He passed up the steps, at the top of which Mr. Newlington—fat and pale and monstrously overdressed—stood bowing to welcome his royal visitor. Host and guest vanished, followed by some six officers of Monmouth's, among whom were Grey and Wade. The sight-seers flattened themselves against the walls as the great lumbering coach put about and went off again the way it had come, the life-guards following after.

Trenchard fancied that he caught a sigh of relief from Richard, but the street was noisy at the time and he may well have been mistaken.

"Come," said he, renewing his invitation, "we shall both be the better for a little milk of the White Cow."

Richard wavered almost by instinct. The White Cow, he knew, was famous for its sack; on the other hand, he was pledged to Sir Rowland to stand guard in the narrow lane at the back where ran the wall of Mr. Newlington's garden. Under the gentle suasion of Trenchard's arm, he moved a few steps up the street; then halted, his duty battling with his inclination.

"No, no," he muttered. "If you will excuse me..."

"Not I," said Trenchard, drawing from his hesitation a shrewd inference as to Richard's business.

"To drink alone is an abomination I'll not be guilty of."

"But..." began the irresolute Richard.

"Shalt urge me no excuses, or we'll quarrel. Come," and he moved on, dragging Richard with him.

A few steps Richard took unwillingly under the other's soft compulsion; then, having given the matter thought—he was always one to take the line of least resistance—he assured himself that his sentryship was entirely superfluous; the matter of Blake's affair was an entire secret, shared only by those who had a hand in it. Blake was quite safe from all surprises; Trenchard was insistent and it was difficult to deny him; and the sack at the White Cow was no doubt the best in Somerset. He gave himself up to the inevitable and fell into step alongside his companion who babbled aimlessly of trivial matters. Trenchard felt the change from unwilling to willing companionship, and approved it.

They mounted the three steps and entered the common room of the inn. It was well thronged at the time, but they found places at the end of a long table, and there they sat and discussed the landlady's Canary for the best part of a half-hour, until a sudden spatter of musketry, near at hand, came to startle the whole room.

There was a momentary stillness in the tavern, succeeded by an excited clamouring, a dash for the windows and a storm of questions, to which none could return any answer. Richard had risen with a sudden exclamation, very pale and scared of aspect. Trenchard tugged at his sleeve.

"Sit down," said he. "Sit down. It will be nothing."

"Nothing?" echoed Richard, and his eyes were suddenly bent on Trenchard in a look in which suspicion was now blent with terror.

A second volley of musketry crackled forth at that moment, and the next the whole street was in an uproar. Men were running and shots resounded on every side, above all of which predominated the cry that His Majesty was murdered.

In an instant the common room of the White Cow was emptied of every occupant save two—Trenchard and Westmacott. Neither of them felt the need to go forth in quest of news. They knew how idle was the cry in the streets. They knew what had taken place, and knowing it, Trenchard smoked on placidly, satisfied that Wilding had been in time, whilst Richard stood stricken and petrified by dismay at realizing, with even greater certainty, that something had supervened to thwart, perhaps to destroy, Sir Rowland. For he knew that Blake's party had gone forth armed with pistols only, and intent not to use even these save in the last extremity; to avoid noise they were to keep to steel. This knowledge gave Richard positive assurance that the volleys they had heard must have been fired by some party that had fallen upon Blake's men and taken them by surprise.

And it was his fault! He was the traitor to whom perhaps a score of men owed their deaths at that moment! He had failed to keep watch as he had undertaken. His fault it was—No! not his, but this villain's who sat there smugly taking his ease and pulling at his pipe.

At a blow Richard dashed the thing from his companion's mouth and fingers.

Trenchard looked up startled.

"What the devil...?" he began.

"It is your fault, your fault!" cried Richard, his eyes blazing, his lips livid. "It was you who lured me hither."

Trenchard stared at him in bland surprise. "Now, what a plague is't you're saying?" he asked, and brought Richard to his senses by awaking in him the instinct of self-preservation.

How could he explain his meaning without betraying himself?—and surely that were a folly, now that the others were no doubt disposed of. Let him, rather, bethink him of his own safety. Trenchard looked at him keenly, with well-assumed intent to read what might be passing in his mind, then rose, paid for the wine, and expressed his intention of going forth to inquire into these strange matters that were happening in Bridgwater.

Meanwhile, those volleys fired in Mr. Newlington's orchard had caused—as well may be conceived—an agitated interruption of the superb feast Mr. Newlington had spread for his noble and distinguished guests. The Duke had for some days been going in fear of his life, for already he had been fired at more than once by men anxious to earn the price at which his head was valued; instantly he surmised that whatever that firing might mean, it indicated some attempt to surprise him with the few gentlemen who attended him.

The whole company came instantly to its feet, and Colonel Wade stepped to a window that stood open—for the night was very warm. The Duke turned for explanation to his host; the trader, however, professed himself entirely unable to offer any. He was very pale and his limbs were visibly trembling, but then his agitation was most natural. His wife and daughter supervened at that moment, in their alarm entering the room unceremoniously, in spite of the august presence, to inquire into the meaning of this firing, and to reassure themselves that their father and his illustrious guests were safe.

From the windows they could observe a stir in the gardens below. Black shadows of men flitted to and fro, and a loud, rich voice was heard calling to them to take cover, that they were betrayed. Then a sheet of livid flame blazed along the summit of the low wall, and a second volley of musketry rang out, succeeded by cries and screams from the assailed and the shouts of the assailers who were now pouring into the garden through the battered doorway and over the wall. For some moments steel rang on steel, and pistol-shots cracked here and there to the accompaniment of voices, raised some in anger, some in pain. But it was soon over, and a comparative stillness succeeded.

A voice called up from the darkness under the windows to know if His Majesty was safe. There had been a plot to take him; but the ambuscaders had been ambuscaded in their turn, and not a man of them remained—which was hardly exact, for under a laurel bush, scarce daring to breathe, lay Sir Rowland Blake, livid with fear and fury, and bleeding from a rapier scratch in the cheek, but otherwise unhurt.

In the room above, Monmouth had sunk wearily into his chair upon hearing of the design there had been against his life. A deep, bitter melancholy enwrapped his spirit. Lord Grey's first thoughts flew to the man he most disliked—the one man missing from those who had

been bidden to accompany His Majesty, whose absence had already formed the subject of comment. Grey remembered this bearing before the council that same evening, and his undisguised resentment of the reproaches levelled against him.

"Where is Mr. Wilding?" he asked suddenly, his voice dominating the din of talk that filled the room. "Do we hold the explanation of his absence?"

Monmouth looked up quickly, his beautiful eyes ineffably sad, his weak mouth drooping at the corners. Wade turned to confront Grey.

"Your lordship does not suggest that Mr. Wilding can have a hand in this?"

"Appearances would seem to point in that direction," answered Grey, and in his wicked heart he almost hoped it might be so.

"Then appearances speak truth for once," came a bitter, ringing voice. They turned, and there on the threshold stood Mr. Wilding. Unheard he had come upon them. He was bareheaded and carried his drawn sword. There was blood upon it, and there was blood on the lace that half concealed the hand that held it; otherwise—and saving that his shoes and stockings were sodden with the dew from the long grass in the orchard—he was as spotless as when he had left Ruth in Trenchard's lodging; his face, too, was calm, save for the mocking smile with which he eyed Lord Grey.

Monmouth rose on his appearance, and put his hand to his sword in alarm. Grey whipped his own from the scabbard, and placed himself slightly in front of his master as if to preserve him.

"You mistake, sirs," said Wilding quietly. "The hand I have had in this affair has been to save Your Majesty from your enemies. At the moment I should have joined you, word was brought me of the plot that was laid, of the trap that was set for you. I hastened to the Castle

and obtained a score of musketeers of Slape's company. With those I surprised the murderers lurking in the garden there, and made an end of them. I greatly feared I should not come in time; but it is plain that Heaven preserves Your Majesty for better days."

In the revulsion of feeling, Monmouth's eyes shone moist. Grey sheathed his sword with an awkward laugh, and a still more awkward word of apology to Wilding. The Duke, moved by a sudden impulse to make amends for his unworthy suspicions, for his perhaps unworthy reception of Wilding earlier that evening in the council-room, drew the sword on which his hand still rested. He advanced a step.

"Kneel, Mr. Wilding," he said in a voice stirred by emotion. But Wilding's stern spirit scorned this all too sudden friendliness of Monmouth's as much as he scorned the accolade at Monmouth's hands.

"There are more pressing matters to demand Your Majesty's attention," said Mr. Wilding coldly, advancing to the table as he spoke, and taking up a napkin to wipe his blade, "than the reward of an unworthy servant."

Monmouth felt his sudden enthusiasm chilled by that tone and manner.

"Mr. Newlington," said Mr. Wilding, after the briefest of pauses, and the fat, sinful merchant started forward in alarm. It was like a summons of doom. "His Majesty came hither, I am informed, to receive at your hands a sum of money—twenty thousand pounds—towards the expenses of the campaign. Have you the money at hand?" And his eye, glittering between cruelty and mockery, fixed itself upon the merchant's ashen face.

"It... it shall be forthcoming by morning," stammered Newlington.

"By morning?" cried Grey, who, with the others, watched Mr.

Newlington what time they all wondered at Mr. Wilding's question and the manner of it.

"You knew that I march to-night," Monmouth reproached the merchant.

"And it was to receive the money that you invited His Majesty to do you the honours of supping with you here," put in Wade, frowning darkly.

The merchant's wife and daughter stood beside him watching him, and plainly uneasy. Before he could make any reply, Mr. Wilding spoke again.

"The circumstance that he has not the money by him is a little odd—or would be were it not for what has happened. I would submit, Your Majesty, that you receive from Mr. Newlington not twenty thousand pounds as he had promised you, but thirty thousand, and that you receive it not as a loan as was proposed, but as a fine imposed upon him in consequence of... his lack of care in the matter of his orchard."

Monmouth looked at the merchant very sternly. "You have heard Mr. Wilding's suggestion," said he. "You may thank the god of traitors it was made, else we might have thought of a harsher course. You shall pay the money by ten o'clock to-morrow to Mr. Wilding, whom I shall leave behind for the sole purpose of collecting it." He turned from Newlington in plain disgust. "I think, sirs, that here is no more to be done. Are the streets safe, Mr. Wilding?"

"Not only safe, Your Majesty, but the twenty men of Slape's and your own life-guards are waiting to escort you.

"Then in God's name let us be going," said Monmouth, sheathing his sword and moving towards the door. Not a second time did he offer to confer the honour of knighthood upon his saviour.

Mr. Wilding turned and went out to marshal his men. The Duke and his officers followed more leisurely. As they reached the door, a woman's cry broke the silence behind them. Monmouth turned. Mr. Newlington, purple of face and his eyes protruding horribly, was beating the air with his hands. Suddenly he collapsed, and crashed forward with arms flung out amid the glass and silver of the table all spread with the traitor's banquet to which he had bidden his unsuspecting victim.

His wife and daughter ran to him and called him by name, Monmouth pausing a moment to watch them from the doorway with eyes unmoved. But Mr. Newlington answered, not their call, for he was dead.

CHAPTER XX. THE RECKONING

Ruth had sped home through the streets unattended, as she had come, heedless of the rude jostlings and ruder greetings she met with from those she passed; heedless, too, of the smarting of her injured hand, for the agony of her soul was such that it whelmed all minor sufferings of the flesh.

In the dining-room at Lupton House she came upon Diana and Lady Horton at supper, and her appearance—her white and distraught face and blood-smeared gown—brought both women to their feet in alarmed inquiry, no less than it brought Jasper, the butler, to her side with ready solicitude. Ruth answered him that there was no cause for fear, that she was quite well—had scratched her hand, no more; and with that dismissed him. When she was alone with her aunt and cousin, she sank into a chair and told them what had passed 'twixt her husband and herself and most of what she said was Greek to Lady Horton.

"Mr. Wilding has gone to warn the Duke," she ended, and the despair of her tone was tragical. "I sought to detain him until it should be too late—I thought I had done so, but.., but... Oh, I am afraid, Diana!"

"Afraid of what?" asked Diana. "Afraid of what?"

And she came to Ruth and set an arm in comfort about her shoulders.

"Afraid that Mr. Wilding might reach the Duke in time to be

destroyed with him," her cousin answered. "Such a warning could but hasten on the blow."

Lady Horton begged to be enlightened, and was filled with horror when—from Diana—enlightenment was hers. Her sympathies were all with the handsome Monmouth, for he was beautiful and should therefore be triumphant; poor Lady Horton never got beyond externals. That her nephew and Sir Rowland, whom she had esteemed, should be leagued in this dastardly undertaking against that lovely person horrified her beyond words. She withdrew soon afterwards, having warmly praised Ruth's action in warning Mr. Wilding—unable to understand that it should be no part of Ruth's design to save the Duke—and went to her room to pray for the preservation of the late King's handsome son.

Left alone with her cousin, Ruth gave expression to the fears for Richard by which she was being tortured. Diana poured wine for her and urged her to drink; she sought to comfort and reassure her. But as moments passed and grew to hours and still Richard did not appear, Ruth's fears that he had come to harm were changed to certainty. There was a moment when, but for Diana's remonstrances, she had gone forth in quest of news. Bad news were better than this horror of suspense. What if Wilding's warning should have procured help, and Richard were slain in consequence? Oh, it was unthinkable! Diana, white of face, listened to and shared her fears. Even her shallow nature was stirred by the tragedy of Ruth's position, by dread lest Richard should indeed have met his end that night. In these moments of distress, she forgot her hopes of triumphing over Blake, of punishing him for his indifference to herself.

At last, at something after midnight, there came a fevered rapping at the outer door. Both women started up, and with arms about each other, in their sudden panic, stood there waiting for the news that must be here at last.

The door of the dining-room was flung open; the women recoiled in their dread of what might come; then Richard entered, Jasper's startled countenance showing behind him.

He closed the door, shutting out the wondering servant, and they saw that, though his face was ashen and his limbs all a-tremble, he showed no sign of any hurt or effort. His dress was as meticulous as when last they had seen him. Ruth flew to him, flung her arms about his neck, and pressed him to her.

"Oh, Richard, Richard!" she sobbed in the immensity of her relief. "Thank God! Thank God!"

He wriggled peevishly in her embrace, disengaged her arms, and put her from him almost roughly. "Have done!" he growled, and, lurching past her, he reached the table, took up a bottle, and brimmed himself a measure. He gulped the wine avidly, set down the cup, and shivered. "Where is Blake?" he asked.

"Blake?" echoed Ruth, her lips white. Diana sank into a chair, watchful, fearful and silent, taking now no glory in the thing she had encompassed.

Richard beat his hands together in a passion of dismay. "Is he not here?" he asked, and groaned, "O God!" He flung himself all limp into a chair. "You have heard the news, I see," he said.

"Not all of it," said Diana hoarsely, leaning forward. "Tell us what passed."

He moistened his lips with his tongue. "We were betrayed," he said in a quivering voice. "Betrayed! Did I but know by whom..." He broke off with a bitter laugh and shrugged, rubbing his hands together and shivering till his shoulders shook. "Blake's party was set upon by half a company of musketeers. Their corpses are strewn about old Newlington's orchard. Not one of them escaped. They say that

Newlington himself is dead." He poured himself more wine.

Ruth listened, her eyes burning, the rest of her as cold as ice. "But...but..., oh, thank God that you at least are safe, Dick!"

"How did you escape?" quoth Diana.

"How?" He started as if he had been stung. He laughed in a high, cracked voice, his eyes wild and bloodshot. "How? Perhaps it is just as well that Blake has gone to his account. Perhaps..." He checked on the word, and started to his feet; Diana screamed in sheer afright. Behind her the windows had been thrust open so violently that one of the panes was shattered. Blake stood under the lintel, scarce recognizable, so smeared was his face with the blood escaping from the wound his cheek had taken. His clothes were muddied, soiled, torn, and disordered.

Framed there against the black background of the night, he stood and surveyed them for a moment, his aspect terrific. Then he leapt forward, baring his sword as he came. An incoherent roar burst from his lips as he bore straight down upon Richard.

"You damned, infernal traitor!" he cried. "Draw, draw! Or die like the muckworm that you are."

Intrepid, her terror all vanished now that there was the need for courage, Ruth confronted him, barring his passage, a buckler to her palsied brother.

"Out of my way, mistress, or I'll be doing you a mischief."

"You are mad, Sir Rowland," she told him in a voice that did something towards restoring him to his senses.

His fierce eyes considered her a moment, and he controlled himself to offer an explanation. "The twenty that were with me lie stark under the stars in Newlington's garden," he told her, as Richard had

told her already. "I escaped by a miracle, no less, but for what? Feversham will demand of me a stern account of those lives, whilst if I am found in Bridgwater there will be a short shrift for me at the rebel hands—for my share in this affair is known, my name on every lip in the town. And why?" he asked with a sudden increase of fierceness. "Why? Because that craven villain there betrayed me."

"He did not," she answered in so assured a voice that not only did it give him pause, but caused Richard, cowering behind her, to raise his head in wonder.

Sir Rowland smiled his disbelief, and that smile, twisting his blood-smeared countenance, was grotesque and horrible. "I left him to guard our backs and give me warning if any approached," he informed her. "I knew him for too great a coward to be trusted in the fight; so I gave him a safe task, and yet in that he failed me—failed me because he had betrayed and sold me."

"He had not. I tell you he had not," she insisted. "I swear it."

He stared at her. "There was no one else for it," he made answer, and bade her harshly stand aside.

Diana, huddled together, watched and waited in horror for the end of these consequences of her work.

Blake made a sudden movement to win past Ruth. Richard staggered to his feet intent on defending himself; but he was swordless; retreat to the door suggested itself, and he had half turned to attempt to gain it, when Ruth's next words arrested him, petrified him.

"There was some one else for it, Sir Rowland," she cried. "It was not Richard who betrayed you. It... it was I."

"You?" The fierceness seemed all to drop away from him, whelmed

in the immensity of his astonishment. "You?" Then he laughed loud in scornful disbelief. "You think to save him," he said.

"Should I lie?" she asked him, calm and brave.

He stared at her stupidly; he passed a hand across his brow, and looked at Diana. "Oh, it is impossible!" he said at last.

"You shall hear," she answered, and told him how at the last moment she had learnt not only that her husband was in Bridgwater, but that he was to sup at Newlington's with the Duke's party.

"I had no thought of betraying you or of saving the Duke," she said. "I knew how justifiable was what you intended. But I could not let Mr. Wilding go to his death. I sought to detain him, warning him only when I thought it would be too late for him to warn others. But you delayed overlong, and..."

A hoarse inarticulate cry from him came to interrupt her at that point. One glimpse of his face she had and of the hand half raised with sword pointing towards her, and she closed her eyes, thinking that her sands were run. And, indeed, Blake's intention was just then to kill her. That he should owe his betrayal to her was in itself cause enough to enrage him, but that her motive should have been her desire to save Wilding—Wilding of all men!—that was the last straw.

Had he been forewarned that Wilding was to be one of Monmouth's party at Mr. Newlington's, his pulses would have throbbed with joy, and he would have flung himself into his murderous task with twice the zest he had carried to it. And now he learnt that not only had she thwarted his schemes against Monmouth, but had deprived him of the ardently sought felicity of widowing her. He drew back his arm for the thrust; Diana huddled into her chair too horror-stricken to speak or move: Richard—immediately behind his sister—saw nothing of what was passing, and thought of nothing but his own safety.

Then Blake paused, stepped back, returned his sword to its scabbard, and bending himself—but whether to bow or not was not quite plain—he took some paces backwards, then turned and went out by the window as he had come. But there was a sudden purposefulness in the way he did it that might have warned them this withdrawal was not quite the retreat it seemed.

They watched him with many emotions, predominant among which was relief, and when he was gone Diana rose and came to Ruth.

"Come," she said, and sought to lead her from the room.

But there was Richard now to be reckoned with, Richard from whom the palsy was of a sudden fallen, now that the cause of it had withdrawn. He had his back to the door, and his weak mouth was pursed up into a semblance of resolution, his pale eyes looked stern, his white eyebrows bent together in a frown.

"Wait," he said. They looked at him, and the shadow of a smile almost flitted across Diana's face. He stepped to the door, and, opening it, held it wide. "Go, Diana," he said. "Ruth and I must understand each other."

Diana hesitated. "You had better go, Diana," said her cousin, whereupon Mistress Horton went.

Hot and fierce came the recriminations from Richard's lips when he and his sister were alone, and Ruth weathered the storm bravely until it was stemmed again by fresh fear in Richard. For Blake had suddenly reappeared. He came forward from his window; his manner composed and full of resolution. Young Westmacott recoiled, the heat all frozen out of him. But Blake scarce looked at him, his smouldering glance was all for Ruth, who watched him with incipient fear, despite herself.

"Madam," he said, "'tis not to be supposed a mind holding so much

thought for a husband's safety could find room for any concern as to another's. I will ask you, natheless, to consider what tale I am to bear Lord Feversham."

"What tale?" said she.

"Aye—that will account for what has chanced; for my failure to discharge the task entrusted me, and for the slaughter of an officer of his and twenty men.

"Why ask me this?" she demanded half angrily; then suddenly bethinking her of how she had ruined his enterprise, and of the position in which she had placed him, she softened. Her clear mind held justice very dear. She approached. "Oh, I am sorry—sorry, Sir Rowland," she cried.

He sneered. He had wiped some of the blood from his face, but still looked terrible enough.

"Sorry!" said he, and laughed unpleasantly. "You'll come with me to Feversham and tell him what you did," said he.

"I?" She recoiled in fear.

"At once" he informed her.

"Wha... what's that?" faltered Richard, calling up his manhood, and coming forward. "What are you saying, Blake?"

Sir Rowland disdained to heed him. "Come, mistress," he said, and putting forward his hand he caught her wrist and pulled her roughly towards him. She struggled to free herself, but he leered evilly upon her, no whit discomposed by her endeavours. Though short of stature, he was a man of considerable bodily strength, and she, though tall, was slight of frame. He released her wrist, and before she realized what he was about he had stooped, passed an arm behind her knees, another round her waist, and, swinging her from her feet,

took her up bodily in his arms. He turned about, and a scream broke from her.

"Hold!" cried Richard. "Hold, you madman!"

"Keep off, or I'll make an end of you before I go," roared Blake over his shoulder, for already he had turned about and was making for the window, apparently no more hindered by his burden than had she been a doll.

Richard sprang to the door. "Jasper!" he bawled. "Jasper!" He had no weapons, as we have seen, else it may be that he had made an attempt to use them.

Ruth got a hand free and caught at the windowframe as Blake was leaping through. It checked their progress, but did not sensibly delay it. It was unfortunately her wounded hand with which she had sought to cling, and with an angry, brutal wrench Sir Rowland compelled her to unclothe her grasp. He sped down the lawn towards the orchard, where his horse was tethered. And now she knew in a subconscious sort of way why he had earlier withdrawn. He had gone to saddle for this purpose.

She struggled now, thinking that he would be too hampered to compel her to his will. He became angry, and set her down beside his horse, one arm still holding her.

"Look you, mistress," he told her fiercely, "living or dead, you come with me to Feversham. Choose now."

His tone was such that she never doubted he would carry out his threat. And so in dull despair she submitted, hoping that Feversham might be a gentleman and would recognize and respect a lady. Half fainting, she allowed him to swing her to the withers of his horse. Thus they threaded their way in the dim starlit night through the trees towards the gate.

It stood open, and they passed out into the lane. There Sir Rowland put his horse to the trot, which he increased to a gallop when he was over the bridge and clear of the town.

CHAPTER XXI. THE SENTENCE

Mr. Wilding, as we know, was to remain at Bridgwater for the purpose of collecting from Mr. Newington the fine which had been imposed upon him. It is by no means clear whether Monmouth realized the fullness of the tragedy at the merchant's house, and whether he understood that, stricken with apoplexy at the thought of parting with so considerable a portion of his fortune, Mr. Newington had not merely fainted, but had expired under His Grace's eyes. If he did realize it he was cynically indifferent, and lest we should be doing him an injustice by assuming this we had better give him the benefit of the doubt, and take it that in the subsequent bustle of departure, his mind filled with the prospect of the night attack to be delivered upon his uncle's army at Sedgemoor, he thought no more either of Mr. Newington or of Mr. Wilding. The latter, as we know, had no place in the rebel army; although a man of his hands, he was not a trained soldier, and notwithstanding that he may fully have intended to draw his sword for Monmouth when the time came, yet circumstances had led to his continuing after Monmouth's landing the more diplomatic work of movement-man, in which he had been engaged for the months that had preceded it.

So it befell that when Monmouth's army marched out of Bridgwater at eleven o'clock on that Sunday night, not to make for Gloucester and Cheshire, as was generally believed, but to fall upon the encamped Feversham at Sedgemoor and slaughter the royal army in their beds, Mr. Wilding was left behind. Trenchard was gone, in command of his troop of horse, and Mr. Wilding had for only company his thoughts touching the singular happenings of that busy night.

He went back to the sign of The Ship overlooking the Cross, and,

kicking off his sodden shoes, he supped quietly in the room of which shattered door and broken window reminded him of his odd interview with Ruth, and of the comedy of love she had enacted to detain him there. The thought of it embittered him; the part she had played seemed to his retrospective mind almost a wanton's part—for all that in name she was his wife. And yet, underlying a certain irrepressible nausea, came the reflection that, after all, her purpose had been to save his life. It would have been a sweet thought, sweet enough to have overlaid that other bitterness, had he not insisted upon setting it down entirely to her gratitude and her sense of justice. She intended to repay the debt in which she had stood to him since, at the risk of his own life and fortune, he had rescued her brother from the clutches of the Lord-Lieutenant at Taunton.

He sighed heavily as he thought of the results that had attended his compulsory wedding of her. In the intensity of his passion, in the blindness of his vanity, which made him confident—gloriously confident—that did he make himself her husband, she herself would make of him her lover before long, he had committed an unworthiness of which it seemed he might never cleanse himself in life. There was but one amend, as he had told her. Let him make it, and perhaps she would—out of gratitude, if out of no other feeling—come to think more kindly of him; and that night it seemed to him as he sat alone in that mean chamber that it were a better and a sweeter thing to earn some measure of her esteem by death than to continue in a life that inspired her hatred and resentment. From which it will be seen how utterly he disbelieved the protestations she had uttered in seeking to detain him. They were—he was assured—a part of a scheme, a trick, to lull him while Monmouth and his officers were being butchered. And she had gone the length of saying she loved him! He regretted that, being as he was convinced of its untruth. What cause had she to love him? She hated him, and because she hated him she did not scruple to lie to him—once with suggestions and this time with actual expression of affection—that she might gain her ends: ends that concerned her

brother and Sir Rowland Blake. Sir Rowland Blake! The name was a very goad to his passion and despair.

He rose from the table and took a turn in the room, moving noiselessly in his stockinged feet. He felt the need of air and action; the weariness of his flesh incurred in his long ride from London was cast off or forgotten. He must go forth. He picked up his fine shoes of Spanish leather, but as luck would have it—little though he guessed the extent just then—he found them hardening, though still damp from the dews of Mr. Newlington's garden. He cast them aside, and, taking a key from his pocket, unlocked an oak cupboard and withdrew the heavy muddy boots in which he had ridden from town. He drew them on and, taking up his hat and sword, went down the creaking stairs and out into the street.

Bridgwater had fallen quiet by now; the army was gone and townfolk were in their beds. Moodily, unconsciously, yet as if guided by a sort of instinct, he went down the High Street, and then turned off into the narrower lane that led in the direction of Lupton House. By the gates of this he paused, recalled out of his abstraction and rendered aware of whither his steps had led him by the sight of the hall door standing open, a black figure silhouetted against the light behind it. What was happening here? Why were they not abed like all decent folk?

The figure called to him in a quavering voice. "Mr. Wilding! Mr. Wilding!" for the light beating upon his face and figure from the open door had revealed him. The form came swiftly forward, its steps pattering down the walk, another slenderer figure surged in its place upon the threshold, hovered there an instant, then plunged down into the darkness to come after it. But the first was by now upon Mr. Wilding.

"What is it, Jasper?" he asked, recognizing the old servant.

"Mistress Ruth!" wailed the fellow, wringing his hands. "She..., she has been... carried off." He got it out in gasps, winded by his short run and by the excitement that possessed him.

No word said Wilding. He just stood and stared, scarcely understanding, and in that moment they were joined by Richard. He seized Wilding by the arm. "Blake has carried her off," he cried.

"Blake?" said Mr. Wilding, and wondered with a sensation of nausea was it an ordinary running away. But Richard's next words made it plain to him that it was no amorous elopement, nor even amorous abduction.

"He has carried her to Feversham... for her betrayal of his to-night's plan to seize the Duke."

That stirred Mr. Wilding. He wasted no time in idle questions or idler complainings. "How long since?" he asked, and it was he who clutched Richard now, by the shoulder and with a hand that hurt.

"Not ten minutes ago," was the quavering answer.

"And you were at hand when it befell?" cried Wilding, the scorn in his voice rising superior to his agitation and fears for Ruth. "You were at hand, and could neither prevent nor follow him?"

"I'll go with you now, if you'll give chase," whimpered Richard, feeling himself for once the craven that he was.

"If?" echoed Wilding scornfully, and dragged him past the gate and up towards the house even as he spoke. "Is there room for a doubt of it? Have you horses, at least?"

"To spare," said Richard as they hurried on. They skirted the house and found the stable door open as Blake had left it. Old Jasper followed with a lamp which burned steadily, so calm was the air of that July night. In three minutes they had saddled a couple of nags; in five

they were riding for the bridge and the road to Weston Zoyland.

"It is a miracle you remained in Bridgwater," said Richard as they rode. "How came you to be left behind?"

"I had a task assigned me in the town against the Duke's return to-morrow," Wilding explained, and he spoke almost mechanically, his mind full of—anguished by—thoughts of Ruth.

"Against the Duke's return?" cried Richard, first surprised and then thinking that Wilding spoke at random. "Against the Duke's return?" he repeated.

"That is what I said?"

"But the Duke is marching to Gloucester."

"The Duke is marching by circuitous ways to Sedgemoor," answered Wilding, never dreaming that at this time of day there could be the slightest imprudence in saying so much, indeed, taking little heed of what he said, his mind obsessed by the other, to him, far weightier matter.

"To Sedgemoor?" gasped Westmacott.

"Aye—to take Feversham by surprise—to destroy King James's soldiers in their beds. He should be near upon the attack by now. But there! Spur on and save your breath if we are to overtake Sir Rowland."

They pounded on through the night at a breakneck pace which they never slackened until, when within a quarter of a mile or so of Penzoy Pound, where the army was encamped and slumbering by now, they caught sight of the musketeers' matches glowing in the dark ahead of them. An outpost barred their progress; but Richard had the watchword, and he spurred ahead shouting "Albemarle," and the

soldiers fell back and gave them passage. On they galloped, skirting Penzoy Pound and the army sleeping in Utter unconsciousness of the fate that was creeping stealthily upon it out of the darkness and mists across the moors; they clattered on past Langmoor Stone and dashed straight into the village, Richard never drawing rein until he reached the door of the cottage where Feversham was lodged.

They had come not only at a headlong pace, but in a headlong manner, without quite considering what awaited them at the end of their ride in addition to their object of finding Ruth. It was only now, as he drew rein before the lighted house and caught the sound of Blake's raised voice pouring through an open window on the ground floor, that Richard fully realized what manner of rashness he was committing. He was too late to rescue Ruth from Blake. What more could he look to achieve? His hope had been that with Wilding's help he might snatch her from Sir Rowland before the latter reached his destination. But now—to enter Feversham's presence and in association with so notorious a rebel as Mr. Wilding were a piece of folly of the heroic kind that Richard did not savour. Indeed, had it not been for Wilding's masterful presence, it is more than odds he had turned tail, and ridden home again to bed.

But Wilding, who had leapt nimbly to the ground, stood waiting for Richard to dismount, impatient now that from the sound of Sir Rowland's voice he had assurance that Richard had proved an able guide. The young man got down, but might yet have hesitated had not Wilding caught him by the arm and whirled him up the steps, through the open door, past the two soldiers who kept it, and who were too surprised to stay him, straight into the long, low-ceilinged chamber where Feversham, attended by a captain of horse, was listening to Blake's angry narrative of that night's failure.

Mr. Wilding's entrance was decidedly sensational. He stepped quickly forward, and, taking Blake who was still talking, all

unconscious of those behind him, by the collar of his coat, he interrupted him in the middle of an impassioned period, wrenched him backwards off his feet, and dashed him with a force almost incredible into a heap in a corner of the room. There for some moments the baronet lay half dazed by the shock of his fall.

A long table, which seemed to divide the chamber in two, stood between Lord Feversham and his officer and Mr. Wilding and Ruth—by whose side he had now come to stand in Blake's room.

There was an exclamation, half anger, half amazement, at Mr. Wilding's outrage upon Sir Rowland, and the captain of horse sprang forward. But Wilding raised his hand, his face so composed and calm that it was impossible to think him conceiving any violence, as indeed he protested at that moment.

"Be assured, gentlemen," he said, "that I have no further rudeness to offer any so that this lady is suffered to withdraw with me." And he took in his own hand that Ruth, amazed and unresisting, yielded up to him. That touch of his seemed to drive out her fears and to restore her confidence; the mortal terror in which she had been until his coming dropped from her now. She was no longer alone and abandoned to the vindictiveness of rude and violent men. She had beside her one in whom experience had taught her to have faith.

Louis Duras, Marquis de Blanquefort, and Earl of Feversham, coughed with mock discreetness under cover of his hand. "Ahem!"

He was a comely man with a long nose, good lowlidded eyes, a humorous mouth, and a weak chin; at a glance he looked what he was, a weak, good-natured sensualist. He was resplendent at the moment in a blue satin dressing-gown stiff with gold lace, for he had been interrupted by Blake's arrival in the very act of putting himself to bed, and his head—divested of his wig—was bound up in a scarf of many colours.

At his side, the red-coated captain, arrested by the general's sardonic cough, stood, a red-faced, freckled boy, looking to his superior for orders.

"I t'ink you 'ave 'urt Sare Rowland," said Feversham composedly in his bad English. "Who are you, sare?"

"This lady's husband," answered Wilding, whereupon the captain stared and Feversham's brows went up in surprised amusement.

"So-ho! T'at true?" quoth the latter in a tone suggesting that it explained everything to him. "T'is gif a differen' colour to your story, Sare Rowlan'." Then he added in a chuckle, "Ho, ho—I'amour!" and laughed outright.

Blake, gathering together his wits and his limbs at the same time, made shift to rise.

"What a plague does their relationship matter?" he began. He would have added more, but the Frenchman thought this question one that needed answering.

"Parbleu!" he swore, his amusement rising. "It seem to matter somet'ing."

"Damn me!" swore Blake, red in the face from pale that he had been. "Do you conceive that if I had run away with his wife for her own sake I had fetched her to you?" He lurched forward as he spoke, but kept his distance from Wilding, who stood between Ruth and him.

Feversham bowed sardonically. "You are a such flatterer, Sare Rowlan'," said he, laughter bubbling in his words.

Blake looked his scorn of this trivial Frenchman, who, upon scenting what appeared to be the comedy of an outraged husband overtaking the man who had carried off his wife, forgot the serious

business, a part of which Sir Rowland had already imparted to him. Captain Wentworth—a time-serving gentleman—smiled with this French general of a British army that he might win the great man's favour.

"I have told your lordship," said Blake, froth on his lips, "that the twenty men I had from you, as well as Ensign Norris, are dead in Bridgwater, and that my plan to carry off King Monmouth has come to ruin, all because we were betrayed by this woman. It is now my further privilege to point out to your lordship the man to whom she sold us."

Feversham disliked Sir Rowland's arrogant tone, disliked his angry, scornful glance. His eyes narrowed, the laughter faded slowly from his face.

"Yes, yes, I remember," said he; "t'is lady, you have tole us, betray you. Ver' well. But you have not tole us who betray you to t'is lady." And he looked inquiringly at Blake.

The baronet's jaw dropped; his face lost some of its high colour. He was stunned by the question as the bird is stunned that flies headlong against a pane of glass. He had crashed into an obstruction so transparent that he had not seen it.

"So!" said Feversham, and he stroked the cleft of his chin. "Captain Wentwort', be so kind as to call t'e guard."

Wentworth moved to obey, but before he had gone round the table, Blake had looked behind him and espied Richard shrinking by the door.

"By heaven!" he cried, "I can more than answer your lordship's question."

Wentworth stopped, looking at Feversham.

"Voyons," said the General.

"I can place you in possession of the man who has wrought our ruin. He is there," and he pointed theatrically to Richard.

Feversham looked at the limp figure in some bewilderment. Indeed, he was having a most bewildering evening—or morning, rather, for it was even then on the stroke of one o'clock. "An' who are you, sare?" he asked.

Richard came forward, nerving himself for what was to follow. It had just occurred to him that he held a card which should trump any trick of Sir Rowland's vindictiveness, and the prospect heartened and comforted him.

"I am this lady's brother, my lord," he answered, and his voice was fairly steady.

"Tiens!" said Feversham, and, smiling, he turned to Wentworth.

"Quite a family party, sir," said the captain, smiling back.

"Oh! mais tout—fait," said the General, laughing outright, and then Wilding created a diversion by leading Ruth to a chair that stood at the far end of the table, and drawing it forward for her. "Ah, yes," said Feversham airily, "let Madame sit."

"You are very good, sir," said Ruth, her voice brave and calm.

"But somewhat lacking in spontaneity," Wilding criticized, which set Wentworth staring and the Frenchman scowling.

"Shall I call the guard, my lord?" asked Wentworth crisply.

"I t'ink yes," said Feversham, and the captain gained the door, and spoke a word to one of the soldiers without.

"But, my lord," exclaimed Blake in a tone of protest, "I vow you are too ready to take this fellow's word."

"He 'as spoke so few," said Feversham.

"Do you know who he is?"

"You 'af 'eard 'im say—t'e lady's 'usband."

"Aye—but his name," cried Blake, quivering with anger. "Do you know that it is Wilding?"

The name certainly made an impression that might have flattered the man to whom it belonged. Feversham's whole manner changed; the trivial air of persiflage that he had adopted hitherto was gone on the instant, and his brow grew dark.

"T'at true?" he asked sharply. "Are you Mistaire Wildin'—Mistaire Antoine Wildin'?"

"Your lordship's most devoted servant," said Wilding suavely, and made a leg.

Wentworth in the background paused in the act of reclosing the door to stare at this gentleman whose name Albemarle had rendered so excellently well known.

"And you to dare come 'ere?" thundered Feversham, thoroughly roused by the other's airy indifference. "You to dare come 'ere—into my ver' presence?"

Mr. Wilding smiled conciliatingly. "I came for my wife, my lord," he reminded him. "It grieves me to intrude upon your lordship at so late an hour, and indeed it was far from my intent. I had hoped to overtake Sir Rowland before he reached you."

"Nom de Dieu!" swore Feversham. "Ho! A so great effrontery!" He swung round upon Blake again. "Sare Rowlan'," he bade him angrily, "be so kind to tell me what 'appen in Breechwater—everyt'ing!"

Blake, his face purple, seemed to struggle for breath and words. Mr. Wilding answered for him.

"Sir Rowland is so choleric, my lord," he said in his pleasant, level voice, "that perhaps the tale would come more intelligibly from me. Believe me that he has served you to the best of his ability. Unfortunately for the success of your choice plan of murder, I had news of it at the eleventh hour, and with a party of musketeers I was able to surprise and destroy your cut-throats in Mr. Newlington's garden. You see, my lord, I was to have been one of the victims myself, and I resented the attentions that were intended me. I had no knowledge that Sir Rowland had contrived to escape, and, frankly, it is a thing I deplore more than I can say, for had that not happened much trouble might have been saved and your lordship's rest had not been disturbed."

"But t'e woman?" cried Feversham impatiently. "How is she come into this galare?"

"It was she who warned him," Blake got out, "as already I have had the honour to inform your lordship."

"And your lordship cannot blame her for that," said Wilding. "The lady is a most loyal subject of King James; but she is also, as you observe, a dutiful wife. I will add that it was her intention to warn me only when too late for interference. Sir Rowland, as it happened, was slow in..."

"Silence!" blazed the Frenchman. "Now t'at I know who you are, t'at make a so great difference. Where is t'e guard, Wentwort'?"

"I hear them," answered the captain, and from the street came the tramp of their marching feet.

Feversham turned again to Blake. "T'e affaire 'as 'appen' so," he said, between question and assertion, summing up the situation as

he understood it. "T'is rogue," and he pointed to Richard, "'ave betray your plan to 'is sister, who betray it to 'er 'usband, who save t'e Duc de Monmoot'. N'est-ce pas?"

"That is so," said Blake, and Ruth scarcely thought it worth while to add that she had heard of the plot not only from her brother, but from Blake as well. After all, Blake's attitude in the matter, his action in bringing her to Feversham for punishment, and to exculpate himself, must suffice to cause any such statement of hers to be lightly received by the General.

She sat in an anguished silence, her eyes wide, her face pale, and waited for the end of this strange business. In her heart she did permit herself to think that it would be difficult to assemble a group of men less worthy of respect. Cholerick and vindictive Blake, foolish Feversham, stupid Wentworth, and timid Richard—even Richard did not escape the unfavourable criticism they were undergoing in her subconscious mind. Only Wilding detached in that assembly—as he had detached in another that she remembered—and stood out in sharp relief a very man, calm, intrepid, self-possessed; and if she was afraid, she was more afraid for him than for herself. This was something that, perhaps, she scarcely realized just then; but she was to realize it soon.

Feversham was speaking again, asking Blake a fresh question. "And who betray you to t'is rogue?"

"To Westmacott?" cried Blake. "He was in the plot with me. He was left to guard the rear, to see that we were not taken by surprise, and he deserted his post. Had he not done that, there had been no disaster, in spite of Mr. Wilding's intervention."

Feversham's brow was dark, his eyes glittered as they rested on the traitor.

"Tat true, sare?" he asked him.

"Not quite," put in Mr. Wilding. "Mr. Westmacott, I think, was constrained away. He did not intend..."

"Tais-toi!" blazed Feversham. "Did I interrogate you? It is for Mistaire Westercott to answer." He set a hand on the table and leaned forward towards Wilding, his face very malign. "You shall to answer for yourself, Mistaire Wildin'; I promise you you shall to answer for yourself." He turned again to Richard. "Ek, bien?" he snapped. "Will you speak?"

Richard came forward a step; he was certainly nervous, and certainly pale; but neither as pale nor as nervous as from our knowledge of Richard we might have looked to see him at that moment.

"It is in a measure true," he said. "But what Mr. Wilding has said is more exact. I was induced away. I did not dream any could know of the plan, or that my absence could cause this catastrophe."

"So you went, eh, vaurien? You t'ought t'at be to do your duty, eh? And it was you who tole your sistaire?"

"I may have told her, but not before she had the tale already from Blake."

Feversham sneered and shrugged. "Natural you will not speak true. A traitor I 'ave observe' is always liar."

Richard drew himself up; he seemed invested almost with a new dignity. "Your lordship is pleased to account me a traitor?" he inquired.

"A dam' traitor," said his lordship, and at that moment the door opened, and a sergeant, with six men following him, stood at the salute upon the threshold. "A la bonne heure!" his lordship hailed

them. "Sergean', you will arrest t'is rogue and t'is lady,"—he waved his hand from Richard to Ruth—"and you will take t'em to lock..up."

The sergeant advanced towards Richard, who drew a step away from him. Ruth rose to her feet in agitation. Mr. Wilding interposed himself between her and the guard, his hand upon his sword.

"My lord," he cried, "do they teach no better courtesy in France?"

Feversham scowled at him, smiling darkly. "I shall talk wit' you soon, sare," said he, his words a threat.

"But, my lord..." began Richard. "I can make it very plain I am no traitor..."

"In t'e mornin'," said Feversham blandly, waving his hand, and the sergeant took Richard by the shoulder.

But Richard twisted from his grasp. "In the morning will be too late," he cried. "I have it in my power to render you such a service as you little dream of."

"Take 'im away," said Feversham wearily.

"I can save you from destruction," bawled Richard, "you and your army."

Perhaps even now Feversham had not heeded him but for Wilding's sudden interference.

"Silence, Richard!" he cried to him. "Would you betray...?" He checked on the word; more he dared not say; but he hoped faintly that he had said enough.

Feversham, however, chanced to observe that this man who had shown himself hitherto so calm looked suddenly most singularly perturbed.

"Eh?" quoth the General. "An instan', Sergeant'. What is t'is, eh?"—and he looked from Wilding to Richard.

"Your lordship shall learn at a price," cried Richard.

"Me, I not bargain wit' traitors," said his lordship stiffly.

"Very well, then," answered Richard, and he folded his arms dramatically. "But no matter what your lordship's life may be hereafter, you will never regret anything more bitterly than you shall regret this by sunrise if indeed you live to see it."

Feversham shifted uneasily on his feet. "What you say?" he asked. "What you mean?"

"You shall know at a price," said Richard again.

Wilding, realizing the hopelessness of interfering now, stood gloomily apart, a great bitterness in his soul at the indiscretion he had committed in telling Richard of the night attack that was afoot.

"Your lordship shall hear my price, but you need not pay it me until you have had an opportunity of verifying the information I have to give you.

"Tell me," said Feversham after a brief pause, during which he scrutinized the young man's face.

"If your lordship will promise liberty and safe-conduct to my sister and myself."

"Tell me," Feversham repeated.

"When you have promised to grant me what I ask in return for my information."

"Yes, if I t'ink your information is wort'"

"I am content," said Richard. He inclined his head and loosed the quarrel of his news. "Your camp is slumbering, your officers are all abed with the exception of the outpost on the road to Bridgwater. What should you say if I told you that Monmouth and all his army are marching upon you at this very moment, will probably fall upon you before another hour is past?"

Wilding uttered a groan, and his hands fell to his sides. Had Feversham observed this he might have been less ready with his sneering answer.

"A lie!" he answered, and laughed. "My fren', I 'ave myself been to-night, at midnight, on t'e moore, and I 'ave 'eard t'e army of t'e Duc de Monmoot' marching to Bristol on t'e road—what you call t'e road, Wentwort'?"

"The Eastern Causeway, my lord," answered the captain.

"Voil!" said Feversham, and spread his hands. "What you say now, eh?"

"That that is part of Monmouth's plan to come at you across the moors, by way of Chedzoy, avoiding your only outpost, and falling upon you in your beds, all unawares. Lord! sir, do not take my word for it. Send out your scouts, and I dare swear they'll not need go far before they come upon the enemy."

Feversham looked at Wentworth. His lordship's face had undergone a change.

"What you t'ink?" he asked.

"Indeed, my lord, it sounds so likely," answered Wentworth, "that... that... I marvel we did not provide against such a contingency."

"But I 'ave provide'!" cried this nephew of the great Turenne. "Ogelt'orpe is on t'e moor and Sare Francis Compton. If t'is is true,

'low can t'ey 'ave miss Monmoot'? Send word to Milor' Churchill at once, Wentwort'. Let t'e matter be investigate'—at once, Wentwort'—at once!" The General was dancing with excitement. Wentworth saluted and turned to leave the room. "If you 'ave tole me true," continued Feversham, turning now to Richard, "you shall 'ave t'e price you ask, and t'e t'anks of t'e King's army. But if not..."

"Oh, it's true enough," broke in Wilding, and his voice was like a groan, his face overcharged with gloom.

Feversham looked at him; his sneering smile returned.

"Me, I not remember," said he, "that Mr. Westercott 'ave include you in t'e bargain."

Nothing had been further from Wilding's thoughts than such a suggestion. And he snorted his disdain. The sergeant had fallen back at Feversham's words, and his men lined the wall of the chamber. The General bade Richard be seated whilst he waited. Sir Rowland stood apart, leaning wearily against the wainscot, waiting also, his dull wits not quite clear how Richard might have come by so valuable a piece of information, his evil spirit almost wishing it untrue, in his vindictiveness, to the end that Richard might pay the price of having played him false and Ruth the price of having scorned him.

Feversham meanwhile was seeking—with no great success—to engage Mr. Wilding in talk of Monmouth, against whom Feversham harboured in addition to his political enmity a very deadly personal hatred; for Feversham had been a suitor to the hand of the Lady Henrietta Wentworth, the woman for whom Monmouth—worthy son of his father—had practically abandoned his own wife; the woman with whom he had run off, to the great scandal of court and nation.

Despairing of drawing any useful information from Wilding, his lordship was on the point of turning to Blake, when quick steps and

the rattle of a scabbard sounded without; the door was thrust open without ceremony, and Captain Wentworth reappeared.

"My lord," he cried, his manner excited beyond aught one could have believed possible in so phlegmatic-seeming a person, "it is true. We are beset."

"Beset!" echoed Feversham. "Beset already?"

"We can hear them moving on the moor. They are crossing the Langmoor Rhine. They will be upon us in ten minutes at the most. I have roused Colonel Douglas, and Dunbarton's regiment is ready for them."

Feversham exploded. "What else 'ave you done?" he asked. "Where is Milor' Churchill?"

"Lord Churchill is mustering his men as quietly as may be that they may be ready to surprise those who come to surprise us. By Heaven, sir, we owe a great debt to Mr. Westmacott. Without his information we might have had all our throats cut whilst we slept."

"Be so kind to call Belmont," said Feversham. "Tell him to bring my clot'es."

Wentworth turned and went out again to execute the General's orders. Feversham spoke to Richard. "We are oblige', Mr. Westercott," said he. "We are ver' much oblige'."

Suddenly from a little distance came the roll of drums. Other sounds began to stir in the night outside to tell of a waking army.

Feversham stood listening. "It is Dunbarton's," he murmured. Then, with some show of heat, "Ah, pardieu!" he cried. "But it was a dirty t'ing t'is Monmoot' 'ave prepare'. It is murder; it is not t'e war.

"And yet," said Wilding critically, "it is a little more like war than the

Bridgwater affair to which your lordship gave your sanction."

Feversham pursed his lips and considered the speaker. Wentworth reentered, followed by the Earl's valet carrying an armful of garments. His lordship threw off his dressing-gown and stood forth in shirt and breeches.

"Mais dpche-toi, donc, Belmont!" said he. "Nous nous battons! Ii faut que je m'habille." Belmont, a little wizened fellow who understood nothing of this topsy-turveydom, hastened forward, deposited his armful on the table, and selected a finely embroidered waistcoat, which he proceeded to hold for his master. Wriggling into it, Feversham rapped out his orders.

"Captain Wentwort', you will go to your regimen at once. But first, ah-wait. Take t'ose six men and Mistaire Wilding. 'Ave 'im shot at once; you onderstan', eh? Good. Allons, Belmont! my cravat."

CHAPTER XXII. THE EXECUTION

Captain Wentworth clicked his heels together and saluted. Blake, in the background, drew a deep breath—unmistakably of satisfaction, and his eyes glittered. A muffled cry broke from Ruth, who rose instantly from her chair, her hand on her bosom. Richard stood with fallen jaw, amazed, a trifle troubled even, whilst Mr. Wilding started more in surprise than actual fear, and approached the table.

"You heard, sir," said Captain Wentworth.

"I heard," answered Mr. Wilding quietly. "But surely not aright. One moment, sir," and he waved his hand so compellingly that, despite the order he had received, the phlegmatic captain hesitated.

Feversham, who had taken the cravat—a yard of priceless Dutch lace—from the hands of his valet, and was standing with his back to the company at a small and very faulty mirror that hung by the overmantel, looked peevishly over his shoulder.

"My lord," said Wilding, and Blake, for all his hatred of this man, marvelled at a composure that did not forsake him even now, "you are surely not proposing to deal with me in this fashion—not seriously, my lord?"

"Ah, ca!" said the Frenchman. "T'ink it a jest if you please. What for you come 'ere?"

"Assuredly not for the purpose of being shot," said Wilding, and actually smiled. Then, in the tones of one discussing a matter that is

grave but not of surpassing gravity, he continued: "It is not that I fail to recognize that I may seem to have incurred the rigour of the law; but these matters must be formally proved against me. I have affairs to set in order against such a consummation."

"Ta, ta!" snapped Feversham. "T'at not regard me. Weutwort', you 'ave 'eard my order." And he returned to his mirror and the nice adjustment of his neckwear.

"But, my lord," insisted Wilding, "you have not the right—you have not the power so to proceed against me. A man of my quality is not to be shot without a trial."

"You can 'ang if you prefer," said Feversham indifferently, drawing out the ends of his cravat and smoothing them down upon his breast. He faced about briskly. "Give me t'at coat, Belmont. His Majesty 'ave empower me to 'ang or shoot any gentlemens of t'e partie of t'e Duc t'e Monmoot' on t'e spot. I say t'at for your satisfaction. And look, I am desolate' to be so quick wit' you, but please to consider t'e circumstance. T'e enemy go to attack. Wentwort' must go to his regimen', and my ot'er officers are all occupi'. You comprehen' I 'ave not t'e time to spare you—n'est-ce-pas?"—Wentworth's hand touched Wilding on the shoulder. He was standing with head slightly bowed, his brows knit in thought. He looked round at the touch, sighed and smiled.

Belmont held the coat for his master, who slipped into it, and flung at Wilding what was intended for a consolatory sop. "It is fortune de guerre, Mistaire Wilding. I am desolate'; but it is fortune of t'e war."

"May it be less fortunate for your lordship, then," said Wilding dryly, and was on the point of turning, when Ruth's voice came in a loud cry to startle him and to quicken his pulses.

"My lord!" It was a cry of utter anguish.

Feversham, settling his gold-laced coat comfortably to his figure, looked at her. "Madame?" said he.

But she had nothing to say. She stood, deathly white, slightly bent forward, one hand wringing the other, her eyes almost wild, her bosom heaving frantically.

"Hum!" said Feversham, and he loosened and removed the scarf from his head. He shrugged slightly and looked at Wentworth. "Finissons!" said he.

The word and the look snapped the trammels that bound Ruth's speech.

"Five minutes, my lord!" she cried imploringly. "Give him five minutes—and me, my lord!"

Wilding, deeply shaken, trembled now as he awaited Feversham's reply.

The Frenchman seemed to waver. "Bien," he began, spreading his hands. And in that moment a shot rang out in the night and startled the whole company. Feversham threw back his head; the signs of yielding left his face. "Ha!" he cried. "T'ey are arrive." He snatched his wig from his lacquey's hands, donned it, and turned again an instant to the mirror to adjust the great curls. "Quick, Wentwort! T'ere is no more time now. Make Mistaire Wilding be shot at once. T'en to your regimen'." He faced about and took the sword his valet proffered. "Au revoir, messieurs!"

"Serviteur, madame!" And, buckling his sword-belt as he went, he swept out, leaving the door wide open, Belmont following, Wentworth saluting and the guards presenting arms.

"Come, sir," said the captain in a subdued voice, his eyes avoiding Ruth's face.

"I am ready," answered Wilding firmly, and he turned to glance at his wife.

She was bending towards him, her hands held out, such a look on her face as almost drove him mad with despair, reading it as he did. He made a sound deep in his throat before he found words.

"Give me one minute, sir—one minute," he begged Wentworth. "I ask no more than that."

Wentworth was a gentleman and not ill-natured. But he was a soldier and had received his orders. He hesitated between the instincts of the two conditions. And what time he did so there came a clatter of hoofs without to resolve him. It was Feversham departing.

"You shall have your minute, sir," said he. "More I dare not give you, as you can see."

"From my heart I thank you," answered Mr. Wilding, and from the gratitude of his tone you might have inferred that it was his life Wentworth had accorded him.

The captain had already turned aside to address his men. "Two of you outside, guard that window," he ordered. "The rest of you, in the passage. Bestir there!"

"Take your precautions, by all means, sir," said Wilding; "but I give you my word of honour I shall attempt no escape."

Wentworth nodded without replying. His eye lighted on Blake—who had been seemingly forgotten in the confusion—and on Richard. A kindness for the man who met his end so unflinchingly, a respect for so worthy an enemy, actuated the red-faced captain.

"You had better take yourself off, Sir Rowland," said he. "And you, Mr. Westmacott—you can wait in the passage with my men."

They obeyed him promptly enough, but when outside Sir Rowland made bold to remind the captain that he was failing in his duty, and that he should make a point of informing the General of this anon. Wentworth bade him go to the devil, and so was rid of him.

Alone, inside that low-ceilinged chamber, stood Ruth and Wilding face to face. He advanced towards her, and with a shuddering sob she flung herself into his arms. Still, he mistrusted the emotion to which she was a prey—dreading lest it should have its root in pity. He patted her shoulder soothingly.

"Nay, nay, little child," he whispered in her ear. "Never weep for me that have not a tear for myself. What better resolution of the difficulties my folly has created?" For only answer she clung closer, her hands locked about his neck, her slender body shaken by her silent weeping. "Don't pity me," he besought her. "I am content it should be so. It is the amend I promised you. Waste no pity on me, Ruth."

She raised her face, her eyes wild and blurred with tears, looked up to his.

"It is not pity!" she cried. "I want you, Anthony! I love you, Anthony, Anthony!"

His face grew ashen. "It is true, then!" he asked her. "And what you said to-night was true! I thought you said it only to detain me."

"Oh, it is true, it is true!" she wailed.

He sighed; he disengaged a hand to stroke her face. "I am happy," he said, and strove to smile. "Had I lived, who knows...?"

"No, no, no," she interrupted him passionately, her arms tightening about his neck. He bent his head. Their lips met and clung. A knock fell upon the door. They started, and Wilding raised his hands gently to disengage her pinioning arms.

"I must go, sweet," he said.

"God help me!" she moaned, and clung to him still. "It is I who am killing you—I and your love for me. For it was to save me you rode hither to-night, never pausing to weigh your own deadly danger. Oh, I am punished for having listened to every voice but the voice of my own heart where you were concerned. Had I loved you earlier—had I owned it earlier..."

"It had still been too late," he said, more to comfort her than because he knew it to be so. "Be brave for my sake, Ruth. You can be brave, I know—so well. Listen, sweet. Your words have made me happy. Mar not this happiness of mine by sending me out in grief at your grief."

Her response to his prayer was brave, indeed. Through her tears came a faint smile to overspread her face so white and pitiful.

"We shall meet soon again," she said.

"Aye—think on that," he bade her, and pressed her to him. "Good-bye, sweet! God keep you till we meet!" he added, his voice infinitely tender.

"Mr. Wilding!" Wentworth's voice called him, and the captain thrust the door open a foot or so. "Mr. Wilding!"

"I am coming," he answered steadily. He kissed her again, and on that kiss of his she sank against him, and he felt her turn all limp. He raised his voice. "Richard!" he shouted wildly. "Richard!"

At the note of alarm in his voice, Wentworth flung wide the door and entered, Richard's ashen face showing over his shoulder. In her brother's care Wilding delivered his mercifully unconscious wife. "See to her, Dick," he said, and turned to go, mistrusting himself now. But he paused as he reached the door, Wentworth waxing more and

more impatient at his elbow. He turned again.

"Dick," he said, "we might have been better friends. I would we had been. Let us part so at least," and he held out his hand, smiling.

Before so much gallantry Richard was conquered almost to the point of worship; a weak man himself, there was no virtue he could more admire than strength. He left Ruth in the high-backed chair in which Wilding's tender hands had placed her, and sprang forward, tears in his eyes. He wrung Wilding's hands in wordless passion.

"Be good to her, Dick," said Wilding, and went out with Wentworth.

He was marched down the street in the centre of that small party of musketeers of Dunbarton's regiment, his thoughts all behind him rather than ahead, a smile on his lips. He had conquered at the last. He thought of that other parting of theirs, nearly a month ago, on the road by Walford. Now, as then, circumstance was the fire that had melted her. But the crucible was no longer—as then of pity; it was the crucible of love.

And in that same crucible, too, Anthony Wilding's nature had undergone a transmutation; his love for Ruth had been purified of that base alloy of desire which had driven him into the unworthiness of making her his own at all costs; there was no carnal grossness in his present passion; it was pure as a religion—the love that takes no account of self, the love that makes for joyous and grateful martyrdom. And a joyous and grateful martyr would Anthony Wilding have been could he have thought that his death would bring her happiness or peace. In such a faith as that he had marched—or so he thought blithely to his end, and the smile on his lips had been less wistful than it was. Thinking of the agony in which he had left her, he almost came to wish—so pure was his love grown—that he had not conquered. The joy that at first was his was now all dashed. His death would cause her pain. His death! O God! It is an easy thing to be a martyr;

but this was not martyrdom; having done what he had done he had not the right to die. The last vestige of the smile that he had worn faded from his tight-pressed lips tight-pressed as though to endure some physical suffering. His face greyed, and deep lines furrowed his brow. Thus he marched on, mechanically, amid his marching escort, through the murky, fog-laden night, taking no heed of the stir about them, for all Weston Zoyland was aroused by now.

Ahead of them, and over to the east, the firing blazed and crackled, volley upon volley, to tell them that already battle had been joined in earnest. Monmouth's surprise had aborted, and it passed through Wilding's mind that to a great extent he was to blame for this. But it gave him little care.

At least his indiscretion had served the purpose of rescuing Ruth from Lord Feversham's unclean clutches. For the rest, knowing that Monmouth's army by far outnumbered Feversham's, he had no doubt that the advantage must still lie with the Duke, in spite of Feversham's having been warned in the eleventh hour.

Louder grew the sounds of battle. Above the din of firing a swelling chorus rose upon the night, startling and weird in such a time and place. Monmouth's pious infantry went into action singing hymns, and Wentworth, impatient to be at his post, bade his men go faster.

The night was by now growing faintly luminous, and the deathly grey light of approaching dawn hung in the mists upon the moor. Objects grew visible in bulk at least, if not in form and shape, by the time the little company had reached the end of Weston village and come upon the deep mud dyke which had been Wentworth's objective—a ditch that communicated with the great rhine that served the King's forces so well on that night of Sedgemoor.

Within some twenty paces of this Wentworth called a halt, and would have had Wilding's hands pinioned behind him, and his eyes

blindfolded, but that Wilding begged him this might not be done. Wentworth was, as we know, impatient; and between impatience and kindness, perhaps, he acceded to Wilding's prayer.

He even hesitated a moment at the last. It was in his mind to speak some word of comfort to the doomed man. Then a sudden volley, more terrific than any that had preceded it, followed by hoarse cheering away to eastward, quickened his impatience. He bade the sergeant lead Mr. Wilding forward and stand him on the edge of the ditch. His object was that thus the man's body would be disposed of without waste of time. This Wilding realized, his soul rebelling against this fate which had come upon him in the very hour when he most desired to live. Mad thoughts of escape crossed his mind—of a leap across the dyke, and a wild dash through the fog. But the futility of it was too appalling. The musketeers were already blowing their matches. He would suffer the ignominy of being shot in the back, like a coward, if he made any such attempt.

And so, despairing but not resigned, he took his stand on the very edge of the ditch. In an irony of obligingness he set half of his heels over the void, so that he was nicely balanced upon the edge of the cutting, and must go backwards and down into the mud when hit.

It was this position he had taken that gave him an inspiration in that last moment. The sergeant had moved away out of the line of fire, and he stood there alone, waiting, erect and with his head held high, his eyes upon the grey mass of musketeers—blurred alike by mist and semi-darkness—some twenty paces distant along the line of which glowed eight red fuses.

Wentworth's voice rang out with the words of command.

"Blow your matches!"

Brighter gleamed the points of light, and under their steel pots the

faces of the musketeers, suffused by a dull red glow, sprang for a moment out of the grey mass, to fade once more into the general greyness at the word, "Cock your matches!"

"Guard your pans!" came a second later the captain's voice, and then:

"Present!"

There was a stir and rattle, and the dark, indistinct figure standing on the lip of the ditch was covered by the eight muskets. To the eyes of the firing-party he was no more than a blurred shadowy form, showing a little darker than the encompassing dark grey.

"Give fire!"

On the word Mr. Wilding lost the delicate, precarious balance he had been sustaining on the edge of the ditch, and went over backwards, at the imminent risk—as he afterwards related—of breaking his neck. At the same instant a jagged, eight-pointed line of flame slashed the darkness, and the thunder of the volley pealed forth to lose itself in the greater din of battle on Penzoy Pound, hard by.

CHAPTER XXIII. MR. WILDING'S BOOTS

In the filth of the ditch, Mr. Wilding rolled over and lay prone. He threw out his left arm, and rested his brow upon it to keep his face above the mud. He strove to hold his breath, not that he might dissemble death, but that he might avoid being poisoned by the foul gases that, disturbed by his weight, bubbled up to choke him. His body half sank and settled in the mud, and seen from above, as he was presently seen by Wentworth—who ran forward with the sergeant's lanthorn to assure himself that the work had been well done—he had all the air of being not only dead but already half buried.

And now, for a second, Mr. Wilding was in his greatest danger, and this from the very humaneness of the sergeant. The fellow advanced to the captain's side, a pistol in his hand. Wentworth held the light aloft and peered down into that six feet of blackness at the jacent figure.

"Shall I give him an ounce of lead to make sure, Captain?" quoth the sergeant. But Wentworth, in his great haste, had already turned about, and the light of his lanthorn no longer revealed the form of Mr. Wilding.

"There is not the need. The ditch will do what may remain to be done, if anything does. Come on, man. We are wanted yonder."

The light passed, steps retreated, the sergeant muttering, and then Wentworth's voice was heard by Wilding some little distance off.

"Bring up your muskets!"

"Shoulder!"

"By the right—turn! March!" And the tramp, tramp of feet receded rapidly.

Wilding was already sitting up, endeavouring to get a breath of purer air. He rose to his feet, sinking almost to the top of his boots in the oozy slime. Foul gases were belched up to envelop him. He seized at irregularities in the bank, and got his head above the level of the ground. He thrust forward his chin and took great greedy breaths in a very gluttony of air—and never came Muscadine sweeter to a drunkard's lips. He laughed softly to himself. He was alone and safe. Wentworth and his men had disappeared. Away in the direction of Penzoy Pound the sounds of battle swelled ever to a greater volume. Cannons were booming now, and all was uproar—flame and shouting, cheering and shrieking, the thunder of hastening multitudes, the clash of steel, the pounding of horses, all blent to make up the horrid din of carnage.

Mr. Wilding listened, and considered what to do. His first impulse was to join the fray. But, bethinking him that there could be little place for him in the confusion that must prevail by now, he reconsidered the matter, and his thoughts returning to Ruth—the wife for whom he had been at such pains to preserve himself on the very brink of death—he resolved to endanger himself no further for that night.

He dropped back into the ditch, and waded, ankle deep in slime, to the other side. There he crawled out, and gaining the moor lay down awhile to breathe his lungs. But not for long. The dawn was creeping pale and ghostly across the solid earth, and a faint fresh breeze was stirring and driving the mist in wispy shrouds before it. If he lingered there he might yet be found by some party of Royalist soldiers, and that would be to undo all that he had done. He rose, and struck out across the peaty ground. None knew the moors better than did he,

and had he been with Grey's horse that night, it is possible things had fared differently, for he had proved a surer guide than did Godfrey, the spy.

At first he thought of making for Bridgwater and Lupton House. By now Richard would be on his way thither with Ruth, and Wilding was in haste that she should be reassured that he had not fallen to the muskets of Wentworth's firing-party. But Bridgwater was far, and he began to realize, now that all excitement was past, that he was utterly exhausted. Next he thought of Scoresby Hall and his cousin Lord Gervase. But he was by no means sure that he might count upon a welcome. Gervase had shown no sympathy for Monmouth or his partisans, and whilst he would hardly go so far as to refuse Mr. Wilding shelter, still Wilding felt an aversion to seeking what might be grudged him. At last he bethought him of home. Zoyland Chase was near at hand; but he had not been there since his wedding-day, and in the mean time he knew that it had been used as a barrack for the militia, and had no doubt that it had been wrecked and plundered. Still, it must have walls and a roof, and that, for the time, was all he craved, that he might rest awhile and recuperate his wasted forces.

A half-hour later he dragged himself wearily up the avenue between the elms—looking white as snow in the pale July dawn—to the clearing in front of his house.

Desertion was stamped upon the face of it. Shattered windows and hanging shutters everywhere. How wantonly they had wrecked it! It might have been a church, and the militia a regiment of Cromwell's iconoclastic Puritans. The door was locked, but going round he found a window—one of the door—windows of his library hanging loose upon its hinges. He pushed it wide, and entered with a heavy heart. Instantly something stirred in a corner; a fierce growl was followed by a furious bark, and a lithe brown body leapt from the greater into the lesser shadows to attack the intruder. But at one word of his the

round checked suddenly, crouched an instant, then with a queer, throaty sound bounded forward in a wild delight that robbed it on the instant of its voice. It found it anon and leapt about him, barking furious joy in spite of all his vain endeavours to calm it. He grew afraid lest the dog should draw attention. He knew not who—if any—might be in possession of his house. The library, as he looked round showed a scene of wreckage that excellently matched the exterior. Not a picture on the walls, not an arras, but had been rent to shreds. The great lustre that had hung from the centre of the ceiling was gone. Disorder reigned along the bookshelves, and yet there and elsewhere there was a certain orderliness, suggesting an attempt to straighten up the place after the ravagers had departed. It was these signs made him afraid the house might be tenanted by such as might prove his enemies.

"Down, Jack," he said to the dog for the twentieth time, patting its sleek head. "Down, down!"

But still the dog bounded about him, barking wildly.

"Sh!" he hissed suddenly. Steps sounded in the hall. It was as he feared. The door was suddenly thrown open, and the grey morning light gleamed upon the long barrel of a musket. After it, bearing it, entered a white-haired old man.

He paused on the threshold, measuring the tall disordered stranger who stood there, his figure a black silhouette against the window by which he had entered.

"What seek you here, sir, in this house of desolation?" asked the voice of Mr. Wilding's old servant.

He answered but one word. "Walters!"

The musket dropped with a clatter from the old man's hands. He sank back against the doorpost and leaned there an instant; then,

whimpering and laughing, he came tottering forward—his old legs failing him in this excess of unexpected joy—and sank on his knees to kiss his master's hand.

Wilding patted the old head, as he had patted the dog's a little while ago. He was oddly moved; there was a knot in his throat. No home-coming could well have been more desolate. And yet, what home-coming could have brought him such a torturing joy as was now his? Oh, it is good to be loved, if it be by no more than a dog and an old servant!

In a moment Walters was himself again. He was on his feet, scrutinizing Wilding's haggard face and disordered, filthy clothes. He broke into exclamations between dismay and reproach, but these Wilding interrupted to ask the old man how it happened that he had remained.

"My son John was a sergeant in the troop that quartered itself here, sir," Walters explained, "and so they left me alone. But even had it not been for that, I scarcely think they would have harmed an old man. They were brave fellows for all the mischief they did here, and they seemed to have little heart in the service of the Popish King. It was the officers drove them on to all this damage, and once they'd started—well, there were rogues amongst them saw a chance of plunder, and they took it. I have sought to put the place to rights; but they did some woeful, wanton mischief."

Wilding sighed. "It's little matter, perhaps, as the place is no longer mine.

"No... no longer yours, sir?"

"I'm an attainted outlaw, Walters," he explained. "They'll bestow it on some Popish time-server, unless King Monmouth can follow up by greater victories to-night's. Have you aught a man may eat or drink?"

Meat and wine, fresh linen and fresh garments did old Walters find him; and when he had washed, eaten, and drunk, Mr. Wilding wrapped himself in a dressing-gown and laid himself down to sleep on a settle in the library, his servant and his dog on guard.

Not above an hour, however, was he destined to enjoy his hard-earned rest. The light had grown, meanwhile, and from grey it had turned golden, the heralds of the sun being already in the east. In the distance the firing had died down to a mere occasional boom.

Suddenly old Walters raised his head to listen. The beat of hoofs was drawing rapidly near, so near that presently he rose in alarm, for a horseman was pounding up the avenue, had drawn rein at the main entrance.

Walters knit his brows in perplexity, and glanced at his master who slept on utterly worn out. A silent pause followed, lasting some minutes. Then it was the dog that rose with a growl, his coat bristling, and an instant later there came a sharp rapping at the hall door.

"Sh! Down, Jack!" whispered Walters, afraid of rousing Mr. Wilding. He tiptoed softly across the room, picked up his musket, and, calling the dog, went out, a great fear in his heart, but not for himself.

The rapping continued, growing every instant more urgent, so urgent that Walters was almost reassured. Here was no enemy, but surely some one in need. Walters opened at last, and Mr. Trenchard, grimy of face and hands, his hat shorn of its plumes, his clothes torn, staggered with an oath across the threshold.

"Walters!" he cried. "Thank God! I thought you'd be here, but I wasn't certain. Down, Jack!"

The hound was barking madly again, having recognized an old friend.

"Plague on the dog!" growled Walters. "He'll wake Mr. Wilding."

"Mr. Wilding?" said Trenchard, and checked midway across the hall. "Mr. Wilding?"

"He arrived here a couple of hours ago, sir..."

"Wilding here? Oddsheart! I was more than well advised to come. Where is he, man?"

"Sh, sir! He's asleep in the library. You'll wake him, you'll wake him!"

But Trenchard never paused. He crossed the hall at a bound, and flung wide the library door. "Anthony!" he shouted. "Anthony!" And in the background Walters cursed him for a fool. Wilding leapt to his feet, awake and startled.

"Wha... Nick!"

"Oons!" roared Nick. "You're choicely found. I came to send to Bridgwater for you. We must away at once, man."

"How—away? I thought you were in the fight, Nick."

"And don't I look as if I had been?"

"But then..

"The fight is fought and lost; there's an end to the garboil. Monmouth is in full flight with what's left him of his horse. When I quitted the field, he was riding hard for Polden Hill." He dropped into a chair, his accents grim and despairing, his eyes haggard.

"Lost?" gasped Wilding, and his conscience pricked him for a moment, remembering how much it had been his fault—however indirectly—that Feversham had been forewarned. "But how lost?" he

cried a moment later.

"Ask Grey," snapped Trenchard. "Ask his craven, numskulled lordship. He had as good a hand in losing it as any. Oh, it was all most infernally mishandled, as has been everything in this ill-starred rising. Grey sent back Godfrey, the guide, and attempted in the dark to find his own way across the rhine. He missed the ford. What else could the fool have hoped? And when he was discovered and Dunbarton's guns began to play on us—hell and fire! we ran as if Sedgemoor had been a race-course.

"The rest was but the natural sequel. The foot, seeing our confusion, broke. They were rallied again; broke again; and again were rallied; but all too late. The enemy was up, and with that damned ditch between us there was no getting to close quarters with them. Had Grey ridden round, and sought to turn their flank, things might have been—O God!—they would have been entirely different. I did suggest it. But for my pains Grey threatened to pistol me if I presumed to instruct him in his duty. I would to Heaven I had pistolled him where he stood."

Walters, at gaze in the doorway, listened to the bitter tirade. Wilding, on the settle, sat silent a moment, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands, his eyes set and grim as Trenchard's own. Then he mastered himself, and waved a hand towards the table where stood food and wine.

"Eat and drink, Nick," he said, "and we'll discuss what's to be done."

"It'll need little discussing," was Nick's savage answer as he rose and went to pour himself a cup of wine. "There's but one course open to us —instant flight. I am for Minehead to join Hewling's horse, which went there yesterday for guns. We might seize a ship somewhere on the coast, and thus get out of this infernal country of mine."

They discussed the matter in spite of Trenchard's having said that there was nothing to discuss, and in the end Wilding agreed to go with him. What choice had he? But first he must go to Bridgwater to reassure his wife.

"To Bridgwater?" blazed Trenchard, in a passion at the folly of the suggestion. "You're clearly mad! All the King's forces will be there in an hour or two."

"No matter," said Wilding, "I must go. I am dead already, as it happens." And he related his singular adventure in Feversham's camp last night.

Trenchard heard him in amazement. If any suspicion crossed his mind that his friend's love affairs had had anything to do with rousing Feversham prematurely, he showed no sign of it. But he shook his head at Wilding's insistence that he must first go to Lupton House.

"Shalt send a message, Anthony. Walters will find some one to bear it. But you must not go yourself."

In the end Mr. Trenchard prevailed upon him to adopt this course, however reluctant he might be. Thereafter they proceeded to make their preparations. There were still a couple of nags in the stables, in spite of the visitation of the militia, and Walters was able to find fresh clothes for Mr. Trenchard above-stairs.

A half-hour later they were ready to set out on this forlorn hope of escape; the horses were at the door, and Mr. Wilding was in the act of drawing on the fresh pair of boots which Walters had fetched him. Suddenly he paused, his foot in the leg of his right boot, and sat bemused a moment.

Trenchard, watching him, waxed impatient. "What ails you now?" he croaked.

Without answering him, Wilding turned to Walters. "Where are the boots I wore last night?" he asked, and his voice was sharp—oddly sharp, considering how trivial the matter of his speech.

"In the kitchen," answered Walters.

"Fetch me them." And he kicked off again the boot he had half drawn on.

"But they are all befouled with mud, sir."

"Clean them, Walters; clean them and let me have them."

Still Walters hesitated, pointing out that the boots he had brought his master were newer and sounder. Wilding interrupted him impatiently. "Do as I bid you, Walters." And the old man, understanding nothing, went off on the errand.

"A pox on your boots!" swore Trenchard. "What does this mean?"

Wilding seemed suddenly to have undergone a transformation. His gloom had fallen from him. He looked up at his old friend and, smiling, answered him. "It means, Nick, that whilst these excellent boots that Walters would have me wear might be well enough for a ride to the coast such as you propose, they are not at all suited to the journey I intend to make."

"Maybe," said Nick with a sniff, "you're intending to journey to Tower Hill?"

"In that direction," answered Mr. Wilding suavely.

"I am for London, Nick. And you shall come with me."

"God save us! Do you keep a fool's egg under that nest of hair?"

Wilding explained, and by the time Walters returned with the boots Trenchard was walking up and down the room in an odd agitation.

"Odds my life, Tony!" he cried at last. "I believe it is the best thing."

"The only thing, Nick."

"And since all is lost, why..." Trenchard blew out his cheeks and smacked fist into palm. "I am with you," said he.

CHAPTER XXIV. JUSTICE

It has fallen to my lot in the course of this veridical chronicle of Mr. Anthony Wilding's connection with the Rebellion in the West, and of his wedding and post-nuptial winning of Ruth Westmacott, to relate certain matters of incident and personality that may be accounted strange. But the strangest yet remains to be related. For in spite of all that had passed between Sir Rowland Blake and the Westmacotts on that memorable night of Sunday to Monday, on which the battle of Sedgemoor was lost and won, towards the end of that same month of July we find him not only back at Lupton House, but once again the avowed suitor of Mr. Wilding's widow. For effrontery this is a matter of which it is to be doubted whether history furnishes a parallel. Indeed, until the circumstances are sifted it seems wild and incredible. So let us consider these.

On the morrow of Sedgemoor, the town of Bridgwater became invested—infested were no whit too strong a word—by the King's forces under Feversham and the odious Kirke, and there began a reign of terror for the town. The prisons were choked with attainted and suspected rebels. From Bridgwater to Weston Zoyland the road was become an avenue of gallows, each bearing its repulsive gemmace-laden burden; for the King's commands were unequivocal, and hanging was the order of the day.

It is not my desire at this stage to surfeit you with the horrors that were perpetrated during that hideous week of July, when no man's life was safe from the royal butchers. The awful campaign of Jeifreys and his four associates was yet to follow, but it is doubtful if it could compare in ruthlessness with that of Feversham and Kirke. At least, when Jeifreys came, men were given a trial—or what looked like it—

and there remained them a chance, however slender, of acquittal, as many lived to prove thereafter. With Feversham there was no such chance. And it was of this circumstance that Sir Rowland Blake took the fullest and the cowardliest advantage.

There can be no doubt that Sir Rowland was a villain. It might be urged for him that he was a creature of circumstance, and that had circumstances been other it is possible he had been a credit to his name. But he was weak in character, and out of that weakness he had developed a Herculean strength in villainy. Failure had dogged him in everything he undertook. Broken at the gaming-tables, hounded out of town by creditors, he was in desperate straits to repair his fortunes and, as we have seen, he was not nice in his endeavours to achieve that end.

Ruth Westmacott's fair inheritance had seemed an easy thing to conquer, and to its conquest he had applied himself to suffer defeat as he had suffered it in all things else. But Sir Rowland did not yet acknowledge himself beaten, and the Bridgwater reign of terror dealt him a fresh hand—a hand of trumps. With this he came boldly to renew the game.

He was as smooth as oil at first, a very penitent, confessing himself mad in what he had done on that Sunday night—mad with despair and rage at having been defeated in the noble task to which he had turned his hands. His penitence might have had little effect upon the Westmacotts had he not known how to insinuate that it might be best for them to lend an ear to it—and a forgiving one.

"You will tell Mr. Westmacott, Jasper," he had said, when Jasper told him that they could not receive him, "that he would be unwise not to see me, and the same to Mistress Wilding."

And old Jasper had carried his message, and had told Richard of the wicked smile that had been on Sir Rowland's lips when he had

uttered it.

Now Richard was in many ways a changed man since that night at Weston Zoyland. A transformation seemed to have been wrought in him as odd as it was sudden, and it dated from the moment when with tears in his eyes he had wrung Wilding's hand in farewell. Where precept had failed, Richard found himself converted by example. He contrasted himself in that stressful hour with great-souled Anthony Wilding, and saw himself as he was, a weakling, strong only in vicious ways. Repentance claimed him; repentance and a fine ambition to be worthier, to resemble as nearly as his nature would allow him this Anthony Wilding whom he took for pattern. He changed his ways, abandoned drink and gaming, and gained thereby a healthier countenance. Then in his zeal he overshot his mark. He developed a taste for Scripture-reading, bethought him of prayers, and even took to saying grace to his meat. Indeed—for conversion, when it comes, is a furious thing—the swing of his soul's pendulum threatened now to carry him to extremes of virtue and piety. "O Lord!" he would cry a score of times a day, "Thou hast brought up my soul from the grave; Thou hast kept me alive that I should not go down to the pit!"

But underlying all this remained unfortunately the inherent weakness of his nature—indeed, it was that very weakness and malleability made this sudden and wholesale conversion possible.

Upon hearing Sir Rowland's message his heart fainted, despite his good intentions, and he urged that perhaps they had better hear what the baronet might have to say.

It was three days after Sedgemoor Fight, and poor Ruth was worn and exhausted with her grief—believing Wilding dead, for he had sent no message to inform her of his almost miraculous preservation. The thing he went to do in London was fraught with such peril that he foresaw but the slenderest chance of escaping with his life. Therefore, he had argued, why console her now with news that he lived, when in

a few days the headsman might prove that his end had been but postponed? To do so might be to give her cause to mourn him twice. Again he was haunted by the thought that, in spite of all, it may have been pity that had so grievously moved her at their last meeting. Better, then, to wait; better for both their sakes. If he came safely through his ordeal it would be time enough to bear her news of his preservation.

In deepest mourning, very white, with dark stains beneath her eyes to tell the tale of anguished vigils, she received Sir Rowland in the withdrawing-room, her brother at her side. To his expressions of deep penitence he found them cold; so he passed on to show them what disastrous results might ensue upon a stubborn maintaining of this attitude of theirs towards him.

"I have come," he said, his eyes downcast, his face long-drawn, for he could play the sorrowful with any hypocrite in England, "to do something more than speak of my grief and regret. I have come to offer proof of it by service.

"We ask no service of you, sir," said Ruth, her voice a sword of sharpness.

He sighed, and turned to Richard. "This were folly," he assured his whilom friend. "You know the influence I wield."

"Do I?" quoth Richard, his tone implying doubt. "You think that the bungled matter at Newington's may have shaken it?" quoth Blake. "With Feversham, perhaps. But Albemarle, remember, trusts me very fully. There are ugly happenings in the town here. Men are being hung like linen on a washing-day. Be not too sure that yourself are free from all danger." Richard paled under the baronet's baleful, half-sneering glance. "Be not in too great haste to cast me aside, for you may find me useful."

"Do you threaten, sir?" cried Ruth.

"Threaten?" quoth he. He turned up his eyes and showed the whites of them. "Is it to threaten to promise you my protection; to show you how I can serve you?—than which I ask no sweeter boon of heaven. A word from me, and Richard need fear nothing."

"He need fear nothing without that word," said Ruth disdainfully. "Such service as he did Lord Feversham the other night.."

"Is soon forgotten," Blake cut in adroitly. "Indeed, 'twill be most convenient to his lordship to forget it. Think you he would care to have it known that 'twas to such a chance he owes the preservation of his army?" He laughed, and added in a voice of much sly meaning, "The times are full of peril. There's Kirke and his lambs. And there's no saying how Kirke might act did he chance to learn what Richard failed to do that night when he was left to guard the rear at Newlington's!"

"Would you inform him of it?" cried Richard, between anger and alarm.

Blake thrust out his hands in a gesture of horrified repudiation. "Richard!" he cried in deep reproof and again, "Richard!"

"What other tongue has he to fear?" asked Ruth. "Am I the only one who knows of it?" cried Blake. "Oh, madam, why will you ever do me such injustice? Richard has been my friend—my dearest friend. I wish him so to continue, and I swear that he shall find me his, as you shall find me yours.

"It is a boon I could dispense with," she assured him, and rose. "This talk can profit little, Sir Rowland," said she. "You seek to bargain."

"You shall see how unjust you are," he cried with deep sorrow. "It is but fitting, perhaps, after what has passed. It is my punishment. But

you shall come to acknowledge that you have done me wrong. You shall see how I shall befriend and protect him."

That said, he took his leave and went, but he left behind him a shrewd seed of fear in Richard's mind, and of the growth that sprang from it Richard almost unconsciously transplanted something in the days that followed into the heart of Ruth. As a result, to make sure that no harm should come to her brother, the last of his name and race, she resolved to receive Sir Rowland, resolved in spite of Diana's outspoken scorn, in spite of Richard's protests—for though afraid, yet he would not have it so—in spite even of her own deep repugnance of the man.

Days passed and grew to weeks. Bridgwater was settling down to peace again—to peace and mourning; the Royalist scourge had spread to Taunton, and Blake lingered on at Lupton House, an unwelcome but an undeniable guest.

His presence was as detestable to Richard now as it was to Ruth, for Richard had to submit to the mockery with which the town rake lashed his godly bearing and altered ways. More than once in gusts of sudden valour the boy urged his sister to permit him to drive the baronet from the house and let him do his worst. But Ruth, afraid for Richard, bade him wait until the times were more settled. When the royal vengeance had slaked its lust for blood it might matter little, perhaps, what tales Sir Rowland might elect to carry.

And so Sir Rowland remained and waited. He assured himself that he knew how to be patient, and congratulated himself upon that circumstance. Wilding dead, a little time must now suffice to blunt the sharp edge of his widow's grief; let him but await that time, and the rest should be easy, the battle his. With Richard he did not so much as trouble himself to reckon.

Thus he determined, and thus no doubt he would have acted but for

an unforeseen contingency. A miserable, paltry creditor had smoked him out in his Somerset retreat, and got a letter to him full of dark hints of a debtor's gaol. The fellow's name was Swiney, and Sir Rowland knew him for fierce and pertinacious where a defaulting creditor was concerned. One only course remained him: to force matters with Wilding's widow. For days he refrained, fearing that precipitancy might lose him all; it was his wish to do the thing without too much coercion; some, he was not coxcomb enough to think—coxcomb though he was—might be dispensed with.

At last one Sunday evening he decided to be done with dallying, and to bring Ruth between the hammer and the anvil of his will. It was the last Sunday in July, exactly three weeks after Sedgemoor, and the odd coincidence of his having chosen such a day and hour you shall appreciate anon.

They were on the lawn taking the cool of the evening after an oppressively hot day. By the stone seat, now occupied by Lady Horton and Diana, Richard lay on the sward at their feet in talk with them, and their talk was of Sir Rowland. Diana—gall in her soul to see the baronet by way of gaining yet his ends—chid Richard in strong terms for his weakness in submitting to Blake's constant presence at Lupton House. And Richard meekly took her chiding and promised that, if Ruth would but sanction it, things should be changed upon the morrow.

Sir Rowland, all unconscious—reckless, indeed—of this, sauntered with Ruth some little distance from them, having contrived adroitly to draw her aside. He broke a spell of silence with a dolorous sigh.

"Ruth," said he pensively, "I mind me of the last evening on which you and I walked here alone."

She flashed him a glance of fear and aversion, and stood still. Under his brow he watched the quick heave of her bosom, the sudden

flow and abiding ebb of blood in her face—grown now so thin and wistful—and he realized that before him lay no easy task. He set his teeth for battle.

"Will you never have a kindness for me, Ruth?" he sighed.

She turned about, her intent to join the others, a dull anger in her soul. He sat a hand upon her arm. "Wait!" said he, and the tone in which he uttered that one word kept her beside him. His manner changed a little. "I am tired of this," said he.

"Why, so am I," she answered bitterly.

"Since we are agreed so far, let us agree to end it."

"It is all I ask."

"Yes, but—alas!—in a different way. Listen now."

"I will not listen. Let me go.

"I were your enemy did I do so, for you would know hereafter a sorrow and repentance for which nothing short of death could offer you escape. Richard is under suspicion."

"Do you hark back to that?" The scorn of her voice was deadly. Had it been herself he desired, surely that tone had quenched all passion in him, or else transformed it into hatred. But Blake was playing for a fortune, for shelter from a debtor's prison.

"It has become known," he continued, "that Richard was one of the early plotters who paved the way for Monmouth's coming. I think that that, in conjunction with his betrayal of his trust that night at Newlington's, thereby causing the death of some twenty gallant fellows of King James's, will be enough to hang him."

Her hand clutched at her heart. "What is't you seek?" she cried. It

was almost a moan. "What is't you want of me?"

"Yourself," said he. "I love you, Ruth," he added, and stepped close up to her.

"O God!" she cried aloud. "Had I a man at hand to kill you for that insult!"

And then—miracle of miracles!—a voice from the shrubs by which they stood bore to her ears the startling words that told her her prayer was answered there and then.

"Madam, that man is here."

She stood frozen. Not more of a statue was Lot's wife in the moment of looking behind her than she who dared not look behind. That voice! A voice from the dead, a voice she had heard for the last time in the cottage that was Feversham's lodging at Weston Zoyland. Her wild eyes fell upon Sir Rowland's face. It showed livid; the nether-lip sucked in and caught in the strong teeth, as if to prevent an outcry; the eyes wild with fright. What did it mean? By an effort she wrenched herself round at last, and a scream broke from her to rouse her aunt, her cousin, and her brother, and bring them hastening towards her across the sweep of lawn.

Before her, on the edge of the shrubbery, a grey figure stood erect and graceful, and the face, with its thin lips faintly smiling, its dark eyes gleaming, was the face of Anthony Wilding. And as she stared he moved forward, and she heard the fall of his foot upon the turf, the clink of his spurs, the swish of his scabbard against the shrubs, and reason told her that this was no ghost.

She held out her arms to him. "Anthony! Anthony!" She staggered forward, and he was no more than in time to catch her as she swayed.

He held her fast against him and kissed her brow. "Sweet," he

said, "forgive me that I frightened you. I came by the orchard gate, and my coming was so timely that I could not hold in my answer to your cry."

Her eyelids fluttered, she drew a long sighing breath, and nestled closer to him. "Anthony!" she murmured again, and reached up a hand to stroke his face, to feel that it was truly living flesh.

And Sir Rowland, realizing, too, by now that here was no ghost, recovered his lost courage. He put a hand to his sword, then withdrew it, leaving the weapon sheathed. Here was a hangman's job, not a swordsman's, he opined—and wisely, for he had had earlier experience of Mr. Wilding's play of steel.

He advanced a step. "O fool!" he snarled. "The hangman waits for you."

"And a creditor for you, Sir Rowland," came the voice of Mr. Trenchard, who now pushed forward through those same shrubs that had masked his friend's approach. "A Mr. Swiney. 'Twas I sent him from town. He's lodged at the Bull, and bellows like one when he speaks of what you owe him. There are three messengers with him, and they tell of a debtor's gaol for you, sweetheart."

A spasm of fury crossed the face of Blake. "They may have me, and welcome, when I've told my tale," said he. "Let me but tell of Anthony Wilding's lurking here, and not only Anthony Wilding, but all the rest of you are doomed for harbouring him. You know the law, I think," he mocked them, for Lady Horton, Diana, and Richard, who had come up, stood now a pace or so away in deepest wonder. "You shall know it better before the night is out, and better still before next Sunday's come."

"Tush!" said Trenchard, and quoted, "'There's none but Anthony may conquer Anthony.'"

"Tis clear," said Wilding, "you take me for a rebel. An odd mistake! For it chances, Sir Rowland, that you behold in me an accredited servant of the Secretary of State."

Blake stared, then fell a prey to ironic laughter. He would have spoken, but Mr. Wilding plucked a paper from his pocket, and handed it to Trenchard.

"Show it him," said he, and Blake's face grew white again as he read the lines above Sunderland's signature and observed the seals of office. He looked from the paper to the hated smiling face of Mr. Wilding.

"You were a spy?" he said, his tone making a question of the odious statement. "A dirty spy?"

"Your incredulity is flattering, at least," said Wilding pleasantly as he repocketed the parchment, "and it leads you in the right direction. I neither was nor am a spy."

"That paper proves it!" cried Blake contemptuously. Having been a spy himself, he was a good judge of the vileness of the office.

"See to my wife, Nick," said Wilding sharply, and made as if to transfer her to the care of his friend.

"Nay," said Trenchard, "'tis your own duty that. Let me discharge the other for you." And he stepped up to Blake and tapped him briskly on the shoulder. "Sir Rowland," said he, "you're a knave." Sir Rowland stared at him. "You're a foul thing—a muckworm—Sir Rowland," added Trenchard amiably, "and you've been discourteous to a lady, for which may Heaven forgive you—I can't."

"Stand aside," Blake bade him, hoarse with passion, blind to all risks. "My affair is with Mr. Wilding."

"Aye," said Trenchard, "but mine is with you. If you survive it, you

can settle what other affairs you please—including, belike, your business with Mr. Swiney."

"Not so, Nick," said Wilding suddenly, and turned to Richard. "Here, Richard! Take her," he bade his brother-in-law.

"Anthony, you damned shirk-duty, see to your wife. Leave me to my own diversions. Sir Rowland," he reminded the baronet, "I have called you a knave and a foul thing, and faith! if you want it proven, you need but step down the orchard with me."

He saw hesitation lingering in Sir Rowland's face, and he uncurled the last of the whip he carried. "I'd grieve to do a violent thing before the ladies," he murmured deprecatingly. "I'd never respect myself again if I had to drive a gentleman of your quality to the ground of honour with a horsewhip. But, as God's my life, if you don't go willingly this instant, 'tis what will happen."

Richard's newborn righteousness prompted him to interfere, to seek to avert this threatened bloodshed; his humanity urged him to let matters be, and his humanity prevailed. Diana watched this foreshadowing of tragedy with tight lips, pale cheeks. Justice was to be done at last, it seemed, and as her frightened eye fell upon Sir Rowland she knew not whether to exult or weep. Her mother—understanding nothing—plied her meanwhile with whispered questions.

As for Sir Rowland, he looked into the old rake's eyes agleam with wicked mirth, and rage welled up to choke him. He must kill this man.

"Come," said he. "I'll see to your fine friend Wilding afterwards."

"Excellent," said Trenchard, and led the way through the shrubbery to the orchard.

Ruth, reviving, looked up. Her glance met Mr. Wilding's; it

quickened into understanding, and she stirred. "Is it true? Is it really true?" she cried. "I am being tortured by this dream again!"

"Nay, sweet, it is true; it is true. I am here. Say, shall I stay?"

She clung to him for answer. "And you are in no danger?"

"In none, sweet. I am Mr. Wilding of Zoyland Chase, free to come and go as best shall seem to me. He begged the others to leave them a little while, and he led her to the stone seat by the river. He set her at his side there and told her the story of his escape from the firing-party, and of the inspiration that had come to him on the morrow to make use of the letter in his boot which Sunderland had given him for Monmouth in the hour of panic. Monmouth's cavalier treatment of him when he had arrived in Bridgwater had precluded his delivering that letter at the council. There was never another opportunity, nor did he again think of the package in the stressful hours that followed. It was not until the following morning that he suddenly remembered it lay undelivered, and bethought him that it might prove a weapon to win him delivery from the dangers that encompassed him.

"It was a slender chance," he told her, "but I employed it. I waited in London, in hiding, close upon a fortnight ere I had an opportunity of seeing Sunderland. He laughed me to scorn at first, and threatened me with the Tower. But I told him the letter was in safe hands and would remain there in earnest of his good behaviour, and that did he have me arrested it would instantly be laid before the King and bring his own head to the block more surely even than my own. It frightened him; but it had scarcely done so, sweet, had he known that that precious letter was still in my boot, for my boot was on my leg, and my leg was in the room with the rest of me.

"He surrendered at last, and gave me papers proving that Trenchard and I—for I stipulated for old Nick's safety too—were His Majesty's accredited agents in the West. I loathed the title. But.."—he

spread his hands and smiled—"it was that or widowing you."

She took his face in her hands and stroked it fondly, and they sat thus until a dry cough behind them roused them from their joyous silence. Mr. Trenchard was sauntering towards them, his left eye tucked farther under his hat than usual, his hands behind him.

"'Tis a thirsty evening," he informed them.

"Go, tell Richard so," said Wilding, who knew naught of Richard's altered ways.

"I've thought of it; but haply he's sensitive on the score of drinking with me again. He has done it twice to his undoing."

"He'll do it a third time, no doubt," said Mr. Wilding curtly, and Trenchard, taking the hint, turned with a shrug, and went up the lawn towards the house. He found Richard in the porch, where he had lingered fearfully, waiting for news. At sight of Mr. Trenchard's grim, weather-beaten countenance he came forward suddenly.

"How has it sped?" he asked, his lips twitching on the words.

"Yonder they sit," said Trenchard, pointing down the lawn.

"No, no. I mean... Sir Rowland."

"Oh, Sir Rowland?" cried the old sinner, as though Sir Rowland were some matter long forgotten. He sighed. "Alas, poor Swiney! I fear I've cheated him."

"You mean?"

"Art slow at inference, Dick. Sir Rowland has passed away in the odour of villainy."

Richard clasped nervous hands together and raised his colourless eyes to heaven.

"May the Lord have mercy on his soul!" said he.

"May He, indeed!" said Trenchard, when he had recovered from his surprise. "But," he added pessimistically, "I doubt the rogue's in hell."

Richard's eyes kindled suddenly, and he quoted from the thirtieth Psalm, "'I will extol thee, O Lord; for Thou hast lifted me up, and hast not made my foes to rejoice over me.'"

Dumbfounded, wondering, indeed, was Westmacott's mind unhinged, Trenchard scanned him narrowly. Richard caught the glance and misinterpreted it for one of reproof. He bethought him that his joy was unrighteous. He stifled it, and forced his lips to sigh "Poor Blake!"

"Poor, indeed!" quoth Trenchard, and adapted a remembered line of his play-acting days to suit the case. "The tears live in an onion that shall water his grave. Though, perhaps, I am forgetting Swiney." Then, in a brisker tone, "Come, Richard. What like is the muscadine you keep at Lupton House?"

"I have abjured all wine," said Richard.

"A plague you have!" quoth Trenchard, understanding less and less. "Have you turned Mussuman, perchance?"

"No," answered Richard sternly; "Christian."

Trenchard hesitated, rubbing his nose thoughtfully. "Hum," said he at length. "Peace be with you, then. I'll leave you here to bay the moon to your heart's content. Perhaps Jasper will know where to find me a brain-wash." And with a final suspicious, wondering look at the whilom bibber, he passed into the house, much exercised on the score of the sanity of this family into which his friend Anthony had married.

Outside, the twilight shadows were deepening.

"Shall we home, sweet?" whispered Mr. Wilding. The shadows befriended her, a veil for her sudden confusion. She breathed something that seemed no more than a sigh, though more it seemed to Anthony Wilding.

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CAPTAIN BLOOD

By Rafael Sabatini

CAPTAIN BLOOD HIS ODYSSEY



Contents

<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	THE MESSENGER
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	KIRKE'S DRAGOONS
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	HUMAN MERCHANDISE
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	ARABELLA BISHOP
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	PLANS OF ESCAPE
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	PIRATES
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	SPANIARDS
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	THE REBELS-CONVICT
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	DON DIEGO
<u>CHAPTER XI.</u>	FILIAL PIETY
<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	DON PEDRO SANGRE
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	TORTUGA
<u>CHAPTER XIV.</u>	LEVASSEUR'S HEROICS
<u>CHAPTER XV.</u>	THE RANSOM
<u>CHAPTER XVI.</u>	THE TRAP
<u>CHAPTER XVII.</u>	THE DUPES
<u>CHAPTER XVIII.</u>	THE MILAGROSA
<u>CHAPTER XIX.</u>	THE MEETING
<u>CHAPTER XX.</u>	THIEF AND PIRATE
<u>CHAPTER XXI.</u>	THE SERVICE OF KING JAMES
<u>CHAPTER XXII.</u>	HOSTILITIES
<u>CHAPTER XXIII.</u>	HOSTAGES

<u>CHAPTER XXIV.</u>	WAR
<u>CHAPTER XXV.</u>	THE SERVICE OF KING LOUIS
<u>CHAPTER XXVI.</u>	M. de RIVAROL
<u>CHAPTER XXVII.</u>	CARTAGENA
<u>CHAPTER XXVIII.</u>	THE HONOUR OF M. DE RIVAROL
<u>CHAPTER XXIX.</u>	THE SERVICE OF KING WILLIAM
<u>CHAPTER XXX.</u>	THE LAST FIGHT OF THE ARABELLA
<u>CHAPTER XXXI.</u>	HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR

CHAPTER I. THE MESSENGER

Peter Blood, bachelor of medicine and several other things besides, smoked a pipe and tended the geraniums boxed on the sill of his window above Water Lane in the town of Bridgewater.

Sternly disapproving eyes considered him from a window opposite, but went disregarded. Mr. Blood's attention was divided between his task and the stream of humanity in the narrow street below; a stream which poured for the second time that day towards Castle Field, where earlier in the afternoon Ferguson, the Duke's chaplain, had preached a sermon containing more treason than divinity.

These straggling, excited groups were mainly composed of men with green boughs in their hats and the most ludicrous of weapons in their hands. Some, it is true, shouldered fowling pieces, and here and there a sword was brandished; but more of them were armed with clubs, and most of them trailed the mammoth pikes fashioned out of scythes, as formidable to the eye as they were clumsy to the hand. There were weavers, brewers, carpenters, smiths, masons, bricklayers, cobblers, and representatives of every other of the trades of peace among these improvised men of war. Bridgewater, like Taunton, had yielded so generously of its manhood to the service of the bastard Duke that for any to abstain whose age and strength admitted of his bearing arms was to brand himself a coward or a papist.

Yet Peter Blood, who was not only able to bear arms, but trained and skilled in their use, who was certainly no coward, and a papist only when it suited him, tended his geraniums and smoked his pipe on that warm July evening as indifferently as if nothing were afoot.

One other thing he did. He flung after those war-fevered enthusiasts a line of Horace—a poet for whose work he had early conceived an inordinate affection:

"Quo, quo, scelesti, ruitis?"

And now perhaps you guess why the hot, intrepid blood inherited from the roving sires of his Somersetshire mother remained cool amidst all this frenzied fanatical heat of rebellion; why the turbulent spirit which had forced him once from the sedate academical bonds his father would have imposed upon him, should now remain quiet in the very midst of turbulence. You realize how he regarded these men who were rallying to the banners of liberty—the banners woven by the virgins of Taunton, the girls from the seminaries of Miss Blake and Mrs. Musgrove, who—as the ballad runs—had ripped open their silk petticoats to make colours for King Monmouth's army. That Latin line, contemptuously flung after them as they clattered down the cobbled street, reveals his mind. To him they were fools rushing in wicked frenzy upon their ruin.

You see, he knew too much about this fellow Monmouth and the pretty brown slut who had borne him, to be deceived by the legend of legitimacy, on the strength of which this standard of rebellion had been raised. He had read the absurd proclamation posted at the Cross at Bridgewater—as it had been posted also at Taunton and elsewhere—setting forth that "upon the decease of our Sovereign Lord Charles the Second, the right of succession to the Crown of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland, with the dominions and territories thereunto belonging, did legally descend and devolve upon the most illustrious and high-born Prince James, Duke of Monmouth, son and heir apparent to the said King Charles the Second."

It had moved him to laughter, as had the further announcement that "James Duke of York did first cause the said late King to be poisoned, and immediately thereupon did usurp and invade the

Crown."

He knew not which was the greater lie. For Mr. Blood had spent a third of his life in the Netherlands, where this same James Scott—who now proclaimed himself James the Second, by the grace of God, King, et cetera—first saw the light some six-and-thirty years ago, and he was acquainted with the story current there of the fellow's real paternity. Far from being legitimate—by virtue of a pretended secret marriage between Charles Stuart and Lucy Walter—it was possible that this Monmouth who now proclaimed himself King of England was not even the illegitimate child of the late sovereign. What but ruin and disaster could be the end of this grotesque pretension? How could it be hoped that England would ever swallow such a Perkin? And it was on his behalf, to uphold his fantastic claim, that these West Country clods, led by a few armigerous Whigs, had been seduced into rebellion!

"Quo, quo, scelesti, ruitis?"

He laughed and sighed in one; but the laugh dominated the sigh, for Mr. Blood was unsympathetic, as are most self-sufficient men; and he was very self-sufficient; adversity had taught him so to be. A more tender-hearted man, possessing his vision and his knowledge, might have found cause for tears in the contemplation of these ardent, simple, Nonconformist sheep going forth to the shambles—escorted to the rallying ground on Castle Field by wives and daughters, sweethearts and mothers, sustained by the delusion that they were to take the field in defence of Right, of Liberty, and of Religion. For he knew, as all Bridgewater knew and had known now for some hours, that it was Monmouth's intention to deliver battle that same night. The Duke was to lead a surprise attack upon the Royalist army under Feversham that was now encamped on Sedgemoor. Mr. Blood assumed that Lord Feversham would be equally well-informed, and if in this assumption he was wrong, at least he was justified of it. He

was not to suppose the Royalist commander so indifferently skilled in the trade he followed.

Mr. Blood knocked the ashes from his pipe, and drew back to close his window. As he did so, his glance travelling straight across the street met at last the glance of those hostile eyes that watched him. There were two pairs, and they belonged to the Misses Pitt, two amiable, sentimental maiden ladies who yielded to none in Bridgewater in their worship of the handsome Monmouth.

Mr. Blood smiled and inclined his head, for he was on friendly terms with these ladies, one of whom, indeed, had been for a little while his patient. But there was no response to his greeting. Instead, the eyes gave him back a stare of cold disdain. The smile on his thin lips grew a little broader, a little less pleasant. He understood the reason of that hostility, which had been daily growing in this past week since Monmouth had come to turn the brains of women of all ages. The Misses Pitt, he apprehended, contemned him that he, a young and vigorous man, of a military training which might now be valuable to the Cause, should stand aloof; that he should placidly smoke his pipe and tend his geraniums on this evening of all evenings, when men of spirit were rallying to the Protestant Champion, offering their blood to place him on the throne where he belonged.

If Mr. Blood had condescended to debate the matter with these ladies, he might have urged that having had his fill of wandering and adventuring, he was now embarked upon the career for which he had been originally intended and for which his studies had equipped him; that he was a man of medicine and not of war; a healer, not a slayer. But they would have answered him, he knew, that in such a cause it behoved every man who deemed himself a man to take up arms. They would have pointed out that their own nephew Jeremiah, who was by trade a sailor, the master of a ship—which by an ill-chance for

that young man had come to anchor at this season in Bridgewater Bay—had quitted the helm to snatch up a musket in defence of Right. But Mr. Blood was not of those who argue. As I have said, he was a self-sufficient man.

He closed the window, drew the curtains, and turned to the pleasant, candle-lighted room, and the table on which Mrs. Barlow, his housekeeper, was in the very act of spreading supper. To her, however, he spoke aloud his thought.

"It's out of favour I am with the vinegary virgins over the way."

He had a pleasant, vibrant voice, whose metallic ring was softened and muted by the Irish accent which in all his wanderings he had never lost. It was a voice that could woo seductively and caressingly, or command in such a way as to compel obedience. Indeed, the man's whole nature was in that voice of his. For the rest of him, he was tall and spare, swarthy of tint as a gipsy, with eyes that were startlingly blue in that dark face and under those level black brows. In their glance those eyes, flanking a high-bridged, intrepid nose, were of singular penetration and of a steady haughtiness that went well with his firm lips. Though dressed in black as became his calling, yet it was with an elegance derived from the love of clothes that is peculiar to the adventurer he had been, rather than to the staid medicus he now was. His coat was of fine camlet, and it was laced with silver; there were ruffles of Mechlin at his wrists and a Mechlin cravat encased his throat. His great black periwig was as sedulously curled as any at Whitehall.

Seeing him thus, and perceiving his real nature, which was plain upon him, you might have been tempted to speculate how long such a man would be content to lie by in this little backwater of the world into which chance had swept him some six months ago; how long he would continue to pursue the trade for which he had qualified himself before he had begun to live. Difficult of belief though it may be when

you know his history, previous and subsequent, yet it is possible that but for the trick that Fate was about to play him, he might have continued this peaceful existence, settling down completely to the life of a doctor in this Somersetshire haven. It is possible, but not probable.

He was the son of an Irish medicus, by a Somersetshire lady in whose veins ran the rover blood of the Frobishers, which may account for a certain wildness that had early manifested itself in his disposition. This wildness had profoundly alarmed his father, who for an Irishman was of a singularly peace-loving nature. He had early resolved that the boy should follow his own honourable profession, and Peter Blood, being quick to learn and oddly greedy of knowledge, had satisfied his parent by receiving at the age of twenty the degree of *baccalaureus medicinae* at Trinity College, Dublin. His father survived that satisfaction by three months only. His mother had then been dead some years already. Thus Peter Blood came into an inheritance of some few hundred pounds, with which he had set out to see the world and give for a season a free rein to that restless spirit by which he was imbued. A set of curious chances led him to take service with the Dutch, then at war with France; and a predilection for the sea made him elect that this service should be upon that element. He had the advantage of a commission under the famous de Ruyter, and fought in the Mediterranean engagement in which that great Dutch admiral lost his life.

After the Peace of Nimeguen his movements are obscure. But we know that he spent two years in a Spanish prison, though we do not know how he contrived to get there. It may be due to this that upon his release he took his sword to France, and saw service with the French in their warring upon the Spanish Netherlands. Having reached, at last, the age of thirty-two, his appetite for adventure surfeited, his health having grown indifferent as the result of a neglected wound, he was suddenly overwhelmed by homesickness. He took ship from

Nantes with intent to cross to Ireland. But the vessel being driven by stress of weather into Bridgewater Bay, and Blood's health having grown worse during the voyage, he decided to go ashore there, additionally urged to it by the fact that it was his mother's native soil.

Thus in January of that year 1685 he had come to Bridgewater, possessor of a fortune that was approximately the same as that with which he had originally set out from Dublin eleven years ago.

Because he liked the place, in which his health was rapidly restored to him, and because he conceived that he had passed through adventures enough for a man's lifetime, he determined to settle there, and take up at last the profession of medicine from which he had, with so little profit, broken away.

That is all his story, or so much of it as matters up to that night, six months later, when the battle of Sedgemoor was fought.

Deeming the impending action no affair of his, as indeed it was not, and indifferent to the activity with which Bridgewater was that night agog, Mr. Blood closed his ears to the sounds of it, and went early to bed. He was peacefully asleep long before eleven o'clock, at which hour, as you know, Monmouth rode but with his rebel host along the Bristol Road, circuitously to avoid the marshland that lay directly between himself and the Royal Army. You also know that his numerical advantage—possibly counter-balanced by the greater steadiness of the regular troops on the other side—and the advantages he derived from falling by surprise upon an army that was more or less asleep, were all lost to him by blundering and bad leadership before ever he was at grips with Feversham.

The armies came into collision in the neighbourhood of two o'clock in the morning. Mr. Blood slept undisturbed through the distant boom of cannon. Not until four o'clock, when the sun was rising to dispel the last wisps of mist over that stricken field of battle, did he awaken from

his tranquil slumbers.

He sat up in bed, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and collected himself. Blows were thundering upon the door of his house, and a voice was calling incoherently. This was the noise that had aroused him. Conceiving that he had to do with some urgent obstetrical case, he reached for bedgown and slippers, to go below. On the landing he almost collided with Mrs. Barlow, new-risen and unsightly, in a state of panic. He quieted her cluckings with a word of reassurance, and went himself to open.

There in slanting golden light of the new-risen sun stood a breathless, wild-eyed man and a steaming horse. Smothered in dust and grime, his clothes in disarray, the left sleeve of his doublet hanging in rags, this young man opened his lips to speak, yet for a long moment remained speechless.

In that moment Mr. Blood recognized him for the young shipmaster, Jeremiah Pitt, the nephew of the maiden ladies opposite, one who had been drawn by the general enthusiasm into the vortex of that rebellion. The street was rousing, awakened by the sailor's noisy advent; doors were opening, and lattices were being unlatched for the protrusion of anxious, inquisitive heads.

"Take your time, now," said Mr. Blood. "I never knew speed made by overhaste."

But the wild-eyed lad paid no heed to the admonition. He plunged, headlong, into speech, gasping, breathless.

"It is Lord Gildoy," he panted. "He is sore wounded... at Oglethorpe's Farm by the river. I bore him thither... and... and he sent me for you. Come away! Come away!"

He would have clutched the doctor, and haled him forth by force in bedgown and slippers as he was. But the doctor eluded that too

eager hand.

"To be sure, I'll come," said he. He was distressed. Gildoy had been a very friendly, generous patron to him since his settling in these parts. And Mr. Blood was eager enough to do what he now could to discharge the debt, grieved that the occasion should have arisen, and in such a manner—for he knew quite well that the rash young nobleman had been an active agent of the Duke's. "To be sure, I'll come. But first give me leave to get some clothes and other things that I may need."

"There's no time to lose."

"Be easy now. I'll lose none. I tell ye again, ye'll go quickest by going leisurely. Come in... take a chair..." He threw open the door of a parlour.

Young Pitt waved aside the invitation.

"I'll wait here. Make haste, in God's name." Mr. Blood went off to dress and to fetch a case of instruments.

Questions concerning the precise nature of Lord Gildoy's hurt could wait until they were on their way. Whilst he pulled on his boots, he gave Mrs. Barlow instructions for the day, which included the matter of a dinner he was not destined to eat.

When at last he went forth again, Mrs. Barlow clucking after him like a disgruntled fowl, he found young Pitt smothered in a crowd of scared, half-dressed townsfolk—mostly women—who had come hastening for news of how the battle had sped. The news he gave them was to be read in the lamentations with which they disturbed the morning air.

At sight of the doctor, dressed and booted, the case of instruments tucked under his arm, the messenger disengaged himself from those

who pressed about, shook off his weariness and the two tearful aunts that clung most closely, and seizing the bridle of his horse, he climbed to the saddle.

"Come along, sir," he cried. "Mount behind me."

Mr. Blood, without wasting words, did as he was bidden. Pitt touched the horse with his spur. The little crowd gave way, and thus, upon the crupper of that doubly-laden horse, clinging to the belt of his companion, Peter Blood set out upon his Odyssey. For this Pitt, in whom he beheld no more than the messenger of a wounded rebel gentleman, was indeed the very messenger of Fate.

CHAPTER II. KIRKE'S DRAGOONS

Oglethorpe's farm stood a mile or so to the south of Bridgewater on the right bank of the river. It was a straggling Tudor building showing grey above the ivy that clothed its lower parts. Approaching it now, through the fragrant orchards amid which it seemed to drowse in Arcadian peace beside the waters of the Parrett, sparkling in the morning sunlight, Mr. Blood might have had a difficulty in believing it part of a world tormented by strife and bloodshed.

On the bridge, as they had been riding out of Bridgewater, they had met a vanguard of fugitives from the field of battle, weary, broken men, many of them wounded, all of them terror-stricken, staggering in speedless haste with the last remnants of their strength into the shelter which it was their vain illusion the town would afford them. Eyes glazed with lassitude and fear looked up piteously out of haggard faces at Mr. Blood and his companion as they rode forth; hoarse voices cried a warning that merciless pursuit was not far behind. Undeterred, however, young Pitt rode amain along the dusty road by which these poor fugitives from that swift rout on Sedgemoor came flocking in ever-increasing numbers. Presently he swung aside, and quitting the road took to a pathway that crossed the dewy meadowlands. Even here they met odd groups of these human derelicts, who were scattering in all directions, looking fearfully behind them as they came through the long grass, expecting at every moment to see the red coats of the dragoons.

But as Pitt's direction was a southward one, bringing them ever nearer to Feversham's headquarters, they were presently clear of that

human flotsam and jetsam of the battle, and riding through the peaceful orchards heavy with the ripening fruit that was soon to make its annual yield of cider.

At last they alighted on the kidney stones of the courtyard, and Baynes, the master, of the homestead, grave of countenance and flustered of manner, gave them welcome.

In the spacious, stone-flagged hall, the doctor found Lord Gildoy—a very tall and dark young gentleman, prominent of chin and nose—stretched on a cane day-bed under one of the tall mullioned windows, in the care of Mrs. Baynes and her comely daughter. His cheeks were leaden-hued, his eyes closed, and from his blue lips came with each laboured breath a faint, moaning noise.

Mr. Blood stood for a moment silently considering his patient. He deplored that a youth with such bright hopes in life as Lord Gildoy's should have risked all, perhaps existence itself, to forward the ambition of a worthless adventurer. Because he had liked and honoured this brave lad he paid his case the tribute of a sigh. Then he knelt to his task, ripped away doublet and underwear to lay bare his lordship's mangled side, and called for water and linen and what else he needed for his work.

He was still intent upon it a half-hour later when the dragoons invaded the homestead. The clatter of hooves and hoarse shouts that heralded their approach disturbed him not at all. For one thing, he was not easily disturbed; for another, his task absorbed him. But his lordship, who had now recovered consciousness, showed considerable alarm, and the battle-stained Jeremy Pitt sped to cover in a clothes-press. Baynes was uneasy, and his wife and daughter trembled. Mr. Blood reassured them.

"Why, what's to fear?" he said. "It's a Christian country, this, and Christian men do not make war upon the wounded, nor upon those

who harbour them." He still had, you see, illusions about Christians. He held a glass of cordial, prepared under his directions, to his lordship's lips. "Give your mind peace, my lord. The worst is done."

And then they came rattling and clanking into the stone-flagged hall—a round dozen jack-booted, lobster-coated troopers of the Tangiers Regiment, led by a sturdy, black-browed fellow with a deal of gold lace about the breast of his coat.

Baynes stood his ground, his attitude half-defiant, whilst his wife and daughter shrank away in renewed fear. Mr. Blood, at the head of the day-bed, looked over his shoulder to take stock of the invaders.

The officer barked an order, which brought his men to an attentive halt, then swaggered forward, his gloved hand bearing down the pommel of his sword, his spurs jingling musically as he moved. He announced his authority to the yeoman.

"I am Captain Hobart, of Colonel Kirke's dragoons. What rebels do you harbour?"

The yeoman took alarm at that ferocious truculence. It expressed itself in his trembling voice.

"I... I am no harbourer of rebels, sir. This wounded gentleman...."

"I can see for myself." The Captain stamped forward to the day-bed, and scowled down upon the grey-faced sufferer.

"No need to ask how he came in this state and by his wounds. A damned rebel, and that's enough for me." He flung a command at his dragoons. "Out with him, my lads."

Mr. Blood got between the day-bed and the troopers.

"In the name of humanity, sir!" said he, on a note of anger. "This is England, not Tangiers. The gentleman is in sore case. He may not be

moved without peril to his life."

Captain Hobart was amused.

"Oh, I am to be tender of the lives of these rebels! Odds blood! Do you think it's to benefit his health we're taking him? There's gallows being planted along the road from Weston to Bridgewater, and he'll serve for one of them as well as another. Colonel Kirke'll learn these nonconforming oafs something they'll not forget in generations."

"You're hanging men without trial? Faith, then, it's mistaken I am. We're in Tangiers, after all, it seems, where your regiment belongs."

The Captain considered him with a kindling eye. He looked him over from the soles of his riding-boots to the crown of his periwig. He noted the spare, active frame, the arrogant poise of the head, the air of authority that invested Mr. Blood, and soldier recognized soldier. The Captain's eyes narrowed. Recognition went further.

"Who the hell may you be?" he exploded.

"My name is Blood, sir—Peter Blood, at your service."

"Aye—aye! Codso! That's the name. You were in French service once, were you not?"

If Mr. Blood was surprised, he did not betray it.

"I was."

"Then I remember you—five years ago, or more, you were in Tangiers."

"That is so. I knew your colonel."

"Faith, you may be renewing the acquaintance." The Captain laughed unpleasantly. "What brings you here, sir?"

"This wounded gentleman. I was fetched to attend him. I am a medicus."

"A doctor—you?" Scorn of that lie—as he conceived it—rang in the heavy, hectoring voice.

"Medicinae baccalaureus," said Mr. Blood.

"Don't fling your French at me, man," snapped Hobart. "Speak English!"

Mr. Blood's smile annoyed him.

"I am a physician practising my calling in the town of Bridgewater."

The Captain sneered. "Which you reached by way of Lyme Regis in the following of your bastard Duke."

It was Mr. Blood's turn to sneer. "If your wit were as big as your voice, my dear, it's the great man you'd be by this."

For a moment the dragoon was speechless. The colour deepened in his face.

"You may find me great enough to hang you."

"Faith, yes. Ye've the look and the manners of a hangman. But if you practise your trade on my patient here, you may be putting a rope round your own neck. He's not the kind you may string up and no questions asked. He has the right to trial, and the right to trial by his peers."

"By his peers?"

The Captain was taken aback by these three words, which Mr. Blood had stressed.

"Sure, now, any but a fool or a savage would have asked his name

before ordering him to the gallows. The gentleman is my Lord Gildoy."

And then his lordship spoke for himself, in a weak voice.

"I make no concealment of my association with the Duke of Monmouth. I'll take the consequences. But, if you please, I'll take them after trial—by my peers, as the doctor has said."

The feeble voice ceased, and was followed by a moment's silence. As is common in many blustering men, there was a deal of timidity deep down in Hobart. The announcement of his lordship's rank had touched those depths. A servile upstart, he stood in awe of titles. And he stood in awe of his colonel. Percy Kirke was not lenient with blunderers.

By a gesture he checked his men. He must consider. Mr. Blood, observing his pause, added further matter for his consideration.

"Ye'll be remembering, Captain, that Lord Gildoy will have friends and relatives on the Tory side, who'll have something to say to Colonel Kirke if his lordship should be handled like a common felon. You'll go warily, Captain, or, as I've said, it's a halter for your neck ye'll be weaving this morning."

Captain Hobart swept the warning aside with a bluster of contempt, but he acted upon it none the less. "Take up the day-bed," said he, "and convey him on that to Bridgewater. Lodge him in the gaol until I take order about him."

"He may not survive the journey," Blood remonstrated. "He's in no case to be moved."

"So much the worse for him. My affair is to round up rebels." He confirmed his order by a gesture. Two of his men took up the day-bed, and swung to depart with it.

Gildoy made a feeble effort to put forth a hand towards Mr. Blood.

"Sir," he said, "you leave me in your debt. If I live I shall study how to discharge it."

Mr. Blood bowed for answer; then to the men: "Bear him steadily," he commanded. "His life depends on it."

As his lordship was carried out, the Captain became brisk. He turned upon the yeoman.

"What other cursed rebels do you harbour?"

"None other, sir. His lordship...."

"We've dealt with his lordship for the present. We'll deal with you in a moment when we've searched your house. And, by God, if you've lied to me...." He broke off, snarling, to give an order. Four of his dragoons went out. In a moment they were heard moving noisily in the adjacent room. Meanwhile, the Captain was questing about the hall, sounding the wainscoting with the butt of a pistol.

Mr. Blood saw no profit to himself in lingering.

"By your leave, it's a very good day I'll be wishing you," said he.

"By my leave, you'll remain awhile," the Captain ordered him.

Mr. Blood shrugged, and sat down. "You're tiresome," he said. "I wonder your colonel hasn't discovered it yet."

But the Captain did not heed him. He was stooping to pick up a soiled and dusty hat in which there was pinned a little bunch of oak leaves. It had been lying near the clothes-press in which the unfortunate Pitt had taken refuge. The Captain smiled malevolently. His eyes raked the room, resting first sardonically on the yeoman, then on the two women in the background, and finally on Mr. Blood, who sat with one leg thrown over the other in an attitude of indifference that was far from reflecting his mind.

Then the Captain stepped to the press, and pulled open one of the wings of its massive oaken door. He took the huddled inmate by the collar of his doublet, and lugged him out into the open.

"And who the devil's this?" quoth he. "Another nobleman?"

Mr. Blood had a vision of those gallows of which Captain Hobart had spoken, and of this unfortunate young shipmaster going to adorn one of them, strung up without trial, in the place of the other victim of whom the Captain had been cheated. On the spot he invented not only a title but a whole family for the young rebel.

"Faith, ye've said it, Captain. This is Viscount Pitt, first cousin to Sir Thomas Vernon, who's married to that slut Moll Kirke, sister to your own colonel, and sometime lady in waiting upon King James's queen."

Both the Captain and his prisoner gasped. But whereas thereafter young Pitt discreetly held his peace, the Captain rapped out a nasty oath. He considered his prisoner again.

"He's lying, is he not?" he demanded, seizing the lad by the shoulder, and glaring into his face. "He's rallying rue, by God!"

"If ye believe that," said Blood, "hang him, and see what happens to you."

The dragoon glared at the doctor and then at his prisoner. "Pah!" He thrust the lad into the hands of his men. "Fetch him along to Bridgewater. And make fast that fellow also," he pointed to Baynes. "We'll show him what it means to harbour and comfort rebels."

There was a moment of confusion. Baynes struggled in the grip of the troopers, protesting vehemently. The terrified women screamed until silenced by a greater terror. The Captain strode across to them. He took the girl by the shoulders. She was a pretty, golden-headed

creature, with soft blue eyes that looked up entreatingly, piteously into the face of the dragoon. He leered upon her, his eyes aglow, took her chin in his hand, and set her shuddering by his brutal kiss.

"It's an earnest," he said, smiling grimly. "Let that quiet you, little rebel, till I've done with these rogues."

And he swung away again, leaving her faint and trembling in the arms of her anguished mother. His men stood, grinning, awaiting orders, the two prisoners now fast pinioned.

"Take them away. Let Cornet Drake have charge of them." His smouldering eye again sought the cowering girl. "I'll stay awhile—to search out this place. There may be other rebels hidden here." As an afterthought, he added: "And take this fellow with you." He pointed to Mr. Blood. "Bestir!"

Mr. Blood started out of his musings. He had been considering that in his case of instruments there was a lancet with which he might perform on Captain Hobart a beneficial operation. Beneficial, that is, to humanity. In any case, the dragoon was obviously plethoric and would be the better for a blood-letting. The difficulty lay in making the opportunity. He was beginning to wonder if he could lure the Captain aside with some tale of hidden treasure, when this untimely interruption set a term to that interesting speculation.

He sought to temporize.

"Faith it will suit me very well," said he. "For Bridgewater is my destination, and but that ye detained me I'd have been on my way thither now."

"Your destination there will be the gaol."

"Ah, bah! Ye're surely joking!"

"There's a gallows for you if you prefer it. It's merely a question of

now or later."

Rude hands seized Mr. Blood, and that precious lancet was in the case on the table out of reach. He twisted out of the grip of the dragoons, for he was strong and agile, but they closed with him again immediately, and bore him down. Pinning him to the ground, they tied his wrists behind his back, then roughly pulled him to his feet again.

"Take him away," said Hobart shortly, and turned to issue his orders to the other waiting troopers. "Go search the house, from attic to cellar; then report to me here."

The soldiers trailed out by the door leading to the interior. Mr. Blood was thrust by his guards into the courtyard, where Pitt and Baynes already waited. From the threshold of the hall, he looked back at Captain Hobart, and his sapphire eyes were blazing. On his lips trembled a threat of what he would do to Hobart if he should happen to survive this business. Betimes he remembered that to utter it were probably to extinguish his chance of living to execute it. For to-day the King's men were masters in the West, and the West was regarded as enemy country, to be subjected to the worst horror of war by the victorious side. Here a captain of horse was for the moment lord of life and death.

Under the apple-trees in the orchard Mr. Blood and his companions in misfortune were made fast each to a trooper's stirrup leather. Then at the sharp order of the cornet, the little troop started for Bridgewater. As they set out there was the fullest confirmation of Mr. Blood's hideous assumption that to the dragoons this was a conquered enemy country. There were sounds of rending timbers, of furniture smashed and overthrown, the shouts and laughter of brutal men, to announce that this hunt for rebels was no more than a pretext for pillage and destruction. Finally above all other sounds came the piercing screams of a woman in acutest agony.

Baynes checked in his stride, and swung round writhing, his face ashen. As a consequence he was jerked from his feet by the rope that attached him to the stirrup leather, and he was dragged helplessly a yard or two before the trooper reined in, cursing him foully, and striking him with the flat of his sword.

It came to Mr. Blood, as he trudged forward under the laden apple trees on that fragrant, delicious July morning, that man—as he had long suspected—was the vilest work of God, and that only a fool would set himself up as a healer of a species that was best exterminated.

CHAPTER III. THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE

It was not until two months later—on the 19th of September, if you must have the actual date—that Peter Blood was brought to trial, upon a charge of high treason. We know that he was not guilty of this; but we need not doubt that he was quite capable of it by the time he was indicted. Those two months of inhuman, unspeakable imprisonment had moved his mind to a cold and deadly hatred of King James and his representatives. It says something for his fortitude that in all the circumstances he should still have had a mind at all. Yet, terrible as was the position of this entirely innocent man, he had cause for thankfulness on two counts. The first of these was that he should have been brought to trial at all; the second, that his trial took place on the date named, and not a day earlier. In the very delay which exacerbated him lay—although he did not realize it—his only chance of avoiding the gallows.

Easily, but for the favour of Fortune, he might have been one of those haled, on the morrow of the battle, more or less haphazard from the overflowing gaol at Bridgewater to be summarily hanged in the market-place by the bloodthirsty Colonel Kirke. There was about the Colonel of the Tangiers Regiment a deadly despatch which might have disposed in like fashion of all those prisoners, numerous as they were, but for the vigorous intervention of Bishop Mews, which put an end to the drumhead courts-martial.

Even so, in that first week after Sedgemoor, Kirke and Feversham contrived between them to put to death over a hundred men after a trial so summary as to be no trial at all. They required human freights

for the gibbets with which they were planting the countryside, and they little cared how they procured them or what innocent lives they took. What, after all, was the life of a clod? The executioners were kept busy with rope and chopper and cauldrons of pitch. I spare you the details of that nauseating picture. It is, after all, with the fate of Peter Blood that we are concerned rather than with that of the Monmouth rebels.

He survived to be included in one of those melancholy droves of prisoners who, chained in pairs, were marched from Bridgewater to Taunton. Those who were too sorely wounded to march were conveyed in carts, into which they were brutally crowded, their wounds undressed and festering. Many were fortunate enough to die upon the way. When Blood insisted upon his right to exercise his art so as to relieve some of this suffering, he was accounted importunate and threatened with a flogging. If he had one regret now it was that he had not been out with Monmouth. That, of course, was illogical; but you can hardly expect logic from a man in his position.

His chain companion on that dreadful march was the same Jeremy Pitt who had been the agent of his present misfortunes. The young shipmaster had remained his close companion after their common arrest. Hence, fortuitously, had they been chained together in the crowded prison, where they were almost suffocated by the heat and the stench during those days of July, August, and September.

Scraps of news filtered into the gaol from the outside world. Some may have been deliberately allowed to penetrate. Of these was the tale of Monmouth's execution. It created profoundest dismay amongst those men who were suffering for the Duke and for the religious cause he had professed to champion. Many refused utterly to believe it. A wild story began to circulate that a man resembling Monmouth had offered himself up in the Duke's stead, and that Monmouth survived to come again in glory to deliver Zion and make war upon

Babylon.

Mr. Blood heard that tale with the same indifference with which he had received the news of Monmouth's death. But one shameful thing he heard in connection with this which left him not quite so unmoved, and served to nourish the contempt he was forming for King James. His Majesty had consented to see Monmouth. To have done so unless he intended to pardon him was a thing execrable and damnable beyond belief; for the only other object in granting that interview could be the evilly mean satisfaction of spurning the abject penitence of his unfortunate nephew.

Later they heard that Lord Grey, who after the Duke—indeed, perhaps, before him—was the main leader of the rebellion, had purchased his own pardon for forty thousand pounds. Peter Blood found this of a piece with the rest. His contempt for King James blazed out at last.

"Why, here's a filthy mean creature to sit on a throne. If I had known as much of him before as I know to-day, I don't doubt I should have given cause to be where I am now." And then on a sudden thought: "And where will Lord Gildoy be, do you suppose?" he asked.

Young Pitt, whom he addressed, turned towards him a face from which the ruddy tan of the sea had faded almost completely during those months of captivity. His grey eyes were round and questioning. Blood answered him.

"Sure, now, we've never seen his lordship since that day at Oglethorpe's. And where are the other gentry that were taken?—the real leaders of this plaguey rebellion. Grey's case explains their absence, I think. They are wealthy men that can ransom themselves. Here awaiting the gallows are none but the unfortunates who followed; those who had the honour to lead them go free. It's a curious and instructive reversal of the usual way of these things. Faith, it's an

uncertain world entirely!"

He laughed, and settled down into that spirit of scorn, wrapped in which he stepped later into the great hall of Taunton Castle to take his trial. With him went Pitt and the yeoman Baynes. The three of them were to be tried together, and their case was to open the proceedings of that ghastly day.

The hall, even to the galleries—thronged with spectators, most of whom were ladies—was hung in scarlet; a pleasant conceit, this, of the Lord Chief Justice's, who naturally enough preferred the colour that should reflect his own bloody mind.

At the upper end, on a raised dais, sat the Lords Commissioners, the five judges in their scarlet robes and heavy dark periwigs, Baron Jeffreys of Wem enthroned in the middle place.

The prisoners filed in under guard. The crier called for silence under pain of imprisonment, and as the hum of voices gradually became hushed, Mr. Blood considered with interest the twelve good men and true that composed the jury. Neither good nor true did they look. They were scared, uneasy, and hangdog as any set of thieves caught with their hands in the pockets of their neighbours. They were twelve shaken men, each of whom stood between the sword of the Lord Chief Justice's recent bloodthirsty charge and the wall of his own conscience.

From them Mr. Blood's calm, deliberate glance passed on to consider the Lords Commissioners, and particularly the presiding Judge, that Lord Jeffreys, whose terrible fame had come ahead of him from Dorchester.

He beheld a tall, slight man on the young side of forty, with an oval face that was delicately beautiful. There were dark stains of suffering or sleeplessness under the low-lidded eyes, heightening their

brilliance and their gentle melancholy. The face was very pale, save for the vivid colour of the full lips and the hectic flush on the rather high but inconspicuous cheek-bones. It was something in those lips that marred the perfection of that countenance; a fault, elusive but undeniable, lurked there to belie the fine sensitiveness of those nostrils, the tenderness of those dark, liquid eyes and the noble calm of that pale brow.

The physician in Mr. Blood regarded the man with peculiar interest knowing as he did the agonizing malady from which his lordship suffered, and the amazingly irregular, debauched life that he led in spite of it—perhaps because of it.

"Peter Blood, hold up your hand!"

Abruptly he was recalled to his position by the harsh voice of the clerk of arraigns. His obedience was mechanical, and the clerk droned out the wordy indictment which pronounced Peter Blood a false traitor against the Most Illustrious and Most Excellent Prince, James the Second, by the grace of God, of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland King, his supreme and natural lord. It informed him that, having no fear of God in his heart, but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil, he had failed in the love and true and due natural obedience towards his said lord the King, and had moved to disturb the peace and tranquillity of the kingdom and to stir up war and rebellion to depose his said lord the King from the title, honour, and the regal name of the imperial crown—and much more of the same kind, at the end of all of which he was invited to say whether he was guilty or not guilty. He answered more than was asked.

"It's entirely innocent I am."

A small, sharp-faced man at a table before and to the right of him bounced up. It was Mr. Pollexfen, the Judge-Advocate.

"Are you guilty or not guilty?" snapped this peppery gentleman. "You must take the words."

"Words, is it?" said Peter Blood. "Oh—not guilty." And he went on, addressing himself to the bench. "On this same subject of words, may it please your lordships, I am guilty of nothing to justify any of those words I have heard used to describe me, unless it be of a want of patience at having been closely confined for two months and longer in a foetid gaol with great peril to my health and even life."

Being started, he would have added a deal more; but at this point the Lord Chief Justice interposed in a gentle, rather plaintive voice.

"Look you, sir: because we must observe the common and usual methods of trial, I must interrupt you now. You are no doubt ignorant of the forms of law?"

"Not only ignorant, my lord, but hitherto most happy in that ignorance. I could gladly have forgone this acquaintance with them."

A pale smile momentarily lightened the wistful countenance.

"I believe you. You shall be fully heard when you come to your defence. But anything you say now is altogether irregular and improper."

Enheartened by that apparent sympathy and consideration, Mr. Blood answered thereafter, as was required of him, that he would be tried by God and his country. Whereupon, having prayed to God to send him a good deliverance, the clerk called upon Andrew Baynes to hold up his hand and plead.

From Baynes, who pleaded not guilty, the clerk passed on to Pitt, who boldly owned his guilt. The Lord Chief Justice stirred at that.

"Come; that's better," quoth he, and his four scarlet brethren

noded. "If all were as obstinate as his two fellow-rebels, there would never be an end."

After that ominous interpolation, delivered with an inhuman iciness that sent a shiver through the court, Mr. Pollexfen got to his feet. With great prolixity he stated the general case against the three men, and the particular case against Peter Blood, whose indictment was to be taken first.

The only witness called for the King was Captain Hobart. He testified briskly to the manner in which he had found and taken the three prisoners, together with Lord Gildoy. Upon the orders of his colonel he would have hanged Pitt out of hand, but was restrained by the lies of the prisoner Blood, who led him to believe that Pitt was a peer of the realm and a person of consideration.

As the Captain's evidence concluded, Lord Jeffreys looked across at Peter Blood.

"Will the prisoner Blood ask the witness any questions?"

"None, my lord. He has correctly related what occurred."

"I am glad to have your admission of that without any of the prevarications that are usual in your kind. And I will say this, that here prevarication would avail you little. For we always have the truth in the end. Be sure of that."

Baynes and Pitt similarly admitted the accuracy of the Captain's evidence, whereupon the scarlet figure of the Lord Chief Justice heaved a sigh of relief.

"This being so, let us get on, in God's name; for we have much to do." There was now no trace of gentleness in his voice. It was brisk and rasping, and the lips through which it passed were curved in scorn. "I take it, Mr. Pollexfen, that the wicked treason of these three

rogues being established—indeed, admitted by them—there is no more to be said."

Peter Blood's voice rang out crisply, on a note that almost seemed to contain laughter.

"May it please your lordship, but there's a deal more to be said."

His lordship looked at him, first in blank amazement at his audacity, then gradually with an expression of dull anger. The scarlet lips fell into unpleasant, cruel lines that transfigured the whole countenance.

"How now, rogue? Would you waste our time with idle subterfuge?"

"I would have your lordship and the gentlemen of the jury hear me on my defence, as your lordship promised that I should be heard."

"Why, so you shall, villain; so you shall." His lordship's voice was harsh as a file. He writhed as he spoke, and for an instant his features were distorted. A delicate dead-white hand, on which the veins showed blue, brought forth a handkerchief with which he dabbed his lips and then his brow. Observing him with his physician's eye, Peter Blood judged him a prey to the pain of the disease that was destroying him. "So you shall. But after the admission made, what defence remains?"

"You shall judge, my lord."

"That is the purpose for which I sit here."

"And so shall you, gentlemen." Blood looked from judge to jury. The latter shifted uncomfortably under the confident flash of his blue eyes. Lord Jeffreys's bullying charge had whipped the spirit out of them. Had they, themselves, been prisoners accused of treason, he could not have arraigned them more ferociously.

Peter Blood stood boldly forward, erect, self-possessed, and

saturnine. He was freshly shaven, and his periwig, if out of curl, was at least carefully combed and dressed.

"Captain Hobart has testified to what he knows—that he found me at Oglethorpe's Farm on the Monday morning after the battle at Weston. But he has not told you what I did there."

Again the Judge broke in. "Why, what should you have been doing there in the company of rebels, two of whom—Lord Gildoy and your fellow there—have already admitted their guilt?"

"That is what I beg leave to tell your lordship."

"I pray you do, and in God's name be brief, man. For if I am to be troubled with the say of all you traitor dogs, I may sit here until the Spring Assizes."

"I was there, my lord, in my quality as a physician, to dress Lord Gildoy's wounds."

"What's this? Do you tell us that you are a physician?"

"A graduate of Trinity College, Dublin."

"Good God!" cried Lord Jeffreys, his voice suddenly swelling, his eyes upon the jury. "What an impudent rogue is this! You heard the witness say that he had known him in Tangiers some years ago, and that he was then an officer in the French service. You heard the prisoner admit that the witness had spoken the truth?"

"Why, so he had. Yet what I am telling you is also true, so it is. For some years I was a soldier; but before that I was a physician, and I have been one again since January last, established in Bridgewater, as I can bring a hundred witnesses to prove."

"There's not the need to waste our time with that. I will convict you out of your own rascally mouth. I will ask you only this: How came you,

who represent yourself as a physician peacefully following your calling in the town of Bridgewater, to be with the army of the Duke of Monmouth?"

"I was never with that army. No witness has sworn to that, and I dare swear that no witness will. I never was attracted to the late rebellion. I regarded the adventure as a wicked madness. I take leave to ask your lordship" (his brogue became more marked than ever) "what should I, who was born and bred a papist, be doing in the army of the Protestant Champion?"

"A papist thou?" The judge gloomed on him a moment. "Art more like a snivelling, canting Jack Presbyterian. I tell you, man, I can smell a Presbyterian forty miles."

"Then I'll take leave to marvel that with so keen a nose your lordship can't smell a papist at four paces."

There was a ripple of laughter in the galleries, instantly quelled by the fierce glare of the Judge and the voice of the crier.

Lord Jeffreys leaned farther forward upon his desk. He raised that delicate white hand, still clutching its handkerchief, and sprouting from a froth of lace.

"We'll leave your religion out of account for the moment, friend," said he. "But mark what I say to you." With a minatory forefinger he beat the time of his words. "Know, friend, that there is no religion a man can pretend to can give a countenance to lying. Thou hast a precious immortal soul, and there is nothing in the world equal to it in value. Consider that the great God of Heaven and Earth, before Whose tribunal thou and we and all persons are to stand at the last day, will take vengeance on thee for every falsehood, and justly strike thee into eternal flames, make thee drop into the bottomless pit of fire and brimstone, if thou offer to deviate the least from the truth and

nothing but the truth. For I tell thee God is not mocked. On that I charge you to answer truthfully. How came you to be taken with these rebels?"

Peter Blood gaped at him a moment in consternation. The man was incredible, unreal, fantastic, a nightmare judge. Then he collected himself to answer.

"I was summoned that morning to succour Lord Gildoy, and I conceived it to be the duty imposed upon me by my calling to answer that summons."

"Did you so?" The Judge, terrible now of aspect—his face white, his twisted lips red as the blood for which they thirsted—glared upon him in evil mockery. Then he controlled himself as if by an effort. He sighed. He resumed his earlier gentle plaintiveness. "Lord! How you waste our time. But I'll have patience with you. Who summoned you?"

"Master Pitt there, as he will testify."

"Oh! Master Pitt will testify—he that is himself a traitor self-confessed. Is that your witness?"

"There is also Master Baynes here, who can answer to it."

"Good Master Baynes will have to answer for himself; and I doubt not he'll be greatly exercised to save his own neck from a halter. Come, come, sir; are these your only witnesses?"

"I could bring others from Bridgewater, who saw me set out that morning upon the crupper of Master Pitt's horse."

His lordship smiled. "It will not be necessary. For, mark me, I do not intend to waste more time on you. Answer me only this: When Master Pitt, as you pretend, came to summon you, did you know that he had been, as you have heard him confess, of Monmouth's following?"

"I did, My lord."

"You did! Ha!" His lordship looked at the cringing jury and uttered a short, stabbing laugh. "Yet in spite of that you went with him?"

"To succour a wounded man, as was my sacred duty."

"Thy sacred duty, sayest thou?" Fury blazed out of him again. "Good God! What a generation of vipers do we live in! Thy sacred duty, rogue, is to thy King and to God. But let it pass. Did he tell you whom it was that you were desired to succour?"

"Lord Gildoy—yes."

"And you knew that Lord Gildoy had been wounded in the battle, and on what side he fought?"

"I knew."

"And yet, being, as you would have us believe, a true and loyal subject of our Lord the King, you went to succour him?"

Peter Blood lost patience for a moment. "My business, my lord, was with his wounds, not with his politics."

A murmur from the galleries and even from the jury approved him. It served only to drive his terrible judge into a deeper fury.

"Jesus God! Was there ever such an impudent villain in the world as thou?" He swung, white-faced, to the jury. "I hope, gentlemen of the jury, you take notice of the horrible carriage of this traitor rogue, and withal you cannot but observe the spirit of this sort of people, what a villainous and devilish one it is. Out of his own mouth he has said enough to hang him a dozen times. Yet is there more. Answer me this, sir: When you cozened Captain Hobart with your lies concerning the station of this other traitor Pitt, what was your business then?"

"To save him from being hanged without trial, as was threatened."

"What concern was it of yours whether or how the wretch was hanged?"

"Justice is the concern of every loyal subject, for an injustice committed by one who holds the King's commission is in some sense a dishonour to the King's majesty."

It was a shrewd, sharp thrust aimed at the jury, and it reveals, I think, the alertness of the man's mind, his self-possession ever steadiest in moments of dire peril. With any other jury it must have made the impression that he hoped to make. It may even have made its impression upon these poor pusillanimous sheep. But the dread judge was there to efface it.

He gasped aloud, then flung himself violently forward.

"Lord of Heaven!" he stormed. "Was there ever such a canting, impudent rascal? But I have done with you. I see thee, villain, I see thee already with a halter round thy neck."

Having spoken so, gloatingly, evilly, he sank back again, and composed himself. It was as if a curtain fell. All emotion passed again from his pale face. Back to invest it again came that gentle melancholy. Speaking after a moment's pause, his voice was soft, almost tender, yet every word of it carried sharply through that hushed court.

"If I know my own heart it is not in my nature to desire the hurt of anybody, much less to delight in his eternal perdition. It is out of compassion for you that I have used all these words—because I would have you have some regard for your immortal soul, and not ensure its damnation by obdurately persisting in falsehood and prevarication. But I see that all the pains in the world, and all compassion and charity are lost upon you, and therefore I will say no

more to you." He turned again to the jury that countenance of wistful beauty. "Gentlemen, I must tell you for law, of which we are the judges, and not you, that if any person be in actual rebellion against the King, and another person—who really and actually was not in rebellion—does knowingly receive, harbour, comfort, or succour him, such a person is as much a traitor as he who indeed bore arms. We are bound by our oaths and consciences to declare to you what is law, and you are bound by your oaths and your consciences to deliver and to declare to us by your verdict the truth of the facts."

Upon that he proceeded to his summing-up, showing how Baynes and Blood were both guilty of treason, the first for having harboured a traitor, the second for having succoured that traitor by dressing his wounds. He interlarded his address by sycophantic allusions to his natural lord and lawful sovereign, the King, whom God had set over them, and with vituperations of Nonconformity and of Monmouth, of whom—in his own words—he dared boldly affirm that the meanest subject within the kingdom that was of legitimate birth had a better title to the crown. "Jesus God! That ever we should have such a generation of vipers among us," he burst out in rhetorical frenzy. And then he sank back as if exhausted by the violence he had used. A moment he was still, dabbing his lips again; then he moved uneasily; once more his features were twisted by pain, and in a few snarling, almost incoherent words he dismissed the jury to consider the verdict.

Peter Blood had listened to the intemperate, the blasphemous, and almost obscene invective of that tirade with a detachment that afterwards, in retrospect, surprised him. He was so amazed by the man, by the reactions taking place in him between mind and body, and by his methods of bullying and coercing the jury into bloodshed, that he almost forgot that his own life was at stake.

The absence of that dazed jury was a brief one. The verdict found the three prisoners guilty. Peter Blood looked round the scarlet-hung

court. For an instant that foam of white faces seemed to heave before him. Then he was himself again, and a voice was asking him what he had to say for himself, why sentence of death should not be passed upon him, being convicted of high treason.

He laughed, and his laugh jarred uncannily upon the deathly stillness of the court. It was all so grotesque, such a mockery of justice administered by that wistful-eyed jack-pudding in scarlet, who was himself a mockery—the venal instrument of a brutally spiteful and vindictive king. His laughter shocked the austerity of that same jack-pudding.

"Do you laugh, sirrah, with the rope about your neck, upon the very threshold of that eternity you are so suddenly to enter into?"

And then Blood took his revenge.

"Faith, it's in better case I am for mirth than your lordship. For I have this to say before you deliver judgment. Your lordship sees me—an innocent man whose only offence is that I practised charity—with a halter round my neck. Your lordship, being the justiciar, speaks with knowledge of what is to come to me. I, being a physician, may speak with knowledge of what is to come to your lordship. And I tell you that I would not now change places with you—that I would not exchange this halter that you fling about my neck for the stone that you carry in your body. The death to which you may doom me is a light pleasantry by contrast with the death to which your lordship has been doomed by that Great Judge with whose name your lordship makes so free."

The Lord Chief Justice sat stiffly upright, his face ashen, his lips twitching, and whilst you might have counted ten there was no sound in that paralyzed court after Peter Blood had finished speaking. All those who knew Lord Jeffreys regarded this as the lull before the storm, and braced themselves for the explosion. But none came.

Slowly, faintly, the colour crept back into that ashen face. The scarlet figure lost its rigidity, and bent forward. His lordship began to speak. In a muted voice and briefly—much more briefly than his wont on such occasions and in a manner entirely mechanical, the manner of a man whose thoughts are elsewhere while his lips are speaking—he delivered sentence of death in the prescribed form, and without the least allusion to what Peter Blood had said. Having delivered it, he sank back exhausted, his eyes half-closed, his brow agleam with sweat.

The prisoners filed out.

Mr. Pollexfen—a Whig at heart despite the position of Judge-Advocate which he occupied—was overheard by one of the jurors to mutter in the ear of a brother counsel:

"On my soul, that swarthy rascal has given his lordship a scare. It's a pity he must hang. For a man who can frighten Jeffreys should go far."

CHAPTER IV. HUMAN MERCHANDISE

Mr. Pollexfen was at one and the same time right and wrong—a condition much more common than is generally supposed.

He was right in his indifferently expressed thought that a man whose mien and words could daunt such a lord of terror as Jeffreys, should by the dominance of his nature be able to fashion himself a considerable destiny. He was wrong—though justifiably so—in his assumption that Peter Blood must hang.

I have said that the tribulations with which he was visited as a result of his errand of mercy to Oglethorpe's Farm contained—although as yet he did not perceive it, perhaps—two sources of thankfulness: one that he was tried at all; the other that his trial took place on the 19th of September. Until the 18th, the sentences passed by the court of the Lords Commissioners had been carried out literally and expeditiously. But on the morning of the 19th there arrived at Taunton a courier from Lord Sunderland, the Secretary of State, with a letter for Lord Jeffreys wherein he was informed that His Majesty had been graciously pleased to command that eleven hundred rebels should be furnished for transportation to some of His Majesty's southern plantations, Jamaica, Barbados, or any of the Leeward Islands.

You are not to suppose that this command was dictated by any sense of mercy. Lord Churchill was no more than just when he spoke of the King's heart as being as insensible as marble. It had been realized that in these wholesale hangings there was taking place a reckless waste of valuable material. Slaves were urgently required in

the plantations, and a healthy, vigorous man could be reckoned worth at least from ten to fifteen pounds. Then, there were at court many gentlemen who had some claim or other upon His Majesty's bounty. Here was a cheap and ready way to discharge these claims. From amongst the convicted rebels a certain number might be set aside to be bestowed upon those gentlemen, so that they might dispose of them to their own profit.

My Lord Sunderland's letter gives precise details of the royal munificence in human flesh. A thousand prisoners were to be distributed among some eight courtiers and others, whilst a postscriptum to his lordship's letter asked for a further hundred to be held at the disposal of the Queen. These prisoners were to be transported at once to His Majesty's southern plantations, and to be kept there for the space of ten years before being restored to liberty, the parties to whom they were assigned entering into security to see that transportation was immediately effected.

We know from Lord Jeffreys's secretary how the Chief Justice inveighed that night in drunken frenzy against this misplaced clemency to which His Majesty had been persuaded. We know how he attempted by letter to induce the King to reconsider his decision. But James adhered to it. It was—apart from the indirect profit he derived from it—a clemency full worthy of him. He knew that to spare lives in this fashion was to convert them into living deaths. Many must succumb to torment to the horrors of West Indian slavery, and so be the envy of their surviving companions.

Thus it happened that Peter Blood, and with him Jeremy Pitt and Andrew Baynes, instead of being hanged, drawn, and quartered as their sentences directed, were conveyed to Bristol and there shipped with some fifty others aboard the Jamaica Merchant. From close confinement under hatches, ill-nourishment and foul water, a sickness broke out amongst them, of which eleven died. Amongst these was

the unfortunate yeoman from Oglethorpe's Farm, brutally torn from his quiet homestead amid the fragrant cider orchards for no other sin but that he had practised mercy.

The mortality might have been higher than it was but for Peter Blood. At first the master of the Jamaica Merchant had answered with oaths and threats the doctor's expostulations against permitting men to perish in this fashion, and his insistence that he should be made free of the medicine chest and given leave to minister to the sick. But presently Captain Gardner came to see that he might be brought to task for these too heavy losses of human merchandise and because of this he was belatedly glad to avail himself of the skill of Peter Blood. The doctor went to work zealously and zestfully, and wrought so ably that, by his ministrations and by improving the condition of his fellow-captives, he checked the spread of the disease.

Towards the middle of December the Jamaica Merchant dropped anchor in Carlisle Bay, and put ashore the forty-two surviving rebels-convict.

If these unfortunates had imagined—as many of them appear to have done—that they were coming into some wild, savage country, the prospect, of which they had a glimpse before they were hustled over the ship's side into the waiting boats, was enough to correct the impression. They beheld a town of sufficiently imposing proportions composed of houses built upon European notions of architecture, but without any of the huddle usual in European cities. The spire of a church rose dominantly above the red roofs, a fort guarded the entrance of the wide harbour, with guns thrusting their muzzles between the crenels, and the wide facade of Government House revealed itself dominantly placed on a gentle hill above the town. This hill was vividly green as is an English hill in April, and the day was such a day as April gives to England, the season of heavy rains being newly ended.

On a wide cobbled space on the sea front they found a guard of red-coated militia drawn up to receive them, and a crowd—attracted by their arrival—which in dress and manner differed little from a crowd in a seaport at home save that it contained fewer women and a great number of negroes.

To inspect them, drawn up there on the mole, came Governor Steed, a short, stout, red-faced gentleman, in blue taffetas burdened by a prodigious amount of gold lace, who limped a little and leaned heavily upon a stout ebony cane. After him, in the uniform of a colonel of the Barbados Militia, rolled a tall, corpulent man who towered head and shoulders above the Governor, with malevolence plainly written on his enormous yellowish countenance. At his side, and contrasting oddly with his grossness, moving with an easy stripling grace, came a slight young lady in a modish riding-gown. The broad brim of a grey hat with scarlet sweep of ostrich plume shaded an oval face upon which the climate of the Tropic of Cancer had made no impression so delicately fair was its complexion. Ringlets of red-brown hair hung to her shoulders. Frankness looked out from her hazel eyes which were set wide; commiseration repressed now the mischievousness that normally inhabited her fresh young mouth.

Peter Blood caught himself staring in a sort of amazement at that piquant face, which seemed here so out of place, and finding his stare returned, he shifted uncomfortably. He grew conscious of the sorry figure that he cut. Unwashed, with rank and matted hair and a disfiguring black beard upon his face, and the erstwhile splendid suit of black camlet in which he had been taken prisoner now reduced to rags that would have disgraced a scarecrow, he was in no case for inspection by such dainty eyes as these. Nevertheless, they continued to inspect him with round-eyed, almost childlike wonder and pity. Their owner put forth a hand to touch the scarlet sleeve of her companion, whereupon with an ill-tempered grunt the man swung his great bulk round so that he directly confronted her.

Looking up into his face, she was speaking to him earnestly, but the Colonel plainly gave her no more than the half of his attention. His little beady eyes, closely flanking a fleshly, pendulous nose, had passed from her and were fixed upon fair-haired, sturdy young Pitt, who was standing beside Blood.

The Governor had also come to a halt, and for a moment now that little group of three stood in conversation. What the lady said, Peter could not hear at all, for she lowered her voice; the Colonel's reached him in a confused rumble, but the Governor was neither considerate nor indistinct; he had a high-pitched voice which carried far, and believing himself witty, he desired to be heard by all.

"But, my dear Colonel Bishop, it is for you to take first choice from this dainty nosegay, and at your own price. After that we'll send the rest to auction."

Colonel Bishop nodded his acknowledgment. He raised his voice in answering. "Your excellency is very good. But, faith, they're a weedy lot, not likely to be of much value in the plantation." His beady eyes scanned them again, and his contempt of them deepened the malevolence of his face. It was as if he were annoyed with them for being in no better condition. Then he beckoned forward Captain Gardner, the master of the Jamaica Merchant, and for some minutes stood in talk with him over a list which the latter produced at his request.

Presently he waved aside the list and advanced alone towards the rebels-convict, his eyes considering them, his lips pursed. Before the young Somersetshire shipmaster he came to a halt, and stood an instant pondering him. Then he fingered the muscles of the young man's arm, and bade him open his mouth that he might see his teeth. He pursed his coarse lips again and nodded.

He spoke to Gardner over his shoulder.

"Fifteen pounds for this one."

The Captain made a face of dismay. "Fifteen pounds! It isn't half what I meant to ask for him."

"It is double what I had meant to give," grunted the Colonel.

"But he would be cheap at thirty pounds, your honour."

"I can get a negro for that. These white swine don't live. They're not fit for the labour."

Gardner broke into protestations of Pitt's health, youth, and vigour. It was not a man he was discussing; it was a beast of burden. Pitt, a sensitive lad, stood mute and unmoving. Only the ebb and flow of colour in his cheeks showed the inward struggle by which he maintained his self-control.

Peter Blood was nauseated by the loathsome haggle.

In the background, moving slowly away down the line of prisoners, went the lady in conversation with the Governor, who smirked and preened himself as he limped beside her. She was unconscious of the loathly business the Colonel was transacting. Was she, wondered Blood, indifferent to it?

Colonel Bishop swung on his heel to pass on.

"I'll go as far as twenty pounds. Not a penny more, and it's twice as much as you are like to get from Crabston."

Captain Gardner, recognizing the finality of the tone, sighed and yielded. Already Bishop was moving down the line. For Mr. Blood, as for a weedy youth on his left, the Colonel had no more than a glance of contempt. But the next man, a middle-aged Colossus named Wolverstone, who had lost an eye at Sedgemoor, drew his regard,

and the haggling was recommenced.

Peter Blood stood there in the brilliant sunshine and inhaled the fragrant air, which was unlike any air that he had ever breathed. It was laden with a strange perfume, blend of logwood flower, pimento, and aromatic cedars. He lost himself in unprofitable speculations born of that singular fragrance. He was in no mood for conversation, nor was Pitt, who stood dumbly at his side, and who was afflicted mainly at the moment by the thought that he was at last about to be separated from this man with whom he had stood shoulder to shoulder throughout all these troublous months, and whom he had come to love and depend upon for guidance and sustenance. A sense of loneliness and misery pervaded him by contrast with which all that he had endured seemed as nothing. To Pitt, this separation was the poignant climax of all his sufferings.

Other buyers came and stared at them, and passed on. Blood did not heed them. And then at the end of the line there was a movement. Gardner was speaking in a loud voice, making an announcement to the general public of buyers that had waited until Colonel Bishop had taken his choice of that human merchandise. As he finished, Blood, looking in his direction, noticed that the girl was speaking to Bishop, and pointing up the line with a silver-hilted riding-whip she carried. Bishop shaded his eyes with his hand to look in the direction in which she was pointing. Then slowly, with his ponderous, rolling gait, he approached again accompanied by Gardner, and followed by the lady and the Governor.

On they came until the Colonel was abreast of Blood. He would have passed on, but that the lady tapped his arm with her whip.

"But this is the man I meant," she said.

"This one?" Contempt rang in the voice. Peter Blood found himself staring into a pair of beady brown eyes sunk into a yellow, fleshy face

like currants into a dumpling. He felt the colour creeping into his face under the insult of that contemptuous inspection. "Bah! A bag of bones. What should I do with him?"

He was turning away when Gardner interposed.

"He maybe lean, but he's tough; tough and healthy. When half of them was sick and the other half sickening, this rogue kept his legs and doctored his fellows. But for him there'd ha' been more deaths than there was. Say fifteen pounds for him, Colonel. That's cheap enough. He's tough, I tell your honour—tough and strong, though he be lean. And he's just the man to bear the heat when it comes. The climate'll never kill him."

There came a chuckle from Governor Steed. "You hear, Colonel. Trust your niece. Her sex knows a man when it sees one." And he laughed, well pleased with his wit.

But he laughed alone. A cloud of annoyance swept across the face of the Colonel's niece, whilst the Colonel himself was too absorbed in the consideration of this bargain to heed the Governor's humour. He twisted his lip a little, stroking his chin with his hand the while. Jeremy Pitt had almost ceased to breathe.

"I'll give you ten pounds for him," said the Colonel at last.

Peter Blood prayed that the offer might be rejected. For no reason that he could have given you, he was taken with repugnance at the thought of becoming the property of this gross animal, and in some sort the property of that hazel-eyed young girl. But it would need more than repugnance to save him from his destiny. A slave is a slave, and has no power to shape his fate. Peter Blood was sold to Colonel Bishop—a disdainful buyer—for the ignominious sum of ten pounds.

CHAPTER V. ARABELLA BISHOP

One sunny morning in January, about a month after the arrival of the Jamaica Merchant at Bridgetown, Miss Arabella Bishop rode out from her uncle's fine house on the heights to the northwest of the city. She was attended by two negroes who trotted after her at a respectful distance, and her destination was Government House, whither she went to visit the Governor's lady, who had lately been ailing. Reaching the summit of a gentle, grassy slope, she met a tall, lean man dressed in a sober, gentlemanly fashion, who was walking in the opposite direction. He was a stranger to her, and strangers were rare enough in the island. And yet in some vague way he did not seem quite a stranger.

Miss Arabella drew rein, affecting to pause that she might admire the prospect, which was fair enough to warrant it. Yet out of the corner of those hazel eyes she scanned this fellow very attentively as he came nearer. She corrected her first impression of his dress. It was sober enough, but hardly gentlemanly. Coat and breeches were of plain homespun; and if the former sat so well upon him it was more by virtue of his natural grace than by that of tailoring. His stockings were of cotton, harsh and plain, and the broad castor, which he respectfully doffed as he came up with her, was an old one unadorned by band or feather. What had seemed to be a periwig at a little distance was now revealed for the man's own lustrous coiling black hair.

Out of a brown, shaven, saturnine face two eyes that were startlingly blue considered her gravely. The man would have passed on but that she detained him.

"I think I know you, sir," said she.

Her voice was crisp and boyish, and there was something of boyishness in her manner—if one can apply the term to so dainty a lady. It arose perhaps from an ease, a directness, which disdained the artifices of her sex, and set her on good terms with all the world. To this it may be due that Miss Arabella had reached the age of five and twenty not merely unmarried but unwooed. She used with all men a sisterly frankness which in itself contains a quality of aloofness, rendering it difficult for any man to become her lover.

Her negroes had halted at some distance in the rear, and they squatted now upon the short grass until it should be her pleasure to proceed upon her way.

The stranger came to a standstill upon being addressed.

"A lady should know her own property," said he.

"My property?"

"Your uncle's, leastways. Let me present myself. I am called Peter Blood, and I am worth precisely ten pounds. I know it because that is the sum your uncle paid for me. It is not every man has the same opportunities of ascertaining his real value."

She recognized him then. She had not seen him since that day upon the mole a month ago, and that she should not instantly have known him again despite the interest he had then aroused in her is not surprising, considering the change he had wrought in his appearance, which now was hardly that of a slave.

"My God!" said she. "And you can laugh!"

"It's an achievement," he admitted. "But then, I have not fared as ill as I might."

"I have heard of that," said she.

What she had heard was that this rebel-convict had been discovered to be a physician. The thing had come to the ears of Governor Steed, who suffered damnably from the gout, and Governor Steed had borrowed the fellow from his purchaser. Whether by skill or good fortune, Peter Blood had afforded the Governor that relief which his excellency had failed to obtain from the ministrations of either of the two physicians practising in Bridgetown. Then the Governor's lady had desired him to attend her for the megrims. Mr. Blood had found her suffering from nothing worse than peevishness—the result of a natural petulance aggravated by the dulness of life in Barbados to a lady of her social aspirations. But he had prescribed for her none the less, and she had conceived herself the better for his prescription. After that the fame of him had gone through Bridgetown, and Colonel Bishop had found that there was more profit to be made out of this new slave by leaving him to pursue his profession than by setting him to work on the plantations, for which purpose he had been originally acquired.

"It is yourself, madam, I have to thank for my comparatively easy and clean condition," said Mr. Blood, "and I am glad to take this opportunity of doing so."

The gratitude was in his words rather than in his tone. Was he mocking, she wondered, and looked at him with the searching frankness that another might have found disconcerting. He took the glance for a question, and answered it.

"If some other planter had bought me," he explained, "it is odds that the facts of my shining abilities might never have been brought to light, and I should be hewing and hoeing at this moment like the poor wretches who were landed with me."

"And why do you thank me for that? It was my uncle who bought

you."

"But he would not have done so had you not urged him. I perceived your interest. At the time I resented it."

"You resented it?" There was a challenge in her boyish voice.

"I have had no lack of experiences of this mortal life; but to be bought and sold was a new one, and I was hardly in the mood to love my purchaser."

"If I urged you upon my uncle, sir, it was that I commiserated you." There was a slight severity in her tone, as if to reprove the mixture of mockery and flippancy in which he seemed to be speaking.

She proceeded to explain herself. "My uncle may appear to you a hard man. No doubt he is. They are all hard men, these planters. It is the life, I suppose. But there are others here who are worse. There is Mr. Crabston, for instance, up at Speightstown. He was there on the mole, waiting to buy my uncle's leavings, and if you had fallen into his hands... A dreadful man. That is why."

He was a little bewildered.

"This interest in a stranger..." he began. Then changed the direction of his probe. "But there were others as deserving of commiseration."

"You did not seem quite like the others."

"I am not," said he.

"Oh!" She stared at him, bristling a little. "You have a good opinion of yourself."

"On the contrary. The others are all worthy rebels. I am not. That is the difference. I was one who had not the wit to see that England requires purifying. I was content to pursue a doctor's trade in

Bridgewater whilst my betters were shedding their blood to drive out an unclean tyrant and his rascally crew."

"Sir!" she checked him. "I think you are talking treason."

"I hope I am not obscure," said he.

"There are those here who would have you flogged if they heard you."

"The Governor would never allow it. He has the gout, and his lady has the megrims."

"Do you depend upon that?" She was frankly scornful.

"You have certainly never had the gout; probably not even the megrims," said he.

She made a little impatient movement with her hand, and looked away from him a moment, out to sea. Quite suddenly she looked at him again; and now her brows were knit.

"But if you are not a rebel, how come you here?"

He saw the thing she apprehended, and he laughed. "Faith, now, it's a long story," said he.

"And one perhaps that you would prefer not to tell?"

Briefly on that he told it her.

"My God! What an infamy!" she cried, when he had done.

"Oh, it's a sweet country England under King James! There's no need to commiserate me further. All things considered I prefer Barbados. Here at least one can believe in God."

He looked first to right, then to left as he spoke, from the distant

shadowy bulk of Mount Hillbay to the limitless ocean ruffled by the winds of heaven. Then, as if the fair prospect rendered him conscious of his own littleness and the insignificance of his woes, he fell thoughtful.

"Is that so difficult elsewhere?" she asked him, and she was very grave.

"Men make it so."

"I see." She laughed a little, on a note of sadness, it seemed to him. "I have never deemed Barbados the earthly mirror of heaven," she confessed. "But no doubt you know your world better than I." She touched her horse with her little silver-hilted whip. "I congratulate you on this easing of your misfortunes."

He bowed, and she moved on. Her negroes sprang up, and went trotting after her.

Awhile Peter Blood remained standing there, where she left him, conning the sunlit waters of Carlisle Bay below, and the shipping in that spacious haven about which the gulls were fluttering noisily.

It was a fair enough prospect, he reflected, but it was a prison, and in announcing that he preferred it to England, he had indulged that almost laudable form of boasting which lies in belittling our misadventures.

He turned, and resuming his way, went off in long, swinging strides towards the little huddle of huts built of mud and wattles—a miniature village enclosed in a stockade which the plantation slaves inhabited, and where he, himself, was lodged with them.

Through his mind sang the line of Lovelace:

"Stone walls do not a prison make,

Nor iron bars a cage."

But he gave it a fresh meaning, the very converse of that which its author had intended. A prison, he reflected, was a prison, though it had neither walls nor bars, however spacious it might be. And as he realized it that morning so he was to realize it increasingly as time sped on. Daily he came to think more of his clipped wings, of his exclusion from the world, and less of the fortuitous liberty he enjoyed. Nor did the contrasting of his comparatively easy lot with that of his unfortunate fellow-convicts bring him the satisfaction a differently constituted mind might have derived from it. Rather did the contemplation of their misery increase the bitterness that was gathering in his soul.

Of the forty-two who had been landed with him from the Jamaica Merchant, Colonel Bishop had purchased no less than twenty-five. The remainder had gone to lesser planters, some of them to Speightstown, and others still farther north. What may have been the lot of the latter he could not tell, but amongst Bishop's slaves Peter Blood came and went freely, sleeping in their quarters, and their lot he knew to be a brutalizing misery. They toiled in the sugar plantations from sunrise to sunset, and if their labours flagged, there were the whips of the overseer and his men to quicken them. They went in rags, some almost naked; they dwelt in squalor, and they were ill-nourished on salted meat and maize dumplings—food which to many of them was for a season at least so nauseating that two of them sickened and died before Bishop remembered that their lives had a certain value in labour to him and yielded to Blood's intercessions for a better care of such as fell ill. To curb insubordination, one of them who had rebelled against Kent, the brutal overseer, was lashed to death by negroes under his comrades' eyes, and another who had been so misguided as to run away into the woods was tracked, brought back, flogged, and then branded on the forehead with the letters "F. T.," that all might know him for a fugitive traitor as long as

he lived. Fortunately for him the poor fellow died as a consequence of the flogging.

After that a dull, spiritless resignation settled down upon the remainder. The most mutinous were quelled, and accepted their unspeakable lot with the tragic fortitude of despair.

Peter Blood alone, escaping these excessive sufferings, remained outwardly unchanged, whilst inwardly the only change in him was a daily deeper hatred of his kind, a daily deeper longing to escape from this place where man defiled so foully the lovely work of his Creator. It was a longing too vague to amount to a hope. Hope here was inadmissible. And yet he did not yield to despair. He set a mask of laughter on his saturnine countenance and went his way, treating the sick to the profit of Colonel Bishop, and encroaching further and further upon the preserves of the two other men of medicine in Bridgetown.

Immune from the degrading punishments and privations of his fellow-convicts, he was enabled to keep his self-respect, and was treated without harshness even by the soulless planter to whom he had been sold. He owed it all to gout and megrims. He had won the esteem of Governor Steed, and—what is even more important—of Governor Steed's lady, whom he shamelessly and cynically flattered and humoured.

Occasionally he saw Miss Bishop, and they seldom met but that she paused to hold him in conversation for some moments, evincing her interest in him. Himself, he was never disposed to linger. He was not, he told himself, to be deceived by her delicate exterior, her sapling grace, her easy, boyish ways and pleasant, boyish voice. In all his life—and it had been very varied—he had never met a man whom he accounted more beastly than her uncle, and he could not dissociate her from the man. She was his niece, of his own blood, and some of the vices of it, some of the remorseless cruelty of the

wealthy planter must, he argued, inhabit that pleasant body of hers. He argued this very often to himself, as if answering and convincing some instinct that pleaded otherwise, and arguing it he avoided her when it was possible, and was frigidly civil when it was not.

Justifiable as his reasoning was, plausible as it may seem, yet he would have done better to have trusted the instinct that was in conflict with it. Though the same blood ran in her veins as in those of Colonel Bishop, yet hers was free of the vices that tainted her uncle's, for these vices were not natural to that blood; they were, in his case, acquired. Her father, Tom Bishop—that same Colonel Bishop's brother—had been a kindly, chivalrous, gentle soul, who, broken-hearted by the early death of a young wife, had abandoned the Old World and sought an anodyne for his grief in the New. He had come out to the Antilles, bringing with him his little daughter, then five years of age, and had given himself up to the life of a planter. He had prospered from the first, as men sometimes will who care nothing for prosperity. Prospering, he had bethought him of his younger brother, a soldier at home reputed somewhat wild. He had advised him to come out to Barbados; and the advice, which at another season William Bishop might have scorned, reached him at a moment when his wildness was beginning to bear such fruit that a change of climate was desirable. William came, and was admitted by his generous brother to a partnership in the prosperous plantation. Some six years later, when Arabella was fifteen, her father died, leaving her in her uncle's guardianship. It was perhaps his one mistake. But the goodness of his own nature coloured his views of other men; moreover, himself, he had conducted the education of his daughter, giving her an independence of character upon which perhaps he counted unduly. As things were, there was little love between uncle and niece. But she was dutiful to him, and he was circumspect in his behaviour before her. All his life, and for all his wildness, he had gone in a certain awe of his brother, whose worth he had the wit to recognize; and now it was almost as if some of that awe was

transferred to his brother's child, who was also, in a sense, his partner, although she took no active part in the business of the plantations.

Peter Blood judged her—as we are all too prone to judge—upon insufficient knowledge.

He was very soon to have cause to correct that judgment. One day towards the end of May, when the heat was beginning to grow oppressive, there crawled into Carlisle Bay a wounded, battered English ship, the *Pride of Devon*, her freeboard scarred and broken, her coach a gaping wreck, her mizzen so shot away that only a jagged stump remained to tell the place where it had stood. She had been in action off Martinique with two Spanish treasure ships, and although her captain swore that the Spaniards had beset him without provocation, it is difficult to avoid a suspicion that the encounter had been brought about quite otherwise. One of the Spaniards had fled from the combat, and if the *Pride of Devon* had not given chase it was probably because she was by then in no case to do so. The other had been sunk, but not before the English ship had transferred to her own hold a good deal of the treasure aboard the Spaniard. It was, in fact, one of those piratical affrays which were a perpetual source of trouble between the courts of St. James's and the Escorial, complaints emanating now from one and now from the other side.

Steed, however, after the fashion of most Colonial governors, was willing enough to dull his wits to the extent of accepting the English seaman's story, disregarding any evidence that might belie it. He shared the hatred so richly deserved by arrogant, overbearing Spain that was common to men of every other nation from the Bahamas to the Main. Therefore he gave the *Pride of Devon* the shelter she sought in his harbour and every facility to careen and carry out repairs.

But before it came to this, they fetched from her hold over a score

of English seamen as battered and broken as the ship herself, and together with these some half-dozen Spaniards in like case, the only survivors of a boarding party from the Spanish galleon that had invaded the English ship and found itself unable to retreat. These wounded men were conveyed to a long shed on the wharf, and the medical skill of Bridgetown was summoned to their aid. Peter Blood was ordered to bear a hand in this work, and partly because he spoke Castilian—and he spoke it as fluently as his own native tongue—partly because of his inferior condition as a slave, he was given the Spaniards for his patients.

Now Blood had no cause to love Spaniards. His two years in a Spanish prison and his subsequent campaigning in the Spanish Netherlands had shown him a side of the Spanish character which he had found anything but admirable. Nevertheless he performed his doctor's duties zealously and painstakingly, if emotionlessly, and even with a certain superficial friendliness towards each of his patients. These were so surprised at having their wounds healed instead of being summarily hanged that they manifested a docility very unusual in their kind. They were shunned, however, by all those charitably disposed inhabitants of Bridgetown who flocked to the improvised hospital with gifts of fruit and flowers and delicacies for the injured English seamen. Indeed, had the wishes of some of these inhabitants been regarded, the Spaniards would have been left to die like vermin, and of this Peter Blood had an example almost at the very outset.

With the assistance of one of the negroes sent to the shed for the purpose, he was in the act of setting a broken leg, when a deep, gruff voice, that he had come to know and dislike as he had never disliked the voice of living man, abruptly challenged him.

"What are you doing there?"

Blood did not look up from his task. There was not the need. He knew the voice, as I have said.

"I am setting a broken leg," he answered, without pausing in his labours.

"I can see that, fool." A bulky body interposed between Peter Blood and the window. The half-naked man on the straw rolled his black eyes to stare up fearfully out of a clay-coloured face at this intruder. A knowledge of English was unnecessary to inform him that here came an enemy. The harsh, minatory note of that voice sufficiently expressed the fact. "I can see that, fool; just as I can see what the rascal is. Who gave you leave to set Spanish legs?"

"I am a doctor, Colonel Bishop. The man is wounded. It is not for me to discriminate. I keep to my trade."

"Do you, by God! If you'd done that, you wouldn't now be here."

"On the contrary, it is because I did it that I am here."

"Aye, I know that's your lying tale." The Colonel sneered; and then, observing Blood to continue his work unmoved, he grew really angry. "Will you cease that, and attend to me when I am speaking?"

Peter Blood paused, but only for an instant. "The man is in pain," he said shortly, and resumed his work.

"In pain, is he? I hope he is, the damned piratical dog. But will you heed me, you insubordinate knave?"

The Colonel delivered himself in a roar, infuriated by what he conceived to be defiance, and defiance expressing itself in the most unruffled disregard of himself. His long bamboo cane was raised to strike. Peter Blood's blue eyes caught the flash of it, and he spoke quickly to arrest the blow.

"Not insubordinate, sir, whatever I may be. I am acting upon the express orders of Governor Steed."

The Colonel checked, his great face empurpling. His mouth fell open.

"Governor Steed!" he echoed. Then he lowered his cane, swung round, and without another word to Blood rolled away towards the other end of the shed where the Governor was standing at the moment.

Peter Blood chuckled. But his triumph was dictated less by humanitarian considerations than by the reflection that he had baulked his brutal owner.

The Spaniard, realizing that in this altercation, whatever its nature, the doctor had stood his friend, ventured in a muted voice to ask him what had happened. But the doctor shook his head in silence, and pursued his work. His ears were straining to catch the words now passing between Steed and Bishop. The Colonel was blustering and storming, the great bulk of him towering above the wizened little overdressed figure of the Governor. But the little fop was not to be browbeaten. His excellency was conscious that he had behind him the force of public opinion to support him. Some there might be, but they were not many, who held such ruthless views as Colonel Bishop. His excellency asserted his authority. It was by his orders that Blood had devoted himself to the wounded Spaniards, and his orders were to be carried out. There was no more to be said.

Colonel Bishop was of another opinion. In his view there was a great deal to be said. He said it, with great circumstance, loudly, vehemently, obscenely—for he could be fluently obscene when moved to anger.

"You talk like a Spaniard, Colonel," said the Governor, and thus dealt the Colonel's pride a wound that was to smart resentfully for many a week. At the moment it struck him silent, and sent him stamping out of the shed in a rage for which he could find no words.

It was two days later when the ladies of Bridgetown, the wives and daughters of her planters and merchants, paid their first visit of charity to the wharf, bringing their gifts to the wounded seamen.

Again Peter Blood was there, ministering to the sufferers in his care, moving among those unfortunate Spaniards whom no one heeded. All the charity, all the gifts were for the members of the crew of the *Pride of Devon*. And this Peter Blood accounted natural enough. But rising suddenly from the re-dressing of a wound, a task in which he had been absorbed for some moments, he saw to his surprise that one lady, detached from the general throng, was placing some plantains and a bundle of succulent sugar cane on the cloak that served one of his patients for a coverlet. She was elegantly dressed in lavender silk and was followed by a half-naked negro carrying a basket.

Peter Blood, stripped of his coat, the sleeves of his coarse shirt rolled to the elbow, and holding a bloody rag in his hand, stood at gaze a moment. The lady, turning now to confront him, her lips parting in a smile of recognition, was Arabella Bishop.

"The man's a Spaniard," said he, in the tone of one who corrects a misapprehension, and also tinged never so faintly by something of the derision that was in his soul.

The smile with which she had been greeting him withered on her lips. She frowned and stared at him a moment, with increasing haughtiness.

"So I perceive. But he's a human being none the less," said she.

That answer, and its implied rebuke, took him by surprise.

"Your uncle, the Colonel, is of a different opinion," said he, when he had recovered. "He regards them as vermin to be left to languish and

die of their festering wounds."

She caught the irony now more plainly in his voice. She continued to stare at him.

"Why do you tell me this?"

"To warn you that you may be incurring the Colonel's displeasure. If he had had his way, I should never have been allowed to dress their wounds."

"And you thought, of course, that I must be of my uncle's mind?" There was a crispness about her voice, an ominous challenging sparkle in her hazel eyes.

"I'd not willingly be rude to a lady even in my thoughts," said he. "But that you should bestow gifts on them, considering that if your uncle came to hear of it...." He paused, leaving the sentence unfinished. "Ah, well—there it is!" he concluded.

But the lady was not satisfied at all.

"First you impute to me inhumanity, and then cowardice. Faith! For a man who would not willingly be rude to a lady even in his thoughts, it's none so bad." Her boyish laugh trilled out, but the note of it jarred his ears this time.

He saw her now, it seemed to him, for the first time, and saw how he had misjudged her.

"Sure, now, how was I to guess that... that Colonel Bishop could have an angel for his niece?" said he recklessly, for he was reckless as men often are in sudden penitence.

"You wouldn't, of course. I shouldn't think you often guess aright." Having withered him with that and her glance, she turned to her negro and the basket that he carried. From this she lifted now the fruits and

delicacies with which it was laden, and piled them in such heaps upon the beds of the six Spaniards that by the time she had so served the last of them her basket was empty, and there was nothing left for her own fellow-countrymen. These, indeed, stood in no need of her bounty—as she no doubt observed—since they were being plentifully supplied by others.

Having thus emptied her basket, she called her negro, and without another word or so much as another glance at Peter Blood, swept out of the place with her head high and chin thrust forward.

Peter watched her departure. Then he fetched a sigh.

It startled him to discover that the thought that he had incurred her anger gave him concern. It could not have been so yesterday. It became so only since he had been vouchsafed this revelation of her true nature. "Bad cess to it now, it serves me right. It seems I know nothing at all of human nature. But how the devil was I to guess that a family that can breed a devil like Colonel Bishop should also breed a saint like this?"

CHAPTER VI. PLANS OF ESCAPE

After that Arabella Bishop went daily to the shed on the wharf with gifts of fruit, and later of money and of wearing apparel for the Spanish prisoners. But she contrived so to time her visits that Peter Blood never again met her there. Also his own visits were growing shorter in a measure as his patients healed. That they all thrive and returned to health under his care, whilst fully one third of the wounded in the care of Whacker and Bronson—the two other surgeons—died of their wounds, served to increase the reputation in which this rebel-convict stood in Bridgetown. It may have been no more than the fortune of war. But the townsfolk did not choose so to regard it. It led to a further dwindling of the practices of his free colleagues and a further increase of his own labours and his owner's profit. Whacker and Bronson laid their heads together to devise a scheme by which this intolerable state of things should be brought to an end. But that is to anticipate.

One day, whether by accident or design, Peter Blood came striding down the wharf a full half-hour earlier than usual, and so met Miss Bishop just issuing from the shed. He doffed his hat and stood aside to give her passage. She took it, chin in the air, and eyes which disdained to look anywhere where the sight of him was possible.

"Miss Arabella," said he, on a coaxing, pleading note.

She grew conscious of his presence, and looked him over with an air that was faintly, mockingly searching.

"La!" said she. "It's the delicate-minded gentleman!"

Peter groaned. "Am I so hopelessly beyond forgiveness? I ask it very humbly."

"What condescension!"

"It is cruel to mock me," said he, and adopted mock-humility. "After all, I am but a slave. And you might be ill one of these days."

"What, then?"

"It would be humiliating to send for me if you treat me like an enemy."

"You are not the only doctor in Bridgetown."

"But I am the least dangerous."

She grew suddenly suspicious of him, aware that he was permitting himself to rally her, and in a measure she had already yielded to it. She stiffened, and looked him over again.

"You make too free, I think," she rebuked him.

"A doctor's privilege."

"I am not your patient. Please to remember it in future." And on that, unquestionably angry, she departed.

"Now is she a vixen or am I a fool, or is it both?" he asked the blue vault of heaven, and then went into the shed.

It was to be a morning of excitements. As he was leaving an hour or so later, Whacker, the younger of the other two physicians, joined him—an unprecedented condescension this, for hitherto neither of them had addressed him beyond an occasional and surly "good-day!"

"If you are for Colonel Bishop's, I'll walk with you a little way, Doctor

Blood," said he. He was a short, broad man of five-and-forty with pendulous cheeks and hard blue eyes.

Peter Blood was startled. But he dissembled it.

"I am for Government House," said he.

"Ah! To be sure! The Governor's lady." And he laughed; or perhaps he sneered. Peter Blood was not quite certain. "She encroaches a deal upon your time, I hear. Youth and good looks, Doctor Blood! Youth and good looks! They are inestimable advantages in our profession as in others—particularly where the ladies are concerned."

Peter stared at him. "If you mean what you seem to mean, you had better say it to Governor Steed. It may amuse him."

"You surely misapprehend me."

"I hope so."

"You're so very hot, now!" The doctor linked his arm through Peter's. "I protest I desire to be your friend—to serve you. Now, listen." Instinctively his voice grew lower. "This slavery in which you find yourself must be singularly irksome to a man of parts such as yourself."

"What intuitions!" cried sardonic Mr. Blood. But the doctor took him literally.

"I am no fool, my dear doctor. I know a man when I see one, and often I can tell his thoughts."

"If you can tell me mine, you'll persuade me of it," said Mr. Blood.

Dr. Whacker drew still closer to him as they stepped along the wharf. He lowered his voice to a still more confidential tone. His hard blue eyes peered up into the swart, sardonic face of his companion,

who was a head taller than himself.

"How often have I not seen you staring out over the sea, your soul in your eyes! Don't I know what you are thinking? If you could escape from this hell of slavery, you could exercise the profession of which you are an ornament as a free man with pleasure and profit to yourself. The world is large. There are many nations besides England where a man of your parts would be warmly welcomed. There are many colonies besides these English ones." Lower still came the voice until it was no more than a whisper. Yet there was no one within earshot. "It is none so far now to the Dutch settlement of Curacao. At this time of the year the voyage may safely be undertaken in a light craft. And Curacao need be no more than a stepping-stone to the great world, which would lie open to you once you were delivered from this bondage."

Dr. Whacker ceased. He was pale and a little out of breath. But his hard eyes continued to study his impassive companion.

"Well?" he said after a pause. "What do you say to that?"

Yet Blood did not immediately answer. His mind was heaving in tumult, and he was striving to calm it that he might take a proper survey of this thing flung into it to create so monstrous a disturbance. He began where another might have ended.

"I have no money. And for that a handsome sum would be necessary."

"Did I not say that I desired to be your friend?"

"Why?" asked Peter Blood at point-blank range.

But he never heeded the answer. Whilst Dr. Whacker was professing that his heart bled for a brother doctor languishing in slavery, denied the opportunity which his gifts entitled him to make for

himself, Peter Blood pounced like a hawk upon the obvious truth. Whacker and his colleague desired to be rid of one who threatened to ruin them. Sluggishness of decision was never a fault of Blood's. He leapt where another crawled. And so this thought of evasion never entertained until planted there now by Dr. Whacker sprouted into instant growth.

"I see, I see," he said, whilst his companion was still talking, explaining, and to save Dr. Whacker's face he played the hypocrite. "It is very noble in you—very brotherly, as between men of medicine. It is what I myself should wish to do in like case."

The hard eyes flashed, the husky voice grew tremulous as the other asked almost too eagerly:

"You agree, then? You agree?"

"Agree?" Blood laughed. "If I should be caught and brought back, they'd clip my wings and brand me for life."

"Surely the thing is worth a little risk?" More tremulous than ever was the tempter's voice.

"Surely," Blood agreed. "But it asks more than courage. It asks money. A sloop might be bought for twenty pounds, perhaps."

"It shall be forthcoming. It shall be a loan, which you shall repay us—repay me, when you can."

That betraying "us" so hastily retrieved completed Blood's understanding. The other doctor was also in the business.

They were approaching the peopled part of the mole. Quickly, but eloquently, Blood expressed his thanks, where he knew that no thanks were due.

"We will talk of this again, sir—to-morrow," he concluded. "You

have opened for me the gates of hope."

In that at least he tittered no more than the bare truth, and expressed it very baldly. It was, indeed, as if a door had been suddenly flung open to the sunlight for escape from a dark prison in which a man had thought to spend his life.

He was in haste now to be alone, to straighten out his agitated mind and plan coherently what was to be done. Also he must consult another. Already he had hit upon that other. For such a voyage a navigator would be necessary, and a navigator was ready to his hand in Jeremy Pitt. The first thing was to take counsel with the young shipmaster, who must be associated with him in this business if it were to be undertaken. All that day his mind was in turmoil with this new hope, and he was sick with impatience for night and a chance to discuss the matter with his chosen partner. As a result Blood was betimes that evening in the spacious stockade that enclosed the huts of the slaves together with the big white house of the overseer, and he found an opportunity of a few words with Pitt, unobserved by the others.

"To-night when all are asleep, come to my cabin. I have something to say to you."

The young man stared at him, roused by Blood's pregnant tone out of the mental lethargy into which he had of late been lapsing as a result of the dehumanizing life he lived. Then he nodded understanding and assent, and they moved apart.

The six months of plantation life in Barbados had made an almost tragic mark upon the young seaman. His erstwhile bright alertness was all departed. His face was growing vacuous, his eyes were dull and lack-lustre, and he moved in a cringing, furtive manner, like an over-beaten dog. He had survived the ill-nourishment, the excessive work on the sugar plantation under a pitiless sun, the lashes of the

overseer's whip when his labours flagged, and the deadly, unrelieved animal life to which he was condemned. But the price he was paying for survival was the usual price. He was in danger of becoming no better than an animal, of sinking to the level of the negroes who sometimes toiled beside him. The man, however, was still there, not yet dormant, but merely torpid from a surfeit of despair; and the man in him promptly shook off that torpidity and awoke at the first words Blood spoke to him that night—awoke and wept.

"Escape?" he panted. "O God!" He took his head in his hands, and fell to sobbing like a child.

"Sh! Steady now! Steady!" Blood admonished him in a whisper, alarmed by the lad's blubbing. He crossed to Pitt's side, and set a restraining hand upon his shoulder. "For God's sake, command yourself. If we're overheard we shall both be flogged for this."

Among the privileges enjoyed by Blood was that of a hut to himself, and they were alone in this. But, after all, it was built of wattles thinly plastered with mud, and its door was composed of bamboos, through which sound passed very easily. Though the stockade was locked for the night, and all within it asleep by now—it was after midnight—yet a prowling overseer was not impossible, and a sound of voices must lead to discovery. Pitt realized this, and controlled his outburst of emotion.

Sitting close thereafter they talked in whispers for an hour or more, and all the while those dulled wits of Pitt's were sharpening themselves anew upon this precious whetstone of hope. They would need to recruit others into their enterprise, a half-dozen at least, a half-score if possible, but no more than that. They must pick the best out of that score of survivors of the Monmouth men that Colonel Bishop had acquired. Men who understood the sea were desirable. But of these there were only two in that unfortunate gang, and their knowledge was none too full. They were Hagthorpe, a gentleman who

had served in the Royal Navy, and Nicholas Dyke, who had been a petty officer in the late king's time, and there was another who had been a gunner, a man named Ogle.

It was agreed before they parted that Pitt should begin with these three and then proceed to recruit some six or eight others. He was to move with the utmost caution, sounding his men very carefully before making anything in the nature of a disclosure, and even then avoid rendering that disclosure so full that its betrayal might frustrate the plans which as yet had to be worked out in detail. Labouring with them in the plantations, Pitt would not want for opportunities of broaching the matter to his fellow-slaves.

"Caution above everything," was Blood's last recommendation to him at parting. "Who goes slowly, goes safely, as the Italians have it. And remember that if you betray yourself, you ruin all, for you are the only navigator amongst us, and without you there is no escaping."

Pitt reassured him, and slunk off back to his own hut and the straw that served him for a bed.

Coming next morning to the wharf, Blood found Dr. Whacker in a generous mood. Having slept on the matter, he was prepared to advance the convict any sum up to thirty pounds that would enable him to acquire a boat capable of taking him away from the settlement. Blood expressed his thanks becomingly, betraying no sign that he saw clearly into the true reason of the other's munificence.

"It's not money I'll require," said he, "but the boat itself. For who will be selling me a boat and incurring the penalties in Governor Steed's proclamation? Ye'll have read it, no doubt?"

Dr. Whacker's heavy face grew overcast. Thoughtfully he rubbed his chin. "I've read it—yes. And I dare not procure the boat for you. It would be discovered. It must be. And the penalty is a fine of two

hundred pounds besides imprisonment. It would ruin me. You'll see that?"

The high hopes in Blood's soul, began to shrink. And the shadow of his despair overcast his face.

"But then..." he faltered. "There is nothing to be done."

"Nay, nay: things are not so desperate." Dr. Whacker smiled a little with tight lips. "I've thought of it. You will see that the man who buys the boat must be one of those who goes with you—so that he is not here to answer questions afterwards."

"But who is to go with me save men in my own case? What I cannot do, they cannot."

"There are others detained on the island besides slaves. There are several who are here for debt, and would be glad enough to spread their wings. There's a fellow Nuttall, now, who follows the trade of a shipwright, whom I happen to know would welcome such a chance as you might afford him."

"But how should a debtor come with money to buy a boat? The question will be asked."

"To be sure it will. But if you contrive shrewdly, you'll all be gone before that happens."

Blood nodded understanding, and the doctor, setting a hand upon his sleeve, unfolded the scheme he had conceived.

"You shall have the money from me at once. Having received it, you'll forget that it was I who supplied it to you. You have friends in England—relatives, perhaps—who sent it out to you through the agency of one of your Bridgetown patients, whose name as a man of honour you will on no account divulge lest you bring trouble upon him. That is your tale if there are questions."

He paused, looking hard at Blood. Blood nodded understanding and assent. Relieved, the doctor continued:

"But there should be no questions if you go carefully to work. You concert matters With Nuttall. You enlist him as one of your companions and a shipwright should be a very useful member of your crew. You engage him to discover a likely sloop whose owner is disposed to sell. Then let your preparations all be made before the purchase is effected, so that your escape may follow instantly upon it before the inevitable questions come to be asked. You take me?"

So well did Blood take him that within an hour he contrived to see Nuttall, and found the fellow as disposed to the business as Dr. Whacker had predicted. When he left the shipwright, it was agreed that Nuttall should seek the boat required, for which Blood would at once produce the money.

The quest took longer than was expected by Blood, who waited impatiently with the doctor's gold concealed about his person. But at the end of some three weeks, Nuttall—whom he was now meeting daily—informed him that he had found a serviceable wherry, and that its owner was disposed to sell it for twenty-two pounds. That evening, on the beach, remote from all eyes, Peter Blood handed that sum to his new associate, and Nuttall went off with instructions to complete the purchase late on the following day. He was to bring the boat to the wharf, where under cover of night Blood and his fellow-convicts would join him and make off.

Everything was ready. In the shed, from which all the wounded men had now been removed and which had since remained untenanted, Nuttall had concealed the necessary stores: a hundredweight of bread, a quantity of cheese, a cask of water and some few bottles of Canary, a compass, quadrant, chart, half-hour glass, log and line, a tarpaulin, some carpenter's tools, and a lantern and candles. And in

the stockade, all was likewise in readiness. Hagthorpe, Dyke, and Ogle had agreed to join the venture, and eight others had been carefully recruited. In Pitt's hut, which he shared with five other rebels-convict, all of whom were to join in this bid for liberty, a ladder had been constructed in secret during those nights of waiting. With this they were to surmount the stockade and gain the open. The risk of detection, so that they made little noise, was negligible. Beyond locking them all into that stockade at night, there was no great precaution taken. Where, after all, could any so foolish as to attempt escape hope to conceal himself in that island? The chief risk lay in discovery by those of their companions who were to be left behind. It was because of these that they must go cautiously and in silence.

The day that was to have been their last in Barbados was a day of hope and anxiety to the twelve associates in that enterprise, no less than to Nuttall in the town below.

Towards sunset, having seen Nuttall depart to purchase and fetch the sloop to the prearranged moorings at the wharf, Peter Blood came sauntering towards the stockade, just as the slaves were being driven in from the fields. He stood aside at the entrance to let them pass, and beyond the message of hope flashed by his eyes, he held no communication with them.

He entered the stockade in their wake, and as they broke their ranks to seek their various respective huts, he beheld Colonel Bishop in talk with Kent, the overseer. The pair were standing by the stocks, planted in the middle of that green space for the punishment of offending slaves.

As he advanced, Bishop turned to regard him, scowling. "Where have you been this while?" he bawled, and although a minatory note was normal to the Colonel's voice, yet Blood felt his heart tightening apprehensively.

"I've been at my work in the town," he answered. "Mrs. Patch has a fever and Mr. Dekker has sprained his ankle."

"I sent for you to Dekker's, and you were not there. You are given to idling, my fine fellow. We shall have to quicken you one of these days unless you cease from abusing the liberty you enjoy. D'ye forget that ye're a rebel convict?"

"I am not given the chance," said Blood, who never could learn to curb his tongue.

"By God! Will you be pert with me?"

Remembering all that was at stake, growing suddenly conscious that from the huts surrounding the enclosure anxious ears were listening, he instantly practised an unusual submission.

"Not pert, sir. I... I am sorry I should have been sought..."

"Aye, and you'll be sorrier yet. There's the Governor with an attack of gout, screaming like a wounded horse, and you nowhere to be found. Be off, man—away with you at speed to Government House! You're awaited, I tell you. Best lend him a horse, Kent, or the lout'll be all night getting there."

They hustled him away, choking almost from a reluctance that he dared not show. The thing was unfortunate; but after all not beyond remedy. The escape was set for midnight, and he should easily be back by then. He mounted the horse that Kent procured him, intending to make all haste.

"How shall I reenter the stockade, sir?" he enquired at parting.

"You'll not reenter it," said Bishop. "When they've done with you at Government House, they may find a kennel for you there until morning."

Peter Blood's heart sank like a stone through water.

"But..." he began.

"Be off, I say. Will you stand there talking until dark? His excellency is waiting for you." And with his cane Colonel Bishop slashed the horse's quarters so brutally that the beast bounded forward all but unseating her rider.

Peter Blood went off in a state of mind bordering on despair. And there was occasion for it. A postponement of the escape at least until to-morrow night was necessary now, and postponement must mean the discovery of Nuttall's transaction and the asking of questions it would be difficult to answer.

It was in his mind to slink back in the night, once his work at Government House were done, and from the outside of the stockade make known to Pitt and the others his presence, and so have them join him that their project might still be carried out. But in this he reckoned without the Governor, whom he found really in the thrall of a severe attack of gout, and almost as severe an attack of temper nourished by Blood's delay.

The doctor was kept in constant attendance upon him until long after midnight, when at last he was able to ease the sufferer a little by a bleeding. Thereupon he would have withdrawn. But Steed would not hear of it. Blood must sleep in his own chamber to be at hand in case of need. It was as if Fate made sport of him. For that night at least the escape must be definitely abandoned.

Not until the early hours of the morning did Peter Blood succeed in making a temporary escape from Government House on the ground that he required certain medicaments which he must, himself, procure from the apothecary.

On that pretext, he made an excursion into the awakening town,

and went straight to Nuttall, whom he found in a state of livid panic. The unfortunate debtor, who had sat up waiting through the night, conceived that all was discovered and that his own ruin would be involved. Peter Blood quieted his fears.

"It will be for to-night instead," he said, with more assurance than he felt, "if I have to bleed the Governor to death. Be ready as last night."

"But if there are questions meanwhile?" bleated Nuttall. He was a thin, pale, small-featured, man with weak eyes that now blinked desperately.

"Answer as best you can. Use your wits, man. I can stay no longer." And Peter went off to the apothecary for his pretexted drugs.

Within an hour of his going came an officer of the Secretary's to Nuttall's miserable hovel. The seller of the boat had—as by law required since the coming of the rebels-convict—duly reported the sale at the Secretary's office, so that he might obtain the reimbursement of the ten-pound surety into which every keeper of a small boat was compelled to enter. The Secretary's office postponed this reimbursement until it should have obtained confirmation of the transaction.

"We are informed that you have bought a wherry from Mr. Robert Farrell," said the officer.

"That is so," said Nuttall, who conceived that for him this was the end of the world.

"You are in no haste, it seems, to declare the same at the Secretary's office." The emissary had a proper bureaucratic haughtiness.

Nuttall's weak eyes blinked at a redoubled rate.

"To... to declare it?"

"Ye know it's the law."

"I... I didn't, may it please you."

"But it's in the proclamation published last January."

"I... I can't read, sir. I... I didn't know."

"Faugh!" The messenger withered him with his disdain.

"Well, now you're informed. See to it that you are at the Secretary's office before noon with the ten pounds surety into which you are obliged to enter."

The pompous officer departed, leaving Nuttall in a cold perspiration despite the heat of the morning. He was thankful that the fellow had not asked the question he most dreaded, which was how he, a debtor, should come by the money to buy a wherry. But this he knew was only a respite. The question would presently be asked of a certainty, and then hell would open for him. He cursed the hour in which he had been such a fool as to listen to Peter Blood's chatter of escape. He thought it very likely that the whole plot would be discovered, and that he would probably be hanged, or at least branded and sold into slavery like those other damned rebels-convict, with whom he had been so mad as to associate himself. If only he had the ten pounds for this infernal surety, which until this moment had never entered into their calculations, it was possible that the thing might be done quickly and questions postponed until later. As the Secretary's messenger had overlooked the fact that he was a debtor, so might the others at the Secretary's office, at least for a day or two; and in that time he would, he hoped, be beyond the reach of their questions. But in the meantime what was to be done about this money? And it was to be found before noon!

Nuttall snatched up his hat, and went out in quest of Peter Blood.

But where look for him? Wandering aimlessly up the irregular, unpaved street, he ventured to enquire of one or two if they had seen Dr. Blood that morning. He affected to be feeling none so well, and indeed his appearance bore out the deception. None could give him information; and since Blood had never told him of Whacker's share in this business, he walked in his unhappy ignorance past the door of the one man in Barbados who would eagerly have saved him in this extremity.

Finally he determined to go up to Colonel Bishop's plantation. Probably Blood would be there. If he were not, Nuttall would find Pitt, and leave a message with him. He was acquainted with Pitt and knew of Pitt's share in this business. His pretext for seeking Blood must still be that he needed medical assistance.

And at the same time that he set out, insensitive in his anxiety to the broiling heat, to climb the heights to the north of the town, Blood was setting out from Government House at last, having so far eased the Governor's condition as to be permitted to depart. Being mounted, he would, but for an unexpected delay, have reached the stockade ahead of Nuttall, in which case several unhappy events might have been averted. The unexpected delay was occasioned by Miss Arabella Bishop.

They met at the gate of the luxuriant garden of Government House, and Miss Bishop, herself mounted, stared to see Peter Blood on horseback. It happened that he was in good spirits. The fact that the Governor's condition had so far improved as to restore him his freedom of movement had sufficed to remove the depression under which he had been labouring for the past twelve hours and more. In its rebound the mercury of his mood had shot higher far than present circumstances warranted. He was disposed to be optimistic. What had failed last night would certainly not fail again to-night. What was a day, after all? The Secretary's office might be troublesome, but not

really troublesome for another twenty-four hours at least; and by then they would be well away.

This joyous confidence of his was his first misfortune. The next was that his good spirits were also shared by Miss Bishop, and that she bore no rancour. The two things conjoined to make the delay that in its consequences was so deplorable.

"Good-morning, sir," she hailed him pleasantly. "It's close upon a month since last I saw you."

"Twenty-one days to the hour," said he. "I've counted them."

"I vow I was beginning to believe you dead."

"I have to thank you for the wreath."

"The wreath?"

"To deck my grave," he explained.

"Must you ever be rallying?" she wondered, and looked at him gravely, remembering that it was his rallying on the last occasion had driven her away in dudgeon.

"A man must sometimes laugh at himself or go mad," said he. "Few realize it. That is why there are so many madmen in the world."

"You may laugh at yourself all you will, sir. But sometimes I think you laugh at me, which is not civil."

"Then, faith, you're wrong. I laugh only at the comic, and you are not comic at all."

"What am I, then?" she asked him, laughing.

A moment he pondered her, so fair and fresh to behold, so entirely maidenly and yet so entirely frank and unabashed.

"You are," he said, "the niece of the man who owns me his slave." But he spoke lightly. So lightly that she was encouraged to insistence.

"Nay, sir, that is an evasion. You shall answer me truthfully this morning."

"Truthfully? To answer you at all is a labour. But to answer truthfully! Oh, well, now, I should say of you that he'll be lucky who counts you his friend." It was in his mind to add more. But he left it there.

"That's mighty civil," said she. "You've a nice taste in compliments, Mr. Blood. Another in your place...."

"Faith, now, don't I know what another would have said? Don't I know my fellow-man at all?"

"Sometimes I think you do, and sometimes I think you don't. Anyway, you don't know your fellow-woman. There was that affair of the Spaniards."

"Will ye never forget it?"

"Never."

"Bad cess to your memory. Is there no good in me at all that you could be dwelling on instead?"

"Oh, several things."

"For instance, now?" He was almost eager.

"You speak excellent Spanish."

"Is that all?" He sank back into dismay.

"Where did you learn it? Have you been in Spain?"

"That I have. I was two years in a Spanish prison."

"In prison?" Her tone suggested apprehensions in which he had no desire to leave her.

"As a prisoner of war," he explained. "I was taken fighting with the French—in French service, that is."

"But you're a doctor!" she cried.

"That's merely a diversion, I think. By trade I am a soldier—at least, it's a trade I followed for ten years. It brought me no great gear, but it served me better than medicine, which, as you may observe, has brought me into slavery. I'm thinking it's more pleasing in the sight of Heaven to kill men than to heal them. Sure it must be."

"But how came you to be a soldier, and to serve the French?"

"I am Irish, you see, and I studied medicine. Therefore—since it's a perverse nation we are—.... Oh, but it's a long story, and the Colonel will be expecting my return." She was not in that way to be defrauded of her entertainment. If he would wait a moment they would ride back together. She had but come to enquire of the Governor's health at her uncle's request.

So he waited, and so they rode back together to Colonel Bishop's house. They rode very slowly, at a walking pace, and some whom they passed marvelled to see the doctor-slave on such apparently intimate terms with his owner's niece. One or two may have promised themselves that they would drop a hint to the Colonel. But the two rode oblivious of all others in the world that morning. He was telling her the story of his early turbulent days, and at the end of it he dwelt more fully than hitherto upon the manner of his arrest and trial.

The tale was barely done when they drew up at the Colonel's door, and dismounted, Peter Blood surrendering his nag to one of the negro grooms, who informed them that the Colonel was from home at the moment.

Even then they lingered a moment, she detaining him.

"I am sorry, Mr. Blood, that I did not know before," she said, and there was a suspicion of moisture in those clear hazel eyes. With a compelling friendliness she held out her hand to him.

"Why, what difference could it have made?" he asked.

"Some, I think. You have been very hardly used by Fate."

"Och, now...." He paused. His keen sapphire eyes considered her steadily a moment from under his level black brows. "It might have been worse," he said, with a significance which brought a tinge of colour to her cheeks and a flutter to her eyelids.

He stooped to kiss her hand before releasing it, and she did not deny him. Then he turned and strode off towards the stockade a half-mile away, and a vision of her face went with him, tinted with a rising blush and a sudden unusual shyness. He forgot in that little moment that he was a rebel-convict with ten years of slavery before him; he forgot that he had planned an escape, which was to be carried into effect that night; forgot even the peril of discovery which as a result of the Governor's gout now overhung him.

CHAPTER VII. PIRATES

Mr. James Nuttall made all speed, regardless of the heat, in his journey from Bridgetown to Colonel Bishop's plantation, and if ever man was built for speed in a hot climate that man was Mr. James Nuttall, with his short, thin body, and his long, fleshless legs. So withered was he that it was hard to believe there were any juices left in him, yet juices there must have been, for he was sweating violently by the time he reached the stockade.

At the entrance he almost ran into the overseer Kent, a squat, bow-legged animal with the arms of a Hercules and the jowl of a bulldog.

"I am seeking Doctor Blood," he announced breathlessly.

"You are in a rare haste," growled Kent. "What the devil is it? Twins?"

"Eh? Oh! Nay, nay. I'm not married, sir. It's a cousin of mine, sir."

"What is?"

"He is taken bad, sir," Nuttall lied promptly upon the cue that Kent himself had afforded him. "Is the doctor here?"

"That's his hut yonder." Kent pointed carelessly. "If he's not there, he'll be somewhere else." And he took himself off. He was a surly, ungracious beast at all times, readier with the lash of his whip than with his tongue.

Nuttall watched him go with satisfaction, and even noted the direction that he took. Then he plunged into the enclosure, to verify in mortification that Dr. Blood was not at home. A man of sense might

have sat down and waited, judging that to be the quickest and surest way in the end. But Nuttall had no sense. He flung out of the stockade again, hesitated a moment as to which direction he should take, and finally decided to go any way but the way that Kent had gone. He sped across the parched savannah towards the sugar plantation which stood solid as a rampart and gleaming golden in the dazzling June sunshine. Avenues intersected the great blocks of ripening amber cane. In the distance down one of these he espied some slaves at work. Nuttall entered the avenue and advanced upon them. They eyed him dully, as he passed them. Pitt was not of their number, and he dared not ask for him. He continued his search for best part of an hour, up one of those lanes and then down another. Once an overseer challenged him, demanding to know his business. He was looking, he said, for Dr. Blood. His cousin was taken ill. The overseer bade him go to the devil, and get out of the plantation. Blood was not there. If he was anywhere he would be in his hut in the stockade.

Nuttall passed on, upon the understanding that he would go. But he went in the wrong direction; he went on towards the side of the plantation farthest from the stockade, towards the dense woods that fringed it there. The overseer was too contemptuous and perhaps too languid in the stifling heat of approaching noontide to correct his course.

Nuttall blundered to the end of the avenue, and round the corner of it, and there ran into Pitt, alone, toiling with a wooden spade upon an irrigation channel. A pair of cotton drawers, loose and ragged, clothed him from waist to knee; above and below he was naked, save for a broad hat of plaited straw that sheltered his unkempt golden head from the rays of the tropical sun. At sight of him Nuttall returned thanks aloud to his Maker. Pitt stared at him, and the shipwright poured out his dismal news in a dismal tone. The sum of it was that he must have ten pounds from Blood that very morning or they were all undone. And all he got for his pains and his sweat was the

condemnation of Jeremy Pitt.

"Damn you for a fool!" said the slave. "If it's Blood you're seeking, why are you wasting your time here?"

"I can't find him," bleated Nuttall. He was indignant at his reception. He forgot the jangled state of the other's nerves after a night of anxious wakefulness ending in a dawn of despair. "I thought that you...."

"You thought that I could drop my spade and go and seek him for you? Is that what you thought? My God! that our lives should depend upon such a dummerhead. While you waste your time here, the hours are passing! And if an overseer should catch you talking to me? How'll you explain it?"

For a moment Nuttall was bereft of speech by such ingratitude. Then he exploded.

"I would to Heaven I had never had no hand in this affair. I would so! I wish that...."

What else he wished was never known, for at that moment round the block of cane came a big man in biscuit-coloured taffetas followed by two negroes in cotton drawers who were armed with cutlasses. He was not ten yards away, but his approach over the soft, yielding marl had been unheard.

Mr. Nuttall looked wildly this way and that a moment, then bolted like a rabbit for the woods, thus doing the most foolish and betraying thing that in the circumstances it was possible for him to do. Pitt groaned and stood still, leaning upon his spade.

"Hi, there! Stop!" bawled Colonel Bishop after the fugitive, and added horrible threats tricked out with some rhetorical indecencies.

But the fugitive held amain, and never so much as turned his head.

It was his only remaining hope that Colonel Bishop might not have seen his face; for the power and influence of Colonel Bishop was quite sufficient to hang any man whom he thought would be better dead.

Not until the runagate had vanished into the scrub did the planter sufficiently recover from his indignant amazement to remember the two negroes who followed at his heels like a brace of hounds. It was a bodyguard without which he never moved in his plantations since a slave had made an attack upon him and all but strangled him a couple of years ago.

"After him, you black swine!" he roared at them. But as they started he checked them. "Wait! Get to heel, damn you!"

It occurred to him that to catch and deal with the fellow there was not the need to go after him, and perhaps spend the day hunting him in that cursed wood. There was Pitt here ready to his hand, and Pitt should tell him the identity of his bashful friend, and also the subject of that close and secret talk he had disturbed. Pitt might, of course, be reluctant. So much the worse for Pitt. The ingenious Colonel Bishop knew a dozen ways—some of them quite diverting—of conquering stubbornness in these convict dogs.

He turned now upon the slave a countenance that was inflamed by heat internal and external, and a pair of heady eyes that were alight with cruel intelligence. He stepped forward swinging his light bamboo cane.

"Who was that runagate?" he asked with terrible suavity. Leaning over on his spade, Jeremy Pitt hung his head a little, and shifted uncomfortably on his bare feet. Vainly he groped for an answer in a mind that could do nothing but curse the idiocy of Mr. James Nuttall.

The planter's bamboo cane fell on the lad's naked shoulders with

stinging force.

"Answer me, you dog! What's his name?"

Jeremy looked at the burly planter out of sullen, almost defiant eyes.

"I don't know," he said, and in his voice there was a faint note at least of the defiance aroused in him by a blow which he dared not, for his life's sake, return. His body had remained unyielding under it, but the spirit within writhed now in torment.

"You don't know? Well, here's to quicken your wits." Again the cane descended. "Have you thought of his name yet?"

"I have not."

"Stubborn, eh?" For a moment the Colonel leered. Then his passion mastered him. "'Swounds! You impudent dog! D'you trifle with me? D'you think I'm to be mocked?"

Pitt shrugged, shifted sideways on his feet again, and settled into dogged silence. Few things are more provocative; and Colonel Bishop's temper was never one that required much provocation. Brute fury now awoke in him. Fiercely now he lashed those defenceless shoulders, accompanying each blow by blasphemy and foul abuse, until, stung beyond endurance, the lingering embers of his manhood fanned into momentary flame, Pitt sprang upon his tormentor.

But as he sprang, so also sprang the watchful blacks. Muscular bronze arms coiled crushingly about the frail white body, and in a moment the unfortunate slave stood powerless, his wrists pinioned behind him in a leathern thong.

Breathing hard, his face mottled, Bishop pondered him a moment. Then: "Fetch him along," he said.

Down the long avenue between those golden walls of cane standing some eight feet high, the wretched Pitt was thrust by his black captors in the Colonel's wake, stared at with fearful eyes by his fellow-slaves at work there. Despair went with him. What torments might immediately await him he cared little, horrible though he knew they would be. The real source of his mental anguish lay in the conviction that the elaborately planned escape from this unutterable hell was frustrated now in the very moment of execution.

They came out upon the green plateau and headed for the stockade and the overseer's white house. Pitt's eyes looked out over Carlisle Bay, of which this plateau commanded a clear view from the fort on one side to the long sheds of the wharf on the other. Along this wharf a few shallow boats were moored, and Pitt caught himself wondering which of these was the wherry in which with a little luck they might have been now at sea. Out over that sea his glance ranged miserably.

In the roads, standing in for the shore before a gentle breeze that scarcely ruffled the sapphire surface of the Caribbean, came a stately red-hulled frigate, flying the English ensign.

Colonel Bishop halted to consider her, shading his eyes with his fleshly hand. Light as was the breeze, the vessel spread no canvas to it beyond that of her foresail. Furled was her every other sail, leaving a clear view of the majestic lines of her hull, from towering stern castle to gilded beakhead that was aflash in the dazzling sunshine.

So leisurely an advance argued a master indifferently acquainted with these waters, who preferred to creep forward cautiously, sounding his way. At her present rate of progress it would be an hour, perhaps, before she came to anchorage within the harbour. And whilst the Colonel viewed her, admiring, perhaps, the gracious beauty of her, Pitt was hurried forward into the stockade, and clapped into the stocks that stood there ready for slaves who required correction.

Colonel Bishop followed him presently, with leisurely, rolling gait.

"A mutinous cur that shows his fangs to his master must learn good manners at the cost of a striped hide," was all he said before setting about his executioner's job.

That with his own hands he should do that which most men of his station would, out of self-respect, have relegated to one of the negroes, gives you the measure of the man's beastliness. It was almost as if with relish, as if gratifying some feral instinct of cruelty, that he now lashed his victim about head and shoulders. Soon his cane was reduced, to splinters by his violence. You know, perhaps, the sting of a flexible bamboo cane when it is whole. But do you realize its murderous quality when it has been split into several long lithe blades, each with an edge that is of the keenness of a knife?

When, at last, from very weariness, Colonel Bishop flung away the stump and thongs to which his cane had been reduced, the wretched slave's back was bleeding pulp from neck to waist.

As long as full sensibility remained, Jeremy Pitt had made no sound. But in a measure as from pain his senses were mercifully dulled, he sank forward in the stocks, and hung there now in a huddled heap, faintly moaning.

Colonel Bishop set his foot upon the crossbar, and leaned over his victim, a cruel smile on his full, coarse face.

"Let that teach you a proper submission," said he. "And now touching that shy friend of yours, you shall stay here without meat or drink—without meat or drink, d' ye hear me?—until you please to tell me his name and business." He took his foot from the bar. "When you've had enough of this, send me word, and we'll have the branding-irons to you."

On that he swung on his heel, and strode out of the stockade, his negroes following.

Pitt had heard him, as we hear things in our dreams. At the moment so spent was he by his cruel punishment, and so deep was the despair into which he had fallen, that he no longer cared whether he lived or died.

Soon, however, from the partial stupor which pain had mercifully induced, a new variety of pain aroused him. The stocks stood in the open under the full glare of the tropical sun, and its blistering rays streamed down upon that mangled, bleeding back until he felt as if flames of fire were searing it. And, soon, to this was added a torment still more unspeakable. Flies, the cruel flies of the Antilles, drawn by the scent of blood, descended in a cloud upon him.

Small wonder that the ingenious Colonel Bishop, who so well understood the art of loosening stubborn tongues, had not deemed it necessary to have recourse to other means of torture. Not all his fiendish cruelty could devise a torment more cruel, more unendurable than the torments Nature would here procure a man in Pitt's condition.

The slave writhed in his stocks until he was in danger of breaking his limbs, and writhing, screamed in agony.

Thus was he found by Peter Blood, who seemed to his troubled vision to materialize suddenly before him. Mr. Blood carried a large palmetto leaf. Having whisked away with this the flies that were devouring Jeremy's back, he slung it by a strip of fibre from the lad's neck, so that it protected him from further attacks as well as from the rays of the sun. Next, sitting down beside him, he drew the sufferer's head down on his own shoulder, and bathed his face from a pannikin of cold water. Pitt shuddered and moaned on a long, indrawn breath.

"Drink!" he gasped. "Drink, for the love of Christ!" The pannikin

was held to his quivering lips. He drank greedily, noisily, nor ceased until he had drained the vessel. Cooled and revived by the draught, he attempted to sit up.

"My back!" he screamed.

There was an unusual glint in Mr. Blood's eyes; his lips were compressed. But when he parted them to speak, his voice came cool and steady.

"Be easy, now. One thing at a time. Your back's taking no harm at all for the present, since I've covered it up. I'm wanting to know what's happened to you. D' ye think we can do without a navigator that ye go and provoke that beast Bishop until he all but kills you?"

Pitt sat up and groaned again. But this time his anguish was mental rather than physical.

"I don't think a navigator will be needed this time, Peter."

"What's that?" cried Mr. Blood.

Pitt explained the situation as briefly as he could, in a halting, gasping speech. "I'm to rot here until I tell him the identity of my visitor and his business."

Mr. Blood got up, growling in his throat. "Bad cess to the filthy slaver!" said he. "But it must be contrived, nevertheless. To the devil with Nuttall! Whether he gives surety for the boat or not, whether he explains it or not, the boat remains, and we're going, and you're coming with us."

"You're dreaming, Peter," said the prisoner. "We're not going this time. The magistrates will confiscate the boat since the surety's not paid, even if when they press him Nuttall does not confess the whole plan and get us all branded on the forehead."

Mr. Blood turned away, and with agony in his eyes looked out to sea over the blue water by which he had so fondly hoped soon to be travelling back to freedom.

The great red ship had drawn considerably nearer shore by now. Slowly, majestically, she was entering the bay. Already one or two wherries were putting off from the wharf to board her. From where he stood, Mr. Blood could see the glinting of the brass cannons mounted on the prow above the curving beak-head, and he could make out the figure of a seaman in the forechains on her larboard side, leaning out to heave the lead.

An angry voice aroused him from his unhappy thoughts.

"What the devil are you doing here?"

The returning Colonel Bishop came striding into the stockade, his negroes following ever.

Mr. Blood turned to face him, and over that swarthy countenance—which, indeed, by now was tanned to the golden brown of a half-caste Indian—a mask descended.

"Doing?" said he blandly. "Why, the duties of my office."

The Colonel, striding furiously forward, observed two things. The empty pannikin on the seat beside the prisoner, and the palmetto leaf protecting his back. "Have you dared to do this?" The veins on the planter's forehead stood out like cords.

"Of course I have." Mr. Blood's tone was one of faint surprise.

"I said he was to have neither meat nor drink until I ordered it."

"Sure, now, I never heard ye."

"You never heard me? How should you have heard me when you

weren't here?"

"Then how did ye expect me to know what orders ye'd given?" Mr. Blood's tone was positively aggrieved. "All that I knew was that one of your slaves was being murdered by the sun and the flies. And I says to myself, this is one of the Colonel's slaves, and I'm the Colonel's doctor, and sure it's my duty to be looking after the Colonel's property. So I just gave the fellow a spoonful of water and covered his back from the sun. And wasn't I right now?"

"Right?" The Colonel was almost speechless.

"Be easy, now, be easy!" Mr. Blood implored him. "It's an apoplexy ye'll be contacting if ye give way to heat like this."

The planter thrust him aside with an imprecation, and stepping forward tore the palmetto leaf from the prisoner's back.

"In the name of humanity, now...." Mr. Blood was beginning.

The Colonel swung upon him furiously. "Out of this!" he commanded. "And don't come near him again until I send for you, unless you want to be served in the same way."

He was terrific in his menace, in his bulk, and in the power of him. But Mr. Blood never flinched. It came to the Colonel, as he found himself steadily regarded by those light-blue eyes that looked so arrestingly odd in that tawny face—like pale sapphires set in copper—that this rogue had for some time now been growing presumptuous. It was a matter that he must presently correct. Meanwhile Mr. Blood was speaking again, his tone quietly insistent.

"In the name of humanity," he repeated, "ye'll allow me to do what I can to ease his sufferings, or I swear to you that I'll forsake at once the duties of a doctor, and that it's devil another patient will I attend in this unhealthy island at all."

For an instant the Colonel was too amazed to speak. Then—

"By God!" he roared. "D'ye dare take that tone with me, you dog? D'ye dare to make terms with me?"

"I do that." The unflinching blue eyes looked squarely into the Colonel's, and there was a devil peeping out of them, the devil of recklessness that is born of despair.

Colonel Bishop considered him for a long moment in silence. "I've been too soft with you," he said at last. "But that's to be mended." And he tightened his lips. "I'll have the rods to you, until there's not an inch of skin left on your dirty back."

"Will ye so? And what would Governor Steed do, then?"

"Ye're not the only doctor on the island."

Mr. Blood actually laughed. "And will ye tell that to his excellency, him with the gout in his foot so bad that he can't stand? Ye know very well it's devil another doctor will he tolerate, being an intelligent man that knows what's good for him."

But the Colonel's brute passion thoroughly aroused was not so easily to be baulked. "If you're alive when my blacks have done with you, perhaps you'll come to your senses."

He swung to his negroes to issue an order. But it was never issued. At that moment a terrific rolling thunderclap drowned his voice and shook the very air. Colonel Bishop jumped, his negroes jumped with him, and so even did the apparently imperturbable Mr. Blood. Then the four of them stared together seawards.

Down in the bay all that could be seen of the great ship, standing now within a cable's-length of the fort, were her topmasts thrusting above a cloud of smoke in which she was enveloped. From the cliffs

a flight of startled seabirds had risen to circle in the blue, giving tongue to their alarm, the plaintive curlew noisiest of all.

As those men stared from the eminence on which they stood, not yet understanding what had taken place, they saw the British Jack dip from the main truck and vanish into the rising cloud below. A moment more, and up through that cloud to replace the flag of England soared the gold and crimson banner of Castile. And then they understood.

"Pirates!" roared the Colonel, and again, "Pirates!"

Fear and incredulity were blent in his voice. He had paled under his tan until his face was the colour of clay, and there was a wild fury in his beady eyes. His negroes looked at him, grinning idiotically, all teeth and eyeballs.

CHAPTER VIII. SPANIARDS

The stately ship that had been allowed to sail so leisurely into Carlisle Bay under her false colours was a Spanish privateer, coming to pay off some of the heavy debt piled up by the predaceous Brethren of the Coast, and the recent defeat by the *Pride of Devon* of two treasure galleons bound for Cadiz. It happened that the galleon which escaped in a more or less crippled condition was commanded by Don Diego de Espinosa y Valdez, who was own brother to the Spanish Admiral Don Miguel de Espinosa, and who was also a very hasty, proud, and hot-tempered gentleman.

Galled by his defeat, and choosing to forget that his own conduct had invited it, he had sworn to teach the English a sharp lesson which they should remember. He would take a leaf out of the book of Morgan and those other robbers of the sea, and make a punitive raid upon an English settlement. Unfortunately for himself and for many others, his brother the Admiral was not at hand to restrain him when for this purpose he fitted out the *Cinco Llagas* at San Juan de Porto Rico. He chose for his objective the island of Barbados, whose natural strength was apt to render her defenders careless. He chose it also because thither had the *Pride of Devon* been tracked by his scouts, and he desired a measure of poetic justice to invest his vengeance. And he chose a moment when there were no ships of war at anchor in Carlisle Bay.

He had succeeded so well in his intentions that he had aroused no suspicion until he saluted the fort at short range with a broadside of twenty guns.

And now the four gaping watchers in the stockade on the headland

beheld the great ship creep forward under the rising cloud of smoke, her mainsail unfurled to increase her steering way, and go about close-hauled to bring her larboard guns to bear upon the unready fort.

With the crashing roar of that second broadside, Colonel Bishop awoke from stupefaction to a recollection of where his duty lay. In the town below drums were beating frantically, and a trumpet was bleating, as if the peril needed further advertising. As commander of the Barbados Militia, the place of Colonel Bishop was at the head of his scanty troops, in that fort which the Spanish guns were pounding into rubble.

Remembering it, he went off at the double, despite his bulk and the heat, his negroes trotting after him.

Mr. Blood turned to Jeremy Pitt. He laughed grimly. "Now that," said he, "is what I call a timely interruption. Though what'll come of it," he added as an afterthought, "the devil himself knows."

As a third broadside was thundering forth, he picked up the palmetto leaf and carefully replaced it on the back of his fellow-slave.

And then into the stockade, panting and sweating, came Kent followed by best part of a score of plantation workers, some of whom were black and all of whom were in a state of panic. He led them into the low white house, to bring them forth again, within a moment, as it seemed, armed now with muskets and hangers and some of them equipped with bandoleers.

By this time the rebels-convict were coming in, in twos and threes, having abandoned their work upon finding themselves unguarded and upon scenting the general dismay.

Kent paused a moment, as his hastily armed guard dashed forth, to fling an order to those slaves.

"To the woods!" he bade them. "Take to the woods, and lie close there, until this is over, and we've gutted these Spanish swine."

On that he went off in haste after his men, who were to be added to those massing in the town, so as to oppose and overwhelm the Spanish landing parties.

The slaves would have obeyed him on the instant but for Mr. Blood.

"What need for haste, and in this heat?" quoth he. He was surprisingly cool, they thought. "Maybe there'll be no need to take to the woods at all, and, anyway, it will be time enough to do so when the Spaniards are masters of the town."

And so, joined now by the other stragglers, and numbering in all a round score—rebels-convict all—they stayed to watch from their vantage-ground the fortunes of the furious battle that was being waged below.

The landing was contested by the militia and by every islander capable of bearing arms with the fierce resoluteness of men who knew that no quarter was to be expected in defeat. The ruthlessness of Spanish soldiery was a byword, and not at his worst had Morgan or L'Ollonais ever perpetrated such horrors as those of which these Castilian gentlemen were capable.

But this Spanish commander knew his business, which was more than could truthfully be said for the Barbados Militia. Having gained the advantage of a surprise blow, which had put the fort out of action, he soon showed them that he was master of the situation. His guns turned now upon the open space behind the mole, where the incompetent Bishop had marshalled his men, tore the militia into bloody rags, and covered the landing parties which were making the shore in their own boats and in several of those which had rashly gone out to the great ship before her identity was revealed.

All through the scorching afternoon the battle went on, the rattle and crack of musketry penetrating ever deeper into the town to show that the defenders were being driven steadily back. By sunset two hundred and fifty Spaniards were masters of Bridgetown, the islanders were disarmed, and at Government House, Governor Steed—his gout forgotten in his panic—supported by Colonel Bishop and some lesser officers, was being informed by Don Diego, with an urbanity that was itself a mockery, of the sum that would be required in ransom.

For a hundred thousand pieces of eight and fifty head of cattle, Don Diego would forbear from reducing the place to ashes. And what time that suave and courtly commander was settling these details with the apoplectic British Governor, the Spaniards were smashing and looting, feasting, drinking, and ravaging after the hideous manner of their kind.

Mr. Blood, greatly daring, ventured down at dusk into the town. What he saw there is recorded by Jeremy Pitt to whom he subsequently related it—in that voluminous log from which the greater part of my narrative is derived. I have no intention of repeating any of it here. It is all too loathsome and nauseating, incredible, indeed, that men however abandoned could ever descend such an abyss of bestial cruelty and lust.

What he saw was fetching him in haste and white-faced out of that hell again, when in a narrow street a girl hurtled into him, wild-eyed, her unbound hair streaming behind her as she ran. After her, laughing and cursing in a breath, came a heavy-booted Spaniard. Almost he was upon her, when suddenly Mr. Blood got in his way. The doctor had taken a sword from a dead man's side some little time before and armed himself with it against an emergency.

As the Spaniard checked in anger and surprise, he caught in the dusk the livid gleam of that sword which Mr. Blood had quickly

unsheathed.

"Ah, perro ingles!" he shouted, and flung forward to his death.

"It's hoping I am ye're in a fit state to meet your Maker," said Mr. Blood, and ran him through the body. He did the thing skilfully: with the combined skill of swordsman and surgeon. The man sank in a hideous heap without so much as a groan.

Mr. Blood swung to the girl, who leaned panting and sobbing against a wall. He caught her by the wrist.

"Come!" he said.

But she hung back, resisting him by her weight. "Who are you?" she demanded wildly.

"Will ye wait to see my credentials?" he snapped. Steps were clattering towards them from beyond the corner round which she had fled from that Spanish ruffian. "Come," he urged again. And this time, reassured perhaps by his clear English speech, she went without further questions.

They sped down an alley and then up another, by great good fortune meeting no one, for already they were on the outskirts of the town. They won out of it, and white-faced, physically sick, Mr. Blood dragged her almost at a run up the hill towards Colonel Bishop's house. He told her briefly who and what he was, and thereafter there was no conversation between them until they reached the big white house. It was all in darkness, which at least was reassuring. If the Spaniards had reached it, there would be lights. He knocked, but had to knock again and yet again before he was answered. Then it was by a voice from a window above.

"Who is there?" The voice was Miss Bishop's, a little tremulous, but unmistakably her own.

Mr. Blood almost fainted in relief. He had been imagining the unimaginable. He had pictured her down in that hell out of which he had just come. He had conceived that she might have followed her uncle into Bridgetown, or committed some other imprudence, and he turned cold from head to foot at the mere thought of what might have happened to her.

"It is I—Peter Blood," he gasped.

"What do you want?"

It is doubtful whether she would have come down to open. For at such a time as this it was no more than likely that the wretched plantation slaves might be in revolt and prove as great a danger as the Spaniards. But at the sound of her voice, the girl Mr. Blood had rescued peered up through the gloom.

"Arabella!" she called. "It is I, Mary Traill."

"Mary!" The voice ceased above on that exclamation, the head was withdrawn. After a brief pause the door gaped wide. Beyond it in the wide hall stood Miss Arabella, a slim, virginal figure in white, mysteriously revealed in the gleam of a single candle which she carried.

Mr. Blood strode in followed by his distraught companion, who, falling upon Arabella's slender bosom, surrendered herself to a passion of tears. But he wasted no time.

"Whom have you here with you? What servants?" he demanded sharply.

The only male was James, an old negro groom.

"The very man," said Blood. "Bid him get out horses. Then away with you to Speightstown, or even farther north, where you will be safe."

Here you are in danger—in dreadful danger."

"But I thought the fighting was over..." she was beginning, pale and startled.

"So it is. But the devilry's only beginning. Miss Traill will tell you as you go. In God's name, madam, take my word for it, and do as I bid you."

"He... he saved me," sobbed Miss Traill.

"Saved you?" Miss Bishop was aghast. "Saved you from what, Mary?"

"Let that wait," snapped Mr. Blood almost angrily. "You've all the night for chattering when you're out of this, and away beyond their reach. Will you please call James, and do as I say—and at once!"

"You are very peremptory...."

"Oh, my God! I am peremptory! Speak, Miss Traill!, tell her whether I've cause to be peremptory."

"Yes, yes," the girl cried, shuddering. "Do as he says—Oh, for pity's sake, Arabella."

Miss Bishop went off, leaving Mr. Blood and Miss Traill alone again.

"I... I shall never forget what you did, sir," said she, through her diminishing tears. She was a slight wisp of a girl, a child, no more.

"I've done better things in my time. That's why I'm here," said Mr. Blood, whose mood seemed to be snappy.

She didn't pretend to understand him, and she didn't make the attempt.

"Did you... did you kill him?" she asked, fearfully.

He stared at her in the flickering candlelight. "I hope so. It is very probable, and it doesn't matter at all," he said. "What matters is that this fellow James should fetch the horses." And he was stamping off to accelerate these preparations for departure, when her voice arrested him.

"Don't leave me! Don't leave me here alone!" she cried in terror.

He paused. He turned and came slowly back. Standing above her he smiled upon her.

"There, there! You've no cause for alarm. It's all over now. You'll be away soon—away to Speightstown, where you'll be quite safe."

The horses came at last—four of them, for in addition to James who was to act as her guide, Miss Bishop had her woman, who was not to be left behind.

Mr. Blood lifted the slight weight of Mary Traill to her horse, then turned to say good-bye to Miss Bishop, who was already mounted. He said it, and seemed to have something to add. But whatever it was, it remained unspoken. The horses started, and receded into the sapphire starlit night, leaving him standing there before Colonel Bishop's door. The last he heard of them was Mary Traill's childlike voice calling back on a quavering note—

"I shall never forget what you did, Mr. Blood. I shall never forget."

But as it was not the voice he desired to hear, the assurance brought him little satisfaction. He stood there in the dark watching the fireflies amid the rhododendrons, till the hoofbeats had faded. Then he sighed and roused himself. He had much to do. His journey into the town had not been one of idle curiosity to see how the Spaniards conducted themselves in victory. It had been inspired by a very

different purpose, and he had gained in the course of it all the information he desired. He had an extremely busy night before him, and must be moving.

He went off briskly in the direction of the stockade, where his fellow-slaves awaited him in deep anxiety and some hope.

CHAPTER IX. THE REBELS- CONVICT

There were, when the purple gloom of the tropical night descended upon the Caribbean, not more than ten men on guard aboard the *Cinco Llagas*, so confident—and with good reason—were the Spaniards of the complete subjection of the islanders. And when I say that there were ten men on guard, I state rather the purpose for which they were left aboard than the duty which they fulfilled. As a matter of fact, whilst the main body of the Spaniards feasted and rioted ashore, the Spanish gunner and his crew—who had so nobly done their duty and ensured the easy victory of the day—were feasting on the gun-deck upon the wine and the fresh meats fetched out to them from shore. Above, two sentinels only kept vigil, at stem and stern. Nor were they as vigilant as they should have been, or else they must have observed the two wherries that under cover of the darkness came gliding from the wharf, with well-greased rowlocks, to bring up in silence under the great ship's quarter.

From the gallery aft still hung the ladder by which Don Diego had descended to the boat that had taken him ashore. The sentry on guard in the stern, coming presently round this gallery, was suddenly confronted by the black shadow of a man standing before him at the head of the ladder.

"Who's there?" he asked, but without alarm, supposing it one of his fellows.

"It is I," softly answered Peter Blood in the fluent Castilian of which he was master.

"Is it you, Pedro?" The Spaniard came a step nearer.

"Peter is my name; but I doubt I'll not be the Peter you're expecting."

"How?" quoth the sentry, checking.

"This way," said Mr. Blood.

The wooden taffrail was a low one, and the Spaniard was taken completely by surprise. Save for the splash he made as he struck the water, narrowly missing one of the crowded boats that waited under the counter, not a sound announced his misadventure. Armed as he was with corselet, cuissarts, and headpiece, he sank to trouble them no more.

"Whist!" hissed Mr. Blood to his waiting rebels-convict. "Come on, now, and without noise."

Within five minutes they had swarmed aboard, the entire twenty of them overflowing from that narrow gallery and crouching on the quarter-deck itself. Lights showed ahead. Under the great lantern in the prow they saw the black figure of the other sentry, pacing on the forecastle. From below sounds reached them of the orgy on the gun-deck: a rich male voice was singing an obscene ballad to which the others chanted in chorus:

"Y estos son los usos de Castilla y de Leon!"

"From what I've seen to-day I can well believe it," said Mr. Blood, and whispered: "Forward—after me."

Crouching low, they glided, noiseless as shadows, to the quarter-deck rail, and thence slipped without sound down into the waist. Two thirds of them were armed with muskets, some of which they had found in the overseer's house, and others supplied from the secret hoard that Mr. Blood had so laboriously assembled against the day of escape. The remainder were equipped with knives and cutlasses.

In the vessel's waist they hung awhile, until Mr. Blood had satisfied himself that no other sentinel showed above decks but that inconvenient fellow in the prow. Their first attention must be for him. Mr. Blood, himself, crept forward with two companions, leaving the others in the charge of that Nathaniel Hagthorpe whose sometime commission in the King's Navy gave him the best title to this office.

Mr. Blood's absence was brief. When he rejoined his comrades there was no watch above the Spaniards' decks.

Meanwhile the revellers below continued to make merry at their ease in the conviction of complete security. The garrison of Barbados was overpowered and disarmed, and their companions were ashore in complete possession of the town, glutting themselves hideously upon the fruits of victory. What, then, was there to fear? Even when their quarters were invaded and they found themselves surrounded by a score of wild, hairy, half-naked men, who—save that they appeared once to have been white—looked like a horde of savages, the Spaniards could not believe their eyes.

Who could have dreamed that a handful of forgotten plantation-slaves would have dared to take so much upon themselves?

The half-drunken Spaniards, their laughter suddenly quenched, the song perishing on their lips, stared, stricken and bewildered at the levelled muskets by which they were checkmated.

And then, from out of this uncouth pack of savages that beset them, stepped a slim, tall fellow with light-blue eyes in a tawny face, eyes in which glinted the light of a wicked humour. He addressed them in the purest Castilian.

"You will save yourselves pain and trouble by regarding yourselves my prisoners, and suffering yourselves to be quietly bestowed out of harm's way."

"Name of God!" swore the gunner, which did no justice at all to an amazement beyond expression.

"If you please," said Mr. Blood, and thereupon those gentlemen of Spain were induced without further trouble beyond a musket prod or two to drop through a scuttle to the deck below.

After that the rebels-convict refreshed themselves with the good things in the consumption of which they had interrupted the Spaniards. To taste palatable Christian food after months of salt fish and maize dumplings was in itself a feast to these unfortunates. But there were no excesses. Mr. Blood saw to that, although it required all the firmness of which he was capable.

Dispositions were to be made without delay against that which must follow before they could abandon themselves fully to the enjoyment of their victory. This, after all, was no more than a preliminary skirmish, although it was one that afforded them the key to the situation. It remained to dispose so that the utmost profit might be drawn from it. Those dispositions occupied some very considerable portion of the night. But, at least, they were complete before the sun peeped over the shoulder of Mount Hilibay to shed his light upon a day of some surprises.

It was soon after sunrise that the rebel-convict who paced the quarter-deck in Spanish corselet and headpiece, a Spanish musket on his shoulder, announced the approach of a boat. It was Don Diego de Espinosa y Valdez coming aboard with four great treasure-chests, containing each twenty-five thousand pieces of eight, the ransom delivered to him at dawn by Governor Steed. He was accompanied by his son, Don Esteban, and by six men who took the oars.

Aboard the frigate all was quiet and orderly as it should be. She rode at anchor, her larboard to the shore, and the main ladder on her starboard side. Round to this came the boat with Don Diego and his

treasure. Mr. Blood had disposed effectively. It was not for nothing that he had served under de Ruyter. The swings were waiting, and the windlass manned. Below, a gun-crew held itself in readiness under the command of Ogle, who—as I have said—had been a gunner in the Royal Navy before he went in for politics and followed the fortunes of the Duke of Monmouth. He was a sturdy, resolute fellow who inspired confidence by the very confidence he displayed in himself.

Don Diego mounted the ladder and stepped upon the deck, alone, and entirely unsuspecting. What should the poor man suspect?

Before he could even look round, and survey this guard drawn up to receive him, a tap over the head with a capstan bar efficiently handled by Hagthorpe put him to sleep without the least fuss.

He was carried away to his cabin, whilst the treasure-chests, handled by the men he had left in the boat, were being hauled to the deck. That being satisfactorily accomplished, Don Esteban and the fellows who had manned the boat came up the ladder, one by one, to be handled with the same quiet efficiency. Peter Blood had a genius for these things, and almost, I suspect, an eye for the dramatic. Dramatic, certainly, was the spectacle now offered to the survivors of the raid.

With Colonel Bishop at their head, and gout-ridden Governor Steed sitting on the ruins of a wall beside him, they glumly watched the departure of the eight boats containing the weary Spanish ruffians who had glutted themselves with rapine, murder, and violences unspeakable.

They looked on, between relief at this departure of their remorseless enemies, and despair at the wild ravages which, temporarily at least, had wrecked the prosperity and happiness of that little colony.

The boats pulled away from the shore, with their loads of laughing, jeering Spaniards, who were still flinging taunts across the water at their surviving victims. They had come midway between the wharf and the ship, when suddenly the air was shaken by the boom of a gun.

A round shot struck the water within a fathom of the foremost boat, sending a shower of spray over its occupants. They paused at their oars, astounded into silence for a moment. Then speech burst from them like an explosion. Angrily voluble they anathematized this dangerous carelessness on the part of their gunner, who should know better than to fire a salute from a cannon loaded with shot. They were still cursing him when a second shot, better aimed than the first, came to crumple one of the boats into splinters, flinging its crew, dead and living, into the water.

But if it silenced these, it gave tongue, still more angry, vehement, and bewildered to the crews of the other seven boats. From each the suspended oars stood out poised over the water, whilst on their feet in the excitement the Spaniards screamed oaths at the ship, begging Heaven and Hell to inform them what madman had been let loose among her guns.

Plump into their middle came a third shot, smashing a second boat with fearful execution. Followed again a moment of awful silence, then among those Spanish pirates all was gibbering and jabbering and splashing of oars, as they attempted to pull in every direction at once. Some were for going ashore, others for heading straight to the vessel and there discovering what might be amiss. That something was very gravely amiss there could be no further doubt, particularly as whilst they discussed and fumed and cursed two more shots came over the water to account for yet a third of their boats.

The resolute Ogle was making excellent practice, and fully justifying his claims to know something of gunnery. In their consternation the Spaniards had simplified his task by huddling their boats together.

After the fourth shot, opinion was no longer divided amongst them. As with one accord they went about, or attempted to do so, for before they had accomplished it two more of their boats had been sunk.

The three boats that remained, without concerning themselves with their more unfortunate fellows, who were struggling in the water, headed back for the wharf at speed.

If the Spaniards understood nothing of all this, the forlorn islanders ashore understood still less, until to help their wits they saw the flag of Spain come down from the mainmast of the *Cinco Llagas*, and the flag of England soar to its empty place. Even then some bewilderment persisted, and it was with fearful eyes that they observed the return of their enemies, who might vent upon them the ferocity aroused by these extraordinary events.

Ogle, however, continued to give proof that his knowledge of gunnery was not of yesterday. After the fleeing Spaniards went his shots. The last of their boats flew into splinters as it touched the wharf, and its remains were buried under a shower of loosened masonry.

That was the end of this pirate crew, which not ten minutes ago had been laughingly counting up the pieces of eight that would fall to the portion of each for his share in that act of villainy. Close upon threescore survivors contrived to reach the shore. Whether they had cause for congratulation, I am unable to say in the absence of any records in which their fate may be traced. That lack of records is in itself eloquent. We know that they were made fast as they landed, and considering the offence they had given I am not disposed to doubt that they had every reason to regret the survival.

The mystery of the succour that had come at the eleventh hour to wreak vengeance upon the Spaniards, and to preserve for the island the extortionate ransom of a hundred thousand pieces of eight, remained yet to be probed. That the *Cinco Llagas* was now in friendly

hands could no longer be doubted after the proofs it had given. But who, the people of Bridgetown asked one another, were the men in possession of her, and whence had they come? The only possible assumption ran the truth very closely. A resolute party of islanders must have got aboard during the night, and seized the ship. It remained to ascertain the precise identity of these mysterious saviours, and do them fitting honour.

Upon this errand—Governor Steed's condition not permitting him to go in person—went Colonel Bishop as the Governor's deputy, attended by two officers.

As he stepped from the ladder into the vessel's waist, the Colonel beheld there, beside the main hatch, the four treasure-chests, the contents of one of which had been contributed almost entirely by himself. It was a gladsome spectacle, and his eyes sparkled in beholding it.

Ranged on either side, athwart the deck, stood a score of men in two well-ordered files, with breasts and backs of steel, polished Spanish morions on their heads, overshadowing their faces, and muskets ordered at their sides.

Colonel Bishop could not be expected to recognize at a glance in these upright, furbished, soldierly figures the ragged, unkempt scarecrows that but yesterday had been toiling in his plantations. Still less could he be expected to recognize at once the courtly gentleman who advanced to greet him—a lean, graceful gentleman, dressed in the Spanish fashion, all in black with silver lace, a gold-hilted sword dangling beside him from a gold embroidered baldrick, a broad castor with a sweeping plume set above carefully curled ringlets of deepest black.

"Be welcome aboard the Cinco Llagas, Colonel, darling," a voice vaguely familiar addressed the planter. "We've made the best of the

Spaniards' wardrobe in honour of this visit, though it was scarcely yourself we had dared hope to expect. You find yourself among friends—old friends of yours, all." The Colonel stared in stupefaction. Mr. Blood tricked out in all this splendour—indulging therein his natural taste—his face carefully shaven, his hair as carefully dressed, seemed transformed into a younger man. The fact is he looked no more than the thirty-three years he counted to his age.

"Peter Blood!" It was an ejaculation of amazement. Satisfaction followed swiftly. "Was it you, then...?"

"Myself it was—myself and these, my good friends and yours." Mr. Blood tossed back the fine lace from his wrist, to wave a hand towards the file of men standing to attention there.

The Colonel looked more closely. "Gad's my life!" he crowed on a note of foolish jubilation. "And it was with these fellows that you took the Spaniard and turned the tables on those dogs! Oddswounds! It was heroic!"

"Heroic, is it? Bedad, it's epic! Ye begin to perceive the breadth and depth of my genius."

Colonel Bishop sat himself down on the hatch-coaming, took off his broad hat, and mopped his brow.

"Y'amaze me!" he gasped. "On my soul, y'amaze me! To have recovered the treasure and to have seized this fine ship and all she'll hold! It will be something to set against the other losses we have suffered. As Gad's my life, you deserve well for this."

"I am entirely of your opinion."

"Damme! You all deserve well, and damme, you shall find me grateful."

"That's as it should be," said Mr. Blood. "The question is how well

we deserve, and how grateful shall we find you?"

Colonel Bishop considered him. There was a shadow of surprise in his face.

"Why—his excellency shall write home an account of your exploit, and maybe some portion of your sentences shall be remitted."

"The generosity of King James is well known," sneered Nathaniel Hagthorpe, who was standing by, and amongst the ranged rebels—convict some one ventured to laugh.

Colonel Bishop started up. He was pervaded by the first pang of uneasiness. It occurred to him that all here might not be as friendly as appeared.

"And there's another matter," Mr. Blood resumed. "There's a matter of a flogging that's due to me. Ye're a man of your word in such matters, Colonel—if not perhaps in others—and ye said, I think, that ye'd not leave a square inch of skin on my back."

The planter waved the matter aside. Almost it seemed to offend him.

"Tush! Tush! After this splendid deed of yours, do you suppose I can be thinking of such things?"

"I'm glad ye feel like that about it. But I'm thinking it's mighty lucky for me the Spaniards didn't come to-day instead of yesterday, or it's in the same plight as Jeremy Pitt I'd be this minute. And in that case where was the genius that would have turned the tables on these rascally Spaniards?"

"Why speak of it now?"

Mr. Blood resumed: "ye'll please to understand that I must, Colonel, darling. Ye've worked a deal of wickedness and cruelty in your time,

and I want this to be a lesson to you, a lesson that ye'll remember—for the sake of others who may come after us. There's Jeremy up there in the round-house with a back that's every colour of the rainbow; and the poor lad'll not be himself again for a month. And if it hadn't been for the Spaniards maybe it's dead he'd be by now, and maybe myself with him."

Hagthorpe lounged forward. He was a fairly tall, vigorous man with a clear-cut, attractive face which in itself announced his breeding.

"Why will you be wasting words on the hog?" wondered that sometime officer in the Royal Navy. "Fling him overboard and have done with him."

The Colonel's eyes bulged in his head. "What the devil do you mean?" he blustered.

"It's the lucky man ye are entirely, Colonel, though ye don't guess the source of your good fortune."

And now another intervened—the brawny, one-eyed Wolverstone, less mercifully disposed than his more gentlemanly fellow-convict.

"String him up from the yardarm," he cried, his deep voice harsh and angry, and more than one of the slaves standing to their arms made echo.

Colonel Bishop trembled. Mr. Blood turned. He was quite calm.

"If you please, Wolverstone," said he, "I conduct affairs in my own way. That is the pact. You'll please to remember it." His eyes looked along the ranks, making it plain that he addressed them all. "I desire that Colonel Bishop should have his life. One reason is that I require him as a hostage. If ye insist on hanging him, ye'll have to hang me with him, or in the alternative I'll go ashore."

He paused. There was no answer. But they stood hang-dog and

half-mutinous before him, save Hagthorpe, who shrugged and smiled wearily.

Mr. Blood resumed: "Ye'll please to understand that aboard a ship there is one captain. So." He swung again to the startled Colonel. "Though I promise you your life, I must—as you've heard—keep you aboard as a hostage for the good behaviour of Governor Steed and what's left of the fort until we put to sea."

"Until you..." Horror prevented Colonel Bishop from echoing the remainder of that incredible speech.

"Just so," said Peter Blood, and he turned to the officers who had accompanied the Colonel. "The boat is waiting, gentlemen. You'll have heard what I said. Convey it with my compliments to his excellency."

"But, sir..." one of them began.

"There is no more to be said, gentlemen. My name is Blood—Captain Blood, if you please, of this ship the Cinco Llagas, taken as a prize of war from Don Diego de Espinosa y Valdez, who is my prisoner aboard. You are to understand that I have turned the tables on more than the Spaniards. There's the ladder. You'll find it more convenient than being heaved over the side, which is what'll happen if you linger."

They went, though not without some hustling, regardless of the bellowings of Colonel Bishop, whose monstrous rage was fanned by terror at finding himself at the mercy of these men of whose cause to hate him he was very fully conscious.

A half-dozen of them, apart from Jeremy Pitt, who was utterly incapacitated for the present, possessed a superficial knowledge of seamanship. Hagthorpe, although he had been a fighting officer, untrained in navigation, knew how to handle a ship, and under his

directions they set about getting under way.

The anchor catted, and the mainsail unfurled, they stood out for the open before a gentle breeze, without interference from the fort.

As they were running close to the headland east of the bay, Peter Blood returned to the Colonel, who, under guard and panic-stricken had dejectedly resumed his seat on the coamings of the main batch.

"Can ye swim, Colonel?"

Colonel Bishop looked up. His great face was yellow and seemed in that moment of a preternatural flabbiness; his beady eyes were beadier than ever.

"As your doctor, now, I prescribe a swim to cool the excessive heat of your humours." Blood delivered the explanation pleasantly, and, receiving still no answer from the Colonel, continued: "It's a mercy for you I'm not by nature as bloodthirsty as some of my friends here. And it's the devil's own labour I've had to prevail upon them not to be vindictive. I doubt if ye're worth the pains I've taken for you."

He was lying. He had no doubt at all. Had he followed his own wishes and instincts, he would certainly have strung the Colonel up, and accounted it a meritorious deed. It was the thought of Arabella Bishop that had urged him to mercy, and had led him to oppose the natural vindictiveness of his fellow-slaves until he had been in danger of precipitating a mutiny. It was entirely to the fact that the Colonel was her uncle, although he did not even begin to suspect such a cause, that he owed such mercy as was now being shown him.

"You shall have a chance to swim for it," Peter Blood continued. "It's not above a quarter of a mile to the headland yonder, and with ordinary luck ye should manage it. Faith, you're fat enough to float. Come on! Now, don't be hesitating or it's a long voyage ye'll be going with us, and the devil knows what may happen to you. You're not loved

any more than you deserve."

Colonel Bishop mastered himself, and rose. A merciless despot, who had never known the need for restraint in all these years, he was doomed by ironic fate to practise restraint in the very moment when his feelings had reached their most violent intensity.

Peter Blood gave an order. A plank was run out over the gunwale, and lashed down.

"If you please, Colonel," said he, with a graceful flourish of invitation.

The Colonel looked at him, and there was hell in his glance. Then, taking his resolve, and putting the best face upon it, since no other could help him here, he kicked off his shoes, peeled off his fine coat of biscuit-coloured taffetas, and climbed upon the plank.

A moment he paused, steadied by a hand that clutched the ratlines, looking down in terror at the green water rushing past some five-and-twenty feet below.

"Just take a little walk, Colonel, darling," said a smooth, mocking voice behind him.

Still clinging, Colonel Bishop looked round in hesitation, and saw the bulwarks lined with swarthy faces—the faces of men that as lately as yesterday would have turned pale under his frown, faces that were now all wickedly agrin.

For a moment rage stamped out his fear. He cursed them aloud venomously and incoherently, then loosed his hold and stepped out upon the plank. Three steps he took before he lost his balance and went tumbling into the green depths below.

When he came to the surface again, gasping for air, the Cinco Llagas was already some furlongs to leeward. But the roaring cheer

of mocking valediction from the rebels-convict reached him across the water, to drive the iron of impotent rage deeper into his soul.

CHAPTER X. DON DIEGO

Don Diego de Espinosa y Valdez awoke, and with languid eyes in aching head, he looked round the cabin, which was flooded with sunlight from the square windows astern. Then he uttered a moan, and closed his eyes again, impelled to this by the monstrous ache in his head. Lying thus, he attempted to think, to locate himself in time and space. But between the pain in his head and the confusion in his mind, he found coherent thought impossible.

An indefinite sense of alarm drove him to open his eyes again, and once more to consider his surroundings.

There could be no doubt that he lay in the great cabin of his own ship, the Cinco Llagas, so that his vague disquiet must be, surely, ill-founded. And yet, stirrings of memory coming now to the assistance of reflection, compelled him uneasily to insist that here something was not as it should be. The low position of the sun, flooding the cabin with golden light from those square ports astern, suggested to him at first that it was early morning, on the assumption that the vessel was headed westward. Then the alternative occurred to him. They might be sailing eastward, in which case the time of day would be late afternoon. That they were sailing he could feel from the gentle forward heave of the vessel under him. But how did they come to be sailing, and he, the master, not to know whether their course lay east or west, not to be able to recollect whither they were bound?

His mind went back over the adventure of yesterday, if of yesterday it was. He was clear on the matter of the easily successful raid upon the Island of Barbados; every detail stood vividly in his memory up to the moment at which, returning aboard, he had stepped on to his own

deck again. There memory abruptly and inexplicably ceased.

He was beginning to torture his mind with conjecture, when the door opened, and to Don Diego's increasing mystification he beheld his best suit of clothes step into the cabin. It was a singularly elegant and characteristically Spanish suit of black taffetas with silver lace that had been made for him a year ago in Cadiz, and he knew each detail of it so well that it was impossible he could now be mistaken.

The suit paused to close the door, then advanced towards the couch on which Don Diego was extended, and inside the suit came a tall, slender gentleman of about Don Diego's own height and shape. Seeing the wide, startled eyes of the Spaniard upon him, the gentleman lengthened his stride.

"Awake, eh?" said he in Spanish.

The recumbent man looked up bewildered into a pair of light-blue eyes that regarded him out of a tawny, sardonic face set in a cluster of black ringlets. But he was too bewildered to make any answer.

The stranger's fingers touched the top of Don Diego's head, whereupon Don Diego winced and cried out in pain.

"Tender, eh?" said the stranger. He took Don Diego's wrist between thumb and second finger. And then, at last, the intrigued Spaniard spoke.

"Are you a doctor?"

"Among other things." The swarthy gentleman continued his study of the patient's pulse. "Firm and regular," he announced at last, and dropped the wrist. "You've taken no great harm."

Don Diego struggled up into a sitting position on the red velvet couch.

"Who the devil are you?" he asked. "And what the devil are you doing in my clothes and aboard my ship?"

The level black eyebrows went up, a faint smile curled the lips of the long mouth.

"You are still delirious, I fear. This is not your ship. This is my ship, and these are my clothes."

"Your ship?" quoth the other, aghast, and still more aghast he added: "Your clothes? But... then...." Wildly his eyes looked about him. They scanned the cabin once again, scrutinizing each familiar object. "Am I mad?" he asked at last. "Surely this ship is the Cinco Llagas?"

"The Cinco Llagas it is."

"Then...." The Spaniard broke off. His glance grew still more troubled. "Valga me Dios!" he cried out, like a man in anguish. "Will you tell me also that you are Don Diego de Espinosa?"

"Oh, no, my name is Blood—Captain Peter Blood. This ship, like this handsome suit of clothes, is mine by right of conquest. Just as you, Don Diego, are my prisoner."

Startling as was the explanation, yet it proved soothing to Don Diego, being so much less startling than the things he was beginning to imagine.

"But... Are you not Spanish, then?"

"You flatter my Castilian accent. I have the honour to be Irish. You were thinking that a miracle had happened. So it has—a miracle wrought by my genius, which is considerable."

Succinctly now Captain Blood dispelled the mystery by a relation of the facts. It was a narrative that painted red and white by turns the

Spaniard's countenance. He put a hand to the back of his head, and there discovered, in confirmation of the story, a lump as large as a pigeon's egg. Lastly, he stared wild-eyed at the sardonic Captain Blood.

"And my son? What of my son?" he cried out. "He was in the boat that brought me aboard."

"Your son is safe; he and the boat's crew together with your gunner and his men are snugly in irons under hatches."

Don Diego sank back on the couch, his glittering dark eyes fixed upon the tawny face above him. He composed himself. After all, he possessed the stoicism proper to his desperate trade. The dice had fallen against him in this venture. The tables had been turned upon him in the very moment of success. He accepted the situation with the fortitude of a fatalist.

With the utmost calm he enquired:

"And now, Senior Capitan?"

"And now," said Captain Blood—to give him the title he had assumed—"being a humane man, I am sorry to find that ye're not dead from the tap we gave you. For it means that you'll be put to the trouble of dying all over again."

"Ah!" Don Diego drew a deep breath. "But is that necessary?" he asked, without apparent perturbation.

Captain Blood's blue eyes approved his bearing. "Ask yourself," said he. "Tell me, as an experienced and bloody pirate, what in my place would you do, yourself?"

"Ah, but there is a difference." Don Diego sat up to argue the matter. "It lies in the fact that you boast yourself a humane man."

Captain Blood perched himself on the edge of the long oak table. "But I am not a fool," said he, "and I'll not allow a natural Irish sentimentality to stand in the way of my doing what is necessary and proper. You and your ten surviving scoundrels are a menace on this ship. More than that, she is none so well found in water and provisions. True, we are fortunately a small number, but you and your party inconveniently increase it. So that on every hand, you see, prudence suggests to us that we should deny ourselves the pleasure of your company, and, steeling our soft hearts to the inevitable, invite you to be so obliging as to step over the side."

"I see," said the Spaniard pensively. He swung his legs from the couch, and sat now upon the edge of it, his elbows on his knees. He had taken the measure of his man, and met him with a mock-urbanity and a suave detachment that matched his own. "I confess," he admitted, "that there is much force in what you say."

"You take a load from my mind," said Captain Blood. "I would not appear unnecessarily harsh, especially since I and my friends owe you so very much. For, whatever it may have been to others, to us your raid upon Barbados was most opportune. I am glad, therefore, that you agree the I have no choice."

"But, my friend, I did not agree so much."

"If there is any alternative that you can suggest, I shall be most happy to consider it."

Don Diego stroked his pointed black beard.

"Can you give me until morning for reflection? My head aches so damnably that I am incapable of thought. And this, you will admit, is a matter that asks serious thought."

Captain Blood stood up. From a shelf he took a half-hour glass, reversed it so that the bulb containing the red sand was uppermost,

and stood it on the table.

"I am sorry to press you in such a matter, Don Diego, but one glass is all that I can give you. If by the time those sands have run out you can propose no acceptable alternative, I shall most reluctantly be driven to ask you to go over the side with your friends."

Captain Blood bowed, went out, and locked the door. Elbows on his knees and face in his hands, Don Diego sat watching the rusty sands as they filtered from the upper to the lower bulb. And what time he watched, the lines in his lean brown face grew deeper. Punctually as the last grains ran out, the door reopened.

The Spaniard sighed, and sat upright to face the returning Captain Blood with the answer for which he came.

"I have thought of an alternative, sir captain; but it depends upon your charity. It is that you put us ashore on one of the islands of this pestilent archipelago, and leave us to shift for ourselves."

Captain Blood pursed his lips. "It has its difficulties," said he slowly.

"I feared it would be so." Don Diego sighed again, and stood up. "Let us say no more."

The light-blue eyes played over him like points of steel.

"You are not afraid to die, Don Diego?"

The Spaniard threw back his head, a frown between his eyes.

"The question is offensive, sir."

"Then let me put it in another way—perhaps more happily: You do not desire to live?"

"Ah, that I can answer. I do desire to live; and even more do I desire that my son may live. But the desire shall not make a coward of me for

your amusement, master mocker." It was the first sign he had shown of the least heat or resentment.

Captain Blood did not directly answer. As before he perched himself on the corner of the table.

"Would you be willing, sir, to earn life and liberty—for yourself, your son, and the other Spaniards who are on board?"

"To earn it?" said Don Diego, and the watchful blue eyes did not miss the quiver that ran through him. "To earn it, do you say? Why, if the service you would propose is one that cannot hurt my honour...."

"Could I be guilty of that?" protested the Captain. "I realize that even a pirate has his honour." And forthwith he propounded his offer. "If you will look from those windows, Don Diego, you will see what appears to be a cloud on the horizon. That is the island of Barbados well astern. All day we have been sailing east before the wind with but one intent—to set as great a distance between Barbados and ourselves as possible. But now, almost out of sight of land, we are in a difficulty. The only man among us schooled in the art of navigation is fevered, delirious, in fact, as a result of certain ill-treatment he received ashore before we carried him away with us. I can handle a ship in action, and there are one or two men aboard who can assist me; but of the higher mysteries of seamanship and of the art of finding a way over the trackless wastes of ocean, we know nothing. To hug the land, and go blundering about what you so aptly call this pestilent archipelago, is for us to court disaster, as you can perhaps conceive. And so it comes to this: We desire to make for the Dutch settlement of Curacao as straightly as possible. Will you pledge me your honour, if I release you upon parole, that you will navigate us thither? If so, we will release you and your surviving men upon arrival there."

Don Diego bowed his head upon his breast, and strode away in thought to the stern windows. There he stood looking out upon the

sunlit sea and the dead water in the great ship's wake—his ship, which these English dogs had wrested from him; his ship, which he was asked to bring safely into a port where she would be completely lost to him and refitted perhaps to make war upon his kin. That was in one scale; in the other were the lives of sixteen men. Fourteen of them mattered little to him, but the remaining two were his own and his son's.

He turned at length, and his back being to the light, the Captain could not see how pale his face had grown.

"I accept," he said.

CHAPTER XI. FILIAL PIETY

By virtue of the pledge he had given, Don Diego de Espinosa enjoyed the freedom of the ship that had been his, and the navigation which he had undertaken was left entirely in his hands. And because those who manned her were new to the seas of the Spanish Main, and because even the things that had happened in Bridgetown were not enough to teach them to regard every Spaniard as a treacherous, cruel dog to be slain at sight, they used him with the civility which his own suave urbanity invited. He took his meals in the great cabin with Blood and the three officers elected to support him: Hagthorpe, Wolverstone, and Dyke.

They found Don Diego an agreeable, even an amusing companion, and their friendly feeling towards him was fostered by his fortitude and brave equanimity in this adversity.

That Don Diego was not playing fair it was impossible to suspect. Moreover, there was no conceivable reason why he should not. And he had been of the utmost frankness with them. He had denounced their mistake in sailing before the wind upon leaving Barbados. They should have left the island to leeward, heading into the Caribbean and away from the archipelago. As it was, they would now be forced to pass through this archipelago again so as to make Curacao, and this passage was not to be accomplished without some measure of risk to themselves. At any point between the islands they might come upon an equal or superior craft; whether she were Spanish or English would be equally bad for them, and being undermanned they were in no case to fight. To lessen this risk as far as possible, Don Diego directed at first a southerly and then a westerly course; and so, taking a line midway between the islands of Tobago and Grenada, they won

safely through the danger-zone and came into the comparative security of the Caribbean Sea.

"If this wind holds," he told them that night at supper, after he had announced to them their position, "we should reach Curacao inside three days."

For three days the wind held, indeed it freshened a little on the second, and yet when the third night descended upon them they had still made no landfall. The Cinco Llagas was ploughing through a sea contained on every side by the blue bowl of heaven. Captain Blood uneasily mentioned it to Don Diego.

"It will be for to-morrow morning," he was answered with calm conviction.

"By all the saints, it is always 'to-morrow morning' with you Spaniards; and to-morrow never comes, my friend."

"But this to-morrow is coming, rest assured. However early you may be astir, you shall see land ahead, Don Pedro."

Captain Blood passed on, content, and went to visit Jerry Pitt, his patient, to whose condition Don Diego owed his chance of life. For twenty-four hours now the fever had left the sufferer, and under Peter Blood's dressings, his lacerated back was beginning to heal satisfactorily. So far, indeed, was he recovered that he complained of his confinement, of the heat in his cabin. To indulge him Captain Blood consented that he should take the air on deck, and so, as the last of the daylight was fading from the sky, Jeremy Pitt came forth upon the Captain's arm.

Seated on the hatch-coamings, the Somersetshire lad gratefully filled his lungs with the cool night air, and professed himself revived thereby. Then with the seaman's instinct his eyes wandered to the darkling vault of heaven, spangled already with a myriad golden

points of light. As while he scanned it idly, vacantly; then, his attention became sharply fixed. He looked round and up at Captain Blood, who stood beside him.

"D'ye know anything of astronomy, Peter?" quoth he.

"Astronomy, is it? Faith, now, I couldn't tell the Belt of Orion from the Girdle of Venus."

"Ah! And I suppose all the others of this lubberly crew share your ignorance."

"It would be more amiable of you to suppose that they exceed it."

Jeremy pointed ahead to a spot of light in the heavens over the starboard bow. "That is the North Star," said he.

"Is it now? Glory be, I wonder ye can pick it out from the rest."

"And the North Star ahead almost over your starboard bow means that we're steering a course, north, northwest, or maybe north by west, for I doubt if we are standing more than ten degrees westward."

"And why shouldn't we?" wondered Captain Blood.

"You told me—didn't you?—that we came west of the archipelago between Tobago and Grenada, steering for Curacao. If that were our present course, we should have the North Star abeam, out yonder."

On the instant Mr. Blood shed his laziness. He stiffened with apprehension, and was about to speak when a shaft of light clove the gloom above their heads, coming from the door of the poop cabin which had just been opened. It closed again, and presently there was a step on the companion. Don Diego was approaching. Captain Blood's fingers pressed Jerry's shoulder with significance. Then he called the Don, and spoke to him in English as had become his custom when others were present.

"Will ye settle a slight dispute for us, Don Diego?" said he lightly. "We are arguing, Mr. Pitt and I, as to which is the North Star."

"So?" The Spaniard's tone was easy; there was almost a suggestion that laughter lurked behind it, and the reason for this was yielded by his next sentence. "But you tell me Mr. Pitt he is your navigant?"

"For lack of a better," laughed the Captain, good-humouredly contemptuous. "Now I am ready to wager him a hundred pieces of eight that that is the North Star." And he flung out an arm towards a point of light in the heavens straight abeam. He afterwards told Pitt that had Don Diego confirmed him, he would have run him through upon that instant. Far from that, however, the Spaniard freely expressed his scorn.

"You have the assurance that is of ignorance, Don Pedro; and you lose. The North Star is this one." And he indicated it.

"You are sure?"

"But my dear Don Pedro!" The Spaniard's tone was one of amused protest. "But is it possible that I mistake? Besides, is there not the compass? Come to the binnacle and see there what course we make."

His utter frankness, and the easy manner of one who has nothing to conceal resolved at once the doubt that had leapt so suddenly in the mind of Captain Blood. Pitt was satisfied less easily.

"In that case, Don Diego, will you tell me, since Curacao is our destination, why our course is what it is?"

Again there was no faintest hesitation on Don Diego's part. "You have reason to ask," said he, and sighed. "I had hope' it would not be observe'. I have been careless—oh, of a carelessness very culpable. I

neglect observation. Always it is my way. I make too sure. I count too much on dead reckoning. And so to-day I find when at last I take out the quadrant that we do come by a half-degree too much south, so that Curacao is now almost due north. That is what cause the delay. But we will be there to-morrow."

The explanation, so completely satisfactory, and so readily and candidly forthcoming, left no room for further doubt that Don Diego should have been false to his parole. And when presently Don Diego had withdrawn again, Captain Blood confessed to Pitt that it was absurd to have suspected him. Whatever his antecedents, he had proved his quality when he announced himself ready to die sooner than enter into any undertaking that could hurt his honour or his country.

New to the seas of the Spanish Main and to the ways of the adventurers who sailed it, Captain Blood still entertained illusions. But the next dawn was to shatter them rudely and for ever.

Coming on deck before the sun was up, he saw land ahead, as the Spaniard had promised them last night. Some ten miles ahead it lay, a long coast-line filling the horizon east and west, with a massive headland jutting forward straight before them. Staring at it, he frowned. He had not conceived that Curacao was of such considerable dimensions. Indeed, this looked less like an island than the main itself.

Beating out aweather, against the gentle landward breeze he beheld a great ship on their starboard bow, that he conceived to be some three or four miles off, and—as well as he could judge her at that distance—of a tonnage equal if not superior to their own. Even as he watched her she altered her course, and going about came heading towards them, close-hauled.

A dozen of his fellows were astir on the forecastle, looking eagerly

ahead, and the sound of their voices and laughter reached him across the length of the stately Cinco Llagas.

"There," said a soft voice behind him in liquid Spanish, "is the Promised Land, Don Pedro."

It was something in that voice, a muffled note of exultation, that awoke suspicion in him, and made whole the half-doubt he had been entertaining. He turned sharply to face Don Diego, so sharply that the sly smile was not effaced from the Spaniard's countenance before Captain Blood's eyes had flashed upon it.

"You find an odd satisfaction in the sight of it—all things considered," said Mr. Blood.

"Of course." The Spaniard rubbed his hands, and Mr. Blood observed that they were unsteady. "The satisfaction of a mariner."

"Or of a traitor—which?" Blood asked him quietly. And as the Spaniard fell back before him with suddenly altered countenance that confirmed his every suspicion, he flung an arm out in the direction of the distant shore. "What land is that?" he demanded. "Will you have the effrontery to tell me that is the coast of Curacao?"

He advanced upon Don Diego suddenly, and Don Diego, step by step, fell back. "Shall I tell you what land it is? Shall I?" His fierce assumption of knowledge seemed to dazzle and daze the Spaniard. For still Don Diego made no answer. And then Captain Blood drew a bow at a venture—or not quite at a venture. Such a coast-line as that, if not of the main itself, and the main he knew it could not be, must belong to either Cuba or Hispaniola. Now knowing Cuba to lie farther north and west of the two, it followed, he reasoned swiftly, that if Don Diego meant betrayal he would steer for the nearer of these Spanish territories. "That land, you treacherous, forsworn Spanish dog, is the island of Hispaniola."

Having said it, he closely watched the swarthy face now overspread with pallor, to see the truth or falsehood of his guess reflected there. But now the retreating Spaniard had come to the middle of the quarter-deck, where the mizzen sail made a screen to shut them off from the eyes of the Englishmen below. His lips writhed in a snarling smile.

"Ah, perro ingles! You know too much," he said under his breath, and sprang for the Captain's throat.

Tight-locked in each other's arms, they swayed a moment, then together went down upon the deck, the Spaniard's feet jerked from under him by the right leg of Captain Blood. The Spaniard had depended upon his strength, which was considerable. But it proved no match for the steady muscles of the Irishman, tempered of late by the vicissitudes of slavery. He had depended upon choking the life out of Blood, and so gaining the half-hour that might be necessary to bring up that fine ship that was beating towards them—a Spanish ship, perforce, since none other would be so boldly cruising in these Spanish waters off Hispaniola. But all that Don Diego had accomplished was to betray himself completely, and to no purpose. This he realized when he found himself upon his back, pinned down by Blood, who was kneeling on his chest, whilst the men summoned by their Captain's shout came clattering up the companion.

"Will I say a prayer for your dirty soul now, whilst I am in this position?" Captain Blood was furiously mocking him.

But the Spaniard, though defeated, now beyond hope for himself, forced his lips to smile, and gave back mockery for mockery.

"Who will pray for your soul, I wonder, when that galleon comes to lie board and board with you?"

"That galleon!" echoed Captain Blood with sudden and awful

realization that already it was too late to avoid the consequences of Don Diego's betrayal of them.

"That galleon," Don Diego repeated, and added with a deepening sneer: "Do you know what ship it is? I will tell you. It is the Encarnacion, the flagship of Don Miguel de Espinosa, the Lord Admiral of Castile, and Don Miguel is my brother. It is a very fortunate encounter. The Almighty, you see, watches over the destinies of Catholic Spain."

There was no trace of humour or urbanity now in Captain Blood. His light eyes blazed: his face was set.

He rose, relinquishing the Spaniard to his men. "Make him fast," he bade them. "Truss him, wrist and heel, but don't hurt him—not so much as a hair of his precious head."

The injunction was very necessary. Frenzied by the thought that they were likely to exchange the slavery from which they had so lately escaped for a slavery still worse, they would have torn the Spaniard limb from limb upon the spot. And if they now obeyed their Captain and refrained, it was only because the sudden steely note in his voice promised for Don Diego Valdez something far more exquisite than death.

"You scum! You dirty pirate! You man of honour!" Captain Blood apostrophized his prisoner.

But Don Diego looked up at him and laughed.

"You underrated me." He spoke English, so that all might hear. "I tell you that I was not fear death, and I show you that I was not fear it. You no understand. You just an English dog."

"Irish, if you please," Captain Blood corrected him. "And your parole, you tyke of Spain?"

"You think I give my parole to leave you sons of filth with this beautiful Spanish ship, to go make war upon other Spaniards! Ha!" Don Diego laughed in his throat. "You fool! You can kill me. Pish! It is very well. I die with my work well done. In less than an hour you will be the prisoners of Spain, and the Cinco Llagas will go belong to Spain again."

Captain Blood regarded him steadily out of a face which, if impassive, had paled under its deep tan. About the prisoner, clamant, infuriated, ferocious, the rebels-convict surged, almost literally "athirst for his blood."

"Wait," Captain Blood imperiously commanded, and turning on his heel, he went aside to the rail. As he stood there deep in thought, he was joined by Hagthorpe, Wolverstone, and Ogle the gunner. In silence they stared with him across the water at that other ship. She had veered a point away from the wind, and was running now on a line that must in the end converge with that of the Cinco Llagas.

"In less than half-an-hour," said Blood presently, "we shall have her athwart our hawse, sweeping our decks with her guns."

"We can fight," said the one-eyed giant with an oath.

"Fight!" sneered Blood. "Undermanned as we are, mustering a bare twenty men, in what case are we to fight? No, there would be only one way. To persuade her that all is well aboard, that we are Spaniards, so that she may leave us to continue on our course."

"And how is that possible?" Hagthorpe asked.

"It isn't possible," said Blood. "If it..." And then he broke off, and stood musing, his eyes upon the green water. Ogle, with a bent for sarcasm, interposed a suggestion bitterly.

"We might send Don Diego de Espinosa in a boat manned by his

Spaniards to assure his brother the Admiral that we are all loyal subjects of his Catholic Majesty."

The Captain swung round, and for an instant looked as if he would have struck the gunner. Then his expression changed: the light of inspiration Was in his glance.

"Bedad! ye've said it. He doesn't fear death, this damned pirate; but his son may take a different view. Filial piety's mighty strong in Spain." He swung on his heel abruptly, and strode back to the knot of men about his prisoner. "Here!" he shouted to them. "Bring him below." And he led the way down to the waist, and thence by the booby hatch to the gloom of the 'tween-decks, where the air was rank with the smell of tar and spun yarn. Going aft he threw open the door of the spacious wardroom, and went in followed by a dozen of the hands with the pinioned Spaniard. Every man aboard would have followed him but for his sharp command to some of them to remain on deck with Hagthorpe.

In the ward-room the three stern chasers were in position, loaded, their muzzles thrusting through the open ports, precisely as the Spanish gunners had left them.

"Here, Ogle, is work for you," said Blood, and as the burly gunner came thrusting forward through the little throng of gaping men, Blood pointed to the middle chaser; "Have that gun hauled back," he ordered.

When this was done, Blood beckoned those who held Don Diego.

"Lash him across the mouth of it," he bade them, and whilst, assisted by another two, they made haste to obey, he turned to the others. "To the roundhouse, some of you, and fetch the Spanish prisoners. And you, Dyke, go up and bid them set the flag of Spain aloft."

Don Diego, with his body stretched in an arc across the cannon's mouth, legs and arms lashed to the carriage on either side of it, eyeballs rolling in his head, glared maniacally at Captain Blood. A man may not fear to die, and yet be appalled by the form in which death comes to him.

From frothing lips he hurled blasphemies and insults at his tormentor.

"Foul barbarian! Inhuman savage! Accursed heretic! Will it not content you to kill me in some Christian fashion?" Captain Blood vouchsafed him a malignant smile, before he turned to meet the fifteen manacled Spanish prisoners, who were thrust into his presence.

Approaching, they had heard Don Diego's outcries; at close quarters now they beheld with horror-stricken eyes his plight. From amongst them a comely, olive-skinned stripling, distinguished in bearing and apparel from his companions, started forward with an anguished cry of "Father!"

Writhing in the arms that made haste to seize and hold him, he called upon heaven and hell to avert this horror, and lastly, addressed to Captain Blood an appeal for mercy that was at once fierce and piteous. Considering him, Captain Blood thought with satisfaction that he displayed the proper degree of filial piety.

He afterwards confessed that for a moment he was in danger of weakening, that for a moment his mind rebelled against the pitiless thing it had planned. But to correct the sentiment he evoked a memory of what these Spaniards had performed in Bridgetown. Again he saw the white face of that child Mary Traill as she fled in horror before the jeering ruffian whom he had slain, and other things even more unspeakable seen on that dreadful evening rose now before the eyes of his memory to stiffen his faltering purpose. The

Spaniards had shown themselves without mercy or sentiment or decency of any kind; stuffed with religion, they were without a spark of that Christianity, the Symbol of which was mounted on the mainmast of the approaching ship. A moment ago this cruel, vicious Don Diego had insulted the Almighty by his assumption that He kept a specially benevolent watch over the destinies of Catholic Spain. Don Diego should be taught his error.

Recovering the cynicism in which he had approached his task, the cynicism essential to its proper performance, he commanded Ogle to kindle a match and remove the leaden apron from the touch-hole of the gun that bore Don Diego. Then, as the younger Espinosa broke into fresh intercessions mingled with imprecations, he wheeled upon him sharply.

"Peace!" he snapped. "Peace, and listen! It is no part of my intention to blow your father to hell as he deserves, or indeed to take his life at all."

Having surprised the lad into silence by that promise—a promise surprising enough in all the circumstances—he proceeded to explain his aims in that faultless and elegant Castilian of which he was fortunately master—as fortunately for Don Diego as for himself.

"It is your father's treachery that has brought us into this plight and deliberately into risk of capture and death aboard that ship of Spain. Just as your father recognized his brother's flagship, so will his brother have recognized the Cinco Llagas. So far, then, all is well. But presently the Encarnacion will be sufficiently close to perceive that here all is not as it should be. Sooner or later, she must guess or discover what is wrong, and then she will open fire or lay us board and board. Now, we are in no case to fight, as your father knew when he ran us into this trap. But fight we will, if we are driven to it. We make no tame surrender to the ferocity of Spain."

He laid his hand on the breech of the gun that bore Don Diego.

"Understand this clearly: to the first shot from the Encarnacion this gun will fire the answer. I make myself clear, I hope?"

White-faced and trembling, young Espinosa stared into the pitiless blue eyes that so steadily regarded him.

"If it is clear?" he faltered, breaking the utter silence in which all were standing. "But, name of God, how should it be clear? How should I understand? Can you avert the fight? If you know a way, and if I, or these, can help you to it—if that is what you mean—in Heaven's name let me hear it."

"A fight would be averted if Don Diego de Espinosa were to go aboard his brother's ship, and by his presence and assurances inform the Admiral that all is well with the Cinco Llagas, that she is indeed still a ship of Spain as her flag now announces. But of course Don Diego cannot go in person, because he is... otherwise engaged. He has a slight touch of fever—shall we say?—that detains him in his cabin. But you, his son, may convey all this and some other matters together with his homage to your uncle. You shall go in a boat manned by six of these Spanish prisoners, and I—a distinguished Spaniard delivered from captivity in Barbados by your recent raid—will accompany you to keep you in countenance. If I return alive, and without accident of any kind to hinder our free sailing hence, Don Diego shall have his life, as shall every one of you. But if there is the least misadventure, be it from treachery or ill-fortune—I care not which—the battle, as I have had the honour to explain, will be opened on our side by this gun, and your father will be the first victim of the conflict."

He paused a moment. There was a hum of approval from his comrades, an anxious stirring among the Spanish prisoners. Young Espinosa stood before him, the colour ebbing and flowing in his

cheeks. He waited for some direction from his father. But none came. Don Diego's courage, it seemed, had sadly waned under that rude test. He hung limply in his fearful bonds, and was silent. Evidently he dared not encourage his son to defiance, and presumably was ashamed to urge him to yield. Thus, he left decision entirely with the youth.

"Come," said Blood. "I have been clear enough, I think. What do you say?"

Don Esteban moistened his parched lips, and with the back of his hand mopped the anguish-sweat from his brow. His eyes gazed wildly a moment upon the shoulders of his father, as if beseeching guidance. But his father remained silent. Something like a sob escaped the boy.

"I... I accept," he answered at last, and swung to the Spaniards. "And you—you will accept too," he insisted passionately. "For Don Diego's sake and for your own—for all our sakes. If you do not, this man will butcher us all without mercy."

Since he yielded, and their leader himself counselled no resistance, why should they encompass their own destruction by a gesture of futile heroism? They answered without much hesitation that they would do as was required of them.

Blood turned, and advanced to Don Diego.

"I am sorry to inconvenience you in this fashion, but..." For a second he checked and frowned as his eyes intently observed the prisoner. Then, after that scarcely perceptible pause, he continued, "but I do not think that you have anything beyond this inconvenience to apprehend, and you may depend upon me to shorten it as far as possible." Don Diego made him no answer.

Peter Blood waited a moment, observing him; then he bowed and

stepped back.

CHAPTER XII. DON PEDRO SANGRE

The Cinco Llagas and the Encarnacion, after a proper exchange of signals, lay hove to within a quarter of a mile of each other, and across the intervening space of gently heaving, sunlit waters sped a boat from the former, manned by six Spanish seamen and bearing in her stern sheets Don Esteban de Espinosa and Captain Peter Blood.

She also bore two treasure-chests containing fifty thousand pieces of eight. Gold has at all times been considered the best of testimonies of good faith, and Blood was determined that in all respects appearances should be entirely on his side. His followers had accounted this a supererogation of pretence. But Blood's will in the matter had prevailed. He carried further a bulky package addressed to a grande of Spain, heavily sealed with the arms of Espinosa—another piece of evidence hastily manufactured in the cabin of the Cinco Llagas—and he was spending these last moments in completing his instructions to his young companion.

Don Esteban expressed his last lingering uneasiness:

"But if you should betray yourself?" he cried.

"It will be unfortunate for everybody. I advised your father to say a prayer for our success. I depend upon you to help me more materially."

"I will do my best. God knows I will do my best," the boy protested.

Blood nodded thoughtfully, and no more was said until they bumped

alongside the towering mass of the Encarnadon. Up the ladder went Don Esteban closely followed by Captain Blood. In the waist stood the Admiral himself to receive them, a handsome, self-sufficient man, very tall and stiff, a little older and greyer than Don Diego, whom he closely resembled. He was supported by four officers and a friar in the black and white habit of St. Dominic.

Don Miguel opened his arms to his nephew, whose lingering panic he mistook for pleasurable excitement, and having enfolded him to his bosom turned to greet Don Esteban's companion.

Peter Blood bowed gracefully, entirely at his ease, so far as might be judged from appearances.

"I am," he announced, making a literal translation of his name, "Don Pedro Sangre, an unfortunate gentleman of Leon, lately delivered from captivity by Don Esteban's most gallant father." And in a few words he sketched the imagined conditions of his capture by, and deliverance from, those accursed heretics who held the island of Barbados. "Benedicamus Domino," said the friar to his tale.

"Ex hoc nunc et usque in seculum," replied Blood, the occasional papist, with lowered eyes.

The Admiral and his attending officers gave him a sympathetic hearing and a cordial welcome. Then came the dreaded question.

"But where is my brother? Why has he not come, himself, to greet me?"

It was young Espinosa who answered this:

"My father is afflicted at denying himself that honour and pleasure. But unfortunately, sir uncle, he is a little indisposed—oh, nothing grave; merely sufficient to make him keep his cabin. It is a little fever, the result of a slight wound taken in the recent raid upon Barbados,

which resulted in this gentleman's happy deliverance."

"Nay, nephew, nay," Don Miguel protested with ironic repudiation. "I can have no knowledge of these things. I have the honour to represent upon the seas His Catholic Majesty, who is at peace with the King of England. Already you have told me more than it is good for me to know. I will endeavour to forget it, and I will ask you, sirs," he added, glancing at his officers, "to forget it also." But he winked into the twinkling eyes of Captain Blood; then added matter that at once extinguished that twinkle. "But since Diego cannot come to me, why, I will go across to him."

For a moment Don Esteban's face was a mask of pallid fear. Then Blood was speaking in a lowered, confidential voice that admirably blended suavity, impressiveness, and sly mockery.

"If you please, Don Miguel, but that is the very thing you must not do—the very thing Don Diego does not wish you to do. You must not see him until his wounds are healed. That is his own wish. That is the real reason why he is not here. For the truth is that his wounds are not so grave as to have prevented his coming. It was his consideration of himself and the false position in which you would be placed if you had direct word from him of what has happened. As your excellency has said, there is peace between His Catholic Majesty and the King of England, and your brother Don Diego...." He paused a moment. "I am sure that I need say no more. What you hear from us is no more than a mere rumour. Your excellency understands."

His excellency frowned thoughtfully. "I understand... in part," said he.

Captain Blood had a moment's uneasiness. Did the Spaniard doubt his bona fides? Yet in dress and speech he knew himself to be impeccably Spanish, and was not Don Esteban there to confirm him? He swept on to afford further confirmation before the Admiral could say another word.

"And we have in the boat below two chests containing fifty thousand pieces of eight, which we are to deliver to your excellency."

His excellency jumped; there was a sudden stir among his officers.

"They are the ransom extracted by Don Diego from the Governor of...."

"Not another word, in the name of Heaven!" cried the Admiral in alarm. "My brother wishes me to assume charge of this money, to carry it to Spain for him? Well, that is a family matter between my brother and myself. So, it can be done. But I must not know...." He broke off. "Hum! A glass of Malaga in my cabin, if you please," he invited them, "whilst the chests are being hauled aboard."

He gave his orders touching the embarkation of these chests, then led the way to his regally appointed cabin, his four officers and the friar following by particular invitation.

Seated at table there, with the tawny wine before them, and the servant who had poured it withdrawn, Don Miguel laughed and stroked his pointed, grizzled beard.

"Virgen santisima! That brother of mine has a mind that thinks of everything. Left to myself, I might have committed a fine indiscretion by venturing aboard his ship at such a moment. I might have seen things which as Admiral of Spain it would be difficult for me to ignore."

Both Esteban and Blood made haste to agree with him, and then Blood raised his glass, and drank to the glory of Spain and the damnation of the besotted James who occupied the throne of England. The latter part of his toast was at least sincere.

The Admiral laughed.

"Sir, sir, you need my brother here to curb your imprudences. You

should remember that His Catholic Majesty and the King of England are very good friends. That is not a toast to propose in this cabin. But since it has been proposed, and by one who has such particular personal cause to hate these English hounds, why, we will honour it—but unofficially."

They laughed, and drank the damnation of King James—quite unofficially, but the more fervently on that account. Then Don Esteban, uneasy on the score of his father, and remembering that the agony of Don Diego was being protracted with every moment that they left him in his dreadful position, rose and announced that they must be returning.

"My father," he explained, "is in haste to reach San Domingo. He desired me to stay no longer than necessary to embrace you. If you will give us leave, then, sir uncle."

In the circumstances "sir uncle" did not insist.

As they returned to the ship's side, Blood's eyes anxiously scanned the line of seamen leaning over the bulwarks in idle talk with the Spaniards in the cock-boat that waited at the ladder's foot. But their manner showed him that there was no ground for his anxiety. The boat's crew had been wisely reticent.

The Admiral took leave of them—of Esteban affectionately, of Blood ceremoniously.

"I regret to lose you so soon, Don Pedro. I wish that you could have made a longer visit to the Encarnacion."

"I am indeed unfortunate," said Captain Blood politely.

"But I hope that we may meet again."

"That is to flatter me beyond all that I deserve."

They reached the boat; and she cast off from the great ship. As they were pulling away, the Admiral waving to them from the taffrail, they heard the shrill whistle of the bo'sun piping the hands to their stations, and before they had reached the Cinco Llagas, they beheld the Encarnacion go about under sail. She dipped her flag to them, and from her poop a gun fired a salute.

Aboard the Cinco Llagas some one—it proved afterwards to be Hagthorpe—had the wit to reply in the same fashion. The comedy was ended. Yet there was something else to follow as an epilogue, a thing that added a grim ironic flavour to the whole.

As they stepped into the waist of the Cinco Llagas, Hagthorpe advanced to receive them. Blood observed the set, almost scared expression on his face.

"I see that you've found it," he said quietly.

Hagthorpe's eyes looked a question. But his mind dismissed whatever thought it held.

"Don Diego..." he was beginning, and then stopped, and looked curiously at Blood.

Noting the pause and the look, Esteban bounded forward, his face livid.

"Have you broken faith, you curs? Has he come to harm?" he cried—and the six Spaniards behind him grew clamorous with furious questionings.

"We do not break faith," said Hagthorpe firmly, so firmly that he quieted them. "And in this case there was not the need. Don Diego died in his bonds before ever you reached the Encarnacion."

Peter Blood said nothing.

"Died?" screamed Esteban. "You killed him, you mean. Of what did he die?"

Hagthorpe looked at the boy. "If I am a judge," he said, "Don Diego died of fear."

Don Esteban struck Hagthorpe across the face at that, and Hagthorpe would have struck back, but that Blood got between, whilst his followers seized the lad.

"Let be," said Blood. "You provoked the boy by your insult to his father."

"I was not concerned to insult," said Hagthorpe, nursing his cheek. "It is what has happened. Come and look."

"I have seen," said Blood. "He died before I left the Cinco Llagas. He was hanging dead in his bonds when I spoke to him before leaving."

"What are you saying?" cried Esteban.

Blood looked at him gravely. Yet for all his gravity he seemed almost to smile, though without mirth.

"If you had known that, eh?" he asked at last. For a moment Don Esteban stared at him wide-eyed, incredulous. "I don't believe you," he said at last.

"Yet you may. I am a doctor, and I know death when I see it."

Again there came a pause, whilst conviction sank into the lad's mind.

"If I had known that," he said at last in a thick voice, "you would be hanging from the yardarm of the Encarnacion at this moment."

"I know," said Blood. "I am considering it—the profit that a man

may find in the ignorance of others."

"But you'll hang there yet," the boy raved.

Captain Blood shrugged, and turned on his heel. But he did not on that account disregard the words, nor did Hagthorpe, nor yet the others who overheard them, as they showed at a council held that night in the cabin.

This council was met to determine what should be done with the Spanish prisoners. Considering that Curacao now lay beyond their reach, as they were running short of water and provisions, and also that Pitt was hardly yet in case to undertake the navigation of the vessel, it had been decided that, going east of Hispaniola, and then sailing along its northern coast, they should make for Tortuga, that haven of the buccaneers, in which lawless port they had at least no danger of recapture to apprehend. It was now a question whether they should convey the Spaniards thither with them, or turn them off in a boat to make the best of their way to the coast of Hispaniola, which was but ten miles off. This was the course urged by Blood himself.

"There's nothing else to be done," he insisted. "In Tortuga they would be flayed alive."

"Which is less than the swine deserve," growled Wolverstone.

"And you'll remember, Peter," put in Hagthorpe, "that boy's threat to you this morning. If he escapes, and carries word of all this to his uncle, the Admiral, the execution of that threat will become more than possible."

It says much for Peter Blood that the argument should have left him unmoved. It is a little thing, perhaps, but in a narrative in which there is so much that tells against him, I cannot—since my story is in the nature of a brief for the defence—afford to slur a circumstance that is so strongly in his favour, a circumstance revealing that the cynicism

attributed to him proceeded from his reason and from a brooding over wrongs rather than from any natural instincts. "I care nothing for his threats."

"You should," said Wolverstone. "The wise thing'd be to hang him, along o' all the rest."

"It is not human to be wise," said Blood. "It is much more human to err, though perhaps exceptional to err on the side of mercy. We'll be exceptional. Oh, faugh! I've no stomach for cold-blooded killing. At daybreak pack the Spaniards into a boat with a keg of water and a sack of dumplings, and let them go to the devil."

That was his last word on the subject, and it prevailed by virtue of the authority they had vested in him, and of which he had taken so firm a grip. At daybreak Don Esteban and his followers were put off in a boat.

Two days later, the Cinco Llagas sailed into the rock-bound bay of Cayona, which Nature seemed to have designed for the stronghold of those who had appropriated it.

CHAPTER XIII. TORTUGA

It is time fully to disclose the fact that the survival of the story of Captain Blood's exploits is due entirely to the industry of Jeremy Pitt, the Somersetshire shipmaster. In addition to his ability as a navigator, this amiable young man appears to have wielded an indefatigable pen, and to have been inspired to indulge its fluency by the affection he very obviously bore to Peter Blood.

He kept the log of the forty-gun frigate *Arabella*, on which he served as master, or, as we should say to-day, navigating officer, as no log that I have seen was ever kept. It runs into some twenty-odd volumes of assorted sizes, some of which are missing altogether and others of which are so sadly depleted of leaves as to be of little use. But if at times in the laborious perusal of them—they are preserved in the library of Mr. James Speke of Comerton—I have inveighed against these lacunae, at others I have been equally troubled by the excessive prolixity of what remains and the difficulty of disintegrating from the confused whole the really essential parts.

I have a suspicion that Esquemeling—though how or where I can make no surmise—must have obtained access to these records, and that he plucked from them the brilliant feathers of several exploits to stick them into the tail of his own hero, Captain Morgan. But that is by the way. I mention it chiefly as a warning, for when presently I come to relate the affair of Maracaybo, those of you who have read Esquemeling may be in danger of supposing that Henry Morgan really performed those things which here are veraciously attributed to Peter Blood. I think, however, that when you come to weigh the motives actuating both Blood and the Spanish Admiral, in that affair, and when you consider how integrally the event is a part of Blood's history—

whilst merely a detached incident in Morgan's—you will reach my own conclusion as to which is the real plagiarist.

The first of these logs of Pitt's is taken up almost entirely with a retrospective narrative of the events up to the time of Blood's first coming to Tortuga. This and the Tannatt Collection of State Trials are the chief—though not the only—sources of my history so far.

Pitt lays great stress upon the fact that it was the circumstances upon which I have dwelt, and these alone, that drove Peter Blood to seek an anchorage at Tortuga. He insists at considerable length, and with a vehemence which in itself makes it plain that an opposite opinion was held in some quarters, that it was no part of the design of Blood or of any of his companions in misfortune to join hands with the buccaneers who, under a semi-official French protection, made of Tortuga a lair whence they could sally out to drive their merciless piratical trade chiefly at the expense of Spain.

It was, Pitt tells us, Blood's original intention to make his way to France or Holland. But in the long weeks of waiting for a ship to convey him to one or the other of these countries, his resources dwindled and finally vanished. Also, his chronicler thinks that he detected signs of some secret trouble in his friend, and he attributes to this the abuses of the potent West Indian spirit of which Blood became guilty in those days of inaction, thereby sinking to the level of the wild adventurers with whom ashore he associated.

I do not think that Pitt is guilty in this merely of special pleading, that he is putting forward excuses for his hero. I think that in those days there was a good deal to oppress Peter Blood. There was the thought of Arabella Bishop—and that this thought loomed large in his mind we are not permitted to doubt. He was maddened by the tormenting lure of the unattainable. He desired Arabella, yet knew her beyond his reach irrevocably and for all time. Also, whilst he may have desired to go to France or Holland, he had no clear purpose to accomplish when

he reached one or the other of these countries. He was, when all is said, an escaped slave, an outlaw in his own land and a homeless outcast in any other. There remained the sea, which is free to all, and particularly alluring to those who feel themselves at war with humanity. And so, considering the adventurous spirit that once already had sent him a-roving for the sheer love of it, considering that this spirit was heightened now by a recklessness begotten of his outlawry, that his training and skill in militant seamanship clamorously supported the temptations that were put before him, can you wonder, or dare you blame him, that in the end he succumbed? And remember that these temptations proceeded not only from adventurous buccaneering acquaintances in the taverns of that evil haven of Tortuga, but even from M. d'Ogeron, the governor of the island, who levied as his harbour dues a percentage of one tenth of all spoils brought into the bay, and who profited further by commissions upon money which he was desired to convert into bills of exchange upon France.

A trade that might have worn a repellent aspect when urged by greasy, half-drunken adventurers, boucan-hunters, lumbermen, beach-combers, English, French, and Dutch, became a dignified, almost official form of privateering when advocated by the courtly, middle-aged gentleman who in representing the French West India Company seemed to represent France herself.

Moreover, to a man—not excluding Jeremy Pitt himself, in whose blood the call of the sea was insistent and imperative—those who had escaped with Peter Blood from the Barbados plantations, and who, consequently, like himself, knew not whither to turn, were all resolved upon joining the great Brotherhood of the Coast, as those rovers called themselves. And they united theirs to the other voices that were persuading Blood, demanding that he should continue now in the leadership which he had enjoyed since they had left Barbados, and swearing to follow him loyally whithersoever he should lead them.

And so, to condense all that Jeremy has recorded in the matter, Blood ended by yielding to external and internal pressure, abandoned himself to the stream of Destiny. "Fata viam invenerunt," is his own expression of it.

If he resisted so long, it was, I think, the thought of Arabella Bishop that restrained him. That they should be destined never to meet again did not weigh at first, or, indeed, ever. He conceived the scorn with which she would come to hear of his having turned pirate, and the scorn, though as yet no more than imagined, hurt him as if it were already a reality. And even when he conquered this, still the thought of her was ever present. He compromised with the conscience that her memory kept so disconcertingly active. He vowed that the thought of her should continue ever before him to help him keep his hands as clean as a man might in this desperate trade upon which he was embarking. And so, although he might entertain no delusive hope of ever winning her for his own, of ever even seeing her again, yet the memory of her was to abide in his soul as a bitter-sweet, purifying influence. The love that is never to be realized will often remain a man's guiding ideal. The resolve being taken, he went actively to work. Ogeron, most accommodating of governors, advanced him money for the proper equipment of his ship the *Cinco Llagas*, which he renamed the *Arabella*. This after some little hesitation, fearful of thus setting his heart upon his sleeve. But his Barbados friends accounted it merely an expression of the ever-ready irony in which their leader dealt.

To the score of followers he already possessed, he added threescore more, picking his men with caution and discrimination—and he was an exceptional judge of men—from amongst the adventurers of Tortuga. With them all he entered into the articles usual among the Brethren of the Coast under which each man was to be paid by a share in the prizes captured. In other respects, however, the articles were different. Aboard the *Arabella* there was to be none of

the ruffianly indiscipline that normally prevailed in buccaneering vessels. Those who shipped with him undertook obedience and submission in all things to himself and to the officers appointed by election. Any to whom this clause in the articles was distasteful might follow some other leader.

Towards the end of December, when the hurricane season had blown itself out, he put to sea in his well-found, well-manned ship, and before he returned in the following May from a protracted and adventurous cruise, the fame of Captain Peter Blood had run like ripples before the breeze across the face of the Caribbean Sea. There was a fight in the Windward Passage at the outset with a Spanish galleon, which had resulted in the gutting and finally the sinking of the Spaniard. There was a daring raid effected by means of several appropriated piraguas upon a Spanish pearl fleet in the Rio de la Hacha, from which they had taken a particularly rich haul of pearls. There was an overland expedition to the goldfields of Santa Maria, on the Main, the full tale of which is hardly credible, and there were lesser adventures through all of which the crew of the Arabella came with credit and profit if not entirely unscathed.

And so it happened that before the Arabella came homing to Tortuga in the following May to refit and repair—for she was not without scars, as you conceive—the fame of her and of Peter Blood her captain had swept from the Bahamas to the Windward Isles, from New Providence to Trinidad.

An echo of it had reached Europe, and at the Court of St. James's angry representations were made by the Ambassador of Spain, to whom it was answered that it must not be supposed that this Captain Blood held any commission from the King of England; that he was, in fact, a proscribed rebel, an escaped slave, and that any measures against him by His Catholic Majesty would receive the cordial approbation of King James II.

Don Miguel de Espinosa, the Admiral of Spain in the West Indies, and his nephew Don Esteban who sailed with him, did not lack the will to bring the adventurer to the yardarm. With them this business of capturing Blood, which was now an international affair, was also a family matter.

Spain, through the mouth of Don Miguel, did not spare her threats. The report of them reached Tortuga, and with it the assurance that Don Miguel had behind him not only the authority of his own nation, but that of the English King as well.

It was a brutum fulmen that inspired no terrors in Captain Blood. Nor was he likely, on account of it, to allow himself to run to rust in the security of Tortuga. For what he had suffered at the hands of Man he had chosen to make Spain the scapegoat. Thus he accounted that he served a twofold purpose: he took compensation and at the same time served, not indeed the Stuart King, whom he despised, but England and, for that matter, all the rest of civilized mankind which cruel, treacherous, greedy, bigoted Castile sought to exclude from intercourse with the New World.

One day as he sat with Hagthorpe and Wolverstone over a pipe and a bottle of rum in the stifling reek of tar and stale tobacco of a waterside tavern, he was accosted by a splendid ruffian in a gold-laced coat of dark-blue satin with a crimson sash, a foot wide, about the waist.

"C'est vous qu'on appelle Le Sang?" the fellow hailed him.

Captain Blood looked up to consider the questioner before replying. The man was tall and built on lines of agile strength, with a swarthy, aquiline face that was brutally handsome. A diamond of great price flamed on the indifferently clean hand resting on the pommel of his long rapier, and there were gold rings in his ears, half-concealed by long ringlets of oily chestnut hair.

Captain Blood took the pipe-stem from between his lips.

"My name," he said, "is Peter Blood. The Spaniards know me for Don Pedro Sangre and a Frenchman may call me Le Sang if he pleases."

"Good," said the gaudy adventurer in English, and without further invitation he drew up a stool and sat down at that greasy table. "My name," he informed the three men, two of whom at least were eyeing him askance, "it is Levasseur. You may have heard of me."

They had, indeed. He commanded a privateer of twenty guns that had dropped anchor in the bay a week ago, manned by a crew mainly composed of French boucanhunters from Northern Hispaniola, men who had good cause to hate the Spaniard with an intensity exceeding that of the English. Levasseur had brought them back to Tortuga from an indifferently successful cruise. It would need more, however, than lack of success to abate the fellow's monstrous vanity. A roaring, quarrelsome, hard-drinking, hard-gaming scoundrel, his reputation as a buccaneer stood high among the wild Brethren of the Coast. He enjoyed also a reputation of another sort. There was about his gaudy, swaggering raffishness something that the women found singularly alluring. That he should boast openly of his *bonnes fortunes* did not seem strange to Captain Blood; what he might have found strange was that there appeared to be some measure of justification for these boasts.

It was current gossip that even Mademoiselle d'Ogeron, the Governor's daughter, had been caught in the snare of his wild attractiveness, and that Levasseur had gone the length of audacity of asking her hand in marriage of her father. M. d'Ogeron had made him the only possible answer. He had shown him the door. Levasseur had departed in a rage, swearing that he would make mademoiselle his wife in the teeth of all the fathers in Christendom, and that M. d'Ogeron should bitterly rue the affront he had put upon him.

This was the man who now thrust himself upon Captain Blood with a proposal of association, offering him not only his sword, but his ship and the men who sailed in her.

A dozen years ago, as a lad of barely twenty, Levasseur had sailed with that monster of cruelty L'Ollonais, and his own subsequent exploits bore witness and did credit to the school in which he had been reared. I doubt if in his day there was a greater scoundrel among the Brethren of the Coast than this Levasseur. And yet, repulsive though he found him, Captain Blood could not deny that the fellow's proposals displayed boldness, imagination, and resource, and he was forced to admit that jointly they could undertake operations of a greater magnitude than was possible singly to either of them. The climax of Levasseur's project was to be a raid upon the wealthy mainland city of Maracaybo; but for this, he admitted, six hundred men at the very least would be required, and six hundred men were not to be conveyed in the two bottoms they now commanded. Preliminary cruises must take place, having for one of their objects the capture of further ships.

Because he disliked the man, Captain Blood would not commit himself at once. But because he liked the proposal he consented to consider it. Being afterwards pressed by both Hagthorpe and Wolverstone, who did not share his own personal dislike of the Frenchman, the end of the matter was that within a week articles were drawn up between Levasseur and Blood, and signed by them and—as was usual—by the chosen representatives of their followers.

These articles contained, *inter alia*, the common provisions that, should the two vessels separate, a strict account must afterwards be rendered of all prizes severally taken, whilst the vessel taking a prize should retain three fifths of its value, surrendering two fifths to its associate. These shares were subsequently to be subdivided among the crew of each vessel, in accordance with the articles already

obtaining between each captain and his own men. For the rest, the articles contained all the clauses that were usual, among which was the clause that any man found guilty of abstracting or concealing any part of a prize, be it of the value of no more than a peso, should be summarily hanged from the yardarm.

All being now settled they made ready for sea, and on the very eve of sailing, Levasseur narrowly escaped being shot in a romantic attempt to scale the wall of the Governor's garden, with the object of taking passionate leave of the infatuated Mademoiselle d'Ogeron. He desisted after having been twice fired upon from a fragrant ambush of pimento trees where the Governor's guards were posted, and he departed vowing to take different and very definite measures on his return.

That night he slept on board his ship, which with characteristic flamboyance he had named *La Foudre*, and there on the following day he received a visit from Captain Blood, whom he greeted half-mockingly as his admiral. The Irishman came to settle certain final details of which all that need concern us is an understanding that, in the event of the two vessels becoming separated by accident or design, they should rejoin each other as soon as might be at Tortuga.

Thereafter Levasseur entertained his admiral to dinner, and jointly they drank success to the expedition, so copiously on the part of Levasseur that when the time came to separate he was as nearly drunk as it seemed possible for him to be and yet retain his understanding.

Finally, towards evening, Captain Blood went over the side and was rowed back to his great ship with her red bulwarks and gilded ports, touched into a lovely thing of flame by the setting sun.

He was a little heavy-hearted. I have said that he was a judge of men, and his judgment of Levasseur filled him with misgivings which

were growing heavier in a measure as the hour of departure approached.

He expressed it to Wolverstone, who met him as he stepped aboard the Arabella:

"You over persuaded me into those articles, you blackguard; and it'll surprise me if any good comes of this association."

The giant rolled his single bloodthirsty eye, and sneered, thrusting out his heavy jaw. "We'll wring the dog's neck if there's any treachery."

"So we will—if we are there to wring it by then." And on that, dismissing the matter: "We sail in the morning, on the first of the ebb," he announced, and went off to his cabin.

CHAPTER XIV. LEVASSEUR'S HEROICS

It would be somewhere about ten o'clock on the following morning, a full hour before the time appointed for sailing, when a canoe brought up alongside La Foudre, and a half-caste Indian stepped out of her and went up the ladder. He was clad in drawers of hairy, untanned hide, and a red blanket served him for a cloak. He was the bearer of a folded scrap of paper for Captain Levasseur.

The Captain unfolded the letter, sadly soiled and crumpled by contact with the half-caste's person. Its contents may be roughly translated thus:

"My well-beloved—I am in the Dutch brig Jongvrow, which is about to sail. Resolved to separate us for ever, my cruel father is sending me to Europe in my brother's charge. I implore you, come to my rescue. Deliver me, my well-beloved hero!—Your desolated Madeleine, who loves you."

The well-beloved hero was moved to the soul of him by that passionate appeal. His scowling glance swept the bay for the Dutch brig, which he knew had been due to sail for Amsterdam with a cargo of hides and tobacco.

She was nowhere to be seen among the shipping in that narrow, rock-bound harbour. He roared out the question in his mind.

In answer the half-caste pointed out beyond the frothing surf that marked the position of the reef constituting one of the stronghold's main defences. Away beyond it, a mile or so distant, a sail was

standing out to sea. "There she go," he said.

"There!" The Frenchman gazed and stared, his face growing white. The man's wicked temper awoke, and turned to vent itself upon the messenger. "And where have you been that you come here only now with this? Answer me!"

The half-caste shrank terrified before his fury. His explanation, if he had one, was paralyzed by fear. Levasseur took him by the throat, shook him twice, snarling the while, then hurled him into the scuppers. The man's head struck the gunwale as he fell, and he lay there, quite still, a trickle of blood issuing from his mouth.

Levasseur dashed one hand against the other, as if dusting them.

"Heave that muck overboard," he ordered some of those who stood idling in the waist. "Then up anchor, and let us after the Dutchman."

"Steady, Captain. What's that?" There was a restraining hand upon his shoulder, and the broad face of his lieutenant Cahusac, a burly, callous Breton scoundrel, was stolidly confronting him.

Levasseur made clear his purpose with a deal of unnecessary obscenity.

Cahusac shook his head. "A Dutch brig!" said he. "Impossible! We should never be allowed."

"And who the devil will deny us?" Levasseur was between amazement and fury.

"For one thing, there's your own crew will be none too willing. For another there's Captain Blood."

"I care nothing for Captain Blood...."

"But it is necessary that you should. He has the power, the weight of metal and of men, and if I know him at all he'll sink us before he'll suffer interference with the Dutch. He has his own views of privateering, this Captain Blood, as I warned you."

"Ah!" said Levasseur, showing his teeth. But his eyes, riveted upon that distant sail, were gloomily thoughtful. Not for long. The imagination and resource which Captain Blood had detected in the fellow soon suggested a course.

Cursing in his soul, and even before the anchor was weighed, the association into which he had entered, he was already studying ways of evasion. What Cahusac implied was true: Blood would never suffer violence to be done in his presence to a Dutchman; but it might be done in his absence; and, being done, Blood must perforce condone it, since it would then be too late to protest.

Within the hour the Arabella and La Foudre were beating out to sea together. Without understanding the change of plan involved, Captain Blood, nevertheless, accepted it, and weighed anchor before the appointed time upon perceiving his associate to do so.

All day the Dutch brig was in sight, though by evening she had dwindled to the merest speck on the northern horizon. The course prescribed for Blood and Levasseur lay eastward along the northern shores of Hispaniola. To that course the Arabella continued to hold steadily throughout the night. When day broke again, she was alone. La Foudre under cover of the darkness had struck away to The northeast with every rag of canvas on her yards.

Cahusac had attempted yet again to protest against this.

"The devil take you!" Levasseur had answered him. "A ship's a ship, be she Dutch or Spanish, and ships are our present need. That will suffice for the men."

His lieutenant said no more. But from his glimpse of the letter, knowing that a girl and not a ship was his captain's real objective, he gloomily shook his head as he rolled away on his bowed legs to give the necessary orders.

Dawn found La Foudre close on the Dutchman's heels, not a mile astern, and the sight of her very evidently flustered the Jongvrow. No doubt mademoiselle's brother recognizing Levasseur's ship would be responsible for the Dutch uneasiness. They saw the Jongvrow crowding canvas in a futile endeavour to outsail them, whereupon they stood off to starboard and raced on until they were in a position whence they could send a warning shot across her bow. The Jongvrow veered, showed them her rudder, and opened fire with her stern chasers. The small shot went whistling through La Foudre's shrouds with some slight damage to her canvas. Followed a brief running fight in the course of which the Dutchman let fly a broadside.

Five minutes after that they were board and board, the Jongvrow held tight in the clutches of La Foudre's grapnels, and the buccaneers pouring noisily into her waist.

The Dutchman's master, purple in the face, stood forward to beard the pirate, followed closely by an elegant, pale-faced young gentleman in whom Levasseur recognized his brother-in-law elect.

"Captain Levasseur, this is an outrage for which you shall be made to answer. What do you seek aboard my ship?"

"At first I sought only that which belongs to me, something of which I am being robbed. But since you chose war and opened fire on me with some damage to my ship and loss of life to five of my men, why, war it is, and your ship a prize of war."

From the quarter rail Mademoiselle d'Ogeron looked down with glowing eyes in breathless wonder upon her well-beloved hero.

Gloriously heroic he seemed as he stood towering there, masterful, audacious, beautiful. He saw her, and with a glad shout sprang towards her. The Dutch master got in his way with hands upheld to arrest his progress. Levasseur did not stay to argue with him: he was too impatient to reach his mistress. He swung the poleaxe that he carried, and the Dutchman went down in blood with a cloven skull. The eager lover stepped across the body and came on, his countenance joyously alight.

But mademoiselle was shrinking now, in horror. She was a girl upon the threshold of glorious womanhood, of a fine height and nobly moulded, with heavy coils of glossy black hair above and about a face that was of the colour of old ivory. Her countenance was cast in lines of arrogance, stressed by the low lids of her full dark eyes.

In a bound her well-beloved was beside her, flinging away his bloody poleaxe, he opened wide his arms to enfold her. But she still shrank even within his embrace, which would not be denied; a look of dread had come to temper the normal arrogance of her almost perfect face.

"Mine, mine at last, and in spite of all!" he cried exultantly, theatrically, truly heroic.

But she, endeavouring to thrust him back, her hands against his breast, could only falter: "Why, why did you kill him?"

He laughed, as a hero should; and answered her heroically, with the tolerance of a god for the mortal to whom he condescends: "He stood between us. Let his death be a symbol, a warning. Let all who would stand between us mark it and beware."

It was so splendidly terrific, the gesture of it was so broad and fine and his magnetism so compelling, that she cast her silly tremors and yielded herself freely, intoxicated, to his fond embrace. Thereafter he

swung her to his shoulder, and stepping with ease beneath that burden, bore her in a sort of triumph, lustily cheered by his men, to the deck of his own ship. Her inconsiderate brother might have ruined that romantic scene but for the watchful Cahusac, who quietly tripped him up, and then trussed him like a fowl.

Thereafter, what time the Captain languished in his lady's smile within the cabin, Cahusac was dealing with the spoils of war. The Dutch crew was ordered into the longboat, and bidden go to the devil. Fortunately, as they numbered fewer than thirty, the longboat, though perilously overcrowded, could yet contain them. Next, Cahusac having inspected the cargo, put a quartermaster and a score of men aboard the Jongvrow, and left her to follow La Foudre, which he now headed south for the Leeward Islands.

Cahusac was disposed to be ill-humoured. The risk they had run in taking the Dutch brig and doing violence to members of the family of the Governor of Tortuga, was out of all proportion to the value of their prize. He said so, sullenly, to Levasseur.

"You'll keep that opinion to yourself," the Captain answered him. "Don't think I am the man to thrust my neck into a noose, without knowing how I am going to take it out again. I shall send an offer of terms to the Governor of Tortuga that he will be forced to accept. Set a course for the Virgen Magra. We'll go ashore, and settle things from there. And tell them to fetch that milksop Ogeron to the cabin."

Levasseur went back to the adoring lady.

Thither, too, the lady's brother was presently conducted. The Captain rose to receive him, bending his stalwart height to avoid striking the cabin roof with his head. Mademoiselle rose too.

"Why this?" she asked Levasseur, pointing to her brother's pinioned wrists—the remains of Cahusac's precautions.

"I deplore it," said he. "I desire it to end. Let M. d'Ogeron give me his parole...."

"I give you nothing," flashed the white-faced youth, who did not lack for spirit.

"You see." Levasseur shrugged his deep regret, and mademoiselle turned protesting to her brother.

"Henri, this is foolish! You are not behaving as my friend. You...."

"Little fool," her brother answered her—and the "little" was out of place; she was the taller of the twain. "Little fool, do you think I should be acting as your friend to make terms with this blackguard pirate?"

"Steady, my young cockerel!" Levasseur laughed. But his laugh was not nice.

"Don't you perceive your wicked folly in the harm it has brought already? Lives have been lost—men have died—that this monster might overtake you. And don't you yet realize where you stand—in the power of this beast, of this cur born in a kennel and bred in thieving and murder?"

He might have said more but that Levasseur struck him across the mouth. Levasseur, you see, cared as little as another to hear the truth about himself.

Mademoiselle suppressed a scream, as the youth staggered back under the blow. He came to rest against a bulkhead, and leaned there with bleeding lips. But his spirit was unquenched, and there was a ghastly smile on his white face as his eyes sought his sister's.

"You see," he said simply. "He strikes a man whose hands are bound."

The simple words, and, more than the words, their tone of ineffable

disdain, aroused the passion that never slumbered deeply in Levasseur.

"And what should you do, puppy, if your hands were unbound?" He took his prisoner by the breast of his doublet and shook him. "Answer me! What should you do? Tchah! You empty windbag! You...." And then came a torrent of words unknown to mademoiselle, yet of whose foulness her intuitions made her conscious.

With blanched cheeks she stood by the cabin table, and cried out to Levasseur to stop. To obey her, he opened the door, and flung her brother through it.

"Put that rubbish under hatches until I call for it again," he roared, and shut the door.

Composing himself, he turned to the girl again with a deprecatory smile. But no smile answered him from her set face. She had seen her beloved hero's nature in curl-papers, as it were, and she found the spectacle disgusting and terrifying. It recalled the brutal slaughter of the Dutch captain, and suddenly she realized that what her brother had just said of this man was no more than true. Fear growing to panic was written on her face, as she stood there leaning for support against the table.

"Why, sweetheart, what is this?" Levasseur moved towards her. She recoiled before him. There was a smile on his face, a glitter in his eyes that fetched her heart into her throat.

He caught her, as she reached the uttermost limits of the cabin, seized her in his long arms and pulled her to him.

"No, no!" she panted.

"Yes, yes," he mocked her, and his mockery was the most terrible thing of all. He crushed her to him brutally, deliberately hurtful because

she resisted, and kissed her whilst she writhed in his embrace. Then, his passion mounting, he grew angry and stripped off the last rag of hero's mask that still may have hung upon his face. "Little fool, did you not hear your brother say that you are in my power? Remember it, and remember that of your own free will you came. I am not the man with whom a woman can play fast and loose. So get sense, my girl, and accept what you have invited." He kissed her again, almost contemptuously, and flung her off. "No more scowls," he said. "You'll be sorry else."

Some one knocked. Cursing the interruption, Levasseur strode off to open. Cahusac stood before him. The Breton's face was grave. He came to report that they had sprung a leak between wind and water, the consequence of damage sustained from one of the Dutchman's shots. In alarm Levasseur went off with him. The leakage was not serious so long as the weather kept fine; but should a storm overtake them it might speedily become so. A man was slung overboard to make a partial stoppage with a sail-cloth, and the pumps were got to work.

Ahead of them a low cloud showed on the horizon, which Cahusac pronounced one of the northernmost of the Virgin Islands.

"We must run for shelter there, and careen her," said Levasseur. "I do not trust this oppressive heat. A storm may catch us before we make land."

"A storm or something else," said Cahusac grimly. "Have you noticed that?" He pointed away to starboard.

Levasseur looked, and caught his breath. Two ships that at the distance seemed of considerable burden were heading towards them some five miles away.

"If they follow us what is to happen?" demanded Cahusac.

"We'll fight whether we're in case to do so or not," swore Levasseur.

"Counsels of despair." Cahusac was contemptuous. To mark it he spat upon the deck. "This comes of going to sea with a lovesick madman. Now, keep your temper, Captain, for the hands will be at the end of theirs if we have trouble as a result of this Dutchman business."

For the remainder of that day Levasseur's thoughts were of anything but love. He remained on deck, his eyes now upon the land, now upon those two slowly gaining ships. To run for the open could avail him nothing, and in his leaky condition would provide an additional danger. He must stand at bay and fight. And then, towards evening, when within three miles of shore and when he was about to give the order to strip for battle, he almost fainted from relief to hear a voice from the crow's-nest above announce that the larger of the two ships was the Arabella. Her companion was presumably a prize.

But the pessimism of Cahusac abated nothing.

"That is but the lesser evil," he growled. "What will Blood say about this Dutchman?"

"Let him say what he pleases." Levasseur laughed in the immensity of his relief.

"And what about the children of the Governor of Tortuga?"

"He must not know."

"He'll come to know in the end."

"Aye, but by then, morbleu, the matter will be settled. I shall have made my peace with the Governor. I tell you I know the way to compel Ogeron to come to terms."

Presently the four vessels lay to off the northern coast of La Virgen Magra, a narrow little island arid and treeless, some twelve miles by three, uninhabited save by birds and turtles and unproductive of anything but salt, of which there were considerable ponds to the south.

Levasseur put off in a boat accompanied by Cahusac and two other officers, and went to visit Captain Blood aboard the Arabella.

"Our brief separation has been mighty profitable," was Captain Blood's greeting. "It's a busy morning we've both had." He was in high good-humour as he led the way to the great cabin for a rendering of accounts.

The tall ship that accompanied the Arabella was a Spanish vessel of twenty-six guns, the Santiago from Puerto Rico with a hundred and twenty thousand weight of cacao, forty thousand pieces of eight, and the value of ten thousand more in jewels. A rich capture of which two fifths under the articles went to Levasseur and his crew. Of the money and jewels a division was made on the spot. The cacao it was agreed should be taken to Tortuga to be sold.

Then it was the turn of Levasseur, and black grew the brow of Captain Blood as the Frenchman's tale was unfolded. At the end he roundly expressed his disapproval. The Dutch were a friendly people whom it was a folly to alienate, particularly for so paltry a matter as these hides and tobacco, which at most would fetch a bare twenty thousand pieces.

But Levasseur answered him, as he had answered Cahusac, that a ship was a ship, and it was ships they needed against their projected enterprise. Perhaps because things had gone well with him that day, Blood ended by shrugging the matter aside. Thereupon Levasseur proposed that the Arabella and her prize should return to Tortuga there to unload the cacao and enlist the further adventurers that could

now be shipped. Levasseur meanwhile would effect certain necessary repairs, and then proceeding south, await his admiral at Saltatudos, an island conveniently situated—in the latitude of 11 deg. 11' N.—for their enterprise against Maracaybo.

To Levasseur's relief, Captain Blood not only agreed, but pronounced himself ready to set sail at once.

No sooner had the *Arabella* departed than Levasseur brought his ships into the lagoon, and set his crew to work upon the erection of temporary quarters ashore for himself, his men, and his enforced guests during the careening and repairing of *La Foudre*.

At sunset that evening the wind freshened; it grew to a gale, and from that to such a hurricane that Levasseur was thankful to find himself ashore and his ships in safe shelter. He wondered a little how it might be faring with Captain Blood out there at the mercy of that terrific storm; but he did not permit concern to trouble him unduly.

CHAPTER XV. THE RANSOM

In the glory of the following morning, sparkling and clear after the storm, with an invigorating, briny tang in the air from the salt-ponds on the south of the island, a curious scene was played on the beach of the *Virgen Magra*, at the foot of a ridge of bleached dunes, beside the spread of sail from which Levasseur had improvised a tent.

Enthroned upon an empty cask sat the French filibuster to transact important business: the business of making himself safe with the Governor of Tortuga.

A guard of honour of a half-dozen officers hung about him; five of them were rude boucan-hunters, in stained jerkins and leather breeches; the sixth was Cahusac. Before him, guarded by two half-naked negroes, stood young d'Ogeron, in frilled shirt and satin small-clothes and fine shoes of Cordovan leather. He was stripped of doublet, and his hands were tied behind him. The young gentleman's comely face was haggard. Near at hand, and also under guard, but unopinioned, mademoiselle his sister sat hunched upon a hillock of sand. She was very pale, and it was in vain that she sought to veil in a mask of arrogance the fears by which she was assailed.

Levasseur addressed himself to M. d'Ogeron. He spoke at long length. In the end—

"I trust, monsieur," said he, with mock suavity, "that I have made myself quite clear. So that there may be no misunderstandings, I will recapitulate. Your ransom is fixed at twenty thousand pieces of eight, and you shall have liberty on parole to go to Tortuga to collect it. In fact, I shall provide the means to convey you thither, and you shall have a month in which to come and go. Meanwhile, your sister

remains with me as a hostage. Your father should not consider such a sum excessive as the price of his son's liberty and to provide a dowry for his daughter. Indeed, if anything, I am too modest, pardi! M. d'Ogeron is reputed a wealthy man."

M. d'Ogeron the younger raised his head and looked the Captain boldly in the face.

"I refuse—utterly and absolutely, do you understand? So do your worst, and be damned for a filthy pirate without decency and without honour."

"But what words!" laughed Levasseur. "What heat and what foolishness! You have not considered the alternative. When you do, you will not persist in your refusal. You will not do that in any case. We have spurs for the reluctant. And I warn you against giving me your parole under stress, and afterwards playing me false. I shall know how to find and punish you. Meanwhile, remember your sister's honour is in pawn to me. Should you forget to return with the dowry, you will not consider it unreasonable that I forget to marry her."

Levasseur's smiling eyes, intent upon the young man's face, saw the horror that crept into his glance. M. d'Ogeron cast a wild glance at mademoiselle, and observed the grey despair that had almost stamped the beauty from her face. Disgust and fury swept across his countenance.

Then he braced himself and answered resolutely:

"No, you dog! A thousand times, no!"

"You are foolish to persist." Levasseur spoke without anger, with a coldly mocking regret. His fingers had been busy tying knots in a length of whipcord. He held it up. "You know this? It is a rosary of pain that has wrought the conversion of many a stubborn heretic. It is capable of screwing the eyes out of a man's head by way of helping

him to see reason. As you please."

He flung the length of knotted cord to one of the negroes, who in an instant made it fast about the prisoner's brows. Then between cord and cranium the black inserted a short length of metal, round and slender as a pipe-stem. That done he rolled his eyes towards Levasseur, awaiting the Captain's signal.

Levasseur considered his victim, and beheld him tense and braced, his haggard face of a leaden hue, beads of perspiration glinting on his pallid brow just beneath the whipcord.

Mademoiselle cried out, and would have risen: but her guards restrained her, and she sank down again, moaning.

"I beg that you will spare yourself and your sister," said the Captain, "by being reasonable. What, after all, is the sum I have named? To your wealthy father a bagatelle. I repeat, I have been too modest. But since I have said twenty thousand pieces of eight, twenty thousand pieces it shall be."

"And for what, if you please, have you said twenty thousand pieces of eight?"

In execrable French, but in a voice that was crisp and pleasant, seeming to echo some of the mockery that had invested Levasseur's, that question floated over their heads.

Startled, Levasseur and his officers looked up and round. On the crest of the dunes behind them, in sharp silhouette against the deep cobalt of the sky, they beheld a tall, lean figure scrupulously dressed in black with silver lace, a crimson ostrich plume curled about the broad brim of his hat affording the only touch of colour. Under that hat was the tawny face of Captain Blood.

Levasseur gathered himself up with an oath of amazement. He had

conceived Captain Blood by now well below the horizon, on his way to Tortuga, assuming him to have been so fortunate as to have weathered last night's storm.

Launching himself upon the yielding sand, into which he sank to the level of the calves of his fine boots of Spanish leather, Captain Blood came sliding erect to the beach. He was followed by Wolverstone, and a dozen others. As he came to a standstill, he doffed his hat, with a flourish, to the lady. Then he turned to Levasseur.

"Good-morning, my Captain," said he, and proceeded to explain his presence. "It was last night's hurricane compelled our return. We had no choice but to ride before it with stripped poles, and it drove us back the way we had gone. Moreover—as the devil would have it!—the Santiago sprang her mainmast; and so I was glad to put into a cove on the west of the island a couple of miles away, and we've walked across to stretch our legs, and to give you good-day. But who are these?" And he designated the man and the woman.

Cahusac shrugged his shoulders, and tossed his long arms to heaven.

"Voila!" said he, pregnantly, to the firmament.

Levasseur gnawed his lip, and changed colour. But he controlled himself to answer civilly:

"As you see, two prisoners."

"Ah! Washed ashore in last night's gale, eh?"

"Not so." Levasseur contained himself with difficulty before that irony. "They were in the Dutch brig."

"I don't remember that you mentioned them before."

"I did not. They are prisoners of my own—a personal matter. They

are French."

"French!" Captain Blood's light eyes stabbed at Levasseur, then at the prisoners.

M. d'Ogeron stood tense and braced as before, but the grey horror had left his face. Hope had leapt within him at this interruption obviously as little expected by his tormentor as by himself. His sister, moved by a similar intuition, was leaning forward with parted lips and gaping eyes.

Captain Blood fingered his lip, and frowned thoughtfully upon Levasseur.

"Yesterday you surprised me by making war upon the friendly Dutch. But now it seems that not even your own countrymen are safe from you."

"Have I not said that these... that this is a matter personal to me?"

"Ah! And their names?"

Captain Blood's crisp, authoritative, faintly disdainful manner stirred Levasseur's quick anger. The blood crept slowly back into his blenched face, and his glance grew in insolence, almost in menace. Meanwhile the prisoner answered for him.

"I am Henri d'Ogeron, and this is my sister."

"D'Ogeron?" Captain Blood stared. "Are you related by chance to my good friend the Governor of Tortuga?"

"He is my father."

Levasseur swung aside with an imprecation. In Captain Blood, amazement for the moment quenched every other emotion.

"The saints preserve us now! Are you quite mad, Levasseur? First

you molest the Dutch, who are our friends; next you take prisoners two persons that are French, your own countrymen; and now, faith, they're no less than the children of the Governor of Tortuga, which is the one safe place of shelter that we enjoy in these islands...."

Levasseur broke in angrily:

"Must I tell you again that it is a matter personal to me? I make myself alone responsible to the Governor of Tortuga."

"And the twenty thousand pieces of eight? Is that also a matter personal to you?"

"It is."

"Now I don't agree with you at all." Captain Blood sat down on the cask that Levasseur had lately occupied, and looked up blandly. "I may inform you, to save time, that I heard the entire proposal that you made to this lady and this gentleman, and I'll also remind you that we sail under articles that admit no ambiguities. You have fixed their ransom at twenty thousand pieces of eight. That sum then belongs to your crews and mine in the proportions by the articles established. You'll hardly wish to dispute it. But what is far more grave is that you have concealed from me this part of the prizes taken on your last cruise, and for such an offence as that the articles provide certain penalties that are something severe in character."

"Ho, ho!" laughed Levasseur unpleasantly. Then added: "If you dislike my conduct we can dissolve the association."

"That is my intention. But we'll dissolve it when and in the manner that I choose, and that will be as soon as you have satisfied the articles under which we sailed upon this cruise."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll be as short as I can," said Captain Blood. "I'll waive for the

moment the unseemliness of making war upon the Dutch, of taking French prisoners, and of provoking the anger of the Governor of Tortuga. I'll accept the situation as I find it. Yourself you've fixed the ransom of this couple at twenty thousand pieces, and, as I gather, the lady is to be your perquisite. But why should she be your perquisite more than another's, seeing that she belongs by the articles to all of us, as a prize of war?"

Black as thunder grew the brow of Levasseur.

"However," added Captain Blood, "I'll not dispute her to you if you are prepared to buy her."

"Buy her?"

"At the price you have set upon her."

Levasseur contained his rage, that he might reason with the Irishman. "That is the ransom of the man. It is to be paid for him by the Governor of Tortuga."

"No, no. Ye've parcelled the twain together—very oddly, I confess. Ye've set their value at twenty thousand pieces, and for that sum you may have them, since you desire it; but you'll pay for them the twenty thousand pieces that are ultimately to come to you as the ransom of one and the dowry of the other; and that sum shall be divided among our crews. So that you do that, it is conceivable that our followers may take a lenient view of your breach of the articles we jointly signed."

Levasseur laughed savagely. "Ah ca! Credieu! The good jest!"

"I quite agree with you," said Captain Blood.

To Levasseur the jest lay in that Captain Blood, with no more than a dozen followers, should come there attempting to hector him who had a hundred men within easy call. But it seemed that he had left out of his reckoning something which his opponent had counted in. For as,

laughing still, Levasseur swung to his officers, he saw that which choked the laughter in his throat. Captain Blood had shrewdly played upon the cupidity that was the paramount inspiration of those adventurers. And Levasseur now read clearly on their faces how completely they adopted Captain Blood's suggestion that all must participate in the ransom which their leader had thought to appropriate to himself.

It gave the gaudy ruffian pause, and whilst in his heart he cursed those followers of his, who could be faithful only to their greed, he perceived—and only just in time—that he had best tread warily.

"You misunderstand," he said, swallowing his rage. "The ransom is for division, when it comes. The girl, meanwhile, is mine on that understanding."

"Good!" grunted Cahusac. "On that understanding all arranges itself."

"You think so?" said Captain Blood. "But if M. d'Ogeron should refuse to pay the ransom? What then?" He laughed, and got lazily to his feet. "No, no. If Captain Levasseur is meanwhile to keep the girl, as he proposes, then let him pay this ransom, and be his the risk if it should afterwards not be forthcoming."

"That's it!" cried one of Levasseur's officers. And Cahusac added: "It's reasonable, that! Captain Blood is right. It is in the articles."

"What is in the articles, you fools?" Levasseur was in danger of losing his head. "Sacre Dieu! Where do you suppose that I have twenty thousand pieces? My whole share of the prizes of this cruise does not come to half that sum. I'll be your debtor until I've earned it. Will that content you?"

All things considered, there is not a doubt that it would have done so had not Captain Blood intended otherwise.

"And if you should die before you have earned it? Ours is a calling fraught with risks, my Captain."

"Damn you!" Levasseur flung upon him livid with fury. "Will nothing satisfy you?"

"Oh, but yes. Twenty thousand pieces of eight for immediate division."

"I haven't got it."

"Then let some one buy the prisoners who has."

"And who do you suppose has it if I have not?"

"I have," said Captain Blood.

"You have!" Levasseur's mouth fell open. "You... you want the girl?"

"Why not? And I exceed you in gallantry in that I will make sacrifices to obtain her, and in honesty in that I am ready to pay for what I want."

Levasseur stared at him foolishly agape. Behind him pressed his officers, gaping also.

Captain Blood sat down again on the cask, and drew from an inner pocket of his doublet a little leather bag. "I am glad to be able to resolve a difficulty that at one moment seemed insoluble." And under the bulging eyes of Levasseur and his officers, he untied the mouth of the bag and rolled into his left palm four or five pearls each of the size of a sparrow's egg. There were twenty such in the bag, the very pick of those taken in that raid upon the pearl fleet. "You boast a knowledge of pearls, Cahusac. At what do you value this?"

The Breton took between coarse finger and thumb the proffered lustrous, delicately iridescent sphere, his shrewd eyes appraising it.

"A thousand pieces," he answered shortly.

"It will fetch rather more in Tortuga or Jamaica," said Captain Blood, "and twice as much in Europe. But I'll accept your valuation. They are almost of a size, as you can see. Here are twelve, representing twelve thousand pieces of eight, which is La Foudre's share of three fifths of the prize, as provided by the articles. For the eight thousand pieces that go to the Arabella, I make myself responsible to my own men. And now, Wolverstone, if you please, will you take my property aboard the Arabella?" He stood up again, indicating the prisoners.

"Ah, no!" Levasseur threw wide the floodgates of his fury. "Ah, that, no, by example! You shall not take her...." He would have sprung upon Captain Blood, who stood aloof, alert, tight-lipped, and watchful.

But it was one of Levasseur's own officers who hindered him.

"Nom de Dieu, my Captain! What will you do? It is settled; honourably settled with satisfaction to all."

"To all?" blazed Levasseur. "Ah ca! To all of you, you animals! But what of me?"

Cahusac, with the pearls clutched in his capacious hand, stepped up to him on the other side. "Don't be a fool, Captain. Do you want to provoke trouble between the crews? His men outnumber us by nearly two to one. What's a girl more or less? In Heaven's name, let her go. He's paid handsomely for her, and dealt fairly with us."

"Dealt fairly?" roared the infuriated Captain. "You...." In all his foul vocabulary he could find no epithet to describe his lieutenant. He caught him a blow that almost sent him sprawling. The pearls were scattered in the sand.

Cahusac dived after them, his fellows with him. Vengeance must

wait. For some moments they groped there on hands and knees, oblivious of all else. And yet in those moments vital things were happening.

Levasseur, his hand on his sword, his face a white mask of rage, was confronting Captain Blood to hinder his departure.

"You do not take her while I live!" he cried.

"Then I'll take her when you're dead," said Captain Blood, and his own blade flashed in the sunlight. "The articles provide that any man of whatever rank concealing any part of a prize, be it of the value of no more than a peso, shall be hanged at the yardarm. It's what I intended for you in the end. But since ye prefer it this way, ye muckrake, faith, I'll be humouring you."

He waved away the men who would have interfered, and the blades rang together.

M. d'Ogeron looked on, a man bemused, unable to surmise what the issue either way could mean for him. Meanwhile, two of Blood's men who had taken the place of the Frenchman's negro guards, had removed the crown of whipcord from his brow. As for mademoiselle, she had risen, and was leaning forward, a hand pressed tightly to her heaving breast, her face deathly pale, a wild terror in her eyes.

It was soon over. The brute strength, upon which Levasseur so confidently counted, could avail nothing against the Irishman's practised skill. When, with both lungs transfixed, he lay prone on the white sand, coughing out his rascally life, Captain Blood looked calmly at Cahusac across the body.

"I think that cancels the articles between us," he said. With soulless, cynical eyes Cahusac considered the twitching body of his recent leader. Had Levasseur been a man of different temper, the affair might have ended in a very different manner. But, then, it is certain

that Captain Blood would have adopted in dealing with him different tactics. As it was, Levasseur commanded neither love nor loyalty. The men who followed him were the very dregs of that vile trade, and cupidity was their only inspiration. Upon that cupidity Captain Blood had deftly played, until he had brought them to find Levasseur guilty of the one offence they deemed unpardonable, the crime of appropriating to himself something which might be converted into gold and shared amongst them all.

Thus now the threatening mob of buccaneers that came hastening to the theatre of that swift tragi-comedy were appeased by a dozen words of Cahusac's.

Whilst still they hesitated, Blood added something to quicken their decision.

"If you will come to our anchorage, you shall receive at once your share of the booty of the Santiago, that you may dispose of it as you please."

They crossed the island, the two prisoners accompanying them, and later that day, the division made, they would have parted company but that Cahusac, at the instances of the men who had elected him Levasseur's successor, offered Captain Blood anew the services of that French contingent.

"If you will sail with me again," the Captain answered him, "you may do so on the condition that you make your peace with the Dutch, and restore the brig and her cargo."

The condition was accepted, and Captain Blood went off to find his guests, the children of the Governor of Tortuga.

Mademoiselle d'Ogeron and her brother—the latter now relieved of his bonds—sat in the great cabin of the Arabella, whither they had been conducted.

Wine and food had been placed upon the table by Benjamin, Captain Blood's negro steward and cook, who had intimated to them that it was for their entertainment. But it had remained untouched. Brother and sister sat there in agonized bewilderment, conceiving that their escape was but from frying-pan to fire. At length, overwrought by the suspense, mademoiselle flung herself upon her knees before her brother to implore his pardon for all the evil brought upon them by her wicked folly.

M. d'Ogeron was not in a forgiving mood.

"I am glad that at least you realize what you have done. And now this other filibuster has bought you, and you belong to him. You realize that, too, I hope."

He might have said more, but he checked upon perceiving that the door was opening. Captain Blood, coming from settling matters with the followers of Levasseur, stood on the threshold. M. d'Ogeron had not troubled to restrain his high-pitched voice, and the Captain had overheard the Frenchman's last two sentences. Therefore he perfectly understood why mademoiselle should bound up at sight of him, and shrink back in fear.

"Mademoiselle," said he in his vile but fluent French, "I beg you to dismiss your fears. Aboard this ship you shall be treated with all honour. So soon as we are in case to put to sea again, we steer a course for Tortuga to take you home to your father. And pray do not consider that I have bought you, as your brother has just said. All that I have done has been to provide the ransom necessary to bribe a gang of scoundrels to depart from obedience to the arch-scoundrel who commanded them, and so deliver you from all peril. Count it, if you please, a friendly loan to be repaid entirely at your convenience."

Mademoiselle stared at him in unbelief. M. d'Ogeron rose to his feet.

"Monsieur, is it possible that you are serious?"

"I am. It may not happen often nowadays. I may be a pirate. But my ways are not the ways of Levasseur, who should have stayed in Europe, and practised purse-cutting. I have a sort of honour—shall we say, some rags of honour?—remaining me from better days." Then on a brisker note he added: "We dine in an hour, and I trust that you will honour my table with your company. Meanwhile, Benjamin will see, monsieur, that you are more suitably provided in the matter of wardrobe."

He bowed to them, and turned to depart again, but mademoiselle detained him.

"Monsieur!" she cried sharply.

He checked and turned, whilst slowly she approached him, regarding him between dread and wonder.

"Oh, you are noble!"

"I shouldn't put it as high as that myself," said he.

"You are, you are! And it is but right that you should know all."

"Madelon!" her brother cried out, to restrain her.

But she would not be restrained. Her surcharged heart must overflow in confidence.

"Monsieur, for what befell I am greatly at fault. This man—this Levasseur...."

He stared, incredulous in his turn. "My God! Is it possible? That animal!"

Abruptly she fell on her knees, caught his hand and kissed it before

he could wrench it from her.

"What do you do?" he cried.

"An amende. In my mind I dishonoured you by deeming you his like, by conceiving your fight with Levasseur a combat between jackals. On my knees, monsieur, I implore you to forgive me."

Captain Blood looked down upon her, and a smile broke on his lips, irradiating the blue eyes that looked so oddly light in that tawny face.

"Why, child," said he, "I might find it hard to forgive you the stupidity of having thought otherwise."

As he handed her to her feet again, he assured himself that he had behaved rather well in the affair. Then he sighed. That dubious fame of his that had spread so quickly across the Caribbean would by now have reached the ears of Arabella Bishop. That she would despise him, he could not doubt, deeming him no better than all the other scoundrels who drove this villainous buccaneering trade. Therefore he hoped that some echo of this deed might reach her also, and be set by her against some of that contempt. For the whole truth, which he withheld from Mademoiselle d'Ogeron, was that in venturing his life to save her, he had been driven by the thought that the deed must be pleasing in the eyes of Miss Bishop could she but witness it.

CHAPTER XVI. THE TRAP

That affair of Mademoiselle d'Ogeron bore as its natural fruit an improvement in the already cordial relations between Captain Blood and the Governor of Tortuga. At the fine stone house, with its green-jalousied windows, which M. d'Ogeron had built himself in a spacious and luxuriant garden to the east of Cayona, the Captain became a very welcome guest. M. d'Ogeron was in the Captain's debt for more than the twenty thousand pieces of eight which he had provided for mademoiselle's ransom; and shrewd, hard bargain-driver though he might be, the Frenchman could be generous and understood the sentiment of gratitude. This he now proved in every possible way, and under his powerful protection the credit of Captain Blood among the buccaneers very rapidly reached its zenith.

So when it came to fitting out his fleet for that enterprise against Maracaybo, which had originally been Levasseur's project, he did not want for either ships or men to follow him. He recruited five hundred adventurers in all, and he might have had as many thousands if he could have offered them accommodation. Similarly without difficulty he might have increased his fleet to twice its strength of ships but that he preferred to keep it what it was. The three vessels to which he confined it were the *Arabella*, the *La Foudre*, which Cahusac now commanded with a contingent of some sixscore Frenchmen, and the *Santiago*, which had been refitted and rechristened the *Elizabeth*, after that Queen of England whose seamen had humbled Spain as Captain Blood now hoped to humble it again. Hagthorpe, in virtue of his service in the navy, was appointed by Blood to command her, and the appointment was confirmed by the men.

It was some months after the rescue of Mademoiselle d'Ogeron—in

August of that year 1687—that this little fleet, after some minor adventures which I pass over in silence, sailed into the great lake of Maracaybo and effected its raid upon that opulent city of the Main.

The affair did not proceed exactly as was hoped, and Blood's force came to find itself in a precarious position. This is best explained in the words employed by Cahusac—which Pitt has carefully recorded—in the course of an altercation that broke out on the steps of the Church of Nuestra Senora del Carmen, which Captain Blood had impiously appropriated for the purpose of a corps-de-garde. I have said already that he was a papist only when it suited him.

The dispute was being conducted by Hagthorpe, Wolverstone, and Pitt on the one side, and Cahusac, out of whose uneasiness it all arose, on the other. Behind them in the sun-scorched, dusty square, sparsely fringed by palms, whose fronds drooped listlessly in the quivering heat, surged a couple of hundred wild fellows belonging to both parties, their own excitement momentarily quelled so that they might listen to what passed among their leaders.

Cahusac appeared to be having it all his own way, and he raised his harsh, querulous voice so that all might hear his truculent denunciation. He spoke, Pitt tells us, a dreadful kind of English, which the shipmaster, however, makes little attempt to reproduce. His dress was as discordant as his speech. It was of a kind to advertise his trade, and ludicrously in contrast with the sober garb of Hagthorpe and the almost foppish daintiness of Jeremy Pitt. His soiled and blood-stained shirt of blue cotton was open in front, to cool his hairy breast, and the girdle about the waist of his leather breeches carried an arsenal of pistols and a knife, whilst a cutlass hung from a leather baldrick loosely slung about his body; above his countenance, broad and flat as a Mongolian's, a red scarf was swathed, turban-wise, about his head.

"Is it that I have not warned you from the beginning that all was too

easy?" he demanded between plaitiveness and fury. "I am no fool, my friends. I have eyes, me. And I see. I see an abandoned fort at the entrance of the lake, and nobody there to fire a gun at us when we came in. Then I suspect the trap. Who would not that had eyes and brain? Bah! we come on. What do we find? A city, abandoned like the fort; a city out of which the people have taken all things of value. Again I warn Captain Blood. It is a trap, I say. We are to come on; always to come on, without opposition, until we find that it is too late to go to sea again, that we cannot go back at all. But no one will listen to me. You all know so much more. Name of God! Captain Blood, he will go on, and we go on. We go to Gibraltar. True that at last, after long time, we catch the Deputy-Governor; true, we make him pay big ransom for Gibraltar; true between that ransom and the loot we return here with some two thousand pieces of eight. But what is it, in reality, will you tell me? Or shall I tell you? It is a piece of cheese—a piece of cheese in a mousetrap, and we are the little mice. Goddam! And the cats—oh, the cats they wait for us! The cats are those four Spanish ships of war that have come meantime. And they wait for us outside the bottle-neck of this lagoon. Mort de Dieu! That is what comes of the damned obstinacy of your fine Captain Blood."

Wolverstone laughed. Cahusac exploded in fury.

"Ah, sangdieu! Tu ris, animal? You laugh! Tell me this: How do we get out again unless we accept the terms of Monsieur the Admiral of Spain?"

From the buccaneers at the foot of the steps came an angry rumble of approval. The single eye of the gigantic Wolverstone rolled terribly, and he clenched his great fists as if to strike the Frenchman, who was exposing them to mutiny. But Cahusac was not daunted. The mood of the men enheartened him.

"You think, perhaps, this your Captain Blood is the good God. That he can make miracles, eh? He is ridiculous, you know, this Captain

Blood; with his grand air and his...."

He checked. Out of the church at that moment, grand air and all, sauntered Peter Blood. With him came a tough, long-legged French sea-wolf named Yberville, who, though still young, had already won fame as a privateer commander before the loss of his own ship had driven him to take service under Blood. The Captain advanced towards that disputing group, leaning lightly upon his long ebony cane, his face shaded by a broad-plumed hat. There was in his appearance nothing of the buccaneer. He had much more the air of a loungeur in the Mall or the Alameda—the latter rather, since his elegant suit of violet taffetas with gold-embroidered button-holes was in the Spanish fashion. But the long, stout, serviceable rapier, thrust up behind by the left hand resting lightly on the pommel, corrected the impression. That and those steely eyes of his announced the adventurer.

"You find me ridiculous, eh, Cahusac?" said he, as he came to a halt before the Breton, whose anger seemed already to have gone out of him. "What, then, must I find you?" He spoke quietly, almost wearily. "You will be telling them that we have delayed, and that it is the delay that has brought about our danger. But whose is the fault of that delay? We have been a month in doing what should have been done, and what but for your blundering would have been done, inside of a week."

"Ah ca! Nom de Dieu! Was it my fault that...."

"Was it any one else's fault that you ran your ship *La Foudre* aground on the shoal in the middle of the lake? You would not be piloted. You knew your way. You took no soundings even. The result was that we lost three precious days in getting canoes to bring off your men and your gear. Those three days gave the folk at Gibraltar not only time to hear of our coming, but time in which to get away. After that, and because of it, we had to follow the Governor to his infernal island fortress, and a fortnight and best part of a hundred lives

were lost in reducing it. That's how we come to have delayed until this Spanish fleet is fetched round from La Guayra by a guarda-costa; and if ye hadn't lost La Foudre, and so reduced our fleet from three ships to two, we should even now be able to fight our way through with a reasonable hope of succeeding. Yet you think it is for you to come hectoring here, upbraiding us for a situation that is just the result of your own ineptitude."

He spoke with a restraint which I trust you will agree was admirable when I tell you that the Spanish fleet guarding the bottle-neck exit of the great Lake of Maracaybo, and awaiting there the coming forth of Captain Blood with a calm confidence based upon its overwhelming strength, was commanded by his implacable enemy, Don Miguel de Espinosa y Valdez, the Admiral of Spain. In addition to his duty to his country, the Admiral had, as you know, a further personal incentive arising out of that business aboard the Encarnacion a year ago, and the death of his brother Don Diego; and with him sailed his nephew Esteban, whose vindictive zeal exceeded the Admiral's own.

Yet, knowing all this, Captain Blood could preserve his calm in reproving the cowardly frenzy of one for whom the situation had not half the peril with which it was fraught for himself. He turned from Cahusac to address the mob of buccaneers, who had surged nearer to hear him, for he had not troubled to raise his voice. "I hope that will correct some of the misapprehension that appears to have been disturbing you," said he.

"There's no good can come of talking of what's past and done," cried Cahusac, more sullen now than truculent. Whereupon Wolverstone laughed, a laugh that was like the neighing of a horse. "The question is: what are we to do now?"

"Sure, now, there's no question at all," said Captain Blood.

"Indeed, but there is," Cahusac insisted. "Don Miguel, the Spanish

Admiral, have offer us safe passage to sea if we will depart at once, do no damage to the town, release our prisoners, and surrender all that we took at Gibraltar."

Captain Blood smiled quietly, knowing precisely how much Don Miguel's word was worth. It was Yberville who replied, in manifest scorn of his compatriot:

"Which argues that, even at this disadvantage as he has us, the Spanish Admiral is still afraid of us."

"That can be only because he not know our real weakness," was the fierce retort. "And, anyway, we must accept these terms. We have no choice. That is my opinion."

"Well, it's not mine, now," said Captain Blood. "So, I've refused them."

"Refuse'!" Cahusac's broad face grew purple. A muttering from the men behind enheartened him. "You have refuse'? You have refuse' already—and without consulting me?"

"Your disagreement could have altered nothing. You'd have been outvoted, for Hagthorpe here was entirely of my own mind. Still," he went on, "if you and your own French followers wish to avail yourselves of the Spaniard's terms, we shall not hinder you. Send one of your prisoners to announce it to the Admiral. Don Miguel will welcome your decision, you may be sure."

Cahusac glowered at him in silence for a moment. Then, having controlled himself, he asked in a concentrated voice:

"Precisely what answer have you make to the Admiral?"

A smile irradiated the face and eyes of Captain Blood. "I have answered him that unless within four-and-twenty hours we have his parole to stand out to sea, ceasing to dispute our passage or hinder

our departure, and a ransom of fifty thousand pieces of eight for Maracaybo, we shall reduce this beautiful city to ashes, and thereafter go out and destroy his fleet."

The impudence of it left Cahusac speechless. But among the English buccaneers in the square there were many who savoured the audacious humour of the trapped dictating terms to the trappers. Laughter broke from them. It spread into a roar of acclamation; for bluff is a weapon dear to every adventurer. Presently, when they understood it, even Cahusac's French followers were carried off their feet by that wave of jocular enthusiasm, until in his truculent obstinacy Cahusac remained the only dissentient. He withdrew in mortification. Nor was he to be mollified until the following day brought him his revenge. This came in the shape of a messenger from Don Miguel with a letter in which the Spanish Admiral solemnly vowed to God that, since the pirates had refused his magnanimous offer to permit them to surrender with the honours of war, he would now await them at the mouth of the lake there to destroy them on their coming forth. He added that should they delay their departure, he would so soon as he was reenforced by a fifth ship, the Santo Nino, on its way to join him from La Guayra, himself come inside to seek them at Maracaybo.

This time Captain Blood was put out of temper.

"Trouble me no more," he snapped at Cahusac, who came growling to him again. "Send word to Don Miguel that you have seceded from me. He'll give you safe conduct, devil a doubt. Then take one of the sloops, order your men aboard and put to sea, and the devil go with you."

Cahusac would certainly have adopted that course if only his men had been unanimous in the matter. They, however, were torn between greed and apprehension. If they went they must abandon their share of the plunder, which was considerable, as well as the slaves and other prisoners they had taken. If they did this, and Captain Blood

should afterwards contrive to get away unscathed—and from their knowledge of his resourcefulness, the thing, however unlikely, need not be impossible—he must profit by that which they now relinquished. This was a contingency too bitter for contemplation. And so, in the end, despite all that Cahusac could say, the surrender was not to Don Miguel, but to Peter Blood. They had come into the venture with him, they asserted, and they would go out of it with him or not at all. That was the message he received from them that same evening by the sullen mouth of Cahusac himself.

He welcomed it, and invited the Breton to sit down and join the council which was even then deliberating upon the means to be employed. This council occupied the spacious patio of the Governor's house—which Captain Blood had appropriated to his own uses—a cloistered stone quadrangle in the middle of which a fountain played coolly under a trellis of vine. Orange-trees grew on two sides of it, and the still, evening air was heavy with the scent of them. It was one of those pleasant exterior-interiors which Moorish architects had introduced to Spain and the Spaniards had carried with them to the New World.

Here that council of war, composed of six men in all, deliberated until late that night upon the plan of action which Captain Blood put forward.

The great freshwater lake of Maracaybo, nourished by a score of rivers from the snow-capped ranges that surround it on two sides, is some hundred and twenty miles in length and almost the same distance across at its widest. It is—as has been indicated—in the shape of a great bottle having its neck towards the sea at Maracaybo.

Beyond this neck it widens again, and then the two long, narrow strips of land known as the islands of Vigilias and Palomas block the channel, standing lengthwise across it. The only passage out to sea for vessels of any draught lies in the narrow strait between these

islands. Palomas, which is some ten miles in length, is unapproachable for half a mile on either side by any but the shallowest craft save at its eastern end, where, completely commanding the narrow passage out to sea, stands the massive fort which the buccaneers had found deserted upon their coming. In the broader water between this passage and the bar, the four Spanish ships were at anchor in mid-channel. The Admiral's Encarnacion, which we already know, was a mighty galleon of forty-eight great guns and eight small. Next in importance was the Salvador with thirty-six guns; the other two, the Infanta and the San Felipe, though smaller vessels, were still formidable enough with their twenty guns and a hundred and fifty men apiece.

Such was the fleet of which the gauntlet was to be run by Captain Blood with his own Arabella of forty guns, the Elizabeth of twenty-six, and two sloops captured at Gibraltar, which they had indifferently armed with four culverins each. In men they had a bare four hundred survivors of the five hundred-odd that had left Tortuga, to oppose to fully a thousand Spaniards manning the galleons.

The plan of action submitted by Captain Blood to that council was a desperate one, as Cahusac uncompromisingly pronounced it.

"Why, so it is," said the Captain. "But I've done things more desperate." Complacently he pulled at a pipe that was loaded with that fragrant Sacerdotes tobacco for which Gibraltar was famous, and of which they had brought away some hogsheads. "And what is more, they've succeeded. Audaces fortuna juvat. Bedad, they knew their world, the old Romans."

He breathed into his companions and even into Cahusac some of his own spirit of confidence, and in confidence all went busily to work. For three days from sunrise to sunset, the buccaneers laboured and sweated to complete the preparations for the action that was to procure them their deliverance. Time pressed. They must strike

before Don Miguel de Espinosa received the reenforcement of that fifth galleon, the Santo Nino, which was coming to join him from La Guayra.

Their principal operations were on the larger of the two sloops captured at Gibraltar; to which vessel was assigned the leading part in Captain Blood's scheme. They began by tearing down all bulkheads, until they had reduced her to the merest shell, and in her sides they broke open so many ports that her gunwale was converted into the semblance of a grating. Next they increased by a half-dozen the scuttles in her deck, whilst into her hull they packed all the tar and pitch and brimstone that they could find in the town, to which they added six barrels of gunpowder, placed on end like guns at the open ports on her larboard side. On the evening of the fourth day, everything being now in readiness, all were got aboard, and the empty, pleasant city of Maracaybo was at last abandoned. But they did not weigh anchor until some two hours after midnight. Then, at last, on the first of the ebb, they drifted silently down towards the bar with all canvas furled save only their spiltsails, which, so as to give them steering way, were spread to the faint breeze that stirred through the purple darkness of the tropical night.

The order of their going was as follows: Ahead went the improvised fire-ship in charge of Wolverstone, with a crew of six volunteers, each of whom was to have a hundred pieces of eight over and above his share of plunder as a special reward. Next came the Arabella. She was followed at a distance by the Elizabeth, commanded by Hagthorpe, with whom was the now shipless Cahusac and the bulk of his French followers. The rear was brought up by the second sloop and some eight canoes, aboard of which had been shipped the prisoners, the slaves, and most of the captured merchandise. The prisoners were all pinioned, and guarded by four buccaneers with musketoons who manned these boats in addition to the two fellows who were to sail them. Their place was to be in the rear and they were

to take no part whatever in the coming fight.

As the first glimmerings of opalescent dawn dissolved the darkness, the straining eyes of the buccaneers were able to make out the tall rigging of the Spanish vessels, riding at anchor less than a quarter of a mile ahead. Entirely without suspicion as the Spaniards were, and rendered confident by their own overwhelming strength, it is unlikely that they used a vigilance keener than their careless habit. Certain it is that they did not sight Blood's fleet in that dim light until some time after Blood's fleet had sighted them. By the time that they had actively roused themselves, Wolverstone's sloop was almost upon them, speeding under canvas which had been crowded to her yards the moment the galleons had loomed into view.

Straight for the Admiral's great ship, the Encarnacion, did Wolverstone head the sloop; then, lashing down the helm, he kindled from a match that hung ready lighted beside him a great torch of thickly plaited straw that had been steeped in bitumen. First it glowed, then as he swung it round his head, it burst into flame, just as the slight vessel went crashing and bumping and scraping against the side of the flagship, whilst rigging became tangled with rigging, to the straining of yards and snapping of spars overhead. His six men stood at their posts on the larboard side, stark naked, each armed with a grapnel, four of them on the gunwale, two of them aloft. At the moment of impact these grapnels were slung to bind the Spaniard to them, those aloft being intended to complete and preserve the entanglement of the rigging.

Aboard the rudely awakened galleon all was confused hurrying, scurrying, trumpeting, and shouting. At first there had been a desperately hurried attempt to get up the anchor; but this was abandoned as being already too late; and conceiving themselves on the point of being boarded, the Spaniards stood to arms to ward off the onslaught. Its slowness in coming intrigued them, being so

different from the usual tactics of the buccaneers. Further intrigued were they by the sight of the gigantic Wolverstone speeding naked along his deck with a great flaming torch held high. Not until he had completed his work did they begin to suspect the truth—that he was lighting slow-matches—and then one of their officers rendered reckless by panic ordered a boarding-party on to the ship.

The order came too late. Wolverstone had seen his six fellows drop overboard after the grapnels were fixed, and then had sped, himself, to the starboard gunwale. Thence he flung his flaming torch down the nearest gaping scuttle into the hold, and thereupon dived overboard in his turn, to be picked up presently by the longboat from the *Arabella*. But before that happened the sloop was a thing of fire, from which explosions were hurling blazing combustibles aboard the *Encarnacion*, and long tongues of flame were licking out to consume the galleon, beating back those daring Spaniards who, too late, strove desperately to cut her adrift.

And whilst the most formidable vessel of the Spanish fleet was thus being put out of action at the outset, *Blood* had sailed in to open fire upon the *Salvador*. First athwart her hawse he had loosed a broadside that had swept her decks with terrific effect, then going on and about, he had put a second broadside into her hull at short range. Leaving her thus half-crippled, temporarily, at least, and keeping to his course, he had bewildered the crew of the *Infanta* by a couple of shots from the chasers on his beak-head, then crashed alongside to grapple and board her, whilst *Hagthorpe* was doing the like by the *San Felipe*.

And in all this time not a single shot had the Spaniards contrived to fire, so completely had they been taken by surprise, and so swift and paralyzing had been *Blood's* stroke.

Boarded now and faced by the cold steel of the buccaneers, neither the *San Felipe* nor the *Infanta* offered much resistance. The

sight of their admiral in flames, and the Salvador drifting crippled from the action, had so utterly disheartened them that they accounted themselves vanquished, and laid down their arms.

If by a resolute stand the Salvador had encouraged the other two undamaged vessels to resistance, the Spaniards might well have retrieved the fortunes of the day. But it happened that the Salvador was handicapped in true Spanish fashion by being the treasure-ship of the fleet, with plate on board to the value of some fifty thousand pieces. Intent above all upon saving this from falling into the hands of the pirates, Don Miguel, who, with a remnant of his crew, had meanwhile transferred himself aboard her, headed her down towards Palomas and the fort that guarded the passage. This fort the Admiral, in those days of waiting, had taken the precaution secretly to garrison and rearm. For the purpose he had stripped the fort of Cojero, farther out on the gulf, of its entire armament, which included some cannon-royal of more than ordinary range and power.

With no suspicion of this, Captain Blood gave chase, accompanied by the Infanta, which was manned now by a prize-crew under the command of Yberville. The stern chasers of the Salvador desultorily returned the punishing fire of the pursuers; but such was the damage she, herself, sustained, that presently, coming under the guns of the fort, she began to sink, and finally settled down in the shallows with part of her hull above water. Thence, some in boats and some by swimming, the Admiral got his crew ashore on Palomas as best he could.

And then, just as Captain Blood accounted the victory won, and that his way out of that trap to the open sea beyond lay clear, the fort suddenly revealed its formidable and utterly unsuspected strength. With a roar the cannons-royal proclaimed themselves, and the Arabella staggered under a blow that smashed her bulwarks at the waist and scattered death and confusion among the seamen

gathered there.

Had not Pitt, her master, himself seized the whipstaff and put the helm hard over to swing her sharply off to starboard, she must have suffered still worse from the second volley that followed fast upon the first.

Meanwhile it had fared even worse with the frailer Infanta. Although hit by one shot only, this had crushed her larboard timbers on the waterline, starting a leak that must presently have filled her, but for the prompt action of the experienced Yberville in ordering her larboard guns to be flung overboard. Thus lightened, and listing now to starboard, he fetched her about, and went staggering after the retreating Arabella, followed by the fire of the fort, which did them, however, little further damage.

Out of range, at last, they lay to, joined by the Elizabeth and the San Felipe, to consider their position.

CHAPTER XVII. THE DUPES

It was a crestfallen Captain Blood who presided over that hastily summoned council held on the poop-deck of the Arabella in the brilliant morning sunshine. It was, he declared afterwards, one of the bitterest moments in his career. He was compelled to digest the fact that having conducted the engagement with a skill of which he might justly be proud, having destroyed a force so superior in ships and guns and men that Don Miguel de Espinosa had justifiably deemed it overwhelming, his victory was rendered barren by three lucky shots from an unsuspected battery by which they had been surprised. And barren must their victory remain until they could reduce the fort that still remained to defend the passage.

At first Captain Blood was for putting his ships in order and making the attempt there and then. But the others dissuaded him from betraying an impetuosity usually foreign to him, and born entirely of chagrin and mortification, emotions which will render unreasonable the most reasonable of men. With returning calm, he surveyed the situation. The Arabella was no longer in case to put to sea; the Infanta was merely kept afloat by artifice, and the San Felipe was almost as sorely damaged by the fire she had sustained from the buccaneers before surrendering.

Clearly, then, he was compelled to admit in the end that nothing remained but to return to Maracaybo, there to refit the ships before attempting to force the passage.

And so, back to Maracaybo came those defeated victors of that short, terrible fight. And if anything had been wanting further to exasperate their leader, he had it in the pessimism of which Cahusac

did not economize expressions. Transported at first to heights of dizzy satisfaction by the swift and easy victory of their inferior force that morning, the Frenchman was now plunged back and more deeply than ever into the abyss of hopelessness. And his mood infected at least the main body of his own followers.

"It is the end," he told Captain Blood. "This time we are checkmated."

"I'll take the liberty of reminding you that you said the same before," Captain Blood answered him as patiently as he could. "Yet you've seen what you've seen, and you'll not deny that in ships and guns we are returning stronger than we went. Look at our present fleet, man."

"I am looking at it," said Cahusac.

"Pish! Ye're a white-livered cur when all is said."

"You call me a coward?"

"I'll take that liberty."

The Breton glared at him, breathing hard. But he had no mind to ask satisfaction for the insult. He knew too well the kind of satisfaction that Captain Blood was likely to afford him. He remembered the fate of Levasseur. So he confined himself to words.

"It is too much! You go too far!" he complained bitterly.

"Look you, Cahusac: it's sick and tired I am of your perpetual whining and complaining when things are not as smooth as a convent dining-table. If ye wanted things smooth and easy, ye shouldn't have taken to the sea, and ye should never ha' sailed with me, for with me things are never smooth and easy. And that, I think, is all I have to say to you this morning."

Cahusac flung away cursing, and went to take the feeling of his

men.

Captain Blood went off to give his surgeon's skill to the wounded, among whom he remained engaged until late afternoon. Then, at last, he went ashore, his mind made up, and returned to the house of the Governor, to indite a truculent but very scholarly letter in purest Castilian to Don Miguel.

"I have shown your excellency this morning of what I am capable," he wrote. "Although outnumbered by more than two to one in men, in ships, and in guns, I have sunk or captured the vessels of the great fleet with which you were to come to Maracaybo to destroy us. So that you are no longer in case to carry out your boast, even when your reenforcements on the Santo Nino, reach you from La Guayra. From what has occurred, you may judge of what must occur. I should not trouble your excellency with this letter but that I am a humane man, abhorring bloodshed. Therefore before proceeding to deal with your fort, which you may deem invincible, as I have dealt already with your fleet, which you deemed invincible, I make you, purely out of humanitarian considerations, this last offer of terms. I will spare this city of Maracaybo and forthwith evacuate it, leaving behind me the forty prisoners I have taken, in consideration of your paying me the sum of fifty thousand pieces of eight and one hundred head of cattle as a ransom, thereafter granting me unmolested passage of the bar. My prisoners, most of whom are persons of consideration, I will retain as hostages until after my departure, sending them back in the canoes which we shall take with us for that purpose. If your excellency should be so ill-advised as to refuse these terms, and thereby impose upon me the necessity of reducing your fort at the cost of some lives, I warn you that you may expect no quarter from us, and that I shall begin by leaving a heap of ashes where this pleasant city of Maracaybo now stands."

The letter written, he bade them bring him from among the

prisoners the Deputy-Governor of Maracaybo, who had been taken at Gibraltar. Disclosing its contents to him, he despatched him with it to Don Miguel.

His choice of a messenger was shrewd. The Deputy-Governor was of all men the most anxious for the deliverance of his city, the one man who on his own account would plead most fervently for its preservation at all costs from the fate with which Captain Blood was threatening it. And as he reckoned so it befell. The Deputy-Governor added his own passionate pleading to the proposals of the letter.

But Don Miguel was of stouter heart. True, his fleet had been partly destroyed and partly captured. But then, he argued, he had been taken utterly by surprise. That should not happen again. There should be no surprising the fort. Let Captain Blood do his worst at Maracaybo, there should be a bitter reckoning for him when eventually he decided—as, sooner or later, decide he must—to come forth. The Deputy-Governor was flung into panic. He lost his temper, and said some hard things to the Admiral. But they were not as hard as the thing the Admiral said to him in answer.

"Had you been as loyal to your King in hindering the entrance of these cursed pirates as I shall be in hindering their going forth again, we should not now find ourselves in our present straits. So weary me no more with your coward counsels. I make no terms with Captain Blood. I know my duty to my King, and I intend to perform it. I also know my duty to myself. I have a private score with this rascal, and I intend to settle it. Take you that message back."

So back to Maracaybo, back to his own handsome house in which Captain Blood had established his quarters, came the Deputy-Governor with the Admiral's answer. And because he had been shamed into a show of spirit by the Admiral's own stout courage in adversity, he delivered it as truculently as the Admiral could have desired. "And is it like that?" said Captain Blood with a quiet smile,

though the heart of him sank at this failure of his bluster. "Well, well, it's a pity now that the Admiral's so headstrong. It was that way he lost his fleet, which was his own to lose. This pleasant city of Maracaybo isn't. So no doubt he'll lose it with fewer misgivings. I am sorry. Waste, like bloodshed, is a thing abhorrent to me. But there ye are! I'll have the faggots to the place in the morning, and maybe when he sees the blaze to-morrow night he'll begin to believe that Peter Blood is a man of his word. Ye may go, Don Francisco."

The Deputy-Governor went out with dragging feet, followed by guards, his momentary truculence utterly spent.

But no sooner had he departed than up leapt Cahusac, who had been of the council assembled to receive the Admiral's answer. His face was white and his hands shook as he held them out in protest.

"Death of my life, what have you to say now?" he cried, his voice husky. And without waiting to hear what it might be, he raved on: "I knew you not frighten the Admiral so easy. He hold us entrap', and he knows it; yet you dream that he will yield himself to your impudent message. Your fool letter it have seal' the doom of us all."

"Have ye done?" quoth Blood quietly, as the Frenchman paused for breath.

"No, I have not."

"Then spare me the rest. It'll be of the same quality, devil a doubt, and it doesn't help us to solve the riddle that's before us."

"But what are you going to do? Is it that you will tell me?" It was not a question, it was a demand.

"How the devil do I know? I was hoping you'd have some ideas yourself. But since Ye're so desperately concerned to save your skin, you and those that think like you are welcome to leave us. I've no

doubt at all the Spanish Admiral will welcome the abatement of our numbers even at this late date. Ye shall have the sloop as a parting gift from us, and ye can join Don Miguel in the fort for all I care, or for all the good ye're likely to be to us in this present pass."

"It is to my men to decide," Cahusac retorted, swallowing his fury, and on that stalked out to talk to them, leaving the others to deliberate in peace.

Next morning early he sought Captain Blood again. He found him alone in the patio, pacing to and fro, his head sunk on his breast. Cahusac mistook consideration for dejection. Each of us carries in himself a standard by which to measure his neighbour.

"We have take' you at your word, Captain," he announced, between sullenness and defiance. Captain Blood paused, shoulders hunched, hands behind his back, and mildly regarded the buccaneer in silence. Cahusac explained himself. "Last night I send one of my men to the Spanish Admiral with a letter. I make him offer to capitulate if he will accord us passage with the honours of war. This morning I receive his answer. He accord us this on the understanding that we carry nothing away with us. My men they are embarking them on the sloop. We sail at once."

"Bon voyage," said Captain Blood, and with a nod he turned on his heel again to resume his interrupted mediation.

"Is that all that you have to say to me?" cried Cahusac.

"There are other things," said Blood over his shoulder. "But I know ye wouldn't like them."

"Ha! Then it's adieu, my Captain." Venomously he added: "It is my belief that we shall not meet again."

"Your belief is my hope," said Captain Blood.

Cahusac flung away, obscenely vituperative. Before noon he was under way with his followers, some sixty dejected men who had allowed themselves to be persuaded by him into that empty-handed departure—in spite even of all that Yberville could do to prevent it. The Admiral kept faith with him, and allowed him free passage out to sea, which, from his knowledge of Spaniards, was more than Captain Blood had expected.

Meanwhile, no sooner had the deserters weighed anchor than Captain Blood received word that the Deputy-Governor begged to be allowed to see him again. Admitted, Don Francisco at once displayed the fact that a night's reflection had quickened his apprehensions for the city of Maracaybo and his condemnation of the Admiral's intransigence.

Captain Blood received him pleasantly.

"Good-morning to you, Don Francisco. I have postponed the bonfire until nightfall. It will make a better show in the dark."

Don Francisco, a slight, nervous, elderly man of high lineage and low vitality, came straight to business.

"I am here to tell you, Don Pedro, that if you will hold your hand for three days, I will undertake to raise the ransom you demand, which Don Miguel de Espinosa refuses."

Captain Blood confronted him, a frown contracting the dark brows above his light eyes:

"And where will you be raising it?" quoth he, faintly betraying his surprise.

Don Francisco shook his head. "That must remain my affair," he answered. "I know where it is to be found, and my compatriots must contribute. Give me leave for three days on parole, and I will see you

fully satisfied. Meanwhile my son remains in your hands as a hostage for my return." And upon that he fell to pleading. But in this he was crisply interrupted.

"By the Saints! Ye're a bold man, Don Francisco, to come to me with such a tale—to tell me that ye know where the ransom's to be raised, and yet to refuse to say. D'ye think now that with a match between your fingers ye'd grow more communicative?"

If Don Francisco grew a shade paler, yet again he shook his head.

"That was the way of Morgan and L'Ollonais and other pirates. But it is not the way of Captain Blood. If I had doubted that I should not have disclosed so much."

The Captain laughed. "You old rogue," said he. "Ye play upon my vanity, do you?"

"Upon your honour, Captain."

"The honour of a pirate? Ye're surely crazed!"

"The honour of Captain Blood," Don Francisco insisted. "You have the repute of making war like a gentleman."

Captain Blood laughed again, on a bitter, sneering note that made Don Francisco fear the worst. He was not to guess that it was himself the Captain mocked.

"That's merely because it's more remunerative in the end. And that is why you are accorded the three days you ask for. So about it, Don Francisco. You shall have what mules you need. I'll see to it."

Away went Don Francisco on his errand, leaving Captain Blood to reflect, between bitterness and satisfaction, that a reputation for as much chivalry as is consistent with piracy is not without its uses.

Punctually on the third day the Deputy-Governor was back in Maracaybo with his mules laden with plate and money to the value demanded and a herd of a hundred head of cattle driven in by negro slaves.

These bullocks were handed over to those of the company who ordinarily were boucan-hunters, and therefore skilled in the curing of meats, and for best part of a week thereafter they were busy at the waterside with the quartering and salting of carcasses.

While this was doing on the one hand and the ships were being refitted for sea on the other, Captain Blood was pondering the riddle on the solution of which his own fate depended. Indian spies whom he employed brought him word that the Spaniards, working at low tide, had salved the thirty guns of the Salvador, and thus had added yet another battery to their already overwhelming strength. In the end, and hoping for inspiration on the spot, Captain Blood made a reconnaissance in person. At the risk of his life, accompanied by two friendly Indians, he crossed to the island in a canoe under cover of dark. They concealed themselves and the canoe in the short thick scrub with which that side of the island was densely covered, and lay there until daybreak. Then Blood went forward alone, and with infinite precaution, to make his survey. He went to verify a suspicion that he had formed, and approached the fort as nearly as he dared and a deal nearer than was safe.

On all fours he crawled to the summit of an eminence a mile or so away, whence he found himself commanding a view of the interior dispositions of the stronghold. By the aid of a telescope with which he had equipped himself he was able to verify that, as he had suspected and hoped, the fort's artillery was all mounted on the seaward side.

Satisfied, he returned to Maracaybo, and laid before the six who composed his council—Pitt, Hagthorpe, Yberville, Wolverstone, Dyke, and Ogle—a proposal to storm the fort from the landward side.

Crossing to the island under cover of night, they would take the Spaniards by surprise and attempt to overpower them before they could shift their guns to meet the onslaught.

With the exception of Wolverstone, who was by temperament the kind of man who favours desperate chances, those officers received the proposal coldly. Hagthorpe incontinently opposed it.

"It's a harebrained scheme, Peter," he said gravely, shaking his handsome head. "Consider now that we cannot depend upon approaching unperceived to a distance whence we might storm the fort before the cannon could be moved. But even if we could, we can take no cannon ourselves; we must depend entirely upon our small arms, and how shall we, a bare three hundred" (for this was the number to which Cahusac's defection had reduced them), "cross the open to attack more than twice that number under cover?"

The others—Dyke, Ogle, Yberville, and even Pitt, whom loyalty to Blood may have made reluctant—loudly approved him. When they had done, "I have considered all," said Captain Blood. "I have weighed the risks and studied how to lessen them. In these desperate straits...."

He broke off abruptly. A moment he frowned, deep in thought; then his face was suddenly alight with inspiration. Slowly he drooped his head, and sat there considering, weighing, chin on breast. Then he nodded, muttering, "Yes," and again, "Yes." He looked up, to face them. "Listen," he cried. "You may be right. The risks may be too heavy. Whether or not, I have thought of a better way. That which should have been the real attack shall be no more than a feint. Here, then, is the plan I now propose."

He talked swiftly and clearly, and as he talked one by one his officers' faces became alight with eagerness. When he had done, they cried as with one voice that he had saved them.

"That is yet to be proved in action," said he.

Since for the last twenty-four hours all had been in readiness for departure, there was nothing now to delay them, and it was decided to move next morning.

Such was Captain Blood's assurance of success that he immediately freed the prisoners held as hostages, and even the negro slaves, who were regarded by the others as legitimate plunder. His only precaution against those released prisoners was to order them into the church and there lock them up, to await deliverance at the hands of those who should presently be coming into the city.

Then, all being aboard the three ships, with the treasure safely stowed in their holds and the slaves under hatches, the buccaneers weighed anchor and stood out for the bar, each vessel towing three piraguas astern.

The Admiral, beholding their stately advance in the full light of noon, their sails gleaming white in the glare of the sunlight, rubbed his long, lean hands in satisfaction, and laughed through his teeth.

"At last!" he cried. "God delivers him into my hands!" He turned to the group of staring officers behind him. "Sooner or later it had to be," he said. "Say now, gentlemen, whether I am justified of my patience. Here end to-day the troubles caused to the subjects of the Catholic King by this infamous Don Pedro Sangre, as he once called himself to me."

He turned to issue orders, and the fort became lively as a hive. The guns were manned, the gunners already kindling fuses, when the buccaneer fleet, whilst still heading for Palomas, was observed to bear away to the west. The Spaniards watched them, intrigued.

Within a mile and a half to westward of the fort, and within a half-mile of the shore—that is to say, on the very edge of the shoal water

that makes Palomas unapproachable on either side by any but vessels of the shallowest draught—the four ships cast anchor well within the Spaniards' view, but just out of range of their heaviest cannon.

Sneeringly the Admiral laughed.

"Aha! They hesitate, these English dogs! Por Dios, and well they may."

"They will be waiting for night," suggested his nephew, who stood at his elbow quivering with excitement.

Don Miguel looked at him, smiling. "And what shall the night avail them in this narrow passage, under the very muzzles of my guns? Be sure, Esteban, that to-night your father will be paid for."

He raised his telescope to continue his observation of the buccaneers. He saw that the piraguas towed by each vessel were being warped alongside, and he wondered a little what this manoeuver might portend. Awhile those piraguas were hidden from view behind the hulls. Then one by one they reappeared, rowing round and away from the ships, and each boat, he observed, was crowded with armed men. Thus laden, they were headed for the shore, at a point where it was densely wooded to the water's edge. The eyes of the wondering Admiral followed them until the foliage screened them from his view.

Then he lowered his telescope and looked at his officers.

"What the devil does it mean?" he asked.

None answered him, all being as puzzled as he was himself.

After a little while, Esteban, who kept his eyes on the water, plucked at his uncle's sleeve. "There they go!" he cried, and pointed.

And there, indeed, went the piraguas on their way back to the ships. But now it was observed that they were empty, save for the men who rowed them. Their armed cargo had been left ashore.

Back to the ships they pulled, to return again presently with a fresh load of armed men, which similarly they conveyed to Palomas. And at last one of the Spanish officers ventured an explanation:

"They are going to attack us by land—to attempt to storm the fort."

"Of course." The Admiral smiled. "I had guessed it. Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad."

"Shall we make a sally?" urged Esteban, in his excitement.

"A sally? Through that scrub? That would be to play into their hands. No, no, we will wait here to receive this attack. Whenever it comes, it is themselves will be destroyed, and utterly. Have no doubt of that."

But by evening the Admiral's equanimity was not quite so perfect. By then the piraguas had made a half-dozen journeys with their loads of men, and they had landed also—as Don Miguel had clearly observed through his telescope—at least a dozen guns.

His countenance no longer smiled; it was a little wrathful and a little troubled now as he turned again to his officers.

"Who was the fool who told me that they number but three hundred men in all? They have put at least twice that number ashore already."

Amazed as he was, his amazement would have been deeper had he been told the truth: that there was not a single buccaneer or a single gun ashore on Palomas. The deception had been complete. Don Miguel could not guess that the men he had beheld in those piraguas were always the same; that on the journeys to the shore they sat and stood upright in full view; and that on the journeys back to the ships, they lay invisible at the bottom of the boats, which were thus

made to appear empty.

The growing fears of the Spanish soldiery at the prospect of a night attack from the landward side by the entire buccaneer force—and a force twice as strong as they had suspected the pestilent Blood to command—began to be communicated to the Admiral.

In the last hours of fading daylight, the Spaniards did precisely what Captain Blood so confidently counted that they would do—precisely what they must do to meet the attack, preparations for which had been so thoroughly simulated. They set themselves to labour like the damned at those ponderous guns emplaced to command the narrow passage out to sea.

Groaning and sweating, urged on by the curses and even the whips of their officers, they toiled in a frenzy of panic-stricken haste to shift the greater number and the more powerful of their guns across to the landward side, there to emplace them anew, so that they might be ready to receive the attack which at any moment now might burst upon them from the woods not half a mile away.

Thus, when night fell, although in mortal anxiety of the onslaught of those wild devils whose reckless courage was a byword on the seas of the Main, at least the Spaniards were tolerably prepared for it. Waiting, they stood to their guns.

And whilst they waited thus, under cover of the darkness and as the tide began to ebb, Captain Blood's fleet weighed anchor quietly; and, as once before, with no more canvas spread than that which their sprits could carry, so as to give them steering way—and even these having been painted black—the four vessels, without a light showing, groped their way by soundings to the channel which led to that narrow passage out to sea.

The Elizabeth and the Infanta, leading side by side, were almost

abreast of the fort before their shadowy bulks and the soft gurgle of water at their prows were detected by the Spaniards, whose attention until that moment had been all on the other side. And now there arose on the night air such a sound of human baffled fury as may have resounded about Babel at the confusion of tongues. To heighten that confusion, and to scatter disorder among the Spanish soldiery, the Elizabeth emptied her larboard guns into the fort as she was swept past on the swift ebb.

At once realizing—though not yet how—he had been duped, and that his prey was in the very act of escaping after all, the Admiral frantically ordered the guns that had been so laboriously moved to be dragged back to their former emplacements, and commanded his gunners meanwhile to the slender batteries that of all his powerful, but now unavailable, armament still remained trained upon the channel. With these, after the loss of some precious moments, the fort at last made fire.

It was answered by a terrific broadside from the Arabella, which had now drawn abreast, and was crowding canvas to her yards. The enraged and gibbering Spaniards had a brief vision of her as the line of flame spurted from her red flank, and the thunder of her broadside drowned the noise of the creaking halyards. After that they saw her no more. Assimilated by the friendly darkness which the lesser Spanish guns were speculatively stabbing, the escaping ships fired never another shot that might assist their baffled and bewildered enemies to locate them.

Some slight damage was sustained by Blood's fleet. But by the time the Spaniards had resolved their confusion into some order of dangerous offence, that fleet, well served by a southerly breeze, was through the narrows and standing out to sea.

Thus was Don Miguel de Espinosa left to chew the bitter cud of a lost opportunity, and to consider in what terms he would acquaint the

Supreme Council of the Catholic King that Peter Blood had got away from Maracaybo, taking with him two twenty-gun frigates that were lately the property of Spain, to say nothing of two hundred and fifty thousand pieces of eight and other plunder. And all this in spite of Don Miguel's four galleons and his heavily armed fort that at one time had held the pirates so securely trapped.

Heavy, indeed, grew the account of Peter Blood, which Don Miguel swore passionately to Heaven should at all costs to himself be paid in full.

Nor were the losses already detailed the full total of those suffered on this occasion by the King of Spain. For on the following evening, off the coast of Oruba, at the mouth of the Gulf of Venezuela, Captain Blood's fleet came upon the belated Santo Nino, speeding under full sail to reenforce Don Miguel at Maracaybo.

At first the Spaniard had conceived that she was meeting the victorious fleet of Don Miguel, returning from the destruction of the pirates. When at comparatively close quarters the pennon of St. George soared to the Arabella's masthead to disillusion her, the Santo Nino chose the better part of valour, and struck her flag.

Captain Blood ordered her crew to take to the boats, and land themselves at Oruba or wherever else they pleased. So considerate was he that to assist them he presented them with several of the piraguas which he still had in tow.

"You will find," said he to her captain, "that Don Miguel is in an extremely bad temper. Commend me to him, and say that I venture to remind him that he must blame himself for all the ills that have befallen him. The evil has recoiled upon him which he loosed when he sent his brother unofficially to make a raid upon the island of Barbados. Bid him think twice before he lets his devils loose upon an English settlement again."

With that he dismissed the Captain, who went over the side of the Santo Nino, and Captain Blood proceeded to investigate the value of this further prize. When her hatches were removed, a human cargo was disclosed in her hold.

"Slaves," said Wolverstone, and persisted in that belief cursing Spanish devilry until Cahusac crawled up out of the dark bowels of the ship, and stood blinking in the sunlight.

There was more than sunlight to make the Breton pirate blink. And those that crawled out after him—the remnants of his crew—cursed him horribly for the pusillanimity which had brought them into the ignominy of owing their deliverance to those whom they had deserted as lost beyond hope.

Their sloop had encountered and had been sunk three days ago by the Santo Nino, and Cahusac had narrowly escaped hanging merely that for some time he might be a mock among the Brethren of the Coast.

For many a month thereafter he was to hear in Tortuga the jeering taunt:

"Where do you spend the gold that you brought back from Maracaybo?"

CHAPTER XVIII. THE MILAGROSA

The affair at Maracaybo is to be considered as Captain Blood's buccaneering masterpiece. Although there is scarcely one of the many actions that he fought—recorded in such particular detail by Jeremy Pitt—which does not afford some instance of his genius for naval tactics, yet in none is this more shiningly displayed than in those two engagements by which he won out of the trap which Don Miguel de Espinosa had sprung upon him.

The fame which he had enjoyed before this, great as it already was, is dwarfed into insignificance by the fame that followed. It was a fame such as no buccaneer—not even Morgan—has ever boasted, before or since.

In Tortuga, during the months he spent there refitting the three ships he had captured from the fleet that had gone out to destroy him, he found himself almost an object of worship in the eyes of the wild Brethren of the Coast, all of whom now clamoured for the honour of serving under him. It placed him in the rare position of being able to pick and choose the crews for his augmented fleet, and he chose fastidiously. When next he sailed away it was with a fleet of five fine ships in which went something over a thousand men. Thus you behold him not merely famous, but really formidable. The three captured Spanish vessels he had renamed with a certain scholarly humour the Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, a grimly jocular manner of conveying to the world that he made them the arbiters of the fate of any Spaniards he should henceforth encounter upon the seas.

In Europe the news of this fleet, following upon the news of the Spanish Admiral's defeat at Maracaybo, produced something of a sensation. Spain and England were variously and unpleasantly exercised, and if you care to turn up the diplomatic correspondence exchanged on the subject, you will find that it is considerable and not always amiable.

And meanwhile in the Caribbean, the Spanish Admiral Don Miguel de Espinosa might be said—to use a term not yet invented in his day—to have run amok. The disgrace into which he had fallen as a result of the disasters suffered at the hands of Captain Blood had driven the Admiral all but mad. It is impossible, if we impose our minds impartially, to withhold a certain sympathy from Don Miguel. Hate was now this unfortunate man's daily bread, and the hope of vengeance an obsession to his mind. As a madman he went raging up and down the Caribbean seeking his enemy, and in the meantime, as an hors d'oeuvre to his vindictive appetite, he fell upon any ship of England or of France that loomed above his horizon.

I need say no more to convey the fact that this illustrious sea-captain and great gentleman of Castile had lost his head, and was become a pirate in his turn. The Supreme Council of Castile might anon condemn him for his practices. But how should that matter to one who already was condemned beyond redemption? On the contrary, if he should live to lay the audacious and ineffable Blood by the heels, it was possible that Spain might view his present irregularities and earlier losses with a more lenient eye.

And so, reckless of the fact that Captain Blood was now in vastly superior strength, the Spaniard sought him up and down the trackless seas. But for a whole year he sought him vainly. The circumstances in which eventually they met are very curious.

An intelligent observation of the facts of human existence will reveal to shallow-minded folk who sneer at the use of coincidence in the arts

of fiction and drama that life itself is little more than a series of coincidences. Open the history of the past at whatsoever page you will, and there you shall find coincidence at work bringing about events that the merest chance might have averted. Indeed, coincidence may be defined as the very tool used by Fate to shape the destinies of men and nations.

Observe it now at work in the affairs of Captain Blood and of some others.

On the 15th September of the year 1688—a memorable year in the annals of England—three ships were afloat upon the Caribbean, which in their coming conjunctions were to work out the fortunes of several persons.

The first of these was Captain Blood's flagship the *Arabella*, which had been separated from the buccaneer fleet in a hurricane off the Lesser Antilles. In somewhere about 17 deg. N. Lat., and 74 deg. Long., she was beating up for the Windward Passage, before the intermittent southeasterly breezes of that stifling season, homing for Tortuga, the natural rendezvous of the dispersed vessels.

The second ship was the great Spanish galleon, the *Milagrosa*, which, accompanied by the smaller frigate *Hidalga*, lurked off the Caymites, to the north of the long peninsula that thrusts out from the southwest corner of Hispaniola. Aboard the *Milagrosa* sailed the vindictive Don Miguel.

The third and last of these ships with which we are at present concerned was an English man-of-war, which on the date I have given was at anchor in the French port of St. Nicholas on the northwest coast of Hispaniola. She was on her way from Plymouth to Jamaica, and carried on board a very distinguished passenger in the person of Lord Julian Wade, who came charged by his kinsman, my Lord Sunderland, with a mission of some consequence and delicacy,

directly arising out of that vexatious correspondence between England and Spain.

The French Government, like the English, excessively annoyed by the depredations of the buccaneers, and the constant straining of relations with Spain that ensued, had sought in vain to put them down by enjoining the utmost severity against them upon her various overseas governors. But these, either—like the Governor of Tortuga—throve out of a scarcely tacit partnership with the filibusters, or—like the Governor of French Hispaniola—felt that they were to be encouraged as a check upon the power and greed of Spain, which might otherwise be exerted to the disadvantage of the colonies of other nations. They looked, indeed, with apprehension upon recourse to any vigorous measures which must result in driving many of the buccaneers to seek new hunting-grounds in the South Sea.

To satisfy King James's anxiety to conciliate Spain, and in response to the Spanish Ambassador's constant and grievous expostulations, my Lord Sunderland, the Secretary of State, had appointed a strong man to the deputy-governorship of Jamaica. This strong man was that Colonel Bishop who for some years now had been the most influential planter in Barbados.

Colonel Bishop had accepted the post, and departed from the plantations in which his great wealth was being amassed with an eagerness that had its roots in a desire to pay off a score of his own with Peter Blood.

From his first coming to Jamaica, Colonel Bishop had made himself felt by the buccaneers. But do what he might, the one buccaneer whom he made his particular quarry—that Peter Blood who once had been his slave—eluded him ever, and continued undeterred and in great force to harass the Spaniards upon sea and land, and to keep the relations between England and Spain in a state of perpetual ferment, particularly dangerous in those days when the

peace of Europe was precariously maintained.

Exasperated not only by his own accumulated chagrin, but also by the reproaches for his failure which reached him from London, Colonel Bishop actually went so far as to consider hunting his quarry in Tortuga itself and making an attempt to clear the island of the buccaneers it sheltered. Fortunately for himself, he abandoned the notion of so insane an enterprise, deterred not only by the enormous natural strength of the place, but also by the reflection that a raid upon what was, nominally at least, a French settlement, must be attended by grave offence to France. Yet short of some such measure, it appeared to Colonel Bishop that he was baffled. He confessed as much in a letter to the Secretary of State.

This letter and the state of things which it disclosed made my Lord Sunderland despair of solving this vexatious problem by ordinary means. He turned to the consideration of extraordinary ones, and bethought him of the plan adopted with Morgan, who had been enlisted into the King's service under Charles II. It occurred to him that a similar course might be similarly effective with Captain Blood. His lordship did not omit the consideration that Blood's present outlawry might well have been undertaken not from inclination, but under stress of sheer necessity; that he had been forced into it by the circumstances of his transportation, and that he would welcome the opportunity of emerging from it.

Acting upon this conclusion, Sunderland sent out his kinsman, Lord Julian Wade, with some commissions made out in blank, and full directions as to the course which the Secretary considered it desirable to pursue and yet full discretion in the matter of pursuing them. The crafty Sunderland, master of all labyrinths of intrigue, advised his kinsman that in the event of his finding Blood intractable, or judging for other reasons that it was not desirable to enlist him in the King's service, he should turn his attention to the officers serving

under him, and by seducing them away from him leave him so weakened that he must fall an easy victim to Colonel Bishop's fleet.

The Royal Mary—the vessel bearing that ingenious, tolerably accomplished, mildly dissolute, entirely elegant envoy of my Lord Sunderland's—made a good passage to St. Nicholas, her last port of call before Jamaica. It was understood that as a preliminary Lord Julian should report himself to the Deputy-Governor at Port Royal, whence at need he might have himself conveyed to Tortuga. Now it happened that the Deputy-Governor's niece had come to St. Nicholas some months earlier on a visit to some relatives, and so that she might escape the insufferable heat of Jamaica in that season. The time for her return being now at hand, a passage was sought for her aboard the Royal Mary, and in view of her uncle's rank and position promptly accorded.

Lord Julian hailed her advent with satisfaction. It gave a voyage that had been full of interest for him just the spice that it required to achieve perfection as an experience. His lordship was one of your gallants to whom existence that is not graced by womankind is more or less of a stagnation. Miss Arabella Bishop—this straight up and down slip of a girl with her rather boyish voice and her almost boyish ease of movement—was not perhaps a lady who in England would have commanded much notice in my lord's discerning eyes. His very sophisticated, carefully educated tastes in such matters inclined him towards the plump, the languishing, and the quite helplessly feminine. Miss Bishop's charms were undeniable. But they were such that it would take a delicate-minded man to appreciate them; and my Lord Julian, whilst of a mind that was very far from gross, did not possess the necessary degree of delicacy. I must not by this be understood to imply anything against him.

It remained, however, that Miss Bishop was a young woman and a lady; and in the latitude into which Lord Julian had strayed this was a

phenomenon sufficiently rare to command attention. On his side, with his title and position, his personal grace and the charm of a practised courtier, he bore about him the atmosphere of the great world in which normally he had his being—a world that was little more than a name to her, who had spent most of her life in the Antilles. It is not therefore wonderful that they should have been attracted to each other before the Royal Mary was warped out of St. Nicholas. Each could tell the other much upon which the other desired information. He could regale her imagination with stories of St. James's—in many of which he assigned himself a heroic, or at least a distinguished part—and she could enrich his mind with information concerning this new world to which he had come.

Before they were out of sight of St. Nicholas they were good friends, and his lordship was beginning to correct his first impressions of her and to discover the charm of that frank, straightforward attitude of comradeship which made her treat every man as a brother. Considering how his mind was obsessed with the business of his mission, it is not wonderful that he should have come to talk to her of Captain Blood. Indeed, there was a circumstance that directly led to it.

"I wonder now," he said, as they were sauntering on the poop, "if you ever saw this fellow Blood, who was at one time on your uncle's plantations as a slave."

Miss Bishop halted. She leaned upon the taffrail, looking out towards the receding land, and it was a moment before she answered in a steady, level voice:

"I saw him often. I knew him very well."

"Ye don't say!" His lordship was slightly moved out of an imperturbability that he had studiously cultivated. He was a young man of perhaps eight-and-twenty, well above the middle height in

stature and appearing taller by virtue of his exceeding leanness. He had a thin, pale, rather pleasing hatchet-face, framed in the curls of a golden periwig, a sensitive mouth and pale blue eyes that lent his countenance a dreamy expression, a rather melancholy pensiveness. But they were alert, observant eyes notwithstanding, although they failed on this occasion to observe the slight change of colour which his question had brought to Miss Bishop's cheeks or the suspiciously excessive composure of her answer.

"Ye don't say!" he repeated, and came to lean beside her. "And what manner of man did you find him?"

"In those days I esteemed him for an unfortunate gentleman."

"You were acquainted with his story?"

"He told it me. That is why I esteemed him—for the calm fortitude with which he bore adversity. Since then, considering what he has done, I have almost come to doubt if what he told me of himself was true."

"If you mean of the wrongs he suffered at the hands of the Royal Commission that tried the Monmouth rebels, there's little doubt that it would be true enough. He was never out with Monmouth; that is certain. He was convicted on a point of law of which he may well have been ignorant when he committed what was construed into treason. But, faith, he's had his revenge, after a fashion."

"That," she said in a small voice, "is the unforgivable thing. It has destroyed him—deservedly."

"Destroyed him?" His lordship laughed a little. "Be none so sure of that. He has grown rich, I hear. He has translated, so it is said, his Spanish spoils into French gold, which is being treasured up for him in France. His future father-in-law, M. d'Ogeron, has seen to that."

"His future father-in-law?" said she, and stared at him round-eyed, with parted lips. Then added: "M. d'Ogeron? The Governor of Tortuga?"

"The same. You see the fellow's well protected. It's a piece of news I gathered in St. Nicholas. I am not sure that I welcome it, for I am not sure that it makes any easier a task upon which my kinsman, Lord Sunderland, has sent me hither. But there it is. You didn't know?"

She shook her head without replying. She had averted her face, and her eyes were staring down at the gently heaving water. After a moment she spoke, her voice steady and perfectly controlled.

"But surely, if this were true, there would have been an end to his piracy by now. If he... if he loved a woman and was betrothed, and was also rich as you say, surely he would have abandoned this desperate life, and..."

"Why, so I thought," his lordship interrupted, "until I had the explanation. D'Ogeron is avaricious for himself and for his child. And as for the girl, I'm told she's a wild piece, fit mate for such a man as Blood. Almost I marvel that he doesn't marry her and take her a-roving with him. It would be no new experience for her. And I marvel, too, at Blood's patience. He killed a man to win her."

"He killed a man for her, do you say?" There was horror now in her voice.

"Yes—a French buccaneer named Levasseur. He was the girl's lover and Blood's associate on a venture. Blood coveted the girl, and killed Levasseur to win her. Pah! It's an unsavoury tale, I own. But men live by different codes out in these parts...."

She had turned to face him. She was pale to the lips, and her hazel eyes were blazing, as she cut into his apologies for Blood.

"They must, indeed, if his other associates allowed him to live after that."

"Oh, the thing was done in fair fight, I am told."

"Who told you?"

"A man who sailed with them, a Frenchman named Cahusac, whom I found in a waterside tavern in St. Nicholas. He was Levasseur's lieutenant, and he was present on the island where the thing happened, and when Levasseur was killed."

"And the girl? Did he say the girl was present, too?"

"Yes. She was a witness of the encounter. Blood carried her off when he had disposed of his brother-buccaneer."

"And the dead man's followers allowed it?" He caught the note of incredulity in her voice, but missed the note of relief with which it was blent. "Oh, I don't believe the tale. I won't believe it!"

"I honour you for that, Miss Bishop. It strained my own belief that men should be so callous, until this Cahusac afforded me the explanation."

"What?" She checked her unbelief, an unbelief that had uplifted her from an inexplicable dismay. Clutching the rail, she swung round to face his lordship with that question. Later he was to remember and perceive in her present behaviour a certain oddness which went disregarded now.

"Blood purchased their consent, and his right to carry the girl off. He paid them in pearls that were worth more than twenty thousand pieces of eight." His lordship laughed again with a touch of contempt. "A handsome price! Faith, they're scoundrels all—just thieving, venal curs. And faith, it's a pretty tale this for a lady's ear."

She looked away from him again, and found that her sight was blurred. After a moment in a voice less steady than before she asked him:

"Why should this Frenchman have told you such a tale? Did he hate this Captain Blood?"

"I did not gather that," said his lordship slowly. "He related it... oh, just as a commonplace, an instance of buccaneering ways.

"A commonplace!" said she. "My God! A commonplace!"

"I dare say that we are all savages under the cloak that civilization fashions for us," said his lordship. "But this Blood, now, was a man of considerable parts, from what else this Cahusac told me. He was a bachelor of medicine."

"That is true, to my own knowledge."

"And he has seen much foreign service on sea and land. Cahusac said—though this I hardly credit—that he had fought under de Ruyter."

"That also is true," said she. She sighed heavily. "Your Cahusac seems to have been accurate enough. Alas!"

"You are sorry, then?"

She looked at him. She was very pale, he noticed.

"As we are sorry to hear of the death of one we have esteemed. Once I held him in regard for an unfortunate but worthy gentleman. Now...."

She checked, and smiled a little crooked smile. "Such a man is best forgotten."

And upon that she passed at once to speak of other things. The friendship, which it was her great gift to command in all she met, grew

steadily between those two in the little time remaining, until the event befell that marred what was promising to be the pleasantest stage of his lordship's voyage.

The marplot was the mad-dog Spanish Admiral, whom they encountered on the second day out, when halfway across the Gulf of Gonaves. The Captain of the Royal Mary was not disposed to be intimidated even when Don Miguel opened fire on him. Observing the Spaniard's plentiful seaboard towering high above the water and offering him so splendid a mark, the Englishman was moved to scorn. If this Don who flew the banner of Castile wanted a fight, the Royal Mary was just the ship to oblige him. It may be that he was justified of his gallant confidence, and that he would that day have put an end to the wild career of Don Miguel de Espinosa, but that a lucky shot from the Milagrosa got among some powder stored in his forecastle, and blew up half his ship almost before the fight had started. How the powder came there will never now be known, and the gallant Captain himself did not survive to enquire into it.

Before the men of the Royal Mary had recovered from their consternation, their captain killed and a third of their number destroyed with him, the ship yawing and rocking helplessly in a crippled state, the Spaniards boarded her.

In the Captain's cabin under the poop, to which Miss Bishop had been conducted for safety, Lord Julian was seeking to comfort and encourage her, with assurances that all would yet be well, at the very moment when Don Miguel was stepping aboard. Lord Julian himself was none so steady, and his face was undoubtedly pale. Not that he was by any means a coward. But this cooped-up fighting on an unknown element in a thing of wood that might at any moment founder under his feet into the depths of ocean was disturbing to one who could be brave enough ashore. Fortunately Miss Bishop did not appear to be in desperate need of the poor comfort he was in case to

offer. Certainly she, too, was pale, and her hazel eyes may have looked a little larger than usual. But she had herself well in hand. Half sitting, half leaning on the Captain's table, she preserved her courage sufficiently to seek to calm the octoroon waiting-woman who was grovelling at her feet in a state of terror.

And then the cabin-door flew open, and Don Miguel himself, tall, sunburned, and aquiline of face, strode in. Lord Julian span round, to face him, and clapped a hand to his sword.

The Spaniard was brisk and to the point.

"Don't be a fool," he said in his own tongue, "or you'll come by a fool's end. Your ship is sinking."

There were three or four men in morions behind Don Miguel, and Lord Julian realized the position. He released his hilt, and a couple of feet or so of steel slid softly back into the scabbard. But Don Miguel smiled, with a flash of white teeth behind his grizzled beard, and held out his hand.

"If you please," he said.

Lord Julian hesitated. His eyes strayed to Miss Bishop's. "I think you had better," said that composed young lady, whereupon with a shrug his lordship made the required surrender.

"Come you—all of you—aboard my ship," Don Miguel invited them, and strode out.

They went, of course. For one thing the Spaniard had force to compel them; for another a ship which he announced to be sinking offered them little inducement to remain. They stayed no longer than was necessary to enable Miss Bishop to collect some spare articles of dress and my lord to snatch up his valise.

As for the survivors in that ghastly shambles that had been the

Royal Mary, they were abandoned by the Spaniards to their own resources. Let them take to the boats, and if those did not suffice them, let them swim or drown. If Lord Julian and Miss Bishop were retained, it was because Don Miguel perceived their obvious value. He received them in his cabin with great urbanity. Urbanely he desired to have the honour of being acquainted with their names.

Lord Julian, sick with horror of the spectacle he had just witnessed, commanded himself with difficulty to supply them. Then haughtily he demanded to know in his turn the name of their aggressor. He was in an exceedingly ill temper. He realized that if he had done nothing positively discreditable in the unusual and difficult position into which Fate had thrust him, at least he had done nothing creditable. This might have mattered less but that the spectator of his indifferent performance was a lady. He was determined if possible to do better now.

"I am Don Miguel de Espinosa," he was answered. "Admiral of the Navies of the Catholic King."

Lord Julian gasped. If Spain made such a hubbub about the depredations of a runagate adventurer like Captain Blood, what could not England answer now?

"Will you tell me, then, why you behave like a damned pirate?" he asked. And added: "I hope you realize what will be the consequences, and the strict account to which you shall be brought for this day's work, for the blood you have murderously shed, and for your violence to this lady and to myself."

"I offer you no violence," said the Admiral, smiling, as only the man who holds the trumps can smile. "On the contrary, I have saved your lives...."

"Saved our lives!" Lord Julian was momentarily speechless before

such callous impudence. "And what of the lives you have destroyed in wanton butchery? By God, man, they shall cost you dear."

Don Miguel's smile persisted. "It is possible. All things are possible. Meantime it is your own lives that will cost you dear. Colonel Bishop is a rich man; and you, milord, are no doubt also rich. I will consider and fix your ransom."

"So that you're just the damned murderous pirate I was supposing you," stormed his lordship. "And you have the impudence to call yourself the Admiral of the Navies of the Catholic King? We shall see what your Catholic King will have to say to it."

The Admiral ceased to smile. He revealed something of the rage that had eaten into his brain. "You do not understand," he said. "It is that I treat you English heretic dogs just as you English heretic dogs have treated Spaniards upon the seas—you robbers and thieves out of hell! I have the honesty to do it in my own name—but you, you perfidious beasts, you send your Captain Bloods, your Hagthorpes, and your Morgans against us and disclaim responsibility for what they do. Like Pilate, you wash your hands." He laughed savagely. "Let Spain play the part of Pilate. Let her disclaim responsibility for me, when your ambassador at the Escorial shall go whining to the Supreme Council of this act of piracy by Don Miguel de Espinosa."

"Captain Blood and the rest are not admirals of England!" cried Lord Julian.

"Are they not? How do I know? How does Spain know? Are you not liars all, you English heretics?"

"Sir!" Lord Julian's voice was harsh as a rasp, his eyes flashed. Instinctively he swung a hand to the place where his sword habitually hung. Then he shrugged and sneered: "Of course," said he, "it sorts with all I have heard of Spanish honour and all that I have seen of

yours that you should insult a man who is unarmed and your prisoner."

The Admiral's face flamed scarlet. He half raised his hand to strike. And then, restrained, perhaps, by the very words that had cloaked the retorting insult, he turned on his heel abruptly and went out without answering.

CHAPTER XIX. THE MEETING

As the door slammed after the departing Admiral, Lord Julian turned to Arabella, and actually smiled. He felt that he was doing better, and gathered from it an almost childish satisfaction—childish in all the circumstances. "Decidedly I think I had the last word there," he said, with a toss of his golden ringlets.

Miss Bishop, seated at the cabin-table, looked at him steadily, without returning his smile. "Does it matter, then, so much, having the last word? I am thinking of those poor fellows on the Royal Mary. Many of them have had their last word, indeed. And for what? A fine ship sunk, a score of lives lost, thrice that number now in jeopardy, and all for what?"

"You are overwrought, ma'am. I...."

"Overwrought!" She uttered a single sharp note of laughter. "I assure you I am calm. I am asking you a question, Lord Julian. Why has this Spaniard done all this? To what purpose?"

"You heard him." Lord Julian shrugged angrily. "Blood-lust," he explained shortly.

"Blood-lust?" she asked. She was amazed. "Does such a thing exist, then? It is insane, monstrous."

"Fiendish," his lordship agreed. "Devil's work."

"I don't understand. At Bridgetown three years ago there was a Spanish raid, and things were done that should have been impossible to men, horrible, revolting things which strain belief, which seem, when I think of them now, like the illusions of some evil dream. Are

men just beasts?"

"Men?" said Lord Julian, staring. "Say Spaniards, and I'll agree." He was an Englishman speaking of hereditary foes. And yet there was a measure of truth in what he said. "This is the Spanish way in the New World. Faith, almost it justifies such men as Blood of what they do."

She shivered, as if cold, and setting her elbows on the table, she took her chin in her hands, and sat staring before her.

Observing her, his lordship noticed how drawn and white her face had grown. There was reason enough for that, and for worse. Not any other woman of his acquaintance would have preserved her self-control in such an ordeal; and of fear, at least, at no time had Miss Bishop shown any sign. It is impossible that he did not find her admirable.

A Spanish steward entered bearing a silver chocolate service and a box of Peruvian candies, which he placed on the table before the lady.

"With the Admiral's homage," he said, then bowed, and withdrew.

Miss Bishop took no heed of him or his offering, but continued to stare before her, lost in thought. Lord Julian took a turn in the long low cabin, which was lighted by a skylight above and great square windows astern. It was luxuriously appointed: there were rich Eastern rugs on the floor, well-filled bookcases stood against the bulkheads, and there was a carved walnut sideboard laden with silverware. On a long, low chest standing under the middle stern port lay a guitar that was gay with ribbons. Lord Julian picked it up, twanged the strings once as if moved by nervous irritation, and put it down.

He turned again to face Miss Bishop.

"I came out here," he said, "to put down piracy. But—blister me!—I begin to think that the French are right in desiring piracy to continue as a curb upon these Spanish scoundrels."

He was to be strongly confirmed in that opinion before many hours were past. Meanwhile their treatment at the hands of Don Miguel was considerate and courteous. It confirmed the opinion, contemptuously expressed to his lordship by Miss Bishop, that since they were to be held to ransom they need not fear any violence or hurt. A cabin was placed at the disposal of the lady and her terrified woman, and another at Lord Julian's. They were given the freedom of the ship, and bidden to dine at the Admiral's table; nor were his further intentions regarding them mentioned, nor yet his immediate destination.

The *Milagrosa*, with her consort the *Hidalga* rolling after her, steered a south by westerly course, then veered to the southeast round Cape Tiburon, and thereafter, standing well out to sea, with the land no more than a cloudy outline to larboard, she headed directly east, and so ran straight into the arms of Captain Blood, who was making for the Windward Passage, as we know. That happened early on the following morning. After having systematically hunted his enemy in vain for a year, Don Miguel chanced upon him in this unexpected and entirely fortuitous fashion. But that is the ironic way of Fortune. It was also the way of Fortune that Don Miguel should thus come upon the *Arabella* at a time when, separated from the rest of the fleet, she was alone and at a disadvantage. It looked to Don Miguel as if the luck which so long had been on Blood's side had at last veered in his own favour.

Miss Bishop, newly risen, had come out to take the air on the quarter-deck with his lordship in attendance—as you would expect of so gallant a gentleman—when she beheld the big red ship that had once been the *Cinco Llagas* out of Cadiz. The vessel was bearing down upon them, her mountains of snowy canvas bellying forward, the

long pennon with the cross of St. George fluttering from her main truck in the morning breeze, the gilded portholes in her red hull and the gilded beak-head aflash in the morning sun.

Miss Bishop was not to recognize this for that same Cinco Llagas which she had seen once before—on a tragic day in Barbados three years ago. To her it was just a great ship that was heading resolutely, majestically, towards them, and an Englishman to judge by the pennon she was flying. The sight thrilled her curiously; it awoke in her an uplifting sense of pride that took no account of the danger to herself in the encounter that must now be inevitable.

Beside her on the poop, whither they had climbed to obtain a better view, and equally arrested and at gaze, stood Lord Julian. But he shared none of her exultation. He had been in his first sea-fight yesterday, and he felt that the experience would suffice him for a very considerable time. This, I insist, is no reflection upon his courage.

"Look," said Miss Bishop, pointing; and to his infinite amazement he observed that her eyes were sparkling. Did she realize, he wondered, what was afoot? Her next sentence resolved his doubt. "She is English, and she comes resolutely on. She means to fight."

"God help her, then," said his lordship gloomily. "Her captain must be mad. What can he hope to do against two such heavy hulks as these? If they could so easily blow the Royal Mary out of the water, what will they do to this vessel? Look at that devil Don Miguel. He's utterly disgusting in his glee."

From the quarter-deck, where he moved amid the frenzy of preparation, the Admiral had turned to flash a backward glance at his prisoners. His eyes were alight, his face transfigured. He flung out an arm to point to the advancing ship, and bawled something in Spanish that was lost to them in the noise of the labouring crew.

They advanced to the poop-rail, and watched the bustle. Telescope in hand on the quarter-deck, Don Miguel was issuing his orders. Already the gunners were kindling their matches; sailors were aloft, taking in sail; others were spreading a stout rope net above the waist, as a protection against falling spars. And meanwhile Don Miguel had been signalling to his consort, in response to which the *Hidalga* had drawn steadily forward until she was now abeam of the *Milagrosa*, half cable's length to starboard, and from the height of the tall poop my lord and Miss Bishop could see her own bustle of preparation. And they could discern signs of it now aboard the advancing English ship as well. She was furling tops and mainsail, stripping in fact to mizzen and sprit for the coming action. Thus, almost silently without challenge or exchange of signals, had action been mutually determined.

Of necessity now, under diminished sail, the advance of the *Arabella* was slower; but it was none the less steady. She was already within saker shot, and they could make out the figures stirring on her forecastle and the brass guns gleaming on her prow. The gunners of the *Milagrosa* raised their linstocks and blew upon their smouldering matches, looking up impatiently at the Admiral.

But the Admiral solemnly shook his head.

"Patience," he exhorted them. "Save your fire until we have him. He is coming straight to his doom—straight to the yardarm and the rope that have been so long waiting for him."

"Stab me!" said his lordship. "This Englishman may be gallant enough to accept battle against such odds. But there are times when discretion is a better quality than gallantry in a commander."

"Gallantry will often win through, even against overwhelming strength," said Miss Bishop. He looked at her, and noted in her bearing only excitement. Of fear he could still discern no trace. His

lordship was past amazement. She was not by any means the kind of woman to which life had accustomed him.

"Presently," he said, "you will suffer me to place you under cover."

"I can see best from here," she answered him. And added quietly: "I am praying for this Englishman. He must be very brave."

Under his breath Lord Julian damned the fellow's bravery.

The Arabella was advancing now along a course which, if continued, must carry her straight between the two Spanish ships. My lord pointed it out. "He's crazy surely!" he cried. "He's driving straight into a death-trap. He'll be crushed to splinters between the two. No wonder that black-faced Don is holding his fire. In his place, I should do the same."

But even at that moment the Admiral raised his hand; in the waist, below him, a trumpet blared, and immediately the gunner on the prow touched off his guns. As the thunder of them rolled out, his lordship saw ahead beyond the English ship and to larboard of her two heavy splashes. Almost at once two successive spurts of flame leapt from the brass cannon on the Arabella's beak-head, and scarcely had the watchers on the poop seen the shower of spray, where one of the shots struck the water near them, then with a rending crash and a shiver that shook the Milagrosa from stem to stern, the other came to lodge in her forecastle. To avenge that blow, the Hidalgo blazed at the Englishman with both her forward guns. But even at that short range—between two and three hundred yards—neither shot took effect.

At a hundred yards the Arabella's forward guns, which had meanwhile been reloaded, fired again at the Milagrosa, and this time smashed her bowsprit into splinters; so that for a moment she yawed wildly to port. Don Miguel swore profanely, and then, as the helm was put over to swing her back to her course, his own prow replied. But

the aim was too high, and whilst one of the shots tore through the Arabella's shrouds and scarred her mainmast, the other again went wide. And when the smoke of that discharge had lifted, the English ship was found almost between the Spaniards, her bows in line with theirs and coming steadily on into what his lordship deemed a death-trap.

Lord Julian held his breath, and Miss Bishop gasped, clutching the rail before her. She had a glimpse of the wickedly grinning face of Don Miguel, and the grinning faces of the men at the guns in the waist.

At last the Arabella was right between the Spanish ships prow to poop and poop to prow. Don Miguel spoke to the trumpeter, who had mounted the quarter-deck and stood now at the Admiral's elbow. The man raised the silver bugle that was to give the signal for the broadsides of both ships. But even as he placed it to his lips, the Admiral seized his arm, to arrest him. Only then had he perceived what was so obvious—or should have been to an experienced sea-fighter: he had delayed too long and Captain Blood had outmanoeuvred him. In attempting to fire now upon the Englishman, the Milagrosa and her consort would also be firing into each other. Too late he ordered his helmsman to put the tiller hard over and swing the ship to larboard, as a preliminary to manoeuvring for a less impossible position of attack. At that very moment the Arabella seemed to explode as she swept by. Eighteen guns from each of her flanks emptied themselves at that point-blank range into the hulls of the two Spanish vessels.

Half stunned by that reverberating thunder, and thrown off her balance by the sudden lurch of the ship under her feet, Miss Bishop hurtled violently against Lord Julian, who kept his feet only by clutching the rail on which he had been leaning. Billowing clouds of smoke to starboard blotted out everything, and its acrid odour, taking them

presently in the throat, set them gasping and coughing.

From the grim confusion and turmoil in the waist below arose a clamour of fierce Spanish blasphemies and the screams of maimed men. The Milagrosa staggered slowly ahead, a gaping rent in her bulwarks; her foremast was shattered, fragments of the yards hanging in the netting spread below. Her beak-head was in splinters, and a shot had smashed through into the great cabin, reducing it to wreckage.

Don Miguel was bawling orders wildly, and peering ever and anon through the curtain of smoke that was drifting slowly astern, in his anxiety to ascertain how it might have fared with the Hidalgo.

Suddenly, and ghostly at first through that lifting haze, loomed the outline of a ship; gradually the lines of her red hull became more and more sharply defined as she swept nearer with poles all bare save for the spread of canvas on her sprit.

Instead of holding to her course as Don Miguel had expected she would, the Arabella had gone about under cover of the smoke, and sailing now in the same direction as the Milagrosa, was converging sharply upon her across the wind, so sharply that almost before the frenzied Don Miguel had realized the situation, his vessel staggered under the rending impact with which the other came hurtling alongside. There was a rattle and clank of metal as a dozen grapnels fell, and tore and caught in the timbers of the Milagrosa, and the Spaniard was firmly gripped in the tentacles of the English ship.

Beyond her and now well astern the veil of smoke was rent at last and the Hidalgo was revealed in desperate case. She was bilging fast, with an ominous list to larboard, and it could be no more than a question of moments before she settled down. The attention of her hands was being entirely given to a desperate endeavour to launch the boats in time.

Of this Don Miguel's anguished eyes had no more than a fleeting but comprehensive glimpse before his own decks were invaded by a wild, yelling swarm of boarders from the grappling ship. Never was confidence so quickly changed into despair, never was hunter more swiftly converted into helpless prey. For helpless the Spaniards were. The swiftly executed boarding manoeuvre had caught them almost unawares in the moment of confusion following the punishing broadside they had sustained at such short range. For a moment there was a valiant effort by some of Don Miguel's officers to rally the men for a stand against these invaders. But the Spaniards, never at their best in close-quarter fighting, were here demoralized by knowledge of the enemies with whom they had to deal. Their hastily formed ranks were smashed before they could be steadied; driven across the waist to the break of the poop on the one side, and up to the forecastle bulkheads on the other, the fighting resolved itself into a series of skirmishes between groups. And whilst this was doing above, another horde of buccaneers swarmed through the hatch to the main deck below to overpower the gun-crews at their stations there.

On the quarter deck, towards which an overwhelming wave of buccaneers was sweeping, led by a one-eyed giant, who was naked to the waist, stood Don Miguel, numbed by despair and rage. Above and behind him on the poop, Lord Julian and Miss Bishop looked on, his lordship aghast at the fury of this cooped-up fighting, the lady's brave calm conquered at last by horror so that she reeled there sick and faint.

Soon, however, the rage of that brief fight was spent. They saw the banner of Castile come fluttering down from the masthead. A buccaneer had slashed the halyard with his cutlass. The boarders were in possession, and on the upper deck groups of disarmed Spaniards stood huddled now like herded sheep.

Suddenly Miss Bishop recovered from her nausea, to lean forward staring wild-eyed, whilst if possible her cheeks turned yet a deadlier hue than they had been already.

Picking his way daintily through that shambles in the waist came a tall man with a deeply tanned face that was shaded by a Spanish headpiece. He was armed in back-and-breast of black steel beautifully damascened with golden arabesques. Over this, like a stole, he wore a sling of scarlet silk, from each end of which hung a silver-mounted pistol. Up the broad companion to the quarter-deck he came, toying with easy assurance, until he stood before the Spanish Admiral. Then he bowed stiff and formally. A crisp, metallic voice, speaking perfect Spanish, reached those two spectators on the poop, and increased the admiring wonder in which Lord Julian had observed the man's approach.

"We meet again at last, Don Miguel," it said. "I hope you are satisfied. Although the meeting may not be exactly as you pictured it, at least it has been very ardently sought and desired by you."

Speechless, livid of face, his mouth distorted and his breathing laboured, Don Miguel de Espinosa received the irony of that man to whom he attributed his ruin and more beside. Then he uttered an inarticulate cry of rage, and his hand swept to his sword. But even as his fingers closed upon the hilt, the other's closed upon his wrist to arrest the action.

"Calm, Don Miguel!" he was quietly but firmly enjoined. "Do not recklessly invite the ugly extremes such as you would, yourself, have practised had the situation been reversed."

A moment they stood looking into each other's eyes.

"What do you intend by me?" the Spaniard enquired at last, his voice hoarse.

Captain Blood shrugged. The firm lips smiled a little. "All that I intend has been already accomplished. And lest it increase your rancour, I beg you to observe that you have brought it entirely upon yourself. You would have it so." He turned and pointed to the boats, which his men were heaving from the boom amidships. "Your boats are being launched. You are at liberty to embark in them with your men before we scuttle this ship. Yonder are the shores of Hispaniola. You should make them safely. And if you'll take my advice, sir, you'll not hunt me again. I think I am unlucky to you. Get you home to Spain, Don Miguel, and to concerns that you understand better than this trade of the sea."

For a long moment the defeated Admiral continued to stare his hatred in silence, then, still without speaking, he went down the companion, staggering like a drunken man, his useless rapier clattering behind him. His conqueror, who had not even troubled to disarm him, watched him go, then turned and faced those two immediately above him on the poop. Lord Julian might have observed, had he been less taken up with other things, that the fellow seemed suddenly to stiffen, and that he turned pale under his deep tan. A moment he stood at gaze; then suddenly and swiftly he came up the steps. Lord Julian stood forward to meet him.

"Ye don't mean, sir, that you'll let that Spanish scoundrel go free?" he cried.

The gentleman in the black corselet appeared to become aware of his lordship for the first time.

"And who the devil may you be?" he asked, with a marked Irish accent. "And what business may it be of yours, at all?"

His lordship conceived that the fellow's truculence and utter lack of proper deference must be corrected. "I am Lord Julian Wade," he announced, with that object.

Apparently the announcement made no impression.

"Are you, indeed! Then perhaps ye'll explain what the plague you're doing aboard this ship?"

Lord Julian controlled himself to afford the desired explanation. He did so shortly and impatiently.

"He took you prisoner, did he—along with Miss Bishop there?"

"You are acquainted with Miss Bishop?" cried his lordship, passing from surprise to surprise.

But this mannerless fellow had stepped past him, and was making a leg to the lady, who on her side remained unresponsive and forbidding to the point of scorn. Observing this, he turned to answer Lord Julian's question.

"I had that honour once," said he. "But it seems that Miss Bishop has a shorter memory."

His lips were twisted into a wry smile, and there was pain in the blue eyes that gleamed so vividly under his black brows, pain blending with the mockery of his voice. But of all this it was the mockery alone that was perceived by Miss Bishop; she resented it.

"I do not number thieves and pirates among my acquaintance, Captain Blood," said she; whereupon his lordship exploded in excitement.

"Captain Blood!" he cried. "Are you Captain Blood?"

"What else were ye supposing?"

Blood asked the question wearily, his mind on other things. "I do not number thieves and pirates among my acquaintance." The cruel phrase filled his brain, reechoing and reverberating there.

But Lord Julian would not be denied. He caught him by the sleeve with one hand, whilst with the other he pointed after the retreating, dejected figure of Don Miguel.

"Do I understand that ye're not going to hang that Spanish scoundrel?"

"What for should I be hanging him?"

"Because he's just a damned pirate, as I can prove, as I have proved already."

"Ah!" said Blood, and Lord Julian marvelled at the sudden haggardness of a countenance that had been so devil-may-care but a few moments since. "I am a damned pirate, myself; and so I am merciful with my kind. Don Miguel goes free."

Lord Julian gasped. "After what I've told you that he has done? After his sinking of the Royal Mary? After his treatment of me—of us?" Lord Julian protested indignantly.

"I am not in the service of England, or of any nation, sir. And I am not concerned with any wrongs her flag may suffer."

His lordship recoiled before the furious glance that blazed at him out of Blood's haggard face. But the passion faded as swiftly as it had arisen. It was in a level voice that the Captain added:

"If you'll escort Miss Bishop aboard my ship, I shall be obliged to you. I beg that you'll make haste. We are about to scuttle this hulk."

He turned slowly to depart. But again Lord Julian interposed. Containing his indignant amazement, his lordship delivered himself coldly. "Captain Blood, you disappoint me. I had hopes of great things for you."

"Go to the devil," said Captain Blood, turning on his heel, and so

departed.

CHAPTER XX. THIEF AND PIRATE

Captain Blood paced the poop of his ship alone in the tepid dusk, and the growing golden radiance of the great poop lantern in which a seaman had just lighted the three lamps. About him all was peace. The signs of the day's battle had been effaced, the decks had been swabbed, and order was restored above and below. A group of men squatting about the main hatch were drowsily chanting, their hardened natures softened, perhaps, by the calm and beauty of the night. They were the men of the larboard watch, waiting for eight bells which was imminent.

Captain Blood did not hear them; he did not hear anything save the echo of those cruel words which had dubbed him thief and pirate.

Thief and pirate!

It is an odd fact of human nature that a man may for years possess the knowledge that a certain thing must be of a certain fashion, and yet be shocked to discover through his own senses that the fact is in perfect harmony with his beliefs. When first, three years ago, at Tortuga he had been urged upon the adventurer's course which he had followed ever since, he had known in what opinion Arabella Bishop must hold him if he succumbed. Only the conviction that already she was for ever lost to him, by introducing a certain desperate recklessness into his soul had supplied the final impulse to drive him upon his rover's course.

That he should ever meet her again had not entered his calculations, had found no place in his dreams. They were, he

conceived, irrevocably and for ever parted. Yet, in spite of this, in spite even of the persuasion that to her this reflection that was his torment could bring no regrets, he had kept the thought of her ever before him in all those wild years of filibustering. He had used it as a curb not only upon himself, but also upon those who followed him. Never had buccaneers been so rigidly held in hand, never had they been so firmly restrained, never so debarred from the excesses of rapine and lust that were usual in their kind as those who sailed with Captain Blood. It was, you will remember, stipulated in their articles that in these as in other matters they must submit to the commands of their leader. And because of the singular good fortune which had attended his leadership, he had been able to impose that stern condition of a discipline unknown before among buccaneers. How would not these men laugh at him now if he were to tell them that this he had done out of respect for a slip of a girl of whom he had fallen romantically enamoured? How would not that laughter swell if he added that this girl had that day informed him that she did not number thieves and pirates among her acquaintance.

Thief and pirate!

How the words clung, how they stung and burnt his brain!

It did not occur to him, being no psychologist, nor learned in the tortuous workings of the feminine mind, that the fact that she should bestow upon him those epithets in the very moment and circumstance of their meeting was in itself curious. He did not perceive the problem thus presented; therefore he could not probe it. Else he might have concluded that if in a moment in which by delivering her from captivity he deserved her gratitude, yet she expressed herself in bitterness, it must be because that bitterness was anterior to the gratitude and deep-seated. She had been moved to it by hearing of the course he had taken. Why? It was what he did not ask himself, or some ray of light might have come to brighten his dark, his utterly evil

despondency. Surely she would never have been so moved had she not cared—had she not felt that in what he did there was a personal wrong to herself. Surely, he might have reasoned, nothing short of this could have moved her to such a degree of bitterness and scorn as that which she had displayed.

That is how you will reason. Not so, however, reasoned Captain Blood. Indeed, that night he reasoned not at all. His soul was given up to conflict between the almost sacred love he had borne her in all these years and the evil passion which she had now awakened in him. Extremes touch, and in touching may for a space become confused, indistinguishable. And the extremes of love and hate were to-night so confused in the soul of Captain Blood that in their fusion they made up a monstrous passion.

Thief and pirate!

That was what she deemed him, without qualification, oblivious of the deep wrongs he had suffered, the desperate case in which he found himself after his escape from Barbados, and all the rest that had gone to make him what he was. That he should have conducted his filibustering with hands as clean as were possible to a man engaged in such undertakings had also not occurred to her as a charitable thought with which to mitigate her judgment of a man she had once esteemed. She had no charity for him, no mercy. She had summed him up, convicted him and sentenced him in that one phrase. He was thief and pirate in her eyes; nothing more, nothing less. What, then, was she? What are those who have no charity? he asked the stars.

Well, as she had shaped him hitherto, so let her shape him now. Thief and pirate she had branded him. She should be justified. Thief and pirate should he prove henceforth; no more nor less; as bowelless, as remorseless, as all those others who had deserved those names. He would cast out the maudlin ideals by which he had

sought to steer a course; put an end to this idiotic struggle to make the best of two worlds. She had shown him clearly to which world he belonged. Let him now justify her. She was aboard his ship, in his power, and he desired her.

He laughed softly, jeeringly, as he leaned on the taffrail, looking down at the phosphorescent gleam in the ship's wake, and his own laughter startled him by its evil note. He checked suddenly, and shivered. A sob broke from him to end that ribald burst of mirth. He took his face in his hands and found a chill moisture on his brow.

Meanwhile, Lord Julian, who knew the feminine part of humanity rather better than Captain Blood, was engaged in solving the curious problem that had so completely escaped the buccaneer. He was spurred to it, I suspect, by certain vague stirrings of jealousy. Miss Bishop's conduct in the perils through which they had come had brought him at last to perceive that a woman may lack the simpering graces of cultured femininity and yet because of that lack be the more admirable. He wondered what precisely might have been her earlier relations with Captain Blood, and was conscious of a certain uneasiness which urged him now to probe the matter.

His lordship's pale, dreamy eyes had, as I have said, a habit of observing things, and his wits were tolerably acute.

He was blaming himself now for not having observed certain things before, or, at least, for not having studied them more closely, and he was busily connecting them with more recent observations made that very day.

He had observed, for instance, that Blood's ship was named the Arabella, and he knew that Arabella was Miss Bishop's name. And he had observed all the odd particulars of the meeting of Captain Blood and Miss Bishop, and the curious change that meeting had wrought in each.

The lady had been monstrously uncivil to the Captain. It was a very foolish attitude for a lady in her circumstances to adopt towards a man in Blood's; and his lordship could not imagine Miss Bishop as normally foolish. Yet, in spite of her rudeness, in spite of the fact that she was the niece of a man whom Blood must regard as his enemy, Miss Bishop and his lordship had been shown the utmost consideration aboard the Captain's ship. A cabin had been placed at the disposal of each, to which their scanty remaining belongings and Miss Bishop's woman had been duly transferred. They were given the freedom of the great cabin, and they had sat down to table with Pitt, the master, and Wolverstone, who was Blood's lieutenant, both of whom had shown them the utmost courtesy. Also there was the fact that Blood, himself, had kept almost studiously from intruding upon them.

His lordship's mind went swiftly but carefully down these avenues of thought, observing and connecting. Having exhausted them, he decided to seek additional information from Miss Bishop. For this he must wait until Pitt and Wolverstone should have withdrawn. He was hardly made to wait so long, for as Pitt rose from table to follow Wolverstone, who had already departed, Miss Bishop detained him with a question:

"Mr. Pitt," she asked, "were you not one of those who escaped from Barbados with Captain Blood?"

"I was. I, too, was one of your uncle's slaves."

"And you have been with Captain Blood ever since?"

"His shipmaster always, ma'am."

She nodded. She was very calm and self-contained; but his lordship observed that she was unusually pale, though considering what she had that day undergone this afforded no matter for wonder.

"Did you ever sail with a Frenchman named Cahusac?"

"Cahusac?" Pitt laughed. The name evoked a ridiculous memory.
"Aye. He was with us at Maracaybo."

"And another Frenchman named Levasseur?"

His lordship marvelled at her memory of these names.

"Aye. Cahusac was Levasseur's lieutenant, until he died."

"Until who died?"

"Levasseur. He was killed on one of the Virgin Islands two years ago."

There was a pause. Then, in an even quieter voice than before, Miss Bishop asked:

"Who killed him?"

Pitt answered readily. There was no reason why he should not, though he began to find the catechism intriguing.

"Captain Blood killed him."

"Why?"

Pitt hesitated. It was not a tale for a maid's ears.

"They quarrelled," he said shortly.

"Was it about a... a lady?" Miss Bishop relentlessly pursued him.

"You might put it that way."

"What was the lady's name?"

Pitt's eyebrows went up; still he answered.

"Miss d'Ogeron. She was the daughter of the Governor of Tortuga. She had gone off with this fellow Levasseur, and... and Peter delivered her out of his dirty clutches. He was a black-hearted scoundrel, and deserved what Peter gave him."

"I see. And... and yet Captain Blood has not married her?"

"Not yet," laughed Pitt, who knew the utter groundlessness of the common gossip in Tortuga which pronounced Mdlle. d'Ogeron the Captain's future wife.

Miss Bishop nodded in silence, and Jeremy Pitt turned to depart, relieved that the catechism was ended. He paused in the doorway to impart a piece of information.

"Maybe it'll comfort you to know that the Captain has altered our course for your benefit. It's his intention to put you both ashore on the coast of Jamaica, as near Port Royal as we dare venture. We've gone about, and if this wind holds ye'll soon be home again, mistress."

"Vastly obliging of him," drawled his lordship, seeing that Miss Bishop made no shift to answer. Sombre-eyed she sat, staring into vacancy.

"Indeed, ye may say so," Pitt agreed. "He's taking risks that few would take in his place. But that's always been his way."

He went out, leaving his lordship pensive, those dreamy blue eyes of his intently studying Miss Bishop's face for all their dreaminess; his mind increasingly uneasy. At length Miss Bishop looked at him, and spoke.

"Your Cahusac told you no more than the truth, it seems."

"I perceived that you were testing it," said his lordship. "I am wondering precisely why."

Receiving no answer, he continued to observe her silently, his long, tapering fingers toying with a ringlet of the golden periwig in which his long face was set.

Miss Bishop sat bemused, her brows knit, her brooding glance seeming to study the fine Spanish point that edged the tablecloth. At last his lordship broke the silence.

"He amazes me, this man," said he, in his slow, languid voice that never seemed to change its level. "That he should alter his course for us is in itself matter for wonder; but that he should take a risk on our behalf—that he should venture into Jamaica waters.... It amazes me, as I have said."

Miss Bishop raised her eyes, and looked at him. She appeared to be very thoughtful. Then her lip flickered curiously, almost scornfully, it seemed to him. Her slender fingers drummed the table.

"What is still more amazing is that he does not hold us to ransom," said she at last.

"It's what you deserve."

"Oh, and why, if you please?"

"For speaking to him as you did."

"I usually call things by their names."

"Do you? Stab me! I shouldn't boast of it. It argues either extreme youth or extreme foolishness." His lordship, you see, belonged to my Lord Sunderland's school of philosophy. He added after a moment: "So does the display of ingratitude."

A faint colour stirred in her cheeks. "Your lordship is evidently aggrieved with me. I am disconsolate. I hope your lordship's

grievance is sounder than your views of life. It is news to me that ingratitude is a fault only to be found in the young and the foolish."

"I didn't say so, ma'am." There was a tartness in his tone evoked by the tartness she had used. "If you would do me the honour to listen, you would not misapprehend me. For if unlike you I do not always say precisely what I think, at least I say precisely what I wish to convey. To be ungrateful may be human; but to display it is childish."

"I... I don't think I understand." Her brows were knit. "How have I been ungrateful and to whom?"

"To whom? To Captain Blood. Didn't he come to our rescue?"

"Did he?" Her manner was frigid. "I wasn't aware that he knew of our presence aboard the *Milagrosa*."

His lordship permitted himself the slightest gesture of impatience.

"You are probably aware that he delivered us," said he. "And living as you have done in these savage places of the world, you can hardly fail to be aware of what is known even in England: that this fellow Blood strictly confines himself to making war upon the Spaniards. So that to call him thief and pirate as you did was to overstate the case against him at a time when it would have been more prudent to have understated it."

"Prudence?" Her voice was scornful. "What have I to do with prudence?"

"Nothing—as I perceive. But, at least, study generosity. I tell you frankly, ma'am, that in Blood's place I should never have been so nice. Sink me! When you consider what he has suffered at the hands of his fellow-countrymen, you may marvel with me that he should trouble to discriminate between Spanish and English. To be sold into slavery! Ugh!" His lordship shuddered. "And to a damned colonial planter!"

He checked abruptly. "I beg your pardon, Miss Bishop. For the moment...."

"You were carried away by your heat in defence of this... sea-robber." Miss Bishop's scorn was almost fierce.

His lordship stared at her again. Then he half-closed his large, pale eyes, and tilted his head a little. "I wonder why you hate him so," he said softly.

He saw the sudden scarlet flame upon her cheeks, the heavy frown that descended upon her brow. He had made her very angry, he judged. But there was no explosion. She recovered.

"Hate him? Lord! What a thought! I don't regard the fellow at all."

"Then ye should, ma'am." His lordship spoke his thought frankly. "He's worth regarding. He'd be an acquisition to the King's navy—a man that can do the things he did this morning. His service under de Ruyter wasn't wasted on him. That was a great seaman, and—blister me!—the pupil's worthy the master if I am a judge of anything. I doubt if the Royal Navy can show his equal. To thrust himself deliberately between those two, at point-blank range, and so turn the tables on them! It asks courage, resource, and invention. And we land-lubbers were not the only ones he tricked by his manoeuvre. That Spanish Admiral never guessed the intent until it was too late and Blood held him in check. A great man, Miss Bishop. A man worth regarding."

Miss Bishop was moved to sarcasm.

"You should use your influence with my Lord Sunderland to have the King offer him a commission."

His lordship laughed softly. "Faith, it's done already. I have his commission in my pocket." And he increased her amazement by a brief exposition of the circumstances. In that amazement he left her,

and went in quest of Blood. But he was still intrigued. If she were a little less uncompromising in her attitude towards Blood, his lordship would have been happier.

He found the Captain pacing the quarter-deck, a man mentally exhausted from wrestling with the Devil, although of this particular occupation his lordship could have no possible suspicion. With the amiable familiarity he used, Lord Julian slipped an arm through one of the Captain's, and fell into step beside him.

"What's this?" snapped Blood, whose mood was fierce and raw. His lordship was not disturbed.

"I desire, sir, that we be friends," said he suavely.

"That's mighty condescending of you!"

Lord Julian ignored the obvious sarcasm.

"It's an odd coincidence that we should have been brought together in this fashion, considering that I came out to the Indies especially to seek you."

"Ye're not by any means the first to do that," the other scoffed. "But they've mainly been Spaniards, and they hadn't your luck."

"You misapprehend me completely," said Lord Julian. And on that he proceeded to explain himself and his mission.

When he had done, Captain Blood, who until that moment had stood still under the spell of his astonishment, disengaged his arm from his lordship's, and stood squarely before him.

"Ye're my guest aboard this ship," said he, "and I still have some notion of decent behaviour left me from other days, thief and pirate though I may be. So I'll not be telling you what I think of you for daring to bring me this offer, or of my Lord Sunderland—since he's your

kinsman for having the impudence to send it. But it does not surprise me at all that one who is a minister of James Stuart's should conceive that every man is to be seduced by bribes into betraying those who trust him." He flung out an arm in the direction of the waist, whence came the half-melancholy chant of the lounging buccaneers.

"Again you misapprehend me," cried Lord Julian, between concern and indignation. "That is not intended. Your followers will be included in your commission."

"And d' ye think they'll go with me to hunt their brethren—the Brethren of the Coast? On my soul, Lord Julian, it is yourself does the misapprehending. Are there not even notions of honour left in England? Oh, and there's more to it than that, even. D'ye think I could take a commission of King James's? I tell you I wouldn't be soiling my hands with it—thief and pirate's hands though they be. Thief and pirate is what you heard Miss Bishop call me to-day—a thing of scorn, an outcast. And who made me that? Who made me thief and pirate?"

"If you were a rebel...?" his lordship was beginning.

"Ye must know that I was no such thing—no rebel at all. It wasn't even pretended. If it were, I could forgive them. But not even that cloak could they cast upon their foulness. Oh, no; there was no mistake. I was convicted for what I did, neither more nor less. That bloody vampire Jeffreys—bad cess to him!—sentenced me to death, and his worthy master James Stuart afterwards sent me into slavery, because I had performed an act of mercy; because compassionately and without thought for creed or politics I had sought to relieve the sufferings of a fellow-creature; because I had dressed the wounds of a man who was convicted of treason. That was all my offence. You'll find it in the records. And for that I was sold into slavery: because by the law of England, as administered by James Stuart in violation of the laws of God, who harbours or comforts a rebel is himself

adjudged guilty of rebellion. D'ye dream man, what it is to be a slave?"

He checked suddenly at the very height of his passion. A moment he paused, then cast it from him as if it had been a cloak. His voice sank again. He uttered a little laugh of weariness and contempt.

"But there! I grow hot for nothing at all. I explain myself, I think, and God knows, it is not my custom. I am grateful to you, Lord Julian, for your kindly intentions. I am so. But ye'll understand, perhaps. Ye look as if ye might."

Lord Julian stood still. He was deeply stricken by the other's words, the passionate, eloquent outburst that in a few sharp, clear-cut strokes had so convincingly presented the man's bitter case against humanity, his complete apologia and justification for all that could be laid to his charge. His lordship looked at that keen, intrepid face gleaming lividly in the light of the great poop lantern, and his own eyes were troubled. He was abashed.

He fetched a heavy sigh. "A pity," he said slowly. "Oh, blister me—a cursed pity!" He held out his hand, moved to it on a sudden generous impulse. "But no offence between us, Captain Blood!"

"Oh, no offence. But... I'm a thief and a pirate." He laughed without mirth, and, disregarding the proffered hand, swung on his heel.

Lord Julian stood a moment, watching the tall figure as it moved away towards the taffrail. Then letting his arms fall helplessly to his sides in dejection, he departed.

Just within the doorway of the alley leading to the cabin, he ran into Miss Bishop. Yet she had not been coming out, for her back was towards him, and she was moving in the same direction. He followed her, his mind too full of Captain Blood to be concerned just then with her movements.

In the cabin he flung into a chair, and exploded, with a violence altogether foreign to his nature.

"Damme if ever I met a man I liked better, or even a man I liked as well. Yet there's nothing to be done with him."

"So I heard," she admitted in a small voice. She was very white, and she kept her eyes upon her folded hands.

He looked up in surprise, and then sat conning her with brooding glance. "I wonder, now," he said presently, "if the mischief is of your working. Your words have rankled with him. He threw them at me again and again. He wouldn't take the King's commission; he wouldn't take my hand even. What's to be done with a fellow like that? He'll end on a yardarm for all his luck. And the quixotic fool is running into danger at the present moment on our behalf."

"How?" she asked him with a sudden startled interest.

"How? Have you forgotten that he's sailing to Jamaica, and that Jamaica is the headquarters of the English fleet? True, your uncle commands it...."

She leaned across the table to interrupt him, and he observed that her breathing had grown labored, that her eyes were dilating in alarm.

"But there is no hope for him in that!" she cried. "Oh, don't imagine it! He has no bitterer enemy in the world! My uncle is a hard, unforgiving man. I believe that it was nothing but the hope of taking and hanging Captain Blood that made my uncle leave his Barbados plantations to accept the deputy-governorship of Jamaica. Captain Blood doesn't know that, of course...." She paused with a little gesture of helplessness.

"I can't think that it would make the least difference if he did," said his lordship gravely. "A man who can forgive such an enemy as Don

Miguel and take up this uncompromising attitude with me isn't to be judged by ordinary rules. He's chivalrous to the point of idiocy."

"And yet he has been what he has been and done what he has done in these last three years," said she, but she said it sorrowfully now, without any of her earlier scorn.

Lord Julian was sententious, as I gather that he often was. "Life can be infernally complex," he sighed.

CHAPTER XXI. THE SERVICE OF KING JAMES

Miss Arabella Bishop was aroused very early on the following morning by the brazen voice of a bugle and the insistent clanging of a bell in the ship's belfry. As she lay awake, idly watching the rippled green water that appeared to be streaming past the heavily glazed porthole, she became gradually aware of the sounds of swift, laboured bustle—the clatter of many feet, the shouts of hoarse voices, and the persistent trundlings of heavy bodies in the ward-room immediately below the deck of the cabin. Conceiving these sounds to portend a more than normal activity, she sat up, pervaded by a vague alarm, and roused her still slumbering woman.

In his cabin on the starboard side Lord Julian, disturbed by the same sounds, was already astir and hurriedly dressing. When presently he emerged under the break of the poop, he found himself staring up into a mountain of canvas. Every foot of sail that she could carry had been crowded to the Arabella's yards, to catch the morning breeze. Ahead and on either side stretched the limitless expanse of ocean, sparkling golden in the sun, as yet no more than a half-disc of flame upon the horizon straight ahead.

About him in the waist, where all last night had been so peaceful, there was a frenziedly active bustle of some threescore men. By the rail, immediately above and behind Lord Julian, stood Captain Blood in altercation with a one-eyed giant, whose head was swathed in a red cotton kerchief, whose blue shirt hung open at the waist. As his lordship, moving forward, revealed himself, their voices ceased, and Blood turned to greet him.

"Good-morning to you," he said, and added "I've blundered badly, so I have. I should have known better than to come so close to Jamaica by night. But I was in haste to land you. Come up here. I have something to show you."

Wondering, Lord Julian mounted the companion as he was bidden. Standing beside Captain Blood, he looked astern, following the indication of the Captain's hand, and cried out in his amazement. There, not more than three miles away, was land—an uneven wall of vivid green that filled the western horizon. And a couple of miles this side of it, bearing after them, came speeding three great white ships.

"They fly no colours, but they're part of the Jamaica fleet." Blood spoke without excitement, almost with a certain listlessness. "When dawn broke we found ourselves running to meet them. We went about, and it's been a race ever since. But the Arabella 's been at sea these four months, and her bottom's too foul for the speed we're needing."

Wolverstone hooked his thumbs into his broad leather belt, and from his great height looked down sardonically upon Lord Julian, tall man though his lordship was. "So that you're like to be in yet another sea-fight afore ye've done wi' ships, my lord."

"That's a point we were just arguing," said Blood. "For I hold that we're in no case to fight against such odds."

"The odds be damned!" Wolverstone thrust out his heavy jowl. "We're used to odds. The odds was heavier at Maracaybo; yet we won out, and took three ships. They was heavier yesterday when we engaged Don Miguel."

"Aye—but those were Spaniards."

"And what better are these?—Are ye afeard of a lubberly Barbados

planter? Whatever ails you, Peter? I've never known ye scared afore."

A gun boomed out behind them.

"That'll be the signal to lie to," said Blood, in the same listless voice; and he fetched a sigh.

Wolverstone squared himself defiantly before his captain

"I'll see Colonel Bishop in hell or ever I lies to for him." And he spat, presumably for purposes of emphasis.

His lordship intervened.

"Oh, but—by your leave—surely there is nothing to be apprehended from Colonel Bishop. Considering the service you have rendered to his niece and to me...."

Wolverstone's horse-laugh interrupted him. "Hark to the gentleman!" he mocked. "Ye don't know Colonel Bishop, that's clear. Not for his niece, not for his daughter, not for his own mother, would he forgo the blood what he thinks due to him. A drinker of blood, he is. A nasty beast. We knows, the Cap'n and me. We been his slaves."

"But there is myself," said Lord Julian, with great dignity.

Wolverstone laughed again, whereat his lordship flushed. He was moved to raise his voice above its usual languid level.

"I assure you that my word counts for something in England."

"Oh, aye—in England. But this ain't England, damme."

Came the roar of a second gun, and a round shot splashed the water less than half a cable's-length astern. Blood leaned over the rail to speak to the fair young man immediately below him by the helmsman at the whipstaff.

"Bid them take in sail, Jeremy," he said quietly. "We lie to."

But Wolverstone interposed again.

"Hold there a moment, Jeremy!" he roared. "Wait!" He swung back to face the Captain, who had placed a hand on his shoulder and was smiling, a trifle wistfully.

"Steady, Old Wolf! Steady!" Captain Blood admonished him.

"Steady, yourself, Peter. Ye've gone mad! Will ye doom us all to hell out of tenderness for that cold slip of a girl?"

"Stop!" cried Blood in sudden fury.

But Wolverstone would not stop. "It's the truth, you fool. It's that cursed petticoat's making a coward of you. It's for her that ye're afraid—and she, Colonel Bishop's niece! My God, man, ye'll have a mutiny aboard, and I'll lead it myself sooner than surrender to be hanged in Port Royal."

Their glances met, sullen defiance braving dull anger, surprise, and pain.

"There is no question," said Blood, "of surrender for any man aboard save only myself. If Bishop can report to England that I am taken and hanged, he will magnify himself and at the same time gratify his personal rancour against me. That should satisfy him. I'll send him a message offering to surrender aboard his ship, taking Miss Bishop and Lord Julian with me, but only on condition that the Arabella is allowed to proceed unharmed. It's a bargain that he'll accept, if I know him at all."

"It's a bargain he'll never be offered," retorted Wolverstone, and his earlier vehemence was as nothing to his vehemence now. "Ye're surely daft even to think of it, Peter!"

"Not so daft as you when you talk of fighting that." He flung out an arm as he spoke to indicate the pursuing ships, which were slowly but surely creeping nearer. "Before we've run another half-mile we shall be within range."

Wolverstone swore elaborately, then suddenly checked. Out of the tail of his single eye he had espied a trim figure in grey silk that was ascending the companion. So engrossed had they been that they had not seen Miss Bishop come from the door of the passage leading to the cabin. And there was something else that those three men on the poop, and Pitt immediately below them, had failed to observe. Some moments ago Ogle, followed by the main body of his gun-deck crew, had emerged from the booby hatch, to fall into muttered, angrily vehement talk with those who, abandoning the gun-tackles upon which they were labouring, had come to crowd about him.

Even now Blood had no eyes for that. He turned to look at Miss Bishop, marvelling a little, after the manner in which yesterday she had avoided him, that she should now venture upon the quarter-deck. Her presence at this moment, and considering the nature of his altercation with Wolverstone, was embarrassing.

Very sweet and dainty she stood before him in her gown of shimmering grey, a faint excitement tinting her fair cheeks and sparkling in her clear, hazel eyes, that looked so frank and honest. She wore no hat, and the ringlets of her gold-brown hair fluttered distractingly in the morning breeze.

Captain Blood bared his head and bowed silently in a greeting which she returned composedly and formally.

"What is happening, Lord Julian?" she enquired.

As if to answer her a third gun spoke from the ships towards which she was looking intent and wonderingly. A frown rumped her brow.

She looked from one to the other of the men who stood there so glum and obviously ill at ease.

"They are ships of the Jamaica fleet," his lordship answered her.

It should in any case have been a sufficient explanation. But before more could be added, their attention was drawn at last to Ogle, who came bounding up the broad ladder, and to the men lounging aft in his wake, in all of which, instinctively, they apprehended a vague menace.

At the head of the companion, Ogle found his progress barred by Blood, who confronted him, a sudden sternness in his face and in every line of him.

"What's this?" the Captain demanded sharply. "Your station is on the gun-deck. Why have you left it?"

Thus challenged, the obvious truculence faded out of Ogle's bearing, quenched by the old habit of obedience and the natural dominance that was the secret of the Captain's rule over his wild followers. But it gave no pause to the gunner's intention. If anything it increased his excitement.

"Captain," he said, and as he spoke he pointed to the pursuing ships, "Colonel Bishop holds us. We're in no case either to run or fight."

Blood's height seemed to increase, as did his sternness.

"Ogle," said he, in a voice cold and sharp as steel, "your station is on the gun-deck. You'll return to it at once, and take your crew with you, or else...."

But Ogle, violent of mien and gesture, interrupted him.

"Threats will not serve, Captain."

"Will they not?"

It was the first time in his buccaneering career that an order of his had been disregarded, or that a man had failed in the obedience to which he pledged all those who joined him. That this insubordination should proceed from one of those whom he most trusted, one of his old Barbados associates, was in itself a bitterness, and made him reluctant to that which instinct told him must be done. His hand closed over the butt of one of the pistols slung before him.

"Nor will that serve you," Ogle warned him, still more fiercely. "The men are of my thinking, and they'll have their way."

"And what way may that be?"

"The way to make us safe. We'll neither sink nor hang whiles we can help it."

From the three or four score men massed below in the waist came a rumble of approval. Captain Blood's glance raked the ranks of those resolute, fierce-eyed fellows, then it came to rest again on Ogle. There was here quite plainly a vague threat, a mutinous spirit he could not understand. "You come to give advice, then, do you?" quoth he, relenting nothing of his sternness.

"That's it, Captain; advice. That girl, there." He flung out a bare arm to point to her. "Bishop's girl; the Governor of Jamaica's niece.... We want her as a hostage for our safety."

"Aye!" roared in chorus the buccaneers below, and one or two of them elaborated that affirmation.

In a flash Captain Blood saw what was in their minds. And for all that he lost nothing of his outward stern composure, fear invaded his heart.

"And how," he asked, "do you imagine that Miss Bishop will prove such a hostage?"

"It's a providence having her aboard; a providence. Heave to, Captain, and signal them to send a boat, and assure themselves that Miss is here. Then let them know that if they attempt to hinder our sailing hence, we'll hang the doxy first and fight for it after. That'll cool Colonel Bishop's heat, maybe."

"And maybe it won't." Slow and mocking came Wolverstone's voice to answer the other's confident excitement, and as he spoke he advanced to Blood's side, an unexpected ally. "Some o' them dawcocks may believe that tale." He jerked a contemptuous thumb towards the men in the waist, whose ranks were steadily being increased by the advent of others from the forecastle. "Although even some o' they should know better, for there's still a few was on Barbados with us, and are acquainted like me and you with Colonel Bishop. If ye're counting on pulling Bishop's heartstrings, ye're a bigger fool, Ogle, than I've always thought you was with anything but guns. There's no heaving to for such a matter as that unless you wants to make quite sure of our being sunk. Though we had a cargo of Bishop's nieces it wouldn't make him hold his hand. Why, as I was just telling his lordship here, who thought like you that having Miss Bishop aboard would make us safe, not for his mother would that filthy slaver forgo what's due to him. And if ye' weren't a fool, Ogle, you wouldn't need me to tell you this. We've got to fight, my lads...."

"How can we fight, man?" Ogle stormed at him, furiously battling the conviction which Wolverstone's argument was imposing upon his listeners. "You may be right, and you may be wrong. We've got to chance it. It's our only chance...."

The rest of his words were drowned in the shouts of the hands insisting that the girl be given up to be held as a hostage. And then louder than before roared a gun away to leeward, and away on their

starboard beam they saw the spray flung up by the shot, which had gone wide.

"They are within range," cried Ogle. And leaning from the rail, "Put down the helm," he commanded.

Pitt, at his post beside the helmsman, turned intrepidly to face the excited gunner.

"Since when have you commanded on the main deck, Ogle? I take my orders from the Captain."

"You'll take this order from me, or, by God, you'll...."

"Wait!" Blood bade him, interrupting, and he set a restraining hand upon the gunner's arm. "There is, I think, a better way."

He looked over his shoulder, aft, at the advancing ships, the foremost of which was now a bare quarter of a mile away. His glance swept in passing over Miss Bishop and Lord Julian standing side by side some paces behind him. He observed her pale and tense, with parted lips and startled eyes that were fixed upon him, an anxious witness of this deciding of her fate. He was thinking swiftly, reckoning the chances if by pistolling Ogle he were to provoke a mutiny. That some of the men would rally to him, he was sure. But he was no less sure that the main body would oppose him, and prevail in spite of all that he could do, taking the chance that holding Miss Bishop to ransom seemed to afford them. And if they did that, one way or the other, Miss Bishop would be lost. For even if Bishop yielded to their demand, they would retain her as a hostage.

Meanwhile Ogle was growing impatient. His arm still gripped by Blood, he thrust his face into the Captain's.

"What better way?" he demanded. "There is none better. I'll not be bubbled by what Wolverstone has said. He may be right, and he may

be wrong. We'll test it. It's our only chance, I've said, and we must take it."

The better way that was in Captain Blood's mind was the way that already he had proposed to Wolverstone. Whether the men in the panic Ogle had aroused among them would take a different view from Wolverstone's he did not know. But he saw quite clearly now that if they consented, they would not on that account depart from their intention in the matter of Miss Bishop; they would make of Blood's own surrender merely an additional card in this game against the Governor of Jamaica.

"It's through her that we're in this trap," Ogle stormed on. "Through her and through you. It was to bring her to Jamaica that you risked all our lives, and we're not going to lose our lives as long as there's a chance to make ourselves safe through her."

He was turning again to the helmsman below, when Blood's grip tightened on his arm. Ogle wrenched it free, with an oath. But Blood's mind was now made up. He had found the only way, and repellent though it might be to him, he must take it.

"That is a desperate chance," he cried. "Mine is the safe and easy way. Wait!" He leaned over the rail. "Put the helm down," he bade Pitt. "Heave her to, and signal to them to send a boat."

A silence of astonishment fell upon the ship—of astonishment and suspicion at this sudden yielding. But Pitt, although he shared it, was prompt to obey. His voice rang out, giving the necessary orders, and after an instant's pause, a score of hands sprang to execute them. Came the creak of blocks and the rattle of slatting sails as they swung aweather, and Captain Blood turned and beckoned Lord Julian forward. His lordship, after a moment's hesitation, advanced in surprise and mistrust—a mistrust shared by Miss Bishop, who, like his lordship and all else aboard, though in a different way, had been

taken aback by Blood's sudden submission to the demand to lie to.

Standing now at the rail, with Lord Julian beside him, Captain Blood explained himself.

Briefly and clearly he announced to all the object of Lord Julian's voyage to the Caribbean, and he informed them of the offer which yesterday Lord Julian had made to him.

"That offer I rejected, as his lordship will tell you, deeming myself affronted by it. Those of you who have suffered under the rule of King James will understand me. But now in the desperate case in which we find ourselves—outsailed, and likely to be outfought, as Ogle has said—I am ready to take the way of Morgan: to accept the King's commission and shelter us all behind it."

It was a thunderbolt that for a moment left them all dazed. Then Babel was reenacted. The main body of them welcomed the announcement as only men who have been preparing to die can welcome a new lease of life. But many could not resolve one way or the other until they were satisfied upon several questions, and chiefly upon one which was voiced by Ogle.

"Will Bishop respect the commission when you hold it?"

It was Lord Julian who answered:

"It will go very hard with him if he attempts to flout the King's authority. And though he should dare attempt it, be sure that his own officers will not dare to do other than oppose him."

"Aye," said Ogle, "that is true."

But there were some who were still in open and frank revolt against the course. Of these was Wolverstone, who at once proclaimed his hostility.

"I'll rot in hell or ever I serves the King," he bawled in a great rage.

But Blood quieted him and those who thought as he did.

"No man need follow me into the King's service who is reluctant. That is not in the bargain. What is in the bargain is that I accept this service with such of you as may choose to follow me. Don't think I accept it willingly. For myself, I am entirely of Wolverstone's opinion. I accept it as the only way to save us all from the certain destruction into which my own act may have brought us. And even those of you who do not choose to follow me shall share the immunity of all, and shall afterwards be free to depart. Those are the terms upon which I sell myself to the King. Let Lord Julian, the representative of the Secretary of State, say whether he agrees to them."

Prompt, eager, and clear came his lordship's agreement. And that was practically the end of the matter. Lord Julian, the butt now of good-humouredly ribald jests and half-derisive acclamations, plunged away to his cabin for the commission, secretly rejoicing at a turn of events which enabled him so creditably to discharge the business on which he had been sent.

Meanwhile the bo'sun signalled to the Jamaica ships to send a boat, and the men in the waist broke their ranks and went noisily flocking to line the bulwarks and view the great stately vessels that were racing down towards them.

As Ogle left the quarter-deck, Blood turned, and came face to face with Miss Bishop. She had been observing him with shining eyes, but at sight of his dejected countenance, and the deep frown that scarred his brow, her own expression changed. She approached him with a hesitation entirely unusual to her. She set a hand lightly upon his arm.

"You have chosen wisely, sir," she commended him, "however much against your inclinations."

He looked with gloomy eyes upon her for whom he had made this sacrifice.

"I owed it to you—or thought I did," he said.

She did not understand. "Your resolve delivered me from a horrible danger," she admitted. And she shivered at the memory of it. "But I do not understand why you should have hesitated when first it was proposed to you. It is an honourable service."

"King James's?" he sneered.

"England's," she corrected him in reproof. "The country is all, sir; the sovereign naught. King James will pass; others will come and pass; England remains, to be honourably served by her sons, whatever rancour they may hold against the man who rules her in their time."

He showed some surprise. Then he smiled a little. "Shrewd advocacy," he approved it. "You should have spoken to the crew."

And then, the note of irony deepening in his voice: "Do you suppose now that this honourable service might redeem one who was a pirate and a thief?"

Her glance fell away. Her voice faltered a little in replying. "If he... needs redeeming. Perhaps... perhaps he has been judged too harshly."

The blue eyes flashed, and the firm lips relaxed their grim set.

"Why... if ye think that," he said, considering her, an odd hunger in his glance, "life might have its uses, after all, and even the service of King James might become tolerable."

Looking beyond her, across the water, he observed a boat putting off from one of the great ships, which, hove to now, were rocking

gently some three hundred yards away. Abruptly his manner changed. He was like one recovering, taking himself in hand again. "If you will go below, and get your gear and your woman, you shall presently be sent aboard one of the ships of the fleet." He pointed to the boat as he spoke.

She left him, and thereafter with Wolverstone, leaning upon the rail, he watched the approach of that boat, manned by a dozen sailors, and commanded by a scarlet figure seated stiffly in the stern sheets. He levelled his telescope upon that figure.

"It'll not be Bishop himself," said Wolverstone, between question and assertion.

"No." Blood closed his telescope. "I don't know who it is."

"Ha!" Wolverstone vented an ejaculation of sneering mirth. "For all his eagerness, Bishop'd be none so willing to come, hisself. He's been aboard this hulk afore, and we made him swim for it that time. He'll have his memories. So he sends a deputy."

This deputy proved to be an officer named Calverley, a vigorous, self-sufficient fellow, comparatively fresh from England, whose manner made it clear that he came fully instructed by Colonel Bishop upon the matter of how to handle the pirates.

His air, as he stepped into the waist of the *Arabella*, was haughty, truculent, and disdainful.

Blood, the King's commission now in his pocket, and Lord Julian standing beside him, waited to receive him, and Captain Calverley was a little taken aback at finding himself confronted by two men so very different outwardly from anything that he had expected. But he lost none of his haughty poise, and scarcely deigned a glance at the swarm of fierce, half-naked fellows lounging in a semicircle to form a background.

"Good-day to you, sir," Blood hailed him pleasantly. "I have the honour to give you welcome aboard the Arabella. My name is Blood—Captain Blood, at your service. You may have heard of me."

Captain Calverley stared hard. The airy manner of this redoubtable buccaneer was hardly what he had looked for in a desperate fellow, compelled to ignominious surrender. A thin, sour smile broke on the officer's haughty lips.

"You'll ruffle it to the gallows, no doubt," he said contemptuously. "I suppose that is after the fashion of your kind. Meanwhile it's your surrender I require, my man, not your impudence."

Captain Blood appeared surprised, pained. He turned in appeal to Lord Julian.

"D'ye hear that now? And did ye ever hear the like? But what did I tell ye? Ye see, the young gentleman's under a misapprehension entirely. Perhaps it'll save broken bones if your lordship explains just who and what I am."

Lord Julian advanced a step and bowed perfunctorily and rather disdainfully to that very disdainful but now dumbfounded officer. Pitt, who watched the scene from the quarter-deck rail, tells us that his lordship was as grave as a parson at a hanging. But I suspect this gravity for a mask under which Lord Julian was secretly amused.

"I have the honour to inform you, sir," he said stiffly, "that Captain Blood holds a commission in the King's service under the seal of my Lord Sunderland, His Majesty's Secretary of State."

Captain Calverley's face empurpled; his eyes bulged. The buccaneers in the background chuckled and crowed and swore among themselves in their relish of this comedy. For a long moment Calverley stared in silence at his lordship, observing the costly

elegance of his dress, his air of calm assurance, and his cold, fastidious speech, all of which savoured distinctly of the great world to which he belonged.

"And who the devil may you be?" he exploded at last.

Colder still and more distant than ever grew his lordship's voice.

"You're not very civil, sir, as I have already noticed. My name is Wade—Lord Julian Wade. I am His Majesty's envoy to these barbarous parts, and my Lord Sunderland's near kinsman. Colonel Bishop has been notified of my coming."

The sudden change in Calverley's manner at Lord Julian's mention of his name showed that the notification had been received, and that he had knowledge of it.

"I... I believe that he has," said Calverley, between doubt and suspicion. "That is: that he has been notified of the coming of Lord Julian Wade. But... but... aboard this ship...?" The officer made a gesture of helplessness, and, surrendering to his bewilderment, fell abruptly silent.

"I was coming out on the Royal Mary...."

"That is what we were advised."

"But the Royal Mary fell a victim to a Spanish privateer, and I might never have arrived at all but for the gallantry of Captain Blood, who rescued me."

Light broke upon the darkness of Calverley's mind. "I see. I understand."

"I will take leave to doubt it." His lordship's tone abated nothing of its asperity. "But that can wait. If Captain Blood will show you his commission, perhaps that will set all doubts at rest, and we may

proceed. I shall be glad to reach Port Royal."

Captain Blood thrust a parchment under Calverley's bulging eyes. The officer scanned it, particularly the seals and signature. He stepped back, a baffled, impotent man. He bowed helplessly.

"I must return to Colonel Bishop for my orders," he informed them.

At that moment a lane was opened in the ranks of the men, and through this came Miss Bishop followed by her octoroon woman. Over his shoulder Captain Blood observed her approach.

"Perhaps, since Colonel Bishop is with you, you will convey his niece to him. Miss Bishop was aboard the Royal Mary also, and I rescued her together with his lordship. She will be able to acquaint her uncle with the details of that and of the present state of affairs."

Swept thus from surprise to surprise, Captain Calverley could do no more than bow again.

"As for me," said Lord Julian, with intent to make Miss Bishop's departure free from all interference on the part of the buccaneers, "I shall remain aboard the Arabella until we reach Port Royal. My compliments to Colonel Bishop. Say that I look forward to making his acquaintance there."

CHAPTER XXII. HOSTILITIES

In the great harbour of Port Royal, spacious enough to have given moorings to all the ships of all the navies of the world, the Arabella rode at anchor. Almost she had the air of a prisoner, for a quarter of a mile ahead, to starboard, rose the lofty, massive single round tower of the fort, whilst a couple of cables'-length astern, and to larboard, rode the six men-of-war that composed the Jamaica squadron.

Abeam with the Arabella, across the harbour, were the flat-fronted white buildings of that imposing city that came down to the very water's edge. Behind these the red roofs rose like terraces, marking the gentle slope upon which the city was built, dominated here by a turret, there by a spire, and behind these again a range of green hills with for ultimate background a sky that was like a dome of polished steel.

On a cane day-bed that had been set for him on the quarter-deck, sheltered from the dazzling, blistering sunshine by an improvised awning of brown sailcloth, lounged Peter Blood, a calf-bound, well-thumbed copy of Horace's Odes neglected in his hands.

From immediately below him came the swish of mops and the gurgle of water in the scuppers, for it was still early morning, and under the directions of Hayton, the bo'sun, the swabbers were at work in the waist and forecastle. Despite the heat and the stagnant air, one of the toilers found breath to croak a ribald buccaneering ditty:

"For we laid her board and board,
And we put her to the sword,
And we sank her in the deep blue sea.
So It's heigh-ho, and heave-a-ho!

Who'll sail for the Main with me?"

Blood fetched a sigh, and the ghost of a smile played over his lean, sun-tanned face. Then the black brows came together above the vivid blue eyes, and thought swiftly closed the door upon his immediate surroundings.

Things had not sped at all well with him in the past fortnight since his acceptance of the King's commission. There had been trouble with Bishop from the moment of landing. As Blood and Lord Julian had stepped ashore together, they had been met by a man who took no pains to dissemble his chagrin at the turn of events and his determination to change it. He awaited them on the mole, supported by a group of officers.

"You are Lord Julian Wade, I understand," was his truculent greeting. For Blood at the moment he had nothing beyond a malignant glance.

Lord Julian bowed. "I take it I have the honour to address Colonel Bishop, Deputy-Governor of Jamaica." It was almost as if his lordship were giving the Colonel a lesson in deportment. The Colonel accepted it, and belatedly bowed, removing his broad hat. Then he plunged on.

"You have granted, I am told, the King's commission to this man." His very tone betrayed the bitterness of his rancour. "Your motives were no doubt worthy... your gratitude to him for delivering you from the Spaniards. But the thing itself is unthinkable, my lord. The commission must be cancelled."

"I don't think I understand," said Lord Julian distantly.

"To be sure you don't, or you'd never ha' done it. The fellow's bubbled you. Why, he's first a rebel, then an escaped slave, and lastly a bloody pirate. I've been hunting him this year past."

"I assure you, sir, that I was fully informed of all. I do not grant the King's commission lightly."

"Don't you, by God! And what else do you call this? But as His Majesty's Deputy-Governor of Jamaica, I'll take leave to correct your mistake in my own way."

"Ah! And what way may that be?"

"There's a gallows waiting for this rascal in Port Royal."

Blood would have intervened at that, but Lord Julian forestalled him.

"I see, sir, that you do not yet quite apprehend the circumstances. If it is a mistake to grant Captain Blood a commission, the mistake is not mine. I am acting upon the instructions of my Lord Sunderland; and with a full knowledge of all the facts, his lordship expressly designated Captain Blood for this commission if Captain Blood could be persuaded to accept it."

Colonel Bishop's mouth fell open in surprise and dismay.

"Lord Sunderland designated him?" he asked, amazed.

"Expressly."

His lordship waited a moment for a reply. None coming from the speechless Deputy-Governor, he asked a question: "Would you still venture to describe the matter as a mistake, sir? And dare you take the risk of correcting it?"

"I... I had not dreamed...."

"I understand, sir. Let me present Captain Blood."

Perforce Bishop must put on the best face he could command. But that it was no more than a mask for his fury and his venom was plain

to all.

From that unpromising beginning matters had not improved; rather had they grown worse.

Blood's thoughts were upon this and other things as he lounged there on the day-bed. He had been a fortnight in Port Royal, his ship virtually a unit now in the Jamaica squadron. And when the news of it reached Tortuga and the buccaneers who awaited his return, the name of Captain Blood, which had stood so high among the Brethren of the Coast, would become a byword, a thing of execration, and before all was done his life might pay forfeit for what would be accounted a treacherous defection. And for what had he placed himself in this position? For the sake of a girl who avoided him so persistently and intentionally that he must assume that she still regarded him with aversion. He had scarcely been vouchsafed a glimpse of her in all this fortnight, although with that in view for his main object he had daily haunted her uncle's residence, and daily braved the unmasked hostility and baffled rancour in which Colonel Bishop held him. Nor was that the worst of it. He was allowed plainly to perceive that it was the graceful, elegant young trifler from St. James's, Lord Julian Wade, to whom her every moment was devoted. And what chance had he, a desperate adventurer with a record of outlawry, against such a rival as that, a man of parts, moreover, as he was bound to admit?

You conceive the bitterness of his soul. He beheld himself to be as the dog in the fable that had dropped the substance to snatch at a delusive shadow.

He sought comfort in a line on the open page before him:

"levius fit patientia quicquid corrigere est nefas."

Sought it, but hardly found it.

A boat that had approached unnoticed from the shore came scraping and bumping against the great red hull of the Arabella, and a raucous voice sent up a hailing shout. From the ship's belfry two silvery notes rang clear and sharp, and a moment or two later the bo'sun's whistle shrilled a long wail.

The sounds disturbed Captain Blood from his disgruntled musings. He rose, tall, active, and arrestingly elegant in a scarlet, gold-laced coat that advertised his new position, and slipping the slender volume into his pocket, advanced to the carved rail of the quarter-deck, just as Jeremy Pitt was setting foot upon the companion.

"A note for you from the Deputy-Governor," said the master shortly, as he proffered a folded sheet.

Blood broke the seal, and read. Pitt, loosely clad in shirt and breeches, leaned against the rail the while and watched him, unmistakable concern imprinted on his fair, frank countenance.

Blood uttered a short laugh, and curled his lip. "It is a very peremptory summons," he said, and passed the note to his friend.

The young master's grey eyes skimmed it. Thoughtfully he stroked his golden beard.

"You'll not go?" he said, between question and assertion.

"Why not? Haven't I been a daily visitor at the fort...?"

"But it'll be about the Old Wolf that he wants to see you. It gives him a grievance at last. You know, Peter, that it is Lord Julian alone has stood between Bishop and his hate of you. If now he can show that...."

"What if he can?" Blood interrupted carelessly. "Shall I be in greater danger ashore than aboard, now that we've but fifty men left, and they lukewarm rogues who would as soon serve the King as me? Jeremy,

dear lad, the Arabella's a prisoner here, bedad, 'twixt the fort there and the fleet yonder. Don't be forgetting that."

Jeremy clenched his hands. "Why did ye let Wolverstone and the others go?" he cried, with a touch of bitterness. "You should have seen the danger."

"How could I in honesty have detained them? It was in the bargain. Besides, how could their staying have helped me?" And as Pitt did not answer him: "Ye see?" he said, and shrugged. "I'll be getting my hat and cane and sword, and go ashore in the cock-boat. See it manned for me."

"Ye're going to deliver yourself into Bishop's hands," Pitt warned him.

"Well, well, maybe he'll not find me quite so easy to grasp as he imagines. There's a thorn or two left on me." And with a laugh Blood departed to his cabin.

Jeremy Pitt answered the laugh with an oath. A moment he stood irresolute where Blood had left him. Then slowly, reluctance dragging at his feet, he went down the companion to give the order for the cock-boat.

"If anything should happen to you, Peter," he said, as Blood was going over the side, "Colonel Bishop had better look to himself. These fifty lads may be lukewarm at present, as you say, but—sink me!—they'll be anything but lukewarm if there's a breach of faith."

"And what should be happening to me, Jeremy? Sure, now, I'll be back for dinner, so I will."

Blood climbed down into the waiting boat. But laugh though he might, he knew as well as Pitt that in going ashore that morning he carried his life in his hands. Because of this, it may have been that

when he stepped on to the narrow mole, in the shadow of the shallow outer wall of the fort through whose crenels were thrust the black noses of its heavy guns, he gave order that the boat should stay for him at that spot. He realized that he might have to retreat in a hurry.

Walking leisurely, he skirted the embattled wall, and passed through the great gates into the courtyard. Half-a-dozen soldiers lounged there, and in the shadow cast by the wall, Major Mallard, the Commandant, was slowly pacing. He stopped short at sight of Captain Blood, and saluted him, as was his due, but the smile that lifted the officer's stiff mustachios was grimly sardonic. Peter Blood's attention, however, was elsewhere.

On his right stretched a spacious garden, beyond which rose the white house that was the residence of the Deputy-Governor. In that garden's main avenue, that was fringed with palm and sandalwood, he had caught sight of Miss Bishop alone. He crossed the courtyard with suddenly lengthened stride.

"Good-morning to ye, ma'am," was his greeting as he overtook her; and hat in hand now, he added on a note of protest: "Sure, it's nothing less than uncharitable to make me run in this heat."

"Why do you run, then?" she asked him coolly, standing slim and straight before him, all in white and very maidenly save in her unnatural composure. "I am pressed," she informed him. "So you will forgive me if I do not stay."

"You were none so pressed until I came," he protested, and if his thin lips smiled, his blue eyes were oddly hard.

"Since you perceive it, sir, I wonder that you trouble to be so insistent."

That crossed the swords between them, and it was against Blood's instincts to avoid an engagement.

"Faith, you explain yourself after a fashion," said he. "But since it was more or less in your service that I donned the King's coat, you should suffer it to cover the thief and pirate."

She shrugged and turned aside, in some resentment and some regret. Fearing to betray the latter, she took refuge in the former. "I do my best," said she.

"So that ye can be charitable in some ways!" He laughed softly. "Glory be, now, I should be thankful for so much. Maybe I'm presumptuous. But I can't forget that when I was no better than a slave in your uncle's household in Barbados, ye used me with a certain kindness."

"Why not? In those days you had some claim upon my kindness. You were just an unfortunate gentleman then."

"And what else would you be calling me now?"

"Hardly unfortunate. We have heard of your good fortune on the seas—how your luck has passed into a byword. And we have heard other things: of your good fortune in other directions."

She spoke hastily, the thought of Mademoiselle d'Ogeron in her mind. And instantly would have recalled the words had she been able. But Peter Blood swept them lightly aside, reading into them none of her meaning, as she feared he would.

"Aye—a deal of lies, devil a doubt, as I could prove to you."

"I cannot think why you should trouble to put yourself on your defence," she discouraged him.

"So that ye may think less badly of me than you do."

"What I think of you can be a very little matter to you, sir."

This was a disarming stroke. He abandoned combat for expostulation.

"Can ye say that now? Can ye say that, beholding me in this livery of a service I despise? Didn't ye tell me that I might redeem the past? It's little enough I am concerned to redeem the past save only in your eyes. In my own I've done nothing at all that I am ashamed of, considering the provocation I received."

Her glance faltered, and fell away before his own that was so intent.

"I... I can't think why you should speak to me like this," she said, with less than her earlier assurance.

"Ah, now, can't ye, indeed?" he cried. "Sure, then, I'll be telling ye."

"Oh, please." There was real alarm in her voice. "I realize fully what you did, and I realize that partly, at least, you may have been urged by consideration for myself. Believe me, I am very grateful. I shall always be grateful."

"But if it's also your intention always to think of me as a thief and a pirate, faith, ye may keep your gratitude for all the good it's like to do me."

A livelier colour crept into her cheeks. There was a perceptible heave of the slight breast that faintly swelled the flimsy bodice of white silk. But if she resented his tone and his words, she stifled her resentment. She realized that perhaps she had, herself, provoked his anger. She honestly desired to make amends.

"You are mistaken," she began. "It isn't that."

But they were fated to misunderstand each other.

Jealousy, that troubler of reason, had been over-busy with his wits as it had with hers.

"What is it, then?" quoth he, and added the question: "Lord Julian?"

She started, and stared at him blankly indignant now.

"Och, be frank with me," he urged her, unpardonably. "'Twill be a kindness, so it will."

For a moment she stood before him with quickened breathing, the colour ebbing and flowing in her cheeks. Then she looked past him, and tilted her chin forward.

"You... you are quite insufferable," she said. "I beg that you will let me pass."

He stepped aside, and with the broad feathered hat which he still held in his hand, he waved her on towards the house.

"I'll not be detaining you any longer, ma'am. After all, the cursed thing I did for nothing can be undone. Ye'll remember afterwards that it was your hardness drove me."

She moved to depart, then checked, and faced him again. It was she now who was on her defence, her voice quivering with indignation.

"You take that tone! You dare to take that tone!" she cried, astounding him by her sudden vehemence. "You have the effrontery to upbraid me because I will not take your hands when I know how they are stained; when I know you for a murderer and worse?"

He stared at her open-mouthed.

"A murderer—I?" he said at last.

"Must I name your victims? Did you not murder Levasseur?"

"Levasseur?" He smiled a little. "So they've told you about that!"

"Do you deny it?"

"I killed him, it is true. I can remember killing another man in circumstances that were very similar. That was in Bridgetown on the night of the Spanish raid. Mary Traill would tell you of it. She was present."

He clapped his hat on his head with a certain abrupt fierceness, and strode angrily away, before she could answer or even grasp the full significance of what he had said.

CHAPTER XXIII. HOSTAGES

Peter Blood stood in the pillared portico of Government House, and with unseeing eyes that were laden with pain and anger, stared out across the great harbour of Port Royal to the green hills rising from the farther shore and the ridge of the Blue Mountains beyond, showing hazily through the quivering heat.

He was aroused by the return of the negro who had gone to announce him, and following now this slave, he made his way through the house to the wide piazza behind it, in whose shade Colonel Bishop and my Lord Julian Wade took what little air there was.

"So ye've come," the Deputy-Governor hailed him, and followed the greeting by a series of grunts of vague but apparently ill-humoured import.

He did not trouble to rise, not even when Lord Julian, obeying the instincts of finer breeding, set him the example. From under scowling brows the wealthy Barbados planter considered his sometime slave, who, hat in hand, leaning lightly upon his long beribboned cane, revealed nothing in his countenance of the anger which was being steadily nourished by this cavalier reception.

At last, with scowling brow and in self-sufficient tones, Colonel Bishop delivered himself.

"I have sent for you, Captain Blood, because of certain news that has just reached me. I am informed that yesterday evening a frigate left the harbour having on board your associate Wolverstone and a hundred men of the hundred and fifty that were serving under you. His lordship and I shall be glad to have your explanation of how you came

to permit that departure."

"Permit?" quoth Blood. "I ordered it."

The answer left Bishop speechless for a moment. Then:

"You ordered it?" he said in accents of unbelief, whilst Lord Julian raised his eyebrows. "'Swounds! Perhaps you'll explain yourself? Whither has Wolverstone gone?"

"To Tortuga. He's gone with a message to the officers commanding the other four ships of the fleet that is awaiting me there, telling them what's happened and why they are no longer to expect me."

Bishop's great face seemed to swell and its high colour to deepen. He swung to Lord Julian.

"You hear that, my lord? Deliberately he has let Wolverstone loose upon the seas again—Wolverstone, the worst of all that gang of pirates after himself. I hope your lordship begins at last to perceive the folly of granting the King's commission to such a man as this against all my counsels. Why, this thing is... it's just mutiny... treason! By God! It's matter for a court-martial."

"Will you cease your blather of mutiny and treason and courts martial?" Blood put on his hat, and sat down unbidden. "I have sent Wolverstone to inform Hagthorpe and Christian and Yberville and the rest of my lads that they've one clear month in which to follow my example, quit piracy, and get back to their boucans or their logwood, or else sail out of the Caribbean Sea. That's what I've done."

"But the men?" his lordship interposed in his level, cultured voice. "This hundred men that Wolverstone has taken with him?"

"They are those of my crew who have no taste for King James's service, and have preferred to seek work of other kinds. It was in our

compact, my lord, that there should be no constraining of my men."

"I don't remember it," said his lordship, with sincerity.

Blood looked at him in surprise. Then he shrugged. "Faith, I'm not to blame for your lordship's poor memory. I say that it was so; and I don't lie. I've never found it necessary. In any case ye couldn't have supposed that I should consent to anything different."

And then the Deputy-Governor exploded.

"You have given those damned rascals in Tortuga this warning so that they may escape! That is what you have done. That is how you abuse the commission that has saved your own neck!"

Peter Blood considered him steadily, his face impassive. "I will remind you," he said at last, very quietly, "that the object in view was—leaving out of account your own appetites which, as every one knows, are just those of a hangman—to rid the Caribbean of buccaneers. Now, I've taken the most effective way of accomplishing that object. The knowledge that I've entered the King's service should in itself go far towards disbanding the fleet of which I was until lately the admiral."

"I see!" sneered the Deputy-Governor malevolently. "And if it does not?"

"It will be time enough then to consider what else is to be done."

Lord Julian forestalled a fresh outburst on the part of Bishop.

"It is possible," he said, "that my Lord Sunderland will be satisfied, provided that the solution is such as you promise."

It was a courteous, conciliatory speech. Urged by friendliness towards Blood and understanding of the difficult position in which the buccaneer found himself, his lordship was disposed to take his stand

upon the letter of his instructions. Therefore he now held out a friendly hand to help him over the latest and most difficult obstacle which Blood himself had enabled Bishop to place in the way of his redemption. Unfortunately the last person from whom Peter Blood desired assistance at that moment was this young nobleman, whom he regarded with the jaundiced eyes of jealousy.

"Anyway," he answered, with a suggestion of defiance and more than a suggestion of a sneer, "it's the most ye should expect from me, and certainly it's the most ye'll get."

His lordship frowned, and dabbed his lips with a handkerchief.

"I don't think that I quite like the way you put it. Indeed, upon reflection, Captain Blood, I am sure that I do not."

"I am sorry for that, so I am," said Blood impudently. "But there it is. I'm not on that account concerned to modify it."

His lordship's pale eyes opened a little wider. Languidly he raised his eyebrows.

"Ah!" he said. "You're a prodigiously uncivil fellow. You disappoint me, sir. I had formed the notion that you might be a gentleman."

"And that's not your lordship's only mistake," Bishop cut in. "You made a worse when you gave him the King's commission, and so sheltered the rascal from the gallows I had prepared for him in Port Royal."

"Aye—but the worst mistake of all in this matter of commissions," said Blood to his lordship, "was the one that trade this greasy slaver Deputy-Governor of Jamaica instead of its hangman, which is the office for which he's by nature fitted."

"Captain Blood!" said his lordship sharply in reproof. "Upon my soul and honour, sir, you go much too far. You are...."

But here Bishop interrupted him. He had heaved himself to his feet, at last, and was venting his fury in unprintable abuse. Captain Blood, who had also risen, stood apparently impassive, for the storm to spend itself. When at last this happened, he addressed himself quietly to Lord Julian, as if Colonel Bishop had not spoken.

"Your lordship was about to say?" he asked, with challenging smoothness.

But his lordship had by now recovered his habitual composure, and was again disposed to be conciliatory. He laughed and shrugged.

"Faith! here's a deal of unnecessary heat," said he. "And God knows this plaguey climate provides enough of that. Perhaps, Colonel Bishop, you are a little uncompromising; and you, sir, are certainly a deal too peppery. I have said, speaking on behalf of my Lord Sunderland, that I am content to await the result of your experiment."

But Bishop's fury had by now reached a stage in which it was not to be restrained.

"Are you, indeed?" he roared. "Well, then, I am not. This is a matter in which your lordship must allow me to be the better judge. And, anyhow, I'll take the risk of acting on my own responsibility."

Lord Julian abandoned the struggle. He smiled wearily, shrugged, and waved a hand in implied resignation. The Deputy-Governor stormed on.

"Since my lord here has given you a commission, I can't regularly deal with you out of hand for piracy as you deserve. But you shall answer before a court-martial for your action in the matter of Wolverstone, and take the consequences."

"I see," said Blood. "Now we come to it. And it's yourself as

Deputy-Governor will preside over that same court-martial. So that ye can wipe off old scores by hanging me, it's little ye care how ye do it!" He laughed, and added: "Praemonitus, praemunitus."

"What shall that mean?" quoth Lord Julian sharply.

"I had imagined that your lordship would have had some education."

He was at pains, you see, to be provocative.

"It's not the literal meaning I am asking, sir," said Lord Julian, with frosty dignity. "I want to know what you desire me to understand?"

"I'll leave your lordship guessing," said Blood. "And I'll be wishing ye both a very good day." He swept off his feathered hat, and made them a leg very elegantly.

"Before you go," said Bishop, "and to save you from any idle rashness, I'll tell you that the Harbour-Master and the Commandant have their orders. You don't leave Port Royal, my fine gallows bird. Damme, I mean to provide you with permanent moorings here, in Execution Dock."

Peter Blood stiffened, and his vivid blue eyes stabbed the bloated face of his enemy. He passed his long cane into his left hand, and with his right thrust negligently into the breast of his doublet, he swung to Lord Julian, who was thoughtfully frowning.

"Your lordship, I think, promised me immunity from this."

"What I may have promised," said his lordship, "your own conduct makes it difficult to perform." He rose. "You did me a service, Captain Blood, and I had hoped that we might be friends. But since you prefer to have it otherwise...." He shrugged, and waved a hand towards the Deputy-Governor.

Blood completed the sentence in his own way:

"Ye mean that ye haven't the strength of character to resist the urgings of a bully." He was apparently at his ease, and actually smiling. "Well, well—as I said before—praemonitus, praemunitus. I'm afraid that ye're no scholar, Bishop, or ye'd know that I means forewarned, forearmed."

"Forewarned? Ha!" Bishop almost snarled. "The warning comes a little late. You do not leave this house." He took a step in the direction of the doorway, and raised his voice. "Ho there..." he was beginning to call.

Then with a sudden audible catch in his breath, he stopped short. Captain Blood's right hand had reemerged from the breast of his doublet, bringing with it a long pistol with silver mountings richly chased, which he levelled within a foot of the Deputy-Governor's head.

"And forearmed," said he. "Don't stir from where you are, my lord, or there may be an accident."

And my lord, who had been moving to Bishop's assistance, stood instantly arrested. Chap-fallen, with much of his high colour suddenly departed, the Deputy-Governor was swaying on unsteady legs. Peter Blood considered him with a grimness that increased his panic.

"I marvel that I don't pistol you without more ado, ye fat blackguard. If I don't, it's for the same reason that once before I gave ye your life when it was forfeit. Ye're not aware of the reason, to be sure; but it may comfort ye to know that it exists. At the same time I'll warn ye not to put too heavy a strain on my generosity, which resides at the moment in my trigger-finger. Ye mean to hang me, and since that's the worst that can happen to me anyway, you'll realize that I'll not boggle at increasing the account by spilling your nasty blood." He

cast his cane from him, thus disengaging his left hand. "Be good enough to give me your arm, Colonel Bishop. Come, come, man, your arm."

Under the compulsion of that sharp tone, those resolute eyes, and that gleaming pistol, Bishop obeyed without demur. His recent foul volubility was stemmed. He could not trust himself to speak. Captain Blood tucked his left arm through the Deputy-Governor's proffered right. Then he thrust his own right hand with its pistol back into the breast of his doublet.

"Though invisible, it's aiming at ye none the less, and I give you my word of honour that I'll shoot ye dead upon the very least provocation, whether that provocation is yours or another's. Ye'll bear that in mind, Lord Julian. And now, ye greasy hangman, step out as brisk and lively as ye can, and behave as naturally as ye may, or it's the black stream of Cocytus ye'll be contemplating." Arm in arm they passed through the house, and down the garden, where Arabella lingered, awaiting Peter Blood's return.

Consideration of his parting words had brought her first turmoil of mind, then a clear perception of what might be indeed the truth of the death of Levasseur. She perceived that the particular inference drawn from it might similarly have been drawn from Blood's deliverance of Mary Traill. When a man so risks his life for a woman, the rest is easily assumed. For the men who will take such risks without hope of personal gain are few. Blood was of those few, as he had proved in the case of Mary Traill.

It needed no further assurances of his to convince her that she had done him a monstrous injustice. She remembered words he had used—words overheard aboard his ship (which he had named the Arabella) on the night of her deliverance from the Spanish admiral; words he had uttered when she had approved his acceptance of the King's commission; the words he had spoken to her that very

morning, which had but served to move her indignation. All these assumed a fresh meaning in her mind, delivered now from its unwarranted preconceptions.

Therefore she lingered there in the garden, awaiting his return that she might make amends; that she might set a term to all misunderstanding. In impatience she awaited him. Yet her patience, it seemed, was to be tested further. For when at last he came, it was in company—unusually close and intimate company—with her uncle. In vexation she realized that explanations must be postponed. Could she have guessed the extent of that postponement, vexation would have been changed into despair.

He passed, with his companion, from that fragrant garden into the courtyard of the fort. Here the Commandant, who had been instructed to hold himself in readiness with the necessary men against the need to effect the arrest of Captain Blood, was amazed by the curious spectacle of the Deputy-Governor of Jamaica strolling forth arm in arm and apparently on the friendliest terms with the intended prisoner. For as they went, Blood was chatting and laughing briskly.

They passed out of the gates unchallenged, and so came to the mole where the cock-boat from the *Arabella* was waiting. They took their places side by side in the stern sheets, and were pulled away together, always very close and friendly, to the great red ship where Jeremy Pitt so anxiously awaited news.

You conceive the master's amazement to see the Deputy-Governor come toiling up the entrance ladder, with Blood following very close behind him.

"Sure, I walked into a trap, as ye feared, Jeremy," Blood hailed him. "But I walked out again, and fetched the trapper with me. He loves his life, does this fat rascal."

Colonel Bishop stood in the waist, his great face blanched to the colour of clay, his mouth loose, almost afraid to look at the sturdy ruffians who lounged about the shot-rack on the main hatch.

Blood shouted an order to the bo'sun, who was leaning against the forecastle bulkhead.

"Throw me a rope with a running noose over the yardarm there, against the need of it. Now, don't be alarming yourself, Colonel, darling. It's no more than a provision against your being unreasonable, which I am sure ye'll not be. We'll talk the matter over whiles we are dining, for I trust ye'll not refuse to honour my table by your company."

He led away the will-less, cowed bully to the great cabin. Benjamin, the negro steward, in white drawers and cotton shirt, made haste by his command to serve dinner.

Colonel Bishop collapsed on the locker under the stern ports, and spoke now for the first time.

"May I ask wha... what are your intentions?" he quavered.

"Why, nothing sinister, Colonel. Although ye deserve nothing less than that same rope and yardarm, I assure you that it's to be employed only as a last resource. Ye've said his lordship made a mistake when he handed me the commission which the Secretary of State did me the honour to design for me. I'm disposed to agree with you; so I'll take to the sea again. *Cras ingens iterabimus aequor*. It's the fine Latin scholar ye'll be when I've done with ye. I'll be getting back to Tortuga and my buccaneers, who at least are honest, decent fellows. So I've fetched ye aboard as a hostage."

"My God!" groaned the Deputy-Governor. "Ye... ye never mean that ye'll carry me to Tortuga!"

Blood laughed outright. "Oh, I'd never serve ye such a bad turn as that. No, no. All I want is that ye ensure my safe departure from Port Royal. And, if ye're reasonable, I'll not even trouble you to swim for it this time. Ye've given certain orders to your Harbour-Master, and others to the Commandant of your plaguey fort. Ye'll be so good as to send for them both aboard here, and inform them in my presence that the Arabella is leaving this afternoon on the King's service and is to pass out unmolested. And so as to make quite sure of their obedience, they shall go a little voyage with us, themselves. Here's what you require. Now write—unless you prefer the yardarm."

Colonel Bishop heaved himself up in a pet. "You constrain me with violence..." he was beginning.

Blood smoothly interrupted him.

"Sure, now, I am not constraining you at all. I'm giving you a perfectly free choice between the pen and the rope. It's a matter for yourself entirely."

Bishop glared at him; then shrugging heavily, he took up the pen and sat down at the table. In an unsteady hand he wrote that summons to his officers. Blood despatched it ashore; and then bade his unwilling guest to table.

"I trust, Colonel, your appetite is as stout as usual."

The wretched Bishop took the seat to which he was commanded. As for eating, however, that was not easy to a man in his position; nor did Blood press him. The Captain, himself, fell to with a good appetite. But before he was midway through the meal came Hayton to inform him that Lord Julian Wade had just come aboard, and was asking to see him instantly.

"I was expecting him," said Blood. "Fetch him in."

Lord Julian came. He was very stem and dignified. His eyes took in the situation at a glance, as Captain Blood rose to greet him.

"It's mighty friendly of you to have joined us, my lord."

"Captain Blood," said his lordship with asperity, "I find your humour a little forced. I don't know what may be your intentions; but I wonder do you realize the risks you are running."

"And I wonder does your lordship realize the risk to yourself in following us aboard as I had counted that you would."

"What shall that mean, sir?"

Blood signalled to Benjamin, who was standing behind Bishop.

"Set a chair for his lordship. Hayton, send his lordship's boat ashore. Tell them he'll not be returning yet awhile."

"What's that?" cried his lordship. "Blister me! D'ye mean to detain me? Are ye mad?"

"Better wait, Hayton, in case his lordship should turn violent," said Blood. "You, Benjamin, you heard the message. Deliver it."

"Will you tell me what you intend, sir?" demanded his lordship, quivering with anger.

"Just to make myself and my lads here safe from Colonel Bishop's gallows. I've said that I trusted to your gallantry not to leave him in the lurch, but to follow him hither, and there's a note from his hand gone ashore to summon the Harbour-Master and the Commandant of the fort. Once they are aboard, I shall have all the hostages I need for our safety."

"You scoundrel!" said his lordship through his teeth.

"Sure, now, that's entirely a matter of the point of view," said Blood.

"Ordinarily it isn't the kind of name I could suffer any man to apply to me. Still, considering that ye willingly did me a service once, and that ye're likely unwillingly to do me another now, I'll overlook your discourtesy, so I will."

His lordship laughed. "You fool," he said. "Do you dream that I came aboard your pirate ship without taking my measures? I informed the Commandant of exactly how you had compelled Colonel Bishop to accompany you. Judge now whether he or the Harbour-Master will obey the summons, or whether you will be allowed to depart as you imagine."

Blood's face became grave. "I'm sorry for that," said he.

I thought you would be, answered his lordship.

"Oh, but not on my own account. It's the Deputy-Governor there I'm sorry for. D'ye know what Ye've done? Sure, now, ye've very likely hanged him."

"My God!" cried Bishop in a sudden increase of panic.

"If they so much as put a shot across my bows, up goes their Deputy-Governor to the yardarm. Your only hope, Colonel, lies in the fact that I shall send them word of that intention. And so that you may mend as far as you can the harm you have done, it's yourself shall bear them the message, my lord."

"I'll see you damned before I do," fumed his lordship.

"Why, that's unreasonable and unreasoning. But if ye insist, why, another messenger will do as well, and another hostage aboard—as I had originally intended—will make my hand the stronger."

Lord Julian stared at him, realizing exactly what he had refused.

"You'll think better of it now that ye understand?" quoth Blood.

"Aye, in God's name, go, my lord," spluttered Bishop, "and make yourself obeyed. This damned pirate has me by the throat."

His lordship surveyed him with an eye that was not by any means admiring. "Why, if that is your wish..." he began. Then he shrugged, and turned again to Blood.

"I suppose I can trust you that no harm will come to Colonel Bishop if you are allowed to sail?"

"You have my word for it," said Blood. "And also that I shall put him safely ashore again without delay."

Lord Julian bowed stiffly to the cowering Deputy-Governor. "You understand, sir, that I do as you desire," he said coldly.

"Aye, man, aye!" Bishop assented hastily.

"Very well." Lord Julian bowed again and took his departure. Blood escorted him to the entrance ladder at the foot of which still swung the Arabella's own cock-boat.

"It's good-bye, my lord," said Blood. "And there's another thing." He proffered a parchment that he had drawn from his pocket. "It's the commission. Bishop was right when he said it was a mistake."

Lord Julian considered him, and considering him his expression softened.

"I am sorry," he said sincerely.

"In other circumstances..." began Blood. "Oh, but there! Ye'll understand. The boat's waiting."

Yet with his foot on the first rung of the ladder, Lord Julian hesitated.

"I still do not perceive—blister me if I do!—why you should not have

found some one else to carry your message to the Commandant, and kept me aboard as an added hostage for his obedience to your wishes."

Blood's vivid eyes looked into the other's that were clear and honest, and he smiled, a little wistfully. A moment he seemed to hesitate. Then he explained himself quite fully.

"Why shouldn't I tell you? It's the same reason that's been urging me to pick a quarrel with you so that I might have the satisfaction of slipping a couple of feet of steel into your vitals. When I accepted your commission, I was moved to think it might redeem me in the eyes of Miss Bishop—for whose sake, as you may have guessed, I took it. But I have discovered that such a thing is beyond accomplishment. I should have known it for a sick man's dream. I have discovered also that if she's choosing you, as I believe she is, she's choosing wisely between us, and that's why I'll not have your life risked by keeping you aboard whilst the message goes by another who might bungle it. And now perhaps ye'll understand."

Lord Julian stared at him bewildered. His long, aristocratic face was very pale.

"My God!" he said. "And you tell me this?"

"I tell you because... Oh, plague on it!—so that ye may tell her; so that she may be made to realize that there's something of the unfortunate gentleman left under the thief and pirate she accounts me, and that her own good is my supreme desire. Knowing that, she may... faith, she may remember me more kindly—if it's only in her prayers. That's all, my lord."

Lord Julian continued to look at the buccaneer in silence. In silence, at last, he held out his hand; and in silence Blood took it.

"I wonder whether you are right," said his lordship, "and whether

you are not the better man."

"Where she is concerned see that you make sure that I am right. Good-bye to you."

Lord Julian wrung his hand in silence, went down the ladder, and was pulled ashore. From the distance he waved to Blood, who stood leaning on the bulwarks watching the receding cock-boat.

The Arabella sailed within the hour, moving lazily before a sluggish breeze. The fort remained silent and there was no movement from the fleet to hinder her departure. Lord Julian had carried the message effectively, and had added to it his own personal commands.

CHAPTER XXIV. WAR

Five miles out at sea from Port Royal, whence the details of the coast of Jamaica were losing their sharpness, the Arabella hove to, and the sloop she had been towing was warped alongside.

Captain Blood escorted his compulsory guest to the head of the ladder. Colonel Bishop, who for two hours and more had been in a state of mortal anxiety, breathed freely at last; and as the tide of his fears receded, so that of his deep-rooted hate of this audacious buccaneer resumed its normal flow. But he practised circumspection. If in his heart he vowed that once back in Port Royal there was no effort he would spare, no nerve he would not strain, to bring Peter Blood to final moorings in Execution Dock, at least he kept that vow strictly to himself.

Peter Blood had no illusions. He was not, and never would be, the complete pirate. There was not another buccaneer in all the Caribbean who would have denied himself the pleasure of stringing Colonel Bishop from the yardarm, and by thus finally stifling the vindictive planter's hatred have increased his own security. But Blood was not of these. Moreover, in the case of Colonel Bishop there was a particular reason for restraint. Because he was Arabella Bishop's uncle, his life must remain sacred to Captain Blood.

And so the Captain smiled into the sallow, bloated face and the little eyes that fixed him with a malevolence not to be dissembled.

"A safe voyage home to you, Colonel, darling," said he in valediction, and from his easy, smiling manner you would never have dreamt of the pain he carried in his breast. "It's the second time ye've served me for a hostage. Ye'll be well advised to avoid a third. I'm not

lucky to you, Colonel, as you should be perceiving."

Jeremy Pitt, the master, lounging at Blood's elbow, looked darkly upon the departure of the Deputy-Governor. Behind them a little mob of grim, stalwart, sun-tanned buccaneers were restrained from cracking Bishop like a flea only by their submission to the dominant will of their leader. They had learnt from Pitt while yet in Port Royal of their Captain's danger, and whilst as ready as he to throw over the King's service which had been thrust upon them, yet they resented the manner in which this had been rendered necessary, and they marvelled now at Blood's restraint where Bishop was concerned. The Deputy-Governor looked round and met the lowering hostile glances of those fierce eyes. Instinct warned him that his life at that moment was held precariously, that an injudicious word might precipitate an explosion of hatred from which no human power could save him. Therefore he said nothing. He inclined his head in silence to the Captain, and went blundering and stumbling in his haste down that ladder to the sloop and its waiting negro crew.

They pushed off the craft from the red hull of the Arabella, bent to their sweeps, then, hoisting sail, headed back for Port Royal, intent upon reaching it before darkness should come down upon them. And Bishop, the great bulk of him huddled in the stem sheets, sat silent, his black brows knitted, his coarse lips pursed, malevolence and vindictiveness so whelming now his recent panic that he forgot his near escape of the yardarm and the running noose.

On the mole at Port Royal, under the low, embattled wall of the fort, Major Mallard and Lord Julian waited to receive him, and it was with infinite relief that they assisted him from the sloop.

Major Mallard was disposed to be apologetic.

"Glad to see you safe, sir," said he. "I'd have sunk Blood's ship in spite of your excellency's being aboard but for your own orders by

Lord Julian, and his lordship's assurance that he had Blood's word for it that no harm should come to you so that no harm came to him. I'll confess I thought it rash of his lordship to accept the word of a damned pirate...."

"I have found it as good as another's," said his lordship, cropping the Major's too eager eloquence. He spoke with an unusual degree of that frosty dignity he could assume upon occasion. The fact is that his lordship was in an exceedingly bad humour. Having written jubilantly home to the Secretary of State that his mission had succeeded, he was now faced with the necessity of writing again to confess that this success had been ephemeral. And because Major Mallard's crisp mustachios were lifted by a sneer at the notion of a buccaneer's word being acceptable, he added still more sharply: "My justification is here in the person of Colonel Bishop safely returned. As against that, sir, your opinion does not weigh for very much. You should realize it."

"Oh, as your lordship says." Major Mallard's manner was tinged with irony. "To be sure, here is the Colonel safe and sound. And out yonder is Captain Blood, also safe and sound, to begin his piratical ravages all over again."

"I do not propose to discuss the reasons with you, Major Mallard."

"And, anyway, it's not for long," growled the Colonel, finding speech at last. "No, by...." He emphasized the assurance by an unprintable oath. "If I spend the last shilling of my fortune and the last ship of the Jamaica fleet, I'll have that rascal in a hempen necktie before I rest. And I'll not be long about it." He had empurpled in his angry vehemence, and the veins of his forehead stood out like whipcord. Then he checked.

"You did well to follow Lord Julian's instructions," he commended the Major. With that he turned from him, and took his lordship by the arm. "Come, my lord. We must take order about this, you and I."

They went off together, skirting the redoubt, and so through courtyard and garden to the house where Arabella waited anxiously. The sight of her uncle brought her infinite relief, not only on his own account, but on account also of Captain Blood.

"You took a great risk, sir," she gravely told Lord Julian after the ordinary greetings had been exchanged.

But Lord Julian answered her as he had answered Major Mallard. "There was no risk, ma'am."

She looked at him in some astonishment. His long, aristocratic face wore a more melancholy, pensive air than usual. He answered the enquiry in her glance:

"So that Blood's ship were allowed to pass the fort, no harm could come to Colonel Bishop. Blood pledged me his word for that."

A faint smile broke the set of her lips, which hitherto had been wistful, and a little colour tinged her cheeks. She would have pursued the subject, but the Deputy-Governor's mood did not permit it. He sneered and snorted at the notion of Blood's word being good for anything, forgetting that he owed to it his own preservation at that moment.

At supper, and for long thereafter he talked of nothing but Blood—of how he would lay him by the heels, and what hideous things he would perform upon his body. And as he drank heavily the while, his speech became increasingly gross and his threats increasingly horrible; until in the end Arabella withdrew, white-faced and almost on the verge of tears. It was not often that Bishop revealed himself to his niece. Oddly enough, this coarse, overbearing planter went in a certain awe of that slim girl. It was as if she had inherited from her father the respect in which he had always been held by his brother.

Lord Julian, who began to find Bishop disgusting beyond

endurance, excused himself soon after, and went in quest of the lady. He had yet to deliver the message from Captain Blood, and this, he thought, would be his opportunity. But Miss Bishop had retired for the night, and Lord Julian must curb his impatience—it amounted by now to nothing less—until the morrow.

Very early next morning, before the heat of the day came to render the open intolerable to his lordship, he espied her from his window moving amid the azaleas in the garden. It was a fitting setting for one who was still as much a delightful novelty to him in womanhood as was the azalea among flowers. He hurried forth to join her, and when, aroused from her pensiveness, she had given him a good-morrow, smiling and frank, he explained himself by the announcement that he bore her a message from Captain Blood.

He observed her little start and the slight quiver of her lips, and observed thereafter not only her pallor and the shadowy rings about her eyes, but also that unusually wistful air which last night had escaped his notice.

They moved out of the open to one of the terraces, where a pergola of orange-trees provided a shaded sauntering space that was at once cool and fragrant. As they went, he considered her admiringly, and marvelled at himself that it should have taken him so long fully to realize her slim, unusual grace, and to find her, as he now did, so entirely desirable, a woman whose charm must irradiate all the life of a man, and touch its commonplaces into magic.

He noted the sheen of her red-brown hair, and how gracefully one of its heavy ringlets coiled upon her slender, milk-white neck. She wore a gown of shimmering grey silk, and a scarlet rose, fresh-gathered, was pinned at her breast like a splash of blood. Always thereafter when he thought of her it was as he saw her at that moment, as never, I think, until that moment had he seen her.

In silence they paced on a little way into the green shade. Then she paused and faced him.

"You said something of a message, sir," she reminded him, thus betraying some of her impatience.

He fingered the ringlets of his periwig, a little embarrassed how to deliver himself, considering how he should begin. "He desired me," he said at last, "to give you a message that should prove to you that there is still something left in him of the unfortunate gentleman that... that., for which once you knew him."

"That is not now necessary," said she very gravely. He misunderstood her, of course, knowing nothing of the enlightenment that yesterday had come to her.

"I think..., nay, I know that you do him an injustice," said he.

Her hazel eyes continued to regard him.

"If you will deliver the message, it may enable me to judge."

To him, this was confusing. He did not immediately answer. He found that he had not sufficiently considered the terms he should employ, and the matter, after all, was of an exceeding delicacy, demanding delicate handling. It was not so much that he was concerned to deliver a message as to render it a vehicle by which to plead his own cause. Lord Julian, well versed in the lore of womankind and usually at his ease with ladies of the beau-monde, found himself oddly constrained before this frank and unsophisticated niece of a colonial planter.

They moved on in silence and as if by common consent towards the brilliant sunshine where the pergola was intersected by the avenue leading upwards to the house. Across this patch of light fluttered a gorgeous butterfly, that was like black and scarlet velvet

and large as a man's hand. His lordship's brooding eyes followed it out of sight before he answered.

"It is not easy. Stab me, it is not. He was a man who deserved well. And amongst us we have marred his chances: your uncle, because he could not forget his rancour; you, because... because having told him that in the King's service he would find his redemption of what was past, you would not afterwards admit to him that he was so redeemed. And this, although concern to rescue you was the chief motive of his embracing that same service."

She had turned her shoulder to him so that he should not see her face.

"I know. I know now," she said softly. Then after a pause she added the question: "And you? What part has your lordship had in this—that you should incriminate yourself with us?"

"My part?" Again he hesitated, then plunged recklessly on, as men do when determined to perform a thing they fear. "If I understood him aright, if he understood aright, himself, my part, though entirely passive, was none the less effective. I implore you to observe that I but report his own words. I say nothing for myself." His lordship's unusual nervousness was steadily increasing. "He thought, then—so he told me—that my presence here had contributed to his inability to redeem himself in your sight; and unless he were so redeemed, then was redemption nothing."

She faced him fully, a frown of perplexity bringing her brows together above her troubled eyes.

"He thought that you had contributed?" she echoed. It was clear she asked for enlightenment. He plunged on to afford it her, his glance a little scared, his cheeks flushing.

"Aye, and he said so in terms which told me something that I hope

above all things, and yet dare not believe, for, God knows, I am no coxcomb, Arabella. He said... but first let me tell you how I was placed. I had gone aboard his ship to demand the instant surrender of your uncle whom he held captive. He laughed at me. Colonel Bishop should be a hostage for his safety. By rashly venturing aboard his ship, I afforded him in my own person yet another hostage as valuable at least as Colonel Bishop. Yet he bade me depart; not from the fear of consequences, for he is above fear, nor from any personal esteem for me whom he confessed that he had come to find detestable; and this for the very reason that made him concerned for my safety."

"I do not understand," she said, as he paused. "Is not that a contradiction in itself?"

"It seems so only. The fact is, Arabella, this unfortunate man has the... the temerity to love you."

She cried out at that, and clutched her breast whose calm was suddenly disturbed. Her eyes dilated as she stared at him.

"I... I've startled you," said he, with concern. "I feared I should. But it was necessary so that you may understand."

"Go on," she bade him.

"Well, then: he saw in me one who made it impossible that he should win you—so he said. Therefore he could with satisfaction have killed me. But because my death might cause you pain, because your happiness was the thing that above all things he desired, he surrendered that part of his guarantee of safety which my person afforded him. If his departure should be hindered, and I should lose my life in what might follow, there was the risk that... that you might mourn me. That risk he would not take. Him you deemed a thief and a pirate, he said, and added that—I am giving you his own words always—if in choosing between us two, your choice, as he believed,

would fall on me, then were you in his opinion choosing wisely. Because of that he bade me leave his ship, and had me put ashore."

She looked at him with eyes that were aswim with tears. He took a step towards her, a catch in his breath, his hand held out.

"Was he right, Arabella? My life's happiness hangs upon your answer."

But she continued silently to regard him with those tear-laden eyes, without speaking, and until she spoke he dared not advance farther.

A doubt, a tormenting doubt beset him. When presently she spoke, he saw how true had been the instinct of which that doubt was born, for her words revealed the fact that of all that he had said the only thing that had touched her consciousness and absorbed it from all other considerations was Blood's conduct as it regarded herself.

"He said that!" she cried. "He did that! Oh!" She turned away, and through the slender, clustering trunks of the bordering orange-trees she looked out across the glittering waters of the great harbour to the distant hills. Thus for a little while, my lord standing stiffly, fearfully, waiting for fuller revelation of her mind. At last it came, slowly, deliberately, in a voice that at moments was half suffocated. "Last night when my uncle displayed his rancour and his evil rage, it began to be borne in upon me that such vindictiveness can belong only to those who have wronged. It is the frenzy into which men whip themselves to justify an evil passion. I must have known then, if I had not already learnt it, that I had been too credulous of all the unspeakable things attributed to Peter Blood. Yesterday I had his own explanation of that tale of Levasseur that you heard in St. Nicholas. And now this... this but gives me confirmation of his truth and worth. To a scoundrel such as I was too readily brought to believe him, the act of which you have just told me would have been impossible."

"That is my own opinion," said his lordship gently.

"It must be. But even if it were not, that would now weigh for nothing. What weighs—oh, so heavily and bitterly—is the thought that but for the words in which yesterday I repelled him, he might have been saved. If only I could have spoken to him again before he went! I waited for him; but my uncle was with him, and I had no suspicion that he was going away again. And now he is lost—back at his outlawry and piracy, in which ultimately he will be taken and destroyed. And the fault is mine—mine!"

"What are you saying? The only agents were your uncle's hostility and his own obstinacy which would not study compromise. You must not blame yourself for anything."

She swung to him with some impatience, her eyes aswim in tears. "You can say that, and in spite of his message, which in itself tells how much I was to blame! It was my treatment of him, the epithets I cast at him that drove him. So much he has told you. I know it to be true."

"You have no cause for shame," said he. "As for your sorrow—why, if it will afford you solace—you may still count on me to do what man can to rescue him from this position."

She caught her breath.

"You will do that!" she cried with sudden eager hopefulness. "You promise?" She held out her hand to him impulsively. He took it in both his own.

"I promise," he answered her. And then, retaining still the hand she had surrendered to him—"Arabella," he said very gently, "there is still this other matter upon which you have not answered me."

"This other matter?" Was he mad, she wondered.

Could any other matter signify in such a moment.

"This matter that concerns myself; and all my future, oh, so very closely. This thing that Blood believed, that prompted him..., that ... that you are not indifferent to me." He saw the fair face change colour and grow troubled once more.

"Indifferent to you?" said she. "Why, no. We have been good friends; we shall continue so, I hope, my lord."

"Friends! Good friends?" He was between dismay and bitterness. "It is not your friendship only that I ask, Arabella. You heard what I said, what I reported. You will not say that Peter Blood was wrong?"

Gently she sought to disengage her hand, the trouble in her face increasing. A moment he resisted; then, realizing what he did, he set her free.

"Arabella!" he cried on a note of sudden pain.

"I have friendship for you, my lord. But only friendship." His castle of hopes came clattering down about him, leaving him a little stunned. As he had said, he was no coxcomb. Yet there was something that he did not understand. She confessed to friendship, and it was in his power to offer her a great position, one to which she, a colonial planter's niece, however wealthy, could never have aspired even in her dreams. This she rejected, yet spoke of friendship. Peter Blood had been mistaken, then. How far had he been mistaken? Had he been as mistaken in her feelings towards himself as he obviously was in her feelings towards his lordship? In that case ... His reflections broke short. To speculate was to wound himself in vain. He must know. Therefore he asked her with grim frankness:

"Is it Peter Blood?"

"Peter Blood?" she echoed. At first she did not understand the purport of his question. When understanding came, a flush suffused

her face.

"I do not know," she said, faltering a little.

This was hardly a truthful answer. For, as if an obscuring veil had suddenly been rent that morning, she was permitted at last to see Peter Blood in his true relations to other men, and that sight vouchsafed her twenty-four hours too late, filled her with pity and regret and yearning.

Lord Julian knew enough of women to be left in no further doubt. He bowed his head so that she might not see the anger in his eyes, for as a man of honour he took shame in that anger which as a human being he could not repress.

And because Nature in him was stronger—as it is in most of us—than training, Lord Julian from that moment began, almost in spite of himself, to practise something that was akin to villainy. I regret to chronicle it of one for whom—if I have done him any sort of justice—you should have been conceiving some esteem. But the truth is that the lingering remains of the regard in which he had held Peter Blood were choked by the desire to supplant and destroy a rival. He had passed his word to Arabella that he would use his powerful influence on Blood's behalf. I deplore to set it down that not only did he forget his pledge, but secretly set himself to aid and abet Arabella's uncle in the plans he laid for the trapping and undoing of the buccaneer. He might reasonably have urged—had he been taxed with it—that he conducted himself precisely as his duty demanded. But to that he might have been answered that duty with him was but the slave of jealousy in this.

When the Jamaica fleet put to sea some few days later, Lord Julian sailed with Colonel Bishop in Vice-Admiral Craufurd's flagship. Not only was there no need for either of them to go, but the Deputy-Governor's duties actually demanded that he should remain ashore,

whilst Lord Julian, as we know, was a useless man aboard a ship. Yet both set out to hunt Captain Blood, each making of his duty a pretext for the satisfaction of personal aims; and that common purpose became a link between them, binding them in a sort of friendship that must otherwise have been impossible between men so dissimilar in breeding and in aspirations.

The hunt was up. They cruised awhile off Hispaniola, watching the Windward Passage, and suffering the discomforts of the rainy season which had now set in. But they cruised in vain, and after a month of it, returned empty-handed to Port Royal, there to find awaiting them the most disquieting news from the Old World.

The megalomania of Louis XIV had set Europe in a blaze of war. The French legionaries were ravaging the Rhine provinces, and Spain had joined the nations leagued to defend themselves from the wild ambitions of the King of France. And there was worse than this: there were rumours of civil war in England, where the people had grown weary of the bigoted tyranny of King James. It was reported that William of Orange had been invited to come over.

Weeks passed, and every ship from home brought additional news. William had crossed to England, and in March of that year 1689 they learnt in Jamaica that he had accepted the crown and that James had thrown himself into the arms of France for rehabilitation.

To a kinsman of Sunderland's this was disquieting news, indeed. It was followed by letters from King William's Secretary of State informing Colonel Bishop that there was war with France, and that in view of its effect upon the Colonies a Governor-General was coming out to the West Indies in the person of Lord Willoughby, and that with him came a squadron under the command of Admiral van der Kuylen to reenforce the Jamaica fleet against eventualities.

Bishop realized that this must mean the end of his supreme

authority, even though he should continue in Port Royal as Deputy-Governor. Lord Julian, in the lack of direct news to himself, did not know what it might mean to him. But he had been very close and confidential with Colonel Bishop regarding his hopes of Arabella, and Colonel Bishop more than ever, now that political events put him in danger of being retired, was anxious to enjoy the advantages of having a man of Lord Julian's eminence for his relative.

They came to a complete understanding in the matter, and Lord Julian disclosed all that he knew.

"There is one obstacle in our path," said he. "Captain Blood. The girl is in love with him."

"Ye're surely mad!" cried Bishop, when he had recovered speech.

"You are justified of the assumption," said his lordship dolefully. "But I happen to be sane, and to speak with knowledge."

"With knowledge?"

"Arabella herself has confessed it to me."

"The brazen baggage! By God, I'll bring her to her senses." It was the slave-driver speaking, the man who governed with a whip.

"Don't be a fool, Bishop." His lordship's contempt did more than any argument to calm the Colonel. "That's not the way with a girl of Arabella's spirit. Unless you want to wreck my chances for all time, you'll hold your tongue, and not interfere at all."

"Not interfere? My God, what, then?"

"Listen, man. She has a constant mind. I don't think you know your niece. As long as Blood lives, she will wait for him."

"Then with Blood dead, perhaps she will come to her silly senses."

"Now you begin to show intelligence," Lord Julian commended him. "That is the first essential step."

"And here is our chance to take it." Bishop warmed to a sort of enthusiasm. "This war with France removes all restrictions in the matter of Tortuga. We are free to invest it in the service of the Crown. A victory there and we establish ourselves in the favour of this new government."

"Ah!" said Lord Julian, and he pulled thoughtfully at his lip.

"I see that you understand," Bishop laughed coarsely. "Two birds with one stone, eh? We'll hunt this rascal in his lair, right under the beard of the King of France, and we'll take him this time, if we reduce Tortuga to a heap of ashes."

On that expedition they sailed two days later—which would be some three months after Blood's departure—taking every ship of the fleet, and several lesser vessels as auxiliaries. To Arabella and the world in general it was given out that they were going to raid French Hispaniola, which was really the only expedition that could have afforded Colonel Bishop any sort of justification for leaving Jamaica at all at such a time. His sense of duty, indeed, should have kept him fast in Port Royal; but his sense of duty was smothered in hatred—that most fruitless and corruptive of all the emotions. In the great cabin of Vice-Admiral Craufurd's flagship, the *Imperator*, the Deputy-Governor got drunk that night to celebrate his conviction that the sands of Captain Blood's career were running out.

CHAPTER XXV. THE SERVICE OF KING LOUIS

Meanwhile, some three months before Colonel Bishop set out to reduce Tortuga, Captain Blood, bearing hell in his soul, had blown into its rockbound harbour ahead of the winter gales, and two days ahead of the frigate in which Wolverstone had sailed from Port Royal a day before him.

In that snug anchorage he found his fleet awaiting him—the four ships which had been separated in that gale off the Lesser Antilles, and some seven hundred men composing their crews. Because they had been beginning to grow anxious on his behalf, they gave him the greater welcome. Guns were fired in his honour and the ships made themselves gay with bunting. The town, aroused by all this noise in the harbour, emptied itself upon the jetty, and a vast crowd of men and women of all creeds and nationalities collected there to be present at the coming ashore of the great buccaneer.

Ashore he went, probably for no other reason than to obey the general expectation. His mood was taciturn; his face grim and sneering. Let Wolverstone arrive, as presently he would, and all this hero-worship would turn to execration.

His captains, Hagthorpe, Christian, and Yberville, were on the jetty to receive him, and with them were some hundreds of his buccaneers. He cut short their greetings, and when they plagued him with questions of where he had tarried, he bade them await the coming of Wolverstone, who would satisfy their curiosity to a surfeit. On that he shook them off, and shouldered his way through that

heterogeneous throng that was composed of bustling traders of several nations—English, French, and Dutch—of planters and of seamen of various degrees, of buccaneers who were fruit-selling half-castes, negro slaves, some doll-tearsheets and dunghill-queans from the Old World, and all the other types of the human family that converted the quays of Cayona into a disreputable image of Babel.

Winning clear at last, and after difficulties, Captain Blood took his way alone to the fine house of M. d'Ogeron, there to pay his respects to his friends, the Governor and the Governor's family.

At first the buccaneers jumped to the conclusion that Wolverstone was following with some rare prize of war, but gradually from the reduced crew of the *Arabella* a very different tale leaked out to stem their satisfaction and convert it into perplexity. Partly out of loyalty to their captain, partly because they perceived that if he was guilty of defection they were guilty with him, and partly because being simple, sturdy men of their hands, they were themselves in the main a little confused as to what really had happened, the crew of the *Arabella* practised reticence with their brethren in Tortuga during those two days before Wolverstone's arrival. But they were not reticent enough to prevent the circulation of certain uneasy rumours and extravagant stories of discreditable adventures—discreditable, that is, from the buccaneering point of view—of which Captain Blood had been guilty.

But that Wolverstone came when he did, it is possible that there would have been an explosion. When, however, the *Old Wolf* cast anchor in the bay two days later, it was to him all turned for the explanation they were about to demand of Blood.

Now Wolverstone had only one eye; but he saw a deal more with that one eye than do most men with two; and despite his grizzled head—so picturesquely swathed in a green and scarlet turban—he had the sound heart of a boy, and in that heart much love for Peter Blood.

The sight of the Arabella at anchor in the bay had at first amazed him as he sailed round the rocky headland that bore the fort. He rubbed his single eye clear of any deceiving film and looked again. Still he could not believe what it saw. And then a voice at his elbow—the voice of Dyke, who had elected to sail with him—assured him that he was not singular in his bewilderment.

"In the name of Heaven, is that the Arabella or is it the ghost of her?"

The Old Wolf rolled his single eye over Dyke, and opened his mouth to speak. Then he closed it again without having spoken; closed it tightly. He had a great gift of caution, especially in matters that he did not understand. That this was the Arabella he could no longer doubt. That being so, he must think before he spoke. What the devil should the Arabella be doing here, when he had left her in Jamaica? And was Captain Blood aboard and in command, or had the remainder of her hands made off with her, leaving the Captain in Port Royal?

Dyke repeated his question. This time Wolverstone answered him.

"Ye've two eyes to see with, and ye ask me, who's only got one, what it is ye see!"

"But I see the Arabella."

"Of course, since there she rides. What else was you expecting?"

"Expecting?" Dyke stared at him, open-mouthed. "Was you expecting to find the Arabella here?"

Wolverstone looked him over in contempt, then laughed and spoke loud enough to be heard by all around him. "Of course. What else?" And he laughed again, a laugh that seemed to Dyke to be calling him a fool. On that Wolverstone turned to give his attention to the

operation of anchoring.

Anon when ashore he was beset by questioning buccaneers, it was from their very questions that he gathered exactly how matters stood, and perceived that either from lack of courage or other motive Blood, himself, had refused to render any account of his doings since the Arabella had separated from her sister ships. Wolverstone congratulated himself upon the discretion he had used with Dyke.

"The Captain was ever a modest man," he explained to Hagthorpe and those others who came crowding round him. "It's not his way to be sounding his own praises. Why, it was like this. We fell in with old Don Miguel, and when we'd scuttled him we took aboard a London pimp sent out by the Secretary of State to offer the Captain the King's commission if so be him'd quit piracy and be o' good behaviour. The Captain damned his soul to hell for answer. And then we fell in wi' the Jamaica fleet and that grey old devil Bishop in command, and there was a sure end to Captain Blood and to every mother's son of us all. So I goes to him, and 'accept this poxy commission,' says I; 'turn King's man and save your neck and ours.' He took me at my word, and the London pimp gave him the King's commission on the spot, and Bishop all but choked hisself with rage when he was told of it. But happened it had, and he was forced to swallow it. We were King's men all, and so into Port Royal we sailed along o' Bishop. But Bishop didn't trust us. He knew too much. But for his lordship, the fellow from London, he'd ha' hanged the Captain, King's commission and all. Blood would ha' slipped out o' Port Royal again that same night. But that hound Bishop had passed the word, and the fort kept a sharp lookout. In the end, though it took a fortnight, Blood bubbled him. He sent me and most o' the men off in a frigate that I bought for the voyage. His game—as he'd secretly told me—was to follow and give chase. Whether that's the game he played or not I can't tell ye; but here he is afore me as I'd expected he would be."

There was a great historian lost in Wolverstone. He had the right imagination that knows just how far it is safe to stray from the truth and just how far to colour it so as to change its shape for his own purposes.

Having delivered himself of his decoction of fact and falsehood, and thereby added one more to the exploits of Peter Blood, he enquired where the Captain might be found. Being informed that he kept his ship, Wolverstone stepped into a boat and went aboard, to report himself, as he put it.

In the great cabin of the Arabella he found Peter Blood alone and very far gone in drink—a condition in which no man ever before remembered to have seen him. As Wolverstone came in, the Captain raised bloodshot eyes to consider him. A moment they sharpened in their gaze as he brought his visitor into focus. Then he laughed, a loose, idiot laugh, that yet somehow was half a sneer.

"Ah! The Old Wolf!" said he. "Got here at last, eh? And whatcher gonnerdo wi' me, eh?" He hiccoughed resoundingly, and sagged back loosely in his chair.

Old Wolverstone stared at him in sombre silence. He had looked with untroubled eye upon many a hell of devilment in his time, but the sight of Captain Blood in this condition filled him with sudden grief. To express it he loosed an oath. It was his only expression for emotion of all kinds. Then he rolled forward, and dropped into a chair at the table, facing the Captain.

"My God, Peter, what's this?"

"Rum," said Peter. "Rum, from Jamaica." He pushed bottle and glass towards Wolverstone.

Wolverstone disregarded them.

"I'm asking you what ails you?" he bawled.

"Rum," said Captain Blood again, and smiled. "Jus' rum. I answer all your qeshons. Why donjerr answer mine? Watcher gonerdo wi' me?"

"I've done it," said Wolverstone. "Thank God, ye had the sense to hold your tongue till I came. Are ye sober enough to understand me?"

"Drunk or sober, allus 'derstand you."

"Then listen." And out came the tale that Wolverstone had told. The Captain steadied himself to grasp it.

"It'll do as well asertruth," said he when Wolverstone had finished. "And... oh, no marrer! Much obliged to ye, Old Wolf—faithful Old Wolf! But was it worthertrouble? I'm norrer pirate now; never a pirate again. 'S finished!" He banged the table, his eyes suddenly fierce.

"I'll come and talk to you again when there's less rum in your wits," said Wolverstone, rising. "Meanwhile ye'll please to remember the tale I've told, and say nothing that'll make me out a liar. They all believes me, even the men as sailed wi' me from Port Royal. I've made 'em. If they thought as how you'd taken the King's commission in earnest, and for the purpose o' doing as Morgan did, ye guess what would follow."

"Hell would follow," said the Captain. "An' tha's all I'm fit for."

"Ye're maudlin," Wolverstone growled. "We'll talk again to-morrow."

They did; but to little purpose, either that day or on any day thereafter while the rains—which set in that night—endured. Soon the shrewd Wolverstone discovered that rum was not what ailed Blood. Rum was in itself an effect, and not by any means the cause of the Captain's listless apathy. There was a canker eating at his heart, and the Old Wolf knew enough to make a shrewd guess of its nature. He

cursed all things that daggled petticoats, and, knowing his world, waited for the sickness to pass.

But it did not pass. When Blood was not dicing or drinking in the taverns of Tortuga, keeping company that in his saner days he had loathed, he was shut up in his cabin aboard the Arabella, alone and uncommunicative. His friends at Government House, bewildered at this change in him, sought to reclaim him. Mademoiselle d'Ogeron, particularly distressed, sent him almost daily invitations, to few of which he responded.

Later, as the rainy season approached its end, he was sought by his captains with proposals of remunerative raids on Spanish settlements. But to all he manifested an indifference which, as the weeks passed and the weather became settled, begot first impatience and then exasperation.

Christian, who commanded the Clotho, came storming to him one day, upbraiding him for his inaction, and demanding that he should take order about what was to do.

"Go to the devil!" Blood said, when he had heard him out. Christian departed fuming, and on the morrow the Clotho weighed anchor and sailed away, setting an example of desertion from which the loyalty of Blood's other captains would soon be unable to restrain their men.

Sometimes Blood asked himself why had he come back to Tortuga at all. Held fast in bondage by the thought of Arabella and her scorn of him for a thief and a pirate, he had sworn that he had done with buccaneering. Why, then, was he here? That question he would answer with another: Where else was he to go? Neither backward nor forward could he move, it seemed.

He was degenerating visibly, under the eyes of all. He had entirely lost the almost foppish concern for his appearance, and was grown

careless and slovenly in his dress. He allowed a black beard to grow on cheeks that had ever been so carefully shaven; and the long, thick black hair, once so sedulously curled, hung now in a lank, untidy mane about a face that was changing from its vigorous swarthiness to an unhealthy sallow, whilst the blue eyes, that had been so vivid and compelling, were now dull and lacklustre.

Wolverstone, the only one who held the clue to this degeneration, ventured once—and once only—to beard him frankly about it.

"Lord, Peter! Is there never to be no end to this?" the giant had growled. "Will you spend your days moping and swilling 'cause a white-faced ninny in Port Royal'll have none o' ye? 'Sblood and 'ounds! If ye wants the wench, why the plague doesn't ye go and fetch her?"

The blue eyes glared at him from under the jet-black eyebrows, and something of their old fire began to kindle in them. But Wolverstone went on heedlessly.

"I'll be nice wi' a wench as long as niceness be the key to her favour. But sink me now if I'd rot myself in rum on account of anything that wears a petticoat. That's not the Old Wolf's way. If there's no other expedition'll tempt you, why not Port Royal? What a plague do it matter if it is an English settlement? It's commanded by Colonel Bishop, and there's no lack of rascals in your company'd follow you to hell if it meant getting Colonel Bishop by the throat. It could be done, I tell you. We've but to spy the chance when the Jamaica fleet is away. There's enough plunder in the town to tempt the lads, and there's the wench for you. Shall I sound them on 't?"

Blood was on his feet, his eyes blazing, his livid face distorted. "Ye'll leave my cabin this minute, so ye will, or, by Heaven, it's your corpse'll be carried out of it. Ye mangy hound, d'ye dare come to me with such proposals?"

He fell to cursing his faithful officer with a virulence the like of which he had never yet been known to use. And Wolverstone, in terror before that fury, went out without another word. The subject was not raised again, and Captain Blood was left to his idle abstraction.

But at last, as his buccaneers were growing desperate, something happened, brought about by the Captain's friend M. d'Ogeron. One sunny morning the Governor of Tortuga came aboard the *Arabella*, accompanied by a chubby little gentleman, amiable of countenance, amiable and self-sufficient of manner.

"My Captain," M. d'Ogeron delivered himself, "I bring you M. de Cussy, the Governor of French Hispaniola, who desires a word with you."

Out of consideration for his friend, Captain Blood pulled the pipe from his mouth, shook some of the rum out of his wits, and rose and made a leg to M. de Cussy.

"Serviteur!" said he.

M. de Cussy returned the bow and accepted a seat on the locker under the stern windows.

"You have a good force here under your command, my Captain," said he.

"Some eight hundred men."

"And I understand they grow restive in idleness."

"They may go to the devil when they please."

M. de Cussy took snuff delicately. "I have something better than that to propose," said he.

"Propose it, then," said Blood, without interest.

M. de Cussy looked at M. d'Ogeron, and raised his eyebrows a little. He did not find Captain Blood encouraging. But M. d'Ogeron nodded vigorously with pursed lips, and the Governor of Hispaniola propounded his business.

"News has reached us from France that there is war with Spain."

"That is news, is it?" growled Blood.

"I am speaking officially, my Captain. I am not alluding to unofficial skirmishes, and unofficial predatory measures which we have condoned out here. There is war—formally war—between France and Spain in Europe. It is the intention of France that this war shall be carried into the New World. A fleet is coming out from Brest under the command of M. le Baron de Rivarol for that purpose. I have letters from him desiring me to equip a supplementary squadron and raise a body of not less than a thousand men to reenforce him on his arrival. What I have come to propose to you, my Captain, at the suggestion of our good friend M. d'Ogeron, is, in brief, that you enroll your ships and your force under M. de Rivarol's flag."

Blood looked at him with a faint kindling of interest. "You are offering to take us into the French service?" he asked. "On what terms, monsieur?"

"With the rank of Capitaine de Vaisseau for yourself, and suitable ranks for the officers serving under you. You will enjoy the pay of that rank, and you will be entitled, together with your men, to one-tenth share in all prizes taken."

"My men will hardly account it generous. They will tell you that they can sail out of here to-morrow, disembowel a Spanish settlement, and keep the whole of the plunder."

"Ah, yes, but with the risks attaching to acts of piracy. With us your position will be regular and official, and considering the powerful fleet

by which M. de Rivarol is backed, the enterprises to be undertaken will be on a much vaster scale than anything you could attempt on your own account. So that the one tenth in this case may be equal to more than the whole in the other."

Captain Blood considered. This, after all, was not piracy that was being proposed. It was honourable employment in the service of the King of France.

"I will consult my officers," he said; and he sent for them.

They came and the matter was laid before them by M. de Cussy himself. Hagthorpe announced at once that the proposal was opportune. The men were grumbling at their protracted inaction, and would no doubt be ready to accept the service which M. de Cussy offered on behalf of France. Hagthorpe looked at Blood as he spoke. Blood nodded gloomy agreement. Emboldened by this, they went on to discuss the terms. Yberville, the young French filibuster, had the honour to point out to M. de Cussy that the share offered was too small. For one fifth of the prizes, the officers would answer for their men; not for less.

M. de Cussy was distressed. He had his instructions. It was taking a deal upon himself to exceed them. The buccaneers were firm. Unless M. de Cussy could make it one fifth there was no more to be said. M. de Cussy finally consenting to exceed his instructions, the articles were drawn up and signed that very day. The buccaneers were to be at Petit Goave by the end of January, when M. de Rivarol had announced that he might be expected.

After that followed days of activity in Tortuga, refitting the ships, boucanning meat, laying in stores. In these matters which once would have engaged all Captain Blood's attention, he now took no part. He continued listless and aloof. If he had given his consent to the undertaking, or, rather, allowed himself to be swept into it by the

wishes of his officers—it was only because the service offered was of a regular and honourable kind, nowise connected with piracy, with which he swore in his heart that he had done for ever. But his consent remained passive. The service entered awoke no zeal in him. He was perfectly indifferent—as he told Hagthorpe, who ventured once to offer a remonstrance—whether they went to Petit Goave or to Hades, and whether they entered the service of Louis XIV or of Satan.

CHAPTER XXVI. M. de RIVAROL

Captain Blood was still in that disgruntled mood when he sailed from Tortuga, and still in that mood when he came to his moorings in the bay of Petit Goave. In that same mood he greeted M. le Baron de Rivarol when this nobleman with his fleet of five men-of-war at last dropped anchor alongside the buccaneer ships, in the middle of February. The Frenchman had been six weeks on the voyage, he announced, delayed by unfavourable weather.

Summoned to wait on him, Captain Blood repaired to the Castle of Petit Goave, where the interview was to take place. The Baron, a tall, hawk-faced man of forty, very cold and distant of manner, measured Captain Blood with an eye of obvious disapproval. Of Hagthorpe, Yberville, and Wolverstone who stood ranged behind their captain, he took no heed whatever. M. de Cussy offered Captain Blood a chair.

"A moment, M. de Cussy. I do not think M. le Baron has observed that I am not alone. Let me present to you, sir, my companions. Captain Hagthorpe of the Elizabeth, Captain Wolverstone of the Atropos, and Captain Yberville of the Lachesis."

The Baron stared hard and haughtily at Captain Blood, then very distantly and barely perceptibly inclined his head to each of the other three. His manner implied plainly that he despised them and that he desired them at once to understand it. It had a curious effect upon Captain Blood. It awoke the devil in him, and it awoke at the same time his self-respect which of late had been slumbering. A sudden shame of his disordered, ill-kempt appearance made him perhaps

the more defiant. There was almost a significance in the way he hitched his sword-belt round, so that the wrought hilt of his very serviceable rapier was brought into fuller view. He waved his captains to the chairs that stood about.

"Draw up to the table, lads. We are keeping the Baron waiting."

They obeyed him, Wolverstone with a grin that was full of understanding. Haughtier grew the stare of M. de Rivarol. To sit at table with these bandits placed him upon what he accounted a dishonouring equality. It had been his notion that—with the possible exception of Captain Blood—they should take his instructions standing, as became men of their quality in the presence of a man of his. He did the only thing remaining to mark a distinction between himself and them. He put on his hat.

"Ye're very wise now," said Blood amiably. "I feel the draught myself." And he covered himself with his plumed castor.

M. de Rivarol changed colour. He quivered visibly with anger, and was a moment controlling himself before venturing to speak. M. de Cussy was obviously very ill at ease.

"Sir," said the Baron frostily, "you compel me to remind you that the rank you hold is that of Capitaine de Vaisseau, and that you are in the presence of the General of the Armies of France by Sea and Land in America. You compel me to remind you further that there is a deference due from your rank to mine."

"I am happy to assure you," said Captain Blood, "that the reminder is unnecessary. I am by way of accounting myself a gentleman, little though I may look like one at present; and I should not account myself that were I capable of anything but deference to those whom nature or fortune may have placed above me, or to those who being placed beneath me in rank may labour under a disability to resent my lack of

it." It was a neatly intangible rebuke. M. de Rivarol bit his lip. Captain Blood swept on without giving him time to reply: "Thus much being clear, shall we come to business?"

M. de Rivarol's hard eyes considered him a moment. "Perhaps it will be best," said he. He took up a paper. "I have here a copy of the articles into which you entered with M. de Cussy. Before going further, I have to observe that M. de Cussy has exceeded his instructions in admitting you to one fifth of the prizes taken. His authority did not warrant his going beyond one tenth."

"That is a matter between yourself and M. de Cussy, my General."

"Oh, no. It is a matter between myself and you."

"Your pardon, my General. The articles are signed. So far as we are concerned, the matter is closed. Also out of regard for M. de Cussy, we should not desire to be witnesses of the rebukes you may consider that he deserves."

"What I may have to say to M. de Cussy is no concern of yours."

"That is what I am telling you, my General."

"But—nom de Dieu!—it is your concern, I suppose, that we cannot award you more than one tenth share." M. de Rivarol smote the table in exasperation. This pirate was too infernally skillful a fencer.

"You are quite certain of that, M. le Baron—that you cannot?"

"I am quite certain that I will not."

Captain Blood shrugged, and looked down his nose. "In that case," said he, "it but remains for me to present my little account for our disbursement, and to fix the sum at which we should be compensated for our loss of time and derangement in coming hither. That settled, we can part friends, M. le Baron. No harm has been done."

"What the devil do you mean?" The Baron was on his feet, leaning forward across the table.

"Is it possible that I am obscure? My French, perhaps, is not of the purest, but...."

"Oh, your French is fluent enough; too fluent at moments, if I may permit myself the observation. Now, look you here, M. le filibustier, I am not a man with whom it is safe to play the fool, as you may very soon discover. You have accepted service of the King of France—you and your men; you hold the rank and draw the pay of a Capitaine de Vaisseau, and these your officers hold the rank of lieutenants. These ranks carry obligations which you would do well to study, and penalties for failing to discharge them which you might study at the same time. They are something severe. The first obligation of an officer is obedience. I commend it to your attention. You are not to conceive yourselves, as you appear to be doing, my allies in the enterprises I have in view, but my subordinates. In me you behold a commander to lead you, not a companion or an equal. You understand me, I hope."

"Oh, be sure that I understand," Captain Blood laughed. He was recovering his normal self amazingly under the inspiring stimulus of conflict. The only thing that marred his enjoyment was the reflection that he had not shaved. "I forget nothing, I assure you, my General. I do not forget, for instance, as you appear to be doing, that the articles we signed are the condition of our service; and the articles provide that we receive one-fifth share. Refuse us that, and you cancel the articles; cancel the articles, and you cancel our services with them. From that moment we cease to have the honour to hold rank in the navies of the King of France."

There was more than a murmur of approval from his three captains.

Rivarol glared at them, checkmated.

"In effect..." M. de Cussy was beginning timidly.

"In effect, monsieur, this is your doing," the Baron flashed on him, glad to have some one upon whom he could fasten the sharp fangs of his irritation. "You should be broke for it. You bring the King's service into disrepute; you force me, His Majesty's representative, into an impossible position."

"Is it impossible to award us the one-fifth share?" quoth Captain Blood silkily. "In that case, there is no need for beat or for injuries to M. de Cussy. M. de Cussy knows that we would not have come for less. We depart again upon your assurance that you cannot award us more. And things are as they would have been if M. de Cussy had adhered rigidly to his instructions. I have proved, I hope, to your satisfaction, M. le Baron, that if you repudiate the articles you can neither claim our services nor hinder our departure—not in honour."

"Not in honour, sir? To the devil with your insolence! Do you imply that any course that were not in honour would be possible to me?"

"I do not imply it, because it would not be possible," said Captain Blood. "We should see to that. It is, my General, for you to say whether the articles are repudiated."

The Baron sat down. "I will consider the matter," he said sullenly. "You shall be advised of my resolve."

Captain Blood rose, his officers rose with him. Captain Blood bowed.

"M. le Baron!" said he.

Then he and his buccaneers removed themselves from the August and irate presence of the General of the King's Armies by Land and Sea in America.

You conceive that there followed for M. de Cussy an extremely bad quarter of an hour. M. de Cussy, in fact, deserves your sympathy. His self-sufficiency was blown from him by the haughty M. de Rivarol, as down from a thistle by the winds of autumn. The General of the King's Armies abused him—this man who was Governor of Hispaniola—as if he were a lackey. M. de Cussy defended himself by urging the thing that Captain Blood had so admirably urged already on his behalf—that if the terms he had made with the buccaneers were not confirmed there was no harm done. M. de Rivarol bullied and browbeat him into silence.

Having exhausted abuse, the Baron proceeded to indignities. Since he accounted that M. de Cussy had proved himself unworthy of the post he held, M. de Rivarol took over the responsibilities of that post for as long as he might remain in Hispaniola, and to give effect to this he began by bringing soldiers from his ships, and setting his own guard in M. de Cussy's castle.

Out of this, trouble followed quickly. Wolverstone coming ashore next morning in the picturesque garb that he affected, his head swathed in a coloured handkerchief, was jeered at by an officer of the newly landed French troops. Not accustomed to derision, Wolverstone replied in kind and with interest. The officer passed to insult, and Wolverstone struck him a blow that felled him, and left him only the half of his poor senses. Within the hour the matter was reported to M. de Rivarol, and before noon, by M. de Rivarol's orders, Wolverstone was under arrest in the castle.

The Baron had just sat down to dinner with M. de Cussy when the negro who waited on them announced Captain Blood. Peevishly M. de Rivarol bade him be admitted, and there entered now into his presence a spruce and modish gentleman, dressed with care and sombre richness in black and silver, his swarthy, clear-cut face scrupulously shaven, his long black hair in ringlets that fell to a collar

of fine point. In his right hand the gentleman carried a broad black hat with a scarlet ostrich-plume, in his left hand an ebony cane. His stockings were of silk, a bunch of ribbons masked his garters, and the black rosettes on his shoes were finely edged with gold.

For a moment M. de Rivarol did not recognize him. For Blood looked younger by ten years than yesterday. But the vivid blue eyes under their level black brows were not to be forgotten, and they proclaimed him for the man announced even before he had spoken. His resurrected pride had demanded that he should put himself on an equality with the baron and advertise that equality by his exterior.

"I come inopportunately," he courteously excused himself. "My apologies. My business could not wait. It concerns, M. de Cussy, Captain Wolverstone of the Lachesis, whom you have placed under arrest."

"It was I who placed him under arrest," said M. de Rivarol.

"Indeed! But I thought that M. de Cussy was Governor of Hispaniola."

"Whilst I am here, monsieur, I am the supreme authority. It is as well that you should understand it."

"Perfectly. But it is not possible that you are aware of the mistake that has been made."

"Mistake, do you say?"

"I say mistake. On the whole, it is polite of me to use that word. Also it is expedient. It will save discussions. Your people have arrested the wrong man, M. de Rivarol. Instead of the French officer, who used the grossest provocation, they have arrested Captain Wolverstone. It is a matter which I beg you to reverse without delay."

M. de Rivarol's hawk-face flamed scarlet. His dark eyes bulged.

"Sir, you... you are insolent! But of an insolence that is intolerable!" Normally a man of the utmost self-possession he was so rudely shaken now that he actually stammered.

"M. le Baron, you waste words. This is the New World. It is not merely new; it is novel to one reared amid the superstitions of the Old. That novelty you have not yet had time, perhaps, to realize; therefore I overlook the offensive epithet you have used. But justice is justice in the New World as in the Old, and injustice as intolerable here as there. Now justice demands the enlargement of my officer and the arrest and punishment of yours. That justice I invite you, with submission, to administer."

"With submission?" snorted the Baron in furious scorn.

"With the utmost submission, monsieur. But at the same time I will remind M. le Baron that my buccaneers number eight hundred; your troops five hundred; and M. de Cussy will inform you of the interesting fact that any one buccaneer is equal in action to at least three soldiers of the line. I am perfectly frank with you, monsieur, to save time and hard words. Either Captain Wolverstone is instantly set at liberty, or we must take measures to set him at liberty ourselves. The consequences may be appalling. But it is as you please, M. le Baron. You are the supreme authority. It is for you to say."

M. de Rivarol was white to the lips. In all his life he had never been so bearded and defied. But he controlled himself.

"You will do me the favour to wait in the ante-room, M. le Capitaine. I desire a word with M. de Cussy. You shall presently be informed of my decision."

When the door had closed, the baron loosed his fury upon the head of M. de Cussy.

"So, these are the men you have enlisted in the King's service, the men who are to serve under me—men who do not serve, but dictate, and this before the enterprise that has brought me from France is even under way! What explanations do you offer me, M. de Cussy? I warn you that I am not pleased with you. I am, in fact, as you may perceive, exceedingly angry."

The Governor seemed to shed his chubbiness. He drew himself stiffly erect.

"Your rank, monsieur, does not give you the right to rebuke me; nor do the facts. I have enlisted for you the men that you desired me to enlist. It is not my fault if you do not know how to handle them better. As Captain Blood has told you, this is the New World."

"So, so!" M. de Rivarol smiled malignantly. "Not only do you offer no explanation, but you venture to put me in the wrong. Almost I admire your temerity. But there!" he waved the matter aside. He was supremely sardonic. "It is, you tell me, the New World, and—new worlds, new manners, I suppose. In time I may conform my ideas to this new world, or I may conform this new world to my ideas." He was menacing on that. "For the moment I must accept what I find. It remains for you, monsieur, who have experience of these savage by-ways, to advise me out of that experience how to act."

"M. le Baron, it was a folly to have arrested the buccaneer captain. It would be madness to persist. We have not the forces to meet force."

"In that case, monsieur, perhaps you will tell me what we are to do with regard to the future. Am I to submit at every turn to the dictates of this man Blood? Is the enterprise upon which we are embarked to be conducted as he decrees? Am I, in short, the King's representative in America, to be at the mercy of these rascals?"

"Oh, by no means. I am enrolling volunteers here in Hispaniola, and I am raising a corps of negroes. I compute that when this is done we shall have a force of a thousand men, the buccaneers apart."

"But in that case why not dispense with them?"

"Because they will always remain the sharp edge of any weapon that we forge. In the class of warfare that lies before us they are so skilled that what Captain Blood has just said is not an overstatement. A buccaneer is equal to three soldiers of the line. At the same time we shall have a sufficient force to keep them in control. For the rest, monsieur, they have certain notions of honour. They will stand by their articles, and so that we deal justly with them, they will deal justly with us, and give no trouble. I have experience of them, and I pledge you my word for that."

M. de Rivarol condescended to be mollified. It was necessary that he should save his face, and in a degree the Governor afforded him the means to do so, as well as a certain guarantee for the future in the further force he was raising.

"Very well," he said. "Be so good as to recall this Captain Blood."

The Captain came in, assured and very dignified. M. de Rivarol found him detestable; but dissembled it.

"M. le Capitaine, I have taken counsel with M. le Gouverneur. From what he tells me, it is possible that a mistake has been committed. Justice, you may be sure, shall be done. To ensure it, I shall myself preside over a council to be composed of two of my senior officers, yourself and an officer of yours. This council shall hold at once an impartial investigation into the affair, and the offender, the man guilty of having given provocation, shall be punished."

Captain Blood bowed. It was not his wish to be extreme. "Perfectly, M. le Baron. And now, sir, you have had the night for reflection in this

matter of the articles. Am I to understand that you confirm or that you repudiate them?"

M. de Rivarol's eyes narrowed. His mind was full of what M. de Cussy had said—that these buccaneers must prove the sharp edge of any weapon he might forge. He could not dispense with them. He perceived that he had blundered tactically in attempting to reduce the agreed share. Withdrawal from a position of that kind is ever fraught with loss of dignity. But there were those volunteers that M. de Cussy was enrolling to strengthen the hand of the King's General. Their presence might admit anon of the reopening of this question. Meanwhile he must retire in the best order possible.

"I have considered that, too," he announced. "And whilst my opinion remains unaltered, I must confess that since M. de Cussy has pledged us, it is for us to fulfil the pledges. The articles are confirmed, sir."

Captain Blood bowed again. In vain M. de Rivarol looked searchingly for the least trace of a smile of triumph on those firm lips. The buccaneer's face remained of the utmost gravity.

Wolverstone was set at liberty that afternoon, and his assailant sentenced to two months' detention. Thus harmony was restored. But it had been an unpromising beginning, and there was more to follow shortly of a similar discordant kind.

Blood and his officers were summoned a week later to a council which sat to determine their operations against Spain. M. de Rivarol laid before them a project for a raid upon the wealthy Spanish town of Cartagena. Captain Blood professed astonishment. Sourly invited by M. de Rivarol to state his grounds for it, he did so with the utmost frankness.

"Were I General of the King's Armies in America," said he, "I

should have no doubt or hesitation as to the best way in which to serve my Royal master and the French nation. That which I think will be obvious to M. de Cussy, as it is to me, is that we should at once invade Spanish Hispaniola and reduce the whole of this fruitful and splendid island into the possession of the King of France."

"That may follow," said M. de Rivarol. "It is my wish that we begin with Cartagena."

"You mean, sir, that we are to sail across the Caribbean on an adventurous expedition, neglecting that which lies here at our very door. In our absence, a Spanish invasion of French Hispaniola is possible. If we begin by reducing the Spaniards here, that possibility will be removed. We shall have added to the Crown of France the most coveted possession in the West Indies. The enterprise offers no particular difficulty; it may be speedily accomplished, and once accomplished, it would be time to look farther afield. That would seem the logical order in which this campaign should proceed."

He ceased, and there was silence. M. de Rivarol sat back in his chair, the feathered end of a quill between his teeth. Presently he cleared his throat and asked a question.

"Is there anybody else who shares Captain Blood's opinion?"

None answered him. His own officers were overawed by him; Blood's followers naturally preferred Cartagena, because offering the greater chance of loot. Loyalty to their leader kept them silent.

"You seem to be alone in your opinion," said the Baron with his vinegary smile.

Captain Blood laughed outright. He had suddenly read the Baron's mind. His airs and graces and haughtiness had so imposed upon Blood that it was only now that at last he saw through them, into the fellow's peddling spirit. Therefore he laughed; there was really nothing

else to do. But his laughter was charged with more anger even than contempt. He had been deluding himself that he had done with piracy. The conviction that this French service was free of any taint of that was the only consideration that had induced him to accept it. Yet here was this haughty, supercilious gentleman, who dubbed himself General of the Armies of France, proposing a plundering, thieving raid which, when stripped of its mean, transparent mask of legitimate warfare, was revealed as piracy of the most flagrant.

M. de Rivarol, intrigued by his mirth, scowled upon him disapprovingly.

"Why do you laugh, monsieur?"

"Because I discover here an irony that is supremely droll. You, M. le Baron, General of the King's Armies by Land and Sea in America, propose an enterprise of a purely buccaneering character; whilst I, the buccaneer, am urging one that is more concerned with upholding the honour of France. You perceive how droll it is."

M. de Rivarol perceived nothing of the kind. M. de Rivarol in fact was extremely angry. He bounded to his feet, and every man in the room rose with him—save only M. de Cussy, who sat on with a grim smile on his lips. He, too, now read the Baron like an open book, and reading him despised him.

"M. le filibustier," cried Rivarol in a thick voice, "it seems that I must again remind you that I am your superior officer."

"My superior officer! You! Lord of the World! Why, you are just a common pirate! But you shall hear the truth for once, and that before all these gentlemen who have the honour to serve the King of France. It is for me, a buccaneer, a sea-robber, to stand here and tell you what is in the interest of French honour and the French Crown. Whilst you, the French King's appointed General, neglecting this, are for

spending the King's resources against an outlying settlement of no account, shedding French blood in seizing a place that cannot be held, only because it has been reported to you that there is much gold in Cartagena, and that the plunder of it will enrich you. It is worthy of the huckster who sought to haggle with us about our share, and to beat us down after the articles pledging you were already signed. If I am wrong—let M. de Cussy say so. If I am wrong, let me be proven wrong, and I will beg your pardon. Meanwhile, monsieur, I withdraw from this council. I will have no further part in your deliberations. I accepted the service of the King of France with intent to honour that service. I cannot honour that service by lending countenance to a waste of life and resources in raids upon unimportant settlements, with plunder for their only object. The responsibility for such decisions must rest with you, and with you alone. I desire M. de Cussy to report me to the Ministers of France. For the rest, monsieur, it merely remains for you to give me your orders. I await them aboard my ship—and anything else, of a personal nature, that you may feel I have provoked by the terms I have felt compelled to use in this council. M. le Baron, I have the honour to wish you good-day."

He stalked out, and his three captains—although they thought him mad—rolled after him in loyal silence.

M. de Rivarol was gasping like a landed fish. The stark truth had robbed him of speech. When he recovered, it was to thank Heaven vigorously that the council was relieved by Captain Blood's own act of that gentleman's further participation in its deliberations. Inwardly M. de Rivarol burned with shame and rage. The mask had been plucked from him, and he had been held up to scorn—he, the General of the King's Armies by Sea and Land in America.

Nevertheless, it was to Cartagena that they sailed in the middle of March. Volunteers and negroes had brought up the forces directly under M. de Rivarol to twelve hundred men. With these he thought he

could keep the buccaneer contingent in order and submissive.

They made up an imposing fleet, led by M. de Rivarol's flagship, the *Victorieuse*, a mighty vessel of eighty guns. Each of the four other French ships was at least as powerful as Blood's *Arabella*, which was of forty guns. Followed the lesser buccaneer vessels, the *Elizabeth*, *Lachesis*, and *Atropos*, and a dozen frigates laden with stores, besides canoes and small craft in tow.

Narrowly they missed the Jamaica fleet with Colonel Bishop, which sailed north for Tortuga two days after the Baron de Rivarol's southward passage.

CHAPTER XXVII. CARTAGENA

Having crossed the Caribbean in the teeth of contrary winds, it was not until the early days of April that the French fleet hove in sight of Cartagena, and M. de Rivarol summoned a council aboard his flagship to determine the method of assault.

"It is of importance, messieurs," he told them, "that we take the city by surprise, not only before it can put itself into a state of defence; but before it can remove its treasures inland. I propose to land a force sufficient to achieve this to the north of the city to-night after dark." And he explained in detail the scheme upon which his wits had laboured.

He was heard respectfully and approvingly by his officers, scornfully by Captain Blood, and indifferently by the other buccaneer captains present. For it must be understood that Blood's refusal to attend councils had related only to those concerned with determining the nature of the enterprise to be undertaken.

Captain Blood was the only one amongst them who knew exactly what lay ahead. Two years ago he had himself considered a raid upon the place, and he had actually made a survey of it in circumstances which he was presently to disclose.

The Baron's proposal was one to be expected from a commander whose knowledge of Cartagena was only such as might be derived from maps.

Geographically and strategically considered, it is a curious place. It stands almost four-square, screened east and north by hills, and it may be said to face south upon the inner of two harbours by which it

is normally approached. The entrance to the outer harbour, which is in reality a lagoon some three miles across, lies through a neck known as the Boca Chica—or Little Mouth—and defended by a fort. A long strip of densely wooded land to westward acts here as a natural breakwater, and as the inner harbour is approached, another strip of land thrusts across at right angles from the first, towards the mainland on the east. Just short of this it ceases, leaving a deep but very narrow channel, a veritable gateway, into the secure and sheltered inner harbour. Another fort defends this second passage. East and north of Cartagena lies the mainland, which may be left out of account. But to the west and northwest this city, so well guarded on every other side, lies directly open to the sea. It stands back beyond a half-mile of beach, and besides this and the stout Walls which fortify it, would appear to have no other defences. But those appearances are deceptive, and they had utterly deceived M. de Rivarol, when he devised his plan.

It remained for Captain Blood to explain the difficulties when M. de Rivarol informed him that the honour of opening the assault in the manner which he prescribed was to be accorded to the buccaneers.

Captain Blood smiled sardonic appreciation of the honour reserved for his men. It was precisely what he would have expected. For the buccaneers the dangers; for M. de Rivarol the honour, glory and profit of the enterprise.

"It is an honour which I must decline," said he quite coldly.

Wolverstone grunted approval and Hagthorpe nodded. Yberville, who as much as any of them resented the superciliousness of his noble compatriot, never wavered in loyalty to Captain Blood. The French officers—there were six of them present—stared their haughty surprise at the buccaneer leader, whilst the Baron challengingly fired a question at him.

"How? You decline it, 'sir? You decline to obey orders, do you say?"

"I understood, M. le Baron, that you summoned us to deliberate upon the means to be adopted."

"Then you understood amiss, M. le Capitaine. You are here to receive my commands. I have already deliberated, and I have decided. I hope you understand."

"Oh, I understand," laughed Blood. "But, I ask myself, do you?" And without giving the Baron time to set the angry question that was bubbling to his lips, he swept on: "You have deliberated, you say, and you have decided. But unless your decision rests upon a wish to destroy my buccaneers, you will alter it when I tell you something of which I have knowledge. This city of Cartagena looks very vulnerable on the northern side, all open to the sea as it apparently stands. Ask yourself, M. le Baron, how came the Spaniards who built it where it is to have been at such trouble to fortify it to the south, if from the north it is so easily assailable."

That gave M. de Rivarol pause.

"The Spaniards," Blood pursued, "are not quite the fools you are supposing them. Let me tell you, messieurs, that two years ago I made a survey of Cartagena as a preliminary to raiding it. I came hither with some friendly trading Indians, myself disguised as an Indian, and in that guise I spent a week in the city and studied carefully all its approaches. On the side of the sea where it looks so temptingly open to assault, there is shoal water for over half a mile out—far enough out, I assure you, to ensure that no ship shall come within bombarding range of it. It is not safe to venture nearer land than three quarters of a mile."

"But our landing will be effected in canoes and piraguas and open

boats," cried an officer impatiently.

"In the calmest season of the year, the surf will hinder any such operation. And you will also bear in mind that if landing were possible as you are suggesting, that landing could not be covered by the ships' guns. In fact, it is the landing parties would be in danger from their own artillery."

"If the attack is made by night, as I propose, covering will be unnecessary. You should be ashore in force before the Spaniards are aware of the intent."

"You are assuming that Cartagena is a city of the blind, that at this very moment they are not conning our sails and asking themselves who we are and what we intend."

"But if they feel themselves secure from the north, as you suggest," cried the Baron impatiently, "that very security will lull them."

"Perhaps. But, then, they are secure. Any attempt to land on this side is doomed to failure at the hands of Nature."

"Nevertheless, we make the attempt," said the obstinate Baron, whose haughtiness would not allow him to yield before his officers.

"If you still choose to do so after what I have said, you are, of course, the person to decide. But I do not lead my men into fruitless danger."

"If I command you..." the Baron was beginning. But Blood unceremoniously interrupted him.

"M. le Baron, when M. de Cussy engaged us on your behalf, it was as much on account of our knowledge and experience of this class of warfare as on account of our strength. I have placed my own knowledge and experience in this particular matter at your disposal. I will add that I abandoned my own project of raiding Cartagena, not

being in sufficient strength at the time to force the entrance of the harbour, which is the only way into the city. The strength which you now command is ample for that purpose."

"But whilst we are doing that, the Spaniards will have time to remove great part of the wealth this city holds. We must take them by surprise."

Captain Blood shrugged. "If this is a mere pirating raid, that, of course, is a prime consideration. It was with me. But if you are concerned to abate the pride of Spain and plant the Lilies of France on the forts of this settlement, the loss of some treasure should not really weigh for much."

M. de Rivarol bit his lip in chagrin. His gloomy eye smouldered as it considered the self-contained buccaneer.

"But if I command you to go—to make the attempt?" he asked. "Answer me, monsieur, let us know once for all where we stand, and who commands this expedition."

"Positively, I find you tiresome," said Captain Blood, and he swung to M. de Cussy, who sat there gnawing his lip, intensely uncomfortable. "I appeal to you, monsieur, to justify me to the General."

M. de Cussy started out of his gloomy abstraction. He cleared his throat. He was extremely nervous.

"In view of what Captain Blood has submitted...."

"Oh, to the devil with that!" snapped Rivarol. "It seems that I am followed by poltroons. Look you, M. le Capitaine, since you are afraid to undertake this thing, I will myself undertake it. The weather is calm, and I count upon making good my landing. If I do so, I shall have proved you wrong, and I shall have a word to say to you to-morrow

which you may not like. I am being very generous with you, sir." He waved his hand regally. "You have leave to go."

It was sheer obstinacy and empty pride that drove him, and he received the lesson he deserved. The fleet stood in during the afternoon to within a mile of the coast, and under cover of darkness three hundred men, of whom two hundred were negroes—the whole of the negro contingent having been pressed into the undertaking—were pulled away for the shore in the canoes, piraguas, and ships' boats. Rivarol's pride compelled him, however much he may have disliked the venture, to lead them in person.

The first six boats were caught in the surf, and pounded into fragments before their occupants could extricate themselves. The thunder of the breakers and the cries of the shipwrecked warned those who followed, and thereby saved them from sharing the same fate. By the Baron's urgent orders they pulled away again out of danger, and stood about to pick up such survivors as contrived to battle towards them. Close upon fifty lives were lost in the adventure, together with half-a-dozen boats stored with ammunition and light guns.

The Baron went back to his flagship an infuriated, but by no means a wiser man. Wisdom—not even the pungent wisdom experience thrusts upon us—is not for such as M. de Rivarol. His anger embraced all things, but focussed chiefly upon Captain Blood. In some warped process of reasoning he held the buccaneer chiefly responsible for this misadventure. He went to bed considering furiously what he should say to Captain Blood upon the morrow.

He was awakened at dawn by the rolling thunder of guns. Emerging upon the poop in nightcap and slippers, he beheld a sight that increased his unreasonable and unreasoning fury. The four buccaneer ships under canvas were going through extraordinary manoeuvre half a mile off the Boca Chica and little more than half a

mile away from the remainder of the fleet, and from their flanks flame and smoke were belching each time they swung broadside to the great round fort that guarded that narrow entrance. The fort was returning the fire vigorously and viciously. But the buccaneers timed their broadsides with extraordinary judgment to catch the defending ordnance reloading; then as they drew the Spaniards' fire, they swung away again not only taking care to be ever moving targets, but, further, to present no more than bow or stern to the fort, their masts in line, when the heaviest cannonades were to be expected.

Gibbering and cursing, M. de Rivarol stood there and watched this action, so presumptuously undertaken by Blood on his own responsibility. The officers of the *Victorieuse* crowded round him, but it was not until M. de Cussy came to join the group that he opened the sluices of his rage. And M. de Cussy himself invited the deluge that now caught him. He had come up rubbing his hands and taking a proper satisfaction in the energy of the men whom he had enlisted.

"Aha, M. de Rivarol!" he laughed. "He understands his business, eh, this Captain Blood. He'll plant the Lilies of France on that fort before breakfast."

The Baron swung upon him snarling. "He understands his business, eh? His business, let me tell you, M. de Cussy, is to obey my orders, and I have not ordered this. *Par la Mordieu!* When this is over I'll deal with him for his damned insubordination."

"Surely, M. le Baron, he will have justified it if he succeeds."

"Justified it! Ah, *parbleu!* Can a soldier ever justify acting without orders?" He raved on furiously, his officers supporting him out of their detestation of Captain Blood.

Meanwhile the fight went merrily on. The fort was suffering badly. Yet for all their manoeuvring the buccaneers were not escaping

punishment. The starboard gunwale of the Atropos had been hammered into splinters, and a shot had caught her astern in the coach. The Elizabeth was badly battered about the forecastle, and the Arabella's maintop had been shot away, whilst' towards the end of that engagement the Lachesis came reeling out of the fight with a shattered rudder, steering herself by sweeps.

The absurd Baron's fierce eyes positively gleamed with satisfaction.

"I pray Heaven they may sink all his infernal ships!" he cried in his frenzy.

But Heaven didn't hear him. Scarcely had he spoken than there was a terrific explosion, and half the fort went up in fragments. A lucky shot from the buccaneers had found the powder magazine.

It may have been a couple of hours later, when Captain Blood, as spruce and cool as if he had just come from a levee, stepped upon the quarter-deck of the Victoriense, to confront M. de Rivarol, still in bedgown and nightcap.

"I have to report, M. le Baron, that we are in possession of the fort on Boca Chica. The standard of France is flying from what remains of its tower, and the way into the outer harbour is open to your fleet."

M. de Rivarol was compelled to swallow his fury, though it choked him. The jubilation among his officers had been such that he could not continue as he had begun. Yet his eyes were malevolent, his face pale with anger.

"You are fortunate, M. Blood, that you succeeded," he said. "It would have gone very ill with you had you failed. Another time be so good as to await my orders, lest you should afterwards lack the justification which your good fortune has procured you this morning."

Blood smiled with a flash of white teeth, and bowed. "I shall be glad of your orders now, General, for pursuing our advantage. You realize that speed in striking is the first essential."

Rivarol was left gaping a moment. Absorbed in his ridiculous anger, he had considered nothing. But he made a quick recovery. "To my cabin, if you please," he commanded peremptorily, and was turning to lead the way, when Blood arrested him.

"With submission, my General, we shall be better here. You behold there the scene of our coming action. It is spread before you like a map." He waved his hand towards the lagoon, the country flanking it and the considerable city standing back from the beach. "If it is not a presumption in me to offer a suggestion...." He paused. M. de Rivarol looked at him sharply, suspecting irony. But the swarthy face was bland, the keen eyes steady.

"Let us hear your suggestion," he consented.

Blood pointed out the fort at the mouth of the inner harbour, which was just barely visible above the waving palms on the intervening tongue of land. He announced that its armament was less formidable than that of the outer fort, which they had reduced; but on the other hand, the passage was very much narrower than the Boca Chica, and before they could attempt to make it in any case, they must dispose of those defences. He proposed that the French ships should enter the outer harbour, and proceed at once to bombardment. Meanwhile, he would land three hundred buccaneers and some artillery on the eastern side of the lagoon, beyond the fragrant garden islands dense with richly bearing fruit-trees, and proceed simultaneously to storm the fort in the rear. Thus beset on both sides at once, and demoralized by the fate of the much stronger outer fort, he did not think the Spaniards would offer a very long resistance. Then it would be for M. de Rivarol to garrison the fort, whilst Captain Blood would sweep on with his men, and seize the Church of Nuestra Senora de la Poupa, plainly

visible on its hill immediately eastward of the town. Not only did that eminence afford them a valuable and obvious strategic advantage, but it commanded the only road that led from Cartagena to the interior, and once it were held there would be no further question of the Spaniards attempting to remove the wealth of the city.

That to M. de Rivarol was—as Captain Blood had judged that it would be—the crowning argument. Supercilious until that moment, and disposed for his own pride's sake to treat the buccaneer's suggestions with cavalier criticism, M. de Rivarol's manner suddenly changed. He became alert and brisk, went so far as tolerantly to commend Captain Blood's plan, and issued orders that action might be taken upon it at once.

It is not necessary to follow that action step by step. Blunders on the part of the French marred its smooth execution, and the indifferent handling of their ships led to the sinking of two of them in the course of the afternoon by the fort's gunfire. But by evening, owing largely to the irresistible fury with which the buccaneers stormed the place from the landward side, the fort had surrendered, and before dusk Blood and his men with some ordnance hauled thither by mules dominated the city from the heights of Nuestra Senora de la Poupa.

At noon on the morrow, shorn of defences and threatened with bombardment, Cartagena sent offers of surrender to M. de Rivarol.

Swollen with pride by a victory for which he took the entire credit to himself, the Baron dictated his terms. He demanded that all public effects and office accounts be delivered up; that the merchants surrender all moneys and goods held by them for their correspondents; the inhabitants could choose whether they would remain in the city or depart; but those who went must first deliver up all their property, and those who elected to remain must surrender half, and become the subjects of France; religious houses and churches should be spared, but they must render accounts of all moneys and

valuables in their possession.

Cartagena agreed, having no choice in the matter, and on the next day, which was the 5th of April, M. de Rivarol entered the city and proclaimed it now a French colony, appointing M. de Cussy its Governor. Thereafter he proceeded to the Cathedral, where very properly a Te Deum was sung in honour of the conquest. This by way of grace, whereafter M. de Rivarol proceeded to devour the city. The only detail in which the French conquest of Cartagena differed from an ordinary buccaneering raid was that under the severest penalties no soldier was to enter the house of any inhabitant. But this apparent respect for the persons and property of the conquered was based in reality upon M. de Rivarol's anxiety lest a doubloon should be abstracted from all the wealth that was pouring into the treasury opened by the Baron in the name of the King of France. Once the golden stream had ceased, he removed all restrictions and left the city in prey to his men, who proceeded further to pillage it of that part of their property which the inhabitants who became French subjects had been assured should remain inviolate. The plunder was enormous. In the course of four days over a hundred mules laden with gold went out of the city and down to the boats waiting at the beach to convey the treasure aboard the ships.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE HONOUR OF M. DE RIVAROL

During the capitulation and for some time after, Captain Blood and the greater portion of his buccaneers had been at their post on the heights of Nuestra Senora de la Poupa, utterly in ignorance of what was taking place. Blood, although the man chiefly, if not solely, responsible for the swift reduction of the city, which was proving a veritable treasure-house, was not even shown the consideration of being called to the council of officers which with M. de Rivarol determined the terms of the capitulation.

This was a slight that at another time Captain Blood would not have borne for a moment. But at present, in his odd frame of mind, and its divorcement from piracy, he was content to smile his utter contempt of the French General. Not so, however, his captains, and still less his men. Resentment smouldered amongst them for a while, to flame out violently at the end of that week in Cartagena. It was only by undertaking to voice their grievance to the Baron that their captain was able for the moment to pacify them. That done, he went at once in quest of M. de Rivarol.

He found him in the offices which the Baron had set up in the town, with a staff of clerks to register the treasure brought in and to cast up the surrendered account-books, with a view to ascertaining precisely what were the sums yet to be delivered up. The Baron sat there scrutinizing ledgers, like a city merchant, and checking figures to make sure that all was correct to the last peso. A choice occupation this for the General of the King's Armies by Sea and Land. He looked up irritated by the interruption which Captain Blood's advent

occasioned.

"M. le Baron," the latter greeted him. "I must speak frankly; and you must suffer it. My men are on the point of mutiny."

M. de Rivarol considered him with a faint lift of the eyebrows.

"Captain Blood, I, too, will speak frankly; and you, too, must suffer it. If there is a mutiny, you and your captains shall be held personally responsible. The mistake you make is in assuming with me the tone of an ally, whereas I have given you clearly to understand from the first that you are simply in the position of having accepted service under me. Your proper apprehension of that fact will save the waste of a deal of words."

Blood contained himself with difficulty. One of these fine days, he felt, that for the sake of humanity he must slit the comb of this supercilious, arrogant cockerel.

"You may define our positions as you please," said he. "But I'll remind you that the nature of a thing is not changed by the name you give it. I am concerned with facts; chiefly with the fact that we entered into definite articles with you. Those articles provide for a certain distribution of the spoil. My men demand it. They are not satisfied."

"Of what are they not satisfied?" demanded the Baron.

"Of your honesty, M. de Rivarol."

A blow in the face could scarcely have taken the Frenchman more aback. He stiffened, and drew himself up, his eyes blazing, his face of a deathly pallor. The clerks at the tables laid down their pens, and awaited the explosion in a sort of terror.

For a long moment there was silence. Then the great gentleman delivered himself in a voice of concentrated anger. "Do you really dare so much, you and the dirty thieves that follow you? God's Blood!

You shall answer to me for that word, though it entail a yet worse dishonour to meet you. Faugh!"

"I will remind you," said Blood, "that I am speaking not for myself, but for my men. It is they who are not satisfied, they who threaten that unless satisfaction is afforded them, and promptly, they will take it."

"Take it?" said Rivarol, trembling in his rage. "Let them attempt it, and...."

"Now don't be rash. My men are within their rights, as you are aware. They demand to know when this sharing of the spoil is to take place, and when they are to receive the fifth for which their articles provide."

"God give me patience! How can we share the spoil before it has been completely gathered?"

"My men have reason to believe that it is gathered; and, anyway, they view with mistrust that it should all be housed aboard your ships, and remain in your possession. They say that hereafter there will be no ascertaining what the spoil really amounts to."

"But—name of Heaven!—I have kept books. They are there for all to see."

"They do not wish to see account-books. Few of them can read. They want to view the treasure itself. They know—you compel me to be blunt—that the accounts have been falsified. Your books show the spoil of Cartagena to amount to some ten million livres. The men know—and they are very skilled in these computations—that it exceeds the enormous total of forty millions. They insist that the treasure itself be produced and weighed in their presence, as is the custom among the Brethren of the Coast."

"I know nothing of filibuster customs." The gentleman was

disdainful.

"But you are learning quickly."

"What do you mean, you rogue? I am a leader of armies, not of plundering thieves."

"Oh, but of course!" Blood's irony laughed in his eyes. "Yet, whatever you may be, I warn you that unless you yield to a demand that I consider just and therefore uphold, you may look for trouble, and it would not surprise me if you never leave Cartagena at all, nor convey a single gold piece home to France."

"Ah, pardieu! Am I to understand that you are threatening me?"

"Come, come, M. le Baron! I warn you of the trouble that a little prudence may avert. You do not know on what a volcano you are sitting. You do not know the ways of buccaneers. If you persist, Cartagena will be drenched in blood, and whatever the outcome the King of France will not have been well served."

That shifted the basis of the argument to less hostile ground. Awhile yet it continued, to be concluded at last by an ungracious undertaking from M. de Rivarol to submit to the demands of the buccaneers. He gave it with an extreme ill-grace, and only because Blood made him realize at last that to withhold it longer would be dangerous. In an engagement, he might conceivably defeat Blood's followers. But conceivably he might not. And even if he succeeded, the effort would be so costly to him in men that he might not thereafter find himself in sufficient strength to maintain his hold of what he had seized.

The end of it all was that he gave a promise at once to make the necessary preparations, and if Captain Blood and his officers would wait upon him on board the *Victorieuse* to-morrow morning, the treasure should be produced, weighed in their presence, and their fifth share surrendered there and then into their own keeping.

Among the buccaneers that night there was hilarity over the sudden abatement of M. de Rivarol's monstrous pride. But when the next dawn broke over Cartagena, they had the explanation of it. The only ships to be seen in the harbour were the *Arabella* and the *Elizabeth* riding at anchor, and the *Atropos* and the *Lachesis* careened on the beach for repair of the damage sustained in the bombardment. The French ships were gone. They had been quietly and secretly warped out of the harbour under cover of night, and three sails, faint and small, on the horizon to westward was all that remained to be seen of them. The absconding M. de Rivarol had gone off with the treasure, taking with him the troops and mariners he had brought from France. He had left behind him at Cartagena not only the empty-handed buccaneers, whom he had swindled, but also M. de Cussy and the volunteers and negroes from Hispaniola, whom he had swindled no less.

The two parties were fused into one by their common fury, and before the exhibition of it the inhabitants of that ill-fated town were stricken with deeper terror than they had yet known since the coming of this expedition.

Captain Blood alone kept his head, setting a curb upon his deep chagrin. He had promised himself that before parting from M. de Rivarol he would present a reckoning for all the petty affronts and insults to which that unspeakable fellow—now proved a scoundrel—had subjected him.

"We must follow," he declared. "Follow and punish."

At first that was the general cry. Then came the consideration that only two of the buccaneer ships were seaworthy—and these could not accommodate the whole force, particularly being at the moment indifferently victualled for a long voyage. The crews of the *Lachesis* and *Atropos* and with them their captains, Wolverstone and Yberville,

renounced the intention. After all, there would be a deal of treasure still hidden in Cartagena. They would remain behind to extort it whilst fitting their ships for sea. Let Blood and Hagthorpe and those who sailed with them do as they pleased.

Then only did Blood realize the rashness of his proposal, and in attempting to draw back he almost precipitated a battle between the two parties into which that same proposal had now divided the buccaneers. And meanwhile those French sails on the horizon were growing less and less. Blood was reduced to despair. If he went off now, Heaven knew what would happen to the town, the temper of those whom he was leaving being what it was. Yet if he remained, it would simply mean that his own and Hagthorpe's crews would join in the saturnalia and increase the hideousness of events now inevitable. Unable to reach a decision, his own men and Hagthorpe's took the matter off his hands, eager to give chase to Rivarol. Not only was a dastardly cheat to be punished but an enormous treasure to be won by treating as an enemy this French commander who, himself, had so villainously broken the alliance.

When Blood, torn as he was between conflicting considerations, still hesitated, they bore him almost by main force aboard the *Arabella*.

Within an hour, the water-casks at least replenished and stowed aboard, the *Arabella* and the *Elizabeth* put to sea upon that angry chase.

"When we were well at sea, and the *Arabella's* course was laid," writes Pitt, in his log, "I went to seek the Captain, knowing him to be in great trouble of mind over these events. I found him sitting alone in his cabin, his head in his hands, torment in the eyes that stared straight before him, seeing nothing."

"What now, Peter?" cried the young Somerset mariner. "Lord, man,

what is there here to fret you? Surely 't isn't the thought of Rivarol!"

"No," said Blood thickly. And for once he was communicative. It may well be that he must vent the thing that oppressed him or be driven mad by it. And Pitt, after all, was his friend and loved him, and, so, a proper man for confidences. "But if she knew! If she knew! O God! I had thought to have done with piracy; thought to have done with it for ever. Yet here have I been committed by this scoundrel to the worst piracy that ever I was guilty of. Think of Cartagena! Think of the hell those devils will be making of it now! And I must have that on my soul!"

"Nay, Peter—'t isn't on your soul; but on Rivarol's. It is that dirty thief who has brought all this about. What could you have done to prevent it?"

"I would have stayed if it could have availed."

"It could not, and you know it. So why repine?"

"There is more than that to it," groaned Blood. "What now? What remains? Loyal service with the English was made impossible for me. Loyal service with France has led to this; and that is equally impossible hereafter. What to live clean, I believe the only thing is to go and offer my sword to the King of Spain."

But something remained—the last thing that he could have expected—something towards which they were rapidly sailing over the tropical, sunlit sea. All this against which he now inveighed so bitterly was but a necessary stage in the shaping of his odd destiny.

Setting a course for Hispaniola, since they judged that thither must Rivarol go to refit before attempting to cross to France, the Arabella and the Elizabeth ploughed briskly northward with a moderately favourable wind for two days and nights without ever catching a glimpse of their quarry. The third dawn brought with it a haze which

circumscribed their range of vision to something between two and three miles, and deepened their growing vexation and their apprehension that M. de Rivarol might escape them altogether.

Their position then—according to Pitt's log—was approximately 75 deg. 30' W. Long. by 17 deg. 45' N. Lat., so that they had Jamaica on their larboard beam some thirty miles to westward, and, indeed, away to the northwest, faintly visible as a bank of clouds, appeared the great ridge of the Blue Mountains whose peaks were thrust into the clear upper air above the low-lying haze. The wind, to which they were sailing very close, was westerly, and it bore to their ears a booming sound which in less experienced ears might have passed for the breaking of surf upon a lee shore.

"Guns!" said Pitt, who stood with Blood upon the quarter-deck. Blood nodded, listening.

"Ten miles away, perhaps fifteen—somewhere off Port Royal, I should judge," Pitt added. Then he looked at his captain. "Does it concern us?" he asked.

"Guns off Port Royal... that should argue Colonel Bishop at work. And against whom should he be in action but against friends of ours I think it may concern us. Anyway, we'll stand in to investigate. Bid them put the helm over."

Close-hauled they tacked aweather, guided by the sound of combat, which grew in volume and definition as they approached it. Thus for an hour, perhaps. Then, as, telescope to his eye, Blood raked the haze, expecting at any moment to behold the battling ships, the guns abruptly ceased.

They held to their course, nevertheless, with all hands on deck, eagerly, anxiously scanning the sea ahead. And presently an object loomed into view, which soon defined itself for a great ship on fire. As

the Arabella with the Elizabeth following closely nearer on their north-westerly tack, the outlines of the blazing vessel grew clearer. Presently her masts stood out sharp and black above the smoke and flames, and through his telescope Blood made out plainly the pennon of St. George fluttering from her maintop.

"An English ship!" he cried.

He scanned the seas for the conqueror in the battle of which this grim evidence was added to that of the sounds they had heard, and when at last, as they drew closer to the doomed vessel, they made out the shadowy outlines of three tall ships, some three or four miles away, standing in toward Port Royal, the first and natural assumption was that these ships must belong to the Jamaica fleet, and that the burning vessel was a defeated buccaneer, and because of this they sped on to pick up the three boats that were standing away from the blazing hulk. But Pitt, who through the telescope was examining the receding squadron, observed things apparent only to the eye of the trained mariner, and made the incredible announcement that the largest of these three vessels was Rivarol's Victorieuse.

They took in sail and hove to as they came up with the drifting boats, laden to capacity with survivors. And there were others adrift on some of the spars and wreckage with which the sea was strewn, who must be rescued.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE SERVICE OF KING WILLIAM

One of the boats bumped alongside the Arabella, and up the entrance ladder came first a slight, spruce little gentleman in a coat of mulberry satin laced with gold, whose wizened, yellow, rather peevish face was framed in a heavy black periwig. His modish and costly apparel had nowise suffered by the adventure through which he had passed, and he carried himself with the easy assurance of a man of rank. Here, quite clearly, was no buccaneer. He was closely followed by one who in every particular, save that of age, was his physical opposite, corpulent in a brawny, vigorous way, with a full, round, weather-beaten face whose mouth was humourous and whose eyes were blue and twinkling. He was well dressed without fripperies, and bore with him an air of vigorous authority.

As the little man stepped from the ladder into the waist, whither Captain Blood had gone to receive him, his sharp, ferrety dark eyes swept the uncouth ranks of the assembled crew of the Arabella.

"And where the devil may I be now?" he demanded irritably. "Are you English, or what the devil are you?"

"Myself, I have the honour to be Irish, sir. My name is Blood—Captain Peter Blood, and this is my ship the Arabella, all very much at your service.

"Blood!" shrilled the little man. "O 'Sblood! A pirate!" He swung to the Colossus who followed him—"A damned pirate, van der Kuylen. Rend my vitals, but we're come from Scylla to Charybdis."

"So?" said the other gutturally, and again, "So?" Then the humour of it took him, and he yielded to it.

"Damme! What's to laugh at, you porpoise?" spluttered mulberry-coat. "A fine tale this'll make at home! Admiral van der Kuylen first loses his fleet in the night, then has his flagship fired under him by a French squadron, and ends all by being captured by a pirate. I'm glad you find it matter for laughter. Since for my sins I happen to be with you, I'm damned if I do."

"There's a misapprehension, if I may make so bold as to point it out," put in Blood quietly. "You are not captured, gentlemen; you are rescued. When you realize it, perhaps it will occur to you to acknowledge the hospitality I am offering you. It may be poor, but it is the best at my disposal."

The fierce little gentleman stared at him. "Damme! Do you permit yourself to be ironical?" he disapproved him, and possibly with a view to correcting any such tendency, proceeded to introduce himself. "I am Lord Willoughby, King William's Governor-General of the West Indies, and this is Admiral van der Kuylen, commander of His Majesty's West Indian fleet, at present mislaid somewhere in this damned Caribbean Sea."

"King William?" quoth Blood, and he was conscious that Pitt and Dyke, who were behind him, now came edging nearer, sharing his own wonder. "And who may be King William, and of what may he be King?"

"What's that?" In a wonder greater than his own, Lord Willoughby stared back at him. At last: "I am alluding to His Majesty King William III—William of Orange—who, with Queen Mary, has been ruling England for two months and more."

There was a moment's silence, until Blood realized what he was

being told.

"D'ye mean, sir, that they've roused themselves at home, and kicked out that scoundrel James and his gang of ruffians?"

Admiral van der Kuylen nudged his lordship, a humourous twinkle in his blue eyes.

"His bolitics are fery sound, I dink," he growled.

His lordship's smile brought lines like gashes into his leathery cheeks. "'Slife! hadn't you heard? Where the devil have you been at all?"

"Out of touch with the world for the last three months," said Blood.

"Stab me! You must have been. And in that three months the world has undergone some changes." Briefly he added an account of them. King James was fled to France, and living under the protection of King Louis, wherefore, and for other reasons, England had joined the league against her, and was now at war with France. That was how it happened that the Dutch Admiral's flagship had been attacked by M. de Rivarol's fleet that morning, from which it clearly followed that in his voyage from Cartagena, the Frenchman must have spoken some ship that gave him the news.

After that, with renewed assurances that aboard his ship they should be honourably entreated, Captain Blood led the Governor-General and the Admiral to his cabin, what time the work of rescue went on. The news he had received had set Blood's mind in a turmoil. If King James was dethroned and banished, there was an end to his own outlawry for his alleged share in an earlier attempt to drive out that tyrant. It became possible for him to return home and take up his life again at the point where it was so unfortunately interrupted four years ago. He was dazzled by the prospect so abruptly opened out to him. The thing so filled his mind, moved him so deeply, that he must

afford it expression. In doing so, he revealed of himself more than he knew or intended to the astute little gentleman who watched him so keenly the while.

"Go home, if you will," said his lordship, when Blood paused. "You may be sure that none will harass you on the score of your piracy, considering what it was that drove you to it. But why be in haste? We have heard of you, to be sure, and we know of what you are capable upon the seas. Here is a great chance for you, since you declare yourself sick of piracy. Should you choose to serve King William out here during this war, your knowledge of the West Indies should render you a very valuable servant to His Majesty's Government, which you would not find ungrateful. You should consider it. Damme, sir, I repeat: it is a great chance you are given.

"That your lordship gives me," Blood amended, "I am very grateful. But at the moment, I confess, I can consider nothing but this great news. It alters the shape of the world. I must accustom myself to view it as it now is, before I can determine my own place in it."

Pitt came in to report that the work of rescue was at an end, and the men picked up—some forty-five in all—safe aboard the two buccaneer ships. He asked for orders. Blood rose.

"I am negligent of your lordship's concerns in my consideration of my own. You'll be wishing me to land you at Port Royal."

"At Port Royal?" The little man squirmed wrathfully on his seat. Wrathfully and at length he informed Blood that they had put into Port Royal last evening to find its Deputy-Governor absent. "He had gone on some wild-goose chase to Tortuga after buccaneers, taking the whole of the fleet with him."

Blood stared in surprise a moment; then yielded to laughter.

"He went, I suppose, before news reached him of the change of

government at home, and the war with France?"

"He did not," snapped Willoughby. "He was informed of both, and also of my coming before he set out."

"Oh, impossible!"

"So I should have thought. But I have the information from a Major Mallard whom I found in Port Royal, apparently governing in this fool's absence."

"But is he mad, to leave his post at such a time?" Blood was amazed.

"Taking the whole fleet with him, pray remember, and leaving the place open to French attack. That is the sort of Deputy-Governor that the late Government thought fit to appoint: an epitome of its misrule, damme! He leaves Port Royal unguarded save by a ramshackle fort that can be reduced to rubble in an hour. Stab me! It's unbelievable!"

The lingering smile faded from Blood's face. "Is Rivarol aware of this?" he cried sharply.

It was the Dutch Admiral who answered him. "Vould he go dere if he were not? M. de Rivarol he take some of our men prisoners. Berhabs dey dell him. Berhabs he make dem tell. Id is a great obbordunidy."

His lordship snarled like a mountain-cat. "That rascal Bishop shall answer for it with his head if there's any mischief done through this desertion of his post. What if it were deliberate, eh? What if he is more knave than fool? What if this is his way of serving King James, from whom he held his office?"

Captain Blood was generous. "Hardly so much. It was just vindictiveness that urged him. It's myself he's hunting at Tortuga, my lord. But, I'm thinking that while he's about it, I'd best be looking after

Jamaica for King William." He laughed, with more mirth than he had used in the last two months.

"Set a course for Port Royal, Jeremy, and make all speed. We'll be level yet with M. de Rivarol, and wipe off some other scores at the same time."

Both Lord Willoughby and the Admiral were on their feet.

"But you are not equal to it, damme!" cried his lordship. "Any one of the Frenchman's three ships is a match for both yours, my man."

"In guns—aye," said Blood, and he smiled. "But there's more than guns that matter in these affairs. If your lordship would like to see an action fought at sea as an action should be fought, this is your opportunity."

Both stared at him. "But the odds!" his lordship insisted.

"Id is imbossible," said van der Kuylen, shaking his great head. "Seamanship is imbordand. Bud guns is guns."

"If I can't defeat him, I can sink my own ships in the channel, and block him in until Bishop gets back from his wild-goose chase with his squadron, or until your own fleet turns up."

"And what good will that be, pray?" demanded Willoughby.

"I'll be after telling you. Rivarol is a fool to take this chance, considering what he's got aboard. He carried in his hold the treasure plundered from Cartagena, amounting to forty million livres." They jumped at the mention of that colossal sum. "He has gone into Port Royal with it. Whether he defeats me or not, he doesn't come out of Port Royal with it again, and sooner or later that treasure shall find its way into King William's coffers, after, say, one fifth share shall have been paid to my buccaneers. Is that agreed, Lord Willoughby?"

His lordship stood up, and shaking back the cloud of lace from his wrist, held out a delicate white hand.

"Captain Blood, I discover greatness in you," said he.

"Sure it's your lordship has the fine sight to perceive it," laughed the Captain.

"Yes, yes! Bud how vill you do id?" growled van der Kuylen.

"Come on deck, and it's a demonstration I'll be giving you before the day's much older."

CHAPTER XXX. THE LAST FIGHT OF THE ARABELLA

"VHY do you vait, my friend?" growled van der Kuylen.

"Aye—in God's name!" snapped Willoughby.

It was the afternoon of that same day, and the two buccaneer ships rocked gently with idly flapping sails under the lee of the long spit of land forming the great natural harbour of Port Royal, and less than a mile from the straits leading into it, which the fort commanded. It was two hours and more since they had brought up thereabouts, having crept thither unobserved by the city and by M. de Rivarol's ships, and all the time the air had been aquiver with the roar of guns from sea and land, announcing that battle was joined between the French and the defenders of Port Royal. That long, inactive waiting was straining the nerves of both Lord Willoughby and van der Kuylen.

"You said you would show us zome vine dings. Vhere are dese vine dings?"

Blood faced them, smiling confidently. He was arrayed for battle, in back-and-breast of black steel. "I'll not be trying your patience much longer. Indeed, I notice already a slackening in the fire. But it's this way, now: there's nothing at all to be gained by precipitancy, and a deal to be gained by delaying, as I shall show you, I hope."

Lord Willoughby eyed him suspiciously. "Ye think that in the meantime Bishop may come back or Admiral van der Kuylen's fleet appear?"

"Sure, now, I'm thinking nothing of the kind. What I'm thinking is that in this engagement with the fort M. de Rivarol, who's a lubberly fellow, as I've reason to know, will be taking some damage that may make the odds a trifle more even. Sure, it'll be time enough to go forward when the fort has shot its bolt."

"Aye, aye!" The sharp approval came like a cough from the little Governor-General. "I perceive your object, and I believe ye're entirely right. Ye have the qualities of a great commander, Captain Blood. I beg your pardon for having misunderstood you."

"And that's very handsome of your lordship. Ye see, I have some experience of this kind of action, and whilst I'll take any risk that I must, I'll take none that I needn't. But...." He broke off to listen. "Aye, I was right. The fire's slackening. It'll mean the end of Mallard's resistance in the fort. Ho there, Jeremy!"

He leaned on the carved rail and issued orders crisply. The bo'sun's pipe shrilled out, and in a moment the ship that had seemed to slumber there, awoke to life. Came the padding of feet along the decks, the creaking of blocks and the hoisting of sail. The helm was put over hard, and in a moment they were moving, the Elizabeth following, ever in obedience to the signals from the Arabella, whilst Ogle the gunner, whom he had summoned, was receiving Blood's final instructions before plunging down to his station on the main deck.

Within a quarter of an hour they had rounded the head, and stood in to the harbour mouth, within saker shot of Rivarol's three ships, to which they now abruptly disclosed themselves.

Where the fort had stood they now beheld a smoking rubbish heap, and the victorious Frenchman with the lily standard trailing from his mastheads was sweeping forward to snatch the rich prize whose defences he had shattered.

Blood scanned the French ships, and chuckled. The Victorieuse and the Medusa appeared to have taken no more than a few scars; but the third ship, the Baleine, listing heavily to larboard so as to keep the great gash in her starboard well above water, was out of account.

"You see!" he cried to van der Kuylen, and without waiting for the Dutchman's approving grunt, he shouted an order: "Helm, hard-a-port!"

The sight of that great red ship with her gilt beak-head and open ports swinging broadside on must have given check to Rivarol's soaring exultation. Yet before he could move to give an order, before he could well resolve what order to give, a volcano of fire and metal burst upon him from the buccaneers, and his decks were swept by the murderous scythe of the broadside. The Arabella held to her course, giving place to the Elizabeth, which, following closely, executed the same manoeuver. And then whilst still the Frenchmen were confused, panic-stricken by an attack that took them so utterly by surprise, the Arabella had gone about, and was returning in her tracks, presenting now her larboard guns, and loosing her second broadside in the wake of the first. Came yet another broadside from the Elizabeth and then the Arabella's trumpeter sent a call across the water, which Hagthorpe perfectly understood.

"On, now, Jeremy!" cried Blood. "Straight into them before they recover their wits. Stand by, there! Prepare to board! Hayton ... the grapnels! And pass the word to the gunner in the prow to fire as fast as he can load."

He discarded his feathered hat, and covered himself with a steel head-piece, which a negro lad brought him. He meant to lead this boarding-party in person. Briskly he explained himself to his two guests. "Boarding is our only chance here. We are too heavily outgunned."

Of this the fullest demonstration followed quickly. The Frenchmen having recovered their wits at last, both ships swung broadside on, and concentrating upon the Arabella as the nearer and heavier and therefore more immediately dangerous of their two opponents, volleyed upon her jointly at almost the same moment.

Unlike the buccaneers, who had fired high to cripple their enemies above decks, the French fired low to smash the hull of their assailant. The Arabella rocked and staggered under that terrific hammering, although Pitt kept her headed towards the French so that she should offer the narrowest target. For a moment she seemed to hesitate, then she plunged forward again, her beak-head in splinters, her forecastle smashed, and a gaping hole forward, that was only just above the water-line. Indeed, to make her safe from bilging, Blood ordered a prompt jettisoning of the forward guns, anchors, and water-casks and whatever else was moveable.

Meanwhile, the Frenchmen going about, gave the like reception to the Elizabeth. The Arabella, indifferently served by the wind, pressed forward to come to grips. But before she could accomplish her object, the Victorieuse had loaded her starboard guns again, and pounded her advancing enemy with a second broadside at close quarters. Amid the thunder of cannon, the rending of timbers, and the screams of maimed men, the half-necked Arabella plunged and reeled into the cloud of smoke that concealed her prey, and then from Hayton went up the cry that she was going down by the head.

Blood's heart stood still. And then in that very moment of his despair, the blue and gold flank of the Victorieuse loomed through the smoke. But even as he caught that enheartening glimpse he perceived, too, how sluggish now was their advance, and how with every second it grew more sluggish. They must sink before they reached her.

Thus, with an oath, opined the Dutch Admiral, and from Lord

Willoughby there was a word of blame for Blood's seamanship in having risked all upon this gambler's throw of boarding.

"There was no other chance!" cried Blood, in broken-hearted frenzy. "If ye say it was desperate and foolhardy, why, so it was; but the occasion and the means demanded nothing less. I fail within an ace of victory."

But they had not yet completely failed. Hayton himself, and a score of sturdy rogues whom his whistle had summoned, were crouching for shelter amid the wreckage of the forecastle with grapnels ready. Within seven or eight yards of the Victorieuse, when their way seemed spent, and their forward deck already awash under the eyes of the jeering, cheering Frenchmen, those men leapt up and forward, and hurled their grapnels across the chasm. Of the four they flung, two reached the Frenchman's decks, and fastened there. Swift as thought itself, was then the action of those sturdy, experienced buccaneers. Unhesitatingly all threw themselves upon the chain of one of those grapnels, neglecting the other, and heaved upon it with all their might to warp the ships together. Blood, watching from his own quarter-deck, sent out his voice in a clarion call:

"Musketeers to the prow!"

The musketeers, at their station at the waist, obeyed him with the speed of men who know that in obedience is the only hope of life. Fifty of them dashed forward instantly, and from the ruins of the forecastle they blazed over the heads of Hayton's men, mowing down the French soldiers who, unable to dislodge the irons, firmly held where they had deeply bitten into the timbers of the Victorieuse, were themselves preparing to fire upon the grapnel crew.

Starboard to starboard the two ships swung against each other with a jarring thud. By then Blood was down in the waist, judging and acting with the hurricane speed the occasion demanded. Sail had

been lowered by slashing away the ropes that held the yards. The advance guard of boarders, a hundred strong, was ordered to the poop, and his grapnel-men were posted, and prompt to obey his command at the very moment of impact. As a result, the foundering Arabella was literally kept afloat by the half-dozen grapnels that in an instant moored her firmly to the Victorieuse.

Willoughby and van der Kuylen on the poop had watched in breathless amazement the speed and precision with which Blood and his desperate crew had gone to work. And now he came racing up, his bugler sounding the charge, the main host of the buccaneers following him, whilst the vanguard, led by the gunner Ogle, who had been driven from his guns by water in the gun-deck, leapt shouting to the prow of the Victorieuse, to whose level the high poop of the water-logged Arabella had sunk. Led now by Blood himself, they launched themselves upon the French like hounds upon the stag they have brought to bay. After them went others, until all had gone, and none but Willoughby and the Dutchman were left to watch the fight from the quarter-deck of the abandoned Arabella.

For fully half-an-hour that battle raged aboard the Frenchman. Beginning in the prow, it surged through the fore-castle to the waist, where it reached a climax of fury. The French resisted stubbornly, and they had the advantage of numbers to encourage them. But for all their stubborn valour, they ended by being pressed back and back across the decks that were dangerously canted to starboard by the pull of the water-logged Arabella. The buccaneers fought with the desperate fury of men who know that retreat is impossible, for there was no ship to which they could retreat, and here they must prevail and make the Victorieuse their own, or perish.

And their own they made her in the end, and at a cost of nearly half their numbers. Driven to the quarter-deck, the surviving defenders, urged on by the infuriated Rivarol, maintained awhile their desperate

resistance. But in the end, Rivarol went down with a bullet in his head, and the French remnant, numbering scarcely a score of whole men, called for quarter.

Even then the labours of Blood's men were not at an end. The Elizabeth and the Medusa were tight-locked, and Hagthorpe's followers were being driven back aboard their own ship for the second time. Prompt measures were demanded. Whilst Pitt and his seamen bore their part with the sails, and Ogle went below with a gun-crew, Blood ordered the grapnels to be loosed at once. Lord Willoughby and the Admiral were already aboard the Victorieuse. As they swung off to the rescue of Hagthorpe, Blood, from the quarter-deck of the conquered vessel, looked his last upon the ship that had served him so well, the ship that had become to him almost as a part of himself. A moment she rocked after her release, then slowly and gradually settled down, the water gurgling and eddying about her topmasts, all that remained visible to mark the spot where she had met her death.

As he stood there, above the ghastly shambles in the waist of the Victorieuse, some one spoke behind him. "I think, Captain Blood, that it is necessary I should beg your pardon for the second time. Never before have I seen the impossible made possible by resource and valour, or victory so gallantly snatched from defeat."

He turned, and presented to Lord Willoughby a formidable front. His head-piece was gone, his breastplate dented, his right sleeve a rag hanging from his shoulder about a naked arm. He was splashed from head to foot with blood, and there was blood from a scalp-wound that he had taken matting his hair and mixing with the grime of powder on his face to render him unrecognizable.

But from that horrible mask two vivid eyes looked out preternaturally bright, and from those eyes two tears had ploughed each a furrow through the filth of his cheeks.

CHAPTER XXXI. HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR

When the cost of that victory came to be counted, it was found that of three hundred and twenty buccaneers who had left Cartagena with Captain Blood, a bare hundred remained sound and whole. The Elizabeth had suffered so seriously that it was doubtful if she could ever again be rendered seaworthy, and Hagthorpe, who had so gallantly commanded her in that last action, was dead. Against this, on the other side of the account, stood the facts that, with a far inferior force and by sheer skill and desperate valour, Blood's buccaneers had saved Jamaica from bombardment and pillage, and they had captured the fleet of M. de Rivarol, and seized for the benefit of King William the splendid treasure which she carried.

It was not until the evening of the following day that van der Kuylen's truant fleet of nine ships came to anchor in the harbour of Port Royal, and its officers, Dutch and English, were made acquainted with their Admiral's true opinion of their worth.

Six ships of that fleet were instantly refitted for sea. There were other West Indian settlements demanding the visit of inspection of the new Governor-General, and Lord Willoughby was in haste to sail for the Antilles.

"And meanwhile," he complained to his Admiral, "I am detained here by the absence of this fool of a Deputy-Governor."

"So?" said van der Kuylen. "But why should dad dedam you?"

"That I may break the dog as he deserves, and appoint his

successor in some man gifted with a sense of where his duty lies, and with the ability to perform it."

"Aha! But id is not necessary you remain for dat. And he vill require no insdruclshons, dis one. He vill know how to make Port Royal safe, bedder nor you or me."

"You mean Blood?"

"Of gourse. Could any man be bedder? You haf seen vhad he can do."

"You think so, too, eh? Egad! I had thought of it; and, rip me, why not? He's a better man than Morgan, and Morgan was made Governor."

Blood was sent for. He came, spruce and debonair once more, having exploited the resources of Port Royal so to render himself. He was a trifle dazzled by the honour proposed to him, when Lord Willoughby made it known. It was so far beyond anything that he had dreamed, and he was assailed by doubts of his capacity to undertake so onerous a charge.

"Damme!" snapped Willoughby, "Should I offer it unless I were satisfied of your capacity? If that's your only objection...."

"It is not, my lord. I had counted upon going home, so I had. I am hungry for the green lanes of England." He sighed. "There will be apple-blossoms in the orchards of Somerset."

"Apple-blossoms!" His lordship's voice shot up like a rocket, and cracked on the word. "What the devil...? Apple-blossoms!" He looked at van der Kuylen.

The Admiral raised his brows and pursed his heavy lips. His eyes twinkled humourously in his great face.

"So!" he said. "Fery boedical!"

My lord wheeled fiercely upon Captain Blood. "You've a past score to wipe out, my man!" he admonished him. "You've done something towards it, I confess; and you've shown your quality in doing it. That's why I offer you the governorship of Jamaica in His Majesty's name—because I account you the fittest man for the office that I have seen."

Blood bowed low. "Your lordship is very good. But...."

"Tchah! There's no 'but' to it. If you want your past forgotten, and your future assured, this is your chance. And you are not to treat it lightly on account of apple-blossoms or any other damned sentimental nonsense. Your duty lies here, at least for as long as the war lasts. When the war's over, you may get back to Somerset and cider or your native Ireland and its potheen; but until then you'll make the best of Jamaica and rum."

Van der Kuylen exploded into laughter. But from Blood the pleasantry elicited no smile. He remained solemn to the point of glumness. His thoughts were on Miss Bishop, who was somewhere here in this very house in which they stood, but whom he had not seen since his arrival. Had she but shown him some compassion....

And then the rasping voice of Willoughby cut in again, upbraiding him for his hesitation, pointing out to him his incredible stupidity in trifling with such a golden opportunity as this. He stiffened and bowed.

"My lord, you are in the right. I am a fool. But don't be accounting me an ingrate as well. If I have hesitated, it is because there are considerations with which I will not trouble your lordship."

"Apple-blossoms, I suppose?" sniffed his lordship.

This time Blood laughed, but there was still a lingering wistfulness in his eyes.

"It shall be as you wish—and very gratefully, let me assure your lordship. I shall know how to earn His Majesty's approbation. You may depend upon my loyal service.

"If I didn't, I shouldn't offer you this governorship."

Thus it was settled. Blood's commission was made out and sealed in the presence of Mallard, the Commandant, and the other officers of the garrison, who looked on in round-eyed astonishment, but kept their thoughts to themselves.

"Now we can about our business go," said van der Kuylen.

"We sail to-morrow morning," his lordship announced.

Blood was startled.

"And Colonel Bishop?" he asked.

"He becomes your affair. You are now the Governor. You will deal with him as you think proper on his return. Hang him from his own yardarm. He deserves it."

"Isn't the task a trifle invidious?" wondered Blood.

"Very well. I'll leave a letter for him. I hope he'll like it."

Captain Blood took up his duties at once. There was much to be done to place Port Royal in a proper state of defence, after what had happened there. He made an inspection of the ruined fort, and issued instructions for the work upon it, which was to be started immediately. Next he ordered the careening of the three French vessels that they might be rendered seaworthy once more. Finally, with the sanction of Lord Willoughby, he marshalled his buccaneers and surrendered to them one fifth of the captured treasure, leaving it to their choice thereafter either to depart or to enrol themselves in the service of King William.

A score of them elected to remain, and amongst these were Jeremy Pitt, Ogle, and Dyke, whose outlawry, like Blood's, had come to an end with the downfall of King James. They were—saving old Wolverstone, who had been left behind at Cartagena—the only survivors of that band of rebels-convict who had left Barbados over three years ago in the Cinco Llagas.

On the following morning, whilst van der Kuylen's fleet was making finally ready for sea, Blood sat in the spacious whitewashed room that was the Governor's office, when Major Mallard brought him word that Bishop's homing squadron was in sight.

"That is very well," said Blood. "I am glad he comes before Lord Willoughby's departure. The orders, Major, are that you place him under arrest the moment he steps ashore. Then bring him here to me. A moment." He wrote a hurried note. "That to Lord Willoughby aboard Admiral van der Kuylen's flagship."

Major Mallard saluted and departed. Peter Blood sat back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, frowning. Time moved on. Came a tap at the door, and an elderly negro slave presented himself. Would his excellency receive Miss Bishop?

His excellency changed colour. He sat quite still, staring at the negro a moment, conscious that his pulses were drumming in a manner wholly unusual to them. Then quietly he assented.

He rose when she entered, and if he was not as pale as she was, it was because his tan dissembled it. For a moment there was silence between them, as they stood looking each at the other. Then she moved forward, and began at last to speak, haltingly, in an unsteady voice, amazing in one usually so calm and deliberate.

"I... I... Major Mallard has just told me...."

"Major Mallard exceeded his duty," said Blood, and because of the effort he made to steady his voice it sounded harsh and unduly loud.

He saw her start, and stop, and instantly made amends. "You alarm yourself without reason, Miss Bishop. Whatever may lie between me and your uncle, you may be sure that I shall not follow the example he has set me. I shall not abuse my position to prosecute a private vengeance. On the contrary, I shall abuse it to protect him. Lord Willoughby's recommendation to me is that I shall treat him without mercy. My own intention is to send him back to his plantation in Barbados."

She came slowly forward now. "I... I am glad that you will do that. Glad, above all, for your own sake." She held out her hand to him.

He considered it critically. Then he bowed over it. "I'll not presume to take it in the hand of a thief and a pirate," said he bitterly.

"You are no longer that," she said, and strove to smile.

"Yet I owe no thanks to you that I am not," he answered. "I think there's no more to be said, unless it be to add the assurance that Lord Julian Wade has also nothing to apprehend from me. That, no doubt, will be the assurance that your peace of mind requires?"

"For your own sake—yes. But for your own sake only. I would not have you do anything mean or dishonouring."

"Thief and pirate though I be?"

She clenched her hand, and made a little gesture of despair and impatience.

"Will you never forgive me those words?"

"I'm finding it a trifle hard, I confess. But what does it matter, when all is said?"

Her clear hazel eyes considered him a moment wistfully. Then she put out her hand again.

"I am going, Captain Blood. Since you are so generous to my uncle, I shall be returning to Barbados with him. We are not like to meet again—ever. Is it impossible that we should part friends? Once I wronged you, I know. And I have said that I am sorry. Won't you... won't you say 'good-bye'?"

He seemed to rouse himself, to shake off a mantle of deliberate harshness. He took the hand she proffered. Retaining it, he spoke, his eyes sombrely, wistfully considering her.

"You are returning to Barbados?" he said slowly. "Will Lord Julian be going with you?"

"Why do you ask me that?" she confronted him quite fearlessly.

"Sure, now, didn't he give you my message, or did he bungle it?"

"No. He didn't bungle it. He gave it me in your own words. It touched me very deeply. It made me see clearly my error and my injustice. I owe it to you that I should say this by way of amend. I judged too harshly where it was a presumption to judge at all."

He was still holding her hand. "And Lord Julian, then?" he asked, his eyes watching her, bright as sapphires in that copper-coloured face.

"Lord Julian will no doubt be going home to England. There is nothing more for him to do out here."

"But didn't he ask you to go with him?"

"He did. I forgive you the impertinence."

A wild hope leapt to life within him.

"And you? Glory be, ye'll not be telling me ye refused to become my lady, when...."

"Oh! You are insufferable!" She tore her hand free and backed away from him. "I should not have come. Good-bye!" She was speeding to the door.

He sprang after her, and caught her. Her face flamed, and her eyes stabbed him like daggers. "These are pirate's ways, I think! Release me!"

"Arabella!" he cried on a note of pleading. "Are ye meaning it? Must I release ye? Must I let ye go and never set eyes on ye again? Or will ye stay and make this exile endurable until we can go home together? Och, ye're crying now! What have I said to make ye cry, my dear?"

"I... I thought you'd never say it," she mocked him through her tears.

"Well, now, ye see there was Lord Julian, a fine figure of a...."

"There was never, never anybody but you, Peter."

They had, of course, a deal to say thereafter, so much, indeed, that they sat down to say it, whilst time sped on, and Governor Blood forgot the duties of his office. He had reached home at last. His odyssey was ended.

And meanwhile Colonel Bishop's fleet had come to anchor, and the Colonel had landed on the mole, a disgruntled man to be disgruntled further yet. He was accompanied ashore by Lord Julian Wade.

A corporal's guard was drawn up to receive him, and in advance of this stood Major Mallard and two others who were unknown to the Deputy-Governor: one slight and elegant, the other big and brawny.

Major Mallard advanced. "Colonel Bishop, I have orders to arrest

you. Your sword, sir!"

"By order of the Governor of Jamaica," said the elegant little man behind Major Mallard. Bishop swung to him.

"The Governor? Ye're mad!" He looked from one to the other. "I am the Governor."

"You were," said the little man dryly. "But we've changed that in your absence. You're broke for abandoning your post without due cause, and thereby imperiling the settlement over which you had charge. It's a serious matter, Colonel Bishop, as you may find. Considering that you held your office from the Government of King James, it is even possible that a charge of treason might lie against you. It rests with your successor entirely whether ye're hanged or not."

Bishop rapped out an oath, and then, shaken by a sudden fear: "Who the devil may you be?" he asked.

"I am Lord Willoughby, Governor General of His Majesty's colonies in the West Indies. You were informed, I think, of my coming."

The remains of Bishop's anger fell from him like a cloak. He broke into a sweat of fear. Behind him Lord Julian looked on, his handsome face suddenly white and drawn.

"But, my lord..." began the Colonel.

"Sir, I am not concerned to hear your reasons," his lordship interrupted him harshly. "I am on the point of sailing and I have not the time. The Governor will hear you, and no doubt deal justly by you." He waved to Major Mallard, and Bishop, a crumpled, broken man, allowed himself to be led away.

To Lord Julian, who went with him, since none deterred him, Bishop expressed himself when presently he had sufficiently recovered.

"This is one more item to the account of that scoundrel Blood," he said, through his teeth. "My God, what a reckoning there will be when we meet!"

Major Mallard turned away his face that he might conceal his smile, and without further words led him a prisoner to the Governor's house, the house that so long had been Colonel Bishop's own residence. He was left to wait under guard in the hall, whilst Major Mallard went ahead to announce him.

Miss Bishop was still with Peter Blood when Major Mallard entered. His announcement startled them back to realities.

"You will be merciful with him. You will spare him all you can for my sake, Peter," she pleaded.

"To be sure I will," said Blood. "But I'm afraid the circumstances won't."

She effaced herself, escaping into the garden, and Major Mallard fetched the Colonel.

"His excellency the Governor will see you now," said he, and threw wide the door.

Colonel Bishop staggered in, and stood waiting.

At the table sat a man of whom nothing was visible but the top of a carefully curled black head. Then this head was raised, and a pair of blue eyes solemnly regarded the prisoner. Colonel Bishop made a noise in his throat, and, paralyzed by amazement, stared into the face of his excellency the Deputy-Governor of Jamaica, which was the face of the man he had been hunting in Tortuga to his present undoing.

The situation was best expressed to Lord Willoughby by van der Kuylen as the pair stepped aboard the Admiral's flagship.

"Id is fery boedigal!" he said, his blue eyes twinkling. "Cabdain Blood is fond of boedry—you remember de abble-blossoms. So? Ha, ha!"

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SCARAMOUCHE

A ROMANCE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

By Rafael Sabatini

Contents

SCARAMOUCHE

BOOK I.

<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	THE REPUBLICAN
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	THE ARISTOCRAT
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	THE ELOQUENCE OF M. DE VILMORIN
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	THE HERITAGE
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	THE LORD OF GAVRILLAC
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	THE WINDMILL
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	THE WIND
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	OMNES OMNIBUS
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	THE AFTERMATH

BOOK II.

<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	THE TRESPASSERS
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	THE SERVICE OF THESPI
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	THE COMIC MUSE
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	EXIT MONSIEUR PARVISSIMUS
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	ENTER SCARAMOUCHE
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	CLIMENE
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	THE CONQUEST OF NANTES
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	THE DREAM
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	THE AWAKENING
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	CONTRITION

[CHAPTER XI.](#) THE FRACAS AT THE THEATRE FEYDAU

[BOOK III.](#)

<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	TRANSITION
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	QUOS DEUS VULT PERDERE
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	PRESIDENT LE CHAPELIER
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	AT MEUDON
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	MADAME DE PLOUGASTEL
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	POLITICIANS
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	THE SPADASSINICIDES
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	THE PALADIN OF THE THIRD
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	TORN PRIDE
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	THE RETURNING CARRIAGE
<u>CHAPTER XI.</u>	INFERENCES
<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	THE OVERWHELMING REASON
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	SANCTUARY
<u>CHAPTER XIV.</u>	THE BARRIER
<u>CHAPTER XV.</u>	SAFE-CONDUCT
<u>CHAPTER XVI.</u>	SUNRISE

SCARAMOUCHE

BOOK I: THE ROBE

CHAPTER I. THE REPUBLICAN

He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad. And that was all his patrimony. His very paternity was obscure, although the village of Gavrillac had long since dispelled the cloud of mystery that hung about it. Those simple Brittany folk were not so simple as to be deceived by a pretended relationship which did not even possess the virtue of originality. When a nobleman, for no apparent reason, announces himself the godfather of an infant fetched no man knew whence, and thereafter cares for the lad's rearing and education, the most unsophisticated of country folk perfectly understand the situation. And so the good people of Gavrillac permitted themselves no illusions on the score of the real relationship between Andre-Louis Moreau—as the lad had been named—and Quintin de Kercadiou, Lord of Gavrillac, who dwelt in the big grey house that dominated from its eminence the village clustering below.

Andre-Louis had learnt his letters at the village school, lodged the while with old Rabouillet, the attorney, who in the capacity of fiscal intendant, looked after the affairs of M. de Kercadiou. Thereafter, at the age of fifteen, he had been packed off to Paris, to the Lycee of Louis Le Grand, to study the law which he was now returned to practise in conjunction with Rabouillet. All this at the charges of his godfather, M. de Kercadiou, who by placing him once more under the tutelage of Rabouillet would seem thereby quite clearly to be making provision for his future.

Andre-Louis, on his side, had made the most of his opportunities. You behold him at the age of four-and-twenty stuffed with learning enough to produce an intellectual indigestion in an ordinary mind. Out

of his zestful study of Man, from Thucydides to the Encyclopaedists, from Seneca to Rousseau, he had confirmed into an unassailable conviction his earliest conscious impressions of the general insanity of his own species. Nor can I discover that anything in his eventful life ever afterwards caused him to waver in that opinion.

In body he was a slight wisp of a fellow, scarcely above middle height, with a lean, astute countenance, prominent of nose and cheek-bones, and with lank, black hair that reached almost to his shoulders. His mouth was long, thin-lipped, and humorous. He was only just redeemed from ugliness by the splendour of a pair of ever-questing, luminous eyes, so dark as to be almost black. Of the whimsical quality of his mind and his rare gift of graceful expression, his writings—unfortunately but too scanty—and particularly his Confessions, afford us very ample evidence. Of his gift of oratory he was hardly conscious yet, although he had already achieved a certain fame for it in the Literary Chamber of Rennes—one of those clubs by now ubiquitous in the land, in which the intellectual youth of France foregathered to study and discuss the new philosophies that were permeating social life. But the fame he had acquired there was hardly enviable. He was too impish, too caustic, too much disposed—so thought his colleagues—to ridicule their sublime theories for the regeneration of mankind. Himself he protested that he merely held them up to the mirror of truth, and that it was not his fault if when reflected there they looked ridiculous.

All that he achieved by this was to exasperate; and his expulsion from a society grown mistrustful of him must already have followed but for his friend, Philippe de Vilморin, a divinity student of Rennes, who, himself, was one of the most popular members of the Literary Chamber.

Coming to Gavrilac on a November morning, laden with news of the political storms which were then gathering over France, Philippe

found in that sleepy Breton village matter to quicken his already lively indignation. A peasant of Gavrilac, named Mabey, had been shot dead that morning in the woods of Meupont, across the river, by a gamekeeper of the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr. The unfortunate fellow had been caught in the act of taking a pheasant from a snare, and the gamekeeper had acted under explicit orders from his master.

Infuriated by an act of tyranny so absolute and merciless, M. de Vilmorin proposed to lay the matter before M. de Kercadiou. Mabey was a vassal of Gavrilac, and Vilmorin hoped to move the Lord of Gavrilac to demand at least some measure of reparation for the widow and the three orphans which that brutal deed had made.

But because Andre-Louis was Philippe's dearest friend—indeed, his almost brother—the young seminarist sought him out in the first instance. He found him at breakfast alone in the long, low-ceilinged, white-panelled dining-room at Rabouillet's—the only home that Andre-Louis had ever known—and after embracing him, deafened him with his denunciation of M. de La Tour d'Azyr.

"I have heard of it already," said Andre-Louis.

"You speak as if the thing had not surprised you," his friend reproached him.

"Nothing beastly can surprise me when done by a beast. And La Tour d'Azyr is a beast, as all the world knows. The more fool Mabey for stealing his pheasants. He should have stolen somebody else's."

"Is that all you have to say about it?"

"What more is there to say? I've a practical mind, I hope."

"What more there is to say I propose to say to your godfather, M. de Kercadiou. I shall appeal to him for justice."

"Against M. de La Tour d'Azyr?" Andre-Louis raised his eyebrows.

"Why not?"

"My dear ingenuous Philippe, dog doesn't eat dog."

"You are unjust to your godfather. He is a humane man."

"Oh, as humane as you please. But this isn't a question of humanity. It's a question of game-laws."

M. de Vilmorin tossed his long arms to Heaven in disgust. He was a tall, slender young gentleman, a year or two younger than Andre-Louis. He was very soberly dressed in black, as became a seminarist, with white bands at wrists and throat and silver buckles to his shoes. His neatly clubbed brown hair was innocent of powder.

"You talk like a lawyer," he exploded.

"Naturally. But don't waste anger on me on that account. Tell me what you want me to do."

"I want you to come to M. de Kercadiou with me, and to use your influence to obtain justice. I suppose I am asking too much."

"My dear Philippe, I exist to serve you. I warn you that it is a futile quest; but give me leave to finish my breakfast, and I am at your orders."

M. de Vilmorin dropped into a winged armchair by the well-swept hearth, on which a piled-up fire of pine logs was burning cheerily. And whilst he waited now he gave his friend the latest news of the events in Rennes. Young, ardent, enthusiastic, and inspired by Utopian ideals, he passionately denounced the rebellious attitude of the privileged.

Andre-Louis, already fully aware of the trend of feeling in the ranks of an order in whose deliberations he took part as the representative

of a nobleman, was not at all surprised by what he heard. M. de Vilmorin found it exasperating that his friend should apparently decline to share his own indignation.

"Don't you see what it means?" he cried. "The nobles, by disobeying the King, are striking at the very foundations of the throne. Don't they perceive that their very existence depends upon it; that if the throne falls over, it is they who stand nearest to it who will be crushed? Don't they see that?"

"Evidently not. They are just governing classes, and I never heard of governing classes that had eyes for anything but their own profit."

"That is our grievance. That is what we are going to change."

"You are going to abolish governing classes? An interesting experiment. I believe it was the original plan of creation, and it might have succeeded but for Cain."

"What we are going to do," said M. de Vilmorin, curbing his exasperation, "is to transfer the government to other hands."

"And you think that will make a difference?"

"I know it will."

"Ah! I take it that being now in minor orders, you already possess the confidence of the Almighty. He will have confided to you His intention of changing the pattern of mankind."

M. de Vilmorin's fine ascetic face grew overcast. "You are profane, Andre," he reproved his friend.

"I assure you that I am quite serious. To do what you imply would require nothing short of divine intervention. You must change man, not systems. Can you and our vapouring friends of the Literary Chamber of Rennes, or any other learned society of France, devise a system of

government that has never yet been tried? Surely not. And can they say of any system tried that it proved other than a failure in the end? My dear Philippe, the future is to be read with certainty only in the past. *Ab actu ad posse valet consecutio*. Man never changes. He is always greedy, always acquisitive, always vile. I am speaking of Man in the bulk."

"Do you pretend that it is impossible to ameliorate the lot of the people?" M. de Vilmorin challenged him.

"When you say the people you mean, of course, the populace. Will you abolish it? That is the only way to ameliorate its lot, for as long as it remains populace its lot will be damnation."

"You argue, of course, for the side that employs you. That is natural, I suppose." M. de Vilmorin spoke between sorrow and indignation.

"On the contrary, I seek to argue with absolute detachment. Let us test these ideas of yours. To what form of government do you aspire? A republic, it is to be inferred from what you have said. Well, you have it already. France in reality is a republic to-day."

Philippe stared at him. "You are being paradoxical, I think. What of the King?"

"The King? All the world knows there has been no king in France since Louis XIV. There is an obese gentleman at Versailles who wears the crown, but the very news you bring shows for how little he really counts. It is the nobles and clergy who sit in the high places, with the people of France harnessed under their feet, who are the real rulers. That is why I say that France is a republic; she is a republic built on the best pattern—the Roman pattern. Then, as now, there were great patrician families in luxury, preserving for themselves power and wealth, and what else is accounted worth possessing; and there was the populace crushed and groaning, sweating, bleeding,

starving, and perishing in the Roman kennels. That was a republic; the mightiest we have seen."

Philippe strove with his impatience. "At least you will admit—you have, in fact, admitted it—that we could not be worse governed than we are?"

"That is not the point. The point is should we be better governed if we replaced the present ruling class by another? Without some guarantee of that I should be the last to lift a finger to effect a change. And what guarantees can you give? What is the class that aims at government? I will tell you. The bourgeoisie."

"What?"

"That startles you, eh? Truth is so often disconcerting. You hadn't thought of it? Well, think of it now. Look well into this Nantes manifesto. Who are the authors of it?"

"I can tell you who it was constrained the municipality of Nantes to send it to the King. Some ten thousand workmen—shipwrights, weavers, labourers, and artisans of every kind."

"Stimulated to it, driven to it, by their employers, the wealthy traders and shipowners of that city," Andre-Louis replied. "I have a habit of observing things at close quarters, which is why our colleagues of the Literary Chamber dislike me so cordially in debate. Where I delve they but skim. Behind those labourers and artisans of Nantes, counselling them, urging on these poor, stupid, ignorant toilers to shed their blood in pursuit of the will o' the wisp of freedom, are the sail-makers, the spinners, the ship-owners and the slave-traders. The slave-traders! The men who live and grow rich by a traffic in human flesh and blood in the colonies, are conducting at home a campaign in the sacred name of liberty! Don't you see that the whole movement is a movement of hucksters and traders and peddling vassals swollen

by wealth into envy of the power that lies in birth alone? The money-changers in Paris who hold the bonds in the national debt, seeing the parlous financial condition of the State, tremble at the thought that it may lie in the power of a single man to cancel the debt by bankruptcy. To secure themselves they are burrowing underground to overthrow a state and build upon its ruins a new one in which they shall be the masters. And to accomplish this they inflame the people. Already in Dauphiny we have seen blood run like water—the blood of the populace, always the blood of the populace. Now in Brittany we may see the like. And if in the end the new ideas prevail? if the seigneurial rule is overthrown, what then? You will have exchanged an aristocracy for a plutocracy. Is that worth while? Do you think that under money-changers and slave-traders and men who have waxed rich in other ways by the ignoble arts of buying and selling, the lot of the people will be any better than under their priests and nobles? Has it ever occurred to you, Philippe, what it is that makes the rule of the nobles so intolerable? Acquisitiveness. Acquisitiveness is the curse of mankind. And shall you expect less acquisitiveness in men who have built themselves up by acquisitiveness? Oh, I am ready to admit that the present government is execrable, unjust, tyrannical—what you will; but I beg you to look ahead, and to see that the government for which it is aimed at exchanging it may be infinitely worse."

Philippe sat thoughtful a moment. Then he returned to the attack.

"You do not speak of the abuses, the horrible, intolerable abuses of power under which we labour at present."

"Where there is power there will always be the abuse of it."

"Not if the tenure of power is dependent upon its equitable administration."

"The tenure of power is power. We cannot dictate to those who hold it."

"The people can—the people in its might."

"Again I ask you, when you say the people do you mean the populace? You do. What power can the populace wield? It can run wild. It can burn and slay for a time. But enduring power it cannot wield, because power demands qualities which the populace does not possess, or it would not be populace. The inevitable, tragic corollary of civilization is populace. For the rest, abuses can be corrected by equity; and equity, if it is not found in the enlightened, is not to be found at all. M. Necker is to set about correcting abuses, and limiting privileges. That is decided. To that end the States General are to assemble."

"And a promising beginning we have made in Brittany, as Heaven hears me!" cried Philippe.

"Pooh! That is nothing. Naturally the nobles will not yield without a struggle. It is a futile and ridiculous struggle—but then... it is human nature, I suppose, to be futile and ridiculous."

M. de Vilmorin became witheringly sarcastic. "Probably you will also qualify the shooting of Mabey as futile and ridiculous. I should even be prepared to hear you argue in defence of the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr that his gamekeeper was merciful in shooting Mabey, since the alternative would have been a life-sentence to the galleys."

Andre-Louis drank the remainder of his chocolate; set down his cup, and pushed back his chair, his breakfast done.

"I confess that I have not your big charity, my dear Philippe. I am touched by Mabey's fate. But, having conquered the shock of this news to my emotions, I do not forget that, after all, Mabey was thieving when he met his death."

M. de Vilmorin heaved himself up in his indignation.

"That is the point of view to be expected in one who is the assistant fiscal intendant of a nobleman, and the delegate of a nobleman to the States of Brittany."

"Philippe, is that just? You are angry with me!" he cried, in real solicitude.

"I am hurt," Vilmorin admitted. "I am deeply hurt by your attitude. And I am not alone in resenting your reactionary tendencies. Do you know that the Literary Chamber is seriously considering your expulsion?"

Andre-Louis shrugged. "That neither surprises nor troubles me."

M. de Vilmorin swept on, passionately: "Sometimes I think that you have no heart. With you it is always the law, never equity. It occurs to me, Andre, that I was mistaken in coming to you. You are not likely to be of assistance to me in my interview with M. de Kercadiou." He took up his hat, clearly with the intention of departing.

Andre-Louis sprang up and caught him by the arm.

"I vow," said he, "that this is the last time ever I shall consent to talk law or politics with you, Philippe. I love you too well to quarrel with you over other men's affairs."

"But I make them my own," Philippe insisted vehemently.

"Of course you do, and I love you for it. It is right that you should. You are to be a priest; and everybody's business is a priest's business. Whereas I am a lawyer—the fiscal intendant of a nobleman, as you say—and a lawyer's business is the business of his client. That is the difference between us. Nevertheless, you are not going to shake me off."

"But I tell you frankly, now that I come to think of it, that I should prefer you did not see M. de Kercadiou with me. Your duty to your

client cannot be a help to me."

His wrath had passed; but his determination remained firm, based upon the reason he gave.

"Very well," said Andre-Louis. "It shall be as you please. But nothing shall prevent me at least from walking with you as far as the chateau, and waiting for you while you make your appeal to M. de Kercadiou."

And so they left the house good friends, for the sweetness of M. de Vilmorin's nature did not admit of rancour, and together they took their way up the steep main street of Gavrillac.

CHAPTER II. THE ARISTOCRAT

The sleepy village of Gavrillac, a half-league removed from the main road to Rennes, and therefore undisturbed by the world's traffic, lay in a curve of the River Meu, at the foot, and straggling halfway up the slope, of the shallow hill that was crowned by the squat manor. By the time Gavrillac had paid tribute to its seigneur—partly in money and partly in service—tithes to the Church, and imposts to the King, it was hard put to it to keep body and soul together with what remained. Yet, hard as conditions were in Gavrillac, they were not so hard as in many other parts of France, not half so hard, for instance, as with the wretched feudatories of the great Lord of La Tour d'Azyr, whose vast possessions were at one point separated from this little village by the waters of the Meu.

The Chateau de Gavrillac owed such seigneurial airs as might be claimed for it to its dominant position above the village rather than to any feature of its own. Built of granite, like all the rest of Gavrillac, though mellowed by some three centuries of existence, it was a squat, flat-fronted edifice of two stories, each lighted by four windows with external wooden shutters, and flanked at either end by two square towers or pavilions under extinguisher roofs. Standing well back in a garden, denuded now, but very pleasant in summer, and immediately fronted by a fine sweep of balustraded terrace, it looked, what indeed it was, and always had been, the residence of unpretentious folk who found more interest in husbandry than in adventure.

Quintin de Kercadiou, Lord of Gavrillac—Seigneur de Gavrillac was all the vague title that he bore, as his forefathers had borne before him, derived no man knew whence or how—confirmed the

impression that his house conveyed. Rude as the granite itself, he had never sought the experience of courts, had not even taken service in the armies of his King. He left it to his younger brother, Etienne, to represent the family in those exalted spheres. His own interests from earliest years had been centred in his woods and pastures. He hunted, and he cultivated his acres, and superficially he appeared to be little better than any of his rustic metayers. He kept no state, or at least no state commensurate with his position or with the tastes of his niece Aline de Kercadiou. Aline, having spent some two years in the court atmosphere of Versailles under the aegis of her uncle Etienne, had ideas very different from those of her uncle Quintin of what was befitting seigneurial dignity. But though this only child of a third Kercadiou had exercised, ever since she was left an orphan at the early age of four, a tyrannical rule over the Lord of Gavrilac, who had been father and mother to her, she had never yet succeeded in beating down his stubbornness on that score. She did not yet despair—persistence being a dominant note in her character—although she had been assiduously and fruitlessly at work since her return from the great world of Versailles some three months ago.

She was walking on the terrace when Andre-Louis and M. de Vilmorin arrived. Her slight body was wrapped against the chill air in a white pelisse; her head was encased in a close-fitting bonnet, edged with white fur. It was caught tight in a knot of pale-blue ribbon on the right of her chin; on the left a long ringlet of corn-coloured hair had been permitted to escape. The keen air had whipped so much of her cheeks as was presented to it, and seemed to have added sparkle to eyes that were of darkest blue.

Andre-Louis and M. de Vilmorin had been known to her from childhood. The three had been playmates once, and Andre-Louis—in view of his spiritual relationship with her uncle—she called her cousin. The cousinly relations had persisted between these two long after Philippe de Vilmorin had outgrown the earlier intimacy, and had

become to her Monsieur de Vilmorin.

She waved her hand to them in greeting as they advanced, and stood—an entrancing picture, and fully conscious of it—to await them at the end of the terrace nearest the short avenue by which they approached.

"If you come to see monsieur my uncle, you come inopportunately, messieurs," she told them, a certain feverishness in her air. "He is closely—oh, so very closely—engaged."

"We will wait, mademoiselle," said M. de Vilmorin, bowing gallantly over the hand she extended to him. "Indeed, who would haste to the uncle that may tarry a moment with the niece?"

"M. l'abbe," she teased him, "when you are in orders I shall take you for my confessor. You have so ready and sympathetic an understanding."

"But no curiosity," said Andre-Louis. "You haven't thought of that."

"I wonder what you mean, Cousin Andre."

"Well you may," laughed Philippe. "For no one ever knows." And then, his glance straying across the terrace settled upon a carriage that was drawn up before the door of the chateau. It was a vehicle such as was often to be seen in the streets of a great city, but rarely in the country. It was a beautifully sprung two-horse cabriolet of walnut, with a varnish upon it like a sheet of glass and little pastoral scenes exquisitely painted on the panels of the door. It was built to carry two persons, with a box in front for the coachman, and a stand behind for the footman. This stand was empty, but the footman paced before the door, and as he emerged now from behind the vehicle into the range of M. de Vilmorin's vision, he displayed the resplendent blue-and-gold livery of the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr.

"Why!" he exclaimed. "Is it M. de La Tour d'Azyr who is with your uncle?"

"It is, monsieur," said she, a world of mystery in voice and eyes, of which M. de Vilmorin observed nothing.

"Ah, pardon!" he bowed low, hat in hand. "Serviteur, mademoiselle," and he turned to depart towards the house.

"Shall I come with you, Philippe?" Andre-Louis called after him.

"It would be ungallant to assume that you would prefer it," said M. de Vilmorin, with a glance at mademoiselle. "Nor do I think it would serve. If you will wait..."

M. de Vilmorin strode off. Mademoiselle, after a moment's blank pause, laughed ripplingly. "Now where is he going in such a hurry?"

"To see M. de La Tour d'Azyr as well as your uncle, I should say."

"But he cannot. They cannot see him. Did I not say that they are very closely engaged? You don't ask me why, Andre." There was an arch mysteriousness about her, a latent something that may have been elation or amusement, or perhaps both. Andre-Louis could not determine it.

"Since obviously you are all eagerness to tell, why should I ask?" quoth he.

"If you are caustic I shall not tell you even if you ask. Oh, yes, I will. It will teach you to treat me with the respect that is my due."

"I hope I shall never fail in that."

"Less than ever when you learn that I am very closely concerned in the visit of M. de La Tour d'Azyr. I am the object of this visit." And she looked at him with sparkling eyes and lips parted in laughter.

"The rest, you would seem to imply, is obvious. But I am a dolt, if you please; for it is not obvious to me."

"Why, stupid, he comes to ask my hand in marriage."

"Good God!" said Andre-Louis, and stared at her, chapfallen.

She drew back from him a little with a frown and an upward tilt of her chin. "It surprises you?"

"It disgusts me," said he, bluntly. "In fact, I don't believe it. You are amusing yourself with me."

For a moment she put aside her visible annoyance to remove his doubts. "I am quite serious, monsieur. There came a formal letter to my uncle this morning from M. de La Tour d'Azyr, announcing the visit and its object. I will not say that it did not surprise us a little...

"Oh, I see," cried Andre-Louis, in relief. "I understand. For a moment I had almost feared..." He broke off, looked at her, and shrugged.

"Why do you stop? You had almost feared that Versailles had been wasted upon me. That I should permit the court-ship of me to be conducted like that of any village wench. It was stupid of you. I am being sought in proper form, at my uncle's hands."

"Is his consent, then, all that matters, according to Versailles?"

"What else?"

"There is your own."

She laughed. "I am a dutiful niece... when it suits me."

"And will it suit you to be dutiful if your uncle accepts this monstrous proposal?"

"Monstrous!" She bridled. "And why monstrous, if you please?"

"For a score of reasons," he answered irritably.

"Give me one," she challenged him.

"He is twice your age."

"Hardly so much," said she.

"He is forty-five, at least."

"But he looks no more than thirty. He is very handsome—so much you will admit; nor will you deny that he is very wealthy and very powerful; the greatest nobleman in Brittany. He will make me a great lady."

"God made you that, Aline."

"Come, that's better. Sometimes you can almost be polite." And she moved along the terrace, Andre-Louis pacing beside her.

"I can be more than that to show reason why you should not let this beast befoul the beautiful thing that God has made."

She frowned, and her lips tightened. "You are speaking of my future husband," she reproved him.

His lips tightened too; his pale face grew paler.

"And is it so? It is settled, then? Your uncle is to agree? You are to be sold thus, lovelessly, into bondage to a man you do not know. I had dreamed of better things for you, Aline."

"Better than to be Marquise de La Tour d'Azyr?"

He made a gesture of exasperation. "Are men and women nothing more than names? Do the souls of them count for nothing? Is there no

joy in life, no happiness, that wealth and pleasure and empty, high-sounding titles are to be its only aims? I had set you high—so high, Aline—a thing scarce earthly. There is joy in your heart, intelligence in your mind; and, as I thought, the vision that pierces husks and shams to claim the core of reality for its own. Yet you will surrender all for a parcel of make-believe. You will sell your soul and your body to be Marquise de La Tour d'Azyr."

"You are indelicate," said she, and though she frowned her eyes laughed. "And you go headlong to conclusions. My uncle will not consent to more than to allow my consent to be sought. We understand each other, my uncle and I. I am not to be bartered like a turnip."

He stood still to face her, his eyes glowing, a flush creeping into his pale cheeks.

"You have been torturing me to amuse yourself!" he cried. "Ah, well, I forgive you out of my relief."

"Again you go too fast, Cousin Andre I have permitted my uncle to consent that M. le Marquis shall make his court to me. I like the look of the gentleman. I am flattered by his preference when I consider his eminence. It is an eminence that I may find it desirable to share. M. le Marquis does not look as if he were a dullard. It should be interesting to be wooed by him. It may be more interesting still to marry him, and I think, when all is considered, that I shall probably—very probably—decide to do so."

He looked at her, looked at the sweet, challenging loveliness of that childlike face so tightly framed in the oval of white fur, and all the life seemed to go out of his own countenance.

"God help you, Aline!" he groaned.

She stamped her foot. He was really very exasperating, and

something presumptuous too, she thought.

"You are insolent, monsieur."

"It is never insolent to pray, Aline. And I did no more than pray, as I shall continue to do. You'll need my prayers, I think."

"You are insufferable!" She was growing angry, as he saw by the deepening frown, the heightened colour.

"That is because I suffer. Oh, Aline, little cousin, think well of what you do; think well of the realities you will be bartering for these shams—the realities that you will never know, because these cursed shams will block your way to them. When M. de La Tour d'Azyr comes to make his court, study him well; consult your fine instincts; leave your own noble nature free to judge this animal by its intuitions. Consider that..."

"I consider, monsieur, that you presume upon the kindness I have always shown you. You abuse the position of toleration in which you stand. Who are you? What are you, that you should have the insolence to take this tone with me?"

He bowed, instantly his cold, detached self again, and resumed the mockery that was his natural habit.

"My congratulations, mademoiselle, upon the readiness with which you begin to adapt yourself to the great role you are to play."

"Do you adapt yourself also, monsieur," she retorted angrily, and turned her shoulder to him.

"To be as the dust beneath the haughty feet of Madame la Marquise. I hope I shall know my place in future."

The phrase arrested her. She turned to him again, and he perceived that her eyes were shining now suspiciously. In an instant

the mockery in him was quenched in contrition.

"Lord, what a beast I am, Aline!" he cried, as he advanced. "Forgive me if you can."

Almost had she turned to sue forgiveness from him. But his contrition removed the need.

"I'll try," said she, "provided that you undertake not to offend again.

"But I shall," said he. "I am like that. I will fight to save you, from yourself if need be, whether you forgive me or not."

They were standing so, confronting each other a little breathlessly, a little defiantly, when the others issued from the porch.

First came the Marquis of La Tour d'Azyr, Count of Solz, Knight of the Orders of the Holy Ghost and Saint Louis, and Brigadier in the armies of the King. He was a tall, graceful man, upright and soldierly of carriage, with his head disdainfully set upon his shoulders. He was magnificently dressed in a full-skirted coat of mulberry velvet that was laced with gold. His waistcoat, of velvet too, was of a golden apricot colour; his breeches and stockings were of black silk, and his lacquered, red-heeled shoes were buckled in diamonds. His powdered hair was tied behind in a broad ribbon of watered silk; he carried a little three-cornered hat under his arm, and a gold-hilted slender dress-sword hung at his side.

Considering him now in complete detachment, observing the magnificence of him, the elegance of his movements, the great air, blending in so extraordinary a manner disdain and graciousness, Andre-Louis trembled for Aline. Here was a practised, irresistible wooer, whose *bonnes fortunes* were become a by-word, a man who had hitherto been the despair of dowagers with marriageable daughters, and the desolation of husbands with attractive wives.

He was immediately followed by M. de Kercadiou, in completest contrast. On legs of the shortest, the Lord of Gavrillac carried a body that at forty-five was beginning to incline to corpulence and an enormous head containing an indifferent allotment of intelligence. His countenance was pink and blotchy, liberally branded by the smallpox which had almost extinguished him in youth. In dress he was careless to the point of untidiness, and to this and to the fact that he had never married—disregarding the first duty of a gentleman to provide himself with an heir—he owed the character of misogynist attributed to him by the countryside.

After M. de Kercadiou came M. de Vilmorin, very pale and self-contained, with tight lips and an overcast brow.

To meet them, there stepped from the carriage a very elegant young gentleman, the Chevalier de Chabrilane, M. de La Tour d'Azyr's cousin, who whilst awaiting his return had watched with considerable interest—his own presence unsuspected—the perambulations of Andre-Louis and mademoiselle.

Perceiving Aline, M. de La Tour d'Azyr detached himself from the others, and lengthening his stride came straight across the terrace to her.

To Andre-Louis the Marquis inclined his head with that mixture of courtliness and condescension which he used. Socially, the young lawyer stood in a curious position. By virtue of the theory of his birth, he ranked neither as noble nor as simple, but stood somewhere between the two classes, and whilst claimed by neither he was used familiarly by both. Coldly now he returned M. de La Tour d'Azyr's greeting, and discreetly removed himself to go and join his friend.

The Marquis took the hand that mademoiselle extended to him, and bowing over it, bore it to his lips.

"Mademoiselle," he said, looking into the blue depths of her eyes, that met his gaze smiling and untroubled, "monsieur your uncle does me the honour to permit that I pay my homage to you. Will you, mademoiselle, do me the honour to receive me when I come to-morrow? I shall have something of great importance for your ear."

"Of importance, M. le Marquis? You almost frighten me." But there was no fear on the serene little face in its furred hood. It was not for nothing that she had graduated in the Versailles school of artificialities.

"That," said he, "is very far from my design."

"But of importance to yourself, monsieur, or to me?"

"To us both, I hope," he answered her, a world of meaning in his fine, ardent eyes.

"You whet my curiosity, monsieur; and, of course, I am a dutiful niece. It follows that I shall be honoured to receive you."

"Not honoured, mademoiselle; you will confer the honour. To-morrow at this hour, then, I shall have the felicity to wait upon you."

He bowed again; and again he bore her fingers to his lips, what time she curtsied. Thereupon, with no more than this formal breaking of the ice, they parted.

She was a little breathless now, a little dazzled by the beauty of the man, his princely air, and the confidence of power he seemed to radiate. Involuntarily almost, she contrasted him with his critic—the lean and impudent Andre-Louis in his plain brown coat and steel-buckled shoes—and she felt guilty of an unpardonable offence in having permitted even one word of that presumptuous criticism. To-morrow M. le Marquis would come to offer her a great position, a great rank. And already she had derogated from the increase of

dignity accruing to her from his very intention to translate her to so great an eminence. Not again would she suffer it; not again would she be so weak and childish as to permit Andre-Louis to utter his ribald comments upon a man by comparison with whom he was no better than a lackey.

Thus argued vanity and ambition with her better self and to her vast annoyance her better self would not admit entire conviction.

Meanwhile, M. de La Tour d'Azyr was climbing into his carriage. He had spoken a word of farewell to M. de Kercadiou, and he had also had a word for M. de Vilmorin in reply to which M. de Vilmorin had bowed in assenting silence. The carriage rolled away, the powdered footman in blue-and-gold very stiff behind it, M. de La Tour d'Azyr bowing to mademoiselle, who waved to him in answer.

Then M. de Vilmorin put his arm through that of Andre Louis, and said to him, "Come, Andre."

"But you'll stay to dine, both of you!" cried the hospitable Lord of Gavrilac. "We'll drink a certain toast," he added, winking an eye that strayed towards mademoiselle, who was approaching. He had no subtleties, good soul that he was.

M. de Vilmorin deplored an appointment that prevented him doing himself the honour. He was very stiff and formal.

"And you, Andre?"

"I? Oh, I share the appointment, godfather," he lied, "and I have a superstition against toasts." He had no wish to remain. He was angry with Aline for her smiling reception of M. de La Tour d'Azyr and the sordid bargain he saw her set on making. He was suffering from the loss of an illusion.

CHAPTER III. THE ELOQUENCE OF M. DE VILMORIN

As they walked down the hill together, it was now M. de Vilmorin who was silent and preoccupied, Andre-Louis who was talkative. He had chosen Woman as a subject for his present discourse. He claimed—quite unjustifiably—to have discovered Woman that morning; and the things he had to say of the sex were unflattering, and occasionally almost gross. M. de Vilmorin, having ascertained the subject, did not listen. Singular though it may seem in a young French abbe of his day, M. de Vilmorin was not interested in Woman. Poor Philippe was in several ways exceptional. Opposite the Breton arme—the inn and posting-house at the entrance of the village of Gavrilac—M. de Vilmorin interrupted his companion just as he was soaring to the dizziest heights of caustic invective, and Andre-Louis, restored thereby to actualities, observed the carriage of M. de La Tour d'Azyr standing before the door of the hostelry.

"I don't believe you've been listening to me," said he.

"Had you been less interested in what you were saying, you might have observed it sooner and spared your breath. The fact is, you disappoint me, Andre. You seem to have forgotten what we went for. I have an appointment here with M. le Marquis. He desires to hear me further in the matter. Up there at Gavrilac I could accomplish nothing. The time was ill-chosen as it happened. But I have hopes of M. le Marquis."

"Hopes of what?"

"That he will make what reparation lies in his power. Provide for the

widow and the orphans. Why else should he desire to hear me further?"

"Unusual condescension," said Andre-Louis, and quoted "Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes."

"Why?" asked Philippe.

"Let us go and discover—unless you consider that I shall be in the way."

Into a room on the right, rendered private to M. le Marquis for so long as he should elect to honour it, the young men were ushered by the host. A fire of logs was burning brightly at the room's far end, and by this sat now M. de La Tour d'Azyr and his cousin, the Chevalier de Chabrillane. Both rose as M. de Vilmorin came in. Andre-Louis following, paused to close the door.

"You oblige me by your prompt courtesy, M. de Vilmorin," said the Marquis, but in a tone so cold as to belie the politeness of his words. "A chair, I beg. Ah, Moreau?" The note was frigidly interrogative. "He accompanies you, monsieur?" he asked.

"If you please, M. le Marquis."

"Why not? Find yourself a seat, Moreau." He spoke over his shoulder as to a lackey.

"It is good of you, monsieur," said Philippe, "to have offered me this opportunity of continuing the subject that took me so fruitlessly, as it happens, to Gavrillac."

The Marquis crossed his legs, and held one of his fine hands to the blaze. He replied, without troubling to turn to the young man, who was slightly behind him.

"The goodness of my request we will leave out of question for the

moment," said he, darkly, and M. de Chabrilane laughed. Andre-Louis thought him easily moved to mirth, and almost envied him the faculty.

"But I am grateful," Philippe insisted, "that you should condescend to hear me plead their cause."

The Marquis stared at him over his shoulder. "Whose cause?" quoth he.

"Why, the cause of the widow and orphans of this unfortunate Mabey."

The Marquis looked from Vilmorin to the Chevalier, and again the Chevalier laughed, slapping his leg this time.

"I think," said M. de La Tour d'Azyr, slowly, "that we are at cross-purposes. I asked you to come here because the Chateau de Gavrilac was hardly a suitable place in which to carry our discussion further, and because I hesitated to incommode you by suggesting that you should come all the way to Azyr. But my object is connected with certain expressions that you let fall up there. It is on the subject of those expressions, monsieur, that I would hear you further—if you will honour me."

Andre-Louis began to apprehend that there was something sinister in the air. He was a man of quick intuitions, quicker far than those of M. de Vilmorin, who evinced no more than a mild surprise.

"I am at a loss, monsieur," said he. "To what expressions does monsieur allude?"

"It seems, monsieur, that I must refresh your memory." The Marquis crossed his legs, and swung sideways on his chair, so that at last he directly faced M. de Vilmorin. "You spoke, monsieur—and however mistaken you may have been, you spoke very eloquently, too

eloquently almost, it seemed to me—of the infamy of such a deed as the act of summary justice upon this thieving fellow Mabey, or whatever his name may be. Infamy was the precise word you used. You did not retract that word when I had the honour to inform you that it was by my orders that my gamekeeper Benet proceeded as he did."

"If," said M. de Vilmorin, "the deed was infamous, its infamy is not modified by the rank, however exalted, of the person responsible. Rather is it aggravated."

"Ah!" said M. le Marquis, and drew a gold snuffbox from his pocket. "You say, 'if the deed was infamous,' monsieur. Am I to understand that you are no longer as convinced as you appeared to be of its infamy?"

M. de Vilmorin's fine face wore a look of perplexity. He did not understand the drift of this.

"It occurs to me, M. le Marquis, in view of your readiness to assume responsibility, that you must believe justification for the deed which is not apparent to myself."

"That is better. That is distinctly better." The Marquis took snuff delicately, dusting the fragments from the fine lace at his throat. "You realize that with an imperfect understanding of these matters, not being yourself a landowner, you may have rushed to unjustifiable conclusions. That is indeed the case. May it be a warning to you, monsieur. When I tell you that for months past I have been annoyed by similar depredations, you will perhaps understand that it had become necessary to employ a deterrent sufficiently strong to put an end to them. Now that the risk is known, I do not think there will be any more prowling in my coverts. And there is more in it than that, M. de Vilmorin. It is not the poaching that annoys me so much as the contempt for my absolute and inviolable rights. There is, monsieur, as you cannot fail to have observed, an evil spirit of insubordination in

the air, and there is one only way in which to meet it. To tolerate it, in however slight a degree, to show leniency, however leniently disposed, would entail having recourse to still harsher measures to-morrow. You understand me, I am sure, and you will also, I am sure, appreciate the condescension of what amounts to an explanation from me where I cannot admit that any explanations were due. If anything in what I have said is still obscure to you, I refer you to the game laws, which your lawyer friend there will expound for you at need."

With that the gentleman swung round again to face the fire. It appeared to convey the intimation that the interview was at an end. And yet this was not by any means the intimation that it conveyed to the watchful, puzzled, vaguely uneasy Andre-Louis. It was, thought he, a very curious, a very suspicious oration. It affected to explain, with a politeness of terms and a calculated insolence of tone; whilst in fact it could only serve to stimulate and goad a man of M. de Vilmorin's opinions. And that is precisely what it did. He rose.

"Are there in the world no laws but game laws?" he demanded, angrily. "Have you never by any chance heard of the laws of humanity?"

The Marquis sighed wearily. "What have I to do with the laws of humanity?" he wondered.

M. de Vilmorin looked at him a moment in speechless amazement.

"Nothing, M. le Marquis. That is—alas!—too obvious. I hope you will remember it in the hour when you may wish to appeal to those laws which you now deride."

M. de La Tour d'Azyr threw back his head sharply, his high-bred face imperious.

"Now what precisely shall that mean? It is not the first time to-day

that you have made use of dark sayings that I could almost believe to veil the presumption of a threat."

"Not a threat, M. le Marquis—a warning. A warning that such deeds as these against God's creatures... Oh, you may sneer, monsieur, but they are God's creatures, even as you or I—neither more nor less, deeply though the reflection may wound your pride, in His eyes..."

"Of your charity, spare me a sermon, M. l'abbé!"

"You mock, monsieur. You laugh. Will you laugh, I wonder, when God presents His reckoning to you for the blood and plunder with which your hands are full?"

"Monsieur!" The word, sharp as the crack of a whip, was from M. de Chabrilane, who bounded to his feet. But instantly the Marquis repressed him.

"Sit down, Chevalier. You are interrupting M. l'abbé, and I should like to hear him further. He interests me profoundly."

In the background Andre-Louis, too, had risen, brought to his feet by alarm, by the evil that he saw written on the handsome face of M. de La Tour d'Azyr. He approached, and touched his friend upon the arm.

"Better be going, Philippe," said he.

But M. de Vilmorin, caught in the relentless grip of passions long repressed, was being hurried by them recklessly along.

"Oh, monsieur," said he, "consider what you are and what you will be. Consider how you and your kind live by abuses, and consider the harvest that abuses must ultimately bring."

"Revolutionist!" said M. le Marquis, contemptuously. "You have the effrontery to stand before my face and offer me this stinking cant of

your modern so-called intellectuals!"

"Is it cant, monsieur? Do you think—do you believe in your soul—that it is cant? Is it cant that the feudal grip is on all things that live, crushing them like grapes in the press, to its own profit? Does it not exercise its rights upon the waters of the river, the fire that bakes the poor man's bread of grass and barley, on the wind that turns the mill? The peasant cannot take a step upon the road, cross a crazy bridge over a river, buy an ell of cloth in the village market, without meeting feudal rapacity, without being taxed in feudal dues. Is not that enough, M. le Marquis? Must you also demand his wretched life in payment for the least infringement of your sacred privileges, careless of what widows or orphans you dedicate to woe? Will naught content you but that your shadow must lie like a curse upon the land? And do you think in your pride that France, this Job among the nations, will suffer it forever?"

He paused as if for a reply. But none came. The Marquis considered him, strangely silent, a half smile of disdain at the corners of his lips, an ominous hardness in his eyes.

Again Andre-Louis tugged at his friend's sleeve.

"Philippe."

Philippe shook him off, and plunged on, fanatically.

"Do you see nothing of the gathering clouds that herald the coming of the storm? You imagine, perhaps, that these States General summoned by M. Necker, and promised for next year, are to do nothing but devise fresh means of extortion to liquidate the bankruptcy of the State? You delude yourselves, as you shall find. The Third Estate, which you despise, will prove itself the preponderating force, and it will find a way to make an end of this canker of privilege that is devouring the vitals of this unfortunate country."

M. le Marquis shifted in his chair, and spoke at last.

"You have, monsieur," said he, "a very dangerous gift of eloquence. And it is of yourself rather than of your subject. For after all, what do you offer me? A rechauffe of the dishes served to out-at-elbow enthusiasts in the provincial literary chambers, compounded of the effusions of your Voltaires and Jean-Jacques and such dirty-fingered scribblers. You have not among all your philosophers one with the wit to understand that we are an order consecrated by antiquity, that for our rights and privileges we have behind us the authority of centuries."

"Humanity, monsieur," Philippe replied, "is more ancient than nobility. Human rights are contemporary with man."

The Marquis laughed and shrugged.

"That is the answer I might have expected. It has the right note of cant that distinguishes the philosophers." And then M. de Chabrilane spoke.

"You go a long way round," he criticized his cousin, on a note of impatience.

"But I am getting there," he was answered. "I desired to make quite certain first."

"Faith, you should have no doubt by now."

"I have none." The Marquis rose, and turned again to M. de Vilmorin, who had understood nothing of that brief exchange. "M. l'abbé," said he once more, "you have a very dangerous gift of eloquence. I can conceive of men being swayed by it. Had you been born a gentleman, you would not so easily have acquired these false views that you express."

M. de Vilmorin stared blankly, uncomprehending.

"Had I been born a gentleman, do you say?" quoth he, in a slow, bewildered voice. "But I was born a gentleman. My race is as old, my blood as good as yours, monsieur."

From M. le Marquis there was a slight play of eyebrows, a vague, indulgent smile. His dark, liquid eyes looked squarely into the face of M. de Vilmorin.

"You have been deceived in that, I fear."

"Deceived?"

"Your sentiments betray the indiscretion of which madame your mother must have been guilty."

The brutally affronting words were sped beyond recall, and the lips that had uttered them, coldly, as if they had been the merest commonplace, remained calm and faintly sneering.

A dead silence followed. Andre-Louis' wits were numbed. He stood aghast, all thought suspended in him, what time M. de Vilmorin's eyes continued fixed upon M. de La Tour d'Azyr's, as if searching there for a meaning that eluded him. Quite suddenly he understood the vile affront. The blood leapt to his face, fire blazed in his gentle eyes. A convulsive quiver shook him. Then, with an inarticulate cry, he leaned forward, and with his open hand struck M. le Marquis full and hard upon his sneering face.

In a flash M. de Chabrilane was on his feet, between the two men.

Too late Andre-Louis had seen the trap. La Tour d'Azyr's words were but as a move in a game of chess, calculated to exasperate his opponent into some such counter-move as this—a counter-move that left him entirely at the other's mercy.

M. le Marquis looked on, very white save where M. de Vilmorin's finger-prints began slowly to colour his face; but he said nothing more.

Instead, it was M. de Chabrilane who now did the talking, taking up his preconcerted part in this vile game.

"You realize, monsieur, what you have done," said he, coldly, to Philippe. "And you realize, of course, what must inevitably follow."

M. de Vilmorin had realized nothing. The poor young man had acted upon impulse, upon the instinct of decency and honour, never counting the consequences. But he realized them now at the sinister invitation of M. de Chabrilane, and if he desired to avoid these consequences, it was out of respect for his priestly vocation, which strictly forbade such adjustments of disputes as M. de Chabrilane was clearly thrusting upon him.

He drew back. "Let one affront wipe out the other," said he, in a dull voice. "The balance is still in M. le Marquis's favour. Let that content him."

"Impossible." The Chevalier's lips came together tightly. Thereafter he was suavity itself, but very firm. "A blow has been struck, monsieur. I think I am correct in saying that such a thing has never happened before to M. le Marquis in all his life. If you felt yourself affronted, you had but to ask the satisfaction due from one gentleman to another. Your action would seem to confirm the assumption that you found so offensive. But it does not on that account render you immune from the consequences."

It was, you see, M. de Chabrilane's part to heap coals upon this fire, to make quite sure that their victim should not escape them.

"I desire no immunity," flashed back the young seminarist, stung by this fresh goad. After all, he was nobly born, and the traditions of his class were strong upon him—stronger far than the seminarist schooling in humility. He owed it to himself, to his honour, to be killed rather than avoid the consequences of the thing he had done.

"But he does not wear a sword, messieurs!" cried Andre Louis, aghast.

"That is easily amended. He may have the loan of mine."

"I mean, messieurs," Andre-Louis insisted, between fear for his friend and indignation, "that it is not his habit to wear a sword, that he has never worn one, that he is untutored in its uses. He is a seminarist—a postulant for holy orders, already half a priest, and so forbidden from such an engagement as you propose."

"All that he should have remembered before he struck a blow," said M. de Chabrilane, politely.

"The blow was deliberately provoked," raged Andre-Louis. Then he recovered himself, though the other's haughty stare had no part in that recovery. "O my God, I talk in vain! How is one to argue against a purpose formed! Come away, Philippe. Don't you see the trap..."

M. de Vilmorin cut him short, and flung him off. "Be quiet, Andre. M. le Marquis is entirely in the right."

"M. le Marquis is in the right?" Andre-Louis let his arms fall helplessly. This man he loved above all other living men was caught in the snare of the world's insanity. He was baring his breast to the knife for the sake of a vague, distorted sense of the honour due to himself. It was not that he did not see the trap. It was that his honour compelled him to disdain consideration of it. To Andre-Louis in that moment he seemed a singularly tragic figure. Noble, perhaps, but very pitiful.

CHAPTER IV. THE HERITAGE

It was M. de Vilmorin's desire that the matter should be settled out of hand. In this he was at once objective and subjective. A prey to emotions sadly at conflict with his priestly vocation, he was above all in haste to have done, so that he might resume a frame of mind more proper to it. Also he feared himself a little; by which I mean that his honour feared his nature. The circumstances of his education, and the goal that for some years now he had kept in view, had robbed him of much of that spirited brutality that is the birthright of the male. He had grown timid and gentle as a woman. Aware of it, he feared that once the heat of his passion was spent he might betray a dishonouring weakness, in the ordeal.

M. le Marquis, on his side, was no less eager for an immediate settlement; and since they had M. de Chabrilane to act for his cousin, and Andre-Louis to serve as witness for M. de Vilmorin, there was nothing to delay them.

And so, within a few minutes, all arrangements were concluded, and you behold that sinisterly intentioned little group of four assembled in the afternoon sunshine on the bowling-green behind the inn. They were entirely private, screened more or less from the windows of the house by a ramage of trees, which, if leafless now, was at least dense enough to provide an effective lattice.

There were no formalities over measurements of blades or selection of ground. M. le Marquis removed his sword-belt and scabbard, but declined—not considering it worth while for the sake of so negligible an opponent—to divest himself either of his shoes or his coat. Tall, lithe, and athletic, he stood to face the no less tall, but very

delicate and frail, M. de Vilmorin. The latter also disdained to make any of the usual preparations. Since he recognized that it could avail him nothing to strip, he came on guard fully dressed, two hectic spots above the cheek-bones burning on his otherwise grey face.

M. de Chabrilane, leaning upon a cane—for he had relinquished his sword to M. de Vilmorin—looked on with quiet interest. Facing him on the other side of the combatants stood Andre-Louis, the palest of the four, staring from fevered eyes, twisting and untwisting clammy hands.

His every instinct was to fling himself between the antagonists, to protest against and frustrate this meeting. That sane impulse was curbed, however, by the consciousness of its futility. To calm him, he clung to the conviction that the issue could not really be very serious. If the obligations of Philippe's honour compelled him to cross swords with the man he had struck, M. de La Tour d'Azyr's birth compelled him no less to do no serious hurt to the unfledged lad he had so grievously provoked. M. le Marquis, after all, was a man of honour. He could intend no more than to administer a lesson; sharp, perhaps, but one by which his opponent must live to profit. Andre-Louis clung obstinately to that for comfort.

Steel beat on steel, and the men engaged. The Marquis presented to his opponent the narrow edge of his upright body, his knees slightly flexed and converted into living springs, whilst M. de Vilmorin stood squarely, a full target, his knees wooden. Honour and the spirit of fair play alike cried out against such a match.

The encounter was very short, of course. In youth, Philippe had received the tutoring in sword-play that was given to every boy born into his station of life. And so he knew at least the rudiments of what was now expected of him. But what could rudiments avail him here? Three disengages completed the exchanges, and then without any haste the Marquis slid his right foot along the moist turf, his long,

graceful body extending itself in a lunge that went under M. de Vilmorin's clumsy guard, and with the utmost deliberation he drove his blade through the young man's vitals.

Andre-Louis sprang forward just in time to catch his friend's body under the armpits as it sank. Then, his own legs bending beneath the weight of it, he went down with his burden until he was kneeling on the damp turf. Philippe's limp head lay against Andre-Louis' left shoulder; Philippe's relaxed arms trailed at his sides; the blood welled and bubbled from the ghastly wound to saturate the poor lad's garments.

With white face and twitching lips, Andre-Louis looked up at M. de La Tour d'Azyr, who stood surveying his work with a countenance of grave but remorseless interest.

"You have killed him!" cried Andre-Louis.

"Of course."

The Marquis ran a lace handkerchief along his blade to wipe it. As he let the dainty fabric fall, he explained himself. "He had, as I told him, a too dangerous gift of eloquence."

And he turned away, leaving completest understanding with Andre-Louis. Still supporting the limp, draining body, the young man called to him.

"Come back, you cowardly murderer, and make yourself quite safe by killing me too!"

The Marquis half turned, his face dark with anger. Then M. de Chabrillane set a restraining hand upon his arm. Although a party throughout to the deed, the Chevalier was a little appalled now that it was done. He had not the high stomach of M. de La Tour d'Azyr, and he was a good deal younger.

"Come away," he said. "The lad is raving. They were friends."

"You heard what he said?" quoth the Marquis.

"Nor can he, or you, or any man deny it," flung back Andre-Louis. "Yourself, monsieur, you made confession when you gave me now the reason why you killed him. You did it because you feared him."

"If that were true—what, then?" asked the great gentleman.

"Do you ask? Do you understand of life and humanity nothing but how to wear a coat and dress your hair—oh, yes, and to handle weapons against boys and priests? Have you no mind to think, no soul into which you can turn its vision? Must you be told that it is a coward's part to kill the thing he fears, and doubly a coward's part to kill in this way? Had you stabbed him in the back with a knife, you would have shown the courage of your vileness. It would have been a vileness undisguised. But you feared the consequences of that, powerful as you are; and so you shelter your cowardice under the pretext of a duel."

The Marquis shook off his cousin's hand, and took a step forward, holding now his sword like a whip. But again the Chevalier caught and held him.

"No, no, Gervais! Let be, in God's name!"

"Let him come, monsieur," raved Andre-Louis, his voice thick and concentrated. "Let him complete his coward's work on me, and thus make himself safe from a coward's wages."

M. de Chabrilane let his cousin go. He came white to the lips, his eyes glaring at the lad who so recklessly insulted him. And then he checked. It may be that he remembered suddenly the relationship in which this young man was popularly believed to stand to the Seigneur de Gavrilac, and the well-known affection in which the Seigneur held him. And so he may have realized that if he pushed this matter further,

he might find himself upon the horns of a dilemma. He would be confronted with the alternatives of shedding more blood, and so embroiling himself with the Lord of Gavrilac at a time when that gentleman's friendship was of the first importance to him, or else of withdrawing with such hurt to his dignity as must impair his authority in the countryside hereafter.

Be it so or otherwise, the fact remains that he stopped short; then, with an incoherent ejaculation, between anger and contempt, he tossed his arms, turned on his heel and strode off quickly with his cousin.

When the landlord and his people came, they found Andre-Louis, his arms about the body of his dead friend, murmuring passionately into the deaf ear that rested almost against his lips:

"Philippe! Speak to me, Philippe! Philippe... Don't you hear me? O God of Heaven! Philippe!"

At a glance they saw that here neither priest nor doctor could avail. The cheek that lay against Andre-Louis's was leaden-hued, the half-open eyes were glazed, and there was a little froth of blood upon the vacuously parted lips.

Half blinded by tears Andre-Louis stumbled after them when they bore the body into the inn. Upstairs in the little room to which they conveyed it, he knelt by the bed, and holding the dead man's hand in both his own, he swore to him out of his impotent rage that M. de La Tour d'Azyr should pay a bitter price for this.

"It was your eloquence he feared, Philippe," he said. "Then if I can get no justice for this deed, at least it shall be fruitless to him. The thing he feared in you, he shall fear in me. He feared that men might be swayed by your eloquence to the undoing of such things as himself. Men shall be swayed by it still. For your eloquence and your

arguments shall be my heritage from you. I will make them my own. It matters nothing that I do not believe in your gospel of freedom. I know it—every word of it; that is all that matters to our purpose, yours and mine. If all else fails, your thoughts shall find expression in my living tongue. Thus at least we shall have frustrated his vile aim to still the voice he feared. It shall profit him nothing to have your blood upon his soul. That voice in you would never half so relentlessly have hounded him and his as it shall in me—if all else fails."

It was an exulting thought. It calmed him; it soothed his grief, and he began very softly to pray. And then his heart trembled as he considered that Philippe, a man of peace, almost a priest, an apostle of Christianity, had gone to his Maker with the sin of anger on his soul. It was horrible. Yet God would see the righteousness of that anger. And in no case—be man's interpretation of Divinity what it might—could that one sin outweigh the loving good that Philippe had ever practised, the noble purity of his great heart. God after all, reflected Andre-Louis, was not a grand-seigneur.

CHAPTER V. THE LORD OF GAVRILLAC

For the second time that day Andre-Louis set out for the chateau, walking briskly, and heeding not at all the curious eyes that followed him through the village, and the whisperings that marked his passage through the people, all agog by now with that day's event in which he had been an actor.

He was ushered by Benoit, the elderly body-servant, rather grandiloquently called the seneschal, into the ground-floor room known traditionally as the library. It still contained several shelves of neglected volumes, from which it derived its title, but implements of the chase—fowling-pieces, powder-horns, hunting-bags, sheath-knives—obtruded far more prominently than those of study. The furniture was massive, of oak richly carved, and belonging to another age. Great massive oak beams crossed the rather lofty whitewashed ceiling.

Here the squat Seigneur de Gavrilac was restlessly pacing when Andre-Louis was introduced. He was already informed, as he announced at once, of what had taken place at the Breton arme. M. de Chabrilane had just left him, and he confessed himself deeply grieved and deeply perplexed.

"The pity of it!" he said. "The pity of it!" He bowed his enormous head. "So estimable a young man, and so full of promise. Ah, this La Tour d'Azyr is a hard man, and he feels very strongly in these matters. He may be right. I don't know. I have never killed a man for holding different views from mine. In fact, I have never killed a man at all. It

isn't in my nature. I shouldn't sleep of nights if I did. But men are differently made."

"The question, monsieur my godfather," said Andre-Louis, "is what is to be done." He was quite calm and self-possessed, but very white.

M. de Kercadiou stared at him blankly out of his pale eyes.

"Why, what the devil is there to do? From what I am told, Vilmorin went so far as to strike M. le Marquis."

"Under the very grossest provocation."

"Which he himself provoked by his revolutionary language. The poor lad's head was full of this encyclopaedist trash. It comes of too much reading. I have never set much store by books, Andre; and I have never known anything but trouble to come out of learning. It unsettles a man. It complicates his views of life, destroys the simplicity which makes for peace of mind and happiness. Let this miserable affair be a warning to you, Andre. You are, yourself, too prone to these new-fashioned speculations upon a different constitution of the social order. You see what comes of it. A fine, estimable young man, the only prop of his widowed mother too, forgets himself, his position, his duty to that mother—everything; and goes and gets himself killed like this. It is infernally sad. On my soul it is sad." He produced a handkerchief, and blew his nose with vehemence.

Andre-Louis felt a tightening of his heart, a lessening of the hopes, never too sanguine, which he had founded upon his godfather.

"Your criticisms," he said, "are all for the conduct of the dead, and none for that of the murderer. It does not seem possible that you should be in sympathy with such a crime.

"Crime?" shrilled M. de Kercadiou. "My God, boy, you are

speaking of M. de La Tour d'Azyr."

"I am, and of the abominable murder he has committed..."

"Stop!" M. de Kercadiou was very emphatic. "I cannot permit that you apply such terms to him. I cannot permit it. M. le Marquis is my friend, and is likely very soon to stand in a still closer relationship."

"Notwithstanding this?" asked Andre-Louis.

M. de Kercadiou was frankly impatient.

"Why, what has this to do with it? I may deplore it. But I have no right to condemn it. It is a common way of adjusting differences between gentlemen."

"You really believe that?"

"What the devil do you imply, Andre? Should I say a thing that I don't believe? You begin to make me angry."

"'Thou shalt not kill,' is the King's law as well as God's."

"You are determined to quarrel with me, I think. It was a duel..."

Andre-Louis interrupted him. "It is no more a duel than if it had been fought with pistols of which only M. le Marquis's was loaded. He invited Philippe to discuss the matter further, with the deliberate intent of forcing a quarrel upon him and killing him. Be patient with me, monsieur my god-father. I am not telling you of what I imagine but what M. le Marquis himself admitted to me."

Dominated a little by the young man's earnestness, M. de Kercadiou's pale eyes fell away. He turned with a shrug, and sauntered over to the window.

"It would need a court of honour to decide such an issue. And we have no courts of honour," he said.

"But we have courts of justice."

With returning testiness the seigneur swung round to face him again. "And what court of justice, do you think, would listen to such a plea as you appear to have in mind?"

"There is the court of the King's Lieutenant at Rennes."

"And do you think the King's Lieutenant would listen to you?"

"Not to me, perhaps, Monsieur. But if you were to bring the plaint..."

"I bring the plaint?" M. de Kercadiou's pale eyes were wide with horror of the suggestion.

"The thing happened here on your domain."

"I bring a plaint against M. de La Tour d'Azyr! You are out of your senses, I think. Oh, you are mad; as mad as that poor friend of yours who has come to this end through meddling in what did not concern him. The language he used here to M. le Marquis on the score of Mabey was of the most offensive. Perhaps you didn't know that. It does not at all surprise me that the Marquis should have desired satisfaction."

"I see," said Andre-Louis, on a note of hopelessness.

"You see? What the devil do you see?"

"That I shall have to depend upon myself alone."

"And what the devil do you propose to do, if you please?"

"I shall go to Rennes, and lay the facts before the King's Lieutenant."

"He'll be too busy to see you." And M. de Kercadiou's mind swung

a trifle inconsequently, as weak minds will. "There is trouble enough in Rennes already on the score of these crazy States General, with which the wonderful M. Necker is to repair the finances of the kingdom. As if a peddling Swiss bank-clerk, who is also a damned Protestant, could succeed where such men as Calonne and Brienne have failed."

"Good-afternoon, monsieur my godfather," said Andre-Louis.

"Where are you going?" was the querulous demand.

"Home at present. To Rennes in the morning."

"Wait, boy, wait!" The squat little man rolled forward, affectionate concern on his great ugly face, and he set one of his podgy hands on his godson's shoulder. "Now listen to me, Andre," he reasoned. "This is sheer knight-errantry—moonshine, lunacy. You'll come to no good by it if you persist. You've read 'Don Quixote,' and what happened to him when he went tilting against windmills. It's what will happen to you, neither more nor less. Leave things as they are, my boy. I wouldn't have a mischief happen to you."

Andre-Louis looked at him, smiling wanly.

"I swore an oath to-day which it would damn my soul to break."

"You mean that you'll go in spite of anything that I may say?" Impetuous as he was inconsequent, M. de Kercadiou was bristling again. "Very well, then, go... Go to the devil!"

"I will begin with the King's Lieutenant."

"And if you get into the trouble you are seeking, don't come whimpering to me for assistance," the seigneur stormed. He was very angry now. "Since you choose to disobey me, you can break your empty head against the windmill, and be damned to you."

Andre-Louis bowed with a touch of irony, and reached the door.

"If the windmill should prove too formidable," said he, from the threshold, "I may see what can be done with the wind. Good-bye, monsieur my godfather."

He was gone, and M. de Kercadiou was alone, purple in the face, puzzling out that last cryptic utterance, and not at all happy in his mind, either on the score of his godson or of M. de La Tour d'Azyr. He was disposed to be angry with them both. He found these headstrong, wilful men who relentlessly followed their own impulses very disturbing and irritating. Himself he loved his ease, and to be at peace with his neighbours; and that seemed to him so obviously the supreme good of life that he was disposed to brand them as fools who troubled to seek other things.

CHAPTER VI. THE WINDMILL

There was between Nantes and Rennes an established service of three stage-coaches weekly in each direction, which for a sum of twenty-four livres—roughly, the equivalent of an English guinea—would carry you the seventy and odd miles of the journey in some fourteen hours. Once a week one of the diligences going in each direction would swerve aside from the highroad to call at Gavrilac, to bring and take letters, newspapers, and sometimes passengers. It was usually by this coach that Andre-Louis came and went when the occasion offered. At present, however, he was too much in haste to lose a day awaiting the passing of that diligence. So it was on a horse hired from the Breton arme that he set out next morning; and an hour's brisk ride under a grey wintry sky, by a half-ruined road through ten miles of flat, uninteresting country, brought him to the city of Rennes.

He rode across the main bridge over the Vilaine, and so into the upper and principal part of that important city of some thirty thousand souls, most of whom, he opined from the seething, clamant crowds that everywhere blocked his way, must on this day have taken to the streets. Clearly Philippe had not overstated the excitement prevailing there.

He pushed on as best he could, and so came at last to the Place Royale, where he found the crowd to be most dense. From the plinth of the equestrian statue of Louis XV, a white-faced young man was excitedly addressing the multitude. His youth and dress proclaimed the student, and a group of his fellows, acting as a guard of honour to him, kept the immediate precincts of the statue.

Over the heads of the crowd Andre-Louis caught a few of the phrases flung forth by that eager voice.

"It was the promise of the King... It is the King's authority they flout... They arrogate to themselves the whole sovereignty in Brittany. The King has dissolved them... These insolent nobles defying their sovereign and the people..."

Had he not known already, from what Philippe had told him, of the events which had brought the Third Estate to the point of active revolt, those few phrases would fully have informed him. This popular display of temper was most opportune to his need, he thought. And in the hope that it might serve his turn by disposing to reasonableness the mind of the King's Lieutenant, he pushed on up the wide and well-paved Rue Royale, where the concourse of people began to diminish. He put up his hired horse at the Come de Cerf, and set out again, on foot, to the Palais de Justice.

There was a brawling mob by the framework of poles and scaffoldings about the building cathedral, upon which work had been commenced a year ago. But he did not pause to ascertain the particular cause of that gathering. He strode on, and thus came presently to the handsome Italianate palace that was one of the few public edifices that had survived the devastating fire of sixty years ago.

He won through with difficulty to the great hall, known as the Salle des Pas Perdus, where he was left to cool his heels for a full half-hour after he had found an usher so condescending as to inform the god who presided over that shrine of Justice that a lawyer from Gavrillac humbly begged an audience on an affair of gravity.

That the god condescended to see him at all was probably due to the grave complexion of the hour. At long length he was escorted up the broad stone staircase, and ushered into a spacious, meagrely

furnished anteroom, to make one of a waiting crowd of clients, mostly men.

There he spent another half-hour, and employed the time in considering exactly what he should say. This consideration made him realize the weakness of the case he proposed to set before a man whose views of law and morality were coloured by his social rank.

At last he was ushered through a narrow but very massive and richly decorated door into a fine, well-lighted room furnished with enough gilt and satin to have supplied the boudoir of a lady of fashion.

It was a trivial setting for a King's Lieutenant, but about the King's Lieutenant there was—at least to ordinary eyes—nothing trivial. At the far end of the chamber, to the right of one of the tall windows that looked out over the inner court, before a goat-legged writing-table with Watteau panels, heavily encrusted with ormolu, sat that exalted being. Above a scarlet coat with an order flaming on its breast, and a billow of lace in which diamonds sparkled like drops of water, sprouted the massive powdered head of M. de Lesdiguières. It was thrown back to scowl upon this visitor with an expectant arrogance that made Andre-Louis wonder almost was a genuflection awaited from him.

Perceiving a lean, lantern-jawed young man, with straight, lank black hair, in a caped riding-coat of brown cloth, and yellow buckskin breeches, his knee-boots splashed with mud, the scowl upon that August visage deepened until it brought together the thick black eyebrows above the great hooked nose.

"You announce yourself as a lawyer of Gavrillac with an important communication," he growled. It was a peremptory command to make this communication without wasting the valuable time of a King's Lieutenant, of whose immense importance it conveyed something more than a hint. M. de Lesdiguières accounted himself an imposing

personality, and he had every reason to do so, for in his time he had seen many a poor devil scared out of all his senses by the thunder of his voice.

He waited now to see the same thing happen to this youthful lawyer from Gavrillac. But he waited in vain.

Andre-Louis found him ridiculous. He knew pretentiousness for the mask of worthlessness and weakness. And here he beheld pretentiousness incarnate. It was to be read in that arrogant poise of the head, that scowling brow, the inflexion of that reverberating voice. Even more difficult than it is for a man to be a hero to his valet—who has witnessed the dispersal of the parts that make up the imposing whole—is it for a man to be a hero to the student of Man who has witnessed the same in a different sense.

Andre-Louis stood forward boldly—impudently, thought M. de Lesdiguières.

"You are His Majesty's Lieutenant here in Brittany," he said—and it almost seemed to the August lord of life and death that this fellow had the incredible effrontery to address him as one man speaking to another. "You are the dispenser of the King's high justice in this province."

Surprise spread on that handsome, sallow face under the heavily powdered wig.

"Is your business concerned with this infernal insubordination of the canaille?" he asked.

"It is not, monsieur."

The black eyebrows rose. "Then what the devil do you mean by intruding upon me at a time when all my attention is being claimed by the obvious urgency of this disgraceful affair?"

"The affair that brings me is no less disgraceful and no less urgent."

"It will have to wait!" thundered the great man in a passion, and tossing back a cloud of lace from his hand, he reached for the little silver bell upon his table.

"A moment, monsieur!" Andre-Louis' tone was peremptory. M. de Lesdiguieres checked in sheer amazement at its impudence. "I can state it very briefly..."

"Haven't I said already..."

"And when you have heard it," Andre-Louis went on, relentlessly, interrupting the interruption, "you will agree with me as to its character."

M. de Lesdiguieres considered him very sternly.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Andre-Louis Moreau."

"Well, Andre-Louis Moreau, if you can state your plea briefly, I will hear you. But I warn you that I shall be very angry if you fail to justify the impertinence of this insistence at so inopportune a moment."

"You shall be the judge of that, monsieur," said Andre-Louis, and he proceeded at once to state his case, beginning with the shooting of Mabey, and passing thence to the killing of M. de Vilmorin. But he withheld until the end the name of the great gentleman against whom he demanded justice, persuaded that did he introduce it earlier he would not be allowed to proceed.

He had a gift of oratory of whose full powers he was himself hardly conscious yet, though destined very soon to become so.. He told his story well, without exaggeration, yet with a force of simple appeal that was irresistible. Gradually the great man's face relaxed from its

forbidding severity. Interest, warming almost to sympathy, came to be reflected on it.

"And who, sir, is the man you charge with this?"

"The Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr."

The effect of that formidable name was immediate. Dismayed anger, and an arrogance more utter than before, took the place of the sympathy he had been betrayed into displaying.

"Who?" he shouted, and without waiting for an answer, "Why, here's impudence," he stormed on, "to come before me with such a charge against a gentleman of M. de La Tour d'Azyr's eminence! How dare you speak of him as a coward."

"I speak of him as a murderer," the young man corrected. "And I demand justice against him."

"You demand it, do you? My God, what next?"

"That is for you to say, monsieur."

It surprised the great gentleman into a more or less successful effort of self-control.

"Let me warn you," said he, acidly, "that it is not wise to make wild accusations against a nobleman. That, in itself, is a punishable offence, as you may learn. Now listen to me. In this matter of Mabey—assuming your statement of it to be exact—the gamekeeper may have exceeded his duty; but by so little that it is hardly worth comment. Consider, however, that in any case it is not a matter for the King's Lieutenant, or for any court but the seigneurial court of M. de La Tour d'Azyr himself. It is before the magistrates of his own appointing that such a matter must be laid, since it is matter strictly concerning his own seigneurial jurisdiction. As a lawyer you should not need to be told so much."

"As a lawyer, I am prepared to argue the point. But, as a lawyer I also realize that if that case were prosecuted, it could only end in the unjust punishment of a wretched gamekeeper, who did no more than carry out his orders, but who none the less would now be made a scapegoat, if scapegoat were necessary. I am not concerned to hang Benet on the gallows earned by M. de La Tour d'Azyr."

M. de Lesdiguières smote the table violently. "My God!" he cried out, to add more quietly, on a note of menace, "You are singularly insolent, my man."

"That is not my intention, sir, I assure you. I am a lawyer, pleading a case—the case of M. de Vilmorin. It is for his assassination that I have come to beg the King's justice."

"But you yourself have said that it was a duel!" cried the Lieutenant, between anger and bewilderment.

"I have said that it was made to appear a duel. There is a distinction, as I shall show, if you will condescend to hear me out."

"Take your own time, sir!" said the ironical M. de Lesdiguières, whose tenure of office had never yet held anything that remotely resembled this experience.

Andre-Louis took him literally. "I thank you, sir," he answered, solemnly, and submitted his argument. "It can be shown that M. de Vilmorin never practised fencing in all his life, and it is notorious that M. de La Tour d'Azyr is an exceptional swordsman. Is it a duel, monsieur, where one of the combatants alone is armed? For it amounts to that on a comparison of their measures of respective skill."

"There has scarcely been a duel fought on which the same trumpery argument might not be advanced."

"But not always with equal justice. And in one case, at least, it was advanced successfully."

"Successfully? When was that?"

"Ten years ago, in Dauphiny. I refer to the case of M. de Gesvres, a gentleman of that province, who forced a duel upon M. de la Roche Jeannine, and killed him. M. de Jeannine was a member of a powerful family, which exerted itself to obtain justice. It put forward just such arguments as now obtain against M. de La Tour d'Azyr. As you will remember, the judges held that the provocation had proceeded of intent from M. de Gesvres; they found him guilty of premeditated murder, and he was hanged."

M. de Lesdiguieres exploded yet again. "Death of my life!" he cried. "Have you the effrontery to suggest that M. de La Tour d'Azyr should be hanged? Have you?"

"But why not, monsieur, if it is the law, and there is precedent for it, as I have shown you, and if it can be established that what I state is the truth—as established it can be without difficulty?"

"Do you ask me, why not? Have you temerity to ask me that?"

"I have, monsieur. Can you answer me? If you cannot, monsieur, I shall understand that whilst it is possible for a powerful family like that of La Roche Jeannine to set the law in motion, the law must remain inert for the obscure and uninfluential, however brutally wronged by a great nobleman."

M. de Lesdiguieres perceived that in argument he would accomplish nothing against this impassive, resolute young man. The menace of him grew more fierce.

"I should advise you to take yourself off at once, and to be thankful for the opportunity to depart unscathed."

"I am, then, to understand, monsieur, that there will be no inquiry into this case? That nothing that I can say will move you?"

"You are to understand that if you are still there in two minutes it will be very much the worse for you." And M. de Lesdiguières tinkled the silver hand-bell upon his table.

"I have informed you, monsieur, that a duel—so-called—has been fought, and a man killed. It seems that I must remind you, the administrator of the King's justice, that duels are against the law, and that it is your duty to hold an inquiry. I come as the legal representative of the bereaved mother of M. de Vilmorin to demand of you the inquiry that is due."

The door behind Andre-Louis opened softly. M. de Lesdiguières, pale with anger, contained himself with difficulty.

"You seek to compel us, do you, you impudent rascal?" he growled. "You think the King's justice is to be driven headlong by the voice of any impudent roturier? I marvel at my own patience with you. But I give you a last warning, master lawyer; keep a closer guard over that insolent tongue of yours, or you will have cause very bitterly to regret its glibness." He waved a jewelled, contemptuous hand, and spoke to the usher standing behind Andre. "To the door!" he said, shortly.

Andre-Louis hesitated a second. Then with a shrug he turned. This was the windmill, indeed, and he a poor knight of rueful countenance. To attack it at closer quarters would mean being dashed to pieces. Yet on the threshold he turned again.

"M. de Lesdiguières," said he, "may I recite to you an interesting fact in natural history? The tiger is a great lord in the jungle, and was for centuries the terror of lesser beasts, including the wolf. The wolf, himself a hunter, wearied of being hunted. He took to associating with other wolves, and then the wolves, driven to form packs for self-

protection, discovered the power of the pack, and took to hunting the tiger, with disastrous results to him. You should study Buffon, M. de Lesdiguieres."

"I have studied a buffoon this morning, I think," was the punning sneer with which M. de Lesdiguieres replied. But that he conceived himself witty, it is probable he would not have condescended to reply at all. "I don't understand you," he added.

"But you will, M. de Lesdiguieres. You will," said Andre-Louis, and so departed.

CHAPTER VII. THE WIND

He had broken his futile lance with the windmill—the image suggested by M. de Kercadiou persisted in his mind—and it was, he perceived, by sheer good fortune that he had escaped without hurt. There remained the wind itself—the whirlwind. And the events in Rennes, reflex of the graver events in Nantes, had set that wind blowing in his favour.

He set out briskly to retrace his steps towards the Place Royale, where the gathering of the populace was greatest, where, as he judged, lay the heart and brain of this commotion that was exciting the city.

But the commotion that he had left there was as nothing to the commotion which he found on his return. Then there had been a comparative hush to listen to the voice of a speaker who denounced the First and Second Estates from the pedestal of the statue of Louis XV. Now the air was vibrant with the voice of the multitude itself, raised in anger. Here and there men were fighting with canes and fists; everywhere a fierce excitement raged, and the gendarmes sent thither by the King's Lieutenant to restore and maintain order were so much helpless flotsam in that tempestuous human ocean.

There were cries of "To the Palais! To the Palais! Down with the assassins! Down with the nobles! To the Palais!"

An artisan who stood shoulder to shoulder with him in the press enlightened Andre-Louis on the score of the increased excitement.

"They've shot him dead. His body is lying there where it fell at the foot of the statue. And there was another student killed not an hour

ago over there by the cathedral works. Pardi! If they can't prevail in one way they'll prevail in another." The man was fiercely emphatic. "They'll stop at nothing. If they can't overawe us, by God, they'll assassinate us. They are determined to conduct these States of Brittany in their own way. No interests but their own shall be considered."

Andre-Louis left him still talking, and clove himself a way through that human press.

At the statue's base he came upon a little cluster of students about the body of the murdered lad, all stricken with fear and helplessness.

"You here, Moreau!" said a voice.

He looked round to find himself confronted by a slight, swarthy man of little more than thirty, firm of mouth and impertinent of nose, who considered him with disapproval. It was Le Chapelier, a lawyer of Rennes, a prominent member of the Literary Chamber of that city, a forceful man, fertile in revolutionary ideas and of an exceptional gift of eloquence.

"Ah, it is you, Chapelier! Why don't you speak to them? Why don't you tell them what to do? Up with you, man!" And he pointed to the plinth.

Le Chapelier's dark, restless eyes searched the other's impassive face for some trace of the irony he suspected. They were as wide asunder as the poles, these two, in their political views; and mistrusted as Andre-Louis was by all his colleagues of the Literary Chamber of Rennes, he was by none mistrusted so thoroughly as by this vigorous republican. Indeed, had Le Chapelier been able to prevail against the influence of the seminarist Vilmorin, Andre-Louis would long since have found himself excluded from that assembly of the intellectual youth of Rennes, which he exasperated by his eternal

mockery of their ideals.

So now Le Chapelier suspected mockery in that invitation, suspected it even when he failed to find traces of it on Andre-Louis' face, for he had learnt by experience that it was a face not often to be trusted for an indication of the real thoughts that moved behind it.

"Your notions and mine on that score can hardly coincide," said he.

"Can there be two opinions?" quoth Andre-Louis.

"There are usually two opinions whenever you and I are together, Moreau—more than ever now that you are the appointed delegate of a nobleman. You see what your friends have done. No doubt you approve their methods." He was coldly hostile.

Andre-Louis looked at him without surprise. So invariably opposed to each other in academic debates, how should Le Chapelier suspect his present intentions?

"If you won't tell them what is to be done, I will," said he.

"Nom de Dieu! If you want to invite a bullet from the other side, I shall not hinder you. It may help to square the account."

Scarcely were the words out than he repented them; for as if in answer to that challenge Andre-Louis sprang up on to the plinth. Alarmed now, for he could only suppose it to be Andre-Louis' intention to speak on behalf of Privilege, of which he was a publicly appointed representative, Le Chapelier clutched him by the leg to pull him down again.

"Ah, that, no!" he was shouting. "Come down, you fool. Do you think we will let you ruin everything by your clowning? Come down!"

Andre-Louis, maintaining his position by clutching one of the legs of the bronze horse, flung his voice like a bugle-note over the heads of

that seething mob.

"Citizens of Rennes, the motherland is in danger!"

The effect was electric. A stir ran, like a ripple over water, across that froth of upturned human faces, and completest silence followed. In that great silence they looked at this slim young man, hatless, long wisps of his black hair fluttering in the breeze, his neckcloth in disorder, his face white, his eyes on fire.

Andre-Louis felt a sudden surge of exaltation as he realized by instinct that at one grip he had seized that crowd, and that he held it fast in the spell of his cry and his audacity.

Even Le Chapelier, though still clinging to his ankle, had ceased to tug. The reformer, though unshaken in his assumption of Andre-Louis' intentions, was for a moment bewildered by the first note of his appeal.

And then, slowly, impressively, in a voice that travelled clear to the ends of the square, the young lawyer of Gavrilac began to speak.

"Shuddering in horror of the vile deed here perpetrated, my voice demands to be heard by you. You have seen murder done under your eyes—the murder of one who nobly, without any thought of self, gave voice to the wrongs by which we are all oppressed. Fearing that voice, shunning the truth as foul things shun the light, our oppressors sent their agents to silence him in death."

Le Chapelier released at last his hold of Andre-Louis' ankle, staring up at him the while in sheer amazement. It seemed that the fellow was in earnest; serious for once; and for once on the right side. What had come to him?

"Of assassins what shall you look for but assassination? I have a tale to tell which will show that this is no new thing that you have

witnessed here to-day; it will reveal to you the forces with which you have to deal. Yesterday..."

There was an interruption. A voice in the crowd, some twenty paces, perhaps, was raised to shout:

"Yet another of them!"

Immediately after the voice came a pistol-shot, and a bullet flattened itself against the bronze figure just behind Andre-Louis.

Instantly there was turmoil in the crowd, most intense about the spot whence the shot had been fired. The assailant was one of a considerable group of the opposition, a group that found itself at once beset on every side, and hard put to it to defend him.

From the foot of the plinth rang the voice of the students making chorus to Le Chapelier, who was bidding Andre-Louis to seek shelter.

"Come down! Come down at once! They'll murder you as they murdered La Riviere."

"Let them!" He flung wide his arms in a gesture supremely theatrical, and laughed. "I stand here at their mercy. Let them, if they will, add mine to the blood that will presently rise up to choke them. Let them assassinate me. It is a trade they understand. But until they do so, they shall not prevent me from speaking to you, from telling you what is to be looked for in them." And again he laughed, not merely in exaltation as they supposed who watched him from below, but also in amusement. And his amusement had two sources. One was to discover how glibly he uttered the phrases proper to whip up the emotions of a crowd: the other was in the remembrance of how the crafty Cardinal de Retz, for the purpose of inflaming popular sympathy on his behalf, had been in the habit of hiring fellows to fire upon his carriage. He was in just such case as that arch-politician. True, he

had not hired the fellow to fire that pistol-shot; but he was none the less obliged to him, and ready to derive the fullest, advantage from the act.

The group that sought to protect that man was battling on, seeking to hew a way out of that angry, heaving press.

"Let them go!" Andre-Louis called down..."What matters one assassin more or less? Let them go, and listen to me, my countrymen!"

And presently, when some measure of order was restored, he began his tale. In simple language now, yet with a vehemence and directness that drove home every point, he tore their hearts with the story of yesterday's happenings at Gavrilac. He drew tears from them with the pathos of his picture of the bereaved widow Mabey and her three starving, destitute children—"orphaned to avenge the death of a pheasant"—and the bereaved mother of that M. de Vilmorin, a student of Rennes, known here to many of them, who had met his death in a noble endeavour to champion the cause of an esurient member of their afflicted order.

"The Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr said of him that he had too dangerous a gift of eloquence. It was to silence his brave voice that he killed him. But he has failed of his object. For I, poor Philippe de Vilmorin's friend, have assumed the mantle of his apostleship, and I speak to you with his voice to-day."

It was a statement that helped Le Chapelier at last to understand, at least in part, this bewildering change in Andre-Louis, which rendered him faithless to the side that employed him.

"I am not here," continued Andre-Louis, "merely to demand at your hands vengeance upon Philippe de Vilmorin's murderers. I am here to tell you the things he would to-day have told you had he lived."

So far at least he was frank. But he did not add that they were things he did not himself believe, things that he accounted the cant by which an ambitious bourgeoisie—speaking through the mouths of the lawyers, who were its articulate part—sought to overthrow to its own advantage the present state of things. He left his audience in the natural belief that the views he expressed were the views he held.

And now in a terrible voice, with an eloquence that amazed himself, he denounced the inertia of the royal justice where the great are the offenders. It was with bitter sarcasm that he spoke of their King's Lieutenant, M. de Lesdiguières.

"Do you wonder," he asked them, "that M. de Lesdiguières should administer the law so that it shall ever be favourable to our great nobles? Would it be just, would it be reasonable that he should otherwise administer it?" He paused dramatically to let his sarcasm sink in. It had the effect of reawakening Le Chapelier's doubts, and checking his dawning conviction in Andre-Louis' sincerity. Whither was he going now?

He was not left long in doubt. Proceeding, Andre-Louis spoke as he conceived that Philippe de Vilmorin would have spoken. He had so often argued with him, so often attended the discussions of the Literary Chamber, that he had all the rant of the reformers—that was yet true in substance—at his fingers' ends.

"Consider, after all, the composition of this France of ours. A million of its inhabitants are members of the privileged classes. They compose France. They are France. For surely you cannot suppose the remainder to be anything that matters. It cannot be pretended that twenty-four million souls are of any account, that they can be representative of this great nation, or that they can exist for any purpose but that of servitude to the million elect."

Bitter laughter shook them now, as he desired it should. "Seeing

their privileges in danger of invasion by these twenty-four millions—mostly canailles; possibly created by God, it is true, but clearly so created to be the slaves of Privilege—does it surprise you that the dispensing of royal justice should be placed in the stout hands of these Lesdiguieres, men without brains to think or hearts to be touched? Consider what it is that must be defended against the assault of us others—canaille. Consider a few of these feudal rights that are in danger of being swept away should the Privileged yield even to the commands of their sovereign; and admit the Third Estate to an equal vote with themselves.

"What would become of the right of terrage on the land, of parciere on the fruit-trees, of carpot on the vines? What of the corvees by which they command forced labour, of the ban de vendage, which gives them the first vintage, the banvin which enables them to control to their own advantage the sale of wine? What of their right of grinding the last liard of taxation out of the people to maintain their own opulent estate; the cens, the lods-et-ventes, which absorb a fifth of the value of the land, the blairee, which must be paid before herds can feed on communal lands, the pulverage to indemnify them for the dust raised on their roads by the herds that go to market, the sextelage on everything offered for sale in the public markets, the etalonnage, and all the rest? What of their rights over men and animals for field labour, of ferries over rivers, and of bridges over streams, of sinking wells, of warren, of dovecot, and of fire, which last yields them a tax on every peasant hearth? What of their exclusive rights of fishing and of hunting, the violation of which is ranked as almost a capital offence?

"And what of other rights, unspeakable, abominable, over the lives and bodies of their people, rights which, if rarely exercised, have never been rescinded. To this day if a noble returning from the hunt were to slay two of his serfs to bathe and refresh his feet in their blood, he could still claim in his sufficient defence that it was his absolute feudal right to do so.

"Rough-shod, these million Privileged ride over the souls and bodies of twenty-four million contemptible canaille existing but for their own pleasure. Woe betide him who so much as raises his voice in protest in the name of humanity against an excess of these already excessive abuses. I have told you of one remorselessly slain in cold blood for doing no more than that. Your own eyes have witnessed the assassination of another here upon this plinth, of yet another over there by the cathedral works, and the attempt upon my own life.

"Between them and the justice due to them in such cases stand these Lesdiguieres, these King's Lieutenants; not instruments of justice, but walls erected for the shelter of Privilege and Abuse whenever it exceeds its grotesquely excessive rights.

"Do you wonder that they will not yield an inch; that they will resist the election of a Third Estate with the voting power to sweep all these privileges away, to compel the Privileged to submit themselves to a just equality in the eyes of the law with the meanest of the canaille they trample underfoot, to provide that the moneys necessary to save this state from the bankruptcy into which they have all but plunged it shall be raised by taxation to be borne by themselves in the same proportion as by others?

"Sooner than yield to so much they prefer to resist even the royal command."

A phrase occurred to him used yesterday by Vilmorin, a phrase to which he had refused to attach importance when uttered then. He used it now. "In doing this they are striking at the very foundations of the throne. These fools do not perceive that if that throne falls over, it is they who stand nearest to it who will be crushed."

A terrific roar acclaimed that statement. Tense and quivering with the excitement that was flowing through him, and from him out into that great audience, he stood a moment smiling ironically. Then he waved

them into silence, and saw by their ready obedience how completely he possessed them. For in the voice with which he spoke each now recognized the voice of himself, giving at last expression to the thoughts that for months and years had been inarticulately stirring in each simple mind.

Presently he resumed, speaking more quietly, that ironic smile about the corner of his mouth growing more marked:

"In taking my leave of M. de Lesdiguieres I gave him warning out of a page of natural history. I told him that when the wolves, roaming singly through the jungle, were weary of being hunted by the tiger, they banded themselves into packs, and went a-hunting the tiger in their turn. M. de Lesdiguieres contemptuously answered that he did not understand me. But your wits are better than his. You understand me, I think? Don't you?"

Again a great roar, mingled now with some approving laughter, was his answer. He had wrought them up to a pitch of dangerous passion, and they were ripe for any violence to which he urged them. If he had failed with the windmill, at least he was now master of the wind.

"To the Palais!" they shouted, waving their hands, brandishing canes, and—here and there—even a sword. "To the Palais! Down with M. de Lesdiguieres! Death to the King's Lieutenant!"

He was master of the wind, indeed. His dangerous gift of oratory—a gift nowhere more powerful than in France, since nowhere else are men's emotions so quick to respond to the appeal of eloquence—had given him this mastery. At his bidding now the gale would sweep away the windmill against which he had flung himself in vain. But that, as he straightforwardly revealed it, was no part of his intent.

"Ah, wait!" he bade them. "Is this miserable instrument of a corrupt

system worth the attention of your noble indignation?"

He hoped his words would be reported to M. de Lesdiguières. He thought it would be good for the soul of M. de Lesdiguières to hear the undiluted truth about himself for once.

"It is the system itself you must attack and overthrow; not a mere instrument—a miserable painted lath such as this. And precipitancy will spoil everything. Above all, my children, no violence!"

My children! Could his godfather have heard him!

"You have seen often already the result of premature violence elsewhere in Brittany, and you have heard of it elsewhere in France. Violence on your part will call for violence on theirs. They will welcome the chance to assert their mastery by a firmer grip than heretofore. The military will be sent for. You will be faced by the bayonets of mercenaries. Do not provoke that, I implore you. Do not put it into their power, do not afford them the pretext they would welcome to crush you down into the mud of your own blood."

Out of the silence into which they had fallen anew broke now the cry of

"What else, then? What else?"

"I will tell you," he answered them. "The wealth and strength of Brittany lies in Nantes—a bourgeois city, one of the most prosperous in this realm, rendered so by the energy of the bourgeoisie and the toil of the people. It was in Nantes that this movement had its beginning, and as a result of it the King issued his order dissolving the States as now constituted—an order which those who base their power on Privilege and Abuse do not hesitate to thwart. Let Nantes be informed of the precise situation, and let nothing be done here until Nantes shall have given us the lead. She has the power—which we in Rennes have not—to make her will prevail, as we have seen already.

Let her exert that power once more, and until she does so do you keep the peace in Rennes. Thus shall you triumph. Thus shall the outrages that are being perpetrated under your eyes be fully and finally avenged."

As abruptly as he had leapt upon the plinth did he now leap down from it. He had finished. He had said all—perhaps more than all—that could have been said by the dead friend with whose voice he spoke. But it was not their will that he should thus extinguish himself. The thunder of their acclamations rose deafeningly upon the air. He had played upon their emotions—each in turn—as a skilful harpist plays upon the strings of his instrument. And they were vibrant with the passions he had aroused, and the high note of hope on which he had brought his symphony to a close.

A dozen students caught him as he leapt down, and swung him to their shoulders, where again he came within view of all the acclaiming crowd.

The delicate Le Chapelier pressed alongside of him with flushed face and shining eyes.

"My lad," he said to him, "you have kindled a fire to-day that will sweep the face of France in a blaze of liberty." And then to the students he issued a sharp command. "To the Literary Chamber—at once. We must concert measures upon the instant, a delegate must be dispatched to Nantes forthwith, to convey to our friends there the message of the people of Rennes."

The crowd fell back, opening a lane through which the students bore the hero of the hour. Waving his hands to them, he called upon them to disperse to their homes, and await there in patience what must follow very soon.

"You have endured for centuries with a fortitude that is a pattern to

the world," he flattered them. "Endure a little longer yet. The end, my friends, is well in sight at last."

They carried him out of the square and up the Rue Royale to an old house, one of the few old houses surviving in that city that had risen from its ashes, where in an upper chamber lighted by diamond-shaped panes of yellow glass the Literary Chamber usually held its meetings. Thither in his wake the members of that chamber came hurrying, summoned by the messages that Le Chapelier had issued during their progress.

Behind closed doors a flushed and excited group of some fifty men, the majority of whom were young, ardent, and afire with the illusion of liberty, hailed Andre-Louis as the strayed sheep who had returned to the fold, and smothered him in congratulations and thanks.

Then they settled down to deliberate upon immediate measures, whilst the doors below were kept by a guard of honour that had improvised itself from the masses. And very necessary was this. For no sooner had the Chamber assembled than the house was assailed by the gendarmerie of M. de Lesdiguieres, dispatched in haste to arrest the firebrand who was inciting the people of Rennes to sedition. The force consisted of fifty men. Five hundred would have been too few. The mob broke their carbines, broke some of their heads, and would indeed have torn them into pieces had they not beaten a timely and well-advised retreat before a form of horseplay to which they were not at all accustomed.

And whilst that was taking place in the street below, in the room abovestairs the eloquent Le Chapelier was addressing his colleagues of the Literary Chamber. Here, with no bullets to fear, and no one to report his words to the authorities, Le Chapelier could permit his oratory a full, unintimidated flow. And that considerable oratory was as direct and brutal as the man himself was delicate and elegant.

He praised the vigour and the greatness of the speech they had heard from their colleague Moreau. Above all he praised its wisdom. Moreau's words had come as a surprise to them. Hitherto they had never known him as other than a bitter critic of their projects of reform and regeneration; and quite lately they had heard, not without misgivings, of his appointment as delegate for a nobleman in the States of Brittany. But they held the explanation of his conversion. The murder of their dear colleague Vilmorin had produced this change. In that brutal deed Moreau had beheld at last in true proportions the workings of that evil spirit which they were vowed to exorcise from France. And to-day he had proven himself the stoutest apostle among them of the new faith. He had pointed out to them the only sane and useful course. The illustration he had borrowed from natural history was most apt. Above all, let them pack like the wolves, and to ensure this uniformity of action in the people of all Brittany, let a delegate at once be sent to Nantes, which had already proved itself the real seat of Brittany's power. It but remained to appoint that delegate, and Le Chapelier invited them to elect him.

Andre-Louis, on a bench near the window, a prey now to some measure of reaction, listened in bewilderment to that flood of eloquence.

As the applause died down, he heard a voice exclaiming:

"I propose to you that we appoint our leader here, Le Chapelier, to be that delegate."

Le Chapelier reared his elegantly dressed head, which had been bowed in thought, and it was seen that his countenance was pale. Nervously he fingered a gold spy-glass.

"My friends," he said, slowly, "I am deeply sensible of the honour that you do me. But in accepting it I should be usurping an honour that rightly belongs elsewhere. Who could represent us better, who more

deserving to be our representative, to speak to our friends of Nantes with the voice of Rennes, than the champion who once already to-day has so incomparably given utterance to the voice of this great city? Confer this honour of being your spokesman where it belongs—upon Andre-Louis Moreau."

Rising in response to the storm of applause that greeted the proposal, Andre-Louis bowed and forthwith yielded. "Be it so," he said, simply. "It is perhaps fitting that I should carry out what I have begun, though I too am of the opinion that Le Chapelier would have been a worthier representative. I will set out to-night."

"You will set out at once, my lad," Le Chapelier informed him, and now revealed what an uncharitable mind might account the true source of his generosity. "It is not safe after what has happened for you to linger an hour in Rennes. And you must go secretly. Let none of you allow it to be known that he has gone. I would not have you come to harm over this, Andre-Louis. But you must see the risks you run, and if you are to be spared to help in this work of salvation of our afflicted motherland, you must use caution, move secretly, veil your identity even. Or else M. de Lesdiguieres will have you laid by the heels, and it will be good-night for you."

CHAPTER VIII. OMNES OMNIBUS

Andre-Louis rode forth from Rennes committed to a deeper adventure than he had dreamed of when he left the sleepy village of Gavrilac. Lying the night at a roadside inn, and setting out again early in the morning, he reached Nantes soon after noon of the following day.

Through that long and lonely ride through the dull plains of Brittany, now at their dreariest in their winter garb, he had ample leisure in which to review his actions and his position. From one who had taken hitherto a purely academic and by no means friendly interest in the new philosophies of social life, exercising his wits upon these new ideas merely as a fencer exercises his eye and wrist with the foils, without ever suffering himself to be deluded into supposing the issue a real one, he found himself suddenly converted into a revolutionary firebrand, committed to revolutionary action of the most desperate kind. The representative and delegate of a nobleman in the States of Brittany, he found himself simultaneously and incongruously the representative and delegate of the whole Third Estate of Rennes.

It is difficult to determine to what extent, in the heat of passion and swept along by the torrent of his own oratory, he might yesterday have succeeded in deceiving himself. But it is at least certain that, looking back in cold blood now he had no single delusion on the score of what he had done. Cynically he had presented to his audience one side only of the great question that he propounded.

But since the established order of things in France was such as to

make a rampart for M. de La Tour d'Azyr, affording him complete immunity for this and any other crimes that it pleased him to commit, why, then the established order must take the consequences of its wrong-doing. Therein he perceived his clear justification.

And so it was without misgivings that he came on his errand of sedition into that beautiful city of Nantes, rendered its spacious streets and splendid port the rival in prosperity of Bordeaux and Marseilles.

He found an inn on the Quai La Fosse, where he put up his horse, and where he dined in the embrasure of a window that looked out over the tree-bordered quay and the broad bosom of the Loire, on which argosies of all nations rode at anchor. The sun had again broken through the clouds, and shed its pale wintry light over the yellow waters and the tall-masted shipping.

Along the quays there was a stir of life as great as that to be seen on the quays of Paris. Foreign sailors in outlandish garments and of harsh-sounding, outlandish speech, stalwart fishwives with baskets of herrings on their heads, voluminous of petticoat above bare legs and bare feet, calling their wares shrilly and almost inarticulately, watermen in woollen caps and loose trousers rolled to the knees, peasants in goatskin coats, their wooden shoes clattering on the round kidney-stones, shipwrights and labourers from the dockyards, bellows-menders, rat-catchers, water-carriers, ink-sellers, and other itinerant pedlars. And, sprinkled through this proletariat mass that came and went in constant movement, Andre-Louis beheld tradesmen in sober garments, merchants in long, fur-lined coats; occasionally a merchant-prince rolling along in his two-horse cabriolet to the whip-crackings and shouts of "Gare!" from his coachman; occasionally a dainty lady carried past in her sedan-chair, with perhaps a mincing abbe from the episcopal court tripping along in attendance; occasionally an officer in scarlet riding disdainfully; and

once the great carriage of a nobleman, with escutcheoned panels and a pair of white-stockinged, powdered footmen in gorgeous liveries hanging on behind. And there were Capuchins in brown and Benedictines in black, and secular priests in plenty—for God was well served in the sixteen parishes of Nantes—and by way of contrast there were lean-jawed, out-at-elbow adventurers, and gendarmes in blue coats and gaitered legs, sauntering guardians of the peace.

Representatives of every class that went to make up the seventy thousand inhabitants of that wealthy, industrious city were to be seen in the human stream that ebbed and flowed beneath the window from which Andre-Louis observed it.

Of the waiter who ministered to his humble wants with soup and bouilli, and a measure of vin gris, Andre-Louis enquired into the state of public feeling in the city. The waiter, a staunch supporter of the privileged orders, admitted regretfully that an uneasiness prevailed. Much would depend upon what happened at Rennes. If it was true that the King had dissolved the States of Brittany, then all should be well, and the malcontents would have no pretext for further disturbances. There had been trouble and to spare in Nantes already. They wanted no repetition of it. All manner of rumours were abroad, and since early morning there had been crowds besieging the portals of the Chamber of Commerce for definite news. But definite news was yet to come. It was not even known for a fact that His Majesty actually had dissolved the States.

It was striking two, the busiest hour of the day upon the Bourse, when Andre-Louis reached the Place du Commerce. The square, dominated by the imposing classical building of the Exchange, was so crowded that he was compelled almost to fight his way through to the steps of the magnificent Ionic porch. A word would have sufficed to have opened a way for him at once. But guile moved him to keep silent. He would come upon that waiting multitude as a thunderclap,

precisely as yesterday he had come upon the mob at Rennes. He would lose nothing of the surprise effect of his entrance.

The precincts of that house of commerce were jealously kept by a line of ushers armed with staves, a guard as hurriedly assembled by the merchants as it was evidently necessary. One of these now effectively barred the young lawyer's passage as he attempted to mount the steps.

Andre-Louis announced himself in a whisper.

The staff was instantly raised from the horizontal, and he passed and went up the steps in the wake of the usher. At the top, on the threshold of the chamber, he paused, and stayed his guide.

"I will wait here," he announced. "Bring the president to me."

"Your name, monsieur?"

Almost had Andre-Louis answered him when he remembered Le Chapelier's warning of the danger with which his mission was fraught, and Le Chapelier's parting admonition to conceal his identity.

"My name is unknown to him; it matters nothing; I am the mouthpiece of a people, no more. Go."

The usher went, and in the shadow of that lofty, pillared portico Andre-Louis waited, his eyes straying out ever and anon to survey that spread of upturned faces immediately below him.

Soon the president came, others following, crowding out into the portico, jostling one another in their eagerness to hear the news.

"You are a messenger from Rennes?"

"I am the delegate sent by the Literary Chamber of that city to inform you here in Nantes of what is taking place."

"Your name?"

Andre-Louis paused. "The less we mention names perhaps the better."

The president's eyes grew big with gravity. He was a corpulent, florid man, purse-proud, and self-sufficient.

He hesitated a moment. Then—"Come into the Chamber," said he.

"By your leave, monsieur, I will deliver my message from here—from these steps."

"From here?" The great merchant frowned.

"My message is for the people of Nantes, and from here I can speak at once to the greatest number of Nantais of all ranks, and it is my desire—and the desire of those whom I represent—that as great a number as possible should hear my message at first hand."

"Tell me, sir, is it true that the King has dissolved the States?"

Andre-Louis looked at him. He smiled apologetically, and waved a hand towards the crowd, which by now was straining for a glimpse of this slim young man who had brought forth the president and more than half the numbers of the Chamber, guessing already, with that curious instinct of crowds, that he was the awaited bearer of tidings.

"Summon the gentlemen of your Chamber, monsieur," said he, "and you shall hear all."

"So be it."

A word, and forth they came to crowd upon the steps, but leaving clear the topmost step and a half-moon space in the middle.

To the spot so indicated, Andre-Louis now advanced very deliberately. He took his stand there, dominating the entire assembly.

He removed his hat, and launched the opening bombshell of that address which is historic, marking as it does one of the great stages of France's progress towards revolution.

"People of this great city of Nantes, I have come to summon you to arms!"

In the amazed and rather scared silence that followed he surveyed them for a moment before resuming.

"I am a delegate of the people of Rennes, charged to announce to you what is taking place, and to invite you in this dreadful hour of our country's peril to rise and march to her defence."

"Name! Your name!" a voice shouted, and instantly the cry was taken up by others, until the multitude rang with the question.

He could not answer that excited mob as he had answered the president. It was necessary to compromise, and he did so, happily. "My name," said he, "is Omnes Omnibus—all for all. Let that suffice you now. I am a herald, a mouthpiece, a voice; no more. I come to announce to you that since the privileged orders, assembled for the States of Brittany in Rennes, resisted your will—our will—despite the King's plain hint to them, His Majesty has dissolved the States."

There was a burst of delirious applause. Men laughed and shouted, and cries of "Vive le Roi!" rolled forth like thunder. Andre-Louis waited, and gradually the preternatural gravity of his countenance came to be observed, and to beget the suspicion that there might be more to follow. Gradually silence was restored, and at last Andre Louis was able to proceed.

"You rejoice too soon. Unfortunately, the nobles, in their insolent arrogance, have elected to ignore the royal dissolution, and in despite of it persist in sitting and in conducting matters as seems good to them."

A silence of utter dismay greeted that disconcerting epilogue to the announcement that had been so rapturously received. Andre-Louis continued after a moment's pause:

"So that these men who were already rebels against the people, rebels, against justice and equity, rebels against humanity itself, are now also rebels against their King. Sooner than yield an inch of the unconscionable privileges by which too long already they have flourished, to the misery of a whole nation, they will make a mock of royal authority, hold up the King himself to contempt. They are determined to prove that there is no real sovereignty in France but the sovereignty of their own parasitic faineantise."

There was a faint splutter of applause, but the majority of the audience remained silent, waiting.

"This is no new thing. Always has it been the same. No minister in the last ten years, who, seeing the needs and perils of the State, counselled the measures that we now demand as the only means of arresting our motherland in its ever-quickenning progress to the abyss, but found himself as a consequence cast out of office by the influence which Privilege brought to bear against him. Twice already has M. Necker been called to the ministry, to be twice dismissed when his insistent counsels of reform threatened the privileges of clergy and nobility. For the third time now has he been called to office, and at last it seems we are to have States General in spite of Privilege. But what the privileged orders can no longer prevent, they are determined to stultify. Since it is now a settled thing that these States General are to meet, at least the nobles and the clergy will see to it—unless we take measures to prevent them—by packing the Third Estate with their own creatures, and denying it all effective representation, that they convert the States General into an instrument of their own will for the perpetuation of the abuses by which they live. To achieve this end they will stop at nothing. They have flouted the authority of the King,

and they are silencing by assassination those who raise their voices to condemn them. Yesterday in Rennes two young men who addressed the people as I am addressing you were done to death in the streets by assassins at the instigation of the nobility. Their blood cries out for vengeance."

Beginning in a sullen mutter, the indignation that moved his hearers swelled up to express itself in a roar of anger.

"Citizens of Nantes, the motherland is in peril. Let us march to her defence. Let us proclaim it to the world that we recognize that the measures to liberate the Third Estate from the slavery in which for centuries it has groaned find only obstacles in those orders whose phrenetic egotism sees in the tears and suffering of the unfortunate an odious tribute which they would pass on to their generations still unborn. Realizing from the barbarity of the means employed by our enemies to perpetuate our oppression that we have everything to fear from the aristocracy they would set up as a constitutional principle for the governing of France, let us declare ourselves at once enfranchised from it.

"The establishment of liberty and equality should be the aim of every citizen member of the Third Estate; and to this end we should stand indivisibly united, especially the young and vigorous, especially those who have had the good fortune to be born late enough to be able to gather for themselves the precious fruits of the philosophy of this eighteenth century."

Acclamations broke out unstintedly now. He had caught them in the snare of his oratory. And he pressed his advantage instantly.

"Let us all swear," he cried in a great voice, "to raise up in the name of humanity and of liberty a rampart against our enemies, to oppose to their bloodthirsty covetousness the calm perseverance of men whose cause is just. And let us protest here and in advance

against any tyrannical decrees that should declare us seditious when we have none but pure and just intentions. Let us make oath upon the honour of our motherland that should any of us be seized by an unjust tribunal, intending against us one of those acts termed of political expediency—which are, in effect, but acts of despotism—let us swear, I say, to give a full expression to the strength that is in us and do that in self-defence which nature, courage, and despair dictate to us."

Loud and long rolled the applause that greeted his conclusion, and he observed with satisfaction and even some inward grim amusement that the wealthy merchants who had been congregated upon the steps, and who now came crowding about him to shake him by the hand and to acclaim him, were not merely participants in, but the actual leaders of, this delirium of enthusiasm.

It confirmed him, had he needed confirmation, in his conviction that just as the philosophies upon which this new movement was based had their source in thinkers extracted from the bourgeoisie, so the need to adopt those philosophies to the practical purposes of life was most acutely felt at present by those bourgeois who found themselves debarred by Privilege from the expansion their wealth permitted them. If it might be said of Andre-Louis that he had that day lighted the torch of the Revolution in Nantes, it might with even greater truth be said that the torch itself was supplied by the opulent bourgeoisie.

I need not dwell at any length upon the sequel. It is a matter of history how that oath which Omnes Omnibus administered to the citizens of Nantes formed the backbone of the formal protest which they drew up and signed in their thousands. Nor were the results of that powerful protest—which, after all, might already be said to harmonize with the expressed will of the sovereign himself—long delayed. Who shall say how far it may have strengthened the hand of Necker, when on the 27th of that same month of November he

compelled the Council to adopt the most significant and comprehensive of all those measures to which clergy and nobility had refused their consent? On that date was published the royal decree ordaining that the deputies to be elected to the States General should number at least one thousand, and that the deputies of the Third Estate should be fully representative by numbering as many as the deputies of clergy and nobility together.

CHAPTER IX. THE AFTERMATH

Dusk of the following day was falling when the homing Andre-Louis approached Gavrillac. Realizing fully what a hue and cry there would presently be for the apostle of revolution who had summoned the people of Nantes to arms, he desired as far as possible to conceal the fact that he had been in that maritime city. Therefore he made a wide detour, crossing the river at Bruz, and recrossing it a little above Chavagne, so as to approach Gavrillac from the north, and create the impression that he was returning from Rennes, whither he was known to have gone two days ago.

Within a mile or so of the village he caught in the fading light his first glimpse of a figure on horseback pacing slowly towards him. But it was not until they had come within a few yards of each other, and he observed that this cloaked figure was leaning forward to peer at him, that he took much notice of it. And then he found himself challenged almost at once by a woman's voice.

"It is you, Andre—at last!"

He drew rein, mildly surprised, to be assailed by another question, impatiently, anxiously asked.

"Where have you been?"

"Where have I been, Cousin Aline? Oh... seeing the world."

"I have been patrolling this road since noon to-day waiting for you." She spoke breathlessly, in haste to explain. "A troop of the *marechaussee* from Rennes descended upon Gavrillac this morning in quest of you. They turned the chateau and the village inside out,

and at last discovered that you were due to return with a horse hired from the Breton arme. So they have taken up their quarters at the inn to wait for you. I have been here all the afternoon on the lookout to warn you against walking into that trap."

"My dear Aline! That I should have been the cause of so much concern and trouble!"

"Never mind that. It is not important."

"On the contrary; it is the most important part of what you tell me. It is the rest that is unimportant."

"Do you realize that they have come to arrest you?" she asked him, with increasing impatience. "You are wanted for sedition, and upon a warrant from M. de Lesdiguieres."

"Sedition?" quoth he, and his thoughts flew to that business at Nantes. It was impossible they could have had news of it in Rennes and acted upon it in so short a time.

"Yes, sedition. The sedition of that wicked speech of yours at Rennes on Wednesday."

"Oh, that!" said he. "Pooh!" His note of relief might have told her, had she been more attentive, that he had to fear the consequences of a greater wickedness committed since. "Why, that was nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I almost suspect that the real intentions of these gentlemen of the marechaussee have been misunderstood. Most probably they have come to thank me on M. de Lesdiguieres' behalf. I restrained the people when they would have burnt the Palais and himself inside it."

"After you had first incited them to do it. I suppose you were afraid of your work. You drew back at the last moment. But you said things of

M. de Lesdiguières, if you are correctly reported, which he will never forgive."

"I see," said Andre-Louis, and he fell into thought.

But Mlle. de Kercadiou had already done what thinking was necessary, and her alert young mind had settled all that was to be done.

"You must not go into Gavrilac," she told him, "and you must get down from your horse, and let me take it. I will stable it at the chateau to-night. And sometime to morrow afternoon, by when you should be well away, I will return it to the Breton arme."

"Oh, but that is impossible."

"Impossible? Why?"

"For several reasons. One of them is that you haven't considered what will happen to you if you do such a thing."

"To me? Do you suppose I am afraid of that pack of oafs sent by M. Lesdiguières? I have committed no sedition."

"But it is almost as bad to give aid to one who is wanted for the crime. That is the law."

"What do I care for the law? Do you imagine that the law will presume to touch me?"

"Of course there is that. You are sheltered by one of the abuses I complained of at Rennes. I was forgetting."

"Complain of it as much as you please, but meanwhile profit by it. Come, Andre, do as I tell you. Get down from your horse." And then, as he still hesitated, she stretched out and caught him by the arm. Her voice was vibrant with earnestness. "Andre, you don't realize how

serious is your position. If these people take you, it is almost certain that you will be hanged. Don't you realize it? You must not go to Gavrilac. You must go away at once, and lie completely lost for a time until this blows over. Indeed, until my uncle can bring influence to bear to obtain your pardon, you must keep in hiding."

"That will be a long time, then," said Andre-Louis. "M. de Kercadiou has never cultivated friends at court."

"There is M. de La Tour d'Azyr," she reminded him, to his astonishment.

"That man!" he cried, and then he laughed. "But it was chiefly against him that I aroused the resentment of the people of Rennes. I should have known that all my speech was not reported to you."

"It was, and that part of it among the rest."

"Ah! And yet you are concerned to save me, the man who seeks the life of your future husband at the hands either of the law or of the people? Or is it, perhaps, that since you have seen his true nature revealed in the murder of poor Philippe, you have changed your views on the subject of becoming Marquise de La Tour d'Azyr?"

"You often show yourself without any faculty of deductive reasoning."

"Perhaps. But hardly to the extent of imagining that M. de La Tour d'Azyr will ever lift a finger to do as you suggest."

"In which, as usual, you are wrong. He will certainly do so if I ask him."

"If you ask him?" Sheer horror rang in his voice.

"Why, yes. You see, I have not yet said that I will be Marquise de La Tour d'Azyr. I am still considering. It is a position that has its

advantages. One of them is that it ensures a suitor's complete obedience."

"So, so. I see the crooked logic of your mind. You might go so far as to say to him: 'Refuse me this, and I shall refuse to be your marquise.' You would go so far as that?"

"At need, I might."

"And do you not see the converse implication? Do you not see that your hands would then be tied, that you would be wanting in honour if afterwards you refused him? And do you think that I would consent to anything that could so tie your hands? Do you think I want to see you damned, Aline?"

Her hand fell away from his arm.

"Oh, you are mad!" she exclaimed, quite out of patience.

"Possibly. But I like my madness. There is a thrill in it unknown to such sanity as yours. By your leave, Aline, I think I will ride on to Gavrilac."

"Andre, you must not! It is death to you!" In her alarm she backed her horse, and pulled it across the road to bar his way.

It was almost completely night by now; but from behind the wrack of clouds overhead a crescent moon sailed out to alleviate the darkness.

"Come, now," she enjoined him. "Be reasonable. Do as I bid you. See, there is a carriage coming up behind you. Do not let us be found here together thus."

He made up his mind quickly. He was not the man to be actuated by false heroics about dying, and he had no fancy whatever for the gallows of M. de Lesdiguieres' providing. The immediate task that he

had set himself might be accomplished. He had made heard—and ringingly—the voice that M. de La Tour d'Azyr imagined he had silenced. But he was very far from having done with life.

"Aline, on one condition only."

"And that?"

"That you swear to me you will never seek the aid of M. de La Tour d'Azyr on my behalf."

"Since you insist, and as time presses, I consent. And now ride on with me as far as the lane. There is that carriage coming up."

The lane to which she referred was one that branched off the road some three hundred yards nearer the village and led straight up the hill to the chateau itself. In silence they rode together towards it, and together they turned into that thickly hedged and narrow bypath. At a depth of fifty yards she halted him.

"Now!" she bade him.

Obediently he swung down from his horse, and surrendered the reins to her.

"Aline," he said, "I haven't words in which to thank you."

"It isn't necessary," said she.

"But I shall hope to repay you some day."

"Nor is that necessary. Could I do less than I am doing? I do not want to hear of you hanged, Andre; nor does my uncle, though he is very angry with you."

"I suppose he is."

"And you can hardly be surprised. You were his delegate, his

representative. He depended upon you, and you have turned your coat. He is rightly indignant, calls you a traitor, and swears that he will never speak to you again. But he doesn't want you hanged, Andre."

"Then we are agreed on that at least, for I don't want it myself."

"I'll make your peace with him. And now—good-bye, Andre. Send me a word when you are safe."

She held out a hand that looked ghostly in the faint light. He took it and bore it to his lips.

"God bless you, Aline."

She was gone, and he stood listening to the receding clopper-clop of hooves until it grew faint in the distance. Then slowly, with shoulders hunched and head sunk on his breast, he retraced his steps to the main road, cogitating whither he should go. Quite suddenly he checked, remembering with dismay that he was almost entirely without money. In Brittany itself he knew of no dependable hiding-place, and as long as he was in Brittany his peril must remain imminent. Yet to leave the province, and to leave it as quickly as prudence dictated, horses would be necessary. And how was he to procure horses, having no money beyond a single louis d'or and a few pieces of silver?

There was also the fact that he was very weary. He had had little sleep since Tuesday night, and not very much then; and much of the time had been spent in the saddle, a wearing thing to one so little accustomed to long rides. Worn as he was, it was unthinkable that he should go far to-night. He might get as far as Chavagne, perhaps. But there he must sup and sleep; and what, then, of to-morrow?

Had he but thought of it before, perhaps Aline might have been able to assist him with the loan of a few louis. His first impulse now was to follow her to the chateau. But prudence dismissed the notion.

Before he could reach her, he must be seen by servants, and word of his presence would go forth.

There was no choice for him; he must tramp as far as Chavagne, find a bed there, and leave to-morrow until it dawned. On the resolve he set his face in the direction whence he had come. But again he paused. Chavagne lay on the road to Rennes. To go that way was to plunge further into danger. He would strike south again. At the foot of some meadows on this side of the village there was a ferry that would put him across the river. Thus he would avoid the village; and by placing the river between himself and the immediate danger, he would obtain an added sense of security.

A lane, turning out of the highroad, a quarter of a mile this side of Gavrilac, led down to that ferry. By this lane some twenty minutes later came Andre-Louis with dragging feet. He avoided the little cottage of the ferryman, whose window was alight, and in the dark crept down to the boat, intending if possible to put himself across. He felt for the chain by which the boat was moored, and ran his fingers along this to the point where it was fastened. Here to his dismay he found a padlock.

He stood up in the gloom and laughed silently. Of course he might have known it. The ferry was the property of M. de La Tour d'Azyr, and not likely to be left unfastened so that poor devils might cheat him of seigneurial dues.

There being no possible alternative, he walked back to the cottage, and rapped on the door. When it opened, he stood well back, and aside, out of the shaft of light that issued thence.

"Ferry!" he rapped out, laconically.

The ferryman, a burly scoundrel well known to him, turned aside to pick up a lantern, and came forth as he was bidden. As he stepped

from the little porch, he levelled the lantern so that its light fell on the face of this traveller.

"My God!" he ejaculated.

"You realize, I see, that I am pressed," said Andre-Louis, his eyes on the fellow's startled countenance.

"And well you may be with the gallows waiting for you at Rennes," growled the ferryman. "Since you've been so foolish as to come back to Gavrilac, you had better go again as quickly as you can. I will say nothing of having seen you."

"I thank you, Fresnel. Your advice accords with my intention. That is why I need the boat."

"Ah, that, no," said Fresnel, with determination. "I'll hold my peace, but it's as much as my skin is worth to help you.

"You need not have seen my face. Forget that you have seen it."

"I'll do that, monsieur. But that is all I will do. I cannot put you across the river."

"Then give me the key of the boat, and I will put myself across."

"That is the same thing. I cannot. I'll hold my tongue, but I will not—I dare not—help you."

Andre-Louis looked a moment into that sullen, resolute face, and understood. This man, living under the shadow of La Tour d'Azyr, dared exercise no will that might be in conflict with the will of his dread lord.

"Fresnel," he said, quietly, "if, as you say, the gallows claim me, the thing that has brought me to this extremity arises out of the shooting of Mabey. Had not Mabey been murdered there would have been no

need for me to have raised my voice as I have done. Mabey was your friend, I think. Will you for his sake lend me the little help I need to save my neck?"

The man kept his glance averted, and the cloud of sullenness deepened on his face.

"I would if I dared, but I dare not." Then, quite suddenly he became angry. It was as if in anger he sought support. "Don't you understand that I dare not? Would you have a poor man risk his life for you? What have you or yours ever done for me that you should ask that? You do not cross to-night in my ferry. Understand that, monsieur, and go at once—go before I remember that it may be dangerous even to have talked to you and not give information. Go!"

He turned on his heel to reenter his cottage, and a wave of hopelessness swept over Andre-Louis.

But in a second it was gone. The man must be compelled, and he had the means. He bethought him of a pistol pressed upon him by Le Chapelier at the moment of his leaving Rennes, a gift which at the time he had almost disdained. True, it was not loaded, and he had no ammunition. But how was Fresnel to know that?

He acted quickly. As with his right hand he pulled it from his pocket, with his left he caught the ferryman by the shoulder, and swung him round.

"What do you want now?" Fresnel demanded angrily. "Haven't I told you that I..."

He broke off short. The muzzle of the pistol was within a foot of his eyes.

"I want the key of the boat. That is all, Fresnel. And you can either give it me at once, or I'll take it after I have burnt your brains. I should

regret to kill you, but I shall not hesitate. It is your life against mine, Fresnel; and you'll not find it strange that if one of us must die I prefer that it shall be you."

Fresnel dipped a hand into his pocket, and fetched thence a key. He held it out to Andre-Louis in fingers that shook—more in anger than in fear.

"I yield to violence," he said, showing his teeth like a snarling dog. "But don't imagine that it will greatly profit you."

Andre-Louis took the key. His pistol remained levelled.

"You threaten me, I think," he said. "It is not difficult to read your threat. The moment I am gone, you will run to inform against me. You will set the marechaussee on my heels to overtake me."

"No, no!" cried the other. He perceived his peril. He read his doom in the cold, sinister note on which Andre-Louis addressed him, and grew afraid. "I swear to you, monsieur, that I have no such intention."

"I think I had better make quite sure of you."

"O my God! Have mercy, monsieur!" The knave was in a palsy of terror. "I mean you no harm—I swear to Heaven I mean you no harm. I will not say a word. I will not..."

"I would rather depend upon your silence than your assurances. Still, you shall have your chance. I am a fool, perhaps, but I have a reluctance to shed blood. Go into the house, Fresnel. Go, man. I follow you."

In the shabby main room of that dwelling, Andre-Louis halted him again. "Get me a length of rope," he commanded, and was readily obeyed.

Five minutes later Fresnel was securely bound to a chair, and

effectively silenced by a very uncomfortable gag improvised out of a block of wood and a muffler.

On the threshold the departing Andre-Louis turned.

"Good-night, Fresnel," he said. Fierce eyes glared mute hatred at him. "It is unlikely that your ferry will be required again to-night. But some one is sure to come to your relief quite early in the morning. Until then bear your discomfort with what fortitude you can, remembering that you have brought it entirely upon yourself by your uncharitableness. If you spend the night considering that, the lesson should not be lost upon you. By morning you may even have grown so charitable as not to know who it was that tied you up. Good-night."

He stepped out and closed the door.

To unlock the ferry, and pull himself across the swift-running waters, on which the faint moonlight was making a silver ripple, were matters that engaged not more than six or seven minutes. He drove the nose of the boat through the decaying sedges that fringed the southern bank of the stream, sprang ashore, and made the little craft secure. Then, missing the footpath in the dark, he struck out across a sodden meadow in quest of the road.

BOOK II: THE BUSKIN

CHAPTER I. THE TRESPASSERS

Coming presently upon the Redon road, Andre-Louis, obeying instinct rather than reason, turned his face to the south, and plodded wearily and mechanically forward. He had no clear idea of whither he was going, or of whither he should go. All that imported at the moment was to put as great a distance as possible between Gavrilac and himself.

He had a vague, half-formed notion of returning to Nantes; and there, by employing the newly found weapon of his oratory, excite the people into sheltering him as the first victim of the persecution he had foreseen, and against which he had sworn them to take up arms. But the idea was one which he entertained merely as an indefinite possibility upon which he felt no real impulse to act.

Meanwhile he chuckled at the thought of Fresnel as he had last seen him, with his muffled face and glaring eyeballs. "For one who was anything but a man of action," he writes, "I felt that I had acquitted myself none so badly." It is a phrase that recurs at intervals in his sketchy "Confessions." Constantly is he reminding you that he is a man of mental and not physical activities, and apologizing when dire necessity drives him into acts of violence. I suspect this insistence upon his philosophic detachment—for which I confess he had justification enough—to betray his besetting vanity.

With increasing fatigue came depression and self-criticism. He had stupidly overshot his mark in insultingly denouncing M. de Lesdiguieres. "It is much better," he says somewhere, "to be wicked

than to be stupid. Most of this world's misery is the fruit not as priests tell us of wickedness, but of stupidity." And we know that of all stupidities he considered anger the most deplorable. Yet he had permitted himself to be angry with a creature like M. de Lesdiguières—a lackey, a fribble, a nothing, despite his potentialities for evil. He could perfectly have discharged his self-imposed mission without arousing the vindictive resentment of the King's Lieutenant.

He beheld himself vaguely launched upon life with the riding-suit in which he stood, a single louis d'or and a few pieces of silver for all capital, and a knowledge of law which had been inadequate to preserve him from the consequences of infringing it.

He had, in addition—but these things that were to be the real salvation of him he did not reckon—his gift of laughter, sadly repressed of late, and the philosophic outlook and mercurial temperament which are the stock-in-trade of your adventurer in all ages.

Meanwhile he tramped mechanically on through the night, until he felt that he could tramp no more. He had skirted the little township of Guichen, and now within a half-mile of Guignen, and with Gavrillac a good seven miles behind him, his legs refused to carry him any farther.

He was midway across the vast common to the north of Guignen when he came to a halt. He had left the road, and taken heedlessly to the footpath that struck across the waste of indifferent pasture interspersed with clumps of gorse. A stone's throw away on his right the common was bordered by a thorn hedge. Beyond this loomed a tall building which he knew to be an open barn, standing on the edge of a long stretch of meadowland. That dark, silent shadow it may have been that had brought him to a standstill, suggesting shelter to his subconsciousness. A moment he hesitated; then he struck across towards a spot where a gap in the hedge was closed by a five-barred

gate. He pushed the gate open, went through the gap, and stood now before the barn. It was as big as a house, yet consisted of no more than a roof carried upon half a dozen tall, brick pillars. But densely packed under that roof was a great stack of hay that promised a warm couch on so cold a night. Stout timbers had been built into the brick pillars, with projecting ends to serve as ladders by which the labourer might climb to pack or withdraw hay. With what little strength remained him, Andre-Louis climbed by one of these and landed safely at the top, where he was forced to kneel, for lack of room to stand upright. Arrived there, he removed his coat and neckcloth, his sodden boots and stockings. Next he cleared a trough for his body, and lying down in it, covered himself to the neck with the hay he had removed. Within five minutes he was lost to all worldly cares and soundly asleep.

When next he awakened, the sun was already high in the heavens, from which he concluded that the morning was well advanced; and this before he realized quite where he was or how he came there. Then to his awakening senses came a drone of voices close at hand, to which at first he paid little heed. He was deliciously refreshed, luxuriously drowsy and luxuriously warm.

But as consciousness and memory grew more full, he raised his head clear of the hay that he might free both ears to listen, his pulses faintly quickened by the nascent fear that those voices might bode him no good. Then he caught the reassuring accents of a woman, musical and silvery, though laden with alarm.

"Ah, mon Dieu, Leandre, let us separate at once. If it should be my father..."

And upon this a man's voice broke in, calm and reassuring:

"No, no, Climene; you are mistaken. There is no one coming. We are quite safe. Why do you start at shadows?"

"Ah, Leandre, if he should find us here together! I tremble at the very thought."

More was not needed to reassure Andre-Louis. He had overheard enough to know that this was but the case of a pair of lovers who, with less to fear of life, were yet—after the manner of their kind—more timid of heart than he. Curiosity drew him from his warm trough to the edge of the hay. Lying prone, he advanced his head and peered down.

In the space of cropped meadow between the barn and the hedge stood a man and a woman, both young. The man was a well-set-up, comely fellow, with a fine head of chestnut hair tied in a queue by a broad bow of black satin. He was dressed with certain tawdry attempts at ostentatious embellishments, which did not prepossess one at first glance in his favour. His coat of a fashionable cut was of faded plum-coloured velvet edged with silver lace, whose glory had long since departed. He affected ruffles, but for want of starch they hung like weeping willows over hands that were fine and delicate. His breeches were of plain black cloth, and his black stockings were of cotton—matters entirely out of harmony with his magnificent coat. His shoes, stout and serviceable, were decked with buckles of cheap, lack-lustre paste. But for his engaging and ingenuous countenance, Andre-Louis must have set him down as a knight of that order which lives dishonestly by its wits. As it was, he suspended judgment whilst pushing investigation further by a study of the girl. At the outset, he it confessed that it was a study that attracted him prodigiously. And this notwithstanding the fact that, bookish and studious as were his ways, and in despite of his years, it was far from his habit to waste consideration on femininity.

The child—she was no more than that, perhaps twenty at the most—possessed, in addition to the allurements of face and shape that went very near perfection, a sparkling vivacity and a grace of

movement the like of which Andre-Louis did not remember ever before to have beheld assembled in one person. And her voice too—that musical, silvery voice that had awakened him—possessed in its exquisite modulations an allurements of its own that must have been irresistible, he thought, in the ugliest of her sex. She wore a hooded mantle of green cloth, and the hood being thrown back, her dainty head was all revealed to him. There were glints of gold struck by the morning sun from her light nut-brown hair that hung in a cluster of curls about her oval face. Her complexion was of a delicacy that he could compare only with a rose petal. He could not at that distance discern the colour of her eyes, but he guessed them blue, as he admired the sparkle of them under the fine, dark line of eyebrows.

He could not have told you why, but he was conscious that it aggrieved him to find her so intimate with this pretty young fellow, who was partly clad, as it appeared, in the cast-offs of a nobleman. He could not guess her station, but the speech that reached him was cultured in tone and word. He strained to listen.

"I shall know no peace, Leandre, until we are safely wedded," she was saying. "Not until then shall I count myself beyond his reach. And yet if we marry without his consent, we but make trouble for ourselves, and of gaining his consent I almost despair."

Evidently, thought Andre-Louis, her father was a man of sense, who saw through the shabby finery of M. Leandre, and was not to be dazzled by cheap paste buckles.

"My dear Climene," the young man was answering her, standing squarely before her, and holding both her hands, "you are wrong to despond. If I do not reveal to you all the stratagem that I have prepared to win the consent of your unnatural parent, it is because I am loath to rob you of the pleasure of the surprise that is in store. But place your faith in me, and in that ingenious friend of whom I have spoken, and who should be here at any moment."

The stilted ass! Had he learnt that speech by heart in advance, or was he by nature a pedantic idiot who expressed himself in this set and formal manner? How came so sweet a blossom to waste her perfumes on such a prig? And what a ridiculous name the creature owned!

Thus Andre-Louis to himself from his observatory. Meanwhile, she was speaking.

"That is what my heart desires, Leandre, but I am beset by fears lest your stratagem should be too late. I am to marry this horrible Marquis of Sbrufadelli this very day. He arrives by noon. He comes to sign the contract—to make me the Marchioness of Sbrufadelli. Oh!" It was a cry of pain from that tender young heart. "The very name burns my lips. If it were mine I could never utter it—never! The man is so detestable. Save me, Leandre. Save me! You are my only hope."

Andre-Louis was conscious of a pang of disappointment. She failed to soar to the heights he had expected of her. She was evidently infected by the stilted manner of her ridiculous lover. There was an atrocious lack of sincerity about her words. They touched his mind, but left his heart unmoved. Perhaps this was because of his antipathy to M. Leandre and to the issue involved.

So her father was marrying her to a marquis! That implied birth on her side. And yet she was content to pair off with this dull young adventurer in the tarnished lace! It was, he supposed, the sort of thing to be expected of a sex that all philosophy had taught him to regard as the maddest part of a mad species.

"It shall never be!" M. Leandre was storming passionately. "Never! I swear it!" And he shook his puny fist at the blue vault of heaven—Ajax defying Jupiter. "Ah, but here comes our subtle friend..." (Andre-Louis did not catch the name, M. Leandre having at that moment turned to face the gap in the hedge.) "He will bring us news, I know."

Andre-Louis looked also in the direction of the gap. Through it emerged a lean, slight man in a rusty cloak and a three-cornered hat worn well down over his nose so as to shade his face. And when presently he doffed this hat and made a sweeping bow to the young lovers, Andre-Louis confessed to himself that had he been cursed with such a hangdog countenance he would have worn his hat in precisely such a manner, so as to conceal as much of it as possible. If M. Leandre appeared to be wearing, in part at least, the cast-offs of nobleman, the newcomer appeared to be wearing the cast-offs of M. Leandre. Yet despite his vile clothes and viler face, with its three days' growth of beard, the fellow carried himself with a certain air; he positively strutted as he advanced, and he made a leg in a manner that was courtly and practised.

"Monsieur," said he, with the air of a conspirator, "the time for action has arrived, and so has the Marquis... That is why."

The young lovers sprang apart in consternation; Climene with clasped hands, parted lips, and a bosom that raced distractingly under its white fichu-menteur; M. Leandre agape, the very picture of foolishness and dismay.

Meanwhile the newcomer rattled on. "I was at the inn an hour ago when he descended there, and I studied him attentively whilst he was at breakfast. Having done so, not a single doubt remains me of our success. As for what he looks like, I could entertain you at length upon the fashion in which nature has designed his gross fatuity. But that is no matter. We are concerned with what he is, with the wit of him. And I tell you confidently that I find him so dull and stupid that you may be confident he will tumble headlong into each and all of the traps I have so cunningly prepared for him."

"Tell me, tell me! Speak!" Climene implored him, holding out her hands in a supplication no man of sensibility could have resisted. And

then on the instant she caught her breath on a faint scream. "My father!" she exclaimed, turning distractedly from one to the other of those two. "He is coming! We are lost!"

"You must fly, Climene!" said M. Leandre.

"Too late!" she sobbed. "Too late! He is here."

"Calm, mademoiselle, calm!" the subtle friend was urging her. "Keep calm and trust to me. I promise you that all shall be well."

"Oh!" cried M. Leandre, limply. "Say what you will, my friend, this is ruin—the end of all our hopes. Your wits will never extricate us from this. Never!"

Through the gap strode now an enormous man with an inflamed moon face and a great nose, decently dressed after the fashion of a solid bourgeois. There was no mistaking his anger, but the expression that it found was an amazement to Andre-Louis.

"Leandre, you're an imbecile! Too much phlegm, too much phlegm! Your words wouldn't convince a ploughboy! Have you considered what they mean at all? Thus," he cried, and casting his round hat from him in a broad gesture, he took his stand at M. Leandre's side, and repeated the very words that Leandre had lately uttered, what time the three observed him coolly and attentively.

"Oh, say what you will, my friend, this is ruin—the end of all our hopes. Your wits will never extricate us from this. Never!"

A frenzy of despair vibrated in his accents. He swung again to face M. Leandre. "Thus," he bade him contemptuously. "Let the passion of your hopelessness express itself in your voice. Consider that you are not asking Scaramouche here whether he has put a patch in your breeches. You are a despairing lover expressing..."

He checked abruptly, startled. Andre-Louis, suddenly realizing what

was afoot, and how duped he had been, had loosed his laughter. The sound of it pealing and booming uncannily under the great roof that so immediately confined him was startling to those below.

The fat man was the first to recover, and he announced it after his own fashion in one of the ready sarcasms in which he habitually dealt.

"Hark!" he cried, "the very gods laugh at you, Leandre." Then he addressed the roof of the barn and its invisible tenant. "Hi! You there!"

Andre-Louis revealed himself by a further protrusion of his tousled head.

"Good-morning," said he, pleasantly. Rising now on his knees, his horizon was suddenly extended to include the broad common beyond the hedge. He beheld there an enormous and very battered travelling chaise, a cart piled up with timbers partly visible under the sheet of oiled canvas that covered them, and a sort of house on wheels equipped with a tin chimney, from which the smoke was slowly curling. Three heavy Flemish horses and a couple of donkeys—all of them hobbled—were contentedly cropping the grass in the neighbourhood of these vehicles. These, had he perceived them sooner, must have given him the clue to the queer scene that had been played under his eyes. Beyond the hedge other figures were moving. Three at that moment came crowding into the gap—a saucy-faced girl with a tip-tilted nose, whom he supposed to be Columbine, the soubrette; a lean, active youngster, who must be the lackey Harlequin; and another rather loutish youth who might be a zany or an apothecary.

All this he took in at a comprehensive glance that consumed no more time than it had taken him to say good-morning. To that good-morning Pantaloon replied in a bellow:

"What the devil are you doing up there?"

"Precisely the same thing that you are doing down there," was the answer. "I am trespassing."

"Eh?" said Pantaloon, and looked at his companions, some of the assurance beaten out of his big red face. Although the thing was one that they did habitually, to hear it called by its proper name was disconcerting.

"Whose land is this?" he asked, with diminishing assurance.

Andre-Louis answered, whilst drawing on his stockings. "I believe it to be the property of the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr."

"That's a high-sounding name. Is the gentleman severe?"

"The gentleman," said Andre-Louis, "is the devil; or rather, I should prefer to say upon reflection, that the devil is a gentleman by comparison.

"And yet," interposed the villainous-looking fellow who played Scaramouche, "by your own confessing you don't hesitate, yourself, to trespass upon his property."

"Ah, but then, you see, I am a lawyer. And lawyers are notoriously unable to observe the law, just as actors are notoriously unable to act. Moreover, sir, Nature imposes her limits upon us, and Nature conquers respect for law as she conquers all else. Nature conquered me last night when I had got as far as this. And so I slept here without regard for the very high and puissant Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr. At the same time, M. Scaramouche, you'll observe that I did not flaunt my trespass quite as openly as you and your companions."

Having donned his boots, Andre-Louis came nimbly to the ground in his shirt-sleeves, his riding-coat over his arm. As he stood there to don it, the little cunning eyes of the heavy father coned him in detail. Observing that his clothes, if plain, were of a good fashion, that his

shirt was of fine cambric, and that he expressed himself like a man of culture, such as he claimed to be, M. Pantaloon was disposed to be civil.

"I am very grateful to you for the warning, sir..." he was beginning.

"Act upon it, my friend. The gardes-champetres of M. d'Azyr have orders to fire on trespassers. Imitate me, and decamp."

They followed him upon the instant through that gap in the hedge to the encampment on the common. There Andre-Louis took his leave of them. But as he was turning away he perceived a young man of the company performing his morning toilet at a bucket placed upon one of the wooden steps at the tail of the house on wheels. A moment he hesitated, then he turned frankly to M. Pantaloon, who was still at his elbow.

"If it were not unconscionable to encroach so far upon your hospitality, monsieur," said he, "I would beg leave to imitate that very excellent young gentleman before I leave you."

"But, my dear sir!" Good-nature oozed out of every pore of the fat body of the master player. "It is nothing at all. But, by all means. Rhodomont will provide what you require. He is the dandy of the company in real life, though a fire-eater on the stage. Hi, Rhodomont!"

The young ablutionist straightened his long body from the right angle in which it had been bent over the bucket, and looked out through a foam of soapsuds. Pantaloon issued an order, and Rhodomont, who was indeed as gentle and amiable off the stage as he was formidable and terrible upon it, made the stranger free of the bucket in the friendliest manner.

So Andre-Louis once more removed his neckcloth and his coat, and rolled up the sleeves of his fine shirt, whilst Rhodomont procured him soap, a towel, and presently a broken comb, and even a greasy

hair-ribbon, in case the gentleman should have lost his own. This last Andre-Louis declined, but the comb he gratefully accepted, and having presently washed himself clean, stood, with the towel flung over his left shoulder, restoring order to his dishevelled locks before a broken piece of mirror affixed to the door of the travelling house.

He was standing thus, what time the gentle Rhodomont babbled aimlessly at his side when his ears caught the sound of hooves. He looked over his shoulder carelessly, and then stood frozen, with uplifted comb and loosened mouth. Away across the common, on the road that bordered it, he beheld a party of seven horsemen in the blue coats with red facings of the *marechaussee*.

Not for a moment did he doubt what was the quarry of this prowling *gendarmierie*. It was as if the chill shadow of the gallows had fallen suddenly upon him.

And then the troop halted, abreast with them, and the sergeant leading it sent his bawling voice across the common.

"Hi, there! Hi!" His tone rang with menace.

Every member of the company—and there were some twelve in all—stood at gaze. Pantaloon advanced a step or two, stalking, his head thrown back, his manner that of a King's Lieutenant.

"Now, what the devil's this?" quoth he, but whether of Fate or Heaven or the sergeant, was not clear.

There was a brief colloquy among the horsemen, then they came trotting across the common straight towards the players' encampment.

Andre-Louis had remained standing at the tail of the travelling house. He was still passing the comb through his straggling hair, but mechanically and unconsciously. His mind was all intent upon the

advancing troop, his wits alert and gathered together for a leap in whatever direction should be indicated.

Still in the distance, but evidently impatient, the sergeant bawled a question.

"Who gave you leave to encamp here?"

It was a question that reassured Andre-Louis not at all. He was not deceived by it into supposing or even hoping that the business of these men was merely to round up vagrants and trespassers. That was no part of their real duty; it was something done in passing—done, perhaps, in the hope of levying a tax of their own. It was very long odds that they were from Rennes, and that their real business was the hunting down of a young lawyer charged with sedition. Meanwhile Pantaloon was shouting back.

"Who gave us leave, do you say? What leave? This is communal land, free to all."

The sergeant laughed unpleasantly, and came on, his troop following.

"There is," said a voice at Pantaloon's elbow, "no such thing as communal land in the proper sense in all M. de La Tour d'Azyr's vast domain. This is a terre censive, and his bailiffs collect his dues from all who send their beasts to graze here."

Pantaloon turned to behold at his side Andre-Louis in his shirt-sleeves, and without a neckcloth, the towel still trailing over his left shoulder, a comb in his hand, his hair half dressed.

"God of God!" swore Pantaloon. "But it is an ogre, this Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr!"

"I have told you already what I think of him," said Andre-Louis. "As for these fellows you had better let me deal with them. I have

experience of their kind." And without waiting for Pantaloon's consent, Andre-Louis stepped forward to meet the advancing men of the marechaussee. He had realized that here boldness alone could save him.

When a moment later the sergeant pulled up his horse alongside of this half-dressed young man, Andre-Louis combed his hair what time he looked up with a half smile, intended to be friendly, ingenuous, and disarming.

In spite of it the sergeant hailed him gruffly: "Are you the leader of this troop of vagabonds?"

"Yes... that is to say, my father, there, is really the leader." And he jerked a thumb in the direction of M. Pantaloon, who stood at gaze out of earshot in the background. "What is your pleasure, captain?"

"My pleasure is to tell you that you are very likely to be gaoled for this, all the pack of you." His voice was loud and bullying. It carried across the common to the ears of every member of the company, and brought them all to stricken attention where they stood. The lot of strolling players was hard enough without the addition of gaolings.

"But how so, my captain? This is communal land free to all."

"It is nothing of the kind."

"Where are the fences?" quoth Andre-Louis, waving the hand that held the comb, as if to indicate the openness of the place.

"Fences!" snorted the sergeant. "What have fences to do with the matter? This is terre censive. There is no grazing here save by payment of dues to the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr."

"But we are not grazing," quoth the innocent Andre-Louis.

"To the devil with you, zany! You are not grazing! But your beasts

are grazing!"

"They eat so little," Andre-Louis apologized, and again essayed his ingratiating smile.

The sergeant grew more terrible than ever. "That is not the point. The point is that you are committing what amounts to a theft, and there's the gaol for thieves."

"Technically, I suppose you are right," sighed Andre-Louis, and fell to combing his hair again, still looking up into the sergeant's face. "But we have sinned in ignorance. We are grateful to you for the warning." He passed the comb into his left hand, and with his right fumbled in his breeches' pocket, whence there came a faint jingle of coins. "We are desolated to have brought you out of your way. Perhaps for their trouble your men would honour us by stopping at the next inn to drink the health of... of this M. de La Tour d' Azyr, or any other health that they think proper."

Some of the clouds lifted from the sergeant's brow. But not yet all.

"Well, well," said he, gruffly. "But you must decamp, you understand." He leaned from the saddle to bring his recipient hand to a convenient distance. Andre-Louis placed in it a three-livre piece.

"In half an hour," said Andre-Louis.

"Why in half an hour? Why not at once?"

"Oh, but time to break our fast."

They looked at each other. The sergeant next considered the broad piece of silver in his palm. Then at last his features relaxed from their sternness.

"After all," said he, "it is none of our business to play the tipstaves for M. de La Tour d'Azyr. We are of the marechaussee from Rennes."

Andre-Louis' eyelids played him false by flickering. "But if you linger, look out for the gardes-champetres of the Marquis. You'll find them not at all accommodating. Well, well—a good appetite to you, monsieur," said he, in valediction.

"A pleasant ride, my captain," answered Andre-Louis.

The sergeant wheeled his horse about, his troop wheeled with him. They were starting off, when he reined up again.

"You, monsieur!" he called over his shoulder. In a bound Andre-Louis was beside his stirrup. "We are in quest of a scoundrel named Andre-Louis Moreau, from Gavrillac, a fugitive from justice wanted for the gallows on a matter of sedition. You've seen nothing, I suppose, of a man whose movements seemed to you suspicious?"

"Indeed, we have," said Andre-Louis, very boldly, his face eager with consciousness of the ability to oblige.

"You have?" cried the sergeant, in a ringing voice. "Where? When?"

"Yesterday evening in the neighbourhood of Guignen..."

"Yes, yes," the sergeant felt himself hot upon the trail.

"There was a fellow who seemed very fearful of being recognized ... a man of fifty or thereabouts..."

"Fifty!" cried the sergeant, and his face fell. "Bah! This man of ours is no older than yourself, a thin wisp of a fellow of about your own height and of black hair, just like your own, by the description. Keep a lookout on your travels, master player. The King's Lieutenant in Rennes has sent us word this morning that he will pay ten louis to any one giving information that will lead to this scoundrel's arrest. So there's ten louis to be earned by keeping your eyes open, and sending word to the nearest justices. It would be a fine windfall for

you, that."

"A fine windfall, indeed, captain," answered Andre-Louis, laughing.

But the sergeant had touched his horse with the spur, and was already trotting off in the wake of his men. Andre-Louis continued to laugh, quite silently, as he sometimes did when the humour of a jest was peculiarly keen.

Then he turned slowly about, and came back towards Pantaloon and the rest of the company, who were now all grouped together, at gaze.

Pantaloon advanced to meet him with both hands out-held. For a moment Andre-Louis thought he was about to be embraced.

"We hail you our saviour!" the big man declaimed. "Already the shadow of the gaol was creeping over us, chilling us to the very marrow. For though we be poor, yet are we all honest folk and not one of us has ever suffered the indignity of prison. Nor is there one of us would survive it. But for you, my friend, it might have happened. What magic did you work?"

"The magic that is to be worked in France with a King's portrait. The French are a very loyal nation, as you will have observed. They love their King—and his portrait even better than himself, especially when it is wrought in gold. But even in silver it is respected. The sergeant was so overcome by the sight of that noble visage—on a three-livre piece—that his anger vanished, and he has gone his ways leaving us to depart in peace."

"Ah, true! He said we must decamp. About it, my lads! Come, come..."

"But not until after breakfast," said Andre-Louis. "A half-hour for breakfast was conceded us by that loyal fellow, so deeply was he

touched. True, he spoke of possible gardes-champetres. But he knows as well as I do that they are not seriously to be feared, and that if they came, again the King's portrait—wrought in copper this time—would produce the same melting effect upon them. So, my dear M. Pantaloon, break your fast at your ease. I can smell your cooking from here, and from the smell I argue that there is no need to wish you a good appetite."

"My friend, my saviour!" Pantaloon flung a great arm about the young man's shoulders. "You shall stay to breakfast with us."

"I confess to a hope that you would ask me," said Andre-Louis.

CHAPTER II. THE SERVICE OF THESPIS

They were, thought Andre-Louis, as he sat down to breakfast with them behind the itinerant house, in the bright sunshine that tempered the cold breath of that November morning, an odd and yet an attractive crew. An air of gaiety pervaded them. They affected to have no cares, and made merry over the trials and tribulations of their nomadic life. They were curiously, yet amiably, artificial; histrionic in their manner of discharging the most commonplace of functions; exaggerated in their gestures; stilted and affected in their speech. They seemed, indeed, to belong to a world apart, a world of unreality which became real only on the planks of their stage, in the glare of their footlights. Good-fellowship bound them one to another; and Andre-Louis reflected cynically that this harmony amongst them might be the cause of their apparent unreality. In the real world, greedy striving and the emulation of acquisitiveness preclude such amity as was present here.

They numbered exactly eleven, three women and eight men; and they addressed each other by their stage names: names which denoted their several types, and never—or only very slightly—varied, no matter what might be the play that they performed.

"We are," Pantaloon informed him, "one of those few remaining staunch bands of real players, who uphold the traditions of the old Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*. Not for us to vex our memories and stultify our wit with the stilted phrases that are the fruit of a wretched author's lucubrations. Each of us is in detail his own author in a measure as he develops the part assigned to him. We are

improvisers—improvisers of the old and noble Italian school."

"I had guessed as much," said Andre-Louis, "when I discovered you rehearsing your improvisations."

Pantaloön frowned.

"I have observed, young sir, that your humour inclines to the pungent, not to say the acrid. It is very well. It is I suppose, the humour that should go with such a countenance. But it may lead you astray, as in this instance. That rehearsal—a most unusual thing with us—was necessitated by the histrionic rawness of our Leandre. We are seeking to inculcate into him by training an art with which Nature neglected to endow him against his present needs. Should he continue to fail in doing justice to our schooling... But we will not disturb our present harmony with the unpleasant anticipation of misfortunes which we still hope to avert. We love our Leandre, for all his faults. Let me make you acquainted with our company."

And he proceeded to introduction in detail. He pointed out the long and amiable Rhodomont, whom Andre-Louis already knew.

"His length of limb and hooked nose were his superficial qualifications to play roaring captains," Pantaloön explained. "His lungs have justified our choice. You should hear him roar. At first we called him Spavento or Epouvapte. But that was unworthy of so great an artist. Not since the superb Mondor amazed the world has so thrasonical a bully been seen upon the stage. So we conferred upon him the name of Rhodomont that Mondor made famous; and I give you my word, as an actor and a gentleman—for I am a gentleman, monsieur, or was—that he has justified us."

His little eyes beamed in his great swollen face as he turned their gaze upon the object of his encomium. The terrible Rhodomont, confused by so much praise, blushed like a schoolgirl as he met the

solemn scrutiny of Andre-Louis.

"Then here we have Scaramouche, whom also you already know. Sometimes he is Scapin and sometimes Coviello, but in the main Scaramouche, to which let me tell you he is best suited—sometimes too well suited, I think. For he is Scaramouche not only on the stage, but also in the world. He has a gift of sly intrigue, an art of setting folk by the ears, combined with an impudent aggressiveness upon occasion when he considers himself safe from reprisals. He is Scaramouche, the little skirmisher, to the very life. I could say more. But I am by disposition charitable and loving to all mankind."

"As the priest said when he kissed the serving-wench," snarled Scaramouche, and went on eating.

"His humour, like your own, you will observe, is acrid," said Pantaloon. He passed on. "Then that rascal with the lumpy nose and the grinning bucolic countenance is, of course, Pierrot. Could he be aught else?"

"I could play lovers a deal better," said the rustic cherub.

"That is the delusion proper to Pierrot," said Pantaloon, contemptuously. "This heavy, beetle-browed ruffian, who has grown old in sin, and whose appetite increases with his years, is Polichinelle. Each one, as you perceive, is designed by Nature for the part he plays. This nimble, freckled jackanapes is Harlequin; not your spangled Harlequin into which modern degeneracy has debased that first-born of Momus, but the genuine original zany of the Commedia, ragged and patched, an impudent, cowardly, blackguardly clown."

"Each one of us, as you perceive," said Harlequin, mimicking the leader of the troupe, "is designed by Nature for the part he plays."

"Physically, my friend, physically only, else we should not have so much trouble in teaching this beautiful Leandre to become a lover.

Then we have Pasquariel here, who is sometimes an apothecary, sometimes a notary, sometimes a lackey—an amiable, accommodating fellow. He is also an excellent cook, being a child of Italy, that land of gluttons. And finally, you have myself, who as the father of the company very properly play as Pantaloön the roles of father. Sometimes, it is true, I am a deluded husband, and sometimes an ignorant, self-sufficient doctor. But it is rarely that I find it necessary to call myself other than Pantaloön. For the rest, I am the only one who has a name—a real name. It is Binet, monsieur.

"And now for the ladies... First in order of seniority we have Madame there." He waved one of his great hands towards a buxom, smiling blonde of five-and-forty, who was seated on the lowest of the steps of the travelling house. "She is our Duegne, or Mother, or Nurse, as the case requires. She is known quite simply and royally as Madame. If she ever had a name in the world, she has long since forgotten it, which is perhaps as well. Then we have this pert jade with the tip-tilted nose and the wide mouth, who is of course our soubrette Columbine, and lastly, my daughter Climene, an amoureuse of talents not to be matched outside the Comedie Francaise, of which she has the bad taste to aspire to become a member."

The lovely Climene—and lovely indeed she was—tossed her nut-brown curls and laughed as she looked across at Andre-Louis. Her eyes, he had perceived by now, were not blue, but hazel.

"Do not believe him, monsieur. Here I am queen, and I prefer to be queen here rather than a slave in Paris."

"Mademoiselle," said Andre-Louis, quite solemnly, "will be queen wherever she condescends to reign."

Her only answer was a timid—timid and yet alluring—glance from under fluttering lids. Meanwhile her father was bawling at the comely young man who played lovers—"You hear, Leandre! That is the sort of

speech you should practise."

Leandre raised languid eyebrows. "That?" quoth he, and shrugged. "The merest commonplace."

Andre-Louis laughed approval. "M. Leandre is of a readier wit than you concede. There is subtlety in pronouncing it a commonplace to call Mlle. Climene a queen."

Some laughed, M. Binet amongst them, with good-humoured mockery.

"You think he has the wit to mean it thus? Bah! His subtleties are all unconscious."

The conversation becoming general, Andre-Louis soon learnt what yet there was to learn of this strolling band. They were on their way to Guichen, where they hoped to prosper at the fair that was to open on Monday next. They would make their triumphal entry into the town at noon, and setting up their stage in the old market, they would give their first performance that same Saturday night, in a new canevas—or scenario—of M. Binet's own, which should set the rustics gaping. And then M. Binet fetched a sigh, and addressed himself to the elderly, swarthy, beetle-browed Polichinelle, who sat on his left.

"But we shall miss Felicien," said he. "Indeed, I do not know what we shall do without him."

"Oh, we shall contrive," said Polichinelle, with his mouth full.

"So you always say, whatever happens, knowing that in any case the contriving will not fall upon yourself."

"He should not be difficult to replace," said Harlequin.

"True, if we were in a civilized land. But where among the rustics of Brittany are we to find a fellow of even his poor parts?" M. Binet

turned to Andre-Louis. "He was our property-man, our machinist, our stage-carpenter, our man of affairs, and occasionally he acted."

"The part of Figaro, I presume," said Andre-Louis, which elicited a laugh.

"So you are acquainted with Beaumarchais!" Binet eyed the young man with fresh interest.

"He is tolerably well known, I think."

"In Paris, to be sure. But I had not dreamt his fame had reached the wilds of Brittany."

"But then I was some years in Paris—at the Lycee of Louis le Grand. It was there I made acquaintance with his work."

"A dangerous man," said Polichinelle, sententiously.

"Indeed, and you are right," Pantaloon agreed. "Clever—I do not deny him that, although myself I find little use for authors. But of a sinister cleverness responsible for the dissemination of many of these subversive new ideas. I think such writers should be suppressed."

"M. de La Tour d'Azyr would probably agree with you—the gentleman who by the simple exertion of his will turns this communal land into his own property." And Andre-Louis drained his cup, which had been filled with the poor vin gris that was the players' drink.

It was a remark that might have precipitated an argument had it not also reminded M. Binet of the terms on which they were encamped there, and of the fact that the half-hour was more than past. In a moment he was on his feet, leaping up with an agility surprising in so corpulent a man, issuing his commands like a marshal on a field of battle.

"Come, come, my lads! Are we to sit guzzling here all day? Time

flees, and there's a deal to be done if we are to make our entry into Guichen at noon. Go, get you dressed. We strike camp in twenty minutes. Bestir, ladies! To your chaise, and see that you contrive to look your best. Soon the eyes of Guichen will be upon you, and the condition of your interior to-morrow will depend upon the impression made by your exterior to-day. Away! Away!"

The implicit obedience this autocrat commanded set them in a whirl. Baskets and boxes were dragged forth to receive the platters and remains of their meagre feast. In an instant the ground was cleared, and the three ladies had taken their departure to the chaise, which was set apart for their use. The men were already climbing into the house on wheels, when Binet turned to Andre-Louis.

"We part here, sir," said he, dramatically, "the richer by your acquaintance; your debtors and your friends." He put forth his podgy hand.

Slowly Andre-Louis took it in his own. He had been thinking swiftly in the last few moments. And remembering the safety he had found from his pursuers in the bosom of this company, it occurred to him that nowhere could he be better hidden for the present, until the quest for him should have died down.

"Sir," he said, "the indebtedness is on my side. It is not every day one has the felicity to sit down with so illustrious and engaging a company."

Binet's little eyes peered suspiciously at the young man, in quest of irony. He found nothing but candour and simple good faith.

"I part from you reluctantly," Andre-Louis continued. "The more reluctantly since I do not perceive the absolute necessity for parting."

"How?" quoth Binet, frowning, and slowly withdrawing the hand which the other had already retained rather longer than was

necessary.

"Thus," Andre-Louis explained himself. "You may set me down as a sort of knight of rueful countenance in quest of adventure, with no fixed purpose in life at present. You will not marvel that what I have seen of yourself and your distinguished troupe should inspire me to desire your better acquaintance. On your side you tell me that you are in need of some one to replace your Figaro—your Felicien, I think you called him. Whilst it may be presumptuous of me to hope that I could discharge an office so varied and so onerous..."

"You are indulging that acrid humour of yours again, my friend," Binet interrupted him. "Excepting for that," he added, slowly, meditatively, his little eyes screwed up, "we might discuss this proposal that you seem to be making."

"Alas! we can except nothing. If you take me, you take me as I am. What else is possible? As for this humour—such as it is—which you decry, you might turn it to profitable account."

"How so?"

"In several ways. I might, for instance, teach Leandre to make love."

Pantaloon burst into laughter. "You do not lack confidence in your powers. Modesty does not afflict you."

"Therefore I evince the first quality necessary in an actor."

"Can you act?"

"Upon occasion, I think," said Andre-Louis, his thoughts upon his performance at Rennes and Nantes, and wondering when in all his histrionic career Pantaloon's improvisations had so rent the heart of mobs.

M. Binet was musing. "Do you know much of the theatre?" quoth

he.

"Everything," said Andre-Louis.

"I said that modesty will prove no obstacle in your career."

"But consider. I know the work of Beaumarchais, Eglantine, Mercier, Chenier, and many others of our contemporaries. Then I have read, of course, Moliere, Racine, Corneille, besides many other lesser French writers. Of foreign authors, I am intimate with the works of Gozzi, Goldoni, Guarini, Bibbiena, Machiavelli, Secchi, Tasso, Ariosto, and Fedini. Whilst of those of antiquity I know most of the work of Euripides, Aristophanes, Terence, Plautus..."

"Enough!" roared Pantaloon.

"I am not nearly through with my list," said Andre-Louis.

"You may keep the rest for another day. In Heaven's name, what can have induced you to read so many dramatic authors?"

"In my humble way I am a student of man, and some years ago I made the discovery that he is most intimately to be studied in the reflections of him provided for the theatre."

"That is a very original and profound discovery," said Pantaloon, quite seriously. "It had never occurred to me. Yet is it true. Sir, it is a truth that dignifies our art. You are a man of parts, that is clear to me. It has been clear since first I met you. I can read a man. I knew you from the moment that you said 'good-morning.' Tell me, now: Do you think you could assist me upon occasion in the preparation of a scenario? My mind, fully engaged as it is with a thousand details of organization, is not always as clear as I would have it for such work. Could you assist me there, do you think?"

"I am quite sure I could."

"Hum, yes. I was sure you would be. The other duties that were Felicien's you would soon learn. Well, well, if you are willing, you may come along with us. You'd want some salary, I suppose?"

"If it is usual," said Andre-Louis.

"What should you say to ten livres a month?"

"I should say that it isn't exactly the riches of Peru."

"I might go as far as fifteen," said Binet, reluctantly. "But times are bad."

"I'll make them better for you."

"I've no doubt you believe it. Then we understand each other?"

"Perfectly," said Andre-Louis, dryly, and was thus committed to the service of Thespis.

CHAPTER II. THE COMIC MUSE

The company's entrance into the township of Guichen, if not exactly triumphal, as Binet had expressed the desire that it should be, was at least sufficiently startling and cacophonous to set the rustics gaping. To them these fantastic creatures appeared—as indeed they were—beings from another world.

First went the great travelling chaise, creaking and groaning on its way, drawn by two of the Flemish horses. It was Pantaloon who drove it, an obese and massive Pantaloon in a tight-fitting suit of scarlet under a long brown bed-gown, his countenance adorned by a colossal cardboard nose. Beside him on the box sat Pierrot in a white smock, with sleeves that completely covered his hands, loose white trousers, and a black skull-cap. He had whitened his face with flour, and he made hideous noises with a trumpet.

On the roof of the coach were assembled Polichinelle, Scaramouche, Harlequin, and Pasquariel. Polichinelle in black and white, his doublet cut in the fashion of a century ago, with humps before and behind, a white frill round his neck and a black mask upon the upper half of his face, stood in the middle, his feet planted wide to steady him, solemnly and viciously banging a big drum. The other three were seated each at one of the corners of the roof, their legs dangling over. Scaramouche, all in black in the Spanish fashion of the seventeenth century, his face adorned with a pair of mostachios, jangled a guitar discordantly. Harlequin, ragged and patched in every colour of the rainbow, with his leather girdle and sword of lath, the upper half of his face smeared in soot, clashed a pair of cymbals intermittently. Pasquariel, as an apothecary in skull-cap and white apron, excited the hilarity of the onlookers by his enormous tin clyster,

which emitted when pumped a dolorous squeak.

Within the chaise itself, but showing themselves freely at the windows, and exchanging quips with the townsfolk, sat the three ladies of the company. Climene, the amoureuse, beautifully gowned in flowered satin, her own clustering ringlets concealed under a pumpkin-shaped wig, looked so much the lady of fashion that you might have wondered what she was doing in that fantastic rabble. Madame, as the mother, was also dressed with splendour, but exaggerated to achieve the ridiculous. Her headdress was a monstrous structure adorned with flowers, and superimposed by little ostrich plumes. Columbine sat facing them, her back to the horses, falsely demure, in milkmaid bonnet of white muslin, and a striped gown of green and blue.

The marvel was that the old chaise, which in its halcyon days may have served to carry some dignity of the Church, did not founder instead of merely groaning under that excessive and ribald load.

Next came the house on wheels, led by the long, lean Rhodomont, who had daubed his face red, and increased the terror of it by a pair of formidable mostachios. He was in long thigh-boots and leather jerkin, trailing an enormous sword from a crimson baldrick. He wore a broad felt hat with a draggled feather, and as he advanced he raised his great voice and roared out defiance, and threats of blood-curdling butchery to be performed upon all and sundry. On the roof of this vehicle sat Leandre alone. He was in blue satin, with ruffles, small sword, powdered hair, patches and spy-glass, and red-heeled shoes: the complete courtier, looking very handsome. The women of Guichen ogled him coquettishly. He took the ogling as a proper tribute to his personal endowments, and returned it with interest. Like Climene, he looked out of place amid the bandits who composed the remainder of the company.

Bringing up the rear came Andre-Louis leading the two donkeys

that dragged the property-cart. He had insisted upon assuming a false nose, representing as for embellishment that which he intended for disguise. For the rest, he had retained his own garments. No one paid any attention to him as he trudged along beside his donkeys, an insignificant rear guard, which he was well content to be.

They made the tour of the town, in which the activity was already above the normal in preparation for next week's fair. At intervals they halted, the cacophony would cease abruptly, and Polichinelle would announce in a stentorian voice that at five o'clock that evening in the old market, M. Binet's famous company of improvisers would perform a new comedy in four acts entitled, "The Heartless Father."

Thus at last they came to the old market, which was the groundfloor of the town hall, and open to the four winds by two archways on each side of its length, and one archway on each side of its breadth. These archways, with two exceptions, had been boarded up. Through those two, which gave admission to what presently would be the theatre, the ragamuffins of the town, and the niggards who were reluctant to spend the necessary sous to obtain proper admission, might catch furtive glimpses of the performance.

That afternoon was the most strenuous of Andre-Louis' life, unaccustomed as he was to any sort of manual labour. It was spent in erecting and preparing the stage at one end of the market-hall; and he began to realize how hard-earned were to be his monthly fifteen livres. At first there were four of them to the task—or really three, for Pantaloon did no more than bawl directions. Stripped of their finery, Rhodomont and Leandre assisted Andre-Louis in that carpentering. Meanwhile the other four were at dinner with the ladies. When a half-hour or so later they came to carry on the work, Andre-Louis and his companions went to dine in their turn, leaving Polichinelle to direct the operations as well as assist in them.

They crossed the square to the cheap little inn where they had

taken up their quarters. In the narrow passage Andre-Louis came face to face with Climene, her fine feathers cast, and restored by now to her normal appearance.

"And how do you like it?" she asked him, pertly.

He looked her in the eyes. "It has its compensations," quoth he, in that curious cold tone of his that left one wondering whether he meant or not what he seemed to mean.

She knit her brows. "You... you feel the need of compensations already?"

"Faith, I felt it from the beginning," said he. "It was the perception of them allured me."

They were quite alone, the others having gone on into the room set apart for them, where food was spread. Andre-Louis, who was as unlearned in Woman as he was learned in Man, was not to know, upon feeling himself suddenly extraordinarily aware of her femininity, that it was she who in some subtle, imperceptible manner so rendered him.

"What," she asked him, with demurest innocence, "are these compensations?"

He caught himself upon the brink of the abyss.

"Fifteen livres a month," said he, abruptly.

A moment she stared at him bewildered. He was very disconcerting. Then she recovered.

"Oh, and bed and board," said she. "Don't be leaving that from the reckoning, as you seem to be doing; for your dinner will be going cold. Aren't you coming?"

"Haven't you dined?" he cried, and she wondered had she caught a note of eagerness.

"No," she answered, over her shoulder. "I waited."

"What for?" quoth his innocence, hopefully.

"I had to change, of course, zany," she answered, rudely. Having dragged him, as she imagined, to the chopping-block, she could not refrain from chopping. But then he was of those who must be chopping back.

"And you left your manners upstairs with your grand-lady clothes, mademoiselle. I understand."

A scarlet flame suffused her face. "You are very insolent," she said, lamely.

"I've often been told so. But I don't believe it." He thrust open the door for her, and bowing with an air which imposed upon her, although it was merely copied from Fleury of the Comedie Francaise, so often visited in the Louis le Grand days, he waved her in. "After you, ma demoiselle." For greater emphasis he deliberately broke the word into its two component parts.

"I thank you, monsieur," she answered, frostily, as near sneering as was possible to so charming a person, and went in, nor addressed him again throughout the meal. Instead, she devoted herself with an unusual and devastating assiduity to the suspiring Leandre, that poor devil who could not successfully play the lover with her on the stage because of his longing to play it in reality.

Andre-Louis ate his herrings and black bread with a good appetite nevertheless. It was poor fare, but then poor fare was the common lot of poor people in that winter of starvation, and since he had cast in his fortunes with a company whose affairs were not flourishing, he must

accept the evils of the situation philosophically.

"Have you a name?" Binet asked him once in the course of that repast and during a pause in the conversation.

"It happens that I have," said he. "I think it is Parvissimus."

"Parvissimus?" quoth Binet. "Is that a family name?"

"In such a company, where only the leader enjoys the privilege of a family name, the like would be unbecoming its least member. So I take the name that best becomes in me. And I think it is Parvissimus—the very least."

Binet was amused. It was droll; it showed a ready fancy. Oh, to be sure, they must get to work together on those scenarios.

"I shall prefer it to carpentering," said Andre-Louis. Nevertheless he had to go back to it that afternoon, and to labour strenuously until four o'clock, when at last the autocratic Binet announced himself satisfied with the preparations, and proceeded, again with the help of Andre-Louis, to prepare the lights, which were supplied partly by tallow candles and partly by lamps burning fish-oil.

At five o'clock that evening the three knocks were sounded, and the curtain rose on "The Heartless Father."

Among the duties inherited by Andre-Louis from the departed Felicien whom he replaced, was that of doorkeeper. This duty he discharged dressed in a Polichinelle costume, and wearing a pasteboard nose. It was an arrangement mutually agreeable to M. Binet and himself. M. Binet—who had taken the further precaution of retaining Andre-Louis' own garments—was thereby protected against the risk of his latest recruit absconding with the takings. Andre-Louis, without illusions on the score of Pantaloon's real object, agreed to it willingly enough, since it protected him from the chance of recognition

by any acquaintance who might possibly be in Guichen.

The performance was in every sense unexciting; the audience meagre and unenthusiastic. The benches provided in the front half of the market contained some twenty-seven persons: eleven at twenty sous a head and sixteen at twelve. Behind these stood a rabble of some thirty others at six sous apiece. Thus the gross takings were two louis, ten livres, and two sous. By the time M. Binet had paid for the use of the market, his lights, and the expenses of his company at the inn over Sunday, there was not likely to be very much left towards the wages of his players. It is not surprising, therefore, that M. Binet's bonhomie should have been a trifle overcast that evening.

"And what do you think of it?" he asked Andre-Louis, as they were walking back to the inn after the performance.

"Possibly it could have been worse; probably it could not," said he.

In sheer amazement M. Binet checked in his stride, and turned to look at his companion.

"Huh!" said he. "Dieu de Dien! But you are frank."

"An unpopular form of service among fools, I know."

"Well, I am not a fool," said Binet.

"That is why I am frank. I pay you the compliment of assuming intelligence in you, M. Binet."

"Oh, you do?" quoth M. Binet. "And who the devil are you to assume anything? Your assumptions are presumptuous, sir." And with that he lapsed into silence and the gloomy business of mentally casting up his accounts.

But at table over supper a half-hour later he revived the topic.

"Our latest recruit, this excellent M. Parvissimus," he announced, "has the impudence to tell me that possibly our comedy could have been worse, but that probably it could not." And he blew out his great round cheeks to invite a laugh at the expense of that foolish critic.

"That's bad," said the swarthy and sardonic Polichinelle. He was grave as Rhadamanthus pronouncing judgment. "That's bad. But what is infinitely worse is that the audience had the impudence to be of the same mind."

"An ignorant pack of clods," sneered Leandre, with a toss of his handsome head.

"You are wrong," quoth Harlequin. "You were born for love, my dear, not criticism."

Leandre—a dull dog, as you will have conceived—looked contemptuously down upon the little man. "And you, what were you born for?" he wondered.

"Nobody knows," was the candid admission. "Nor yet why. It is the case of many of us, my dear, believe me."

"But why"—M. Binet took him up, and thus spoilt the beginnings of a very pretty quarrel—"why do you say that Leandre is wrong?"

"To be general, because he is always wrong. To be particular, because I judge the audience of Guichen to be too sophisticated for 'The Heartless Father.'"

"You would put it more happily," interposed Andre-Louis—who was the cause of this discussion—"if you said that 'The Heartless Father' is too unsophisticated for the audience of Guichen."

"Why, what's the difference?" asked Leandre.

"I didn't imply a difference. I merely suggested that it is a happier

way to express the fact."

"The gentleman is being subtle," sneered Binet.

"Why happier?" Harlequin demanded.

"Because it is easier to bring 'The Heartless Father' to the sophistication of the Guichen audience, than the Guichen audience to the unsophistication of 'The Heartless Father.'"

"Let me think it out," groaned Polichinelle, and he took his head in his hands.

But from the tail of the table Andre-Louis was challenged by Climene who sat there between Columbine and Madame.

"You would alter the comedy, would you, M. Parvissimus?" she cried.

He turned to parry her malice.

"I would suggest that it be altered," he corrected, inclining his head.

"And how would you alter it, monsieur?"

"I? Oh, for the better."

"But of course!" She was sleekest sarcasm. "And how would you do it?"

"Aye, tell us that," roared M. Binet, and added: "Silence, I pray you, gentlemen and ladies. Silence for M. Parvissimus."

Andre-Louis looked from father to daughter, and smiled. "Pardi!" said he. "I am between bludgeon and dagger. If I escape with my life, I shall be fortunate. Why, then, since you pin me to the very wall, I'll tell you what I should do. I should go back to the original and help myself more freely from it."

"The original?" questioned M. Binet—the author.

"It is called, I believe, 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac,' and was written by Moliere."

Somebody tittered, but that somebody was not M. Binet. He had been touched on the raw, and the look in his little eyes betrayed the fact that his bonhomme exterior covered anything but a bonhomme.

"You charge me with plagiarism," he said at last; "with filching the ideas of Moliere."

"There is always, of course," said Andre-Louis, unruffled, "the alternative possibility of two great minds working upon parallel lines."

M. Binet studied the young man attentively a moment. He found him bland and inscrutable, and decided to pin him down.

"Then you do not imply that I have been stealing from Moliere?"

"I advise you to do so, monsieur," was the disconcerting reply.

M. Binet was shocked.

"You advise me to do so! You advise me, me, Antoine Binet, to turn thief at my age!"

"He is outrageous," said mademoiselle, indignantly.

"Outrageous is the word. I thank you for it, my dear. I take you on trust, sir. You sit at my table, you have the honour to be included in my company, and to my face you have the audacity to advise me to become a thief—the worst kind of thief that is conceivable, a thief of spiritual things, a thief of ideas! It is insufferable, intolerable! I have been, I fear, deeply mistaken in you, monsieur; just as you appear to have been mistaken in me. I am not the scoundrel you suppose me, sir, and I will not number in my company a man who dares to suggest

that I should become one. Outrageous!"

He was very angry. His voice boomed through the little room, and the company sat hushed and something scared, their eyes upon Andre-Louis, who was the only one entirely unmoved by this outburst of virtuous indignation.

"You realize, monsieur," he said, very quietly, "that you are insulting the memory of the illustrious dead?"

"Eh?" said Binet.

Andre-Louis developed his sophistries.

"You insult the memory of Moliere, the greatest ornament of our stage, one of the greatest ornaments of our nation, when you suggest that there is vileness in doing that which he never hesitated to do, which no great author yet has hesitated to do. You cannot suppose that Moliere ever troubled himself to be original in the matter of ideas. You cannot suppose that the stories he tells in his plays have never been told before. They were culled, as you very well know—though you seem momentarily to have forgotten it, and it is therefore necessary that I should remind you—they were culled, many of them, from the Italian authors, who themselves had culled them Heaven alone knows where. Moliere took those old stories and retold them in his own language. That is precisely what I am suggesting that you should do. Your company is a company of improvisers. You supply the dialogue as you proceed, which is rather more than Moliere ever attempted. You may, if you prefer it—though it would seem to me to be yielding to an excess of scruple—go straight to Boccaccio or Sacchetti. But even then you cannot be sure that you have reached the sources."

Andre-Louis came off with flying colours after that. You see what a debater was lost in him; how nimble he was in the art of making white

look black. The company was impressed, and no one more than M. Binet, who found himself supplied with a crushing argument against those who in future might tax him with the impudent plagiarisms which he undoubtedly perpetrated. He retired in the best order he could from the position he had taken up at the outset.

"So that you think," he said, at the end of a long outburst of agreement, "you think that our story of 'The Heartless Father' could be enriched by dipping into 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac,' to which I confess upon reflection that it may present certain superficial resemblances?"

"I do; most certainly I do—always provided that you do so judiciously. Times have changed since Moliere." It was as a consequence of this that Binet retired soon after, taking Andre-Louis with him. The pair sat together late that night, and were again in close communion throughout the whole of Sunday morning.

After dinner M. Binet read to the assembled company the amended and amplified canevas of "The Heartless Father," which, acting upon the advice of M. Parvissimus, he had been at great pains to prepare. The company had few doubts as to the real authorship before he began to read; none at all when he had read. There was a verve, a grip about this story; and, what was more, those of them who knew their Moliere realized that far from approaching the original more closely, this canevas had drawn farther away from it. Moliere's original part—the title role—had dwindled into insignificance, to the great disgust of Polichinelle, to whom it fell. But the other parts had all been built up into importance, with the exception of Leandre, who remained as before. The two great roles were now Scaramouche, in the character of the intriguing Sbrigandini, and Pantaloon the father. There was, too, a comical part for Rhodomont, as the roaring bully hired by Polichinelle to cut Leandre into ribbons. And in view of the importance now of Scaramouche, the play had been rechristened

"Figaro-Scaramouche."

This last had not been without a deal of opposition from M. Binet. But his relentless collaborator, who was in reality the real author—drawing shamelessly, but practically at last upon his great store of reading—had overborne him.

"You must move with the times, monsieur. In Paris Beaumarchais is the rage. 'Figaro' is known to-day throughout the world. Let us borrow a little of his glory. It will draw the people in. They will come to see half a 'Figaro' when they will not come to see a dozen 'Heartless Fathers.' Therefore let us cast the mantle of Figaro upon some one, and proclaim it in our title."

"But as I am the head of the company..." began M. Binet, weakly.

"If you will be blind to your interests, you will presently be a head without a body. And what use is that? Can the shoulders of Pantaloon carry the mantle of Figaro? You laugh. Of course you laugh. The notion is absurd. The proper person for the mantle of Figaro is Scaramouche, who is naturally Figaro's twin-brother."

Thus tyrannized, the tyrant Binet gave way, comforted by the reflection that if he understood anything at all about the theatre, he had for fifteen livres a month acquired something that would presently be earning him as many louis.

The company's reception of the canevas now confirmed him, if we except Polichinelle, who, annoyed at having lost half his part in the alterations, declared the new scenario fatuous.

"Ah! You call my work fatuous, do you?" M. Binet hectored him.

"Your work?" said Polichinelle, to add with his tongue in his cheek: "Ah, pardon. I had not realized that you were the author."

"Then realize it now."

"You were very close with M. Parvissimus over this authorship," said Polichinelle, with impudent suggestiveness.

"And what if I was? What do you imply?"

"That you took him to cut quills for you, of course."

"I'll cut your ears for you if you're not civil," stormed the infuriated Binet.

Polichinelle got up slowly, and stretched himself.

"Dieu de Dieu!" said he. "If Pantaloon is to play Rhodomont, I think I'll leave you. He is not amusing in the part." And he swaggered out before M. Binet had recovered from his speechlessness.

CHAPTER IV. EXIT MONSIEUR PARVISSIMUS

At four o'clock on Monday afternoon the curtain rose on "Figaro-Scaramouche" to an audience that filled three quarters of the market-hall. M. Binet attributed this good attendance to the influx of people to Guichen for the fair, and to the magnificent parade of his company through the streets of the township at the busiest time of the day. Andre-Louis attributed it entirely to the title. It was the "Figaro" touch that had fetched in the better-class bourgeoisie, which filled more than half of the twenty-sous places and three quarters of the twelve-sous seats. The lure had drawn them. Whether it was to continue to do so would depend upon the manner in which the canevas over which he had laboured to the glory of Binet was interpreted by the company. Of the merits of the canevas itself he had no doubt. The authors upon whom he had drawn for the elements of it were sound, and he had taken of their best, which he claimed to be no more than the justice due to them.

The company excelled itself. The audience followed with relish the sly intrigues of Scaramouche, delighted in the beauty and freshness of Climene, was moved almost to tears by the hard fate which through four long acts kept her from the hungering arms of the so beautiful Leandre, howled its delight over the ignominy of Pantaloon, the buffooneries of his sprightly lackey Harlequin, and the thrasonical strut and bellowing fierceness of the cowardly Rhodomont.

The success of the Binet troupe in Guichen was assured. That night the company drank Burgundy at M. Binet's expense. The takings reached the sum of eight louis, which was as good business as M.

Binet had ever done in all his career. He was very pleased. Gratification rose like steam from his fat body. He even condescended so far as to attribute a share of the credit for the success to M. Parvissimus.

"His suggestion," he was careful to say, by way of properly delimiting that share, "was most valuable, as I perceived at the time."

"And his cutting of quills," growled Polichinelle. "Don't forget that. It is most important to have by you a man who understands how to cut a quill, as I shall remember when I turn author."

But not even that gibe could stir M. Binet out of his lethargy of content.

On Tuesday the success was repeated artistically and augmented financially. Ten louis and seven livres was the enormous sum that Andre-Louis, the doorkeeper, counted over to M. Binet after the performance. Never yet had M. Binet made so much money in one evening—and a miserable little village like Guichen was certainly the last place in which he would have expected this windfall.

"Ah, but Guichen in time of fair," Andre-Louis reminded him. "There are people here from as far as Nantes and Rennes to buy and sell. To-morrow, being the last day of the fair, the crowds will be greater than ever. We should better this evening's receipts."

"Better them? I shall be quite satisfied if we do as well, my friend."

"You can depend upon that," Andre-Louis assured him. "Are we to have Burgundy?"

And then the tragedy occurred. It announced itself in a succession of bumps and thuds, culminating in a crash outside the door that brought them all to their feet in alarm.

Pierrot sprang to open, and beheld the tumbled body of a man lying

at the foot of the stairs. It emitted groans, therefore it was alive. Pierrot went forward to turn it over, and disclosed the fact that the body wore the wizened face of Scaramouche, a grimacing, groaning, twitching Scaramouche.

The whole company, pressing after Pierrot, abandoned itself to laughter.

"I always said you should change parts with me," cried Harlequin. "You're such an excellent tumbler. Have you been practising?"

"Fool!" Scaramouche snapped. "Must you be laughing when I've all but broken my neck?"

"You are right. We ought to be weeping because you didn't break it. Come, man, get up," and he held out a hand to the prostrate rogue.

Scaramouche took the hand, clutched it, heaved himself from the ground, then with a scream dropped back again.

"My foot!" he complained.

Binet rolled through the group of players, scattering them to right and left. Apprehension had been quick to seize him. Fate had played him such tricks before.

"What ails your foot?" quoth he, sourly.

"It's broken, I think," Scaramouche complained.

"Broken? Bah! Get up, man." He caught him under the armpits and hauled him up.

Scaramouche came howling to one foot; the other doubled under him when he attempted to set it down, and he must have collapsed again but that Binet supported him. He filled the place with his plaint, whilst Binet swore amazingly and variedly.

"Must you bellow like a calf, you fool? Be quiet. A chair here, some one."

A chair was thrust forward. He crushed Scaramouche down into it.

"Let us look at this foot of yours."

Heedless of Scaramouche's howls of pain, he swept away shoe and stocking.

"What ails it?" he asked, staring. "Nothing that I can see." He seized it, heel in one hand, instep in the other, and gyrated it. Scaramouche screamed in agony, until Climene caught Binet's arm and made him stop.

"My God, have you no feelings?" she reproved her father. "The lad has hurt his foot. Must you torture him? Will that cure it?"

"Hurt his foot!" said Binet. "I can see nothing the matter with his foot—nothing to justify all this uproar. He has bruised it, maybe..."

"A man with a bruised foot doesn't scream like that," said Madame over Climene's shoulder. "Perhaps he has dislocated it."

"That is what I fear," whimpered Scaramouche.

Binet heaved himself up in disgust.

"Take him to bed," he bade them, "and fetch a doctor to see him."

It was done, and the doctor came. Having seen the patient, he reported that nothing very serious had happened, but that in falling he had evidently sprained his foot a little. A few days' rest and all would be well.

"A few days!" cried Binet. "God of God! Do you mean that he can't walk?"

"It would be unwise, indeed impossible for more than a few steps."

M. Binet paid the doctor's fee, and sat down to think. He filled himself a glass of Burgundy, tossed it off without a word, and sat thereafter staring into the empty glass.

"It is of course the sort of thing that must always be happening to me," he grumbled to no one in particular. The members of the company were all standing in silence before him, sharing his dismay. "I might have known that this—or something like it—would occur to spoil the first vein of luck that I have found in years. Ah, well, it is finished. To-morrow we pack and depart. The best day of the fair, on the crest of the wave of our success—a good fifteen louis to be taken, and this happens! God of God!"

"Do you mean to abandon to-morrow's performance?"

All turned to stare with Binet at Andre-Louis.

"Are we to play 'Figaro-Scaramouche' without Scaramouche?" asked Binet, sneering.

"Of course not." Andre-Louis came forward. "But surely some rearrangement of the parts is possible. For instance, there is a fine actor in Polichinelle."

Polichinelle swept him a bow. "Overwhelmed," said he, ever sardonic.

"But he has a part of his own," objected Binet.

"A small part, which Pasquariel could play."

"And who will play Pasquariel?"

"Nobody. We delete it. The play need not suffer."

"He thinks of everything," sneered Polichinelle. "What a man!"

But Binet was far from agreement. "Are you suggesting that Polichinelle should play Scaramouche?" he asked, incredulously.

"Why not? He is able enough!"

"Overwhelmed again," interjected Polichinelle.

"Play Scaramouche with that figure?" Binet heaved himself up to point a denunciatory finger at Polichinelle's sturdy, thick-set shortness.

"For lack of a better," said Andre-Louis.

"Overwhelmed more than ever." Polichinelle's bow was superb this time. "Faith, I think I'll take the air to cool me after so much blushing."

"Go to the devil," Binet flung at him.

"Better and better." Polichinelle made for the door. On the threshold he halted and struck an attitude. "Understand me, Binet. I do not now play Scaramouche in any circumstances whatever." And he went out. On the whole, it was a very dignified exit.

Andre-Louis shrugged, threw out his arms, and let them fall to his sides again. "You have ruined everything," he told M. Binet. "The matter could easily have been arranged. Well, well, it is you are master here; and since you want us to pack and be off, that is what we will do, I suppose."

He went out, too. M. Binet stood in thought a moment, then followed him, his little eyes very cunning. He caught him up in the doorway. "Let us take a walk together, M. Parvissimus," said he, very affably.

He thrust his arm through Andre-Louis', and led him out into the street, where there was still considerable movement. Past the booths that ranged about the market they went, and down the hill towards the

bridge. "I don't think we shall pack to-morrow," said M. Binet, presently. "In fact, we shall play to-morrow night."

"Not if I know Polichinelle. You have..."

"I am not thinking of Polichinelle."

"Of whom, then?"

"Of yourself."

"I am flattered, sir. And in what capacity are you thinking of me?" There was something too sleek and oily in Binet's voice for Andre-Louis' taste.

"I am thinking of you in the part of Scaramouche."

"Day-dreams," said Andre-Louis. "You are amusing yourself, of course."

"Not in the least. I am quite serious."

"But I am not an actor."

"You told me that you could be."

"Oh, upon occasion... a small part, perhaps..."

"Well, here is a big part—the chance to arrive at a single stride. How many men have had such a chance?"

"It is a chance I do not covet, M. Binet. Shall we change the subject?" He was very frosty, as much perhaps because he scented in M. Binet's manner something that was vaguely menacing as for any other reason.

"We'll change the subject when I please," said M. Binet, allowing a glimpse of steel to glimmer through the silk of him. "To-morrow night

you play Scaramouche. You are ready enough in your wits, your figure is ideal, and you have just the kind of mordant humour for the part. You should be a great success."

"It is much more likely that I should be an egregious failure."

"That won't matter," said Binet, cynically, and explained himself. "The failure will be personal to yourself. The receipts will be safe by then."

"Much obliged," said Andre-Louis.

"We should take fifteen louis to-morrow night."

"It is unfortunate that you are without a Scaramouche," said Andre-Louis.

"It is fortunate that I have one, M. Parvissimus."

Andre-Louis disengaged his arm. "I begin to find you tiresome," said he. "I think I will return."

"A moment, M. Parvissimus. If I am to lose that fifteen louis... you'll not take it amiss that I compensate myself in other ways?"

"That is your own concern, M. Binet."

"Pardon, M. Parvissimus. It may possibly be also yours." Binet took his arm again. "Do me the kindness to step across the street with me. Just as far as the post-office there. I have something to show you."

Andre-Louis went. Before they reached that sheet of paper nailed upon the door, he knew exactly what it would say. And in effect it was, as he had supposed, that twenty louis would be paid for information leading to the apprehension of one Andre-Louis Moreau, lawyer of Gavrilac, who was wanted by the King's Lieutenant in Rennes upon a charge of sedition.

M. Binet watched him whilst he read. Their arms were linked, and Binet's grip was firm and powerful.

"Now, my friend," said he, "will you be M. Parvissimus and play Scaramouche to-morrow, or will you be Andre-Louis Moreau of Gavrilac and go to Rennes to satisfy the King's Lieutenant?"

"And if it should happen that you are mistaken?" quoth Andre-Louis, his face a mask.

"I'll take the risk of that," leered M. Binet. "You mentioned, I think, that you were a lawyer. An indiscretion, my dear. It is unlikely that two lawyers will be in hiding at the same time in the same district. You see it is not really clever of me. Well, M. Andre-Louis Moreau, lawyer of Gavrilac, what is it to be?"

"We will talk it over as we walk back," said Andre-Louis.

"What is there to talk over?"

"One or two things, I think. I must know where I stand. Come, sir, if you please."

"Very well," said M. Binet, and they turned up the street again, but M. Binet maintained a firm hold of his young friend's arm, and kept himself on the alert for any tricks that the young gentleman might be disposed to play. It was an unnecessary precaution. Andre-Louis was not the man to waste his energy futilely. He knew that in bodily strength he was no match at all for the heavy and powerful Pantaloon.

"If I yield to your most eloquent and seductive persuasions, M. Binet," said he, sweetly, "what guarantee do you give me that you will not sell me for twenty louis after I shall have served your turn?"

"You have my word of honour for that." M. Binet was emphatic.

Andre-Louis laughed. "Oh, we are to talk of honour, are we? Really,

M. Binet? It is clear you think me a fool."

In the dark he did not see the flush that leapt to M. Binet's round face. It was some moments before he replied.

"Perhaps you are right," he growled. "What guarantee do you want?"

"I do not know what guarantee you can possibly give."

"I have said that I will keep faith with you."

"Until you find it more profitable to sell me."

"You have it in your power to make it more profitable always for me to keep faith with you. It is due to you that we have done so well in Guichen. Oh, I admit it frankly."

"In private," said Andre-Louis.

M. Binet left the sarcasm unheeded.

"What you have done for us here with 'Figaro-Scaramouche,' you can do elsewhere with other things. Naturally, I shall not want to lose you. That is your guarantee."

"Yet to-night you would sell me for twenty louis."

"Because—name of God!—you enrage me by refusing me a service well within your powers. Don't you think, had I been entirely the rogue you think me, I could have sold you on Saturday last? I want you to understand me, my dear Parvissimus."

"I beg that you'll not apologize. You would be more tiresome than ever."

"Of course you will be gibing. You never miss a chance to gibe. It'll bring you trouble before you're done with life. Come; here we are

back at the inn, and you have not yet given me your decision."

Andre-Louis looked at him. "I must yield, of course. I can't help myself."

M. Binet released his arm at last, and slapped him heartily upon the back. "Well declared, my lad. You'll never regret it. If I know anything of the theatre, I know that you have made the great decision of your life. To-morrow night you'll thank me."

Andre-Louis shrugged, and stepped out ahead towards the inn. But M. Binet called him back.

"M. Parvissimus!"

He turned. There stood the man's great bulk, the moonlight beating down upon that round fat face of his, and he was holding out his hand.

"M. Parvissimus, no rancour. It is a thing I do not admit into my life. You will shake hands with me, and we will forget all this."

Andre-Louis considered him a moment with disgust. He was growing angry. Then, realizing this, he conceived himself ridiculous, almost as ridiculous as that sly, scoundrelly Pantaloon. He laughed and took the outstretched hand. "No rancour?" M. Binet insisted.

"Oh, no rancour," said Andre-Louis.

CHAPTER V. ENTER SCARAMOUCHE

Dressed in the close-fitting suit of a bygone age, all black, from flat velvet cap to rosetted shoes, his face whitened and a slight up-curved moustache glued to his upper lip, a small-sword at his side and a guitar slung behind him, Scaramouche surveyed himself in a mirror, and was disposed to be sardonic—which was the proper mood for the part.

He reflected that his life, which until lately had been of a stagnant, contemplative quality, had suddenly become excessively active. In the course of one week he had been lawyer, mob-orator, outlaw, property-man, and finally buffoon. Last Wednesday he had been engaged in moving an audience of Rennes to anger; on this Wednesday he was to move an audience of Guichen to mirth. Then he had been concerned to draw tears; to-day it was his business to provoke laughter. There was a difference, and yet there was a parallel. Then as now he had been a comedian; and the part that he had played then was, when you came to think of it, akin to the part he was to play this evening. For what had he been at Rennes but a sort of Scaramouche—the little skirmisher, the astute intriguer, spattering the seed of trouble with a sly hand? The only difference lay in the fact that to-day he went forth under the name that properly described his type, whereas last week he had been disguised as a respectable young provincial attorney.

He bowed to his reflection in the mirror.

"Buffoon!" he apostrophized it. "At last you have found yourself. At

last you have come into your heritage. You should be a great success."

Hearing his new name called out by M. Binet, he went below to find the company assembled, and waiting in the entrance corridor of the inn.

He was, of course, an object of great interest to all the company. Most critically was he coned by M. Binet and mademoiselle; by the former with gravely searching eyes, by the latter with a curl of scornful lip.

"You'll do," M. Binet commended his make-up. "At least you look the part."

"Unfortunately men are not always what they look," said Climene, acidly.

"That is a truth that does not at present apply to me," said Andre-Louis. "For it is the first time in my life that I look what I am."

Mademoiselle curled her lip a little further, and turned her shoulder to him. But the others thought him very witty—probably because he was obscure. Columbine encouraged him with a friendly smile that displayed her large white teeth, and M. Binet swore yet once again that he would be a great success, since he threw himself with such spirit into the undertaking. Then in a voice that for the moment he appeared to have borrowed from the roaring captain, M. Binet marshalled them for the short parade across to the market-hall.

The new Scaramouche fell into place beside Rhodomont. The old one, hobbling on a crutch, had departed an hour ago to take the place of doorkeeper, vacated of necessity by Andre-Louis. So that the exchange between those two was a complete one.

Headed by Polichinelle banging his great drum and Pierrot blowing

his trumpet, they set out, and were duly passed in review by the ragamuffins drawn up in files to enjoy so much of the spectacle as was to be obtained for nothing.

Ten minutes later the three knocks sounded, and the curtains were drawn aside to reveal a battered set that was partly garden, partly forest, in which Climene feverishly looked for the coming of Leandre. In the wings stood the beautiful, melancholy lover, awaiting his cue, and immediately behind him the unfledged Scaramouche, who was anon to follow him.

Andre-Louis was assailed with nausea in that dread moment. He attempted to take a lightning mental review of the first act of this scenario of which he was himself the author-in-chief; but found his mind a complete blank. With the perspiration starting from his skin, he stepped back to the wall, where above a dim lantern was pasted a sheet bearing the brief outline of the piece. He was still studying it, when his arm was clutched, and he was pulled violently towards the wings. He had a glimpse of Pantaloon's grotesque face, its eyes blazing, and he caught a raucous growl:

"Climene has spoken your cue three times already."

Before he realized it, he had been bundled on to the stage, and stood there foolishly, blinking in the glare of the footlights, with their tin reflectors. So utterly foolish and bewildered did he look that volley upon volley of laughter welcomed him from the audience, which this evening packed the hall from end to end. Trembling a little, his bewilderment at first increasing, he stood there to receive that rolling tribute to his absurdity. Climene was eyeing him with expectant mockery, savouring in advance his humiliation; Leandre regarded him in consternation, whilst behind the scenes, M. Binet was dancing in fury.

"Name of a name," he groaned to the rather scared members of

the company assembled there, "what will happen when they discover that he isn't acting?"

But they never did discover it. Scaramouche's bewildered paralysis lasted but a few seconds. He realized that he was being laughed at, and remembered that his Scaramouche was a creature to be laughed with, and not at. He must save the situation; twist it to his own advantage as best he could. And now his real bewilderment and terror was succeeded by acted bewilderment and terror far more marked, but not quite so funny. He contrived to make it clearly appear that his terror was of some one off the stage. He took cover behind a painted shrub, and thence, the laughter at last beginning to subside, he addressed himself to Climene and Leandre.

"Forgive me, beautiful lady, if the abrupt manner of my entrance startled you. The truth is that I have never been the same since that last affair of mine with Almaziva. My heart is not what it used to be. Down there at the end of the lane I came face to face with an elderly gentleman carrying a heavy cudgel, and the horrible thought entered my mind that it might be your father, and that our little stratagem to get you safely married might already have been betrayed to him. I think it was the cudgel put such notion in my head. Not that I am afraid. I am not really afraid of anything. But I could not help reflecting that, if it should really have been your father, and he had broken my head with his cudgel, your hopes would have perished with me. For without me, what should you have done, my poor children?"

A ripple of laughter from the audience had been steadily enheartening him, and helping him to recover his natural impudence. It was clear they found him comical. They were to find him far more comical than ever he had intended, and this was largely due to a fortuitous circumstance upon which he had insufficiently reckoned. The fear of recognition by some one from Gavrillac or Rennes had been strong upon him. His face was sufficiently made up to baffle

recognition; but there remained his voice. To dissemble this he had availed himself of the fact that Figaro was a Spaniard. He had known a Spaniard at Louis le Grand who spoke a fluent but most extraordinary French, with a grotesque excess of sibilant sounds. It was an accent that he had often imitated, as youths will imitate characteristics that excite their mirth. Opportunely he had bethought him of that Spanish student, and it was upon his speech that to-night he modelled his own. The audience of Guichen found it as laughable on his lips as he and his fellows had found it formerly on the lips of that derided Spaniard.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Binet—listening to that glib impromptu of which the scenario gave no indication—had recovered from his fears.

"Dieu de Dieu!" he whispered, grinning. "Did he do it, then, on purpose?"

It seemed to him impossible that a man who had been so terror-stricken as he had fancied Andre-Louis, could have recovered his wits so quickly and completely. Yet the doubt remained.

To resolve it after the curtain had fallen upon a first act that had gone with a verve unrivalled until this hour in the annals of the company, borne almost entirely upon the slim shoulders of the new Scaramouche, M. Binet bluntly questioned him.

They were standing in the space that did duty as green-room, the company all assembled there, showering congratulations upon their new recruit. Scaramouche, a little exalted at the moment by his success, however trivial he might consider it to-morrow, took then a full revenge upon Climene for the malicious satisfaction with which she had regarded his momentary blank terror.

"I do not wonder that you ask," said he. "Faith, I should have

warned you that I intended to do my best from the start to put the audience in a good humour with me. Mademoiselle very nearly ruined everything by refusing to reflect any of my terror. She was not even startled. Another time, mademoiselle, I shall give you full warning of my every intention."

She crimsoned under her grease-paint. But before she could find an answer of sufficient venom, her father was rating her soundly for her stupidity—the more soundly because himself he had been deceived by Scaramouche's supreme acting.

Scaramouche's success in the first act was more than confirmed as the performance proceeded. Completely master of himself by now, and stimulated as only success can stimulate, he warmed to his work. Impudent, alert, sly, graceful, he incarnated the very ideal of Scaramouche, and he helped out his own native wit by many a remembered line from Beaumarchais, thereby persuading the better informed among the audience that here indeed was something of the real Figaro, and bringing them, as it were, into touch with the great world of the capital.

When at last the curtain fell for the last time, it was Scaramouche who shared with Climene the honours of the evening, his name that was coupled with hers in the calls that summoned them before the curtains.

As they stepped back, and the curtains screened them again from the departing audience, M. Binet approached them, rubbing his fat hands softly together. This runagate young lawyer, whom chance had blown into his company, had evidently been sent by Fate to make his fortune for him. The sudden success at Guichen, hitherto unrivalled, should be repeated and augmented elsewhere. There would be no more sleeping under hedges and tightening of belts. Adversity was behind him. He placed a hand upon Scaramouche's shoulder, and surveyed him with a smile whose oiliness not even his red paint and

colossal false nose could dissemble.

"And what have you to say to me now?" he asked him. "Was I wrong when I assured you that you would succeed? Do you think I have followed my fortunes in the theatre for a lifetime without knowing a born actor when I see one? You are my discovery, Scaramouche. I have discovered you to yourself. I have set your feet upon the road to fame and fortune. I await your thanks."

Scaramouche laughed at him, and his laugh was not altogether pleasant.

"Always Pantaloon!" said he.

The great countenance became overcast. "I see that you do not yet forgive me the little stratagem by which I forced you to do justice to yourself. Ungrateful dog! As if I could have had any purpose but to make you; and I have done so. Continue as you have begun, and you will end in Paris. You may yet tread the stage of the Comedie Francaise, the rival of Talma, Fleury, and Dugazon. When that happens to you perhaps you will feel the gratitude that is due to old Binet, for you will owe it all to this soft-hearted old fool."

"If you were as good an actor on the stage as you are in private," said Scaramouche, "you would yourself have won to the Comedie Francaise long since. But I bear no rancour, M. Binet." He laughed, and put out his hand.

Binet fell upon it and wrung it heartily.

"That, at least, is something," he declared. "My boy, I have great plans for you—for us. To-morrow we go to Maure; there is a fair there to the end of this week. Then on Monday we take our chances at Pipriac, and after that we must consider. It may be that I am about to realize the dream of my life. There must have been upwards of fifteen louis taken to-night. Where the devil is that rascal Cordemais?"

Cordemais was the name of the original Scaramouche, who had so unfortunately twisted his ankle. That Binet should refer to him by his secular designation was a sign that in the Binet company at least he had fallen for ever from the lofty eminence of Scaramouche.

"Let us go and find him, and then we'll away to the inn and crack a bottle of the best Burgundy, perhaps two bottles."

But Cordemais was not readily to be found. None of the company had seen him since the close of the performance. M. Binet went round to the entrance. Cordemais was not there. At first he was annoyed; then as he continued in vain to bawl the fellow's name, he began to grow uneasy; lastly, when Polichinelle, who was with them, discovered Cordemais' crutch standing discarded behind the door, M. Binet became alarmed. A dreadful suspicion entered his mind. He grew visibly pale under his paint.

"But this evening he couldn't walk without the crutch!" he exclaimed. "How then does he come to leave it there and take himself off?"

"Perhaps he has gone on to the inn," suggested some one.

"But he couldn't walk without his crutch," M. Binet insisted.

Nevertheless, since clearly he was not anywhere about the market-hall, to the inn they all trooped, and deafened the landlady with their inquiries.

"Oh, yes, M. Cordemais came in some time ago."

"Where is he now?"

"He went away again at once. He just came for his bag."

"For his bag!" Binet was on the point of an apoplexy. "How long ago was that?"

She glanced at the timepiece on the overmantel. "It would be about half an hour ago. It was a few minutes before the Rennes diligence passed through."

"The Rennes diligence!" M. Binet was almost inarticulate. "Could he... could he walk?" he asked, on a note of terrible anxiety.

"Walk? He ran like a hare when he left the inn. I thought, myself, that his agility was suspicious, seeing how lame he had been since he fell downstairs yesterday. Is anything wrong?"

M. Binet had collapsed into a chair. He took his head in his hands, and groaned.

"The scoundrel was shamming all the time!" exclaimed Climene. "His fall downstairs was a trick. He was playing for this. He has swindled us."

"Fifteen louis at least—perhaps sixteen!" said M. Binet. "Oh, the heartless blackguard! To swindle me who have been as a father to him—and to swindle me in such a moment."

From the ranks of the silent, awe-stricken company, each member of which was wondering by how much of the loss his own meagre pay would be mulcted, there came a splutter of laughter.

M. Binet glared with blood-injected eyes.

"Who laughs?" he roared. "What heartless wretch has the audacity to laugh at my misfortune?"

Andre-Louis, still in the sable glories of Scaramouche, stood forward. He was laughing still.

"It is you, is it? You may laugh on another note, my friend, if I choose a way to recoup myself that I know of."

"Dullard!" Scaramouche scorned him. "Rabbit-brained elephant! What if Cordemais has gone with fifteen louis? Hasn't he left you something worth twenty times as much?"

M. Binet gaped uncomprehending.

"You are between two wines, I think. You've been drinking," he concluded.

"So I have—at the fountain of Thalia. Oh, don't you see? Don't you see the treasure that Cordemais has left behind him?"

"What has he left?"

"A unique idea for the groundwork of a scenario. It unfolds itself all before me. I'll borrow part of the title from Moliere. We'll call it 'Les Fourberies de Scaramouche,' and if we don't leave the audiences of Maure and Pipriac with sides aching from laughter I'll play the dullard Pantaloon in future."

Polichinelle smacked fist into palm. "Superb!" he said, fiercely. "To cull fortune from misfortune, to turn loss into profit, that is to have genius."

Scaramouche made a leg. "Polichinelle, you are a fellow after my own heart. I love a man who can discern my merit. If Pantaloon had half your wit, we should have Burgundy to-night in spite of the flight of Cordemais."

"Burgundy?" roared M. Binet, and before he could get farther Harlequin had clapped his hands together.

"That is the spirit, M. Binet. You heard him, landlady. He called for Burgundy."

"I called for nothing of the kind."

"But you heard him, dear madame. We all heard him."

The others made chorus, whilst Scaramouche smiled at him, and patted his shoulder.

"Up, man, a little courage. Did you not say that fortune awaits us? And have we not now the wherewithal to constrain fortune? Burgundy, then, to... to toast 'Les Fourberies de Scaramouche.'"

And M. Binet, who was not blind to the force of the idea, yielded, took courage, and got drunk with the rest.

CHAPTER VI. CLIMENE

Diligent search among the many scenarios of the improvisers which have survived their day, has failed to bring to light the scenario of "Les Fourberies de Scaramouche," upon which we are told the fortunes of the Binet troupe came to be soundly established. They played it for the first time at Maure in the following week, with Andre-Louis—who was known by now as Scaramouche to all the company, and to the public alike—in the title-role. If he had acquitted himself well as Figaro-Scaramouche, he excelled himself in the new piece, the scenario of which would appear to be very much the better of the two.

After Maure came Pipriac, where four performances were given, two of each of the scenarios that now formed the backbone of the Binet repertoire. In both Scaramouche, who was beginning to find himself, materially improved his performances. So smoothly now did the two pieces run that Scaramouche actually suggested to Binet that after Fougery, which they were to visit in the following week, they should tempt fortune in a real theatre in the important town of Redon. The notion terrified Binet at first, but coming to think of it, and his ambition being fanned by Andre-Louis, he ended by allowing himself to succumb to the temptation.

It seemed to Andre-Louis in those days that he had found his real metier, and not only was he beginning to like it, but actually to look forward to a career as actor-author that might indeed lead him in the end to that Mecca of all comedians, the Comedie Francaise. And there were other possibilities. From the writing of skeleton scenarios for improvisers, he might presently pass to writing plays of dialogue, plays in the proper sense of the word, after the manner of Chenier,

Eglantine, and Beaumarchais.

The fact that he dreamed such dreams shows us how very kindly he had taken to the profession into which Chance and M. Binet between them had conspired to thrust him. That he had real talent both as author and as actor I do not doubt, and I am persuaded that had things fallen out differently he would have won for himself a lasting place among French dramatists, and thus fully have realized that dream of his.

Now, dream though it was, he did not neglect the practical side of it.

"You realize," he told M. Binet, "that I have it in my power to make your fortune for you."

He and Binet were sitting alone together in the parlour of the inn at Pipriac, drinking a very excellent bottle of Volnay. It was on the night after the fourth and last performance there of "Les Feurberies." The business in Pipriac had been as excellent as in Maure and Guichen. You will have gathered this from the fact that they drank Volnay.

"I will concede it, my dear Scaramouche, so that I may hear the sequel."

"I am disposed to exercise this power if the inducement is sufficient. You will realize that for fifteen livres a month a man does not sell such exceptional gifts as mine.

"There is an alternative," said M. Binet, darkly.

"There is no alternative. Don't be a fool, Binet."

Binet sat up as if he had been prodded. Members of his company did not take this tone of direct rebuke with him.

"Anyway, I make you a present of it," Scaramouche pursued, airily.

"Exercise it if you please. Step outside and inform the police that they can lay hands upon one Andre-Louis Moreau. But that will be the end of your fine dreams of going to Redon, and for the first time in your life playing in a real theatre. Without me, you can't do it, and you know it; and I am not going to Redon or anywhere else, in fact I am not even going to Fougeray, until we have an equitable arrangement."

"But what heat!" complained Binet, "and all for what? Why must you assume that I have the soul of a usurer? When our little arrangement was made, I had no idea how could I?—that you would prove as valuable to me as you are? You had but to remind me, my dear Scaramouche. I am a just man. As from to-day you shall have thirty livres a month. See, I double it at once. I am a generous man."

"But you are not ambitious. Now listen to me, a moment."

And he proceeded to unfold a scheme that filled Binet with a paralyzing terror.

"After Redon, Nantes," he said. "Nantes and the Theatre Feydau."

M. Binet choked in the act of drinking. The Theatre Feydau was a sort of provincial Comedie Francaise. The great Fleury had played there to an audience as critical as any in France. The very thought of Redon, cherished as it had come to be by M. Binet, gave him at moments a cramp in the stomach, so dangerously ambitious did it seem to him. And Redon was a puppet-show by comparison with Nantes. Yet this raw lad whom he had picked up by chance three weeks ago, and who in that time had blossomed from a country attorney into author and actor, could talk of Nantes and the Theatre Feydau without changing colour.

"But why not Paris and the Comedie Francaise?" wondered M. Binet, with sarcasm, when at last he had got his breath.

"That may come later," says impudence.

"Eh? You've been drinking, my friend."

But Andre-Louis detailed the plan that had been forming in his mind. Fougeray should be a training-ground for Redon, and Redon should be a training-ground for Nantes. They would stay in Redon as long as Redon would pay adequately to come and see them, working hard to perfect themselves the while. They would add three or four new players of talent to the company; he would write three or four fresh scenarios, and these should be tested and perfected until the troupe was in possession of at least half a dozen plays upon which they could depend; they would lay out a portion of their profits on better dresses and better scenery, and finally in a couple of months' time, if all went well, they should be ready to make their real bid for fortune at Nantes. It was quite true that distinction was usually demanded of the companies appearing at the Feydau, but on the other hand Nantes had not seen a troupe of improvisers for a generation and longer. They would be supplying a novelty to which all Nantes should flock provided that the work were really well done, and Scaramouche undertook—pledged himself—that if matters were left in his own hands, his projected revival of the *Commedia dell'Arte* in all its glories would exceed whatever expectations the public of Nantes might bring to the theatre.

"We'll talk of Paris after Nantes," he finished, supremely matter-of-fact, "just as we will definitely decide on Nantes after Redon."

The persuasiveness that could sway a mob ended by sweeping M. Binet off his feet. The prospect which Scaramouche unfolded, if terrifying, was also intoxicating, and as Scaramouche delivered a crushing answer to each weakening objection in a measure as it was advanced, Binet ended by promising to think the matter over.

"Redon will point the way," said Andre-Louis, "and I don't doubt which way Redon will point."

Thus the great adventure of Redon dwindled to insignificance. Instead of a terrifying undertaking in itself, it became merely a rehearsal for something greater. In his momentary exaltation Binet proposed another bottle of Volnay. Scaramouche waited until the cork was drawn before he continued.

"The thing remains possible," said he then, holding his glass to the light, and speaking casually, "as long as I am with you."

"Agreed, my dear Scaramouche, agreed. Our chance meeting was a fortunate thing for both of us."

"For both of us," said Scaramouche, with stress. "That is as I would have it. So that I do not think you will surrender me just yet to the police."

"As if I could think of such a thing! My dear Scaramouche, you amuse yourself. I beg that you will never, never allude to that little joke of mine again."

"It is forgotten," said Andre-Louis. "And now for the remainder of my proposal. If I am to become the architect of your fortunes, if I am to build them as I have planned them, I must also and in the same degree become the architect of my own."

"In the same degree?" M. Binet frowned.

"In the same degree. From to-day, if you please, we will conduct the affairs of this company in a proper manner, and we will keep account-books."

"I am an artist," said M. Binet, with pride. "I am not a merchant."

"There is a business side to your art, and that shall be conducted in the business manner. I have thought it all out for you. You shall not be troubled with details that might hinder the due exercise of your art. All that you have to do is to say yes or no to my proposal."

"Ah? And the proposal?"

"Is that you constitute me your partner, with an equal share in the profits of your company."

Pantaloon's great countenance grew pale, his little eyes widened to their fullest extent as he coned the face of his companion. Then he exploded.

"You are mad, of course, to make me a proposal so monstrous."

"It has its injustices, I admit. But I have provided for them. It would not, for instance, be fair that in addition to all that I am proposing to do for you, I should also play Scaramouche and write your scenarios without any reward outside of the half-profit which would come to me as a partner. Thus before the profits come to be divided, there is a salary to be paid me as actor, and a small sum for each scenario with which I provide the company; that is a matter for mutual agreement. Similarly, you shall be paid a salary as Pantaloon. After those expenses are cleared up, as well as all the other salaries and disbursements, the residue is the profit to be divided equally between us."

It was not, as you can imagine, a proposal that M. Binet would swallow at a draught. He began with a point-blank refusal to consider it.

"In that case, my friend," said Scaramouche, "we part company at once. To-morrow I shall bid you a reluctant farewell."

Binet fell to raging. He spoke of ingratitude in feeling terms; he even permitted himself another sly allusion to that little jest of his concerning the police, which he had promised never again to mention.

"As to that, you may do as you please. Play the informer, by all

means. But consider that you will just as definitely be deprived of my services, and that without me you are nothing—as you were before I joined your company."

M. Binet did not care what the consequences might be. A fig for the consequences! He would teach this impudent young country attorney that M. Binet was not the man to be imposed upon.

Scaramouche rose. "Very well," said he, between indifference and resignation. "As you wish. But before you act, sleep on the matter. In the cold light of morning you may see our two proposals in their proper proportions. Mine spells fortune for both of us. Yours spells ruin for both of us. Good-night, M. Binet. Heaven help you to a wise decision."

The decision to which M. Binet finally came was, naturally, the only one possible in the face of so firm a resolve as that of Andre-Louis, who held the trumps. Of course there were further discussions, before all was settled, and M. Binet was brought to an agreement only after an infinity of haggling surprising in one who was an artist and not a man of business. One or two concessions were made by Andre-Louis; he consented, for instance, to waive his claim to be paid for scenarios, and he also consented that M. Binet should appoint himself a salary that was out of all proportion to his deserts.

Thus in the end the matter was settled, and the announcement duly made to the assembled company. There were, of course, jealousies and resentments. But these were not deep-seated, and they were readily swallowed when it was discovered that under the new arrangement the lot of the entire company was to be materially improved from the point of view of salaries. This was a matter that had met with considerable opposition from M. Binet. But the irresistible Scaramouche swept away all objections.

"If we are to play at the Feydau, you want a company of self-

respecting comedians, and not a pack of cringing starvelings. The better we pay them in reason, the more they will earn for us."

Thus was conquered the company's resentment of this too swift promotion of its latest recruit. Cheerfully now—with one exception—they accepted the dominance of Scaramouche, a dominance soon to be so firmly established that M. Binet himself came under it.

The one exception was Climene. Her failure to bring to heel this interesting young stranger, who had almost literally dropped into their midst that morning outside Guichen, had begotten in her a malice which his persistent ignoring of her had been steadily inflaming. She had remonstrated with her father when the new partnership was first formed. She had lost her temper with him, and called him a fool, whereupon M. Binet—in Pantaloon's best manner—had lost his temper in his turn and boxed her ears. She piled it up to the account of Scaramouche, and spied her opportunity to pay off some of that ever-increasing score. But opportunities were few. Scaramouche was too occupied just then. During the week of preparation at Fougeray, he was hardly seen save at the performances, whilst when once they were at Redon, he came and went like the wind between the theatre and the inn.

The Redon experiment had justified itself from the first. Stimulated and encouraged by this, Andre-Louis worked day and night during the month that they spent in that busy little town. The moment had been well chosen, for the trade in chestnuts of which Redon is the centre was just then at its height. And every afternoon the little theatre was packed with spectators. The fame of the troupe had gone forth, borne by the chestnut-growers of the district, who were bringing their wares to Redon market, and the audiences were made up of people from the surrounding country, and from neighbouring villages as far out as Allaire, Saint-Perrieux and Saint-Nicholas. To keep the business from slackening, Andre-Louis prepared a new scenario every week. He

wrote three in addition to those two with which he had already supplied the company; these were "The Marriage of Pantaloon," "The Shy Lover," and "The Terrible Captain." Of these the last was the greatest success. It was based upon the "Miles Gloriosus" of Plautus, with great opportunities for Rhodomont, and a good part for Scaramouche as the roaring captain's sly lieutenant. Its success was largely due to the fact that Andre-Louis amplified the scenario to the extent of indicating very fully in places the lines which the dialogue should follow, whilst here and there he had gone so far as to supply some of the actual dialogue to be spoken, without, however, making it obligatory upon the actors to keep to the letter of it.

And meanwhile as the business prospered, he became busy with tailors, improving the wardrobe of the company, which was sorely in need of improvement. He ran to earth a couple of needy artists, lured them into the company to play small parts—apothecaries and notaries—and set them to beguile their leisure in painting new scenery, so as to be ready for what he called the conquest of Nantes, which was to come in the new year. Never in his life had he worked so hard; never in his life had he worked at all by comparison with his activities now. His fund of energy and enthusiasm was inexhaustible, like that of his good humour. He came and went, acted, wrote, conceived, directed, planned, and executed, what time M. Binet took his ease at last in comparative affluence, drank Burgundy every night, ate white bread and other delicacies, and began to congratulate himself upon his astuteness in having made this industrious, tireless fellow his partner. Having discovered how idle had been his fears of performing at Redon, he now began to dismiss the terrors with which the notion of Nantes had haunted him.

And his happiness was reflected throughout the ranks of his company, with the single exception always of Climene. She had ceased to sneer at Scaramouche, having realized at last that her sneers left him untouched and recoiled upon herself. Thus her almost

indefinable resentment of him was increased by being stifled, until, at all costs, an outlet for it must be found.

One day she threw herself in his way as he was leaving the theatre after the performance. The others had already gone, and she had returned upon pretence of having forgotten something.

"Will you tell me what I have done to you?" she asked him, point-blank.

"Done to me, mademoiselle?" He did not understand.

She made a gesture of impatience. "Why do you hate me?"

"Hate you, mademoiselle? I do not hate anybody. It is the most stupid of all the emotions. I have never hated—not even my enemies."

"What Christian resignation!"

"As for hating you, of all people! Why... I consider you adorable. I envy Leandre every day of my life. I have seriously thought of setting him to play Scaramouche, and playing lovers myself."

"I don't think you would be a success," said she.

"That is the only consideration that restrains me. And yet, given the inspiration that is given Leandre, it is possible that I might be convincing."

"Why, what inspiration do you mean?"

"The inspiration of playing to so adorable a Climene."

Her lazy eyes were now alert to search that lean face of his.

"You are laughing at me," said she, and swept past him into the theatre on her pretended quest. There was nothing to be done with such a fellow. He was utterly without feeling. He was not a man at all.

Yet when she came forth again at the end of some five minutes, she found him still lingering at the door.

"Not gone yet?" she asked him, superciliously.

"I was waiting for you, mademoiselle. You will be walking to the inn. If I might escort you..."

"But what gallantry! What condescension!"

"Perhaps you would prefer that I did not?"

"How could I prefer that, M. Scaramouche? Besides, we are both going the same way, and the streets are common to all. It is that I am overwhelmed by the unusual honour."

He looked into her piquant little face, and noted how obscured it was by its cloud of dignity. He laughed.

"Perhaps I feared that the honour was not sought."

"Ah, now I understand," she cried. "It is for me to seek these honours. I am to woo a man before he will pay me the homage of civility. It must be so, since you, who clearly know everything, have said so. It remains for me to beg your pardon for my ignorance."

"It amuses you to be cruel," said Scaramouche. "No matter. Shall we walk?"

They set out together, stepping briskly to warm their blood against the wintry evening air. Awhile they went in silence, yet each furtively observing the other.

"And so, you find me cruel?" she challenged him at length, thereby betraying the fact that the accusation had struck home.

He looked at her with a half smile. "Will you deny it?"

"You are the first man that ever accused me of that."

"I dare not suppose myself the first man to whom you have been cruel. That were an assumption too flattering to myself. I must prefer to think that the others suffered in silence."

"Mon Dieu! Have you suffered?" She was between seriousness and raillery.

"I place the confession as an offering on the altar of your vanity."

"I should never have suspected it."

"How could you? Am I not what your father calls a natural actor? I was an actor long before I became Scaramouche. Therefore I have laughed. I often do when I am hurt. When you were pleased to be disdainful, I acted disdain in my turn."

"You acted very well," said she, without reflecting.

"Of course. I am an excellent actor."

"And why this sudden change?"

"In response to the change in you. You have grown weary of your part of cruel madam—a dull part, believe me, and unworthy of your talents. Were I a woman and had I your loveliness and your grace, Climene, I should disdain to use them as weapons of offence."

"Loveliness and grace!" she echoed, feigning amused surprise. But the vain baggage was mollified. "When was it that you discovered this beauty and this grace, M. Scaramouche?"

He looked at her a moment, considering the sprightly beauty of her, the adorable femininity that from the first had so irresistibly attracted him.

"One morning when I beheld you rehearsing a love-scene with

Leandre."

He caught the surprise that leapt to her eyes, before she veiled them under drooping lids from his too questing gaze.

"Why, that was the first time you saw me."

"I had no earlier occasion to remark your charms."

"You ask me to believe too much," said she, but her tone was softer than he had ever known it yet.

"Then you'll refuse to believe me if I confess that it was this grace and beauty that determined my destiny that day by urging me to join your father's troupe."

At that she became a little out of breath. There was no longer any question of finding an outlet for resentment. Resentment was all forgotten.

"But why? With what object?"

"With the object of asking you one day to be my wife."

She halted under the shock of that, and swung round to face him. Her glance met his own without, shyness now; there was a hardening glitter in her eyes, a faint stir of colour in her cheeks. She suspected him of an unpardonable mockery.

"You go very fast, don't you?" she asked him, with heat.

"I do. Haven't you observed it? I am a man of sudden impulses. See what I have made of the Binet troupe in less than a couple of months. Another might have laboured for a year and not achieved the half of it. Shall I be slower in love than in work? Would it be reasonable to expect it? I have curbed and repressed myself not to scare you by precipitancy. In that I have done violence to my feelings,

and more than all in using the same cold aloofness with which you chose to treat me. I have waited—oh! so patiently—until you should tire of that mood of cruelty."

"You are an amazing man," said she, quite colourlessly.

"I am," he agreed with her. "It is only the conviction that I am not commonplace that has permitted me to hope as I have hoped."

Mechanically, and as if by tacit consent, they resumed their walk.

"And I ask you to observe," he said, "when you complain that I go very fast, that, after all, I have so far asked you for nothing."

"How?" quoth she, frowning.

"I have merely told you of my hopes. I am not so rash as to ask at once whether I may realize them."

"My faith, but that is prudent," said she, tartly.

"Of course."

It was his self-possession that exasperated her; for after that she walked the short remainder of the way in silence, and so, for the moment, the matter was left just there.

But that night, after they had supped, it chanced that when Climene was about to retire, he and she were alone together in the room above stairs that her father kept exclusively for his company. The Binet Troupe, you see, was rising in the world.

As Climene now rose to withdraw for the night, Scaramouche rose with her to light her candle. Holding it in her left hand, she offered him her right, a long, tapering, white hand at the end of a softly rounded arm that was bare to the elbow.

"Good-night, Scaramouche," she said, but so softly, so tenderly,

that he caught his breath, and stood conning her, his dark eyes aglow.

Thus a moment, then he took the tips of her fingers in his grasp, and bowing over the hand, pressed his lips upon it. Then he looked at her again. The intense femininity of her lured him on, invited him, surrendered to him. Her face was pale, there was a glitter in her eyes, a curious smile upon her parted lips, and under its fichu-menteur her bosom rose and fell to complete the betrayal of her.

By the hand he continued to hold, he drew her towards him. She came unresisting. He took the candle from her, and set it down on the sideboard by which she stood. The next moment her slight, lithe body was in his arms, and he was kissing her, murmuring her name as if it were a prayer.

"Am I cruel now?" she asked him, panting. He kissed her again for only answer. "You made me cruel because you would not see," she told him next in a whisper.

And then the door opened, and M. Binet came in to have his paternal eyes regaled by this highly indecorous behaviour of his daughter.

He stood at gaze, whilst they quite leisurely, and in a self-possession too complete to be natural, detached each from the other

"And what may be the meaning of this?" demanded M. Binet, bewildered and profoundly shocked.

"Does it require explaining?" asked Scaramouche. "Doesn't it speak for itself—eloquently? It means that Climene and I have taken it into our heads to be married."

"And doesn't it matter what I may take into my head?"

"Of course. But you could have neither the bad taste nor the bad heart to offer any obstacle."

"You take that for granted? Aye, that is your way, to be sure—to take things for granted. But my daughter is not to be taken for granted. I have very definite views for my daughter. You have done an unworthy thing, Scaramouche. You have betrayed my trust in you. I am very angry with you."

He rolled forward with his ponderous yet curiously noiseless gait. Scaramouche turned to her, smiling, and handed her the candle.

"If you will leave us, Climene, I will ask your hand of your father in proper form."

She vanished, a little fluttered, lovelier than ever in her mixture of confusion and timidity. Scaramouche closed the door and faced the enraged M. Binet, who had flung himself into an armchair at the head of the short table, faced him with the avowed purpose of asking for Climene's hand in proper form. And this was how he did it:

"Father-in-law," said he, "I congratulate you. This will certainly mean the Comedie Francaise for Climene, and that before long, and you shall shine in the glory she will reflect. As the father of Madame Scaramouche you may yet be famous."

Binet, his face slowly empurpling, glared at him in speechless stupefaction. His rage was the more utter from his humiliating conviction that whatever he might say or do, this irresistible fellow would bend him to his will. At last speech came to him.

"You're a damned corsair," he cried, thickly, banging his ham-like fist upon the table. "A corsair! First you sail in and plunder me of half my legitimate gains; and now you want to carry off my daughter. But I'll be damned if I'll give her to a graceless, nameless scoundrel like you, for whom the gallows are waiting already."

Scaramouche pulled the bell-rope, not at all discomposed. He

smiled. There was a flush on his cheeks and a gleam in his eyes. He was very pleased with the world that night. He really owed a great debt to M. de Lesdiguieres.

"Binet," said he, "forget for once that you are Pantaloon, and behave as a nice, amiable father-in-law should behave when he has secured a son-in-law of exceptionable merits. We are going to have a bottle of Burgundy at my expense, and it shall be the best bottle of Burgundy to be found in Redon. Compose yourself to do fitting honour to it. Excitations of the bile invariably impair the fine sensitiveness of the palate."

CHAPTER VII. THE CONQUEST OF NANTES

The Binet Troupe opened in Nantes—as you may discover in surviving copies of the "Courrier Nantais"—on the Feast of the Purification with "Les Fourberies de Scaramouche." But they did not come to Nantes as hitherto they had gone to little country villages and townships, unheralded and depending entirely upon the parade of their entrance to attract attention to themselves. Andre-Louis had borrowed from the business methods of the Comedie Francaise. Carrying matters with a high hand entirely in his own fashion, he had ordered at Redon the printing of playbills, and four days before the company's descent upon Nantes, these bills were pasted outside the Theatre Feydau and elsewhere about the town, and had attracted—being still sufficiently unusual announcements at the time—considerable attention. He had entrusted the matter to one of the company's latest recruits, an intelligent young man named Basque, sending him on ahead of the company for the purpose.

You may see for yourself one of these playbills in the Carnavalet Museum. It details the players by their stage names only, with the exception of M. Binet and his daughter, and leaving out of account that he who plays Trivelin in one piece appears as Tabarin in another, it makes the company appear to be at least half as numerous again as it really was. It announces that they will open with "Les Fourberies de Scaramouche," to be followed by five other plays of which it gives the titles, and by others not named, which shall also be added should the patronage to be received in the distinguished and enlightened city of Nantes encourage the Binet Troupe to prolong its sojourn at the Theatre Feydau. It lays great stress upon the fact that this is a

company of improvisers in the old Italian manner, the like of which has not been seen in France for half a century, and it exhorts the public of Nantes not to miss this opportunity of witnessing these distinguished mimes who are reviving for them the glories of the Comedie de l'Art. Their visit to Nantes—the announcement proceeds—is preliminary to their visit to Paris, where they intend to throw down the glove to the actors of the Comedie Francaise, and to show the world how superior is the art of the improviser to that of the actor who depends upon an author for what he shall say, and who consequently says always the same thing every time that he plays in the same piece.

It is an audacious bill, and its audacity had scared M. Binet out of the little sense left him by the Burgundy which in these days he could afford to abuse. He had offered the most vehement opposition. Part of this Andre-Louis had swept aside; part he had disregarded.

"I admit that it is audacious," said Scaramouche. "But at your time of life you should have learnt that in this world nothing succeeds like audacity."

"I forbid it; I absolutely forbid it," M. Binet insisted.

"I knew you would. Just as I know that you'll be very grateful to me presently for not obeying you."

"You are inviting a catastrophe."

"I am inviting fortune. The worst catastrophe that can overtake you is to be back in the market-halls of the country villages from which I rescued you. I'll have you in Paris yet in spite of yourself. Leave this to me."

And he went out to attend to the printing. Nor did his preparations end there. He wrote a piquant article on the glories of the Comedie de l'Art, and its resurrection by the improvising troupe of the great mime Florimond Binet. Binet's name was not Florimond; it was just

Pierre. But Andre-Louis had a great sense of the theatre. That article was an amplification of the stimulating matter contained in the playbills; and he persuaded Basque, who had relations in Nantes, to use all the influence he could command, and all the bribery they could afford, to get that article printed in the "Courrier Nantais" a couple of days before the arrival of the Binet Troupe.

Basque had succeeded, and, considering the undoubted literary merits and intrinsic interest of the article, this is not at all surprising.

And so it was upon an already expectant city that Binet and his company descended in that first week of February. M. Binet would have made his entrance in the usual manner—a full-dress parade with banging drums and crashing cymbals. But to this Andre-Louis offered the most relentless opposition.

"We should but discover our poverty," said he. "Instead, we will creep into the city unobserved, and leave ourselves to the imagination of the public."

He had his way, of course. M. Binet, worn already with battling against the strong waters of this young man's will, was altogether unequal to the contest now that he found Climene in alliance with Scaramouche, adding her insistence to his, and joining with him in reprobation of her father's sluggish and reactionary wits. Metaphorically, M. Binet threw up his arms, and cursing the day on which he had taken this young man into his troupe, he allowed the current to carry him whither it would. He was persuaded that he would be drowned in the end. Meanwhile he would drown his vexation in Burgundy. At least there was abundance of Burgundy. Never in his life had he found Burgundy so plentiful. Perhaps things were not as bad as he imagined, after all. He reflected that, when all was said, he had to thank Scaramouche for the Burgundy. Whilst fearing the worst, he would hope for the best.

And it was very much the worst that he feared as he waited in the wings when the curtain rose on that first performance of theirs at the Theatre Feydau to a house that was tolerably filled by a public whose curiosity the preliminary announcements had thoroughly stimulated.

Although the scenario of "Lee Fourberies de Scaramouche" has not apparently survived, yet we know from Andre-Louis "Confessions" that it is opened by Polichinelle in the character of an arrogant and fiercely jealous lover shown in the act of beguiling the waiting-maid, Columbine, to play the spy upon her mistress, Climene. Beginning with cajolery, but failing in this with the saucy Columbine, who likes cajolers to be at least attractive and to pay a due deference to her own very piquant charms, the fierce humpbacked scoundrel passes on to threats of the terrible vengeance he will wreak upon her if she betrays him or neglects to obey him implicitly; failing here, likewise, he finally has recourse to bribery, and after he has bled himself freely to the very expectant Columbine, he succeeds by these means in obtaining her consent to spy upon Climene, and to report to him upon her lady's conduct.

The pair played the scene well together, stimulated, perhaps, by their very nervousness at finding themselves before so imposing an audience. Polichinelle was everything that is fierce, contemptuous, and insistent. Columbine was the essence of pert indifference under his cajolery, saucily mocking under his threats, and finely sly in extorting the very maximum when it came to accepting a bribe. Laughter rippled through the audience and promised well. But M. Binet, standing trembling in the wings, missed the great guffaws of the rustic spectators to whom they had played hitherto, and his fears steadily mounted.

Then, scarcely has Polichinelle departed by the door than Scaramouche bounds in through the window. It was an effective entrance, usually performed with a broad comic effect that set the

people in a roar. Not so on this occasion. Meditating in bed that morning, Scaramouche had decided to present himself in a totally different aspect. He would cut out all the broad play, all the usual clowning which had delighted their past rude audiences, and he would obtain his effects by subtlety instead. He would present a slyly humorous rogue, restrained, and of a certain dignity, wearing a countenance of complete solemnity, speaking his lines drily, as if unconscious of the humour with which he intended to invest them. Thus, though it might take the audience longer to understand and discover him, they would like him all the better in the end.

True to that resolve, he now played his part as the friend and hired ally of the lovesick Leandre, on whose behalf he came for news of Climene, seizing the opportunity to further his own amour with Columbine and his designs upon the money-bags of Pantaloon. Also he had taken certain liberties with the traditional costume of Scaramouche; he had caused the black doublet and breeches to be slashed with red, and the doublet to be cut more to a peak, a la Henri III. The conventional black velvet cap he had replaced by a conical hat with a turned-up brim, and a tuft of feathers on the left, and he had discarded the guitar.

M. Binet listened desperately for the roar of laughter that usually greeted the entrance of Scaramouche, and his dismay increased when it did not come. And then he became conscious of something alarmingly unusual in Scaramouche's manner. The sibilant foreign accent was there, but none of the broad boisterousness their audiences had loved.

He wrung his hands in despair. "It is all over!" he said. "The fellow has ruined us! It serves me right for being a fool, and allowing him to take control of everything!"

But he was profoundly mistaken. He began to have an inkling of this when presently himself he took the stage, and found the public

attentive, remarked a grin of quiet appreciation on every upturned face. It was not, however, until the thunders of applause greeted the fall of the curtain on the first act that he felt quite sure they would be allowed to escape with their lives.

Had the part of Pantaloon in "Les Fourberies" been other than that of a blundering, timid old idiot, Binet would have ruined it by his apprehensions. As it was, those very apprehensions, magnifying as they did the hesitancy and bewilderment that were the essence of his part, contributed to the success. And a success it proved that more than justified all the heralding of which Scaramouche had been guilty.

For Scaramouche himself this success was not confined to the public. At the end of the play a great reception awaited him from his companions assembled in the green-room of the theatre. His talent, resource, and energy had raised them in a few weeks from a pack of vagrant mountebanks to a self-respecting company of first-rate players. They acknowledged it generously in a speech entrusted to Polichinelle, adding the tribute to his genius that, as they had conquered Nantes, so would they conquer the world under his guidance.

In their enthusiasm they were a little neglectful of the feelings of M. Binet. Irritated enough had he been already by the overriding of his every wish, by the consciousness of his weakness when opposed to Scaramouche. And, although he had suffered the gradual process of usurpation of authority because its every step had been attended by his own greater profit, deep down in him the resentment abode to stifle every spark of that gratitude due from him to his partner. To-night his nerves had been on the rack, and he had suffered agonies of apprehension, for all of which he blamed Scaramouche so bitterly that not even the ultimate success—almost miraculous when all the elements are considered—could justify his partner in his eyes.

And now, to find himself, in addition, ignored by this company—his

own company, which he had so laboriously and slowly assembled and selected among the men of ability whom he had found here and there in the dregs of cities was something that stirred his bile, and aroused the malevolence that never did more than slumber in him. But deeply though his rage was moved, it did not blind him to the folly of betraying it. Yet that he should assert himself in this hour was imperative unless he were for ever to become a thing of no account in this troupe over which he had lorded it for long months before this interloper came amongst them to fill his purse and destroy his authority.

So he stepped forward now when Polichinelle had done. His make-up assisting him to mask his bitter feelings, he professed to add his own to Polichinelle's acclamations of his dear partner. But he did it in such a manner as to make it clear that what Scaramouche had done, he had done by M. Binet's favour, and that in all M. Binet's had been the guiding hand. In associating himself with Polichinelle, he desired to thank Scaramouche, much in the manner of a lord rendering thanks to his steward for services diligently rendered and orders scrupulously carried out.

It neither deceived the troupe nor mollified himself. Indeed, his consciousness of the mockery of it but increased his bitterness. But at least it saved his face and rescued him from nullity—he who was their chief.

To say, as I have said, that it did not deceive them, is perhaps to say too much, for it deceived them at least on the score of his feelings. They believed, after discounting the insinuations in which he took all credit to himself, that at heart he was filled with gratitude, as they were. That belief was shared by Andre-Louis himself, who in his brief, grateful answer was very generous to M. Binet, more than endorsing the claims that M. Binet had made.

And then followed from him the announcement that their success in

Nantes was the sweeter to him because it rendered almost immediately attainable the dearest wish of his heart, which was to make Climene his wife. It was a felicity of which he was the first to acknowledge his utter unworthiness. It was to bring him into still closer relations with his good friend M. Binet, to whom he owed all that he had achieved for himself and for them. The announcement was joyously received, for the world of the theatre loves a lover as dearly as does the greater world. So they acclaimed the happy pair, with the exception of poor Leandre, whose eyes were more melancholy than ever.

They were a happy family that night in the upstairs room of their inn on the Quai La Fosse—the same inn from which Andre-Louis had set out some weeks ago to play a vastly different role before an audience of Nantes. Yet was it so different, he wondered? Had he not then been a sort of Scaramouche—an intriguer, glib and specious, deceiving folk, cynically misleading them with opinions that were not really his own? Was it at all surprising that he should have made so rapid and signal a success as a mime? Was not this really all that he had ever been, the thing for which Nature had designed him?

On the following night they played "The Shy Lover" to a full house, the fame of their debut having gone abroad, and the success of Monday was confirmed. On Wednesday they gave "Figaro Scaramouche," and on Thursday morning the "Courrier Nantais" came out with an article of more than a column of praise of these brilliant improvisers, for whom it claimed that they utterly put to shame the mere reciters of memorized parts.

Andre-Louis, reading the sheet at breakfast, and having no delusions on the score of the falseness of that statement, laughed inwardly. The novelty of the thing, and the pretentiousness in which he had swaddled it, had deceived them finely. He turned to greet Binet and Climene, who entered at that moment. He waved the sheet above

his head.

"It is settled," he announced, "we stay in Nantes until Easter."

"Do we?" said Binet, sourly. "You settle everything, my friend."

"Read for yourself." And he handed him the paper.

Moodily M. Binet read. He set the sheet down in silence, and turned his attention to his breakfast.

"Was I justified or not?" quoth Andre-Louis, who found M. Binet's behaviour a thought intriguing.

"In what?"

"In coming to Nantes?"

"If I had not thought so, we should not have come," said Binet, and he began to eat.

Andre-Louis dropped the subject, wondering.

After breakfast he and Climene sallied forth to take the air upon the quays. It was a day of brilliant sunshine and less cold than it had lately been. Columbine tactlessly joined them as they were setting out, though in this respect matters were improved a little when Harlequin came running after them, and attached himself to Columbine.

Andre-Louis, stepping out ahead with Climene, spoke of the thing that was uppermost in his mind at the moment.

"Your father is behaving very oddly towards me," said he. "It is almost as if he had suddenly become hostile."

"You imagine it," said she. "My father is very grateful to you, as we all are."

"He is anything but grateful. He is infuriated against me; and I think I know the reason. Don't you? Can't you guess?"

"I can't, indeed."

"If you were my daughter, Climene, which God be thanked you are not, I should feel aggrieved against the man who carried you away from me. Poor old Pantaloon! He called me a corsair when I told him that I intend to marry you."

"He was right. You are a bold robber, Scaramouche."

"It is in the character," said he. "Your father believes in having his mimes play upon the stage the parts that suit their natural temperaments."

"Yes, you take everything you want, don't you?" She looked up at him, half adoringly, half shyly.

"If it is possible," said he. "I took his consent to our marriage by main force from him. I never waited for him to give it. When, in fact, he refused it, I just snatched it from him, and I'll defy him now to win it back from me. I think that is what he most resents."

She laughed, and launched upon an animated answer. But he did not hear a word of it. Through the bustle of traffic on the quay a cabriolet, the upper half of which was almost entirely made of glass, had approached them. It was drawn by two magnificent bay horses and driven by a superbly livened coachman.

In the cabriolet alone sat a slight young girl wrapped in a lynx-fur pelisse, her face of a delicate loveliness. She was leaning forward, her lips parted, her eyes devouring Scaramouche until they drew his gaze. When that happened, the shock of it brought him abruptly to a dumfounded halt.

Climene, checking in the middle of a sentence, arrested by his own

sudden stopping, plucked at his sleeve.

"What is it, Scaramouche?"

But he made no attempt to answer her, and at that moment the coachman, to whom the little lady had already signalled, brought the carriage to a standstill beside them. Seen in the gorgeous setting of that coach with its escutcheoned panels, its portly coachman and its white-stockinged footman—who swung instantly to earth as the vehicle stopped—its dainty occupant seemed to Climene a princess out of a fairy-tale. And this princess leaned forward, with eyes aglow and cheeks aflush, stretching out a choicely gloved hand to Scaramouche.

"Andre-Louis!" she called him.

And Scaramouche took the hand of that exalted being, just as he might have taken the hand of Climene herself, and with eyes that reflected the gladness of her own, in a voice that echoed the joyous surprise of hers, he addressed her familiarly by name, just as she had addressed him.

"Aline!"

CHAPTER VIII. THE DREAM

"The door," Aline commanded her footman, and "Mount here beside me," she commanded Andre-Louis, in the same breath.

"A moment, Aline."

He turned to his companion, who was all amazement, and to Harlequin and Columbine, who had that moment come up to share it. "You permit me, Climene?" said he, breathlessly. But it was more a statement than a question. "Fortunately you are not alone. Harlequin will take care of you. Au revoir, at dinner."

With that he sprang into the cabriolet without waiting for a reply. The footman closed the door, the coachman cracked his whip, and the regal equipage rolled away along the quay, leaving the three comedians staring after it, open-mouthed... Then Harlequin laughed.

"A prince in disguise, our Scaramouche!" said he.

Columbine clapped her hands and flashed her strong teeth. "But what a romance for you, Climene! How wonderful!"

The frown melted from Climene's brow. Resentment changed to bewilderment.

"But who is she?"

"His sister, of course," said Harlequin, quite definitely.

"His sister? How do you know?"

"I know what he will tell you on his return."

"But why?"

"Because you wouldn't believe him if he said she was his mother."

Following the carriage with their glance, they wandered on in the direction it had taken. And in the carriage Aline was considering Andre-Louis with grave eyes, lips slightly compressed, and a tiny frown between her finely drawn eyebrows.

"You have taken to queer company, Andre," was the first thing she said to him. "Or else I am mistaken in thinking that your companion was Mlle. Binet of the Theatre Feydau."

"You are not mistaken. But I had not imagined Mlle. Binet so famous already."

"Oh, as to that..." mademoiselle shrugged, her tone quietly scornful. And she explained. "It is simply that I was at the play last night. I thought I recognized her."

"You were at the Feydau last night? And I never saw you!"

"Were you there, too?"

"Was I there!" he cried. Then he checked, and abruptly changed his tone. "Oh, yes, I was there," he said, as commonplace as he could, beset by a sudden reluctance to avow that he had so willingly descended to depths that she must account unworthy, and grateful that his disguise of face and voice should have proved impenetrable even to one who knew him so very well.

"I understand," said she, and compressed her lips a little more tightly.

"But what do you understand?"

"The rare attractions of Mlle. Binet. Naturally you would be at the

theatre. Your tone conveyed it very clearly. Do you know that you disappoint me, Andre? It is stupid of me, perhaps; it betrays, I suppose, my imperfect knowledge of your sex. I am aware that most young men of fashion find an irresistible attraction for creatures who parade themselves upon the stage. But I did not expect you to ape the ways of a man of fashion. I was foolish enough to imagine you to be different; rather above such trivial pursuits. I conceived you something of an idealist."

"Sheer flattery."

"So I perceive. But you misled me. You talked so much morality of a kind, you made philosophy so readily, that I came to be deceived. In fact, your hypocrisy was so consummate that I never suspected it. With your gift of acting I wonder that you haven't joined Mlle. Binet's troupe."

"I have," said he.

It had really become necessary to tell her, making choice of the lesser of the two evils with which she confronted him.

He saw first incredulity, then consternation, and lastly disgust overspread her face.

"Of course," said she, after a long pause, "that would have the advantage of bringing you closer to your charmer."

"That was only one of the inducements. There was another. Finding myself forced to choose between the stage and the gallows, I had the incredible weakness to prefer the former. It was utterly unworthy of a man of my lofty ideals, but—what would you? Like other ideologists, I find it easier to preach than to practise. Shall I stop the carriage and remove the contamination of my disgusting person? Or shall I tell you how it happened?"

"Tell me how it happened first. Then we will decide."

He told her how he met the Binet Troupe, and how the men of the marechaussee forced upon him the discovery that in its bosom he could lie safely lost until the hue and cry had died down. The explanation dissolved her iciness.

"My poor Andre, why didn't you tell me this at first?"

"For one thing, you didn't give me time; for another, I feared to shock you with the spectacle of my degradation."

She took him seriously. "But where was the need of it? And why did you not send us word as I required you of your whereabouts?"

"I was thinking of it only yesterday. I have hesitated for several reasons."

"You thought it would offend us to know what you were doing?"

"I think that I preferred to surprise you by the magnitude of my ultimate achievements."

"Oh, you are to become a great actor?" She was frankly scornful.

"That is not impossible. But I am more concerned to become a great author. There is no reason why you should sniff. The calling is an honourable one. All the world is proud to know such men as Beaumarchais and Chenier."

"And you hope to equal them?"

"I hope to surpass them, whilst acknowledging that it was they who taught me how to walk. What did you think of the play last night?"

"It was amusing and well conceived."

"Let me present you to the author."

"You? But the company is one of the improvisers."

"Even improvisers require an author to write their scenarios. That is all I write at present. Soon I shall be writing plays in the modern manner."

"You deceive yourself, my poor Andre. The piece last night would have been nothing without the players. You are fortunate in your Scaramouche."

"In confidence—I present you to him."

"You—Scaramouche? You?" She turned to regard him fully. He smiled his close-lipped smile that made wrinkles like gashes in his cheeks. He nodded. "And I didn't recognize you!"

"I thank you for the tribute. You imagined, of course, that I was a scene-shifter. And now that you know all about me, what of Gavrilac? What of my godfather?"

He was well, she told him, and still profoundly indignant with Andre-Louis for his defection, whilst secretly concerned on his behalf.

"I shall write to him to-day that I have seen you."

"Do so. Tell him that I am well and prospering. But say no more. Do not tell him what I am doing. He has his prejudices too. Besides, it might not be prudent. And now the question I have been burning to ask ever since I entered your carriage. Why are you in Nantes, Aline?"

"I am on a visit to my aunt, Mme. de Sautron. It was with her that I came to the play yesterday. We have been dull at the chateau; but it will be different now. Madame my aunt is receiving several guests to-day. M. de La Tour d'Azyr is to be one of them."

Andre-Louis frowned and sighed. "Did you ever hear, Aline, how

poor Philippe de Vilmorin came by his end?"

"Yes; I was told, first by my uncle; then by M. de La Tour d'Azyr, himself."

"Did not that help you to decide this marriage question?"

"How could it? You forget that I am but a woman. You don't expect me to judge between men in matters such as these?"

"Why not? You are well able to do so. The more since you have heard two sides. For my godfather would tell you the truth. If you cannot judge, it is that you do not wish to judge." His tone became harsh. "Wilfully you close your eyes to justice that might check the course of your unhealthy, unnatural ambition."

"Excellent!" she exclaimed, and considered him with amusement and something else. "Do you know that you are almost droll? You rise unblushing from the dregs of life in which I find you, and shake off the arm of that theatre girl, to come and preach to me."

"If these were the dregs of life I might still speak from them to counsel you out of my respect and devotion Aline." He was very, stiff and stern. "But they are not the dregs of life. Honour and virtue are possible to a theatre girl; they are impossible to a lady who sells herself to gratify ambition; who for position, riches, and a great title barter herself in marriage."

She looked at him breathlessly. Anger turned her pale. She reached for the cord.

"I think I had better let you alight so that you may go back to practise virtue and honour with your theatre wench."

"You shall not speak so of her, Aline."

"Faith, now we are to have heat on her behalf. You think I am too

delicate? You think I should speak of her as a..."

"If you must speak of her at all," he interrupted, hotly, "you'll speak of her as my wife."

Amazement smothered her anger. Her pallor deepened. "My God!" she said, and looked at him in horror. And in horror she asked him presently: "You are married—married to that—?"

"Not yet. But I shall be, soon. And let me tell you that this girl whom you visit with your ignorant contempt is as good and pure as you are, Aline. She has wit and talent which have placed her where she is and shall carry her a deal farther. And she has the womanliness to be guided by natural instincts in the selection of her mate."

She was trembling with passion. She tugged the cord.

"You will descend this instant!" she told him fiercely. "That you should dare to make a comparison between me and that..."

"And my wife-to-be," he interrupted, before she could speak the infamous word. He opened the door for himself without waiting for the footman, and leapt down. "My compliments," said he, furiously, "to the assassin you are to marry." He slammed the door. "Drive on," he bade the coachman.

The carriage rolled away up the Faubourg Gigan, leaving him standing where he had alighted, quivering with rage. Gradually, as he walked back to the inn, his anger cooled. Gradually, as he cooled, he perceived her point of view, and in the end forgave her. It was not her fault that she thought as she thought. Her rearing had been such as to make her look upon every actress as a trull, just as it had qualified her calmly to consider the monstrous marriage of convenience into which she was invited.

He got back to the inn to find the company at table. Silence fell

when he entered, so suddenly that of necessity it must be supposed he was himself the subject of the conversation. Harlequin and Columbine had spread the tale of this prince in disguise caught up into the chariot of a princess and carried off by her; and it was a tale that had lost nothing in the telling.

Climene had been silent and thoughtful, pondering what Columbine had called this romance of hers. Clearly her Scaramouche must be vastly other than he had hitherto appeared, or else that great lady and he would never have used such familiarity with each other. Imagining him no better than he was, Climene had made him her own. And now she was to receive the reward of disinterested affection.

Even old Binet's secret hostility towards Andre-Louis melted before this astounding revelation. He had pinched his daughter's ear quite playfully. "Ah, ah, trust you to have penetrated his disguise, my child!"

She shrank resentfully from that implication.

"But I did not. I took him for what he seemed."

Her father winked at her very solemnly and laughed. "To be sure, you did. But like your father, who was once a gentleman, and knows the ways of gentlemen, you detected in him a subtle something different from those with whom misfortune has compelled you hitherto to herd. You knew as well as I did that he never caught that trick of haughtiness, that grand air of command, in a lawyer's musty office, and that his speech had hardly the ring or his thoughts the complexion of the bourgeois that he pretended to be. And it was shrewd of you to have made him yours. Do you know that I shall be very proud of you yet, Climene?"

She moved away without answering. Her father's oiliness offended her. Scaramouche was clearly a great gentleman, an eccentric if you please, but a man born. And she was to be his lady. Her father must

learn to treat her differently.

She looked shyly—with a new shyness—at her lover when he came into the room where they were dining. She observed for the first time that proud carriage of the head, with the chin thrust forward, that was a trick of his, and she noticed with what a grace he moved—the grace of one who in youth has had his dancing-masters and fencing-masters.

It almost hurt her when he flung himself into a chair and exchanged a quip with Harlequin in the usual manner as with an equal, and it offended her still more that Harlequin, knowing what he now knew, should use him with the same unbecoming familiarity.

CHAPTER IX. THE AWAKENING

"Do you know," said Climene, "that I am waiting for the explanation which I think you owe me?"

They were alone together, lingering still at the table to which Andre-Louis had come belatedly, and Andre-Louis was loading himself a pipe. Of late—since joining the Binet Troupe—he had acquired the habit of smoking. The others had gone, some to take the air and others, like Binet and Madame, because they felt that it were discreet to leave those two to the explanations that must pass. It was a feeling that Andre-Louis did not share. He kindled a light and leisurely applied it to his pipe. A frown came to settle on his brow.

"Explanation?" he questioned presently, and looked at her. "But on what score?"

"On the score of the deception you have practised on us—on me."

"I have practised none," he assured her.

"You mean that you have simply kept your own counsel, and that in silence there is no deception. But it is deceitful to withhold facts concerning yourself and your true station from your future wife. You should not have pretended to be a simple country lawyer, which, of course, any one could see that you are not. It may have been very romantic, but... Enfin, will you explain?"

"I see," he said, and pulled at his pipe. "But you are wrong, Climene. I have practised no deception. If there are things about me that I have not told you, it is that I did not account them of much importance. But I have never deceived you by pretending to be other

than I am. I am neither more nor less than I have represented myself."

This persistence began to annoy her, and the annoyance showed on her winsome face, coloured her voice.

"Ha! And that fine lady of the nobility with whom you are so intimate, who carried you off in her cabriolet with so little ceremony towards myself? What is she to you?"

"A sort of sister," said he.

"A sort of sister!" She was indignant. "Harlequin foretold that you would say so; but he was amusing himself. It was not very funny. It is less funny still from you. She has a name, I suppose, this sort of sister?"

"Certainly she has a name. She is Mlle. Aline de Kercadiou, the niece of Quintin de Kercadiou, Lord of Gavrillac."

"Oho! That's a sufficiently fine name for your sort of sister. What sort of sister, my friend?"

For the first time in their relationship he observed and deplored the taint of vulgarity, of shrewishness, in her manner.

"It would have been more accurate in me to have said a sort of reputed left-handed cousin."

"A reputed left-handed cousin! And what sort of relationship may that be? Faith, you dazzle me with your lucidity."

"It requires to be explained."

"That is what I have been telling you. But you seem very reluctant with your explanations."

"Oh, no. It is only that they are so unimportant. But be you the judge. Her uncle, M. de Kercadiou, is my godfather, and she and I have been

playmates from infancy as a consequence. It is popularly believed in Gavrillac that M. de Kercadiou is my father. He has certainly cared for my rearing from my tenderest years, and it is entirely owing to him that I was educated at Louis le Grand. I owe to him everything that I have—or, rather, everything that I had; for of my own free will I have cut myself adrift, and to-day I possess nothing save what I can earn for myself in the theatre or elsewhere."

She sat stunned and pale under that cruel blow to her swelling pride. Had he told her this but yesterday, it would have made no impression upon her, it would have mattered not at all; the event of to-day coming as a sequel would but have enhanced him in her eyes. But coming now, after her imagination had woven for him so magnificent a background, after the rashly assumed discovery of his splendid identity had made her the envied of all the company, after having been in her own eyes and theirs enshrined by marriage with him as a great lady, this disclosure crushed and humiliated her. Her prince in disguise was merely the outcast bastard of a country gentleman! She would be the laughing-stock of every member of her father's troupe, of all those who had so lately envied her this romantic good fortune.

"You should have told me this before," she said, in a dull voice that she strove to render steady.

"Perhaps I should. But does it really matter?"

"Matter?" She suppressed her fury to ask another question. "You say that this M. de Kercadiou is popularly believed to be your father. What precisely do you mean?"

"Just that. It is a belief that I do not share. It is a matter of instinct, perhaps, with me. Moreover, once I asked M. de Kercadiou point-blank, and I received from him a denial. It is not, perhaps, a denial to which one would attach too much importance in all the circumstances.

Yet I have never known M de Kercadiou for other than a man of strictest honour, and I should hesitate to disbelieve him—particularly when his statement leaps with my own instincts. He assured me that he did not know who my father was."

"And your mother, was she equally ignorant?" She was sneering, but he did not remark it. Her back was to the light.

"He would not disclose her name to me. He confessed her to be a dear friend of his."

She startled him by laughing, and her laugh was not pleasant.

"A very dear friend, you may be sure, you simpleton. What name do you bear?"

He restrained his own rising indignation to answer her question calmly: "Moreau. It was given me, so I am told, from the Brittany village in which I was born. But I have no claim to it. In fact I have no name, unless it be Scaramouche, to which I have earned a title. So that you see, my dear," he ended with a smile, "I have practised no deception whatever."

"No, no. I see that now." She laughed without mirth, then drew a deep breath and rose. "I am very tired," she said.

He was on his feet in an instant, all solicitude. But she waved him wearily back.

"I think I will rest until it is time to go to the theatre." She moved towards the door, dragging her feet a little. He sprang to open it, and she passed out without looking at him.

Her so brief romantic dream was ended. The glorious world of fancy which in the last hour she had built with such elaborate detail, over which it should be her exalted destiny to rule, lay shattered about her feet, its debris so many stumbling-blocks that prevented her from

winning back to her erstwhile content in Scaramouche as he really was.

Andre-Louis sat in the window embrasure, smoking and looking idly out across the river. He was intrigued and meditative. He had shocked her. The fact was clear; not so the reason. That he should confess himself nameless should not particularly injure him in the eyes of a girl reared amid the surroundings that had been Climene's. And yet that his confession had so injured him was fully apparent.

There, still at his brooding, the returning Columbine discovered him a half-hour later.

"All alone, my prince!" was her laughing greeting, which suddenly threw light upon his mental darkness. Climene had been disappointed of hopes that the wild imagination of these players had suddenly erected upon the incident of his meeting with Aline. Poor child! He smiled whimsically at Columbine.

"I am likely to be so for some little time," said he, "until it becomes a commonplace that I am not, after all, a prince.

"Not a prince? Oh, but a duke, then—at least a marquis."

"Not even a chevalier, unless it be of the order of fortune. I am just Scaramouche. My castles are all in Spain."

Disappointment clouded the lively, good-natured face.

"And I had imagined you..."

"I know," he interrupted. "That is the mischief." He might have gauged the extent of that mischief by Climene's conduct that evening towards the gentlemen of fashion who clustered now in the green-room between the acts to pay their homage to the incomparable amoureuse. Hitherto she had received them with a circumspection

compelling respect. To-night she was recklessly gay, impudent, almost wanton.

He spoke of it gently to her as they walked home together, counselling more prudence in the future.

"We are not married yet," she told him, tartly. "Wait until then before you criticize my conduct."

"I trust that there will be no occasion then," said he.

"You trust? Ah, yes. You are very trusting."

"Climene, I have offended you. I am sorry."

"It is nothing," said she. "You are what you are." Still was he not concerned. He perceived the source of her ill-humour; understood, whilst deploring it; and, because he understood, forgave. He perceived also that her ill-humour was shared by her father, and by this he was frankly amused. Towards M. Binet a tolerant contempt was the only feeling that complete acquaintance could beget. As for the rest of the company, they were disposed to be very kindly towards Scaramouche. It was almost as if in reality he had fallen from the high estate to which their own imaginations had raised him; or possibly it was because they saw the effect which that fall from his temporary and fictitious elevation had produced upon Climene.

Leandre alone made himself an exception. His habitual melancholy seemed to be dispelled at last, and his eyes gleamed now with malicious satisfaction when they rested upon Scaramouche, whom occasionally he continued to address with sly mockery as "mon prince."

On the morrow Andre-Louis saw but little of Climene. This was not in itself extraordinary, for he was very hard at work again, with preparations now for "Figaro-Scaramouche" which was to be played

on Saturday. Also, in addition to his manifold theatrical occupations, he now devoted an hour every morning to the study of fencing in an academy of arms. This was done not only to repair an omission in his education, but also, and chiefly, to give him added grace and poise upon the stage. He found his mind that morning distracted by thoughts of both Climene and Aline. And oddly enough it was Aline who provided the deeper perturbation. Climene's attitude he regarded as a passing phase which need not seriously engage him. But the thought of Aline's conduct towards him kept rankling, and still more deeply rankled the thought of her possible betrothal to M. de La Tour d'Azyr.

This it was that brought forcibly to his mind the self-imposed but by now half-forgotten mission that he had made his own. He had boasted that he would make the voice which M. de La Tour d'Azyr had sought to silence ring through the length and breadth of the land. And what had he done of all this that he had boasted? He had incited the mob of Rennes and the mob of Nantes in such terms as poor Philippe might have employed, and then because of a hue and cry he had fled like a cur and taken shelter in the first kennel that offered, there to lie quiet and devote himself to other things—self-seeking things. What a fine contrast between the promise and the fulfilment!

Thus Andre-Louis to himself in his self-contempt. And whilst he trifled away his time and played Scaramouche, and centred all his hopes in presently becoming the rival of such men as Chenier and Mercier, M. de La Tour d'Azyr went his proud ways unchallenged and wrought his will. It was idle to tell himself that the seed he had sown was bearing fruit. That the demands he had voiced in Nantes for the Third Estate had been granted by M. Necker, thanks largely to the commotion which his anonymous speech had made. That was not his concern or his mission. It was no part of his concern to set about the regeneration of mankind, or even the regeneration of the social structure of France. His concern was to see that M. de La Tour d'Azyr

paid to the uttermost liard for the brutal wrong he had done Philippe de Vilmorin. And it did not increase his self-respect to find that the danger in which Aline stood of being married to the Marquis was the real spur to his rancour and to remembrance of his vow. He was—too unjustly, perhaps—disposed to dismiss as mere sophistries his own arguments that there was nothing he could do; that, in fact, he had but to show his head to find himself going to Rennes under arrest and making his final exit from the world's stage by way of the gallows.

It is impossible to read that part of his "Confessions" without feeling a certain pity for him. You realize what must have been his state of mind. You realize what a prey he was to emotions so conflicting, and if you have the imagination that will enable you to put yourself in his place, you will also realize how impossible was any decision save the one to which he says he came, that he would move, at the first moment that he perceived in what direction it would serve his real aims to move.

It happened that the first person he saw when he took the stage on that Thursday evening was Aline; the second was the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr. They occupied a box on the right of, and immediately above, the stage. There were others with them—notably a thin, elderly, resplendent lady whom Andre-Louis supposed to be Madame la Comtesse de Sautron. But at the time he had no eyes for any but those two, who of late had so haunted his thoughts. The sight of either of them would have been sufficiently disconcerting. The sight of both together very nearly made him forget the purpose for which he had come upon the stage. Then he pulled himself together, and played. He played, he says, with an unusual nerve, and never in all that brief but eventful career of his was he more applauded.

That was the evening's first shock. The next came after the second act. Entering the green-room he found it more thronged than usual, and at the far end with Climene, over whom he was bending from his

fine height, his eyes intent upon her face, what time his smiling lips moved in talk, M. de La Tour d'Azyr. He had her entirely to himself, a privilege none of the men of fashion who were in the habit of visiting the coulisse had yet enjoyed. Those lesser gentlemen had all withdrawn before the Marquis, as jackals withdraw before the lion.

Andre-Louis stared a moment, stricken. Then recovering from his surprise he became critical in his study of the Marquis. He considered the beauty and grace and splendour of him, his courtly air, his complete and unshakable self-possession. But more than all he considered the expression of the dark eyes that were devouring Climene's lovely face, and his own lips tightened.

M. de La Tour d'Azyr never heeded him or his stare; nor, had he done so, would he have known who it was that looked at him from behind the make-up of Scaramouche; nor, again, had he known, would he have been in the least troubled or concerned.

Andre-Louis sat down apart, his mind in turmoil. Presently he found a mincing young gentleman addressing him, and made shift to answer as was expected. Climene having been thus sequestered, and Columbine being already thickly besieged by gallants, the lesser visitors had to content themselves with Madame and the male members of the troupe. M. Binet, indeed, was the centre of a gay cluster that shook with laughter at his sallies. He seemed of a sudden to have emerged from the gloom of the last two days into high good-humour, and Scaramouche observed how persistently his eyes kept flickering upon his daughter and her splendid courtier.

That night there, were high words between Andre-Louis and Climene, the high words proceeding from Climene. When Andre-Louis again, and more insistently, enjoined prudence upon his betrothed, and begged her to beware how far she encouraged the advances of such a man as M. de La Tour d'Azyr, she became roundly abusive. She shocked and stunned him by her virulently

shrewish tone, and her still more unexpected force of invective.

He sought to reason with her, and finally she came to certain terms with him.

"If you have become betrothed to me simply to stand as an obstacle in my path, the sooner we make an end the better."

"You do not love me then, Climene?"

"Love has nothing to do with it. I'll not tolerate your insensate jealousy. A girl in the theatre must make it her business to accept homage from all."

"Agreed; and there is no harm, provided she gives nothing in exchange."

White-faced, with flaming eyes she turned on him at that.

"Now, what exactly do you mean?"

"My meaning is clear. A girl in your position may receive all the homage that is offered, provided she receives it with a dignified aloofness implying clearly that she has no favours to bestow in return beyond the favour of her smile. If she is wise she will see to it that the homage is always offered collectively by her admirers, and that no single one amongst them shall ever have the privilege of approaching her alone. If she is wise she will give no encouragement, nourish no hopes that it may afterwards be beyond her power to deny realization."

"How? You dare?"

"I know my world. And I know M. de La Tour d'Azyr," he answered her. "He is a man without charity, without humanity almost; a man who takes what he wants wherever he finds it and whether it is given willingly or not; a man who reckons nothing of the misery he scatters

on his self-indulgent way; a man whose only law is force. Ponder it, Climene, and ask yourself if I do you less than honour in warning you."

He went out on that, feeling a degradation in continuing the subject.

The days that followed were unhappy days for him, and for at least one other. That other was Leandre, who was cast into the profoundest dejection by M. de La Tour d'Azyr's assiduous attendance upon Climene. The Marquis was to be seen at every performance; a box was perpetually reserved for him, and invariably he came either alone or else with his cousin M. de Chabrilane.

On Tuesday of the following week, Andre-Louis went out alone early in the morning. He was out of temper, fretted by an overwhelming sense of humiliation, and he hoped to clear his mind by walking. In turning the corner of the Place du Bouffay he ran into a slightly built, sallow-complexioned gentleman very neatly dressed in black, wearing a tie-wig under a round hat. The man fell back at sight of him, levelling a spy-glass, then hailed him in a voice that rang with amazement.

"Moreau! Where the devil have you been hiding your-self these months?"

It was Le Chapelier, the lawyer, the leader of the Literary Chamber of Rennes.

"Behind the skirts of Thespis," said Scaramouche.

"I don't understand."

"I didn't intend that you should. What of yourself, Isaac? And what of the world which seems to have been standing still of late?"

"Standing still!" Le Chapelier laughed. "But where have you been, then? Standing still!" He pointed across the square to a café under the shadow of the gloomy prison. "Let us go and drink a bavaoise.

You are of all men the man we want, the man we have been seeking everywhere, and—behold!—you drop from the skies into my path."

They crossed the square and entered the café.

"So you think the world has been standing still! Dieu de Dieu! I suppose you haven't heard of the royal order for the convocation of the States General, or the terms of them—that we are to have what we demanded, what you demanded for us here in Nantes! You haven't heard that the order has gone forth for the primary elections—the elections of the electors. You haven't heard of the fresh uproar in Rennes, last month. The order was that the three estates should sit together at the States General of the bailliages, but in the bailliage of Rennes the nobles must ever be recalcitrant. They took up arms actually—six hundred of them with their valetaille, headed by your old friend M. de La Tour d'Azyr, and they were for slashing us—the members of the Third Estate—into ribbons so as to put an end to our insolence." He laughed delicately. "But, by God, we showed them that we, too, could take up arms. It was what you yourself advocated here in Nantes, last November. We fought them a pitched battle in the streets, under the leadership of your namesake Moreau, the provost, and we so peppered them that they were glad to take shelter in the Cordelier Convent. That is the end of their resistance to the royal authority and the people's will."

He ran on at great speed detailing the events that had taken place, and finally came to the matter which had, he announced, been causing him to hunt for Andre-Louis until he had all but despaired of finding him.

Nantes was sending fifty delegates to the assembly of Rennes which was to select the deputies to the Third Estate and edit their cahier of grievances. Rennes itself was being as fully represented, whilst such villages as Gavrillac were sending two delegates for every two hundred hearths or less. Each of these three had clamoured that

Andre-Louis Moreau should be one of its delegates. Gavrillac wanted him because he belonged to the village, and it was known there what sacrifices he had made in the popular cause; Rennes wanted him because it had heard his spirited address on the day of the shooting of the students; and Nantes—to whom his identity was unknown—asked for him as the speaker who had addressed them under the name of Omnes Omnibus and who had framed for them the memorial that was believed so largely to have influenced M. Necker in formulating the terms of the convocation.

Since he could not be found, the delegations had been made up without him. But now it happened that one or two vacancies had occurred in the Nantes representation; and it was the business of filling these vacancies that had brought Le Chapelier to Nantes.

Andre-Louis firmly shook his head in answer to Le Chapelier's proposal.

"You refuse?" the other cried. "Are you mad? Refuse, when you are demanded from so many sides? Do you realize that it is more than probable you will be elected one of the deputies, that you will be sent to the States General at Versailles to represent us in this work of saving France?"

But Andre-Louis, we know, was not concerned to save France. At the moment he was concerned to save two women, both of whom he loved, though in vastly different ways, from a man he had vowed to ruin. He stood firm in his refusal until Le Chapelier dejectedly abandoned the attempt to persuade him.

"It is odd," said Andre-Louis, "that I should have been so deeply immersed in trifles as never to have perceived that Nantes is being politically active."

"Active! My friend, it is a seething cauldron of political emotions. It

is kept quiet on the surface only by the persuasion that all goes well. At a hint to the contrary it would boil over."

"Would it so?" said Scaramouche, thoughtfully. "The knowledge may be useful." And then he changed the subject. "You know that La Tour d'Azyr is here?"

"In Nantes? He has courage if he shows himself. They are not a docile people, these Nantais, and they know his record and the part he played in the rising at Rennes. I marvel they haven't stoned him. But they will, sooner or later. It only needs that some one should suggest it."

"That is very likely," said Andre-Louis, and smiled. "He doesn't show himself much; not in the streets, at least. So that he has not the courage you suppose; nor any kind of courage, as I told him once. He has only insolence."

At parting Le Chapelier again exhorted him to give thought to what he proposed. "Send me word if you change your mind. I am lodged at the Cerf, and I shall be here until the day after to-morrow. If you have ambition, this is your moment."

"I have no ambition, I suppose," said Andre-Louis, and went his way.

That night at the theatre he had a mischievous impulse to test what Le Chapelier had told him of the state of public feeling in the city. They were playing "The Terrible Captain," in the last act of which the empty cowardice of the bullying braggart Rhodomont is revealed by Scaramouche.

After the laughter which the exposure of the roaring captain invariably produced, it remained for Scaramouche contemptuously to dismiss him in a phrase that varied nightly, according to the inspiration of the moment. This time he chose to give his phrase a

political complexion:

"Thus, O thrasonical coward, is your emptiness exposed. Because of your long length and the great sword you carry and the angle at which you cock your hat, people have gone in fear of you, have believed in you, have imagined you to be as terrible and as formidable as you insolently make yourself appear. But at the first touch of true spirit you crumple up, you tremble, you whine pitifully, and the great sword remains in your scabbard. You remind me of the Privileged Orders when confronted by the Third Estate."

It was audacious of him, and he was prepared for anything—a laugh, applause, indignation, or all together. But he was not prepared for what came. And it came so suddenly and spontaneously from the groundlings and the body of those in the amphitheatre that he was almost scared by it—as a boy may be scared who has held a match to a sun-scorched hayrick. It was a hurricane of furious applause. Men leapt to their feet, sprang up on to the benches, waving their hats in the air, deafening him with the terrific uproar of their acclamations. And it rolled on and on, nor ceased until the curtain fell.

Scaramouche stood meditatively smiling with tight lips. At the last moment he had caught a glimpse of M. de La Tour d'Azyr's face thrust farther forward than usual from the shadows of his box, and it was a face set in anger, with eyes on fire.

"Mon Dieu!" laughed Rhodomont, recovering from the real scare that had succeeded his histrionic terror, "but you have a great trick of tickling them in the right place, Scaramouche."

Scaramouche looked up at him and smiled. "It can be useful upon occasion," said he, and went off to his dressing-room to change.

But a reprimand awaited him. He was delayed at the theatre by matters concerned with the scenery of the new piece they were to

mount upon the morrow. By the time he was rid of the business the rest of the company had long since left. He called a chair and had himself carried back to the inn in solitary state. It was one of many minor luxuries his comparatively affluent present circumstances permitted.

Coming into that upstairs room that was common to all the troupe, he found M. Binet talking loudly and vehemently. He had caught sounds of his voice whilst yet upon the stairs. As he entered Binet broke off short, and wheeled to face him.

"You are here at last!" It was so odd a greeting that Andre-Louis did no more than look his mild surprise. "I await your explanations of the disgraceful scene you provoked to-night."

"Disgraceful? Is it disgraceful that the public should applaud me?"

"The public? The rabble, you mean. Do you want to deprive us of the patronage of all gentlefolk by vulgar appeals to the low passions of the mob?"

Andre-Louis stepped past M. Binet and forward to the table. He shrugged contemptuously. The man offended him, after all.

"You exaggerate grossly—as usual."

"I do not exaggerate. And I am the master in my own theatre. This is the Binet Troupe, and it shall be conducted in the Binet way."

"Who are the gentlefolk the loss of whose patronage to the Feydau will be so poignantly felt?" asked Andre-Louis.

"You imply that there are none? See how wrong you are. After the play to-night M. le Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr came to me, and spoke to me in the severest terms about your scandalous outburst. I was forced to apologize, and..."

"The more fool you," said Andre-Louis. "A man who respected himself would have shown that gentleman the door." M. Binet's face began to empurple. "You call yourself the head of the Binet Troupe, you boast that you will be master in your own theatre, and you stand like a lackey to take the orders of the first insolent fellow who comes to your green-room to tell you that he does not like a line spoken by one of your company! I say again that had you really respected yourself you would have turned him out."

There was a murmur of approval from several members of the company, who, having heard the arrogant tone assumed by the Marquis, were filled with resentment against the slur cast upon them all.

"And I say further," Andre-Louis went on, "that a man who respects himself, on quite other grounds, would have been only too glad to have seized this pretext to show M. de La Tour d'Azyr the door."

"What do you mean by that?" There was a rumble of thunder in the question.

Andre-Louis' eyes swept round the company assembled at the supper-table. "Where is Climene?" he asked, sharply.

Leandre leapt up to answer him, white in the face, tense and quivering with excitement.

"She left the theatre in the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr's carriage immediately after the performance. We heard him offer to drive her to this inn."

Andre-Louis glanced at the timepiece on the overmantel. He seemed unnaturally calm.

"That would be an hour ago—rather more. And she has not yet arrived?"

His eyes sought M. Binet's. M. Binet's eyes eluded his glance. Again it was Leandre who answered him.

"Not yet."

"Ah!" Andre-Louis sat down, and poured himself wine. There was an oppressive silence in the room. Leandre watched him expectantly, Columbine commiseratingly. Even M. Binet appeared to be waiting for a cue from Scaramouche. But Scaramouche disappointed him. "Have you left me anything to eat?" he asked.

Platters were pushed towards him. He helped himself calmly to food, and ate in silence, apparently with a good appetite. M. Binet sat down, poured himself wine, and drank. Presently he attempted to make conversation with one and another. He was answered curtly, in monosyllables. M. Binet did not appear to be in favour with his troupe that night.

At long length came a rumble of wheels below and a rattle of halting hooves. Then voices, the high, trilling laugh of Climene floating upwards. Andre-Louis went on eating unconcernedly.

"What an actor!" said Harlequin under his breath to Polichinelle, and Polichinelle nodded gloomily.

She came in, a leading lady taking the stage, head high, chin thrust forward, eyes dancing with laughter; she expressed triumph and arrogance. Her cheeks were flushed, and there was some disorder in the mass of nut-brown hair that crowned her head. In her left hand she carried an enormous bouquet of white camellias. On its middle finger a diamond of great price drew almost at once by its effulgence the eyes of all.

Her father sprang to meet her with an unusual display of paternal tenderness. "At last, my child!"

He conducted her to the table. She sank into a chair, a little wearily, a little nervelessly, but the smile did not leave her face, not even when she glanced across at Scaramouche. It was only Leandre, observing her closely, with hungry, scowling stare, who detected something as of fear in the hazel eyes momentarily seen between the fluttering of her lids.

Andre-Louis, however, still went on eating stolidly, without so much as a look in her direction. Gradually the company came to realize that just as surely as a scene was brooding, just so surely would there be no scene as long as they remained. It was Polichinelle, at last, who gave the signal by rising and withdrawing, and within two minutes none remained in the room but M. Binet, his daughter, and Andre-Louis. And then, at last, Andre-Louis set down knife and fork, washed his throat with a draught of Burgundy, and sat back in his chair to consider Climene.

"I trust," said he, "that you had a pleasant ride, mademoiselle."

"Most pleasant, monsieur." Impudently she strove to emulate his coolness, but did not completely succeed.

"And not unprofitable, if I may judge that jewel at this distance. It should be worth at least a couple of hundred louis, and that is a formidable sum even to so wealthy a nobleman as M. de La Tour d'Azyr. Would it be impertinent in one who has had some notion of becoming your husband, to ask you, mademoiselle, what you have given him in return?"

M. Binet uttered a gross laugh, a queer mixture of cynicism and contempt.

"I have given nothing," said Climene, indignantly.

"Ah! Then the jewel is in the nature of a payment in advance."

"My God, man, you're not decent!" M. Binet protested.

"Decent?" Andre-Louis' smouldering eyes turned to discharge upon M. Binet such a fulmination of contempt that the old scoundrel shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Did you mention decency, Binet? Almost you make me lose my temper, which is a thing that I detest above all others!" Slowly his glance returned to Climene, who sat with elbows on the table, her chin cupped in her palms, regarding him with something between scorn and defiance. "Mademoiselle," he said, slowly, "I desire you purely in your own interests to consider whither you are going."

"I am well able to consider it for myself, and to decide without advice from you, monsieur."

"And now you've got your answer," chuckled Binet. "I hope you like it."

Andre-Louis had paled a little; there was incredulity in his great sombre eyes as they continued steadily to regard her. Of M. Binet he took no notice.

"Surely, mademoiselle, you cannot mean that willingly, with open eyes and a full understanding of what you do, you would exchange an honourable wifehood for... for the thing that such men as M. de La Tour d'Azyr may have in store for you?"

M. Binet made a wide gesture, and swung to his daughter. "You hear him, the mealy-mouthed prude! Perhaps you'll believe at last that marriage with him would be the ruin of you. He would always be there the inconvenient husband—to mar your every chance, my girl."

She tossed her lovely head in agreement with her father "I begin to find him tiresome with his silly jealousies," she confessed. "As a husband I am afraid he would be impossible."

Andre-Louis felt a constriction of the heart. But—always the actor—he showed nothing of it. He laughed a little, not very pleasantly, and rose.

"I bow to your choice, mademoiselle. I pray that you may not regret it."

"Regret it?" cried M. Binet. He was laughing, relieved to see his daughter at last rid of this suitor of whom he had never approved, if we except those few hours when he really believed him to be an eccentric of distinction. "And what shall she regret? That she accepted the protection of a nobleman so powerful and wealthy that as a mere trinket he gives her a jewel worth as much as an actress earns in a year at the Comedie Francaise?" He got up, and advanced towards Andre-Louis. His mood became conciliatory. "Come, come, my friend, no rancour now. What the devil! You wouldn't stand in the girl's way? You can't really blame her for making this choice? Have you thought what it means to her? Have you thought that under the protection of such a gentleman there are no heights which she may not reach? Don't you see the wonderful luck of it? Surely, if you're fond of her, particularly being of a jealous temperament, you wouldn't wish it otherwise?"

Andre-Louis looked at him in silence for a long moment. Then he laughed again. "Oh, you are fantastic," he said. "You are not real." He turned on his heel and strode to the door.

The action, and more the contempt of his look, laugh, and words stung M. Binet to passion, drove out the conciliatoriness of his mood.

"Fantastic, are we?" he cried, turning to follow the departing Scaramouche with his little eyes that now were inexpressibly evil. "Fantastic that we should prefer the powerful protection of this great nobleman to marriage with beggarly, nameless bastard. Oh, we are fantastic!"

Andre-Louis turned, his hand upon the door-handle. "No," he said, "I was mistaken. You are not fantastic. You are just vile—both of you." And he went out.

CHAPTER X. CONTRITION

Mlle. de Kercadiou walked with her aunt in the bright morning sunshine of a Sunday in March on the broad terrace of the Chateau de Sautron.

For one of her natural sweetness of disposition she had been oddly irritable of late, manifesting signs of a cynical worldliness, which convinced Mme. de Sautron more than ever that her brother Quintin had scandalously conducted the child's education. She appeared to be instructed in all the things of which a girl is better ignorant, and ignorant of all the things that a girl should know. That at least was the point of view of Mme. de Sautron.

"Tell me, madame," quoth Aline, "are all men beasts?" Unlike her brother, Madame la Comtesse was tall and majestically built. In the days before her marriage with M. de Sautron, ill-natured folk described her as the only man in the family. She looked down now from her noble height upon her little niece with startled eyes.

"Really, Aline, you have a trick of asking the most disconcerting and improper questions."

"Perhaps it is because I find life disconcerting and improper."

"Life? A young girl should not discuss life."

"Why not, since I am alive? You do not suggest that it is an impropriety to be alive?"

"It is an impropriety for a young unmarried girl to seek to know too much about life. As for your absurd question about men, when I remind you that man is the noblest work of God, perhaps you will

consider yourself answered."

Mme. de Sautron did not invite a pursuance of the subject. But Mlle. de Kercadiou's outrageous rearing had made her headstrong.

"That being so," said she, "will you tell me why they find such an overwhelming attraction in the immodest of our sex?"

Madame stood still and raised shocked hands. Then she looked down her handsome, high-bridged nose.

"Sometimes—often, in fact, my dear Aline—you pass all understanding. I shall write to Quintin that the sooner you are married the better it will be for all."

"Uncle Quintin has left that matter to my own deciding," Aline reminded her.

"That," said madame with complete conviction, "is the last and most outrageous of his errors. Who ever heard of a girl being left to decide the matter of her own marriage? It is... indelicate almost to expose her to thoughts of such things." Mme. de Sautron shuddered. "Quintin is a boor. His conduct is unheard of. That M. de La Tour d'Azyr should parade himself before you so that you may make up your mind whether he is the proper man for you!" Again she shuddered. "It is of a grossness, of... of a prurience almost... Mon Dieu! When I married your uncle, all this was arranged between our parents. I first saw him when he came to sign the contract. I should have died of shame had it been otherwise. And that is how these affairs should be conducted."

"You are no doubt right, madame. But since that is not how my own case is being conducted, you will forgive me if I deal with it apart from others. M. de La Tour d'Azyr desires to marry me. He has been permitted to pay his court. I should be glad to have him informed that he may cease to do so."

Mme. de Sautron stood still, petrified by amazement. Her long face turned white; she seemed to breathe with difficulty.

"But... but... what are you saying?" she gasped.

Quietly Aline repeated her statement.

"But this is outrageous! You cannot be permitted to play fast-and-loose with a gentleman of M. le Marquis' quality! Why, it is little more than a week since you permitted him to be informed that you would become his wife!"

"I did so in a moment of... rashness. Since then M. le Marquis' own conduct has convinced me of my error."

"But—mon Dieu!" cried the Countess. "Are you blind to the great honour that is being paid you? M. le Marquis will make you the first lady in Brittany. Yet, little fool that you are, and greater fool that Quintin is, you trifle with this extraordinary good fortune! Let me warn you." She raised an admonitory forefinger. "If you continue in this stupid humour M. de La Tour d'Azyr may definitely withdraw his offer and depart in justified mortification."

"That, madame, as I am endeavouring to convey to you, is what I most desire."

"Oh, you are mad."

"It may be, madame, that I am sane in preferring to be guided by my instincts. It may be even that I am justified in resenting that the man who aspires to become my husband should at the same time be paying such assiduous homage to a wretched theatre girl at the Feydau."

"Aline!"

"Is it not true? Or perhaps you do not find it strange that M. de La Tour d'Azyr should so conduct himself at such a time?"

"Aline, you are so extraordinary a mixture. At moments you shock me by the indecency of your expressions; at others you amaze me by the excess of your prudery. You have been brought up like a little bourgeoisie, I think. Yes, that is it—a little bourgeoisie. Quentin was always something of a shopkeeper at heart."

"I was asking your opinion on the conduct of M. de La Tour d'Azyr, madame. Not on my own."

"But it is an indelicacy in you to observe such things. You should be ignorant of them, and I can't think who is so... so unfeeling as to inform you. But since you are informed, at least you should be modestly blind to things that take place outside the... orbit of a properly conducted demoiselle."

"Will they still be outside my orbit when I am married?"

"If you are wise. You should remain without knowledge of them. It... it deflowers your innocence. I would not for the world that M. de La Tour d'Azyr should know you so extraordinarily instructed. Had you been properly reared in a convent this would never have happened to you."

"But you do not answer me, madame!" cried Aline in despair. "It is not my chastity that is in question; but that of M. de La Tour d'Azyr."

"Chastity!" Madame's lips trembled with horror. Horror overspread her face. "Wherever did you learn that dreadful, that so improper word?"

And then Mme. de Sautron did violence to her feelings. She realized that here great calm and prudence were required. "My child, since you know so much that you ought not to know, there can be no

harm in my adding that a gentleman must have these little distractions."

"But why, madame? Why is it so?"

"Ah, mon Dieu, you are asking me riddles of nature. It is so because it is so. Because men are like that."

"Because men are beasts, you mean—which is what I began by asking you."

"You are incorrigibly stupid, Aline."

"You mean that I do not see things as you do, madame. I am not over-expectant as you appear to think; yet surely I have the right to expect that whilst M. de La Tour d'Azyr is wooing me, he shall not be wooing at the same time a drab of the theatre. I feel that in this there is a subtle association of myself with that unspeakable creature which soils and insults me. The Marquis is a dullard whose wooing takes the form at best of stilted compliments, stupid and unoriginal. They gain nothing when they fall from lips still warm from the contamination of that woman's kisses."

So utterly scandalized was madame that for a moment she remained speechless. Then—

"Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed. "I should never have suspected you of so indelicate an imagination."

"I cannot help it, madame. Each time his lips touch my fingers I find myself thinking of the last object that they touched. I at once retire to wash my hands. Next time, madame, unless you are good enough to convey my message to him, I shall call for water and wash them in his presence."

"But what am I to tell him? How... in what words can I convey such a message?" Madame was aghast.

"Be frank with him, madame. It is easiest in the end. Tell him that however impure may have been his life in the past, however impure he intend that it shall be in the future, he must at least study purity whilst approaching with a view to marriage a virgin who is herself pure and without stain."

Madame recoiled, and put her hands to her ears, horror stamped on her handsome face. Her massive bosom heaved.

"Oh, how can you?" she panted. "How can you make use of such terrible expressions? Wherever have you learnt them?"

"In church," said Aline.

"Ah, but in church many things are said that... that one would not dream of saying in the world. My dear child, how could I possibly say such a thing to M. le Marquis? How could I possibly?"

"Shall I say it?"

"Aline!"

"Well, there it is," said Aline. "Something must be done to shelter me from insult. I am utterly disgusted with M. le Marquis—a disgusting man. And however fine a thing it may be to become Marquise de La Tour d'Azyr, why, frankly, I'd sooner marry a cobbler who practised decency."

Such was her vehemence and obvious determination that Mme. de Sautron fetched herself out of her despair to attempt persuasion. Aline was her niece, and such a marriage in the family would be to the credit of the whole of it. At all costs nothing must frustrate it.

"Listen, my dear," she said. "Let us reason. M. le Marquis is away and will not be back until to-morrow."

"True. And I know where he has gone—or at least whom he has gone with. Mon Dieu, and the drab has a father and a lout of a fellow who intends to make her his wife, and neither of them chooses to do anything. I suppose they agree with you, madame, that a great gentleman must have his little distractions." Her contempt was as scorching as a thing of fire. "However, madame, you were about to say?"

"That on the day after to-morrow you are returning to Gavrillac. M. de La Tour d'Azyr will most likely follow at his leisure."

"You mean when this dirty candle is burnt out?"

"Call it what you will." Madame, you see, despaired by now of controlling the impropriety of her niece's expressions. "At Gavrillac there will be no Mlle. Binet. This thing will be in the past. It is unfortunate that he should have met her at such a moment. The chit is very attractive, after all. You cannot deny that. And you must make allowances."

"M. le Marquis formally proposed to me a week ago. Partly to satisfy the wishes of the family, and partly..." She broke off, hesitating a moment, to resume on a note of dull pain, "Partly because it does not seem greatly to matter whom I marry, I gave him my consent. That consent, for the reasons I have given you, madame, I desire now definitely to withdraw."

Madame fell into agitation of the wildest. "Aline, I should never forgive you! Your uncle Quintin would be in despair. You do not know what you are saying, what a wonderful thing you are refusing. Have you no sense of your position, of the station into which you were born?"

"If I had not, madame, I should have made an end long since. If I have tolerated this suit for a single moment, it is because I realize the

importance of a suitable marriage in the worldly sense. But I ask of marriage something more; and Uncle Quintin has placed the decision in my hands."

"God forgive him!" said madame. And then she hurried on: "Leave this to me now, Aline. Be guided by me—oh, be guided by me!" Her tone was beseeching. "I will take counsel with your uncle Charles. But do not definitely decide until this unfortunate affair has blown over. Charles will know how to arrange it. M. le Marquis shall do penance, child, since your tyranny demands it; but not in sackcloth and ashes. You'll not ask so much?"

Aline shrugged. "I ask nothing at all," she said, which was neither assent nor dissent.

So Mme. de Sautron interviewed her husband, a slight, middle-aged man, very aristocratic in appearance and gifted with a certain shrewd sense. She took with him precisely the tone that Aline had taken with herself and which in Aline she had found so disconcertingly indelicate. She even borrowed several of Aline's phrases.

The result was that on the Monday afternoon when at last M. de La Tour d'Azyr's returning berline drove up to the chateau, he was met by M. le Comte de Sautron who desired a word with him even before he changed.

"Gervais, you're a fool," was the excellent opening made by M. le Comte.

"Charles, you give me no news," answered M. le Marquis. "Of what particular folly do you take the trouble to complain?"

He flung himself wearily upon a sofa, and his long graceful body sprawling there he looked up at his friend with a tired smile on that nobly handsome pale face that seemed to defy the onslaught of age.

"Of your last. This Binet girl."

"That! Pooh! An incident; hardly a folly."

"A folly—at such a time," Sautron insisted. The Marquis looked a question. The Count answered it. "Aline," said he, pregnantly. "She knows. How she knows I can't tell you, but she knows, and she is deeply offended."

The smile perished on the Marquis' face. He gathered himself up.

"Offended?" said he, and his voice was anxious.

"But yes. You know what she is. You know the ideals she has formed. It wounds her that at such a time—whilst you are here for the purpose of wooing her—you should at the same time be pursuing this affair with that chit of a Binet girl."

"How do you know?" asked La Tour d'Azyr.

"She has confided in her aunt. And the poor child seems to have some reason. She says she will not tolerate that you should come to kiss her hand with lips that are still contaminated from... Oh, you understand. You appreciate the impression of such a thing upon a pure, sensitive girl such as Aline. She said—I had better tell you—that the next time you kiss her hand, she will call for water and wash it in your presence."

The Marquis' face flamed scarlet. He rose. Knowing his violent, intolerant spirit, M. de Sautron was prepared for an outburst. But no outburst came. The Marquis turned away from him, and paced slowly to the window, his head bowed, his hands behind his back. Halted there he spoke, without turning, his voice was at once scornful and wistful.

"You are right, Charles, I am a fool—a wicked fool! I have just enough sense left to perceive it. It is the way I have lived, I suppose. I

have never known the need to deny myself anything I wanted." Then suddenly he swung round, and the outburst came. "But, my God, I want Aline as I have never wanted anything yet! I think I should kill myself in rage if through my folly I should have lost her." He struck his brow with his hand. "I am a beast!" he said. "I should have known that if that sweet saint got word of these petty devilries of mine she would despise me; and I tell you, Charles, I'd go through fire to regain her respect."

"I hope it is to be regained on easier terms," said Charles; and then to ease the situation which began to irk him by its solemnity, he made a feeble joke. "It is merely asked of you that you refrain from going through certain fires that are not accounted by mademoiselle of too purifying a nature."

"As to that Binet girl, it is finished—finished," said the Marquis.

"I congratulate you. When did you make that decision?"

"This moment. I would to God I had made it twenty-four hours ago. As it is—" he shrugged—"why, twenty-four hours of her have been enough for me as they would have been for any man—a mercenary, self-seeking little baggage with the soul of a trull. Bah!" He shuddered in disgust of himself and her.

"Ah! That makes it easier for you," said M. de Sautron, cynically.

"Don't say it, Charles. It is not so. Had you been less of a fool, you would have warned me sooner."

"I may prove to have warned you soon enough if you'll profit by the warning."

"There is no penance I will not do. I will prostrate myself at her feet. I will abase myself before her. I will make confession in the proper spirit of contrition, and Heaven helping me, I'll keep to my purpose of

amendment for her sweet sake." He was tragically in earnest.

To M. de Sautron, who had never seen him other than self-contained, supercilious, and mocking, this was an amazing revelation. He shrank from it almost; it gave him the feeling of prying, of peeping through a keyhole. He slapped his friend's shoulder.

"My dear Gervais, here is a magnificently romantic mood. Enough said. Keep to it, and I promise you that all will presently be well. I will be your ambassador, and you shall have no cause to complain."

"But may I not go to her myself?"

"If you are wise you will at once efface yourself. Write to her if you will—make your act of contrition by letter. I will explain why you have gone without seeing her. I will tell her that you did so upon my advice, and I will do it tactfully. I am a good diplomat, Gervais. Trust me."

M. le Marquis raised his head, and showed a face that pain was searing. He held out his hand. "Very well, Charles. Serve me in this, and count me your friend in all things."

CHAPTER XI. THE FRACAS AT THE THEATRE FEYDAU

Leaving his host to act as his plenipotentiary with Mademoiselle de Kercadiou, and to explain to her that it was his profound contrition that compelled him to depart without taking formal leave of her, the Marquis rolled away from Sautron in a cloud of gloom. Twenty-four hours with La Binet had been more than enough for a man of his fastidious and discerning taste. He looked back upon the episode with nausea—the inevitable psychological reaction—marvelling at himself that until yesterday he should have found her so desirable, and cursing himself that for the sake of that ephemeral and worthless gratification he should seriously have imperilled his chances of winning Mademoiselle de Kercadiou to wife. There is, after all, nothing very extraordinary in his frame of mind, so that I need not elaborate it further. It resulted from the conflict between the beast and the angel that go to make up the composition of every man.

The Chevalier de Chabrilane—who in reality occupied towards the Marquis a position akin to that of gentleman-in-waiting—sat opposite to him in the enormous travelling berline. A small folding table had been erected between them, and the Chevalier suggested piquet. But M. le Marquis was in no humour for cards. His thoughts absorbed him. As they were rattling over the cobbles of Nantes' streets, he remembered a promise to La Binet to witness her performance that night in "The Faithless Lover." And now he was running away from her. The thought was repugnant to him on two scores. He was breaking his pledged word, and he was acting like a coward. And there was more than that. He had led the mercenary little strumpet—it was thus he thought of her at present, and with some justice—to

expect favours from him in addition to the lavish awards which already he had made her. The baggage had almost sought to drive a bargain with him as to her future. He was to take her to Paris, put her into her own furniture—as the expression ran, and still runs—and under the shadow of his powerful protection see that the doors of the great theatres of the capital should be opened to her talents. He had not—he was thankful to reflect—exactly committed himself. But neither had he definitely refused her. It became necessary now to come to an understanding, since he was compelled to choose between his trivial passion for her—a passion quenched already—and his deep, almost spiritual devotion to Mademoiselle de Kercadiou.

His honour, he considered, demanded of him that he should at once deliver himself from a false position. La Binet would make a scene, of course; but he knew the proper specific to apply to hysteria of that nature. Money, after all, has its uses.

He pulled the cord. The carriage rolled to a standstill; a footman appeared at the door.

"To the Theatre Feydau," said he.

The footman vanished and the berline rolled on. M. de Chabrilane laughed cynically.

"I'll trouble you not to be amused," snapped the Marquis. "You don't understand." Thereafter he explained himself. It was a rare condescension in him. But, then, he could not bear to be misunderstood in such a matter. Chabrilane grew serious in reflection of the Marquis' extreme seriousness.

"Why not write?" he suggested. "Myself, I confess that I should find it easier."

Nothing could better have revealed M. le Marquis' state of mind than his answer.

"Letters are liable both to miscarriage and to misconstruction. Two risks I will not run. If she did not answer, I should never know which had been incurred. And I shall have no peace of mind until I know that I have set a term to this affair. The berline can wait while we are at the theatre. We will go on afterwards. We will travel all night if necessary."

"Peste!" said M. de Chabrilane with a grimace. But that was all.

The great travelling carriage drew up at the lighted portals of the Feydau, and M. le Marquis stepped out. He entered the theatre with Chabrilane, all unconsciously to deliver himself into the hands of Andre-Louis.

Andre-Louis was in a state of exasperation produced by Climene's long absence from Nantes in the company of M. le Marquis, and fed by the unspeakable complacency with which M. Binet regarded that event of quite unmistakable import.

However much he might affect the frame of mind of the stoics, and seek to judge with a complete detachment, in the heart and soul of him Andre-Louis was tormented and revolted. It was not Climene he blamed. He had been mistaken in her. She was just a poor weak vessel driven helplessly by the first breath, however foul, that promised her advancement. She suffered from the plague of greed; and he congratulated himself upon having discovered it before making her his wife. He felt for her now nothing but a deal of pity and some contempt. The pity was begotten of the love she had lately inspired in him. It might be likened to the dregs of love, all that remained after the potent wine of it had been drained off. His anger he reserved for her father and her seducer.

The thoughts that were stirring in him on that Monday morning, when it was discovered that Climene had not yet returned from her excursion of the previous day in the coach of M. le Marquis, were already wicked enough without the spurring they received from the

distraught Leandre.

Hitherto the attitude of each of these men towards the other had been one of mutual contempt. The phenomenon has frequently been observed in like cases. Now, what appeared to be a common misfortune brought them into a sort of alliance. So, at least, it seemed to Leandre when he went in quest of Andre-Louis, who with apparent unconcern was smoking a pipe upon the quay immediately facing the inn.

"Name of a pig!" said Leandre. "How can you take your ease and smoke at such a time?"

Scaramouche surveyed the sky. "I do not find it too cold," said he. "The sun is shining. I am very well here."

"Do I talk of the weather?" Leandre was very excited.

"Of what, then?"

"Of Climene, of course."

"Oh! The lady has ceased to interest me," he lied.

Leandre stood squarely in front of him, a handsome figure handsomely dressed in these days, his hair well powdered, his stockings of silk. His face was pale, his large eyes looked larger than usual.

"Ceased to interest you? Are you not to marry her?"

Andre-Louis expelled a cloud of smoke. "You cannot wish to be offensive. Yet you almost suggest that I live on other men's leavings."

"My God!" said Leandre, overcome, and he stared awhile. Then he burst out afresh. "Are you quite heartless? Are you always Scaramouche?"

"What do you expect me to do?" asked Andre-Louis, evincing surprise in his own turn, but faintly.

"I do not expect you to let her go without a struggle."

"But she has gone already." Andre-Louis pulled at his pipe a moment, what time Leandre clenched and unclenched his hands in impotent rage. "And to what purpose struggle against the inevitable? Did you struggle when I took her from you?"

"She was not mine to be taken from me. I but aspired, and you won the race. But even had it been otherwise where is the comparison? That was a thing in honour; this—this is hell."

His emotion moved Andre-Louis. He took Leandre's arm. "You're a good fellow, Leandre. I am glad I intervened to save you from your fate."

"Oh, you don't love her!" cried the other, passionately. "You never did. You don't know what it means to love, or you'd not talk like this. My God! if she had been my affianced wife and this had happened, I should have killed the man—killed him! Do you hear me? But you... Oh, you, you come out here and smoke, and take the air, and talk of her as another man's leavings. I wonder I didn't strike you for the word."

He tore his arm from the other's grip, and looked almost as if he would strike him now.

"You should have done it," said Andre-Louis. "It's in your part."

With an imprecation Leandre turned on his heel to go. Andre-Louis arrested his departure.

"A moment, my friend. Test me by yourself. Would you marry her now?"

"Would I?" The young man's eyes blazed with passion. "Would I? Let her say that she will marry me, and I am her slave."

"Slave is the right word—a slave in hell."

"It would never be hell to me where she was, whatever she had done. I love her, man, I am not like you. I love her, do you hear me?"

"I have known, it for some time," said Andre-Louis. "Though I didn't suspect your attack of the disease to be quite so violent. Well, God knows I loved her, too, quite enough to share your thirst for killing. For myself, the blue blood of La Tour d'Azyr would hardly quench this thirst. I should like to add to it the dirty fluid that flows in the veins of the unspeakable Binet."

For a second his emotion had been out of hand, and he revealed to Leandre in the mordant tone of those last words something of the fires that burned under his icy exterior. The young man caught him by the hand.

"I knew you were acting," said he. "You feel—you feel as I do."

"Behold us, fellows in viciousness. I have betrayed myself, it seems. Well, and what now? Do you want to see this pretty Marquis torn limb from limb? I might afford you the spectacle."

"What?" Leandre stared, wondering was this another of Scaramouche's cynicisms.

"It isn't really difficult provided I have aid. I require only a little. Will you lend it me?"

"Anything you ask," Leandre exploded. "My life if you require it."

Andre-Louis took his arm again. "Let us walk," he said. "I will instruct you."

When they came back the company was already at dinner. Mademoiselle had not yet returned. Sullenness presided at the table. Columbine and Madame wore anxious expressions. The fact was that relations between Binet and his troupe were daily growing more strained.

Andre-Louis and Leandre went each to his accustomed place. Binet's little eyes followed them with a malicious gleam, his thick lips pouted into a crooked smile.

"You two are grown very friendly of a sudden," he mocked.

"You are a man of discernment, Binet," said Scaramouche, the cold loathing of his voice itself an insult. "Perhaps you discern the reason?"

"It is readily discerned."

"Regale the company with it!" he begged; and waited. "What? You hesitate? Is it possible that there are limits to your shamelessness?"

Binet reared his great head. "Do you want to quarrel with me, Scaramouche?" Thunder was rumbling in his deep, voice.

"Quarrel? You want to laugh. A man doesn't quarrel with creatures like you. We all know the place held in the public esteem by complacent husbands. But, in God's name, what place is there at all for complacent fathers?"

Binet heaved himself up, a great towering mass of manhood. Violently he shook off the restraining hand of Pierrot who sat on his left.

"A thousand devils!" he roared; "if you take that tone with me, I'll break every bone in your filthy body."

"If you were to lay a finger on me, Binet, you would give me the only

provocation I still need to kill you." Andre-Louis was as calm as ever, and therefore the more menacing. Alarm stirred the company. He protruded from his pocket the butt of a pistol—newly purchased. "I go armed, Binet. It is only fair to give you warning. Provoke me as you have suggested, and I'll kill you with no more compunction than I should kill a slug, which after all is the thing you most resemble—a slug, Binet; a fat, slimy body; foulness without soul and without intelligence. When I come to think of it I can't suffer to sit at table with you. It turns my stomach."

He pushed away his platter and got up. "I'll go and eat at the ordinary below stairs."

Thereupon up jumped Columbine.

"And I'll come with you, Scaramouche!" cried she.

It acted like a signal. Had the thing been concerted it couldn't have fallen out more uniformly. Binet, in fact, was persuaded of a conspiracy. For in the wake of Columbine went Leandre, in the wake of Leandre, Polichinelle and then all the rest together, until Binet found himself sitting alone at the head of an empty table in an empty room—a badly shaken man whose rage could afford him no support against the dread by which he was suddenly invaded.

He sat down to think things out, and he was still at that melancholy occupation when perhaps a half-hour later his daughter entered the room, returned at last from her excursion.

She looked pale, even a little scared—in reality excessively self-conscious now that the ordeal of facing all the company awaited her.

Seeing no one but her father in the room, she checked on the threshold.

"Where is everybody?" she asked, in a voice rendered natural by

effort.

M. Binet reared his great head and turned upon her eyes that were blood-injected. He scowled, blew out his thick lips and made harsh noises in his throat. Yet he took stock of her, so graceful and comely and looking so completely the lady of fashion in her long fur-trimmed travelling coat of bottle green, her muff and her broad hat adorned by a sparkling Rhinestone buckle above her adorably coiffed brown hair. No need to fear the future whilst he owned such a daughter, let Scaramouche play what tricks he would.

He expressed, however, none of these comforting reflections.

"So you're back at last, little fool," he growled in greeting. "I was beginning to ask myself if we should perform this evening. It wouldn't greatly have surprised me if you had not returned in time. Indeed, since you have chosen to play the fine hand you held in your own way and scorning my advice, nothing can surprise me."

She crossed the room to the table, and leaning against it, looked down upon him almost disdainfully.

"I have nothing to regret," she said.

"So every fool says at first. Nor would you admit it if you had. You are like that. You go your own way in spite of advice from older heads. Death of my life, girl, what do you know of men?"

"I am not complaining," she reminded him.

"No, but you may be presently, when you discover that you would have done better to have been guided by your old father. So long as your Marquis languished for you, there was nothing you could not have done with the fool. So long as you let him have no more than your fingertips to kiss... ah, name of a name! that was the time to build your future. If you live to be a thousand you'll never have such a chance

again, and you've squandered it, for what?"

Mademoiselle sat down.—"You're sordid," she said, with disgust.

"Sordid, am I?" His thick lips curled again. "I have had enough of the dregs of life, and so I should have thought have you. You held a hand on which to have won a fortune if you had played it as I bade you. Well, you've played it, and where's the fortune? We can whistle for that as a sailor whistles for wind. And, by Heaven, we'll need to whistle presently if the weather in the troupe continues as it's set in. That scoundrel Scaramouche has been at his ape's tricks with them. They've suddenly turned moral. They won't sit at table with me any more." He was spluttering between anger and sardonic mirth. "It was your friend Scaramouche set them the example of that. He threatened my life actually. Threatened my life! Called me... Oh, but what does that matter? What matters is that the next thing to happen to us will be that the Binet Troupe will discover it can manage without M. Binet and his daughter. This scoundrelly bastard I've befriended has little by little robbed me of everything. It's in his power to-day to rob me of my troupe, and the knave's ungrateful enough and vile enough to make use of his power.

"Let him," said mademoiselle contemptuously.

"Let him?" He was aghast. "And what's to become of us?"

"In no case will the Binet Troupe interest me much longer," said she. "I shall be going to Paris soon. There are better theatres there than the Feydau. There's Mlle. Montansier's theatre in the Palais Royal; there's the Ambigu Comique; there's the Comedie Francaise; there's even a possibility I may have a theatre of my own."

His eyes grew big for once. He stretched out a fat hand, and placed it on one of hers. She noticed that it trembled.

"Has he promised that? Has he promised?"

She looked at him with her head on one side, eyes sly and a queer little smile on her perfect lips.

"He did not refuse me when I asked it," she answered, with conviction that all was as she desired it.

"Bah!" He withdrew his hand, and heaved himself up. There was disgust on his face. "He did not refuse!" he mocked her; and then with passion: "Had you acted as I advised you, he would have consented to anything that you asked, and what is more he would have provided anything that you asked—anything that lay within his means, and they are inexhaustible. You have changed a certainty into a possibility, and I hate possibilities—God of God! I have lived on possibilities, and infernally near starved on them."

Had she known of the interview taking place at that moment at the Chateau de Sautron she would have laughed less confidently at her father's gloomy forebodings. But she was destined never to know, which indeed was the cruellest punishment of all. She was to attribute all the evil that of a sudden overwhelmed her, the shattering of all the future hopes she had founded upon the Marquis and the sudden disintegration of the Binet Troupe, to the wicked interference of that villain Scaramouche.

She had this much justification that possibly, without the warning from M. de Sautron, the Marquis would have found in the events of that evening at the Theatre Feydau a sufficient reason for ending an entanglement that was fraught with too much unpleasant excitement, whilst the breaking-up of the Binet Troupe was most certainly the result of Andre-Louis' work. But it was not a result that he intended or even foresaw.

So much was this the case that in the interval after the second act, he sought the dressing-room shared by Polichinelle and Rhodomont. Polichinelle was in the act of changing.

"I shouldn't trouble to change," he said. "The piece isn't likely to go beyond my opening scene of the next act with Leandre."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see." He put a paper on Polichinelle's table amid the grease-paints. "Cast your eye over that. It's a sort of last will and testament in favour of the troupe. I was a lawyer once; the document is in order. I relinquish to all of you the share produced by my partnership in the company."

"But you don't mean that you are leaving us?" cried Polichinelle in alarm, whilst Rhodomont's sudden stare asked the same question.

Scaramouche's shrug was eloquent. Polichinelle ran on gloomily: "Of course it was to have been foreseen. But why should you be the one to go? It is you who have made us; and it is you who are the real head and brains of the troupe; it is you who have raised it into a real theatrical company. If any one must go, let it be Binet—Binet and his infernal daughter. Or if you go, name of a name! we all go with you!"

"Aye," added Rhodomont, "we've had enough of that fat scoundrel."

"I had thought of it, of course," said Andre-Louis. "It was not vanity, for once; it was trust in your friendship. After to-night we may consider it again, if I survive."

"If you survive?" both cried.

Polichinelle got up. "Now, what madness have you in mind?" he asked.

"For one thing I think I am indulging Leandre; for another I am pursuing an old quarrel."

The three knocks sounded as he spoke.

"There, I must go. Keep that paper, Polichinelle. After all, it may not be necessary."

He was gone. Rhodomont stared at Polichinelle. Polichinelle stared at Rhodomont.

"What the devil is he thinking of?" quoth the latter.

"That is most readily ascertained by going to see," replied Polichinelle. He completed changing in haste, and despite what Scaramouche had said; and then followed with Rhodomont.

As they approached the wings a roar of applause met them coming from the audience. It was applause and something else; applause on an unusual note. As it faded away they heard the voice of Scaramouche ringing clear as a bell:

"And so you see, my dear M. Leandre, that when you speak of the Third Estate, it is necessary to be more explicit. What precisely is the Third Estate?"

"Nothing," said Leandre.

There was a gasp from the audience, audible in the wings, and then swiftly followed Scaramouche's next question:

"True. Alas! But what should it be?"

"Everything," said Leandre.

The audience roared its acclamations, the more violent because of the unexpectedness of that reply.

"True again," said Scaramouche. "And what is more, that is what it will be; that is what it already is. Do you doubt it?"

"I hope it," said the schooled Leandre.

"You may believe it," said Scaramouche, and again the acclamations rolled into thunder.

Polichinelle and Rhodomont exchanged glances: indeed, the former winked, not without mirth.

"Sacred name!" growled a voice behind them. "Is the scoundrel at his political tricks again?"

They turned to confront M. Binet. Moving with that noiseless tread of his, he had come up unheard behind them, and there he stood now in his scarlet suit of Pantaloon under a trailing bedgown, his little eyes glaring from either side of his false nose. But their attention was held by the voice of Scaramouche. He had stepped to the front of the stage.

"He doubts it," he was telling the audience. "But then this M. Leandre is himself akin to those who worship the worm-eaten idol of Privilege, and so he is a little afraid to believe a truth that is becoming apparent to all the world. Shall I convince him? Shall I tell him how a company of noblemen backed by their servants under arms—six hundred men in all—sought to dictate to the Third Estate of Rennes a few short weeks ago? Must I remind him of the martial front shown on that occasion by the Third Estate, and how they swept the streets clean of that rabble of nobles—*cette canaille noble*..."

Applause interrupted him. The phrase had struck home and caught. Those who had writhed under that infamous designation from their betters leapt at this turning of it against the nobles themselves.

"But let me tell you of their leader—*le pins noble de cette canaille*, on bien le plus canaille de ces nobles! You know him—that one. He fears many things, but the voice of truth he fears most. With such as him the eloquent truth eloquently spoken is a thing instantly to be silenced. So he marshalled his peers and their valetailles, and led

them out to slaughter these miserable bourgeois who dared to raise a voice. But these same miserable bourgeois did not choose to be slaughtered in the streets of Rennes. It occurred to them that since the nobles decreed that blood should flow, it might as well be the blood of the nobles. They marshalled themselves too—this noble rabble against the rabble of nobles—and they marshalled themselves so well that they drove M. de La Tour d'Azyr and his warlike following from the field with broken heads and shattered delusions. They sought shelter at the hands of the Cordeliers; and the shavelings gave them sanctuary in their convent—those who survived, among whom was their proud leader, M. de La Tour d'Azyr. You have heard of this valiant Marquis, this great lord of life and death?"

The pit was in an uproar a moment. It quieted again as Scaramouche continued:

"Oh, it was a fine spectacle to see this mighty hunter scuttling to cover like a hare, going to earth in the Cordelier Convent. Rennes has not seen him since. Rennes would like to see him again. But if he is valorous, he is also discreet. And where do you think he has taken refuge, this great nobleman who wanted to see the streets of Rennes washed in the blood of its citizens, this man who would have butchered old and young of the contemptible canaille to silence the voice of reason and of liberty that presumes to ring through France to day? Where do you think he hides himself? Why, here in Nantes."

Again there was uproar.

"What do you say? Impossible? Why, my friends, at this moment he is here in this theatre—skulking up there in that box. He is too shy to show himself—oh, a very modest gentleman. But there he is behind the curtains. Will you not show yourself to your friends, M. de La Tour d'Azyr, Monsieur le Marquis who considers eloquence so very dangerous a gift? See, they would like a word with you; they do not believe me when I tell them that you are here."

Now, whatever he may have been, and whatever the views held on the subject by Andre-Louis, M. de La Tour d'Azyr was certainly not a coward. To say that he was hiding in Nantes was not true. He came and went there openly and unabashed. It happened, however, that the Nantais were ignorant until this moment of his presence among them. But then he would have disdained to have informed them of it just as he would have disdained to have concealed it from them.

Challenged thus, however, and despite the ominous manner in which the bourgeois element in the audience had responded to Scaramouche's appeal to its passions, despite the attempts made by Chabrilane to restrain him, the Marquis swept aside the curtain at the side of the box, and suddenly showed himself, pale but self-contained and scornful as he surveyed first the daring Scaramouche and then those others who at sight of him had given tongue to their hostility.

Hoots and yells assailed him, fists were shaken at him, canes were brandished menacingly.

"Assassin! Scoundrel! Coward! Traitor!"

But he braved the storm, smiling upon them his ineffable contempt. He was waiting for the noise to cease; waiting to address them in his turn. But he waited in vain, as he very soon perceived.

The contempt he did not trouble to dissemble served but to goad them on.

In the pit pandemonium was already raging. Blows were being freely exchanged; there were scuffling groups, and here and there swords were being drawn, but fortunately the press was too dense to permit of their being used effectively. Those who had women with them and the timid by nature were making haste to leave a house that looked like becoming a cockpit, where chairs were being smashed to provide weapons, and parts of chandeliers were already being used

as missiles.

One of these hurled by the hand of a gentleman in one of the boxes narrowly missed Scaramouche where he stood, looking down in a sort of grim triumph upon the havoc which his words had wrought. Knowing of what inflammable material the audience was composed, he had deliberately flung down amongst them the lighted torch of discord, to produce this conflagration.

He saw men falling quickly into groups representative of one side or the other of this great quarrel that already was beginning to agitate the whole of France. Their rallying cries were ringing through the theatre.

"Down with the canaille!" from some.

"Down with the privileged!" from others.

And then above the general din one cry rang out sharply and insistently:

"To the box! Death to the butcher of Rennes! Death to La Tour d'Azyr who makes war upon the people!"

There was a rush for one of the doors of the pit that opened upon the staircase leading to the boxes.

And now, whilst battle and confusion spread with the speed of fire, overflowing from the theatre into the street itself, La Tour d'Azyr's box, which had become the main object of the attack of the bourgeoisie, had also become the rallying ground for such gentlemen as were present in the theatre and for those who, without being men of birth themselves, were nevertheless attached to the party of the nobles.

La Tour d'Azyr had quitted the front of the box to meet those who came to join him. And now in the pit one group of infuriated gentlemen, in attempting to reach the stage across the empty

orchestra, so that they might deal with the audacious comedian who was responsible for this explosion, found themselves opposed and held back by another group composed of men to whose feelings Andre-Louis had given expression.

Perceiving this, and remembering the chandelier, he turned to Leandre, who had remained beside him.

"I think it is time to be going," said he.

Leandre, looking ghastly under his paint, appalled by the storm which exceeded by far anything that his unimaginative brain could have conjectured, gurgled an inarticulate agreement. But it looked as if already they were too late, for in that moment they were assailed from behind.

M. Binet had succeeded at last in breaking past Polichinelle and Rhodomont, who in view of his murderous rage had been endeavouring to restrain him. Half a dozen gentlemen, habitués of the green-room, had come round to the stage to disembowel the knave who had created this riot, and it was they who had flung aside those two comedians who hung upon Binet. After him they came now, their swords out; but after them again came Polichinelle, Rhodomont, Harlequin, Pierrot, Pasquariel, and Basque the artist, armed with such implements as they could hastily snatch up, and intent upon saving the man with whom they sympathized in spite of all, and in whom now all their hopes were centred.

Well ahead rolled Binet, moving faster than any had ever seen him move, and swinging the long cane from which Pantaloon is inseparable.

"Infamous scoundrel!" he roared. "You have ruined me! But, name of a name, you shall pay!"

Andre-Louis turned to face him. "You confuse cause with effect,"

said he. But he got no farther... Binet's cane, viciously driven, descended and broke upon his shoulder. Had he not moved swiftly aside as the blow fell it must have taken him across the head, and possibly stunned him. As he moved, he dropped his hand to his pocket, and swift upon the cracking of Binet's breaking cane came the crack of the pistol with which Andre-Louis replied.

"You had your warning, you filthy pander!" he cried. And on the word he shot him through the body.

Binet went down screaming, whilst the fierce Polichinelle, fiercer than ever in that moment of fierce reality, spoke quickly into Andre-Louis' ear:

"Fool! So much was not necessary! Away with you now, or you'll leave your skin here! Away with you!"

Andre-Louis thought it good advice, and took it. The gentlemen who had followed Binet in that punitive rush upon the stage, partly held in check by the improvised weapons of the players, partly intimidated by the second pistol that Scaramouche presented, let him go. He gained the wings, and here found himself faced by a couple of sergeants of the watch, part of the police that was already invading the theatre with a view to restoring order. The sight of them reminded him unpleasantly of how he must stand towards the law for this night's work, and more particularly for that bullet lodged somewhere in Binet's obese body. He flourished his pistol.

"Make way, or I'll burn your brains!" he threatened them, and intimidated, themselves without firearms, they fell back and let him pass. He slipped by the door of the green-room, where the ladies of the company had shut themselves in until the storm should be over, and so gained the street behind the theatre. It was deserted. Down this he went at a run, intent on reaching the inn for clothes and money, since it was impossible that he should take the road in the garb of

Scaramouche.

BOOK III: THE SWORD

CHAPTER I. TRANSITION

"You may agree," wrote Andre-Louis from Paris to Le Chapelier, in a letter which survives, "that it is to be regretted I should definitely have discarded the livery of Scaramouche, since clearly there could be no livery fitter for my wear. It seems to be my part always to stir up strife and then to slip away before I am caught in the crash of the warring elements I have aroused. It is a humiliating reflection. I seek consolation in the reminder of Epictetus (do you ever read Epictetus?) that we are but actors in a play of such a part as it may please the Director to assign us. It does not, however, console me to have been cast for a part so contemptible, to find myself excelling ever in the art of running away. But if I am not brave, at least I am prudent; so that where I lack one virtue I may lay claim to possessing another almost to excess. On a previous occasion they wanted to hang me for sedition. Should I have stayed to be hanged? This time they may want to hang me for several things, including murder; for I do not know whether that scoundrel Binet be alive or dead from the dose of lead I pumped into his fat paunch. Nor can I say that I very greatly care. If I have a hope at all in the matter it is that he is dead—and damned. But I am really indifferent. My own concerns are troubling me enough. I have all but spent the little money that I contrived to conceal about me before I fled from Nantes on that dreadful night; and both of the only two professions of which I can claim to know anything—the law and the stage—are closed to me, since I cannot find employment in either without revealing myself as a fellow who is urgently wanted by the hangman. As things are it is very possible that I may die of hunger, especially considering the present price of victuals in this ravenous city. Again I have recourse to Epictetus for comfort. 'It is better,' he says, 'to die of hunger having lived without grief and fear, than to live

with a troubled spirit amid abundance.' I seem likely to perish in the estate that he accounts so enviable. That it does not seem exactly enviable to me merely proves that as a Stoic I am not a success."

There is also another letter of his written at about the same time to the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr—a letter since published by M. Emile Quersac in his "Undercurrents of the Revolution in Brittany," unearthed by him from the archives of Rennes, to which it had been consigned by M. de Lesdiguieres, who had received it for justiciary purposes from the Marquis.

"The Paris newspapers," he writes in this, "which have reported in considerable detail the fracas at the Theatre Feydau and disclosed the true identity of the Scaramouche who provoked it, inform me also that you have escaped the fate I had intended for you when I raised that storm of public opinion and public indignation. I would not have you take satisfaction in the thought that I regret your escape. I do not. I rejoice in it. To deal justice by death has this disadvantage that the victim has no knowledge that justice has overtaken him. Had you died, had you been torn limb from limb that night, I should now repine in the thought of your eternal and untroubled slumber. Not in euthanasia, but in torment of mind should the guilty atone. You see, I am not sure that hell hereafter is a certainty, whilst I am quite sure that it can be a certainty in this life; and I desire you to continue to live yet awhile that you may taste something of its bitterness.

"You murdered Philippe de Vilморin because you feared what you described as his very dangerous gift of eloquence, I took an oath that day that your evil deed should be fruitless; that I would render it so; that the voice you had done murder to stifle should in spite of that ring like a trumpet through the land. That was my conception of revenge. Do you realize how I have been fulfilling it, how I shall continue to fulfil it as occasion offers? In the speech with which I fired the people of Rennes on the very morrow of that deed, did you not hear the voice of

Philippe de Vilmorin uttering the ideas that were his with a fire and a passion greater than he could have commanded because Nemesis lent me her inflaming aid? In the voice of Omnes Omnibus at Nantes my voice again—demanding the petition that sounded the knell of your hopes of coercing the Third Estate, did you not hear again the voice of Philippe de Vilmorin? Did you not reflect that it was the mind of the man you had murdered, resurrected in me his surviving friend, which made necessary your futile attempt under arms last January, wherein your order, finally beaten, was driven to seek sanctuary in the Cordelier Convent? And that night when from the stage of the Feydau you were denounced to the people, did you not hear yet again, in the voice of Scaramouche, the voice of Philippe de Vilmorin, using that dangerous gift of eloquence which you so foolishly imagined you could silence with a sword-thrust? It is becoming a persecution—is it not?—this voice from the grave that insists upon making itself heard, that will not rest until you have been cast into the pit. You will be regretting by now that you did not kill me too, as I invited you on that occasion. I can picture to myself the bitterness of this regret, and I contemplate it with satisfaction. Regret of neglected opportunity is the worst hell that a living soul can inhabit, particularly such a soul as yours. It is because of this that I am glad to know that you survived the riot at the Feydau, although at the time it was no part of my intention that you should. Because of this I am content that you should live to enrage and suffer in the shadow of your evil deed, knowing at last—since you had not hitherto the wit to discern it for yourself—that the voice of Philippe de Vilmorin will follow you to denounce you ever more loudly, ever more insistently, until having lived in dread you shall go down in blood under the just rage which your victim's dangerous gift of eloquence is kindling against you."

I find it odd that he should have omitted from this letter all mention of Mlle. Binet, and I am disposed to account it at least a partial insincerity that he should have assigned entirely to his self-imposed mission, and not at all to his lacerated feelings in the matter of

Climene, the action which he had taken at the Feydau.

Those two letters, both written in April of that year 1789, had for only immediate effect to increase the activity with which Andre-Louis Moreau was being sought.

Le Chapelier would have found him so as to lend him assistance to urge upon him once again that he should take up a political career. The electors of Nantes would have found him—at least, they would have found Omnes Omnibus, of whose identity with himself they were still in ignorance—on each of the several occasions when a vacancy occurred in their body. And the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr and M. de Lesdiguieres would have found him that they might send him to the gallows.

With a purpose no less vindictive was he being sought by M. Binet, now unhappily recovered from his wound to face completest ruin. His troupe had deserted him during his illness, and reconstituted under the direction of Polichinelle it was now striving with tolerable success to continue upon the lines which Andre-Louis had laid down. M. le Marquis, prevented by the riot from expressing in person to Mlle. Binet his purpose of making an end of their relations, had been constrained to write to her to that effect from Azyr a few days later. He tempered the blow by enclosing in discharge of all liabilities a bill on the Caisse d'Escompte for a hundred louis. Nevertheless it almost crushed the unfortunate and it enabled her father when he recovered to enrage her by pointing out that she owed this turn of events to the premature surrender she had made in defiance of his sound worldly advice. Father and daughter alike were left to assign the Marquis' desertion, naturally enough, to the riot at the Feydau. They laid that with the rest to the account of Scaramouche, and were forced in bitterness to admit that the scoundrel had taken a superlative revenge. Climene may even have come to consider that it would have paid her better to have run a straight course with Scaramouche and

by marrying him to have trusted to his undoubted talents to place her on the summit to which her ambition urged her, and to which it was now futile for her to aspire. If so, that reflection must have been her sufficient punishment. For, as Andre-Louis so truly says, there is no worse hell than that provided by the regrets for wasted opportunities.

Meanwhile the fiercely sought Andre-Louis Moreau had gone to earth completely for the present. And the brisk police of Paris, urged on by the King's Lieutenant from Rennes, hunted for him in vain. Yet he might have been found in a house in the Rue du Hasard within a stone's throw of the Palais Royal, whither purest chance had conducted him.

That which in his letter to Le Chapelier he represents as a contingency of the near future was, in fact, the case in which already he found himself. He was destitute. His money was exhausted, including that procured by the sale of such articles of adornment as were not of absolute necessity.

So desperate was his case that strolling one gusty April morning down the Rue du Hasard with his nose in the wind looking for what might be picked up, he stopped to read a notice outside the door of a house on the left side of the street as you approach the Rue de Richelieu. There was no reason why he should have gone down the Rue du Hasard. Perhaps its name attracted him, as appropriate to his case.

The notice written in a big round hand announced that a young man of good address with some knowledge of swordsmanship was required by M. Bertrand des Amis on the second floor. Above this notice was a black oblong board, and on this a shield, which in vulgar terms may be described as red charged with two swords crossed and four fleurs de lys, one in each angle of the saltire. Under the shield, in letters of gold, ran the legend:

Andre-Louis stood considering. He could claim, he thought, to possess the qualifications demanded. He was certainly young and he believed of tolerable address, whilst the fencing-lessons he had received in Nantes had given him at least an elementary knowledge of swordsmanship. The notice looked as if it had been pinned there some days ago, suggesting that applicants for the post were not very numerous. In that case perhaps M. Bertrand des Amis would not be too exigent. And anyway, Andre-Louis had not eaten for four-and-twenty hours, and whilst the employment here offered—the precise nature of which he was yet to ascertain—did not appear to be such as Andre-Louis would deliberately have chosen, he was in no case now to be fastidious.

Then, too, he liked the name of Bertrand des Amis. It felicitously combined suggestions of chivalry and friendliness. Also the man's profession being of a kind that is flavoured with romance it was possible that M. Bertrand des Amis would not ask too many questions.

In the end he climbed to the second floor. On the landing he paused outside a door, on which was written "Academy of M. Bertrand des Amis." He pushed this open, and found himself in a sparsely furnished, untenanted antechamber. From a room beyond, the door of which was closed, came the stamping of feet, the click and slither of steel upon steel, and dominating these sounds a vibrant sonorous voice speaking a language that was certainly French; but such French as is never heard outside a fencing-school.

"Coulez! Mais, coulez donc!.... So! Now the flanconnade—en carte.... And here is the riposte.... Let us begin again. Come! The ward of fierce.... Make the coupe, and then the quinte par dessus les

armes.... O, mais allongez! Allongez! Allez au fond!" the voice cried in expostulation. "Come, that was better." The blades ceased.

"Remember: the hand in pronation, the elbow not too far out. That will do for to-day. On Wednesday we shall see you tirer au mur. It is more deliberate. Speed will follow when the mechanism of the movements is more assured."

Another voice murmured in answer. The steps moved aside. The lesson was at an end. Andre-Louis tapped on the door.

It was opened by a tall, slender, gracefully proportioned man of perhaps forty. Black silk breeches and stockings ending in light shoes clothed him from the waist down. Above he was encased to the chin in a closely fitting plastron of leather. His face was aquiline and swarthy, his eyes full and dark, his mouth firm and his clubbed hair was of a lustrous black with here and there a thread of silver showing.

in the crook of his left arm he carried a fencing-mask, a thing of leather with a wire grating to protect the eyes. His keen glance played over Andre-Louis from head to foot.

"Monsieur?" he inquired, politely.

It was clear that he mistook Andre-Louis' quality, which is not surprising, for despite his sadly reduced fortunes, his exterior was irreproachable, and M. des Amis was not to guess that he carried upon his back the whole of his possessions.

"You have a notice below, monsieur," he said, and from the swift lighting of the fencing-master's eyes he saw that he had been correct in his assumption that applicants for the position had not been jostling one another on his threshold. And then that flash of satisfaction was followed by a look of surprise.

"You are come in regard to that?"

Andre-Louis shrugged and half smiled. "One must live," said he.

"But come in. Sit down there. I shall be at your.... I shall be free to attend to you in a moment."

Andre-Louis took a seat on the bench ranged against one of the whitewashed walls. The room was long and low, its floor entirely bare. Plain wooden forms such as that which he occupied were placed here and there against the wall. These last were plastered with fencing trophies, masks, crossed foils, stuffed plastrons, and a variety of swords, daggers, and targets, belonging to a variety of ages and countries. There was also a portrait of an obese, big-nosed gentleman in an elaborately curled wig, wearing the blue ribbon of the Saint Esprit, in whom Andre-Louis recognized the King. And there was a framed parchment—M. des Amis' certificate from the King's Academy. A bookcase occupied one corner, and near this, facing the last of the four windows that abundantly lighted the long room, there was a small writing-table and an armchair. A plump and beautifully dressed young gentleman stood by this table in the act of resuming coat and wig. M. des Amis sauntered over to him—moving, thought Andre-Louis, with extraordinary grace and elasticity—and stood in talk with him whilst also assisting him to complete his toilet.

At last the young gentleman took his departure, mopping himself with a fine kerchief that left a trail of perfume on the air. M. des Amis closed the door, and turned to the applicant, who rose at once.

"Where have you studied?" quoth the fencing-master abruptly.

"Studied?" Andre-Louis was taken aback by the question. "Oh, at Louis Le Grand."

M. des Amis frowned, looking up sharply as if to see whether his applicant was taking the liberty of amusing himself.

"In Heaven's name! I am not asking you where you did your

humanities, but in what academy you studied fencing."

"Oh—fencing!" It had hardly ever occurred to Andre-Louis that the sword ranked seriously as a study. "I never studied it very much. I had some lessons in... in the country once."

The master's eyebrows went up. "But then?" he cried. "Why trouble to come up two flights of stairs?" He was impatient.

"The notice does not demand a high degree of proficiency. If I am not proficient enough, yet knowing the rudiments I can easily improve. I learn most things readily," Andre-Louis commended himself. "For the rest: I possess the other qualifications. I am young, as you observe: and I leave you to judge whether I am wrong in assuming that my address is good. I am by profession a man of the robe, though I realize that the motto here is *cedat toga armis*."

M. des Amis smiled approvingly. Undoubtedly the young man had a good address, and a certain readiness of wit, it would appear. He ran a critical eye over his physical points. "What is your name?" he asked.

Andre-Louis hesitated a moment. "Andre-Louis," he said.

The dark, keen eyes coned him more searchingly.

"Well? Andre-Louis what?"

"Just Andre-Louis. Louis is my surname."

"Oh! An odd surname. You come from Brittany by your accent. Why did you leave it?"

"To save my skin," he answered, without reflecting. And then made haste to cover the blunder. "I have an enemy," he explained.

M. des Amis frowned, stroking his square chin. "You ran away?"

"You may say so.

"A coward, eh?"

"I don't think so." And then he lied romantically. Surely a man who lived by the sword should have a weakness for the romantic. "You see, my enemy is a swordsman of great strength—the best blade in the province, if not the best blade in France. That is his repute. I thought I would come to Paris to learn something of the art, and then go back and kill him. That, to be frank, is why your notice attracted me. You see, I have not the means to take lessons otherwise. I thought to find work here in the law. But I have failed. There are too many lawyers in Paris as it is, and whilst waiting I have consumed the little money that I had, so that... so that, enfin, your notice seemed to me something to which a special providence had directed me."

M. des Amis gripped him by the shoulders, and looked into his face.

"Is this true, my friend?" he asked.

"Not a word of it," said Andre-Louis, wrecking his chances on an irresistible impulse to say the unexpected. But he didn't wreck them. M. des Amis burst into laughter; and having laughed his fill, confessed himself charmed by his applicant's fundamental honesty.

"Take off your coat," he said, "and let us see what you can do. Nature, at least, designed you for a swordsman. You are light, active, and supple, with a good length of arm, and you seem intelligent. I may make something of you, teach you enough for my purpose, which is that you should give the elements of the art to new pupils before I take them in hand to finish them. Let us try. Take that mask and foil, and come over here."

He led him to the end of the room, where the bare floor was scored with lines of chalk to guide the beginner in the management of his

feet.

At the end of a ten minutes' bout, M. des Amis offered him the situation, and explained it. In addition to imparting the rudiments of the art to beginners, he was to brush out the fencing-room every morning, keep the foils furbished, assist the gentlemen who came for lessons to dress and undress, and make himself generally useful. His wages for the present were to be forty livres a month, and he might sleep in an alcove behind the fencing-room if he had no other lodging.

The position, you see, had its humiliations. But, if Andre-Louis would hope to dine, he must begin by eating his pride as an hors d'oeuvre.

"And so," he said, controlling a grimace, "the robe yields not only to the sword, but to the broom as well. Be it so. I stay."

It is characteristic of him that, having made that choice, he should have thrown himself into the work with enthusiasm. It was ever his way to do whatever he did with all the resources of his mind and energies of his body. When he was not instructing very young gentlemen in the elements of the art, showing them the elaborate and intricate salute—which with a few days' hard practice he had mastered to perfection—and the eight guards, he was himself hard at work on those same guards, exercising eye, wrist, and knees.

Perceiving his enthusiasm, and seeing the obvious possibilities it opened out of turning him into a really effective assistant, M. des Amis presently took him more seriously in hand.

"Your application and zeal, my friend, are deserving of more than forty livres a month," the master informed him at the end of a week. "For the present, however, I will make up what else I consider due to you by imparting to you secrets of this noble art. Your future depends upon how you profit by your exceptional good fortune in receiving

instruction from me."

Thereafter every morning before the opening of the academy, the master would fence for half an hour with his new assistant. Under this really excellent tuition Andre-Louis improved at a rate that both astounded and flattered M. des Amis. He would have been less flattered and more astounded had he known that at least half the secret of Andre-Louis' amazing progress lay in the fact that he was devouring the contents of the master's library, which was made up of a dozen or so treatises on fencing by such great masters as La Bessiere, Danet, and the syndic of the King's Academy, Augustin Rousseau. To M. des Amis, whose swordsmanship was all based on practice and not at all on theory, who was indeed no theorist or student in any sense, that little library was merely a suitable adjunct to a fencing-academy, a proper piece of decorative furniture. The books themselves meant nothing to him in any other sense. He had not the type of mind that could have read them with profit nor could he understand that another should do so. Andre-Louis, on the contrary, a man with the habit of study, with the acquired faculty of learning from books, read those works with enormous profit, kept their precepts in mind, critically set off those of one master against those of another, and made for himself a choice which he proceeded to put into practice.

At the end of a month it suddenly dawned upon M. des Amis that his assistant had developed into a fencer of very considerable force, a man in a bout with whom it became necessary to exert himself if he were to escape defeat.

"I said from the first," he told him one day, "that Nature designed you for a swordsman. See how justified I was, and see also how well I have known how to mould the material with which Nature has equipped you."

"To the master be the glory," said Andre-Louis.

His relations with M. des Amis had meanwhile become of the friendliest, and he was now beginning to receive from him other pupils than mere beginners. In fact Andre-Louis was becoming an assistant in a much fuller sense of the word. M. des Amis, a chivalrous, open-handed fellow, far from taking advantage of what he had guessed to be the young man's difficulties, rewarded his zeal by increasing his wages to four louis a month.

From the earnest and thoughtful study of the theories of others, it followed now—as not uncommonly happens—that Andre-Louis came to develop theories of his own. He lay one June morning on his little truckle bed in the alcove behind the academy, considering a passage that he had read last night in Danet on double and triple feints. It had seemed to him when reading it that Danet had stopped short on the threshold of a great discovery in the art of fencing. Essentially a theorist, Andre-Louis perceived the theory suggested, which Danet himself in suggesting it had not perceived. He lay now on his back, surveying the cracks in the ceiling and considering this matter further with the lucidity that early morning often brings to an acute intelligence. You are to remember that for close upon two months now the sword had been Andre-Louis' daily exercise and almost hourly thought. Protracted concentration upon the subject was giving him an extraordinary penetration of vision. Swordsmanship as he learnt and taught and saw it daily practised consisted of a series of attacks and parries, a series of disengages from one line into another. But always a limited series. A half-dozen disengages on either side was, strictly speaking, usually as far as any engagement went. Then one recommenced. But even so, these disengages were fortuitous. What if from first to last they should be calculated?

That was part of the thought—one of the two legs on which his theory was to stand; the other was: what would happen if one so elaborated Danet's ideas on the triple feint as to merge them into a

series of actual calculated disengages to culminate at the fourth or fifth or even sixth disengage? That is to say, if one were to make a series of attacks inviting ripostes again to be countered, each of which was not intended to go home, but simply to play the opponent's blade into a line that must open him ultimately, and as predetermined, for an irresistible lunge. Each counter of the opponent's would have to be preconsidered in this widening of his guard, a widening so gradual that he should himself be unconscious of it, and throughout intent upon getting home his own point on one of those counters.

Andre-Louis had been in his time a chess-player of some force, and at chess he had excelled by virtue of his capacity for thinking ahead. That virtue applied to fencing should all but revolutionize the art. It was so applied already, of course, but only in an elementary and very limited fashion, in mere feints, single, double, or triple. But even the triple feint should be a clumsy device compared with this method upon which he theorized.

He considered further, and the conviction grew that he held the key of a discovery. He was impatient to put his theory to the test.

That morning he was given a pupil of some force, against whom usually he was hard put to it to defend himself. Coming on guard, he made up his mind to hit him on the fourth disengage, predetermining the four passes that should lead up to it. They engaged in tierce, and Andre-Louis led the attack by a beat and a straightening of the arm. Came the demi-contre he expected, which he promptly countered by a thrust in quinte; this being countered again, he reentered still lower, and being again correctly parried, as he had calculated, he lunged swirling his point into carte, and got home full upon his opponent's breast. The ease of it surprised him.

They began again. This time he resolved to go in on the fifth disengage, and in on that he went with the same ease. Then, complicating the matter further, he decided to try the sixth, and

worked out in his mind the combination of the five preliminary engages. Yet again he succeeded as easily as before.

The young gentleman opposed to him laughed with just a tinge of mortification in his voice.

"I am all to pieces this morning," he said.

"You are not of your usual force," Andre-Louis politely agreed. And then greatly daring, always to test that theory of his to the uttermost: "So much so," he added, "that I could almost be sure of hitting you as and when I declare."

The capable pupil looked at him with a half-sneer. "Ah, that, no," said he.

"Let us try. On the fourth disengage I shall touch you. Allons! En garde!"

And as he promised, so it happened.

The young gentleman who, hitherto, had held no great opinion of Andre-Louis' swordsmanship, accounting him well enough for purposes of practice when the master was otherwise engaged, opened wide his eyes. In a burst of mingled generosity and intoxication, Andre-Louis was almost for disclosing his method—a method which a little later was to become a commonplace of the fencing-rooms. Betimes he checked himself. To reveal his secret would be to destroy the prestige that must accrue to him from exercising it.

At noon, the academy being empty, M. des Amis called Andre-Louis to one of the occasional lessons which he still received. And for the first time in all his experience with Andre-Louis, M. des Amis received from him a full hit in the course of the first bout. He laughed, well pleased, like the generous fellow he was.

"Aha! You are improving very fast, my friend." He still laughed, though not so well pleased, when he was hit in the second bout. After that he settled down to fight in earnest with the result that Andre-Louis was hit three times in succession. The speed and accuracy of the fencing-master when fully exerting himself disconcerted Andre-Louis' theory, which for want of being exercised in practice still demanded too much consideration.

But that his theory was sound he accounted fully established, and with that, for the moment, he was content. It remained only to perfect by practice the application of it. To this he now devoted himself with the passionate enthusiasm of the discoverer. He confined himself to a half-dozen combinations, which he practised assiduously until each had become almost automatic. And he proved their infallibility upon the best among M. des Amis' pupils.

Finally, a week or so after that last bout of his with des Amis, the master called him once more to practice.

Hit again in the first bout, the master set himself to exert all his skill against his assistant. But to-day it availed him nothing before Andre-Louis' impetuous attacks.

After the third hit, M. des Amis stepped back and pulled off his mask.

"What's this?" he asked. He was pale, and his dark brows were contracted in a frown. Not in years had he been so wounded in his self-love. "Have you been taught a secret botte?"

He had always boasted that he knew too much about the sword to believe any nonsense about secret bottles; but this performance of Andre-Louis' had shaken his convictions on that score.

"No," said Andre-Louis. "I have been working hard; and it happens that I fence with my brains."

"So I perceive. Well, well, I think I have taught you enough, my friend. I have no intention of having an assistant who is superior to myself."

"Little danger of that," said Andre-Louis, smiling pleasantly. "You have been fencing hard all morning, and you are tired, whilst I, having done little, am entirely fresh. That is the only secret of my momentary success."

His tact and the fundamental good-nature of M. des Amis prevented the matter from going farther along the road it was almost threatening to take. And thereafter, when they fenced together, Andre-Louis, who continued daily to perfect his theory into an almost infallible system, saw to it that M. des Amis always scored against him at least two hits for every one of his own. So much he would grant to discretion, but no more. He desired that M. des Amis should be conscious of his strength, without, however, discovering so much of its real extent as would have excited in him an unnecessary degree of jealousy.

And so well did he contrive that whilst he became ever of greater assistance to the master—for his style and general fencing, too, had materially improved—he was also a source of pride to him as the most brilliant of all the pupils that had ever passed through his academy. Never did Andre-Louis disillusion him by revealing the fact that his skill was due far more to M. des Amis' library and his own mother wit than to any lessons received.

CHAPTER II. QUOS DEUS VULT PERDERE

Once again, precisely as he had done when he joined the Binet troupe, did Andre-Louis now settle down whole-heartedly to the new profession into which necessity had driven him, and in which he found effective concealment from those who might seek him to his hurt. This profession might—although in fact it did not—have brought him to consider himself at last as a man of action. He had not, however, on that account ceased to be a man of thought, and the events of the spring and summer months of that year 1789 in Paris provided him with abundant matter for reflection. He read there in the raw what is perhaps the most amazing page in the history of human development, and in the end he was forced to the conclusion that all his early preconceptions had been at fault, and that it was such exalted, passionate enthusiasts as Vilmorin who had been right.

I suspect him of actually taking pride in the fact that he had been mistaken, complacently attributing his error to the circumstance that he had been, himself, of too sane and logical a mind to gauge the depths of human insanity now revealed.

He watched the growth of hunger, the increasing poverty and distress of Paris during that spring, and assigned it to its proper cause, together with the patience with which the people bore it. The world of France was in a state of hushed, of paralyzed expectancy, waiting for the States General to assemble and for centuries of tyranny to end. And because of this expectancy, industry had come to a standstill, the stream of trade had dwindled to a trickle. Men would not buy or sell until they clearly saw the means by which the genius of

the Swiss banker, M. Necker, was to deliver them from this morass. And because of this paralysis of affairs the men of the people were thrown out of work and left to starve with their wives and children.

Looking on, Andre-Louis smiled grimly. So far he was right. The sufferers were ever the proletariat. The men who sought to make this revolution, the electors—here in Paris as elsewhere—were men of substance, notable bourgeois, wealthy traders. And whilst these, despising the canaille, and envying the privileged, talked largely of equality—by which they meant an ascending equality that should confuse themselves with the gentry—the proletariat perished of want in its kennels.

At last with the month of May the deputies arrived, Andre-Louis' friend Le Chapelier prominent amongst them, and the States General were inaugurated at Versailles. It was then that affairs began to become interesting, then that Andre-Louis began seriously to doubt the soundness of the views he had held hitherto.

When the royal proclamation had gone forth decreeing that the deputies of the Third Estate should number twice as many as those of the other two orders together, Andre-Louis had believed that the preponderance of votes thus assured to the Third Estate rendered inevitable the reforms to which they had pledged themselves.

But he had reckoned without the power of the privileged orders over the proud Austrian queen, and her power over the obese, phlegmatic, irresolute monarch. That the privileged orders should deliver battle in defence of their privileges, Andre-Louis could understand. Man being what he is, and labouring under his curse of acquisitiveness, will never willingly surrender possessions, whether they be justly or unjustly held. But what surprised Andre-Louis was the unutterable crassness of the methods by which the Privileged ranged themselves for battle. They opposed brute force to reason and philosophy, and battalions of foreign mercenaries to ideas. As if

ideas were to be impaled on bayonets!

The war between the Privileged and the Court on one side, and the Assembly and the People on the other had begun.

The Third Estate contained itself, and waited; waited with the patience of nature; waited a month whilst, with the paralysis of business now complete, the skeleton hand of famine took a firmer grip of Paris; waited a month whilst Privilege gradually assembled an army in Versailles to intimidate it—an army of fifteen regiments, nine of which were Swiss and German—and mounted a park of artillery before the building in which the deputies sat. But the deputies refused to be intimidated; they refused to see the guns and foreign uniforms; they refused to see anything but the purpose for which they had been brought together by royal proclamation.

Thus until the 10th of June, when that great thinker and metaphysician, the Abbe Sieyes, gave the signal: "It is time," said he, "to cut the cable."

And the opportunity came soon, at the very beginning of July. M. du Chatelet, a harsh, haughty disciplinarian, proposed to transfer the eleven French Guards placed under arrest from the military gaol of the Abbaye to the filthy prison of Bicetre reserved for thieves and felons of the lowest order. Word of that intention going forth, the people at last met violence with violence. A mob four thousand strong broke into the Abbaye, and delivered thence not only the eleven guardsmen, but all the other prisoners, with the exception of one whom they discovered to be a thief, and whom they put back again.

That was open revolt at last, and with revolt Privilege knew how to deal. It would strangle this mutinous Paris in the iron grip of the foreign regiments. Measures were quickly concerted. Old Marechal de Broglie, a veteran of the Seven Years' War, imbued with a soldier's contempt for civilians, conceiving that the sight of a uniform

would be enough to restore peace and order, took control with Besenval as his second-in-command. The foreign regiments were stationed in the environs of Paris, regiments whose very names were an irritation to the Parisians, regiments of Reisbach, of Diesbach, of Nassau, Esterhazy, and Roehmer. Reinforcements of Swiss were sent to the Bastille between whose crenels already since the 30th of June were to be seen the menacing mouths of loaded cannon.

On the 10th of July the electors once more addressed the King to request the withdrawal of the troops. They were answered next day that the troops served the purpose of defending the liberties of the Assembly! And on the next day to that, which was a Sunday, the philanthropist Dr. Guillotin—whose philanthropic engine of painless death was before very long to find a deal of work, came from the Assembly, of which he was a member, to assure the electors of Paris that all was well, appearances notwithstanding, since Necker was more firmly in the saddle than ever. He did not know that at the very moment in which he was speaking so confidently, the oft-dismissed and oft-recalled M. Necker had just been dismissed yet again by the hostile cabal about the Queen. Privilege wanted conclusive measures, and conclusive measures it would have—conclusive to itself.

And at the same time yet another philanthropist, also a doctor, one Jean-Paul Mara, of Italian extraction—better known as Marat, the gallicized form of name he adopted—a man of letters, too, who had spent some years in England, and there published several works on sociology, was writing:

"Have a care! Consider what would be the fatal effect of a seditious movement. If you should have the misfortune to give way to that, you will be treated as people in revolt, and blood will flow."

Andre-Louis was in the gardens of the Palais Royal, that place of shops and puppet-shows, of circus and cafes, of gaming houses and

brothels, that universal rendezvous, on that Sunday morning when the news of Necker's dismissal spread, carrying with it dismay and fury. Into Necker's dismissal the people read the triumph of the party hostile to themselves. It sounded the knell of all hope of redress of their wrongs.

He beheld a slight young man with a pock-marked face, redeemed from utter ugliness by a pair of magnificent eyes, leap to a table outside the Café de Foy, a drawn sword in his hand, crying, "To arms!" And then upon the silence of astonishment that cry imposed, this young man poured a flood of inflammatory eloquence, delivered in a voice marred at moments by a stutter. He told the people that the Germans on the Champ de Mars would enter Paris that night to butcher the inhabitants. "Let us mount a cockade!" he cried, and tore a leaf from a tree to serve his purpose—the green cockade of hope.

Enthusiasm swept the crowd, a motley crowd made up of men and women of every class, from vagabond to nobleman, from harlot to lady of fashion. Trees were despoiled of their leaves, and the green cockade was flaunted from almost every head.

"You are caught between two fires," the incendiary's stuttering voice raved on. "Between the Germans on the Champ de Mars and the Swiss in the Bastille. To arms, then! To arms!"

Excitement boiled up and over. From a neighbouring waxworks show came the bust of Necker, and presently a bust of that comedian the Duke of Orleans, who had a party and who was as ready as any other of the budding opportunists of those days to take advantage of the moment for his own aggrandizement. The bust of Necker was draped with crepe.

Andre-Louis looked on, and grew afraid. Marat's pamphlet had impressed him. It had expressed what himself he had expressed more than half a year ago to the mob at Rennes. This crowd, he felt

must be restrained. That hot-headed, irresponsible stutterer would have the town in a blaze by night unless something were done. The young man, a causeless advocate of the Palais named Camille Desmoulins, later to become famous, leapt down from his table still waving his sword, still shouting, "To arms! Follow me!" Andre-Louis advanced to occupy the improvised rostrum, which the stutterer had just vacated, to make an effort at counteracting that inflammatory performance. He thrust through the crowd, and came suddenly face to face with a tall man beautifully dressed, whose handsome countenance was sternly set, whose great sombre eyes mouldered as if with suppressed anger.

Thus face to face, each looking into the eyes of the other, they stood for a long moment, the jostling crowd streaming past them, unheeded. Then Andre-Louis laughed.

"That fellow, too, has a very dangerous gift of eloquence, M. le Marquis," he said. "In fact there are a number of such in France to-day. They grow from the soil, which you and yours have irrigated with the blood of the martyrs of liberty. Soon it may be your blood instead. The soil is parched, and thirsty for it."

"Gallows-bird!" he was answered. "The police will do your affair for you. I shall tell the Lieutenant-General that you are to be found in Paris."

"My God, man!" cried Andre-Louis, "will you never get sense? Will you talk like that of Lieutenant-Generals when Paris itself is likely to tumble about your ears or take fire under your feet? Raise your voice, M. le Marquis. Denounce me here, to these. You will make a hero of me in such an hour as this. Or shall I denounce you? I think I will. I think it is high time you received your wages. Hi! You others, listen to me! Let me present you to..."

A rush of men hurtled against him, swept him along with them, do

what he would, separating him from M. de La Tour d'Azyr, so oddly met. He sought to breast that human torrent; the Marquis, caught in an eddy of it, remained where he had been, and Andre-Louis' last glimpse of him was of a man smiling with tight lips, an ugly smile.

Meanwhile the gardens were emptying in the wake of that stuttering firebrand who had mounted the green cockade. The human torrent poured out into the Rue de Richelieu, and Andre-Louis perforce must suffer himself to be borne along by it, at least as far as the Rue du Hasard. There he sidled out of it, and having no wish to be crushed to death or to take further part in the madness that was afoot, he slipped down the street, and so got home to the deserted academy. For there were no pupils to-day, and even M. des Amis, like Andre-Louis, had gone out to seek for news of what was happening at Versailles.

This was no normal state of things at the Academy of Bertrand des Amis. Whatever else in Paris might have been at a standstill lately, the fencing academy had flourished as never hitherto. Usually both the master and his assistant were busy from morning until dusk, and already Andre-Louis was being paid now by the lessons that he gave, the master allowing him one half of the fee in each case for himself, an arrangement which the assistant found profitable. On Sundays the academy made half-holiday; but on this Sunday such had been the state of suspense and ferment in the city that no one having appeared by eleven o'clock both des Amis and Andre-Louis had gone out. Little they thought as they lightly took leave of each other—they were very good friends by now—that they were never to meet again in this world.

Bloodshed there was that day in Paris. On the Place Vendome a detachment of dragoons awaited the crowd out of which Andre-Louis had slipped. The horsemen swept down upon the mob, dispersed it, smashed the waxen effigy of M. Necker, and killed one man on the spot—an unfortunate French Guard who stood his ground. That was a

beginning. As a consequence Besenval brought up his Swiss from the Champ de Mars and marshalled them in battle order on the Champs Elysees with four pieces of artillery. His dragoons he stationed in the Place Louis XV. That evening an enormous crowd, streaming along the Champs Elysees and the Tuileries Gardens, considered with eyes of alarm that warlike preparation. Some insults were cast upon those foreign mercenaries and some stones were flung. Besenval, losing his head, or acting under orders, sent for his dragoons and ordered them to disperse the crowd, But that crowd was too dense to be dispersed in this fashion; so dense that it was impossible for the horsemen to move without crushing some one. There were several crushed, and as a consequence when the dragoons, led by the Prince de Lambesc, advanced into the Tuileries Gardens, the outraged crowd met them with a fusillade of stones and bottles. Lambesc gave the order to fire. There was a stampede. Pouring forth from the Tuileries through the city went those indignant people with their story of German cavalry trampling upon women and children, and uttering now in grimmest earnest the call to arms, raised at noon by Desmoulins in the Palais Royal.

The victims were taken up and borne thence, and amongst them was Bertrand des Amis, himself—like all who lived by the sword—an ardent upholder of the noblesse, trampled to death under hooves of foreign horsemen launched by the noblesse and led by a nobleman.

To Andre-Louis, waiting that evening on the second floor of No. 13 Rue du Hasard for the return of his friend and master, four men of the people brought that broken body of one of the earliest victims of the Revolution that was now launched in earnest.

CHAPTER III. PRESIDENT LE CHAPELIER

The ferment of Paris which, during the two following days, resembled an armed camp rather than a city, delayed the burial of Bertrand des Amis until the Wednesday of that eventful week. Amid events that were shaking a nation to its foundations the death of a fencing-master passed almost unnoticed even among his pupils, most of whom did not come to the academy during the two days that his body lay there. Some few, however, did come, and these conveyed the news to others, with the result that the master was followed to Pere Lachaise by a score of young men at the head of whom as chief mourner walked Andre-Louis.

There were no relatives to be advised so far as Andre-Louis was aware, although within a week of M. des Amis' death a sister turned up from Passy to claim his heritage. This was considerable, for the master had prospered and saved money, most of which was invested in the Compagnie des Eaux and the National Debt. Andre-Louis consigned her to the lawyers, and saw her no more.

The death of des Amis left him with so profound a sense of loneliness and desolation that he had no thought or care for the sudden access of fortune which it automatically procured him. To the master's sister might fall such wealth as he had amassed, but Andre-Louis succeeded to the mine itself from which that wealth had been extracted, the fencing-school in which by now he was himself so well established as an instructor that its numerous pupils looked to him to carry it forward successfully as its chief. And never was there a season in which fencing-academies knew such prosperity as in these

troubled days, when every man was sharpening his sword and schooling himself in the uses of it.

It was not until a couple of weeks later that Andre-Louis realized what had really happened to him, and he found himself at the same time an exhausted man, for during that fortnight he had been doing the work of two. If he had not hit upon the happy expedient of pairing off his more advanced pupils to fence with each other, himself standing by to criticize, correct and otherwise instruct, he must have found the task utterly beyond his strength. Even so, it was necessary for him to fence some six hours daily, and every day he brought arrears of lassitude from yesterday until he was in danger of succumbing under the increasing burden of fatigue. In the end he took an assistant to deal with beginners, who gave the hardest work. He found him readily enough by good fortune in one of his own pupils named Le Duc. As the summer advanced, and the concourse of pupils steadily increased, it became necessary for him to take yet another assistant—an able young instructor named Galoche—and another room on the floor above.

They were strenuous days for Andre-Louis, more strenuous than he had ever known, even when he had been at work to build up the Binet Company; but it follows that they were days of extraordinary prosperity. He comments regretfully upon the fact that Bertrand des Amis should have died by ill-chance on the very eve of so profitable a vogue of sword-play.

The arms of the Academie du Roi, to which Andre-Louis had no title, still continued to be displayed outside his door. He had overcome the difficulty in a manner worthy of Scaramouche. He left the escutcheon and the legend "Academie de Bertrand des Amis, Maitre en fait d'Armes des Academies du Roi," appending to it the further legend: "Conducted by Andre-Louis."

With little time now in which to go abroad it was from his pupils and

the newspapers—of which a flood had risen in Paris with the establishment of the freedom of the Press—that he learnt of the revolutionary processes around him, following upon, as a measure of anticlimax, the fall of the Bastille. That had happened whilst M. des Amis lay dead, on the day before they buried him, and was indeed the chief reason of the delay in his burial. It was an event that had its inspiration in that ill-considered charge of Prince Lambesc in which the fencing-master had been killed.

The outraged people had besieged the electors in the Hotel de Ville, demanding arms with which to defend their lives from these foreign murderers hired by despotism. And in the end the electors had consented to give them arms, or, rather—for arms it had none to give—to permit them to arm themselves. Also it had given them a cockade, of red and blue, the colours of Paris. Because these colours were also those of the liveries of the Duke of Orleans, white was added to them—the white of the ancient standard of France—and thus was the tricolour born. Further, a permanent committee of electors was appointed to watch over public order.

Thus empowered the people went to work with such good effect that within thirty-six hours sixty thousand pikes had been forged. At nine o'clock on Tuesday morning thirty thousand men were before the Invalides. By eleven o'clock they had ravished it of its store of arms amounting to some thirty thousand muskets, whilst others had seized the Arsenal and possessed themselves of powder.

Thus they prepared to resist the attack that from seven points was to be launched that evening upon the city. But Paris did not wait for the attack. It took the initiative. Mad with enthusiasm it conceived the insane project of taking that terrible menacing fortress, the Bastille, and, what is more, it succeeded, as you know, before five o'clock that night, aided in the enterprise by the French Guards with cannon.

The news of it, borne to Versailles by Lambesc in flight with his

dragoons before the vast armed force that had sprouted from the paving-stones of Paris, gave the Court pause. The people were in possession of the guns captured from the Bastille. They were erecting barricades in the streets, and mounting these guns upon them. The attack had been too long delayed. It must be abandoned since now it could lead only to fruitless slaughter that must further shake the already sorely shaken prestige of Royalty.

And so the Court, growing momentarily wise again under the spur of fear, preferred to temporize. Necker should be brought back yet once again, the three orders should sit united as the National Assembly demanded. It was the completest surrender of force to force, the only argument. The King went alone to inform the National Assembly of that eleventh-hour resolve, to the great comfort of its members, who viewed with pain and alarm the dreadful state of things in Paris. "No force but the force of reason and argument" was their watchword, and it was so to continue for two years yet, with a patience and fortitude in the face of ceaseless provocation to which insufficient justice has been done.

As the King was leaving the Assembly, a woman, embracing his knees, gave tongue to what might well be the question of all France:

"Ah, sire, are you really sincere? Are you sure they will not make you change your mind?"

Yet no such question was asked when a couple of days later the King, alone and unguarded save by the representatives of the Nation, came to Paris to complete the peacemaking, the surrender of Privilege. The Court was filled with terror by the adventure. Were they not the "enemy," these mutinous Parisians? And should a King go thus among his enemies? If he shared some of that fear, as the gloom of him might lead us to suppose, he must have found it idle. What if two hundred thousand men under arms—men without uniforms and with the most extraordinary motley of weapons ever seen—awaited

him? They awaited him as a guard of honour.

Mayor Bailly at the barrier presented him with the keys of the city. "These are the same keys that were presented to Henri IV. He had reconquered his people. Now the people have reconquered their King."

At the Hotel de Ville Mayor Bailly offered him the new cockade, the tricoloured symbol of constitutional France, and when he had given his royal confirmation to the formation of the Garde Bourgeoise and to the appointments of Bailly and Lafayette, he departed again for Versailles amid the shouts of "Vive le Roi!" from his loyal people.

And now you see Privilege—before the cannon's mouth, as it were—submitting at last, where had they submitted sooner they might have saved oceans of blood—chiefly their own. They come, nobles and clergy, to join the National Assembly, to labour with it upon this constitution that is to regenerate France. But the reunion is a mockery—as much a mockery as that of the Archbishop of Paris singing the Te Deum for the fall of the Bastille—most grotesque and incredible of all these grotesque and incredible events. All that has happened to the National Assembly is that it has introduced five or six hundred enemies to hamper and hinder its deliberations.

But all this is an oft-told tale, to be read in detail elsewhere. I give you here just so much of it as I have found in Andre-Louis' own writings, almost in his own words, reflecting the changes that were operated in his mind. Silent now, he came fully to believe in those things in which he had not believed when earlier he had preached them.

Meanwhile together with the change in his fortune had come a change in his position towards the law, a change brought about by the other changes wrought around him. No longer need he hide himself. Who in these days would prefer against him the grotesque charge of

sedition for what he had done in Brittany? What court would dare to send him to the gallows for having said in advance what all France was saying now? As for that other possible charge of murder, who should concern himself with the death of the miserable Binet killed by him—if, indeed, he had killed him, as he hoped—in self-defence.

And so one fine day in early August, Andre-Louis gave himself a holiday from the academy, which was now working smoothly under his assistants, hired a chaise and drove out to Versailles to the Café d'Amaury, which he knew for the meeting-place of the Club Breton, the seed from which was to spring that Society of the Friends of the Constitution better known as the Jacobins. He went to seek Le Chapelier, who had been one of the founders of the club, a man of great prominence now, president of the Assembly in this important season when it was deliberating upon the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Le Chapelier's importance was reflected in the sudden servility of the shirt-sleeved, white-aproned waiter of whom Andre-Louis inquired for the representative.

M. Le Chapelier was above-stairs with friends. The waiter desired to serve the gentleman, but hesitated to break in upon the assembly in which M. le Depute found himself.

Andre-Louis gave him a piece of silver to encourage him to make the attempt. Then he sat down at a marble-topped table by the window looking out over the wide tree-encircled square. There, in that common-room of the café, deserted at this hour of mid-afternoon, the great man came to him. Less than a year ago he had yielded precedence to Andre-Louis in a matter of delicate leadership; to-day he stood on the heights, one of the great leaders of the Nation in travail, and Andre-Louis was deep down in the shadows of the general mass.

The thought was in the minds of both as they scanned each other, each noting in the other the marked change that a few months had wrought. In Le Chapelier, Andre-Louis observed certain heightened refinements of dress that went with certain subtler refinements of countenance. He was thinner than of old, his face was pale and there was a weariness in the eyes that considered his visitor through a gold-rimmed spy-glass. In Andre-Louis those jaded but quick-moving eyes of the Breton deputy noted changes even more marked. The almost constant swordmanship of these last months had given Andre-Louis a grace of movement, a poise, and a curious, indefinable air of dignity, of command. He seemed taller by virtue of this, and he was dressed with an elegance which if quiet was none the less rich. He wore a small silver-hilted sword, and wore it as if used to it, and his black hair that Le Chapelier had never seen other than fluttering lank about his bony cheeks was glossy now and gathered into a club. Almost he had the air of a *petit-maitre*.

In both, however, the changes were purely superficial, as each was soon to reveal to the other. Le Chapelier was ever the same direct and downright Breton, abrupt of manner and of speech. He stood smiling a moment in mingled surprise and pleasure; then opened wide his arms. They embraced under the awe-stricken gaze of the waiter, who at once effaced himself.

"Andre-Louis, my friend! Whence do you drop?"

"We drop from above. I come from below to survey at close quarters one who is on the heights."

"On the heights! But that you willed it so, it is yourself might now be standing in my place."

"I have a poor head for heights, and I find the atmosphere too rarefied. Indeed, you look none too well on it yourself, Isaac. You are pale."

"The Assembly was in session all last night. That is all. These damned Privileged multiply our difficulties. They will do so until we decree their abolition."

They sat down. "Abolition! You contemplate so much? Not that you surprise me. You have always been an extremist."

"I contemplate it that I may save them. I seek to abolish them officially, so as to save them from abolition of another kind at the hands of a people they exasperate."

"I see. And the King?"

"The King is the incarnation of the Nation. We shall deliver him together with the Nation from the bondage of Privilege. Our constitution will accomplish it. You agree?"

Andre-Louis shrugged. "Does it matter? I am a dreamer in politics, not a man of action. Until lately I have been very moderate; more moderate than you think. But now almost I am a republican. I have been watching, and I have perceived that this King is—just nothing, a puppet who dances according to the hand that pulls the string."

"This King, you say? What other king is possible? You are surely not of those who weave dreams about Orleans? He has a sort of party, a following largely recruited by the popular hatred of the Queen and the known fact that she hates him. There are some who have thought of making him regent, some even more; Robespierre is of the number."

"Who?" asked Andre-Louis, to whom the name was unknown.

"Robespierre—a preposterous little lawyer who represents Arras, a shabby, clumsy, timid dullard, who will make speeches through his nose to which nobody listens—an ultra-royalist whom the royalists and the Orleanists are using for their own ends. He has pertinacity, and he

insists upon being heard. He may be listened to some day. But that he, or the others, will ever make anything of Orleans... pish! Orleans himself may desire it, but the man is a eunuch in crime; he would, but he can't. The phrase is Mirabeau's."

He broke off to demand Andre-Louis' news of himself.

"You did not treat me as a friend when you wrote to me," he complained. "You gave me no clue to your whereabouts; you represented yourself as on the verge of destitution and withheld from me the means to come to your assistance. I have been troubled in mind about you, Andre. Yet to judge by your appearance I might have spared myself that. You seem prosperous, assured. Tell me of it."

Andre-Louis told him frankly all that there was to tell. "Do you know that you are an amazement to me?" said the deputy. "From the robe to the buskin, and now from the buskin to the sword! What will be the end of you, I wonder?"

"The gallows, probably."

"Pish! Be serious. Why not the toga of the senator in senatorial France? It might be yours now if you had willed it so."

"The surest way to the gallows of all," laughed Andre-Louis.

At the moment Le Chapelier manifested impatience. I wonder did the phrase cross his mind that day four years later when himself he rode in the death-cart to the Greve.

"We are sixty-six Breton deputies in the Assembly. Should a vacancy occur, will you act as suppleant? A word from me together with the influence of your name in Rennes and Nantes, and the thing is done."

Andre-Louis laughed outright. "Do you know, Isaac, that I never meet you but you seek to thrust me into politics?"

"Because you have a gift for politics. You were born for politics."

"Ah, yes—Scaramouche in real life. I've played it on the stage. Let that suffice. Tell me, Isaac, what news of my old friend, La Tour d'Azyr?"

"He is here in Versailles, damn him—a thorn in the flesh of the Assembly. They've burnt his chateau at La Tour d'Azyr. Unfortunately he wasn't in it at the time. The flames haven't even singed his insolence. He dreams that when this philosophic aberration is at an end, there will be serfs to rebuild it for him."

"So there has been trouble in Brittany?" Andre-Louis had become suddenly grave, his thoughts swinging to Gavrillac.

"An abundance of it, and elsewhere too. Can you wonder? These delays at such a time, with famine in the land? Chateaux have been going up in smoke during the last fortnight. The peasants took their cue from the Parisians, and treated every castle as a Bastille. Order is being restored, there as here, and they are quieter now."

"What of Gavrillac? Do you know?"

"I believe all to be well. M. de Kercadiou was not a Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr. He was in sympathy with his people. It is not likely that they would injure Gavrillac. But don't you correspond with your godfather?"

"In the circumstances—no. What you tell me would make it now more difficult than ever, for he must account me one of those who helped to light the torch that has set fire to so much belonging to his class. Ascertain for me that all is well, and let me know."

"I will, at once."

At parting, when Andre-Louis was on the point of stepping into his

cabriolet to return to Paris, he sought information on another matter.

"Do you happen to know if M. de La Tour d'Azyr has married?" he asked.

"I don't; which really means that he hasn't. One would have heard of it in the case of that exalted Privileged."

"To be sure." Andre-Louis spoke indifferently. "Au revoir, Isaac! You'll come and see me—13 Rue du Hasard. Come soon."

"As soon and as often as my duties will allow. They keep me chained here at present."

"Poor slave of duty with your gospel of liberty!"

"True! And because of that I will come. I have a duty to Brittany: to make Omnes Omnibus one of her representatives in the National Assembly."

"That is a duty you will oblige me by neglecting," laughed Andre-Louis, and drove away.

CHAPTER IV. AT MEUDON

Later in the week he received a visit from Le Chapelier just before noon.

"I have news for you, Andre. Your godfather is at Meudon. He arrived there two days ago. Had you heard?"

"But no. How should I hear? Why is he at Meudon?" He was conscious of a faint excitement, which he could hardly have explained.

"I don't know. There have been fresh disturbances in Brittany. It may be due to that."

"And so he has come for shelter to his brother?" asked Andre-Louis.

"To his brother's house, yes; but not to his brother. Where do you live at all, Andre? Do you never hear any of the news? Etienne de Gavrillac emigrated years ago. He was of the household of M. d'Artois, and he crossed the frontier with him. By now, no doubt, he is in Germany with him, conspiring against France. For that is what the emigres are doing. That Austrian woman at the Tuileries will end by destroying the monarchy."

"Yes, yes," said Andre-Louis impatiently. Politics interested him not at all this morning. "But about Gavrillac?"

"Why, haven't I told you that Gavrillac is at Meudon, installed in the house his brother has left? Dieu de Dieu! Don't I speak French or don't you understand the language? I believe that Rabouillet, his intendant, is in charge of Gavrillac. I have brought you the news the moment I received it. I thought you would probably wish to go out to

Meudon."

"Of course. I will go at once—that is, as soon as I can. I can't to-day, nor yet to-morrow. I am too busy here." He waved a hand towards the inner room, whence proceeded the click-click of blades, the quick moving of feet, and the voice of the instructor, Le Duc.

"Well, well, that is your own affair. You are busy. I leave you now. Let us dine this evening at the Café de Foy. Kersain will be of the party."

"A moment!" Andre-Louis' voice arrested him on the threshold. "Is Mlle. de Kercadiou with her uncle?"

"How the devil should I know? Go and find out."

He was gone, and Andre-Louis stood there a moment deep in thought. Then he turned and went back to resume with his pupil, the Vicomte de Villeniort, the interrupted exposition of the demi-contre of Danet, illustrating with a small-sword the advantages to be derived from its adoption.

Thereafter he fenced with the Vicomte, who was perhaps the ablest of his pupils at the time, and all the while his thoughts were on the heights of Meudon, his mind casting up the lessons he had to give that afternoon and on the morrow, and wondering which of these he might postpone without deranging the academy. When having touched the Vicomte three times in succession, he paused and wrenched himself back to the present, it was to marvel at the precision to be gained by purely mechanical action. Without bestowing a thought upon what he was doing, his wrist and arm and knees had automatically performed their work, like the accurate fighting engine into which constant practice for a year and more had combined them.

Not until Sunday was Andre-Louis able to satisfy a wish which the impatience of the intervening days had converted into a yearning.

Dressed with more than ordinary care, his head elegantly coiffed—by one of those hairdressers to the nobility of whom so many were being thrown out of employment by the stream of emigration which was now flowing freely—Andre-Louis mounted his hired carriage, and drove out to Meudon.

The house of the younger Kercadiou no more resembled that of the head of the family than did his person. A man of the Court, where his brother was essentially a man of the soil, an officer of the household of M. le Comte d'Artois, he had built for himself and his family an imposing villa on the heights of Meudon in a miniature park, conveniently situated for him midway between Versailles and Paris, and easily accessible from either. M. d'Artois—the royal tennis-player—had been amongst the very first to emigrate. Together with the Condes, the Contis, the Polignacs, and others of the Queen's intimate council, old Marshal de Broglie and the Prince de Lambesc, who realized that their very names had become odious to the people, he had quitted France immediately after the fall of the Bastille. He had gone to play tennis beyond the frontier—and there consummate the work of ruining the French monarchy upon which he and those others had been engaged in France. With him, amongst several members of his household went Etienne de Kercadiou, and with Etienne de Kercadiou went his family, a wife and four children. Thus it was that the Seigneur de Gavrillac, glad to escape from a province so peculiarly disturbed as that of Brittany—where the nobles had shown themselves the most intransigent of all France—had come to occupy in his brother's absence the courtier's handsome villa at Meudon.

That he was quite happy there is not to be supposed. A man of his almost Spartan habits, accustomed to plain fare and self-help, was a little uneasy in this sybaritic abode, with its soft carpets, profusion of gilding, and battalion of sleek, silent-footed servants—for Kercadiou the younger had left his entire household behind. Time, which at Gavrillac he had kept so fully employed in agrarian concerns, here

hung heavily upon his hands. In self-defence he slept a great deal, and but for Aline, who made no attempt to conceal her delight at this proximity to Paris and the heart of things, it is possible that he would have beat a retreat almost at once from surroundings that sorted so ill with his habits. Later on, perhaps, he would accustom himself and grow resigned to this luxurious inactivity. In the meantime the novelty of it fretted him, and it was into the presence of a peevish and rather somnolent M. de Kercadiou that Andre-Louis was ushered in the early hours of the afternoon of that Sunday in June. He was unannounced, as had ever been the custom at Gavrilac. This because Benoit, M. de Kercadiou's old seneschal, had accompanied his seigneur upon this soft adventure, and was installed—to the ceaseless and but half-concealed hilarity of the impertinent valetaille that M. Etienne had left—as his maitre d'hotel here at Meudon.

Benoit had welcomed M. Andre with incoherencies of delight; almost had he gambolled about him like some faithful dog, whilst conducting him to the salon and the presence of the Lord of Gavrilac, who would—in the words of Benoit—be ravished to see M. Andre again.

"Monseigneur! Monseigneur!" he cried in a quavering voice, entering a pace or two in advance of the visitor. "It is M. Andre... M. Andre, your godson, who comes to kiss your hand. He is here... and so fine that you would hardly know him. Here he is, monseigneur! Is he not beautiful?"

And the old servant rubbed his hands in conviction of the delight that he believed he was conveying to his master.

Andre-Louis crossed the threshold of that great room, soft-carpeted to the foot, dazzling to the eye. It was immensely lofty, and its festooned ceiling was carried on fluted pillars with gilded capitals. The door by which he entered, and the windows that opened upon the garden, were of an enormous height—almost, indeed, the full height

of the room itself. It was a room overwhelmingly gilded, with an abundance of ormolu encrustations on the furniture, in which it nowise differed from what was customary in the dwellings of people of birth and wealth. Never, indeed, was there a time in which so much gold was employed decoratively as in this age when coined gold was almost unprocurable, and paper money had been put into circulation to supply the lack. It was a saying of Andre-Louis' that if these people could only have been induced to put the paper on their walls and the gold into their pockets, the finances of the kingdom might soon have been in better case.

The Seigneur—furbished and beruffled to harmonize with his surroundings—had risen, startled by this exuberant invasion on the part of Benoit, who had been almost as forlorn as himself since their coming to Meudon.

"What is it? Eh?" His pale, short-sighted eyes peered at the visitor. "Andre!" said he, between surprise and sternness; and the colour deepened in his great pink face.

Benoit, with his back to his master, deliberately winked and grinned at Andre-Louis to encourage him not to be put off by any apparent hostility on the part of his godfather. That done, the intelligent old fellow discreetly effaced himself.

"What do you want here?" growled M. de Kercadiou.

"No more than to kiss your hand, as Benoit has told you, monsieur my godfather," said Andre-Louis submissively, bowing his sleek black head.

"You have contrived without kissing it for two years."

"Do not, monsieur, reproach me with my misfortune."

The little man stood very stiffly erect, his disproportionately large

head thrown back, his pale prominent eyes very stern.

"Did you think to make your outrageous offence any better by vanishing in that heartless manner, by leaving us without knowledge of whether you were alive or dead?"

"At first it was dangerous—dangerous to my life—to disclose my whereabouts. Then for a time I was in need, almost destitute, and my pride forbade me, after what I had done and the view you must take of it, to appeal to you for help. Later..."

"Destitute?" The Seigneur interrupted. For a moment his lip trembled. Then he steadied himself, and the frown deepened as he surveyed this very changed and elegant godson of his, noted the quiet richness of his apparel, the paste buckles and red heels to his shoes, the sword hilted in mother-o'-pearl and silver, and the carefully dressed hair that he had always seen hanging in wisps about his face. "At least you do not look destitute now," he sneered.

"I am not. I have prospered since. In that, monsieur, I differ from the ordinary prodigal, who returns only when he needs assistance. I return solely because I love you, monsieur—to tell you so. I have come at the very first moment after hearing of your presence here." He advanced. "Monsieur my godfather!" he said, and held out his hand.

But M. de Kercadiou remained unbending, wrapped in his cold dignity and resentment.

"Whatever tribulations you may have suffered or consider that you may have suffered, they are far less than your disgraceful conduct deserved, and I observe that they have nothing abated your impudence. You think that you have but to come here and say, 'Monsieur my godfather!' and everything is to be forgiven and forgotten. That is your error. You have committed too great a wrong; you have offended against everything by which I hold, and against

myself personally, by your betrayal of my trust in you. You are one of those unspeakable scoundrels who are responsible for this revolution."

"Alas, monsieur, I see that you share the common delusion. These unspeakable scoundrels but demanded a constitution, as was promised them from the throne. They were not to know that the promise was insincere, or that its fulfilment would be baulked by the privileged orders. The men who have precipitated this revolution, monsieur, are the nobles and the prelates."

"You dare—and at such a time as this—stand there and tell me such abominable lies! You dare to say that the nobles have made the revolution, when scores of them, following the example of M. le Duc d'Aiguillon, have flung their privileges, even their title-deeds, into the lap of the people! Or perhaps you deny it?"

"Oh, no. Having wantonly set fire to their house, they now try to put it out by throwing water on it; and where they fail they put the entire blame on the flames."

"I see that you have come here to talk politics."

"Far from it. I have come, if possible, to explain myself. To understand is always to forgive. That is a great saying of Montaigne's. If I could make you understand..."

"You can't. You'll never make me understand how you came to render yourself so odiously notorious in Brittany."

"Ah, not odiously, monsieur!"

"Certainly, odiously—among those that matter. It is said even that you were Omnes Omnibus, though that I cannot, will not believe."

"Yet it is true."

M. de Kercadiou choked. "And you confess it? You dare to confess it?"

"What a man dares to do, he should dare to confess—unless he is a coward."

"Oh, and to be sure you were very brave, running away each time after you had done the mischief, turning comedian to hide yourself, doing more mischief as a comedian, provoking a riot in Nantes, and then running away again, to become God knows what—something dishonest by the affluent look of you. My God, man, I tell you that in these past two years I have hoped that you were dead, and you profoundly disappoint me that you are not!" He beat his hands together, and raised his shrill voice to call—"Benoit!" He strode away towards the fireplace, scarlet in the face, shaking with the passion into which he had worked himself. "Dead, I might have forgiven you, as one who had paid for his evil, and his folly. Living, I never can forgive you. You have gone too far. God alone knows where it will end."

"Benoit, the door. M. Andre-Louis Moreau to the door!" The tone argued an irrevocable determination. Pale and self-contained, but with a queer pain at his heart, Andre-Louis heard that dismissal, saw Benoit's white, scared face and shaking hands half-raised as if he were about to expostulate with his master. And then another voice, a crisp, boyish voice, cut in.

"Uncle!" it cried, a world of indignation and surprise in its pitch, and then: "Andre!" And this time a note almost of gladness, certainly of welcome, was blended with the surprise that still remained.

Both turned, half the room between them at the moment, and beheld Aline in one of the long, open windows, arrested there in the act of entering from the garden, Aline in a milk-maid bonnet of the latest mode, though without any of the tricolour embellishments that were so commonly to be seen upon them.

The thin lips of Andre's long mouth twisted into a queer smile. Into his mind had flashed the memory of their last parting. He saw himself again, standing burning with indignation upon the pavement of Nantes, looking after her carriage as it receded down the Avenue de Gigan.

She was coming towards him now with outstretched hands, a heightened colour in her cheeks, a smile of welcome on her lips. He bowed low and kissed her hand in silence.

Then with a glance and a gesture she dismissed Benoit, and in her imperious fashion constituted herself Andre's advocate against that harsh dismissal which she had overheard.

"Uncle," she said, leaving Andre and crossing to M. de Kercadiou, "you make me ashamed of you! To allow a feeling of peevishness to overwhelm all your affection for Andre!"

"I have no affection for him. I had once. He chose to extinguish it. He can go to the devil; and please observe that I don't permit you to interfere."

"But if he confesses that he has done wrong..."

"He confesses nothing of the kind. He comes here to argue with me about these infernal Rights of Man. He proclaims himself unrepentant. He announces himself with pride to have been, as all Brittany says, the scoundrel who hid himself under the sobriquet of Omnes Omnibus. Is that to be condoned?"

She turned to look at Andre across the wide space that now separated them.

"But is this really so? Don't you repent, Andre—now that you see all the harm that has come?"

It was a clear invitation to him, a pleading to him to say that he repented, to make his peace with his godfather. For a moment it almost moved him. Then, considering the subterfuge unworthy, he answered truthfully, though the pain he was suffering rang in his voice.

"To confess repentance," he said slowly, "would be to confess to a monstrous crime. Don't you see that? Oh, monsieur, have patience with me; let me explain myself a little. You say that I am in part responsible for something of all this that has happened. My exhortations of the people at Rennes and twice afterwards at Nantes are said to have had their share in what followed there. It may be so. It would be beyond my power positively to deny it. Revolution followed and bloodshed. More may yet come. To repent implies a recognition that I have done wrong. How shall I say that I have done wrong, and thus take a share of the responsibility for all that blood upon my soul? I will be quite frank with you to show you how far, indeed, I am from repentance. What I did, I actually did against all my convictions at the time. Because there was no justice in France to move against the murderer of Philippe de Vilmorin, I moved in the only way that I imagined could make the evil done recoil upon the hand that did it, and those other hands that had the power but not the spirit to punish. Since then I have come to see that I was wrong, and that Philippe de Vilmorin and those who thought with him were in the right.

"You must realize, monsieur, that it is with sincerest thankfulness that I find I have done nothing calling for repentance; that, on the contrary, when France is given the inestimable boon of a constitution, as will shortly happen, I may take pride in having played my part in bringing about the conditions that have made this possible."

There was a pause. M. de Kercadiou's face turned from pink to purple.

"You have quite finished?" he said harshly.

"If you have understood me, monsieur."

"Oh, I have understood you, and... and I beg that you will go."

Andre-Louis shrugged his shoulders and hung his head. He had come there so joyously, in such yearning, merely to receive a final dismissal. He looked at Aline. Her face was pale and troubled; but her wit failed to show her how she could come to his assistance. His excessive honesty had burnt all his boats.

"Very well, monsieur. Yet this I would ask you to remember after I am gone. I have not come to you as one seeking assistance, as one driven to you by need. I am no returning prodigal, as I have said. I am one who, needing nothing, asking nothing, master of his own destinies, has come to you driven by affection only, urged by the love and gratitude he bears you and will continue to bear you."

"Ah, yes!" cried Aline, turning now to her uncle. Here at least was an argument in Andre's favour, thought she. "That is true. Surely that..."

Inarticulately he hissed her into silence, exasperated.

"Hereafter perhaps that will help you to think of me more kindly, monsieur.

"I see no occasion, sir, to think of you at all. Again, I beg that you will go."

Andre-Louis looked at Aline an instant, as if still hesitating.

She answered him by a glance at her furious uncle, a faint shrug, and a lift of the eyebrows, dejection the while in her countenance.

It was as if she said: "You see his mood. There is nothing to be done."

He bowed with that singular grace the fencing-room had given him and went out by the door.

"Oh, it is cruel!" cried Aline, in a stifled voice, her hands clenched, and she sprang to the window.

"Aline!" her uncle's voice arrested her. "Where are you going?"

"But we do not know where he is to be found."

"Who wants to find the scoundrel?"

"We may never see him again."

"That is most fervently to be desired."

Aline said "Ouf!" and went out by the window.

He called after her, imperiously commanding her return. But Aline—dutiful child—closed her ears lest she must disobey him, and sped light-footed across the lawn to the avenue there to intercept the departing Andre-Louis.

As he came forth wrapped in gloom, she stepped from the bordering trees into his path.

"Aline!" he cried, joyously almost.

"I did not want you to go like this. I couldn't let you," she explained herself. "I know him better than you do, and I know that his great soft heart will presently melt. He will be filled with regret. He will want to send for you, and he will not know where to send."

"You think that?"

"Oh, I know it! You arrive in a bad moment. He is peevish and cross-grained, poor man, since he came here. These soft surroundings are all so strange to him. He wearies himself away from

his beloved Gavrilac, his hunting and tillage, and the truth is that in his mind he very largely blames you for what has happened—for the necessity, or at least, the wisdom, of this change. Brittany, you must know, was becoming too unsafe. The chateau of La Tour d'Azyr, amongst others, was burnt to the ground some months ago. At any moment, given a fresh excitement, it may be the turn of Gavrilac. And for this and his present discomfort he blames you and your friends. But he will come round presently. He will be sorry that he sent you away like this—for I know that he loves you, Andre, in spite of all. I shall reason with him when the time comes. And then we shall want to know where to find you."

"At number 13, Rue du Hasard. The number is unlucky, the name of the street appropriate. Therefore both are easy to remember."

She nodded. "I will walk with you to the gates." And side by side now they proceeded at a leisurely pace down the long avenue in the June sunshine dappled by the shadows of the bordering trees. "You are looking well, Andre; and do you know that you have changed a deal? I am glad that you have prospered." And then, abruptly changing the subject before he had time to answer her, she came to the matter uppermost in her mind.

"I have so wanted to see you in all these months, Andre. You were the only one who could help me; the only one who could tell me the truth, and I was angry with you for never having written to say where you were to be found."

"Of course you encouraged me to do so when last we met in Nantes."

"What? Still resentful?"

"I am never resentful. You should know that." He expressed one of his vanities. He loved to think himself a Stoic. "But I still bear the scar

of a wound that would be the better for the balm of your retraction."

"Why, then, I retract, Andre. And now tell me."

"Yes, a self-seeking retraction," said he. "You give me something that you may obtain something." He laughed quite pleasantly. "Well, well; command me."

"Tell me, Andre." She paused, as if in some difficulty, and then went on, her eyes upon the ground: "Tell me—the truth of that event at the Feydau."

The request fetched a frown to his brow. He suspected at once the thought that prompted it. Quite simply and briefly he gave her his version of the affair.

She listened very attentively. When he had done she sighed; her face was very thoughtful.

"That is much what I was told," she said. "But it was added that M. de La Tour d'Azyr had gone to the theatre expressly for the purpose of breaking finally with La Binet. Do you know if that was so?"

"I don't; nor of any reason why it should be so. La Binet provided him the sort of amusement that he and his kind are forever craving..."

"Oh, there was a reason," she interrupted him. "I was the reason. I spoke to Mme. de Sautron. I told her that I would not continue to receive one who came to me contaminated in that fashion." She spoke of it with obvious difficulty, her colour rising as he watched her half-averted face.

"Had you listened to me..." he was beginning, when again she interrupted him.

"M. de Sautron conveyed my decision to him, and afterwards represented him to me as a man in despair, repentant, ready to give

proofs—any proofs—of his sincerity and devotion to me. He told me that M. de La Tour d'Azyr had sworn to him that he would cut short that affair, that he would see La Binet no more. And then, on the very next day I heard of his having all but lost his life in that riot at the theatre. He had gone straight from that interview with M. de Sautron, straight from those protestations of future wisdom, to La Binet. I was indignant. I pronounced myself finally. I stated definitely that I would not in any circumstances receive M. de La Tour d'Azyr again! And then they pressed this explanation upon me. For a long time I would not believe it."

"So that you believe it now," said Andre quickly. "Why?"

"I have not said that I believe it now. But... but... neither can I disbelieve. Since we came to Meudon M. de La Tour d'Azyr has been here, and himself he has sworn to me that it was so."

"Oh, if M. de La Tour d'Azyr has sworn..." Andre-Louis was laughing on a bitter note of sarcasm.

"Have you ever known him lie?" she cut in sharply. That checked him. "M. de La Tour d'Azyr is, after all, a man of honour, and men of honour never deal in falsehood. Have you ever known him do so, that you should sneer as you have done?"

"No," he confessed. Common justice demanded that he should admit that virtue at least in his enemy. "I have not known him lie, it is true. His kind is too arrogant, too self-confident to have recourse to untruth. But I have known him do things as vile..."

"Nothing is as vile," she interrupted, speaking from the code by which she had been reared. "It is for liars only—who are first cousin to thieves—that there is no hope. It is in falsehood only that there is real loss of honour."

"You are defending that satyr, I think," he said frostily.

"I desire to be just."

"Justice may seem to you a different matter when at last you shall have resolved yourself to become Marquise de La Tour d'Azyr." He spoke bitterly.

"I don't think that I shall ever take that resolve."

"But you are still not sure—in spite of everything."

"Can one ever be sure of anything in this world?"

"Yes. One can be sure of being foolish."

Either she did not hear or did not heed him.

"You do not of your own knowledge know that it was not as M. de La Tour d'Azyr asserts—that he went to the Feydau that night?"

"I don't," he admitted. "It is of course possible. But does it matter?"

"It might matter. Tell me; what became of La Binet after all?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" She turned to consider him. "And you can say it with that indifference! I thought... I thought you loved her, Andre."

"So did I, for a little while. I was mistaken. It required a La Tour d'Azyr to disclose the truth to me. They have their uses, these gentlemen. They help stupid fellows like myself to perceive important truths. I was fortunate that revelation in my case preceded marriage. I can now look back upon the episode with equanimity and thankfulness for my near escape from the consequences of what was no more than an aberration of the senses. It is a thing commonly confused with love. The experience, as you see, was very instructive."

She looked at him in frank surprise.

"Do you know, Andre, I sometimes think that you have no heart."

"Presumably because I sometimes betray intelligence. And what of yourself, Aline? What of your own attitude from the outset where M. de La Tour d'Azyr is concerned? Does that show heart? If I were to tell you what it really shows, we should end by quarrelling again, and God knows I can't afford to quarrel with you now. I... I shall take another way."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, nothing at the moment, for you are not in any danger of marrying that animal."

"And if I were?"

"Ah! In that case affection for you would discover to me some means of preventing it—unless..." He paused.

"Unless?" she demanded, challengingly, drawn to the full of her sort height, her eyes imperious.

"Unless you could also tell me that you loved him," said he simply, whereat she was as suddenly and most oddly softened. And then he added, shaking his head: "But that of course is impossible."

"Why?" she asked him, quite gently now.

"Because you are what you are, Aline—utterly good and pure and adorable. Angels do not mate with devils. His wife you might become, but never his mate, Aline—never."

They had reached the wrought-iron gates at the end of the avenue. Through these they beheld the waiting yellow chaise which had brought Andre-Louis. From near at hand came the creak of other wheels, the beat of other hooves, and now another vehicle came in

sight, and drew to a stand-still beside the yellow chaise—a handsome equipage with polished mahogany panels on which the gold and azure of armorial bearings flashed brilliantly in the sunlight. A footman swung to earth to throw wide the gates; but in that moment the lady who occupied the carriage, perceiving Aline, waved to her and issued a command.

CHAPTER V. MADAME DE PLOUGASTEL

The postilion drew rein, and the footman opened the door, letting down the steps and proffering his arm to his mistress to assist her to alight, since that was the wish she had expressed. Then he opened one wing of the iron gates, and held it for her. She was a woman of something more than forty, who once must have been very lovely, who was very lovely still with the refining quality that age brings to some women. Her dress and carriage alike advertised great rank.

"I take my leave here, since you have a visitor," said Andre-Louis.

"But it is an old acquaintance of your own, Andre. You remember Mme. la Comtesse de Plougastel?"

He looked at the approaching lady, whom Aline was now hastening forward to meet, and because she was named to him he recognized her. He must, he thought, had he but looked, have recognized her without prompting anywhere at any time, and this although it was some sixteen years since last he had seen her. The sight of her now brought it all back to him—a treasured memory that had never permitted itself to be entirely overlaid by subsequent events.

When he was a boy of ten, on the eve of being sent to school at Rennes, she had come on a visit to his godfather, who was her cousin. It happened that at the time he was taken by Rabouillet to the Manor of Gavrillac, and there he had been presented to Mme. de Plougastel. The great lady, in all the glory then of her youthful beauty, with her gentle, cultured voice—so cultured that she had seemed to speak a language almost unknown to the little Breton lad—and her

majestic air of the great world, had scared him a little at first. Very gently had she allayed those fears of his, and by some mysterious enchantment she had completely enslaved his regard. He recalled now the terror in which he had gone to the embrace to which he was bidden, and the subsequent reluctance with which he had left those soft round arms. He remembered, too, how sweetly she had smelled and the very perfume she had used, a perfume as of lilac—for memory is singularly tenacious in these matters.

For three days whilst she had been at Gavrillac, he had gone daily to the manor, and so had spent hours in her company. A childless woman with the maternal instinct strong within her, she had taken this precociously intelligent, wide-eyed lad to her heart.

"Give him to me, Cousin Quintin," he remembered her saying on the last of those days to his godfather. "Let me take him back with me to Versailles as my adopted child."

But the Seigneur had gravely shaken his head in silent refusal, and there had been no further question of such a thing. And then, when she said good-bye to him—the thing came flooding back to him now—there had been tears in her eyes.

"Think of me sometimes, Andre-Louis," had been her last words.

He remembered how flattered he had been to have won within so short a time the affection of this great lady. The thing had given him a sense of importance that had endured for months thereafter, finally to fade into oblivion.

But all was vividly remembered now upon beholding her again, after sixteen years, profoundly changed and matured, the girl—for she had been no more in those old days—sunk in this worldly woman with the air of calm dignity and complete self-possession. Yet, he insisted, he must have known her anywhere again.

Aline embraced her affectionately, and then answering the questioning glance with faintly raised eyebrows that madame was directing towards Aline's companion—

"This is Andre-Louis," she said. "You remember Andre-Louis, madame?"

Madame checked. Andre-Louis saw the surprise ripple over her face, taking with it some of her colour, leaving her for a moment breathless.

And then the voice—the well-remembered rich, musical voice—richer and deeper now than of yore, repeated his name:

"Andre-Louis!"

Her manner of uttering it suggested that it awakened memories, memories perhaps of the departed youth with which it was associated. And she paused a long moment, considering him, a little wide-eyed, what time he bowed before her.

"But of course I remember him," she said at last, and came towards him, putting out her hand. He kissed it dutifully, submissively, instinctively. "And this is what you have grown into?" She appraised him, and he flushed with pride at the satisfaction in her tone. He seemed to have gone back sixteen years, and to be again the little Breton lad at Gavrillac. She turned to Aline. "How mistaken Quintin was in his assumptions. He was pleased to see him again, was he not?"

"So pleased, madame, that he has shown me the door," said Andre-Louis.

"Ah!" She frowned, conning him still with those dark, wistful eyes of hers. "We must change that, Aline. He is of course very angry with you. But it is not the way to make converts. I will plead for you, Andre-

Louis. I am a good advocate."

He thanked her and took his leave.

"I leave my case in your hands with gratitude. My homage, madame."

And so it happened that in spite of his godfather's forbidding reception of him, the fragment of a song was on his lips as his yellow chaise whirled him back to Paris and the Rue du Hasard. That meeting with Mme. de Plougastel had enheartened him; her promise to plead his case in alliance with Aline gave him assurance that all would be well.

That he was justified of this was proved when on the following Thursday towards noon his academy was invaded by M. de Kercadiou. Gilles, the boy, brought him word of it, and breaking off at once the lesson upon which he was engaged, he pulled off his mask, and went as he was—in a chamois waistcoat buttoned to the chin and with his foil under his arm to the modest salon below, where his godfather awaited him.

The florid little Lord of Gavrillac stood almost defiantly to receive him.

"I have been over-persuaded to forgive you," he announced aggressively, seeming thereby to imply that he consented to this merely so as to put an end to tiresome importunities.

Andre-Louis was not misled. He detected a pretence adopted by the Seigneur so as to enable him to retreat in good order.

"My blessings on the persuaders, whoever they may have been. You restore me my happiness, monsieur my godfather."

He took the hand that was proffered and kissed it, yielding to the impulse of the unfailing habit of his boyish days. It was an act

symbolical of his complete submission, reestablishing between himself and his godfather the bond of protected and protector, with all the mutual claims and duties that it carries. No mere words could more completely have made his peace with this man who loved him.

M. de Kercadiou's face flushed a deeper pink, his lip trembled, and there was a huskiness in the voice that murmured "My dear boy! Then he recollected himself, threw back his great head and frowned. His voice resumed its habitual shrillness. "You realize, I hope, that you have behaved damnably... damnably, and with the utmost ingratitude?"

"Does not that depend upon the point of view?" quoth Andre-Louis, but his tone was studiously conciliatory.

"It depends upon a fact, and not upon any point of view. Since I have been persuaded to overlook it, I trust that at least you have some intention of reforming."

"I... I will abstain from politics," said Andre-Louis, that being the utmost he could say with truth.

"That is something, at least." His godfather permitted himself to be mollified, now that a concession—or a seeming concession—had been made to his just resentment.

"A chair, monsieur."

"No, no. I have come to carry you off to pay a visit with me. You owe it entirely to Mme. de Plougastel that I consent to receive you again. I desire that you come with me to thank her."

"I have my engagements here..." began Andre-Louis, and then broke off. "No matter! I will arrange it. A moment." And he was turning away to reenter the academy.

"What are your engagements? You are not by chance a fencing-instructor?" M. de Kercadiou had observed the leather waistcoat and the foil tucked under Andre-Louis' arm.

"I am the master of this academy—the academy of the late Bertrand des Amis, the most flourishing school of arms in Paris to-day."

M. de Kercadiou's brows went up.

"And you are master of it?"

"Maitre en fait d'Armes. I succeeded to the academy upon the death of des Amis."

He left M. Kercadiou to think it over, and went to make his arrangements and effect the necessary changes in his toilet.

"So that is why you have taken to wearing a sword," said M. de Kercadiou, as they climbed into his waiting carriage.

"That and the need to guard one's self in these times."

"And do you mean to tell me that a man who lives by what is after all an honourable profession, a profession mainly supported by the nobility, can at the same time associate himself with these peddling attorneys and low pamphleteers who are spreading dissension and insubordination?"

"You forget that I am a peddling attorney myself, made so by your own wishes, monsieur."

M. de Kercadiou grunted, and took snuff. "You say the academy flourishes?" he asked presently.

"It does. I have two assistant instructors. I could employ a third. It is hard work."

"That should mean that your circumstances are affluent."

"I have reason to be satisfied. I have far more than I need."

"Then you'll be able to do your share in paying off this national debt," growled the nobleman, well content that as he conceived it—some of the evil Andre-Louis had helped to sow should recoil upon him.

Then the talk veered to Mme. de Plougastel. M. de Kercadiou, Andre-Louis gathered, but not the reason for it, disapproved most strongly of this visit. But then Madame la Comtesse was a headstrong woman whom there was no denying, whom all the world obeyed. M. de Plougastel was at present absent in Germany, but would shortly be returning. It was an indiscreet admission from which it was easy to infer that M. de Plougastel was one of those intriguing emissaries who came and went between the Queen of France and her brother, the Emperor of Austria.

The carriage drew up before a handsome hotel in the Faubourg Saint-Denis, at the corner of the Rue Paradis, and they were ushered by a sleek servant into a little boudoir, all gilt and brocade, that opened upon a terrace above a garden that was a park in miniature. Here madame awaited them. She rose, dismissing the young person who had been reading to her, and came forward with both hands outtheld to greet her cousin Kercadiou.

"I almost feared you would not keep your word," she said. "It was unjust. But then I hardly hoped that you would succeed in bringing him." And her glance, gentle, and smiling welcome upon him, indicated Andre-Louis.

The young man made answer with formal gallantry.

"The memory of you, madame, is too deeply imprinted on my heart for any persuasions to have been necessary."

"Ah, the courtier!" said madame, and abandoned him her hand. "We are to have a little talk, Andre-Louis," she informed him, with a gravity that left him vaguely ill at ease.

They sat down, and for a while the conversation was of general matters, chiefly concerned, however, with Andre-Louis, his occupations and his views. And all the while madame was studying him attentively with those gentle, wistful eyes, until again that sense of uneasiness began to pervade him. He realized instinctively that he had been brought here for some purpose deeper than that which had been avowed.

At last, as if the thing were concerted—and the clumsy Lord of Gavrillac was the last man in the world to cover his tracks—his godfather rose and, upon a pretext of desiring to survey the garden, sauntered through the windows on to the terrace, over whose white stone balustrade the geraniums trailed in a scarlet riot. Thence he vanished among the foliage below.

"Now we can talk more intimately," said madame. "Come here, and sit beside me." She indicated the empty half of the settee she occupied.

Andre-Louis went obediently, but a little uncomfortably. "You know," she said gently, placing a hand upon his arm, "that you have behaved very ill, that your godfather's resentment is very justly founded?"

"Madame, if I knew that, I should be the most unhappy, the most despairing of men." And he explained himself, as he had explained himself on Sunday to his godfather. "What I did, I did because it was the only means to my hand in a country in which justice was paralyzed by Privilege to make war upon an infamous scoundrel who had killed my best friend—a wanton, brutal act of murder, which there was no law to punish. And as if that were not enough—forgive me if I speak with the utmost frankness, madame—he afterwards debauched the

woman I was to have married."

"Ah, mon Dieu!" she cried out.

"Forgive me. I know that it is horrible. You perceive, perhaps, what I suffered, how I came to be driven. That last affair of which I am guilty—the riot that began in the Feydau Theatre and afterwards enveloped the whole city of Nantes—was provoked by this."

"Who was she, this girl?"

It was like a woman, he thought, to fasten upon the unessential.

"Oh, a theatre girl, a poor fool of whom I have no regrets. La Binet was her name. I was a player at the time in her father's troupe. That was after the Rennes business, when it was necessary to hide from such justice as exists in France—the gallows' justice for unfortunates who are not 'born.' This added wrong led me to provoke a riot in the theatre."

"Poor boy," she said tenderly. "Only a woman's heart can realize what you must have suffered; and because of that I can so readily forgive you. But now..."

"Ah, but you don't understand, madame. If to-day I thought that I had none but personal grounds for having lent a hand in the holy work of abolishing Privilege, I think I should cut my throat. My true justification lies in the insincerity of those who intended that the convocation of the States General should be a sham, mere dust in the eyes of the nation."

"Was it not, perhaps, wise to have been insincere in such a matter?"

He looked at her blankly.

"Can it ever be wise, madame, to be insincere?"

"Oh, indeed it can; believe me, who am twice your age, and know my world."

"I should say, madame, that nothing is wise that complicates existence; and I know of nothing that so complicates it as insincerity. Consider a moment the complications that have arisen out of this."

"But surely, Andre-Louis, your views have not been so perverted that you do not see that a governing class is a necessity in any country?"

"Why, of course. But not necessarily a hereditary one."

"What else?"

He answered her with an epigram. "Man, madame, is the child of his own work. Let there be no inheriting of rights but from such a parent. Thus a nation's best will always predominate, and such a nation will achieve greatly."

"But do you account birth of no importance?"

"Of none, madame—or else my own might trouble me." From the deep flush that stained her face, he feared that he had offended by what was almost an indelicacy. But the reproof that he was expecting did not come. Instead—

"And does it not?" she asked. "Never, Andre?"

"Never, madame. I am content."

"You have never... never regretted your lack of parents' care?"

He laughed, sweeping aside her sweet charitable concern that was so superfluous. "On the contrary, madame, I tremble to think what they might have made of me, and I am grateful to have had the fashioning of myself."

She looked at him for a moment very sadly, and then, smiling, gently shook her head.

"You do not want self-satisfaction... Yet I could wish that you saw things differently, Andre. It is a moment of great opportunities for a young man of talent and spirit. I could help you; I could help you, perhaps, to go very far if you would permit yourself to be helped after my fashion."

"Yes," he thought, "help me to a halter by sending me on treasonable missions to Austria on the Queen's behalf, like M. de Plougastel. That would certainly end in a high position for me."

Aloud he answered more as politeness prompted. "I am grateful, madame. But you will see that, holding the ideals I have expressed, I could not serve any cause that is opposed to their realization."

"You are misled by prejudice, Andre-Louis, by personal grievances. Will you allow them to stand in the way of your advancement?"

"If what I call ideals were really prejudices, would it be honest of me to run counter to them whilst holding them?"

"If I could convince you that you are mistaken! I could help you so much to find a worthy employment for the talents you possess. In the service of the King you would prosper quickly. Will you think of it, Andre-Louis, and let us talk of this again?"

He answered her with formal, chill politeness.

"I fear that it would be idle, madame. Yet your interest in me is very flattering, and I thank you. It is unfortunate for me that I am so headstrong."

"And now who deals in insincerity?" she asked him.

"Ah, but you see, madame, it is an insincerity that does not

mislead."

And then M. de Kercadiou came in through the window again, and announced fussily that he must be getting back to Meudon, and that he would take his godson with him and set him down at the Rue du Hasard.

"You must bring him again, Quintin," the Countess said, as they took their leave of her.

"Some day, perhaps," said M. de Kercadiou vaguely, and swept his godson out.

In the carriage he asked him bluntly of what madame had talked.

"She was very kind—a sweet woman," said Andre-Louis pensively.

"Devil take you, I didn't ask you the opinion that you presume to have formed of her. I asked you what she said to you."

"She strove to point out to me the error of my ways. She spoke of great things that I might do—to which she would very kindly help me—if I were to come to my senses. But as miracles do not happen, I gave her little encouragement to hope."

"I see. I see. Did she say anything else?"

He was so peremptory that Andre-Louis turned to look at him.

"What else did you expect her to say, monsieur my godfather?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Then she fulfilled your expectations."

"Eh? Oh, a thousand devils, why can't you express yourself in a sensible manner that a plain man can understand without having to think about it?"

He sulked after that most of the way to the Rue du Hasard, or so it seemed to Andre-Louis. At least he sat silent, gloomily thoughtful to judge by his expression.

"You may come and see us soon again at Meudon," he told Andre-Louis at parting. "But please remember—no revolutionary politics in future, if we are to remain friends."

CHAPTER VI. POLITICIANS

One morning in August the academy in the Rue du Hasard was invaded by Le Chapelier accompanied by a man of remarkable appearance, whose herculean stature and disfigured countenance seemed vaguely familiar to Andre-Louis. He was a man of little, if anything, over thirty, with small bright eyes buried in an enormous face. His cheek-bones were prominent, his nose awry, as if it had been broken by a blow, and his mouth was rendered almost shapeless by the scars of another injury. (A bull had horned him in the face when he was but a lad.) As if that were not enough to render his appearance terrible, his cheeks were deeply pock-marked. He was dressed untidily in a long scarlet coat that descended almost to his ankles, soiled buckskin breeches and boots with reversed tops. His shirt, none too clean, was open at the throat, the collar hanging limply over an unknotted cravat, displaying fully the muscular neck that rose like a pillar from his massive shoulders. He swung a cane that was almost a club in his left hand, and there was a cockade in his biscuit-coloured, conical hat. He carried himself with an aggressive, masterful air, that great head of his thrown back as if he were eternally at defiance.

Le Chapelier, whose manner was very grave, named him to Andre-Louis.

"This is M. Danton, a brother-lawyer, President of the Cordeliers, of whom you will have heard."

Of course Andre-Louis had heard of him. Who had not, by then?

Looking at him now with interest, Andre-Louis wondered how it came that all, or nearly all the leading innovators, were pock-marked.

Mirabeau, the journalist Desmoulins, the philanthropist Marat, Robespierre the little lawyer from Arras, this formidable fellow Danton, and several others he could call to mind all bore upon them the scars of smallpox. Almost he began to wonder was there any connection between the two. Did an attack of smallpox produce certain moral results which found expression in this way?

He dismissed the idle speculation, or rather it was shattered by the startling thunder of Danton's voice.

"This—Chapelier has told me of you. He says that you are a patriotic—."

More than by the tone was Andre-Louis startled by the obscenities with which the Colossus did not hesitate to interlard his first speech to a total stranger. He laughed outright. There was nothing else to do.

"If he has told you that, he has told you more than the truth! I am a patriot. The rest my modesty compels me to disavow."

"You're a joker too, it seems," roared the other, but he laughed nevertheless, and the volume of it shook the windows. "There's no offence in me. I am like that."

"What a pity," said Andre-Louis.

It disconcerted the king of the markets. "Eh? what's this, Chapelier? Does he give himself airs, your friend here?"

The spruce Breton, a very petit-maitre in appearance by contrast with his companion, but nevertheless of a down-right manner quite equal to Danton's in brutality, though dispensing with the emphasis of foulness, shrugged as he answered him:

"It is merely that he doesn't like your manners, which is not at all surprising. They are execrable."

"Ah, bah! You are all like that, you—Bretons. Let's come to business. You'll have heard what took place in the Assembly yesterday? You haven't? My God, where do you live? Have you heard that this scoundrel who calls himself King of France gave passage across French soil the other day to Austrian troops going to crush those who fight for liberty in Belgium? Have you heard that, by any chance?"

"Yes," said Andre-Louis coldly, masking his irritation before the other's hectoring manner. "I have heard that."

"Oh! And what do you think of it?" arms akimbo, the Colossus towered above him.

Andre-Louis turned aside to Le Chapelier.

"I don't think I understand. Have you brought this gentleman here to examine my conscience?"

"Name of a name! He's prickly as a—porcupine!" Danton protested.

"No, no." Le Chapelier was conciliatory, seeking to provide an antidote to the irritant administered by his companion. "We require your help, Andre. Danton here thinks that you are the very man for us. Listen now..."

"That's it. You tell him," Danton agreed. "You both talk the same mincing—sort of French. He'll probably understand you."

Le Chapelier went on without heeding the interruption. "This violation by the King of the obvious rights of a country engaged in framing a constitution that shall make it free has shattered every philanthropic illusion we still cherished. There are those who go so far as to proclaim the King the vowed enemy of France. But that, of course, is excessive."

"Who says so?" blazed Danton, and swore horribly by way of conveying his total disagreement.

Le Chapelier waved him into silence, and proceeded.

"Anyhow, the matter has been more than enough, added to all the rest, to set us by the ears again in the Assembly. It is open war between the Third Estate and the Privileged."

"Was it ever anything else?"

"Perhaps not; but it has assumed a new character. You'll have heard of the duel between Lameth and the Duc de Castries?"

"A trifling affair."

"In its results. But it might have been far other. Mirabeau is challenged and insulted now at every sitting. But he goes his way, cold-bloodedly wise. Others are not so circumspect; they meet insult with insult, blow with blow, and blood is being shed in private duels. The thing is reduced by these swordsmen of the nobility to a system."

Andre-Louis nodded. He was thinking of Philippe de Vilmorin. "Yes," he said, "it is an old trick of theirs. It is so simple and direct—like themselves. I wonder only that they didn't hit upon this system sooner. In the early days of the States General, at Versailles, it might have had a better effect. Now, it comes a little late."

"But they mean to make up for lost time—sacred name!" cried Danton. "Challenges are flying right and left between these bully-swordsmen, these spadassinicides, and poor devils of the robe who have never learnt to fence with anything but a quill. It's just—murder. Yet if I were to go amongst messieurs les nobles and crunch an addled head or two with this stick of mine, snap a few aristocratic necks between these fingers which the good God has given me for the purpose, the law would send me to atone upon the gallows. This in

a land that is striving after liberty. Why, Dieu me damne! I am not even allowed to keep my hat on in the theatre. But they—these—s!"

"He is right," said Le Chapelier. "The thing has become unendurable, insufferable. Two days ago M. d'Ambly threatened Mirabeau with his cane before the whole Assembly. Yesterday M. de Faussigny leapt up and harangued his order by inviting murder. 'Why don't we fall on these scoundrels, sword in hand?' he asked. Those were his very words: 'Why don't we fall on these scoundrels, sword in hand.'"

"It is so much simpler than lawmaking," said Andre-Louis.

"Lagron, the deputy from Ancenis in the Loire, said something that we did not hear in answer. As he was leaving the Manege one of these bullies grossly insulted him. Lagron no more than used his elbow to push past when the fellow cried out that he had been struck, and issued his challenge. They fought this morning early in the Champs Elysees, and Lagron was killed, run through the stomach deliberately by a man who fought like a fencing-master, and poor Lagron did not even own a sword. He had to borrow one to go to the assignation."

Andre-Louis—his mind ever on Vilmorin, whose case was here repeated, even to the details—was swept by a gust of passion. He clenched his hands, and his jaws set. Danton's little eyes observed him keenly.

"Well? And what do you think of that? Noblesse oblige, eh? The thing is we must oblige them too, these—s. We must pay them back in the same coin; meet them with the same weapons. Abolish them; tumble these assassinateurs into the abyss of nothingness by the same means."

"But how?"

"How? Name of God! haven't I said it?"

"That is where we require your help," Le Chapelier put in. "There must be men of patriotic feeling among the more advanced of your pupils. M. Danton's idea is that a little band of these—say a half-dozen, with yourself at their head—might read these bullies a sharp lesson."

Andre-Louis frowned.

"And how, precisely, had M. Danton thought that this might be done?"

M. Danton spoke for himself, vehemently.

"Why, thus: We post you in the Manege, at the hour when the Assembly is rising. We point out the six leading phlebotomists, and let you loose to insult them before they have time to insult any of the representatives. Then to-morrow morning, six—phlebotomists themselves phlebotomized secundum artem. That will give the others something to think about. It will give them a great deal to think about, by—! If necessary the dose may be repeated to ensure a cure. If you kill the—s, so much the better."

He paused, his sallow face flushed with the enthusiasm of his idea. Andre-Louis stared at him inscrutably.

"Well, what do you say to that?"

"That it is most ingenious." And Andre-Louis turned aside to look out of the window.

"And is that all you think of it?"

"I will not tell you what else I think of it because you probably would not understand. For you, M. Danton, there is at least this excuse that you did not know me. But you, Isaac—to bring this gentleman here

with such a proposal!"

Le Chapelier was overwhelmed in confusion. "I confess I hesitated," he apologized. "But M. Danton would not take my word for it that the proposal might not be to your taste."

"I would not!" Danton broke in, bellowing. He swung upon Le Chapelier, brandishing his great arms. "You told me monsieur was a patriot. Patriotism knows no scruples. You call this mincing dancing-master a patriot?"

"Would you, monsieur, out of patriotism consent to become an assassin?"

"Of course I would. Haven't I told you so? Haven't I told you that I would gladly go among them with my club, and crack them like so many—fleas?"

"Why not, then?"

"Why not? Because I should get myself hanged. Haven't I said so?"

"But what of that—being a patriot? Why not, like another Curtius, jump into the gulf, since you believe that your country would benefit by your death?"

M. Danton showed signs of exasperation. "Because my country will benefit more by my life."

"Permit me, monsieur, to suffer from a similar vanity."

"You? But where would be the danger to you? You would do your work under the cloak of duelling—as they do."

"Have you reflected, monsieur, that the law will hardly regard a fencing-master who kills his opponent as an ordinary combatant, particularly if it can be shown that the fencing-master himself

provoked the attack?"

"So! Name of a name!" M. Danton blew out his cheeks and delivered himself with withering scorn. "It comes to this, then: you are afraid!"

"You may think so if you choose—that I am afraid to do slyly and treacherously that which a thrasonical patriot like yourself is afraid of doing frankly and openly. I have other reasons. But that one should suffice you."

Danton gasped. Then he swore more amazingly and variedly than ever.

"By—! you are right," he admitted, to Andre-Louis' amazement. "You are right, and I am wrong. I am as bad a patriot as you are, and I am a coward as well." And he invoked the whole Pantheon to witness his self-denunciation. "Only, you see, I count for something: and if they take me and hang me, why, there it is! Monsieur, we must find some other way. Forgive the intrusion. Adieu!" He held out his enormous hand..

Le Chapelier stood hesitating, crestfallen.

"You understand, Andre? I am sorry that..."

"Say no more, please. Come and see me soon again. I would press you to remain, but it is striking nine, and the first of my pupils is about to arrive."

"Nor would I permit it," said Danton. "Between us we must resolve the riddle of how to extinguish M. de La Tour d'Azyr and his friends."

"Who?"

Sharp as a pistol-shot came that question, as Danton was turning away. The tone of it brought him up short. He turned again, Le

Chapelier with him.

"I said M. de La Tour d'Azyr."

"What has he to do with the proposal you were making me?"

"He? Why, he is the phlebotomist in chief."

And Le Chapelier added. "It is he who killed Lagron."

"Not a friend of yours, is he?" wondered Danton.

"And it is La Tour d'Azyr you desire me to kill?" asked Andre-Louis very slowly, after the manner of one whose thoughts are meanwhile pondering the subject.

"That's it," said Danton. "And not a job for a prentice hand, I can assure you.

"Ah, but this alters things," said Andre-Louis, thinking aloud. "It offers a great temptation."

"Why, then...?" The Colossus took a step towards him again.

"Wait!" He put up his hand. Then with chin sunk on his breast, he paced away to the window, musing.

Le Chapelier and Danton exchanged glances, then watched him, waiting, what time he considered.

At first he almost wondered why he should not of his own accord have decided upon some such course as this to settle that long-standing account of M. de La Tour d'Azyr. What was the use of this great skill in fence that he had come to acquire, unless he could turn it to account to avenge Vilmorin, and to make Aline safe from the lure of her own ambition? It would be an easy thing to seek out La Tour d'Azyr, put a mortal affront upon him, and thus bring him to the point. To-day this would be murder, murder as treacherous as that which La

Tour d'Azyr had done upon Philippe de Vilmorin; for to-day the old positions were reversed, and it was Andre-Louis who might go to such an assignation without a doubt of the issue. It was a moral obstacle of which he made short work. But there remained the legal obstacle he had expounded to Danton. There was still a law in France; the same law which he had found it impossible to move against La Tour d'Azyr, but which would move briskly enough against himself in like case. And then, suddenly, as if by inspiration, he saw the way—a way which if adopted would probably bring La Tour d'Azyr to a poetic justice, bring him, insolent, confident, to thrust himself upon Andre-Louis' sword, with all the odium of provocation on his own side.

He turned to them again, and they saw that he was very pale, that his great dark eyes glowed oddly.

"There will probably be some difficulty in finding a suppleant for this poor Lagron," he said. "Our fellow-countrymen will be none so eager to offer themselves to the swords of Privilege."

"True enough," said Le Chapelier gloomily; and then, as if suddenly leaping to the thing in Andre-Louis' mind: "Andre!" he cried. "Would you..."

"It is what I was considering. It would give me a legitimate place in the Assembly. If your Tour d'Azyrs choose to seek me out then, why, their blood be upon their own heads. I shall certainly do nothing to discourage them." He smiled curiously. "I am just a rascal who tries to be honest—Scaramouche always, in fact; a creature of sophistries. Do you think that Ancenis would have me for its representative?"

"Will it have Omnes Omnibus for its representative?" Le Chapelier was laughing, his countenance eager. "Ancenis will be convulsed with pride. It is not Rennes or Nantes, as it might have been had you wished it. But it gives you a voice for Brittany."

"I should have to go to Ancenis..."

"No need at all. A letter from me to the Municipality, and the Municipality will confirm you at once. No need to move from here. In a fortnight at most the thing can be accomplished. It is settled, then?"

Andre-Louis considered yet a moment. There was his academy. But he could make arrangements with Le Duc and Galoche to carry it on for him whilst himself directing and advising. Le Duc, after all, was become a thoroughly efficient master, and he was a trustworthy fellow. At need a third assistant could be engaged.

"Be it so," he said at last.

Le Chapelier clasped hands with him and became congratulatorily voluble, until interrupted by the red-coated giant at the door.

"What exactly does it mean to our business, anyway?" he asked. "Does it mean that when you are a representative you will not scruple to skewer M. le Marquis?"

"If M. le Marquis should offer himself to be skewered, as he no doubt will."

"I perceive the distinction," said M. Danton, and sneered. "You've an ingenious mind." He turned to Le Chapelier. "What did you say he was to begin with—a lawyer, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I was a lawyer, and afterwards a mountebank."

"And this is the result!"

"As you say. And do you know that we are after all not so dissimilar, you and I?"

"What?"

"Once like you I went about inciting other people to go and kill the

man I wanted dead. You'll say I was a coward, of course."

Le Chapelier prepared to slip between them as the clouds gathered on the giant's brow. Then these were dispelled again, and the great laugh vibrated through the long room.

"You've touched me for the second time, and in the same place. Oh, you can fence, my lad. We should be friends. Rue des Cordeliers is my address. Any—scoundrel will tell you where Danton lodges. Desmoulins lives underneath. Come and visit us one evening. There's always a bottle for a friend."

CHAPTER VII. THE SPADASSINICIDES

After an absence of rather more than a week, M. le Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr was back in his place on the Cote Droit of the National Assembly. Properly speaking, we should already at this date allude to him as the ci-devant Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr, for the time was September of 1790, two months after the passing—on the motion of that downright Breton leveller, Le Chapelier—of the decree that nobility should no more be hereditary than infamy; that just as the brand of the gallows must not defile the possibly worthy descendants of one who had been convicted of evil, neither should the blazon advertising achievement glorify the possibly unworthy descendants of one who had proved himself good. And so the decree had been passed abolishing hereditary nobility and consigning family escutcheons to the rubbish-heap of things no longer to be tolerated by an enlightened generation of philosophers. M. le Comte de Lafayette, who had supported the motion, left the Assembly as plain M. Motier, the great tribune Count Mirabeau became plain M. Riquetti, and M. le Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr just simple M. Lesarques. The thing was done in one of those exaltations produced by the approach of the great National Festival of the Champ de Mars, and no doubt it was thoroughly repented on the morrow by those who had lent themselves to it. Thus, although law by now, it was a law that no one troubled just yet to enforce.

That, however, is by the way. The time, as I have said, was September, the day dull and showery, and some of the damp and gloom of it seemed to have penetrated the long Hall of the Manege, where on their eight rows of green benches elliptically arranged in

ascending tiers about the space known as La Piste, sat some eight or nine hundred of the representatives of the three orders that composed the nation.

The matter under debate by the constitution-builders was whether the deliberating body to succeed the Constituent Assembly should work in conjunction with the King, whether it should be periodic or permanent, whether it should govern by two chambers or by one.

The Abbe Maury, son of a cobbler, and therefore in these days of antitheses orator-in-chief of the party of the Right—the Blacks, as those who fought Privilege's losing battles were known—was in the tribune. He appeared to be urging the adoption of a two-chambers system framed on the English model. He was, if anything, more long-winded and prosy even than his habit; his arguments assumed more and more the form of a sermon; the tribune of the National Assembly became more and more like a pulpit; but the members, conversely, less and less like a congregation. They grew restive under that steady flow of pompous verbiage, and it was in vain that the four ushers in black satin breeches and carefully powdered heads, chain of office on their breasts, gilded sword at their sides, circulated in the Piste, clapping their hands, and hissing,

"Silence! En place!"

Equally vain was the intermittent ringing of the bell by the president at his green-covered table facing the tribune. The Abbe Maury had talked too long, and for some time had failed to interest the members. Realizing it at last, he ceased, whereupon the hum of conversation became general. And then it fell abruptly. There was a silence of expectancy, and a turning of heads, a craning of necks. Even the group of secretaries at the round table below the president's dais roused themselves from their usual apathy to consider this young man who was mounting the tribune of the Assembly for the first time.

"M. Andre-Louis Moreau, deputy suppleant, vice Emmanuel Lagron, deceased, for Ancenis in the Department of the Loire."

M. de La Tour d'Azyr shook himself out of the gloomy abstraction in which he had sat. The successor of the deputy he had slain must, in any event, be an object of grim interest to him. You conceive how that interest was heightened when he heard him named, when, looking across, he recognized indeed in this Andre-Louis Moreau the young scoundrel who was continually crossing his path, continually exerting against him a deep-moving, sinister influence to make him regret that he should have spared his life that day at Gavrilac two years ago. That he should thus have stepped into the shoes of Lagron seemed to M. de La Tour d'Azyr too apt for mere coincidence, a direct challenge in itself.

He looked at the young man in wonder rather than in anger, and looking at him he was filled by a vague, almost a premonitory, uneasiness.

At the very outset, the presence which in itself he conceived to be a challenge was to demonstrate itself for this in no equivocal terms.

"I come before you," Andre-Louis began, "as a deputy-suppleant to fill the place of one who was murdered some three weeks ago."

It was a challenging opening that instantly provoked an indignant outcry from the Blacks. Andre-Louis paused, and looked at them, smiling a little, a singularly self-confident young man.

"The gentlemen of the Right, M. le President, do not appear to like my words. But that is not surprising. The gentlemen of the Right notoriously do not like the truth."

This time there was uproar. The members of the Left roared with laughter, those of the Right thundered menacingly. The ushers circulated at a pace beyond their usual, agitated themselves, clapped

their hands, and called in vain for silence.

The President rang his bell.

Above the general din came the voice of La Tour d'Azyr, who had half-risen from his seat: "Mountebank! This is not the theatre!"

"No, monsieur, it is becoming a hunting-ground for bully-swordsmen," was the answer, and the uproar grew.

The deputy-suppleant looked round and waited. Near at hand he met the encouraging grin of Le Chapelier, and the quiet, approving smile of Kersain, another Breton deputy of his acquaintance. A little farther off he saw the great head of Mirabeau thrown back, the great eyes regarding him from under a frown in a sort of wonder, and yonder, among all that moving sea of faces, the sallow countenance of the Arras' lawyer Robespierre—or de Robespierre, as the little snob now called himself, having assumed the aristocratic particle as the prerogative of a man of his distinction in the councils of his country. With his tip-tilted nose in the air, his carefully curled head on one side, the deputy for Arras was observing Andre-Louis attentively. The horn-rimmed spectacles he used for reading were thrust up on to his pale forehead, and it was through a levelled spy-glass that he considered the speaker, his thin-lipped mouth stretched a little in that tiger-cat smile that was afterwards to become so famous and so feared.

Gradually the uproar wore itself out, and diminished so that at last the President could make himself heard. Leaning forward, he gravely addressed the young man in the tribune:

"Monsieur, if you wish to be heard, let me beg of you not to be provocative in your language." And then to the others: "Messieurs, if we are to proceed, I beg that you will restrain your feelings until the deputy-suppleant has concluded his discourse."

"I shall endeavour to obey, M. le President, leaving provocation to the gentlemen of the Right. If the few words I have used so far have been provocative, I regret it. But it was necessary that I should refer to the distinguished deputy whose place I come so unworthily to fill, and it was unavoidable that I should refer to the event which has procured us this sad necessity. The deputy Lagron was a man of singular nobility of mind, a selfless, dutiful, zealous man, inflamed by the high purpose of doing his duty by his electors and by this Assembly. He possessed what his opponents would call a dangerous gift of eloquence."

La Tour d'Azyr writhed at the well-known phrase—his own phrase—the phrase that he had used to explain his action in the matter of Philippe de Vilmorin, the phrase that from time to time had been cast in his teeth with such vindictive menace.

And then the crisp voice of the witty Canales, that very rapier of the Privileged party, cut sharply into the speaker's momentary pause.

"M. le President," he asked with great solemnity, "has the deputy-suppleant mounted the tribune for the purpose of taking part in the debate on the constitution of the legislative assemblies, or for the purpose of pronouncing a funeral oration upon the departed deputy Lagron?"

This time it was the Blacks who gave way to mirth, until checked by the deputy-suppleant.

"That laughter is obscene!" In this truly Gallic fashion he flung his glove into the face of Privilege, determined, you see, upon no half measures; and the rippling laughter perished on the instant quenched in speechless fury.

Solemnly he proceeded.

"You all know how Lagron died. To refer to his death at all requires

courage, to laugh in referring to it requires something that I will not attempt to qualify. If I have alluded to his decease, it is because my own appearance among you seemed to render some such allusion necessary. It is mine to take up the burden which he set down. I do not pretend that I have the strength, the courage, or the wisdom of Lagron; but with every ounce of such strength and courage and wisdom as I possess that burden will I bear. And I trust, for the sake of those who might attempt it, that the means taken to impose silence upon that eloquent voice will not be taken to impose silence upon mine."

There was a faint murmur of applause from the Left, splutter of contemptuous laughter from the Right.

"Rhodomont!" a voice called to him.

He looked in the direction of that voice, proceeding from the group of spadassins amid the Blacks across the Piste, and he smiled. Inaudibly his lips answered:

"No, my friend—Scaramouche; Scaramouche, the subtle, dangerous fellow who goes tortuously to his ends." Aloud, he resumed: "M. le President, there are those who will not understand that the purpose for which we are assembled here is the making of laws by which France may be equitably governed, by which France may be lifted out of the morass of bankruptcy into which she is in danger of sinking. For there are some who want, it seems, not laws, but blood; I solemnly warn them that this blood will end by choking them, if they do not learn in time to discard force and allow reason to prevail."

Again in that phrase there was something that stirred a memory in La Tour d'Azyr. He turned in the fresh uproar to speak to his cousin Chabrillane who sat beside him.

"A daring rogue, this bastard of Gavrilac's," said he.

Chabrilane looked at him with gleaming eyes, his face white with anger.

"Let him talk himself out. I don't think he will be heard again after to-day. Leave this to me."

Hardly could La Tour have told you why, but he sank back in his seat with a sense of relief. He had been telling himself that here was matter demanding action, a challenge that he must take up. But despite his rage he felt a singular unwillingness. This fellow had a trick of reminding him, he supposed, too unpleasantly of that young abbe done to death in the garden behind the Breton arme at Gavrilac. Not that the death of Philippe de Vilmorin lay heavily upon M. de La Tour d'Azyr's conscience. He had accounted himself fully justified of his action. It was that the whole thing as his memory revived it for him made an unpleasant picture: that distraught boy kneeling over the bleeding body of the friend he had loved, and almost begging to be slain with him, dubbing the Marquis murderer and coward to incite him.

Meanwhile, leaving now the subject of the death of Lagron, the deputy-suppleant had at last brought himself into order, and was speaking upon the question under debate. He contributed nothing of value to it; he urged nothing definite. His speech on the subject was very brief—that being the pretext and not the purpose for which he had ascended the tribune.

When later he was leaving the hall at the end of the sitting, with Le Chapelier at his side, he found himself densely surrounded by deputies as by a body-guard. Most of them were Bretons, who aimed at screening him from the provocations which his own provocative words in the Assembly could not fail to bring down upon his head. For a moment the massive form of Mirabeau brought up alongside of him.

"Felicitations, M. Moreau," said the great man. "You acquitted yourself very well. They will want your blood, no doubt. But be discreet, monsieur, if I may presume to advise you, and do not allow yourself to be misled by any false sense of quixotry. Ignore their challenges. I do so myself. I place each challenger upon my list. There are some fifty there already, and there they will remain. Refuse them what they are pleased to call satisfaction, and all will be well." Andre-Louis smiled and sighed.

"It requires courage," said the hypocrite.

"Of course it does. But you would appear to have plenty."

"Hardly enough, perhaps. But I shall do my best."

They had come through the vestibule, and although this was lined with eager Blacks waiting for the young man who had insulted them so flagrantly from the rostrum, Andre-Louis' body-guard had prevented any of them from reaching him.

Emerging now into the open, under the great awning at the head of the Carriere, erected to enable carriages to reach the door under cover, those in front of him dispersed a little, and there was a moment as he reached the limit of the awning when his front was entirely uncovered. Outside the rain was falling heavily, churning the ground into thick mud, and for a moment Andre-Louis, with Le Chapelier ever at his side, stood hesitating to step out into the deluge.

The watchful Chabrilane had seen his chance, and by a detour that took him momentarily out into the rain, he came face to face with the too-daring young Breton. Rudely, violently, he thrust Andre-Louis back, as if to make room for himself under the shelter.

Not for a second was Andre-Louis under any delusion as to the man's deliberate purpose, nor were those who stood near him, who made a belated and ineffectual attempt to close about him. He was

grievously disappointed. It was not Chabrilane he had been expecting. His disappointment was reflected on his countenance, to be mistaken for something very different by the arrogant Chevalier.

But if Chabrilane was the man appointed to deal with him, he would make the best of it.

"I think you are pushing against me, monsieur," he said, very civilly, and with elbow and shoulder he thrust M. de Chabrilane back into the rain.

"I desire to take shelter, monsieur," the Chevalier hectored.

"You may do so without standing on my feet. I have a prejudice against any one standing on my feet. My feet are very tender. Perhaps you did not know it, monsieur. Please say no more."

"Why, I wasn't speaking, you lout!" exclaimed the Chevalier, slightly discomposed.

"Were you not? I thought perhaps you were about to apologize."

"Apologize?" Chabrilane laughed. "To you! Do you know that you are amusing?" He stepped under the awning for the second time, and again in view of all thrust Andre-Louis rudely back.

"Ah!" cried Andre-Louis, with a grimace. "You hurt me, monsieur. I have told you not to push against me." He raised his voice that all might hear him, and once more impelled M. de Chabrilane back into the rain.

Now, for all his slenderness, his assiduous daily sword-practice had given Andre-Louis an arm of iron. Also he threw his weight into the thrust. His assailant reeled backwards a few steps, and then his heel struck a baulk of timber left on the ground by some workmen that morning, and he sat down suddenly in the mud.

A roar of laughter rose from all who witnessed the fine gentleman's downfall. He rose, mud-bespattered, in a fury, and in that fury sprang at Andre-Louis.

Andre-Louis had made him ridiculous, which was altogether unforgivable.

"You shall meet me for this!" he spluttered. "I shall kill you for it."

His inflamed face was within a foot of Andre-Louis'. Andre-Louis laughed. In the silence everybody heard the laugh and the words that followed.

"Oh, is that what you wanted? But why didn't you say so before? You would have spared me the trouble of knocking you down. I thought gentlemen of your profession invariably conducted these affairs with decency, decorum, and a certain grace. Had you done so, you might have saved your breeches."

"How soon shall we settle this?" snapped Chabrilane, livid with very real fury.

"Whenever you please, monsieur. It is for you to say when it will suit your convenience to kill me. I think that was the intention you announced, was it not?" Andre-Louis was suavity itself.

"To-morrow morning, in the Bois. Perhaps you will bring a friend."

"Certainly, monsieur. To-morrow morning, then. I hope we shall have fine weather. I detest the rain."

Chabrilane looked at him almost with amazement Andre-Louis smiled pleasantly.

"Don't let me detain you now, monsieur. We quite understand each other. I shall be in the Bois at nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

"That is too late for me, monsieur."

"Any other hour would be too early for me. I do not like to have my habits disturbed. Nine o'clock or not at all, as you please."

"But I must be at the Assembly at nine, for the morning session."

"I am afraid, monsieur, you will have to kill me first, and I have a prejudice against being killed before nine o'clock."

Now this was too complete a subversion of the usual procedure for M. de Chabrilane's stomach. Here was a rustic deputy assuming with him precisely the tone of sinister mockery which his class usually dealt out to their victims of the Third Estate. And to heighten the irritation, Andre-Louis—the actor, Scaramouche always—produced his snuffbox, and proffered it with a steady hand to Le Chapelier before helping himself.

Chabrilane, it seemed, after all that he had suffered, was not even to be allowed to make a good exit.

"Very well, monsieur," he said. "Nine o'clock, then; and we'll see if you'll talk as pertly afterwards."

On that he flung away, before the jeers of the provincial deputies. Nor did it soothe his rage to be laughed at by urchins all the way down the Rue Dauphine because of the mud and filth that dripped from his satin breeches and the tails of his elegant, striped coat.

But though the members of the Third had jeered on the surface, they trembled underneath with fear and indignation. It was too much. Lagron killed by one of these bullies, and now his successor challenged, and about to be killed by another of them on the very first day of his appearance to take the dead man's place. Several came now to implore Andre-Louis not to go to the Bois, to ignore the challenge and the whole affair, which was but a deliberate attempt to

put him out of the way. He listened seriously, shook his head gloomily, and promised at last to think it over.

He was in his seat again for the afternoon session as if nothing disturbed him.

But in the morning, when the Assembly met, his place was vacant and so was M. de Chabrilane's. Gloom and resentment sat upon the members of the Third, and brought a more than usually acrid note into their debates. They disapproved of the rashness of the new recruit to their body. Some openly condemned his lack of circumspection. Very few—and those only the little group in Le Chapelier's confidence—ever expected to see him again.

It was, therefore, as much in amazement as in relief that at a few minutes after ten they saw him enter, calm, composed, and bland, and thread his way to his seat. The speaker occupying the rostrum at that moment—a member of the Privileged—stopped short to stare in incredulous dismay. Here was something that he could not understand at all. Then from somewhere, to satisfy the amazement on both sides of the assembly, a voice explained the phenomenon contemptuously.

"They haven't met. He has shirked it at the last moment."

It must be so, thought all; the mystification ceased, and men were settling back into their seats. But now, having reached his place, having heard the voice that explained the matter to the universal satisfaction, Andre-Louis paused before taking his seat. He felt it incumbent upon him to reveal the true fact.

"M. le President, my excuses for my late arrival." There was no necessity for this. It was a mere piece of theatricality, such as it was not in Scaramouche's nature to forgo. "I have been detained by an engagement of a pressing nature. I bring you also the excuses of M.

de Chabrilane. He, unfortunately, will be permanently absent from this Assembly in future."

The silence was complete. Andre-Louis sat down.

CHAPTER VIII. THE PALADIN OF THE THIRD

M. Le Chevalier de Chabrilane had been closely connected, you will remember, with the iniquitous affair in which Philippe de Vilmorin had lost his life. We know enough to justify a surmise that he had not merely been La Tour d'Azyr's second in the encounter, but actually an instigator of the business. Andre-Louis may therefore have felt a justifiable satisfaction in offering up the Chevalier's life to the Manes of his murdered friend. He may have viewed it as an act of common justice not to be procured by any other means. Also it is to be remembered that Chabrilane had gone confidently to the meeting, conceiving that he, a practised ferailleux, had to deal with a bourgeois utterly unskilled in swordsmanship. Morally, then, he was little better than a murderer, and that he should have tumbled into the pit he conceived that he dug for Andre-Louis was a poetic retribution. Yet, notwithstanding all this, I should find the cynical note on which Andre-Louis announced the issue to the Assembly utterly detestable did I believe it sincere. It would justify Aline of the expressed opinion, which she held in common with so many others who had come into close contact with him, that Andre-Louis was quite heartless.

You have seen something of the same heartlessness in his conduct when he discovered the faithlessness of La Binet although that is belied by the measures he took to avenge himself. His subsequent contempt of the woman I account to be born of the affection in which for a time he held her. That this affection was as deep as he first imagined, I do not believe; but that it was as shallow as he would almost be at pains to make it appear by the completeness with which he affects to have put her from his mind when he discovered her

worthlessness, I do not believe; nor, as I have said, do his actions encourage that belief. Then, again, his callous cynicism in hoping that he had killed Binet is also an affectation. Knowing that such things as Binet are better out of the world, he can have suffered no compunction; he had, you must remember, that rarely level vision which sees things in their just proportions, and never either magnifies or reduces them by sentimental considerations. At the same time, that he should contemplate the taking of life with such complete and cynical equanimity, whatever the justification, is quite incredible.

Similarly now, it is not to be believed that in coming straight from the Bois de Boulogne, straight from the killing of a man, he should be sincerely expressing his nature in alluding to the fact in terms of such outrageous flippancy. Not quite to such an extent was he the incarnation of Scaramouche. But sufficiently was he so ever to mask his true feelings by an arresting gesture, his true thoughts by an effective phrase. He was the actor always, a man ever calculating the effect he would produce, ever avoiding self-revelation, ever concerned to overlay his real character by an assumed and quite fictitious one. There was in this something of impishness, and something of other things.

Nobody laughed now at his flippancy. He did not intend that anybody should. He intended to be terrible; and he knew that the more flippant and casual his tone, the more terrible would be its effect. He produced exactly the effect he desired.

What followed in a place where feelings and practices had become what they had become is not difficult to surmise. When the session rose, there were a dozen spadassins awaiting him in the vestibule, and this time the men of his own party were less concerned to guard him. He seemed so entirely capable of guarding himself; he appeared, for all his circumspection, to have so completely carried the war into the enemy's camp, so completely to have adopted their

own methods, that his fellows scarcely felt the need to protect him as yesterday.

As he emerged, he scanned that hostile file, whose air and garments marked them so clearly for what they were. He paused, seeking the man he expected, the man he was most anxious to oblige. But M. de La Tour d'Azyr was absent from those eager ranks. This seemed to him odd. La Tour d'Azyr was Chabrilane's cousin and closest friend. Surely he should have been among the first to-day. The fact was that La Tour d'Azyr was too deeply overcome by amazement and grief at the utterly unexpected event. Also his vindictiveness was held curiously in leash. Perhaps he, too, remembered the part played by Chabrilane in the affair at Gavrilac, and saw in this obscure Andre-Louis Moreau, who had so persistently persecuted him ever since, an ordained avenger. The repugnance he felt to come to the point, with him, particularly after this culminating provocation, was puzzling even to himself. But it existed, and it curbed him now.

To Andre-Louis, since La Tour was not one of that waiting pack, it mattered little on that Tuesday morning who should be the next. The next, as it happened, was the young Vicomte de La Motte-Royau, one of the deadliest blades in the group.

On the Wednesday morning, coming again an hour or so late to the Assembly, Andre-Louis announced—in much the same terms as he had announced the death of Chabrilane—that M. de La Motte-Royau would probably not disturb the harmony of the Assembly for some weeks to come, assuming that he were so fortunate as to recover ultimately from the effects of an unpleasant accident with which he had quite unexpectedly had the misfortune to meet that morning.

On Thursday he made an identical announcement with regard to the Vidame de Blavon. On Friday he told them that he had been delayed by M. de Troiscantins, and then turning to the members of the

Cote Droit, and lengthening his face to a sympathetic gravity:

"I am glad to inform you, messieurs, that M. des Troiscantins is in the hands of a very competent surgeon who hopes with care to restore him to your councils in a few weeks' time."

It was paralyzing, fantastic, unreal; and friend and foe in the assembly sat alike stupefied under those bland daily announcements. Four of the most redoubtable spadassinicides put away for a time, one of them dead—and all this performed with such an air of indifference and announced in such casual terms by a wretched little provincial lawyer!

He began to assume in their eyes a romantic aspect. Even that group of philosophers of the Cote Gauche, who refused to worship any force but the force of reason, began to look upon him with a respect and consideration which no oratorical triumphs could ever have procured him.

And from the Assembly the fame of him oozed out gradually over Paris. Desmoulins wrote a panegyric upon him in his paper "Les Revolutions," wherein he dubbed him the "Paladin of the Third Estate," a name that caught the fancy of the people, and clung to him for some time. Disdainfully was he mentioned in the "Actes des Apotres," the mocking organ of the Privileged party, so light-heartedly and provocatively edited by a group of gentlemen afflicted by a singular mental myopia.

The Friday of that very busy week in the life of this young man who even thereafter is to persist in reminding us that he is not in any sense a man of action, found the vestibule of the Manege empty of swordsmen when he made his leisurely and expectant egress between Le Chapelier and Kersain.

So surprised was he that he checked in his stride.

"Have they had enough?" he wondered, addressing the question to Le Chapelier.

"They have had enough of you, I should think," was the answer. "They will prefer to turn their attention to some one less able to take care of himself."

Now this was disappointing. Andre-Louis had lent himself to this business with a very definite object in view. The slaying of Chabrilane had, as far as it went, been satisfactory. He had regarded that as a sort of acceptable hors d'oeuvre. But the three who had followed were no affair of his at all. He had met them with a certain amount of repugnance, and dealt with each as lightly as consideration of his own safety permitted. Was the baiting of him now to cease whilst the man at whom he aimed had not presented himself? In that case it would be necessary to force the pace!

Out there under the awning a group of gentlemen stood in earnest talk. Scanning the group in a rapid glance, Andre-Louis perceived M. de La Tour d'Azyr amongst them. He tightened his lips. He must afford no provocation. It must be for them to fasten their quarrels upon him. Already the "Actes des Apotres" that morning had torn the mask from his face, and proclaimed him the fencing-master of the Rue du Hasard, successor to Bertrand des Amis. Hazardous as it had been hitherto for a man of his condition to engage in single combat it was rendered doubly so by this exposure, offered to the public as an aristocratic apologia.

Still, matters could not be left where they were, or he should have had all his pains for nothing. Carefully looking away from that group of gentlemen, he raised his voice so that his words must carry to their ears.

"It begins to look as if my fears of having to spend the remainder of my days in the Bois were idle."

Out of the corner of his eye he caught the stir his words created in that group. Its members had turned to look at him; but for the moment that was all. A little more was necessary. Pacing slowly along between his friends he resumed:

"But is it not remarkable that the assassin of Lagron should make no move against Lagron's successor? Or perhaps it is not remarkable. Perhaps there are good reasons. Perhaps the gentleman is prudent."

He had passed the group by now, and he left that last sentence of his to trail behind him, and after it sent laughter, insolent and provoking.

He had not long to wait. Came a quick step behind him, and a hand falling upon his shoulder, spun him violently round. He was brought face to face with M. de La Tour d'Azyr, whose handsome countenance was calm and composed, but whose eyes reflected something of the sudden blaze of passion stirring in him. Behind him several members of the group were approaching more slowly. The others—like Andre-Louis' two companions—remained at gaze.

"You spoke of me, I think," said the Marquis quietly.

"I spoke of an assassin—yes. But to these my friends." Andre-Louis' manner was no less quiet, indeed the quieter of the two, for he was the more experienced actor.

"You spoke loudly enough to be overheard," said the Marquis, answering the insinuation that he had been eavesdropping.

"Those who wish to overhear frequently contrive to do so."

"I perceive that it is your aim to be offensive."

"Oh, but you are mistaken, M. le Marquis. I have no wish to be

offensive. But I resent having hands violently laid upon me, especially when they are hands that I cannot consider clean, in the circumstances I can hardly be expected to be polite."

The elder man's eyelids flickered. Almost he caught himself admiring Andre-Louis' bearing. Rather, he feared that his own must suffer by comparison. Because of this, he enraged altogether, and lost control of himself.

"You spoke of me as the assassin of Lagron. I do not affect to misunderstand you. You expounded your views to me once before, and I remember."

"But what flattery, monsieur!"

"You called me an assassin then, because I used my skill to dispose of a turbulent hot-head who made the world unsafe for me. But how much better are you, M. the fencing-master, when you oppose yourself to men whose skill is as naturally inferior to your own!"

M. de La Tour d'Azyr's friends looked grave, perturbed. It was really incredible to find this great gentleman so far forgetting himself as to descend to argument with a canaille of a lawyer-swordsman. And what was worse, it was an argument in which he was being made ridiculous.

"I oppose myself to them!" said Andre-Louis on a tone of amused protest. "Ah, pardon, M. le Marquis; it is they who chose to oppose themselves to me—and so stupidly. They push me, they slap my face, they tread on my toes, they call me by unpleasant names. What if I am a fencing-master? Must I on that account submit to every manner of ill-treatment from your bad-mannered friends? Perhaps had they found out sooner that I am a fencing-master their manners would have been better. But to blame me for that! What injustice!"

"Comedian!" the Marquis contemptuously apostrophized him. "Does it alter the case? Are these men who have opposed you men who live by the sword like yourself?"

"On the contrary, M. le Marquis, I have found them men who died by the sword with astonishing ease. I cannot suppose that you desire to add yourself to their number."

"And why, if you please?" La Tour d'Azyr's face had flamed scarlet before that sneer.

"Oh," Andre-Louis raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips, a man considering. He delivered himself slowly. "Because, monsieur, you prefer the easy victim—the Lagrons and Vilmorins of this world, mere sheep for your butchering. That is why."

And then the Marquis struck him.

Andre-Louis stepped back. His eyes gleamed a moment; the next they were smiling up into the face of his tall enemy.

"No better than the others, after all! Well, well! Remark, I beg you, how history repeats itself—with certain differences. Because poor Vilmorin could not bear a vile lie with which you goaded him, he struck you. Because you cannot bear an equally vile truth which I have uttered, you strike me. But always is the vileness yours. And now as then for the striker there is..." He broke off. "But why name it? You will remember what there is. Yourself you wrote it that day with the point of your too-ready sword. But there. I will meet you if you desire it, monsieur."

"What else do you suppose that I desire? To talk?"

Andre-Louis turned to his friends and sighed. "So that I am to go another jaunt to the Bois. Isaac, perhaps you will kindly have a word with one of these friends of M. le Marquis', and arrange for nine

o'clock to-morrow, as usual."

"Not to-morrow," said the Marquis shortly to Le Chapeher. "I have an engagement in the country, which I cannot postpone."

Le Chapelier looked at Andre-Louis.

"Then for M. le Marquis' convenience, we will say Sunday at the same hour."

"I do not fight on Sunday. I am not a pagan to break the holy day."

"But surely the good God would not have the presumption to damn a gentleman of M. le Marquis' quality on that account? Ah, well, Isaac, please arrange for Monday, if it is not a feast-day or monsieur has not some other pressing engagement. I leave it in your hands."

He bowed with the air of a man wearied by these details, and threading his arm through Kersain's withdrew.

"Ah, Dieu de Dieu! But what a trick of it you have," said the Breton deputy, entirely unsophisticated in these matters.

"To be sure I have. I have taken lessons at their hands." He laughed. He was in excellent good-humour. And Kersain was enrolled in the ranks of those who accounted Andre-Louis a man without heart or conscience.

But in his "Confessions" he tells us—and this is one of the glimpses that reveal the true man under all that make-believe—that on that night he went down on his knees to commune with his dead friend Philippe, and to call his spirit to witness that he was about to take the last step in the fulfilment of the oath sworn upon his body at Gavrilac two years ago.

CHAPTER IX. TORN PRIDE

M. de La Tour d'Azyr's engagement in the country on that Sunday was with M. de Kercadiou. To fulfil it he drove out early in the day to Meudon, taking with him in his pocket a copy of the last issue of "Les Actes des Apotres," a journal whose merry sallies at the expense of the innovators greatly diverted the Seigneur de Gavrillac. The venomous scorn it poured upon those worthless rascallions afforded him a certain solatium against the discomforts of expatriation by which he was afflicted as a result of their detestable energies.

Twice in the last month, had M. de La Tour d'Azyr gone to visit the Lord of Gavrillac at Meudon, and the sight of Aline, so sweet and fresh, so bright and of so lively a mind, had caused those embers smouldering under the ashes of the past, embers which until now he had believed utterly extinct, to kindle into flame once more. He desired her as we desire Heaven. I believe that it was the purest passion of his life; that had it come to him earlier he might have been a vastly different man. The cruelest wound that in all his selfish life he had taken was when she sent him word, quite definitely after the affair at the Feydau, that she could not again in any circumstances receive him. At one blow—through that disgraceful riot—he had been robbed of a mistress he prized and of a wife who had become a necessity to the very soul of him. The sordid love of La Binet might have consoled him for the compulsory renunciation of his exalted love of Aline, just as to his exalted love of Aline he had been ready to sacrifice his attachment to La Binet. But that ill-timed riot had robbed him at once of both. Faithful to his word to Sautron he had definitely broken with La Binet, only to find that Aline had definitely broken with him. And by the time that he had sufficiently recovered from his grief to think again of La Binet, the comedienne had vanished beyond discovery.

For all this he blamed, and most bitterly blamed, Andre-Louis. That low-born provincial lout pursued him like a Nemesis, was become indeed the evil genius of his life. That was it—the evil genius of his life! And it was odds that on Monday... He did not like to think of Monday. He was not particularly afraid of death. He was as brave as his kind in that respect, too brave in the ordinary way, and too confident of his skill, to have considered even remotely such a possibility as that of dying in a duel. It was only that it would seem like a proper consummation of all the evil that he had suffered directly or indirectly through this Andre-Louis Moreau that he should perish ignobly by his hand. Almost he could hear that insolent, pleasant voice making the flippant announcement to the Assembly on Monday morning.

He shook off the mood, angry with himself for entertaining it. It was maudlin. After all Chabrilane and La Motte-Royau were quite exceptional swordsmen, but neither of them really approached his own formidable calibre. Reaction began to flow, as he drove out through country lanes flooded with pleasant September sunshine. His spirits rose. A premonition of victory stirred within him. Far from fearing Monday's meeting, as he had so unreasonably been doing; he began to look forward to it. It should afford him the means of setting a definite term to this persecution of which he had been the victim. He would crush this insolent and persistent flea that had been stinging him at every opportunity. Borne upward on that wave of optimism, he took presently a more hopeful view of his case with Aline.

At their first meeting a month ago he had used the utmost frankness with her. He had told her the whole truth of his motives in going that night to the Feydau; he had made her realize that she had acted unjustly towards him. True he had gone no farther.

But that was very far to have gone as a beginning. And in their last meeting, now a fortnight old, she had received him with frank

friendliness. True, she had been a little aloof. But that was to be expected until he quite explicitly avowed that he had revived the hope of winning her. He had been a fool not to have returned before to-day.

Thus in that mood of new-born confidence—a confidence risen from the very ashes of despondency—came he on that Sunday morning to Meudon. He was gay and jovial with M. de Kercadiou what time he waited in the salon for mademoiselle to show herself. He pronounced with confidence on the country's future. There were signs already—he wore the rosiest spectacles that morning—of a change of opinion, of a more moderate note. The Nation began to perceive whither this lawyer rabble was leading it. He pulled out "The Acts of the Apostles" and read a stinging paragraph. Then, when mademoiselle at last made her appearance, he resigned the journal into the hands of M. de Kercadiou.

M. de Kercadiou, with his niece's future to consider, went to read the paper in the garden, taking up there a position whence he could keep the couple within sight—as his obligations seemed to demand of him—whilst being discreetly out of earshot.

The Marquis made the most of an opportunity that might be brief. He quite frankly declared himself, and begged, implored to be taken back into Aline's good graces, to be admitted at least to the hope that one day before very long she would bring herself to consider him in a nearer relationship.

"Mademoiselle," he told her, his voice vibrating with a feeling that admitted of no doubt, "you cannot lack conviction of my utter sincerity. The very constancy of my devotion should afford you this. It is just that I should have been banished from you, since I showed myself so utterly unworthy of the great honour to which I aspired. But this banishment has nowise diminished my devotion. If you could conceive what I have suffered, you would agree that I have fully expiated my abject fault."

She looked at him with a curious, gentle wistfulness on her lovely face.

"Monsieur, it is not you whom I doubt. It is myself."

"You mean your feelings towards me?"

"Yes."

"But that I can understand. After what has happened..."

"It was always so, monsieur," she interrupted quietly. "You speak of me as if lost to you by your own action. That is to say too much. Let me be frank with you. Monsieur, I was never yours to lose. I am conscious of the honour that you do me. I esteem you very deeply..."

"But, then," he cried, on a high note of confidence, "from such a beginning..."

"Who shall assure me that it is a beginning? May it not be the whole? Had I held you in affection, monsieur, I should have sent for you after the affair of which you have spoken. I should at least not have condemned you without hearing your explanation. As it was..." She shrugged, smiling gently, sadly. "You see..."

But his optimism far from being crushed was stimulated. "But it is to give me hope, mademoiselle. If already I possess so much, I may look with confidence to win more. I shall prove myself worthy. I swear to do that. Who that is permitted the privilege of being near you could do other than seek to render himself worthy?"

And then before she could add a word, M. de Kercadiou came blustering through the window, his spectacles on his forehead, his face inflamed, waving in his hand "The Acts of the Apostles," and apparently reduced to speechlessness.

Had the Marquis expressed himself aloud he would have been

profane. As it was he bit his lip in vexation at this most inopportune interruption.

Aline sprang up, alarmed by her uncle's agitation.

"What has happened?"

"Happened?" He found speech at last. "The scoundrel! The faithless dog! I consented to overlook the past on the clear condition that he should avoid revolutionary politics in future. That condition he accepted, and now"—he smacked the news-sheet furiously—"he has played me false again. Not only has he gone into politics, once more, but he is actually a member of the Assembly, and what is worse he has been using his assassin's skill as a fencing-master, turning himself into a bully-swordsman. My God! Is there any law at all left in France?"

One doubt M. de La Tour d'Azyr had entertained, though only faintly, to mar the perfect serenity of his growing optimism. That doubt concerned this man Moreau and his relations with M. de Kercadiou. He knew what once they had been, and how changed they subsequently were by the ingratitude of Moreau's own behavior in turning against the class to which his benefactor belonged. What he did not know was that a reconciliation had been effected. For in the past month—ever since circumstances had driven Andre-Louis to depart from his undertaking to steer clear of politics—the young man had not ventured to approach Meudon, and as it happened his name had not been mentioned in La Tour d'Azyr's hearing on the occasion of either of his own previous visits. He learnt of that reconciliation now; but he learnt at the same time that the breach was now renewed, and rendered wider and more impassable than ever. Therefore he did not hesitate to avow his own position.

"There is a law," he answered. "The law that this rash young man himself evokes. The law of the sword." He spoke very gravely, almost

sadly. For he realized that after all the ground was tender. "You are not to suppose that he is to continue indefinitely his career of evil and of murder. Sooner or later he will meet a sword that will avenge the others. You have observed that my cousin Chabrilane is among the number of this assassin's victims; that he was killed on Tuesday last."

"If I have not expressed my condolence, Azyr, it is because my indignation stifles at the moment every other feeling. The scoundrel! You say that sooner or later he will meet a sword that will avenge the others. I pray that it may be soon."

The Marquis answered him quietly, without anything but sorrow in his voice. "I think your prayer is likely to be heard. This wretched young man has an engagement for to-morrow, when his account may be definitely settled."

He spoke with such calm conviction that his words had all the sound of a sentence of death. They suddenly stemmed the flow of M. de Kercadiou's anger. The colour receded from his inflamed face; dread looked out of his pale eyes, to inform M. de La Tour d'Azyr, more clearly than any words, that M. de Kercadiou's hot speech had been the expression of unreflecting anger, that his prayer that retribution might soon overtake his godson had been unconsciously insincere. Confronted now by the fact that this retribution was about to be visited upon that scoundrel, the fundamental gentleness and kindness of his nature asserted itself; his anger was suddenly whelmed in apprehension; his affection for the lad beat up to the surface, making Andre-Louis' sin, however hideous, a thing of no account by comparison with the threatened punishment.

M. de Kercadiou moistened his lips.

"With whom is this engagement?" he asked in a voice that by an effort he contrived to render steady.

M. de La Tour d'Azyr bowed his handsome head, his eyes upon the gleaming parquetry of the floor. "With myself," he answered quietly, conscious already with a tightening of the heart that his answer must sow dismay. He caught the sound of a faint outcry from Aline; he saw the sudden recoil of M. de Kercadiou. And then he plunged headlong into the explanation that he deemed necessary.

"In view of his relations with you, M. de Kercadiou, and because of my deep regard for you, I did my best to avoid this, even though as you will understand the death of my dear friend and cousin Chabrillane seemed to summon me to action, even though I knew that my circumspection was becoming matter for criticism among my friends. But yesterday this unbridled young man made further restraint impossible to me. He provoked me deliberately and publicly. He put upon me the very grossest affront, and... to-morrow morning in the Bois... we meet."

He faltered a little at the end, fully conscious of the hostile atmosphere in which he suddenly found himself. Hostility from M. de Kercadiou, the latter's earlier change of manner had already led him to expect; the hostility of mademoiselle came more in the nature of a surprise.

He began to understand what difficulties the course to which he was committed must raise up for him. A fresh obstacle was to be flung across the path which he had just cleared, as he imagined. Yet his pride and his sense of the justice due to be done admitted of no weakening.

In bitterness he realized now, as he looked from uncle to niece—his glance, usually so direct and bold, now oddly furtive—that though to-morrow he might kill Andre-Louis, yet even by his death Andre-Louis would take vengeance upon him. He had exaggerated nothing in reaching the conclusion that this Andre-Louis Moreau was the evil genius of his life. He saw now that do what he would, kill him even

though he might, he could never conquer him. The last word would always be with Andre-Louis Moreau. In bitterness, in rage, and in humiliation—a thing almost unknown to him—did he realize it, and the realization steeled his purpose for all that he perceived its futility.

Outwardly he showed himself calm and self-contained, properly suggesting a man regretfully accepting the inevitable. It would have been as impossible to find fault with his bearing as to attempt to turn him from the matter to which he was committed. And so M. de Kercadiou perceived.

"My God!" was all that he said, scarcely above his breath, yet almost in a groan.

M. de La Tour d'Azyr did, as always, the thing that sensibility demanded of him. He took his leave. He understood that to linger where his news had produced such an effect would be impossible, indecent. So he departed, in a bitterness comparable only with his erstwhile optimism, the sweet fruit of hope turned to a thing of gall even as it touched his lips. Oh, yes; the last word, indeed, was with Andre-Louis Moreau—always!

Uncle and niece looked at each other as he passed out, and there was horror in the eyes of both. Aline's pallor was deathly almost, and standing there now she wrung her hands as if in pain.

"Why did you not ask him—beg him..." She broke off.

"To what end? He was in the right, and... and there are things one cannot ask; things it would be a useless humiliation to ask." He sat down, groaning. "Oh, the poor boy—the poor, misguided boy."

In the mind of neither, you see, was there any doubt of what must be the issue. The calm confidence in which La Tour d'Azyr had spoken compelled itself to be shared. He was no vainglorious boaster, and they knew of what a force as a swordsman he was generally

accounted.

"What does humiliation matter? A life is at issue—Andre's life."

"I know. My God, don't I know? And I would humiliate myself if by humiliating myself I could hope to prevail. But Azyr is a hard, relentless man, and..."

Abruptly she left him.

She overtook the Marquis as he was in the act of stepping his carriage. He turned as she called, and bowed.

"Mademoiselle?"

At once he guessed her errand, tasted in anticipation the unparalleled bitterness of being compelled to refuse her. Yet at her invitation he stepped back into the cool of the hall.

In the middle of the floor of chequered marbles, black and white, stood a carved table of black oak. By this he halted, leaning lightly against it whilst she sat enthroned in the great crimson chair beside it.

"Monsieur, I cannot allow you so to depart," she said. "You cannot realize, monsieur, what a blow would be dealt my uncle if... if evil, irrevocable evil were to overtake his godson to-morrow. The expressions that he used at first..."

"Mademoiselle, I perceived their true value. Spare yourself. Believe me I am profoundly desolated by circumstances which I had not expected to find. You must believe me when I say that. It is all that I can say."

"Must it really be all? Andre is very dear to his godfather."

The pleading tone cut him like a knife; and then suddenly it aroused another emotion—an emotion which he realized to be utterly

unworthy, an emotion which, in his overwhelming pride of race, seemed almost sullyng, yet not to be repressed. He hesitated to give it utterance; hesitated even remotely to suggest so horrible a thing as that in a man of such lowly origin he might conceivably discover a rival. Yet that sudden pang of jealousy was stronger than his monstrous pride.

"And to you, mademoiselle? What is this Andre-Louis Moreau to you? You will pardon the question. But I desire clearly to understand."

Watching her he beheld the scarlet stain that overspread her face. He read in it at first confusion, until the gleam of her blue eyes announced its source to lie in anger. That comforted him; since he had affronted her, he was reassured. It did not occur to him that the anger might have another source.

"Andre and I have been playmates from infancy. He is very dear to me, too; almost I regard him as a brother. Were I in need of help, and were my uncle not available, Andre would be the first man to whom I should turn. Are you sufficiently answered, monsieur? Or is there more of me you would desire revealed?"

He bit his lip. He was unnerved, he thought, this morning; otherwise the silly suspicion with which he had offended could never have occurred to him.

He bowed very low. "Mademoiselle, forgive that I should have troubled you with such a question. You have answered more fully than I could have hoped or wished."

He said no more than that. He waited for her to resume. At a loss, she sat in silence awhile, a pucker on her white brow, her fingers nervously drumming on the table. At last she flung herself headlong against the impassive, polished front that he presented.

"I have come, monsieur, to beg you to put off this meeting."

She saw the faint raising of his dark eyebrows, the faintly regretful smile that scarcely did more than tinge his fine lips, and she hurried on. "What honour can await you in such an engagement, monsieur?"

It was a shrewd thrust at the pride of race that she accounted his paramount sentiment, that had as often lured him into error as it had urged him into good.

"I do not seek honour in it, mademoiselle, but—I must say it—justice. The engagement, as I have explained, is not of my seeking. It has been thrust upon me, and in honour I cannot draw back."

"Why, what dishonour would there be in sparing him? Surely, monsieur, none would call your courage in question? None could misapprehend your motives."

"You are mistaken, mademoiselle. My motives would most certainly be misapprehended. You forget that this young man has acquired in the past week a certain reputation that might well make a man hesitate to meet him."

She brushed that aside almost contemptuously, conceiving it the merest quibble.

"Some men, yes. But not you, M. le Marquis."

Her confidence in him on every count was most sweetly flattering. But there was a bitterness behind the sweet.

"Even I, mademoiselle, let me assure you. And there is more than that. This quarrel which M. Moreau has forced upon me is no new thing. It is merely the culmination of a long-drawn persecution.

"Which you invited," she cut in. "Be just, monsieur."

"I hope that it is not in my nature to be otherwise, mademoiselle."

"Consider, then, that you killed his friend."

"I find in that nothing with which to reproach myself. My justification lay in the circumstances—the subsequent events in this distracted country surely confirm it."

"And..." She faltered a little, and looked away from him for the first time. "And that you... that you... And what of Mademoiselle Binet, whom he was to have married?"

He stared at her for a moment in sheer surprise. "Was to have married?" he repeated incredulously, dismayed almost.

"You did not know that?"

"But how do you?"

"Did I not tell you that we are as brother and sister almost? I have his confidence. He told me, before... before you made it impossible."

He looked away, chin in hand, his glance thoughtful, disturbed, almost wistful.

"There is," he said slowly, musingly, "a singular fatality at work between that man and me, bringing us ever each by turns athwart the other's path..."

He sighed; then swung to face her again, speaking more briskly: "Mademoiselle, until this moment I had no knowledge—no suspicion of this thing. But..." He broke off, considered, and then shrugged. "If I wronged him, I did so unconsciously. It would be unjust to blame me, surely. In all our actions it must be the intention alone that counts."

"But does it make no difference?"

"None that I can discern, mademoiselle. It gives me no justification to withdraw from that to which I am irrevocably committed. No

justification, indeed, could ever be greater than my concern for the pain it must occasion my good friend, your uncle, and perhaps yourself, mademoiselle."

She rose suddenly, squarely confronting him, desperate now, driven to play the only card upon which she thought she might count.

"Monsieur," she said, "you did me the honour to-day to speak in certain terms; to... to allude to certain hopes with which you honour me."

He looked at her almost in fear. In silence, not daring to speak, he waited for her to continue.

"I... I... Will you please to understand, monsieur, that if you persist in this matter, if... unless you can break this engagement of yours to-morrow morning in the Bois, you are not to presume to mention this subject to me again, or, indeed, ever again to approach me."

To put the matter in this negative way was as far as she could possibly go. It was for him to make the positive proposal to which she had thus thrown wide the door.

"Mademoiselle, you cannot mean..."

"I do, monsieur... irrevocably, please to understand." He looked at her with eyes of misery, his handsome, manly face as pale as she had ever seen it. The hand he had been holding out in protest began to shake. He lowered it to his side again, lest she should perceive its tremor. Thus a brief second, while the battle was fought within him, the bitter engagement between his desires and what he conceived to be the demands of his honour, never perceiving how far his honour was buttressed by implacable vindictiveness. Retreat, he conceived, was impossible without shame; and shame was to him an agony unthinkable. She asked too much. She could not understand what she was asking, else she would never be so unreasonable, so unjust. But

also he saw that it would be futile to attempt to make her understand.

It was the end. Though he kill Andre-Louis Moreau in the morning as he fiercely hoped he would, yet the victory even in death must lie with Andre-Louis Moreau.

He bowed profoundly, grave and sorrowful of face as he was grave and sorrowful of heart.

"Mademoiselle, my homage," he murmured, and turned to go.

"But you have not answered me!" she called after him in terror.

He checked on the threshold, and turned; and there from the cool gloom of the hall she saw him a black, graceful silhouette against the brilliant sunshine beyond—a memory of him that was to cling as something sinister and menacing in the dread hours that were to follow.

"What would you, mademoiselle? I but spared myself and you the pain of a refusal."

He was gone leaving her crushed and raging. She sank down again into the great red chair, and sat there crumpled, her elbows on the table, her face in her hands—a face that was on fire with shame and passion. She had offered herself, and she had been refused! The inconceivable had befallen her. The humiliation of it seemed to her something that could never be effaced.

Startled, appalled, she stepped back, her hand pressed to her tortured breast.

CHAPTER X. THE RETURNING CARRIAGE

M. de Kercadiou wrote a letter.

"Godson," he began, without any softening adjective, "I have learnt with pain and indignation that you have dishonoured yourself again by breaking the pledge you gave me to abstain from politics. With still greater pain and indignation do I learn that your name has become in a few short days a byword, that you have discarded the weapon of false, insidious arguments against my class—the class to which you owe everything—for the sword of the assassin. It has come to my knowledge that you have an assignation to-morrow with my good friend M. de La Tour d'Azyr. A gentleman of his station is under certain obligations imposed upon him by his birth, which do not permit him to draw back from an engagement. But you labour under no such disadvantages. For a man of your class to refuse an engagement of honour, or to neglect it when made, entails no sacrifice. Your peers will probably be of the opinion that you display a commendable prudence. Therefore I beg you, indeed, did I think that I still exercise over you any such authority as the favours you have received from me should entitle me to exercise, I would command you, to allow this matter to go no farther, and to refrain from rendering yourself to your assignation to-morrow morning. Having no such authority, as your past conduct now makes clear, having no reason to hope that a proper sentiment of gratitude to me will induce to give heed to this my most earnest request, I am compelled to add that should you survive to-morrow's encounter, I can in no circumstances ever again permit myself to be conscious of your existence. If any spark survives of the affection that once you expressed for me, or if

you set any value upon the affection, which, in spite of all that you have done to forfeit it, is the chief prompter of this letter, you will not refuse to do as I am asking."

It was not a tactful letter. M. de Kercadiou was not a tactful man. Read it as he would, Andre-Louis—when it was delivered to him on that Sunday afternoon by the groom dispatched with it into Paris—could read into it only concern for M. La Tour d'Azyr, M. de Kercadiou's good friend, as he called him, and prospective nephew-in-law.

He kept the groom waiting a full hour while composing his answer. Brief though it was, it cost him very considerable effort and several unsuccessful attempts. In the end this is what he wrote:

Monsieur my godfather—You make refusal singularly hard for me when you appeal to me upon the ground of affection. It is a thing of which all my life I shall hail the opportunity to give you proofs, and I am therefore desolated beyond anything I could hope to express that I cannot give you the proof you ask to-day. There is too much between M. de La Tour d'Azyr and me. Also you do me and my class—whatever it may be—less than justice when you say that obligations of honour are not binding upon us. So binding do I count them, that, if I would, I could not now draw back.

If hereafter you should persist in the harsh intention you express, I must suffer it. That I shall suffer be assured.

Your affectionate and grateful godson

Andre-Louis

He dispatched that letter by M. de Kercadiou's groom, and conceived this to be the end of the matter. It cut him keenly; but he bore the wound with that outward stoicism he affected.

Next morning, at a quarter past eight, as with Le Chapelier—who had come to break his fast with him—he was rising from table to set out for the Bois, his housekeeper startled him by announcing Mademoiselle de Kercadiou.

He looked at his watch. Although his cabriolet was already at the door, he had a few minutes to spare. He excused himself from Le Chapelier, and went briskly out to the anteroom.

She advanced to meet him, her manner eager, almost feverish.

"I will not affect ignorance of why you have come," he said quickly, to make short work. "But time presses, and I warn you that only the most solid of reasons can be worth stating."

It surprised her. It amounted to a rebuff at the very outset, before she had uttered a word; and that was the last thing she had expected from Andre-Louis. Moreover, there was about him an air of aloofness that was unusual where she was concerned, and his voice had been singularly cold and formal.

It wounded her. She was not to guess the conclusion to which he had leapt. He made with regard to her—as was but natural, after all—the same mistake that he had made with regard to yesterday's letter from his godfather. He conceived that the mainspring of action here was solely concern for M. de La Tour d'Azyr. That it might be concern for himself never entered his mind. So absolute was his own conviction of what must be the inevitable issue of that meeting that he could not conceive of any one entertaining a fear on his behalf.

What he assumed to be anxiety on the score of the predestined victim had irritated him in M. de Kercadiou; in Aline it filled him with a cold anger; he argued from it that she had hardly been frank with him; that ambition was urging her to consider with favour the suit of M. de La Tour d'Azyr. And than this there was no spur that could have driven

more relentlessly in his purpose, since to save her was in his eyes almost as momentous as to avenge the past.

She coned him searchingly, and the complete calm of him at such a time amazed her. She could not repress the mention of it.

"How calm you are, Andre!"

"I am not easily disturbed. It is a vanity of mine."

"But... Oh, Andre, this meeting must not take place!" She came close up to him, to set her hands upon his shoulders, and stood so, her face within a foot of his own.

"You know, of course, of some good reason why it should not?" said he.

"You may be killed," she answered him, and her eyes dilated as she spoke.

It was so far from anything that he had expected that for a moment he could only stare at her. Then he thought he had understood. He laughed as he removed her hands from his shoulders, and stepped back. This was a shallow device, childish and unworthy in her.

"Can you really think to prevail by attempting to frighten me?" he asked, and almost sneered.

"Oh, you are surely mad! M. de La Tour d'Azyr is reputed the most dangerous sword in France."

"Have you never noticed that most reputations are undeserved? Chabrilane was a dangerous swordsman, and Chabrilane is underground. La Motte-Royau was an even more dangerous swordsman, and he is in a surgeon's hands. So are the other spadassinicides who dreamt of skewering a poor sheep of a provincial lawyer. And here to-day comes the chief, the fine flower of

these bully-swordsmen. He comes for wages long overdue. Be sure of that. So if you have no other reason to urge..."

It was the sarcasm of him that mystified her. Could he possibly be sincere in his assurance that he must prevail against M. de La Tour d'Azyr? To her in her limited knowledge, her mind filled with her uncle's contrary conviction, it seemed that Andre-Louis was only acting; he would act a part to the very end.

Be that as it might, she shifted her ground to answer him.

"You had my uncle's letter?"

"And I answered it."

"I know. But what he said, he will fulfil. Do not dream that he will relent if you carry out this horrible purpose."

"Come, now, that is a better reason than the other," said he. "If there is a reason in the world that could move me it would be that. But there is too much between La Tour d'Azyr and me. There is an oath I swore on the dead hand of Philippe de Vilmorin. I could never have hoped that God would afford me so great an opportunity of keeping it."

"You have not kept it yet," she warned him.

He smiled at her. "True!" he said. "But nine o'clock will soon be here. Tell me," he asked her suddenly, "why did you not carry this request of yours to M. de La Tour d'Azyr?"

"I did," she answered him, and flushed as she remembered her yesterday's rejection. He interpreted the flush quite otherwise.

"And he?" he asked.

"M. de La Tour d'Azyr's obligations..." she was beginning: then she

broke off to answer shortly: "Oh, he refused."

"So, so. He must, of course, whatever it may have cost him. Yet in his place I should have counted the cost as nothing. But men are different, you see." He sighed. "Also in your place, had that been so, I think I should have left the matter there. But then..."

"I don't understand you, Andre."

"I am not so very obscure. Not nearly so obscure as I can be. Turn it over in your mind. It may help to comfort you presently." He consulted his watch again. "Pray use this house as your own. I must be going."

Le Chapelier put his head in at the door.

"Forgive the intrusion. But we shall be late, Andre, unless you..."

"Coming," Andre answered him. "If you will await my return, Aline, you will oblige me deeply. Particularly in view of your uncle's resolve."

She did not answer him. She was numbed. He took her silence for assent, and, bowing, left her. Standing there she heard his steps going down the stairs together with Le Chapelier's. He was speaking to his friend, and his voice was calm and normal.

Oh, he was mad—blinded by self-confidence and vanity. As his carriage rattled away, she sat down limply, with a sense of exhaustion and nausea. She was sick and faint with horror. Andre-Louis was going to his death. Conviction of it—an unreasoning conviction, the result, perhaps, of all M. de Kercadiou's rantings—entered her soul. Awhile she sat thus, paralyzed by hopelessness. Then she sprang up again, wringing her hands. She must do something to avert this horror. But what could she do? To follow him to the Bois and intervene there would be to make a scandal for no purpose. The conventions of conduct were all against her, offering a barrier that was not to be overstepped. Was there no one could help her?

Standing there, half-frenzied by her helplessness, she caught again a sound of vehicles and hooves on the cobbles of the street below. A carriage was approaching. It drew up with a clatter before the fencing-academy. Could it be Andre-Louis returning? Passionately she snatched at that straw of hope. Knocking, loud and urgent, fell upon the door. She heard Andre-Louis' housekeeper, her wooden shoes clanking upon the stairs, hurrying down to open.

She sped to the door of the anteroom, and pulling it wide stood breathlessly to listen. But the voice that floated up to her was not the voice she so desperately hoped to hear. It was a woman's voice asking in urgent tones for M. Andre-Louis—a voice at first vaguely familiar, then clearly recognized, the voice of Mme. de Plougastel.

Excited, she ran to the head of the narrow staircase in time to hear Mme. de Plougastel exclaim in agitation:

"He has gone already! Oh, but how long since? Which way did he take?"

It was enough to inform Aline that Mme. de Plougastel's errand must be akin to her own. At the moment, in the general distress and confusion of her mind, her mental vision focussed entirely on the one vital point, she found in this no matter for astonishment. The singular regard conceived by Mme. de Plougastel for Andre-Louis seemed to her then a sufficient explanation.

Without pausing to consider, she ran down that steep staircase, calling:

"Madame! Madame!"

The portly, comely housekeeper drew aside, and the two ladies faced each other on that threshold. Mme. de Plougastel looked white and haggard, a nameless dread staring from her eyes.

"Aline! You here!" she exclaimed. And then in the urgency sweeping aside all minor considerations, "Were you also too late?" she asked.

"No, madame. I saw him. I implored him. But he would not listen."

"Oh, this is horrible!" Mme. de Plougastel shuddered as she spoke. "I heard of it only half an hour ago, and I came at once, to prevent it at all costs."

The two women looked blankly, despairingly, at each other. In the sunshine-flooded street one or two shabby idlers were pausing to eye the handsome equipage with its magnificent bay horses, and the two great ladies on the doorstep of the fencing-academy. From across the way came the raucous voice of an itinerant bellows-mender raised in the cry of his trade:

"A raccommoder les vieux soufflets!"

Madame swung to the housekeeper.

"How long is it since monsieur left?"

"Ten minutes, maybe; hardly more." Conceiving these great ladies to be friends of her invincible master's latest victim, the good woman preserved a decently stolid exterior.

Madame wrung her hands. "Ten minutes! Oh!" It was almost a moan. "Which way did he go?"

"The assignation is for nine o'clock in the Bois de Boulogne," Aline informed her. "Could we follow? Could we prevail if we did?"

"Ah, my God! The question is should we come in time? At nine o'clock! And it wants but little more than a quarter of an hour. Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" Madame clasped and unclasped her hands in anguish. "Do you know, at least, where in the Bois they are to meet?"

"No—only that it is in the Bois."

"In the Bois!" Madame was flung into a frenzy. "The Bois is nearly half as large as Paris." But she swept breathlessly on, "Come, Aline: get in, get in!"

Then to her coachman. "To the Bois de Boulogne by way of the Cours la Reine," she commanded, "as fast as you can drive. There are ten pistoles for you if we are in time. Whip up, man!"

She thrust Aline into the carriage, and sprang after her with the energy of a girl. The heavy vehicle—too heavy by far for this race with time—was moving before she had taken her seat. Rocking and lurching it went, earning the maledictions of more than one pedestrian whom it narrowly avoided crushing against a wall or trampling underfoot.

Madame sat back with closed eyes and trembling lips. Her face showed very white and drawn. Aline watched her in silence. Almost it seemed to her that Mme. de Plougastel was suffering as deeply as herself, enduring an anguish of apprehension as great as her own.

Later Aline was to wonder at this. But at the moment all the thought of which her half-numbed mind was capable was bestowed upon their desperate errand.

The carriage rolled across the Place Louis XV and out on to the Cours la Reine at last. Along that beautiful, tree-bordered avenue between the Champs Elysees and the Seine, almost empty at this hour of the day, they made better speed, leaving now a cloud of dust behind them.

But fast to danger-point as was the speed, to the women in that carriage it was too slow. As they reached the barrier at the end of the Cours, nine o'clock was striking in the city behind them, and every

stroke of it seemed to sound a note of doom.

Yet here at the barrier the regulations compelled a momentary halt. Aline enquired of the sergeant-in-charge how long it was since a cabriolet such as she described had gone that way. She was answered that some twenty minutes ago a vehicle had passed the barrier containing the deputy M. le Chapelier and the Paladin of the Third Estate, M. Moreau. The sergeant was very well informed. He could make a shrewd guess, he said, with a grin, of the business that took M. Moreau that way so early in the day.

They left him, to speed on now through the open country, following the road that continued to hug the river. They sat back mutely despairing, staring hopelessly ahead, Aline's hand clasped tight in madame's. In the distance, across the meadows on their right, they could see already the long, dusky line of trees of the Bois, and presently the carriage swung aside following a branch of the road that turned to the right, away from the river and heading straight for the forest.

Mademoiselle broke at last the silence of hopelessness that had reigned between them since they had passed the barrier.

"Oh, it is impossible that we should come in time! Impossible!"

"Don't say it! Don't say it!" madame cried out.

"But it is long past nine, madame! Andre would be punctual, and these... affairs do not take long. It... it will be all over by now."

Madame shivered, and closed her eyes. Presently, however, she opened them again, and stirred. Then she put her head from the window. "A carriage is approaching," she announced, and her tone conveyed the thing she feared.

"Not already! Oh, not already!" Thus Aline expressed the silently

communicated thought. She experienced a difficulty in breathing, felt the sudden need of air. Something in her throat was throbbing as if it would suffocate her; a mist came and went before her eyes.

In a cloud of dust an open caleche was speeding towards them, coming from the Bois. They watched it, both pale, neither venturing to speak, Aline, indeed, without breath to do so.

As it approached, it slowed down, perforce, as they did, to effect a safe passage in that narrow road. Aline was at the window with Mme. de Plougastel, and with fearful eyes both looked into this open carriage that was drawing abreast of them.

"Which of them is it, madame? Oh, which of them?" gasped Aline, scarce daring to look, her senses swimming.

On the near side sat a swarthy young gentleman unknown to either of the ladies. He was smiling as he spoke to his companion. A moment later and the man sitting beyond came into view. He was not smiling. His face was white and set, and it was the face of the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr.

For a long moment, in speechless horror, both women stared at him, until, perceiving them, blankest surprise invaded his stern face.

In that moment, with a long shuddering sigh Aline sank swooning to the carriage floor behind Mme. de Plougastel.

CHAPTER XI. INFERENCES

By fast driving Andre-Louis had reached the ground some minutes ahead of time, notwithstanding the slight delay in setting out. There he had found M. de La Tour d'Azyr already awaiting him, supported by a M. d'Ormesson, a swarthy young gentleman in the blue uniform of a captain in the Gardes du Corps.

Andre-Louis had been silent and preoccupied throughout that drive. He was perturbed by his last interview with Mademoiselle de Kercadiou and the rash inferences which he had drawn as to her motives.

"Decidedly," he had said, "this man must be killed."

Le Chapelier had not answered him. Almost, indeed, had the Breton shuddered at his compatriot's cold-bloodedness. He had often of late thought that this fellow Moreau was hardly human. Also he had found him incomprehensibly inconsistent. When first this spadassinicide business had been proposed to him, he had been so very lofty and disdainful. Yet, having embraced it, he went about it at times with a ghoulish flippancy that was revolting, at times with a detachment that was more revolting still.

Their preparations were made quickly and in silence, yet without undue haste or other sign of nervousness on either side. In both men the same grim determination prevailed. The opponent must be killed; there could be no half-measures here. Stripped each of coat and waistcoat, shoeless and with shirt-sleeves rolled to the elbow, they faced each other at last, with the common resolve of paying in full the long score that stood between them. I doubt if either of them entertained a misgiving as to what must be the issue.

Beside them, and opposite each other, stood Le Chapelier and the young captain, alert and watchful.

"Allez, messieurs!"

The slender, wickedly delicate blades clashed together, and after a momentary glizade were whirling, swift and bright as lightnings, and almost as impossible to follow with the eye. The Marquis led the attack, impetuously and vigorously, and almost at once Andre-Louis realized that he had to deal with an opponent of a very different mettle from those successive duellists of last week, not excluding La Motte-Royau, of terrible reputation.

Here was a man whom much and constant practice had given extraordinary speed and a technique that was almost perfect. In addition, he enjoyed over Andre-Louis physical advantages of strength and length of reach, which rendered him altogether formidable. And he was cool, too; cool and self-contained; fearless and purposeful. Would anything shake that calm, wondered Andre-Louis?

He desired the punishment to be as full as he could make it. Not content to kill the Marquis as the Marquis had killed Philippe, he desired that he should first know himself as powerless to avert that death as Philippe had been. Nothing less would content Andre-Louis. M. le Marquis must begin by tasting of that cup of despair. It was in the account; part of the quittance due.

As with a breaking sweep Andre-Louis parried the heavy lunge in which that first series of passes culminated, he actually laughed—gleefully, after the fashion of a boy at a sport he loves.

That extraordinary, ill-timed laugh made M. de La Tour d'Azyr's recovery hastier and less correctly dignified than it would otherwise have been. It startled and discomposed him, who had already been

discomposed by the failure to get home with a lunge so beautifully timed and so truly delivered.

He, too, had realized that his opponent's force was above anything that he could have expected, fencing-master though he might be, and on that account he had put forth his utmost energy to make an end at once.

More than the actual parry, the laugh by which it was accompanied seemed to make of that end no more than a beginning. And yet it was the end of something. It was the end of that absolute confidence that had hitherto inspired M. de La Tour d'Azyr. He no longer looked upon the issue as a thing forgone. He realized that if he was to prevail in this encounter, he must go warily and fence as he had never fenced yet in all his life.

They settled down again; and again—on the principle this time that the soundest defence is in attack—it was the Marquis who made the game. Andre-Louis allowed him to do so, desired him to do so; desired him to spend himself and that magnificent speed of his against the greater speed that whole days of fencing in succession for nearly two years had given the master. With a beautiful, easy pressure of forte on foible Andre-Louis kept himself completely covered in that second bout, which once more culminated in a lunge.

Expecting it now, Andre-Louis parried it by no more than a deflecting touch. At the same moment he stepped suddenly forward, right within the other's guard, thus placing his man so completely at his mercy that, as if fascinated, the Marquis did not even attempt to recover himself.

This time Andre-Louis did not laugh: He just smiled into the dilating eyes of M. de La Tour d'Azyr, and made no shift to use his advantage.

"Come, come, monsieur!" he bade him sharply. "Am I to run my

blade through an uncovered man?" Deliberately he fell back, whilst his shaken opponent recovered himself at last.

M. d'Ormesson released the breath which horror had for a moment caught. Le Chapelier swore softly, muttering:

"Name of a name! It is tempting Providence to play the fool in this fashion!"

Andre-Louis observed the ashen pallor that now over spread the face of his opponent.

"I think you begin to realize, monsieur, what Philippe de Vilmorin must have felt that day at Gavrilac. I desired that you should first do so. Since that is accomplished, why, here's to make an end."

He went in with lightning rapidity. For a moment his point seemed to La Tour d'Azyr to be everywhere at once, and then from a low engagement in sixte, Andre-Louis stretched forward with swift and vigorous ease to lunge in tierce. He drove his point to transfix his opponent whom a series of calculated disengages uncovered in that line. But to his amazement and chagrin, La Tour d'Azyr parried the stroke; infinitely more to his chagrin La Tour d'Azyr parried it just too late. Had he completely parried it, all would yet have been well. But striking the blade in the last fraction of a second, the Marquis deflected the point from the line of his body, yet not so completely but that a couple of feet of that hard-driven steel tore through the muscles of his sword-arm.

To the seconds none of these details had been visible. All that they had seen had been a swift whirl of flashing blades, and then Andre-Louis stretched almost to the ground in an upward lunge that had pierced the Marquis' right arm just below the shoulder.

The sword fell from the suddenly relaxed grip of La Tour d'Azyr's fingers, which had been rendered powerless, and he stood now

disarmed, his lip in his teeth, his face white, his chest heaving, before his opponent, who had at once recovered. With the blood-tinged tip of his sword resting on the ground, Andre-Louis surveyed him grimly, as we survey the prey that through our own clumsiness has escaped us at the last moment.

In the Assembly and in the newspapers this might be hailed as another victory for the Paladin of the Third Estate; only himself could know the extent and the bitterness of the failure.

M. d'Ormesson had sprung to the side of his principal.

"You are hurt!" he had cried stupidly.

"It is nothing," said La Tour d'Azyr. "A scratch." But his lip writhed, and the torn sleeve of his fine cambric shirt was full of blood.

D'Ormesson, a practical man in such matters, produced a linen kerchief, which he tore quickly into strips to improvise a bandage.

Still Andre-Louis continued to stand there, looking on as if bemused. He continued so until Le Chapelier touched him on the arm. Then at last he roused himself, sighed, and turned away to resume his garments, nor did he address or look again at his late opponent, but left the ground at once.

As, with Le Chapelier, he was walking slowly and in silent dejection towards the entrance of the Bois, where they had left their carriage, they were passed by the caleche conveying La Tour d'Azyr and his second—which had originally driven almost right up to the spot of the encounter. The Marquis' wounded arm was carried in a sling improvised from his companion's sword-belt. His sky-blue coat with three collars had been buttoned over this, so that the right sleeve hung empty. Otherwise, saving a certain pallor, he looked much his usual self.

And now you understand how it was that he was the first to return, and that seeing him thus returning, apparently safe and sound, the two ladies, intent upon preventing the encounter, should have assumed that their worst fears were realized.

Mme. de Plougastel attempted to call out, but her voice refused its office. She attempted to throw open the door of her own carriage; but her fingers fumbled clumsily and ineffectively with the handle. And meanwhile the caleche was slowly passing, La Tour d'Azyr's fine eyes sombrely yet intently meeting her own anguished gaze. And then she saw something else. M. d'Ormesson, leaning back again from the forward inclination of his body to join his own to his companion's salutation of the Countess, disclosed the empty right sleeve of M. de La Tour d'Azyr's blue coat. More, the near side of the coat itself turned back from the point near the throat where it was caught together by single button, revealed the slung arm beneath in its blood-sodden cambric sleeve.

Even now she feared to jump to the obvious conclusion feared lest perhaps the Marquis, though himself wounded, might have dealt his adversary a deadlier wound.

She found her voice at last, and at the same moment signalled to the driver of the caleche to stop.

As it was pulled to a standstill, M. d'Ormesson alighted, and so met madame in the little space between the two carriages.

"Where is M. Moreau?" was the question with which she surprised him.

"Following at his leisure, no doubt, madame," he answered, recovering.

"He is not hurt?"

"Unfortunately it is we who..." M. d'Ormesson was beginning, when from behind him M. de La Tour d'Azyr's voice cut in crisply:

"This interest on your part in M. Moreau, dear Countess..."

He broke off, observing a vague challenge in the air with which she confronted him. But indeed his sentence did not need completing.

There was a vaguely awkward pause. And then she looked at M. d'Ormesson. Her manner changed. She offered what appeared to be an explanation of her concern for M. Moreau.

"Mademoiselle de Kercadiou is with me. The poor child has fainted."

There was more, a deal more, she would have said just then, but for M. d'Ormesson's presence.

Moved by a deep solicitude for Mademoiselle de Kertadiou, de La Tour d'Azyr sprang up despite his wound.

"I am in poor case to render assistance, madame," he said, an apologetic smile on his pale face. "But..."

With the aid of d'Ormesson, and in spite of the latter's protestations, he got down from the caleche, which then moved on a little way, so as to leave the road clear—for another carriage that was approaching from the direction of the Bois.

And thus it happened that when a few moments later that approaching cabriolet overtook and passed the halted vehicles, Andre-Louis beheld a very touching scene. Standing up to obtain a better view, he saw Aline in a half-swooning condition—she was beginning to revive by now—seated in the doorway of the carriage, supported by Mme. de Plougastel. In an attitude of deepest concern, M. de La Tour d'Azyr, his wound notwithstanding, was bending over the girl, whilst behind him stood M. d'Ormesson and madame's

footman.

The Countess looked up and saw him as he was driven past. Her face lighted; almost it seemed to him she was about to greet him or to call him, wherefore, to avoid a difficulty, arising out of the presence there of his late antagonist, he anticipated her by bowing frigidly—for his mood was frigid, the more frigid by virtue of what he saw—and then resumed his seat with eyes that looked deliberately ahead.

Could anything more completely have confirmed him in his conviction that it was on M. de La Tour d'Azyr's account that Aline had come to plead with him that morning? For what his eyes had seen, of course, was a lady overcome with emotion at the sight of blood of her dear friend, and that same dear friend restoring her with assurances that his hurt was very far from mortal. Later, much later, he was to blame his own perverse stupidity. Almost is he too severe in his self-condemnation. For how else could he have interpreted the scene he beheld, his preconceptions being what they were?

That which he had already been suspecting, he now accounted proven to him. Aline had been wanting in candour on the subject of her feelings towards M. de La Tour d'Azyr. It was, he supposed, a woman's way to be secretive in such matters, and he must not blame her. Nor could he blame her in his heart for having succumbed to the singular charm of such a man as the Marquis—for not even his hostility could blind him to M. de La Tour d'Azyr's attractions. That she had succumbed was betrayed, he thought, by the weakness that had overtaken her upon seeing him wounded.

"My God!" he cried aloud. "What must she have suffered, then, if I had killed him as I intended!"

If only she had used candour with him, she could so easily have won his consent to the thing she asked. If only she had told him what now he saw, that she loved M. de La Tour d'Azyr, instead of leaving

him to assume her only regard for the Marquis to be based on unworthy worldly ambition, he would at once have yielded.

He fetched a sigh, and breathed a prayer for forgiveness to the shade of Vilmorin.

"It is perhaps as well that my lunge went wide," he said.

"What do you mean?" wondered Le Chapelier.

"That in this business I must relinquish all hope of recommencing."

CHAPTER XII. THE OVERWHELMING REASON

M. de La Tour d'Azyr was seen no more in the Manege—or indeed in Paris at all—throughout all the months that the National Assembly remained in session to complete its work of providing France with a constitution. After all, though the wound to his body had been comparatively slight, the wound to such a pride as his had been all but mortal.

The rumour ran that he had emigrated. But that was only half the truth. The whole of it was that he had joined that group of noble travellers who came and went between the Tuileries and the headquarters of the emigres at Coblenz. He became, in short, a member of the royalist secret service that in the end was to bring down the monarchy in ruins.

As for Andre-Louis, his godfather's house saw him no more, as a result of his conviction that M. de Kercadiou would not relent from his written resolve never to receive him again if the duel were fought.

He threw himself into his duties at the Assembly with such zeal and effect that when—its purpose accomplished—the Constituent was dissolved in September of the following year, membership of the Legislative, whose election followed immediately, was thrust upon him.

He considered then, like many others, that the Revolution was a thing accomplished, that France had only to govern herself by the Constitution which had been given her, and that all would now be well. And so it might have been but that the Court could not bring itself to

accept the altered state of things. As a result of its intrigues half Europe was arming to hurl herself upon France, and her quarrel was the quarrel of the French King with his people. That was the horror at the root of all the horrors that were to come.

Of the counter-revolutionary troubles that were everywhere being stirred up by the clergy, none were more acute than those of Brittany, and, in view of the influence it was hoped he would wield in his native province, it was proposed to Andre-Louis by the Commission of Twelve, in the early days of the Girondin ministry, that he should go thither to combat the unrest. He was desired to proceed peacefully, but his powers were almost absolute, as is shown by the orders he carried—orders enjoining all to render him assistance and warning those who might hinder him that they would do so at their peril.

He accepted the task, and he was one of the five plenipotentiaries despatched on the same errand in that spring of 1792. It kept him absent from Paris for four months and might have kept him longer but that at the beginning of August he was recalled. More imminent than any trouble in Brittany was the trouble brewing in Paris itself; when the political sky was blacker than it had been since '89. Paris realized that the hour was rapidly approaching which would see the climax of the long struggle between Equality and Privilege. And it was towards a city so disposed that Andre-Louis came speeding from the West, to find there also the climax of his own disturbed career.

Mlle. de Kercadiou, too, was in Paris in those days of early August, on a visit to her uncle's cousin and dearest friend, Mme. de Plougastel. And although nothing could now be plainer than the seething unrest that heralded the explosion to come, yet the air of gaiety, indeed of jocularly, prevailing at Court—whither madame and mademoiselle went almost daily—reassured them. M. de Plougastel had come and gone again, back to Coblenz on that secret business that kept him now almost constantly absent from his wife. But whilst

with her he had positively assured her that all measures were taken, and that an insurrection was a thing to be welcomed, because it could have one only conclusion, the final crushing of the Revolution in the courtyard of the Tuileries. That, he added, was why the King remained in Paris. But for his confidence in that he would put himself in the centre of his Swiss and his knights of the dagger, and quit the capital. They would hack a way out for him easily if his departure were opposed. But not even that would be necessary.

Yet in those early days of August, after her husband's departure the effect of his inspiring words was gradually dissipated by the march of events under madame's own eyes. And finally on the afternoon of the ninth, there arrived at the Hotel Plougastel a messenger from Meudon bearing a note from M. de Kercadiou in which he urgently bade mademoiselle join him there at once, and advised her hostess to accompany her.

You may have realized that M. de Kercadiou was of those who make friends with men of all classes. His ancient lineage placed him on terms of equality with members of the noblesse; his simple manners—something between the rustic and the bourgeois—and his natural affability placed him on equally good terms with those who by birth were his inferiors. In Meudon he was known and esteemed of all the simple folk, and it was Rougane, the friendly mayor, who, informed on the 9th of August of the storm that was brewing for the morrow, and knowing of mademoiselle's absence in Paris, had warningly advised him to withdraw her from what in the next four-and-twenty hours might be a zone of danger for all persons of quality, particularly those suspected of connections with the Court party.

Now there was no doubt whatever of Mme. de Plougastel's connection with the Court. It was not even to be doubted—indeed, measure of proof of it was to be forthcoming—that those vigilant and ubiquitous secret societies that watched over the cradle of the young

revolution were fully informed of the frequent journeyings of M. de Plougastel to Coblenz, and entertained no illusions on the score of the reason for them. Given, then, a defeat of the Court party in the struggle that was preparing, the position in Paris of Mme. de Plougastel could not be other than fraught with danger, and that danger would be shared by any guest of birth at her hotel.

M. de Kercadiou's affection for both those women quickened the fears aroused in him by Rougane's warning. Hence that hastily dispatched note, desiring his niece and imploring his friend to come at once to Meudon.

The friendly mayor carried his complaisance a step farther, and dispatched the letter to Paris by the hands of his own son, an intelligent lad of nineteen. It was late in the afternoon of that perfect August day when young Rougane presented himself at the Hotel Plougastel.

He was graciously received by Mme. de Plougastel in the salon, whose splendours, when combined with the great air of the lady herself, overwhelmed the lad's simple, unsophisticated soul. Madame made up her mind at once.

M. de Kercadiou's urgent message no more than confirmed her own fears and inclinations. She decided upon instant departure.

"Bien, madame," said the youth. "Then I have the honour to take my leave."

But she would not let him go. First to the kitchen to refresh himself, whilst she and mademoiselle made ready, and then a seat for him in her carriage as far as Meudon. She could not suffer him to return on foot as he had come.

Though in all the circumstances it was no more than his due, yet the kindness that in such a moment of agitation could take thought for

another was presently to be rewarded. Had she done less than this, she would have known—if nothing worse—at least some hours of anguish even greater than those that were already in store for her.

It wanted, perhaps, a half-hour to sunset when they set out in her carriage with intent to leave Paris by the Porte Saint-Martin. They travelled with a single footman behind. Rougane—terrifying condescension—was given a seat inside the carriage with the ladies, and proceeded to fall in love with Mlle. de Kercadiou, whom he accounted the most beautiful being he had ever seen, yet who talked to him simply and unaffectedly as with an equal. The thing went to his head a little, and disturbed certain republican notions which he had hitherto conceived himself to have thoroughly digested.

The carriage drew up at the barrier, checked there by a picket of the National Guard posted before the iron gates.

The sergeant in command strode to the door of the vehicle. The Countess put her head from the window.

"The barrier is closed, madame," she was curtly informed.

"Closed!" she echoed. The thing was incredible. "But... but do you mean that we cannot pass?"

"Not unless you have a permit, madame." The sergeant leaned nonchalantly on his pike. "The orders are that no one is to leave or enter without proper papers."

"Whose orders?"

"Orders of the Commune of Paris."

"But I must go into the country this evening." Madame's voice was almost petulant. "I am expected."

"In that case let madame procure a permit."

"Where is it to be procured?"

"At the Hotel de Ville or at the headquarters of madame's section."

She considered a moment. "To the section, then. Be so good as to tell my coachman to drive to the Bondy Section."

He saluted her and stepped back. "Section Bondy, Rue des Morts," he bade the driver.

Madame sank into her seat again, in a state of agitation fully shared by mademoiselle. Rougane set himself to pacify and reassure them. The section would put the matter in order. They would most certainly be accorded a permit. What possible reason could there be for refusing them? A mere formality, after all!

His assurance uplifted them merely to prepare them for a still more profound dejection when presently they met with a flat refusal from the president of the section who received the Countess.

"Your name, madame?" he had asked brusquely. A rude fellow of the most advanced republican type, he had not even risen out of deference to the ladies when they entered. He was there, he would have told you, to perform the duties of his office, not to give dancing-lessons.

"Plougastel," he repeated after her, without title, as if it had been the name of a butcher or baker. He took down a heavy volume from a shelf on his right, opened it and turned the pages. It was a sort of directory of his section. Presently he found what he sought. "Comte de Plougastel, Hotel Plougastel, Rue du Paradis. Is that it?"

"That is correct, monsieur," she answered, with what civility she could muster before the fellow's affronting rudeness.

There was a long moment of silence, during which he studied

certain pencilled entries against the name. The sections had been working in the last few weeks much more systematically than was generally suspected.

"Your husband is with you, madame?" he asked curtly, his eyes still conning that page.

"M. le Comte is not with me," she answered, stressing the title.

"Not with you?" He looked up suddenly, and directed upon her a glance in which suspicion seemed to blend with derision. "Where is he?"

"He is not in Paris, monsieur.

"Ah! Is he at Coblenz, do you think?"

Madame felt herself turning cold. There was something ominous in all this. To what end had the sections informed themselves so thoroughly of the comings and goings of their inhabitants? What was preparing? She had a sense of being trapped, of being taken in a net that had been cast unseen.

"I do not know, monsieur," she said, her voice unsteady.

"Of course not." He seemed to sneer. "No matter. And you wish to leave Paris also? Where do you desire to go?"

"To Meudon."

"Your business there?"

The blood leapt to her face. His insolence was unbearable to a woman who in all her life had never known anything but the utmost deference from inferiors and equals alike. Nevertheless, realizing that she was face to face with forces entirely new, she controlled herself, stifled her resentment, and answered steadily.

"I wish to conduct this lady, Mlle de Kercadiou, back to her uncle who resides there."

"Is that all? Another day will do for that, madame. The matter is not pressing."

"Pardon, monsieur, to us the matter is very pressing."

"You have not convinced me of it, and the barriers are closed to all who cannot prove the most urgent and satisfactory reasons for wishing to pass. You will wait, madame, until the restriction is removed. Good-evening."

"But, monsieur..."

"Good-evening, madame," he repeated significantly, a dismissal more contemptuous and despotic than any royal "You have leave to go."

Madame went out with Aline. Both were quivering with the anger that prudence had urged them to suppress. They climbed into the coach again, desiring to be driven home.

Rougane's astonishment turned into dismay when they told him what had taken place. "Why not try the Hotel de Ville, madame?" he suggested.

"After that? It would be useless. We must resign ourselves to remaining in Paris until the barriers are opened again."

"Perhaps it will not matter to us either way by then, madame," said Aline.

"Aline!" she exclaimed in horror.

"Mademoiselle!" cried Rougane on the same note. And then, because he perceived that people detained in this fashion must be in

some danger not yet discernible, but on that account more dreadful, he set his wits to work. As they were approaching the Hotel Plougastel once more, he announced that he had solved the problem.

"A passport from without would do equally well," he announced. "Listen, now, and trust to me. I will go back to Meudon at once. My father shall give me two permits—one for myself alone, and another for three persons—from Meudon to Paris and back to Meudon. I reenter Paris with my own permit, which I then proceed to destroy, and we leave together, we three, on the strength of the other one, representing ourselves as having come from Meudon in the course of the day. It is quite simple, after all. If I go at once, I shall be back to-night."

"But how will you leave?" asked Aline.

"I? Pooh! As to that, have no anxiety. My father is Mayor of Meudon. There are plenty who know him. I will go to the Hotel de Ville, and tell them what is, after all, true—that I am caught in Paris by the closing of the barriers, and that my father is expecting me home this evening. They will pass me through. It is quite simple."

His confidence uplifted them again. The thing seemed as easy as he represented it.

"Then let your passport be for four, my friend," madame begged him. "There is Jacques," she explained, indicating the footman who had just assisted them to alight.

Rougane departed confident of soon returning, leaving them to await him with the same confidence. But the hours succeeded one another, the night closed in, bedtime came, and still there was no sign of his return.

They waited until midnight, each pretending for the other's sake to a confidence fully sustained, each invaded by vague premonitions of

evil, yet beguiling the time by playing tric-trac in the great salon, as if they had not a single anxious thought between them.

At last on the stroke of midnight, madame sighed and rose.

"It will be for to-morrow morning," she said, not believing it.

"Of course," Aline agreed. "It would really have been impossible for him to have returned to-night. And it will be much better to travel to-morrow. The journey at so late an hour would tire you so much, dear madame."

Thus they made pretence.

Early in the morning they were awakened by a din of bells—the tocsins of the sections ringing the alarm. To their startled ears came later the rolling of drums, and at one time they heard the sounds of a multitude on the march. Paris was rising. Later still came the rattle of small-arms in the distance and the deeper boom of cannon. Battle was joined between the men of the sections and the men of the Court. The people in arms had attacked the Tuileries. Wildest rumours flew in all directions, and some of them found their way through the servants to the Hotel Plougastel, of that terrible fight for the palace which was to end in the purposeless massacre of all those whom the invertebrate monarch abandoned there, whilst placing himself and his family under the protection of the Assembly. Purposeless to the end, ever adopting the course pointed out to him by evil counsellors, he prepared for resistance only until the need for resistance really arose, whereupon he ordered a surrender which left those who had stood by him to the last at the mercy of a frenzied mob.

And while this was happening in the Tuileries, the two women at the Hotel Plougastel still waited for the return of Rougane, though now with ever-lessening hope. And Rougane did not return. The affair did not appear so simple to the father as to the son. Rougane the elder

was rightly afraid to lend himself to such a piece of deception.

He went with his son to inform M. de Kercadiou of what had happened, and told him frankly of the thing his son suggested, but which he dared not do.

M. de Kercadiou sought to move him by intercessions and even by the offer of bribes. But Rougane remained firm.

"Monsieur," he said, "if it were discovered against me, as it inevitably would be, I should hang for it. Apart from that, and in spite of my anxiety to do all in my power to serve you, it would be a breach of trust such as I could not contemplate. You must not ask me, monsieur."

"But what do you conceive is going to happen?" asked the half-demented gentleman.

"It is war," said Rougane, who was well informed, as we have seen. "War between the people and the Court. I am desolated that my warning should have come too late. But, when all is said, I do not think that you need really alarm yourself. War will not be made on women." M. de Kercadiou clung for comfort to that assurance after the mayor and his son had departed. But at the back of his mind there remained the knowledge of the traffic in which M. de Plougastel was engaged. What if the revolutionaries were equally well informed? And most probably they were. The women-folk political offenders had been known aforetime to suffer for the sins of their men. Anything was possible in a popular upheaval, and Aline would be exposed jointly with Mme. de Plougastel.

Late that night, as he sat gloomily in his brother's library, the pipe in which he had sought solace extinguished between his fingers, there came a sharp knocking at the door.

To the old seneschal of Gavrillac who went to open there stood

revealed upon the threshold a slim young man in a dark olive surcoat, the skirts of which reached down to his calves. He wore boots, buckskins, and a small-sword, and round his waist there was a tricolour sash, in his hat a tricolour cockade, which gave him an official look extremely sinister to the eyes of that old retainer of feudalism, who shared to the full his master's present fears.

"Monsieur desires?" he asked, between respect and mistrust.

And then a crisp voice startled him.

"Why, Benoit! Name of a name! Have you completely forgotten me?"

With a shaking hand the old man raised the lantern he carried so as to throw its light more fully upon that lean, wide-mouthed countenance.

"M. Andre!" he cried. "M. Andre!" And then he looked at the sash and the cockade, and hesitated, apparently at a loss.

But Andre-Louis stepped past him into the wide vestibule, with its tessellated floor of black-and-white marble.

"If my godfather has not yet retired, take me to him. If he has retired, take me to him all the same."

"Oh, but certainly, M. Andre—and I am sure he will be ravished to see you. No, he has not yet retired. This way, M. Andre; this way, if you please."

The returning Andre-Louis, reaching Meudon a half-hour ago, had gone straight to the mayor for some definite news of what might be happening in Paris that should either confirm or dispel the ominous rumours that he had met in ever-increasing volume as he approached the capital. Rougane informed him that insurrection was imminent, that already the sections had possessed themselves of the barriers,

and that it was impossible for any person not fully accredited to enter or leave the city.

Andre-Louis bowed his head, his thoughts of the gravest. He had for some time perceived the danger of this second revolution from within the first, which might destroy everything that had been done, and give the reins of power to a villainous faction that would plunge the country into anarchy. The thing he had feared was more than ever on the point of taking place. He would go on at once, that very night, and see for himself what was happening.

And then, as he was leaving, he turned again to Rougane to ask if M. de Kercadiou was still at Meudon.

"You know him, monsieur?"

"He is my godfather."

"Your godfather! And you a representative! Why, then, you may be the very man he needs." And Rougane told him of his son's errand into Paris that afternoon and its result.

No more was required. That two years ago his godfather should upon certain terms have refused him his house weighed for nothing at the moment. He left his travelling carriage at the little inn and went straight to M. de Kercadiou.

And M. de Kercadiou, startled in such an hour by this sudden apparition, of one against whom he nursed a bitter grievance, greeted him in terms almost identical with those in which in that same room he had greeted him on a similar occasion once before.

"What do you want here, sir?"

"To serve you if possible, my godfather," was the disarming answer.

But it did not disarm M. de Kercadiou. "You have stayed away so long that I hoped you would not again disturb me."

"I should not have ventured to disobey you now were it not for the hope that I can be of service. I have seen Rougane, the mayor..."

"What's that you say about not venturing to disobey?"

"You forbade me your house, monsieur."

M. de Kercadiou stared at him helplessly.

"And is that why you have not come near me in all this time?"

"Of course. Why else?"

M. de Kercadiou continued to stare. Then he swore under his breath. It disconcerted him to have to deal with a man who insisted upon taking him so literally. He had expected that Andre-Louis would have come contritely to admit his fault and beg to be taken back into favour. He said so.

"But how could I hope that you meant less than you said, monsieur? You were so very definite in your declaration. What expressions of contrition could have served me without a purpose of amendment? And I had no notion of amending. We may yet be thankful for that."

"Thankful?"

"I am a representative. I have certain powers. I am very opportunely returning to Paris. Can I serve you where Rougane cannot? The need, monsieur, would appear to be very urgent if the half of what I suspect is true. Aline should be placed in safety at once."

M. de Kercadiou surrendered unconditionally. He came over and took Andre-Louis' hand.

"My boy," he said, and he was visibly moved, "there is in you a

certain nobility that is not to be denied. If I seemed harsh with you, then, it was because I was fighting against your evil proclivities. I desired to keep you out of the evil path of politics that have brought this unfortunate country into so terrible a pass. The enemy on the frontier; civil war about to flame out at home. That is what you revolutionaries have done."

Andre-Louis did not argue. He passed on.

"About Aline?" he asked. And himself answered his own question: "She is in Paris, and she must be brought out of it at once, before the place becomes a shambles, as well it may once the passions that have been brewing all these months are let loose. Young Rougane's plan is good. At least, I cannot think of a better one."

"But Rougane the elder will not hear of it."

"You mean he will not do it on his own responsibility. But he has consented to do it on mine. I have left him a note over my signature to the effect that a safe-conduct for Mlle. de Kercadiou to go to Paris and return is issued by him in compliance with orders from me. The powers I carry and of which I have satisfied him are his sufficient justification for obeying me in this. I have left him that note on the understanding that he is to use it only in an extreme case, for his own protection. In exchange he has given me this safe-conduct."

"You already have it!"

M. de Kercadiou took the sheet of paper that Andre-Louis held out. His hand shook. He approached it to the cluster of candles burning on the console and screwed up his short-sighted eyes to read.

"If you send that to Paris by young Rougane in the morning," said Andre-Louis, "Aline should be here by noon. Nothing, of course, could be done to-night without provoking suspicion. The hour is too late. And now, monsieur my godfather, you know exactly why I intrude in

violation of your commands. If there is any other way in which I can serve you, you have but to name it whilst I am here."

"But there is, Andre. Did not Rougane tell you that there were others..."

"He mentioned Mme. de Plougastel and her servant."

"Then why...?" M. de Kercadiou broke off, looking his question.

Very solemnly Andre-Louis shook his head.

"That is impossible," he said.

M. de Kercadiou's mouth fell open in astonishment. "Impossible!" he repeated. "But why?"

"Monsieur, I can do what I am doing for Aline without offending my conscience. Besides, for Aline I would offend my conscience and do it. But Mme. de Plougastel is in very different case. Neither Aline nor any of hers have been concerned in counter-revolutionary work, which is the true source of the calamity that now threatens to overtake us. I can procure her removal from Paris without self-reproach, convinced that I am doing nothing that any one could censure, or that might become the subject of enquiries. But Mme. de Plougastel is the wife of M. le Comte de Plougastel, whom all the world knows to be an agent between the Court and the emigres."

"That is no fault of hers," cried M. de Kercadiou through his consternation.

"Agreed. But she may be called upon at any moment to establish the fact that she is not a party to these manoeuvres. It is known that she was in Paris to-day. Should she be sought to-morrow and should it be found that she has gone, enquiries will certainly be made, from which it must result that I have betrayed my trust, and abused my powers to serve personal ends. I hope, monsieur, that you will

understand that the risk is too great to be run for the sake of a stranger."

"A stranger?" said the Seigneur reproachfully.

"Practically a stranger to me," said Andre-Louis.

"But she is not a stranger to me, Andre. She is my cousin and very dear and valued friend. And, mon Dieu, what you say but increases the urgency of getting her out of Paris. She must be rescued, Andre, at all costs—she must be rescued! Why, her case is infinitely more urgent than Aline's!"

He stood a suppliant before his godson, very different now from the stern man who had greeted him on his arrival. His face was pale, his hands shook, and there were beads of perspiration on his brow.

"Monsieur my godfather, I would do anything in reason. But I cannot do this. To rescue her might mean ruin for Aline and yourself as well as for me."

"We must take the risk."

"You have a right to speak for yourself, of course."

"Oh, and for you, believe me, Andre, for you!" He came close to the young man. "Andre, I implore you to take my word for that, and to obtain this permit for Mme. de Plougastel."

Andre looked at him mystified. "This is fantastic," he said. "I have grateful memories of the lady's interest in me for a few days once when I was a child, and again more recently in Paris when she sought to convert me to what she accounts the true political religion. But I do not risk my neck for her—no, nor yours, nor Aline's."

"Ah! But, Andre..."

"That is my last word, monsieur. It is growing late, and I desire to sleep in Paris."

"No, no! Wait!" The Lord of Gavrilac was displaying signs of unspeakable distress. "Andre, you must!"

There was in this insistence and, still more, in the frenzied manner of it, something so unreasonable that Andre could not fail to assume that some dark and mysterious motive lay behind it.

"I must?" he echoed. "Why must I? Your reasons, monsieur?"

"Andre, my reasons are overwhelming."

"Pray allow me to be the judge of that." Andre-Louis' manner was almost peremptory.

The demand seemed to reduce M. de Kercadiou to despair. He paced the room, his hands tight-clasped behind him, his brow wrinkled. At last he came to stand before his godson.

"Can't you take my word for it that these reasons exist?" he cried in anguish.

"In such a matter as this—a matter that may involve my neck? Oh, monsieur, is that reasonable?"

"I violate my word of honour, my oath, if I tell you." M. de Kercadiou turned away, wringing his hands, his condition visibly piteous; then turned again to Andre. "But in this extremity, in this desperate extremity, and since you so ungenerously insist, I shall have to tell you. God help me, I have no choice. She will realize that when she knows. Andre, my boy..." He paused again, a man afraid. He set a hand on his godson's shoulder, and to his increasing amazement Andre-Louis perceived that over those pale, short-sighted eyes there was a film of tears. "Mme. de Plougastel is your mother."

Followed, for a long moment, utter silence. This thing that he was told was not immediately understood. When understanding came at last Andre-Louis' first impulse was to cry out. But he possessed himself, and played the Stoic. He must ever be playing something. That was in his nature. And he was true to his nature even in this supreme moment. He continued silent until, obeying that queer histrionic instinct, he could trust himself to speak without emotion. "I see," he said, at last, quite coolly.

His mind was sweeping back over the past. Swiftly he reviewed his memories of Mme. de Plougastel, her singular if sporadic interest in him, the curious blend of affection and wistfulness which her manner towards him had always presented, and at last he understood so much that hitherto had intrigued him.

"I see," he said again; and added now, "Of course, any but a fool would have guessed it long ago."

It was M. de Kercadiou who cried out, M. de Kercadiou who recoiled as from a blow.

"My God, Andre, of what are you made? You can take such an announcement in this fashion?"

"And how would you have me take it? Should it surprise me to discover that I had a mother? After all, a mother is an indispensable necessity to getting one's self born."

He sat down abruptly, to conceal the too-revealing fact that his limbs were shaking. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to mop his brow, which had grown damp. And then, quite suddenly, he found himself weeping.

At the sight of those tears streaming silently down that face that had turned so pale, M. de Kercadiou came quickly across to him. He sat down beside him and threw an arm affectionately over his shoulder.

"Andre, my poor lad," he murmured. "I... I was fool enough to think you had no heart. You deceived me with your infernal pretence, and now I see... I see..." He was not sure what it was that he saw, or else he hesitated to express it.

"It is nothing, monsieur. I am tired out, and... and I have a cold in the head." And then, finding the part beyond his power, he abruptly threw it up, utterly abandoned all pretence. "Why... why has there been all this mystery?" he asked. "Was it intended that I should never know?"

"It was, Andre. It... it had to be, for prudence' sake."

"But why? Complete your confidence, sir. Surely you cannot leave it there. Having told me so much, you must tell me all."

"The reason, my boy, is that you were born some three years after your mother's marriage with M. de Plougastel, some eighteen months after M. de Plougastel had been away with the army, and some four months before his return to his wife. It is a matter that M. de Plougastel has never suspected, and for gravest family reasons must never suspect. That is why the utmost secrecy has been preserved. That is why none was ever allowed to know. Your mother came betimes into Brittany, and under an assumed name spent some months in the village of Moreau. It was while she was there that you were born."

Andre-Louis turned it over in his mind. He had dried his tears. And sat now rigid and collected.

"When you say that none was ever allowed to know, you are telling me, of course, that you, monsieur..."

"Oh, mon Dieu, no!" The denial came in a violent outburst. M. de Kercadiou sprang to his feet propelled from Andre's side by the violence of his emotions. It was as if the very suggestion filled him

with horror. "I was the only other one who knew. But it is not as you think, Andre. You cannot imagine that I should lie to you, that I should deny you if you were my son?"

"If you say that I am not, monsieur, that is sufficient."

"You are not. I was Therese's cousin and also, as she well knew, her truest friend. She knew that she could trust me; and it was to me she came for help in her extremity. Once, years before, I would have married her. But, of course, I am not the sort of man a woman could love. She trusted, however, to my love for her, and I have kept her trust."

"Then, who was my father?"

"I don't know. She never told me. It was her secret, and I did not pry. It is not in my nature, Andre."

Andre-Louis got up, and stood silently facing M. de Kercadiou.

"You believe me, Andre."

"Naturally, monsieur; and I am sorry, I am sorry that I am not your son."

M. de Kercadiou gripped his godson's hand convulsively, and held it a moment with no word spoken. Then as they fell away from each other again:

"And now, what will you do, Andre?" he asked. "Now that you know?"

Andre-Louis stood awhile, considering, then broke into laughter. The situation had its humours. He explained them.

"What difference should the knowledge make? Is filial piety to be called into existence by the mere announcement of relationship? Am I

to risk my neck through lack of circumspection on behalf of a mother so very circumspect that she had no intention of ever revealing herself? The discovery rests upon the merest chance, upon a fall of the dice of Fate. Is that to weigh with me?"

"The decision is with you, Andre."

"Nay, it is beyond me. Decide it who can, I cannot."

"You mean that you refuse even now?"

"I mean that I consent. Since I cannot decide what it is that I should do, it only remains for me to do what a son should. It is grotesque; but all life is grotesque."

"You will never, never regret it."

"I hope not," said Andre. "Yet I think it very likely that I shall. And now I had better see Rougane again at once, and obtain from him the other two permits required. Then perhaps it will be best that I take them to Paris myself, in the morning. If you will give me a bed, monsieur, I shall be grateful. I... I confess that I am hardly in case to do more to-night."

CHAPTER XIII. SANCTUARY

Into the late afternoon of that endless day of horror with its perpetual alarms, its volleying musketry, rolling drums, and distant muttering of angry multitudes, Mme. de Plougastel and Aline sat waiting in that handsome house in the Rue du Paradis. It was no longer for Rougane they waited. They realized that, be the reason what it might—and by now many reasons must no doubt exist—this friendly messenger would not return. They waited without knowing for what. They waited for whatever might betide.

At one time early in the afternoon the roar of battle approached them, racing swiftly in their direction, swelling each moment in volume and in horror. It was the frenzied clamour of a multitude drunk with blood and bent on destruction. Near at hand that fierce wave of humanity checked in its turbulent progress. Followed blows of pikes upon a door and imperious calls to open, and thereafter came the rending of timbers, the shivering of glass, screams of terror blending with screams of rage, and, running through these shrill sounds, the deeper diapason of bestial laughter.

It was a hunt of two wretched Swiss guardsmen seeking blindly to escape. And they were run to earth in a house in the neighbourhood, and there cruelly done to death by that demoniac mob. The thing accomplished, the hunters, male and female, forming into a battalion, came swinging down the Rue du Paradis, chanting the song of Marseilles—a song new to Paris in those days:

Allons, enfants de la patrie!
Le jour de gloire est arrive
Contre nous de la tyrannie
L'etendard sanglant est leve.

Nearer it came, raucously bawled by some hundreds of voices, a dread sound that had come so suddenly to displace at least temporarily the merry, trivial air of the "Ca ira!" which hitherto had been the revolutionary carillon. Instinctively Mme. de Plougastel and Aline clung to each other. They had heard the sound of the ravishing of that other house in the neighbourhood, without knowledge of the reason. What if now it should be the turn of the Hotel Plougastel! There was no real cause to fear it, save that amid a turmoil imperfectly understood and therefore the more awe-inspiring, the worst must be feared always.

The dreadful song so dreadfully sung, and the thunder of heavily shod feet upon the roughly paved street, passed on and receded. They breathed again, almost as if a miracle had saved them, to yield to fresh alarm an instant later, when madame's young footman, Jacques, the most trusted of her servants, burst into their presence unceremoniously with a scared face, bringing the announcement that a man who had just climbed over the garden wall professed himself a friend of madame's, and desired to be brought immediately to her presence.

"But he looks like a sansculotte, madame," the staunch fellow warned her.

Her thoughts and hopes leapt at once to Rougane.

"Bring him in," she commanded breathlessly.

Jacques went out, to return presently accompanied by a tall man in a long, shabby, and very ample overcoat and a wide-brimmed hat that was turned down all round, and adorned by an enormous tricolour cockade. This hat he removed as he entered.

Jacques, standing behind him, perceived that his hair, although now in some disorder, bore signs of having been carefully dressed. It

was clubbed, and it carried some lingering vestiges of powder. The young footman wondered what it was in the man's face, which was turned from him, that should cause his mistress to out and recoil. Then he found himself dismissed abruptly by a gesture.

The newcomer advanced to the middle of the salon, moving like a man exhausted and breathing hard. There he leaned against a table, across which he confronted Mme. de Plougastel. And she stood regarding him, a strange horror in her eyes.

In the background, on a settle at the salon's far end, sat Aline staring in bewilderment and some fear at a face which, if unrecognizable through the mask of blood and dust that smeared it, was yet familiar. And then the man spoke, and instantly she knew the voice for that of the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr.

"My dear friend," he was saying, "forgive me if I startled you. Forgive me if I thrust myself in here without leave, at such a time, in such a manner. But... you see how it is with me. I am a fugitive. In the course of my distracted flight, not knowing which way to turn for safety, I thought of you. I told myself that if I could but safely reach your house, I might find sanctuary."

"You are in danger?"

"In danger?" Almost he seemed silently to laugh at the unnecessary question. "If I were to show myself openly in the streets just now, I might with luck contrive to live for five minutes! My friend, it has been a massacre. Some few of us escaped from the Tuileries at the end, to be hunted to death in the streets. I doubt if by this time a single Swiss survives. They had the worst of it, poor devils. And as for us—my God! They hate us more than they hate the Swiss. Hence this filthy disguise."

He peeled off the shaggy greatcoat, and casting it from him

stepped forth in the black satin that had been the general livery of the hundred knights of the dagger who had rallied in the Tuileries that morning to the defence of their king.

His coat was rent across the back, his neckcloth and the ruffles at his wrists were torn and bloodstained; with his smeared face and disordered headdress he was terrible to behold. Yet he contrived to carry himself with his habitual easy assurance, remembered to kiss the trembling hand which Mme. de Plougastel extended to him in welcome.

"You did well to come to me, Gervais," she said. "Yes, here is sanctuary for the present. You will be quite safe, at least for as long as we are safe. My servants are entirely trustworthy. Sit down and tell me all."

He obeyed her, collapsing almost into the armchair which she thrust forward, a man exhausted, whether by physical exertion or by nerve-strain, or both. He drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped some of the blood and dirt from his face.

"It is soon told." His tone was bitter with the bitterness of despair. "This, my dear, is the end of us. Plougastel is lucky in being across the frontier at such a time. Had I not been fool enough to trust those who to-day have proved themselves utterly unworthy of trust, that is where I should be myself. My remaining in Paris is the crowning folly of a life full of follies and mistakes. That I should come to you in my hour of most urgent need adds point to it." He laughed in his bitterness.

Madame moistened her dry lips. "And... and now?" she asked him.

"It only remains to get away as soon as may be, if it is still possible. Here in France there is no longer any room for us—at least, not above ground. To-day has proved it." And then he looked up at her, standing

there beside him so pale and timid, and he smiled. He patted the fine hand that rested upon the arm of his chair. "My dear Therese, unless you carry charitableness to the length of giving me to drink, you will see me perish of thirst under your eyes before ever the canaille has a chance to finish me."

She started. "I should have thought of it!" she cried in self-reproach, and she turned quickly. "Aline," she begged, "tell Jacques to bring..."

"Aline!" he echoed, interrupting, and swinging round in his turn. Then, as Aline rose into view, detaching from her background, and he at last perceived her, he heaved himself abruptly to his weary legs again, and stood there stiffly bowing to her across the space of gleaming floor. "Mademoiselle, I had not suspected your presence," he said, and he seemed extraordinarily ill-at-ease, a man startled, as if caught in an illicit act.

"I perceived it, monsieur," she answered, as she advanced to do madame's commission. She paused before him. "From my heart, monsieur, I grieve that we should meet again in circumstances so very painful."

Not since the day of his duel with Andre-Louis—the day which had seen the death and burial of his last hope of winning her—had they stood face to face.

He checked as if on the point of answering her. His glance strayed to Mme. de Plougastel, and, oddly reticent for one who could be very glib, he bowed in silence.

"But sit, monsieur, I beg. You are fatigued."

"You are gracious to observe it. With your permission, then." And he resumed his seat. She continued on her way to the door and passed out upon her errand.

When presently she returned they had almost unaccountably changed places. It was Mme. de Plougastel who was seated in that armchair of brocade and gilt, and M. de La Tour d'Azyr who, despite his lassitude, was leaning over the back of it talking earnestly, seeming by his attitude to plead with her. On Aline's entrance he broke off instantly and moved away, so that she was left with a sense of having intruded. Further she observed that the Countess was in tears.

Following her came presently the diligent Jacques, bearing a tray laden with food and wine. Madame poured for her guest, and he drank a long draught of the Burgundy, then begged, holding forth his grimy hands, that he might mend his appearance before sitting down to eat.

He was led away and valeted by Jacques, and when he returned he had removed from his person the last vestige of the rough handling he had received. He looked almost his normal self, the disorder in his attire repaired, calm and dignified and courtly in his bearing, but very pale and haggard of face, seeming suddenly to have increased in years, to have reached in appearance the age that was in fact his own.

As he ate and drank—and this with appetite, for as he told them he had not tasted food since early morning—he entered into the details of the dreadful events of the day, and gave them the particulars of his own escape from the Tuileries when all was seen to be lost and when the Swiss, having burnt their last cartridge, were submitting to wholesale massacre at the hands of the indescribably furious mob.

"Oh, it was all most ill done," he ended critically. "We were timid when we should have been resolute, and resolute at last when it was too late. That is the history of our side from the beginning of this accursed struggle. We have lacked proper leadership throughout, and now—as I have said already—there is an end to us. It but

remains to escape, as soon as we can discover how the thing is to be accomplished."

Madame told him of the hopes that she had centred upon Rougane.

It lifted him out of his gloom. He was disposed to be optimistic.

"You are wrong to have abandoned that hope," he assured her. "If this mayor is so well disposed, he certainly can do as his son promised. But last night it would have been too late for him to have reached you, and to-day, assuming that he had come to Paris, almost impossible for him to win across the streets from the other side. It is most likely that he will yet come. I pray that he may; for the knowledge that you and Mlle. de Kercadiou are out of this would comfort me above all."

"We should take you with us," said madame.

"Ah! But how?"

"Young Rougane was to bring me permits for three persons—Aline, myself, and my footman, Jacques. You would take the place of Jacques."

"Faith, to get out of Paris, madame, there is no man whose place I would not take." And he laughed.

Their spirits rose with his and their flagging hopes revived. But as dusk descended again upon the city, without any sign of the deliverer they awaited, those hopes began to ebb once more.

M. de La Tour d'Azyr at last pleaded weariness, and begged to be permitted to withdraw that he might endeavour to take some rest against whatever might have to be faced in the immediate future. When he had gone, madame persuaded Aline to go and lie down.

"I will call you, my dear, the moment he arrives," she said, bravely

maintaining that pretence of a confidence that had by now entirely evaporated.

Aline kissed her affectionately, and departed, outwardly so calm and unperturbed as to leave the Countess wondering whether she realized the peril by which they were surrounded, a peril infinitely increased by the presence in that house of a man so widely known and detested as M. de La Tour d'Azyr, a man who was probably being sought for by his enemies at this moment.

Left alone, madame lay down on a couch in the salon itself, to be ready for any emergency. It was a hot summer night, and the glass doors opening upon the luxuriant garden stood wide to admit the air. On that air came intermittently from the distance sounds of the continuing horrible activities of the populace, the aftermath of that bloody day.

Mme. de Plougastel lay there, listening to those sounds for upwards of an hour, thanking Heaven that for the present at least the disturbances were distant, dreading lest at any moment they should occur nearer at hand, lest this Bondy section in which her hotel was situated should become the scene of horrors similar to those whose echoes reached her ears from other sections away to the south and west.

The couch occupied by the Countess lay in shadow; for all the lights in that long salon had been extinguished with the exception of a cluster of candles in a massive silver candle branch placed on a round marquetry table in the middle of the room—an island of light in the surrounding gloom.

The timepiece on the overmantel chimed melodiously the hour of ten, and then, startling in the suddenness with which it broke the immediate silence, another sound vibrated through the house, and brought madame to her feet, in a breathless mingling of hope and

dread. Some one was knocking sharply on the door below. Followed moments of agonized suspense, culminating in the abrupt invasion of the room by the footman Jacques. He looked round, not seeing his mistress at first.

"Madame! Madame!" he panted, out of breath.

"What is it, Jacques!" Her voice was steady now that the need for self-control seemed thrust upon her. She advanced from the shadows into that island of light about the table. "There is a man below. He is asking... he is demanding to see you at once."

"A man?" she questioned.

"He... he seems to be an official; at least he wears the sash of office. And he refuses to give any name; he says that his name would convey nothing to you. He insists that he must see you in person and at once."

"An official?" said madame.

"An official," Jacques repeated. "I would not have admitted him, but that he demanded it in the name of the Nation. Madame, it is for you to say what shall be done. Robert is with me. If you wish it... whatever it may be..."

"My good Jacques, no, no." She was perfectly composed. "If this man intended evil, surely he would not come alone. Conduct him to me, and then beg Mlle. de Kercadiou to join me if she is awake."

Jacques departed, himself partly reassured. Madame seated herself in the armchair by the table well within the light. She smoothed her dress with a mechanical hand. If, as it would seem, her hopes had been futile, so had her momentary fears. A man on any but an errand of peace would have brought some following with him, as she had said.

The door opened again, and Jacques reappeared; after him, stepping briskly past him, came a slight man in a wide-brimmed hat, adorned by a tricolour cockade. About the waist of an olive-green riding-coat he wore a broad tricolour sash; a sword hung at his side.

He swept off his hat, and the candlelight glinted on the steel buckle in front of it. Madame found herself silently regarded by a pair of large, dark eyes set in a lean, brown face, eyes that were most singularly intent and searching.

She leaned forward, incredulity swept across her countenance. Then her eyes kindled, and the colour came creeping back into her pale cheeks. She rose suddenly. She was trembling.

"Andre-Louis!" she exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIV. THE BARRIER

That gift of laughter of his seemed utterly extinguished. For once there was no gleam of humour in those dark eyes, as they continued to consider her with that queer stare of scrutiny. And yet, though his gaze was sombre, his thoughts were not. With his cruelly true mental vision which pierced through shams, and his capacity for detached observation—which properly applied might have carried him very far, indeed—he perceived the grotesqueness, the artificiality of the emotion which in that moment he experienced, but by which he refused to be possessed. It sprang entirely from the consciousness that she was his mother; as if, all things considered, the more or less accidental fact that she had brought him into the world could establish between them any real bond at this time of day! The motherhood that bears and forsakes is less than animal. He had considered this; he had been given ample leisure in which to consider it during those long, turbulent hours in which he had been forced to wait, because it would have been almost impossible to have won across that seething city, and certainly unwise to have attempted so to do.

He had reached the conclusion that by consenting to go to her rescue at such a time he stood committed to a piece of purely sentimental quixotry. The quittances which the Mayor of Meudon had exacted from him before he would issue the necessary safe-conducts placed the whole of his future, perhaps his very life, in jeopardy. And he had consented to do this not for the sake of a reality, but out of regard for an idea—he who all his life had avoided the false lure of worthless and hollow sentimentality.

Thus thought Andre-Louis as he considered her now so searchingly, finding it, naturally enough, a matter of extraordinary

interest to look consciously upon his mother for the first time at the age of eight-and-twenty.

From her he looked at last at Jacques, who remained at attention, waiting by the open door.

"Could we be alone, madame?" he asked her.

She waved the footman away, and the door closed. In agitated silence, unquestioning, she waited for him to account for his presence there at so extraordinary a time.

"Rougane could not return," he informed her shortly. "At M. de Kercadiou's request, I come instead."

"You! You are sent to rescue us!" The note of amazement in her voice was stronger than that of her relief.

"That, and to make your acquaintance, madame."

"To make my acquaintance? But what do you mean, Andre-Louis?"

"This letter from M. de Kercadiou will tell you." Intrigued by his odd words and odder manner, she took the folded sheet. She broke the seal with shaking hands, and with shaking hands approached the written page to the light. Her eyes grew troubled as she read; the shaking of her hands increased, and midway through that reading a moan escaped her. One glance that was almost terror she darted at the slim, straight man standing so incredibly impassive upon the edge of the light, and then she endeavoured to read on. But the crabbed characters of M. de Kercadiou swam distortedly under her eyes. She could not read. Besides, what could it matter what else he said. She had read enough. The sheet fluttered from her hands to the table, and out of a face that was like a face of wax, she looked now with a wistfulness, a sadness indescribable, at Andre-Louis.

"And so you know, my child?" Her voice was stifled to a whisper.

"I know, madame my mother."

The grimness, the subtle blend of merciless derision and reproach in which it was uttered completely escaped her. She cried out at the new name. For her in that moment time and the world stood still. Her peril there in Paris as the wife of an intriguer at Coblenz was blotted out, together with every other consideration—thrust out of a consciousness that could find room for nothing else beside the fact that she stood acknowledged by her only son, this child begotten in adultery, borne furtively and in shame in a remote Brittany village eight-and-twenty years ago. Not even a thought for the betrayal of that inviolable secret, or the consequences that might follow, could she spare in this supreme moment.

She took one or two faltering steps towards him, hesitating. Then she opened her arms. Sobs suffocated her voice.

"Won't you come to me, Andre-Louis?"

A moment yet he stood hesitating, startled by that appeal, angered almost by his heart's response to it, reason and sentiment at grips in his soul. This was not real, his reason postulated; this poignant emotion that she displayed and that he experienced was fantastic. Yet he went. Her arms enfolded him; her wet cheek was pressed hard against his own; her frame, which the years had not yet succeeded in robbing of its grace, was shaken by the passionate storm within her.

"Oh, Andre-Louis, my child, if you knew how I have hungered to hold you so! If you knew how in denying myself this I have atoned and suffered! Kercadiou should not have told you—not even now. It was wrong—most wrong, perhaps, to you. It would have been better that he should have left me here to my fate, whatever that may be. And yet—come what may of this—to be able to hold you so, to be able to acknowledge you, to hear you call me mother—oh! Andre-Louis, I

cannot now regret it. I cannot... I cannot wish it otherwise."

"Is there any need, madame?" he asked her, his stoicism deeply shaken. "There is no occasion to take others into our confidence. This is for to-night alone. To-night we are mother and son. To-morrow we resume our former places, and, outwardly at least, forget."

"Forget? Have you no heart, Andre-Louis?"

The question recalled him curiously to his attitude towards life—that histrionic attitude of his that he accounted true philosophy. Also he remembered what lay before them; and he realized that he must master not only himself but her; that to yield too far to sentiment at such a time might be the ruin of them all.

"It is a question propounded to me so often that it must contain the truth," said he. "My rearing is to blame for that."

She tightened her clutch about his neck even as he would have attempted to disengage himself from her embrace.

"You do not blame me for your rearing? Knowing all, as you do, Andre-Louis, you cannot altogether blame. You must be merciful to me. You must forgive me. You must! I had no choice."

"When we know all of whatever it may be, we can never do anything but forgive, madame. That is the profoundest religious truth that was ever written. It contains, in fact, a whole religion—the noblest religion any man could have to guide him. I say this for your comfort, madame my mother."

She sprang away from him with a startled cry. Beyond him in the shadows by the door a pale figure shimmered ghostly. It advanced into the light, and resolved itself into Aline. She had come in answer to that forgotten summons madame had sent her by Jacques. Entering unperceived she had seen Andre-Louis in the embrace of

the woman whom he addressed as "mother." She had recognized him instantly by his voice, and she could not have said what bewildered her more: his presence there or the thing she overheard.

"You heard, Aline?" madame exclaimed.

"I could not help it, madame. You sent for me. I am sorry if..." She broke off, and looked at Andre-Louis long and curiously. She was pale, but quite composed. She held out her hand to him. "And so you have come at last, Andre," said she. "You might have come before."

"I come when I am wanted," was his answer. "Which is the only time in which one can be sure of being received." He said it without bitterness, and having said it stooped to kiss her hand.

"You can forgive me what is past, I hope, since I failed of my purpose," he said gently, half-pleading. "I could not have come to you pretending that the failure was intentional—a compromise between the necessities of the case and your own wishes. For it was not that. And yet, you do not seem to have profited by my failure. You are still a maid."

She turned her shoulder to him.

"There are things," she said, "that you will never understand."

"Life, for one," he acknowledged. "I confess that I am finding it bewildering. The very explanations calculated to simplify it seem but to complicate it further." And he looked at Mme. de Plougastel.

"You mean something, I suppose," said mademoiselle.

"Aline!" It was the Countess who spoke. She knew the danger of half-discoveries. "I can trust you, child, I know, and Andre-Louis, I am sure, will offer no objection." She had taken up the letter to show it to Aline. Yet first her eyes questioned him.

"Oh, none, madame," he assured her. "It is entirely a matter for yourself."

Aline looked from one to the other with troubled eyes, hesitating to take the letter that was now proffered. When she had read it through, she very thoughtfully replaced it on the table. A moment she stood there with bowed head, the other two watching her. Then impulsively she ran to madame and put her arms about her.

"Aline!" It was a cry of wonder, almost of joy. "You do not utterly abhor me!"

"My dear," said Aline, and kissed the tear-stained face that seemed to have grown years older in these last few hours.

In the background Andre-Louis, steeling himself against emotionalism, spoke with the voice of Scaramouche.

"It would be well, mesdames, to postpone all transports until they can be indulged at greater leisure and in more security. It is growing late. If we are to get out of this shambles we should be wise to take the road without more delay."

It was a tonic as effective as it was necessary. It startled them into remembrance of their circumstances, and under the spur of it they went at once to make their preparations.

They left him for perhaps a quarter of an hour, to pace that long room alone, saved only from impatience by the turmoil of his mind. When at length they returned, they were accompanied by a tall man in a full-skirted shaggy greatcoat and a broad hat the brim of which was turned down all around. He remained respectfully by the door in the shadows.

Between them the two women had concerted it thus, or rather the Countess had so concerted it when Aline had warned her that Andre-

Louis's bitter hostility towards the Marquis made it unthinkable that he should move a finger consciously to save him.

Now despite the close friendship uniting M. de Kercadiou and his niece with Mme. de Plougastel, there were several matters concerning them of which the Countess was in ignorance. One of these was the project at one time existing of a marriage between Aline and M. de La Tour d'Azyr. It was a matter that Aline—naturally enough in the state of her feelings—had never mentioned, nor had M. de Kercadiou ever alluded to it since his coming to Meudon, by when he had perceived how unlikely it was ever to be realized.

M. de La Tour d'Azyr's concern for Aline on that morning of the duel when he had found her half-swooning in Mme. de Plougastel's carriage had been of a circumspection that betrayed nothing of his real interest in her, and therefore had appeared no more than natural in one who must account himself the cause of her distress. Similarly Mme. de Plougastel had never realized nor did she realize now—for Aline did not trouble fully to enlighten her—that the hostility between the two men was other than political, the quarrel other than that which already had taken Andre-Louis to the Bois on every day of the preceding week. But, at least, she realized that even if Andre-Louis' rancour should have no other source, yet that inconclusive duel was cause enough for Aline's fears.

And so she had proposed this obvious deception; and Aline had consented to be a passive party to it. They had made the mistake of not fully forewarning and persuading M. de La Tour d'Azyr. They had trusted entirely to his anxiety to escape from Paris to keep him rigidly within the part imposed upon him. They had reckoned without the queer sense of honour that moved such men as M. le Marquis, nurtured upon a code of shams.

Andre-Louis, turning to scan that muffled figure, advanced from the dark depths of the salon. As the light beat on his white, lean face the

pseudo-footman started. The next moment he too stepped forward into the light, and swept his broad-brimmed hat from his brow. As he did so Andre-Louis observed that his hand was fine and white and that a jewel flashed from one of the fingers. Then he caught his breath, and stiffened in every line as he recognized the face revealed to him.

"Monsieur," that stern, proud man was saying, "I cannot take advantage of your ignorance. If these ladies can persuade you to save me, at least it is due to you that you shall know whom you are saving."

He stood there by the table very erect and dignified, ready to perish as he had lived—if perish he must—without fear and without deception.

Andre-Louis came slowly forward until he reached the table on the other side, and then at last the muscles of his set face relaxed, and he laughed.

"You laugh?" said M. de La Tour d'Azyr, frowning, offended.

"It is so damnably amusing," said Andre-Louis.

"You've an odd sense of humour, M. Moreau."

"Oh, admitted. The unexpected always moves me so. I have found you many things in the course of our acquaintance. To-night you are the one thing I never expected to find you: an honest man."

M. de La Tour d'Azyr quivered. But he attempted no reply.

"Because of that, monsieur, I am disposed to be clement. It is probably a foolishness. But you have surprised me into it. I give you three minutes, monsieur, in which to leave this house, and to take your own measures for your safety. What afterwards happens to you shall be no concern of mine."

"Ah, no, Andre! Listen..." Madame began in anguish.

"Pardon, madame. It is the utmost that I will do, and already I am violating what I conceive to be my duty. If M. de La Tour d'Azyr remains he not only ruins himself, but he imperils you. For unless he departs at once, he goes with me to the headquarters of the section, and the section will have his head on a pike inside the hour. He is a notorious counter-revolutionary, a knight of the dagger, one of those whom an exasperated populace is determined to exterminate. Now, monsieur, you know what awaits you. Resolve yourself and at once, for these ladies' sake."

"But you don't know, Andre-Louis!" Mme. de Plougastel's condition was one of anguish indescribable. She came to him and clutched his arm. "For the love of Heaven, Andre-Louis, be merciful with him! You must!"

"But that is what I am being, madame—merciful; more merciful than he deserves. And he knows it. Fate has meddled most oddly in our concerns to bring us together to-night. Almost it is as if Fate were forcing retribution at last upon him. Yet, for your sakes, I take no advantage of it, provided that he does at once as I have desired him."

And now from beyond the table the Marquis spoke icily, and as he spoke his right hand stirred under the ample folds of his greatcoat.

"I am glad, M. Moreau, that you take that tone with me. You relieve me of the last scruple. You spoke of Fate just now, and I must agree with you that Fate has meddled oddly, though perhaps not to the end that you discern. For years now you have chosen to stand in my path and thwart me at every turn, holding over me a perpetual menace. Persistently you have sought my life in various ways, first indirectly and at last directly. Your intervention in my affairs has ruined my highest hopes—more effectively, perhaps, than you suppose. Throughout you have been my evil genius. And you are even one of

the agents of this climax of despair that has been reached by me to-night."

"Wait! Listen!" Madame was panting. She flung away from Andre-Louis, as if moved by some premonition of what was coming. "Gervais! This is horrible!"

"Horrible, perhaps, but inevitable. Himself he has invited it. I am a man in despair, the fugitive of a lost cause. That man holds the keys of escape. And, besides, between him and me there is a reckoning to be paid."

His hand came from beneath the coat at last, and it came armed with a pistol.

Mme. de Plougastel screamed, and flung herself upon him. On her knees now, she clung to his arm with all her strength and might.

Vainly he sought to shake himself free of that desperate clutch.

"Therese!" he cried. "Are you mad? Will you destroy me and yourself? This creature has the safe-conducts that mean our salvation. Himself, he is nothing."

From the background Aline, a breathless, horror-stricken spectator of that scene, spoke sharply, her quick mind pointing out the line of checkmate.

"Burn the safe-conducts, Andre-Louis. Burn them at once—in the candles there."

But Andre-Louis had taken advantage of that moment of M. de La Tour d'Azyr's impotence to draw a pistol in his turn. "I think it will be better to burn his brains instead," he said. "Stand away from him, madame."

Far from obeying that imperious command, Mme. de Plougastel

rose to her feet to cover the Marquis with her body. But she still clung to his arm, clung to it with unsuspected strength that continued to prevent him from attempting to use the pistol.

"Andre! For God's sake, Andre!" she panted hoarsely over her shoulder.

"Stand away, madame," he commanded her again, more sternly, "and let this murderer take his due. He is jeopardizing all our lives, and his own has been forfeit these years. Stand away!" He sprang forward with intent now to fire at his enemy over her shoulder, and Aline moved too late to hinder him.

"Andre! Andre!"

Panting, gasping, haggard of face, on the verge almost of hysteria, the distracted Countess flung at last an effective, a terrible barrier between the hatred of those men, each intent upon taking the other's life.

"He is your father, Andre! Gervais, he is your son—our son! The letter there... on the table... O my God!" And she slipped nervelessly to the ground, and crouched there sobbing at the feet of M. de La Tour d'Azyr.

CHAPTER XV. SAFE-CONDUCT

Across the body of that convulsively sobbing woman, the mother of one and the mistress of the other, the eyes of those mortal enemies met, invested with a startled, appalled interest that admitted of no words.

Beyond the table, as if turned to stone by this culminating horror of revelation, stood Aline.

M. de La Tour d'Azyr was the first to stir. Into his bewildered mind came the memory of something that Mme. de Plougastel had said of a letter that was on the table. He came forward, unhindered. The announcement made, Mme. de Plougastel no longer feared the sequel, and so she let him go. He walked unsteadily past this new-found son of his, and took up the sheet that lay beside the candlebranch. A long moment he stood reading it, none heeding him. Aline's eyes were all on Andre-Louis, full of wonder and commiseration, whilst Andre-Louis was staring down, in stupefied fascination, at his mother.

M. de La Tour d'Azyr read the letter slowly through. Then very quietly he replaced it. His next concern, being the product of an artificial age sternly schooled in the suppression of emotion, was to compose himself. Then he stepped back to Mme. de Plougastel's side and stooped to raise her.

"Therese," he said.

Obeying, by instinct, the implied command, she made an effort to rise and to control herself in her turn. The Marquis half conducted, half carried her to the armchair by the table.

Andre-Louis looked on. Still numbed and bewildered, he made no attempt to assist. He saw as in a dream the Marquis bending over Mme. de Plougastel. As in a dream he heard him ask:

"How long have you known this, Therese?"

"I... I have always known it... always. I confided him to Kercadiou. I saw him once as a child... Oh, but what of that?"

"Why was I never told? Why did you deceive me? Why did you tell me that this child had died a few days after birth? Why, Therese? Why?"

"I was afraid. I... I thought it better so—that nobody, nobody, not even you, should know. And nobody has known save Quintin until last night, when to induce him to come here and save me he was forced to tell him."

"But I, Therese?" the Marquis insisted. "It was my right to know."

"Your right? What could you have done? Acknowledge him? And then? Ha!" It was a queer, desperate note of laughter. "There was Plougastel; there was my family. And there was you... you, yourself, who had ceased to care, in whom the fear of discovery had stifled love. Why should I have told you, then? Why? I should not have told you now had there been any other way to... to save you both. Once before I suffered just such dreadful apprehensions when you and he fought in the Bois. I was on my way to prevent it when you met me. I would have divulged the truth, as a last resource, to avert that horror. But mercifully God spared me the necessity then."

It had not occurred to any of them to doubt her statement, incredible though it might seem. Had any done so her present words must have resolved all doubt, explaining as they did much that to each of her listeners had been obscure until this moment.

M. de La Tour d'Azyr, overcome; reeled away to a chair and sat down heavily. Losing command of himself for a moment, he took his haggard face in his hands.

Through the windows open to the garden came from the distance the faint throbbing of a drum to remind them of what was happening around them. But the sound went unheeded. To each it must have seemed that here they were face to face with a horror greater than any that might be tormenting Paris. At last Andre-Louis began to speak, his voice level and unutterably cold.

"M. de La Tour d'Azyr," he said, "I trust that you'll agree that this disclosure, which can hardly be more distasteful and horrible to you than it is to me, alters nothing,—since it effaces nothing of all that lies between us. Or, if it alters anything, it is merely to add something to that score. And yet... Oh, but what can it avail to talk! Here, monsieur, take this safe-conduct which is made out for Mme. de Plougastel's footman, and with it make your escape as best you can. In return I will beg of you the favour never to allow me to see you or hear of you again."

"Andre!" His mother swung upon him with that cry. And yet again that question. "Have you no heart? What has he ever done to you that you should nurse so bitter a hatred of him?"

"You shall hear, madame. Once, two years ago in this very room I told you of a man who had brutally killed my dearest friend and debauched the girl I was to have married. M. de La Tour d'Azyr is that man."

A moan was her only answer. She covered her face with her hands.

The Marquis rose slowly to his feet again. He came slowly forward, his smouldering eyes scanning his son's face.

"You are hard," he said grimly. "But I recognize the hardness. It

derives from the blood you bear."

"Spare me that," said Andre-Louis.

The Marquis inclined his head. "I will not mention it again. But I desire that you should at least understand me, and you too, Therese. You accuse me, sir, of murdering your dearest friend. I will admit that the means employed were perhaps unworthy. But what other means were at my command to meet an urgency that every day since then proves to have existed? M. de Vilmorin was a revolutionary, a man of new ideas that should overthrow society and rebuild it more akin to the desires of such as himself. I belonged to the order that quite as justifiably desired society to remain as it was. Not only was it better so for me and mine, but I also contend, and you have yet to prove me wrong, that it is better so for all the world; that, indeed, no other conceivable society is possible. Every human society must of necessity be composed of several strata. You may disturb it temporarily into an amorphous whole by a revolution such as this; but only temporarily. Soon out of the chaos which is all that you and your kind can ever produce, order must be restored or life will perish; and with the restoration of order comes the restoration of the various strata necessary to organized society. Those that were yesterday at the top may in the new order of things find themselves dispossessed without any benefit to the whole. That change I resisted. The spirit of it I fought with whatever weapons were available, whenever and wherever I encountered it. M. de Vilmorin was an incendiary of the worst type, a man of eloquence full of false ideals that misled poor ignorant men into believing that the change proposed could make the world a better place for them. You are an intelligent man, and I defy you to answer me from your heart and conscience that such a thing was true or possible. You know that it is untrue; you know that it is a pernicious doctrine; and what made it worse on the lips of M. de Vilmorin was that he was sincere and eloquent. His voice was a danger that must be removed—silenced. So much was necessary in

self-defence. In self-defence I did it. I had no grudge against M. de Vilmorin. He was a man of my own class; a gentleman of pleasant ways, amiable, estimable, and able.

"You conceive me slaying him for the very lust of slaying, like some beast of the jungle flinging itself upon its natural prey. That has been your error from the first. I did what I did with the very heaviest heart—oh, spare me your sneer!—I do not lie, I have never lied. And I swear to you here and now, by my every hope of Heaven, that what I say is true. I loathed the thing I did. Yet for my own sake and the sake of my order I must do it. Ask yourself whether M. de Vilmorin would have hesitated for a moment if by procuring my death he could have brought the Utopia of his dreams a moment nearer realization.

"After that. You determined that the sweetest vengeance would be to frustrate my ends by reviving in yourself the voice that I had silenced, by yourself carrying forward the fantastic apostleship of equality that was M. de Vilmorin's. You lacked the vision that would have shown you that God did not create men equals. Well, you are in case to-night to judge which of us was right, which wrong. You see what is happening here in Paris. You see the foul spectre of Anarchy stalking through a land fallen into confusion. Probably you have enough imagination to conceive something of what must follow. And do you deceive yourself that out of this filth and ruin there will rise up an ideal form of society? Don't you understand that society must re-order itself presently out of all this?

"But why say more? I must have said enough to make you understand the only thing that really matters—that I killed M. de Vilmorin as a matter of duty to my order. And the truth—which though it may offend you should also convince you—is that to-night I can look back on the deed with equanimity, without a single regret, apart from what lies between you and me.

"When, kneeling beside the body of your friend that day at

Gavrillic, you insulted and provoked me, had I been the tiger you conceived me I must have killed you too. I am, as you may know, a man of quick passions. Yet I curbed the natural anger you aroused in me, because I could forgive an affront to myself where I could not overlook a calculated attack upon my order."

He paused a moment. Andre-Louis stood rigid listening and wondering. So, too, the others. Then M. le Marquis resumed, on a note of less assurance. "In the matter of Mlle. Binet I was unfortunate. I wronged you through inadvertence. I had no knowledge of the relations between you."

Andre-Louis interrupted him sharply at last with a question: "Would it have made a difference if you had?"

"No," he was answered frankly. "I have the faults of my kind. I cannot pretend that any such scruple as you suggest would have weighed with me. But can you—if you are capable of any detached judgment—blame me very much for that?"

"All things considered, monsieur, I am rapidly being forced to the conclusion that it is impossible to blame any man for anything in this world; that we are all of us the sport of destiny. Consider, monsieur, this gathering—this family gathering—here to-night, whilst out there... O my God, let us make an end! Let us go our ways and write 'finis' to this horrible chapter of our lives."

M. le La Tour considered him gravely, sadly, in silence for a moment.

"Perhaps it is best," he said, at length, in a small voice. He turned to Mme. de Plougastel. "If a wrong I have to admit in my life, a wrong that I must bitterly regret, it is the wrong that I have done to you, my dear..."

"Not now, Gervais! Not now!" she faltered, interrupting him.

"Now—for the first and the last time. I am going. It is not likely that we shall ever meet again—that I shall ever see any of you again—you who should have been the nearest and dearest to me. We are all, he says, the sport of destiny. Ah, but not quite. Destiny is an intelligent force, moving with purpose. In life we pay for the evil that in life we do. That is the lesson that I have learnt to-night. By an act of betrayal begot unknown to me a son who, whilst as ignorant as myself of our relationship, has come to be the evil genius of my life, to cross and thwart me, and finally to help to pull me down in ruin. It is just—poetically just. My full and resigned acceptance of that fact is the only atonement I can offer you."

He stooped and took one of madame's hands that lay limply in her lap.

"Good-bye, Therese!" His voice broke. He had reached the end of his iron self-control.

She rose and clung to him a moment, unashamed before them. The ashes of that dead romance had been deeply stirred this night, and deep down some lingering embers had been found that glowed brightly now before their final extinction. Yet she made no attempt to detain him. She understood that their son had pointed out the only wise, the only possible course, and was thankful that M. de La Tour d'Azyr accepted it.

"God keep you, Gervais," she murmured. "You will take the safe-conduct, and... and you will let me know when you are safe?"

He held her face between his hands an instant; then very gently kissed her and put her from him. Standing erect, and outwardly calm again, he looked across at Andre-Louis who was proffering him a sheet of paper.

"It is the safe-conduct. Take it, monsieur. It is my first and last gift to

you, and certainly the last gift I should ever have thought of making you—the gift of life. In a sense it makes us quits. The irony, sir, is not mine, but Fate's. Take it, monsieur, and go in peace."

M. de La Tour d'Azyr took it. His eyes looked hungrily into the lean face confronting him, so sternly set. He thrust the paper into his bosom, and then abruptly, convulsively, held out his hand. His son's eyes asked a question.

"Let there be peace between us, in God's name," said the Marquis thickly.

Pity stirred at last in Andre-Louis. Some of the sternness left his face. He sighed. "Good-bye, monsieur," he said.

"You are hard," his father told him, speaking wistfully. "But perhaps you are in the right so to be. In other circumstances I should have been proud to have owned you as my son. As it is..." He broke off abruptly, and as abruptly added, "Good-bye."

He loosed his son's hand and stepped back. They bowed formally to each other. And then M. de La Tour d'Azyr bowed to Mlle. de Kercadiou in utter silence, a bow that contained something of utter renunciation, of finality.

That done he turned and walked stiffly out of the room, and so out of all their lives. Months later they were to hear of him in the service of the Emperor of Austria.

CHAPTER XVI. SUNRISE

Andre-Louis took the air next morning on the terrace at Meudon. The hour was very early, and the newly risen sun was transmuting into diamonds the dewdrops that still lingered on the lawn. Down in the valley, five miles away, the morning mists were rising over Paris. Yet early as it was that house on the hill was astir already, in a bustle of preparation for the departure that was imminent.

Andre-Louis had won safely out of Paris last night with his mother and Aline, and to-day they were to set out all of them for Coblenz.

To Andre-Louis, sauntering there with hands clasped behind him and head hunched between his shoulders—for life had never been richer in material for reflection—came presently Aline through one of the glass doors from the library.

"You're early astir," she greeted him.

"Faith, yes. I haven't been to bed. No," he assured her, in answer to her exclamation. "I spent the night, or what was left of it, sitting at the window thinking."

"My poor Andre!"

"You describe me perfectly. I am very poor—for I know nothing, understand nothing. It is not a calamitous condition until it is realized. Then..." He threw out his arms, and let them fall again. His face she observed was very drawn and haggard.

She paced with him along the old granite balustrade over which the geraniums flung their mantle of green and scarlet.

"Have you decided what you are going to do?" she asked him.

"I have decided that I have no choice. I, too, must emigrate. I am lucky to be able to do so, lucky to have found no one amid yesterday's chaos in Paris to whom I could report myself as I foolishly desired, else I might no longer be armed with these." He drew from his pocket the powerful passport of the Commission of Twelve, enjoining upon all Frenchmen to lend him such assistance as he might require, and warning those who might think of hindering him that they did so at their own peril. He spread it before her. "With this I conduct you all safely to the frontier. Over the frontier M. de Kercadiou and Mme. de Plougastel will have to conduct me; and then we shall be quits."

"Quits?" quoth she. "But you will be unable to return!"

"You conceive, of course, my eagerness to do so. My child, in a day or two there will be enquiries. It will be asked what has become of me. Things will transpire. Then the hunt will start. But by then we shall be well upon our way, well ahead of any possible pursuit. You don't imagine that I could ever give the government any satisfactory explanation of my absence—assuming that any government remains to which to explain it?"

"You mean... that you will sacrifice your future, this career upon which you have embarked?" It took her breath away.

"In the pass to which things have come there is no career for me down there—at least no honest one. And I hope you do not think that I could be dishonest. It is the day of the Dantons, and the Marats, the day of the rabble. The reins of government will be tossed to the populace, or else the populace, drunk with the conceit with which the Dantons and the Marats have filled it, will seize the reins by force. Chaos must follow, and a despotism of brutes and apes, a government of the whole by its lowest parts. It cannot endure, because unless a nation is ruled by its best elements it must wither

and decay."

"I thought you were a republican," said she.

"Why, so I am. I am talking like one. I desire a society which selects its rulers, from the best elements of every class and denies the right of any class or corporation to usurp the government to itself—whether it be the nobles, the clergy, the bourgeoisie, or the proletariat. For government by any one class is fatal to the welfare of the whole. Two years ago our ideal seemed to have been realized. The monopoly of power had been taken from the class that had held it too long and too unjustly by the hollow right of heredity. It had been distributed as evenly as might be throughout the State, and if men had only paused there, all would have been well. But our impetus carried us too far, the privileged orders goaded us on by their very opposition, and the result is the horror of which yesterday you saw no more than the beginnings. No, no," he ended. "Careers there may be for venal place-seekers, for opportunists; but none for a man who desires to respect himself. It is time to go. I make no sacrifice in going."

"But where will you go? What will you do?"

"Oh, something. Consider that in four years I have been lawyer, politician, swordsman, and buffoon—especially the latter. There is always a place in the world for Scaramouche. Besides, do you know that unlike Scaramouche I have been oddly provident? I am the owner of a little farm in Saxony. I think that agriculture might suit me. It is a meditative occupation; and when all is said, I am not a man of action. I haven't the qualities for the part."

She looked up into his face, and there was a wistful smile in her deep blue eyes.

"Is there any part for which you have not the qualities, I wonder?"

"Do you really? Yet you cannot say that I have made a success of

any of those which I have played. I have always ended by running away. I am running away now from a thriving fencing-academy, which is likely to become the property of Le Duc. That comes of having gone into politics, from which I am also running away. It is the one thing in which I really excel. That, too, is an attribute of Scaramouche."

"Why will you always be deriding yourself?" she wondered.

"Because I recognize myself for part of this mad world, I suppose. You wouldn't have me take it seriously? I should lose my reason utterly if I did; especially since discovering my parents."

"Don't, Andre!" she begged him. "You are insincere, you know."

"Of course I am. Do you expect sincerity in man when hypocrisy is the very keynote of human nature? We are nurtured on it; we are schooled in it, we live by it; and we rarely realize it. You have seen it rampant and out of hand in France during the past four years—cant and hypocrisy on the lips of the revolutionaries, cant and hypocrisy on the lips of the upholders of the old regime; a riot of hypocrisy out of which in the end is begotten chaos. And I who criticize it all on this beautiful God-given morning am the rankest and most contemptible hypocrite of all. It was this—the realization of this truth kept me awake all night. For two years I have persecuted by every means in my power... M. de La Tour d'Azyr."

He paused before uttering the name, paused as if hesitating how to speak of him.

"And in those two years I have deceived myself as to the motive that was spurring me. He spoke of me last night as the evil genius of his life, and himself he recognized the justice of this. It may be that he was right, and because of that it is probable that even had he not killed Philippe de Vilmorin, things would still have been the same. Indeed, to-day I know that they must have been. That is why I call

myself a hypocrite, a poor, self-duping hypocrite."

"But why, Andre?"

He stood still and looked at her. "Because he sought you, Aline. Because in that alone he must have found me ranged against him, utterly intransigent. Because of that I must have strained every nerve to bring him down—so as to save you from becoming the prey of your own ambition.

"I wish to speak of him no more than I must. After this, I trust never to speak of him again. Before the lines of our lives crossed, I knew him for what he was, I knew the report of him that ran the countryside. Even then I found him detestable. You heard him allude last night to the unfortunate La Binet. You heard him plead, in extenuation of his fault, his mode of life, his rearing. To that there is no answer, I suppose. He conforms to type. Enough! But to me, he was the embodiment of evil, just as you have always been the embodiment of good; he was the embodiment of sin, just as you are the embodiment of purity. I had enthroned you so high, Aline, so high, and yet no higher than your place. Could I, then, suffer that you should be dragged down by ambition, could I suffer the evil I detested to mate with the good I loved? What could have come of it but your own damnation, as I told you that day at Gavrilac? Because of that my detestation of him became a personal, active thing. I resolved to save you at all costs from a fate so horrible. Had you been able to tell me that you loved him it would have been different. I should have hoped that in a union sanctified by love you would have raised him to your own pure heights. But that out of considerations of worldly advancement you should lovelessly consent to mate with him... Oh, it was vile and hopeless. And so I fought him—a rat fighting a lion—fought him relentlessly until I saw that love had come to take in your heart the place of ambition. Then I desisted."

"Until you saw that love had taken the place of ambition!" Tears had

been gathering in her eyes whilst he was speaking. Now amazement eliminated her emotion. "But when did you see that? When?"

"I—I was mistaken. I know it now. Yet, at the time... surely, Aline, that morning when you came to beg me not to keep my engagement with him in the Bois, you were moved by concern for him?"

"For him! It was concern for you," she cried, without thinking what she said.

But it did not convince him. "For me? When you knew—when all the world knew what I had been doing daily for a week!"

"Ah, but he, he was different from the others you had met. His reputation stood high. My uncle accounted him invincible; he persuaded me that if you met nothing could save you."

He looked at her frowning.

"Why this, Aline?" he asked her with some sternness. "I can understand that, having changed since then, you should now wish to disown those sentiments. It is a woman's way, I suppose."

"Oh, what are you saying, Andre? How wrong you are! It is the truth I have told you!"

"And was it concern for me," he asked her, "that laid you swooning when you saw him return wounded from the meeting? That was what opened my eyes."

"Wounded? I had not seen his wound. I saw him sitting alive and apparently unhurt in his caleche, and I concluded that he had killed you as he had said he would. What else could I conclude?"

He saw light, dazzling, blinding, and it scared him. He fell back, a hand to his brow. "And that was why you fainted?" he asked incredulously.

She looked at him without answering. As she began to realize how much she had been swept into saying by her eagerness to make him realize his error, a sudden fear came creeping into her eyes.

He held out both hands to her.

"Aline! Aline!" His voice broke on the name. "It was I..."

"O blind Andre, it was always you—always! Never, never did I think of him, not even for loveless marriage, save once for a little while, when... when that theatre girl came into your life, and then..." She broke off, shrugged, and turned her head away. "I thought of following ambition, since there was nothing left to follow."

He shook himself. "I am dreaming, of course, or else I am mad," he said.

"Blind, Andre; just blind," she assured him.

"Blind only where it would have been presumption to have seen."

"And yet," she answered him with a flash of the Aline he had known of old, "I have never found you lack presumption."

M. de Kercadiou, emerging a moment later from the library window, beheld them holding hands and staring each at the other, beatifically, as if each saw Paradise in the other's face.

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THE HISTORICAL NIGHTS' ENTERTAINMENT

First Series

By Rafael Sabatini

PREFACE

In approaching "The Historical Nights' Entertainment" I set myself the task of reconstructing, in the fullest possible detail and with all the colour available from surviving records, a group of more or less famous events. I would select for my purpose those which were in themselves bizarre and resulting from the interplay of human passions, and whilst relating each of these events in the form of a story, I would compel that story scrupulously to follow the actual, recorded facts without owing anything to fiction, and I would draw upon my imagination, if at all, merely as one might employ colour to fill in the outlines which history leaves grey, taking care that my colour should be as true to nature as possible. For dialogue I would depend upon such scraps of actual speech as were chronicled in each case, amplifying it by translating into terms of speech the paraphrases of contemporary chroniclers.

Such was the task I set myself. I am aware that it has been attempted once or twice already, beginning, perhaps, with the "Crimes Celebres" of Alexandre Dumas. I am not aware that the attempt has ever succeeded. This is not to say that I claim success in the essays that follow. How nearly I may have approached success—judged by the standard I had set myself—how far I may have fallen short, my readers will discern. I am conscious, however, of having in the main dutifully resisted the temptation to take the easier road, to break away from restricting fact for the sake of achieving a more intriguing narrative. In one instance, however, I have quite deliberately failed, and in some others I have permitted myself certain speculations to resolve mysteries of which no explanation has been discovered. Of these it is necessary that I should make a full confession.

My deliberate failure is "The Night of Nuptials." I discovered an allusion to the case of Charles the Bold and Sapphira Danvelt in Macaulay's "History of England"—quoted from an old number of the "Spectator"—whilst I was working upon the case of Lady Alice Lisle. There a similar episode is mentioned as being related of Colonel Kirke, but discredited because known for a story that has a trick of springing up to attach itself to unscrupulous captains. I set out to track it to its source, and having found its first appearance to be in connection with Charles the Bold's German captain Rhynsault, I attempted to reconstruct the event as it might have happened, setting it at least in surroundings of solid fact.

My most flagrant speculation occurs in "The Night of Hate." But in defence of it I can honestly say that it is at least no more flagrant than the speculations on this subject that have become enshrined in history as facts. In other words, I claim for my reconstruction of the circumstances attending the mysterious death of Giovanni Borgia, Duke of Gandia, that it no more lacks historical authority than do any other of the explanatory narratives adopted by history to assign the guilt to Gandia's brother, Cesare Borgia.

In the "Cambridge Modern History" our most authoritative writers on this epoch have definitely pronounced that there is no evidence acceptable to historians to support the view current for four centuries that Cesare Borgia was the murderer.

Elsewhere I have dealt with this at length. Here let it suffice to say that it was not until nine months after the deed that the name of Cesare Borgia was first associated with it; that public opinion had in the mean time assigned the guilt to a half-dozen others in succession; that no motive for the crime is discoverable in the case of Cesare; that the motives advanced will not bear examination, and that they bear on the face of them the stamp of having been put forward hastily to support an accusation unscrupulously political in purpose; that the

first men accused by the popular voice were the Cardinal Vice-Chancellor Ascanio Sforza and his nephew Giovanni Sforza, Tyrant of Pesaro; and, finally, that in Matarazzo's "Chronicles of Perugia" there is a fairly detailed account of how the murder was perpetrated by the latter.

Matarazzo, I confess, is worthy of no more credit than any other of the contemporary reporters of common gossip. But at least he is worthy of no less. And it is undeniable that in Sforza's case a strong motive for the murder was not lacking.

My narrative in "The Night of Hate" is admittedly a purely theoretical account of the crime. But it is closely based upon all the known facts of incidence and of character; and if there is nothing in the surviving records that will absolutely support it, neither is there anything that can absolutely refute it.

In "The Night of Masquerade" I am guilty of quite arbitrarily discovering a reason to explain the mystery of Baron Bjelke's sudden change from the devoted friend and servant of Gustavus III of Sweden into his most bitter enemy. That speculation is quite indefensible, although affording a possible explanation of that mystery. In the case of "The Night of Kirk o' Field," on the other hand, I do not think any apology is necessary for my reconstruction of the precise manner in which Darnley met his death. The event has long been looked upon as one of the mysteries of history—the mystery lying in the fact that whilst the house at Kirk o' Field was destroyed by an explosion, Darnley's body was found at some distance away, together with that of his page, bearing every evidence of death by strangulation. The explanation I adopt seems to me to owe little to speculation.

In the story of Antonio Perez—"The Night of Betrayal"—I have permitted myself fewer liberties with actual facts than might appear. I have closely followed his own "Relacion," which, whilst admittedly a piece of special pleading, must remain the most authoritative

document of the events with which it deals. All that I have done has been to reverse the values as Perez presents them, throwing the personal elements into higher relief than the political ones, and laying particular stress upon the matter of his relations with the Princess of Eboli. "The Night of Betrayal" is presented in the form of a story within a story. Of the containing story let me say that whilst to some extent it is fictitious, it is by no means entirely so. There is enough to justify most of it in the "Relaciori" itself.

The exceptions mentioned being made, I hope it may be found that I have adhered rigorously to my purpose of owing nothing to invention in my attempt to flesh and clothe these few bones of history.

I should add, perhaps, that where authorities differ as to motives, where there is a conflict of evidence as to the facts themselves, or where the facts admit of more than one interpretation, I have permitted myself to be selective, and confined myself to a point of view adopted at the outset.

R. S.

LONDON, August, 1917

Contents

PREFACE

THE HISTORICAL NIGHTS' ENTERTAINMENT

- I. THE NIGHT OF HOLYROOD—The Murder of David Rizzio
- II. THE NIGHT OF KIRK O' FIELD—The Murder of Darnley
- III. THE NIGHT OF BETRAYAL—Antonio Perez and Philip II of Spain
- IV. THE NIGHT OF CHARITY—The Case Of The Lady Alice Lisle
- V. THE NIGHT OF MASSACRE—The Story Of The Saint Bartholomew
- VI. THE NIGHT OF WITCHCRAFT—Louis XIV and Madame De Montespan
- VII. THE NIGHT OF GEMS—The "Affairs" Of The Queen's Necklace
- VIII. THE NIGHT OF TERROR—The Drownings At Nantes Under Carrier
- IX. THE NIGHT OF NUPTIALS—Charles The Bold And Sapphira Danvelt
- X. THE NIGHT OF STRANGLERS—Govanna Of Naples And Andreas Of Hungary
- XI. THE NIGHT OF HATE—The Murder Of The Duke Of Gandia
- XII. THE NIGHT OF ESCAPE—Casanova's Escape From The Piombi
- XIII. THE NIGHT OF MASQUERADE—The Assassination Of Gustavus III Of Sweden

THE HISTORICAL NIGHTS' ENTERTAINMENT

I. THE NIGHT OF HOLYROOD— The Murder of David Rizzio

The tragedy of my Lord Darnley's life lay in the fact that he was a man born out of his proper station—a clown destined to kingship by the accident of birth and fortune. By the blood royal flowing in his veins, he could, failing others, have claimed succession to both the English and the Scottish thrones, whilst by his marriage with Mary Stuart he made a definite attempt to possess himself of that of Scotland.

The Queen of Scots, enamoured for a season of the clean-limbed grace and almost feminine beauty ("ladyfaced," Melville had called him once) of this "long lad of nineteen" who came a-wooing her, had soon discovered, in matrimony, his vain, debauched, shiftless, and cowardly nature. She had married him in July of 1565, and by Michaelmas she had come to know him for just a lovely husk of a man, empty of heart or brain; and the knowledge transmuted affection into contempt.

Her natural brother, the Earl of Murray, had opposed the marriage, chiefly upon the grounds that Darnley was a Catholic, and with Argyll, Chatellerault, Glencairn, and a host of other Protestant lords, had risen in arms against his sovereign and her consort. But Mary had chased her rebel brother and his fellows over the border into England, and by this very action, taken for the sake of her worthless husband, she sowed the first seeds of discord between herself and him. It happened that stout service had been rendered her in this affair by the arrogant border ruffian, the Earl of Bothwell. Partly to reward him, partly because of the confidence with which he inspired her, she

bestowed upon him the office of Lieutenant-General of the East, Middle, and West Marches—an office which Darnley had sought for his father, Lennox. That was the first and last concerted action of the royal couple. Estrangement grew thereafter between them, and, in a measure, as it grew so did Darnley's kingship, hardly established as yet—for the Queen had still to redeem her pre-nuptial promise to confer upon him the crown matrimonial—begin to dwindle.

At first it had been "the King and Queen," or "His Majesty and Hers"; but by Christmas—five months after the wedding—Darnley was known simply as "the Queen's husband," and in all documents the Queen's name now took precedence of his, whilst coins bearing their two heads, and the legend "Hen. et Maria," were called in and substituted by a new coinage relegating him to the second place.

Deeply affronted, and seeking anywhere but in himself and his own shortcomings the cause of the Queen's now manifest hostility, he presently conceived that he had found it in the influence exerted upon her by the Seigneur Davie—that Piedmontese, David Rizzio, who had come to the Scottish Court some four years ago as a starveling minstrel in the train of Monsieur de Morette, the ambassador of Savoy.

It was Rizzio's skill upon the rebec that had first attracted Mary's attention. Later he had become her secretary for French affairs and the young Queen, reared amid the elegancies of the Court of France, grew attached to him as to a fellow-exile in the uncouth and turbulent land over which a harsh destiny ordained that she should rule. Using his opportunities and his subtle Italian intelligence, he had advanced so rapidly that soon there was no man in Scotland who stood higher with the Queen. When Maitland of Lethington was dismissed under suspicion of favouring the exiled Protestant lords, the Seigneur Davie succeeded him as her secretary; and now that Morton was under the same suspicion, it was openly said that the Seigneur Davie would be

made chancellor in his stead.

Thus the Seigneur Davie was become the most powerful man in Scotland, and it is not to be dreamt that a dour, stiff-necked nobility would suffer it without demur. They intrigued against him, putting it abroad, amongst other things, that this foreign upstart was an emissary, of the Pope's, scheming to overthrow the Protestant religion in Scotland. But in the duel that followed their blunt Scotch wits were no match for his Italian subtlety. Intrigue as they might his power remained unshaken. And then, at last it began to be whispered that he owed his high favour with the beautiful young Queen to other than his secretarial abilities, so that Bedford wrote to Cecil:

"What countenance the Queen shows David I will not write, for the honour due to the person of a queen."

This bruit found credit—indeed, there have been ever since those who have believed it—and, as it spread, it reached the ears of Darnley. Because it afforded him an explanation of the Queen's hostility, since he was without the introspection that would have discovered the true explanation in his own shortcomings, he flung it as so much fuel upon the seething fires of his rancour, and became the most implacable of those who sought the ruin of Rizzio.

He sent for Ruthven, the friend of Murray and the exiled lords—exiled, remember, on Darnley's own account—and offered to procure the reinstatement of those outlaws if they would avenge his honour and make him King of Scots in something more than name.

Ruthven, sick of a mortal illness, having risen from a bed of pain to come in answer to that summons, listened dourly to the frothing speeches of that silly, lovely boy.

"No doubt you'll be right about yon fellow Davie," he agreed sombrely, and purposely he added things that must have outraged

Darnley's every feeling as king and as husband. Then he stated the terms on which Darnley might count upon his aid.

"Early next month Parliament is to meet over the business of a Bill of Attainder against Murray and his friends, declaring them by their rebellion to have forfeited life, land, and goods. Ye can see the power with her o' this foreign fiddler, that it drives her so to attain her own brother. Murray has ever hated Davie, knowing too much of what lies 'twixt the Queen and him to her dishonour, and Master Davie thinks so to make an end of Murray and his hatred."

Darnley clenched teeth and hands, tortured by the craftily administered poison.

"What then? What is to do?" he cried,

Ruthven told him bluntly.

"That Bill must never pass. Parliament must never meet to pass it. You are Her Grace's husband and King of Scots."

"In name!" sneered Darnley bitterly.

"The name will serve," said Ruthven. "In that name ye'll sign me a bond of formal remission to Murray and his friends for all their actions and quarrels, permitting their safe return to Scotland, and charging the lieges to convoy them safely. Do that and leave the rest to us."

If Darnley hesitated at all, it was not because he perceived the irony of the situation—that he himself, in secret opposition to the Queen, should sign the pardon of those who had rebelled against her precisely because she had taken him to husband. He hesitated because indecision was inherent in his nature.

"And then?" he asked at last.

Ruthven's blood-injected eyes considered him stonily out of a livid,

gleaming face.

"Then, whether you reign with her or without her, reign you shall as King o' Scots. I pledge myself to that, and I pledge those others, so that we have the bond."

Darnley sat down to sign the death warrant of the Seigneur Davie.

It was the night of Saturday, the 9th of March.

A fire of pine logs burned fragrantly on the hearth of the small closet adjoining the Queen's chamber, suffusing it with a sense of comfort, the greater by contrast with the cheerlessness out of doors, where an easterly wind swept down from Arthur's Seat and moaned its dismal way over a snowclad world.

The lovely, golden-headed young queen supped with a little company of intimates: her natural sister, the Countess of Argyll, the Commendator of Holyrood, Beaton, the Master of the Household, Arthur Erskine, the Captain of the Guard, and one other—that, David Rizzio, who from an errant minstrel had risen to this perilous eminence, a man of a swarthy, ill-favoured countenance redeemed by the intelligence that glowed in his dark eyes, and of a body so slight and fragile as to seem almost misshapen. His age was not above thirty, yet indifferent health, early privation, and misfortune had so set their mark upon him that he had all the appearance of a man of fifty. He was dressed with sombre magnificence, and a jewel of great price smouldered upon the middle finger of one of his slender, delicate hands.

Supper was at an end. The Queen lounged on a long seat over against the tapestried wall. The Countess of Argyll, in a tall chair on the Queen's left, sat with elbows on the table watching the Seigneur Davie's fine fingers as they plucked softly at the strings of a long-necked lute. The talk, which, intimate and untrammelled, had lately

been of the child of which Her Majesty was to be delivered some three months hence, was flagging now, and it was to fill the gap that Rizzio had taken up the lute.

His harsh countenance was transfigured as he caressed the strings, his soul absorbed in the theme of his inspiration. Very softly—indeed, no more than tentatively as yet—he was beginning one of those wistful airs in which his spirit survives in Scotland to this day, when suddenly the expectant hush was broken by a clash of curtain-rings. The tapestries that masked the door had been swept aside, and on the threshold, unheralded, stood the tall, stripling figure of the young King.

Darnley's appearance abruptly scattered the Italian's inspiration. The melody broke off sharply on the single loud note of a string too rudely plucked.

That and the silence that followed it irked them all, conveying a sense that here something had been broken which never could be made whole again.

Darnley shuffled forward. His handsome face was pale save for the two burning spots upon his cheekbones, and his eyes glittered feveredly. He had been drinking, so much was clear; and that he should seek the Queen thus, who so seldom sought her sober, angered those intimates who had come to share her well-founded dislike of him. King though he might be in name, into such contempt was he fallen that not one of them rose in deference, whilst Mary herself watched his approach with hostile, mistrusting eyes.

"What is it, my lord?" she asked him coldly, as he flung himself down on the settle beside her.

He leered at her, put an arm about her waist, pulled her to him, and kissed her oafishly.

None stirred. All eyes were upon them, and all faces blank. After all, he was the King and she his wife. And then upon the silence, ominous as the very steps of doom, came a ponderous, clanking tread from the ante-room beyond. Again the curtains were thrust aside, and the Countess of Argyll uttered a gasp of sudden fear at the grim spectre she beheld there. It was a figure armed as for a tourney, in gleaming steel from head to foot, girt with a sword, the right hand resting upon the hilt of the heavy dagger in the girdle. The helmet's vizor was raised, revealing the ghastly face of Ruthven—so ghastly that it must have seemed the face of a dead man but for the blazing life in the eyes that scanned the company. Those questing eyes went round the table, settled upon Rizzio, and seemed horribly to smile.

Startled, disquieted by this apparition, the Queen half rose, Darnley's hindering arm still flung about her waist.

"What's this?" she cried, her voice sharp.

And then, as if she guessed intuitively what it might portend, she considered her husband with pale-faced contempt.

"Judas!" she called him, flung away from his detaining arm, and stood forth to confront that man in steel. "What seek ye here, my lord—and in this guise?" was her angry challenge.

Ruthven's burning eyes fell away before her glance. He clanked forward a step or two, flung out a mailed arm, and with a hand that shook pointed to the Seigneur Davie, who stood blankly watching him.

"I seek yon man," he said gruffly. "Let him come forth."

"He is here by my will," she told him, her anger mounting. "And so are not you—for which you shall be made to answer."

Then to Darnley, who sat hunched on the settle:

"What does this mean, sir?" she demanded.

"Why—how should I know? Why—why, nothing," he faltered foolishly.

"Pray God that you are right," said she, "for your own sake. And you," she continued, addressing Ruthven again and waving a hand in imperious dismissal, "be you gone, and wait until I send for you, which I promise you shall be right soon."

If she divined some of the evil of their purpose, if any fear assailed her, yet she betrayed nothing of it. She was finely tempered steel.

But Ruthven, sullen and menacing, stood his ground.

"Let yon man come forth," he repeated. "He has been here ower lang."

"Over long?" she echoed, betrayed by her quick resentment.

"Aye, ower lang for the good o' Scotland and your husband," was the brutal answer.

Erskine, of her guards, leapt to his feet.

"Will you begone, sir?" he cried; and after him came Beaton and the Commendator, both echoing the captain's threatening question.

A smile overspread Ruthven's livid face. The heavy dagger flashed from his belt.

"My affair is not with any o' ye, but if ye thrust yersels too close upon my notice—"

The Queen stepped clear of the table to intervene, lest violence should be done here in her presence. Rizzio, who had risen, stood now beside her, watching all with a white, startled face. And then, before more could be said, the curtains were torn away and half a

score of men, whose approach had passed unnoticed, poured into the room. First came Morton, the Chancellor, who was to be dispossessed of the great seal in Rizzio's favour. After him followed the brutal Lindsay of the Byres, Kerr of Faudonside, black-browed Brunston, red-headed Douglas, and a half-dozen others.

Confusion ensued; the three men of the Queen's household were instantly surrounded and overpowered. In the brief, sharp struggle the table was overturned, and all would have been in darkness but that as the table went over the Countess of Argyll had snatched up the candle-branch, and stood now holding it aloft to light that extraordinary scene. Rizzio, to whom the sight of Morton had been as the removal of his last illusion, flung himself upon his knees before the Queen. Frail and feeble of body, and never a man of his hands, he was hopelessly unequal to the occasion.

"Justice, madame!" he cried. "Faites justice! Sauvez ma vie!"

Fearlessly, she stepped between him and the advancing horde of murderers, making of her body a buckler for his protection. White of face, with heaving bosom and eyes like two glowing sapphires, she confronted them.

"Back, on your lives!" she bade them.

But they were lost to all sense of reverence, even to all sense of decency, in their blind rage against this foreign upstart who had trampled their Scottish vanity in the dust. George Douglas, without regard for her condition either as queen or woman—and a woman almost upon the threshold of motherhood—clapped a pistol to her breast and roughly bade her stand aside.

Undaunted, she looked at him with eyes that froze his trigger-finger, whilst behind her Rizzio grovelled in his terror, clutching her petticoat. Thus, until suddenly she was seized about the waist and half dragged,

half-lifted aside by Darnley, who at the same time spurned Rizzio forward with his foot.

The murderers swooped down upon their prey. Kerr of Faudonside flung a noose about his body, and drew it tight with a jerk that pulled the secretary from his knees. Then he and Morton took the rope between them, and so dragged their victim across the room towards the door. He struggled blindly as he went, vainly clutching first at an overset chair, then at a leg of the table, and screeching piteously the while to the Queen to save him. And Mary, trembling with passion, herself struggling in the arms of Darnley, flung an angry warning after them.

"If Davie's blood be spilt, it shall be dear blood to some of you! Remember that, sirs!"

But they were beyond control by now, hounds unleashed upon the quarry of their hate. Out of her presence Morton and Douglas dragged him, the rest of the baying pack going after them. They dragged him, screeching still, across the ante-chamber to the head of the great stairs, and there they fell on him all together, and so wildly that they wounded one another in their fury to rend him into pieces. The tattered body, gushing blood from six-and-fifty wounds, was hurled from top to bottom of the stairs, with a gold-hilted dagger—Darnley's, in token of his participation in the deed—still sticking in his breast.

Ruthven stood forward from the group, his reeking poniard clutched in his right hand, a grin distorting his ghastly, vulturine face. Then he stalked back alone into the royal presence, dragging his feet a little, like a man who is weary.

He found the room much as he had left it, save that the Queen had sunk back to her seat on the settle, and Darnley was now standing over her, whilst her people were still hemmed about by his own men.

Without a "by your leave," he flung himself into a chair and called hoarsely for a cup of wine.

Mary's white face frowned at him across the room.

"You shall yet drink the wine that I shall pour you for this night's work, my lord, and for this insolence! Who gave you leave to sit before me?"

He waved a hand as if to dismiss the matter. It may have seemed to him frivolous to dwell upon such a trifle amid so much.

"It's no' frae lack o' respect, Your Grace," he growled, "but frae lack o' strength. I am ill, and I should ha' been abed but for what was here to do."

"Ah!" She looked at him with cold repugnance. "What have you done with Davie?"

He shrugged, yet his eyes quailed before her own.

"He'll be out yonder," he answered, grimly evasive; and he took the wine one of his followers proffered him.

"Go see," she bade the Countess.

And the Countess, setting the candle-branch upon the buffet, went out, none attempting to hinder her.

Then, with narrowed eyes, the Queen watched Ruthven while he drank.

"It will be for the sake of Murray and his friends that you do this," she said slowly. "Tell me, my lord, what great kindness is there between Murray and you that, to save him from forfeiture, you run the risk of being forfeited with him?"

"What I have done," he said, "I have done for others, and under a

bond that shall hold me scatheless."

"Under a bond?" said she, and now she looked up at Darnley, standing ever at her side. "And was the bond yours, my lord?"

"Mme?" He started back. "I know naught of it."

But as he moved she saw something else. She leaned forward, pointing to the empty sheath at his girdle.

"Where is your dagger, my lord?" she asked him sharply.

"My dagger? Ha! How should I know?"

"But I shall know!" she threatened, as if she were not virtually a prisoner in the hands of these violent men who had invaded her palace and dragged Rizzio from her side. "I shall not rest until I know!"

The Countess came in, white to the lips, bearing in her eyes something of the horror she had beheld.

"What is it?" Mary asked her, her voice suddenly hushed and faltering.

"Madame—he is dead! Murdered!" she announced.

The Queen looked at her, her face of marble. Then her voice came hushed and tense:

"Are—you sure?"

"Myself I saw his body, madame."

There was a long pause. A low moan escaped the Queen, and her lovely eyes were filled with tears; slowly these coursed down her cheeks. Something compelling in her grief hushed every voice, and the craven husband at her side shivered as her glance fell upon him once more.

"And is it so?" she said at length, considering him. She dried her eyes. "Then farewell tears; I must study revenge." She rose as if with labour, and standing, clung a moment to the table's edge. A moment she looked at Ruthven, who sat glooming there, dagger in one hand and empty wine-cup in the other; then her glance passed on, and came to rest balefully on Darnley's face. "You have had your will, my lord," she said, "but consider well what I now say. Consider and remember. I shall never rest until I give you as sore a heart as I have presently."

That said she staggered forward. The Countess hastened to her, and leaning upon her arm, Mary passed through the little door of the closet into her chamber.

That night the common bell was rung, and Edinburgh roused in alarm. Bothwell, Huntly, Atholl, and others who were at Holyrood when Rizzio was murdered, finding it impossible to go to the Queen's assistance, and fearing to share the secretary's fate—for the palace was a-swarm with the murderers' men-at-arms—had escaped by one of the windows. The alarm they spread in Edinburgh brought the provost and townsmen in arms to the palace by torchlight, demanding to see the Queen, and refusing to depart until Darnley had shown himself and assured them that all was well with the Queen and with himself. And what time Darnley gave them this reassurance from a window of her room, Mary herself stood pale and taut amid the brutal horde that on this alarm had violated the privacy of her chamber, while the ruffianly Red Douglas flashed his dagger before her eyes, swearing that if she made a sound they would cut her into collops.

When at last they withdrew and left her to herself, they left her no illusions as to her true condition. She was a prisoner in her own palace. The ante-rooms and courts were thronged with the soldiers of Morton and Ruthven, the palace itself was hemmed about, and none might come or go save at the good pleasure of the murderers.

At last Darnley grasped the authority he had coveted. He dictated forthwith a proclamation which was read next morning at Edinburgh Market Cross—commanding that the nobles who had assembled in Edinburgh to compose the Parliament that was to pass the Bill of Attainder should quit the city within three hours, under pain of treason and forfeiture.

And meanwhile, with poor Rizzio's last cry of "justice!" still ringing in her ears, Mary sat alone in her chamber, studying revenge as she had promised. So that life be spared her, justice, she vowed, should be done—punishment not only for that barbarous deed, but for the very manner of the doing of it, for all the insult to which she had been subjected, for the monstrous violence done her feelings and her very person, for the present detention and peril of which she was full conscious.

Her anger was the more intense because she never permitted it to diffuse itself over the several offenders. Ruthven, who had insulted her so grossly; Douglas, who had offered her personal violence; the Laird of Faudonside, Morton, and all the others who held her now a helpless prisoner, she hew for no more than the instruments of Darnley. It was against Darnley that all her rage was concentrated. She recalled in those bitter hours all that she had suffered at his vile hands, and swore that at whatever cost to herself he should yield a full atonement.

He sought her in the morning emboldened by the sovereign power he was usurping confident that now that he showed himself master of the situation she would not repine over what was done beyond recall, but would submit to the inevitable, be reconciled with him, and grant him, perforce—supported as he now was by the rebellious lords—the crown matrimonial and the full kingly power he coveted.

But her reception of him broke that confidence into shards.

"You have done me such a Wrong," she told him in a voice of cold

hatred, "that neither the recollection of our early friendship, nor all the hope you can give me of the future, could ever make me forget it. Jamais! Jamais je n'oublierai!" she added, and upon that she dismissed him so imperiously that he went at once.

She sought a way to deal with him, groped blindly for it, being as yet but half informed of what was taking place; and whilst she groped, the thing she sought was suddenly thrust into her land. Mary Beaton, one of the few attendants left her, brought her word later that day that the Earl of Murray, with Rothes and some other of the exiled lords, was in the palace. The news brought revelation. It flooded with light the tragic happening of the night before, showed her how Darnley was building himself a party in the state. It did more than that. She recalled the erstwhile mutual hatred and mistrust of Murray and Darnley, and saw how it might serve her in this emergency.

Instantly she summoned Murray to her presence with the message that she welcomed his return. Yet, despite that message, he hardly expected—considering what lay between them—the reception that awaited him at her hands.

She rose to receive him, her lovely eyes suffused with tears. She embraced him, kissed him, and then, nestling to him, as if for comfort, her cheek against his bearded face, she allowed her tears to flow unchecked.

"I am punished," she sobbed—"oh, I am punished! Had I kept you at home, Murray, you would never have suffered men to entreat me as I have been entreated."

Holding her to hint, he could but pat her shoulder, soothing her, utterly taken aback, and deeply moved, too, by this display of an affection for him that he had never hitherto suspected in her.

"Ah, mon Dieu, Jamie, how welcome you are to one in my sorrow!"

she continued. "It is the fault of others that you have been so long out of the country. I but require of you that you be a good subject to me, and you shall never find me other to you than you deserve."

And he, shaken to the depths of his selfish soul by her tears, her clinging caresses, and her protestations of affection, answered with an oath and a sob that no better or more loyal and devoted subject than himself could all Scotland yield her.

"And, as for this killing of Davie," he ended vehemently, "I swear by my soul's salvation that I have had no part in it, nor any knowledge of it until my return!"

"I know—I know!" she moaned. "Should I make you welcome, else? Be my friend, Jamie; be my friend!"

He swore it readily, for he was very greedy of power, and saw the door of his return to it opening wider than he could have hoped. Then he spoke of Darnley, begging her to receive him, and hear what he might have to say, protesting that the King swore that he had not desired the murder, and that the lords had carried the matter out of his hands and much beyond all that he had intended.

Because it suited her deep purpose, Mary consented, feigning to be persuaded. She had realized that before she could deal with Darnley, and the rebel lords who held her a prisoner, she must first win free from Holyrood.

Darnley came. He was sullen now, mindful of his recent treatment, and in fear—notwithstanding Murray's reassurance—of further similar rebuffs. She announced herself ready to hear what he might have to say, and she listened attentively while he spoke, her elbow on the carved arm of her chair, her chin in her hand. When he had done, she sat long in thought, gazing out through the window at the grey March sky. At length she turned and looked at him.

"Do you pretend, my lord, to regret for what has passed?" she challenged him.

"You tempt me to hypocrisy," he said. "Yet I will be frank as at an Easter shrift. Since that fellow Davie fell into credit and familiarity with Your Majesty, you no longer treated me nor entertained me after your wonted fashion, nor would you ever bear me company save this Davie were the third. Can I pretend, then, to regret that one who deprived me of what I prized most highly upon earth should have been removed? I cannot. Yet I can and do proclaim my innocence of any part or share in the deed that has removed him."

She lowered her eyes an instant, then raised them again to meet his own.

"You had commerce with these traitor lords," she reminded him. "It is by your decree that they are returned from exile. What was your aim in this?"

"To win back the things of which this fellow Davie had robbed me, a share in the ruling and the crown matrimonial that was my right, yet which you denied me. That and no more. I had not intended that Davie should be slain. I had not measured the depth of their hatred of that upstart knave. You see that I am frank with you."

"Aye, and I believe you," she lied slowly, considering him as she spoke. And he drew a breath of relief, suspecting nothing of her deep guile. "And do you know why I believe you? Because you are a fool."

"Madame!" he cried.

She rose, magnificently contemptuous.

"Must I prove it? You say that the crown matrimonial which I denied you is to be conferred on you by these lawless men? Believing that, you signed their pardon and recall from exile. Ha! You do not see, my

lord, that you are no more than their tool, their cat's-paw. You do not see that they use you but for their ends, and that when they have done with you, they will serve you as they served poor Davie? No, you see none of that, which is why I call you a fool, that need a woman's wit to open wide your eyes."

She was so vehement that she forced upon his dull wits some of the convictions she pretended were her own. Yet, resisting those convictions, he cried out that she was at fault.

"At fault?" She laughed. "Let my memory inform your judgment. When these lords, with Murray at their head, protested against our marriage, in what terms did they frame their protest? They complained that I had set over them without consulting them one who had no title to it, whether by lineal descent of blood, by nature, or by consent of the Estates. Consider that! They added, remember—I repeat to you the very words they wrote and published—that while they deemed it their duty to endure under me, they deemed it intolerable to suffer under you."

She was flushed, and her eyes gleamed with excitement. She clutched his sleeve, and brought her face close to his own, looked deep and compellingly into his eyes as she continued:

"Such was their proclamation, and they took arms against me to enforce it, to pull you down from the place to which I had raised you out of the dust. Yet you can forget it, and in your purblind folly turn to these very men to right the wrongs you fancy I have done you. Do you think that men, holding you in such esteem as that, can keep any sort of faith with you? Do you think these are the men who are likely to fortify and maintain your title to the crown? Ask yourself, and answer for yourself."

He was white to the lips. As much by her vehement pretence of sincerity as by the apparently irrefragable logic of her arguments, she

forced conviction upon him. This brought a loathly fear in its train, and the gates of his heart stood ever wide to fear. He stepped aside to a chair, and sank into it, looking at her with dilating eyes—a fool confronted with the likely fruits of his folly.

"Then—then—why did they proffer me their help? How can they achieve their ends this way?"

"How? Do you still ask? Do you not see what a blind tool you have been in their crafty hands? In name at least you are king, and your signature is binding upon my subjects. Have you not brought them back from exile by one royal decree, whilst by another you have dispersed the Parliament that was assembled to attain them of treason?"

She stepped close up to him, and bending over him as he sat there, crushed by realization, she lowered her voice.

"Pray God, my lord, that all their purpose with you is not yet complete, else in their hands I do not think your life is to be valued at an apple-paring. You go the ways poor Davie went."

He sank his handsome head to his hands, and covered his face. A while he sat huddled there, she watching him with gleaming, crafty eyes. At length he rallied. He looked up, tossing back the auburn hair from his white brow, still fighting, though weakly, against persuasion. "It is not possible," he, cried. "They could not! They could not!"

She laughed, betwixt bitterness and sadness.

"Trust to that," she bade him. "Yet look well at matters as they are already. I am a prisoner here in these men's hands. They will not let me go until their full purpose is accomplished—perhaps," she added wistfully, "perhaps not even then."

"Ah, not that!" he cried out.

"Even that," she answered firmly. "But," and again she grew vehement, "is it less so with you? Are you less a prisoner than I? D'y'e think you will be suffered to come and go at will?" She saw the increase of fear in him, and then she struck boldly, setting all upon the gamble of a guess. "I am kept here until I shall have been brought to such a state that I will add my signature to your own and so pardon one and all for what is done."

His sudden start, the sudden quickening of his glance told her how shrewdly she had struck home. Fearlessly, then, sure of herself, she continued. "To that end they use you. When you shall have served it you will but cumber them. When they shall have used you to procure their security from me, then they will deal with you as they have ever sought to deal with you—so that you trouble them no more. Ali, at last you understand!"

He came to his feet, his brow gleaming with sweat, his slender hands nervously interlocked.

"Oh, God!" he cried in a stifled voice.

"Aye, you are in a trap, my lord. Yourself you've sprung it."

And now you behold him broken by the terror she had so cunningly evoked. He flung himself upon his knees before her, and with upturned face and hands that caught and clawed at her own, he implored her pardon for the wrong that in his folly he had done her in taking sides with her enemies.

She dissembled under a mask of gentleness the loathing that his cowardice aroused in her.

"My enemies?" she echoed wistfully. "Say rather your own enemies. It was their enmity to you that drove them into exile. In your rashness you have recalled them, whilst at the same time you have so bound my hands that I cannot now help you if I would."

"You can, Mary," he cried, "or else no one can. Withhold the pardon they will presently be seeking of you. Refuse to sign any remission of their deed."

"And leave them to force you to sign it, and so destroy us both," she answered.

He ranted then, invoking the saints of heaven, and imploring her in their name—she who was so wise and strong—to discover some way out of this tangle in which his madness had enmeshed them.

"What way is there short of flight?" she asked him. "And how are we to fly who are imprisoned here you as well as myself? Alas, Darnley, I fear our lives will end by paying the price of your folly."

Thus she played upon his terrors, so that he would not be dismissed until she had promised that she would consider and seek some means of saving him, enjoining him meanwhile to keep strict watch upon himself and see that he betrayed nothing of his thoughts.

She left him to the chastening of a sleepless night, then sent for him betimes on Monday morning, and bade him repair to the lords and tell them that realizing herself a prisoner in their hands she was disposed to make terms with them. She would grant them pardon for what was done if on their side they undertook to be loyal henceforth and allowed her to resume her liberty.

The message startled him. But the smile with which she followed it was reassuring.

"There is something else you are to do," she said, "if we are to turn the tables on these traitorous gentlemen. Listen." And she added matter that begat fresh hope in Darnley's despairing soul.

He kissed her hands, lowly now and obedient as a hound that had been whipped to heel, and went below to bear her message to the

lords.

Morton and Ruthven heard him out, but betrayed no eagerness to seize the opportunity.

"All this is but words that we hear," growled Ruthven, who lay stretched upon a couch, grimly suffering from the disease that was, slowly eating up his life.

"She is guileful as the serpent," Morton added, "being bred up in the Court of France. She will make you follow her will and desire, but she will not so lead us. We hold her fast, and we do not let her go without some good security of what shall follow."

"What security will satisfy you?" quoth Darnley.

Murray and Lindsay came in as he was speaking, and Morton told them of the message that Darnley had brought. Murray moved heavily across to a window-seat, and sat down. He cleared a windowpane with his hand, and looked out upon the wintry landscape as if the matter had no interest for him. But Lindsay echoed what the other twain had said already.

"We want a deal more than promises that need not be kept," he said.

Darnley looked from one to the other of them, seeing in their uncompromising attitude a confirmation of what the Queen had told him, and noting, too—as at another time he might not have noted—their utter lack of deference to himself, their King.

"Sirs," he said, "I vow you wrong Her Majesty. I will stake my life upon her honour."

"Why, so you may," sneered Ruthven, "but you'll not stake ours."

"Take what security you please, and I will subscribe it."

"Aye, but will the Queen?" wondered Morton.

"She will. I have her word for it."

It took them the whole of that day to consider the terms of the articles that would satisfy them. Towards evening the document was ready, and Morton and Ruthven representing all, accompanied by Murray, and introduced by Darnley, came to the chamber to which Her Majesty was confined by the guard they had set upon her.

She sat as if in state awaiting them, very lovely and very tearful, knowing that woman's greatest strength is in her weakness, that tears would serve her best by presenting her as if broken to their will.

In outward submission they knelt before her to make the pretence of suing for the pardon which they extorted by force of arms and duress. When each in his turn had made the brief pleading oration he had prepared, she dried her eyes and controlled herself by obvious effort.

"My lords," she said, in a voice that quivered and broke on every other word, "when have ye ever found me blood-thirsty, or greedy of your lands or goods that you must use me so, and take such means with me? Ye have set my authority at naught, and wrought sedition in this realm. Yet I forgive you all, that by this clemency I may move you to a better love and loyalty. I desire that all that is passed may be buried in oblivion, so that you swear to me that in the future you will stand my friends and serve me faithfully, who am but a weak woman, and sorely need stout men to be my friends."

For a moment her utterance was checked by sobs. Then she controlled herself again by an effort so piteous to behold that even the flinty-hearted Ruthven was moved to some compassion.

"Forgive this weakness in me, who am very weak, for very soon I

am to be brought to bed as you wel know, and I am in no case to offer resistance to any. I have no more to say, my lords. Since you promise on your side that you will put all disloyalty behind you, I pledge myself to remit and pardon all those that were banished for their share in the late rising, and likewise to pardon those that were concerned in the killing of Seigneur Davie. All this shall be as if it had never been. I pray you, my lords, make your own security in what sort you best please, and I will subscribe it."

Morton proffered her the document they had prepared. She conned it slowly, what time they watched her, pausing ever and anon to brush aside the tears that blurred her vision. At last she nodded her lovely golden head.

"It is very well," she said. "All is here as I would have it be between us." And she turned to Darnley. "Give me pen and ink, my lord."

Darnley dipped a quill and handed it to her. She set the parchment on the little pulpit at her side. Then, as she bent to sign, the pen fluttered from her fingers, and with a deep, shuddering sigh she sank back in her chair, her eyes closed, her face piteously white.

"The Queen is faint!" cried Murray, springing forward.

But she rallied instantly, smiling upon them wanly.

"It is naught; it is past," she said. But even as she spoke she put a hand to her brow. "I am something dizzy. My condition—" She faltered on a trembling note of appeal that increased their compassion, and aroused in them a shame of their own harshness. "Leave this security with me. I will subscribe it in the morning—indeed, as soon as I am sufficiently recovered."

They rose from their knees at her bidding, and Morton in the name of all professed himself full satisfied, and deplored the affliction they had caused her, for which in the future they should make her their

amends.

"I thank you," she answered simply. "You have leave to go."

They departed well satisfied; and, counting the matter at an end, they quitted the palace and rode to their various lodgings in Edinburgh town, Murray going with Morton.

Anon to Maitland of Lethington, who had remained behind, came one of the Queen's women to summon him to her presence. He found her disposing herself for bed, and was received by her with tearful upbraidings.

"Sir," she said, "one of the conditions upon which I consented to the will of your lordships was that an immediate term should be set to the insulting state of imprisonment in which I am kept here. Yet men-at-arms still guard the very door of my chamber, and my very attendants are hindered in their comings and goings. Do you call this keeping faith with me? Have I not granted all the requests of the lords?"

Lethington, perceiving the justice of what she urged, withdrew shamed and confused at once to remedy the matter by removing the guards from the passage and the stairs and elsewhere, leaving none but those who paced outside the palace.

It was a rashness he was bitterly to repent him on the morrow, when it was discovered that in the night Mary had not only escaped, but had taken Darnley with her. Accompanied by him and a few attendants, she had executed the plan in which earlier that day she had secured her scared husband's cooperation. At midnight they had made their way along the now unguarded corridors, and descended to the vaults of the palace, whence a secret passage communicated with the chapel. Through this and across the graveyard where lay the newly buried body of the Siegneur Davie—almost across the very grave itself which stood near the chapel door they had won to the horses

waiting by Darnley's orders in the open. And they had ridden so hard that by five o'clock of that Tuesday morning they were in Dunbar.

In vain did the alarmed lords send a message after her to demand her signature of the security upon which she had duped them into counting prematurely.

Within a week they were in full flight before the army at the head of which the prisoner who had slipped through their hands was returning to destroy them. Too late did they perceive the arts by which she had fooled them, and seduced the shallow Darnley to betray them.

II. THE NIGHT OF KIRK O' FIELD—The Murder of Darnley

Perhaps one of the greatest mistakes of a lifetime in which mistakes were plentiful was the hesitancy of the Queen of Scots in executing upon her husband Darnley the prompt vengeance she had sworn for the murder of David Rizzio.

When Rizzio was slain, and she herself held captive by the murderers in her Palace of Holyrood, whilst Darnley ruled as king, she had simulated belief in her husband's innocence that she might use him for her vengeful ends.

She had played so craftily upon his cowardly nature as to convince him that Morton, Ruthven, and the other traitor lords with whom he had leagued himself were at heart his own implacable enemies; that they pretended friendship for him to make a tool of him, and that when he had served their turn they would destroy him.

In his consequent terror he had betrayed his associates, assisting her to trick them by a promise to sign an act of oblivion for what was done. Trusting to this the lords had relaxed their vigilance, whereupon, accompanied by Darnley, she had escaped by night from Holyrood.

Hope tempering at first the rage and chagrin in the hearts of the lords she had duped, they had sent a messenger to her at Dunbar to request of her the fulfilment of her promise to sign the document of their security.

But Mary put off the messenger, and whilst the army she had summoned was hastily assembling, she used her craft to divide the

rebels against themselves.

To her natural brother, the Earl of Murray, to Argyll, and to all those who had been exiled for their rebellion at the time of her marriage—and who knew not where they stood in the present turn of events, since one of the objects of the murder had been to procure their reinstatement—she sent an offer of complete pardon, on condition that they should at once dissociate themselves from those concerned in the death of the Seigneur Davie.

These terms they accepted thankfully, as well they might. Thereupon, finding themselves abandoned by all men—even by Darnley in whose service they had engaged in the murder—Morton, Ruthven, and their associates scattered and fled.

By the end of that month of March, Morton, Ruthven, Lindsay of the Byres, George Douglas, and some sixty others were denounced as rebels with forfeiture of life and goods, while one Thomas Scott, who had been in command of the guards that had kept Her Majesty prisoner at Holyrood, was hanged, drawn, and quartered at the Market Cross.

News of this reached the fugitives to increase their desperate rage. But what drove the iron into the soul of the arch-murderer Ruthven was Darnley's solemn public declaration denying all knowledge of or complicity in Rizzio's assassination; nor did it soothe his fury to know that all Scotland rang with contemptuous laughter at that impudent and cowardly perjury. From his sick-bed at Newcastle, whereon some six weeks later he was to breathe his last, the forsaken wretch replied to it by sending the Queen the bond to which he had demanded Darnley's signature before embarking upon the business.

It was a damning document. There above the plain signature and seal of the King was the admission, not merely of complicity, but that the thing was done by his express will and command, that the

responsibility was his own, and that he would hold the doers scatheless from all consequences.

Mary could scarcely have hoped to be able to confront her worthless husband with so complete a proof of his duplicity and baseness. She sent for him, confounded him with the sight of that appalling bond, made an end to the amity which for her own ends she had pretended, and drove him out of her presence with a fury before which he dared not linger.

You see him, then, crushed under his load of mortification, realizing at last how he had been duped on every hand, first by the lords for their own purpose, and then by the Queen for hers. Her contempt of him was now so manifest that it spread to all who served him—for she made it plain that who showed him friendship earned her deep displeasure—so that he was forced to withdraw from a Court where his life was become impossible. For a while he wandered up and down a land where every door was shut in his face, where every man of whatsoever party, traitor or true, despised him alike. In the end, he took himself off to his father, Lennox, and at Glasgow he sought what amusement he could with his dogs and his hawks, and such odd vulgar rustic love-affairs as came his way.

It was in allowing him thus to go his ways, in leaving her vengeance—indeed, her justice—but half accomplished, that lay the greatest of the Queen's mistakes. Better for her had she taken with Darnley the direct way that was her right. Better for her, if acting strongly then, she had banished or hanged him for his part in the treason that had inspired the murder of Rizzio. Unfortunately, a factor that served to quicken her abhorrence of him served also to set a curb of caution upon the satisfaction of it.

This factor that came so inopportunately into her life was her regard for the arrogant, unscrupulous Earl of Bothwell. Her hand was stayed by fear that men should say that for Bothwell's sake she had rid

herself of a husband become troublesome. That Bothwell had been her friend in the hour when she had needed friends, and knew not whom she might trust; that by his masterfulness he seemed a man upon whom a woman might lean with confidence, may account for the beginnings of the extraordinary influence he came so swiftly to exercise over her, and the passion he awakened in her to such a degree that she was unable to dissemble it.

Her regard for him, the more flagrant by contrast with her contempt for Darnley, is betrayed in the will she made before her confinement in the following June. Whilst to Darnley she bequeathed nothing but the red-enamelled diamond ring with which he had married her—"It was with this that I was married," she wrote almost contemptuously. "I leave it to the King who gave it me"—she appointed Bothwell to the tutelage of her child in the event of her not surviving it, and to the government of the realm.

The King came to visit her during her convalescence, and was scowled upon by Murray and Argyll, who were at Holyrood, and most of all by Bothwell, whose arrogance by now was such that he was become the best-hated man in Scotland. The Queen received him very coldly, whilst using Bothwell more than cordially in his very presence, so that he departed again in a deeper humiliation than before.

Then before the end of July there was her sudden visit to Bothwell at Alloa, which gave rise to so much scandal. Hearing of it, Darnley followed in a vain attempt to assert his rights as king and husband, only to be flouted and dismissed with the conviction that his life was no longer safe in Scotland, and that he had best cross the Border. Yet, to his undoing, detained perhaps by the overweening pride that is usually part of a fool's equipment, he did not act upon that wise resolve. He returned instead to his hawking and his hunting, and was seldom seen at Court thereafter.

Even when in the following October, Mary lay at the point of death at Jedburgh, Darnley came but to stay a day, and left her again without any assurance that she would recover. But then the facts of her illness, and how it had been contracted, were not such as to encourage kindness in him, even had he been inclined to kindness.

Bothwell had taken three wounds in a Border affray some weeks before, and Mary, hearing of this and that he lay in grievous case at Hermitage, had ridden thither in her fond solicitude—a distance of thirty miles—and back again in the same day, thus contracting a chill which had brought her to the very gates of death.

Darnley had not only heard of this, but he had found Bothwell at Jedburgh, whither he had been borne in a litter, when in his turn he had heard of how it was with Mary; and Bothwell had treated him with more than the contempt which all men now showed him, but which from none could wound him so deeply as from this man whom rumour accounted Mary's lover.

Matters between husband and wife were thus come to a pass in which they could not continue, as all men saw, and as she herself confessed at Craignillar, whither she repaired, still weak in body, towards the end of November.

Over a great fire that blazed in a vast chamber of the castle she sat sick at heart and shivering, for all that her wasted body was swathed in a long cloak of deepest purple reversed with ermine. Her face was thin and of a transparent pallor, her eyes great pools of wistfulness amid the shadows which her illness had set about them.

"I do wish I could be dead!" she sighed.

Bothwell's eyes narrowed. He was leaning on the back of her tall chair, a long, virile figure with a hawk-nosed, bearded face that was sternly handsome. He thrust back the crisp dark hair that clustered

about his brow, and fetched a sigh.

"It was never my own death I wished when a man stood in my road to aught I craved," he said, lowering his voice, for Maitland of Lethington—now restored to his secretaryship—was writing at a table across the room, and my Lord of Argyll was leaning over him.

She looked up at him suddenly, her eyes startled.

"What devil's counsel do you whisper?" she asked him. And when he would have answered, she raised a hand. "No," she said. "Not that way."

"There is another," said Bothwell coolly. He moved, came round, and stood squarely upon the hearth, his back to the fire, confronting her, nor did he further trouble to lower his voice. "We have considered it already."

"What have you considered?"

Her voice was strained; fear and excitement blended in her face.

"How the shackles that fetter you might be broken. Be not alarmed. It was the virtuous Murray himself propounded it to Argyll and Lethington—for the good of Scotland and yourself." A sneer flitted across his tanned face. "Let them speak for themselves." He raised his voice and called to them across the room.

They came at once, and the four made an odd group as they stood there in the firelit gloom of that November day—the lovely young Queen, so frail and wistful in her high-backed chair; the stalwart, arrogant Bothwell, magnificent in a doublet of peach-coloured velvet that tapered to a golden girdle; Argyll, portly and sober in a rich suit of black; and Maitland of Lethington, lean and crafty of face, in a long furred gown that flapped about his bony shanks.

It was to Lethington that Bothwell addressed himself.

"Her Grace is in a mood to hear how the Gordian knot of her marriage might be unravelled," said he, grimly ironic.

Lethington raised his eyebrows, licked his thin lips, and rubbed his bony hands one in the other.

"Unravelled?" he echoed with wondering stress. "Unravelled? Ha!" His dark eyes flashed round at them. "Better adopt Alexander's plan, and cut it. 'Twill be more complete, and—and final."

"No, no!" she cried. "I will not have you shed his blood."

"He himself was none so tender where another was concerned," Bothwell reminded her—as if the memory of Rizzio were dear to him.

"What he may have done does not weigh upon my conscience," was her answer.

"He might," put in Argyll, "be convicted of treason for having consented to Your Grace's retention in ward at Holyrood after Rizzio's murder."

She considered an instant, then shook her head.

"It is too late. It should have been done long since. Now men will say that it is but a pretext to be rid of him." She looked up at Bothwell, who remained standing immediately before her, between her and the fire. "You said that my Lord of Murray had discussed this matter. Was it in such terms as these?"

Bothwell laughed silently at the thought of the sly Murray rendering himself a party to anything so direct and desperate. It was Lethington who answered her.

"My Lord Murray was for a divorce. That would set Your Grace free, and it might be obtained, he said, by tearing up the Pope's bull of

dispensation that permitted the marriage. Yet, madame, although Lord Murray would himself go no further, I have no cause to doubt that were other means concerted, he would be content to look through his fingers."

Her mind, however, did not seem to follow his speech beyond the matter of the divorce. A faint flush of eagerness stirred in her pale cheeks.

"Ah, yes!" she cried. "I, too, have thought of that—of this divorce. And God knows I do not want for grounds. And it could be obtained, you say, by tearing up this papal bull?"

"The marriage could be proclaimed void thereafter," Argyll explained.

She looked past Bothwell into the fire, and took her chin in her hand.

"Yes," she said slowly, musingly, and again, "yes. That were a way. That is the way." And then suddenly she looked up, and they saw doubt and dread in her eyes. "But in that case—what of my son?"

"Aye!" said Lethington grimly. He shrugged his narrow shoulders, parted his hands, and brought them together again. "That's the obstacle, as we perceived. It would imperil his succession."

"It would make a bastard of him, you mean?" she cried, demanding the full expansion of their thoughts.

"Indeed it would do no less," the secretary assented.

"So that," said Bothwell, softly, "we come back to Alexander's method. What the fingers may not unravel, the knife can sever."

She shivered, and drew her furred cloak the more closely about her.

Lethington leaned forward. He spoke in kindly, soothing accents.

"Let us guide this matter among us, madame," he murmured, "and we'll find means to rid Your Grace of this young fool, without hurt to your honour or prejudice to your son. And the Earl of Murray will look the other way, provided you pardon Morton and his friends for the killing they did in Darnley's service."

She looked from one to the other of them, scanning each face in turn. Then her eyes returned to a contemplation of the flaming logs, and she spoke very softly.

"Do nothing by which a spot might be laid on my honour or conscience," she said, with an odd deliberateness that seemed to insist upon the strictly literal meaning of her words. "Rather I pray you let the matter rest until God remedy it."

Lethington looked at the other two, the other two looked at him. He rubbed his hands softly.

"Trust to us, madame," he answered. "We will so guide the matter that Your Grace shall see nothing but what is good and approved by Parliament."

She committed herself to no reply, and so they were content to take their answer from her silence. They went in quest of Huntly and Sir James Balfour, and the five of them entered into a bond for the destruction of him whom they named "the young fool and proud tiranne," to be engaged in when Mary should have pardoned Morton and his fellow-conspirators.

It was not until Christmas Eve that she signed this pardon of some seventy fugitives, proscribed for their participation in the Rizzio murder, towards whom she had hitherto shown herself so implacable.

The world saw in this no more than a deed of clemency and charity

befitting the solemn festival of good-will. But the five who had entered into that bond at Craigmillar Castle beheld in it more accurately the fulfilment of her part of the suggested bargain, the price she paid in advance to be rid of Darnley, the sign of her full agreement that the knot which might not be unravelled should be cut.

On that same day Her Grace went with Bothwell to Lord Drummond's, where they abode for the best part of a week, and thence they went on together to Tullibardine, the rash and open intimacy between them giving nourishment to scandal.

At the same time Darnley quitted Stirling, where he had lately been living in miserable conditions, ignored by the nobles, and even stinted in his necessary expenses, deprived of his ordinary servants, and his silver replaced by pewter. The miserable youth reached Glasgow deadly sick. He had been taken ill on the way, and the inevitable rumour was spread that he had been poisoned. Later, when it became known that his once lovely countenance was now blotched and disfigured, it was realized that his illness was no more than the inevitable result of the debauched life he led.

Conceiving himself on the point of death, Darnley wrote piteously to the Queen; but she ignored his letters until she learnt that his condition was improving, when at last (on January 29th) she went to visit him at Glasgow. It may well be that she nourished some hope that nature would resolve the matter for her, and remove the need for such desperate measures as had been concerted. But seeing him likely to recover, two things became necessary, to bring him to the place that was suitable for the fulfilment of her designs, and to simulate reconciliation with him, and even renewed and tender affection, so that none might hereafter charge her with complicity in what should follow.

I hope that in this I do her memory no injustice. It is thus that I read the sequel, nor can I read it in any other way.

She found him abed, with a piece of taffeta over his face to hide its disfigurement, and she was so moved—as it seemed—by his condition, that she fell on her knees beside him, and wept in the presence of her attendants and his own; confessing penitence if anything she had done in the past could have contributed to their estrangement. Thus reconciliation followed, and she used him tenderly, grew solicitous concerning him, and vowed that as soon as he could be moved, he must be taken to surroundings more salubrious and more befitting the dignity of his station.

Gladly then he agreed to return with her to Holyrood.

"Not to Holyrood," she said. "At least, not until your health is mended, lest you should carry thither infection dangerous to your little son."

"Whither then?" he asked her, and when she mentioned Craigmillar, he started up in bed, so that the taffeta slipped from his face, and it was with difficulty that she dissembled the loathing with which the sight of its pustules inspired her.

"Craigmillar!" he cried. "Then what I was told is true."

"What were you told?" quoth she, staring at him, brows knit, her face blank.

A rumour had filtered through to him of the Craigmillar bond. He had been told that a letter drawn up there had been presented to her for her signature, which she had refused. Thus much he told her, adding that he could not believe that she would do him any hurt; and yet why did she desire to bear him to Craigmillar?

"You have been told lies," she answered him. "I saw no such letter; I subscribed none, nor was ever asked to subscribe any," which indeed was literally true. "To this I swear. As for your going to

Craigmillar, you shall go whithersoever you please, yourself."

He sank back on his pillows, and his trembling subsided.

"I believe thee, Mary. I believe thou'd never do me any harm," he repeated, "and if any other would," he added on a bombastic note, "they shall buy it dear, unless they take me sleeping. But I'll never to Craigmillar."

"I have said you shall go where you please," she assured him again.

He considered.

"There is the house at Kirk o' Field. It has a fine garden, and is in a position that is deemed the healthiest about Edinburgh. I need good air; good air and baths have been prescribed me to cleanse me of this plague. Kirk o' Field will serve, if it be your pleasure."

She gave a ready consent, dispatched messengers ahead to prepare the house, and to take from Holyrood certain furnishings that should improve the interior, and render it as fitting as possible a dwelling for a king.

Some days later they set out, his misgivings quieted by the tenderness which she now showed him—particularly when witnesses were at hand.

It was a tenderness that grew steadily during those twelve days in which he lay in convalescence in the house at Kirk o' Field; she was playful and coquettish with him as a maid with her lover, so that nothing was talked of but the completeness of this reconciliation, and the hope that it would lead to a peace within the realm that would be a benefit to all. Yet many there were who marvelled at it, wondering whether the waywardness and caprice of woman could account for so sudden a change from hatred to affection.

Darnley was lodged on the upper floor, in a room comfortably furnished from the palace. It was hung with six pieces of tapestry, and the floor was partly covered by an Eastern carpet. It contained, besides the handsome bed—which once had belonged to the Queen's mother—a couple of high chairs in purple velvet, a little table with a green velvet cover, and some cushions in red. By the side of the bed stood the specially prepared bath that was part of the cure which Darnley was undergoing. It had for its incongruous lid a door that had been lifted from its hinges.

Immediately underneath was a room that had been prepared for the Queen, with a little bed of yellow and green damask, and a furred coverlet. The windows looked out upon the close, and the door opened upon the passage leading to the garden.

Here the Queen slept on several of those nights of early February, for indeed she was more often at Kirk o' Field than at Holy-rood, and when she was not bearing Darnley company in his chamber, and beguiling the tedium of his illness, she was to be seen walking in the garden with Lady Reres, and from his bed he could hear her sometimes singing as she sauntered there.

Never since the ephemeral season of their courtship had she been on such fond terms with him, and all his fears of hostile designs entertained against him by her immediate followers were stilled at last. Yet not for long. Into his fool's paradise came Lord Robert of Holyrood, with a warning that flung him into a sweat of panic.

The conspirators had hired a few trusted assistants to help them carry out their plans, and a rumour had got abroad—in the unaccountable way of rumours—that there was danger to the King. It was of this rumour that Lord Robert brought him word, telling him bluntly that unless he escaped quickly from this place, he would leave his life there. Yet when Darnley had repeated this to the Queen, and the Queen indignantly had sent for Lord Robert and demanded to

know his meaning, his lordship denied that he had uttered any such warning, protested that his words must have been misunderstood—that they referred solely to the King's condition, which demanded, he thought, different treatment and healthier air.

Knowing not what to believe, Darnley's uneasiness abode with him. Yet, trusting Mary, and feeling secure so long as she was by his side, he became more and more insistent upon her presence, more and more fretful in her absence. It was to quiet him that she consented to sleep as often as might be at Kirk o' Field. She slept there on the Wednesday of that week, and again on Friday, and she was to have done so yet again on that fateful Sunday, February 9th, but that her servant Sebastien—one who had accompanied her from France, and for whom she had a deep affection—was that day married, and Her Majesty had promised to be present at the masque that night at Holyrood, in honour of his nuptials.

Nevertheless, she did not utterly neglect her husband on that account. She rode to Kirk o' Field early in the evening, accompanied by Bothwell, Huntly, Argyll, and some others; and leaving the lords at cards below to while away the time, she repaired to Darnley, and sat beside his bed, soothing a spirit oddly perturbed, as if with some premonition of what was brewing.

"Ye'll not leave me the night," he begged her once.

"Alas," she said, "I must! Sebastien is being wed, and I have promised to be present."

He sighed and shifted uneasily.

"Soon I shall be well, and then these foolish humours will cease to haunt me. But just now I cannot bear you from my sight. When you are with me I am at peace. I know that all is well. But when you go I am filled with fears, lying helpless here."

"What should you fear?" she asked him.

"The hate that I know is alive against me."

"You are casting shadows to affright yourself," said she.

"What's that?" he cried, half raising himself in sudden alarm.
"Listen!"

From the room below came faintly a sound of footsteps, accompanied by a noise as of something being trundled.

"It will be my servants in my room—putting it to rights."

"To what purpose since you do not sleep there tonight?" he asked.
He raised his voice and called his page.

"Why, what will you do?" she asked him, steadying her own alarm.

He answered her by bidding the youth who had entered go see what was doing in the room below. The lad departed, and had he done his errand faithfully, he would have found Bothwell's followers, Hay and Hepburn, and the Queen's man, Nicholas Hubert better known as French Paris—emptying a keg of gunpowder on the floor immediately under the King's bed. But it happened that in the passage he came suddenly face to face with the splendid figure of Bothwell, cloaked and hatted, and Bothwell asked him whither he went.

The boy told him.

"It is nothing," Bothwell said. "They are moving Her Grace's bed in accordance with her wishes."

And the lad, overborne by that commanding figure which so effectively blocked his path, chose the line of lesser resistance. He went back to bear the King that message as if for himself he had

seen what my Lord Bothwell had but told him.

Darnley was pacified by the assurance, and the lad withdrew.

"Did I not tell you how it was?" quoth Mary. "Is not my word enough?"

"Forgive the doubt," Darnley begged her. "Indeed, there was no doubt of you, who have shown me so much charity in my affliction." He sighed, and looked at her with melancholy eyes.

"I would the past had been other than it has been between you and me," he said. "I was too young for kingship, I think. In my green youth I listened to false counsellors, and was quick to jealousy and the follies it begets. Then, when you cast me out and I wandered friendless, a devil took possession of me. Yet, if you will but consent to bury all the past into oblivion, I will make amends, and you shall find me worthier hereafter."

She rose, white to the lips, her bosom heaving under her long cloak. She turned aside and stepped to the window. She stood there, peering out into the gloom of the close, her knees trembling under her.

"Why do you not answer me?" he cried.

"What answer do you need?" she said, and her voice shook. "Are you not answered already?" And then, breathlessly, she added: "It is time to go, I think."

They heard a heavy step upon the stairs and the clank of a sword against the rails. The door opened, and Bothwell, wrapped in his scarlet cloak, stood bending his tall shoulders under the low lintel. His gleaming eyes, so oddly mocking in their glance, for all that his face was set, fell upon Darnley, and with their look flung him into an inward state of blending fear and rage.

"Your Grace," said Bothwell's deep voice, "it is close upon midnight."

He came no more than in time; it needed the sight of him with its reminder of all that he meant to her to sustain a purpose that was being sapped by pity.

"Very well," she said. "I come."

Bothwell stood aside to give her egress and to invite it. But the King delayed her.

"A moment—a word!" he begged, and to Bothwell: "Give us leave apart, sir!"

Yet, King though he might be, there was no ready obedience from the arrogant Border lord, her lover. It was to Mary that Bothwell looked for commands, nor stirred until she signed to him to go. And even then he went no farther than the other side of the door, so that he might be close at hand to fortify her should any weakness assail her now in this supreme hour.

Darnley struggled up in bed, caught her hand, and pulled her to him.

"Do not leave me, Mary. Do not leave me!" he implored her.

"Why, what is this?" she cried, but her voice lacked steadiness. "Would you have me disappoint poor Sebastien, who loves me?"

"I see. Sebastien is more to you than I?"

"Now this is folly. Sebastien is my faithful servant."

"And am I less? Do you not believe that my one aim henceforth will be to serve you and faithfully? Oh, forgive this weakness. I am full of evil foreboding to-night. Go, then, if go you must, but give me at least some assurance of your love, some pledge of it in earnest that you

will come again to-morrow nor part from me again."

She looked into the white, piteous young face that had once been so lovely, and her soul faltered. It needed the knowledge that Bothwell waited just beyond the door, that he could overhear what was being said, to strengthen her fearfully in her tragic purpose.

She has been censured most for what next she did. Murray himself spoke of it afterwards as the worst part of the business. But it is possible that she was concerned only at the moment to put an end to a scene that was unnerving her, and that she took the readiest means to it.

She drew a ring from her finger and slipped it on to one of his.

"Be this the pledge, then," she said; "and so content and rest yourself."

With that she broke from him, white and scared, and reached the door. Yet with her hand upon the latch she paused. Looking at him she saw that he was smiling, and perhaps horror of her betrayal of him overwhelmed her. It must be that she then desired to warn him, yet with Bothwell within earshot she realized that any warning must precipitate the tragedy, with direst consequences to Bothwell and herself.

To conquer her weakness, she thought of David Rizzio, whom Darnley had murdered almost at her feet, and whom this night was to avenge. She thought of the Judas part that he had played in that affair, and sought persuasion that it was fitting he should now be paid in kind. Yet, very woman that she was, failing to find any such persuasion, she found instead in the very thought of Rizzio the very means to convey her warning.

Standing tense and white by the door, regarding him with dilating eyes, she spoke her last words to him.

"It would be just about this time last year that Davie was slain," she said, and on that passed out to the waiting Bothwell.

Once on the stairs she paused and set a hand upon the shoulder of the stalwart Borderer.

"Must it be? Oh, must it be?" she whispered fearfully.

She caught the flash of his eyes in the half gloom as he leaned over her, his arm about her waist drawing her to him.

"Is it not just? Is it not full merited?" he asked her.

"And yet I would that we did not profit by it," she complained.

"Shall we pity him on that account?" he asked, and laughed softly and shortly. "Come away," he added abruptly. "They wait for you!" And so, by the suasion of his arm and his imperious will, she was swept onward along the road of her destiny.

Outside the horses were ready. There was a little group of gentlemen to escort her, and half a dozen servants with lighted torches, whilst Lady Reres was in waiting. A man stood forward to assist her to mount, his face and hands so blackened by gunpowder that for a moment she failed to recognize him. She laughed nervously when he named himself.

"Lord, Paris, how begrimed you are!" she cried; and, mounting, rode away towards Holyrood with her torchbearers and attendants.

In the room above, Darnley lay considering her last words. He turned them over in his thoughts, assured by the tone she had used and how she had looked that they contained some message.

"It would be just about this time last year that Davie was slain."

In themselves, those words were not strictly accurate. It wanted yet

a month to the anniversary of Rizzio's death. And why, at parting, should she have reminded him of that which she had agreed should be forgotten? Instantly came the answer that she sought to warn him that retribution was impending. He thought again of the rumours that he had heard of a bond signed at Craigmillar; he recalled Lord Robert's warning to him, afterwards denied.

He recalled her words to himself at the time of Rizzio's death: "Consider well what I now say. Consider and remember. I shall never rest until I give you as sore a heart as I have presently." And further, he remembered her cry at once agonized and fiercely vengeful: "Jamais, jamais je n'oublierai."

His terrors mounted swiftly, to be quieted again at last when he looked at the ring she had put upon his finger in pledge of her renewed affection. The past was dead and buried, surely. Though danger might threaten, she would guard him against it, setting her love about him like a panoply of steel. When she came to-morrow, he would question her closely, and she should be more frank and open with him, and tell him all. Meanwhile, he would take his precautions for to-night.

He sent his page to make fast all doors. The youth went and did as he was bidden, with the exception of the door that led to the garden. It had no bolts, and the key was missing; yet, seeing his master's nervous, excited state, he forbore from any mention of that circumstance when presently he returned to him.

Darnley requested a book of Psalms, that he might read himself to sleep. The page dozed in a chair, and so the hours passed; and at last the King himself fell into a light slumber. Out of this he started suddenly at a little before two o'clock, and sat upright in bed, alarmed without knowing why, listening with straining ears and throbbing pulses.

He caught a repetition of the sound that had aroused him, a sound akin to that which had drawn his attention earlier, when Mary had been with him. It came up faintly from the room immediately beneath her room. Some one was moving there, he thought. Then, as he continued to listen, all became quiet again, save his fears, which would not be quieted. He extinguished the light, slipped from the bed and, crossing to the window, peered out into the close that was faintly illumined by a moon in its first quarter. A shadow moved, he thought. He watched with increasing panic for confirmation, and presently saw that he had been right. Not one, but several shadows were shifting there among the trees. Shadows of men, they were, and as he peered, he saw one that went running from the house across the lawn and joined the others, now clustered together in a group. What could be their purpose here? In the silence, he seemed to hear again the echo of Mary's last words to him:

"It would be just about this time last year that Davie was slain."

In terror, he groped his way to the chair where the page slept and shook the lad vigorously.

"Afoot, boy!" he said, in a hoarse whisper. He had meant to shout it, but his voice failed him, his windpipe clutched by panic. "Afoot—we are beset by enemies!"

At once the youth was wide awake, and together the King just in his shirt as he was—they made their way from the room in the dark, groping their way, and so reached the windows at the back. Darnley opened one of these very softly, then sent the boy back for a sheet. Making this fast, they descended by it to the garden, and started towards the wall, intending to climb it, that they might reach the open.

The boy led the way, and the King followed, his teeth chattering as much from the cold as from the terror that possessed him. And then, quite suddenly, without the least warning, the ground, it seemed to

them, heaved under their feet, and they were flung violently forward on their faces. A great blaze rent the darkness of the night, accompanied by the thunders of an explosion so terrific that it seemed as if the whole world must have been shattered by it.

For some instants the King and his page lay half stunned where they had fallen, and well might it have been for them had they so continued. But Darnley, recovering, staggered to his feet, pulling the boy up with him and supporting him. Then, as he began to move, he heard a soft whistle in the gloom behind him. Over his shoulder he looked towards the house, to behold a great, smoking gap now yawning in it. Through this gap he caught a glimpse of shadowy men moving in the close beyond, and he realized that he had been seen. The white shirt he wore had betrayed his presence to them.

With a stifled scream, he began to run towards the wall, the page staggering after him. Behind them now came the clank and thud of a score of overtaking feet. Soon they were surrounded. The King turned this way and that, desperately seeking a way out of the murderous human ring that fenced them round.

"What d'ye seek? What d'ye seek?" he screeched, in a pitiful attempt to question with authority.

A tall man in a trailing cloak advanced and seized him.

"We seek thee, fool!" said the voice of Bothwell.

The kingliness that he had never known how to wear becomingly now fell from him utterly.

"Mercy—mercy!" he cried.

"Such mercy as you had on David Rizzio!" answered the Border lord.

Darnley fell on his knees and sought to embrace the murderer's

legs. Bothwell stooped over him, seized the wretched man's shirt, and pulled it from his shivering body; then, flinging the sleeves about the royal neck, slipped one over the other and drew them tight, nor relaxed his hold until the young man's struggles had entirely ceased.

Four days later, Mary went to visit the body of her husband in the chapel of Holyrood House, whither it had been conveyed, and there, as a contemporary tells us, she looked upon it long, "not only without grief, but with greedy eyes." Thereafter it was buried secretly in the night by Rizzio's side, so that murderer and victim lay at peace together in the end.

III. THE NIGHT OF BETRAYAL— Antonio Perez and Philip II of Spain

"You a Spaniard of Spain?" had been her taunt, dry and contemptuous. "I do not believe it."

And upon that she had put spur to the great black horse that bore her and had ridden off along the precipitous road by the river.

After her he had flung his answer on a note of laughter, bitter and cynical as the laughter of the damned, laughter that expressed all things but mirth.

"Oh, a Spaniard of Spain, indeed, Madame la Marquise. Very much a Spaniard of Spain, I assure you."

The great black horse and the woman in red flashed round a bend of the rocky road and were eclipsed by a clump of larches. The man leaned heavily upon his ebony cane, sighed wearily, and grew thoughtful. Then, with a laugh and a shrug, he sat down in the shade of the firs that bordered the road. Behind him, crowning the heights, loomed the brown castle built by Gaston Phoebus, Count of Foix, two hundred years ago, and the Tower of Montauzet, its walls scarred by the shots of the rebellious Biscayans. Below him, nourished by the snows that were dissolving under the sunshine of early spring, sped the tumbling river; beyond this spread pasture and arable land to the distant hills, and beyond those stood the gigantic sharp-summited wall of the Pyrenees, its long ridge dominated by the cloven cone of the snow clad Pic du Midi. There was in the sight of that great barrier,

at once natural and political, a sense of security for this fugitive from the perils and the hatreds that lurked in Spain beyond. Here in Bearn he was a king's guest, enjoying the hospitality of the great Castle of Pau, safe from the vindictive persecution of the mean tyrant who ruled in Spain. And here, at last, he was at peace, or would have been but for the thought of this woman—this Marquise de Chantenac—who had gone to such lengths in her endeavours to soften his exile that her ultimate object could never have been in doubt to a coxcomb, though it was in some doubt to Antonio Perez, who had been cured for all time of Coxcombry by suffering and misfortune, to say nothing of increasing age. It was when he bethought him of that age of his that he was chiefly intrigued by the amazing ardour of this great lady of Bearn. A dozen years ago—before misfortune overtook him—he would have accepted her flagrant wooing as a proper tribute. For then he had been the handsome, wealthy, witty, profligate Secretary of State to His Catholic Majesty King Philip II, with a power in Spain second only to the King's, and sometimes even greater. In those days he would have welcomed her as her endowments merited. She was radiantly lovely, in the very noontide of her resplendent youth, the well-born widow of a gentleman of Bearn. And it would not have lain within the strength or inclinations of Antonio Perez, as he once had been, to have resisted the temptation that she offered. Ever avid of pleasure, he had denied himself no single cup of it that favouring Fortune had proffered him. It was, indeed, because of this that he was fallen from his high estate; it was a woman who had pulled him down in ruin, tumbling with him to her doom. She, poor soul, was dead at last, which was the best that any lover could have wished her. But he lived on, embittered, vengeful, with gall in his veins instead of blood. He was the pale, faded shadow of that arrogant, reckless, joyous Antonio Perez beloved of Fortune. He was fifty, gaunt, hollow-eyed, and grey, half crippled by torture, sickly from long years of incarceration.

What, he asked himself, sitting there, his eyes upon the eternal snows of the barrier that shut out his past, was there left in him to

awaken love in such a woman as Madame de Chantenac? Was it that his tribulations stirred her pity, or that the fame of him which rang through Europe shed upon his withering frame some of the transfiguring radiance of romance?

It marked, indeed, the change in him that he should pause to question, whose erstwhile habit had been blindly to accept the good things tossed by Fortune into his lap. But question he did, pondering that parting taunt of hers to which, for emphasis, she had given an odd redundancy—"You a Spaniard of Spain!" Could her meaning have been plainer? Was not a Spaniard proverbially as quick to love as to jealousy? Was not Spain, that scented land of warmth and colour, of cruelty and blood, of throbbing lutes under lattices ajar, of mitred sinners doing public penance, that land where lust and piety went hand in hand, where passion and penitence lay down together—was not Spain the land of love's most fruitful growth? And was not a Spaniard the very hierophant of love?

His thoughts swung with sudden yearning to his wife Juana and their children, held in brutal captivity by Philip, who sought to slake upon them some of the vindictiveness from which their husband and father had at last escaped. Not that Antonio Perez observed marital fidelity more closely than any other Spaniard of his time, or of any time. But Antonio Perez was growing old, older than he thought, older than his years. He knew it. Madame de Chantenac had proved it to him.

She had reproached him with never coming to see her at Chantenac, neglecting to return the too assiduous visits that she paid him here at Pau.

"You are very beautiful, madame, and the world is very foul," he had excused himself. "Believe one who knows the world, to his bitter cost. Tongues will wag."

"And your Spanish pride will not suffer that clods may talk of you?"

"I am thinking of you, madame."

"Of me?" she had answered. "Why, of me they talk already—talk their fill. I must pretend blindness to the leering eyes that watch me each time I come to Pau; feign unconsciousness of the impertinent glances of the captain of the castle there as I ride in."

"Then why do you come?" he had asked point-blank. But before her sudden change of countenance he had been quick to add: "Oh, madame, I am full conscious of the charity that brings you, and I am deeply, deeply grateful; but—"

"Charity?" she had interrupted sharply, on a laugh that was self-mocking. "Charity?"

"What else, madame?"

"Ask yourself," she had answered, reddening and averting her face from his questioning eyes.

"Madame," he had faltered, "I dare not."

"Dare not?"

"Madame, how should I? I am an old man, broken by sickness, disheartened by misfortune, daunted by tribulation—a mere husk cast aside by Fortune, whilst you are lovely as one of the angels about the Throne of Heaven."

She had looked into the haggard face, into the scars of suffering that seared it, and she had answered gently: "Tomorrow you shall come to me at Chantenac, my friend."

"I am a Spaniard, for whom to-morrow never comes."

"But it will this time. To-morrow I shall expect you."

He looked up at her sitting her great black horse beside which he had been pacing.

"Better not, madame! Better not!" he had said.

And then he saw the eyes that had been tender grow charged with scorn; then came her angry taunt:

"You a Spaniard of Spain! I do not believe it!"

Oh, there was no doubt that he had angered her. Women of her temperament are quick to anger as to every emotion. But he had not wished to anger her. God knows it was never the way of Antonio Perez to anger lovely women—at least not in this fashion. And it was an ill return for her gentleness and attention to himself. Considering this as he sat there now, he resolved that he must make amends—the only amends it was possible to make.

An hour later, in one of the regal rooms of the castle, where he enjoyed the hospitality of King Henri IV of France and Navarre, he announced to that most faithful equerry, Gil de Mesa, his intention of riding to Chantenac to-morrow.

"Is it prudent?" quoth Mesa, frowning.

"Most imprudent," answered Don Antonio. "That is why I go."

And on the morrow he went, escorted by a single groom. Gil de Mesa had begged at first to be allowed to accompany him. But for Gil he had other work, of which the instructions he left were very full. The distance was short—three miles along the Gave de Pau—and Don Antonio covered it on a gently ambling mule, such as might have been bred to bear some aged dignitary of Holy Church.

The lords of Chantenac were as noble, as proud, and as poor as most great lords of Bearn. Their lineage was long, their rent-rolls

short. And the last marquis had suffered more from this dual complaint than any of his forbears, and he had not at all improved matters by a certain habit of gaming contracted in youth. The chateau bore abundant signs of it. It was a burnt red pile standing four-square on a little eminence, about the base of which the river went winding turbulently; it was turreted at each of its four angles, imposing in its way, but in a sad state of dilapidation and disrepair.

The interior, when Don Antonio reached it, was rather better; the furnishings, though sparse, were massive and imposing; the tapestries on the walls, if old, were rich and choice. But everywhere the ill-assorted marriage of pretentiousness and neediness was apparent. The floors of hall and living-room were strewn with fresh-cut rushes, an obsolescent custom which served here alike to save the heavy cost of carpets and to lend the place an ancient baronial dignity. Whilst pretence was made of keeping state, the servitors were all old, and insufficient in number to warrant the retention of the infirm seneschal by whom Don Antonio was ceremoniously received. A single groom, aged and without livery, took charge at once of Don Antonio's mule, his servant's horse, and the servant himself.

The seneschal, hobbling before him, conducted our Spaniard across the great hall, gloomy and half denuded, through the main living-room of the chateau into a smaller, more intimate apartment, holding some trace of luxury, which he announced as madame's own room. And there he left him to await the coming of the chatelaine.

She, at least, showed none of the outward disrepair of her surroundings. She came to him sheathed in a gown of shimmering silk that was of the golden brown of autumn tints, caught to her waist by a slender girdle of hammered gold. Eyes of deepest blue pondered him questioningly, whilst red lips smiled their welcome. "So you have come in spite of all?" she greeted him. "Be very welcome to my poor house, Don Antonio."

And regally she proffered her hand to his homage.

He took it, observing the shapely, pointed fingers, the delicately curving nails. Reluctantly, almost, he admitted to himself how complete was her beauty, how absolute her charm. He sighed—a sigh for that lost youth of his, perhaps—as he bowed from his fine, lean height to press cold lips of formal duty on that hand.

"Your will, madame, was stronger than my prudence," said he.

"Prudence?" quoth she, and almost sneered. "Since when has Antonio Perez stooped to prudence?"

"Since paying the bitter price of imprudence. You know my story?"

"A little. I know, for instance, that you murdered Escovedo—all the world knows that. Is that the imprudence of which you speak? I have heard it said that it was for love of a woman that you did it."

"You have heard that, too?" he said. He had paled a little. "You have heard a deal, Marquise. I wonder would it amuse you to hear more, to hear from my own lips this story of mine which all Europe garbles? Would it?"

There was a faint note of anxiety in his voice, a look faintly anxious in his eyes.

She scanned him a moment gravely, almost inscrutably. "What purpose can it serve?" she asked; and her tone was forbidding—almost a tone of fear.

"It will explain," he insisted.

"Explain what?"

"How it comes that I am not this moment prostrate at your feet; how it happens that I am not on my knees to worship your heavenly beauty;

how I have contrived to remain insensible before a loveliness that in happier times would have made me mad."

"Vive Dieu!" she murmured, half ironical. "Perhaps that needs explaining."

"How it became necessary," he pursued, never heeding the interruption, "that yesterday you should proclaim your disbelief that I could be, as you said, a Spaniard of Spain. How it happens that Antonio Perez has become incapable of any emotion but hate. Will you hear the story—all of it?"

He was leaning towards her, his white face held close to her own, a smouldering fire in the dark, sunken eyes that now devoured her.

She shivered, and her own cheeks turned very pale. Her lips were faintly twisted as if in an effort to smile.

"My friend—if you insist," she consented.

"It is the purpose for which I came," he announced.

For a long moment each looked into the other's eyes with a singular intentness that nothing here would seem to warrant.

At length she spoke.

"Come," she said, "you shall tell me."

And she waved him to a chair set in the embrasure of the mullioned window that looked out over a tract of meadowland sweeping gently down to the river.

Don Antonio sank into the chair, placing his hat and whip upon the floor beside him. The Marquise faced him, occupying the padded window-seat, her back to the light, her countenance in shadow.

And here, in his own words, follows the story that he told her as she

herself set it down soon after. Whilst more elaborate and intimate in parts, it yet so closely agrees throughout with his own famous "Relacion," that I do not hesitate to accept the assurance she has left us that every word he uttered was burnt as if by an acid upon her memory.

THE STORY OF ANTONIO PEREZ

As a love-story this is, I think, the saddest that ever was invented by a romancer intent upon wringing tears from sympathetic hearts. How sad it is you will realize when I tell you that daily I thank God on my knees—for I still believe in God, despite what was alleged against me by the inquisitors of Aragon—that she who inspired this love of which I am to tell you is now in the peace of death. She died in exile at Pastrana a year ago. Anne de Mendoza was what you call in France a great parti. She came of one of the most illustrious families in Spain, and she was a great heiress. So much all the world knew. What the world forgot was that she was a woman, with a woman's heart and mind, a woman's natural instincts to select her mate. There are fools who envy the noble and the wealthy. They are little to be envied, those poor pawns in the game of statecraft, moved hither and thither at the will of players who are themselves no better. The human nature of them is a negligible appendage to the names and rent-rolls that predetermine their place upon the board of worldly ambition, a board befouled by blood, by slobberings from the evil mouth of greed, and by infamy of every kind.

So, because Anne was a daughter of the House of Mendoza, because her endowments were great, they plucked her from her convent at the age of thirteen years, knowing little more of life than the merest babe, and they flung her into the arms of Ruy Gomez, Prince of Eboli, who was old enough to have been her father. But Eboli was a great man in Spain, perhaps the greatest; he was, first Minister to Philip II, and between his House and that of Mendoza an alliance was

desired. To establish it that tender child was sacrificed without ruth. She discovered that life held nothing of all that her maiden dreamings had foreseen; that it was a thing of horror and greed and lovelessness and worse. For there was much worse to come.

Eboli brought his child-princess to Court. He wore her lightly as a ribbon or a glove, the insignificant appendage to the wealth and powerful alliance he had acquired with her. And at Court she came under the eye of that pious satyr Philip. The Catholic King is very devout—perfervidly devout. He prays, he fasts, he approaches the sacraments, he does penance, all in proper season as prescribed by Mother Church; he abominates sin and lack of faith—particularly in others; he has drenched Flanders in blood that he might wash it clean of the heresy of thinking differently from himself in spiritual matters, and he would have done the same by England but that God—Who cannot, after all, be quite of Philip's way of thinking—willed otherwise. All this he has done for the greater honour and glory of his Maker, but he will not tolerate his Maker's interference with his own minor pleasures of the flesh. He is, as you would say, a Spaniard of Spain.

This satyr's protruding eyes fell upon the lovely Princess of Eboli—for lovely she was, a very pearl among women. I spare you details. Eboli was most loyal and submissive where his King was concerned, most complacent and accommodating. That was but logical, and need not shock you at all. To advance his worldly ambitions had he taken Anne to wife; why should he scruple, then, to yield her again that thus he might advance those ambitions further?

If poor Anne argued at all, she must have argued thus. For the rest, she was told that to be loved by the King was an overwhelming honour, a matter for nightly prayers of thankfulness. Philip was something very exalted, hardly human in fact; almost, if not quite, divine. Who and what was Anne that she should dispute with those who knew the world, and who placed these facts before her? Never in

all her little life had she belonged to herself. Always had she been the property of somebody else, to be dealt with as her owner might consider best. If about the Court she saw some men more nearly of her own age—though there were not many, for Philip's Court was ever a gloomy, sparsely peopled place—she took it for granted that such men were not for her. This until I taught her otherwise, which, however was not yet a while. Had I been at Court in those days, I think I should have found the means, at whatever cost, of preventing that infamy; for I know that I loved her from the day I saw her. But I was of no more than her own age, and I had not yet been drawn into that whirlpool.

So she went to the arms of that rachitic prince, and she bore him a son—for, as all the world knows, the Duke of Prastana owns Philip for his father. And Eboli increased in power and prosperity and the favour of his master, and also, no doubt, in the contempt of posterity. There are times when the thought of posterity and its vengeance is of great solace.

It would be some six years later when first I came to Court, brought thither by my father, to enter the service of the Prince of Eboli as one of his secretaries. As I have told you, I loved the Princess from the moment I beheld her. From the gossip of the Court I pieced together her story, and pitied her, and, pitying her, I loved her the more. Her beauty dazzled me, her charm enmeshed me, and she had grown by now in worldly wisdom and mental attainments. Yet I set a mask upon my passion, and walked very circumspectly, for all that by nature I was as reckless and profligate as all the world could ever call me. She was the wife of the puissant Secretary of State, the mistress of the King. Who was I to dispute their property to those exalted ones?

And another consideration stayed me. She seemed to love the King. Young and lacking in wisdom, this amazed me. In age he compared favourably with her husband he was but thirteen years older than herself—but in nothing else. He was a weedy, unhealthy-

looking man, weakly of frame, rachitic, undersized, with spindle-shanks, and a countenance that was almost grotesque, with its protruding jaw, gaping mouth, great, doglike eyes, and yellow tuft of beard. A great king, perhaps, this Philip, having so been born; but a ridiculous man and an unspeakable lover. And yet this incomparable woman seemed to love him.

Let me pass on. For ten years I nursed that love of mine in secret. I was helped, perhaps, by the fact that in the mean time I had married—oh, just as Eboli himself had married, an arrangement dictated by worldly considerations—and no better, truer mate did ever a man find than I in Juana Coello. We had children and we were happy, and for a season—for years, indeed—I began to think that my unspoken passion for the Princess of Eboli was dead and done with. I saw her rarely now, and my activities increased with increasing duties. At twenty-six I was one of the Ministers of the Crown, and one of the chief supporters of that party of which Eboli was the leader in Spanish politics. I sat in Philip's Council, and I came under the spell of that taciturn, suspicious man, who, utterly unlovable as he was, had yet an uncanny power of inspiring devotion. From the spell of it I never quite escaped until after long years of persecution. Yet the discovery that one by nature so entirely antipathetic to me should have obtained such sway over my mind helped me to understand Anne's attachment to him.

When Eboli died, in 1573, I had so advanced in ability and Royal favour that I took his place as Secretary of State, thus becoming all but the supreme ruler of Spain. I do not believe that there was ever in Spain a Minister so highly favoured by the reigning Prince, so powerful as I became. Not Eboli himself in his halcyon days had been so deeply esteemed of Philip, or had wielded such power as I now made my own. All Europe knows it—for it was to me all Europe addressed itself for affairs that concerned the Catholic King.

And with my power came wealth—abundant, prodigious wealth. I was housed like a Prince of the blood, and no Prince of the blood ever kept greater state than I, was ever more courted, fawned upon, or flattered. And remember I was young, little more than thirty, with all the strength and zest to enjoy my intoxicating eminence. I was to my party what Eboli had been, though the nominal leader of it remained Quiroga, Archbishop of Toledo. On the other side was the Duke of Alva with his following.

You must know that it was King Philip's way to encourage two rival parties in the State, between which he shared his confidence and sway. Thus he stimulated emulation and enlightened his own views in the opposing opinions that were placed before him. But the power of my party was absolute in those days, and Alva himself was as the dust beneath our feet.

Such eminences, they say, are perilous. Heads that are very highly placed may at any moment be placed still higher—upon a pike. I am all but a living witness to the truth of that, and yet I wonder would it so have fallen out with me had I mistrusted that slumbering passion of mine for Anne. I should have known that where such fires have once been kindled in a man they never quite die out as long as life endures. Time and preoccupations may overlay them as with a film of ashes, but more or less deeply down they smoulder on, and the first breath will fan them into flame again.

It was at the King's request I went to see her in her fine Madrid house opposite Santa Maria Mayor some months after her husband's death. There were certain matters of heritage to be cleared up, and, having regard to her high rank, it was Philip's wish that I—who was by now Eboli's official successor—should wait on her in person.

There were documents to be conned and signed, and the matter took some days, for Eboli's possessions were not only considerable, but scattered, and his widow displayed an acquired knowledge of

affairs and a natural wisdom that inspired her to probe deeply. To my undoing, she probed too deeply in one matter. It concerned some land—a little property—at Velez. She had been attached to the place, it seemed, and she missed all mention of it from the papers that I brought her. She asked the reason.

"It is disposed of," I told her.

"Disposed of!" quoth she. "But by whom?"

"By the Prince, your husband, a little while before he died."

She looked up at me—she was seated at the wide, carved writing-table, I standing by her side—as if expecting me to say more. As I left my utterance there, she frowned perplexedly.

"But what mystery is this?" she asked me. "To whom has it gone?"

"To one Sancho Gordo."

"To Sancho Gordo?" The frown deepened. "The washerwoman's son? You will not tell me that he bought it?"

"I do not tell you so, madame. It was a gift from the Prince, your husband."

"A gift!" She laughed. "To Sancho Gordo! So the washerwoman's child is Eboli's son!"

And again she laughed on a note of deep contempt.

"Madame!" I cried, appalled and full of pity, "I assure you that you assume too much. The Prince—"

"Let be," she interrupted me. "Do you dream I care what rivals I may have had, however lowly they may have been? The Prince, my husband, is dead, and that is very well. He is much better dead, Don Antonio. The pity of it is that he ever lived, or else that I was born a

woman."

She was staring straight before her, her hands fallen to her lap, her face set as if carved and lifeless, and her voice came hard as the sound of one stone beating upon another.

"Do you dream what it can mean to have been so nurtured on indignities that there is no anger left, no pride to wound by the discovery of yet another nothing but cold, cold hate? That, Don Antonio, is my case. You do not know what my life has been. That man—"

"He is dead, madame," I reminded her, out of pity.

"And damned, I hope," she answered me in that same cold, emotionless voice. "He deserves no less for all the wrongs he did to me, the least of which was the great wrong of marrying me. For advancement he acquired me; for his advancement he bartered and used me and made of me a thing of shame."

I was so overwhelmed with grief and love and pity that a groan escaped me almost before I was aware of it. She broke off short, and stared at me in haughtiness.

"You presume to pity me, I think," she reproved me. "It is my own fault. I was wrong to talk. Women should suffer silently, that they may preserve at least a mask of dignity. Otherwise they incur pity—and pity is very near contempt."

And then I lost my head.

"Not mine, not mine!" I cried, throwing out my arms; and though that was all I said, there was such a ring in my choking voice that she rose stiffly from her seat and stood tense and tall confronting me, almost eye to eye, reproof in every line of her.

"Princess, forgive me!" I cried. "It breaks my heart in pieces to hear

you utter things that have been in my mind these many years, poisoning the devotion that I owed to the late Prince, poisoning the very loyalty I owe my King. You say I pity you. If that were so, none has the better right."

"Who gave it you?" she asked me, breathless.

"Heaven itself, I think," I answered recklessly. "What you have suffered, I have suffered for you. When I came to Court the infamy was a thing accomplished—all of it. But I gathered it, and gathering it, thanked Heaven I had been spared the pain and misery of witnessing it, which must have been more than ever I could have endured. Yet when I saw you, when I watched you—your wistful beauty, your incomparable grace—there was a time when the thought to murder stirred darkly in my mind that I might at least avenge you."

She fell away before me, white to the very lips, her eyes dilating as they regarded me.

"In God's name, why?" she asked me in a strangled voice.

"Because I loved you," I replied, "always, always, since the day I saw you. Unfortunately, that day was years too late, even had I dared to hope—"

"Antonio!" Something in her voice drew my averted eyes. Her lips had parted, her eyes kindled into life, a flush was stirring in her cheeks.

"And I never knew! I never knew!" she faltered piteously.

I stared.

"Dear Heaven, why did you withhold a knowledge that would have upheld me and enheartened me through all that I have suffered? Once, long, long ago I hoped—"

"You hoped!"

"I hoped, Antonio—long, long ago."

We were in each other's arms, she weeping on my shoulder as if her heart would burst, I almost mad with mingling joy and pain—and as God lives there was more matter here for pain than joy.

We sat long together after that, and talked it out. There was no help for it. It was too late on every count. On her side there was the King, most jealous of all men, whose chattel she was become; on mine, there was my wife and children, and so deep and true was my love for Anne that it awakened in me thoughts of the loyalty I owed Juana, thoughts that had never troubled me hitherto in my pleasure-loving life—and this not only as concerned Anne herself, but as concerned all women. There was something so ennobling and sanctifying about our love that it changed at once the whole of my life, the whole tenor of my ways. I abandoned profligacy, and became so staid and orderly in my conduct that I was scarcely recognizable for the Antonio Perez whom the world had known hitherto.

We parted there that day with a resolve to put all this behind us; to efface from our minds all memory of what had passed between us! Poor fools were we to imagine we could resist the vortex of circumstance which had caught us. For three months we kept our engagement scrupulously; and then, at last, resistance mutually exhausted, we yielded each to the other, both to Fate.

But because we cherished our love we moved with caution. I was circumspect in my comings and goings, and such were the precautions we observed, that for four years the world had little suspicion, and certainly no knowledge, that I had inherited from the Prince of Eboli more than his office as Secretary of State. This secrecy was necessary as long as Philip lived, for we were both fully aware of what manner of vengeance we should have to reckon with

did knowledge of our relations reach the jealous King. And I think that but for Don John of Austria's affairs, and the intervention in them of the Escovedo whom you say—whom the world says I murdered, all might have been well to this day.

Escovedo had been, like myself, one of Eboli's secretaries in his day, and it was this that won him after Eboli's death a place at the Royal Council board. It was but an inferior place, yet the King remarked him for a man shrewd and able, who might one day have his uses.

That day was not very long in coming, though the opportunity it afforded Escovedo was scarcely such as, in his greedy, insatiable ambition, he had hoped for. Yet the opportunity, such as it was, was afforded him by me, and had he used it properly it should have carried him far, certainly much farther than his talent and condition warranted.

It came about through Don John of Austria's dreams of sovereignty. You will have heard—as who has not?—so much of Don John, the natural son of Charles V, that I need tell you little concerning him. In body and soul he was a very different man, indeed, from his half-brother Philip of Spain. As joyous as Philip was gloomy, as open and frank as Philip was cloudy and suspicious, and as beautiful as Philip was grotesque, Don John was the Bayard of our day, the very mirror of all knightly graces. To the victory of Lepanto, which had made him illustrious as a soldier, he had added, in '73—the year of Eboli's death the conquest of Tunis, thereby completing the triumph of Christianity over the Muslim in the Mediterranean. Success may have turned his head a little. He was young, you know, and an emperor's son. He dreamt of an empire for himself, of sovereignty, and of making Tunis the capital of the kingdom he would found.

We learnt of this. Indeed, Don John made little secret of his intentions. But they went not at all with Philip's views. It was far from

his notions that Don John should go founding kingdoms of his own. His valour and talents were required to be employed for the greater honour and glory of the Crown of Spain, and nothing further.

Philip consulted me, who was by then the depository of all his secrets, the familiar of his inmost desires. There was evidence that Don John's ambitions were being fomented by his secretary, who dreamt, no doubt, of his own aggrandizement in the aggrandizement of his master. Philip proposed the man's removal.

"That would be something," I agreed. "But not enough. He must be replaced by a man of our own, a man loyal to Your Majesty, who will not only seek to guide Don John in the course that he should follow, but will keep close watch upon his projects, and warn you should they threaten to neglect your interests the interests of Spain for his own."

"And such a man? Where shall we find him?"

I considered a moment, and bethought me of Escovedo. He was able; he had charm and an ingratiating manner; I believed him loyal, and imagined that I could quicken that loyalty by showing him that advancement would wait upon its observation; he could well be spared from the Council, where, as I have said, he occupied a quite inferior post; lastly, we were friends, and I was glad of the opportunity to serve him, and place him on the road to better things.

All this I said to Philip, and so the matter was concluded. But Escovedo failed me. His abilities and ingratiating manner endeared him quickly to Don John, whilst himself he succumbed entirely, not only to Don John of Austria's great personal charm, but also to Don John's ambitious projects. The road to advancement upon which I had set him seemed to him long and toilsome by contrast with the shorter cut that was offered by his new master's dreams. He fell as the earlier secretary had fallen, and more grievously, for he was the more ambitious of the two, and from merely seconding Don John's projects,

it was not long before he spurred them on, not long before he was dreaming dreams of his own for Don John to realize.

From Tunis, which had by now been recovered by the Turks, and any hopes concerned with which King Philip had discouraged, the eyes of Don John were set, at Escovedo's bidding, I believe, upon the crown of England.

He had just been invited by Philip to make ready to take in hand the affairs of Flanders, sadly disorganized under the incompetent rule of Alva. It occurred to him that if he were to issue victoriously from that enterprise—and so far victory had waited upon his every venture—if he were to succeed in restoring peace and Spanish order in rebellious Flanders, he would then be able to move against England with the Spanish troops under his command, overthrow Elizabeth, deliver Mary Stuart from the captivity in which she languished, and by marriage with her set the crown of England on his brow. To this great project he sought the support of Rome, and Rome accorded it very readily being naturally hostile to the heretic daughter of Anne Boleyn.

It was Escovedo himself who went as Don John's secret ambassador to the Vatican in this affair Escovedo, who had been placed with Don John to act as a curb on that young man's ambitions. Nor did he move with the prudence he should have observed.

Knowledge of what was brewing reached us from the Papal Nuncio in Madrid, who came to see me one day in the matter.

"I have a dispatch from Rome," he announced, "in which His Holiness instructs me to enjoin upon the King that the expedition against England be now executed, and that he consider bestowing its crown upon Don John of Austria for the greater honour and glory of Holy Church."

I was thunderstruck. The expedition against England, I knew, was

no new project. Three years before a secret envoy from the Queen of Scots, an Italian named Ridolfi, had come to propose to Philip that, in concert with the Pope, he should reestablish the Catholic faith in England and place Mary Stuart upon the throne. It was a scheme attractive to Philip, since it agreed at once with his policy and his religion. But it had been abandoned under the dissuasions of Alva who accounted that it would be too costly even if successful. Here it was again, emanating now directly from the Holy See, but in a slightly altered form.

"Why Don John of Austria?" I asked him.

"A great soldier of the faith. And the Queen of Scots must have a husband."

"I should have thought that she had had husbands enough by now," said I.

"His Holiness does not appear to share that view," he answered tartly.

"I wonder will the King," said I.

"The Catholic King is ever an obedient child of Mother Church," the oily Nuncio reminded me, to reprove my doubt.

But I knew better—that the King's own policy was the measure of his obedience. This the Nuncio should learn for himself; for if I knew anything of Philip's mind, I knew precisely how he would welcome this proposal.

"Will you see the King now?" I suggested maliciously, anxious to witness the humbling of his priestly arrogance.

"Not yet. It is upon that I came to see you. I am instructed first to consult with one Escoda as to the manner in which this matter shall be presented to His Majesty. Who is Escoda?"

"I never heard of him," said I. "Perhaps he comes from Rome."

"No, no. Strange!" he muttered, frowning, and plucked a parchment from his sleeve. "It is here." He peered slowly at the writing, and slowly spelled out the name: "Juan de Escoda."

In a flash it came to me.

"Escovedo you mean," I cried,

"Yes, yes—Escovedo, to be sure," he agreed, having consulted the writing once more. "Where is he?"

"On his way to Madrid with Don John," I informed him. "He is Don John's secretary."

"I will do nothing, then, until he arrives," he said, and took his leave.

Oh, monstrous indiscretion! That dispatch from Rome so cunningly and secretly contrived in cipher had yet contained no warning that Escovedo's share in this should be concealed. There are none so imprudent as the sly. I sought the King at once, and told him all that I had learnt. He was aghast. Indeed, I never saw him more near to anger. For Philip of Spain was not the man to show wrath or any other emotion. He had a fish-like, cold, impenetrable inscrutability. True, his yellow skin grew yellower, his gaping mouth gaped wider, his goggle eyes goggled more than usual. Left to himself, I think he would have disgraced Don John and banished Escovedo there and then, as he did, indeed, suggest. And I have since had cause enough to wish to God that I had left him to himself.

"Who will replace Don John in Flanders?" I asked him quietly. He stared at me. "He is useful to you there. Use him, Sire, to your own ends."

"But they will press this English business."

"Acquiesce."

"Acquiesce? Are you mad?"

"Seem to acquiesce. Temporize. Answer them, 'One thing at a time.' Say, 'When the Flanders business is happily concluded, we will think of England.' Give them hope that success in Flanders will dispose you to support the other project. Thus you offer Don John an incentive to succeed, yet commit yourself to nothing."

"And this dog Escovedo?"

"Is a dog who betrays himself by his bark. We will listen for it."

And thus it was determined; thus was Don John suckled on the windy pap of hope when presently he came to Court with Escovedo at his heels. Distended by that empty fare he went off to the Low Countries, leaving Escovedo in Madrid to represent him, with secret instructions to advance his plans.

Now Escovedo's talents were far inferior to my conception of them.

He was just a greedy schemer, without the wit to dissemble his appetite or the patience necessary to secure attainment.

Affairs in Flanders went none too well, yet that did not set a curb upon him. He pressed his master's business upon the King with an ardour amounting to disrespect, and disrespect was a thing the awful majesty of Philip could never brook. Escovedo complained of delays, of indecision, and finally—in the summer of '76—he wrote the King a letter of fierce upbraidings, criticizing his policy in terms that were contemptuous, and which entirely exasperated Philip.

It was in vain I strove to warn the fellow of whither he was drifting; in vain I admonished and sought to curb his headlong recklessness. I have said that I had a friendship for him, and because of that I took

more pains, perhaps, than I should have taken in another's case.

"Unless you put some judgment into that head of yours, my friend, you will leave it in this business," I told him one day.

He flung into a passion at the admonition, heaped abuse upon me, swore that it was I who thwarted him, I who opposed the fulfilment of Don John's desires and fostered the dilatory policy of the King.

I left him after that to pursue his course, having no wish to quarrel with this headstrong upstart; yet, liking him as I did, I spared no endeavour to shield him from the consequences he provoked. But that letter of his to Philip made the task a difficult one. Philip showed it to me.

"If that man," he said, "had uttered to my face what he has dared to write, I do not think I should have been able to contain myself without visible change of countenance. It is a sanguinary letter."

I set myself to calm him as best I could.

"The man is indiscreet, which has its advantage, for we always know whither an indiscreet man is heading. His zeal for his master blinds him and makes him rash. It is better, perhaps, than if he were secretive and crafty."

With such arguments I appeased his wrath against the secretary. But I knew that his hatred of Escovedo, his thirst for Escovedo's blood, dated from that moment in which Escovedo had forgotten the reverence due to majesty. I was glad when at last he took himself off to Flanders to rejoin Don John. But that was very far from setting a term to his pestering. The Flanders affair was going so badly that the hopes of an English throne to follow were dwindling fast. Something else must be devised against the worst, and now Don John and Escovedo began to consider the acquisition of power in Spain itself. Their ambition aimed at giving Don John the standing of an Infante.

Both of them wrote to me to advance this fresh project of theirs, to work for their recall, so that they could ally themselves with my party—the Archbishop's party—and ensure its continuing supremacy. Escovedo wrote me a letter that was little better than an attempt to bribe me. The King was ageing, and the Prince was too young to relieve him of the heavy duties of State. Don John should shoulder these, and in so doing Escovedo and myself should be hoisted into greater power.

I carried all those letters to the King, and at his suggestion I even pretended to lend an ear to these proposals that we might draw from Escovedo a fuller betrayal of his real ultimate aims. It was dangerous, and I enjoined the King to move carefully.

"Be discreet," I warned him, "for if my artifice were discovered, I should not be of any further use to you at all. In my conscience I am satisfied that in acting as I do I am performing no more than my duty. I require no theology other than my own to understand that much."

"My theology," he answered me, "takes much the same view. You would have failed in your duty to God and me had you failed to enlighten me on the score of this deception. These things," he added in a dull voice, "appal me."

So I wrote to Don John, urging him as one who counselled him for his good, who had no interest but his own at heart, to remain in Flanders until the work there should be satisfactorily completed. He did so, since he was left no choice in the matter, but the intrigues continued. Later we saw how far he was from having forsaken his dreams of England, when I discovered that he had engaged the Pope to assist him with six thousand men and one hundred and fifty thousand ducats when the time for that adventure should be ripe.

And then, quite suddenly, entirely unheralded, Escovedo reappeared in Madrid, having come to press Philip in person for

reinforcements that should enable Don John to finish the campaign. He brought news that there had been a fresh rupture of the patched-up peace, that Don John had taken the field once more, and had forcibly made himself master of Namur. This was contrary to all the orders we had sent, a direct overriding of Philip's wishes. The King desired peace in the Low Countries because he was in no case just then to renew the war, and Escovedo's impudently couched demands completed his exasperation.

"My will," he said, "is as naught before the ambitions of these two. You sent my clear instructions to Escovedo, who was placed with Don John that he might render him pliant to my wishes. Instead, he stiffens him in rebellion. There must be an end to this man."

"Sire," I cried, "it may be they think to advance your interests."

"Heaven help me!" he cried. "Did ever villain wear so transparent a mask as this dog Escovedo? To advance my interests—that will be his tale, no doubt. He will advance them where I do not wish them advanced; he will advance them to my ruin; he will stake all on a success in Flanders that shall be the preliminary to a descent upon England in the interests of Don John. I say there must be an end to this man before he works more mischief."

Again I set myself to calm him, as I had so often done before, and again I was the shield between Escovedo and the royal lightnings, of whose menace to blot him out the fool had no suspicion. For months things hung there, until, in January of '78, when war had been forced in earnest upon Spain by Elizabeth's support of the Low Countries, Don John won the great victory of Gemblours. This somewhat raised the King's depression, somewhat dissipated his overgrowing mistrust of his half-brother, and gave him patience to read the letters in which Don John urged him to send money—to throw wood on the fire whilst it was alight, or else resign himself to the loss of Flanders for all time. As it meant also resigning himself to the loss of all hope of England

for all time, Escovedo's activities were just then increased a hundredfold.

"Send me money and Escovedo," was the burden of the almost daily letters from Don John to me, and at my elbow was Escovedo, perpetually pressing me to bend the King to his master's will. Another matter on which he pressed me then was that I should obtain for himself the governorship of the Castle of Mogro, which commands the port of Santander, an ambition this which intrigued me deeply, for I confess I could not fathom what it had to do with all the rest.

And then something else happened. From the Spanish Ambassador at the Louvre we learnt one day of a secret federation entered into between Don John and the Guises, known as the Defence of the Two Crowns. Its object was as obscure as its title. But it afforded the last drop to the cup of Philip's mistrust. This time it was directly against Don John that he inveighed to me. And to defend Don John, in the interests of common justice, I was forced to place the blame where it belonged.

"Nay, Sire," I assured him, "these ambitions are not Don John's. With all his fevered dreams of greatness, Don John has ever been, will ever be, loyal to his King."

"If you know anything of temptation," he answered me, "you should know that there is a breaking-point to every man's resistance of it. How long will Don John remain loyal while Escovedo feeds his disloyalty, adds daily to the weight of temptation the burden of a fresh ambition? I tell you, man, I feel safe no longer." He rose up before me, a blotch on his sallow face, his fingers tugging nervously at the tuft of straw-coloured beard. "I tell you some blow is about to fall unless we avert it. This man this fellow Escovedo—must be dispatched before he can kill us."

I shrugged and affected carelessness to soothe him.

"A contemptible dreamer," I said. "Pity him, Sire. He has his uses. To remove him would be to remove a channel through which we can always obtain knowledge precisely of what is doing."

Again I prevailed, and there the matter hung a while. But the King was right, his fears were well inspired. Escovedo, always impatient, was becoming desperate under persistent frustration. I reasoned with him—was he not still my friend?—I held him off, urged prudence and patience upon him, and generally sought to temporize. I was as intent upon saving him from leaving his skin in this business as I was, on the other hand, intent upon doing my duty without pause or scruple to my King. But the fool forced my hand. A Court is a foul place always, even so attenuated a Court as that which Philip of Spain encouraged. Rumour thrives in it, scandal blossoms luxuriantly in its fetid atmosphere. And rumour and scandal had been busy with the Princess of Eboli and me, though I did not dream it.

We had been indiscreet, no doubt. We had been seen together in public too often. We had gone to the play together more than once; she had been present with me at a bull-fight on one occasion, and it was matter of common gossip, as I was to learn, that I was a too frequent visitor at her house.

Another visitor there was Escovedo when in Madrid. Have I not said that in his early days he had been one of Eboli's secretaries? On that account the house of Eboli remained open to him at all times. The Princess liked him, was kindly disposed towards him, and encouraged his visits. We met there more than once. One day we left together, and that day the fool set spark to a train that led straight to the mine on which, all unconsciously, he stood.

"A word of advice in season, Don Antonio," he said as we stepped forth together. "Do not go so often to visit the Princess."

I sought to pull my arm from his, but he dung to it and pinned it to his

side.

"Nay, now—nay, now!" he soothed me. "Not so hot, my friend. What the devil have I said to provoke resentment? I advise you as your friend."

"In future advise that other friend of yours, the devil," I answered angrily, and pulled my arm away at last. "Don Juan, you have presumed, I think. I did not seek your advice. It is yourself that stands in need of advice this moment more than any man in Spain."

"Lord of the World," he exclaimed in amiable protest, "listen to him! I speak because I owe friendship to the Princess. Men whisper of your comings and goings, I tell you. And the King, you know well, should he hear of this I am in danger of losing my only friend at Court, and so—"

"Another word of this," I broke in fiercely, "now or at any other time, and I'll skewer you like a rabbit!"

I had stopped. My face was thrust within a hand's-breadth of his own; I had tossed back my cloak, and my fingers clutched the hilt of my sword. He became grave. His fine eyes—he had great, sombre, liquid eyes, such as you'll scarcely ever see outside of Spain—considered me thoughtfully a moment. Then he laughed lightly and fell back a pace.

"Pish!" said he. "Saint James! I am no rabbit for your skewering. If it comes to skewers, I am a useful man of my hands, Antonio. Come, man"—and again he took my arm—"if I presume, forgive it out of the assurance that I am moved solely by interest and concern for you. We have been friends too long that I should be denied."

I had grown cool again, and I realized that perhaps my show of anger had been imprudent. So I relented now, and we went our ways together without further show of ill-humour on my part, or further advice

on his. But the matter did not end there. Indeed, it but began. Going early in the afternoon of the morrow to visit Anne, I found her in tears—tears, as I was to discover, of anger.

Escovedo had been to visit her before me, and he had dared to reproach her on the same subject.

"You are talked about, you and Perez," he had informed her, "and the thing may have evil consequences. It is because I have eaten our bread that I tell you this for your own good."

She had risen up in a great passion.

"You will leave my house, and never set foot in it again," she had told him. "You should learn that grooms and lackeys have no concern in the conduct of great ladies. It is because you have eaten my bread that I tell you this for your own good."

It drove him out incontinently, but it left her in the condition in which I was later to discover her. I set myself to soothe her. I swore that Escovedo should be punished. But she would not be soothed. She blamed herself for an unpardonable rashness. She should not have taken that tone with Escovedo. He could avenge himself by telling Philip, and if he told Philip, and Philip believed him—as Philip would, being jealous and mistrustful beyond all men—my ruin must follow. She had thought only of herself in dismissing him in that high-handed manner. Coming since to think of me it was that she had fallen into this despair. She clung to me in tears.

"Forgive me, Antonio. The fault is all mine—the fault of all. Always have I known that this danger must overhang you as a penalty for loving me. Always I knew it, and, knowing it, I should have been stronger. I should have sent you from me at the first. But I was so starved of love from childhood till I met you. I hungered so for love—for your love, Antonio—that I had not the strength. I was weak and selfish,

and because I was ready and glad to pay the price myself, whatever it should be and whenever asked, I did not take thought enough for you."

"Take no thought now," I implored her, holding her close.

"I must. I can't help it. I have raised this peril for you. He will go to Philip."

"Not he; he dare not. I am his only hope. I am the ladder by which he hopes to scale the heaven of his high ambition. If he destroys me, there is the kennel for himself. He knows it."

"Do you say that to comfort me, or is it really true?"

"God's truth, sweetheart," I swore, and drew her closer.

She was comforted long before I left her. But as I stepped out into the street again a man accosted me. Evidently he had been on the watch, awaiting me. He fell into step beside me almost before I realized his presence. It was Escovedo.

"So," he said, very sinister, "you'll not be warned."

"Nor will you," I answered, no whit less sinister myself.

It was broad daylight. A pale March sunshine was beating down upon the cobbled streets, and passers-by were plentiful. There was no fingering of hilts or talk of skewering on either side. Nor must I show any of the anger that was boiling in me. My face was too well known in Madrid streets, and a Secretary of State does not parade emotions to the rabble. So I walked stiff and dignified amain, that dog in step with me the while.

"She will have told you what I have said to her," he murmured.

"And what she said to you. It was less than your deserts."

"Groom and lackey, eh?" said he. "And less than I deserve—a man of my estate. Oh, ho! Groom and lackey! Those are epithets to be washed out in blood and tears."

"You rant," I said.

"Or else to be paid for—handsomely." His tone was sly—so sly that I answered nothing, for to answer a sly man is to assist him, and my business was to let him betray the cause of this slyness. Followed a spell of silence. Then, "Do you know," said he, "that several of her relatives are thinking seriously of killing you?"

"Many men have thought seriously of that—so seriously that they never attempted it. Antonio Perez is not easily murdered, Don Juan, as you may discover."

It was a boast that I may claim to have since justified.

"Shall I tell you their names?" quoth he.

"If you want to ruin them."

"Ha!" It was a short bark of a laugh. "You talk glibly of ruining—but then you talk to a groom and lackey." The epithets rankled in his mind; they were poison to his blood, it seemed. It takes a woman to find words that burn and blister a man. "Yet groom and lackey that I am, I hold you both in the hollow of my hand. If I close that hand, it will be very bad for you, very bad for her. If, for instance, I were to tell King Philip that I have seen her in your arms—"

"You dog!"

"I have—I swear to God I have, with these two eyes—at least with one of them, applied to the keyhole half an hour ago. Her servants passed me in; a ducat or two well bestowed—you understand?"

We had reached the door of my house. I paused and turned to him.

"You will come in?" I invited.

"As the wolf said to the lamb, eh? Well, why not?" And we went in.

"You are well housed," he commented, his greedy, envious eyes considering all the tokens of my wealth. "It were a pity to lose so much, I think. The King is at the Escorial, I am told."

He was. He had gone thither into retreat, that he might cleanse his pious, murky soul against the coming of Eastertide.

"You would not, I am sure, compel me to undertake so tedious a journey," said he.

"Will you put off this slyness and be plain?" I bade him. "You have some bargain in your mind. Propound it."

He did, and left me aghast.

"You have temporized long enough, Perez," he began. "You have been hunting with the dogs and running with the stag. There must be an end to all that. Stand by me now, and I will make you greater than you are, greater than you could ever dream to be. Oppose me, betray me—for I am going to be very frank—and the King shall hear things from me that will mean your ruin and hers. You understand?"

Then came his demands. First of all the command of the fortress of Mogro for himself. I must obtain him that at once. Secondly, I must see to it that Philip pledged himself to support Don John's expedition against England and Elizabeth and to seat Don John upon the throne with Mary Stuart for his wife. These things must come about, and quickly, or I perished. Nor was that all. Indeed, no more than a beginning. He opened out the vista of his dreams, that having blackmailed me on the one hand, he might now bribe me on the other. Once England was theirs, he aimed at no less than a descent upon Spain itself. That was why he wanted Mogro to facilitate a landing at

Santander. Thus, as the Christians had originally come down from the mountains of the Asturias to drive the Moors from the Peninsula, so should the forces of Don John descend again to reconquer it for himself.

It was a madman's fancy utterly—fruit of a brain that ambition had completely addled; and I do not believe that Don John had any part in it or even knowledge of it. Escovedo saw himself, perhaps, upon the throne of one or the other of the two kingdoms as Don John's vice-regent—for himself and for me, if I stood by him, there was such power in store as no man ever dreamed of. If I refused, he would destroy me.

"And if I go straight to the Escorial and lay this project before the King?" I asked him.

He smiled.

"You will force me to tell him that it is a lie invented to deliver you from a man who can destroy you by the knowledge he possesses, knowledge which I shall at once impart to Philip. Think what that will mean to you. Think," he added very wickedly, "what it will mean to her."

As I am a Christian, I believe that had it been but the consideration of myself I would have flung him from my house upon the instant and bade him do his worst. But he was well advised to remind me of her. Whatever Philip's punishment of me, it would be as nothing to his punishment of that long-suffering woman who had betrayed him. Oh, I assure you it is a very evil, ill judged thing to have a king for rival, particularly a fish-souled tyrant of King Philip's kind.

I was all limp with dread. I passed a hand across my brow, and found it chill and moist.

"I am in your hands, Escovedo," I confessed miserably.

"Say, rather, that we are partners. Forget all else." He was eager, joyous, believing all accomplished, such was his faith in my influence with Philip. "And now, Mogro for me, and England for Don John. About it with dispatch."

"The King is in retreat. We must wait some days."

"Till Easter, then." And he held out his hand. I took it limply, thus clenching the bargain of infamy between us. What else was there for me. What, otherwise, was to become of Anne?

Oh, I may have been self-seeking and made the most of my position, as was afterwards urged against me. I may have been extortionate and venal, and I may have taken regal bribes to expedite affairs. But always was I loyal and devoted to the King. Never once had I been bribed to aught that ran counter to his interests; never until now, when at a stroke I had sold my honour and pledged myself to this betrayal of my trust.

Not in all Spain was there a more miserable man than I. All night I sat in the room where I was wont to work, and to my wife's entreaties that I should take some rest I answered that the affairs of Spain compelled attention. And when morning found me haggard and distraught came a courier from Philip with a letter.

"I have letters from Don John," he wrote, "more insistent than ever in their tone. He demands the instant dispatch of money and Escovedo. I have been thinking, and this letter confirms my every fear. I have cause to apprehend some stroke that may disturb the public peace and ruin Don John himself if he is allowed to retain Escovedo any longer in his service. I am writing to Don John that I will see to it that Escovedo is promptly dispatched as he requests. Do you see him dispatched, then, in precise accordance with his deserts, and this at once, before the villain kills us."

My skin bristled as I read. Here was fatality itself at work. Philip was at his old fears—and, Heaven knows, he was not without justification of his intuitions, as I had learnt by now—that Escovedo meditated the most desperate measures. He was urging me again, as he had urged me before, and more than once, to dispatch this traitor whose restless existence so perpetually perturbed him. I was not deceived as to the meaning he set upon that word "dispatch." I knew quite well the nature of the dispatch he bade me contrive.

Conceive now my temptation. Escovedo dead, I should be safe, and Anne would be safe, and this without any such betrayal as was being forced upon me. And that death the King himself commanded a secret, royal execution, such as his confessor Frey Diego de Chaves has since defended as an expedient measure within the royal prerogative. He had commanded it before quite unequivocally, but always I had stood between Escovedo and the sword. Was I to continue in that attitude? Could it humanly be expected of me in all the circumstances again to seek to deflect the royal wrath from that too daring head? I was, after all, only a man, subject to the temptations of the flesh, and there was a woman whom I loved better than my own salvation to whose peace and happiness that fellow Escovedo was become a menace.

If he lived, and for as long as he lived, she and I were to be as slaves of his will, and I was to drag my honour and my loyalty through the foul kennels of his disordered ambitions. And the King my master was bidding me clearly see to it that he died immediately.

I sat down and wrote at once, and the burden of my letter was: "Be more explicit, Sire. What manner of dispatch is it your will that Escovedo should be given?"

On the morrow, which was Thursday of Holy Week, that note of mine was returned to me, and on the margin of it, in Philip's own hand, Escovedo's death-warrant. "I mean that it would be well to

hasten the death of this rascal before some act of his should render it too late; for he never rests, nor will anything turn him from his usual ways. Do it, then, and do it quickly, before he kills us."

There was no more to be said. My instructions were clear and definite. Obedience alone remained. I went about it.

Just as all my life I have been blessed with the staunchest friends, so have I, too, been blessed with the most faithful servants. And of these none was more faithful than my steward, Diego Martinez, unless, indeed, it be my equerry, Gil de Mesa, who to this day follows my evil fortunes. But Mesa at that time was as yet untried, whilst in Diego I knew that I had a man devoted to me heart and soul, a man who would allow himself to be torn limb from limb on the rack on my behalf.

I placed the affair in Diego's hands. I told him that I was acting under orders from the King, and that the thing at issue was the private execution of a dangerous traitor, who could not be brought to trial lest there he should impeach of complicity one whose birth and blood must be shielded from all scandal. I bade him get what men he required, and see the thing done with the least possible delay. And thereupon I instantly withdrew from Madrid and went to Alcala.

Diego engaged five men to assist him in the task; these were a young officer named Enriquez, a lackey named Rubio, the two Aragonese—Mesa and Insausti—and another whose name was Bosque. He clearly meant to take no chances, but I incline to think that he overdid precaution, and employed more hands than were necessary for the job. However, the six of them lurked in waiting on three successive nights for Escovedo near his house in the little square of Santiago. At last, on the night of Easter Monday, March 31st, they caught him and dispatched him. He died almost before he realized himself beset, from a sword-thrust with which Insausti transfixed him. But there were at least half a dozen wounds in the

body when it was found. Diego, I have said, was a man who made quite certain.

No sooner was it done than they dispersed, whilst the lackey Rubio, instantly quitting Madrid, brought me news of the deed to Alcala, and the assurance that no arrests had been made. But there was a great ado in Madrid upon the morrow, as you may imagine, for it is no everyday occurrence to find a royal secretary murdered in the streets.

The alcaldes set out upon a rigorous search, and they began by arresting and questioning all who attempted to leave the city. On the next day they harassed with their perquisitions all those who let lodgings. They were still at this work in the evening when I returned to Madrid, brought back—as it would seem—from my country rest by the news of this murder of my friend and colleague. I bore myself as I should have done had I no knowledge of how the thing had been contrived. That was a necessity as imperative as it was odious, and no part of it more odious than the visit of condolence I was forced to pay to the Escovedo family, which I found plunged in grief.

From the very outset suspicion pointed its finger at me, although there were no visible traces to connect me with the deed. Rumour, however, was astir, and as I had powerful friends, so, too, I had the powerful enemies which envy must always be breeding for men in high places such as mine. Escovedo's wife mistrusted me, though at first she seems equally to have suspected in this deed the hand of the Duke of Alva, who was hostile to Don John and all his creatures. Very soon, as a result of this, came the Court alcalde to visit and question me. His stated object was in the hope that I might give him information which would lead to the discovery of the assassin; but his real object, rendered apparent by the searching, insistent nature of his questions, was to lead me to incriminate myself. I presented a bold front. I pretended to see in this, perhaps, the work of the Flemish States. I deplored—that I might remind him of it—my absence from

Madrid at the time.

He was followed by another high official, who came in simulated friendship to warn me that certain rumours linking me with the deed were in circulation, in reality to trap me into some admission, to watch my countenance for some betraying sign.

I endured it stoutly, but inwardly I was shaken, as I wrote to Philip, giving him full details of what had been said and what answers I had returned, what bitter draughts I had been forced to swallow.

He wrote in reply: "I find that you answered very well. Continue to be prudent. They will tell you a thousand things, not for the sake of telling them, but in the hope of drawing something out of you. The bitter draughts you mention are inevitable. But use all the dissimulation and address of which you are capable."

We corresponded daily after that, and I told him of every step I took; how I kept my men about me, for fear that if they attempted to leave Madrid they would be arrested, and how, finally, I contrived their departure one by one, under conditions that placed them beyond all suspicion. Juan de Mesa set out for Aragon on a mission concerned with the administration of some property of the Princess of Eboli's. Rubio, Insausti, and Enriquez were each given an ensign's commission, bearing the King's own signature, and ordered to join the armies in various parts of Italy; the first was sent to Milan, the second to Sicily, and the last to Naples. Bosque went back to Aragon. Thus all were placed beyond the reach of the active justice of Castile, all save myself—and the King, who wrote to me expressing his satisfaction that there had been no arrests.

But rumour continued to give tongue, and the burden of its tale was that the murder had been my work, in complicity with the Princess of Eboli. How they came to drag her name into the affair I do not know. It may have been pure malice trading upon its knowledge of the

relations between us. She may have lent colour to the charge by her own precipitancy in denying it. She announced indignantly that she was being accused, almost before this had come to pass, and as indignantly protested against the accusation, and threatened those who dared to voice it.

The end of it all was that, a month later, the Escovedo family drew up a memorial for the consideration of the King, in which they laid the murder to my charge, and Philip consented to receive Don Pedro de Escovedo—the dead man's son—and promised him that he would consider the memorial, and that he would deliver up to justice whomsoever he thought right. He was embarrassed by these demands of the Escovedos, my own danger, his duty as king, and his interests as an accomplice, or, rather, as the originator of the deed.

The Escovedos were powerfully seconded by Vasquez, the Secretary of the Council, a member of Alva's party, a secret enemy of my own, consumed by jealousy of my power, and no longer fearing to disclose himself and assail me since he believed himself possessed of the means of ruining me. He spoke darkly to the King of a woman concerned in this business, without yet daring to mention Anne by name, and urged him for the satisfaction of the State, where evil rumours were abroad, to order an inquiry that should reveal the truth of the affair.

It was Philip himself who informed me of what had passed, sneering at the wildness of rumours that missed the truth so wildly, and when I evinced distress at my position, he sought to reassure me; he even wrote to me after I had left him: "As long as I live you have nothing to fear. Others may change, but I never change, as you should know who know me."

That was a letter that epitomized many others written me in those days to Madrid from the Escorial, whither he had returned. And those letters comforted me not only by their expressed assurances, but by

the greater assurance implicit in them of the King's good faith. I had by now a great mass of his notes dealing with the Escovedo business, in almost every one of which he betrayed his own share as the chief murderer, showing that I was no more than his dutiful instrument in that execution. With those letters in my power what need I ever fear? Not Philip himself would dare to betray me.

But I went now in a new dread—the dread of being myself murdered. There were threats of it in the air. The Escovedo family and their partisans, who included all my enemies, and even some members of the Eboli family, who considered that I had sullied the honour of their name by my relations with Anne, talked openly of vengeance, so that I was driven to surround myself by armed attendants whenever now I went abroad.

I appealed again to Philip to protect me. I even begged him to permit me to retire from my Ministerial office, that thus the clamant envy that inspired my persecution might be deprived of its incentive. Finally, I begged him to order me to stand my trial, that thus, since I was confident that no evidence could be produced against me, I should force an acquittal from the courts and lay the matter to rest for all time.

"Go and see the President of Castile," he bade me. "Tell him the causes that led to the death of Escovedo, and then let him talk to Don Pedro de Escovedo and to Vasquez, so as to induce them to desist."

I did as I was bidden, and when the president, who was the Bishop of Pati, had heard me, he sent for my two chief enemies.

"I have, Don Pedro," he said, "your memorial to the King in which you accuse Don Antonio Perez of the murder of your father. And I am to assure you in the King's name that justice will be done upon the murderer, whoever he may be, without regard to rank. But I am first to engage you to consider well what evidence you have to justify your

charge against a person of such consideration. For should your proofs be insufficient I warn you that matters are likely to take a bad turn for yourself. Finally, before you answer me, let me add, upon my word as a priest, that Antonio Perez is as innocent as I am."

It was the truth—the absolute truth, so far as it was known to Philip and to the Bishop—for, indeed, I was no more than the instrument of my master's will.

Don Pedro looked foolish, almost awed. He was as a man who suddenly becomes aware that he has missed stepping over the edge of a chasm in which destruction awaited him. He may have bethought him at last that all his rantings had no better authority than suspicions which no evidence could support.

"Sir," he faltered, "since you tell me this, I pledge you my word on behalf of myself and my family to make no more mention of this death against Don Antonio."

The Bishop swung then upon Vasquez, and his brow became furrowed with contemptuous anger.

"As for you, sir, you have heard—which was more than your due, for it is not your business by virtue of your office, nor have you any obligations towards the deceased, such as excuse Don Pedro's rashness, to pursue the murderers of Escovedo. Your solicitude in this matter brings you under a suspicion the more odious since you are a priest. I warn you, sir, to abstain, for this affair is different far from anything that you imagine."

But envy is a fierce goad, a consuming, irresistible passion, corroding wisdom and deaf to all prudent counsels. Vasquez could not abstain. Ridden by his devil of spite and jealousy, he would not pause until he had destroyed either himself or me.

Since Escovedo's immediate family now washed their hands of the

affair, Vasquez sought out more distant relatives of the murdered man, and stirred them up until they went in their turn to pester the courts, not only with accusations against myself, but with accusations that now openly linked with mine the name of the Princess of Eboli.

We were driven to the brink of despair, and in this Anne wrote to Philip. It was a madness. She made too great haste to excuse herself. She demanded protection from Vasquez and the evil rumours he was putting abroad, implored the King to make an example of men who could push so far their daring and irreverence, and to punish that Moorish dog Vasquez—I dare say there was Moorish blood in the fellow's veins—as he deserved.

I think our ruin dated from that letter. Philip sent for me to the Escorial. He wished to know more precisely what the accusations were. I told him, denying them. Then he desired of the Princess proof of what she alleged against Vasquez, and she had no difficulty in satisfying him. He seemed to believe our assurance that all was lies. Yet he did not move to punish Vasquez. But then I knew that sluggishness was his great characteristic. "Time and I are one," he would say when I pressed on matters.

After that it was open war in the Council between me and Vasquez. The climax came when I was at the Escorial. I had sent a servant to Vasquez for certain State papers to be submitted to the King. He brought them, and folded in them a fiercely denunciatory letter full of insults and injuries, not the least of which was the imputation that my blood was not clean, my caste not good.

In a passion I sought Philip, beside myself almost, trembling under the insult.

"See, Sire, what this Moorish thief has dared to write me. It transcends all bearing. Either you take satisfaction for me of these insults or you permit me to take it for myself."

He appeared to share my indignation, promised to give me leave to proceed against the man, but bade me first wait a while until certain business in the competent hands of Vasquez should be transacted. But weeks grew into months, and nothing was done. We were in April of '79, a year after the murder, and I was grown so uneasy, so sensitive to dangers about me, that I dared no longer visit Anne. And then Philip's confessor, Frey Diego de Chaves, came to me one day with a request on the King's part that I should make my peace with Vasquez.

"If he will retract," was my condition. And Chaves went to see my enemy. What passed between them, what Vasquez may have told him, what he may have added to those rumours of my relations with Anne, I do not know. But I know that from that date there was a change in the King's attitude towards me, a change in the tone of the letters that he sent me, and, this continuing, I wrote to him at last releasing him from his promise to afford me satisfaction against Vasquez, assuring him that since, himself, he could forgive the injuries against us both, I could easily forgive those I had received myself, and finally begging his permission to resign my office and retire.

Anne had contributed to this. She had sent for me, and in tears had besought me to make my peace with Vasquez since the King desired it, and this was no time in which to attempt resistance to his wishes. I remained with her some hours, comforting her, for she was in the very depths of despair, persuaded that we were both ruined, and inconsolable in the thought that the blame of this was all her own.

It may be that I was watched, perhaps more closely than I imagined. It may be that spies were close about us, set by the jealous Philip, who desired confirmation or refutation of the things he had been told, the rumours that were gnawing at his vitals.

I left her, little dreaming that I was never to see her again in this life.

That night I was arrested at my house by the Court alcalde upon an order from the King. The paltry reason advanced was my refusal to make my peace with Vasquez, and this when already the King was in possession of my letter acknowledging my readiness to do so; for the King was in Madrid, unknown to me. He came, it seems, that he might be present at another arrest effected that same night. From the porch of the Church of Santa Maria Mayor, he watched his alguazils enter the house of the Princess of Eboli, bring her forth, bestow her in a waiting carriage that was to bear her away to the fortress of Pinto, to an imprisonment which was later exchanged for exile to Pastrana lasting as long as life itself.

To sin against a Prince is worse, it seems, than to sin against God Himself. For God forgives, but princes, wounded in their vanity and pride, know nothing of forgiveness.

I was kept for four months a prisoner by the alcalde, no charge being preferred against me. Then, because my health was suffering grievously from confinement and the anxiety of suspense, I was moved to my own house, and detained there for another eight months under close guard. My friends besought the King in vain either to restore me to liberty or to bring me to trial. He told them the affair was of a nature very different from anything they deemed, and so evaded all demands.

In the summer of 1580, Philip went to Lisbon to take formal possession of the crown of Portugal, which he had inherited. I sent my wife to him to intercede for me. But he refused to see her, and so I was left to continue the victim of his vindictive lethargy. After a year of this, upon my giving a formal promise to renounce all hostility towards Vasquez, and never seek to do him harm in any way, I was accorded some degree of liberty. I was allowed to go out and to receive visitors, but not to visit any one myself.

Followed a further pause. Vasquez was now a man of power, for

my party had fallen with me, and his own had supplanted it in the royal councils. It was by his work that at last, in '84, I was brought to trial upon a charge of corruption and misappropriation. I knew that my enemies had, meanwhile, become possessed of Enriquez, and that he was ready to give evidence, that he was making no secret of his share in the death of Escovedo, and that the King was being pressed by the Escovedos to bring me to trial upon the charge of murder. Instead, the other charge alone was preferred.

It was urged against me that I had kept a greater state than any grandee of Spain, that when I went abroad I did so with a retinue befitting a prince, that I had sold my favour and accepted bribes from foreign princes to guard their interests with the King of Spain.

They sentenced me to two years' imprisonment in a fortress, to be followed by ten years of exile, and I was to make, within nine days, restitution of some twenty million maravedis*—the alleged extent of my misappropriations—besides some jewels and furniture which I had received from the Princess of Eboli, and which I was now ordered to deliver up to the heirs of the late Prince.

*Ten thousand pounds, but with at least five times the present purchasing power of that sum.

Perquisitions had been made in my house, and my papers ransacked. Well I knew what they had sought. For the thought of the letters that had passed between Philip and myself at the time of Escovedo's death must now be troubling his peace of mind. I had taken due precautions when first I had seen the gathering clouds foreshadowing this change of weather. I had bestowed those papers safely in two iron-bound chests which had been concealed away against the time when I might need them to save my neck. And because now he failed to find what he sought—the evidence of his own share in the deed and his present base duplicity—Philip dared not slip the leash from those dogs who would be at my throat for the murder of Escovedo. That was why he bade them proceed against me only on the lesser charge of corruption.

I was taken to the fortress of Turruegano, and there they came to demand of me the surrender of my papers which the alcalde had failed to discover at my house. I imagined the uneasiness of Philip in dispatching those emissaries. I almost laughed as I refused. Those papers were my buckler against worse befalling me than had befallen already. Even now, if too hard pressed, I might find the opportunity of breaking my bonds by means of them. I sometimes wonder why I did not apply myself to that. Yet there is small cause for wonder, really. From boyhood, almost, King Philip had been my master. Loyalty to him was a habit that went to the very roots of my being. I had served him without conscience and without scruple, and the notion of betraying him, save as a very last and very desperate resource, was inconceivable. I do not think he ever knew the depth and breadth of that loyalty of mine.

My refusal led those sons of dogs to attempt to frighten my wife with threats of unmentionable horrors unless she delivered up the papers I

had secreted. She and our children were threatened with perpetual imprisonment on bread and water if she persisted in refusing to surrender them. But she held out against all threats, and remained firm even under the oily persecution to the same end of Philip's confessor, Frey Diego. Finally, I was notified that, in view of her stubbornness and my own, she and our children were cast into prison and that there they would remain until I saw fit to become submissive to the royal will.

It is a subtle form of mental torture that will bid a man contemplate the suffering for his sake to which those who are dear to him are being subjected.

I raged and stormed before the officer who brought me this infamous piece of news. I gave vent to my impotent anger in blasphemous expressions that were afterwards to be used against me. The officer was subtly sympathetic.

"I understand your grief, Don Antonio," he said. "Believe me, I feel for you—so much that I urge you to set an end to the captivity of those dear ones who are innocent, who are suffering for your sake."

"And so make an end of myself?" I asked him fiercely.

"Reflection may show that even that is your duty in the circumstances."

I looked into his smug face, and I was within an ace of striking him. Then I controlled myself, and my will was snapped.

"Very well," I said. "The papers shall be surrendered. Let my steward, Diego Martinez, come to me here, and he shall receive my instructions to deliver the chests containing them to my wife, that she in turn may deliver them to the King."

He withdrew, well pleased. No doubt he would take great credit to

himself for this. Within three days, such haste did they make, my faithful steward stood before me in my prison at Turruegano.

You conceive the despair that had overwhelmed me after giving my consent, the consciousness that it was my life I was surrendering with those papers,—that without them I should be utterly defenceless. But in the three days that were sped I had been thinking, and not quite in vain.

Martinez left me with precise instructions, as a result of which those two iron-bound chests, locked and sealed, were delivered, together with the keys, to the royal confessor. Martinez was asked what they contained.

"I do not know," he answered. "My orders are merely to deliver them."

I can conceive the King's relief and joy in his conviction that thus had he drawn my teeth, that betide now what might, I could never defend or justify myself. The immediate sequel took me by surprise. We were at the end of '85, and my health was suffering from my confinement and its privations. And now my captivity was mitigated. My wife Juana even succeeded in obtaining permission that I should be taken home to Madrid, and there for fourteen months I enjoyed a half liberty, and received the visits of my old friends, among whom were numbered most of the members of the Court.

I imagined at first that since my teeth were drawn the King despised me, and intended nothing further. But I was soon to be disillusioned on that score. It began with the arrest of Martinez on a charge of complicity in the murder of Escovedo. And then one day I was again arrested, without warning, and carried off for a while to the fortress of Pinto. Thence I was brought back in close captivity to Madrid, and there I learnt at last what had been stirring.

In the previous summer King Philip had gone into Aragon to preside over the Cortes, and Vasquez, who had gone with him, had seized the opportunity to examine the ensign Enriquez, who had, meanwhile, denounced himself of complicity in the murder of Escovedo. Enriquez made a full confession—turned accuser under a promise of full pardon for himself and charged Mesa, Rubio, and my steward Martinez with complicity, denouncing Martinez as the ringleader of the business. The other two, Insausti and Bosque, were already dead.

Immediately Vasquez attempted to seize the survivors. But Mesa had gone to earth in Aragon, and Rubio was with him. Martinez alone remained, and him they seized and questioned. He remained as cool and master of himself as he was true and loyal to me. Their threats made no impression on him. He maintained that the tale was all a lie, begotten of spite, that I had been Escovedo's best friend, that I had been greatly afflicted by his death, and that no man could have done more than I to discover his real murderers. They confronted him with Enriquez, and the confrontation no whit disturbed him. He handled the traitor contemptuously as a perjured, suborned witness, a false servant, a man who, as he proceeded to show, was a scoundrel steeped in crime, whose word was utterly worthless, and who, no doubt, had been bought to bring these charges against his sometime master.

The situation, thanks to Martinez's stoutness, had reached a deadlock. Between the assertions of one man, who was revealed to the judges for a worthless scoundrel, and the denials of the other, against whom nothing was known, it was impossible for the court of inquiry to reach any conclusion. At least another witness must be obtained. And Vasquez laboured with all his might and arts and wiles to draw Rubio out of Aragon into the clutches of the justice of Castile. But he laboured in vain, for I had secretly found the means to instruct my trusty Mesa to retain the fellow where he was.

In this inconclusive state of things the months dragged on and my captivity continued. I wrote to Philip, imploring his mercy, complaining of these unjust delays on the part of Vasquez, which threatened to go on forever, and begging His Majesty to command the conclusion of the affair. That was in August of '89. You see how time had sped. All that came of my appeal was at first an increased rigour of imprisonment, and then a visit from Vasquez to examine and question me upon the testimony of Enriquez. As you can imagine, the attempt to lure me into self-betrayal was completely fruitless. My enemy withdrew, baffled, to go question my wife, but without any better success.

Nevertheless, Vasquez proclaimed the charge established against myself and Martinez, and allowed us ten days in which to prepare our answer. Immediately upon that Don Pedro de Escovedo lodged a formal indictment against us, and I was put into irons.

To rebut the evidence of one single, tainted witness I produced six witnesses of high repute, including the Secretary of the Council of Aragon. They testified for me that I was at Alcala at the time of Escovedo's death, that I had always been Escovedo's friend, that I was a good Christian incapable of such a deed, and that Enriquez as an evil man whose word was worthless, a false witness inspired by vengeance.

Thus, in spite of the ill-will of my judges and the hatred of my enemies, it was impossible legally to condemn me upon the evidence. There were documents enough in existence to have proved my part in the affair; but not one of them dared the King produce, since they would also show me to have been no more than his instrument. And so, desiring my death as it was now clear he did, he must sit impotently brooding there with what patience he could command, like a gigantic, evil spider into whose web I obstinately refused to fling myself.

My hopes began to revive. When at last the court announced that it postponed judgment whilst fresh evidence was sought, there was an outcry of indignation on all sides. This was a tyrannical abuse of power, men said; and I joined my voice to theirs to demand that judgment be pronounced and my liberty restored to me, pointing out that I had already languished years in captivity without any charge against me—beyond that of corruption, which had been purged by now—having been established.

Then at last the King stirred in his diabolical underground manner. He sent his confessor to me in prison. The friar was mild and benign.

"My poor friend," he said, "why do you allow yourself to suffer in this fashion, when a word from you can set a term to it? Confess the deed without fear, since at the same time you can advance a peremptory reason of State to justify it."

It was too obvious a trap. Did I make confession, indeed, upon such grounds, they would demand of me proof of what I asserted; and meanwhile the documents to prove it had been extorted from me and had passed into the King's possession. In the result I should be ruined completely as one who, to the crime of murder, added a wicked, insidious falsehood touching the honour of his King.

But I said naught of this. I met guile with guile. "Alas! I have been tempted," I answered him. "But I thank Heaven I have known even in my extremity how to resist the temptation of such disloyalty. I cannot forget, Brother Diego, that amongst the letters from the King was one that said, 'Be not troubled by anything your enemies may do against you. I shall not abandon you, and be sure their animosity cannot prevail. But you must understand that it must not be discovered that this death took place by my order.'"

"But if the King were to release you from that command?" he asked.

"When His Majesty in his goodness and generosity sends me a note in his own hand to say, 'You may confess that it was by my express order that you contrived the death of Escovedo,' then I shall thankfully account myself absolved from the silence his service imposes on me."

He looked at me narrowly. He may have suspected that I saw through the transparent device to ruin me, and that in a sense I mocked him with my answer.

He withdrew, and for some days nothing further happened. Then the rigours of my captivity were still further increased. I was allowed to communicate with no one, and even the alguazil who guarded me was forbidden, under pain of death, to speak to me.

And in January I was visited by Vasquez, who brought me a letter from the King, not, indeed, addressed to me and in the terms I had suggested, but to Vasquez himself, and it ran:

You may tell Antonio Perez from me, and, if necessary, show him this letter, that he is aware of my knowledge of having ordered him to put Escovedo to death and of the motives which he told me existed for this measure; and that as it imports for the satisfaction of my conscience that it be ascertained whether or not those motives were sufficient, I order him to state them in the fullest detail, and to advance proof of what he then alleged to me, which is not unknown to yourself, since I have clearly imparted it to you. When I shall have seen his answers, and the reasons he advances, I shall give order that such measures be taken as may befit.

I, THE KING

You see what a twist he had given to the facts. It was I who had urged the death of Escovedo; it was I who had advanced reasons which he had considered sufficient, trusting to my word; and it was

because of this he had consented to give the order. Let me confess so much, let me prove it, and prove, too, that the motives I had advanced were sound ones, or I must be destroyed. That was all clear. And that false king held fast the two trunks of papers that would have given the lie to this atrocious note of his, that would have proved that again and again I had shielded Escovedo from the death his king designed for him.

I looked into the face of my enemy, and there was a twisted smile on my lips.

"What fresh trap is this?" I asked him. "King Philip never wrote that note."

"You should know his hand. Look closer," he bade me harshly.

"I know his hand—none better. But I claim, too, to know something of his heart. And I know that it is not the heart of a perjured liar such as penned those lines."

That was as near as a man dared to go in expressing his true opinion of a prince.

"For the rest," I said, "I do not understand it. I know nothing of the death of Escovedo. I have nothing to add to what already I have said in open court unless it be to protest against you, who are a passionate, hostile judge."

Six times in the month that followed did Vasquez come to me, accompanied now by a notary, to press me to confess. At last, seeing that no persuasions could bend my obstinacy, they resorted to other measures.

"You will drive us to use the torture upon you so that we may loosen your tongue!" snarled Vasquez fiercely, enraged by my obduracy.

I laughed at the threat. I was a noble of Spain, by birth immune from

torture. They dared not violate the law. But they did dare. There was no law, human or divine, the King was not prepared to violate so that he might slake his vengeance upon the man who had dared to love where he had loved.

They delivered me naked into the hands of the executioner, and I underwent the question at the rope. They warned me that if I lost my life or the use of any of my limbs, it would be solely by my own fault. I advanced my nobility and the state of my health as all-sufficient reasons why the torture should not be applied to me, reminding them that for eleven years already I had suffered persecution and detention, so that my vigour was all gone.

For the last time they summoned me to answer as the King desired. And then, since I still refused, the executioner was recalled, he crossed my arms upon my breast, bound them securely, thrust a long rod beneath the cord, and, seizing one end of this in either hand, gave the first turn.

I screamed. I could not help it, enfeebled as I was. But my spirit being stouter than my flesh, I still refused to answer. Not indeed, until they had given the rope eight turns, not until it had sliced through my muscles and crushed the bone of one of my arms, so that to this day it remains of little use to me, did they conquer me. I had reached the limit of endurance.

"In Christ's name, release me!" I gasped. "I will say anything you wish."

Released at last, half swooning, smothered in blood, agonized by pain, I confessed that it was myself had procured the death of Escovedo for reasons of State and acting upon the orders of the King. The notary made haste to write down my words, and, when I had done, it was demanded of me that I should advance proof of the State reasons which I had alleged.

Oh, I had never been under any delusion on that score, as I have shown you. The demand did not take me by surprise at all. I was waiting for it, knowing that my answer to it would pronounce my doom. But I delivered it none the less.

"My papers have been taken from me, and without them I can prove nothing. With them I could prove my words abundantly."

They left me then. On the morrow, as I afterwards learnt, they read my confession to my devoted Martinez, and the poor fellow, who hitherto had remained staunch and silent under every test, seeing that there was no further purpose to be served by silence, gave them the confirmation they desired of Enriquez's accusation.

Meanwhile, I was very ill, in a raging fever as you may well conceive, and in answer to my prayer my own doctor was permitted to visit me in prison. He announced that he found my case extremely grave, and that I must perish unless I were relieved. As a consequence, and considering my weakness and the uselessness just then of both my arms, one of which was broken, first a page of my own, then other servants, and lastly my wife were allowed to come and tend me.

That was at the end of February. By the middle of April my wounds had healed, I had recovered the use of my limbs, though one remains half maimed for life, and my condition had undergone a very considerable improvement. But of this I allowed no sign to show, no suspicion even. I continued to lie there day after day in a state of complete collapse, so that whilst I was quickly gathering strength it was believed by my gaolers that I was steadily sinking, and that I should soon be dead.

My only hope, you see, lay now in evasion, and it was for this that I was thus craftily preparing. Once out of Castile I could deal with Philip, and he should not find me as impotent, as toothless as he

believed. But I go too fast.

One night at last, on April 20th, by when all measures had been concerted, and Gil de Mesa awaited me outside with horses—the whole having been contrived by my dear wife—I made the attempt. My apparent condition had naturally led to carelessness in guarding me. Who would guard a helpless, dying man? Soon after dark I rose, donned over my own clothes a petticoat and a hooded cloak belonging to my wife, and thus muffled walked out of my cell, past the guards, and so out of the prison unchallenged. I joined Gil de Mesa, discarded my feminine disguise, mounted and set out with him upon that ninety-mile journey into Aragon.

We reached Saragossa in safety, and there my first act was to surrender myself to the Grand Justiciary of Aragon to stand my trial for the murder of Escovedo with which I was charged.

It must have sent a shudder through the wicked Philip when he received news of that. A very stricken man he must have been, for he must have suspected something of the truth, that if I dared, after all the evidence amassed now against me, including my own confession under torture, openly to seek a judgment, it was because I must possess some unsuspected means of establishing all the truth—the truth that must make his own name stink in the nostrils of the world. And so it was. Have you supposed that Antonio Perez, who had spent his life in studying the underground methods of burrowing statecraft, had allowed himself to be taken quite so easily in their snare? Have you imagined that when I sent for Diego Martinez to come to me at Turruegano and instructed him touching the surrender of those two chests of documents, that I did not also instruct him carefully touching the abstraction in the first instance of a few serviceable papers and the renewal of the seals that should conceal the fact that he had tampered with the chests? If you have thought that, you have done me less than justice. There had been so much correspondence between

Philip and myself, so many notes had passed touching the death of Escovedo, and there was that habit of Philip's of writing his replies in marginal notes to my own letters and so returning them, that it was unthinkable he should have kept them all in his memory, and the abstraction of three or four could not conceivably be detected by him.

Ever since then those few letters, of a most deeply incriminating character, selected with great acumen by my steward, had secretly remained in the possession of my wife. Yet I had not dared produce them in Castile, knowing that I should instantly have been deprived of them, and with them of my last hope. They remained concealed against precisely such a time as this, when, beyond the immediate reach of Philip's justice, I should startle the world and clear my own character by their production.

You know the ancient privileges enjoyed by Aragon, privileges of which the Aragonese are so jealous that a King of Castile may not assume the title of King of Aragon until, bareheaded, he shall have received from the Grand Justiciary of Aragon the following admonition: "We, who are of equal worth and greater power than you, constitute you our king on the condition that you respect our privileges, and not otherwise." And to that the king must solemnly bind himself by oath, whose violation would raise in revolt against him the very cobbles of the streets. No king of Spain had ever yet been found to dare violate the constitution and the fueros of Aragon, the independence of their cortes, or parliament, composed of the four orders of the State. The Grand Justiciary's Court was superior to any royally constituted tribunal in the kingdom; to that court it was the privilege of any man to appeal for justice in any cause; and there justice was measured out with a stern impartiality that had not its like in any other State of Europe.

That was the tribunal to which I made surrender of my person and my cause. There was an attempt on the part of Philip to seize me and

drag me back to Castile and his vengeance. His officers broke into the prison for that purpose, and already I was in their power, when the men of the Justiciary, followed by an excited mob, which threatened open rebellion at this violation of their ancient rights, delivered me from their hands.

Baffled in this—and I can imagine his fury, which has since been vented on the Aragonese—Philip sent his representatives and his jurists to accuse me before the Court of the Grand Justiciary and to conduct my prosecution.

The trial began, exciting the most profound interest, not only in Aragon, but also in Castile, which, as I afterwards learnt, had openly rejoiced at my escape. It proceeded with the delays and longueurs that are inseparable from the sluggish majesty of the law. One of these pauses I wrote to Philip, inviting him to desist, and to grant me the liberty to live out my days in peace with my family in some remote corner of his kingdom. I warned him that I was not helpless before his persecution, as he imagined; that whilst I had made surrender of two chests of papers, I yet retained enough authentic documents—letters in his own hand—to make my innocence and his guilt apparent in a startling degree, with very evil consequences to himself.

His answer was to seize my wife and children and cast them into prison, and then order the courts of Madrid to pronounce sentence of death against me for the murder of Escovedo. Such were the sops with which he sought to quench his vindictive rage.

Thereupon the trial proceeded. I prepared my long memorial of the affair, supporting it with proofs in the shape of those letters I had retained. And then at last Philip of Spain took fright. He was warned by one of his representatives that there was little doubt I should be acquitted on all counts, and, too late, he sought to save his face by ordering the cessation of the prosecution he had instructed.

He stated that since I had chosen a line of defence, to answer which—as it could be answered—it would be necessary to touch upon matters of a secrecy that was inviolable, and to introduce personages whose reputation and honour was of more consequence to the State than the condemnation of Antonio Perez, he preferred to renounce the prosecution before the tribunal of Aragon. But he added a certificate upon his royal word to the effect that my crimes were greater than had ever been the crimes of any man, and that, whilst he renounced the prosecution before the courts of Aragon, he retained the right to demand of me an account of my actions before any other tribunal at any future time.

My acquittal followed immediately. And immediately again that was succeeded by fresh charges against me on behalf of the King. First it was sought to prove that I had procured the death of two of my servants—a charge which I easily dispersed by proving them to have died natural deaths. Then it was sought to prosecute me on the charge of corruption, for which I had once already been prosecuted, condemned, and punished. Confidently I demanded my release, and Philip must have ground his teeth in rage to see his prey escaping him, to see himself the butt of scorn and contempt for the wrongs that it became clear he had done me.

One weapon remained to him, and a terrible weapon this—the Holy Office of the Inquisition, a court before which all temporal courts must bow and quail. He launched its power against me, and behold me, in the moment when I accounted myself the victor in the unequal contest, accused of the dread sin of heresy. Words lightly weighed—uttered by me in prison under stress—had been zealously gathered up by spies.

On one occasion I had exclaimed: "I think God sleeps where my affairs are concerned, and I am in danger of losing my faith." The Holy Office held this to be a scandalous proposition, offensive to pious

ears.

Again, when I heard of the arrest of my wife and children I had cried out in rage: "God sleeps! God sleeps! There cannot be a God!"

This they argued at length to be rank heresy, since it is man's duty positively to believe, and who does not believe is an infidel.

Yet again it seems I had exclaimed: "Should things so come to pass, I shall refuse to believe in God!" This was accounted blasphemous, scandalous, and not without suspicion of heresy.

Upon these grounds the Supreme Council of the Inquisition at Madrid drew up its impeachment, and delivered it to the inquisitors of Aragon at Saragossa. These at once sent their familiars to demand the surrender of me from the Grand Justiciary, in whose hands I still remained. The Grand Justiciary incontinently refused to yield me up.

Thereupon the three Inquisitors drew up a peremptory demand, addressed to the lieutenants of the Justiciary, summoning them by virtue of holy obedience, under pain of greater excommunication, of a fine in the case of each of them of one thousand ducats, and other penalties to which they might later be condemned, to deliver me up within three hours to the pursuivants of the Holy Office.

This was the end of the Justiciary's resistance. He dared not refuse a demand so framed, and surrender of me was duly made. But the news of what was doing had run abroad. I had no lack of friends, whom I instantly warned of what was afoot, and they had seen to it that the knowledge spread in an inflammatory manner. Saragossa began to stir at once. Here was a thinly masked violation of their ancient privileges. If they suffered this precedent of circumventing their rights, what was to become of their liberties in future, who would be secure against an unjust persecution? For their sympathies were all with me throughout that trial.

I was scarcely in the prison of the Holy Office before the dread cry of *Contrafueros!* was ringing through the streets of Saragossa, summoning the citizens to arm and come forth in defence of their inviolable rights. They stormed the palace of the Grand Justiciary, demanded that he should defend the *fueros*, to whose guardianship he had been elected. Receiving no satisfaction, they attacked the palace of the Inquisition, clamouring insistently that I should immediately be returned to the Justiciary's prison, whence I had so unwarrantably been taken.

The Inquisitors remained firm a while, but the danger was increasing hourly. In the end they submitted, for the sake of their skins, and considering, no doubt, a later vengeance for this outrage upon their holy authority. But it was not done until faggots had been stacked against the Holy House, and the exasperated mob had threatened to burn them out of it.

"Castilian hypocrites!" had been the insurgent roar. "Surrender your prisoner, or you shall be roasted in the fire in which you roast so many!"

Blood was shed in the streets. The King's representative died of wounds that he received in the affray, whilst the Viceroy himself was assailed and compelled to intervene and procure my deliverance.

For the moment I was out of danger. But for the moment only. There was no question now of my enlargement. The Grand Justiciary, intimidated by what had taken place, by the precise expression of the King's will, dared not set me at liberty. And then the Holy Office, under the direction of the King, went to work in that subterranean way which it has made its own; legal quibbles were raised to soothe the sensibilities of the Aragonese with respect to my removal from the Justiciary's prison to that of the Holy Office. Strong forces of troops were brought to Saragossa to overawe the plebeian insolence, and so, by the following September, all the preliminaries being concluded,

the Inquisition came in force and in form to take possession of me.

The mob looked on and murmured; but it was intimidated by the show of ordered force; it had perhaps tired a little of the whole affair, and did not see that it should shed its blood and lay up trouble for itself for the sake of one who, after all, was of no account in the affairs of Aragon. I stood upon the threshold of my ruin. All my activities were to go unrewarded. Doom awaited me. And then the unexpected happened. The alguazil of the Holy Office was in the very act of setting the gyves upon my legs when the first shot was fired, followed almost at once by a fusillade.

It was Gil de Mesa, faithfulest servant that ever any man possessed. He had raised an armed band, consisting of some Aragonese gentlemen and their servants, and with this he fell like a thunderbolt upon the Castilian men-at-arms and the familiars of the Inquisition. The alguazil fled, leaving me one leg free, the other burdened by the gyve, and as he fled so fled all others, being thus taken unawares. The Inquisitors scuttled to the nearest shelter; the Viceroy threw himself into his house and barricaded the door. There was no one to guide, no one to direct. The soldiery in these circumstances, and accounting themselves overpowered, offered no resistance. They, too, fled before the fusillade and the hail of shot that descended on them.

Before I realized what had happened, the iron had been struck from my leg, I was mounted on a horse, and, with Gil at my side, I was galloping out of Saragossa by the gate of Santa Engracia, and breasting the slopes with little cause to fear pursuit just yet, such was the disorder we had left behind.

And there, very briefly, you have the story of my sufferings and my escapes. Not entirely to be baulked, numerous arrests were made by the Inquisitors in Saragossa when order was at last restored. There followed an auto-da-fe, the most horrible and vindictive of all those

horrors, in which many suffered for having displayed the weakness of charity towards a persecuted man. And, since my body was no longer in their clutches, they none the less sentenced me to death as contumaciously absent, and my effigy was burnt in the holy fires they lighted, amongst the human candles which they offered up for the greater honour and glory of a merciful God. Let me say no more, lest I blaspheme in earnest.

After months of wandering and hiding, Gil and I made our way here into Navarre, where we remain the guests of Protestant King Henri IV, who does not love King Philip any better since he has heard my story.

Still King Philip's vengeance does not sleep. Twice has he sent after me his assassins—since assassination is the only weapon now remaining to him. But his poor tools have each time been taken, exposed to Philip's greater infamy and shame—and hanged as they deserve who can so vilely serve so vile a master. It has even been sought to bribe my faithful Gil de Mesa into turning his hand against me, and that attempt, too, has been given the fullest publication. Meanwhile, my death to-day could no longer avail Philip very much. My memorial is published throughout Europe for all to read. It has been avidly read until Philip of Spain has earned the contempt of every upright man. In his own dominions the voice of execration has been raised against him. One of his own nobles has contemptuously announced that Spain under Philip has become unsafe for any gentleman, and that a betrayal of a subject by his king is without parallel in history.

That is some measure of vengeance. But if I am spared I shall not leave it there. Henry of Navarre is on the point of turning Catholic that his interests may be better served. Elizabeth of England remains. In her dominions, where thrives the righteous hatred of Philip and all the evil that he stands for, I shall find a welcome and a channel for the activities that are to show him that Antonio Perez lives. I have sent

him word that when he is weary of the conflict he can signify his surrender by delivering from their prison my wife and children, upon whom he seeks still to visit some of the vengeance I have succeeded in eluding. When he does that, then will I hold my hand. But not before.

"That, madame, is my story," said Don Antonio, after a pause, and from narrowing eyes looked at the beauty who had heard him through.

Daylight had faded whilst the tale was telling. Night was come, and lights had long since been fetched, the curtains drawn over the long windows that looked out across the parkland to the river.

Twice only had he paused in all that narrative. Once when he had described the avowal of his love for Anne, Princess of Eboli, when a burst of sobs from her had come to interrupt him; again when a curious bird-note had rung out upon the gathering dusk. Then he stopped to listen.

"Curious that," he had said—"an eagle's cry. I have not heard it these many months, not since I left the hills of Aragon."

Thereafter he had continued to the end.

Considering her now, his glance inscrutable, he said:

"You weep, madame. Tell me, what is it that has moved you—the contemplation of my sufferings, or of your own duplicity?"

She started up, very white, her eyes scared.

"I do not understand you. What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean, madame, that God did not give you so much beauty that you should use it in the decoying of an unfortunate, that you should hire it at an assassin's fee to serve the crapulous King of Spain."

He rose and towered before her, a figure at once of anger, dignity,

and some compassion.

"So much ardour from youth and beauty to age and infirmity was in itself suspicious. The Catholic King has the guile of Satan, I remembered. I wondered, and hoped my suspicions might be unfounded. Yet prudence made me test them, that the danger, if it existed, should manifest itself and be destroyed. So I came to tell you all my story, so that if you did the thing I feared, you might come to the knowledge of precisely what it was you did. I have learnt whilst here that what I suspected is—alas! quite true. You were a lure, a decoy sent to work my ruin, to draw me into a trap where daggers waited for me. Why did you do this? What was the bribe that could corrupt you, lovely lady?"

Sobs shook her. Her will gave way before his melancholy sternness.

"I do not know by what wizardry you have discovered it!" she cried. "It was true; but it is true no longer. I knew not what I did. By that window, across the meadows, you can reach the river in safety." She rose, controlling her emotion that she might instruct him. "They wait for you in the enclosed garden."

He smiled wistfully.

"They waited, madame. They wait no longer, unless it be for death. That eagle's cry, thrice repeated, was the signal from my faithful Gil, not only that the trap was discovered, but that those who baited it were taken. Suspecting what I did, I took my measures ere I came. Antonio Perez, as I have told you, is not an easy man to murder. Unlike Philip, I do not make war on women, and I have no reckoning to present to you. But I am curious, madame, to know what led you to this baseness."

"I—I thought you evil, and—and they bribed me. I was offered ten

thousand ducats for your head. We are very poor, we Chantenacs, and so I fell. But, sir—sir"—she was on her knees to him now, and she had caught his hand in hers—"poor as I am, all that I have is yours to do with as you will, to help to avenge yourself upon that Spanish monster. Take what you will. Take all I have."

His smile grew gentler. Gently he raised her.

"Madame," he said, "I am myself a sinner, as I have shown you, a man unequal to resisting temptation when it took me in its trammels. Of all that you offer, I will take only the right to this kiss."

And bending, he bore her hand to his lips.

Then he went out to join Gil and his men, who waited in the courtyard, guarding three prisoners they had taken.

Perez considered them by the light of the lantern that Gil held aloft for him.

"One of you," he announced, "shall return to Castile and give tidings to Philip, his master, that Antonio Perez leaves for England and the Court of Elizabeth, to aid her, by his knowledge of the affairs of Spain, in her measures against the Catholic King, and to continue his holy work, which is to make the name of Philip II stink in the nostrils of all honest men. One of you I will spare for that purpose. You shall draw lots for it in the morning. The other two must hang."

IV. THE NIGHT OF CHARITY— The Case Of The Lady Alice Lisle

Of all the cases tried in the course of that terrible circuit, justly known as the Bloody Assizes, the only one that survives at all in the popular memory is the case of the Lady Alice Lisle. Her advanced age, the fact that she was the first woman known in English history to have suffered death for no worse an offence than that of having exercised the feminine prerogative of mercy, and the further fact that, even so, this offence—technical as it was—was never fully proved against her, are all circumstances which have left their indelible stamp of horror upon the public mind. There is also the further circumstance that hers was the first case tried in the West by that terrible Chief Justice, Baron Jeffreys of Wem.

But the feature that renders her case peculiarly interesting to the historical psychologist—and it is a feature that is in danger of being overlooked—is that she cannot really be said to have suffered for the technical offence for which she took her trial. That was the pretext rather than the cause. In reality she was the innocent victim of a relentless, undiscerning Nemesis.

The battle of Sedgemoor had been fought and lost by the Protestant champion, James, Duke of Monmouth. In the West, which had answered the Duke's summons to revolt, there was established now a horrible reign of terror reflecting the bigoted, pitiless, vindictive nature of the King. Faversham had left Colonel Percy Kirke in command at Bridgwater, a ruthless ruffian, who at one time had

commanded the Tangier garrison, and whose men were full worthy of their commander. Kirke's Lambs they were called, in an irony provoked by the emblem of the Paschal Lamb on the flag of this, the First Tangier Regiment, originally levied to wage war upon the infidel.

From Bridgwater Colonel Kirke made a horrible punitive progress to Taunton, where he put up at the White Hart Inn. Now, there was a very solid signpost standing upon a triangular patch of green before the door of the White Hart, and Colonel Kirke conceived the quite facetious notion of converting this advertisement of hospitality into a gallows—a signpost of temporal welfare into a signpost of eternity. So forth he fetched the prisoners he had brought in chains from Bridgwater, and proceeded, without any form of trial whatsoever, to string them up before the inn. The story runs that as they were hoisted to that improvised gibbet, Kirke and his officers, standing at the windows, raised their glasses to pledge their happy deliverance; then, when the victims began to kick convulsively, Kirke would order the drums to strike up, so that the gentlemen might have music for their better dancing.

The colonel, you see, was a humorist, as humour was then understood upon the northern shores of Africa, where he had been schooled.

When, eventually, Colonel Kirke was recalled and reprimanded, it was not because of his barbarities many of which transcend the possibilities of decent print—but because of a lenity which this venal gentleman began to display when he discovered that many of his victims were willing to pay handsomely for mercy.

Meanwhile, under his reign of terror, men who had cause to fear the terrible hand of the King's vengeance went into hiding wherever they could. Among those who escaped into Hampshire, thinking themselves safer in a county that had not participated in the war, were a dissenting parson named George Hicks, who had been in

Monmouth's army, and a lawyer named Richard Nelthorpe, outlawed for participation in the Rye House Plot. In his desperate quest for shelter, Hicks bethought him of the charitable Nonconformist lady of Moyle's Court, the widow of that John Lisle who had been one of Cromwell's Lords Commissioners of the Great Seal, and most active in bringing King Charles I to justice.

John Lisle had fled to Switzerland at the Restoration; but Stuart vengeance had followed him, set a price upon his head, and procured his murder at Lausanne. That was twenty years ago. Since then his lady, because she was known to have befriended and sheltered many Royalists, and because she had some stout Tory friends to plead for her, was allowed to remain in tranquil possession of her estates. And there the Lady Alice Lisle—so called by courtesy, since Cromwell's titles did not at law survive the Restoration—might have ended her days in peace, but that it was written that those who hated her—innocent and aged though she was—for the name she bore, who included her in the rancour which had procured her husband's assassination, were to be fully satisfied. And the instrument of fate was this parson Hicks. He prevailed upon Dunne, a baker of Warminster, and a Nonconformist, to convey to the Lady Lisle his prayer for shelter. With that message Dunne set out on July 25th for Ellingham, a journey of some twenty miles. He went by way of Fovant and Chalk to Salisbury Plain. But as he did not know the way thence, he sought out a co-religionist named Barter, who undertook, for a consideration, to go with him and direct him.

Together the pair came in the late afternoon of that Saturday to the handsome house of Moyle's Court, and to my lady's steward, who received them. Dunne, who appears to have been silly and imprudent, states that he is sent to know if my lady will entertain a minister named Hicks.

Carpenter, the steward, a staid, elderly fellow, took fright at once.

Although he may not have associated an absconding Presbyterian parson with the late rebellion, he must have supposed at least that he was one of those against whom there were warrants for preaching in forbidden private meetings. So to her ladyship above stairs Carpenter conveyed a warning with the message.

But that slight, frail, homely lady of seventy, with kindly eyes of a faded blue, smiled upon his fears. She had sheltered fugitives before—in the old days of the Commonwealth—and nothing but good had ever come of it. She would see this messenger.

With misgivings, Carpenter haled Dunne into her presence, and left them alone together. The impression conveyed by Dunne was that Hicks was in hiding from the warrants that were out against all Nonconformist preachers. But when he mentioned that Hicks had a companion, she desired to know his name.

"I do not know, my lady. But I do not think he has been in the army, either."

She considered a while. But in the end pity conquered doubt in her sweetly charitable soul.

"Very well," she said, "I will give them entertainment for a week. Bring them on Tuesday after dark, and come by the back way through the orchard, that they may not be seen."

And upon this she rose, and took up an ebony cane, herself to reconduct him and to see to his entertainment before he left. Not until they came to the kitchen did she realize that he had a companion. At sight of Barter, who rose respectfully when she entered, she checked, turned to Dunne, and whispered something, to which his answer provoked from her a laugh.

Now Barter, intrigued by this whispering and laughing, of which he deemed himself the object, questioned Dunne upon it as they rode

forth again together.

"She asked me if you knew aught of the business," replied Dunne; "and I answered 'No.'"

"Business, say'st thou?" quoth Barter. "What business?"

"Sure, the business on which we came," Dunne evaded; and he laughed.

It was an answer that left Barter uneasy. Nor was his mind set at rest by the parting words with which Dunne accompanied the half-crown for his services.

"This is but an earnest of what's to come if you will meet me here on Tuesday to show me the way to Moyle's Court again. I shall be bringing two gentlemen with me—wealthy men, of a half-score thousand pounds a year apiece. I tell you there will be a fine booty for my part, so fine that I shall never want for money again all the days of my life. And, so that you meet us here, you too may count upon a handsome reward."

Consenting, Barter went his ways home. But as he pondered Dunne's silly speech, and marvelled that honest men should pay so disproportionately for an honest service, he came to the reasonable conclusion that he had to do with rebels. This made him so uneasy that he resolved at last to lodge information with the nearest justice.

Now, it happened, by the irony of Fate, that the justice sought by Barter was one Colonel Penruddock—the vindictive son of that Penruddock whom the late John Lisle—whilst Lord President of the High Court—had sentenced to death some thirty years ago for participation in an unsuccessful Wiltshire rising against the Commonwealth.

The colonel, a lean, stark man of forty-five, heard with interest

Barter's story.

"Art an honest fellow!" he commended him. "What are the names of these rogues?"

"The fellow named no names, sir."

"Well, well, we shall discover that for ourselves when we come to take them at this trysting-place. Whither do you say you are to conduct them?"

"To Moyle's Court, sir, where my Lady Lisle is to give them entertainment."

The colonel stared a moment; then a heavy smile came to light the saturnine face under the heavy periwig. Beyond that he gave no sign of what was passing in his mind.

"You may go," he said slowly, at last. "Be sure we shall be at the tryst to take these rascals."

But the colonel did not keep his promise. To Barter's surprise, there were no soldiers at the tryst on Salisbury Plain on the following Tuesday; and he was suffered to lead Dunne and the two men with him the short, corpulent Mr. Hicks and the long, lean Nelthorp—to Moyle's Court without interference.

The rich reward that Dunne had promised him amounted in actual fact to five shillings, that he had from Nelthorpe at parting. Puzzled by Colonel Penruddock's failure to do his part, Barter went off at once to the colonel's house to inform him that the pair were now at Lady Lisle's.

"Why, that is very well," said the colonel, his smile more sinister than ever. "Trouble not yourself about that."

And Barter, the unreasoning instrument of Fate, was not to know

that the apprehending of a couple of traitorous Jack Presbyters was of small account to Colonel Penruddock by comparison with the satisfaction of the blood-feud between himself and the House of Lisle.

Meanwhile the fugitives were being entertained at Moyle's Court, and whilst they sat at supper in a room above-stairs, Dunne being still of the party, my lady came in person to see that they had all that they required, and stayed a little while in talk with them. There was some mention of Monmouth and the battle of Sedgemoor, which was natural, that being the topic of the hour.

My lady asked no questions at the time regarding Hicks's long, lean companion. But it occurred to her later that perhaps she should know more about him. Early next morning, therefore, she sent for Hicks as he was in the act of sitting down to breakfast, and by her direct questions elicited from him that this companion was that Richard Nelthorpe outlawed for his share in the Rye House Plot. Not only was the information alarming, but it gave her a sense that she had not been dealt with fairly, as indeed she told him.

"You will see, sir," she concluded, "that you cannot bide here. So long as I thought it was on the score of Nonconformity alone that you were suffering persecution, I was willing to take some risk in hiding you. But since your friend is what he is, the risk is greater than I should be asked to face, for my own sake and for that of my daughters. Nor can I say that I have ever held plottings and civil war in anything but abhorrence—as much in the old days as now. I am a loyal woman, and as a loyal woman I must bid you take your friend hence as soon as your fast is broken."

The corpulent and swarthy Hicks stood dejectedly before her. He might have pleaded, but at that moment there came a loud knocking at the gates below, and instantly Carpenter flung into the room with a white, scared face and whirling gestures.

"Soldiers, my lady!" he panted in affright. "We have been betrayed. The presence of Mr. Hicks here is known. What shall we do? What shall we do?"

She stood quite still, her countenance entirely unchanged, unless it were to smile a little upon Carpenter's terror. The mercy of her nature rose dominant now.

"Why, we must hide these poor fellows as best we can," said she; and Hicks flung down upon one knee to kiss her hand with protestations that he would sooner be hanged than bring trouble upon her house.

But she insisted, calm and self-contained; and Carpenter carried Hicks away to bestow him, together with Dunne, in a hole in the malt-house under a heap of sacking. Nelthorp had already vanished completely on his own initiative.

Meanwhile, the insistent knocking at the gate continued. Came shouted demands to open in the name of the King, until from a window my lady's daughters looked out to challenge those who knocked.

Colonel Penruddock, who had come in person with the soldiers to raid the house of his hereditary foe, stood forth to answer, very stiff and brave in his scarlet coat and black plumed hat.

"You have rebels in the house," he announced, "and I require you in the King's name to deliver them up to me."

And then, before they could answer him, came Carpenter to, unbar the door, and admit them to the court. Penruddock, standing squarely before the steward, admonished him very sternly.

"Friend," said he, "you had best be ingenuous with me and discover who are in your lady's house, for it is within my knowledge

that some strangers came hither last night."

The stricken Carpenter stood white-faced and trembling.

"Sir—sir—" he faltered.

But the colonel was impatient.

"Come, come, my friend. Since I know they are here, there's an end on't. Show me where they are hid if you would save your own neck from the halter."

It was enough for Carpenter. The pair in the malthouse might have eluded all search but for the steward's pusillanimity. Incontinently, he betrayed the hiding-place.

"But, sir, of your charity do not tell my mistress that I have told you. Pray, sir—"

Penruddock brushed him aside as if he had been a pestering fly, and with his men went in, and straight to the spot where Hicks and Dunne were lurking. When he had taken them, he swung round on Carpenter, who had followed.

"These be but two," he said, "and to my knowledge three rogues came hither last night. No shuffling with me, rascal. Where have you bestowed the other?"

"I swear, as Heaven's my witness, I do not know where he is," protested the afflicted steward, truly enough.

Penruddock turned to his men.

"Make search," he bade them; and search was made in the ruthless manner of such searches.

The brutal soldiers passed from room to room beating the wainscoting with pike and musket-butts, splintering and smashing

heedlessly. Presses were burst open and their contents scattered; chests were broken into and emptied, the searchers appropriating such objects as took their fancy, with true military cynicism. A mirror was shattered, and some boards of the floor were torn up because a sergeant conceived that the blows of his halbert rang hollow.

When the tumult was at its height, came her ladyship at last into the room, where Colonel Penruddock stood watching the operations of his men. She stood in the doorway leaning upon her ebony cane, her faded eyes considering the gaunt soldier with reproachful question.

"Sir," she asked him with gentle irony, masking her agitation, "has my house been given over to pillage?"

He bowed, doffing his plumed hat with an almost excessive courtesy.

"To search, madame," he corrected her. And added: "In the King's name."

"The King," she answered, "may give you authority to search my house, but not to plunder it. Your men are robbing and destroying."

He shrugged. It was the way of soldiers. Fine manners, he suggested, were not to be expected of their kind. And he harangued her upon the wrong she had done in harbouring rebels and giving entertainment to the King's enemies.

"That is not true," said she. "I know of no King's enemies."

He smiled darkly upon her from his great height. She was so frail a body and so old that surely it was not worth a man's while to sacrifice her on the altar of revenge. But not so thought Colonel Penruddock. Therefore he smiled.

"Two of them, a snivelling Jack Presbyter named Hicks and a rascal named Dunne, are taken already. Pray, madame, be so free

and ingenuous with me aye, and so kind to yourself—as if there be any other person concealed in your house—and I am sure there is somebody else—to deliver him up, and you shall come to no further trouble."

She looked up at him, and returned him smile for smile.

"I know nothing," she said, "of what you tell me, or of what you ask."

His countenance hardened.

"Then, mistress, the search must go on."

But a shout from the adjoining room announced that it was at an end. Nelthorp had been discovered and dragged from the chimney into which he had crept.

Almost exactly a month later—on August 27th the Lady Alice Lisle was brought to the bar of the court-house at Winchester upon a charge of high treason.

The indictment ran that secretly, wickedly, and traitorously she did entertain, conceal, comfort, uphold, and maintain John Hicks, knowing him to be a false traitor, against the duty of her allegiance and against the peace of "our sovereign lord the King that now is."

Demurely dressed in grey, the little white-haired lady calmly faced the Lord Chief Justice Jeffreys and the four judges of oyer and terminer who sat with him, and confidently made her plea of "Not Guilty."

It was inconceivable that Christian men should deal harshly with her for a technical offence amounting to an act of Christian charity. And the judge, sitting there in his robe of scarlet reversed with ermine, looked a gentle, kindly man; his handsome, oval, youthful face—Jeffreys was in his thirty-sixth year—set in the heavy black periwig, was so pale that the mouth made a vivid line of scarlet; and the eyes

that now surveyed her were large and liquid and compassionate, as it seemed to her.

She was not to know that the pallor which gave him so interesting an air, and the dark stains which lent his eyes that gentle wistfulness, were the advertisements at once of the debauch that had kept him from his bed until after two o'clock that morning and of the inexorable disease that slowly gnawed away his life and enraged him out of all humanity.

And the confidence his gentle countenance inspired was confirmed by the first words he had occasion to address to her. She had interrupted counsel to the Crown when, in his opening address to the jury—composed of some of the most considerable gentlemen of Hampshire—he seemed to imply that she had been in sympathy with Monmouth's cause. She was, of course, without counsel, and must look herself to her defence.

"My lord," she cried, "I abhorred that rebellion as much as any woman in the world!"

Jeffreys leaned forward with a restraining gesture.

"Look you, Mrs. Lisle," he admonished her sweetly, "because we must observe the common and usual methods of trial in your case I must interrupt you now." And upon that he promised that she should be fully heard in her own defence at the proper time, and that himself he would instruct her in the forms of law to her advantage. He reassured her by reverent allusions to the great Judge of Heaven and Earth, in whose sight they stood, that she should have justice. "And as to what you say concerning yourself," he concluded, "I pray God with all my heart you may be innocent."

He was benign and reassuring. But she had the first taste of his true quality in the examination of Dunne—a most unwilling witness.

Reluctantly, under the pressure put upon him, did Dunne yield up the tale of how he had conducted the two absconders to my lady's house with her consent, and it was sought to prove that she was aware of their connection with the rebellion. The stubbornly evasive Dunne was asked at last:

"Do you believe that she knew Mr. Hicks before?"

He returned the answer that already he had returned to many questions of the sort.

"I cannot tell truly."

Jeffreys stirred in his scarlet robes, and his wistful eyes grew terrible as they bent from under beetling brows upon the witness.

"Why," he asked, "dost thou think that she would entertain any one she had no knowledge of merely upon thy message? Mr. Dunne, Mr. Dunne! Have a care. It may be more is known to me of this matter than you think for."

"My lord, I speak nothing but the truth!" bleated the terrified Dunne.

"I only bid you have a care," Jeffreys smiled; and his smile was more terrible than his frown. "Truth never wants a subterfuge; it always loves to appear naked; it needs no enamel nor any covering. But lying and snivelling and canting and Hicksing always appear in masquerade. Come, go on with your evidence."

But Dunne was reluctant to go on, and out of his reluctance he lied foolishly, and pretended that both Hicks and Nelthorpe were unknown to him. When pressed to say why he should have served two men whom he had never seen before, he answered:

"All the reason that induced me to it was that they said they were men in debt, and desired to be concealed for a while."

Then the thunder was heard in Jeffreys' voice.

"Dost thou believe that any one here believes thee? Prithee, what trade art thou?"

"My lord," stammered the unfortunate, "I—I am a baker by trade."

"And wilt thou bake thy bread at such easy rates? Upon my word, then, thou art very kind. Prithee, tell me. I believe thou dost use to bake on Sundays, dost thou not?"

"No, my lord, I do not!" cried Dunne indignantly.

"Alackaday! Art precise in that," sneered the judge. "But thou canst travel on Sundays to lead rogues into lurking-holes."

Later, when to implicate the prisoner, it was sought to draw from Dunne a full account of the reception she had given his companions, his terror under the bullying to which he was subjected made him contradict himself more flagrantly than ever. Jeffreys addressed the jury.

"You see, gentlemen, what a precious fellow this is; a very pretty tool to be employed upon such an errand; a knave that nobody would trust for half a crown. A Turk has more title to an eternity of bliss than these pretenders to Christianity."

And as there was no more to be got from Dunne just then, he was presently dismissed, and Barter's damning evidence was taken. Thereafter the wretched Dunne was recalled, to be bullied by Jeffreys in blasphemous terms that may not be printed here.

Barter had told the Court how my lady had come into the kitchen with Dunne, and how, when he had afterwards questioned Dunne as to why they had whispered and laughed together, Dunne told him she had asked "If he knew aught of the business." Jeffreys sought now to wring from Dunne what was this business to which he had so

mysteriously alluded—this with the object of establishing Lady Lisle's knowledge of Hicks's treason.

Dunne resisted more stubbornly than ever. Jeffreys, exasperated—since without the admission it would be difficult to convict her ladyship—invited the jury to take notice of the strange, horrible carriage of the fellow, and heaped abuse upon the snivelling, canting sect of which he was a member. Finally, he reminded Dunne of his oath to tell the truth, and addressed him with a sort of loving ferocity.

"What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" bellowed that terrible judge, his eyes aflame. "Is not this the voice of Scripture itself? And wilt thou hazard so dear and precious a thing as thy soul for a lie? Thou wretch! All the mountains and hills of the world heaped upon one another will not cover thee from the vengeance of the Great God for this transgression of false-witness bearing."

"I cannot tell what to say, my lord," gasped Dunne.

In his rage to see all efforts vain, the judge's language became that of the cockpit. Recovering at last, he tried gentleness again, and very elaborately invited Dunne, in my lady's own interest, to tell him what was the business to which he had referred to Barter.

"She asked me whether I did not know that Hicks was a Nonconformist."

"That cannot be all. There must be something more in it."

"Yes, my lord," Dunne protested, "it is all. I know nothing more."

"Was there ever such an impudent rascal?" roared the judge. "Dolt think that, after all the pains I have been at to get an answer, thou canst banter me with such sham stuff as this? Hold the candle to his brazen face, that we may see it clearly."

Dunne stood terrified and trembling under the glance of those terrible eyes.

"My lord," he cried, "I am so baulked, I am cluttered out of my senses."

Again he was put down whilst Colonel Penruddock gave his evidence of the apprehension of the rebels. When he had told how he found Hicks and Dunne concealed under some stuff in the malt-house, Dunne was brought back yet again, that Jeffreys might resume his cross-examination.

"Dunne, how came you to hide yourself in the malthouse?"

"My lord," said Dunne foolishly, "I was frightened by the noise."

"Prithee, what needest thou be afraid of, for thou didst not know Hicks nor Nelthorp; and my lady only asked thee whether Hicks were a Nonconformist parson. Surely, so very innocent a soul needed no occasion to be afraid. I doubt there was something in the case of that business we were talking of before. If we could but get out of thee what it was."

But Dunne continued to evade.

"My lord, I heard a great noise in the house, and did not know what it meant. So I went and hid myself."

"It is very strange thou shouldst hide thyself for a little noise, when thou knewest nothing of the business."

Again the witness, with a candle still held close to his nose, complained that he was quite cluttered out of his senses, and did not know what he was saying.

"But to tell the truth would not rob thee of any of thy senses, if ever thou hadst any," Jeffreys told him angrily. "But it would seem that

neither thou nor thy mistress, the prisoner, had any; for she knew nothing of it either, though she had sent for them thither."

"My lord," cried her ladyship at that, "I hope I shall not be condemned without being heard."

"No, God forbid, Mrs. Lisle," he answered; and then viciously flashed forth a hint of the true forces of Nemesis at work against her. "That was a sort of practice in your late husband's time—you know very well what I mean—but God be thanked it is not so now."

Came next the reluctant evidence of Carpenter and his wife, and after that there was yet a fourth equally futile attempt to drag from Dunne an admission that her ladyship was acquainted with Hicks's share in the rebellion. But if stupid, Dunne at least was staunch, and so, with a wealth of valedictory invective, Jeffreys dismissed him, and addressed at last the prisoner, inviting her to speak in her own defence.

She rose to do so, fearlessly yet gently.

"My lord, what I have to say is this. I knew of nobody's coming to my house but Mr. Hicks, and for him I was informed that he did abscond by reason of warrants that were out against him for preaching in private meetings; for that reason I sent to him to come by night. But I had never heard that Nelthorp was to come with him, nor what name Nelthorp had till after he had come to my house. I could die upon it. As for Mr. Hicks, I did not in the least suspect that he had been in the army, being a Presbyterian minister that used to preach and not to fight."

"But I will tell you," Jeffreys interrupted her, "that there is not one of those lying, snivelling, canting Presbyterian rascals but one way or the other had a hand in the late horrid conspiracy and rebellion."

"My lord, I abhorred both the principles and the practices of the late

rebellion," she protested; adding that if she had been tried in London, my Lady Abergavenny and many other persons of quality could have testified with what detestation she had spoken of the rebellion, and that she had been in London until Monmouth had been beheaded.

"If I had known the time of my trial in the country," she pursued, "I could have had the testimony of those persons of honour for me. But, my lord, I have been told, and so I thought it would have been, that I should not have been tried for harbouring Mr. Hicks until he should himself be convict as a traitor. I did abhor those that were in the plot and conspiracy against the King. I know my duty to my King better, and have always exercised it. I defy anybody in the world that ever knew contrary to come and give testimony."

His voice broke harshly upon the pause. "Have you any more to say?"

"As to what they say to my denying Nelthorp to be in the house," she resumed. "I was in very great consternation and fear of the soldiers, who were very rude and violent. I beseech your lordship to make that construction of it, and not harbour an ill opinion of me because of those false reports that go about of me, relating to my carriage towards the old King, that I was anyways consenting to the death of King Charles I; for, my lord, that is as false as God is true. I was not out of my chamber all the day in which that king was beheaded, and I believe I shed more tears for him than any other woman then living.

"And I do repeat it, my lord, as I hope to attain salvation, I never did know Nelthorp, nor did I know of anybody's coming but Mr. Hicks. Him I knew to be a Nonconformist minister, and there being, as is well known, warrants out to apprehend all Nonconformist ministers, I was willing to give him shelter from these warrants, which I knew was no treason."

"Have you any more to say for yourself?" he asked her.

"My lord," she was beginning, "I came but five days before this into the country."

"Nay," he broke in, "I cannot tell when you came into the country, nor I don't care. It seems you came in time to harbour rebels."

She protested that if she would have ventured her life for anything, it would have been to serve the King.

"But, though I could not fight for him myself, my son did; he was actually in arms on the King's side in this business. It was I that bred him in loyalty and to fight for the King."

"Well, have you done?" he asked her brutally.

"Yes, my lord," she answered; and resumed her seat, trembling a little from the exertion and emotion of her address.

His charge to the jury began. It was very long, and the first half of it was taken up with windy rhetoric in which the Almighty was invoked at every turn. It degenerated at one time into a sermon upon the text of "render unto Caesar," inveighing against the Presbyterian religion. And the dull length of his lordship's periods, combined with the monotone in which he spoke, lulled the wearied lady at the bar into slumber. She awakened with a start when suddenly his fist crashed down and his voice rose in fierce denunciation of the late rebellion. But she was dozing again—so calm and so little moved was she—before he had come to apply his denunciations to her own case, and this in spite of all her protests that she had held the rebellion in abhorrence.

It was all calculated to prejudice the minds of the jurymen before he came to the facts and the law of the case. And that charge of his throughout, far from being a judicial summing-up, was a virulent

address for the prosecution, just as his bearing hitherto in examining and cross-examining witnesses had been that of counsel for the Crown. The statement that she had made in her own defence he utterly ignored, save in one particular, where he saw his opportunity further to prejudice her case.

"I am sorry," he said, his face lengthening, "to remember something that dropped even from the gentlewoman herself. She pretends to religion and loyalty very much—how greatly she wept at the death of King Charles the Martyr—and owns her great obligations to the late king and his royal brother. And yet no sooner is one in the grave than she forgets all gratitude and entertains those that were rebels against his royal successor.

"I will not say," he continued with deliberate emphasis, "what hand her husband had in the death of that blessed martyr; she has enough to answer for her own guilt; and I must confess that it ought not, one way or other, to make any ingredient into this case what she was in former times."

But he had dragged it in, protesting that it should not influence the case, yet coldly, calculatingly intending it to do so. She was the widow of a regicide, reason and to spare in the views of himself and his royal master why she should be hounded to her death upon any pretext.

Thereafter he reviewed the evidence against her, dwelt upon the shuffling of Dunne, deduced that the reason for so much lying was to conceal the damning truth—namely, that she knew Hicks for a rebel when she gave him shelter, and thus became the partner of his horrible guilt. Upon that he charged them to find their verdict "without any consideration of persons, but considering only the truth."

Nevertheless, although his commands were clear, some of the jury would seem to have feared the God whom Jeffreys invoked so

constantly. One of them rose to ask him pertinently, in point of law, whether it was treason to have harboured Hicks before the man had been convicted of treason.

Curtly he answered them that beyond doubt it was, and upon that assurance the jury withdrew, the Court settled down into an expectant silence, and her ladyship dozed again in her chair.

The minutes passed. It was growing late, and Jeffreys was eager to be done with this prejudged affair, that he might dine in peace. His voice broke the stillness of the court, protesting his angry wonder at the need to deliberate in so plain a case. He was threatening to adjourn and let the jury lie by all night if they did not bring in their verdict quickly. When, at the end of a half-hour, they returned, his fierce, impatient glance found them ominously grave.

"My lord," said Mr. Whistler, the foreman, "we have to beg of your lordship some directions before we can bring our verdict. We have some doubt upon us whether there be sufficient proof that she knew Hicks to have been in the army."

Well might they doubt it, for there was no proof at all. Yet he never hesitated to answer them.

"There is as full proof as proof can be. But you are judges of the proof. For my part, I thought there was no difficulty in it."

"My lord," the foreman insisted, "we are in some doubt about it."

"I cannot help your doubts," he said irritably. "Was there not proved a discourse of the battle and of the battle and of the army at supper-time?"

"But, my lord, we are not satisfied that she had notice that Hicks was in the army."

He glowered upon them in silence for a moment. They deserved to

be themselves indicted for their slowness to perceive where lay their duty to their king.

"I cannot tell what would satisfy you," he said; and sneered. "Did she not inquire of Dunne whether Hicks had been in the army? And when he told her he did not know, she did not say she would refuse if he had been, but ordered him to come by night, by which it is evident she suspected it."

He ignored, you see, her own complete explanation of that circumstance.

"And when Hicks and Nelthorp came, did she not discourse with them about the battle and the army?" (As if that were not at the time a common topic of discussion.) "Come, come, gentlemen," he said, with amazing impudence, "it is plain proof."

But Mr. Whistler was not yet satisfied.

"We do not remember, my lord, that it was proved that she asked any such question."

That put him in a passion.

"Sure," he bellowed, "you do not remember anything that has passed. Did not Dunne tell you there was such a discourse, and she was by? But if there were no such proof, the circumstances and management of the thing are as full proof as can be. I wonder what it is you doubt of!"

Mrs. Lisle had risen. There was a faint flush of excitement on her grey old face.

"My lord, I hope—" she began, in trembling tones, to get no further.

"You must not speak now!" thundered her terrible judge; and thus struck her silent.

The brief resistance to his formidable will was soon at an end. Within a quarter of an hour the jury announced their verdict. They found her guilty.

"Gentlemen," said his lordship, "I did not think I should have occasion to speak after your verdict, but, finding some hesitancy and doubt among you, I cannot but say I wonder it should come about; for I think, in my conscience, the evidence was as full and plain as it could be, and if I had been among you, and she had been my own mother, I should have found her guilty."

She was brought up for sentence on the morrow, together with several others subsequently convicted. Amid fresh invectives against the religion she practised, he condemned her to be burned alive—which was the proper punishment for high treason—ordering the sheriff to prepare for her execution that same afternoon.

"But look you, Mrs. Lisle," he added, "we that are the judges shall stay in town an hour or two. You shall have pen, ink, and paper, and if, in the mean time, you employ that pen, ink, and paper and that hour or two well—you understand what I mean it may be that you shall hear further from us in a deferring of this execution."

What was this meaning that he assumed she understood? Jeffreys had knowledge of Kirke's profitable traffic in the West, and it is known that he spared no means of acquiring an estate suitable to his rank which he did not possess by way of patrimony. Thus cynically he invited a bribe.

It is the only inference that explains the subsequent rancour he displayed against her, aroused by her neglect to profit by his suggestions. The intercession of the divines of Winchester procured her a week's reprieve, and in that week her puissant friends in London, headed by the Earl of Abergavenny, petitioned the King on her behalf. Even Feversham, the victor of Sedgemoor, begged her

life of the King—bribed to it, as men say, by an offer of a thousand pounds. But the King withheld his mercy upon the plea that he had promised Lord Jeffreys he would not reprieve her, and the utmost clemency influential petitions could wring from James II was that she should be beheaded instead of burned.

She suffered in the market-place of Winchester on September 2d. Christian charity was all her sin, and for this her head was demanded in atonement. She yielded it with a gentle fortitude and resolution. In lieu of speech, she left with the sheriff a pathetic document wherein she protests her innocence of all offence against the King, and forgives her enemies specifically—the judge, who prejudiced her case, and forgot that "the Court should be counsel for the prisoner," and Colonel Penruddock, "though he told me he could have taken those men before they came to my house."

Between those lines you may read the true reason why the Lady Alice Lisle died. She died to slake the cruelly vindictive thirst of King James II on the one hand, and Colonel Penruddock on the other, against her husband who had been dead for twenty years.

V. THE NIGHT OF MASSACRE

—The Story Of The Saint Bartholomew

There are elements of mystery about the massacre of Saint Bartholomew over which, presumably, historians will continue to dispute as long as histories are written. Indeed, it is largely of their disputes that the mystery is begotten. Broadly speaking, these historians may be divided into two schools—Catholic and anti-Catholic. The former have made it their business to show that the massacre was purely a political affair, having no concern with religion; the latter have been equally at pains to prove it purely an act of religious persecution having no concern with politics. Those who adopt the latter point of view insist that the affair was long premeditated, that it had its source in something concerted some seven years earlier between Catherine of Medicis and the sinister Duke of Alva. And they would seem to suggest that Henry of Navarre, the nominal head of the Protestant party, was brought to Paris to wed Marguerite de Valois merely so that by this means the Protestant nobles of the kingdom, coming to the capital for the wedding, should be lured to their destruction.

It does not lie within the purview of the present narrative to enter into a consideration of the arguments of the two schools, nor will it be attempted.

But it may briefly be stated that the truth lies probably in a middle course of reasoning—that the massacre was political in conception and religious in execution; or, in other words, that statecraft

deliberately made use of fanaticism as of a tool; that the massacre was brought about by a sudden determination begotten of opportunity which is but another word for Chance.

Against the theory of premeditation the following cardinal facts may be urged:

(a) The impossibility of guarding for seven years a secret that several must have shared;

(b) The fact that neither Charles IX nor his mother Catherine were in any sense bigoted Catholics, or even of a normal religious sincerity.

(c) The lack of concerted action—so far as the kingdom generally was concerned—in the execution of the massacre.

A subsidiary disproof lies in the attempted assassination of Coligny two days before the massacre, an act which might, by putting the Huguenots on their guard, have caused the miscarriage of the entire plan—had it existed.

It must be borne in mind that for years France had been divided by religious differences into two camps, and that civil war between Catholic and Huguenot had ravaged and distracted the country. At the head of the Protestant party stood that fine soldier Gaspard de Chatillon, Admiral de Coligny, virtually the Protestant King of France, a man who raised armies, maintaining them by taxes levied upon Protestant subjects, and treated with Charles IX as prince with prince. At the head of the Catholic party—the other imperium in imperio—stood the Duke of Guise. The third and weakest party in the State, serving, as it seemed, little purpose beyond that of holding the scales between the other turbulent two, was the party of the King.

The motives and events that precipitated the massacre are set forth in the narration of the King's brother, the Duke of Anjou (afterwards Henri III). It was made by him to Miron, his physician and

confidential servant in Cracow, when he ruled there later as King of Poland, under circumstances which place it beyond suspicion of being intended to serve ulterior aims. For partial corroboration, and for other details of the massacre itself, we have the narratives, among others, of Sully, who was then a young man in the train of the King of Navarre, and of Lusignan, a gentleman of the Admiral's household. We shall closely follow these in our reconstruction of the event and its immediate causes.

The gay chatter of the gallants and ladies thronging the long gallery of the Louvre sank and murmured into silence, and a movement was made to yield a free passage to the King, who had suddenly made his appearance leaning affectionately upon the shoulder of the Admiral de Coligny.

The Duke of Anjou, a slender, graceful young man in a gold-embroidered suit of violet, forgot the interest he was taking in his beautiful hands to bend lower over the handsome Madame de Nemours what time the unfriendly eyes of both were turned upon the Admiral.

The King and the great Huguenot leader came slowly down the gallery, an oddly contrasting pair. Coligny would have been the taller by a half-head but for his stoop, yet in spite of it there was energy and military vigour in his carriage, just as there was a severe dignity amounting to haughtiness in his scarred and wrinkled countenance. A bullet that had pierced his cheek and broken three of his teeth at the battle of Moncontour had left a livid scar that lost itself in his long white beard. His forehead was high and bald, and his eyes were of a steely keenness under their tufted brows. He was dressed with Calvinistic simplicity entirely in black, and just as this contrasted with the King's suit of sulphur-coloured satin, so did the gravity of his countenance contrast with the stupidity of his sovereign's.

Charles IX, a slimly built young man in his twenty-fourth year, was of

a pallid, muddy complexion, with great, shifty, greenish eyes, and a thick, pendulous nose. The protruding upper lip of his long, thin mouth gave him an oafish expression, which was increased by his habit of carrying his head craned forward.

His nature was precisely what you would have expected from his appearance—dull and gross. He was chiefly distinguished among men of birth for general obscenity of speech and morphological inventiveness in blasphemy.

At the end of the gallery Coligny stooped to kiss the royal hand in leave-taking. With his other hand Charles patted the Admiral's shoulder.

"Count me your friend," he said, "body and soul, heart and bowels, even as I count you mine. Fare you well, my father."

Coligny departed, and the King retraced his steps, walking quickly, his head hunched between his shoulders, his baleful eyes looking neither to left nor right. As he passed out, the Duke of Anjou quitted the side of Madame de Nemours, and went after him. Then at last the suspended chatter of the courtiers broke loose again.

The King was pacing his cabinet—a simple room furnished with a medley of objects appertaining to study, to devotion, and to hunting. A large picture of the Virgin hung from a wall flanked on either side by an arquebus, and carrying a hunting-horn on one of its upper corners. A little alabaster holy-water font near the door, crowned by a sprig of palm, seemed to serve as a receptacle for hawk-bells and straps. There was a writing-table of beautifully carved walnut near the leaded window, littered with books and papers—a treatise on hunting lay cheek by jowl with a Book of Hours; a string of rosary beads and a dog-whip lay across an open copy of Ronsard's verses. The King was quite the vilest poetaster of his day.

Charles looked over his shoulder as his brother entered. The scowl on his face deepened when he saw who came, and with a grunt he viciously kicked the liver-coloured hound that lay stretched at his feet. The hound fled yelping to a corner, the Duke checked, startled, in his advance.

"Well?" growled the King. "Well? Am I never to have peace? Am I never to be alone? What now? Bowels of God! What do you want?"

His green eyes smouldered, his right hand opened and closed on the gold hilt of the dagger at his girdle:

Scared by the maniac ferocity of this reception, the young Duke precipitately withdrew.

"It is nothing. Another time, since I disturb you now." He bowed and vanished, followed by an evil, cackling laugh.

Anjou knew how little his brother loved him, and he confesses how much he feared him in that moment. But under his fear it is obvious that there was lively resentment. He went straight in quest of his mother, whose darling he was, to bear her the tale of the King's mood, and what he accounted, no doubt rightly, the cause of it.

"It is the work of that pestilential Huguenot admiral," he announced, at the end of a long tirade, "It is always thus with him after he has seen Coligny."

Catherine of Medicis considered. She was a fat, comfortable woman, with a thick nose, pinched lips, and sleepy eyes.

"Charles," she said at length, in her monotonous, emotionless voice, "is a weathercock that turns with every wind that blows upon him. You should know him by now." And she yawned, so that one who did not know her and her habit of perpetually yawning might have supposed that she was but indifferently interested.

They were alone together in the intimate little tapestried room she called her oratory. She half sat, half reclined upon a couch of rose brocade. Anjou stood over by the window, his back to it, so that his pale face was in shadow. He considered his beautiful hands, which he was reluctant to lower, lest the blood should flow into them and mar their white perfection.

"The Admiral's influence over him is increasing," he complained, "and he uses it to lessen our own."

"Do I not know it?" came her dull voice.

"It is time to end it," said Anjou passionately, "before he ends us. Your influence grows weaker every day and the Admiral's stronger. Charles begins to take sides with him against us. We shall have him a tool of the Huguenot party before all is done. Ah, mon Dieu! You should have seen him leaning upon the shoulder of that old parpaillot, calling him 'my father,' and protesting himself his devoted friend 'body and soul, heart and bowels,' in his own words. And when I seek him afterwards, he scowls and snarls at me, and fingers his dagger as if he would have it in my throat. It is plain to see upon what subject the old scoundrel entertained him." And again he repeated, more fiercely than before: "It is time to end it!"

"I know," she said, ever emotionless before so much emotion. "And it shall be ended. The old assassin should have been hanged years ago for guiding the hand that shot Francois de Guise. Daily he becomes a greater danger, to Charles, to ourselves, and to France. He is embroiling us with Spain through this Huguenot army he is raising to go and fight the battles of Calvinism in Flanders. A fine thing that. Ah, per Dio!" For a moment her voice was a little warmed and quickened. "Catholic France at war with Catholic Spain for the sake of Huguenot Flanders!" She laughed shortly. Then her voice reverted to its habitual sleepy level. "You are right. It is time to end it. Coligny is the head of this rebellious beast. If we cut off the head,

perhaps the beast will perish. We will consult the Duke of Guise." She yawned again. "Yes, the Duke of Guise will be ready to lend us his counsel and his aid. Decidedly we must get rid of the Admiral."

That was on Monday, August 18th of that year 1572, and such was the firm purpose and energy of that fat and seemingly sluggish woman, that within two days all necessary measures were taken, and Maurevert, the assassin, was at his post in the house of Vilaine, in the Cloisters of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, procured for the purpose by Madame de Nemours, who bore the Admiral a mortal hatred.

It was not, however, until the following Friday that Maurevert was given the opportunity of carrying out the task to which he had been hired. On that morning, as the Admiral was passing, accompanied by a few gentlemen of his household, returning from the Louvre to his house in the Rue Betisy, the assassin did his work. There was a sudden arquebusade from a first-floor window, and a bullet smashed two fingers of the Admiral's right hand, and lodged itself in the muscles of his left arm.

With his maimed and bleeding hand he pointed to the window whence the shot had been fired, bidding his gentlemen to force a way into the house and take the assassin. But whilst they were breaking in at the front, Maurevert was making his escape by the back, where a horse waited for him, and, though pursued, he was never overtaken.

News of the event was instantly borne to the King. It found him at tennis with the Duke of Guise and the Admiral's son-in-law, Teligny.

"In this assassin's work, Sire," said the blunt gentleman whom Coligny had sent, "the Admiral desires you to see the proof of the worth of the agreement between himself and Monsieur de Guise that followed upon the treaty of peace of Saint-Germain."

The Duke of Guise drew himself stiffly up, but said no word. The

King, livid with rage, looked at him balefully a moment, then to vent some of his fury he smashed his racket against the wall.

"God's Blood!" he cried, mouthing horribly. "Am I then never to have rest?" He flung away the broken remnants of his racket, and went out cursing. Questioning the messenger further, he learnt that the shot had been fired from the house of Vilaine, a sometime tutor to the Duke of Guise, and that the horse upon which the assassin had fled had been held for him by a groom in the Guise livery.

Meanwhile the Duke and Monsieur de Teligny had gone their ways with no word spoken between them—Guise to shut himself up in his hotel and assemble his friends, Teligny to repair at once to his father-in-law.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, in response to an urgent request from the Admiral, the King went to visit him, accompanied by the Queen-Mother, by his brothers Anjou and Alencon, and a number of officers and courtiers. The royal party saw nothing of the excitement which had been prevailing in the city ever since the morning's event, an excitement which subsided at their approach. The King was gloomy, resentful, and silent, having so far refused to discuss the matter with any one, denying audience even to his mother. Catherine and Anjou were vexed by the miscarriage of the affair, anxious and no less silent than the King.

They found the Admiral awaiting them, calm and composed. The famous Ambroise Pare had amputated the two broken fingers, and had dealt with the wound in the arm. But although Coligny might be considered to have escaped lightly, and not to be in any danger, a rumour was abroad that the bullet was poisoned; and neither the Admiral nor his people seem to have rejected the possibility. One suspects, indeed, that capital was made out of it. It was felt, perhaps, that thus should the Admiral maintain a greater influence with the King. For in any uncertainty as to whether Coligny would live or die,

the King's feelings must be more deeply stirred than if he knew that the wound carried no peril to life.

Followed closely by his mother and his brothers, Charles swept through the spacious ante-chamber, thronged now with grim-faced, resentful Huguenot gentlemen, and so entered the room where Coligny reclined upon a day bed near the window. The Admiral made shift to rise, but this the King hurried forward to prevent.

"Rest yourself, my dear father!" he cried, in accents of deep concern. "Heart of God! What is this they have done to you? Assure me, at least, that your life is safe, or, by the Mass, I'll—"

"I hold my life from God," the Admiral replied gravely, "and when He requires it of me I will yield it up. That is nothing."

"Nothing? God's Blood! Nothing? The hurt is yours, my father, but the outrage mine; and I swear to you, by the Blood and the Death, that I will take such a vengeance as shall never be forgotten!"

Thereupon he fell into such a storm of imprecation and blasphemy that the Admiral, a sincerely devout, God-fearing heretic, shuddered to hear him.

"Calm, Sire!" he begged at last, laying his sound hand upon the King's velvet sleeve. "Be calm and listen, for it is not to speak of myself, of these wounds, or of the wrong done me, that I have presumed to beg you to visit me. This attempt to murder me is but a sign of the evil that is stirring in France to sap your authority and power. But—" He checked and looked at the three who stood immediately behind the King. "What I have to say is, if you will deign to listen, for your private ear."

The King jerked round in a fashion peculiar to him; his every action was abrupt and spasmodic. He eyed his mother and brothers shiftily. It was beyond his power to look any one directly in the face.

"Outside!" he commanded, waving an impatient hand almost in their faces. "Do you hear? Leave me to talk with my father the Admiral."

The young dukes fell back at once, ever in dread of provoking the horrible displays of passion that invariably followed upon any resistance of his feeble will. But the sluggish Catherine was not so easily moved.

"Is Monsieur de Coligny strong enough, do you think, to treat of affairs at present? Consider his condition, I beg," she enjoined in her level voice.

"I thank you for your consideration, madame," said the Admiral, the ghost of an ironic smile about his lips. "But I am strong enough, thank God! And even though my strength were less than it is, it would be more heavily taxed by the thought that I had neglected my duty to His Majesty than it ever could be by the performance of that duty."

"Ha! You hear?" snapped the King. "Go, then; go!"

They went, returning to the ante-chamber to wait until the audience should conclude. The three stood there in the embrasure of a window that looked out upon the hot, sunlit courtyard. There, as Anjou himself tells us, they found themselves hemmed about by some two hundred sullen, grim-faced gentlemen and officers of the Admiral's party, who eyed them without dissembling their hostility, who preserved a silence that was disturbed only by the murmurs of their constant whisperings, and who moved to and fro before the royal group utterly careless of the proper degree of deference and respect.

Isolated thus in that hostile throng, Catherine and her sons became more and more uneasy, so that, as the Queen-Mother afterwards confessed, she was never in any place where her tarrying was attended by so much fear, or her departure thence by so much

pleasure.

It was this fear that spurred her at last to put an end to that secret conference in the room beyond. She did it in characteristic manner. In the most complete outward composure, stifling a yawn as she went, she moved deliberately across to the door, her sons following, rapped shortly on the panel, and entered without waiting to be bidden.

The King, who was standing by the Admiral's side, wheeled sharply at the sound of the opening door. His eyes blazed with sudden anger when he beheld his mother, but she was the first to speak.

"My son," she said, "I am concerned for the poor Admiral. He will have the fever if you continue to permit him to weary himself with affairs at present. It is not to treat him as a friend to prolong this interview. Let business wait until he is recovered, which will be the sooner if he is given rest at present."

Coligny stroked his white beard in silence, while the King flared out, striding towards her:

"Par la Mort Dieu! What is this sudden concern for the Admiral?"

"Not sudden, my son," she answered in her dull voice, her eyes intent upon him, with something magnetic in their sleepy glance that seemed to rob him of half his will. "None knows more accurately than I the Admiral's precise, value to France."

Anjou behind her may have smiled at that equivocal phrase.

"God's Bowels! Am I King, or what am I?"

"It ill becomes a king to abuse the strength of a poor wounded subject," she returned, her eyes ever regarding him steadily. "Come, Charles. Another day, when the Admiral shall have recovered more fully, you may continue this discourse. Come now."

His anger was subdued to mere sullenness, almost infantile in its outward petulant expression. He attempted to meet her glance, and he was completely lost.

"Perhaps... Ah, *Ventre Dieu*, my mother is right! Let the matter rest, then, my father. We will talk of it again as soon as you are well."

He stepped up to the couch, and held out his hand.

Coligny took it, and his eyes looked up wistfully into the weak young face of his King.

"I thank you, Sire, for coming and for hearing me. Another day, if I am spared, I may tell you more. Meanwhile, bear well in mind what I have said already. I have no interests in this world but your own, Sire." And he kissed the royal hand in farewell.

Not until they were back in the Louvre did the Queen attempt to break upon the King's gloomy abstraction, to learn—as learn she must—the subject of the Admiral's confidential communication.

Accompanied by Anjou, she sought him in his cabinet, nor would she be denied. He sat at his writing-table, his head sunken between his shoulders, his receding chin in his cupped palms. He glared at the pair as they entered, swore savagely, and demanded their business with him.

Catherine sat down with massive calm. Anjou remained standing beside and slightly behind her, leaning upon the back of her tall chair.

"My son," she said bluntly, "I have come to learn what passed between you and Coligny."

"What passed? What concern is that of yours?"

"All your concerns are mine," she answered tranquilly. "I am your mother."

"And I am your king!" he answered, banging the table. "And I mean to be king!"

"By the grace of God and the favour of Monsieur de Coligny," she sneered, with unruffled calm.

"What's that?" His mouth fell open, and his eyes stared. A crimson flush overspread his muddy complexion. "What's that?"

Her dull glance met and held his own whilst calmly she repeated her sneering words.

"And that is why I have come to you," she added. "If you are unable to rule without guidance, I must at least do what I can so that the guidance shall not be that of a rebel, of one who guides you to the end that he may master you."

"Master me!" he screamed. He rose in his indignation and faced her. But his glance, unable to support her steady eyes, faltered and fell away. Foul oaths poured from his royal lips. "Master me!" he repeated.

"Aye—master you," she answered him. "Master you until the little remnant of your authority shall have been sapped; until you are no more than a puppet in the hands of the Huguenot party, a roi faineant, a king of straw."

"By God, madame, were you not my mother—"

"It is because I am your mother that I seek to save you."

He looked at her again, but again his glance faltered. He paced the length of the room and back, mouthing and muttering. Then he came to stand, leaning on the prie-dieu, facing her.

"By God's Death, madame, since you demand to know what the Admiral said, you shall. You prove to me that what he told me was no

more than true. He told me that a king is only recognized in France as long as he is a power for good or ill over his subjects; that this power, together with the management of all State affairs, is slipping, by the crafty contrivances of yourself and Anjou there, out of my hands into your own; that this power and authority which you are both stealing from me may one day be used against me and my kingdom. And he bade me be on my guard against you both and take my measures. He gave me this counsel, madame, because he deemed it his duty as one of my most loyal and faithful servants at the point of death, and —"

"The shameless hypocrite!" her dull, contemptuous voice interrupted him. "At the point of death! Two broken fingers and a flesh-wound in the arm and he represents himself as in articulo mortis that he may play upon you, and make you believe his lies."

Her stolidity of manner and her logic, ponderous and irresistible, had their effect. His big, green eyes seemed to dilate, his mouth fell open.

"If—" he began, and checked, rapped out an oath, and checked again. "Are they lies, madame?" he asked slowly.

She caught the straining note of hope in that question of his—a hope founded upon vanity, the vanity to be king in fact, as well as king in name. She rose.

"To ask me that—me, your mother—is to insult me. Come, Anjou."

And on that she departed, craftily, leaving her suggestion to prey upon his mind.

But once alone in her oratory with Anjou, her habitual torpor was sloughed away. For once she quivered and crimsoned and raised her voice, whilst for once her sleepy eyes kindled and flashed as she inveighed against Coligny and the Huguenots.

For the moment, however, there was no more to be done. The stroke had failed; Coligny had survived the attempt upon his life, and there was danger that on the recoil the blow might smite those who had launched it. But on the morrow, which was Saturday, things suddenly assumed a very different complexion.

That great Catholic leader, the powerful, handsome Duke of Guise, who, more than suspected of having inspired the attempted assassination, had kept his hotel since yesterday, now sought the Queen-Mother with news of what was happening in the city. Armed bands of Huguenot nobles were riding through the streets, clamouring:

"Death to the assassins of the Admiral! Down with the Guisards!"

And, although a regiment of Gardes Francaises had been hastily brought to Paris to keep order, the Duke feared grave trouble in a city which the royal wedding had filled with Huguenot gentlemen and their following. Then, too, there were rumours that the Huguenots were arming everywhere—rumours which, whether true or not, were, under the circumstances, sufficiently natural and probable to be taken seriously.

Leaving Guise in her oratory, and summoning her darling Anjou, Catherine at once sought the King. She may have believed the rumours, and she may even have stated them as facts beyond dispute so as to strengthen and establish her case against Gaspard de Coligny.

"King Gaspard I," she told him, "is already taking his measures. The Huguenots are arming; officers have been dispatched into the provinces to levy troops. The Admiral has ordered the raising of ten thousand horse in Germany, and another ten thousand Swiss mercenaries in the Cantons."

He stared at her vacuously. Some such rumour had already reached him, and he conceived that here was definite confirmation of it.

"You may determine now who are your friends, who your loyal servants," she told him. "How is so much force to be resisted in the state in which you find yourself? The Catholics exhausted, and weary as they are by a civil war in which their king was of little account to them, are going to arm so as to offer what resistance they can without depending upon you. Thus, within your State you will have two great parties under arms, neither of which can be called your own. Unless you stir yourself, and quickly, unless you choose now between friends and foes, you will find yourself alone, isolated, in grave peril, without authority or power."

He sank overwhelmed to a chair, and took his head in his hands, cogitating. When next he looked at her there was positive fear in his great eyes, a fear evoked by contemplation of the picture which her words had painted for him.

He looked from her to Anjou.

"What then?" he asked. "What then? How is the danger to be averted?"

"By a simple stroke of the sword," she answered calmly. "Slice off at a blow the head of this beast of rebellion, this hydra of heresy."

He huddled back, horror in his eyes. His hands slid slowly along the carved arms of his chair, and clenched the ends so tightly that his knuckles looked like knobs of marble.

"Kill the Admiral?" he said slowly.

"The Admiral and the chief Huguenot leaders," she said, much in the tone she might have used, were it a matter of wringing the necks

of a dozen capons.

"Ah, ca! Par la Mort Dieu!" He heaved himself up, raging. "Thus would your hatred of him be served. Thus would you—"

Coolly she sliced into his foaming speech.

"Not I—not I!" she said. "Do nothing upon my advice. Summon your Council. Send for Tavannes, Biragues, Retz, and the others. Consult with them. They are your friends; you trust and believe in them. When they know the facts, see if their counsel will differ from your mother's. Send for them; they are in the Louvre now."

He looked at her a moment.

"Very well," he said; and reeled to the door, bawling hoarsely his orders.

They came, one by one—the Marshal de Tavannes, the Duke of Retz, the Duke of Nevers, the Chancellor de Biragues, and lastly the Duke of Guise, upon whom the King scowled a jealous hatred that was now fully alive.

The window, which overlooked the quay and the river, stood open to admit what air might be stirring on that hot day of August.

Charles sat at his writing-table, sullen and moody, twining a string of beads about his fingers. Catherine occupied the chair over beyond the table, Anjou sitting near her on a stool. The others stood respectfully awaiting that the King should make known his wishes. The shifty royal glance swept over them from under lowering brows; then it rested almost in challenge upon his mother.

"Tell them," he bade her curtly.

She told them what already she had told her son, relating all now with greater detail and circumstance. For some moments nothing was

heard in that room but the steady drone of her unemotional voice. When she had finished, she yawned and settled herself to hear what might be answered.

"Well," snapped the King, "you have heard. What do you advise? Speak out!"

Nevers was the first to answer.

"There is no other way," he said stiffly, "but that which Her Majesty advises. The danger is grave. If it is to be averted, action must be prompt and effective."

Tavannes clasped his hands behind him and said much the same, as did presently the Chancellor.

Twisting and untwisting his chaplet of beads about his long fingers, his eyes averted, the King heard each in turn. Then he looked up. His glance, deliberately ignoring Guise, settled upon the Duke of Retz, who held aloof.

"And you, Monsieur le Marechal, what is your counsel?"

Retz drew himself up, as if bracing himself to meet opposing forces. He was a little pale, but quite composed.

"If there is a man whom I should hate," he said, "it is this Gaspard de Coligny, who has defamed me and all my family by the foul accusations he has put abroad. But I will not," he added firmly, "take vengeance upon my enemies at the expense of my king and master. I cannot counsel a course so disastrous to Your Majesty and the whole kingdom. Did we act as we have been advised, Sire, can you doubt that we should be taxed—and rightly taxed in view of the treaty that has been signed—with perfidy and disloyalty?"

Dead silence followed that bombshell of opposition, coming from a quarter whence it was least expected. For Catherine and Anjou had

confidently counted upon the Duke's hatred of Coligny to ensure his support of their designs.

A little colour crept into the pale cheeks of the King. His glance kindled out of its sullenness. He was as one who sees sudden hope amid despair.

"That is the truth," he said. "Messieurs, and you, madame my mother, you have heard the truth. How do you like it?"

"Monsieur de Retz is deceived by an excess of loyalty," said Anjou quickly. "Because he bears a personal enmity to the Admiral, he conceives that it would hurt his honour to speak otherwise. It must savour to him, as he has said, of using his king and master to avenge his own personal wrongs. We can respect Monsieur de Retz's view, although we hold it mistaken."

"Will Monsieur de Retz tell us what other course lies open?" quoth the bluff Tavannes.

"Some other course must be found," cried the King, rousing himself. "It must be found, do you hear? I will not have you touch the life of my friend the Admiral. I will not have it—by the Blood!"

A hubbub followed, all speaking at once, until the King banged the table, and reminded them that his cabinet was not a fish-market.

"I say that there is no other way," Catherine insisted. "There cannot be two kings in France, nor can there be two parties. For your own safety's sake, and for the safety of your kingdom, I beseech you so to contrive that in France there be but one party with one head—yourself."

"Two kings in France?" he said. "What two kings?"

"Yourself and Gaspard I—King Coligny, the King of the Huguenots."

"He is my subject—my faithful, loyal subject," the King protested, but with less assurance.

"A subject who raises forces of his own, levies taxes of his own, garrisons Huguenot cities," said Biragues. "That is a very dangerous type of subject, Sire."

"A subject who forces you into war with Protestant Flanders against Catholic Spain," added the blunt Tavannes.

"Forces me?" roared the King, half rising, his eyes aflash. "That is a very daring word."

"It would be if the proof were absent. Remember, Sire, his very speech to you before you permitted him to embark upon preparations for this war. 'Give us leave,' he said, 'to make war in Flanders, or we shall be compelled to make war upon yourself.'"

The King winced and turned livid. Sweat stood in beads upon his brow. He was touched in his most sensitive spot. That speech of Coligny's was of all things the one he most desired to forget. He twisted the chaplet so that the beads bit deeply into his fingers.

"Sire," Tavannes continued, "were I a king, and did a subject so address me, I should have his head within the hour. Yet worse has happened since, worse is happening now. The Huguenots are arming. They ride arrogantly through the streets of your capital, stirring up rebellion. They are here in force, and the danger grows acute and imminent."

Charles writhed before them. He mopped his brow with a shaking hand.

"The danger—yes. I see that. I admit the danger. But Coligny—"

"Is it to be King Gaspard or King Charles?" rasped the voice of Catherine.

The chaplet snapped suddenly in the King's fingers. He sprang to his feet, deathly pale.

"So be it!" he cried. "Since it is necessary to kill the Admiral, kill him, then. Kill him!" he screamed, in a fury that seemed aimed at those who forced this course upon him. "Kill him—but see to it also that at the same time you kill every Huguenot in France, so that not one shall be left to reproach me. Not one, do you hear? Take your measures and let the thing be done at once." And on that, his face livid and twitching, his limbs shaking, he flung out of the room and left them.

It was all the warrant they required, and they set to work at once there in the King's own cabinet, where he had left them. Guise, who had hitherto been no more than a silent spectator, assumed now the most active part. Upon his own shoulders he took the charge of seeing the Admiral done to death.

The remainder of the day and a portion of the evening were spent in concerting ways and means. They assured themselves of the Provost of the merchants of Paris, of the officers of the Gardes Francaises and the three thousand Swiss, of the Captains of the quarters and other notoriously factious persons who could be trusted as leaders. By ten o'clock at night all preparations were made and it was agreed that the ringing of the bell of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois for matins was to be the signal for the massacre.

A gentleman of the Admiral's household taking his way homeward that night passed several men bearing sheaves of pikes upon their shoulders, and never suspected whom these weapons were to arm. He met several small companies of soldiers marching quietly, their weapons shouldered, their matches glowing, and still he suspected nothing, whilst in one quarter he stopped to watch a man whose behaviour seemed curious, and discovered that he was chalking a

white cross upon the doors of certain houses.

Meeting soon afterwards another man with a bundle of weapons on his shoulder, the intrigued Huguenot gentleman asked him bluntly what he carried and whither he went.

"It is for the divertissement at the Louvre tonight," he was answered.

But in the Louvre the Queen-Mother and the Catholic leaders, the labours of preparation ended, were snatching a brief rest. Between two and three o'clock in the morning Catherine and Anjou repaired again to the King's cabinet. They found him waiting there, his face haggard and his eyes fevered.

He had spent a part of the evening at billiards, and among the players had been La Rochefoucauld, of whom he was fond, and who had left him with a jest at eleven o'clock, little dreaming that it was for the last time.

The three of them crossed to the window overlooking the river. They opened it, and peered out fearfully. Even Catherine trembled now that the hour approached. The air was fresh and cool, swept clean by the stirring breeze of the dawn, whose first ghostly gleams were already in the sky. Suddenly, somewhere near at hand, a pistol cracked. The noise affected them oddly. The King fell into an ague and his teeth chattered audibly. Panic seized him.

"By the Blood, it shall not be! It shall not be!" he cried suddenly.

He looked at his mother and his brother and they looked at him; ghastly were the faces of all three, their eyes wide and staring with horror.

Charles swore in his terror that he would cancel all commands. And since Catherine and Anjou made no attempt to hinder him, he

summoned an officer and bade him seek out the Duke of Guise at once and command him to stay his hand.

The messenger eventually found the Duke in the courtyard of the Admiral's house, standing over the Admiral's dead body, which his assassins had flung down from the bedroom window. Guise laughed, and stirred the head of the corpse with his foot, answering that the message came too late. Even as he spoke the great bell of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois began to ring for matins.

The royal party huddled at that window of the Louvre heard it at the same moment, and heard, as if in immediate answer, shots of arquebus and pistol, cries and screams near at hand, and then, gradually swelling from a murmur, the baying of the fierce multitude. Other bells gave tongue, until from every steeple in Paris the alarm rang out. The red glow from thousands of torches flushed the heavens with a rosy tint as of dawn, the air grew heavy with the smell of pitch and resin.

The King, clutching the sill of the window, poured out a stream of blasphemy from between his chattering teeth. Then the hubbub rose suddenly near at hand. The neighbourhood of the Louvre was populous with Huguenots, and into it now poured the excited Catholic citizens and soldiers. Soon the quay beneath the palace windows presented the fiercest spectacle of any quarter, of Paris.

Half-clad men, women, and children fled screaming before the assassins, until they were checked by the chains that everywhere had been placed across the streets. Some sought the river, hoping to find a way of escape. But with Satanic foresight, the boats usually moored there had been conveyed to the other side. Thus some hundreds of Huguenots were brought to bay, and done to death under the very eyes of the King who had unleashed this horror. Doors were crashed open, flames rose to heaven, men and women were shot down under the palace wall, bodies were flung from windows, and on every side—

in the words of D'Aubigne—the blood now flowed, seeking the river.

The King watched a while, screams and curses pouring from his lips to be lost in the horrible uproar. He turned, perhaps to upbraid his mother and his brother, but found that they were no longer at his side. Behind him in the room a page was crouching, watching him with a white, horrified face.

Suddenly the King laughed—it was the fierce, hysterical laugh of a madman. His eyes fell on the arquebuses flanking the picture of the Mother of Mercy. He took one of them down, then caught the boy by the collar of his doublet and dragged him forward to the window.

"Hither, and load for me!" he bade him, between peals of his terrible laughter. Then he levelled the weapon across the sill of the window. "Parpaillots! Parpaillots!" he screamed. "Kill! Kill!" and he discharged the arquebus into a fleeing group of Huguenots.

Five days later, the King—who by now had thrown the blame of the whole affair, with its slaughter of some two thousand Huguenots, upon the Guises and their hatred of Coligny—rode out to Montfaucon to behold the decapitated body of the Admiral, which hung from the gallows in chains. A courtier of a poor but obtrusive wit leaned towards him.

"The Admiral becomes noisome, I think," he said.

The King's green eyes considered him, his lips curling grimly.

"The body of a dead enemy always smells sweet," he said.

VI. THE NIGHT OF WITCHCRAFT—Louis XIV and Madame De Montespan

If you scrape the rubbish-heap of servile, coeval flattery that usually smothers the personality of a monarch, you will discover a few kings who have been truly great; many who have achieved greatness because they were wisely content to serve as masks for the great intellects of their time; and, for the rest, some bad kings, some foolish kings, and some ridiculous kings. But in all that royal gallery of history you will hardly find a more truly absurd figure than that of the resplendent Roi Soleil, the Grand Monarque, the Fourteenth Louis of France.

I am not aware that he has ever been laughed at; certainly never to the extent which he deserves. The flatterers of his day, inevitable products of his reign, did their work so thoroughly that even in secret they do not appear to have dared to utter—possibly they did not even dare to think—the truth about him. Their work survives, and when you have assessed the monstrous flattery at its true worth, swept it aside and come down to the real facts of his life, you make the discovery that the proudest title their sycophancy could bestow and his own fatuity accept—Le Roi Soleil, the Sun-King—makes him what indeed he is: a king of opera bouffe. There is about him at times something almost reminiscent of the Court buffoons of a century before, who puffed themselves out with mock pride, and aped a sort of sovereignty to excite laughter; with this difference, however, that in his own case it was not intended to be amusing.

A heartless voluptuary of mediocre intelligence, he contrived to wrap himself in what Saint-Simon has called a "terrible majesty." He was obsessed by the idea of the dignity, almost the divinity—of kingship. I cannot believe that he conceived himself human. He appears to have held that being king was very like being God, and he duped the world by ceremonials of etiquette that were very nearly sacramental. We find him burdening the most simple and personal acts of everyday life with a succession of rites of an amazing complexity. Thus, when he rose in the morning, princes of the blood and the first gentlemen of France were in attendance: one to present to him his stockings, another to proffer on bended knee the royal garters, a third to perform the ceremony of handing him his wig, and so on until the toilette of his plump, not unhandsome person was complete. You miss the incense, you feel that some noble thurifer should have fumigated him at each stage. Perhaps he never thought of it.

The evil fruits of his reign—evil, that is to say, from the point of view of his order, which was swept away as so much anachronistic rubbish—did not come until a hundred years later. In his own day France was great, and this not because but in spite of him. After all, he was not the absolute ruler he conceived himself. There were such capable men as Colbert and Louvois at the King's side'; there was the great genius of France which manifests itself when and as it will, whatever the regime—and there was Madame de Montespan to whose influence not a little of Louis's glory may be ascribed, since the most splendid years of his reign were those between 1668 and 1678 when she was *maitresse en titre* and more than Queen of France. The women played a great part at the Court of Louis XIV, and those upon whom he turned his dark eyes were in the main as wax under the solar rays of the Sun-King. But Madame de Montespan had discovered the secret of reversing matters, so that in her hands it was the King who became as wax for her modelling. It is with this secret—a page of the secret history of France that we are here concerned.

Francoises Athenais de Tonnay-Charente had come to Court in 1660 as a maid of honour to the Queen. Of a wit and grace to match her superb beauty, she was also of a perfervid piety, a daily communicant, a model of virtue to all maids of honour. This until the Devil tempted her. When that happened, she did not merely eat an apple; she devoured an entire orchard. Pride and ambition brought about her downfall. She shared the universal jealousy of which Louise de la Valliere was a victim, and coveted the honours and the splendour by which that unfortunate favourite was surrounded.

Not even her marriage with the Marquis de Montespan some three years after her coming to Court sufficed to overcome the longings born of her covetousness and ambition. And then, when the Sun-King looked with favour upon her opulent charms, when at last she saw the object of her ambition within reach, that husband of hers went very near to wrecking everything by his unreasonable behaviour. This preposterous marquis had the effrontery to dispute his wife with Jupiter, was so purblind as not to appreciate the honour the Sun-King proposed to do him.

In putting it thus, I but make myself the mouthpiece of the Court.

When Montespan began to make trouble by railing furiously against the friendship of the King for his wife, his behaviour so amazed the King's cousin, Mademoiselle de Montpensier, that she called him "an extravagant and extraordinary man." To his face she told him that he must be mad to behave in this fashion; and so incredibly distorted were his views, that he did not at all agree with her. He provoked scenes with the King, in which he quoted Scripture, made opposite allusions to King David which were in the very worst taste, and even ventured to suggest that the Sun-King might have to reckon with the judgment of God. If he escaped a *lettre de cachet* and a dungeon in the Bastille, it can only have been because the King feared the further spread of a scandal injurious to the sacrosanctity of his royal dignity.

The Marchioness fumed in private and sneered in public. When Mademoiselle de Montpensier suggested that for his safety's sake she should control her husband's antics, she expressed her bitterness.

"He and my parrot," she said, "amuse the Court to my shame."

In the end, finding that neither by upbraiding the King nor by beating his wife could he prevail, Monsieur de Montespan resigned himself after his own fashion. He went into widower's mourning, dressed his servants in black, and came ostentatiously to Court in a mourning coach to take ceremonious leave of his friends. It was an affair that profoundly irritated the Sun-King, and very nearly made him ridiculous.

Thereafter Montespan abandoned his wife to the King. He withdrew first to his country seat, and, later, from France, having received more than a hint that Louis was intending to settle his score with him. By that time Madame de Montespan was firmly established as *maitresse en titre*, and in January of 1669 she gave birth to the Duke of Maine, the first of the seven children she was to bear the King. Parliament was to legitimize them all, declaring them royal children of France, and the country was to provide titles, dignities, and royal rent-rolls for them and their heirs forever. Do you wonder that there was a revolution a century later, and that the people, grown weary of the parasitic anachronism of royalty, should have risen to throw off the intolerable burden it imposed upon them?

The splendour of Madame de Montespan in those days was something the like of which had never been seen at the Court of France. On her estate of Clagny, near Versailles, stood now a magnificent chateau. Louis had begun by building a country villa, which satisfied her not at all.

"That," she told him, "might do very well for an opera-girl":

whereupon the infatuated monarch had no alternative but to command its demolition, and call in the famous architect, Mansard, to erect in its place an ultraroyal residence.

At Versailles itself, whilst the long-suffering Queen had to be content with ten rooms on the second floor, Madame de Montespan was installed in twice that number on the first; and whilst a simple page sufficed to carry the Queen's train at Court, nothing less than the wife of a marshal of France must perform the same office for the favourite. She kept royal state as few queens have ever kept it. She was assigned a troop of royal bodyguards for escort, and when she travelled there was a never-ending train to follow her six-horse coach, and officers of State came to receive her with royal honours wherever she passed.

In her immeasurable pride she became a tyrant, even over the King himself.

"Thunderous and triumphant," Madame de Sevigne describes her in those days when the Sun-King was her utter and almost timid slave.

But constancy is not a Jovian virtue. Jupiter grew restless, and then, shaking off all restraint, plunged into inconstancy of the most scandalous and flagrant kind. It is doubtful if the history of royal amours, with all its fecundity, can furnish a parallel. Within a few months, Madame de Soubise, Mademoiselle de Rochefort-Theobon, Madame de Louvigny, Madame de Ludres, and some lesser ones passed in rapid succession through the furnace of the Sun-King's affection—which is to say, through the royal bed—and at last the Court was amazed to see the Widow Scarron, who had been appointed governess to Madame de Montespan's royal children, empanoplied in a dignity and ceremony that left no doubt on the score of her true position at Court.

And so, after seven years of absolute sway in which homage had

been paid her almost in awe by noble and simple alike, Madame de Montespan, neglected now by Louis, moved amid reflections of that neglect, with arrogantly smiling lips and desperate rage in her heart. She sneered openly at the royal lack of taste, allowed her barbed wit to make offensive sport with the ladies who supplanted her; yet, ravaged by jealousy, she feared for herself the fate which through her had overtaken La Valliere.

That fear was with her now as she sat in the window embrasure, hell in her heart and a reflection of it in her eyes, as, fallen almost to the rank of a spectator in that comedy wherein she was accustomed to the leading part, she watched the shifting, chattering, glittering crowd. And as she watched, her line of vision was crossed to her undoing by the slender, wellknit figure of de Vanens, who, dressed from head to foot in black, detached sharply from that dazzling throng. His face was pale and saturnine, his eyes dark, very level, and singularly piercing. Thus his appearance served to underline the peculiar fascination which he exerted, the rather sinister appeal which he made to the imagination.

This young Provencal nobleman was known to dabble in magic, and there were one or two dark passages in his past life of which more than a whisper had gone abroad. Of being a student of alchemy, a "philosopher"—that is to say, a seeker after the philosopher's stone, which was to effect the transmutation of metals—he made no secret. But if you taxed him with demoniacal practices he would deny it, yet in a way that carried no conviction.

To this dangerous fellow Madame de Montespan now made appeal in her desperate need.

Their eyes met as he was sauntering past, and with a lazy smile and a languid wave of her fan she beckoned him to her side.

"They tell me, Vanens," said she, "that your philosophy succeeds

so well that you are transmuting copper into silver."

His piercing eyes surveyed her, narrowing; a smile flickered over his thin lips.

"They tell you the truth," he said. "I have cast a bar which has been purchased as good silver by the Mint."

Her interest quickened. "By the Mint!" she echoed, amazed. "But, then, my friend—" She was breathless with excitement. "It is a miracle."

"No less," he admitted. "But there is the greater miracle to come—the transmutation of base metal into gold."

"And you will perform it?"

"Let me but conquer the secret of solidifying mercury, and the rest is naught. I shall conquer it, and soon."

He spoke with easy confidence, a man stating something that he knew beyond the possibility of doubt. The Marquise became thoughtful. She sighed.

"You are the master of deep secrets, Vanens. Have you none that will soften flinty hearts, make them responsive?"

He considered this woman whom Saint-Simon has called "beautiful as the day," and his smile broadened.

"Look in your mirror for the alchemy needed there," he bade her.

Anger rippled across the perfect face. She lowered

"I have looked—in vain. Can you not help me, Vanens, you who know so much?"

"A love-philtre?" said he, and hummed. "Are you in earnest?"

"Do you mock me with that question? Is not my need proclaimed for all to see?"

Vanens became grave.

"It is not an alchemy in which myself I dabble," he said slowly. "But I am acquainted with those who do."

She clutched his wrist in her eagerness.

"I will pay well," she said.

"You will need to. Such things are costly." He glanced round to see that none was listening, then bending nearer: "There is a sorceress named La Voisin in the Rue de la Tannerie, well known as a fortuneteller to many ladies of the Court, who at a word from me will do your need."

La Montespan turned white. The piety in which she had been reared—the habits of which clung to her despite the irregularity of her life—made her recoil before the thing that she desired. Sorcery was of the Devil. She told him so. But Vanens laughed.

"So that it be effective. . ." said he with a shrug.

And then across the room floated a woman's trilling laugh. She looked in the direction of the sound and beheld the gorgeous figure of the King bending—yet haughty and condescending even in adoration—over handsome Madame de Ludres. Pride and ambition rose up in sudden fury to trample on religious feeling. Let Vanens take her to this witch of his, for be the aid what it might, she must have it.

And so, one dark night late in the year, Louis de Vanens handed a masked and muffled lady from a coach at the corner of the Rue de la Tannerie, and conducted her to the house of La Voisin.

The door was opened for them by a young woman of some twenty

years of age—Marguerite Monvoisin, the daughter of the witch—who led them upstairs to a room that was handsomely furnished and hung with fantastic tapestry of red designs upon a black ground—designs that took monstrous shapes in the flickering light of a cluster of candles. Black curtains parted, and from between them stepped a short, plump woman, of a certain comeliness, with two round black beads of eyes. She was fantastically robed in a cloak of crimson velvet, lined with costly furs and closely studded with double-headed eagles in fine gold, which must have been worth a prince's ransom; and she wore red shoes on each of which there was the same eagle design in gold.

"Ah, Vanens!" she said familiarly.

He bowed.

"I bring you," he announced, "a lady who has need of your skill."

And he waved a hand towards the tall cloaked figure at his side.

La Voisin looked at the masked face.

"Velvet faces tell me little, Madame la Marquise," she said calmly. "Nor, believe me, will the King look at a countenance that you conceal from me."

There was an exclamation of surprise and anger from Madame de Montespan. She plucked off her mask.

"You knew me?"

"Can you wonder?" asked La Voisin, "since I have told you what you carry concealed in your heart?"

Madame de Montespan was as credulous as only the very devout can be.

"Since that is so, since you know already what I seek, tell me can you procure it me?" she asked in a fever of excitement. "I will pay well."

La Voisin smiled darkly.

"Obdurate, indeed, is the case that will not yield to such medicine as mine," she said. "Let me consider first what must be done. In a few days I shall bring you word. But have you courage for a great ordeal?"

"For any ordeal that will give me what I want."

"In a few days, then, you shall hear from me," said the witch, and so dismissed the great lady.

Leaving a heavy purse behind her, as Vanens had instructed her, the Marchioness departed with her escort. And there, with that initiation, as far as we can ascertain, ended Louis de Vanens's connection with the affair.

At Clagny Madame de Montespan waited for three days in a fever of impatience for the coming of the witch. But when at last La Voisin presented herself, the proposal that she had to make was one before which the Marchioness recoiled in horror and some indignation.

The magic that La Voisin suggested involved a coadjutor, the Abbe Guibourg, and the black mass to be celebrated by him. Madame de Montespan had heard something of these dread sacrificial rites to Satan; sufficient to fill her with loathing and disgust of the whitefaced, beady-eyed woman who dared to insult her by the proposal. She fumed and raged a while, and even went near to striking La Voisin, who looked on with inscrutable face and stony, almost contemptuous, indifference. Before that impenetrable, almost uncanny, calm, Madame de Montespan's fury at last abated. Then the urgency of her need becoming paramount, she desired more clearly to be told what would be expected of her. What the witch told her was more appalling

than anything she could have imagined. But La Voisin argued:

"Can anything be accomplished without cost? Can anything be gained in this life without payment of some kind?"

"But the price of this is monstrous!" Madame de Montespan protested.

"Measure it by the worldly advantages to be gained. They are not small, madame. To enjoy boundless wealth, boundless power, and boundless honour, to be more than queen—is not all this worth some sacrifice?"

To Madame de Montespan it must have been worth any sacrifice in this world or the next, since in the end she conquered her disgust, and agreed to lend herself to this horror.

Three masses, she was told, would be necessary to ensure success, and it was determined that they should be celebrated in the chapel of the Chateau de Villebousin, where Guibourg had been almoner, to which he had access, and which was at the time untenanted.

The chateau was a gloomy mediaeval fortress, blackened by age, and standing, surrounded by a moat, in a lonely spot some two miles to the south of Paris. Thither on a dark, gusty night of March came Madame de Montespan, accompanied by her confidential waiting-woman, Mademoiselle Desceillets. They left the coach to await them on the Orleans road, and thence, escorted by a single male attendant, they made their way by a rutted, sodden path towards the grim castle looming faintly through the enveloping gloom.

The wind howled dismally about the crenellated turrets; and a row of poplars, standing like black, phantasmal guardians of the evil place, bent groaning before its fury. From the running waters of the moat, swollen by recent rains, came a gurgling sound that was

indescribably wicked.

Desocille was frightened by the dark, the desolate loneliness and eeriness of the place; but she dared utter no complaint as she stumbled forward over the uneven ground, through the gloom and the buffeting wind, compelled by the suasion of her mistress's imperious will. Thus, by a drawbridge spanning dark, oily waters, they came into a vast courtyard and an atmosphere as of mildew. A studded door stood ajar, and through the gap, from a guiding beacon of infamy, fell a rhomb of yellow light, suddenly obscured by a squat female figure when the steps of the Marchioness and her companions fell upon the stones of the yard.

It was La Voisin who stood on the threshold to receive her client. In the stone-flagged hall behind her the light of a lantern revealed her daughter, Marguerite Monvoisin, and a short, crafty-faced, misshapen fellow in black homespun and a red wig—a magician named Lesage, one of La Voisin's coadjutors, a rogue of some talent who exploited the witches of Paris to his own profit.

Leaving Leroy—the Marchioness's male attendant below in this fellow's company, La Voisin took up a candle and lighted Madame de Montespan up the broad stone staircase, draughty and cold, to the ante-room of the chapel on the floor above. Mademoiselle Desceille followed closely and fearfully, and Marguerite Monvoisin came last.

They entered the ante-room, a spacious chamber, bare of furniture save for an oaken table in the middle, some faded and mildewed tapestries, and a cane-backed settle of twisted walnut over against the wall. An alabaster lamp on the table made an island of light in that place of gloom, and within the circle of its feeble rays stood a gross old man of some seventy years of age in sacerdotal garments of unusual design: the white alb worn over a greasy cassock was studded with black fir-cones; the stole and maniple were of black satin, with fir-cones wrought in yellow thread.

His inflamed countenance was of a revolting hideousness: his cheeks were covered by a network of blue veins, his eyes squinted horribly, his lips vanished inwards over toothless gums, and a fringe of white hair hung in matted wisps from his high, bald crown. This was the infamous Abbe Guibourg, sacristan of Saint Denis, an ordained priest who had consecrated himself to the service of the Devil.

He received the great lady with a low bow which, despite herself, she acknowledged by a shudder. She was very pale, and her eyes were dilating and preternaturally bright. Fear began to possess her, yet she suffered herself to be ushered into the chapel, which was dimly illumined by a couple of candles standing beside a basin on a table. The altar light had been extinguished. Her maid would have hung back, but that she feared to be parted from her mistress. She passed in with her in the wake of Guibourg, and followed by La Voisin, who closed the door, leaving her daughter in the ante-room.

Although she had never been a participant in any of the sorceries practised by her mother, yet Marguerite was fully aware of their extent, and more than guessed what horrors were taking place beyond the closed doors of the chapel. The very thought of them filled her with loathing and disgust as she sat waiting, huddled in a corner of the settle. And yet when presently through the closed doors came the drone of the voice of that unclean celebrant, to blend with the whine of the wind in the chimney, Marguerite, urged by a morbid curiosity she could not conquer, crept shuddering to the door, which directly faced the altar, and going down on her knees applied her eye to the keyhole.

What she saw may very well have appalled her considering the exalted station of Madame de Montespan. She beheld the white, sculptural form of the royal favourite lying at full length supine upon the altar, her arms outstretched, holding a lighted candle in each hand. Immediately before her stood the Abbe Guibourg, his body screening

the chalice and its position from the eye of the watching girl.

She heard the whine of his voice pattering the Latin of the mass, which he was reciting backwards from the last gospel; and occasionally she heard responses muttered by her mother, who with Mademoiselle Desceillets was beyond Marguerite's narrow range of vision.

Apart from the interest lent to the proceedings by the presence of the royal favourite the affair must have seemed now very stupid and pointless to Marguerite, although she would certainly not have found it so had she known enough Latin to understand the horrible perversion of the Credo. But when the Offertory was reached, matters suddenly quickened. In stealing away from the door, she was no more than in time to avoid being caught spying by her mother, who now issued from the chapel.

La Voisin crossed the ante-room briskly and went out.

Within a very few minutes she was back again, her approach now heralded by the feeble, quavering squeals of a very young child.

Marguerite Monvoisin was sufficiently acquainted with the ghastly rites to guess what was impending. She was young, and herself a mother. She had her share of the maternal instinct alive in every female animal—with the occasional exception of the human pervert—and the hoarse, plaintive cries of that young child chilled her to the soul with horror. She felt the skin roughening and tightening upon her body, and a sense of physical sickness overcame her. That and the fear of her mother kept her stiff and frozen in an angle of the settle until La Voisin had passed through and reentered the chapel bearing that piteous bundle in her arms.

Then, when the door had closed again, the girl, horrified and fascinated, sped back to watch. She saw that unclean priest turn and

receive the child from La Voisin. As it changed hands its cries were stilled.

Guibourg faced the altar once more, that little wisp of humanity that was but a few days old held now aloft, naked, in his criminal hands. His muttering, slobbering voice pronouncing the words of that demoniac consecration reached the ears of the petrified girl at the keyhole.

"Ashtaroth, Asmodeus, Princes of Affection, I conjure you to acknowledge the sacrifice I offer to you of this child for the things I ask of you, which are that the King's love for me shall be continued, and that honoured by princes and princesses nothing shall be denied me of all that I may ask."

A sudden gust of wind smote and rattled the windows of the chapel and the ante-room, as if the legions of hell had flung themselves against the walls of the chateau. There was a rush and clatter in the chimney of the ante-room's vast, empty fireplace, and through the din Marguerite, as her failing limbs sank under her and she slithered down in a heap against the chapel door, seemed to hear a burst of exultantly cruel satanic laughter. With chattering teeth and burning eyes she sat huddled, listening in terror. The child began to cry again, more violently, more piteously; then, quite suddenly, there was a little choking cough, a gurgle, the chink of metal against earthenware, and silence.

When some moments later the squat figure of La Voisin emerged from the chapel, Marguerite was back in the shadows, hunched on the settle to which she had crawled. She saw that her mother now carried a basin under her arm, and she did not need the evidence of her eyes to inform her of the dreadful contents that the witch was bearing away in it.

Meanwhile in the chapel the ineffably blasphemous rites

proceeded. To the warm human blood which had been caught in the consecrated chalice, Guibourg had added, among other foulnesses, powdered cantharides, the dust of desiccated moles, and the blood of bats. By the addition of flour he had wrought the ingredients into an ineffable paste, and over this, through the door, which La Voisin had left ajar, Marguerite heard his voice pronouncing the dread words of Transubstantiation.

Marguerite's horror mounted until it threatened to suffocate her. It was as if some hellish miasma, released by Guibourg's monstrous incantations, crept through to permeate and poison the air she breathed.

It would be a half-hour later when Madame de Montespan at last came out. She was of a ghastly pallor, her limbs shook and trembled under her as she stepped forth, and there was a wild horror in her staring eyes. Yet she contrived to carry herself almost defiantly erect, and she spoke sharply to the half-swooning Desceillets, who staggered after her.

She took her departure from that unholy place bearing with her the host compounded of devilish ingredients which when dried and reduced to powder was to be administered to the King to ensure the renewal of his failing affection for her.

The Marchioness contrived that a creature of her own, an officer of the buttery in her pay, should introduce it into the royal soup. The immediate and not unnatural result was that the King was taken violently ill, and Madame de Montespan's anxiety and suspense were increased thereby. On his recovery, however, it would seem that the demoniac sacrament—thrice repeated by then—had not been in vain.

The sequel, indeed, appeared to justify Madame de Montespan's faith in sorcery, and to compensate her for all the horror to which in her despair she had submitted. Madame de Ludres found herself

coldly regarded by the convalescent King. Very soon she was discarded, the Widow Scarron neglected, and the fickle monarch was once more at the feet of the lovely marchioness, her utter and devoted slave.

Thus was Madame de Montespan "thunderously triumphant" once more, and established as firmly as 'ever in the Sun-King's favour. Madame de Sevigne, in speaking of this phase of their relations, dilates upon the completeness of the reconciliation, and tells us that the ardour of the first years seemed now to have returned. And for two whole years it continued thus. Never before had Madame de Montespan's sway been more absolute, no shadow came to trouble, the serenity of her rule.

But it proved, after all, to be no more than the last flare of an expiring fire that was definitely quenched at last, in 1679, by Mademoiselle de Fontanges. A maid of honour to madame, she was a child of not more than eighteen years, fair and flaxen, with pink cheeks and large, childish eyes; and it was for this doll that the regal Montespan now found herself discarded.

Honours rained upon the new favourite. Louis made her a duchess with an income of twenty thousand livres, and deeply though this may have disgusted his subjects, it disgusted Madame de Montespan still more. Blinded by rage she openly abused the new duchess, and provoked a fairly public scene with Louis, in which she gave him her true opinion of him with a disturbing frankness.

"You dishonour yourself," she informed him among other things. "And you betray your taste when you make love to a pink-and-white doll, a little fool that has no more wit nor manners than if she were painted on canvas!" Then, with an increase of scorn, she delivered herself of an unpardonable apostrophe: "You, a king, to accept the inheritance of that chit's rustic lovers!"

He flushed and scowled upon her.

"That is an infamous falsehood!" he exclaimed. "Madame, you are unbearable!" He was very angry, and it infuriated him the more that she should stand so coldly mocking before an anger that could bow the proudest heads in France. "You have the pride of Satan, your greed is insatiable, your domineering spirit utterly insufferable, and you have the most false and poisonous tongue in the world!"

Her brutal answer bludgeoned that high divinity to earth.

"With all my imperfections," she sneered, "at least I do not smell as badly as you do!"

It was an answer that extinguished her last chance. It was fatal to the dignity, to the "terrible majesty" of Louis. It stripped him of all divinity, and revealed him authoritatively as intensely and even unpleasantly human. It was beyond hope of pardon.

His face turned the colour of wax. A glacial silence hung over the agonized witnesses of that royal humiliation. Then, without a word, in a vain attempt to rescue the dignity she had so cruelly mauled, he turned, his red heels clicked rapidly and unsteadily across the polished floor, and he was gone.

When Madame de Montespan realized exactly what she had done, nothing but rage remained to her—rage and its offspring, vindictiveness. The Duchess of Fontanges must not enjoy her victory, nor must Louis escape punishment for his faithlessness. La Voisin should afford her the means to accomplish this. And so she goes once more to the Rue de la Tannerie.

Now, the matter of Madame de Montespan's present needs was one in which the witches were particularly expert. Were you troubled with a rival, did your husband persist in surviving your affection for him, did those from whom you had expectations cling obstinately and

inconsiderately to life, the witches by incantations and the use of powders—in which arsenic was the dominant charm—could usually put the matter right for you. Indeed, so wide and general was the practice of poisoning become, that the authorities, lately aroused to the fact by the sensational revelations of the Marchioness de Brinvilliers, had set up in this year 1670 the tribunal known as the *Chambre Ardente* to inquire into the matter, and to conduct prosecutions.

La Voisin promised help to the Marchioness. She called in another witch of horrible repute, named La Filastre, her coadjutor Lesage, and two expert poisoners, Romani and Bertrand, who devised an ingenious plot for the murder of the Duchess of Fontanges. They were to visit her, Romani as a cloth merchant, and Bertrand as his servant, to offer her their wares, including some Grenoble gloves, which were the most beautiful gloves in the world and unfailingly irresistible to ladies. These gloves they prepared in accordance with certain magical recipes in such a way that the Duchess, after wearing them, must die a lingering death in which there could be no suspicion of poisoning.

The King was to be dealt with by means of a petition steeped in similar powders, and should receive his death by taking it into his hands. La Voisin herself was to go to Saint-Germain to present this petition on Monday, March 13th, one of those days on which, according to ancient custom, all comers were admitted to the royal presence.

Thus they disposed. But Fate was already silently stalking La Voisin.

It is to the fact that an obscure and vulgar woman had drunk one glass of wine too many three months earlier that the King owed his escape.

If you are interested in the almost grotesque disparity that can lie between cause and effect, here is a subject for you. Three months earlier a tailor named Vigoureux, whose wife secretly practised magic, had entertained a few friends to dinner, amongst whom was an intimate of his wife's, named Marie Bosse. This Marie Bosse it was who drank that excessive glass of wine which, drowning prudence, led her to boast of the famous trade she drove as a fortune-teller to the nobility, and even to hint of something further.

"Another three poisonings," she chuckled, "and I shall retire with my fortune made!"

An attorney who was present pricked up his ears, bethought him of the tales that were afloat, and gave information to the police. The police set a trap for Marie Bosse, and she betrayed herself. Later, under torture, she betrayed La Vigoureux. La Vigoureux betrayed others, and these others again.

The arrest of Marie Bosse was like knocking down the first of a row of ninepins, but none could have suspected that the last of these stood in the royal apartments.

On the day before she was to repair to Saint-Germain, La Voisin, betrayed in her turn, received a surprise visit from the police—who, of course, had no knowledge of the regicide their action was thwarting—and she was carried off to the Chatelet. Put to the question, she revealed a great deal; but her terror of the horrible punishment reserved for regicides prevented her to the day of her death at the stake—in February of 1680 from saying a word of her association with Madame de Montespan.

But there were others whom she betrayed under torture, and whose arrest followed quickly upon her own, who had not her strength of character. Among these were La Filastre and the magician Lesage. When it was found that these two corroborated each other in the

incredible things which they related, the Chambre Ardente took fright. La Reynie, who presided over it, laid the matter before the King, and the King, horror-stricken by the discovery of the revolting practices in which the mother of his children had been engaged, suspended the sittings of the Chambre Ardente, and commanded that no further proceedings should be taken against Lesage and La Filastre, and none initiated against Romani, Bertrand, the Abbe Guibourg, and the scores of other poisoners and magicians who had been arrested, and who were acquainted with Madame de Montespan's unholy traffic.

But it was not out of any desire to spare Madame de Montespan that the King proceeded in this manner; he was concerned only to spare himself and his royal dignity. He feared above all things the scandal and ridicule which must touch him as a result of publicity, and because he feared it so much, he could impose no punishment upon Madame de Montespan.

This he made known to her at the interview between them procured by his minister Louvois, at about the time that the sittings of the Chambre Ardente were suspended.

To this interview that proud, domineering woman came in dread, and in tears and humility for once. The King's bearing was cold and hard. Cold and hard were the words in which he declared the extent of his knowledge of her infamy, words which revealed the loathing and disgust this knowledge brought him. If at first she was terror-stricken, crushed under the indictment, yet she was never of a temper to bear reproaches long. Under his scorn her anger kindled and her humility was sloughed.

"What then?" she cried at last, eyes aflash through lingering tears. "Is the blame all mine? If all this is true, it is no less true that I was driven to it by my love for you and the despair to which your heartlessness and infidelity reduced me. To you," she continued,

gathering force at every word, "I sacrificed everything—my honour, a noble husband who loved me, all that a woman prizes. And what did you give me in exchange? Your cruel fickleness exposed me to the low mockery of the lick-spittles of your Court. Do you wonder that I went mad, and that in my madness I sacrificed what shreds of self-respect you had left me? And now it seems I have lost all but life. Take that, too, if it be your pleasure. Heaven knows it has little value left for me! But remember that in striking me you strike the mother of your children—the legitimate children of France. Remember that!"

He remembered it. Indeed, he was never in danger of forgetting it; for she might have added that he would be striking also at himself and at that royal dignity which was his religion. And so that all scandalous comment might be avoided she was actually allowed to remain at Court, although no longer in her first-floor apartments; and it was not until ten years later that she departed to withdraw to the community of Saint Joseph.

But even in her disgrace this woman, secretly convicted among other abominations of attempting to procure the poisoning of the King and of her rival, enjoyed an annual pension of 1,200,000 livres; whilst none dared proceed against those who shared her guilt—not even the infamous Guibourg, the poisoners Romani and Bertrand, and La Filastre—nor yet against some scores of associates of these, who were known to live by sorcery and poisonings, and who might be privy to the part played by Madame de Montespan in that horrible night of magic at the Chateau de Villebousin.

The hot blast of revolution was needed to sweep France clean.

VII. THE NIGHT OF GEMS—The "Affairs" Of The Queen's Necklace

Under the stars of a tepid, scented night of August of 1784, Prince Louis de Rohan, Cardinal of Strasbourg, Grand Almoner of France, made his way with quickened pulses through the Park of Versailles to a momentous assignation in the Grove of Venus.

This illustrious member of an illustrious House, that derived from both the royal lines of Valois and Bourbon, was a man in the prime of life, of a fine height, still retaining something of the willowy slenderness that had been his in youth, and of a gentle, almost womanly beauty of countenance.

In a grey cloak and a round, grey hat with gold cords, followed closely by two shadowy attendant figures, he stepped briskly amain, eager to open those gates across the path of his ambition, locked against him hitherto by the very hands from which he now went to receive the key.

He deserves your sympathy, this elegant Cardinal-Prince, who had been the victim of the malice and schemings of the relentless Austrian Empress since the days when he represented the King of France at the Court of Vienna.

The state he had kept there had been more than royal and royal in the dazzling French manner, which was perturbing to a woman of Marie Therese's solid German notions. His hunting-parties, his supper-parties, the fetes he gave upon every occasion, the worldly

intemperateness, the sumptuousness and reckless extravagance that made each of these affairs seem like a supplement to "The Arabian Nights' Entertainments," the sybaritic luxury of his surroundings, the incredible prodigality of his expenditure, all served profoundly to scandalize and embitter the Empress.

That a priest in gay, secular clothes should hunt the stag on horseback filled her with horror at his levity; that he should flirt discreetly with the noble ladies of Vienna made her despair of his morals; whilst his personal elegance and irresistible charm were proofs to her of a profligacy that perverted the Court over which she ruled.

She laboured for the extinction of his pernicious brilliance, and intrigued for his recall. She made no attempt to conceal her hostility, nor did she love him any the better because he met her frigid haughtiness with an ironical urbanity that seemed ever to put her in the wrong. And then one day he permitted his wit to be bitingly imprudent.

"Marie Therese," he wrote to D'Aiguillon, "holds in one hand a handkerchief to receive her tears for the misfortunes of oppressed Poland, and in the other a sword to continue its partition."

To say that in this witticism lay one of the causes of the French Revolution may seem at first glance an outrageous overstatement. Yet it is certain that, but for that imprudent phrase, the need would never have arisen that sent Rohan across the Park of Versailles on that August night to an assignation that in the sequel was to place a terrible weapon in the hands of the Revolutionary party.

D'Aiguillon had published the gibe. It had reached the ears of Marie Antoinette, and from her it had travelled back to her mother in Vienna. It aroused in the Empress a resentment and a bitterness that did not rest until the splendid Cardinal-Prince was recalled from his

embassy. It did not rest even then. By the ridicule to which the gibe exposed her—and if you know Marie Therese at all, you can imagine what that meant—it provoked a hostility that was indefatigably to labour against him.

The Cardinal was ambitious, he had confidence in his talents and in the driving force of his mighty family, and he looked to become another Richelieu or Mazarin, the first Minister of the Crown, the empurpled ruler of France, the guiding power behind the throne. All this he looked confidently to achieve; all this he might have achieved but for the obstacle that Marie Therese's resentment flung across his path. The Empress saw to it that, through the person of her daughter, her hatred should pursue him even into France.

Obedient ever to the iron will of her mother, sharing her mother's resentment, Marie Antoinette exerted all her influence to thwart this Cardinal whom her mother had taught her to regard as a dangerous, unprincipled man.

On his return from Vienna bearing letters from Marie Therese to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, the Cardinal found himself coldly received by the dull King, and discouraged from remaining at Court, whilst the Queen refused to grant him so much as the audience necessary for the delivery of these letters, desiring him to forward them instead.

The chagrined Cardinal had no illusions. He beheld here the hand of Marie Therese controlling Marie Antoinette, and, through Marie Antoinette, the King himself. Worse followed. He who had dreamt himself another Richelieu could only with difficulty obtain the promised position of Grand Almoner of France, and this solely as a result of the powerful and insistent influence exerted by his family.

He perceived that if he was to succeed at all he must begin by softening the rigorous attitude which the Queen maintained towards

him. To that end he addressed himself. But three successive letters he wrote to the Queen remained unanswered. Through other channels persistently he begged for an audience that he might come in person to express his regrets for the offending indiscretion. But the Queen remained unmoved, ruled over by the Austrian Empress, who through her daughter sought to guide the affairs of France.

Rohan was reduced to despair, and then in an evil hour his path was crossed by Jeanne de la Motte de Valois, who enjoyed the reputation of secretly possessing the friendship of the Queen, exerting a sort of back-stair influence, and who lived on that reputation.

As a drowning man clutches at a straw, so the Cardinal-Prince Louis de Rohan, Grand Almoner of France, Landgrave of Alsace, Commander of the Order of the Holy Ghost, clutched at this *faiseuse d'affaires* to help him in his desperate need.

Jeanne de la Motte de Valois—perhaps the most astounding adventuress that ever lived by her wits and her beauty—had begun life by begging her bread in the streets. She laid claim to left-handed descent from the royal line of Valois, and, her claim supported by the Marchioness Boulainvilliers, who had befriended her, she had obtained from the Crown a small pension, and had married the unscrupulous Marc Antoine de la Motte, a young soldier in the Burgundy regiment of the Gendarmerie.

Later, in the autumn of 1786, her protectress presented her to Cardinal de Rohan. His Eminence, interested in the lady's extraordinary history, in her remarkable beauty, vivacity, and wit, received the De la Mottes at his sumptuous chateau at Saverne, near Strasbourg, heard her story in greater detail, promised his protection, and as an earnest of his kindly intentions obtained for her husband a captain's commission in the Dragoons.

Thereafter you see the De la Mottes in Paris and at Versailles, hustled from lodging to lodging for failure to pay what they owe; and finally installed in a house in the Rue Neuve Saint-Gilles. There they kept a sort of state, spending lavishly, now the money borrowed from the Cardinal, or upon the Cardinal's security; now the proceeds of pawned goods that had been bought on credit, and of other swindles practised upon those who were impressed by the lady's name and lineage and the patronage of the great Cardinal which she enjoyed.

To live on your wits is no easy matter. It demands infinite address, coolness, daring, and resource qualities which Madame de la Motte possessed in the highest degree, so that, harassed and pressed by creditors, she yet contrived to evade their attacks and to present a calm and, therefore, confidence-inspiring front to the world.

The truth of Madame de la Motte de Valois's reputation for influence at Court was never doubted. There was nothing in the character of Marie Antoinette to occasion such doubts. Indiscreet in many things, Her Majesty was most notoriously so in her attachments, as witness her intimacy with Madame de Polignac and the Princesse de Lambelle. And the public voice had magnified—as it will—those indiscretions until it had torn her character into shreds.

The fame of the Countess Jeanne de Valois—as Madame de la Motte now styled herself—increasing, she was employed as an intermediary by place-seekers and people with suits to prefer, who gratefully purchased her promises to interest herself on their behalf at Court.

And then into her web of intrigue blundered the Cardinal de Rohan, who, as he confessed, "was completely blinded by his immense desire to regain the good graces of the Queen." She aroused fresh hope in his despairing heart by protesting that, as some return for all the favours she had received from him, she would not rest until she had disposed the Queen more favourably towards him.

Later came assurances that the Queen's hostility was melting under her persuasions, and at last she announced that she was authorized by Her Majesty to invite him to submit the justification which so long and so vainly he had sought permission to present.

Rohan, in a vertigo of satisfaction, indited his justification forwarded it to the Queen by the hand of the Countess, and some days later received a note in the Queen's hand upon blue-edged paper adorned by the lilies of France.

"I rejoice," wrote Marie Antoinette, "to find at last that you were not in fault. I cannot yet grant you the audience you desire, but as soon as the circumstances allow of it I shall let you know. Be discreet."

Upon the advice of the Countess of Valois, His Eminence sent a reply expressive of his deep gratitude and joy.

Thus began a correspondence between Queen and Cardinal which continued regularly for a space of three months, growing gradually more confidential and intimate. As time passed his solicitations of an audience became more pressing, until at last the Queen wrote announcing that, actuated by esteem and affection for him who had so long been kept in banishment, she herself desired the meeting. But it must be secret. An open audience would still be premature; he had numerous enemies at Court, who, thus forewarned, might so exert themselves against him as yet to ruin all.

To receive such a letter from a beautiful woman, and that woman a queen whose glories her inaccessibility had magnified a thousandfold in his imagination, must have all but turned the Cardinal's head. The secrecy of the correspondence, culminating in a clandestine meeting, seemed to establish between them an intimacy impossible under other circumstances.

Into the warp of his ambition was now woven another, tenderly

romantic, though infinitely respectful, feeling.

You realize, I hope, the frame of mind in which the Cardinal-Prince took his way through that luminous, fragrant summer night towards the Grove of Venus. He went to lay the cornerstone of the proud edifice of his ambitions. To him it was a night of nights—a night of gems, he pronounced it, looking up into the jewelled vault of heaven. And in that phrase he was singularly prophetic.

By an avenue of boxwood and yoke-elm he entered into an open glade, in the middle of which there was a circle where the intended statue of Venus was never placed. But if the cold marble effigy of a goddess were absent, the warm, living figure of a queen stood, all in shimmering white amid the gloom, awaiting him.

Rohan checked a moment, his breath arrested, his pulses quickened. Then he sped forward, and, flinging off his wide-brimmed hat, he prostrated himself to kiss the hem of her white cambric gown. Something—a rose that she let fall—brushed lightly past his cheek. Reverently he recovered it, accounting it a tangible symbol of her favour, and he looked up into the proud, lovely face—which, although but dimly discernible, was yet unmistakable to him protesting his gratitude and devotion. He perceived that she was trembling, and caught the quiver in the voice that answered him.

"You may hope that the past will be forgiven."

And then, before he could drink more deeply of this cup of delight, came rapid steps to interrupt them. A slender man, in whom the Cardinal seemed to recognize the Queen's valet Desclaux, thrust through the curtains of foliage into the grove.

"Quick, madame!" he exclaimed in agitation. "Madame la Comtesse and Mademoiselle d'Artois are approaching!"

The Queen was whirled away, and the Cardinal discreetly effaced

himself, his happiness tempered by chagrin at the interruption.

When, on the morrow, the Countess of Valois brought him a blue-bordered note with Her Majesty's wishes that he should patiently await a propitious season for his public restoration to royal favour, he resigned himself with the most complete and satisfied submission. Had he not the memory of her voice and the rose she had given him? Soon afterwards came a blue-bordered note in which Marie Antoinette advised him to withdraw to his Bishopric of Strasbourg until she should judge that the desired season of his reinstatement had arrived.

Obediently Rohan withdrew.

It was in the following December that the Countess of Valois's good offices at Court were solicited by a new client, and that she first beheld the famous diamond necklace.

It had been made by the Court jewellers of the Rue Vendome—Bohmer and Bassenge—and intended for the Countess du Barry. On the assembling of its component gems Bohmer had laboured for five years and travelled all over Europe, with the result that he had achieved not so much a necklace as a blazing scarf of diamonds of a splendour outrivalling any jewel that the world had ever seen.

Unfortunately, Bohmer was too long over the task. Louis XV died inopportunately, and the firm found itself with a necklace worth two million livres on its hands.

Hopes were founded upon Marie Antoinette's reputed extravagance. But the price appalled her, while Louis XVI met the importunities of the jeweller with the reply that the country needed a ship of war more urgently than a necklace.

Thereafter Bohmer offered it in various Courts of Europe, but always without success. Things were becoming awkward. The firm

had borrowed heavily to pay for the stones, and anxiety seems to have driven Bohmer to the verge of desperation. Again he offered the necklace to the King, announcing himself ready to make terms, and to accept payment in instalments; but again it was refused.

Bohmer now became that pest to society, the man with a grievance that he must be venting everywhere. On one occasion he so far forgot himself as to intrude upon the Queen as she was walking in the gardens of the Trianon. Flinging himself upon his knees before her, he protested with sobs that he was in despair, and that unless she purchased the necklace he would go and drown himself. His tears left her unmoved to anything but scorn.

"Get up, Bohmer!" she bade him. "I don't like such scenes. I have refused the necklace, and I don't want to hear of it again. Instead of drowning yourself, break it up and sell the diamonds separately."

He did neither one nor the other, but continued to air his grievance; and among those who heard him was one Laporte, an impecunious visitor at the house of the Countess of Valois.

Bohmer had said that he would pay a thousand louis to any one who found him a purchaser for the necklace. That was enough to stir the needy Laporte. He mentioned the matter to the Countess, and enlisted her interest. Then he told Bohmer of her great influence with the Queen, and brought the jeweller to visit her with the necklace.

Dazzled by the fire of those gems, the Countess nevertheless protested—but in an arch manner calculated to convince Bohmer of the contrary—that she had no power to influence Her Majesty. Yet yielding with apparent reluctance to his importunities, she, nevertheless, ended by promising to see what could be done.

On January 3d the Cardinal came back from Strasbourg. Correspondence with the Queen, through Madame de Valois, had

continued during his absence, and now, within a few days of his return, an opportunity was to be afforded him of proving his readiness to serve Her Majesty, and of placing her under a profound obligation to him.

The Countess brought him a letter from Marie Antoinette, in which the Queen expressed her desire to acquire the necklace, but added that, being without the requisite funds at the moment, it would be necessary to settle the terms and arrange the instalments, which should be paid at intervals of three months. For this she required an intermediary who in himself would be a sufficient guarantee to the Bohmers, and she ended by inviting His Eminence to act on her behalf.

That invitation the Cardinal, who had been waiting ever since the meeting in the Grove of Venus for an opportunity of proving himself, accepted with alacrity.

And so, on January 24th, the Countess drives up to the Grand Balcon, the jewellers' shop in the Rue Vendome. Her dark eyes sparkle, the lovely, piquant face is wreathed in smiles.

"Messieurs," she greets the anxious partners, "I think I can promise you that the necklace will very shortly be sold."

The jewellers gasp in the immensity of the hope her words arouse.

"The purchase," she goes on to inform them, "will be effected by a very great nobleman."

Bassenge bursts into voluble gratitude. She cuts it short.

"That nobleman is the Cardinal-Prince Louis de Rohan. It is with him that you will arrange the affair, and I advise you," she adds in a confidential tone, "to take every precaution, especially in the matter of the terms of payment that may be proposed to you. That is all, I think,

messieurs. You will, of course, bear in mind that it is no concern of mine, and that I do not so much as want my name mentioned in connection with it."

"Perfectly, madame," splutters Bohmer, who is perspiring, although the air is cold—"perfectly! We understand, and we are profoundly grateful. If—" His hands fumble nervously at a case. "If you would deign, madame, to accept this trifle as an earnest of our indebtedness, we—"

There is a tinge of haughtiness in her manner as she interrupts him.

"You do not appear to understand, Bohmer, that the matter does not at all concern me. I have done nothing," she insists; then, melting into smiles, "My only desire," she adds, "was to be of service to you."

And upon that she departs, leaving them profoundly impressed by her graciousness and still more by her refusal to accept a valuable jewel.

On the morrow the great nobleman she had heralded, the Cardinal himself, alighted at the Grand Balcon, coming, on the Queen's behalf, to see the necklace and settle the terms. By the end of the week the bargain was concluded. The price was fixed at 1,600,000 livres, which the Queen was to pay in four instalments extending over two years, the first falling due on the following August 1st.

These terms the Cardinal embodied in a note which he forwarded to Madame de la Motte, that they might be ratified by the Queen.

The Countess returned the note to him next day.

"Her Majesty is pleased and grateful," she announced, "and she approves of all that you have done. But she does not wish to sign anything."

On that point, however, the Cardinal was insistent. The magnitude

of the transaction demanded it, and he positively refused to move further without Her Majesty's signature.

The Countess departed to return again on the last day of the month with the document completed as the Cardinal required, bearing now the signature "Marie Antoinette de France," and the terms marked "approved" in the Queen's hand.

"The Queen," Madame de la Motte informed him, "is making this purchase secretly, without the King's knowledge, and she particularly begs that this note shall not leave Your Eminence's hands. Do not, therefore, allow any one to see it."

Rohan gave the required promise, but, not conceiving that the Bohmers were included in it, he showed them the note and the Queen's signature when they came to wait upon him with the necklace on the morrow.

In the dusk of evening a closed carriage drew up at the door of Madame de la Motte Valois's lodging on the Place Dauphine at Versailles. Rohan alighted, and went upstairs with a casket under his arm.

Madame awaited him in a white-panelled, indifferently lighted room, to which there was an alcove with glass doors.

"You have brought the necklace?"

"It is here," he replied, tapping the box with his gloved hand.

"Her Majesty is expecting it to-night. Her messenger should arrive at any moment. She will be pleased with Your Eminence."

"That is all that I can desire," he answered gravely; and sat down in answer to her invitation, the precious casket on his knees.

Waiting thus, they talked desultorily for some moments. At last

came steps upon the stairs.

"Quick! The alcove!" she exclaimed. "You must not be seen by Her Majesty's messenger."

Rohan, with ready understanding, a miracle of discretion, effaced himself into the alcove, through the glass doors of which he could see what passed.

The door was opened by madame's maid with the announcement:

"From the Queen."

A tall, slender young man in black, the Queen's attendant of that other night of gems—the night of the Grove of Venus—stepped quickly into the room, bowed like a courtier to Madame de la Motte, and presented a note.

Madame broke the seal, then begged the messenger to withdraw for a moment. When he had gone, she turned to the Cardinal, who stood in the doorway of the alcove.

"That is Desclaux, Her Majesty's valet," she said; and held out to him the note, which requested the delivery of the necklace to the bearer.

A moment later the messenger was reintroduced to receive the casket from the hands of Madame de la Motte. Within five minutes the Cardinal was in his carriage again, driving happily back to Paris with his dreams of a queen's gratitude and confidence.

Two days later, meeting Bohmer at Versailles, the Cardinal suggested to him that he should offer his thanks to the Queen for having purchased the necklace.

Bohmer sought an opportunity for this in vain. None offered. It was also in vain that he waited to hear that the Queen had worn the

necklace. But he does not appear to have been anxious on that score. Moreover, the Queen's abstention was credibly explained by Madame de la Motte to Laporte with the statement that Her Majesty did not wish to wear the necklace until it was paid for.

With the same explanation she answered the Cardinal's inquiries in the following July, when he returned from a three months' sojourn in Strasbourg.

And she took the opportunity to represent to him that one of the reasons why the Queen could not yet consider the necklace quite her own was that she found the price too high.

"Indeed, she may be constrained to return it, after all, unless the Bohmers are prepared to be reasonable."

If His Eminence was a little dismayed by this, at least any nascent uneasiness was quieted. He consented to see the jewellers in the matter, and on July 10th—three weeks before the first instalment was due—he presented himself at the Grand Balcon to convey the Queen's wishes to the Bohmers.

Bohmer scarcely troubled to prevent disgust from showing on his keen, swarthy countenance. Had not his client been a queen and her intermediary a cardinal, he would, no doubt, have afforded it full expression.

"The price agreed upon was already greatly below the value of the necklace," he grumbled. "I should never have accepted it but for the difficulties under which we have been placed by the purchase of the stones—the money we owe and the interest we are forced to pay. A further reduction is impossible."

The handsome Cardinal was suave, courtly, regretful, but firm. Since that was the case, there would be no alternative but to return the necklace.

Bohmer took fright. The annulment of the sale would bring him face to face with ruin. Reluctantly, feeling that he was being imposed upon, he reduced the price by two hundred thousand livres, and even consented to write the Queen the following letter, whose epistolary grace suggests the Cardinal's dictation:

MADAME,—We are happy to hazard the thought that our submission with zeal and respect to the last arrangement proposed constitutes a proof of our devotion and obedience to the orders of Your Majesty. And we have genuine satisfaction in thinking that the most beautiful set of diamonds in existence will serve to adorn the greatest and best of queens.

Now it happened that Bohmer was about to deliver personally to the Queen some jewels with which the King was presenting her on the occasion of the baptism of his nephew. He availed himself of that opportunity, two days later, personally to hand his letter to Her Majesty. But chance brought the Comptroller-General into the room before she had opened it, and as a result the jeweller departed while the letter was, still unread.

Afterwards, in the presence of Madame de Campan, who relates the matter in her memoirs, the Queen opened the note, pored over it a while, and then, perhaps with vivid memories of Bohmer's threat of suicide:

"Listen to what that madman Bohmer writes to me," she said, and read the lines aloud. "You guessed the riddles in the 'Mercure' this morning. I wonder could you guess me this one."

And, with a half-contemptuous shrug, she held the sheet in the flame of one of the tapers that stood alight on the table for the purpose of sealing letters.

"That man exists for my torment," she continued. "He has always

some mad notion in his head, and must always be visiting it upon me. When next you see him, pray convince him how little I care for diamonds."

And there the matter was dismissed.

Days passed, and then a week before the instalment of 350,000 livres was due, the Cardinal received a visit from Madame de la Motte on the Queen's behalf.

"Her Majesty," madame announced, "seems embarrassed about the instalment. She does not wish to trouble you by writing about it. But I have thought of a way by which you could render yourself agreeable to her and, at the same time, set her mind at rest. Could you not raise a loan for the amount?"

Had not the Cardinal himself dictated to Bohmer a letter which Bohmer himself had delivered to the Queen, he must inevitably have suspected by now that all was not as it should be. But, satisfied as he was by that circumstance, he addressed himself to the matter which Madame de la Motte proposed. But, although Rohan was extraordinarily wealthy, he had ever been correspondingly lavish.

Moreover, to complicate matters, there had been the bankruptcy of his nephew, the Prince de Guimenee, whose debts had amounted to some three million livres. Characteristically, and for the sake of the family honour, Rohan had taken the whole of this burden upon his own shoulders. Hence his resources were in a crippled condition, and it was beyond his power to advance so considerable a sum at such short notice. Nor did he succeed in obtaining a loan within the little time at his disposal.

His anxieties on this score were increased by a letter from the Queen which Madame de la Motte brought him on July 30th, in which Her Majesty wrote that the first instalment could not be paid until

October 1st; but that on that date a payment of seven hundred thousand livres—half of the revised price—would unfailingly be made. Together with this letter, Madame de la Motte handed him thirty thousand livres, interest on the instalment due, with which to pacify the jewellers.

But the jewellers were not so easily to be pacified. Bohmer, at the end of his patience, definitely refused to grant the postponement or to receive the thirty thousand livres other than as on account of the instalment due.

The Cardinal departed in vexation. Something must be done at once, or his secret relations with the Queen would be disclosed, thus precipitating a catastrophe and a scandal. He summoned Madame de la Motte, flung her into a panic with his news and sent her away to see what she could do. What she actually did would have surprised him. Realizing that a crisis had been reached calling for bold measures, she sent for Bassenge, the milder of the two partners. He came to the Rue Neuve Saint-Gilles, protesting that he was being abused.

"Abused?" quoth she, taking him up on the word. "Abused, do you say?" She laughed sharply. "Say duped, my friend; for that is what has happened to you. You are the victim of a swindle."

Bassenge turned white; his prominent eyes bulged in his rather pasty face.

"What are you saying, madame?" His voice was husky.

"The Queen's signature on the note in the Cardinal's possession is a forgery."

"A forgery! The Queen's signature? Oh, mon Dieu!" He stared at her, and his knees began to tremble. "How do you know, madame?"

"I have seen it," she answered.

"But—but—"

His nerveless limbs succumbing under him, he sank without ceremony to a chair that was opportunely near him. With the same lack of ceremony, mechanically, in a dazed manner, he mopped the sweat that stood in beads on his brow, then raised his wig and mopped his head.

"There is no need to waste emotion," said she composedly. "The Cardinal de Rohan is very rich. You must look to him. He will pay you."

"Will he?"

Hope and doubt were blended in the question.

"What else?" she asked. "Can you conceive that he will permit such a scandal to burst about his name and the name of the Queen?"

Bassenge saw light. The rights and wrongs of the case, and who might be the guilty parties, were matters of very secondary importance. What mattered was that the firm should recover the 14,000,000 livres for which the necklace had been sold; and Bassenge was quick to attach full value to the words of Madame de la Motte.

Unfortunately for everybody concerned, including the jewellers themselves, Bohmer's mind was less supple. Panic-stricken by Bassenge's report, he was all for the direct method. There was no persuading him to proceed cautiously, and to begin by visiting the Cardinal. He tore away to Versailles at once, intent upon seeing the Queen. But the Queen, as we know, had had enough of Bohmer. He had to content himself with pouring his mixture of intercessions and demands into the ears of Madame de Campan.

"You have been swindled, Bohmer," said the Queen's lady

promptly. "Her Majesty never received the necklace."

Bohmer would not be convinced. Disbelieving, and goaded to fury, he returned to Bassenge.

Bassenge, however, though perturbed, retained his calm. The Cardinal, he insisted, was their security, and it was impossible to doubt that the Cardinal would fulfil his obligations at all costs, rather than be overwhelmed by a scandal.

And this, no doubt, is what would have happened but for that hasty visit of Bohmer's to Versailles. It ruined everything. As a result of it, Bohmer was summoned to wait instantly upon the Queen in the matter of some paste buckles.

The Queen received the jeweller in private, and her greeting proved that the paste buckles were a mere pretext. She demanded to know the meaning of his words to Madame de Campan.

Bohmer could not rid himself of the notion that he was being trifled with. Had he not written and himself delivered to the Queen a letter in which he thanked her for purchasing the necklace, and had not that letter remained unanswered—a silent admission that the necklace was in her hands? In his exasperation he became insolent.

"The meaning, madame? The meaning is that I require payment for my necklace, that the patience of my creditors is exhausted, and that unless you order the money to be paid, I am a ruined man!"

Marie Antoinette considered him in cold, imperious anger.

"Are you daring to suggest that your necklace is in my possession?"

Bohmer was white to the lips, his hands worked nervously.

"Does Your Majesty deny it?"

"You are insolent!" she exclaimed. "You will be good enough to answer questions, not to ask them. Answer me, then. Do you suggest that I have your necklace?"

But a desperate man is not easily intimidated.

"No, madame; I affirm it! It was the Countess of Valois who—"

"Who is the Countess of Valois?"

That sudden question, sharply uttered, was a sword of doubt through the heart of Bohmer's confidence. He stared wide-eyed a moment at the indignant lady before him, then collected himself, and made as plain a tale as he could of the circumstances under which he had parted with the necklace. Madame de la Motte's intervention, the mediation of the Cardinal de Rohan with Her Majesty's signed approval of the terms, and the delivery of the necklace to His Eminence for transmission to the Queen.

Marie Antoinette listened in increasing horror and anger. A flush crept into her pale cheeks.

"You will prepare and send me a written statement of what you have just told me," she said. "You have leave to go."

That interview took place on August 9th. The 15th was the Feast of the Assumption, and also the name-day of the Queen, therefore a gala day at Court, bringing a concourse of nobility to Versailles. Mass was to be celebrated in the royal chapel at ten o'clock, and the celebrant, as by custom established for the occasion, was the Grand Almoner of France, the Cardinal de Rohan.

But at ten o'clock a meeting was being held in the King's cabinet, composed of the King and Queen, the Baron de Breteuil, and the Keeper of the Seals, Miromesnil. They were met, as they believed, to decide upon a course of action in the matter of a diamond necklace.

In reality, these puppets in the hands of destiny were helping to decide the fate of the French monarchy.

The King, fat, heavy, and phlegmatic, sat in a gilded chair by an ormolu-encrusted writing-table. His bovine eyes were troubled. Two wrinkles of vexation puckered the flesh above his great nose. Beside, and slightly behind him, stood the Queen, white and imperious, whilst facing them stood Monsieur de Breteuil, reading aloud the statement which Bohmer had drawn up.

When he had done, there was a moment's utter silence. Then the King spoke, his voice almost plaintive.

"What is to be done, then? But what is to be done?"

It was the Queen who answered him, harshly and angrily.

"When the Roman purple and a princely title are but masks to cover a swindler, there is only one thing to be done. This swindler must be exposed and punished."

"But," the King faltered, "we have not heard the Cardinal."

"Can you think that Bohmer, that any man, would dare to lie upon such a matter?"

"But consider, madame, the Cardinal's rank and family," calmly interposed the prudent Miromesnil; "consider the stir, the scandal that must ensue if this matter is made public."

But the obedient daughter of Marie Therese, hating Rohan at her mother's bidding and for her mother's sake, was impatient of any such wise considerations.

"What shall the scandal signify to us?" she demanded. The King looked at Breteuil.

"And you, Baron? What is your view?"

Breteuil, Rohan's mortal enemy, raised his shoulders and flipped the document.

"In the face of this, Sire, it seems to me that the only course is to arrest the Cardinal."

"You believe, then—" began the King, and checked, leaving the sentence unfinished.

But Breteuil had understood.

"I know that the Cardinal must be pressed for money," he said. "Ever prodigal in his expenditure, he is further saddled with the debts of the Prince de Guimenee."

"And you can believe," the King cried, "that a Prince of the House of Rohan, however pressed for money, could—Oh, it is unimaginable!"

"Yet has he not stolen my name?" the Queen cut in. "Is he not proven a common, stupid forger?"

"We have not heard him," the King reminded her gently.

"And His Eminence might be able to explain," ventured Miromesnil. "It were certainly prudent to give him the opportunity."

Slowly the King nodded his great, powdered head. "Go and find him. Bring him at once!" he bade Breteuil; and Breteuil bowed and departed.

Very soon he returned, and he held the door whilst the handsome Cardinal, little dreaming what lay before him, serene and calm, a commanding figure in his cassock of scarlet watered silk, rustled forward into the royal presence, and so came face to face with the

Queen for the first time since that romantic night a year ago in the Grove of Venus.

Abruptly the King launched his thunderbolt.

"Cousin," he asked, "what purchase is this of a diamond necklace that you are said to have made in the Queen's name?"

King and Cardinal looked into each other's eyes, the King's narrowing, the Cardinal's dilating, the King leaning forward in his chair, elbows on the table, the Cardinal standing tense and suddenly rigid.

Slowly the colour ebbed from Rohan's face, leaving it deathly pale. His eyes sought the Queen, and found her contemptuous glance, her curling lip. Then at last his handsome head sank a little forward.

"Sire," he said unsteadily, "I see that I have been duped. But I have duped nobody."

"You have no reason to be troubled, then. You need but to explain."

Explain! That was precisely what he could not do. Besides, what was the nature of the explanation demanded of him? Whilst he stood stricken there, it was the Queen who solved this question.

"If, indeed, you have been duped," she said scornfully, her colour high, her eyes like points of steel, "you have been self-duped. But even then it is beyond belief that self-deception could have urged you to the lengths of passing yourself off as my intermediary—you, who should know yourself to be the last man in France I should employ, you to whom I have not spoken once in eight years." Tears of anger glistened in her eyes; her voice shrilled up. "And yet, since you have not denied it, since you put forward this pitiful plea that you have been duped, we must believe the unbelievable."

Thus at a blow she shattered the fond hopes he had been

cherishing ever since the night of gems—of gems, forsooth!—in the Grove of Venus; thus she laid his ambition in ruins about him, and left the man himself half stunned.

Observing his disorder, the ponderous but kindly monarch rose.

"Come, my cousin," he said more gently, "collect yourself. Sit down here and write what you may have to say in answer."

And with that he passed into the library beyond, accompanied by the Queen and the two Ministers.

Alone, Rohan staggered forward and sank nervelessly into the chair. He took up a pen, pondered a moment, and began to write. But he did not yet see clear. He could not yet grasp the extent to which he had been deceived, could not yet believe that those treasured notes from Marie Antoinette were forgeries, that it was not the Queen who had met him in the Grove of Venus and given him the rose whose faded petals kept those letters company in a portfolio of red morocco. But at least it was clear to him that, for the sake of honour—the Queen's honour—he must assume it so; and in that assumption he now penned his statement.

When it was completed, himself he bore it to the King in the library.

Louis read it with frowning brows; then passed it to the Queen.

"Have you the necklace now?" he asked Rohan.

"Sir, I left it in the hands of this woman Valois."

"Where is this woman?"

"I do not know, Sire."

"And the letter of authority bearing the Queen's signature, which the jewellers say you presented to them—where is that?"

"I have it, Sire. I will place it before you. It is only now that I realize that it is a forgery."

"Only now!" exclaimed the Queen in scorn.

"Her Majesty's name has been compromised," said the King sternly. "It must be cleared. As King and as husband my duty is clear. Your Eminence must submit to arrest."

Rohan fell back a step in stupefaction. For disgrace and dismissal he was prepared, but not for this.

"Arrest?" he whispered. "Ah, wait, Sire. The publicity! The scandal! Think of that! As for the necklace, I will pay for it myself, and so pay for my credulous folly. I beseech you, Sire, to let the matter end here. I implore it for my own sake, for the sake of the Prince de Soubise and the name of Rohan, which would be smirched unjustly and to no good purpose."

He spoke with warmth and force; and, without adding more, yet conveyed an impression that much more could be said for the course he urged.

The King hesitated, considering. Noting this, the prudent, far-seeing Miromesnil ventured to develop the arguments at which Rohan had hinted, laying stress upon the desirability of avoiding scandal.

Louis was nodding, convinced, when Marie Antoinette, unable longer to contain her rancour, broke into opposition of those prudent measures.

"This hideous affair must be disclosed," she insisted. "It is due to me that it should publicly be set right. The Cardinal shall tell the world how he came to suppose that, not having spoken to him for eight years, I could have wished to make use of his services in the purchase of this necklace."

She was in tears, and her weak, easily swayed husband accounted her justified in her demand. And so, to the great consternation of all the world, Prince Louis de Rohan was arrested like a common thief.

A foolish, indiscreet, short-sighted woman had allowed her rancour to override all other considerations—careless of consequences, careless of injustice so that her resentment, glutted by her hatred of the Cardinal, should be gratified. The ungenerous act was terribly to recoil upon her. In tears and blood was she to expiate her lack of charity; very soon she was to reap its bitter fruits.

Saint-Just, a very prominent counsellor of the Parliament, one of the most advanced apostles of the new ideas that were to find full fruition in the Revolution, expressed the popular feeling in the matter.

"Great and joyful affair! A cardinal and a queen implicated in a forgery and a swindle! Filth on the crosier and the sceptre! What a triumph for the ideas of liberty!"

At the trial that followed before Parliament, Madame de la Motte, a man named Reteaux de Villette—who had forged the Queen's hand and impersonated Desclaux and a Mademoiselle d'Oliva—who had used her striking resemblance to Marie Antoinette to impersonate the Queen in the Grove of Venus were found guilty and sentenced. But the necklace was not recovered. It had been broken up, and some of the diamonds were already sold; others were being sold in London by Captain de la Motte, who had gone thither for the purpose, and who prudently remained there.

The Cardinal was acquitted, amid intense public joy and acclamation, which must have been gall and wormwood to the Queen. His powerful family, the clergy of France, and the very people, with whom he had ever been popular, had all laboured strenuously to vindicate him. And thus it befell that the one man the Queen had aimed at crushing was the only person connected with the affair who

came out of it unhurt. The Queen's animus against the Cardinal aroused against her the animus of his friends of all classes. Appalling libels of her were circulated throughout Europe. It was thought and argued that she was more deeply implicated in the swindle than had transpired, that Madame de la Motte was a scapegoat, that the Queen should have stood her trial with the others, and that she was saved only by the royalty that hedged her.

Conceive what a weapon this placed in the hands of the men of the new ideas of liberty—men who were bent on proving the corruption of a system they sought to destroy!

Marie Antoinette should have foreseen something of this. She might have done so had not her hatred blinded her, had she been less intent upon seizing the opportunity at all costs to make Rohan pay for his barbed witticism upon her mother. She might have been spared much had she but spared Rohan when the chance was hers. As it was, the malevolent echoes of the affair and of Saint-Just's exultation were never out of her ears. They followed her to her trial eight years later before the revolutionary tribunal. They followed her to the very scaffold, of which they had undoubtedly supplied a plank.

VIII, THE NIGHT OF TERROR— The Drownings At Nantes Under Carrier

The Revolutionary Committee of the city of Nantes, reinforced by some of the administrators of the district and a few members of the People's Society, sat in the noble hall of the Cour des Comptes, which still retained much of its pre-republican sumptuousness. They sat expectantly—Goullin, the attorney, president of the committee, a frail, elegant valetudinarian, fierily eloquent; Grandmaison, the fencing-master, who once had been a gentleman, fierce of eye and inflamed of countenance; Minee, the sometime bishop, now departmental president; Pierre Chaux, the bankrupt merchant; the sans-culotte Forget, of the People's Society, an unclean, ill-kempt ruffian; and some thirty others called like these from every walk of life.

Lamps were lighted, and under their yellow glare the huddled company—for the month was December, and the air of the vast room was chill and dank—looked anxious and ill at ease.

Suddenly the doors were thrown open by an usher; and his voice rang loud in announcement—

"The Citizen Representative Carrier."

The great man came in, stepping quickly. Of middle height, very frail and delicate, his clay-colored face was long and thin, with arched eyebrows, a high nose, and a loose, coarse mouth. His deeply sunken dark eyes glared fiercely, and wisps of dead-black hair, which had escaped the confining ribbon of his queue, hung about his livid

brow. He was wrapped in a riding-coat of bottle-green, heavily lined with fur, the skirts reaching down to the tops of his Hessian boots, and the enormous turned-up collar almost touching the brim of his round hat. Under the coat his waist was girt with the tricolour of office, and there were gold rings in his ears.

Such at the age of five-and-thirty was Jean Baptiste Carrier, Representative of the Convention with the Army of the West, the attorney who once had been intended by devout parents for the priesthood. He had been a month in Nantes, sent thither to purge the body politic.

He reached a chair placed in the focus of the gathering, which sat in a semicircle. Standing by it, one of his lean hands resting upon the back, he surveyed them, disgust in his glance, a sneer curling his lip, so terrible and brutal of aspect despite his frailness that more than one of those stout fellows quailed now before him.

Suddenly he broke into torrential speech, his voice shrill and harsh:

"I do not know by what fatality it happens, but happen it does, that during the month that I have been in Nantes you have never ceased to give me reason to complain of you. I have summoned you to meet me here that you may justify yourselves, if you can, for your ineptitude!" And he flung himself into the chair, drawing his fur-lined coat about him. "Let me hear from you!" he snapped.

Minee, the unfrocked bishop, preserving still a certain episcopal portliness of figure, a certain episcopal oiliness of speech, respectfully implored the representative to be more precise.

The invitation flung him into a passion. His irascibility, indeed, deserved to become a byword.

"Name of a name!" he shrilled, his sunken eyes ablaze, his face convulsed. "Is there a thing I can mention in this filthy city of yours that

is not wrong? Everything is wrong! You have failed in your duty to provide adequately for the army of Vendee. Angers has fallen, and now the brigands are threatening Nantes itself. There is abject want in the city, disease is rampant; people are dying of hunger in the streets and of typhus in the prisons. And sacre nom!—you ask me to be precise! I'll be precise in telling you where lies the fault. It lies in your lousy administration. Do you call yourselves administrators? You—" He became unprintable. "I have come here to shake you out of your torpor, and by—I'll shake you out of it or I'll have the blasted heads off the lot of you."

They shivered with chill fear under the wild glare of his sunken eyes.

"Well?" he barked after a long pause. "Are you all dumb as well as idiots?"

It was the ruffian Forget who had the courage to answer him:

"I have told the People's Society that if the machine works badly it is because the Citizen Carrier refuses to consult with the administration."

"You told them that, did you, you—liar?" screeched Carrier. "Am I not here now to consult with you? And should I not have come before had you suggested it? Instead, you have waited until, of my own accord, I should come to tell you that your administration is ruining Nantes."

Goullin, the eloquent and elegant Goullin, rose to soothe him:

"Citizen Representative, we admit the truth of all that you have said. There has been a misunderstanding. We could not take it upon ourselves to summon the august representative of the Sacred People. I We have awaited your own good pleasure, and now that you have made this manifest, there is no reason why the machine should not work effectively. The evils of which you speak exist, alas! But they

are not so deeply rooted that, working under your guidance and advice, we cannot uproot them, rendering the soil fertile once more of good under the beneficent fertilizing showers of liberty."

Mollified, Carrier grunted approval.

"That is well said, Citizen Goullin. The fertilizer needed by the soil is blood—the bad blood of aristocrats and federalists, and I can promise you, in the name of the august people, that it shall be abundantly provided."

The assembly broke into applause, and his vanity melted to it. He stood up, expressed his gratification at being so completely understood, opened his arms, and invited the departmental president, Minee, to come down and receive the kiss of brotherhood.

Thereafter they passed to the consideration of measures of improvement, of measures to combat famine and disease. In Carrier's view there was only one way of accomplishing this—the number of mouths to be fed must be reduced, the diseased must be eliminated. It was the direct, the radical, the heroic method.

That very day six prisoners in Le Bouffay had been sentenced to death for attempting to escape.

"How do we know," he asked, "that those six include all the guilty? How do we know that all in Le Bouffay do not share the guilt? The prisoners are riddled with disease, which spreads to the good patriots of Nantes; they eat bread, which is scarce, whilst good patriots starve. We must have the heads off all those blasted swine!" He took fire at his own suggestion. "Aye, that would be a useful measure. We'll deal with it at once. Let some one fetch the President of the Revolutionary Tribunal."

He was fetched—a man of good family and a lawyer, named Francois Phelippes.

"Citizen President," Carrier greeted him, "the administration of Nantes has been considering an important measure. To-day you sentenced to death six prisoners in Le Bouffay for attempting to escape. You are to postpone execution so as to include all the Bouffay prisoners in the sentence."

Although an ardent revolutionary, Phelippes was a logically minded man with a lawyer's reverence for the sacredness of legal form. This command, issued with such cynical coldness, and repudiated by none of those present, seemed to him as grotesque and ridiculous as it was horrible.

"But that is impossible, Citizen Representative," said he.

"Impossible!" snarled Carrier. "A fool's word. The administration desires you to understand that it is not impossible. The sacred will of the august people—"

Phelippes interrupted him without ceremony.

"There is no power in France that can countermand the execution of a sentence of the law."

"No—no power!"

Carrier's loose mouth fell open. He was too amazed to be angry.

"Moreover," Phelippes pursued calmly, "there is the fact that all the other prisoners in Le Bouffay are innocent of the offence for which the six are to die."

"What has that to do with it?" roared Carrier. "Last year I rode a she-ass that could argue better than you! In the name of—, what has that to do with it?"

But there were members of the assembly who thought with

Phelippes, and who, whilst lacking the courage to express themselves, yet found courage to support another who so boldly expressed them.

Carrier sprang up quivering with rage before that opposition. "It seems to me," he snarled, "that there are more than the scoundrels in Le Bouffay who need to be shortened by a head for the good of the nation. I tell you that you are slaying the commonweal by your slowness and circumspection. Let all the scoundrels perish!"

A handsome, vicious youngster named Robin made chorus.

"Patriots are without bread! It is fitting that the scoundrels should die, and not eat the bread of starving patriots."

Carrier shook his fist at the assembly.

"You hear, you—! I cannot pardon whom the law condemns."

It was an unfortunate word, and Phelippes fastened on it.

"That is the truth, Citizen Representative," said Phelippes. "And as for the prisoners in Le Bouffay, you will wait until the law condemns them."

And without staying to hear more, he departed as firmly as he had come, indifferent to the sudden uproar.

When he had gone, the Representative flung himself into his chair again, biting his lip.

"There goes a fellow who will find his way to the guillotine in time," he growled.

But he was glad to be rid of him, and would not have him brought back. He saw how the opposition of Phelippes had stiffened the weaker opposition of some of those in the assembly. If he was to

have his way he would contrive better without the legal-minded President of the Revolutionary Tribunal. And his way he had in the end, though not until he had stormed and cursed and reviled the few who dared to offer remonstrances to his plan of wholesale slaughter.

When at last he took his departure, it was agreed that the assembly should proceed to elect a jury which was to undertake the duty of drawing up immediately a list of those confined in the prisons of Nantes. This list they were to deliver when ready to the committee, which would know how to proceed, for Carrier had made his meaning perfectly clear. The first salutary measure necessary to combat the evils besetting the city was to wipe out at once the inmates of all the prisons in Nantes.

In the chill December dawn of the next day the committee—which had sat all night under the presidency of Goullin forwarded a list of some five hundred prisoners to General Boivin, the commandant of the city of Nantes, together with an order to collect them without a moment's delay, take them to L'Eperonniere, and there have them shot.

But Boivin was a soldier, and a soldier is not a sans-culotte. He took the order to Phelippes, with the announcement that he had no intention of obeying it. Phelippes, to Boivin's amazement, agreed with him. He sent the order back to the committee, denouncing it as flagrantly illegal, and reminding them that it was illegal to remove any prisoner, no matter by whose order, without such an order as might follow upon a decision of the Tribunal.

The committee, intimidated by this firmness on the part of the President of the Revolutionary Tribunal, dared not insist, and there the matter remained.

When Carrier learnt of it the things he said were less than ever fit for publication. He raved like a madman at the very thought that a

quibbling lawyer should stand in the very path of him, the august representative of the Sacred People.

It had happened that fifty-three priests, who had been brought to Nantes a few days before, were waiting in the sheds of the entrepot for prison accommodation, so that their names did not yet appear upon any of the prison registers. As a solatium to his wounded feelings, he ordered his friends of the Marat Company to get rid of them.

Lamberty, the leader of the Marats, asked him how it should be done.

"How?" he croaked. "Not so much mystery, my friend. Fling the swine into the water, and so let's be rid of them. There will be plenty of their kind left in France."

But he seems to have explained himself further, and what precisely were his orders, and how they were obeyed, transpires from a letter which he wrote to the Convention, stating that those fifty-three wretched priests, "being confined in a boat on the Loire, were last night swallowed up by the river." And he added the apostrophe, "What a revolutionary torrent is the Loire!"

The Convention had no illusions as to his real meaning; and when Carrier heard that his letter had been applauded by the National Assembly, he felt himself encouraged to break down all barriers of mere legality that might obstruct his path. And, after all, what the Revolutionary Committee as a body—intimidated by Phelippes—dared not do could be done by his faithful and less punctilious friends of the Marat Company.

This Marat Company, the police of the Revolutionary Committee, enrolled from the scourgings of Nantes' sans-culottism, and captained by a ruffian named Fleury, had been called into being by Carrier

himself with the assistance of Goullin.

On the night of the 24th Frimaire of the year III (December 14, 1793, old style), which was a Saturday, Fleury mustered some thirty of his men, and took them to the Cour des Comptes, where they were awaited by Goullin, Bachelier, Grandmaison, and some other members of the committee entirely devoted to Carrier. From these the Marats received their formal instructions.

"Plague," Goullin informed them, "is raging in the gaols, and its ravages must be arrested. You will therefore proceed this evening to the prison of Le Bouffay in order to take over the prisoners whom you will march up to the Quay La Fosse, whence they will be shipped to Belle Isle."

In a cell of that sordid old building known as Le Bouffay lay a cocassier, an egg and poultry dealer, arrested some three years before upon a charge of having stolen a horse, and since forgotten. His own version was that a person of whom he knew very little had entrusted him with the sale of the stolen animal in possession of which he was discovered.

The story sounds familiar; it is the sort of story that must have done duty many times; and it is probable that the cocassier was no better than he should have been. Nevertheless Fate selected him to be one of her unconscious instruments. His name was Leroy, and we have his own word for it that he was a staunch patriot. The horse business was certainly in the best vein of sans-culottism.

Leroy was awakened about ten o'clock that night by sounds that were very unusual in that sombre, sepulchral prison. They were sounds of unbridled revelry—snatches of ribald song, bursts of coarse, reverberating laughter and they proceeded, as it seemed to him, from the courtyard and the porter's lodge.

He crawled from the dank straw which served him for a bed, and approached the door to listen. Clearly the porter Laqueze was entertaining friends and making unusually merry. It was also to be gathered that Laqueze's friends were getting very drunk. What the devil did it mean?

His curiosity was soon to be very fully gratified. Came heavy steps up the stone staircase, the clatter of sabots, the clank of weapons, and through the grille of his door an increasing light began to beat.

Some one was singing the "Carmagnole" in drunken, discordant tones. Keys rattled, bolts were drawn; doors were being flung open. The noise increased. Above the general din he heard the detestable voice of the turnkey.

"Come and see my birds in their cages. Come and see my pretty birds."

Leroy began to have an uneasy premonition that the merrymaking portended sinister things.

"Get up, all of you!" bawled the turnkey. "Up and pack your traps. You're to go on a voyage. No laggards, now. Up with you!"

The door of Leroy's cell was thrown open in its turn, and he found himself confronting a group of drunken ruffians. One of these—a red-capped giant with long, black mustaches and a bundle of ropes over one arm suddenly pounced upon him. The cocassier was an active, vigorous young man. But, actuated by fear and discretion, he permitted himself tamely to be led away.

Along the stone-flagged corridor he went, and on every hand beheld his fellow-prisoners in the same plight, being similarly dragged from their cells and similarly hurried below. At the head of the stairs one fellow, perfectly drunk, was holding a list, hiccupping over names which he garbled ludicrously as he called them out. He

was lighted in his task by a candle held by another who was no less drunk. The swaying pair seemed to inter-support one another grotesquely.

Leroy suffered himself to be led down the stairs, and so came to the porter's lodge, where he beheld a half-dozen Marats assembled round a table, with bumpers of wine before them, bawling, singing, cursing, and cracking lewd jests at the expense of each prisoner as he entered. The place was in a litter. A lamp had been smashed, and there was a puddle of wine on the floor from a bottle that had been knocked over. On a bench against the wall were ranged a number of prisoners, others lay huddled on the floor, and all of them were pinioned.

Two or three of the Marats lurched up to Leroy, and ran their hands over him, turning out his pockets, and cursing him foully for their emptiness. He saw the same office performed upon others, and saw them stripped of money, pocket-books, watches, rings, buckles, and whatever else of value they happened to possess. One man, a priest, was even deprived of his shoes by a ruffian who was in want of foot-gear.

As they were pinioning his wrists, Leroy looked up. He confesses that he was scared.

"What is this for?" he asked. "Does it mean death?"

With an oath he was bidden to ask no questions.

"If I die," he assured them, "you will be killing a good republican."

A tall man with an inflamed countenance and fierce, black eyes, that were somewhat vitreous, now leered down upon him.

"You babbling fool! It's not your life, it's your property we want."

This was Grandmaison, the fencing-master, who once had been a

gentleman. He had been supping with Carrier, and he had only just arrived at Le Bouffay, accompanied by Goullin. He found the work behind time, and told them so.

"Leave that fellow now, Jolly. He's fast enough. Up and fetch the rest. It's time to be going... time to be going."

Flung aside now that he was pinioned, Leroy sat down on the floor and looked about him. Near him an elderly man was begging for a cup of water. They greeted the prayer with jeering laughter.

"Water! By Sainte Guillotine, he asks for water!" The drunken sans-culottes were intensely amused. "Patience, my friend—patience, and you shall drink your fill. You shall drink from the great cup."

Soon the porter's lodge was crowded with prisoners, and they were overflowing into the passage.

Came Grandmaison cursing and swearing at the sluggishness of the Marats, reminding them—as he had been reminding them for the last hour—that it was time to be off, that the tide was on the ebb.

Stimulated by him, Jolly—the red-capped giant with the black mustaches—and some others of the Marat Company, set themselves to tie the prisoners into chains of twenty, further to ensure against possible evasion. They were driven into the chilly courtyard, and there Grandmaison, followed by a fellow with a lantern, passed along the ranks counting them.

The result infuriated him.

"A hundred and five!" he roared, and swore horribly. "You have been here nearly five hours, and in all that time you have managed to truss up only a hundred and five. Are we never to get through with it? I tell you the tide is ebbing. It is time to be off."

Laqueze, the porter of Le Bouffay, with whose food and wine those myrmidons of the committee had made so disgracefully free, came to assure him that he had all who were in the prison.

"All?" cried Grandmaison, aghast. "But according to the list there should have been nearer two hundred." And he raised his voice to call: "Goullin! Hola, Goullin! Where the devil is Goullin?"

"The list," Laqueze told him, "was drawn up from the register. But you have not noted that many have died since they came—we have had the fever here—and that a few are now in hospital."

"In hospital! Bah! Go up, some of you, and fetch them. We are taking them somewhere where they will be cured." And then he hailed the elegant Goullin, who came up wrapped in a cloak. "Here's a fine bathing-party!" he grumbled. "A rare hundred of these swine!"

Goullin turned to Laqueze.

"What have you done with the fifteen brigands I sent you this evening?"

"But they only reached Nantes to-day," said Laqueze, who understood nothing of these extraordinary proceedings. "They have not yet been registered, not even examined."

"I asked you what you have done with them?" snapped Goullin.

"They are upstairs."

"Then fetch them. They are as good as any others."

With these, and a dozen or so dragged from sick-beds, the total was made up to about a hundred and thirty.

The Marats, further reinforced now by half a company of National Guards, set out from the prison towards five o'clock in the morning;

urging their victims along with blows and curses.

Our cocassier found himself bound wrist to wrist with a young Capuchin brother, who stumbled along in patient resignation, his head bowed, his lips moving as if he were in prayer.

"Can you guess what they are going to do with us?" murmured Leroy.

He caught the faint gleam of the Capuchin's eyes in the gloom.

"I do not know, brother. Commend yourself to God, and so be prepared for whatever may befall."

The answer was not very comforting to a man of Leroy's temperament. He stumbled on, and they came now upon the Place du Bouffay, where the red guillotine loomed in ghostly outline, and headed towards the Quai Tourville. Thence they were marched by the river the whole length of the Quai La Fosse. Fear spreading amongst them, some clamours were raised, to be instantly silenced by blows and assurances that they were to be shipped to Belle Isle, where they were to be set to work to build a fort.

The cocassier thought this likely enough, and found it more comforting than saying his prayers—a trick which he had long since lost.

As they defiled along the quays, an occasional window was thrown up, and an inquisitive head protruded, to be almost instantly withdrawn again.

On the Cale Robin at last they were herded into a shed which opened on to the water. Here they found a large lighter alongside, and they beheld in the lantern-light the silhouettes of a half-dozen shipwrights busily at work upon it, whilst the place rang with the blows of hammers and the scream of saws.

Some of those nearest the barge saw what was being done. Two great ports were being opened in the vessel's side, and over one of these thus opened the shipwrights were nailing planks. They observed that these ports, which remained above the water-line now that the barge was empty, would be well below it once she were laden, and conceiving that they perceived at last the inhuman fate awaiting them, their terror rose again. They remembered snatches of conversation and grim jests uttered by the Marats in Le Bouffay, which suddenly became clear, and the alarm spreading amongst them, they writhed and clamoured, screamed for mercy, cursed and raved.

Blows were showered upon them. In vain was it sought to quiet them again with that fable of a fort to be constructed on Belle Isle. One of them in a frenzy of despair tore himself free of his bonds, profited by a moment of confusion, and vanished so thoroughly that Grandmaison and his men lost a quarter of an hour seeking him in vain, and would have so spent the remainder of the night but for a sharp word from a man in a greatcoat and a round hat who stood looking on in conversation with Goullin.

"Get on, man! Never mind that one! We'll have him later. It will be daylight soon. You've wasted time enough already."

It was Carrier.

He had come in person to see the execution of his orders, and at his command Grandmaison now proceeded to the loading. A ladder was set against the side of the lighter by which the prisoners were to descend. The cords binding them in chains were now severed, and they were left pinioned only by the wrists. They were ordered to embark. But as they were slow to obey, and as some, indeed, hung back wailing and interceding, he and Jolly took them by their collars, thrust them to the edge, and bundled them neck and crop down into the hold, recking nothing of broken limbs. Finding this method of

embarkation more expeditious, the use of the ladder was neglected thenceforth.

Among the last to be thus flung aboard was our cocassier Leroy. He fell soft upon a heaving, writhing mass of humanity, which only gradually shook down and sorted itself out on the bottom of the lighter when the hatches overhead were being nailed down. Yet by an odd chance the young Capuchin and Leroy, who had been companions in the chain, were not separated even now. Amid the human welter in that agitated place of darkness, the cries and wails that rang around him, Leroy recognized the voice of the young friar exhorting them to prayer.

They were in the stern of the vessel, against one of the sides, and Leroy, who still kept a grip on the wits by which he had lived, bade the Capuchin hold up his wrists. Then he went nosing like a dog, until at last he found them, and his strong teeth fastened upon the cord that bound them, and began with infinite patience to gnaw it through.

Meanwhile that floating coffin had left its moorings and was gliding with the stream. On the hatches sat Grandmaison, with Jolly and two other Marats, howling the "Carmagnole" to drown the cries of the wretches underneath, and beating time with their feet upon the deck.

Leroy's teeth worked on like a rat's until at last the cord was severed. Then, lest they should be parted in the general heaving and shifting of that human mass, those teeth of his fastened upon the Capuchin's sleeve.

"Take hold of me!" he commanded as distinctly as he could; and the Capuchin gratefully obeyed. "Now untie my wrists!"

The Capuchin's hands slid along Leroy's arms until they found his hands, and there his fingers grew busy, groping at the knots. It was no easy matter to untie them in the dark, guided by sense of touch alone.

But the friar was persistent and patient, and in the end the last knot ran loose, and our cocassier was unopinioned.

It comforted him out of all proportion to the advantage. At least his hands were free for any emergency that might offer. That he depended in such a situation, and with no illusions as to what was to happen, upon emergency, shows how tenacious he was of hope.

He had been released not a moment too soon. Overhead, Grandmaison and his men were no longer singing. They were moving about. Something bumped against the side of the vessel, near the bow, obviously a boat, and voices came up from below the level of the deck. Then the lighter shuddered under a great blow upon the planks of the forecastle port. The cries in the hold redoubled. Panting, cursing, wailing men hurtled against Leroy, and almost crushed him for a moment under their weight as the vessel heaved to starboard. Came a succession of blows, not only on the port in the bow, but also on that astern. There was a cracking and rending of timbers, and the water rushed in.

Then the happenings in that black darkness became indescribably horrible. In their frenzy not a few had torn themselves free of their bonds. These hurled themselves towards the open ports through which the water was pouring. They tore at the planks with desperate, lacerated hands. Some got their arms through, seeking convulsively to widen the openings and so to gain an egress. But outside in the shipwrights' boat stood Grandmaison, the fencing-master, brandishing a butcher's sword.

With derision and foul oburgations he slashed at protruding arms and hands, thrust his sword again and again through the port into that close-packed, weltering mass, until at last the shipwrights backed away the boat to escape the suction of the sinking lighter.

The vessel, with its doomed freight of a hundred and thirty human

lives, settled down slowly by the head, and the wailing and cursing was suddenly silenced as the icy waters of the Loire eddied over it and raced on.

Caught in the swirl of water, Leroy had been carried up against the deck of the lighter. Instinctively he had clutched at a crossbeam. The water raced over his head, and then, to his surprise, receded, beat up once or twice as the lighter grounded, and finally settled on a level with his shoulders.

He was quick to realize what had happened. The lighter had gone down by the head on a shallow. Her stern remained slightly protruding, so that in that part of her between the level of the water and the deck there was a clear space of perhaps a foot or a foot and a half. Yet of the hundred and thirty doomed wretches on board he was the only one who had profited by this extraordinary chance.

Leroy hung on there; and thereafter for two hours, to use his own expression, he floated upon corpses. A man of less vigorous mettle, moral and physical, could never have withstood the ordeal of a two hours' immersion in the ice-cold water of that December morning. Leroy clung on, and hoped. I have said that he was tenacious of hope. And soon after daybreak he was justified of his confidence in his luck. As the first livid gleams of light began to suffuse the water in which he floated, a creaking of rowlocks and a sound of voices reached his ears. A boat was passing down the river.

Leroy shouted, and his voice rang hollow and sepulchral on the morning stillness. The creak of oars ceased abruptly. He shouted again, and was answered. The oars worked now at twice their former speed. The boat was alongside. Blows of a grapnel tore at the planking of the deck until there was a hole big enough to admit the passage of his body.

He looked through the faint mist which he had feared never to see

again, heaved himself up with what remained him of strength until his breast was on a level with the deck, and beheld two men in a boat.

But, exhausted by the effort, his numbed limbs refused to support him. He sank back, and went overhead, fearing now, indeed, that help had arrived too late. But as he struggled to the surface the bight of a rope smacked the water within the hold. Convulsively he clutched it, wound it about one arm, and bade them haul.

Thus they dragged him out and aboard their own craft, and put him ashore at the nearest point willing out of humanity to do so much, but daring to do no more when he had told them how he came where they had found him.

Half naked, numbed through and through, with chattering teeth and failing limbs, Leroy staggered into the guard-house at Chantenay. Soldiers of the Blues stripped him of his sodden rags, wrapped him in a blanket, thawed him outwardly before a fire and inwardly with gruel, and then invited him to give an account of himself.

The story of the horse will have led you to suppose him a ready liar. He drew now upon that gift of his, represented himself as a mariner from Montoir, and told a harrowing tale of shipwreck. Unfortunately, he overdid it. There was present a fellow who knew something of the sea, and something of Montoir, to whom Leroy's tale did not ring quite true. To rid themselves of responsibility, the soldiers carried him before the Revolutionary Committee of Nantes.

Even here all might have gone well with him, since there was no member of that body with seacraft to penetrate his imposture. But as ill-chance would have it, one of the members sitting that day was the black-mustached sans-culotte Jolly, the very man who had dragged Leroy out of his cell last night and tied him up.

At sight of him Jolly's eyes bulged in his head.

"Where the devil have you come from?" he greeted him thunderously.

Leroy quailed. Jolly's associates stared. But Jolly explained to them:

"He was of last night's bathing party. And he has the impudence to come before us like this. Take him away and shove him back into the water."

But Bachelier, a man who, next to the President Goullin, exerted the greatest influence in the committee, was gifted with a sense of humour worthy of the Revolution. He went off into peals of laughter as he surveyed the crestfallen cocassier, and, perhaps because Leroy's situation amused him, he was disposed to be humane.

"No, no!" he said. "Take him back to Le Bouffay for the present. Let the Tribunal deal with him."

So back to Le Bouffay went Leroy, back to his dungeon, his fetid straw and his bread and water, there to be forgotten again, as he had been forgotten before, until Fate should need him.

It is to him that we owe most of the materials from which we are able to reconstruct in detail that first of Carrier's drownings on a grand scale, conceived as an expeditious means of ridding the city of useless mouths, of easing the straitened circumstances resulting from misgovernment.

Very soon it was followed by others, and, custom increasing Carrier's audacity, these drownings—there were in all some twenty-three noyades—ceased to be conducted in the secrecy of the night, or to be confined to men. They were made presently to include women—of whom at one drowning alone, in Novose, three hundred perished under the most revolting circumstances—and even little children. Carrier himself admitted that during the three months of his

rule some three thousand victims visited the national bathing-place, whilst other, and no doubt more veracious, accounts treble that number of those who received the National Baptism.

Soon these wholesale drownings had become an institution, a sort of national spectacle that Carrier and his committee felt themselves in duty bound to provide.

But at length a point was reached beyond which it seemed difficult to continue them. So expeditious was the measure, that soon the obvious material was exhausted. The prisons were empty. Yet habits, once contracted, are not easily relinquished. Carrier would be looking elsewhere for material, and there was no saying where he might look, or who would be safe. Soon the committee heard a rumour that the Representative intended to depose it and to appoint a new one, whereupon many of its members, who were conscious of lukewarmness, began to grow uneasy.

Uneasy, too, became the members of the People's Society. They had sent a deputation to Carrier with suggestions for the better conduct of the protracted campaign of La Vendee. This was a sore point with the Representative. He received the patriots with the foulest abuse, and had them flung downstairs by his secretaries.

Into this atmosphere of general mistrust and apprehension came the most ridiculous Deus ex machina that ever was in the person of the very young and very rash Marc Antoine Jullien. His father, the Deputy Jullien, was an intimate of Robespierre's, by whose influence Marc Antoine was appointed to the office of Agent of the Committee of Public Safety, and sent on a tour of inspection to report upon public feeling and the conduct of the Convention's Representatives.

Arriving in Nantes at the end of January of '94, one of Marc Antoine's first visits happened to be to the People's Society, which was still quivering with rage at the indignities offered by Carrier to its

deputation.

Marc Antoine was shocked by what he heard, so shocked that instead of going to visit the Representative on the morrow, he spent the morning inditing a letter to Robespierre, in which he set forth in detail the abuses of which Carrier was guilty, and the deplorable state of misery in which he found the city of Nantes.

That night, as Marc Antoine was sinking into the peaceful slumber of the man with duty done, he was rudely aroused by an officer and a couple of men of the National Guard, who announced to him that he was under arrest, and bade him rise and dress.

Marc Antoine flounced out of bed in a temper, and flaunted his credentials. The officer remained unmoved. He was acting upon orders from the Citizen Representative.

Still in a temper, Marc Antoine hurriedly dressed himself. He would soon show this Representative that it is not safe to trifle with Agents of the Public Safety. The Citizen Representative should hear from him. The officer, still unimpressed, bundled him into a waiting carriage, and bore him away to the Maison Villeteux, on the island where Carrier had his residence.

Carrier had gone to bed. But he was awake, and he sat up promptly when the young muscadin from Paris was roughly thrust into his room by the soldiers. The mere sight of the Representative sufficed to evaporate Marc Antoine's anger, and with it his courage.

Carrier's pallor was of a grey-green from the rage that possessed him. His black eyes smouldered like those of an animal seen in the gloom, and his tumbled black hair, fluttering about his moist brow, increased the terrific aspect of his countenance. Marc Antoine shrank and was dumb.

"So," said Carrier, regarding him steadily, terribly, "you are the

thing that dares to denounce me to the Safety, that ventures to find fault with my work!" From under his pillow he drew Marc Antoine's letter to Robespierre. "Is this yours?"

At the sight of this violation of his correspondence with the Incorruptible, Marc Antoine's indignation awoke, and revived his courage.

"It is mine," he answered. "By what right have you intercepted it?"

"By what right?" Carrier put a leg out of bed. "So you question my right, do you? You have so imposed yourself upon folk that you are given powers, and you come here to air them, by—"

"You shall answer to the Citizen Robespierre for your conduct," Marc Antoine threatened him.

"Aha!" Carrier revealed his teeth in a smile of ineffable wickedness. He slipped from the bed, and crouching slightly as if about to spring, he pointed a lean finger at his captive.

"You are of those with whom it is dangerous to deal publicly, and you presume upon that. But you can be dealt with privily, and you shall. I have you, and, by—, you shall not escape me, you—!"

Marc Antoine looked into the Representative's face, and saw there the wickedness of his intent. He stiffened. Nature had endowed him with wits, and he used them now.

"Citizen Carrier," he said, "I understand. I am to be murdered to-night in the gloom and the silence. But you shall perish after me in daylight, and amid the execrations of the people. You may have intercepted my letters to my father and to Robespierre. But if I do not leave Nantes, my father will come to ask an account of you, and you will end your life on the scaffold like the miserable assassin that you are."

Of all that tirade, but one sentence had remained as if corroded into the mind of Carrier. "My letters to my father and to Robespierre," the astute Marc Antoine had said. And Marc Antoine saw the Representative's mouth loosen, saw a glint of fear replace the ferocity in his dark eyes.

What Marc Antoine intended to suggest had instantly leapt to Carrier's mind—that there had been a second letter which his agents had missed. They should pay for that. But, meanwhile, if it were true, he dare not for his neck's sake go further in this matter. He may have suspected that it was not true. But he had no means of testing that suspicion. Marc Antoine, you see, was subtle.

"Your father?" growled the Representative. "Who is your father?"

"The Deputy Jullien."

"What?" Carrier straightened himself, affecting an immense astonishment. "You are the son of the Deputy Julien?" He burst into a laugh. He came forward, holding out both his hands. He could be subtle, too, you see. "My friend, why did you not say so sooner? See in what a ghastly mistake you have let me flounder. I imagined you—of course, it was foolish of me—to be a proscribed rascal from Angers, of the same name."

He had fallen upon Marc Antoine's neck, and was embracing him.

"Forgive me, my friend!" he besought him. "Come and dine with me to-morrow, and we will laugh over it together."

But Marc Antoine had no mind to dine with Carrier, although he promised to do so readily enough. Back at his inn, scarce believing that he had got away alive, still sweating with terror at the very thought of his near escape, he packed his valise, and, by virtue of his commission, obtained post-horses at once.

On the morrow from Angers, safe beyond the reach of Carrier, he wrote again to Robespierre, and this time also to his father.

"In Nantes," he wrote, "I found the old regime in its worst form." He knew the jargon of Liberty, the tune that set the patriots a-dancing. "Carrier's insolent secretaries emulate the intolerable haughtiness of a ci-devant minister's lackeys. Carrier himself lives surrounded by luxury, pampered by women and parasites, keeping a harem and a court. He tramples justice in the mud. He has had all those who filled the prisons flung untried into the Loire. The city of Nantes," he concluded, "needs saving. The Vendean revolt must be suppressed, and Carrier the slayer of Liberty recalled."

The letter had its effect, and Carrier was recalled to Paris, but not in disgrace. Failing health was urged as the solicitous reason for his retirement from the arduous duties of governing Nantes.

In the Convention his return made little stir, and even when early in the following July he learnt that Bourbotte, his successor at Nantes, had ordered the arrest of Goullin, Bachelier, Grandmaison, and his other friends of the committee, on the score of the drownings and the appropriation of national property confiscated from emigres, he remained calm, satisfied that his own position was unassailable.

But the members of the Committee of Nantes were sent to Paris for trial, and their arrival there took place on that most memorable date in the annals of the Revolution, the 10th Thermidor (July 29, 1794, O.S.), the day on which Robespierre fell and the floodgates of vengeance upon the terrorists were flung open.

You have seen in the case of Marc Antoine Jullien how quick Carrier could be to take a cue. In a coach he followed the tumbril that bore Robespierre to execution, radiant of countenance and shouting with the loudest, "Death to the traitor!" On the morrow from the rostrum of the Convention, he passionately represented himself as a

victim of the fallen tyrant, cleverly turning to his own credit the Marc Antoine affair, reminding the Convention how he had himself been denounced to Robespierre. He was greeted with applause in that atmosphere of Thermidorean reaction.

But Nemesis was stalking him relentlessly if silently.

Among a batch of prisoners whom a chain of curious chances had brought from Nantes to Paris was our old friend Leroy the cocassier, required now as a witness against the members of the committee.

Having acquainted the court with the grounds of his arrest, and the fact that for three years he had lain forgotten and without trial in the pestilential prison of Le Bouffay, Leroy passed on to a recital of his sufferings on that night of terror when he had gone down the Loire in the doomed lighter. He told his tale with an artlessness that rendered it the more moving and convincing. The audience crowding the chamber of justice shuddered with horror, and sobbed over the details of his torments, wept for joy over his miraculous preservation. At the close he was applauded on all sides, which bewildered him a little, for he had never known anything but abuse in all his chequered life.

And then, at the promptings of that spirit of reaction that was abroad in those days when France was awakening from the nightmare of terror, some one made there and then a collection on his behalf, and came to thrust into his hands a great bundle of assignats and bank bills, which to the humble cocassier represented almost a fortune. It was his turn to weep.

Then the crowd in the court which had heard his story shouted for the head of Carrier. The demand was taken up by the whole of Paris, and finally his associates of the Convention handed him over to the Revolutionary Tribunal.

He came before it on November 25th, and he could not find counsel to defend him. Six advocates named in succession by the President refused to plead the cause of so inhuman a monster. In a rage, at last Carrier announced that he would defend himself. He did.

He took the line that his business in Nantes had been chiefly concerned with provisioning the Army of the West; that he had had little to do with the policing of Nantes, which he left entirely to the Revolutionary Committee; and that he had no knowledge of the things said to have taken place. But Goullin, Bachelier, and the others were there to fling back the accusation in their endeavours to save their own necks at the expense of his.

He was sentenced on the very anniversary of that terrible night on which the men of the Marat Company broke into the prison of Le Bouffay, and he was accompanied in the tumbril by Grandmaison the pitiless, who was now filled with self-pity to such an extent that he wept bitterly.

The crowd, which had hooted and insulted him from the Conciergerie to the Place de Greve, fell suddenly silent as he mounted the scaffold, his step firm, but his shoulders bowed, and his eyes upon the ground.

Suddenly upon the silence, grotesquely, horribly merry, broke the sound of a clarinet playing the "Ca ira!"

Jerking himself erect, Carrier turned and flung the last of his terrible glances at the musician.

A moment later the knife fell with a thud, and a bleeding head rolled into the basket, the eyes still staring, but powerless now to inspire terror.

Upon the general silence broke an echo of the stroke.

"Vlan!" cried a voice. "And there's a fine end to a great drowner!"

It was Leroy the cocassier. The crowd took up the cry.

IX. THE NIGHT OF NUPTIALS— Charles The Bold And Sapphira Danvelt

When Philip the Good succumbed at Bruges of an apoplexy in the early part of the year 1467, the occasion was represented to the stout folk of Flanders as a favourable one to break the Burgundian yoke under which they laboured. It was so represented by the agents of that astute king, Louis XI, who ever preferred guile to the direct and costly exertion of force.

Charles, surnamed the Bold (*le Temeraire*), the new Duke of Burgundy, was of all the French King's enemies by far the most formidable and menacing just then; and the wily King, who knew better than to measure himself with a foe that was formidable, conceived a way to embarrass the Duke and cripple his resources at the very outset of his reign. To this end did he send his agents into the Duke's Flemish dominions, there to intrigue with the powerful and to stir up the spirit of sedition that never did more than slumber in the hearts of those turbulent burghers.

It was from the Belfry Tower of the populous, wealthy city of Ghent—then one of the most populous and wealthy cities of Europe—that the call to arms first rang out, summoning the city's forty thousand weavers to quit their looms and take up weapons—the sword, the pike, and that arm so peculiarly Flemish, known as the *goedendag*. From Ghent the fierce flame of revolt spread rapidly to the valley of the Meuse, and the scarcely less important city of Liege, where the powerful guilds of armourers and leather workers proved as ready for

battle as the weavers of Ghent.

They made a brave enough show until Charles the Bold came face to face with them at Saint-Trond, and smashed the mutinous burgher army into shards, leaving them in their slaughtered thousands upon the stricken field.

The Duke was very angry. He felt that the Flemings had sought to take a base advantage of him at a moment when it was supposed he would not be equal to protecting his interests, and he intended to brand it for all time upon their minds that it was not safe to take such liberties with their liege lord. Thus, when a dozen of the most important burghers of Liege came out to him very humbly in their shirts, with halters round their necks, to kneel in the dust at his feet and offer him the keys of the city, he spurned the offer with angry disdain.

"You shall be taught," he told them, "how little I require your keys, and I hope that you will remember the lesson for your own good."

On the morrow his pioneers began to smash a breach, twenty fathoms wide, in one of the walls of the city, rolling the rubble into the ditch to fill it up at the spot. When the operation was complete, Charles rode through the gap, as a conqueror, with vizor lowered and lance on thigh at the head of his Burgundians, into his city of Liege, whose fortifications he commanded should be permanently demolished.

That was the end of the Flemish rising of 1467 against Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy. The weavers returned to their looms, the armourers to their forges, and the glove-makers and leather workers to their shears. Peace was restored; and to see that it was kept, Charles appointed military governors of his confidence where he deemed them necessary.

One of these was Claudius von Rhynsault, who had followed the Duke's fortunes for some years now, a born leader of men, a fellow of infinite address at arms and resource in battle, and of a bold, reckless courage that nothing could ever daunt. It was perhaps this last quality that rendered him so esteemed of Charles, himself named the Bold, whose view of courage was that it was a virtue so lofty that in the nature of its possessor there could, perforce, be nothing mean.

So now, to mark his esteem of this stalwart German, the Duke made him Governor of the province of Zeeland, and dispatched him thither to stamp out there any lingering sparks of revolt, and to rule it in his name as ducal lieutenant.

Thus, upon a fair May morning, came Claud of Ryhnsault and his hardy riders to the town of Middelburg, the capital of Zeeland, to take up his residence at the Gravenhof in the main square, and thence to dispense justice throughout that land of dykes in his master's princely name. This justice the German captain dispensed with merciless rigour, conceiving that to be the proper way to uproot rebellious tendencies. It was inevitable that he should follow such a course, impelled to it by a remorseless cruelty in his nature, of which the Duke his master had seen no hint, else he might have thought twice before making him Governor of Zeeland, for Charles—despite his rigour when treachery was to be punished—was a just and humane prince.

Now, amongst those arrested and flung into Middelburg gaol as a result of Rhynsault's ruthless perquisitions and inquisitions was a wealthy young burgher named Philip Danvelt. His arrest was occasioned by a letter signed "Philip Danvelt" found in the house of a marked rebel who had been first tortured and then hanged. The letter, of a date immediately preceding the late rising, promised assistance in the shape of arms and money.

Brought before Rhynsault for examination, in a cheerless hall of the Gravenhof, Danvelt's defence was a denial upon oath that he had

ever taken or offered to take any part in the rebellion. Told of the letter found, and of the date it bore, he laughed. That letter made everything very simple and clear. At the date it bore he had been away at Flushing marrying a wife, whom he had since brought thence to Middelburg. It was ludicrous, he urged, to suppose that in such a season—of all seasons in a man's life—he should have been concerned with rebellion or correspondence with rebels, and, urging this, he laughed again.

Now, the German captain did not like burghers who laughed in his presence. It argued a lack of proper awe for the dignity of his office and the importance of his person. From his high seat at the Judgment-board, flanked by clerks and hedged about by men-at-arms, he scowled upon the flaxen-haired, fresh-complexioned young burgher who bore himself so very easily. He was a big, handsome man, this Rhynsault, of perhaps some thirty years of age. His thick hair was of a reddish brown, and his beardless face was cast in bold lines and tanned by exposure to the colour of mahogany, save where the pale line of a scar crossed his left cheek.

"Yet, I tell you, the letter bears your signature," he grumbled sourly.

"My name, perhaps," smiled the amiable Danvelt, "but assuredly not my signature."

"Herrgott!" swore the German captain. "Is this a riddle? What is the difference?"

Feeling himself secure, that very foolish burgher ventured to be mildly insolent.

"It is a riddle that the meanest of your clerks there can read for you," said he.

The Governor's blue eyes gleamed like steel as they, fastened upon Danvelt, his heavy jaw seemed to thrust itself forward, and a dull

flush crept into his cheeks. Then he swore.

"Beim blute Gottes!" quoth he, "do you whet your trader's wit upon me, scum?"

And to the waiting men-at-arms:

"Take him back to his dungeon," he commanded, "that in its quiet he may study a proper carriage before he is next brought before us."

Danvelt was haled away to gaol again, to repent him of his pertness and to reflect that, under the governorship of Claudius von Rhynsault, it was not only the guilty who had need to go warily.

The Governor sat back in his chair with a grunt. His secretary, on his immediate right, leaned towards him.

"It were easy to test the truth of the man's assertion," said he. "Let his servants and his wife attend and be questioned as to when he was in Flushing and when married."

"Aye," growled von Rhynsault. "Let it be done. I don't doubt we shall discover that the dog was lying."

But no such discovery was made when, on the morrow, Danvelt's household and his wife stood before the Governor to answer his questions. Their replies most fully bore out the tale Danvelt had told, and appeared in other ways to place it beyond all doubt that he had taken no part, in deed or even in thought, in the rebellion against the Duke of Burgundy. His wife protested it solemnly and piteously.

"To this I can swear, my lord," she concluded. "I am sure no evidence can be brought against him, who was ever loyal and ever concerned with his affairs and with me at the time in question. My lord"—she held out her hands towards the grim German, and her lovely eyes gleamed with unshed tears of supplication—"I implore you to believe me, and in default of witnesses against him to restore my

husband to me."

Rhynsault's blue eyes kindled now as they considered her, and his full red lips slowly parted in the faintest and most inscrutable of smiles. She was very fair to look upon—of middle height and most exquisite shape. Her gown, of palest saffron, edged with fur, high-waisted according to the mode, and fitted closely to the gently swelling bust, was cut low to display the white perfection of her neck. Her softly rounded face looked absurdly childlike under the tall-crowned hennin, from which a wispy veil floated behind her as she moved.

In silence, then, for a spell, the German mercenary pondered her with those slowly kindling eyes, that slowly spreading, indefinite smile. Then he stirred, and to his secretary he muttered shortly:

"The woman lies. In private I may snare the truth from her."

He rose—a tall, massively imposing figure in a low-girdled tunic of deep purple velvet, open at the breast, and gold-laced across a white silken undervest.

"There is some evidence," he informed her gruffly. "Come with me, and you shall see it for yourself."

He led the way from that cheerless hall by a dark corridor to a small snug room, richly hung and carpeted, where a servant waited. He dismissed the fellow, and in the same breath bade her enter, watching her the while from under lowered brows. One of her women had followed; but admittance was denied her. Danvelt's wife must enter his room alone.

Whilst she waited there, with scared eyes and fluttering bosom, he went to take from an oaken coffer the letter signed "Philip Danvelt." He folded the sheet so that the name only was to be read, and came to thrust it under her eyes.

"What name is that?" he asked her gruffly.

Her answer was very prompt.

"It is my husband's, but not the writing—it is another hand; some other Philip Danvelt; there will be others in Zeeland."

He laughed softly, looking at her ever with that odd intentness, and under his gaze she shrank and cowered in terror; it spoke to her of some nameless evil; the tepid air of the luxurious room was stifling her.

"If I believed you, your husband would be delivered from his prison—from all danger; and he stands, I swear to you, in mortal peril."

"Ah, but you must believe me. There are others who can bear witness."

"I care naught for others," he broke in, with harsh and arrogant contempt. Then he softened his voice to a lover's key. "But I might accept your word that this is not your husband's hand, even though I did not believe you."

She did not understand, and so she could only stare at him with those round, brown eyes of hers dilating, her lovely cheeks blanching with horrid fear.

"Why, see," he said at length, with an easy, gruff good-humour, "I place the life of Philip Danvelt in those fair hands to do with as you please. Surely, sweeting, you will not be so unkind as to destroy it."

And as he spoke his face bent nearer to her own, his flaming eyes devoured her, and his arm slipped softly, snake-like round her to draw her to him. But before it had closed its grip she had started away, springing back in horror, an outcry already on her pale lips.

"One word," he admonished her sharply, "and it speaks your husband's doom!"

"Oh, let me go, let me go!" she cried in anguish.

"And leave your husband in the hangman's hands?" he asked.

"Let me go! Let me go!" was all that she could answer him, expressing the only thought of which in that dread moment her mind was capable.

That and the loathing on her face wounded his vanity for this beast was vain. His manner changed, and the abysmal brute in him was revealed in the anger he displayed. With foul imprecations he drove her out.

Next day a messenger from the Governor waited upon her at her house with a brief note to inform her that her husband would be hanged upon the morrow. Incredulity was succeeded by a numb, stony, dry-eyed grief, in which she sat alone for hours—a woman entranced. At last, towards dusk, she summoned a couple of her grooms to attend and light her, and made her way, ever in that odd somnambulistic state, to the gaol of Middelburg. She announced herself to the head gaoler as the wife of Philip Danvelt, lying under sentence of death, and that she was come to take her last leave of him. It was not a thing to be denied, nor had the gaoler any orders to deny it.

So she was ushered into the dank cell where Philip waited for his doom, and by the yellow wheel of light of the lantern that hung from the shallow vaulted ceiling she beheld the ghastly change that the news of impending death had wrought in him. No longer was he the self-assured young burgher who, conscious of his innocence and worldly importance, had used a certain careless insolence with the Governor of Zeeland. Here she beheld a man of livid and distorted face, wild-

eyed, his hair and garments in disarray, suggesting the physical convulsions to which he had yielded in his despair and rage.

"Sapphira!" he cried at sight of her. A sigh of anguish and he flung himself, shuddering and sobbing, upon her breast. She put her arms about him, soothed him gently, and drew him back to the wooden chair from which he had leapt to greet her.

He took his head in his hands and poured out the fierce anguish of his soul. To die innocent as he was, to be the victim of an arbitrary, unjust power! And to perish at his age!

Hearing him rave, she shivered out of an agony of compassion and also of some terror for herself. She would that he found it less hard to die. And thinking this she thought further, and uttered some of her thought aloud.

"I could have saved you, my poor Philip."

He started up, and showed her again that livid, distorted face of his.

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely. "You could have saved me, do you say? Then—then why—"

"Ah, but the price, my dear," she sobbed.

"Price?" quoth he in sudden, fierce contempt. "What price is too great to pay for life? Does this Rhynsault want all our wealth, then yield it to him yield it so that I may live—"

"Should I have hesitated had it been but that?" she interrupted.

And then she told him, whilst he sat there hunched and shuddering.

"The dog! The foul German dog!" he muttered through clenched teeth.

"So that you see, my dear," she pursued brokenly, "it was too great

a price. Yourself, you could not have condoned it, or done aught else but loathe me afterwards."

But he was not as stout-mettled as she deemed him, or else the all-consuming thirst of life, youth's stark horror of death, made him a temporizing craven in that hour.

"Who knows?" he answered. "Certes, I do not. But a thing so done, a thing in which the will and mind have no part, resolves itself perhaps into a sacrifice—"

He broke off there, perhaps from very shame. After all he was a man, and there are limits to what manhood will permit of one.

But those words of his sank deeply into her soul. They rang again and again in her ears as she took her anguished way home after the agony of their farewells, and in the end they drove her out again that very night to seek the Governor of Zeeland.

Rhynsault was at supper when she came, and without quitting the table bade them usher her into his presence. He found her very white, but singularly calm and purposeful in her bearing.

"Well, mistress?"

"May I speak to you alone?"

Her voice was as steady as her glance.

He waved away the attendants, drank a deep draught from the cup at his elbow, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and sat back in his tall chair to hear her.

"Yesterday," she said, "you made, or seemed to make, me a proposal."

He looked up at first in surprise, then with a faint smile on his

coarse, red mouth. His glance had read her meaning clearly.

"Look you, mistress, here I am lord of life and death. Yet in the case of your husband I yield up that power to you. Say but the word and I sign the order for his gaol delivery at dawn."

"I have come to say that word," she informed him.

A moment he looked up at her, his smile broadening, a flush mounting to his cheek-bones. Then he rose and sent his chair crashing behind him to the ground.

"Herrgott!" he grunted; and he gathered her slim, trembling body to his massive gold-laced breast.

Soon after sunrise on the morrow she was beating at the gates of Middelburg gaol, a paper clutched convulsively in her left hand.

She was admitted, and to the head gaoler she showed the paper that she carried.

"An order from the Governor of Zeeland for the gaol delivery of Philip Danvelt!" she announced almost hysterically.

The gaoler scanned the paper, then her face. His lips tightened.

"Come this way," he said; and led her down a gloomy corridor to the cell where yesterday she had seen her husband.

He threw wide the door, and Sapphira sprang in.

"Philip!" she cried, and checked as suddenly.

He lay supine and still upon the miserable pallet, his hands folded upon his breast, his face waxen, his eyes staring glassily through half-closed lids.

She sped to his side in a sudden chill of terror. She fell on her

knees and touched him.

"Dead!" she screamed, and, kneeling, span round questioning to face the gaoler in the doorway. "Dead!"

"He was hanged at daybreak, mistress," said the gaoler gently.

She rocked a moment, moaning, then fell suddenly forward across her husband's body in a swoon.

That evening she was again at the Gravenhof to see Rhynsault, and again she was admitted—a haggard faced woman now, in whom there was no trace of beauty left. She came to stand before the Governor, considered him in silence a moment with a loathing unutterable in her glance, then launched into fierce recriminations of his broken faith.

He heard her out, then shrugged and smiled indulgently.

"I performed no less than I promised," said he. "I pledged my word to Danvelt's gaol delivery, and was not my gaol delivery effective? You could hardly suppose that I should allow it to be of such a fashion as to interfere with our future happy meetings."

Before his leering glance she fled in terror, followed by the sound of his bestial laugh.

For a week thereafter she kept her house and brooded. Then one day she sallied forth all dressed in deepest mourning and attended by a train of servants, and, embarking upon a flat-bottomed barge, was borne up the river Scheldt towards Antwerp. Bruges was her ultimate destination, of which she left no word behind her, and took the longest way round to reach it. From Antwerp her barge voyaged on to Ghent, and thence by canal, drawn by four stout Flemish horses, at last to the magnificent city where the Dukes of Burgundy kept their Court.

Under the June sunshine the opulent city of Bruges hummed with

activity like the great human hive it was. For Bruges at this date was the market of the world, the very centre of the world's commerce, the cosmopolis of the age. Within its walls were established the agencies of a score of foreign great trading companies, and the ambassadors of no less a number of foreign Powers. Here on a day you might hear every language of civilization spoken in the broad thoroughfares under the shadow of such imposing buildings as you would not have found together in another city of Europe. To the harbour came the richly laden argosies from Venice and Genoa, from Germany and the Baltic, from Constantinople and from England, and in her thronged markets Lombard and Venetian, Levantine, Teuton, and Saxon stood jostling one another to buy and sell.

It was past noon, and the great belfry above the Gothic Cloth Hall in the Grande Place was casting a lengthening shadow athwart the crowded square. Above the Babel of voices sounded on a sudden the note of a horn, and there was a cry of "The Duke! The Duke!" followed by a general scuttle of the multitude to leave a clear way down the middle of the great square.

A gorgeous cavalcade some twoscore strong came into sight, advancing at an amble, a ducal hunting party returning to the palace. A hush fell upon the burgher crowd as it pressed back respectfully to gaze; and to the din of human voices succeeded now the clatter of hoofs upon the kidney-stones of the square, the jangle of hawkbells, the baying of hounds, and the occasional note of the horn that had first brought warning of the Duke's approach.

It was a splendid iridescent company, flaunting in its apparel every colour of the prism. There were great lords in silks and velvets of every hue, their legs encased in the finest skins of Spain; there were great ladies, in tall, pointed hennins or bicorné headdresses and floating veils, with embroidered gowns that swept down below the bellies of their richly harnessed palfreys. And along the flanks of this

cavalcade ran grooms and huntsmen in green and leather, their jagged liripipes flung about their necks, leading the leashed hounds.

The burghers craned their necks, and Levantine merchant argued with Lombard trader upon an estimate of the wealth paraded thus before them. And then at last came the young Duke himself, in black, as if to detach himself from the surrounding splendour. He was of middle stature, of a strong and supple build, with a lean, swarthy face and lively eyes. Beside him, on a white horse, rode a dazzling youth dressed from head to foot in flame-coloured silk, a peaked bonnet of black velvet set upon his lovely golden head, a hooded falcon perched upon his left wrist, a tiny lute slung behind him by a black ribbon. He laughed as he rode, looking the very incarnation of youth and gaiety.

The cavalcade passed slowly towards the Prinssenhof, the ducal residence. It had all but crossed the square when suddenly a voice—a woman's voice, high and tense—rang out.

"Justice, my Lord Duke of Burgundy! Justice, Lord Duke, for a woman's wrongs!"

It startled the courtly riders, and for a moment chilled their gaiety. The scarlet youth at the Duke's side swung round in his saddle to obtain a view of her who called so piteously, and he beheld Sapphira Danvelt.

She was all in black, and black was the veil that hung from her steeple head-dress, throwing into greater relief her pallid loveliness which the youth's glance was quick to appraise. He saw, too, from her air and from the grooms attending her, that she was a woman of some quality, and the tragic appeal of her smote home in his gay, poetic soul. He put forth a hand and clutched the Duke's arm, and, as if yielding to this, the Duke reined up.

"What is it that you seek?" Charles asked her not unkindly, his lively dark eyes playing over her.

"Justice!" was all she answered him very piteously, and yet with a certain fierceness of insistence.

"None asks it of me in vain, I hope," he answered gravely. "But I do not dispense it from the saddle in the public street. Follow us."

And he rode on.

She followed to the Prinssenhof with her grooms and her woman Catherine. There she was made to wait in a great hall, thronged with grooms and men-at-arms and huntsmen, who were draining the measure sent them by the Duke. She stood apart, wrapped in her tragic sorrow, and none molested her. At last a chamberlain came to summon her to the Duke's presence.

In a spacious, sparsely furnished room she found the Duke awaiting her, wearing now a gown of black and gold that was trimmed with rich fur. He sat in a tall chair of oak and leather, and leaning on the back of it lounged gracefully the lovely scarlet youth who had ridden at his side.

Standing before him, with drooping eyes and folded hands, she told her shameful story. Darker and darker grew his brow as she proceeded with it. But it was the gloom of doubt rather than of anger.

"Rhynsault?" he cried when she had done. "Rhynsault did this?"

There was incredulity in his voice and nothing else.

The youth behind him laughed softly, and shifted his attitude.

"You are surprised. Yet what else was to be looked for in that Teuton swine? Me he never could deceive, for all his—"

"Be silent, Arnault," said the Duke sharply. And to the woman: "It is a grave, grave charge," he said, "against a man I trusted and have esteemed, else I should not have placed him where he is. What proof have you?"

She proffered him a strip of parchment—the signed order for the gaol delivery of Philip Danvelt.

"The gaoler of Middelburg will tell Your Grace that he was hanged already when I presented this. My woman Catherine, whom I have with me, can testify to part. And there are some other servants who can bear witness to my husband's innocence. Captain von Rhynsault had ceased to doubt it."

He studied the parchment, and fell very grave and thoughtful.

"Where are you lodged?" he asked.

She told him.

"Wait there until I send for you again," he bade her. "Leave this order with me, and depend upon it, justice shall be done."

That evening, a messenger rode out to Middelburg to summon von Rhynsault to Bruges, and the arrogant German came promptly and confidently, knowing nothing of the reason, but conceiving naturally that fresh honours were to be conferred upon him by a master who loved stout-hearted servants. And that Rhynsault was stout-hearted he showed most of all when the Duke taxed him without warning with the villainy he had wrought.

If he was surprised, he was not startled. What was the life of a Flemish burgher more or less? What the honour of a Flemish wife? These were not considerations to daunt a soldier, a valiant man of war. And because such was his dull mood—for he was dull, this Rhynsault, as dull as he was brutish—he considered his sin too venial

to be denied. And the Duke, who could be crafty, perceiving that mood of his, and simulating almost an approval of it, drew the German captain into self-betrayal.

"And so this Philip Danvelt may have been innocent?"

"He must have been, for we have since taken the guilty man of the same name," said the German easily. "It was unfortunate, but—"

"Unfortunate!" The Duke's manner changed from silk to steel. He heaved himself out of his chair, and his dark eyes flamed. "Unfortunate! Is that all, you dog?"

"I conceived him guilty when I ordered him to be hanged," spluttered the captain, greatly taken aback.

"Then, why this? Answer me—why this?"

And under his nose the Duke thrust the order of gaol delivery Rhynsault had signed.

The captain blenched, and fear entered his glance. The thing was becoming serious, it seemed.

"Is this the sort of justice you were sent to Middelburg to administer in my name? Is this how you dishonour me? If you conceived him guilty, why did you sign this and upon what terms? Bah, I know the terms. And having made such foul terms, why did you not keep your part of the bargain, evil as it was?"

Rhynsault had nothing to say. He was afraid, and he was angry too. Here was a most unreasonable bother all about nothing, it seemed to him.

"I—I sought to compromise between justice and—and—"

"And your own vile ends," the Duke concluded for him. "By Heaven,

you German dog, I think I'll have you shortened by a head!"

"My lord!" It was a cry of protest.

"There is the woman you have so foully wronged, and so foully swindled," said the Duke, watching him. "What reparation will you make to her? What reparation can you make? I can toss your filthy head into her lap. But will that repair the wrong?"

The captain suddenly saw light, and quite a pleasant light it was, for he had found Sapphira most delectable.

"Why," he said slowly, and with all a fool's audacity, "having made her a widow, I can make her a wife again. I never thought to wive, myself. But if Your Grace thinks such reparation adequate, I will afford it her."

The Duke checked in the very act of replying. Again the expression of his countenance changed. He strode away, his head bowed in thought; then slowly he returned.

"Be it so," he said. "It is not much, but it is all that you can do, and after a fashion it will mend the honour you have torn. See that you wed her within the week. Should she not consent, it will be the worse for you."

She would not have consented—she would have preferred death, indeed—but for the insistence that the Duke used in private with her. And so, half convinced that it would in some sort repair her honour, the poor woman suffered herself to be led, more dead than living, to the altar in the Duke's private chapel, and there, scarcely knowing what she did, she became the wife of Captain Claudius von Rhynsault, the man she had most cause to loathe and hate in all the world.

Rhynsault had ordered a great banquet to celebrate his nuptials, for

on the whole he was well satisfied with the issue of this affair. But as he left the altar, his half-swooning bride upon his arm, the Duke in person tapped his shoulder.

"All is not yet done," he said. "You are to come with me."

The bridal pair were conducted to the great hall of the Prinssenhof where there was a great gathering of the Court—to do honour to his nuptials, thought the German captain. At the broad table sat two clerkly fellows with quills and parchments, and by this table the Duke took his stand, Arnault beside him—in peacock-blue to-day—and called for silence.

"Captain von Rhynsault," he said gravely and quietly, "what you have done is well done; but it does not suffice. In the circumstances of this marriage, and after the revelation we have had of your ways of thought and of honour, it is necessary to make provision against the future. It shall not be yours, save at grave cost, to repudiate the wife you have now taken."

"There is no such intent—" began Rhynsault, who disliked this homily.

The Duke waved him into silence.

"You are interrupting me," he said sharply. "You are a wealthy man, Rhynsault, thanks to the favours I have heaped upon you ever since the day when I picked you from your German kennel to set you where you stand. Here you will find a deed prepared. It is in the form of a will, whereby you bequeath everything of which you are to-day possessed—and it is all set down—to your wife on your death, or on the day on which you put her from you. Your signature is required to that."

The captain hesitated a moment. This deed would fetter all his future. The Duke was unreasonable. But under the steady, compelling eyes of Charles he moved forward to the table, and accepted the quill

the clerk was proffering. There was no alternative, he realized. He was trapped. Well, well! He must make the best of it. He stooped from his great height, and signed in his great sprawling, clumsy, soldier's hand.

The clerk dusted the document with pounce, and handed it to the Duke. Charles cast an eye upon the signature, then taking the quill himself, signed under it, then bore the document to the half-swooning bride.

"Keep this secure," he bade her. "It is your marriage-gift from me."

Rhynsault's eyes gleamed. If his wife were to keep the deed, the thing was none so desperate after all. But the next moment he had other things to think of.

"Give me your sword," the Duke requested.

Wondering, the German unsheathed the weapon, and proffered the hilt to his master. Charles took it, and a stern smile played about his beardless mouth. He grasped it, hilt in one hand and point in the other. Suddenly he bent his right knee, and, bearing sharply downward with the flat of the weapon upon his thigh, snapped in into two.

"So much for that dishonourable blade," he said, and cast the pieces from him. Then he flung out an arm to point to Rhynsault. "Take him out," he commanded; "let him have a priest, and half an hour in which to make his soul, then set his head on a spear above the Cloth Hall, that men may know the justice of Charles of Burgundy."

With the roar of a 'goaded bull the German attempted to fling forward. But men-at-arms, in steel and leather, who had come up quietly behind him, seized him now. Impotent in their coiling arms, he was borne away to his doom, that thereby he might complete the reparation of his hideous offence, and deliver Sapphira from the

bondage of a wedlock which Charles of Burgundy had never intended her to endure.

X. THE NIGHT OF STRANGLERS—Govanna Of Naples And Andreas Of Hungary

Charles, Duke of Durazzo, was one of your super chess-players, handling kings and queens, knights and prelates of flesh and blood in the game that he played with Destiny upon the dark board of Neapolitan politics. And he had no illusions on the score of the forfeit that would be claimed by his grim opponent in the event of his own defeat. He knew that his head was the stake he set upon the board, and he knew, too, that defeat must inevitably follow upon a single false move. Yet he played boldly and craftily, as you shall judge.

He made his first move in March of 1343, some three months after the death of Robert of Anjou, King of Jerusalem and Sicily, as ran the title of the ruler of Naples. He found his opportunity amid the appalling anarchy into which the kingdom was then plunged as a result of a wrong and an ill judged attempt to right it.

Good King Robert the Wise had wrested the crown of Naples from his elder brother, the King of Hungary, and had ruled as a usurper. Perhaps to quiet his conscience, perhaps to ensure against future strife between his own and his brother's descendants, he had attempted to right the wrong by a marriage between his brother's grandson Andreas and his own granddaughter Giovanna, a marriage which had taken place ten years before, when Andreas was but seven years of age and Giovanna five.

The aim had been thus to weld into one the two branches of the House of Anjou. Instead, the rivalry was to be rendered more acute than ever, and King Robert's fear of some such result contributed to it not a little. On his deathbed he summoned the Princes of the Blood—the members of the Houses of Durazzo and Taranto—and the chief nobles of the kingdom, demanding of them an oath of allegiance to Giovanna, and himself appointing a Council of Regency to govern the kingdom during her minority.

The consequence was that, against all that had been intended when the marriage was contracted, Giovanna was now proclaimed queen in her own right, and the government taken over in her name by the appointed Council. Instantly the Court of Naples was divided into two camps, the party of the Queen, including the Neapolitan nobility, and the party of Andreas of Hungary, consisting of the Hungarian nobles forming his train and a few malcontent Neapolitan barons, and guided by the sinister figure of Andreas's preceptor, Friar Robert.

This arrogant friar, of whom Petrarch has left us a vivid portrait, a red-faced, red-bearded man, with a fringe of red hair about his tonsure, short and squat of figure, dirty in his dress and habits, yet imbued with the pride of Lucifer despite his rags, thrust himself violently into the Council of Regency, demanding a voice in the name of his pupil Andreas. And the Council feared him, not only on the score of his over-bearing personality, but also because he was supported by the populace, which had accepted his general filthiness as the outward sign of holiness. His irruption occasioned so much trouble and confusion that in the end the Pope intervened, in his quality as Lord Paramount—Naples being a fief of Holy Church—and appointed a legate to rule the kingdom during Giovanna's minority.

The Hungarians, with Andreas's brother, King Ludwig of Hungary, at their head, now appealed to the Papal Court of Avignon for a Bull commanding the joint coronation of Andreas and Giovanna, which

would be tantamount to placing the government in the hands of Andreas. The Neapolitans, headed by the Princes of the Blood—who, standing next in succession, had also their own interests to consider clamoured that Giovanna alone should be crowned.

In this pass were the affairs of the kingdom when Charles of Durazzo, who had stood watchful and aloof, carefully weighing the chances, resolved at last to play that dangerous game of his. He began by the secret abduction of Maria of Anjou, his own cousin and Giovanna's sister, a child of fourteen. He kept her concealed for a month in his palace, what time he obtained from the Pope, through the good offices of his uncle the Cardinal of Perigord, a dispensation to overcome the barrier of consanguinity. That dispensation obtained, Charles married the girl publicly under the eyes of all Naples, and by the marriage—to which the bride seemed nowise unwilling—became, by virtue of his wife, next heir to the crown of Naples.

That was his opening move. His next was to write to his obliging uncle the Cardinal of Perigord, whose influence at Avignon was very considerable, urging him to prevail upon Pope Clement VI not to sign the Bull in favour of Andreas and the joint coronation.

Now, the high-handed action of Charles in marrying Maria of Anjou had very naturally disposed Giovanna against him; further, it had disposed against him those Princes of the Blood who were next in the succession, and upon whom he had stolen a march by this strengthening of his own claims. It is inevitable to assume that he had counted precisely upon this to afford him the pretext that he sought—he, a Neapolitan prince—to ally himself with the Hungarian intruder.

Under any other circumstances his advances must have been viewed with suspicion by Andreas, and still more by the crafty Friar Robert. But, under the circumstances which his guile had created, he was received with open arms by the Hungarian party, and his defection from the Court of Giovanna was counted a victory by the

supporters of Andreas. He protested his good-will towards Andreas, and proclaimed his hatred of Giovanna's partisans, who poisoned her mind against her husband. He hunted and drank with Andreas—whose life seems to have been largely made up of hunting and drinking—and pandered generally to the rather gross tastes of this foreigner, whom in his heart he despised for a barbarian.

From being a boon companion, Charles very soon became a counsellor to the young Prince, and the poisonous advice that he gave seemed shrewd and good, even to Friar Robert.

"Meet hostility with hostility, ride ruthlessly upon your own way, showing yourself confident of the decision in your favour that the Pope must ultimately give. For bear ever in your mind that you are King of Naples, not by virtue of your marriage with Giovanna, but in your own right, Giovanna being but the offspring of the usurping branch."

The pale bovine eyes of Andreas would kindle into something like intelligence, and a flush would warm his stolid countenance. He was a fair-haired young giant, white-skinned and well-featured, but dull, looking, with cold, hard eyes suggesting the barbarian that he was considered by the cultured Neapolitans, and that he certainly looked by contrast with them. Friar Robert supporting the Duke of Durazzo's advice, Andreas did not hesitate to act upon it; of his own authority he delivered prisoners from gaol, showered honours upon his Hungarian followers and upon such Neapolitan barons as Count Altamura, who was ill-viewed at Court, and generally set the Queen at defiance. The inevitable result, upon which again the subtle Charles had counted, was to exasperate a group of her most prominent nobles into plotting the ruin of Andreas.

It was a good beginning, and unfortunately Giovanna's own behaviour afforded Charles the means of further speeding up his game.

The young Queen was under the governance of Filippa the Catanese, an evil woman, greedy of power. This Filippa, once a washerwoman, had in her youth been chosen for her splendid health to be the foster-mother of Giovanna's father. Beloved of her foster-child, she had become perpetually installed at Court, married to a wealthy Moor named Cabane, who was raised to the dignity of Grand Seneschal of the kingdom, whereby the sometime washerwoman found herself elevated to the rank of one of the first ladies of Naples. She must have known how to adapt herself to her new circumstances, otherwise she would hardly have been appointed, as she was upon the death of her foster-son, governess to his infant daughters. Later, to ensure her hold upon the young Queen, and being utterly unscrupulous in her greed of power, she had herself contrived that her son, Robert of Cabane, became Giovanna's lover.

One of Giovanna's first acts upon her grandfather's death had been to create this Robert Count of Evoli, and this notwithstanding that in the mean time he had been succeeded in her favour by the handsome young Bertrand d'Artois. This was the group—the Catanese, her son, and Bertrand—that, with the Princes of the Blood, governed the Queen's party.

With what eyes Andreas may have looked upon all this we have no means of determining. Possibly, engrossed as he was with his hawks and his hounds, he may have been stupidly blind to his own dishonour, at least as far as Bertrand was concerned. Another than Charles might have chosen the crude course of opening his eyes to it. But Charles was too far-seeing. Precipitancy was not one of his faults. His next move must be dictated by the decision of Avignon regarding the coronation.

This decision came in July of 1345, and it fell like a thunderbolt upon the Court. The Pope had pronounced in favour of Andreas by granting the Bull for the joint coronation of Andreas and Giovanna.

This was check to Charles. His uncle the Cardinal of Perigord had done his utmost to oppose the measure, but he had been overborne in the end by Ludwig of Hungary, who had settled the matter by the powerful argument that he was himself the rightful heir to the crown of Naples, and that he relinquished his claim in favour of his younger brother. He had backed the argument by the payment to the Pope of the enormous sum, for those days, of one hundred thousand gold crowns, and the issue, obscure hitherto, had immediately become clear to the Papal Court.

It was check to Charles, as I have said. But Charles braced himself, and considered the counter-move that should give him the advantage. He went to congratulate Andreas, and found him swollen with pride and arrogance in his triumph.

"Be welcome, Charles," he hailed Durazzo. "I am not the man to forget those who have stood my friends whilst my power was undecided."

"For your own sake," said the smooth Charles, as he stepped back from that brotherly embrace, "I trust you'll not forget those who have been your enemies, and who, being desperate now, may take desperate means to avert your coronation."

The pale eyes of the Hungarian glittered.

"Of whom do you speak?"

Charles smoothed his black beard thoughtfully, his dark eyes narrowed and pensive. There must be a victim, to strike fear into Giovanna's friends and stir them to Charles's purposes.

"Why, first and foremost, I should place Giovanna's counsellor Isernia, that man of law whose evil counsels have hurt your rights as king. Next come—"

But here Charles craftily paused and looked away, a man at fault.

"Next?" cried Andreas. "Who next? Speak out!" The Duke shrugged.

"By the Passion, there is no lack of others. You have enemies to spare among the Queen's friends."

Andreas paled under his faint tan. He flung back his crimson robe as if he felt the heat, and stood forth, lithe as a wrestler, in his close-fitting cote-hardie and hose of violet silk.

"No need, indeed, to name them," he said fiercely.

"None," Charles agreed. "But the most dangerous is Isernia. Whilst he lives you walk amid swords. His death may spread a panic that will paralyze the others."

He would say no more, knowing that he had said enough to send Andreas, scowling and sinister, to sow terror in hearts that guilt must render uneasy now, amongst which hearts be sure that he counted Giovanna's own.

Andreas took counsel with Friar Robert. Touching Isernia, there was evidence and to spare that he was dangerous, and so Isernia fell on the morrow to an assassin's sword as he was in the very act of leaving the Castel Nuovo, and it was Charles himself who bore word of it to the Court, and so plunged it into consternation.

They walked in the cool of evening in the pleasant garden of the Castel Nuovo, when Charles came upon them and touched the stalwart shoulder of Bertrand d'Artois. Bertrand the favourite eyed him askance, mistrusting and disliking him for his association with Andreas.

"The Hungarian boar," said Charles, "is sharpening his tusks now that his authority is assured by the Holy Father."

"Who cares?" sneered Bertrand.

"Should you care if I added that already he has blooded them?"

Bertrand changed countenance. The Duke explained himself.

"He has made a beginning upon Giacomo d' Isernia. Ten minutes ago he was stabbed to death within a stone's throw of the castle." So Charles unburdened himself of his news. "A beginning, no more."

"My God!" said Bertrand. "D' Isernia! Heaven rest him." And devoutly he crossed himself.

"Heaven will rest some more of you if you suffer Andreas of Hungary to be its instrument," said Charles, his lips grimly twisted.

"Do you threaten?"

"Nay, man; be not so hot and foolish. I warn. I know his mood. I know what he intends."

"You ever had his confidence," said Bertrand, sneering.

"Until this hour I had. But there's an end to that. I am a Prince of Naples, and I'll not bend the knee to a barbarian. He was well enough to hunt with and drink with, so long as he was Duke of Calabria with no prospect of being more. But that he should become my King, and that our lady Giovanna should be no more than a queen consort—" He made a gesture of ineffable disgust.

Bertrand's eyes kindled. He gripped the other's arm, and drew him along under a trellis of vines that formed a green cloister about the walls.

"Why, here is great news for our Queen," he cried. "It will rejoice her, my lord, to know you are loyal to her."

"That is no matter," he replied. "What matters is that you should be warned—you, yourself in particular, and Evoli. No doubt there will be others, too. But the Hungarian's confidences went no further."

Bertrand had come to a standstill. He stared at Charles, and slowly the colour left his face.

"Me?" he said, a finger on his heart.

"Aye, you. You will be the next. But not until the crown is firmly on his brow. Then he will settle his score with the nobles of Naples who have withstood him. Listen," and Charles's voice sank as if under the awful burden of his news; "a black banner of vengeance is to precede him to his coronation. And your name stands at the head of the list of the proscribed. Does it surprise you? After all, he is a husband, and he has some knowledge of what lies between the Queen and you—"

"Stop!"

"Pish!" Charles shrugged. "What need for silence upon what all Naples knows? When have you and the Queen ever used discretion? In your place I should not need a warning. I should know what to expect from a husband become king."

"The Queen must be told."

"Indeed, I think so, too. It will come best from you. Go tell her, so that measures may be taken. But go secretly and warily. You are safe until he wears the crown. And above all—whatever you may decide—do nothing here in Naples."

And on that he turned to depart, whilst Bertrand sped to Giovanna. On the threshold of the garden Charles paused and looked back. His eyes sought and found the Queen, a tall, lissome girl of seventeen, in a close-fitting, revealing gown of purple silk, the high, white gorget outlining an oval face of a surpassing loveliness, crowned by a wealth

of copper-coloured hair. She was standing in a stricken attitude, looking up into the face of her lover, who was delivering himself of his news.

Charles departed satisfied.

Three days later a man of the Queen's household, one Melazzo who was in Duke Charles's pay, brought him word that the seed he had cast had fallen upon fertile soil. A conspiracy to destroy the King had been laid by Bertrand d'Artois, Robert of Cabane, Count of Evoli, and the latter's brothers-in-law, Terlizzi and Morcone. Melazzo himself, for his notorious affection for the Queen, had been included in this band, and also a man named Pace, who was body servant to Andreas, and who, like Melazzo, was in Charles's pay.

Charles of Durazzo smiled gently to himself. The game went excellently well.

"The Court," he said, "goes to Aversa for a month before the coronation. That would be a favourable season to their plan. Advise it so."

The date appointed for the coronation was September 20th. A month before—on August 20th—the Court removed itself from the heat and reek of Naples to the cooler air of Aversa, there to spend the time of waiting. They were housed in the monastery of Saint Peter, which had been converted as far as possible into a royal residence for the occasion.

On the night of their arrival there the refectory of the monastery was transfigured to accommodate the numerous noble and very jovial company assembled there to sup. The long, stone-flagged room, lofty and with windows set very high, normally so bare and austere, was hung now with tapestries, and the floor strewn with rushes that were mingled with lemon verbena and other aromatic herbs. Along the

lateral walls and across the end of the room that faced the double doors were set the stone tables of the Spartan monks, on a shallow dais that raised them above the level of the floor. These tables were gay now with the gleam of crystal and the glitter of gold and silver plate. Along one side of them, their backs to the walls, sat the ladies and nobles of the Court. The vaulted ceiling was rudely frescoed to represent the open heavens—the work of a brother whose brush was more devout than cunning—and there was the inevitable cenacolo above the Abbot's table at the upper end of the room.

At this table sat the royal party, the broad-shouldered Andreas of Hungary, slightly asprawl, his golden mane somewhat tumbled now, for he was drinking deeply in accordance with his barbarian habit; ever and anon he would fling down a bone or a piece of meat to the liver-coloured hounds that crouched expectant on the rushes of the floor.

They had hunted that day in the neighbourhood of Capua, and Andreas had acquitted himself well, and was in high good-humour, giving now little thought to the sinister things that Charles of Durazzo had lately whispered, laughing and jesting with the traitor Morcone at his side. Behind him in close attendance stood his servant Pace, once a creature of Durazzo's. The Queen sat on his right, making but poor pretence to eat; her lovely young face was of a ghostly pallor, her dark eyes were wide and staring. Among the guests were the black-browed Evoli and his brother-in-law, Terlizzi; Bertrand of Artois and his father; Melazzo, that other creature of Charles's, and Filippa the Catanese, handsome and arrogant, but oddly silent to-night.

But Charles of Durazzo was not of the company. It is not for the player, himself, to become a piece upon the board.

He had caught a whisper that the thing he had so slyly prompted to Bertrand d'Artois was to be done here at Aversa, and so Charles had remained at Naples. He had discovered very opportunely that his wife

was ailing, and he developed such concern for her that he could not bring himself to leave her side. He had excused himself to Andreas with a thousand regrets, since what he most desired was to enjoy with him the cool, clean air of Aversa and the pleasures of the chase; and he had presented the young King at parting with the best of all his falcons in earnest of affection and disappointment.

The night wore on, and at last, at a sign from the Queen, the ladies rose and departed to their beds. The men settled down again. The cellarers redoubled their activities, the flagons circulated more briskly, and the noise they made must have disturbed the monks entrenched in their cells against these earthly vanities. The laughter of Andreas grew louder and more vacuous, and when at last he heaved himself up at midnight and departed to bed, that he might take some rest against the morrow's hunt, he staggered a little in his walk.

But there were other hunters there whose impatience could not keep until the morrow, whose game was to be run to death that very night. They waited—Bertrand d'Artois, Robert of Cabane, the Counts of Terlizzi and Morcone, Melazzo and Andreas's body servant Pace—until all those who lay at Aversa were deep in slumber. Then at two o'clock in the morning they made their stealthy way to the loggia on the third floor, a long colonnaded gallery above the Abbot's garden. They paused a moment before the Queen's door which opened upon this gallery, then crept on to that of the King's room at the other end. It was Pace who rapped sharply on the panels thrice before he was answered by a sleepy growl from the other side.

"It is I—Pace—my lord," he announced. "A courier has arrived from Naples, from Friar Robert, with instant messages."

From within there was a noisy yawn, a rustle, the sound of an overturning stool, and, lastly, the rasp of a bolt being withdrawn. The door opened, and in the faint light of the dawning day Andreas appeared, drawing a furlined robe about his body, which was naked

of all but a shirt.

He saw no one but Pace. The others had drawn aside into the shadows. Unsuspecting, he stepped forth.

"Where is this messenger?"

The door through which he had come slammed suddenly behind him, and he turned to see Melazzo in the act of bolting it with a dagger to prevent any one from following that way—for the room had another door opening upon the inner corridor.

Instead, Melazzo might have employed his dagger to stab Andreas behind, and so have made an instant end. But it happened to be known that Andreas wore an amulet—a ring that his mother had given him—which rendered him invulnerable to steel or poison. And such was the credulity of his age, such the blind faith of those men in the miraculous power of that charm, that none of them so much as attempted to test it with a dagger. It was for the same reason that no recourse was had to the still easier method of disposing of him by poison. Accepting the amulet at its legendary value, the conspirators had resolved that he must be strangled.

As he turned now they leapt upon him, and, taking him unawares, bore him to the ground before he could realize what was happening. Here they grappled with him, and he with them. He was endowed with the strength of a young bull, and he made full use of it. He rose, beating them off, to be borne down again, bellowing the while for help. He smote out blindly, and stretched Morcone half senseless with a blow of his great fist.

Seeing how difficult he proved to strangle, they must have cursed that amulet of his. He struggled to his knees again, then to his feet, and, at last, with bleeding face, leaving tufts of his fair hair in their murderous hands, he broke through and went bounding down the

loggia, screaming as he ran, until he came to his wife's door. Against that he hurled himself, calling her.

"Giovanna! Giovanna! For the love of God crucified! Open! Open! I am being murdered!"

From within came no answer—utter silence.

"Giovanna! Giovanna!" He beat frenziedly upon the door.

Still no answer, which yet was answer enough.

The stranglers, momentarily discomfited, scared, too, lest his cries should rouse the convent, had stood hesitating after he broke from them. But now Bertrand d'Artois, realizing that too much had been done already to admit of the business being left unfinished, sprang upon him suddenly again. Locked in each other's arms, those wrestlers swayed and panted in the loggia for a moment, then with a crash went down, Bertrand on top, Andreas striking his head against the stone floor as he fell. The Queen's lover pinned him there, kneeling upon his breast.

"The rope!" he panted to the others who came up.

One of them threw him a coil of purple silk interwrought with gold thread, in which a running noose had been tied. Bertrand slipped it over Andreas's head, drew it taut, and held it so, despite the man's desperate, convulsive struggles. The others came to his assistance. Amongst them they lifted the writhing victim to the parapet of the loggia, and flung him over; whilst Bertrand, Cabane, and Pace bore upon the rope, arresting his fall, and keeping him suspended there until he should be dead. Melazzo and Morcone came to assist them, and it was then that Cabane observed that Terlizzi held aloof, as if filled with horror.

Peremptorily he called to him:

"Hither, and lend a hand! The rope is long enough to afford you a grip. We want accomplices, not witnesses, Lord Count."

Terlizzi obeyed, and then the ensuing silence was broken suddenly by screams from the floor below the screams of a woman who slept in the room immediately underneath, who had awakened to behold in the grey light of the breaking day the figure of a man kicking and writhing at a rope's end before her window.

Yet a moment the startled stranglers kept their grip of the rope until the struggles at the end of it had ceased; then they loosed their hold and let the body go plunging down into the Abbot's garden. Thereafter they scattered and fled, for people were stirring now in the convent, aroused by the screams of the woman.

Thrice, so the story runs, came the monks to the Queen's door to knock and demand her orders for the disposal of the body of her husband without receiving any answer to their question. It remained still unanswered when later in the day she departed from Aversa in a closed litter, and returned to Naples escorted by a company of lances, and for lack of instructions the monks left the body in the Abbot's garden, where it had fallen, until Charles of Durazzo came to remove it two days later.

Ostentatiously he bore to Naples the murdered Prince—whose death he had so subtly inspired—and in the cathedral before the Hungarians, whom he had assembled, and in the presence of a vast concourse of the people, he solemnly swore over the body vengeance upon the murderers.

Having made a cat's-paw of Giovanna—through the person of her lover, Bertrand d'Artois, and his confederate assassins—and thus cleared away one of those who stood between himself and the throne, he now sought to make a cat's-paw of justice to clear away the other. Meanwhile, days grew into weeks and weeks into months, and no

attempt was made by the Queen to hunt out the murderers of her husband, no inquiry instituted. Bertrand d'Artois, it is true, had fled with his father to their stronghold of Saint Agatha for safety. But the others—Cabane, Terlizzi, and Morcone—continued unabashed about Giovanna's person at the Castel Nuovo.

Charles wrote to Ludwig of Hungary, and to the Pope, demanding that justice should be done, and pointing out the neglect of all attempt to perform it in the kingdom itself, and inviting them to construe for themselves that neglect. As a consequence, Clement VI issued, on June 2d of the following year, a Bull, whereby Bertrand des Baux, the Grand Justiciary of Naples, was commanded to hunt down and punish the assassins, against whom—at the same time—the Pope launched a second Bull, of excommunication. But the Holy Father accompanied his commands to Des Baux by a private note, wherein he straitly enjoined the Grand Justiciary for reasons of State to permit nothing to transpire that might reflect upon the Queen.

Des Baux set about his task at once, and inspired, no doubt, by Charles, proceeded to the arrest of Melazzo and the servant Pace. It was not for Charles to accuse the Queen or even any of her nobles, whereby he might have aroused against himself the opposition of those who were her loyal partisans. Sufficient for him to point out the two meanest of the conspirators, and depend upon the torture to wring from them confessions that must gradually pull down the rest, and in the end Giovanna herself.

Terlizzi, alive to his danger when he heard of the arrest of those two, made a bold and desperate attempt to avert it. Riding forth with a band of followers, he attacked the escort that was bearing Pace to prison. The prisoner was seized, but not to be rescued. All that Terlizzi wanted was his silence. By his orders the wretched man's tongue was torn out, whereupon he was abandoned once more to his guards and his fate.

Had Terlizzi been able to carry out his intentions of performing the like operation upon Melazzo, Charles might have been placed in a difficult position. So much, however, did not happen, and the horrible deed upon Pace was in vain. Put to the question, Melazzo denounced Terlizzi, and together with him Cabane, Morcone, and the others. Further, his confession incriminated Filippa, the Catanese, and her two daughters, the wives of Terlizzi and Morcone. Of the Queen, however, he said nothing, because, one of the lesser conspirators, little more than a servant like Pace, he can have had no knowledge of the Queen's complicity.

The arrest of the others followed instantly, and, sentenced to death, they were publicly burned in the Square of Sant' Eligio, after suffering all the brutal, unspeakable horrors of fourteenth-century torture, which continued to the very scaffold, with the alleged intention of inducing them to denounce any further accomplices. But though they writhed and fainted under the pincers of the executioners, they confessed nothing. Indeed, they preserved a silence which left the people amazed, for the people lacked the explanation. The Grand Justiciary, Hugh des Baux, had seen to it that the Pope's injunctions should be obeyed. Lest the condemned should say too much, he had taken the precaution of having their tongues fastened down with fish-hooks.

Thus Charles was momentarily baulked, and he was further baulked by the fact that Giovanna had taken a second husband, in her cousin, Louis of Taranto. Unless matters were to remain there and the game end in a stalemate, bold measures were required, and those measures Charles adopted. He wrote to the King of Hungary now openly accusing Giovanna of the murder, and pointing out the circumstances that in themselves afforded corroboration of his charge.

Those circumstances Ludwig embodied in a fulminating letter which he wrote to Giovanna in answer to her defence against the

charge of inaction in the matter of her late husband's murderers: "Giovanna, thy antecedent disorderly life, thy retention of the exclusive power in the kingdom, thy neglect of vengeance upon the murderers of thy husband, thy having taken another husband, and thy very excuses abundantly prove thy complicity in thy husband's death."

So far this was all as Charles of Durazzo could have desired it. But there was more. Ludwig was advancing now in arms to take possession of the kingdom, of which, under all the circumstances, he might consider himself the lawful heir, and the Princes of Italy were affording him unhindered passage through their States. This was not at all to Charles's liking. Indeed, unless he bestirred himself, it might prove to be checkmate from an altogether unexpected quarter, rendering vain all the masterly play with which he had conducted the game so far.

It flustered him a little, and in his haste to counter it he blundered.

Giovanna, alarmed at the rapid advance of Ludwig, summoned her barons to her aid, and in that summons she included Charles, realizing that at all costs he must be brought over to her side. He went, listened, and finally sold himself for a good price the title of Duke of Calabria, which made him heir to the kingdom. He raised a powerful troop of lances, and marched upon Aquila, which had already hoisted the Hungarian banner.

There it was that he discovered, and soon, his move to have been a bad one. News was brought to him that the Queen, taken with panic, had fled to Provence, seeking sanctuary at Avignon.

Charles set about correcting his error without delay, and marched out of Aquila to go and meet Ludwig that he might protest his loyalty, and range himself under the invader's banner.

At Foligno, the King of Hungary was met by a papal legate, who in

the name of Pope Clement forbade him under pain of excommunication to invade a fief of Holy Church.

"When I am master of Naples," answered Ludwig firmly, "I shall count myself a feudatory of the Holy See. Until then I render account to none but God and my conscience." And he pushed on, preceded by a black banner of death, scattering in true Hungarian fashion murder, rape, pillage, and arson through the smiling countryside, exacting upon the whole land a terrible vengeance for the murder of his brother.

Thus he came to Aversa, and there quartered himself and his Hungarians upon that convent of Saint Peter where Andreas had been strangled a year ago. And it was here that he was joined by Charles, who came protesting loyalty, and whom the King received with open arms and a glad welcome, as was to be expected from a man who had been Andreas's one true friend in that land of enemies. Of Charles's indiscreet escapade in the matter of Aquila nothing was said. As Charles had fully expected, it was condoned upon the score both of the past and the present.

That night there was high feasting in that same refectory where Andreas had feasted on the night when the stranglers watched him, waiting, and Charles was the guest of honour. In the morning Ludwig was to pursue his march upon the city of Naples, and all were astir betimes.

On the point of setting out, Ludwig turned to Charles.

"Before I go," he said, "I have a mind to visit the spot where my brother died."

To Charles, no doubt, this seemed a morbid notion to be discouraged. But Ludwig was insistent.

"Take me there," he bade the Duke.

"Indeed, I scarce know—I was not here, remember," Charles answered him, rendered faintly uneasy, perhaps by a certain grimness in the gaunt King's face, perhaps by the mutterings of his own conscience.

"I know that you were not; but surely you must know the place. It will be known to all the world in these parts. Besides, was it not yourself recovered the body? Conduct me thither, then."

Perforce, then, Charles must do his will. Arm-in-arm they mounted the stairs to that sinister loggia, a half-dozen of Ludwig's escorting officers following.

They stepped along the tessellated floor above the Abbot's garden, flooded now with sunshine which drew the perfume from the roses blooming there.

"Here the King slept," said Charles, "and yonder the Queen. Somewhere here between the thing was done, and thence they hanged him."

Ludwig, tall and grim, stood considering, chin in hand. Suddenly he wheeled upon the Duke who stood at his elbow. His face had undergone a change, and his lip curled so that he displayed his strong teeth as a dog displays them when he snarls.

"Traitor!" he rasped. "It is you—you who come smiling and fawning upon me, and spurring me on to vengeance—who are to blame for what happened here."

"I?" Charles fell back, changing colour, his legs trembling under him.

"You!" the King answered him furiously. "His death would never have come about but for your intrigues to keep him out of the royal power, to hinder his coronation."

"It is false!" cried Charles. "False! I swear it before God!"

"Perjured dog! Do you deny that you sought the aid of your precious uncle the Cardinal of Perigord to restrain the Pope from granting the Bull required?"

"I do deny it. The facts deny it. The Bull was forthcoming."

"Then your denial but proves your guilt," the King answered him, and from the leather pouch hanging from his belt, he pulled out a parchment, and held it under the Duke's staring eyes. It was the letter he had written to the Cardinal of Perigord, enjoining him to prevent the Pope from signing the Bull sanctioning Andreas's coronation.

The King smiled terribly into that white, twitching face.

"Deny it now," he mocked him. "Deny, too, that, bribed by the title of Duke of Calabria, you turned to the service of the Queen, to abandon it again for ours when you perceived your danger. You think to use us, traitor, as a stepping-stone to help you to mount the throne—as you sought to use my brother even to the extent of encompassing his murder."

"No, no! I had no hand in that. I was his friend—"

"Liar!" Ludwig struck him across the mouth.

On the instant the officers of Ludwig laid hands upon the Duke, fearing that the indignity might spur him to retaliation.

"You are very opportune," said Ludwig; and added coldly, "Dispatch him."

Charles screamed a moment, even as Andreas had screamed on that same spot, when he found himself staring into the fearful face of death. Then the scream became a cough as a Hungarian sword went

through him from side to side.

They picked up his body from the tessellated floor of the loggia, carried it to the parapet as Andreas's had been carried, and flung it down into the Abbot's garden as Andreas's had been flung. It lay in a rosebush, dyeing the Abbot's roses a deeper red.

Never was justice more poetic.

XI. THE NIGHT OF HATE—The Murder Of The Duke Of Gandia

The Cardinal Vice-Chancellor took the packet proffered him by the fair-haired, scarlet-liveried page, and turned it over, considering it, the gentle, finely featured, almost ascetic face very thoughtful.

"It was brought, my lord, by a man in a mask, who will give no name. He waits below," said the scarlet stripling.

"A man in a mask, eh? What mystery!"

The thoughtful brown eyes smiled, the fine hands broke the fragment of wax. A gold ring fell out and rolled some little way along the black and purple Eastern rug. The boy dived after it, and presented it to his lordship.

The ring bore an escutcheon, and the Cardinal found graven upon this escutcheon his own arms the Sforza lion and the flower of the quince. Instantly those dark, thoughtful eyes of his grew keen as they flashed upon the page.

"Did you see the device?" he asked, a hint of steel under the silkiness of his voice.

"I saw nothing, my lord—a ring, no more. I did not even look."

The Cardinal continued to ponder him for a long moment very searchingly.

"Go—bring this man," he said at last; and the boy departed, soon to reappear; holding aside the tapestry that masked the door to give

passage to a man of middle height wrapped in a black cloak, his face under a shower of golden hair, covered from chin to brow by a black visor.

At a sign from the Cardinal the page departed. Then the man, coming forward, let fall his cloak, revealing a rich dress of close-fitting violet silk, sword and dagger hanging from his jewelled girdle; he plucked away the mask, and disclosed the handsome, weak face of Giovanni Sforza, Lord of Pesaro and Cotignola, the discarded husband of Madonna Lucrezia, Pope Alexander's daughter.

The Cardinal considered his nephew gravely, without surprise. He had expected at first no more than a messenger from the owner of that ring. But at sight of his figure and long, fair hair he had recognized Giovanni before the latter had removed his mask.

"I have always accounted you something mad," said the Cardinal softly. "But never mad enough for this. What brings you to Rome?"

"Necessity, my lord," replied the young tyrant. "The need to defend my honour, which is about to be destroyed."

"And your life?" wondered his uncle. "Has that ceased to be of value?"

"Without honour it is nothing."

"A noble sentiment taught in every school. But for practical purposes—" The Cardinal shrugged.

Giovanni, however, paid no heed.

"Did you think, my lord, that I should tamely submit to be a derided, outcast husband, that I should take no vengeance upon, that villainous Pope for having made me a thing of scorn, a byword throughout Italy?" Livid hate writhed in his fair young face. "Did you think I should, indeed, remain in Pesaro, whither I fled before their threats to my life,

and present no reckoning?"

"What is the reckoning you have in mind?" inquired his uncle, faintly ironical. "You'll not be intending to kill the Holy Father?"

"Kill him?" Giovanni laughed shortly, scornfully. "Do the dead suffer?"

"In hell, sometimes," said the Cardinal.

"Perhaps. But I want to be sure. I want sufferings that I can witness, sufferings that I can employ as balsam for my own wounded honour. I shall strike, even as he has stricken me—at his soul, not at his body. I shall wound him where he is most sensitive."

Ascanio Sforza, towering tall and slender in his scarlet robes, shook his head slowly.

"All this is madness—madness! You were best away, best in Pesaro. Indeed, you cannot safely show your face in Rome."

"That is why I go masked. That is why I come to you, my lord, for shelter here until—"

"Here?" The Cardinal was instantly alert. "Then you think I am as mad as yourself. Why, man, if so much as a whisper of your presence in Rome got abroad, this is the first place where they would look for you. If you will have your way, if you are so set on the avenging of past wrongs and the preventing of future ones, it is not for me, your kinsman, to withstand you. But here in my palace you cannot stay, for your own safety's sake. That page who brought you, now; I would not swear he did not see the arms upon your ring. I pray that he did not. But if he did, your presence is known here already."

Giovanni was perturbed.

"But if not here, where, then, in Rome should I be safe?"

"Nowhere, I think," answered the ironical Ascanio. "Though perhaps you might count yourself safe with Pico. Your common hate of the Holy Father should be a stout bond between you."

Fate prompted the suggestion. Fate drove the Lord of Pesaro to act upon it, and to seek out Antonio Maria Pico, Count of Mirandola in his palace by the river, where Pico, as Ascanio had foreseen, gave him a cordial welcome.

There he abode almost in hiding until the end of May, seldom issuing forth, and never without his mask—a matter this which excited no comment, for masked faces were common in the streets of Rome in the evening of the fifteenth century. In talk with Pico he set forth his intent, elaborating what already he had told the Cardinal Vice-Chancellor.

"He is a father—this Father of Fathers," he said once. "A tender, loving father whose life is in his children, who lives through them and for them. Deprive him of them, and his life would become empty, worthless, a living death. There is Giovanni, who is as the apple of his eye, whom he has created Duke of Gandia, Duke of Benevento, Prince of Sessa, Lord of Teano, and more besides. There is the Cardinal of Valencia, there is Giuffredo, Prince of Squillace, and there is my wife, Lucrezia, of whom he has robbed me. There is, you see, an ample heel to our Achilles. The question is, where shall we begin?"

"And also, how," Pico reminded him.

Fate was to answer both those questions, and that soon.

They went on June 1st—the Lord of Pesaro, with his host and his host's daughter, Antonia—to spend the day at Pico's vineyard in Trastevere. At the moment of setting out to return to Rome in the evening the Count was detained by his steward, newly returned from

a journey with matters to communicate to him.

He bade his guest, with his daughter and their attendants, to ride on, saying that he himself would follow and overtake them. But the steward detained him longer than he had expected, so that, although the company proceeded leisurely towards the city, Pico had not come up with them when they reached the river. In the narrow street beyond the bridge the little escort found itself suddenly confronted and thrust aside by a magnificent cavalcade of ladies and gallants, hawk on wrist and followed by a pack of hounds.

Giovanni had eyes for one only in that gay company—a tall, splendidly handsome man in green, a Plumed bonnet on his auburn head, and a roguish, jovial eye, which, in its turn, saw nobody in that moment but Madonna Antonia, reclining in her litter, the leather curtains of which she had drawn back that she might converse with Giovanni as they rode.

The Lord of Pesaro beheld the sudden kindling of his brother-in-law's glance, for that handsome gallant was the Duke of Gandia, the Pope's eldest son, the very apple of the Holy Father's eye. He saw the Duke's almost unconscious check upon his reins; saw him turn in the saddle to stare boldly at Madonna Antonia until, grown conscious of his regard, she crimsoned under it. And when at last the litter had moved on, he saw over his shoulder a mounted servant detach from the Duke's side to follow them. This fellow dogged their heels all the way to the Parione Quarter, obviously with intent to discover for his master where the beautiful lady of the litter might be housed.

Giovanni said naught of this to Pico when he returned a little later. He was quick to perceive the opportunity that offered, but far from sure that Pico would suffer his daughter to be used as a decoy; far, indeed, from sure that he dared himself so employ her. But on the morrow, chancing to look from a window out of idle curiosity to see what horse it was that was pacing in the street below, he beheld a

man in a rich cloak, in whom at once he recognized the Duke, and he accounted that the dice of destiny had fallen.

Himself unseen by that horseman, Giovanni drew back quickly. On the spur of the moment, he acted with a subtlety worthy of long premeditation. Antonia and he were by an odd fatality alone together in that chamber of the mezzanine. He turned to her.

"An odd fellow rides below here, tarrying as if expectant. I wonder should you know who he is."

Obedying his suggestion, she rose—a tall, slim child of some eighteen years, of a delicate, pale beauty, with dark, thoughtful eyes and long, black tresses, interwoven with jewelled strands of gold thread. She rustled to the window and looked down upon that cavalier; and, as she looked, scanning him intently, the Duke raised his head. Their eyes met, and she drew back with a little cry.

"What is it?" exclaimed Giovanni.

"It is that insolent fellow who stared at me last evening in the street. I would you had not bidden me look."

Now, whilst she had been gazing from the window, Giovanni, moving softly behind her, had espied a bowl of roses on the ebony table in the room's middle. Swiftly and silently he had plucked a blossom, which he now held behind his back. As she turned from him again, he sent it flying through the window; and whilst in his heart he laughed with bitter hate and scorn as he thought of Gandia snatching up that rose and treasuring it in his bosom, aloud he laughed at her fears, derided them as idle.

That night, in his room, Giovanni practised penmanship assiduously, armed with a model with which Antonia had innocently equipped him. He went to bed well pleased, reflecting that as a man lives so does he die. Giovanni Borgia, Duke of Gandia, had been

ever an amiable profligate, a heedless voluptuary obeying no spur but that of his own pleasure, which should drive him now to his destruction. Giovanni Borgia, he considered further, was, as he had expressed it, the very apple of his father's eye; and since, of his own accord, the Duke had come to thrust his foolish head into the noose, the Lord of Pesaro would make a sweet beginning to the avenging of his wrongs by drawing it taut.

Next morning saw him at the Vatican, greatly daring, to deliver in person his forgery to the Duke. Suspicious of his mask, they asked him who he was and whence he came.

"Say one who desires to remain unknown with a letter for the Duke of Gandia which his magnificence will welcome."

Reluctantly, a chamberlain departed with his message. Anon he was conducted above to the magnificent apartments which Gandia occupied during his sojourn there.

He found the Duke newly risen, and with him his brother, the auburn-headed young Cardinal of Valencia, dressed in a close-fitting suit of black, that displayed his lithe and gracefully athletic proportions, and a cloak of scarlet silk to give a suggestion of his ecclesiastical rank.

Giovanni bowed low, and, thickening his voice that it might not be recognized, announced himself and his mission in one.

"From the lady of the rose," said he, proffering the letter.

Valencia stared a moment; then went off into a burst of laughter. Gandia's face flamed and his eyes sparkled. He snatched the letter, broke its seal, and consumed its contents. Then he flung away to a table, took up a pen, and sat down to write; the tall Valencia watching him with amused scorn a while, then crossing to his side and setting a hand upon his shoulder.

"You will never learn," said the more subtle Cesare. "You must forever be leaving traces where traces are not to be desired."

Gandia looked up into that keen, handsome young face.

"You are right," he said; and crumpled the letter in his hand.

Then he looked at the messenger and hesitated.

"I am in Madonna's confidence," said the man in the mask.

Gandia rose. "Then say—say that her letter has carried me to Heaven; that I but await her commands to come in person to declare myself. But bid her hasten, for within two weeks from now I go to Naples, and thence I may return straight to Spain."

"The opportunity shall be found, Magnificent. Myself I shall bring you word of it."

The Duke loaded him with thanks, and in his excessive gratitude pressed upon him at parting a purse of fifty ducats, which Giovanni flung into the Tiber some ten minutes later as he was crossing the Bridge of Sant' Angelo on his homeward way.

The Lord of Pesaro proceeded without haste. Delay and silence he knew would make Gandia the more sharp-set, and your sharp-set, impatient fellow is seldom cautious. Meanwhile, Antonia had mentioned to her father that princely stranger who had stared so offensively one evening, and who for an hour on the following morning had haunted the street beneath her window. Pico mentioned it to Giovanni, whereupon Giovanni told him frankly who it was.

"It was that libertine brother-in-law of mine, the Duke of Gandia," he said. "Had he persisted, I should have bidden you look to your daughter. As it is, no doubt he has other things to think of. He is preparing for his journey to Naples, to accompany his brother Cesare,

who goes as papal legate to crown Federigo of Aragon."

There he left the matter, and no more was heard of it until the night of June 14th, the very eve of the departure of the Borgia princes upon that mission.

Cloaked and masked, Giovanni took his way to the Vatican at dusk that evening, and desired to have himself announced to the Duke. But he was met with the answer that the Duke was absent; that he had gone to take leave of his mother and to sup at her villa in Trastevere. His return was not expected until late.

At first Giovanni feared that, in leaving the consummation of his plot until the eleventh hour, he had left it too late. In his anxiety he at once set out on foot, as he was, for the villa of Madonna Giovanna de Catanei. He reached it towards ten o'clock that night, to be informed that Gandia was there, at supper. The servant went to bear word to the Duke that a man in a mask was asking to see him, a message which instantly flung Gandia into agitation. Excitedly he commanded that the man be brought to him at once.

The Lord of Pesaro was conducted through the house and out into the garden to an arbour of vine, where a rich table was spread in the evening cool, lighted by alabaster lamps. About this table Giovanni found a noble company of his own relations by marriage. There was Gandia, who rose hurriedly at his approach, and came to meet him; there was Cesare, Cardinal of Valencia, who was to go to Naples tomorrow as papal legate, yet dressed tonight in cloth of gold, with no trace of his churchly dignity about him; there was their younger brother Giuffredo, Prince of Squillace, a handsome stripling, flanked by his wife, the free-and-easy Donna Sancia of Aragon, swarthy, coarse-featured, and fleshy, despite her youth; there was Giovanni's sometime wife; the lovely, golden-headed Lucrezia, the innocent cause of all this hate that festered in the Lord of Pesaro's soul; there was their mother, the nobly handsome Giovanozza de Catanei, from

whom the Borgias derived their auburn heads; and there was their cousin, Giovanni Borgia, Cardinal of Monreale, portly and scarlet, at Madonna's side.

All turned to glance at this masked intruder who had the power so oddly to excite their beloved Gandia.

"From the lady of the rose," Giovanni announced himself softly to the Duke.

"Yes, yes," came the answer, feverishly impatient. "Well, what is your message?"

"To-night her father is from home. She will expect your magnificence at midnight."

Gandia drew a deep breath.

"By the Host! You are no more than in time. I had almost despaired, my friend, my best of friends. To-night!" He pronounced the word ecstatically. "Wait you here. Yourself you shall conduct me. Meanwhile, go sup."

And beating his hands, he summoned attendants.

Came the steward and a couple of Moorish slaves in green turbans, to whose care the Duke commanded his masked visitor. But Giovanni neither required nor desired their ministrations; he would not eat nor drink, but contented himself with the patience of hatred to sit for two long hours awaiting the pleasure of his foolish victim.

They left at last, a little before midnight the Duke, his brother Cesare, his cousin Monreale, and a numerous attendance, his own retinue and those of the two cardinals. Thus they rode back to Rome, the Borgias very gay, the man in the mask plodding along beside them.

They came to the Rione de Ponte, where their ways were to separate, and there, opposite the palace of the Cardinal Vice-Chancellor, Gandia drew rein. He announced to the others that he went no farther with them, summoned a single groom to attend him, and bade the remainder return to the Vatican and await him there.

There was a last jest and a laugh from Cesare as the cavalcade went on towards the papal palace. Then Gandia turned to the man in the mask, bade him get up on the crupper of his horse, and so rode slowly off in the direction of the Giudecca, the single attendant he had retained trotting beside his stirrup.

Giovanni directed his brother-in-law, not to the main entrance of the house, but to the garden gate, which opened upon a narrow alley. Here they dismounted, flinging the reins to the groom, who was bidden to wait. Giovanni produced a key, unlocked the door, and ushered the Duke into the gloom of the garden. A stone staircase ran up to the loggia on the mezzanine, and by this way was Gandia now conducted, treading softly. His guide went ahead. He had provided himself with yet another key, and so unlocked the door from the loggia which opened upon the ante-room of Madonna Antonia. He held the door for the Duke, who hesitated, seeing all in darkness.

"In," Giovanni bade him. "Tread softly. Madonna waits for you."

Recklessly, then, that unsuspecting fellow stepped into the trap.

Giovanni followed, closed the door, and locked it. The Duke, standing with quickened pulses in that impenetrable blackness, found himself suddenly embraced, not at all after the fond fashion he was expecting. A wrestler's arms enlaced his body, a sinewy leg coiled itself snake-wise about one of his own, pulling it from under him. As he crashed down under the weight of his unseen opponent, a great voice boomed out:

"Lord of Mirandola! To me! Help! Thieves!"

Suddenly a door opened. Light flooded the gloom, and the writhing Duke beheld a white vision of the girl whose beauty had been the lure that had drawn him into this peril which, as yet, he scarcely understood. But looking up into the face of the man who grappled with him, the man who held him there supine under his weight, he began at last to understand, or, at least, to suspect, for the face he saw, unmasked now, leering at him with hate unspeakable through the cloud of golden hair that half met across it, was the face of Giovanni Sforza, Lord of Pesaro, whom his family had so cruelly wronged. Giovanni Sforza's was the voice that now fiercely announced his doom.

"You and yours have made me a thing of scorn and laughter. Yourself have laughed at me. Go laugh in hell!"

A blade flashed up in Giovanni's hand. Gandia threw up an arm to fend his breast, and the blade buried itself in the muscles. He screamed with pain and terror. The other laughed with hate and triumph, and stabbed again, this time in the shoulder.

Antonia, from the threshold, watching in bewilderment and panic, sent a piercing scream to ring through the house, and then the voice of Giovanni, fierce yet exultant, called aloud:

"Pico! Pico! Lord of Mirandola! Look to your daughter!"

Came steps and voice, more light, flooding now the chamber, and through the mists gathering before his eyes the first-born of the house of Borgia beheld hurrying men, half dressed, with weapons in their hands. But whether they came to kill or to save, they came too late: Ten times Giovanni's blade had stabbed the Duke, yet, hindered by the Duke's struggles and by the effort of holding him there, he had been unable to find his heart, wherefore, as those others entered now,

he slashed his victim across the throat, and so made an end.

He rose, covered with blood, so ghastly and terrific that Pico, thinking him wounded, ran to him. But Giovanni reassured him with a laugh, and pointed with his dripping dagger.

"The blood is his—foul Borgia blood!"

At the name Pico started, and there was a movement as of fear from the three grooms who followed him. The Count looked down at that splendid, blood-spattered figure lying there so still, its sightless eyes staring up at the frescoed ceiling, so brave and so pitiful in his gold-brodered suit of white satin, with the richly jewelled girdle carrying gloves and purse and a jewelled dagger that had been so useless in that extremity.

"Gandia" he cried; and looked at Giovanni with round eyes of fear and amazement. "How came he here?"

"How?"

With bloody hand Giovanni pointed to the open door of Antonia's chamber.

"That was the lure, my lord. Taking the air outside, I saw him slinking hither, and took him for a thief, as, indeed, he was—a thief of honour, like all his kind. I followed, and—there he lies."

"My God!" cried Pico. And then hoarsely asked, "And Antonia?"

Giovanni dismissed the question abruptly.

"She saw, yet she knows nothing."

And then on another note:

"Up now, Pico!" he cried. "Arouse the city, and let all men know how Gandia died the death of a thief. Let all men know this Borgia

brood for what it is."

"Are you mad?" cried Pico. "Will I put my neck under the knife?"

"You took him here in the night, and yours was the right to kill. You exercised it."

Pico looked long and searchingly into the other's face. True, all the appearances bore out the tale, as did, too, what had gone before and had been the cause of Antonia's complaint to him. Yet, knowing what lay between Sforza and Borgia, it may have seemed to Pico too extraordinary a coincidence that Giovanni should have been so ready at hand to defend the honour of the House of Mirandola. But he asked no questions. He was content in his philosophy to accept the event and be thankful for it on every count. But as for Giovanni's suggestion that he should proclaim through Rome how he had exercised his right to slay this Tarquin, the Lord of Mirandola had no mind to adopt it.

"What is done is done," he said shortly, in a tone that conveyed much. "Let it suffice us all. It but remains now to be rid of this."

"You will keep silent?" cried Giovanni, plainly vexed.

"I am not a fool," said Pico gently.

Giovanni understood. "And these your men?"

"Ate very faithful friends who will aid you now to efface all traces."

And upon that he moved away, calling his daughter, whose absence was intriguing him. Receiving no answer, he entered her room, to find her in a swoon across her bed. She had fainted from sheer horror at what she had seen.

Followed by the three servants bearing the body, Giovanni went down across the garden very gently. Approaching the gate, he bade them wait, saying that he went to see that the coast was clear. Then,

going forward alone, he opened the gate and called softly to the waiting groom:

"Hither to me!"

Promptly the man surged before him in the gloom, and as promptly Giovanni sank his dagger in the fellow's breast. He deplored the necessity for the deed, but it was unavoidable, and your cinquecentist never shrank from anything that necessity imposed upon him. To let the lackey live would be to have the bargelli in the house by morning.

The man sank with a half-uttered cry, and lay still.

Giovanni dragged him aside under the shelter of the wall, where the others would not see him, then called softly to them to follow.

When the grooms emerged from Pico's garden, the Lord of Pesaro was astride of the fine white horse on which Gandia had ridden to his death.

"Put him across the crupper," he bade them.

And they so placed the body, the head dangling on one side, the legs on the other. And Giovanni reflected grimly how he had reversed the order in which Gandia and he had ridden that same horse an hour ago.

At a walk they proceeded down the lane towards the river, a groom on each side to see that the burden on the crupper did not jolt off, another going ahead to scout. At the alley's mouth Giovanni drew rein, and let the man emerge upon the river-bank and look to right and left to make sure that there was no one about.

He saw no one. Yet one there was who saw them Giorgio, the timber merchant, who lay aboard his boat moored to the Schiavoni, and who, three days later, testified to what he saw. You know his testimony. It has been repeated often—how he saw the man emerge

from the alley and look up and down, then retire, to emerge again, accompanied now by the horseman with his burden, and the other two; how he saw them take the body from the crupper of the horse, and, with a "one, two, and three," fling it into the river; how he heard the horseman ask them had they thrown it well into the middle, and their answer of, "Yes my lord"; and finally, when asked why he had not come earlier to report the matter, how he had answered that he had thought nothing of it, having in his time seen more than a hundred bodies flung into the Tiber at night.

Returned to the garden gate, Giovanni bade the men go in without him. There was something yet that he must do. When they had gone, he dismounted, and went to the body of the groom which he had left under the wall. He must remove that too. He cut one of the stirrup-leathers from the saddle, and attaching one end of it to the dead man's arm, mounted again, and dragged him thus—ready to leave the body and ride off at the first alarm—some little way, until he came to the Piazza della Giudecca. Here, in the very heart of the Jewish quarters, he left the body, and his movements hereafter are a little obscure. Perhaps he set out to return to Pico della Mirandola's house, but becoming, as was natural, uneasy on the way, fearing lest all traces should, after all, not have been effaced, lest the Duke should be traced to that house, and himself, if found there, dealt with summarily upon suspicion, he turned about, and went off to seek sanctuary with his uncle, the Vice-Chancellor.

The Duke's horse, which he had ridden, he turned loose in the streets, where it was found some hours later, and first gave occasion to rumours of foul play. The rumours growing, with the discovery of the body of Gandia's groom, and search-parties of armed bargelli scouring Rome, and the Giudecca in particular, in the course of the next two days, forth at last came Giorgio, that boatman of the Schiavoni, with the tale of what he had seen. When the stricken Pope heard it, he ordered the bed of the river to be dragged foot by foot,

with the result that the ill-starred Duke of Gandia was brought up in one of the nets, whereupon the heartless Sanazzaro coined his terrible epigram concerning that successor of Saint Peter, that Fisherman of Men.

The people, looking about for him who had the greatest motive for that deed, were quick to fasten the guilt upon Giovanni Sforza, who by that time was far from Rome, riding hard for the shelter of his tyranny of Pesaro; and the Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, who was also mentioned, and who feared to be implicated, apprehensive ever lest his page should have seen the betraying arms upon the ring of his masked visitor—fled also, nor could be induced to return save under a safe-conduct from the Holy Father, expressing conviction of his innocence.

Later public rumour accused others; indeed, they accused in turn every man who could have been a possible perpetrator, attributing to some of them the most fantastic and incredible motives. Once, prompted no doubt by their knowledge of the libertine, pleasure-loving nature of the dead Duke, rumour hit upon the actual circumstances of the murder so closely, indeed, that the Count of Mirandola's house was visited by the bargelli and subjected to an examination, at which Pico violently rebelled, appealing boldly to the Pope against insinuations that reflected upon the honour of his daughter.

The mystery remained impenetrable, and the culprit was never brought to justice. We know that in slaying Gandia, Giovanni Sforza vented a hatred whose object was not Gandia, but Gandia's father. His aim was to deal Pope Alexander the cruellest and most lingering of wounds, and if he lacked the avenger's satisfaction of disclosing himself, at least he did not lack assurance that his blow had stricken home. He heard—as all Italy heard—from that wayfarer on the bridge of Sant' Angelo, how the Pope, in a paroxysm of grief at sight of his son's body fished from the Tiber, had bellowed in his agony like a

tortured bull, so that his cries within the castle were heard upon the bridge. He learnt how the handsome, vigorous Pope staggered into the consistory of the 19th of that same month with the mien and gait of a palsied old man, and, in a voice broken with sobs, proclaimed his bitter lament:

"Had we seven Papacies we would give them all to restore the Duke to life."

He might have been content. But he was not. That deep hate of his against those who had made him a thing of scorn was not so easily to be slaked. He waited, spying his opportunity for further hurt. It came a year later, when Gandia's brother, the ambitious Cesare Borgia, divested himself of his cardinalial robes and rank, exchanging them for temporal dignities and the title of Duke of Valentinois. Then it was that he took up the deadly weapon of calumny, putting it secretly about that Cesare was the murderer of his brother, spurred to it by worldly ambition and by other motives which involved the principal members of the family.

Men do not mount to Borgia heights without making enemies. The evil tale was taken up in all its foul trappings, and, upon no better authority than the public voice, it was enshrined in chronicles by every scribbler of the day. And for four hundred years that lie has held its place in history, the very cornerstone of all the execration that has been heaped upon the name of Borgia. Never was vengeance more terrible, far-reaching, and abiding. It is only in this twentieth century of ours that dispassionate historians have nailed upon the counter of truth the base coin of that accusation.

XII. THE NIGHT OF ESCAPE— Casanova's Escape From The Piombi

Patrician influence from without had procured Casanova's removal in August of that year, 1756, from the loathsome cell he had occupied for thirteen months in the Piombi—so called from the leaded roof immediately above those prisons which are simply the garrets of the Doge's palace.

That cell had been no better than a kennel seldom reached by the light of day, and so shallow that it was impossible for a man of his fine height to stand upright in it. But his present prison was comparatively spacious and it was airy and well-lighted by a barred window, whence he could see the Lido.

Yet he was desperately chagrined at the change, for he had almost completed his arrangements to break out of his former cell. The only ray of hope in his present despair came from the fact that the implement to which he trusted was still in his possession, safely concealed in the upholstery of the armchair that had been moved with him into his present quarters. That implement he had fashioned for himself with infinite pains out of a door-bolt some twenty inches long, which he had found discarded in a rubbish-heap in a corner of the attic where he had been allowed to take his brief daily exercise. Using as a whetstone a small slab of black marble, similarly acquired, he had shaped that bolt into a sharp octagonal-pointed chisel or spontoon.

It remained in his possession, but he saw no chance of using it now, for the suspicions of Lorenzo, the gaoler, were aroused, and daily a couple of archers came to sound the floors and walls. True they did not sound the ceiling, which was low and within reach. But it was obviously impossible to cut through the ceiling in such a manner as to leave the progress of the work unseen.

Hence his despair of breaking out of a prison where he had spent over a year without trial or prospect of a trial, and where he seemed likely to spend the remainder of his days. He did not even know precisely why he had been arrested. All that Giacomo Casanova knew was that he was accounted a disturber of the public peace. He was notoriously a libertine, a gamester, and heavily in debt: also—and this was more serious—he was accused of practising magic, as indeed he had done, as a means of exploiting to his own profit the credulity of simpletons of all degrees. He would have explained to the Inquisitors of State of the Most Serene Republic that the books of magic found by their apparitors in his possession—"The Clavicula of Solomon," the "Zecor-ben," and other kindred works—had been collected by him as curious instances of human aberration. But the Inquisitors of State would not have believed him, for the Inquisitors were among those who took magic seriously. And, anyhow, they had never asked him to explain, but had left him as if forgotten in that abominable verminous cell under the leads, until his patrician friend had obtained him the mercy of this transfer to better quarters.

This Casanova was a man of iron nerve and iron constitution. Tall and well-made, he was boldly handsome, with fine dark eyes and dark brown hair. In age he was barely one and twenty; but he looked older, as well he might, for in his adventurer's way he had already gathered more experience of life than most men gain in half a century.

The same influence that had obtained him his change of cell had also gained him latterly the privilege—and he esteemed it beyond all

else—of procuring himself books. Desiring the works of Maffai, he bade his gaoler purchase them out of the allowance made him by the Inquisitors in accordance with the Venetian custom. This allowance was graduated to the social status of each prisoner. But the books being costly and any monthly surplus from his monthly expenditure being usually the gaoler's perquisite, Lorenzo was reluctant to indulge him. He mentioned that there was a prisoner above who was well equipped with books, and who, no doubt, would be glad to lend in exchange.

Yielding to the suggestion, Casanova handed Lorenzo a copy of Peteau's "Rationarium," and received next morning, in exchange, the first volume of Wolf. Within he found a sheet bearing in six verses a paraphrase of Seneca's epigram, "Calamitosus est animus futuri anxius." Immediately he perceived he had stumbled upon a means of corresponding with one who might be disposed to assist him to break prison.

In reply, being a scholarly rascal (he had been educated for the priesthood), he wrote six verses himself. Having no pen, he cut the long nail of his little finger to a point, and, splitting it, supplied the want. For ink he used the juice of mulberries. In addition to the verses, he wrote a list of the books in his possession, which he placed at the disposal of his fellow-captive. He concealed the written sheet in the spine of that vellum-bound volume; and on the title-page, in warning of this, he wrote the single Latin word "Latet." Next morning he handed the book to Lorenzo, telling him that he had read it, and requesting the second volume.

That second volume came on the next day, and in the spine of it a long letter, some sheets of paper, pens, and a pencil. The writer announced himself as one Marino Balbi, a patrician and a monk, who had been four years in that prison, where he had since been given a companion in misfortune, Count Andrea Asquino.

Thus began a regular and very full correspondence between the prisoners, and soon Casanova—who had not lived on his wits for nothing—was able to form a shrewd estimate of Balbi's character. The monk's letters revealed it as compounded of sensuality, stupidity, ingratitude, and indiscretion.

"In the world," says Casanova, "I should have had no commerce with a fellow of his nature. But in the Piombi I was obliged to make capital out of everything that came under my hands."

The capital he desired to make in this instance was to ascertain whether Balbi would be disposed to do for him what he could not do for himself. He wrote inquiring, and proposing flight.

Balbi replied that he and his companion would do anything possible to make their escape from that abominable prison, but his lack of resource made him add that he was convinced that nothing was possible.

"All that you have to do," wrote Casanova in answer, "is to break through the ceiling of my cell and get me out of this, then trust to me to get you out of the Piombi. If you are disposed to make the attempt, I will supply you with the means, and show you the way."

It was a characteristically bold reply, revealing to us the utter gamester that he was in all things.

He knew that Balbi's cell was situated immediately under the leads, and he hoped that once in it he should be able readily to find a way through the roof. That cell of Balbi's communicated with a narrow corridor, no more than a shaft for light and air, which was immediately above Casanova's prison. And no sooner had Balbi written, consenting, than Casanova explained what was to do. Balbi must break through the wall of his cell into the little corridor, and there cut a round hole in the floor precisely as Casanova had done in his former

cell—until nothing but a shell of ceiling remained—a shell that could be broken down by half a dozen blows when the moment to escape should have arrived.

To begin with, he ordered Balbi to purchase himself two or three dozen pictures of saints, with which to paper his walls, using as many as might be necessary for a screen to hide the hole he would be cutting.

When Balbi wrote that his walls were hung with pictures of saints, it became a question of conveying the spontoon to him. This was difficult, and the monk's fatuous suggestions merely served further to reveal his stupidity. Finally Casanova's wits found the way. He bade Lorenzo buy him an in-folio edition of the Bible which had just been published, and it was into the spine of this enormous tome that he packed the precious spontoon, and thus conveyed it to Balbi, who immediately got to work.

This was at the commencement of October. On the 8th of that month Balbi wrote to Casanova that a whole night devoted to labour had resulted merely in the displacing of a single brick, which so discouraged the faint-hearted monk that he was for abandoning an attempt whose only result must be to increase in the future the rigour of their confinement.

Without hesitation, Casanova replied that he was assured of success—although he was far from having any grounds for any such assurance. He enjoined the monk to believe him, and to persevere, confident that as he advanced he would find progress easier. This proved, indeed, to be the case, for soon Balbi found the brickwork yielding so rapidly to his efforts that one morning, a week later, Casanova heard three light taps above his head—the preconcerted signal by which they were to assure themselves that their notions of the topography of the prison were correct.

All that day he heard Balbi at work immediately above him, and again on the morrow, when Balbi wrote that as the floor was of the thickness of only two boards, he counted upon completing the job on the next day, without piercing the ceiling.

But it would seem as if Fortune were intent upon making a mock of Casanova, luring him to heights of hope, merely to cast him down again into the depths of despair. Just as upon the eve of breaking out of his former cell mischance had thwarted him, so now, when again he deemed himself upon the very threshold of liberty, came mischance again to thwart him.

Early in the afternoon the sound of bolts being drawn outside froze his very blood and checked his breathing. Yet he had the presence of mind to give the double knock that was the agreed alarm signal, whereupon Balbi instantly desisted from his labours overhead.

Came Lorenzo with two archers, leading an ugly, lean little man of between forty and fifty years of age, shabbily dressed and wearing a round black wig, whom the tribunal had ordered should share Casanova's prison for the present. With apologies for leaving such a scoundrel in Casanova's company, Lorenzo departed, and the newcomer went down upon his knees, drew forth a chaplet, and began to tell his beads.

Casanova surveyed this intruder at once with disgust and despair. Presently his disgust was increased when the fellow, whose name was Soradici, frankly avowed himself a spy in the service of the Council of Ten, a calling which he warmly defended from the contempt universally—but unjustly, according to himself—meted out to it. He had been imprisoned for having failed in his duty on one occasion through succumbing to a bribe.

Conceive Casanova's frame of mind—his uncertainty as to how long this monster, as he calls him, might be left in his company, his

curbed impatience to regain his liberty, and his consciousness of the horrible risk of discovery which delay entailed! He wrote to Balbi that night while the spy slept, and for the present their operations were suspended. But not for very long. Soon Casanova's wits resolved how to turn to account the weakness which he discovered in Soradici.

The spy was devout to the point of bigoted, credulous superstition. He spent long hours in prayer, and he talked freely of his special devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and his ardent faith in miracles.

Casanova—the arch-humbug who had worked magic to delude the credulous—determined there and then to work a miracle for Soradici. Assuming an inspired air, he solemnly informed the spy one morning that it had been revealed to him in a dream that Soradici's devotion to the Rosary was about to be rewarded; that an angel was to be sent from heaven to deliver him from prison, and that Casanova himself would accompany him in his flight.

If Soradici doubted, conviction was soon to follow. For Casanova foretold the very hour at which the angel would come to break into the prison, and at that hour precisely—Casanova having warned Balbi—the noise made by the angel overhead flung Soradici into an ecstasy of terror.

But when, at the end of four hours, the angel desisted from his labours, Soradici was beset by doubts. Casanova explained to him that since angels invariably put on the garb of human flesh when descending upon earth, they labour under human difficulties. He added the prophecy that the angel would return on the last day of the month, the eve of All Saints'—two days later—and that he would then conduct them out of captivity.

By this means Casanova ensured that no betrayal should be feared from the thoroughly duped Soradici, who now spent the time in praying, weeping, and talking of his sins and of the inexhaustibility of

divine grace. To make doubly sure, Casanova added the most terrible oath that if, by a word to the gaoler, Soradici should presume to frustrate the divine intentions, he would immediately strangle him with his own hands.

On October 31st Lorenzo paid his usual daily visit early in the morning. After his departure they waited some hours, Soradici in expectant terror, Casanova in sheer impatience to be at work. Promptly at noon fell heavy blows overhead, and then, in a cloud of plaster and broken laths, the heavenly messenger descended clumsily into Casanova's arms.

Soradici found this tall, gaunt, bearded figure, clad in a dirty shirt and a pair of leather breeches, of a singularly unangelic appearance; indeed, he looked far more like a devil.

When he produced a pair of scissors, so that the spy might cut Casanova's beard, which, like the angel's, had grown in captivity, Soradici ceased to have any illusions on the score of Balbi's celestial nature. Although still intrigued—since he could not guess at the secret correspondence that had passed between Casanova and Balbi—he perceived quite clearly that he had been fooled.

Leaving Soradici in the monk's care, Casanova hoisted himself through the broken ceiling and gained Balbi's cell, where the sight of Count Asquino dismayed him. He found a middle-aged man of a corpulence which must render it impossible for him to face the athletic difficulties that lay before them; of this the Count himself seemed already persuaded.

"If you think," was his greeting, as he shook Casanova's hand, "to break through the roof and find a way down from the leads, I don't see how you are to succeed without wings. I have not the courage to accompany you," he added, "I shall remain and pray for you."

Attempting no persuasions where they must have been idle, Casanova passed out of the cell again, and approaching as nearly as possible to the edge of the attic, he sat down where he could touch the roof as it sloped immediately above his head. With his spontoon he tested the timbers, and found them so decayed that they almost crumbled at the touch. Assured thereby that the cutting of a hole would be an easy matter, he at once returned to his cell, and there he spent the ensuing four hours in preparing ropes. He cut up sheets, blankets, coverlets, and the very cover of his mattress, knotting the strips together with the utmost care. In the end he found himself equipped with some two hundred yards of rope, which should be ample for any purpose.

Having made a bundle of the fine taffeta suit in which he had been arrested, his gay cloak of floss silk, some stockings, shirts, and handkerchiefs, he and Balbi passed up to the other cell, compelling Soradici to go with them. Leaving the monk to make a parcel of his belongings, Casanova went to tackle the roof. By dusk he had made a hole twice as large as was necessary, and had laid bare the lead sheeting with which the roof was covered. Unable, single-handed, to raise one of the sheets, he called Balbi to his aid, and between them, assisted by the spontoon, which Casanova inserted between the edge of the sheet and the gutter, they at last succeeded in tearing away the rivets. Then by putting their shoulders to the lead they bent it upwards until there was room to emerge, and a view of the sky flooded by the vivid light of the crescent moon.

Not daring in that light to venture upon the roof, where they would be seen, they must wait with what patience they could until midnight, when the moon would have set. So they returned to the cell where they had left Soradici with Count Asquino.

From Balbi, Casanova had learnt that Asquino, though well supplied with money, was of an avaricious nature. Nevertheless,

since money would be necessary, Casanova asked the Count for the loan of thirty gold sequins. Asquino answered him gently that, in the first place, they would not need money to escape; that, in the second, he had a numerous family; that, in the third, if Casanova perished the money would be lost; and that, in the fourth, he had no money.

"My reply," writes Casanova, "lasted half an hour."

"Let me remind you," he said in concluding his exhortation, "of your promise to pray for us, and let me ask you what sense there can be in praying for the success of an enterprise to which you refuse to contribute the most necessary means."

The old man was so far conquered by Casanova's eloquence that he offered him two sequins, which Casanova accepted, since he was not in case to refuse anything.

Thereafter, as they sat waiting for the moon to set, Casanova found his earlier estimate of the monk's character confirmed. Balbi now broke into abusive reproaches. He found that Casanova had acted in bad faith by assuring him that he had formed a complete plan of escape. Had he suspected that this was a mere gambler's throw on Casanova's part, he would never have laboured to get him out of his cell. The Count added his advice that they should abandon an attempt foredoomed to failure, and, being concerned for the two sequins with which he had so reluctantly parted, he argued the case at great length. Stifling his disgust, Casanova assured them that, although it was impossible for him to afford them details of how he intended to proceed, he was perfectly confident of success.

At half-past ten he sent Soradici—who had remained silent throughout—to report upon the night. The spy brought word that in another hour or so the moon would have set, but that a thick mist was rising, which must render the leads very dangerous.

"So long as the mist isn't made of oil, I am content," said Casanova. "Come, make a bundle of your cloak. It is time we were moving."

But at this Soradici fell on his knees in the dark, seized Casanova's hands, and begged to be left behind to pray for their safety, since he would be sure to meet his death if he attempted to go with them.

Casanova assented readily, delighted to be rid of the fellow. Then in the dark he wrote as best he could a quite characteristic letter to the Inquisitors of State, in which he took his leave of them, telling them that since he had been fetched into the prison without his wishes being consulted, they could not complain that he should depart without consulting theirs.

The bundle containing Balbi's clothes, and another made up of half the rope, he slung from the monk's neck, thereafter doing the same in his own case. Then, in their shirt-sleeves, their hats on their heads, the pair of them started on their perilous journey, leaving Count Asquino and Soradici to pray for them.

Casanova went first, on all fours, and thrusting the point of his spontoon between the joints of the lead sheeting so as to obtain a hold, he crawled slowly upwards. To follow, Balbi took a grip of Casanova's belt with his right hand, so that, in addition to making his own way, Casanova was compelled to drag the weight of his companion after him, and this up the sharp gradient of a roof rendered slippery by the mist.

Midway in that laborious ascent, the monk called to him to stop. He had dropped the bundle containing the clothes, and he hoped that it had not rolled beyond the gutter, though he did not mention which of them should retrieve it. After the unreasonableness already endured from this man, Casanova's exasperation was such in that moment that, he confesses, he was tempted to kick him after this bundle.

Controlling himself, however, he answered patiently that the matter could not now be helped, and kept steadily afloat.

At last the apex of the roof was reached, and they got astride of it to breathe and to take a survey of their surroundings. They faced the several cupolas of the Church of Saint Mark, which is connected with the ducal palace, being, in fact, no more than the private chapel of the Doge.

They set down their bundles, and, of course, in the act of doing so the wretched Balbi must lose his hat, and send it rolling down the roof after the bundle he had already lost. He cried out that it was an evil omen.

"On the contrary," Casanova assured him patiently, "it is a sign of divine protection; for if your bundle or your hat had happened to roll to the left instead of the right it would have fallen into the courtyard, where it would be seen by the guards, who must conclude that some one is moving on the roof, and so, no doubt, would have discovered us. As it is your hat has followed your bundle into the canal, where it can do no harm."

Thereupon, bidding the monk await his return, Casanova set off alone on a voyage of discovery, keeping for the present astride of the roof in his progress. He spent a full hour wandering along the vast roof, going to right and to left in his quest, but failing completely to make any helpful discovery, or to find anything to which he could attach a rope. In the end it began to look as if, after all, he must choose between returning to prison and flinging himself from the roof into the canal. He was almost in despair, when in his wanderings his attention was caught by a dormer window on the canal side, about two-thirds of the way down the slope of the roof. With infinite precaution he lowered himself down the steep, slippery incline until he was astride of the little dormer roof. Leaning well forward, he discovered that a slender grating barred the leaded panes of the

window itself, and for a moment this grating gave him pause.

Midnight boomed just then from the Church of Saint Mark, like a reminder that but seven hours remained in which to conquer this and further difficulties that might confront him, and in which to win clear of that place, or else submit to a resumption of his imprisonment under conditions, no doubt, a hundredfold more rigorous.

Lying flat on his stomach, and hanging far over, so as to see what he was doing, he worked one point of his spontoon into the sash of the grating, and, levering outwards, he strained until at last it came away completely in his hands. After that it was an easy matter to shatter the little latticed window.

Having accomplished so much, he turned, and, using his spontoon as before, he crawled back to the summit of the roof, and made his way rapidly along this to the spot where he had left Balbi. The monk, reduced by now to a state of blending despair, terror, and rage, greeted Casanova in terms of the grossest abuse for having left him there so long.

"I was waiting only for daylight," he concluded, "to return to prison."

"What did you think had become of me?" asked Casanova.

"I imagined that you had tumbled off the roof."

"And is this abuse the expression of your joy at finding yourself mistaken?"

"Where have you been all this time?" the monk counter-questioned sullenly.

"Come with me and you shall see."

And taking up his bundle again, Casanova led his companion forward until they were in line with the dormer. There Casanova

showed him what he had done, and consulted him as to the means to be adopted to enter the attic. It would be too risky for them to allow themselves to drop from the sill, since the height of the window from the floor was unknown to them, and might be considerable. It would be easy for one of them to lower the other by means of the rope. But it was not apparent how, hereafter, the other was to follow. Thus reasoned Casanova.

"You had better lower me, anyhow," said Balbi, without hesitation; for no doubt he was very tired of that slippery roof, on which a single false step might have sent him to his account. "Once I am inside you can consider ways of following me."

That cold-blooded expression of the fellow's egoism put Casanova in a rage for the second time since they had left their prison. But, as before, he conquered it, and without uttering a word he proceeded to unfasten the coil of rope. Making one end of it secure under Balbi's arms, he bade the monk lie prone upon the roof, his feet pointing downwards, and then, paying out rope, he lowered him to the dormer. He then bade him get through the window as far as the level of his waist, and wait thus, hanging over and supporting himself upon the sill. When he had obeyed, Casanova followed, sliding carefully down to the roof of the dormer. Planting himself firmly, and taking the rope once more, he bade Balbi to let himself go without fear, and so lowered him to the floor—a height from the window, as it proved, of some fifty feet. This extinguished all Casanova's hopes of being able to follow by allowing himself to drop from the sill. He was dismayed. But the monk, happy to find himself at last off that accursed roof, and out of all danger of breaking his neck, called foolishly to Casanova to throw him the rope so that he might take care of it.

"As may be imagined," says Casanova, "I was careful not to take this idiotic advice."

Not knowing now what was to become of him unless he could

discover some other means than those at his command, he climbed back again to the summit of the roof, and started off desperately upon another voyage of discovery. This time he succeeded better than before. He found about a cupola a terrace which he had not earlier noticed, and on this terrace a hod of plaster, a trowel, and a ladder some seventy feet long. He saw his difficulties solved. He passed an end of rope about one of the rungs, laid the ladder flat along the slope of the roof, and then, still astride of the apex, he worked his way back, dragging the ladder with him, until he was once more on a level with the dormer.

But now the difficulty was how to get the ladder through the window, and he had cause to repent having so hastily deprived himself of his companion's assistance. He had got the ladder into position, and lowered it until one of its ends rested upon the dormer, whilst the other projected some twenty feet beyond the edge of the roof. He slid down to the dormer, and placing the ladder beside him, drew it up so that he could reach the eighth rung. To this rung he made fast his rope, then lowered the ladder again until the upper end of it was in line with the window through which he sought to introduce it. But he found it impossible to do so beyond the fifth rung, for at this point the end of the ladder came in contact with the roof inside, and could be pushed no farther until it was inclined downward. Now, the only possible way to accomplish this was by raising the other end.

It occurred to him that he might, by so attaching the rope as to bring the ladder across the window frame, lower himself hand over hand to the floor of the attic. But in so doing he must have left the ladder there to show their pursuers in the morning, not merely the way they had gone, but for all he knew at this stage, the place where they might then be still in hiding. Having come so far, at so much risk and labour, he was determined to leave nothing to chance. To accomplish his object then, he made his way down to the very edge of the roof, sliding carefully on his stomach until his feet found support against the

marble gutter, the ladder meanwhile remaining hooked by one of its rungs to the sill of the dormer.

In that perilous position he lifted his end of the ladder a few inches, and so contrived to thrust it another foot or so through the window, whereby its weight was considerably diminished. If he could but get it another couple of feet farther in he was sure that by returning to the dormer he would have been able to complete the job. In his anxiety to do this and to obtain the necessary elevation, he raised himself upon his knees.

But in the very act of making the thrust he slipped, and, clutching wildly as he went, he shot over the edge of the roof. He found himself hanging there, suspended above that terrific abyss by his hands and his elbows, which had convulsively hooked themselves on to the edge of the gutter, so that he had it on a level with his breast.

It was a moment of dread the like of which he was never likely to endure again in a life that was to know many perils and many hairbreadth escapes. He could not write of it nearly half a century later without shuddering and growing sick with horror.

A moment he hung there gasping, then almost mechanically, guided by the sheer instinct of self-preservation, he not merely attempted, but actually succeeded in raising himself so as to bring his side against the gutter. Then continuing gradually to raise himself until his waist was on a level with the edge, he threw the weight of his trunk forward upon the roof, and slowly brought his right leg up until he had obtained with his knee a further grip of the gutter. The rest was easy, and you may conceive him as he lay there on the roof's edge, panting and shuddering for a moment to regain his breath and nerve.

Meanwhile, the ladder, driven forward by the thrust that had so nearly cost him his life, had penetrated another three feet through the window, and hung there immovable. Recovered, he took up his

spontoon, which he had placed in the gutter, and, assisted by it, he climbed back to the dormer. Almost without further difficulty, he succeeded now in introducing the ladder until, of its own weight, it swung down into position.

A moment later he had joined Balbi in the attic, and together they groped about in it the dark, until finding presently a door, they passed into another chamber, where they discovered furniture by hurtling against it. Guided by a faint glimmer of light, Casanova made his way to one of the windows and opened it. He looked out upon a black abyss, and, having no knowledge of the locality, and no inclination to adventure himself into unknown regions, he immediately abandoned all idea of attempting to climb down. He closed the window again, and going back to the other room, he lay down on the floor, with the bundle of ropes for a pillow, to wait for dawn.

And so exhausted was he, not only by the efforts of the past hours, and the terrible experience in which they had culminated, but also because in the last two days he had scarcely eaten or slept, that straightway, and greatly to Balbi's indignation and disgust, he fell into a profound sleep.

He was aroused three and a half hours later by the clamours and shakings of the exasperated monk. Protesting that such a sleep at such a time was a thing inconceivable, Balbi informed him that it had just struck five.

It was still dark, but already there was a dim grey glimmer of dawn by which objects could be faintly discerned. Searching, Casanova found another door opposite that of the chamber which they had entered earlier. It was locked, but the lock was a poor one that yielded to half a dozen blows of the spontoon, and they passed into a little room beyond which by an open door they came into a long gallery lined with pigeon-holes stuffed with parchments, which they conceived to be the archives. At the end of this gallery they found a short flight of

stairs, and below that yet another, which brought them to a glass door. Opening this, they entered a room which Casanova immediately identified as the ducal chancellery. Descent from one of its windows would have been easy, but they would have found themselves in the labyrinth of courts and alleys behind Saint Mark's, which would not have suited them at all.

On a table Casanova found a stout bodkin with a long wooden handle, the implement used by the secretaries for piercing parchments that were to be joined by a cord bearing the leaden seals of the Republic. He opened a desk, and rummaging in it, found a letter addressed to the Proveditor of Corfu, advising a remittance of three thousand sequins for the repair of the fortress. He rummaged further, seeking the three thousand sequins, which he would have appropriated without the least scruple. Unfortunately they were not there.

Quitting the desk, he crossed to the door, not merely to find it locked, but to discover that it was not the kind of lock that would yield to blows. There was no way out but by battering away one of the panels, and to this he addressed himself without hesitation, assisted by Balbi, who had armed himself with the bodkin, but who trembled fearfully at the noise of Casanova's blows. There was danger in this, but the danger must be braved, for time was slipping away. In half an hour they had broken down all the panel it was possible to remove without the help of a saw. The opening they had made was at a height of five feet from the ground, and the splintered woodwork armed it with a fearful array of jagged teeth.

They dragged a couple of stools to the door, and getting on to these, Casanova bade Balbi go first. The long, lean monk folded his arms, and thrust head and shoulders through the hole; then Casanova lifted him, first by the waist, then by the legs, and so helped him through into the room beyond. Casanova threw their bundles after

him, and then placing a third stool on top of the other two, climbed on to it, and, being almost on a level with the opening, was able to get through as far as his waist, when Balbi took him in his arms and proceeded to drag him out. But it was done at the cost of torn breeches and lacerated legs, and when he stood up in the room beyond he was bleeding freely from the wounds which the jagged edges of the wood had dealt him.

After that they went down two staircases, and came out at last in the gallery leading to the great doors at the head of that magnificent flight of steps known as the Giant's Staircase. But these doors—the main entrance of the palace—were locked, and, at a glance, Casanova saw that nothing short of a hatchet would serve to open them. There was no more to be done.

With a resignation that seemed to Balbi entirely cynical, Casanova sat down on the floor.

"My task is ended," he announced. "It is now for Heaven or Chance to do the rest. I don't know whether the palace cleaners will come here to-day as it is All Saints', or to-morrow, which will be All Souls'. Should any one come, I shall run for it the moment the door is opened, and you had best follow me. If no one comes, I shall not move from here, and if I die of hunger, so much the worse."

It was a speech that flung the monk into a passion. In burning terms he reviled Casanova, calling him a madman, a seducer, a deceiver, a liar. Casanova let him rave. It was just striking six. Precisely an hour had elapsed since they had left the attic.

Balbi, in his red flannel waistcoat and his puce-coloured leather breeches, might have passed for a peasant; but Casanova, in torn garments that were soaked in blood, presented an appearance that was terrifying and suspicious. This he proceeded to repair. Tearing a handkerchief, he made shift to bandage his wounds, and then from

his bundle he took his fine taffeta summer suit, which on a winter's day must render him ridiculous.

He dressed his thick, dark brown hair as best he could, drew on a pair of white stockings, and donned three lace shirts one over another. His fine cloak of floss silk he gave to Balbi, who looked for all the world as if he had stolen it.

Thus dressed, his fine hat laced with point of Spain on his head, Casanova opened a window and looked out. At once he was seen by some idlers in the courtyard, who, amazed at his appearance there, and conceiving that he must have been locked in by mistake on the previous day, went off at once to advise the porter. Meanwhile, Casanova, vexed at having shown himself where he had not expected any one, and little guessing how excellently this was to serve his ends, left the window and went to sit beside the angry friar, who greeted him with fresh revilings.

A sound of steps and a rattle of keys stemmed Balbi's reproaches in full flow. The lock groaned.

"Not a word," said Casanova to the monk, "but follow me."

Holding his spontoon ready, but concealed under his coat, he stepped to the side of the door. It opened, and the porter, who had come alone and bareheaded, stared in stupefaction at the strange apparition of Casanova.

Casanova took advantage of that paralyzing amazement. Without uttering a word, he stepped quickly across the threshold, and with Balbi close upon his heels, he went down the Giant's Staircase in a flash, crossed the little square, reached the canal, bundled Balbi into the first gondola he found there, and jumped in after him.

"I want to go to Fusine, and quickly," he announced. "Call another oarsman."

All was ready, and in a moment the gondola was skimming the canal. Dressed in his unseasonable suit, and accompanied by the still more ridiculous figure of Balbi in his gaudy cloak and without a hat, he imagined he would be taken for a charlatan or an astrologer.

The gondola slipped past the custom-house, and took the canal of the Giudecca. Halfway down this, Casanova put his head out of the little cabin to address the gondolier in the poop.

"Do you think we shall reach Mestre in an hour?"

"Mestre?" quoth the gondolier. "But you said Fusine."

"No, no, I said Mestre—at least, I intended to say Mestre."

And so the gondola was headed for Mestre by a gondolier who professed himself ready to convey his excellency to England if he desired it.

The sun was rising, and the water assumed an opalescent hue. It was a delicious morning, Casanova tells us, and I suspect that never had any morning seemed to that audacious, amiable rascal as delicious as this upon which he regained his liberty, which no man ever valued more highly.

In spirit he was already safely over the frontiers of the Most Serene Republic, impatient to transfer his body thither, as he shortly did, through vicissitudes that are a narrative in themselves, and no part of this story of his escape from the Piombi and the Venetian Inquisitors of State.

XIII. THE NIGHT OF MASQUERADE—The Assassination Of Gustavus III Of Sweden

Baron Bjelke sprang from his carriage almost before it had come to a standstill and without waiting for the footman to let down the steps. With a haste entirely foreign to a person of his station and importance, he swept into the great vestibule of the palace, and in a quivering voice flung a question at the first lackey he encountered:

"Has His Majesty started yet?"

"Not yet, my lord."

The answer lessened his haste, but not his agitation. He cast off the heavy wolfskin pelisse in which he had been wrapped, and, leaving it in the hands of the servant, went briskly up the grand staircase, a tall, youthful figure, very graceful in the suit of black he wore.

As he passed through a succession of ante-rooms on his way to the private apartments of the King, those present observed the pallor of his clean-cut face under the auburn tie-wig he affected, and the feverish glow of eyes that took account of no one. They could not guess that Baron Bjelke, the King's secretary and favourite, carried in his hands the life of his royal master, or its equivalent in the shape of the secret of the plot to assassinate him.

In many ways Bjelke was no better than the other profligate minions

of the profligate Gustavus of Sweden. But he had this advantage over them, that his intellect was above their average. He had detected the first signs of the approach of that storm which the King himself had so heedlessly provoked. He knew, as much by reason as by intuition, that, in these days when the neighbouring State of France writhed in the throes of a terrific revolution against monarchic and aristocratic tyranny, it was not safe for a king to persist in the abuse of his parasitic power. New ideas of socialism were in the air. They were spreading through Europe, and it was not only in France that men accounted it an infamous anachronism that the great mass of a community should toil and sweat and suffer for the benefit of an insolent minority.

Already had there been trouble with the peasantry in Sweden, and Bjelke had endangered his position as a royal favourite by presuming to warn his master. Gustavus III desired amusement, not wisdom, from those about him. He could not be brought to realize the responsibilities which kingship imposes upon a man. It has been pretended that he was endowed with great gifts of mind. He may have been, though the thing has been pretended of so many princes that one may be sceptical where evidence is lacking. If he possessed those gifts, he succeeded wonderfully in concealing them under a nature that was frivolously gay, dissolute, and extravagant.

His extravagance forced him into monstrous extortions when only a madman would have wasted in profligacy the wealth so cruelly wrung from long-suffering subjects. From extortion he was driven by his desperate need of money into flagrant dishonesty. At a stroke of the pen he had reduced the value of the paper currency by one-third—a reduction so violent and sudden that, whilst it impoverished many, it involved some in absolute ruin—and this that he might gratify his appetite for magnificence and enrich the rapacious favourites who shared his profligacy.

The unrest in the kingdom spread. It was no longer a question of the resentment of a more or less docile peasantry whose first stirrings of revolt were easily quelled. The lesser nobility of Sweden were angered by a measure—following upon so many others—that bore peculiarly heavily upon themselves; and out of that anger, fanned by one man—John Jacob Ankarstrom—who had felt the vindictive spirit of royal injustice, flamed in secret the conspiracy against the King's life which Bjelke had discovered.

He had discovered it by the perilous course of joining the conspirators. He had won their confidence, and they recognized that his collaboration was rendered invaluable by the position he held so near the King. And in his subtle wisdom, at considerable danger to himself, Bjelke had kept his counsel. He had waited until now, until the moment when the blow was about to fall, before making the disclosure which should not only save Gustavus, but enable him to cast a net in which all the plotters must be caught. And he hoped that when Gustavus perceived the narrowness of his escape, and the reality of the dangers amid which he walked, he would consider the wisdom of taking another course in future.

He had reached the door of the last ante-chamber, when a detaining hand was laid upon his arm. He found himself accosted by a page—the offspring of one of the noblest families in Sweden, and the son of one of Bjelke's closest friends, a fair-haired, impudent boy to whom the secretary permitted a certain familiarity.

"Are you on your way to the King, Baron?" the lad inquired.

"I am, Carl. What is it?"

"A letter for His Majesty—a note fragrant as a midsummer rose—which a servant has just delivered to me. Will you take it?"

"Give it to me, impudence," said Bjelke, the ghost of a smile

lighting for a moment his white face.

He took the letter and passed on into the last antechamber, which was empty of all but a single chamberlain-in-waiting. This chamberlain bowed respectfully to the Baron.

"His Majesty?" said Bjelke.

"He is dressing. Shall I announce Your Excellency?"

"Pray do."

The chamberlain vanished, and Bjelke was left alone. Waiting, he stood there, idly fingering the scented note he had received from the page. As he turned it in his fingers the superscription came uppermost, and he turned it no more. His eyes lost their absorbed look, their glance quickened into attention, a frown shaped itself between them like a scar; his breathing, suspended a moment, was renewed with a gasp. He stepped aside to a table bearing a score of candles clustered in a massive silver branch, and held the note so that the light fell full upon the writing.

Standing thus, he passed a hand over his eyes and stared again, two hectic spots burning now in his white cheeks. Abruptly, disregarding the superscription, his trembling fingers snapped the blank seal and unfolded the letter addressed to his royal master. He was still reading when the chamberlain returned to announce that the King was pleased to see the Baron at once. He did not seem to hear the announcement. His attention was all upon the letter, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a grin, and beads of perspiration glistening upon his brow.

"His Majesty—" the chamberlain was beginning to repeat, when he broke off suddenly. "Your Excellency is ill?"

"III?"

Bjelke stared at him with glassy eyes. He crumpled the letter in his hand and stuffed one and the other into the pocket of his black satin coat. He attempted to laugh to reassure the startled chamberlain, and achieved a ghastly grimace.

"I must not keep His Majesty waiting," he said thickly, and stumbled on, leaving in the chamberlain's mind a suspicion that His Majesty's secretary was not quite sober.

But Bjelke so far conquered his emotion that he was almost his usual imperturbable self when he reached the royal dressing-room; indeed, he no longer displayed even the agitation that had possessed him when first he entered the palace.

Gustavus, a slight, handsome man of a good height, was standing before a cheval-glass when Bjelke came in. Francois, the priceless valet His Majesty had brought back from his last pleasure-seeking visit to pre-revolutionary Paris some five years ago, was standing back judicially to consider the domino he had just placed upon the royal shoulders. Baron Armfelt whom the conspirators accused of wielding the most sinister of all the sinister influences that perverted the King's mind—dressed from head to foot in shimmering white satin, lounged on a divan with all the easy familiarity permitted to this most intimate of courtiers, the associate of all royal follies.

Gustavus looked over his shoulder as he entered.

"Why, Bjelke," he exclaimed, "I thought you had gone into the country!"

"I am at a loss," replied Bjelke, "to imagine what should have given Your Majesty so mistaken an impression." And he might have smiled inwardly to observe how his words seemed to put Gustavus out of countenance.

The King laughed, nevertheless, with an affectation of ease.

"I inferred it from your absence from Court on such a night. What has been keeping you?" But, without waiting for an answer, he fired another question. "What do you say to my domino, Bjelke?"

It was a garment embroidered upon a black satin ground with tongues of flame so cunningly wrought in mingling threads of scarlet and gold that as he turned about now they flashed in the candlelight, and seemed to leap like tongues of living fire.

"Your Majesty will have a great success," said Bjelke, and to himself relished the full grimness of his joke. For a terrible joke it was, seeing that he no longer intended to discharge the errand which had brought him in such haste to the palace.

"Faith, I deserve it!" was the flippant answer, and he turned again to the mirror to adjust a patch on the left side of his chin. "There is genius in this domino, and it is not the genius of Francois, for the scheme of flames is my very own, the fruit of a deal of thought and study."

There Gustavus uttered his whole character. As a master of the revels, or an opera impresario, this royal rake would have been a complete success in life. The pity of it was that the accident of birth should have robed him in the royal purple. Like many another prince who has come to a violent end, he was born to the wrong metier.

"I derived the notion," he continued, "from a sanbenito in a Goya picture."

"An ominous garb," said Bjelke, smiling curiously. "The garment of the sinner on his way to penitential doom."

Armfelt cried out in a protest of mock horror, but Gustavus laughed cynically.

"Oh, I confess that it would be most apt. I had not thought of it."

His fingers sought a pomatum box, and in doing so displaced a toilet-case of red morocco. An oblong paper package fell from the top of this and arrested the King's attention.

"Why, what is this?" He took it up—a letter bearing the superscription:

TO HIS MAJESTY THE KING
SECRET AND IMPORTANT

"What is this, Francois?" The royal voice was suddenly sharp.

The valet glided forward, whilst Armfelt rose from the divan and, like Bjelke, attracted by the sudden change in the King's tone and manner, drew near his master.

"How comes this letter here?"

The valet's face expressed complete amazement. It must have been placed there in his absence an hour ago, after he had made all preparations for the royal toilette. It was certainly not there at the time, or he must have seen it.

With impatient fingers Gustavus snapped the seal and unfolded the letter. Awhile he stood reading, very still, his brows knit.

Then, with a contemptuous "Poof!" he handed it to his secretary.

At a glance Bjelke recognized the hand for that of Colonel Lillehorn, one of the conspirators, whose courage had evidently failed him in the eleventh hour. He read:

SIRE,—Deign to heed the warning of one who, not being in your service, nor solicitous of your favours, flatters not your crimes, and yet desires to avert the danger threatening you. There is a plot to assassinate you which would by now have been executed but for the

countermanding of the ball at the opera last week. What was not done then will certainly be done to-night if you afford the opportunity. Remain at home and avoid balls and public gatherings for the rest of the year; thus the fanaticism which aims at your life will evaporate.

"Do you know the writing?" Gustavus asked.

Bjelke shrugged. "The hand will be disguised, no doubt," he evaded.

"But you will heed the warning, Sire?" exclaimed, Armfelt, who had read over the secretary's shoulder, and whose face had paled in reading.

Gustavus laughed contemptuously. "Faith, if I were to heed every scaremonger, I should get but little amusement out of life."

Yet he was angry, as his shifting colour showed. The disrespectful tone of the anonymous communication moved him more deeply than its actual message. He toyed a moment with a hair-ribbon, his nether lip thrust out in thought. At last he rapped out an oath of vexation, and proffered the ribbon to his valet.

"My hair, Francois," said he, "and then we will be going."

"Going!"

It was an ejaculation of horror from Armfelt, whose face was now as white as the ivory-coloured suit he wore.

"What else? Am I to be intimidated out of my pleasures?" Yet that his heart was less stout than his words his very next question showed. "Apropos, Bjelke, what was the reason why you countermanded the ball last week?"

"The councillors from Gefle claimed Your Majesty's immediate attention," Bjelke reminded him.

"So you said at the time. But the business seemed none so urgent when we came to it. There was no other reason in your mind—no suspicion?"

His keen, dark blue eyes were fixed upon the pale masklike face of the secretary.

That grave, almost stern countenance relaxed into a smile.

"I suspected no more than I suspect now," was his easy equivocation. "And all that I suspect now is that some petty enemy is attempting to scare Your Majesty."

"To scare me?" Gustavus flushed to the temples. "Am I a man to be scared?"

"Ah, but consider, Sire, and you, Bjelke," Armfelt was bleating. "This may be a friendly warning. In all humility, Sire, let me suggest that you incur no risk; that you countermand the masquerade."

"And permit the insolent writer to boast that he frightened the King?" sneered Bjelke.

"Faith, Baron, you are right. The thing is written with intent to make a mock of me."

"But if it were not so, Sire?" persisted the distressed Armfelt. And volubly he argued now to impose caution, reminding the King of his enemies, who might, indeed, be tempted to go the lengths of which the anonymous writer spoke. Gustavus listened, and was impressed.

"If I took heed of every admonition," he said, "I might as well become a monk at once. And yet—" He took his chin in his hand, and stood thoughtful, obviously hesitating, his head bowed, his straight, graceful figure motionless.

Thus until Bjelke, who now desired above all else the very thing he

had come hot-foot to avert, broke the silence to undo what Armfelt had done.

"Sire," he said, "you may avoid both mockery and danger, and yet attend the masquerade. Be sure, if there is indeed a plot, the assassins will be informed of the disguise you are to wear. Give me your flame-studded domino, and take a plain black one for yourself."

Armfelt gasped at the audacity of the proposal, but Gustavus gave no sign that he had heard. He continued standing in that tense attitude, his eyes vague and dreamy. And as if to show along what roads of thought his mind was travelling, he uttered a single word a name—in a questioning voice scarce louder than a whisper.

Ankarstrom?

Later again he was to think of Ankarstrom, to make inquiries concerning him, which justifies us here in attempting to follow those thoughts of his. They took the road down which his conscience pointed. Above all Swedes he had cause to fear John Jacobi Ankarstrom, for, foully as he had wronged many men in his time, he had wronged none more deeply than that proud, high-minded nobleman. He hated Ankarstrom as we must always hate those whom we have wronged, and he hated him the more because he knew himself despised by Ankarstrom with a cold and deadly contempt that at every turn proclaimed itself.

That hatred was more than twenty years old. It dated back to the time when Gustavus had been a vicious youth, and Ankarstrom himself a boy. They were much of an age. Gustavus had put upon his young companion an infamous insult, which had been answered by a blow. His youth and the admitted provocation alone had saved Ankarstrom from the dread consequence of striking a Prince of the Royal Blood. But they had not saved him from the vindictiveness of Gustavus. He had kept his lust of vengeance warm, and very patiently

had he watched and waited for his opportunity to destroy the man, who had struck him.

That chance had come four years ago—in 1788—during the war with Russia. Ankarstrom commanded the forces defending the island of Gothland. These forces were inadequate for the task, nor was the island in a proper state of defence, being destitute of forts. To have persevered in resistance might have been heroic, but it would have been worse than futile, for not only would it have entailed the massacre of the garrison, but it must have further subjected the inhabitants to all the horrors of sack and pillage.

In the circumstances, Ankarstrom had conceived it his duty to surrender to the superior force of Russia, thereby securing immunity for the persons and property of the inhabitants. In this the King perceived his chance to indulge his hatred. He caused Ankarstrom to be arrested and accused of high treason, it being alleged against him that he had advised the people of Gothland not to take up arms against the Russians. The royal agents found witnesses to bear false evidence against Ankarstrom, with the result that he was sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment in a fortress. But the sentence was never carried out. Gustavus had gone too far, as he was soon made aware. The feelings against him which hitherto had smouldered flamed out at this crowning act of injustice, and to repair his error Gustavus made haste, not, indeed, to exonerate Ankarstrom from the charges brought against him, but to pardon him for his alleged offences.

When the Swedish nobleman was brought to Court to receive this pardon, he used it as a weapon against the King whom he despised.

"My unjust judges," he announced in a ringing voice, the echoes of which were carried to the ends of Sweden, "have never doubted in their hearts my innocence of the charges brought against me, and established by means of false witnesses. The judgment pronounced against me was unrighteous. This exemption from it is my proper due.

Yet I would rather perish through the enmity of the King than live dishonoured by his clemency."

Gustavus had set his teeth in rage when those fierce words were reported to him, and his rage had been increased when he was informed of the cordial reception which everywhere awaited Ankarstrom on his release. He perceived how far he had overshot his mark, and how, in seeking treacherously to hurt Ankarstrom, he had succeeded only in hurting himself. Nor had he appeased the general indignation by his pardon. True, the flame of revolt had been quelled. But he had no lack of evidence that the fire continued to burn steadily in secret, and to eat its way further and further into the ranks of noble and simple alike.

It is little wonder, then, that in this moment, with that warning lying there before him, the name of Ankarstrom should be on his lips, the thought of Ankarstrom, the fear of Ankarstrom, looming big in his mind. It was big enough to make him heed the warning. He dropped into a chair.

"I will not go," he said, and Bjelke saw that his face was white, his hands shaking.

But when the secretary had repeated the proposal which had earlier gone unheard, Gustavus caught at it with sudden avidity, and with but little concern for the danger that Bjelke might be running. He sprang up, applauding it. If a conspiracy there was, the conspirators would thus be trapped; if there were no conspiracy, then this attempt to frighten him should come to nothing; thus he would be as safe from the mockery of his enemies as from their knives. Nor did Armfelt protest or make further attempts to dissuade him from going. In the circumstances proposed by Bjelke, the risk would be Bjelke's, a matter which troubled Armfelt not at all; indeed, he had no cause to love Bjelke, in whom he beheld a formidable rival, and it would be to him no cause for tears if the knife intended for the royal vitals should

find its way into Bjelke's instead.

So Baron Bjelke, arrayed in the domino copied from the penitential sack, departed for the Opera House, leaving Gustavus to follow. Yet, despite the measure of precaution, no sooner had the masked King himself entered the crowded theatre, leaning upon the arm of the Count of Essen, than he conceived that he beheld confirmation of the warning, and regretted that he had not heeded it to the extent of remaining absent. For one of the first faces he beheld, one of the few unmasked faces in that brilliantly lit salon, was the face of Ankarstrom, and Ankarstrom appeared to be watching the entrance.

Gustavus checked in his stride, a tremor ran through him, and he stiffened in his sudden apprehension, for the sight of the tall figure and haughty, resolute face of the nobleman he had wronged was of more significance than at first might seem. Ever since his infamous trial Ankarstrom had been at pains to seize every occasion of marking his contempt for his Prince. Never did he fail upon the King's appearance in any gathering of which he was a member to withdraw immediately; and never once had he been known deliberately to attend any function which was to be graced by the presence of Gustavus. How, then, came he here to this ball given by the King's own command unless he came for the fell purpose of which the letter had given warning?

The King's impulse was to withdraw immediately. He was taken by a curious, an almost unreasoning, fear that was quite foreign to him, who, for all his faults, had never yet lacked courage. But, even as he hesitated, a figure swept past him in a domino flecked with flames, surrounded by revellers of both sexes, and he remembered that if Ankarstrom were bent on evil his attention would be held by that figure before which the crowd fell back, and opened out respectfully, believing it to be the King's. Yet none the less it was Gustavus himself that Ankarstrom continued to regard in such a way that the King had a

feeling that his mask was made of glass.

And then quite suddenly, even as he was on the point of turning, another wave of revellers swept frantically up, and in a moment Gustavus and the Count of Essen were surrounded. Another moment and the buffeting crowd had separated him from his grand equerry. He found himself alone in the centre of this knot of wild fellows who, seeming to mistake him for one of themselves, forced him onward with them in their career. For a moment he attempted to resist. But as well might he have resisted a torrent. Their rush was not to be stemmed. It almost swept him from his feet, and to save himself he must perforce abandon himself to the impetus. Thus he was swirled away across the floor of the amphitheatre, helpless as a swimmer in strong waters, and with the fear of the drowning clutching now at his heart.

He had an impulse to unmask, proclaim himself, and compel the respect that was his due. But to do so might be to expose himself to the very danger of whose presence he was now convinced. His only hope must lie in allowing himself to be borne passively along until a chance opening allowed him to escape from these madmen.

The stage had been connected with the floor of the theatre by a broad flight of wooden steps. Up this flight he was carried by that human wave. But on the stage itself he found an anchorage at last against one of the wings. Breathing hard, he set his back to it, waiting for the wave to sweep on and leave him. Instead, it paused and came to rest with him, and in that moment some one touched him on the shoulder. He turned his head, and looked into the set face of Ankarstrom, who was close behind him. Then a burning, rending pain took him in his side, and he grew sick and dizzy. The uproar of voices became muffled; the lights were merged into a luminous billow that swelled and shrank and then went out altogether.

The report of the pistol had been lost in the general din to all but

those who stood near the spot where it had been fired. And these found themselves suddenly borne backwards by the little crowd of maskers that fell away from the figure lying prone and bleeding on the stage.

Voices were raised, shouting "Fire! Fire!" Thus the conspirators sought to create confusion, that they might disperse and lose themselves in the general crowd. That confusion, however, was very brief. It was stemmed almost immediately by the Count of Essen, who leapt up the steps to the stage with a premonition of what had happened. He stooped to rip away the mask from the face of the victim, and, beholding, as he had feared, the livid countenance of his King, he stood up, himself almost as pale.

"Murder has been done!" he roared. "Let the doors be closed and guarded, and let no one leave the theatre." Instantly was his bidding done by the officers of the guard.

Those of the King's household who were in attendance came forward now to raise Gustavus, and help to bear him to a couch. There presently he recovered consciousness, whilst a physician was seeing to his hurt, and as soon as he realized his condition his manner became so calm that, himself, he took command of the situation. He issued orders that the gates of the city should be closed against everybody, whilst himself apologizing to the Prussian minister who was near him for issuing that inconvenient but necessary order.

"The gates shall remain closed for three days, sir," he announced. "During that time you will not be able to correspond with your Court; but your intelligence, when it goes, will be more certain, since by that time it should be known whether I can survive or not."

His next order, delivered in a voice that was broken by his intense suffering, was to the chamberlain Benzelstjerna, commanding that all present should unmask and sign their names in a book before being

suffered to depart. That done, he bade them bear him home on the couch on which he had been placed that he might be spared the agony of more movement than was necessary.

Thus his grenadiers bore him on their shoulders, lighted by torches, through the streets that were now thronged, for the rumour had now gone forth that the King was dead, and troops had been called out to keep order. Beside him walked Armfelt in his suit of shimmering white satin, weeping at once for his King and for himself, for he knew that he was of those who must fall with Gustavus. And, knowing this, there was bitter rage in his heart against the men who had wrought this havoc, a rage that sharpened his wits to an unusual acuteness.

At last the King was once more in his apartments awaiting the physicians who were to pronounce his fate, and Armfelt kept him company among others, revolving in his mind the terrible suspicion he had formed.

Presently came Duke Charles, the King's brother, and Benzelstjerna with the list of those who had been present at the ball.

"Tell me," he asked, before the list was read to him, "is the name of Ankarstrom included in it?"

"He was the last to sign, Sire," replied the chamberlain.

The King smiled grimly. "Tell Lillesparre to have him arrested and questioned."

Armfelt flung forward. "There is another who should be arrested, too!" he cried fiercely. And added, "Bjelke!"

"Bjelke?"

The King echoed the name almost in anger at the imputation. Armfelt spoke torrentially. "It was he persuaded you to go against your own judgment when you had the warning, and at last induced you to it

by offering to assume your own domino. If the assassins sought the King, how came they to pass over one who wore the King's domino, and to penetrate your own disguise that was like a dozen others? Because they were informed of the change. But by whom—by whom? Who was it knew?"

"My God!" groaned the unfortunate King, who had in his time broken faith with so many, and was now to suffer the knowledge of this broken faith in one whom he had trusted above all others.

Baron Bjelke was arrested an hour later, arrested in the very act of entering his own home. The men of Lillesparre's police had preceded him thither to await his return. He was quite calm when they surged suddenly about him, laid hands upon him, and formally pronounced him their prisoner.

"I suppose," he said, "it was to have been inferred. Allow me to take my leave of the Baroness, and I shall be at your disposal."

"My orders, Baron, are explicit," he was answered by the officer in charge. "I am not to suffer you out of my sight."

"How? Am I to be denied so ordinary a boon?" His voice quivered with sudden anger and something else.

"Such are my orders, Baron."

Bjelke pleaded for five minutes' grace for that leavetaking. But the officer had his orders. He was no more than a machine. The Baron raised his clenched hands in mute protest to the heavens, then let them fall heavily.

"Very well," he said, and suffered them to thrust him back into his carriage and carry him away to the waiting Lillesparre.

He found Armfelt in the office of the chief of the police, haranguing

Ankarstrom, who was already there under arrest. The favourite broke off as Bjelke was brought in.

"You were privy to this infamy, Bjelke," he cried. "If the King does not recover—"

"He will not recover." It was the cold, passionless voice of Ankarstrom that spoke. "My pistol was loaded with rusty nails. I intended to make quite sure of ridding my country of that perjured tyrant."

Armfelt stared at the prisoner a moment with furious, bloodshot eyes. Then he broke into imprecations, stemmed only when Lillesparre ordered Ankarstrom to be removed. When he was gone, the chief of police turned to Bjelke.

"It grieves me, Baron, that we should meet thus, and it is with difficulty that I can believe what is alleged against you. Baron Armfelt is perhaps rendered hasty by his grief and righteous anger. But I hope that you will be able to explain—at least to deny your concern in this horrible deed."

Very tense and white stood Bjelke.

"I have an explanation that should satisfy you as a man of honour," he said quietly, "but not as chief of the police. I joined this conspiracy that I might master its scope and learn the intentions of the plotters. It was a desperate thing I did out of love and loyalty to the King, and I succeeded. I came to-night to the palace with information which should not only have saved the King's life, but would have enabled him to smother the conspiracy for all time. On the threshold of his room this letter for the King was delivered into my hands. Read it, Lillesparre, that you may know precisely what manner of master you serve, that you may understand how Gustavus of Sweden recompenses love and loyalty. Read it, and tell me how you would

have acted in my place!"

And he flung the letter on to the writing-table at which sat Lillesparre.

The chief of police took it up, began to read, turned back to the superscription, then resumed his reading, a dull flush overspreading his face. Over his shoulder Armfelt, too, was reading. But Bjelke cared not. Let all the world behold that advertisement of royal infamy, that incriminating love-letter from Bjelke's wife to the King who had dishonoured him.

Lillesparre was stricken dumb. He dared not raise his eyes to meet the glance of the prisoner. But the shameless Armfelt sucked in a breath of understanding.

"You admit your guilt, then?" he snarled.

"That I sent the monster to the masquerade, knowing that there the blessed hand of Ankarstrom would give him his passport out of a world he had befouled—yes."

"The rack shall make you yield the name of every one of the conspirators."

"The rack!" Bjelke smiled disdainfully, and shrugged. "Your men, Lillesparre, were very prompt and very obdurate. They would not allow me to take leave of the Baroness, so that she has escaped me. But I am not sure that it is not a fitter vengeance to let her live and remember. That letter may now be delivered to the King, for whom it is intended. Its fond messages may lighten the misery of his remaining hours."

His face was contorted, with rage, thought Armfelt, who watched him, but in reality with pain caused by the poison that was corroding his vitals. He had drained a little phial just before stepping into the

presence of Lillesparre, as they discovered upon inquiries made after he had collapsed dead at their feet.

This caused them to bring back Ankarstrom, that he might be searched, lest he, too, should take some similar way of escaping them. When he search was done, having discovered nothing, Lillesparre commanded that he should not have knife or fork or metal comb, or anything with which he might take his life.

"You need not fear that I shall seek to evade the sacrifice," he assured them, his demeanour haughty, his eyes aglow with fanatic zeal. "It is the price I pay for having rid Nature of a monster and my country of a false, perjured tyrant, and I pay it gladly." As he ceased he smiled, and drew from the gold lace of his sleeve a surgeon's lancet. "This was supplied me against my need to open a vein. But the laws of God and man may require my death upon the scaffold."

And, smiling, he placed the lancet on Lillesparre's table.

Upon his conviction execution followed, and it lasted three days—from April 19th to 21 st—being attended by all the horrible and gradual torturings reserved for regicides. Yet possibly he did not suffer more than his victim, whose agony had lasted for thirteen days, and who perished miserably in the consciousness that he deserved his fate, whilst Ankarstrom was uplifted and fortified by his fanaticism.

The scaffold was erected on the Stora Torget, facing the Opera House of Stockholm, where the assassination had taken place. Thence the dismembered remains of Ankarstrom were conveyed to the ordinary gallows in the suburb of Sodermalm to be exhibited, the right hand being nailed below the head. Under this hand on the morrow was found a tablet bearing the legend:

Blessed the hand
That saved the Fatherland.

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THE HISTORICAL NIGHTS' ENTERTAINMENT, SECOND

SERIES

By Rafael Sabatini

To David Whitelaw

My Dear David,

Since the narratives collected here as well as in the preceding volume under the title of the Historical Nights Entertainment—narratives originally published in The Premier Magazine, which you so ably edit—owe their being to your suggestion, it is fitting that some acknowledgment of the fact should be made. To what is hardly less than a duty, allow me to add the pleasure of dedicating to you, in earnest of my friendship and esteem, not merely this volume, but the work of which this volume is the second.

Sincerely yours,

Rafael Sabatini

London, June, 1919.

Contents

[Preface](#)

- [I.](#) THE ABSOLUTION
 - [II.](#) THE FALSE DEMETRIUS
 - [III.](#) THE HERMOSA FEMBRA
 - [IV.](#) THE PASTRY-COOK OF MADRIGAL
 - [V.](#) THE END OF THE "VERT GALANT"
 - [VI.](#) THE BARREN WOOING
 - [VII.](#) SIR JUDAS
 - [VIII.](#) HIS INSOLENT OF BUCKINGHAM
 - [IX.](#) THE PATH OF EXILE
 - [X.](#) THE TRAGEDY OF HERRENHAUSEN
 - [XI.](#) THE TYRANNICIDE
-

Preface

The kindly reception accorded to the first volume of the Historical Nights Entertainment, issued in December of 1917, has encouraged me to prepare the second series here assembled.

As in the case of the narratives that made up the first volume, I set out again with the same ambitious aim of adhering scrupulously in every instance to actual, recorded facts; and once again I find it desirable at the outset to reveal how far the achievement may have fallen short of the admitted aim.

On the whole, I have to confess to having allowed myself perhaps a wider latitude, and to having taken greater liberties than was the case with the essays constituting the previous collection. This, however, applies, where applicable, to the parts rather than to the whole.

The only entirely apocryphal narrative here included is the first—"The Absolution." This is one of those stories which, if resting upon no sufficient authority to compel its acceptance, will, nevertheless, resist all attempts at final refutation, having its roots at least in the soil of fact. It is given in the rather discredited Portuguese chronicles of Acenheiro, and finds place, more or less as related here, in Duarte Galvao's "Chronicle of Affonso Henriques," whence it was taken by the Portuguese historical writer, Alexandre Herculano, to be included in his "Lendas e Narrativas." If it is to be relegated to the Limbo of the *ben trovato*, at least I esteem it to afford us a precious glimpse of the naive spirit of the age in which it is set, and find in that my justification for including it.

The next to require apology is "His Insolence of Buckingham," but only in so far as the incident of the diamond studs is concerned. The

remainder of the narrative, the character of Buckingham, the details of his embassy to Paris, and the particulars of his audacious courtship of Anne of Austria, rest upon unassailable evidence. I would have omitted the very apocryphal incident of the studs, but that I considered it of peculiar interest as revealing the source of the main theme of one of the most famous historical romances ever written—"The Three Musketeers." I give the story as related by La Rochefoucauld in his "Memoirs," whence Alexandre Dumas culled it that he might turn it to such excellent romantic account. In La Rochefoucauld's narrative it is the painter Gerbier who, in a far less heroic manner, plays the part assigned by Dumas to d'Artagnan, and it is the Countess of Carlisle who carries out the political theft which Dumas attributes to Milady. For the rest, I do not invite you to attach undue credit to it, which is not, however, to say that I account it wholly false.

In the case of "*The Hermosa Fembra*" I confess to having blended together into one single narrative two historical episodes closely connected in time and place. Susan's daughter was, in fact, herself the betrayer of her father, and it was in penitence for that unnatural act that she desired her skull to be exhibited as I describe. Into the story of Susan's daughter I have woven that of another New-Christian girl, who, like the *Hermosa Fembra*, her taken a Castilian lover—in this case a youth of the house of Guzman. This youth was driven into concealment in circumstances more or less as I describe them. He overheard the judaizing of several New-Christians there assembled, and bore word of it at once to Ojeda. The two episodes were separated in fact by an interval of three years, and the first afforded Ojeda a strong argument for the institution of the Holy Office in Seville. Between the two there are many points of contact, and each supplies what the other lacks to make an interesting narrative having for background the introduction of the Inquisition to Castile. The denouement I supply is entirely fictitious, and the introduction of Torquemada is quite arbitrary. Ojeda was the inquisitor who dealt with both cases. But if there I stray into fiction, at least I claim to have

sketched a faithful portrait of the Grand Inquisitor as I know him from fairly exhaustive researches into his life and times.

The story of the False Demetrius is here related from the point of view of my adopted solution of what is generally regarded as a historical mystery. The mystery lies, of course, in the man's identity. He has been held by some to have been the unfrocked monk, Grishka Otopiev, by others to have been a son of Stephen Bathory, King of Poland. I am not aware that the theory that he was both at one and the same time has ever been put forward, and whilst admitting that it is speculative, yet I claim that no other would appear so aptly to fit all the known facts of his career or to shed light upon its mysteries.

Undoubtedly I have allowed myself a good deal of licence and speculation in treating certain unwitnessed scenes in "The Barren Wooing." But the theory that I develop in it to account for the miscarriage of the matrimonial plans of Queen Elizabeth and Robert Dudley seems to me to be not only very fully warranted by de Quadra's correspondence, but the only theory that will convincingly explain the events. Elizabeth, as I show, was widely believed to be an accessory to the murder of Amy Robsart. But in carefully following her words and actions at that critical time, as reported by de Quadra, my reading of the transaction is as given here. The most damning fact against Elizabeth was held to be her own statement to de Quadra on the eve of Lady Robert Dudley's murder to the effect that Lady Robert was "already dead, or very nearly so." This foreknowledge of the fate of that unfortunate lady has been accepted as positive evidence that the Queen was a party to the crime at Cumnor, which was to set her lover free to marry again. Far from that, however, I account it positive proof of Elizabeth's innocence of any such part in the deed. Elizabeth was far too crafty and clear-sighted not to realize how her words must incriminate her afterwards if she knew that the murder of Lady Robert was projected. She must have been merely repeating what Dudley himself had told her; and what he must have told her—and she

believed—was that his wife was at the point of a natural death. Similarly, Dudley would not have told her this, unless his aim had been to procure his wife's removal by means which would admit of a natural interpretation. Difficulties encountered, much as I relate them—and for which there is abundant evidence—drove his too-zealous agents to rather desperate lengths, and thus brought suspicion, not only upon the guilty Dudley, but also upon the innocent Queen. The manner of Amy's murder is pure conjecture; but it should not be far from what actually took place. The possibility of an accident—extraordinarily and suspiciously opportune for Dudley as it would have been—could not be altogether ruled out but for the further circumstance that Lady Robert had removed everybody from Cumnor on that day. To what can this point—unless we accept an altogether incredible chain of coincidence—but to some such plotting as I here suggest?

In the remaining six essays in this volume the liberties taken with the absolute facts are so slight as to require no apology or comment.

R. S.

London, June, 1919.

Detailed Contents

I. THE ABSOLUTION

Affonso Henriques, First King of Portugal

II. THE FALSE DEMETRIUS

Boris Godunov and the Pretended Son of Ivan the Terrible

III. THE HERMOSA FEMBRA

An Episode of the Inquisition in Seville

IV. THE PASTRY-COOK OF MADRIGAL

The Story of the False Sebastian of Portugal

V. THE END OF THE VERT GALANT

The Assassination of Henry IV

VI. THE BARREN WOOING

The Murder of Amy Robsart

VII. SIR JUDAS

The Betrayal of Sir Walter Raleigh

VIII. HIS INSOLENCIE OF BUCKINGHAM

George Villiers' Courtship of Anne of Austria

IX. THE PATH OF EXILE

The Fall of Lord Clarendon

X. THE TRAGEDY OF HERRENHAUSEN

Count Philip Königsmark and the Princess Sophia Dorothea

XI. THE TYRANNICIDE

Charlotte Corday and Jean Paul Marat

I. THE ABSOLUTION

Afonso Henriques, first King of Portugal

In 1093 the Moors of the Almoravide dynasty, under the Caliph Yusuf, swept irresistibly upwards into the Iberian Peninsula, recapturing Lisbon and Santarem in the west, and pushing their conquest as far as the river Mondego.

To meet this revival of Mohammedan power, Alfonso VI. Of Castile summoned the chivalry of Christendom to his aid. Among the knights who answered the call was Count Henry of Burgundy (grandson of Robert, first Duke of Burgundy) to whom Alfonso gave his natural daughter Theresa in marriage, together with the Counties of Oporto and Coimbra, with the title of Count of Portugal.

That is the first chapter of the history of Portugal.

Count Henry fought hard to defend his southern frontiers from the incursion of the Moors until his death in 1114. Thereafter his widow Theresa became Regent of Portugal during the minority of their son, Afonso Henriques. A woman of great energy, resource and ambition, she successfully waged war against the Moors, and in other ways laid the foundations upon which her son was to build the Kingdom of Portugal. But her passionate infatuation for one of her knights—Don Fernando Peres de Trava—and the excessive honours she bestowed upon him, made enemies for her in the new state, and estranged her from her son.

In 1127 Alfonso VII. of Castile invaded Portugal, compelling Theresa to recognize him as her suzerain. But Affonso Henriques, now aged seventeen—and declared by the citizens of the capital to be of age and competent to reign—incontinently refused to recognize the submission made by his mother, and in the following year assembled an army for the purpose of expelling her and her lover from the country. The warlike Theresa resisted until defeated in the battle of San Mamede and taken prisoner.

He was little more than a boy, although four years were sped already since, as a mere lad of fourteen, he had kept vigil throughout the night over his arms in the Cathedral of Zamora, preparatory to receiving the honour of knighthood at the hands of his cousin, Alfonso VII. of Castile. Yet already he was looked upon as the very pattern of what a Christian knight should be, worthy son of the father who had devoted his life to doing battle against the Infidel, wheresoever he might be found. He was well-grown and tall, and of a bodily strength that is almost a byword to this day in that Portugal of which he was the real founder and first king. He was skilled beyond the common wont in all knightly exercises of arms and horsemanship, and equipped with far more learning—though much of it was ill-digested, as this story will serve to show—than the twelfth century considered useful or even proper in a knight. And he was at least true to his time in that he combined a fervid piety with a weakness of the flesh and an impetuous arrogance that was to bring him under the ban of greater excommunication at the very outset of his reign.

It happened that his imprisonment of his mother was not at all pleasing in the sight of Rome. Dona Theresa had powerful friends, who so used their influence at the Vatican on her behalf that the Holy Father—conveniently ignoring the provocation she had given and the scandalous, unmotherly conduct of which she had been guilty—came to consider the behaviour of the Infante of Portugal as reprehensibly

unfilial, and commanded him to deliver Dona Theresa at once from duress.

This Papal order, backed by a threat of excommunication in the event of disobedience, was brought to the young prince by the Bishop of Coimbra, whom he counted among his friends.

Affonso Henriques, ever impetuous and quick to anger, flushed scarlet when he heard that uncompromising message. His dark eyes smouldered as they considered the aged prelate.

"You come here to bid me let loose again upon this land of Portugal that author of strife, to deliver over the people once more to the oppression of the Lord of Trava?" he asked. "And you tell me that unless by obeying this command I am false to the duty I owe this country, you will launch the curse of Rome against me? You tell me this?"

The bishop, deeply stirred, torn between his duty to the Holy See and his affection for his prince, bowed his head and wrung his hands. "What choice have I?" he asked, on a quavering note.

"I raised you from the dust." Thunder was rumbling in the prince's voice. "Myself I placed the episcopal ring upon your finger."

"My lord, my lord! Could I forget? All that I have I owe to you—save only my soul, which I owe to God; my faith, which I owe to Christ; and my obedience, which I owe to our Holy Father the Pope."

The prince considered him in silence, mastering his passionate, impetuous nature. "Go," he growled at last.

The prelate bowed his head, his eyes not daring to meet his prince's.

"God keep you, lord," he almost sobbed, and so went out.

But though stirred by his affection for the prince to whom he owed so

much, though knowing in his inmost heart that Affonso Henriques was in the right, the Bishop of Coimbra did not swerve from his duty to Rome, which was as plain as it was unpalatable. Betimes next morning word was brought to Affonso Henriques in the Alcazar of Coimbra that a parchment was nailed to the door of the Cathedral, setting forth his excommunication, and that the Bishop—either out of fear or out of sorrow—had left the city, journeying northward towards Oporto.

Affonso Henriques passed swiftly from incredulity to anger; then almost as swiftly came to a resolve, which was as mad and harebrained as could have been expected from a lad in his eighteenth year who held the reins of power. Yet by its very directness and its superb ignoring of all obstacles, legal and canonical, it was invested with a certain wild sanity.

In full armour, a white cloak simply embroidered in gold at the edge and knotted at the shoulder, he rode to the Cathedral, attended by his half-brother Pedro Affonso, and two of his knights, Emigio Moniz and Sancho Nunes. There on the great iron-studded doors he found, as he had been warned, the Roman parchment pronouncing him accursed, its sonorous Latin periods set forth in a fine round clerkly hand.

He swung down from his great horse and clanked up the Cathedral steps, his attendants following. He had for witnesses no more than a few loiterers, who had paused at sight of their prince.

The interdict had so far attracted no attention, for in the twelfth century the art of letters was a mystery to which there were few initiates.

Affonso Henriques tore the sheepskin from its nails, and crumpled it in his hand; then he passed into the Cathedral, and thence came out presently into the cloisters. Overhead a bell was clanging by his orders, summoning the chapter.

To the Infante, waiting there in the sun-drenched close, came presently the canons, austere, aloof, majestic in their unhurried progress through the fretted cloisters, with flowing garments and hands tucked into their wide sleeves before them. In a semi-circle they arrayed themselves before him, and waited impassively to learn his will. Overhead the bell had ceased.

Affonso Henriques wasted no words.

"I have summoned you," he announced, "to command that you proceed to the election of a bishop."

A rustle stirred through the priestly throng. The canons looked askance at the prince and at one another. Then one of them spoke.

"Habemus episcopum," he said gravely, and several instantly made chorus: "We have a bishop."

The eyes of the young sovereign kindled. "You are wrong," he told them. "You had a bishop, but he is here no longer. He has deserted his see, after publishing this shameful thing." And he held aloft the crumpled interdict. "As I am a God-fearing, Christian knight, I will not live under this ban. Since the bishop who excommunicated me is gone, you will at once elect another in his place who shall absolve me."

They stood before him, silent and impassive, in their priestly dignity, and in their assurance that the law was on their side.

"Well?" the boy growled at them.

"Habemus episcopum," droned a voice again.

"Amen," boomed in chorus through the cloisters.

"I tell you that your bishop is gone," he insisted, his voice quivering now with anger, "and I tell you that he shall not return, that he shall

never set foot again within my city of Coimbra. Proceed you therefore at once to the election of his successor."

"Lord," he was answered coldly by one of them, "no such election is possible or lawful."

"Do you dare stand before my face, and tell me this?" he roared infuriated by their cold resistance. He flung out an arm in a gesture of terrible dismissal. "Out of my sight, you proud and evil men! Back to your cells, to await my pleasure. Since in your arrogant, stiff-necked pride you refuse to do my will, you shall receive the bishop I shall myself select."

He was so terrific in his rage that they dared not tell him that he had no power, prince though he might be, to make such an election, bowed to him, ever impassively, and with their hands still folded, unhurried as they had come, they now turned and filed past him in departure.

He watched them with scowling brows and tightened lips, Moniz and Nunes silent behind him. Suddenly those dark, watchful eyes of his were held by the last figure of all in that austere procession—a tall, gaunt young man, whose copper-coloured skin and hawk-featured face proclaimed his Moorish blood. Instantly, maliciously, it flashed through the prince's boyish mind how he might make of this man an instrument to humble the pride of that insolent clergy. He raised his hand, and beckoned the cleric to him.

"What is your name?" he asked him.

"I am called Zuleyman, lord," he was answered, and the name confirmed—where, indeed, no confirmation was necessary—the fellow's Moorish origin.

Affonso Henriques laughed. It would be an excellent jest to thrust upon these arrogant priests, who refused to appoint a bishop of their

choice, a bishop who was little better than a blackamoor.

"Don Zuleyman," said the prince, "I name you Bishop of Coimbra in the room of the rebel who has fled. You will prepare to celebrate High Mass this morning, and to pronounce my absolution."

The Christianized Moor fell back a step, his face paling under its copper skin to a sickly grey. In the background, the hindmost members of the retreating clerical procession turned and stood at gaze, angered and scandalized by what they heard, which was indeed a thing beyond belief.

"Ah no, my lord! Ah no!" Don Zuleyman was faltering. "Not that!"

The prospect terrified him, and in his agitation he had recourse to Latin. "Domine, non sum dignus," he cried, and beat his breast.

But the uncompromising Affonso Henriques gave him back Latin for Latin.

"Dixi—I have spoken!" he answered sternly. "Do not fail me in obedience, on your life." And on that he clanked out again with his attendants, well-pleased with his morning's work.

As he had disposed with boyish, almost irresponsible rashness, and in flagrant contravention of all canon law, so it fell out. Don Zuleyman, wearing the bishop's robes and the bishop's mitre, intoned the Kyrie Eleison before noon that day in the Cathedral of Coimbra, and pronounced the absolution of the Infante of Portugal, who knelt so submissively and devoutly before him.

Affonso Henriques was very pleased with himself. He made a jest of the affair, and invited his intimates to laugh with him. But Emigio Moniz and the elder members of his council refused to laugh. They looked with awe upon a deed that went perilously near to sacrilege, and implored him to take their own sober view of the thing he had

done.

"By the bones of St. James!" he cried. "A prince is not to be browbeaten by a priest."

Such a view in the twelfth century was little short of revolutionary. The chapter of the Cathedral of Coimbra held the converse opinion that priests were not to be browbeaten by a prince, and set themselves to make Affonso Henriques realize this to his bitter cost. They dispatched to Rome an account of his unconscionable, high-handed, incredible sacrilege, and invited Rome to administer condign spiritual flagellation upon this errant child of Mother Church. Rome made haste to vindicate her authority, and dispatched a legate to the recalcitrant, audacious boy who ruled in Portugal. But the distance being considerable, and means of travel inadequate and slow, it was not until Don Zuleyman had presided in the See of Coimbra for a full two months that the Papal Legate made his appearance in Affonso Henriques' capital.

A very splendid Prince of the Church was Cardinal Corrado, the envoy dispatched by Pope Honorius II., full armed with apostolic weapons to reduce the rebellious Infante of Portugal into proper subjection.

His approach was heralded by the voice of rumour. Affonso Henriques heard of it without perturbation. His conscience at ease in the absolution which he had wrung from Mother Church after his own fashion, he was entirely absorbed in preparations for a campaign against the Moors which was to widen his dominions. Therefore when at length the thunderbolt descended, it fell—so far as he was concerned—from a sky entirely clear.

It was towards dusk of a summer evening when the legate, in a litter slung in line between two mules, entered Coimbra. He was attended by two nephews, Giannino and Pierluigi da Corrado, both patricians

of Rome, and a little knot of servants. Empanoplied in his sacred office, the cardinal had no need of the protection of men-at-arms upon a journey through god-fearing lands.

He was borne straight to the old Moorish palace where the Infante resided, and came upon him there amid a numerous company in the great pillared hall. Against a background of battle trophies, livid weapons, implements of war, and suits of mail both Saracen and Christian, with which the bare walls were hung, moved a gaily-clad, courtly gathering of nobles and their women-folk, when the great cardinal, clad from head to foot in scarlet, entered unannounced.

Laughter rippled into silence. A hush descended upon the company, which stood now at gaze, considering the imposing and unbidden guest. Slowly the legate, followed by the two Roman youths, advanced down the hall, the soft pad of his slippered feet and the rustle of his silken robes being at first the only sound. On he came, until he stood before the shallow dais, where in a massively carved chair sat the Infante of Portugal, mistrustfully observing him. Affonso Henriques scented here an enemy, an ally of his mother's, the bearer of a fresh declaration of hostilities. Therefore of deliberate purpose he kept his seat, as if to stress the fact that here he was the master.

"Lord Cardinal," he greeted the legate, "be welcome to my land of Portugal."

The cardinal bowed stiffly, resentful of this reception. In his long journey across the Spains, princes and nobles had flocked to kiss his hand, and bend the knee before him, seeking his blessing. Yet this mere boy, beardless save for a silky down about his firm young cheeks, retained his seat and greeted him with no more submissiveness than if he had been the envoy of some temporal prince.

"I am the representative of our Holy Father," he announced, in a voice

of stern reproof. "I am from Rome, with these my well-beloved nephews."

"From Rome?" quoth Affonso Henriques. For all his length of limb and massive thews he could be impish upon occasion. He was impish now. "Although no good has ever yet come to me from Rome, you make me hopeful. His Holiness will have heard of the preparations I am making for a war against the Infidel that shall carry the Cross where now stands the Crescent, and sends me perhaps, a gift of gold or assist me in this holy work."

The mockery of it stung the legate sharply. His sallow, ascetic face empurpled.

"It is not gold I bring you," he answered, "but a lesson in the faith which you would seem to have forgotten. I am come to teach you your Christian duty, and to require of you immediate reparation of the sacrilegious wrongs you have done. The Holy Father demands of you the instant re-instatement of the Bishop of Coimbra, whom you have driven out with threats of violence, and the degradation of the cleric you blasphemously appointed Bishop in his stead."

"And is that all?" quoth the boy, in a voice dangerously quiet.

"No." Fearless in his sense of right, the legate towered before him. "It is demanded of you further that you instantly release the lady, your mother, from the unjust confinement in which you hold her."

"That confinement is not unjust, as all here can witness," the Infante answered. "Rome may believe it, because lies have been carried to Rome. Dona Theresa's life was a scandal, her regency an injustice to my people. She and the infamous Lord of Trava lighted the torch of civil war in these dominions. Learn here the truth, and carry it to Rome. Thus shall you do worthy service."

But the prelate was obstinate and proud.

"That is not the answer that our Holy Father awaits."

"It is the answer that I send."

"Rash, rebellious youth, beware!" The cardinal's anger flamed up, and his voice swelled. "I come armed with spiritual weapons of destruction. Do not abuse the patience of Mother Church, or you shall feel the full weight of her wrath released against you."

Exasperated, Affonso Henriques bounded to his feet, his face livid now with passion, his eyes ablaze.

"Out! Away!" he cried. "Go, my lord, and go quickly, or as God watches us I will add here and now yet another sacrilege to those of which you accuse me."

The prelate gathered his ample robes about him. If pale, he was entirely calm once more. With stern dignity, he bowed to the angry youth, and so departed, but with such outward impassivity that it would have been difficult to say with whom lay the victory. If Affonso Henriques thought that night that he had conquered, morning was to shatter the illusion.

He was awakened early by a chamberlain at the urgent instances of Emigio Moniz, who was demanding immediate audience. Affonso Henriques sat up in bed, and bade him to be admitted.

The elderly knight and faithful counsellor came in, treading heavily. His swarthy face was overcast, his mouth set in stern lines under its grizzled beard.

"God keep you, lord," was his greeting, so lugubriously delivered as to sound like a pious, but rather hopeless, wish.

"And you, Emigio," answered him the Infante. "You are early astir. What is the cause?"

"Ill tidings, lord." He crossed the room, unlatched and flung wide a window. "Listen," he bade the prince.

On the still morning air arose a sound like the drone of some gigantic hive, or of the sea when the tide is making. Affonso Henriques recognized it for the murmur of the multitude.

"What does it mean?" he asked, and thrust a sinewy leg from the bed.

"It means that the Papal Legate has done all that he threatened, and something more. He has placed your city of Coimbra under a ban of excommunication. The churches are closed, and until the ban is lifted no priest will be found to baptize, marry, shrive or perform any other Sacrament of Holy Church. The people are stricken with terror, knowing that they share the curse with you. They are massing below at the gates of the alcazar, demanding to see you that they may implore you to lift from them the horror of this excommunication."

Affonso Henriques had come to his feet by now, and he stood there staring at the old knight, his face blanched, his stout heart clutched by fear of these impalpable, blasting weapons that were being used against him.

"My God!" he groaned, and asked: "What must I do?"

Moniz was preternaturally grave. "It is of the first importance that the people should be pacified."

"But how?"

"There is one way only—by a promise that you will submit to the will of the Holy Father, and by penance seek absolution for yourself and your city."

A red flush swept into the young cheeks that had been so pale.

"What?" he cried, his voice a roar. "Release my mother, depose

Zuleyman, recall that fugitive recreant who cursed me, and humble myself to seek pardon at the hands of this insolent Italian cleric? May my bones rot, may I roast for ever in hell-fire if I show myself such a craven! And do you counsel it, Emigio—do you really counsel that?" He was in a towering rage.

"Listen to that voice," Emigio answered him, and waved a hand to the open window. "How else will you silence it?"

Affonso Henriques sat down on the edge of the bed, and took his head in his hands. He was checkmated—and yet....

He rose and beat his hands together, summoning chamberlain and pages to help him dress and arm.

"Where is the legate lodged?" he asked Moniz.

"He is gone," the knight answered him. "He left at cock-crow, taking the road to Spain along the Mondego—so I learnt from the watch at the River Gate."

"How came they to open for him?"

"His office, lord, is a key that opens all doors at any hour of day or night. They dared not detain or delay him."

"Ha!" grunted the Infante. "We will go after him, then." And he made haste to complete his dressing. Then he buckled on his great sword, and they departed.

In the courtyard of the alcazar, he summoned Sancho Nunes and a half-dozen men-at-arms to attend him, mounted a charger and with Emigio Moniz at his side and the others following, he rode out across the draw-bridge into the open space that was thronged with the clamant inhabitants of the stricken city.

A great cry went up when he showed himself—a mighty appeal to him

for mercy and the remission of the curse. Then silence fell, a silence that invited him to answer and give comfort.

He reined in his horse, and standing in his stirrups very tall and virile, he addressed them.

"People of Coimbra," he announced, "I go to obtain this city's absolution from the ban that has been laid upon it. I shall return before sunset. Till then do you keep the peace."

The voice of the multitude was raised again, this time to hail him as the father and protector of the Portuguese, and to invoke the blessing of Heaven upon his handsome head.

Riding between Moniz and Nunes, and followed by his glittering men-at-arms, he crossed the city and took the road along the river by which it was known that the legate had departed. All that morning they rode briskly amain, the Infante fasting, as he had risen, yet unconscious of hunger and of all else but the purpose that was consuming him. He rode in utter silence, his face set, his brows stern; and Moniz, watching him furtively the while, wondered what thoughts were stirring in that rash, impetuous young brain, and was afraid.

Towards noon at last they overtook the legate's party. They espied his mule-litter at the door of an inn in a little village some ten miles beyond the foothills of the Bussaco range. The Infante reined up sharply, a hoarse, fierce cry escaping him, akin to that of some creature of the wild when it espies its prey.

Moniz put forth a hand to seize his arm.

"My lord, my lord," he cried, fearfully. "What is your purpose?"

The prince looked him between the eyes, and his lips curled in a smile that was not altogether sweet.

"I am going to beg Cardinal Corrado to have compassion on me," he

answered, subtly mocking, and on that he swung down from his horse, and tossed the reins to a man-at-arms.

Into the inn he clanked, Moniz and Nunes following closely. He thrust aside the vintner who, not knowing him, would have hindered him, great lord though he seemed, from disturbing the holy guest who was honouring the house. He strode on, and into the room where the Cardinal with his noble nephews sat at dinner.

At sight of him, fearing violence, Giannino and Pierluigi came instantly to their feet, their hands upon their daggers. But Cardinal da Corrado sat unmoved. He looked up, a smile of ineffable gentleness upon his ascetic face.

"I had hoped that you would come after me, my son," he said. "If you come a penitent, then has my prayer been heard."

"A penitent!" cried Affonso Henriques. He laughed wickedly, and plucked his dagger from its sheath.

Sancho Nunes, in terror, set a detaining hand upon his prince's arm.

"My lord," he cried in a voice that shook, "you will not strike the Lord's anointed—that were to destroy yourself for ever."

"A curse," said Affonso Henriques, "perishes with him that uttered it." He could reason loosely, you see, this hot-blooded, impetuous young cutter of Gordian knots. "And it imports above all else that the curse should be lifted from my city of Coimbra."

"It shall be, my son, as soon as you show penitence and a Christian submission to the Holy Father's will," said the undaunted Cardinal.

"God give me patience with you," Affonso Henriques answered him. "Listen to me now, lord Cardinal." And he leaned forward on his dagger, burying the point of it some inches into the deal table. "That

you should punish me with the weapons of the Faith for the sins that you allege against me I can understand and suffer. There is reason in that, perhaps. But will you tell me what reasons there can be in punishing a whole city for an offence which, if it exists at all, is mine alone?—and in punishing it by a curse so terrible that all the consolations of religion are denied those true children of Mother Church, that no priestly office may be performed within the city, that men and women may not approach the altars of the Faith, that they must die unshriven with their sins upon them, and so be damned through all eternity? Where is the reason that urges this?"

The cardinal's smile had changed from one of benignity to one of guile.

"Why, I will answer you. Out of their terror they will be moved to revolt against you, unless you relieve them of the ban. Thus, Lord Prince, I hold you in check. You make submission or else you are destroyed."

Affonso Henriques considered him a moment. "You answer me indeed," said he, and then his voice swelled up in denunciation. "But this is statecraft, not religion. And when a prince has no statecraft to match that which is opposed to him, do you know what follows? He has recourse to force, Lord Cardinal. You compel me to it; upon your own head the consequences."

The legate almost sneered. "What is the force of your poor lethal weapons compared with the spiritual power I wield? Do you threaten me with death? Do you think I fear it?" He rose in a surge of sudden wrath, and tore open his scarlet robe. "Strike here with your poniard. I wear no mail. Strike if you dare, and by the sacrilegious blow destroy yourself in this world and the next."

The Infante considered him. Slowly he sheathed his dagger, smiling a little. Then he beat his hands together. His men-at-arms came in.

"Seize me those two Roman whelps," he commanded, and pointed to Giannino and Pierlulgi. "Seize them, and make them fast. About it!"

"Lord Prince!" cried the legate in a voice of appeal, wherein fear and anger trembled.

It was the note of fear that heartened Affonso Henriques. "About it!" he cried again, though needlessly, for already his men-at-arms were at grips with the Cardinal's nephews. In a trice the kicking, biting, swearing pair were overpowered, deprived of arms, and pinioned. The men looked to their prince for further orders. In the background Moniz and Nunes witnessed all with troubled countenances, whilst the Cardinal, beyond the table, white to the lips, demanded in a quavering voice to know what violence was intended, implored the Infante to consider, and in the same breath threatened him with dread consequences of this affront.

Affonso Henriques, unmoved, pointed through the window to a stalwart oak that stood before the inn.

"Take them out there, and hang them unshriven," he commanded.

The Cardinal swayed, and almost fell forward. He clutched the table, speechless with terror for those lads who were as the very apple of his eye, he who so fearlessly had bared his own breast to the steel.

The two comely Italian youths were dragged out writhing in their captors' hands.

At last the half-swooning legate found his voice. "Lord Prince," he gasped. "Lord Prince... you cannot do this infamy! You cannot! I warn you that... that..." The threat perished unuttered, slain by mounting terror. "Mercy! Have mercy, lord! as you hope for mercy!"

"What mercy do you practice, you who preach a gospel of mercy in the world, and cry for mercy now?" the Infante asked him.

"But this is an infamy! What harm have those poor children done? What concern is it of theirs that I have offended you in performing my sacred duty?"

Swift into that opening flashed the home-thrust of the Infante's answer.

"What harm have my people of Coimbra done? What concern is it of theirs that I have offended you? Yet to master me you did not hesitate to strike at them with the spiritual weapons that are yours. To master you I do not hesitate to strike at your nephews with the lethal weapons that are mine. When you shall have seen them hang you will understand the things that argument could not make clear to you. In the vileness of my act you will see a reflection of the vileness of your own, and perhaps your heart will be touched, your monstrous pride abated."

Outside, under the tree, the figures of the men-at-arms were moving. Expeditiously, and with indifference, they went about the preparations for the task entrusted to them.

The Cardinal writhed, and fought for breath. "Lord Prince, this must not be!" He stretched forth supplicating hands. "Lord Prince, you must release my nephews."

"Lord Cardinal, you must absolve my people."

"If... if you will first make submission. My duty... to the Holy See... Oh God! Will nothing move you?"

"When they have been hanged you will understand, and out of your own affliction learn compassion." The Infante's voice was so cold, his mien so resolute that the legate despaired of conquering his purpose. Abruptly he capitulated, even as the halters went about the necks of his two cherished lads.

"Stop!" he screamed. "Bid them stop! The curse shall be lifted."

Affonso Henriques opened the window with a leisureliness which to the legate seemed to belong to the realm of nightmare.

"Wait yet a moment," the Infante called to those outside, about whom by now a little knot of awe-stricken villagers had gathered. Then he turned again to Cardinal Corrado, who had sunk to his chair like a man exhausted, and sat now panting, his elbows on the table, his head in his hands. "Here," said the prince, "are the terms upon which you may have their lives: Complete absolution, and Apostolic benediction for my people and myself this very night, I on my side making submission to the Holy Father's will to the extent of releasing my mother from duress, with the condition that she leaves Portugal at once and does not return. As for the banished bishop and his successor, matters must remain as they are; but you can satisfy your conscience on that score by yourself confirming the appointment of Don Zuleyman. Come, my lord, I am being generous, I think. In the enlargement of my mother I afford you the means of satisfying Rome. If you have learnt your lesson from what I here proposed, your conscience should satisfy you of the rest."

"Be it so," the Cardinal answered hoarsely. "I will return with you to Coimbra and do your will."

Thereupon, without any tinge of mockery, but in completest sincerity in token that the feud between them was now completely healed, Affonso Henriques went down upon his knees, like the true and humble son of Holy Church he accounted himself, to ask a blessing at the Cardinal's hands.

II. THE FALSE DEMETRIUS

Boris Godunov and the Pretended Son of Ivan the Terrible

The news of it first reached him whilst he sat at supper in the great hall of his palace in the Kremlin. It came at a time when already there was enough to distract his mind; for although the table before him was spread and equipped as became an emperor's, the gaunt spectre of famine stalked outside in the streets of Moscow, and men and women were so reduced by it that cannibalism was alleged to be breaking out amongst them.

Alone, save for the ministering pages, sat Boris Godunov under the iron lamps that made of the table, with its white napery and vessels of gold and silver plate, an island of light in the gloom of that vast apartment. The air was fragrant with the scent of burning pine, for although the time of year was May, the nights were chill, and a great log-fire was blazing on the distant hearth. To him, as he sat there, came his trusted Basmanov with those tidings which startled him at first, seeming to herald that at last the sword of Nemesis was swung above his sinful head.

Basmanov, a flush tinting the prominent cheek-bones of his sallow face, an excited glitter in his long eyes, began by ordering the pages out of earshot, then leaning forward quickly muttered forth his news.

At the first words of it, the Tsar's knife clashed into his golden platter, and his short, powerful hands clutched the carved arms of his great

gilded chair. Quickly he controlled himself, and then as he continued to listen he was moved to scorn, and a faint smile began to stir under his grizzled beard.

A man had appeared in Poland—such was the burden of Basmanov's story—coming none knew exactly whence, who claimed to be Demetrius, the son of Ivan Vassielivitch, and lawful Tsar of Russia—Demetrius, who was believed to have died at Uglich ten years ago, and whose remains lay buried in Moscow, in the Church of St. Michael. This man had found shelter in Lithuania, in the house of Prince Wisniowiecki, and thither the nobles of Poland were now flocking to do him homage, acknowledging him the son of Ivan the Terrible. He was said to be the living image of the dead Tsar, save that he was swarthy and black-haired, like the dowager Tsarina, and there were two warts on his face, such as it was remembered had disfigured the countenance of the boy Demetrius.

Thus Basmanov, adding that he had dispatched a messenger into Lithuania to obtain more precise confirmation of the story. That messenger—chosen in consequence of something else that Basmanov had been told—was Smirnoy Otrepiev.

The Tsar Boris sat back in his chair, his eyes on the gem encrusted goblet, the stem of which his fingers were mechanically turning. There was now no vestige of the smile on his round white face. It had grown set and thoughtful.

"Find Prince Shuiski," he said presently, "and send him to me here."

Upon the tale the boyar had brought him he offered now no comment.

"We will talk of this again, Basmanov," was all he said in acknowledgment that he had heard, and in dismissal.

But when the boyar had gone, Boris Godunov heaved himself to his feet, and strode over to the fire, his great head sunk between his

massive shoulders. He was a short, thick-set, bow-legged man, inclining to corpulence. He set a foot, shod in red leather reversed with ermine, upon an andiron, and, leaning an elbow on the carved overmantel, rested his brow against his hand. His eyes stared into the very heart of the fire, as if they beheld there the pageant of the past, upon which his mind was bent.

Nineteen years were sped since Ivan the Terrible had passed away, leaving two sons, Feodor Ivanovitch, who had succeeded him, and the infant Demetrius. Feodor, a weakling who was almost imbecile, had married Irene, the daughter of Boris Godunov, whereby it had fallen out that Boris became the real ruler of Russia, the power behind the throne. But his insatiable ambition coveted still more. He must wear the crown as well as wield the sceptre; and this could not be until the Ruric dynasty which had ruled Russia for nearly seven centuries should be stamped out. Between himself and the throne stood his daughter's husband and their child, and the boy Demetrius, who had been dispatched with his mother, the dowager Tsarina, to Uglich. The three must be removed.

Boris began with the last, and sought at first to drive him out of the succession without bloodshed. He attempted to have him pronounced illegitimate, on the ground that he was the son of Ivan's seventh wife (the orthodox Church recognizing no wife as legitimate beyond the third). But in this he failed. The memory of the terrible Tsar, the fear of him, was still alive in superstitious Russia, and none dared to dishonour his son. So Boris had recourse to other and surer means. He dispatched his agents to Uglich, and presently there came thence a story that the boy, whilst playing with a knife, had been taken with a fit of epilepsy, and had fallen, running the blade into his throat. But it was not a story that could carry conviction to the Muscovites, since with it came the news that the town of Uglich had risen against the emissaries of Boris, charging them with the murder of the boy, and killing them out of hand.

Terrible had been the vengeance which Boris had exacted. Of the luckless inhabitants of the town two hundred were put to death by his orders, and the rest sent into banishment beyond the Ural Mountains, whilst the Tsarina Maria, Demetrius's mother, for having said that her boy was murdered at the instigation of Boris, was packed off to a convent, and had remained there ever since in close confinement.

That had been in 1591. The next to go was Feodor's infant son, and lastly—in 1598—Feodor himself, succumbing to a mysterious illness, and leaving Boris a clear path to the throne. But he ascended it under the burden of his daughter's curse. Feodor's widow had boldly faced her father, boldly accused him of poisoning her husband to gratify his remorseless ambitions, and on a passionate appeal to God to let it be done by him as he had done by others she had departed to a convent, swearing never to set eyes upon him again.

The thought of her was with him now, as he stood there looking into the heart of the fire; and perhaps it was the memory of her curse that turned his stout heart to water, and made him afraid where there could surely be no cause for fear. For five years now had he been Tsar of Russia, and in these five years he had taken such a grip of power as was not lightly to be loosened.

Long he stood there, and there he was found by the magnificent Prince Shuiski, whom he had bidden Basmanov to summon.

"You went to Uglich when the Tsarevitch Demetrius was slain," said Boris. His voice and mien were calm and normal. "Yourself you saw the body. There is no possibility that you could have been mistaken in it?"

"Mistaken?" The boyar was taken aback by the question. He was a tall man, considerably younger than Boris, who was in his fiftieth year. His face was lean and saturnine, and there was something sinister in the dark, close-set eyes under a single, heavy line of eyebrow.

Boris explained his question, telling him what he had learnt from Basmanov. Basil Shuiski laughed. The story was an absurd one. Demetrius was dead. Himself he had held the body in his arms, and no mistake was possible.

Despite himself, a sigh of relief fluttered from the lips of Boris. Shuiski was right. It was an absurd story, this. There was nothing to fear. He had been a fool to have trembled for a moment.

Nevertheless, in the weeks that followed, he brooded more and more over all that Basmanov had said. It was in the thought that the nobility of Poland was flocking to the house of Wisniowiecki to do honour to this false son of Ivan the Terrible, that Boris found the chief cause of uneasiness. There was famine in Moscow, and empty bellies do not make for loyalty. Then, too, the Muscovite nobles did not love him. He had ruled too sternly, and had curbed their power. There were men like Basil Shuiski who knew too much—greedy, ambitious men, who might turn their knowledge to evil account. The moment might be propitious to the pretender, however false his claim. Therefore Boris dispatched a messenger to Wisniowiecki with the offer of a heavy bribe if he would yield up the person of this false Demetrius.

But that messenger returned empty-handed. He had reached Bragin too late. The pretender had already left the place, and was safely lodged in the castle of George Mniszek, the Palatine of Sandomir, to whose daughter Maryna he was betrothed. If these were ill tidings for Boris, there were worse to follow soon. Within a few months he learned from Sandomir that Demetrius had removed to Cracow, and that there he had been publicly acknowledged by Sigismund III. of Poland as the son of Ivan Vassielivitch, the rightful heir to the crown of Russia. He heard, too, the story upon which this belief was founded. Demetrius had declared that one of the agents employed by Boris Godunov to procure his murder at Uglich had bribed his physician Simon to perform the deed. Simon had pretended to agree as the

only means of saving him. He had dressed the son of a serf, who slightly resembled Demetrius, in garments similar to those worn by the young prince, and thereafter cut the lad's throat, leaving those who had found the body to presume it to be the prince's. Meanwhile, Demetrius himself had been concealed by the physician, and very shortly thereafter carried away from Uglich, to be placed in safety in a monastery, where he had been educated.

Such, in brief, was the story with which Demetrius convinced the court of Poland, and not a few who had known the boy at Uglich came forward now to identify with him the grown man, who carried in his face so strong a resemblance to Ivan the Terrible. That story which Boris now heard was soon heard by all Russia, and Boris realized that something must be done to refute it.

But something more than assurances—his own assurances—were necessary if the Muscovites were to believe him. And so at last Boris bethought him of the Tsarina Maria, the mother of the murdered boy. He had her fetched to Moscow from her convent, and told her of this pretender who was setting up a claim to the throne of Russia, supported by the King of Poland.

She listened impassively, standing before him in the black robes and conventual coif which his tyranny had imposed upon her. When he had done, a faint smile swept over the face that had grown so hard in these last twelve years since that day when her boy had been slain almost under her very eyes.

"It is a circumstantial tale," she said. "It is perhaps true. It is probably true."

"True!" He bounded from his seat. "True? What are you saying, woman? Yourself you saw the boy dead."

"I did, and I know who killed him."

"But you saw him. You recognized him for your own, since you set the people on to kill those whom you believed had slain him."

"Yes," she answered. And added the question: "What do you want of me now?"

"What do I want?" He was amazed that she should ask, exasperated. Had the conventual confinement turned her head? "I want your testimony. I want you to denounce this fellow for the impostor that he is. The people will believe you."

"You think they will?" Interest had kindled in her glance.

"What else? Are you not the mother of Demetrius, and shall not a mother know her own son?"

"You forget. He was ten years of age then—a child. Now he is a grown man of three-and-twenty. How can I be sure? How can I be sure of anything?"

He swore a full round oath at her. "Because you saw him dead."

"Yet I may have been mistaken. I thought I knew the agents of yours who killed him. Yet you made me swear—as the price of my brothers' lives—that I was mistaken. Perhaps I was more mistaken than we thought. Perhaps my little Demetrius was not slain at all. Perhaps this man's tale is true."

"Perhaps..." He broke off to stare at her, mistrustfully, searchingly. "What do you mean?" he asked her sharply.

Again that wan smile crossed the hard, sharp-featured face that once had been so lovely. "I mean that if the devil came out of hell and called himself my son, I should acknowledge him to your undoing."

Thus the pent-up hate and bitterness of years of brooding upon her wrongs broke forth. Taken aback, he quailed before it. His jaw

dropped foolishly, and he stared at her with wide, unblinking eyes.

"The people will believe me, you say—they will believe that a mother should know her own son. Then are your hours of usurpation numbered."

If for a moment it appalled him, yet in the end, forewarned, he was forearmed. It was foolish of her to let him look upon the weapon with which she could destroy him. The result of it was that she went back to her convent under close guard, and was thereafter confined with greater rigour than hitherto.

Desperately Boris heard how the belief in Demetrius was gaining ground in Russia with the people. The nobles might still be sceptical, but Boris knew that he could not trust them, since they had no cause to love him. He began perhaps to realize that it is not good to rule by fear.

And then at last came Smirnoy Otrepiev back from Cracow, where he had been sent by Basmanov to obtain with his own eyes confirmation of the rumour which had reached the boyar on the score of the pretender's real identity.

The rumour, he declared, was right. The false Demetrius was none other than his own nephew, Grishka Otrepiev, who had once been a monk, but, unfrocked, had embraced the Roman heresy, and had abandoned himself to licentious ways. You realize now why Smirnoy had been chosen by Basmanov for this particular mission.

The news heartened Boris. At last he could denounce the impostor in proper terms, and denounce him he did. He sent an envoy to Sigismund III. to proclaim the fellow's true identity, and to demand his expulsion from the Kingdom of Poland; and his denunciation was supported by a solemn excommunication pronounced by the Patriarch of Moscow against the unfrocked monk, Grishka Otrepiev,

who now falsely called himself Demetrius Ivanovitch.

But the denunciation did not carry the conviction that Boris expected. It was reported that the Tsarevitch was a courtly, accomplished man, speaking Polish and Latin, as well as Russian, skilled in horsemanship and in the use of arms, and it was asked how an unfrocked monk had come by these accomplishments. Moreover, although Boris, fore-warned, had prevented the Tsarina Maria from supporting the pretender out of motives of revenge, he had forgotten her two brothers; he had not foreseen that, actuated by the same motives, they might do that which he had prevented her from doing. This was what occurred. The brothers Nagoy repaired to Cracow publicly to acknowledge Demetrius their nephew, and to enrol themselves under his banner.

Against this Boris realized that mere words were useless. The sword of Nemesis was drawn indeed. His sins had found him out. Nothing remained him but to arm and go forth to meet the impostor, who was advancing upon Moscow with a great host of Poles and Cossacks.

He appraised the support of the Nagoys at its right value. They, too, had been at Uglich, and had seen the dead boy, almost seen him slain. Vengeance upon himself was their sole motive. But was it possible that Sigismund of Poland was really deceived, as well as the Palatine of Sandomir, whose daughter was betrothed to the adventurer, Prince Adam Wisniowiecki, in whose house the false Demetrius had first made his appearance, and all those Polish nobles who flocked to his banner? Or were they, too, moved by some ulterior motive which he could not fathom?

That was the riddle that plagued Boris Godunov what time—in the winter of 1604—he sent his armies to meet the invader. He sent them because, crippled now by gout, even the satisfaction of leading them was denied him. He was forced to stay at home in the gloomy apartments of the Kremlin, fretted by care, with the ghosts of his evil

past to keep him company, and assure him that the hour of judgment was at hand.

With deepening rage he heard how town after town capitulated to the adventurer, and mistrusting Basmanov, who was in command, he sent Shuiski to replace him. In January of 1605 the armies met at Dobrinichi, and Demetrius suffered a severe defeat, which compelled him to fall back on Putioli. He lost all his infantry, and every Russian taken in arms on the pretender's side was remorselessly hanged as Boris had directed.

Hope began to revive in the heart of Boris; but as months passed and no decision came, those hopes faded again, and the canker of the past gnawed at his vitals and sapped his strength. And then there was ever present to his mind the nightmare riddle of the pretender's identity. At last, one evening in April, he sent for Smirnoy Otrepiev to question him again concerning that nephew of his. Otrepiev came in fear this time. It is not good to be the uncle of a man who is giving so much trouble to a great prince.

Boris glared at him from blood-injected eyes. His round, white face was haggard, his cheeks sagged, and his fleshy body had lost all its erstwhile firm vigour.

"I have sent for you to question you again," he said, "touching this lewd nephew of yours, this Grishka Otrepiev, this unfrocked monk, who claims to be Tsar of Muscovy. Are you sure, man, that you have made no mistake—are you sure?"

Otrepiev was shaken by the Tsar's manner, by the ferocity of his mien. But he made answer: "Alas, Highness! I could not be mistaken. I am sure."

Boris grunted, and moved his body irritably in his chair. His terrible eyes watched Otrepiev mistrustfully. He had reached the mental stage

in which he mistrusted everything and everybody.

"You lie, you dog," he snarled savagely.

"Highness, I swear..."

"Lies!" Boris roared him down. "And here's the proof. Would Sigismund of Poland have acknowledged him had he been what you say? When I denounced him the unfrocked monk Grishka Otrepiev, would not Sigismund have verified the statement had it been true?"

"The brothers Nagoy, the uncles of the dead Demetrius..." Otrepiev was beginning, when again Boris interrupted him.

"Their acknowledgment of him came after Sigismund's, after—long after—my denunciation." He broke into oaths. "I say you lie. Will you stand there and pelter with me, man? Will you wait until the rack pulls you joint from joint before you speak the truth?"

"Highness!" cried Otrepiev, "I have served you faithfully these years."

"The truth, man; as you hope for life," thundered the Tsar, "the whole truth of this foul nephew of yours, if so be he is your nephew."

And Otrepiev spoke the whole truth at last in his great dread. "He is not my nephew."

"Not?" It was a roar of rage. "You dared lie to me?"

Otrepiev's knees were loosened by terror, and he went down upon them before the irate Tsar.

"I did not lie—not altogether. I told you a half-truth, Highness. His name is Grishka Otrepiev; it is the name by which he always has been known, and he is an unfrocked monk, all as I said, and the son of my brother's wife."

"Then... then..." Boris was bewildered. Suddenly he understood. "And

his father?"

"Was Stephen Bathory, King of Poland. Grishka Otrepiev is King Stephen's natural son."

Boris seemed to fight for breath for a moment.

"This is true?" he asked, and himself answered the question. "Of course it is true. It is the light at last... at last. You may go."

Otrepiev stumbled out, thankful, surprised to escape so lightly. He could not know of how little account to Boris was the deception he had practiced in comparison with the truth he had now revealed, a truth that shed a fearful, dazzling light upon the dark mystery of the false Demetrius. The problem that so long had plagued the Tsar was solved at last.

This pretended Demetrius, this unfrocked monk, was a natural son of Stephen Bathory, and a Roman Catholic. Such men as Sigismund of Poland and the Voyvode of Sandomir were not deceived on the score of his identity. They, and no doubt other of the leading nobles of Poland, knew the man for what he was, and because of it supported him, using the fiction of his being Demetrius Ivanovitch to impose upon the masses, and facilitate the pretenders occupation of the throne of Russia. And the object of it was to set up in Muscovy a ruler who should be a Pole and a Roman Catholic. Boris knew the bigotry of Sigismund, who already had sacrificed a throne—that of Sweden—to his devout conscience, and he saw clearly to the heart of this intrigue. Had he not heard that a Papal Nuncio had been at Cracow, and that this Nuncio had been a stout supporter of the pretender's claim? What could be the Pope's concern in the Muscovite succession? Why should a Roman priest support the claim of a prince to the throne of a country devoted to the Greek faith?

At last all was clear indeed to Boris. Rome was at the bottom of this

business, whose true aim was the Romanization of Russia; and Sigismund had fetched Rome into it, had set Rome on. Himself an elected King of Poland, Sigismund may have seen in the ambitious son of Stephen Bathory one who might perhaps supplant him on the Polish throne. To divert his ambition into another channel he had fathered—if he had not invented—this fiction that the pretender was the dead Demetrius.

Had that fool Smirnoy Otrepiev but dealt frankly with him from the first, what months of annoyance might he not have been spared; how easy it might have been to prick this bubble of imposture. But better late than never. To-morrow he would publish the true facts, and all the world should know the truth; and it was a truth that must give pause to those fools in this superstitious Russia, so devoted to the Orthodox Greek Church, who favoured the pretender. They should see the trap that was being baited for them.

There was a banquet in the Kremlin that night to certain foreign envoys, and Boris came to table in better spirits than he had been for many a day. He was heartened by the thought of what was now to do, by the conviction that he held the false Demetrius in the hollow of his hand. There to those envoys he would announce to-night what to-morrow he would announce to all Russia—tell them of the discovery he had made, and reveal to his subjects the peril in which they stood. Towards the close of the banquet he rose to address his guests, announcing that he had an important communication for them. In silence they waited for him to speak. And then, abruptly, with no word yet spoken, he sank back into his chair, fighting for breath, clawing the air, his face empurpling until suddenly the blood gushed copiously from his mouth and nostrils.

He was vouchsafed time in which to strip off his splendid apparel and wrap himself in a monk's robe, thus symbolizing the putting aside of earthly vanities, and then he expired.

It has been now and then suggested that he was poisoned. His death was certainly most opportune to Demetrius. But there is nothing in the manner of it to justify the opinion that it resulted from anything other than an apoplexy.

His death brought the sinister opportunist Shuiski back to Moscow to place Boris's son Feodor on the throne. But the reign of this lad of sixteen was very brief. Basmanov, who had gone back to the army, being now inspired by jealousy and fear of the ambitious Shuiski, went over at once to the pretender, and proclaimed him Tsar of Russia. Thereafter events moved swiftly. Basmanov marched on Moscow, entered it in triumph, and again proclaimed Demetrius, whereupon the people rose in revolt against the son of the usurper Boris, stormed the Kremlin, and strangled the boy and his mother.

Basil Shuiski would have shared their fate had he not bought his life at the price of betrayal. Publicly he declared to the Muscovites that the boy whose body he had seen at Uglich was not that of Demetrius, but of a peasant's son, who had been murdered in his stead.

That statement cleared the last obstacle from the pretender's path, and he advanced now to take possession of his throne. Yet before he occupied it, he showed the real principles that actuated him, proved how true had been Boris's conclusion. He ordered the arrest and degradation of the Patriarch who had denounced and excommunicated him, and in his place appointed Ignatius, Bishop of Riazan, a man suspected of belonging to the Roman communion.

On the 30th of June of that year 1605, Demetrius made his triumphal entry into Moscow. He went to prostrate himself before the tomb of Ivan the Terrible, and then to visit the Tsarina Maria, who, after a brief communion with him in private, came forth publicly to acknowledge him as her son.

Just as Shuiski had purchased his life by a falsehood, so did she

purchase her enlargement from that convent where so long she had been a prisoner, and restoration to the rank that was her proper due. After all, she had cause for gratitude to Demetrius, who, in addition to restoring her these things, had avenged her upon the hated Boris Godunov.

His coronation followed in due season, and at last this amazing adventurer found himself firmly seated upon the throne of Russia, with Basmanov at his right hand to help and guide him. And at first all went well, and the young Tsar earned a certain measure of popularity. If his swarthy face was coarse-featured, yet his bearing was so courtly and gracious that he won his way quickly to the hearts of his people. For the rest he was of a tall, graceful figure, a fine horseman, and of a knightly address at arms.

But he soon found himself in the impossible position of having to serve two masters. On the one hand there was Russia, and the orthodox Russians whose tsar he was, and on the other there were the Poles, who had made him so at a price, and who now demanded payment. Because he saw that this payment would be difficult and fraught with peril to himself he would—after the common wont of princes who have attained their objects—have repudiated the debt. And so he was disposed to ignore, or at least to evade, the persistent reminders that reached him from the Papal Nuncio, to whom he had promised the introduction into Russia of the Roman faith.

But presently came a letter from Sigismund couched in different terms. The King of Poland wrote to Demetrius that word had reached him that Boris Godunov was still alive, and that he had taken refuge in England, adding that he might be tempted to restore the fugitive to the throne of Muscovy.

The threat contained in that bitter piece of sarcasm aroused Demetrius to a sense of the responsibilities he had undertaken, which were precisely as Boris Godunov had surmised. As a beginning he

granted the Jesuits permission to build a church within the sacred walls of the Kremlin, whereby he gave great scandal. Soon followed other signs that he was not a true son of the Orthodox Greek Church; he gave offence by his indifference to public worship, by his neglect of Russian customs, and by surrounding himself with Roman Catholic Poles, upon whom he conferred high offices and dignities.

And there were those at hand ready to stir up public feeling against him, resentful boyars quick to suspect that perhaps they had been swindled. Foremost among these was the sinister turncoat Shuiski, who had not derived from his perjury all the profit he expected, who resented, above all, to see Basmanov—who had ever been his rival—invested with a power second only to that of the Tsar himself. Shuiski, skilled in intrigue, went to work in his underground, burrowing fashion. He wrought upon the clergy, who in their turn wrought upon the populace, and presently all was seething disaffection under a surface apparently calm.

The eruption came in the following May, when Maryna, the daughter of the Palatine of Sandomir, made her splendid entry into Moscow, the bride-elect of the young Tsar. The dazzling procession and the feasting that followed found little favour in the eyes of the Muscovites, who now beheld their city aswarm with heretic Poles.

The marriage was magnificently solemnized on the 18th of May, 1606. And now Shuiski applied a match to the train he had so skilfully laid. Demetrius had caused a timber fort to be built before the walls of Moscow for a martial spectacle which he had planned for the entertainment of his bride. Shuiski put it abroad that the fort was intended to serve as an engine of destruction, and that the martial spectacle was a pretence, the real object being that from the fort the Poles were to cast firebrands into the city, and then proceed to the slaughter of the inhabitants.

No more was necessary to infuriate an already exasperated

populace. They flew to arms, and on the night of the 29th of May they stormed the Kremlin, led on by the arch-traitor Shuiski himself, to the cry of "Death to the heretic! Death to the impostor!"

They broke into the palace, and swarmed up the stairs into the Tsar's bedchamber, slaying the faithful Basmanov, who stood sword in hand to bar the way and give his master time to escape. The Tsar leapt from a balcony thirty feet to the ground, broke his leg, and lay there helpless, to be dispatched by his enemies, who presently discovered him.

He died firmly and fearlessly protesting that he was Demetrius Ivanovitch. Nevertheless, he was Grishka Otrepiev, the unfrocked monk.

It has been said that he was no more than an instrument in the hands of priestcraft, and that because he played his part badly he met his doom. But something more he was. He was an instrument indeed, not of priestcraft, but of Fate, to bring home to Boris Godunov the hideous sins that stained his soul, and to avenge his victims by personating one of them. In that personation he had haunted Boris as effectively as if he had been the very ghost of the boy murdered at Uglich, haunted and tortured, and finally broken him so that he died.

That was the part assigned him by Fate in the mysterious scheme of human things. And that part being played, the rest mattered little. In the nature of him and of his position it was impossible that his imposture should be other than ephemeral.

III. THE HERMOSA FEMBRA

An Episode of the Inquisition in Seville

Apprehension hung like a thundercloud over the city of Seville in those early days of the year 1481. It had been growing since the previous October, when the Cardinal of Spain and Frey Tomas de Torquemada, acting jointly on behalf of the Sovereigns—Ferdinand and Isabella—had appointed the first inquisitors for Castile, ordering them to set up a Tribunal of the Faith in Seville, to deal with the apostatizing said to be rampant among the New-Christians, or baptized Jews, who made up so large a proportion of the population.

Among the many oppressive Spanish enactments against the Children of Israel, it was prescribed that all should wear the distinguishing circlet of red cloth on the shoulder of their gabardines; that they should reside within the walled confines of their ghettos and never be found beyond them after nightfall, and that they should not practice as doctors, surgeons, apothecaries, or innkeepers. The desire to emancipate themselves from these and other restrictions upon their commerce with Christians and from the generally intolerable conditions of bondage and ignominy imposed upon them, had driven many to accept baptism and embrace Christianity.

But even such New-Christians as were sincere in their professions of faith failed to find in this baptism the peace they sought. Bitter racial hostility, though sometimes tempered, was never extinguished by their conversion.

Hence the alarm with which they viewed the gloomy, funereal, sinister pageant—the white-robed, black-mantled and hooded inquisitors, with their attendant familiars and barefoot friars—headed by a Dominican bearing the white Cross, which invaded the city of Seville one day towards the end of December and took its way to the Convent of St. Paul, there to establish the Holy Office of the Inquisition. The fear of the New-Christians that they were to be the object of the attentions of this dread tribunal had sufficed to drive some thousands of them out of the city, to seek refuge in such feudal lordships as those of the Duke of Medina Sidonia, the Marquis of Cadiz, and the Count of Arcos.

This exodus had led to the publication by the newly appointed inquisitors of the edict of 2nd January, in which they set forth that inasmuch as it had come to their knowledge that many persons had departed out of Seville in fear of prosecution upon grounds of heretical pravity, they commanded the nobles of the Kingdom of Castile that within fifteen days they should make an exact return of the persons of both sexes who had sought refuge in their lordships or jurisdictions; that they arrest all these and lodge them in the prison of the Inquisition in Seville, confiscating their property, and holding it at the disposal of the inquisitors; that none should shelter any fugitive under pain of greater excommunication and of other penalties by law established against abettors of heretics.

The harsh injustice that lay in this call to arrest men and women merely because they had departed from Seville before departure was in any way forbidden, revealed the severity with which the inquisitors intended to proceed. It completed the consternation of the New-Christians who had remained behind, and how numerous these were may be gathered from the fact that in the district of Seville alone they numbered a hundred thousand, many of them occupying, thanks to the industry and talent characteristic of their race, positions of great eminence. It even disquieted the well-favoured young Don Rodrigo de

Cordona, who in all his vain, empty, pampered and rather vicious life had never yet known perturbation. Not that he was a New-Christian. He was of a lineage that went back to the Visigoths, of purest red Castilian blood, untainted by any strain of that dark-hued, unclean fluid alleged to flow in Hebrew veins. But it happened that he was in love with the daughter of the millionaire Diego de Susan, a girl whose beauty was so extraordinary that she was known throughout Seville and for many a mile around as la Hermosa Fembra; and he knew that such commerce—licit or illicitly conducted—was disapproved by the holy fathers. His relations with the girl had been perforce clandestine, because the disapproval of the holy fathers was matched in thoroughness by that of Diego de Susan. It had been vexatious enough on that account not to be able to boast himself the favoured of the beautiful and opulent Isabella de Susan; it was exasperating to discover now a new and more imperative reason for this odious secrecy.

Never sped a lover to his mistress in a frame of mind more aggrieved than that which afflicted Don Rodrigo as, tight-wrapped in his black cloak, he gained the Calle de Ataud on that January night.

Anon, however, when by way of a garden gate and an easily escalated balcony he found himself in the presence of Isabella, the delight of her effaced all other considerations. Her father was from home, as she had told him in the note that summoned him; he was away at Palacios on some merchant's errand, and would not return until the morrow. The servants were all abed, and so Don Rodrigo might put off his cloak and hat, and lounge at his ease upon the low Moorish divan, what time she waited upon him with a Saracen goblet filled with sweet wine of Malaga. The room in which she received him was one set apart for her own use, her bower, a long, low ceilinged chamber, furnished with luxury and taste. The walls were hung with tapestries, the floor spread with costly Eastern rugs; on an inlaid Moorish table a tall, three-beaked lamp of beaten copper charged

with aromatic oil shed light and perfume through the apartment.

Don Rodrigo sipped his wine, and his dark, hungry eyes followed her as she moved about him with vaguely voluptuous, almost feline grace. The wine, the heavy perfume of the lamp, and the beauty of her played havoc among them with his senses, so that he forgot for the moment his Castilian lineage and clean Christian blood, forgot that she derived from the accursed race of the Crucifiers. All that he remembered was that she was the loveliest woman in Seville, daughter to the wealthiest man, and in that hour of weakness he decided to convert into reality that which had hitherto been no more than an infamous presence. He would loyally fulfil the false, disloyal promises he had made. He would take her to wife. It was a sacrifice which her beauty and her wealth should make worth while. Upon that impulse he spoke now, abruptly:

"Isabella, when will you marry me?"

She stood before him, looking down into his weak, handsome face, her fingers interlacing his own. She merely smiled. The question did not greatly move her. Not knowing him for the scoundrel that he was, guessing nothing of the present perturbation of his senses, she found it very natural that he should ask her to appoint the day.

"It is a question you must ask my father," she answered him.

"I will," said he, "to-morrow, on his return." And he drew her down beside him.

But that father was nearer than either of them dreamed. At that very moment the soft thud of the closing housedoor sounded through the house. It brought her sharply to her feet, and loose from his coiling arms, with quickened breath and blanching face. A moment she hung there, tense, then sped to the door of the room, set it ajar and listened.

Up the stairs came the sound of footsteps and of muttering voices. It was her father, and others with him.

With ever-mounting fear she turned to Don Rodrigo, and breathed the question: "If they should come here?"

The Castilian stood where he had risen by the divan, his face paler now than its pale, aristocratic wont, his eyes reflecting the fear that glittered in her own. He had no delusion as to what action Diego de Susan would take upon discovering him. These Jewish dogs were quickly stirred to passion, and as jealous as their betters of the honour of their womenfolk. Already Don Rodrigo in imagination saw his clean red Christian blood bespattering that Hebrew floor, for he had no weapon save the heavy Toledo dagger at his girdle, and Diego de Susan was not alone.

It was, he felt, a ridiculous position for a Hidalgo of Spain. But his dignity was to suffer still greater damage. In another moment she had bundled him into an alcove behind the arras at the chamber's end, a tiny closet that was no better than a cupboard contrived for the storing of household linen. She had moved with a swift precision which at another time might have provoked his admiration, snatching up his cloak and hat, and other evidences of his presence, quenching the lamp, and dragging him to that place of cramped concealment, which she remained to share with him.

Came presently movements in the room beyond, and the voice of her father:

"We shall be securest from intrusion here. It is my daughter's room. If you will give me leave, I will go down again to admit our other friends."

Those other friends, as Don Rodrigo gathered, continued to arrive for the next half-hour, until in the end there must have been some twenty of them assembled in that chamber. The mutter of voices had steadily

increased, but so confused that no more than odd words, affording no clue to the reason of this gathering, had reached the hidden couple.

And then quite suddenly a silence fell, and on that silence beat the sharp, clear voice of Diego de Susan addressing them.

"My friends," he said, "I have called you hither that we may concert measures for the protection of ourselves and all New-Christians in Seville from the fresh peril by which we are menaced. The edict of the inquisitors reveals how much we have to fear. You may gather from it that the court of the Holy Office is hardly likely to deal in justice, and that the most innocent may find himself at any moment exposed to its cruel mercies. Therefore it is for us now to consider how to protect ourselves and our property from the unscrupulous activities of this tribunal. You are the principal New Christian citizens of Seville; you are wealthy, not only in property, but also in the goodwill of the people, who trust and respect, and at need will follow, you. If nothing less will serve, we must have recourse to arms; and so that we are resolute and united, my friends, we shall prevail against the inquisitors."

Within the alcove, Don Rodrigo felt his skin roughening with horror at this speech, which breathed sedition not only against the Sovereigns, but against the very Church. And with his horror was blent a certain increase of fear. If his situation had been perilous before, it was tenfold more dangerous now. Discovery, since he had overheard this treason, must mean his certain death. And Isabella, realizing the same to the exclusion of all else, clutched his arm and cowered against him in the dark.

There was worse to follow. Susan's address was received with a murmur of applause, and then others spoke, and several were named, and their presence thus disclosed. There was the influential Manuel Sauli, who next to Susan was the wealthiest man in Seville; there was Torralba, the Governor of Triana; Juan Abolafio, the farmer of the royal customs, and his brother Fernandez, the licentiate, and

there were others—all of them men of substance, some even holding office under the Crown. Not one was there who dissented from anything that Susan had said; rather did each contribute some spur to the general resolve. In the end it was concerted that each of those present should engage himself to raise a proportion of the men, arms and money that would be needed for their enterprise. And upon that the meeting was dissolved, and they departed. Susan himself went with them. He had work to do in the common cause, he announced, and he would do it that very night in which it was supposed that he was absent at Palacios.

At last, when all had gone, and the house was still again, Isabella and her lover crept forth from their concealment, and in the light of the lamp which Susan had left burning each looked into the other's white, startled face. So shaken was Don Rodrigo with horror of what he had overheard, and with the terror of discovery, that it was with difficulty he kept his teeth from chattering.

"Heaven protect us!" he gasped. "What Judaizing was this?"

"Judaizing!" she echoed. It was the term applied to apostacy, to the relapse of New-Christians to Judaism, an offense to be expiated at the stake. "Here was no Judaizing. Are you mad, Rodrigo? You heard no single word that sinned against the Faith."

"Did I not? I heard treason enough to."

"No, nor treason either. You heard honourable, upright men considering measures of defence against oppression, injustice, and evil acquisitiveness masquerading in the holy garments of religion."

He stared askance at her for a moment, then his full lips curled into a sneer. "Of course you would seek to justify them," he said. "You are of that foul brood yourself. But you cannot think to cozen me, who am of clean Old-christian blood and a true son of Mother Church. These

men plot evil against the Holy Inquisition. Is that not Judaizing when it is done by Jews?"

She was white to the lips, and a new horror stared at him from her great dark eyes; her lovely bosom rose and fell in tumult. Yet still she sought to reason with him.

"They are not Jews—not one of them. Why, Perez is himself in holy orders. All of them are Christians, and..."

"Newly-baptized!" he broke in, sneering viciously. "A defilement of that holy sacrament to gain them worldly advantages. That is revealed by what passed here just now. Jews they were born, the sons of Jews, and Jews they remain under their cloak of mock Christianity, to be damned as Jews in the end." He was panting now with fiery indignation; a holy zeal inflamed this profligate defiler. "God forgive me that ever I entered here. Yet I do believe that it was His will that I should come to overhear what is being plotted. Let me depart from hence."

With a passionate gesture of abhorrence he swung towards the door. Her clutch upon his arm arrested him.

"Whither do you go?" she asked trim sharply. He looked now into her eyes, and of all that they contained he saw only fear; he saw nothing of the hatred into which her love had been transmuted in that moment by his unsparing insults to herself, her race and her home, by the purpose which she clearly read in him.

"Whither?" he echoed, and sought to shake her off.

"Whither my Christian duty bids me."

It was enough for her. Before he could prevent or suspect her purpose, she had snatched the heavy Toledo blade from his girdle, and armed with it stood between the door and him.

"A moment, Don Rodrigo. Do not attempt to advance, or, as Heaven watches us, I strike, and it maybe that I shall kill you. We must talk awhile before you go."

Amazed, chapfallen, half-palsied, he stood before her, his fine religious zeal wiped out by fear of that knife in her weak woman's hand. Rapidly to-night was she coming into real knowledge of this Castilian gentleman, whom with pride she had taken for her lover. It was a knowledge that was to sear her presently with self-loathing and self-contempt. But for the moment her only consideration was that, as a direct result of her own wantonness, her father stood in mortal peril. If he should perish through the deletion of this creature, she would account herself his slayer.

"You have not considered that the deletion you intend will destroy my father," she said quietly.

"There is my Christian duty to consider," answered he, but without boldness now.

"Perhaps. But there is something you must set against it. Have you no duty as a lover—no duty to me?"

"No earthly duty can weigh against a spiritual obligation...."

"Ah, wait! Have patience. You have not well considered, that is plain. In coming here in secret you wronged my father. You will not trouble to deny it.

"Jointly we wronged him, you and I. Will you then take advantage of something learnt whilst you were hiding there like a thief from the consequences of what you did, and so do him yet this further wrong?"

"Must I wrong my conscience?" he asked her sullenly.

"Indeed, I fear you must."

"Imperil my immortal soul?" He almost laughed.

"You talk in vain."

"But I have something more than words for you." With her left hand she drew upon the fine gold chain about her neck, and brought forth a tiny jewelled cross. Passing the chain over her head, she held it out.

"Take this," she bade him. "Take it, I say. Now, with that sacred symbol in your hand, make solemn oath to divulge no word of what you have learnt here tonight, or else resign yourself to an unshriven death. For either you take that oath, or I rouse the servants and have you dealt with as one who has intruded here unbidden for an evil end." She backed away from him as she spoke, and threw wide the door. Then, confronting him from the threshold, she admonished him again, her voice no louder than a whisper. "Quick now! Resolve yourself. Will you die here with all your sins upon you, and so destroy for all eternity the immortal soul that urges you to this betrayal, or will you take the oath that I require?"

He began an argument that was like a sermon of the Faith. But she cut him short. "For the last time!" she bade him. "Will you decide?"

He chose the coward's part, of course, and did violence to his fine conscience. With the cross in his hand he repeated after her the words of the formidable oath that she administered an oath which it must damn his immortal soul to break. Because of that, because she imagined that she had taken the measure of his faith, she returned him his dagger, and let him go at last. She imagined that she had bound him fast in irrefragable spiritual bonds.

And even on the morrow, when her father and all those who had been present at that meeting at Susan's house were arrested by order of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, she still clung to that belief. Yet presently a doubt crept in, a doubt that she must at all costs resolve.

And so presently she called for her litter, and had herself carried to the Convent of St. Paul, where she asked to see Frey Alonso de Ojeda, the Prior of the Dominicans of Seville.

She was left to wait in a square, cheerless, dimly-lighted room pervaded by a musty smell, that had for only furniture a couple of chairs and a praying-stool, and for only ornament a great, gaunt crucifix hanging upon one of its whitewashed walls.

Thither came presently two Dominican friars. One of these was a harsh-featured man of middle height and square build, the uncompromising zealot Ojeda. The other was tall and lean, stooping slightly at the shoulders, haggard and pale of countenance, with deep-set, luminous dark eyes, and a tender, wistful mouth. This was the Queen's confessor, Frey Tomas de Torquemada, Grand Inquisitor of Castile. He approached her, leaving Ojeda in the background, and stood a moment regarding her with eyes of infinite kindness and compassion.

"You are the daughter of that misguided man, Diego de Susan," he said, in a gentle voice. "God help and strengthen you, my child, against the trials that may be in store for you. What do you seek at our poor hands? Speak, child, without fear."

"Father," she faltered, "I come to implore your pity."

"No need to implore it, child. Should I withhold pity who stand myself in need of pity, being a sinner—as are we all."

"It is for my father that I come to beg your mercy."

"So I supposed." A shade crossed the gentle, wistful face; the tender melancholy deepened in the eyes that regarded her. "If your father is innocent of what has been alleged against him, the benign tribunal of the Holy Office will bring his innocence to light, and rejoice therein; if he is guilty, if he has strayed—as we may all stray unless fortified by

heavenly grace—he shall be given the means of expiation, that his salvation may be assured him."

She shivered at the words. She knew the mercy in which the inquisitors dealt, a mercy so spiritual that it took no account of the temporal agonies inflicted to ensure it.

"My father is innocent of any sin against the Faith," said she.

"Are you so sure?" croaked the harsh voice of Ojeda, breaking in. "Consider well. Remember that your duty as a Christian is above your duty as a daughter."

Almost had she bluntly demanded the name of her father's accuser, that thus she might reach the object of her visit. Betimes she checked the rash impulse, perceiving that subtlety was here required; that a direct question would close the door to all information. Skilfully, then, she chose her line of attack.

"I am sure," she exclaimed, "that he is a more fervent and pious Christian—New-Christian though he be—than his accuser."

The wistfulness faded from Torquemada's eyes. They grew keen, as became the eyes of an inquisitor, the eyes of a sleuth, quick to fasten on a spoor. But he shook his head.

Ojeda advanced. "That I cannot believe," said he. "The deletion was made from a sense of duty so pure that the delator did not hesitate to confess the sin of his own commission through which he had discovered the treachery of Don Diego and his associates."

She could have cried out in anguish at this answer to her unspoken question. Yet she controlled herself, and that no single doubt should linger, she thrust boldly home.

"He confessed it?" she cried, seemingly aghast. The friar slowly nodded. "Don Rodrigo confessed?" she insisted, as will the

incredulous.

Abruptly the friar nodded again; and as abruptly checked, recollecting himself.

"Don Rodrigo?" he echoed, and asked: "Who mentioned Don Rodrigo?"

But it was too late. His assenting nod had betrayed the truth, had confirmed her worst fear. She swayed a little; the room swam round her, she felt as she would swoon. Then blind indignation against that forsworn betrayer surged to revive her. If it was through her weakness and undutifulness that her father had been destroyed, through her strength should he be avenged, though in doing so she pulled down and destroyed herself.

"And he confessed to his own sin?" she was repeating slowly, ever on that musing, incredulous note. "He dared confess himself a Judaizer?"

"A Judaizer!" Sheer horror now overspread the friar's grim countenance. "A Judaizer! Don Rodrigo? Oh, impossible!"

"But I thought you said he had confessed."

"Why, yes, but... but not to that." Her pale lips smiled, sadly contemptuous.

"I see. He set limits of prudence upon his confession. He left out his Judatting practices. He did not tell you, for instance, that this deletion was an act of revenge against me who refused to marry him, having discovered his unfaith, and fearing its consequences in this world and the next."

Ojeda stared at her in sheer, incredulous amazement.

And then Torquemada spoke: "Do you say that Don Rodrigo de

Cardona is a Judaizer? Oh, it is unbelievable."

"Yet I could give you evidence that should convince you."

"Then so you shall. It is your sacred duty, lest you become an abettor of heresy, and yourself liable to the extreme penalty."

It would be a half-hour later, perhaps, when she quitted the Convent of St. Paul to return home, with Hell in her heart, knowing in life no purpose but that of avenging the parent her folly had destroyed. As she was being carried past the Alcazar, she espied across the open space a tall, slim figure in black, in whom she recognized her lover, and straightway she sent the page who paced beside her litter to call him to her side. The summons surprised him after what had passed between them; moreover, considering her father's present condition, he was reluctant to be seen in attendance upon the beautiful, wealthy Isabella de Susan. Nevertheless, urged on by curiosity, he went.

Her greeting increased his surprise.

"I am in deep distress, Rodrigo, as you may judge," she told him sadly. "You will have heard what has befallen my father?"

He looked at her sharply, yet saw nothing but loveliness rendered more appealing by sorrow. Clearly she did not suspect him of betrayal; did not realize that an oath extorted by violence—and an oath, moreover, to be false to a sacred duty—could not be accounted binding.

"I... I heard of it an hour ago," he lied a thought unsteadily. "I... I commiserate you deeply."

"I deserve commiseration," answered she, "and so does my poor father, and those others. It is plain that amongst those he trusted there was a traitor, a spy, who went straight from that meeting to inform against them. If I but had a list it were easy to discover the betrayer.

One need but ascertain who is the one of all who were present whose arrest has been omitted." Her lovely sorrowful eyes turned full upon him. "What is to become of me now, alone in the world?" she asked him. "My father was my only friend."

The subtle appeal of her did its work swiftly. Besides, he saw here a noble opportunity worth surely some little risk.

"Your only friend?" he asked her thickly. "Was there no one else? Is there no one else, Isabella?"

"There was," she said, and sighed heavily. "But after what befell last night, when... You know what is in my mind. I was distraught then, mad with fear for this poor father of mine, so that I could not even consider his sin in its full heinousness, nor see how righteous was your intent to inform against him. Yet I am thankful that it was not by your deletion that he was taken. The thought of that is to-day my only consolation."

They had reached her house by now. Don Rodrigo put forth his arm to assist her to alight from her litter, and begged leave to accompany her within. But she denied him.

"Not now—though I am grateful to you, Rodrigo. Soon, if you will come and comfort me, you may. I will send you word when I am more able to receive you—that is, if I am forgiven for..."

"Not another word," he begged her. "I honour you for what you did. It is I who should sue to you for forgiveness."

"You are very noble and generous, Don Rodrigo. God keep you!" And so she left him.

She had found him—had she but known it—a dejected, miserable man in the act of reckoning up all that he had lost. In betraying Susan he had acted upon an impulse that sprang partly from rage, and partly from a sense of religious duty. In counting later the cost to himself, he

cursed the folly of his rage, and began to wonder if such strict observance of religious duty was really worth while to a man who had his way to make in the world. In short, he was in the throes of reaction. But now, in her unsuspection, he found his hopes revive. She need never know. The Holy Office preserved inviolate secrecy on the score of deletions—since to do otherwise might be to discourage delators—and there were no confrontations of accuser and accused, such as took place in temporal courts. Don Rodrigo left the Calle de Ataud better pleased with the world than he had been since morning.

On the morrow he went openly to visit her; but he was denied, a servant announcing her indisposed. This fretted him, damped his hopes, and thereby increased his longing. But on the next day he received from her a letter which made him the most ample amends:

"Rodrigo,—There is a matter on which we must come early to an understanding. Should my poor father be convicted of heresy and sentenced, it follows that his property will be confiscated, since as the daughter of a convicted heretic I may not inherit. For myself I care little; but I am concerned for you, Rodrigo, since if in spite of what has happened you would still wish to make me your wife, as you declared on Monday, it would be my wish to come to you well cowered. Now the inheritance which would be confiscated by the Holy Office from the daughter of a heretic might not be so confiscated from the wife of a gentleman of Castile. I say no more. Consider this well, and decide as your heart dictates. I shall receive you to-morrow if you come to me.

"Isabella."

She bade him consider well. But the matter really needed little consideration. Diego de Susan was sure to go to the fire. His fortune was estimated at ten million maravedis. That fortune, it seemed, Rodrigo was given the chance to make his own by marrying the beautiful Isabella at once, before sentence came to be passed upon

her father. The Holy Office might impose a fine, but would not go further where the inheritance of a Castilian nobleman of clean lineage was concerned. He was swayed between admiration of her shrewdness and amazement at his own good fortune. Also his vanity was immensely flattered.

He sent her three lines to protest his undying love, and his resolve to marry her upon the morrow, and went next day in person, as she had bidden him, to carry out the resolve.

She received him in the mansion's best room, a noble chamber furnished with a richness such as no other house in Seville could have boasted. She had arrayed herself for the interview with an almost wanton cunning that should enhance her natural endowments. Her high-waisted gown, low-cut and close-fitting in the bodice, was of cloth of gold, edged with miniver at skirt and cuffs and neck. On her white bosom hung a priceless carcanet of limpid diamonds, and through the heavy tresses of her bronze-coloured hair was coiled a string of lustrous pearls. Never had Don Rodrigo found her more desirable; never had he felt so secure and glad in his possession of her. The quickening blood flushing now his olive face, he gathered her slim shapeliness into his arms, kissing her cheek, her lips, her neck.

"My pearl, my beautiful, my wife!" he murmured, rapturously. Then added the impatient question: "The priest? Where is the priest that shall make us one?"

Deep, unfathomable eyes looked up to meet his burning glance. Languorously she lay against his breast, and her red lips parted in a smile that maddened him.

"You love me, Rodrigo—in spite of all?"

"Love you!" It was a throbbing, strangled cry, an almost inarticulate ejaculation. "Better than life—better than salvation."

She fetched a sigh, as of deep content, and nestled closer. "Oh, I am glad—so glad—that your love for me is truly strong. I am about to put it to the test, perhaps."

He held her very close. "What is this test, beloved?"

"It is that I want this marriage knot so tied that it shall be indissoluble save by death."

"Why, so do I," quoth he, who had so much to gain.

"And, therefore, because after all, though I profess Christianity, there is Jewish blood in my veins, I would have a marriage that must satisfy even my father when he regains his freedom, as I believe he will—for, after all, he is not charged with any sin against the faith."

She paused, and he was conscious of a premonitory chill upon his ardour.

"What do you mean?" he asked her, and his voice was strained.

"I mean—you'll not be angry with me?—I mean that I would have us married not only by a Christian priest, and in the Christian manner, but also and first of all by a Rabbi, and in accordance with the Jewish rites."

Upon the words, she felt his encircling arms turn limp, and relax their grip upon her, whereupon she clung to him the more tightly.

"Rodrigo! Rodrigo! If you truly love me, if you truly want me, you'll not deny me this condition, for I swear to you that once I am your wife you shall never hear anything again to remind you that I am of Jewish blood."

His face turned ghastly pale, his lips writhed and twitched, and beads of sweat stood out upon his brow.

"My God!" he groaned. "What do you ask? I... I can't. It were a desecration, a defilement."

She thrust him from her in a passion. "You regard it so? You protest love, and in the very hour when I propose to sacrifice all to you, you will not make this little sacrifice for my sake, you even insult the faith that was my forbears', if it is not wholly mine. I misjudged you, else I had not bidden you here to-day. I think you had better leave me."

Trembling, appalled, a prey to an ineffable tangle of emotion, he sought to plead, to extenuate his attitude, to move her from her own. He ranted torrentially, but in vain. She stood as cold and aloof as earlier she had been warm and clinging. He had proved the measure of his love. He could go his ways.

The thing she proposed was to him, as he had truly said, a desecration, a defilement. Yet to have dreamed yourself master of ten million maravedis, and a matchless woman, is a dream not easily relinquished. There was enough cupidity in his nature, enough neediness in his condition, to make the realization of that dream worth the defilement of the abominable marriage rites upon which she insisted. But fear remained where Christian scruples were already half-effaced.

"You do not realize," he cried. "If it were known that I so much as contemplated this, the Holy Office would account it clear proof of apostasy, and send me to the fire."

"If that were your only objection it were easily overcome," she informed him coldly. "For who should ever inform against you? The Rabbi who is waiting above-stairs dare not for his own life's sake betray us, and who else will ever know?"

"You can be sure of that?"

He was conquered. But she played him yet awhile, compelling him in

his turn to conquer the reluctance which his earlier hesitation had begotten in her, until it was he who pleaded insistently for this Jewish marriage that filled him with such repugnance.

And so at last she yielded, and led him up to that bower of hers in which the conspirators had met.

"Where is the Rabbi?" he asked impatiently, looking round that empty room.

"I will summon him if you are quite sure that you desire him."

"Sure? Have I not protested enough? Can you still doubt me?"

"No," she said. She stood apart, conning him steadily. "Yet I would not have it supposed that you were in any way coerced to this." They were odd words; but he heeded not their oddness. He was hardly master of the wits which in themselves were never of the brightest. "I require you to declare that it is your own desire that our marriage should be solemnized in accordance with the Jewish rites and the law of Moses."

And he, fretted now by impatience, anxious to have this thing done and ended, made answer hastily:

"Why, to be sure I do declare it to be my wish that we should be so married—in the Jewish manner, and in accordance with the law of Moses. And now, where is the Rabbi?" He caught a sound and saw a quiver in the tapestries that masked the door of the alcove. "Ah! He is here, I suppose...."

He checked abruptly, and recoiled as from a blow, throwing up his hands in a convulsive gesture. The tapestry had been swept aside, and forth stepped not the Rabbi he expected, but a tall, gaunt man, stooping slightly at the shoulders, dressed in the white habit and black cloak of the order of St. Dominic, his face lost in the shadows of a

black cowl. Behind him stood two lay brothers of the order, two armed familiars of the Holy Office, displaying the white cross on their sable doublets.

Terrified by that apparition, evoked, as it seemed, by those terribly damning words he had pronounced, Don Rodrigo stood blankly at gaze a moment, not even seeking to understand how this dread thing had come to pass.

The friar pushed back his cowl, as he advanced, and displayed the tender, compassionate, infinitely wistful countenance of Frey Tomas de Torquemada. And infinitely compassionate and wistful came the voice of that deeply sincere and saintly man.

"My son, I was told this of you—that you were a Judaizer—yet before I could bring myself to believe so incredible a thing in one of your lineage, I required the evidence of my own senses. Oh, my poor child, by what wicked counsels have you been led so far astray?" The sweet, tender eyes of the inquisitor were luminous with unshed tears. Sorrowing pity shook his gentle voice.

And then Don Rodrigo's terror changed to wrath, and this exploded. He flung out an arm towards Isabella in passionate denunciation.

"It was that woman who bewitched and fooled and seduced me into this. It was a trap she baited for my undoing."

"It was, indeed. She had my consent to do so, to test the faith which I was told you lacked. Had your heart been free of heretical pravity the trap had never caught you; had your faith been strong, my son, you could not have been seduced from loyalty to your Redeemers."

"Father! Hear me, I implore you!" He flung down upon his knees, and held out shaking, supplicating hands.

"You shall be heard, my son. The Holy Office does not condemn any

man unheard. But what hope can you put in protestations? I had been told that your life was disorderly and vain, and I grieved that it should be so, trembled for you when I heard how wide you opened the gates of your soul to evil. But remembering that age and reason will often make good and penitent amends for the follies of early life, I hoped and prayed for you. Yet that you should Judaize—that you should be bound in wedlock by the unclean ties of Judaism—Oh!" The melancholy voice broke off upon a sob, and Torquemada covered his pale face with his hands—long, white, emaciated, almost transparent hands. "Pray now, my child, for grace and strength," he exhorted. "Offer up the little temporal suffering that may yet be yours in atonement for your error, and so that your heart be truly contrite and penitent, you shall deserve salvation from that Divine Mercy which is boundless. You shall have my prayers, my son. I can do no more. Take him hence."

On the 6th of February of that year 1481, Seville witnessed the first Auto de Fe, the sufferers being Diego de Susan, his fellow-conspirators, and Don Rodrigo de Cardona. The function presented but little of the ghastly pomp that was soon to distinguish these proceedings. But the essentials were already present.

In a procession headed by a Dominican bearing aloft the green Cross of the Inquisition, swathed in a veil of crepe, behind whom walked two by two the members of the Confraternity of St. Peter the Martyr, the familiars of the Holy Office, came the condemned, candle in hand, barefoot, in the ignominious yellow penitential sack. Hemmed about by halberdiers, they were paraded through the streets to the Cathedral, where Mass was said and a sermon of the faith preached to them by the stern Ojeda. Thereafter they were conveyed beyond the city to the meadows of Tablada, where the stake and faggots awaited them.

Thus the perjured accuser perished in the same holocaust with the

accused. Thus was Isabella de Susan, known as la Hermosa Fembra, avenged by falseness upon the worthless lover who made her by falseness the instrument of her father's ruin.

For herself, when all was over, she sought the refuge of a convent. But she quitted it without professing. The past gave her no peace, and she returned to the world to seek in excesses an oblivion which the cloister denied her and only death could give. In her will she disposed that her skull should be placed over the doorway of the house in the Calle de Ataud, as a measure of posthumous atonement for her sins. And there the fleshless, grinning skull of that once lovely head abode for close upon four hundred years. It was still to be seen there when Buonaparte's legions demolished the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

IV. THE PASTRY-COOK OF MADRIGAL

The Story of the False Sebastian of Portugal

There is not in all that bitter tragi-comic record of human frailty which we call History a sadder story than this of the Princess Anne, the natural daughter of the splendid Don John of Austria, natural son of the Emperor Charles V. and, so, half-brother to the boweless King Philip II. of Spain. Never was woman born to royal or semi-royal state who was more utterly the victim of the circumstances of her birth.

Of the natural sons of princes something could be made, as witness the dazzling career of Anne's own father; but for natural daughters—and especially for one who, like herself, bore a double load of cadency—there was little use or hope. Their royal blood set them in a class apart; their bastardy denied them the worldly advantages of that spurious eminence. Their royal blood prescribed that they must mate with princes; their bastardy raised obstacles to their doing so. Therefore, since the world would seem to hold no worthy place for them, it was expedient to withdraw them from the world before its vanities beglamoured them, and to immure them in convents, where they might aspire with confidence to the sterile dignity of abbesshood.

Thus it befell with Anne. At the early age of six she had been sent to the Benedictine convent at Burgos, and in adolescence removed thence to the Monastery of Santa Maria la Real at Madrigal, where it

was foreordained that she should take the veil. She went unwillingly. She had youth, and youth's hunger of life, and not even the repressive conditions in which she had been reared had succeeded in extinguishing her high spirit or in concealing from her the fact that she was beautiful. On the threshold of that convent which by her dread uncle's will was to be her living tomb, above whose gates her spirit may have beheld the inscription, "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch' entrate!" she made her protest, called upon the bishop who accompanied her to bear witness that she did not go of her own free will.

But what she willed was a matter of no account. King Philip's was, under God's, the only will in Spain. Still, less perhaps to soften the sacrifice imposed upon her than because of what he accounted due to one of his own blood, his Catholic Majesty accorded her certain privileges unusual to members of religious communities: he granted her a little civil list—two ladies-in-waiting and two grooms—and conferred upon her the title of Excellency, which she still retained even when after her hurried novitiate of a single year she had taken the veil. She submitted where to have striven would have been to have spent herself in vain; but her resignation was only of the body, and this dejected body moved mechanically through the tasks and recreations that go to make up the grey monotone of conventual existence; in which one day is as another day, one hour as another hour; in which the seasons of the year lose their significance; in which time has no purpose save for its subdivision into periods devoted to sleeping and waking, to eating and fasting, to praying and contemplating, until life loses all purpose and object, and sterilizes itself into preparation for death.

Though they might command and compel her body, her spirit remained unfettered in rebellion. Anon the claustral apathy might encompass her; in time and by slow degrees she might become absorbed into the grey spirit of the place. But that time was not yet.

For the present she must nourish her caged and starving soul with memories of glimpses caught in passing of the bright, active, stirring world without; and where memory stopped she had now beside her a companion to regale her with tales of high adventure and romantic deeds and knightly feats, which served but to feed and swell her yearnings.

This companion, Frey Miguel de Souza, was a Portuguese friar of the order of St. Augustine, a learned, courtly man who had moved in the great world and spoke with the authority of an eye-witness. And above all he loved to talk of that last romantic King of Portugal, with whom he had been intimate, that high-spirited, headstrong, gallant, fair-haired lad Sebastian, who at the age of four-and-twenty had led the disastrous overseas expedition against the Infidel, which had been shattered on the field of Alcacer-el-Kebir some fifteen years ago.

He loved to paint for her in words the dazzling knightly pageants he had seen along the quays at Lisbon, when that expedition was embarking with crusader ardour, the files of Portuguese knights and men-at-arms, the array of German and Italian mercenaries, the young king in his bright armour, bare of head—an incarnation of St. Michael—moving forward exultantly amid flowers and acclamations to take ship for Africa. And she would listen with parted lips and glistening eyes, her slim body bending forward in her eagerness to miss no word of this great epic. Anon when he came to tell of that disastrous day of Alcacer-el-Kebir, her dark, eager eyes would fill with tears. His tale of it was hardly truthful. He did not say that military incompetence and a presumptuous vanity which would listen to no counsels had been the cause of a ruin that had engulfed the chivalry of Portugal, and finally the very kingdom itself. He represented the defeat as due to the overwhelming numbers of the Infidel, and dwelt at length upon the closing scene, told her in fullest detail how Sebastian had scornfully rejected the counsels of those who urged him to fly when all

was lost, how the young king, who had fought with a lion-hearted courage, unwilling to survive the day's defeat, had turned and ridden back alone into the Saracen host to fight his last fight and find a knightly death. Thereafter he was seen no more.

It was a tale she never tired of hearing, and it moved her more and more deeply each time she listened to it. She would ply him with questions touching this Sebastian, who had been her cousin, concerning his ways of life, his boyhood, and his enactments when he came to the crown of Portugal. And all that Frey Miguel de Souza told her served but to engrave more deeply upon her virgin mind the adorable image of the knightly king. Ever present in the daily thoughts of this ardent girl, his empanoplied figure haunted now her sleep, so real and vivid that her waking senses would dwell fondly upon the dream-figure as upon the memory of someone seen in actual life; likewise she treasured up the memory of the dream—words he had uttered, words it would seem begotten of the longings of her starved and empty heart, words of a kind not calculated to bring peace to the soul of a nun professed. She was enamoured, deeply, fervently, and passionately enamoured of a myth, a mental image of a man who had been dust these fifteen years. She mourned him with a fond widow's mourning; prayed daily and nightly for the repose of his soul, and in her exaltation waited now almost impatiently for death that should unite her with him. Taking joy in the thought that she should go to him a maid, she ceased at last to resent the maidenhood that had been imposed upon her.

One day a sudden, wild thought filled her with a strange excitement.

"Is it so certain that he is dead?" she asked. "When all is said, none actually saw him die, and you tell me that the body surrendered by Mulai-Ahmed-ben-Mahomet was disfigured beyond recognition. Is it not possible that he may have survived?"

The lean, swarthy face of Frey Miguel grew pensive. He did not

impatiently scorn the suggestion as she had half-feared he would.

"In Portugal," he answered slowly, "it is firmly believed that he lives, and that one day he will come, like another Redeemer, to deliver his country from the thrall of Spain."

"Then... then..."

Wistfully, he smiled. "A people will always believe what it wishes to believe."

"But you, yourself?" she pressed him.

He did not answer her at once. The cloud of thought deepened on his ascetic face. He half turned from her—they were standing in the shadow of the fretted cloisters—and his pensive eyes roamed over the wide quadrangle that was at once the convent garden and burial ground. Out there in the sunshine amid the hum of invisible but ubiquitously pulsating life, three nuns, young and vigorous, their arms bared to the elbows, the skirts of their black habits shortened by a cincture of rope, revealing feet roughly shod in wood, were at work with spade and mattock, digging their own graves in memento mori. Amid the shadows of the cloisters, within sight but beyond earshot, hovered Dona Maria de Grado and Dona Luiza Nieto, the two nobly-born nuns appointed by King Philip to an office as nearly akin to that of ladies-in-waiting as claustral conditions would permit.

At length Frey Miguel seemed to resolve himself.

"Since you ask me, why should I not tell you? When I was on my way to preach the funeral oration in the Cathedral at Lisbon, as befitted one who had been Don Sebastian's preacher, I was warned by a person of eminence to have a care of what I said of Don Sebastian, for not only was he alive, but he would be secretly present at the Requiem."

He met her dilating glance, noted the quivering of her parted lips.

"But that," he added, "was fifteen years ago, and since then I have had no sign. At first I thought it possible... there was a story afloat that might have been true... But fifteen years!" He sighed, and shook his head.

"What... what was the story?" She was trembling from head to foot.

"On the night after the battle three horsemen rode up to the gates of the fortified coast-town of Arzilla. When the timid guard refused to open to them, they announced that one of them was King Sebastian, and so won admittance. One of the three was wrapped in a cloak, his face concealed, and his two companions were observed to show him the deference due to royalty."

"Why, then..." she was beginning.

"Ah, but afterwards," he interrupted her, "afterwards, when all Portugal was thrown into commotion by that tale, it was denied that King Sebastian had been among these horsemen. It was affirmed to have been no more than a ruse of those men's to gain the shelter of the city."

She questioned and cross-questioned him upon that, seeking to draw from him the admission that it was possible denial and explanation obeyed the wishes of the hidden prince.

"Yes, it is possible," he admitted at length, "and it is believed by many to be the fact. Don Sebastian was as sensitive as high-spirited. The shame of his defeat may have hung so heavily upon him that he preferred to remain in hiding, and to sacrifice a throne of which he now felt himself unworthy. Half Portugal believes it so, and waits and hopes."

When Frey Miguel parted from her that day, he took with him the clear

conviction that not in all Portugal was there a soul who hoped more fervently than she that Don Sebastian lived, or yearned more passionately to acclaim him should he show himself. And that was much to think, for the yearning of Portugal was as the yearning of the slave for freedom.

Sebastian's mother was King Philip's sister, whereby King Philip had claimed the succession, and taken possession of the throne of Portugal. Portugal writhed under the oppressive heel of that foreign rule, and Frey Miguel de Sousa himself, a deeply, passionately patriotic man, had been foremost among those who had sought to liberate her. When Don Antonio, the sometime Prior of Crato, Sebastian's natural cousin, and a bold, ambitious, enterprising man, had raised the standard of revolt, the friar had been the most active of all his coadjutors. In those days Frey Miguel, who was the Provincial of his order, a man widely renowned for his learning and experience of affairs, who had been preacher to Don Sebastian and confessor to Don Antonio, had wielded a vast influence in Portugal. That influence he had unstintingly exerted on behalf of the Pretender, to whom he was profoundly devoted. After Don Antonio's army had been defeated on land by the Duke of Alba, and his fleet shattered in the Azores in 1582 by the Marquis of Santa Cruz, Frey Miguel found himself deeply compromised by his active share in the rebellion. He was arrested and suffered a long imprisonment in Spain. In the end, because he expressed repentance, and because Philip II., aware of the man's gifts and worth, desired to attach him to himself by gratitude, he was enlarged, and appointed Vicar of Santa Maria la Real, where he was now become confessor, counsellor and confidant of the Princess Anne of Austria.

But his gratitude to King Philip was not of a kind to change his nature, to extinguish his devotion to the Pretender, Don Antonio—who, restlessly ambitious, continued ceaselessly to plot abroad—or yet to abate the fervour of his patriotism. The dream of his life was ever the

independence of Portugal, with a native prince upon the throne. And because of Anne's fervent hope, a hope that grew almost daily into conviction, that Sebastian had survived and would return one day to claim his kingdom, those two at Madrigal, in that quiet eddy of the great stream of life, were drawn more closely to each other.

But as the years passed, and Anne's prayers remained unanswered and the deliverer did not come, her hopes began to fade again. Gradually she reverted to her earlier frame of mind in which all hopes were set upon a reunion with the unknown beloved in the world to come.

One evening in the spring of 1594—four years after the name of Sebastian had first passed between the priest and the princess—Frey Miguel was walking down the main street of Madrigal, a village whose every inhabitant was known to him, when he came suddenly face to face with a stranger. A stranger would in any case have drawn his attention, but there was about this man something familiar to the friar, something that stirred in him vague memories of things long forgotten. His garb of shabby black was that of a common townsman, but there was something in his air and glance, his soldierly carriage, and the tilt of his bearded chin, that belied his garb. He bore upon his person the stamp of intrepidity and assurance.

Both halted, each staring at the other, a faint smile on the lips of the stranger—who, in the fading light, might have been of any age from thirty to fifty—a puzzled frown upon the brow of the friar. Then the man swept off his broad-brimmed hat.

"God save your paternity," was his greeting.

"God save you, my son," replied Frey Miguel, still pondering him. "I seem to know you. Do I?"

The stranger laughed. "Though all the world forget, your paternity

should remember me."

And then Frey Miguel sucked in his breath sharply. "My God!" he cried, and set a hand upon the fellow's shoulder, looking deeply into those bold, grey eyes. "What make you here?"

"I am a pastry-cook."

"A pastry-cook? You?"

"One must live, and it is a more honest trade than most. I was in Valladolid, when I heard that your paternity was the Vicar of the Convent here, and so for the sake of old times—of happier times—I bethought me that I might claim your paternity's support." He spoke with a careless arrogance, half-tinged with mockery.

"Assuredly..." began the priest, and then he checked. "Where is your shop?"

"Just down the street. Will your paternity honour me?"

Frey Miguel bowed, and together they departed.

For three days thereafter the convent saw the friar only in the celebration of the Mass. But on the morning of the fourth, he went straight from the sacristy to the parlour, and, despite the early hour, desired to see her Excellency.

"Lady," he told her, "I have great news; news that will rejoice your heart." She looked at him, and saw the feverish glitter in his sunken eyes, the hectic flush on his prominent cheek-bones. "Don Sebastian lives. I have seen him."

A moment she stared at him as if she did not understand. Then she paled until her face became as white as the nun's coil upon her brow; her breath came in a faint moan, she stiffened, and swayed upon her feet, and caught at the back of a prie-dieu to steady and save herself

from falling. He saw that he had blundered by his abruptness, that he had failed to gauge the full depth of her feelings for the Hidden Prince, and for a moment feared that she would swoon under the shock of the news he had so recklessly delivered.

"What do you say? Oh, what do you say?" she moaned, her eyes half-closed.

He repeated the news in more measured, careful terms, exerting all the magnetism of his will to sustain her reeling senses. Gradually she quelled the storm of her emotions.

"And you say that you have seen him? Oh!" Once more the colour suffused her cheeks, and her eyes glowed, her expression became radiant. "Where is he?"

"Here. Here in Madrigal."

"In Madrigal?" She was all amazement. "But why in Madrigal?"

"He was in Valladolid, and there heard that I—his sometime preacher and counsellor—was Vicar here at Santa Maria la Real. He came to seek me. He comes disguised, under the false name of Gabriel de Espinosa, and setting up as a pastry-cook until his term of penance shall be completed, and he shall be free to disclose himself once more to his impatiently awaiting people."

It was bewildering, intoxicating news to her. It set her mind in turmoil, made of her soul a battle-ground for mad hope and dreadful fear. This dream-prince, who for four years had been the constant companion of her thoughts, whom her exalted, ardent, imaginative, starved Soul had come to love with a consuming passion, was a living reality near at hand, to be seen in the flesh by the eyes of her body. It was a thought that set her in an ecstasy of terror, so that she dared not ask Frey Miguel to bring Don Sebastian to her. But she plied him with questions, and so elicited from him a very circumstantial story.

Sebastian, after his defeat and escape, had made a vow upon the Holy Sepulchre to lay aside the royal dignity of which he deemed that he had proved himself unworthy, and to do penance for the pride that had brought him down, by roaming the world in humble guise, earning his bread by the labour of his hands and the sweat of his brow like any common hind, until he should have purged his offense and rendered himself worthy once more to resume the estate to which he had been born.

It was a tale that moved her pity to the point of tears. It exalted her hero even beyond the eminence he had already held in her fond dreams, particularly when to that general outline were added in the days that followed details of the wanderings and sufferings of the Hidden Prince. At last, some few weeks after that first startling announcement of his presence, in the early days of August of that year 1594, Frey Miguel proposed to her the thing she most desired, yet dared not beg.

"I have told His Majesty of your attachment to his memory in all these years in which we thought him dead, and he is deeply touched. He desires your leave to come and prostrate himself at your feet."

She crimsoned from brow to chin, then paled again; her bosom heaved in tumult. Between dread and yearning she spoke a faint consent.

Next day he came, brought by Frey Miguel to the convent parlour, where her Excellency waited, her two attendant nuns discreetly in the background. Her eager, frightened eyes beheld a man of middle height, dignified of mien and carriage, dressed with extreme simplicity, yet without the shabbiness in which Frey Miguel had first discovered him.

His hair was of a light brown—the colour to which the golden locks of the boy who had sailed for Africa some fifteen years ago might well

have faded—his beard of an auburn tint, and his eyes were grey. His face was handsome, and save for the colour of his eyes and the high arch of his nose presented none of the distinguishing and marring features peculiar to the House of Austria, from which Don Sebastian derived through his mother.

Hat in hand, he came forward, and went down on one knee before her.

"I am here to receive your Excellency's commands," he said.

She steadied her shuddering knees and trembling lips.

"Are you Gabriel de Espinosa, who has come to Madrigal to set up as a pastry-cook?" she asked him.

"To serve your Excellency."

"Then be welcome, though I am sure that the trade you least understand is that of a pastry-cook."

The kneeling man bowed his handsome head, and fetched a deep sigh.

"If in the past I had better understood another trade, I should not now be reduced to following this one."

She urged him now to rise, hereafter the entertainment between them was very brief on that first occasion. He departed upon a promise to come soon again, and the undertaking on her side to procure for his shop the patronage of the convent.

Thereafter it became his custom to attend the morning Mass celebrated by Frey Miguel in the convent chapel—which was open to the public—and afterwards to seek the friar in the sacristy and accompany him thence to the convent parlour, where the Princess waited, usually with one or another of her attendant nuns. These daily

interviews were brief at first, but gradually they lengthened until they came to consume the hours to dinner-time, and presently even that did not suffice, and Sebastian must come again later in the day.

And as the interviews increased and lengthened, so they grew also in intimacy between the royal pair, and plans for Sebastian's future came to be discussed. She urged him to proclaim himself. His penance had been overlong already for what was really no fault at all, since it is the heart rather than the deed that Heaven judges, and his heart had been pure, his intention in making war upon the Infidel loftily pious. Diffidently he admitted that it might be so, but both he and Frey Miguel were of opinion that it would be wiser now to await the death of Philip II., which, considering his years and infirmities, could not be long delayed. Out of jealousy for his possessions, King Philip might oppose Sebastian's claims.

Meanwhile these daily visits of Espinosa's, and the long hours he spent in Anne's company gave, as was inevitable, rise to scandal, within and without the convent. She was a nun professed, interdicted from seeing any man but her confessor other than through the parlour grating, and even then not at such length or with such constancy as this. The intimacy between them—fostered and furthered by Frey Miguel—had so ripened in a few weeks that Anne was justified in looking upon him as her saviour from the living tomb to which she had been condemned, in hoping that he would restore her to the life and liberty for which she had ever yearned by taking her to Queen when his time came to claim his own. What if she was a nun professed? Her profession had been against her will, preceded by only one year of novitiate, and she was still within the five probationary years prescribed. Therefore, in her view, her vows were revocable.

But this was a matter beyond the general consideration or knowledge, and so the scandal grew. Within the convent there was none bold enough, considering Anne's royal rank, to offer

remonstrance or advice, particularly too, considering that her behaviour had the sanction of Frey Miguel, the convent's spiritual adviser. But from without, from the Provincial of the Order of St. Augustine, came at last a letter to Anne, respectfully stern in tone, to inform her that the numerous visits she received from a pastry-cook were giving rise to talk, for which it would be wise to cease to give occasion. That recommendation scorched her proud, sensitive soul with shame. She sent her servant Roderos at once to fetch Frey Miguel, and placed the letter in his hands.

The friar's dark eyes scanned it and grew troubled.

"It was to have been feared," he said, and sighed.

"There is but one remedy, lest worse follow and all be ruined. Don Sebastian must go."

"Go?" Fear robbed her of breath. "Go where?"

"Away from Madrigal—anywhere—and at once; tomorrow at latest." And then, seeing the look of horror in her face, "What else, what else?" he added, impatiently. "This meddlesome provincial may be stirring up trouble already."

She fought down her emotion. "I... I shall see him before he goes?" she begged.

"I don't know. It may not be wise. I must consider." He flung away in deepest perturbation, leaving her with a sense that life was slipping from her.

That late September evening, as she sat stricken in her room, hoping against hope for at least another glimpse of him, Dona Maria de Grado brought word that Espinosa was even then in the convent in Frey Miguel's cell. Fearful lest he should be smuggled thence without her seeing him, And careless of the impropriety of the hour—it was

already eight o'clock and dusk was falling—she at once dispatched Roderos to the friar, bidding him bring Espinosa to her in the parlour.

The friar obeyed, and the lovers—they were no less by now—came face to face in anguish.

"My lord, my lord," she cried, casting all prudence to the winds, "what is decided?"

"That I leave in the morning," he answered.

"To go where?" She was distraught.

"Where?" He shrugged. "To Valladolid at first, and then... where God pleases."

"And when shall I see you again?"

"When... when God pleases."

"Oh, I am terrified... if I should lose you... if I should never see you more!" She was panting, distraught.

"Nay, lady, nay," he answered. "I shall come for you when the time is ripe. I shall return by All Saints, or by Christmas at the latest, and I shall bring with me one who will avouch me."

"What need any to avouch you to me?" she protested, on a note of fierceness. "We belong to each other, you and I. But you are free to roam the world, and I am caged here and helpless..."

"Ah, but I shall free you soon, and we'll go hence together. See." He stepped to the table. There was an ink-horn, a box of pounce, some quills, and a sheaf of paper there. He took up a quill, and wrote with labour, for princes are notoriously poor scholars:

"I, Don Sebastian, by the Grace of God King of Portugal, take to wife the most serene Dona ulna of Austria, daughter of the most serene

Prince, Don John of Austria, by virtue of the dispensation which I hold from two pontiffs."

And he signed it—after the manner of the Kings of Portugal in all ages—"El Rey"—the King.

"Will that content you, lady?" he pleaded, handing it to her.

"How shall this scrawl content me?"

"It is a bond I shall redeem as soon as Heaven will permit."

Thereafter she fell to weeping, and he to protesting, until Frey Miguel urged him to depart, as it grew late. And then she forgot her own grief, and became all solicitude for him, until naught would content her but she must empty into his hands her little store of treasure—a hundred ducats and such jewels as she possessed, including a gold watch set with diamonds and a ring bearing a cameo portrait of King Philip, and last of all a portrait of herself, of the size of a playing-card.

At last, as ten was striking, he was hurried away. Frey Miguel had gone on his knees to him, and kissed his hand, what time he had passionately urged him not to linger; and then Sebastian had done the same by the Princess both weeping now. At last he was gone, and on the arm of Dona Maria de Grado the forlorn Anne staggered back to her cell to weep and pray.

In the days that followed she moved, pale and listless, oppressed by her sense of loss and desolation, a desolation which at last she sought to mitigate by writing to him to Valladolid, whither he had repaired. Of all those letters only two survive.

"My king and lord," she wrote in one of these, "alas! How we suffer by absence! I am so filled with the pain of it that if I did not seek the relief of writing to your Majesty and thus spend some moments in communion with you, there would be an end to me. What I feel to-day

is what I feel every day when I recall the happy moments sodeliciously spent, which are no more. This privation is for me so severe a punishment of heaven that I should call it unjust, for without cause I find myself deprived of the happiness missed by me for so many years and purchased at the price of suffering and tears. Ah, my lord, how willingly, nevertheless, would I not suffer all over again the misfortunes that have crushed me if thus I might spare your Majesty the least of them. May He who rules the world grant my prayers and set a term to so great an unhappiness, and to the intolerable torment I suffer through being deprived of the presence of your Majesty. It were impossible for long to suffer so much pain and live.

"I belong to you, my lord; you know it already. The troth I plighted to you I shall keep in life and in death, for death itself could not tear it from my soul, and this immortal soul will harbour it through eternity..."

Thus and much more in the same manner wrote the niece of King Philip of Spain to Gabriel Espinosa, the pastry-cook, in his Valladolid retreat. How he filled his days we do not know, beyond the fact that he moved freely abroad. For it was in the streets of that town that meddlesome Fate brought him face to face one day with Gregorio Gonzales, under whom Espinosa had been a scullion once in the service of the Count of Nyeba.

Gregorio hailed him, staring round-eyed; for although Espinosa's garments were not in their first freshness they were far from being those of a plebeian.

"In whose service may you be now?" quoth the intrigued Gregorio, so soon as greetings had passed between them.

Espinosa shook off his momentary embarrassment, and took the hand of his sometime comrade. "Times are changed, friend Gregorio. I am not in anybody's service, rather do I require servants myself."

"Why, what is your present situation?"

Loftily Espinosa put him off. "No matter for that," he answered, with a dignity that forbade further questions. He gathered his cloak about him to proceed upon his way. "If there is anything you wish for I shall be happy, for old times' sake, to oblige you."

But Gregorio was by no means disposed to part from him. We do not readily part from an old friend whom we rediscover in an unsuspected state of affluence. Espinosa must home with Gregorio. Gregorio's wife would be charmed to renew his acquaintance, and to hear from his own lips of his improved and prosperous state. Gregorio would take no refusal, and in the end Espinosa, yielding to his insistence, went with him to the sordid quarter where Gregorio had his dwelling.

About an unclean table of pine, in a squalid room, sat the three—Espinosa, Gregorio, and Gregorio's wife; but the latter displayed none of the signs of satisfaction at Espinosa's prosperity which Gregorio had promised. Perhaps Espinosa observed her evil envy, and it may have been to nourish it—which is the surest way to punish envy—that he made Gregorio a magnificent offer of employment.

"Enter my service," said he, "and I will pay you fifty ducats down and four ducats a month."

Obviously they were incredulous of his affluence. To convince them he displayed a gold watch—most rare possession—set with diamonds, a ring of price, and other costly jewels. The couple stared now with dazzled eyes.

"But didn't you tell me when we were in Madrid together that you had been a pastry-cook at Ocana?" burst from Gregorio.

Espinosa smiled. "How many kings and princes have been compelled to conceal themselves under disguises?" he asked oracularly. And seeing them stricken, he must play upon them further.

Nothing, it seems, was sacred to him—not even the portrait of that lovely, desolate royal lady in her convent at Madrigal. Forth he plucked it, and thrust it to them across the stains of wine and oil that befouled their table.

"Look at this beautiful lady, the most beautiful in Spain," he bade them. "A prince could not have a lovelier bride."

"But she is dressed as a nun," the woman protested. "How, then, can she marry?"

"For kings there are no laws," he told her with finality.

At last he departed, but bidding Gregorio to think of the offer he had made him. He would come again for the cook's reply, leaving word meanwhile of where he was lodged.

They deemed him mad, and were disposed to be derisive. Yet the woman's disbelief was quickened into malevolence by the jealous fear that what he had told them of himself might, after all, be true. Upon that malevolence she acted forthwith, lodging an information with Don Rodrigo de Santillan, the Alcalde of Valladolid.

Very late that night Espinosa was roused from his sleep to find his room invaded by alguaziles—the police of the Alcalde. He was arrested and dragged before Don Rodrigo to give an account of himself and of certain objects of value found in his possession—more particularly of a ring, on the cameo of which was carved a portrait of King Philip.

"I am Gabriel de Espinosa," he answered firmly, "a pastry-cook of Madrigal."

"Then how come you by these jewels?"

"They were given me by Dona Ana of Austria to sell for her account. That is the business that has brought me to Valladolid."

"Is this Dona Ana's portrait?"

"It is."

"And this lock of hair? Is that also Dona Ana's? And do you, then, pretend that these were also given you to sell?"

"Why else should they be given me?"

Don Rodrigo wondered. They were useless things to steal, and as for the lock of hair, where should the fellow find a buyer for that? The Alcalde conned his man more closely, and noted that dignity of bearing, that calm assurance which usually is founded upon birth and worth. He sent him to wait in prison, what time he went to ransack the fellow's house in Madrigal.

Don Rodrigo was prompt in acting; yet even so his prisoner mysteriously found means to send a warning that enabled Frey Miguel to forestall the Alcalde. Before Don Rodrigo's arrival, the friar had abstracted from Espinosa's house a box of papers which he reduced to ashes. Unfortunately Espinosa had been careless. Four letters not confided to the box were discovered by the alguaziles. Two of them were from Anne—one of which supplies the extract I have given; the other two from Frey Miguel himself.

Those letters startled Don Rodrigo de Santillan. He was a shrewd reasoner and well-informed. He knew how the justice of Castile was kept on the alert by the persistent plottings of the Portuguese Pretender, Don Antonio, sometime Prior of Crato. He was intimate with the past life of Frey Miguel, knew his self-sacrificing patriotism and passionate devotion to the cause of Don Antonio, remembered the firm dignity of his prisoner, and leapt at a justifiable conclusion. The man in his hands—the man whom the Princess Anne addressed in such passionate terms by the title of Majesty—was the Prior of Crato. He conceived that he had stumbled here upon something

grave and dangerous. He ordered the arrest of Frey Miguel, and then proceeded to visit Dona Ana at the convent. His methods were crafty, and depended upon the effect of surprise. He opened the interview by holding up before her one of the letters he had found, asking her if she acknowledged it for her own.

She stared a moment panic-stricken; then snatched it from his hands, tore it across, and would have torn again, but that he caught her wrists in a grip of iron to prevent her, with little regard in that moment for the blood royal in her veins. King Philip was a stern master, pitiless to blunderers, and Don Rodrigo knew he never would be forgiven did he suffer that precious letter to be destroyed.

Overpowered in body and in spirit, she surrendered the fragments and confessed the letter her own.

"What is the real name of this man, who calls himself a pastry-cook, and to whom you write in such terms as these?" quoth the magistrate.

"He is Don Sebastian, King of Portugal." And to that declaration she added briefly the story of his escape from Alcacer-el-Kebir and subsequent penitential wanderings.

Don Rodrigo departed, not knowing what to think or believe, but convinced that it was time he laid the whole matter before King Philip. His Catholic Majesty was deeply perturbed. He at once dispatched Don Juan de Llano, the Apostolic Commissary of the Holy Office to Madrigal to sift the matter, and ordered that Anne should be solitarily confined in her cell, and her nuns-in-waiting and servants placed under arrest.

Espinosa, for greater security, was sent from Valladolid to the prison of Medina del Campo. He was taken thither in a coach with an escort of arquebusiers.

"Why convey a poor pastry-cook with so much honour?" he asked his

guards, half-mockingly.

Within the coach he was accompanied by a soldier named Cervatos, a travelled man, who fell into talk with him, and discovered that he spoke both French and German fluently. But when Cervatos addressed him in Portuguese the prisoner seemed confused, and replied that although he had been in Portugal, he could not speak the language.

Thereafter, throughout that winter, examinations of the three chief prisoners—Espinosa, Frey Miguel, and the Princess Anne—succeeded one another with a wearisome monotony of results. The Apostolic Commissary interrogated the princess and Frey Miguel; Don Rodrigo conducted the examinations of Espinosa. But nothing was elicited that took the matter forward or tended to dispel its mystery.

The princess replied with a candour that became more and more tinged with indignation under the persistent and at times insulting interrogatories. She insisted that the prisoner was Don Sebastian, and wrote passionate letters to Espinosa, begging him for her honour's sake to proclaim himself what he really was, declaring to him that the time had come to cast off all disguise.

Yet the prisoner, unmoved by these appeals, persisted that he was Gabriel de Espinosa, a pastry-cook. But the man's bearing, and the air of mystery cloaking him, seemed in themselves to belie that asseveration. That he could not be the Prior of Crato, Don Rodrigo had now assured himself. He fenced skilfully under exurnation, ever evading the magistrate's practiced point when it sought to pin him, and he was no less careful to say nothing that should incriminate either of the other two prisoners. He denied that he had ever given himself out to be Don Sebastian, though he admitted that Frey Miguel and the princess had persuaded themselves that he was that lost prince.

He pleaded ignorance when asked who were his parents, stating that he had never known either of them—an answer this which would have fitted the case of Don Sebastian, who was born after his father's death, and quitted in early infancy by his mother.

As for Frey Miguel, he stated boldly under examination the conviction that Don Sebastian had survived the African expedition, and the belief that Espinosa might well be the missing monarch. He protested that he had acted in good faith throughout, and without any thought of disloyalty to the King of Spain.

Late one night, after he had been some three months in prison, Espinosa was roused from sleep by an unexpected visit from the Alcalde. At once he would have risen and dressed.

"Nay," said Don Rodrigo, restraining him, "that is not necessary for what is intended."

It was a dark phrase which the prisoner, sitting up in bed with tousled hair, and blinking in the light of the torches, instantly interpreted into a threat of torture. His face grew white.

"It is impossible," he protested. "The King cannot have ordered what you suggest. His Majesty will take into account that I am a man of honour. He may require my death, but in an honourable manner, and not upon the rack. And as for its being used to make me speak, I have nothing to add to what I have said already."

The stern, dark face of the Alcalde was overspread by a grim smile.

"I would have you remark that you fall into contradictions. Sometimes you pretend to be of humble and lowly origin, and sometimes a person of honourable degree. To hear you at this moment one might suppose that to submit you to torture would be to outrage your dignity. What then..."

Don Rodrigo broke off suddenly to stare, then snatched a torch from the hand of his alguaziles and held it close to the face of the prisoner, who cowered now, knowing full well what it was the Alcalde had detected. In that strong light Don Rodrigo saw that the prisoner's hair and beard had turned grey at the roots, and so received the last proof that he had to do with the basest of impostures. The fellow had been using dyes, the supply of which had been cut short by his imprisonment. Don Rodrigo departed well-satisfied with the results of that surprise visit.

Thereafter Espinosa immediately shaved himself. But it was too late, and even so, before many weeks were past his hair had faded to its natural grey, and he presented the appearance of what in fact he was—a man of sixty, or thereabouts.

Yet the torture to which he was presently submitted drew nothing from him that could explain all that yet remained obscure. It was from Frey Miguel, after a thousand prevarications and tergiversations, that the full truth—known to himself alone—was extracted by the rack.

He confessed that, inspired by the love of country and the ardent desire to liberate Portugal from the Spanish yoke, he had never abandoned the hope of achieving this, and of placing Don Antonio, the Prior of Crato, on the throne of his ancestors. He had devised a plan, primarily inspired by the ardent nature of the Princess Anne and her impatience of the conventual life. It was while casting about for the chief instrument that he fortuitously met Espinosa in the streets of Madrigal. Espinosa had been a soldier, and had seen the world. During the war between Spain and Portugal he had served in the armies of King Philip, had befriended Frey Miguel when the friar's convent was on the point of being invaded by soldiery, and had rescued him from the peril of it. Thus they had become acquainted, and Frey Miguel had had an instance of the man's resource and courage. Further, he was of the height of Don Sebastian and of the

build to which the king might have grown in the years that were sped, and he presented other superficial resemblances to the late king. The colour of his hair and beard could be corrected; and he might be made to play the part of the Hidden Prince for whose return Portugal was waiting so passionately and confidently. There had been other impostors aforetime, but they had lacked the endowments of Espinosa, and their origins could be traced without difficulty. In addition to these natural endowments, Espinosa should be avouched by Frey Miguel than whom nobody in the world was better qualified in such a matter—and by the niece of King Philip, to whom he would be married when he raised his standard. It was arranged that the three should go to Paris so soon as the arrangements were complete, where the Pretender would be accredited by the exiled friends of Don Antonio residing there—the Prior of Crato being a party to the plot. From France Frey Miguel would have worked in Portugal through his agents, and presently would have gone there himself to stir up a national movement in favour of a pretender so fully accredited. Thus he had every hope of restoring Portugal to her independence. Once this should have been accomplished, Don Antonio would appear in Lisbon, unmask the impostor, and himself assume the crown of the kingdom which had been forcibly and definitely wrenched from Spain.

That was the crafty plan which the priest had laid with a singleness of aim and a detachment from minor considerations that never hesitated to sacrifice the princess, together with the chief instrument of the intrigue. Was the liberation of a kingdom, the deliverance of a nation from servitude, the happiness of a whole people, to weigh in the balance against the fates of a natural daughter of Don John of Austria and a soldier of fortune turned pastry-cook? Frey Miguel thought not, and his plot might well have succeeded but for the base strain in Espinosa and the man's overweening vanity, which had urged him to dazzle the Gonzales at Valladolid. That vanity sustained him to the end, which he suffered in October of 1595, a full year after his arrest. To the last he avoided admissions that should throw light upon his

obscure identity and origin.

"If it were known who I am..." he would say, and there break off.

He was hanged, drawn and quartered, and he endured his fate with calm fortitude. Frey Miguel suffered in the same way with the like dignity, after having undergone degradation from his priestly dignity.

As for the unfortunate Princess Anne, crushed under a load of shame and humiliation, she had gone to her punishment in the previous July. The Apostolic Commissary notified her of the sentence which King Philip had confirmed. She was to be transferred to another convent, there to undergo a term of four years' solitary confinement in her cell, and to fast on bread and water every Friday. She was pronounced incapable of ever holding any office, and was to be treated on the expiry of her term as an ordinary nun, her civil list abolished, her title of Excellency to be extinguished, together with all other honours and privileges conferred upon her by King Philip.

The piteous letters of supplication that she addressed to the King, her uncle, still exist. But they left the cold, implacable Philip of Spain unmoved. Her only sin was that, yielding to the hunger of her starved heart, and chafing under the ascetic life imposed upon her, she had allowed herself to be fascinated by the prospect of becoming the protectress of one whom she believed to be an unfortunate and romantic prince, and of exchanging her convent for a throne.

Her punishment—poor soul—endured for close upon forty years, but the most terrible part of it was not that which lay within the prescription of King Philip, but that which arose from her own broken and humiliated spirit. She had been uplifted a moment by a glorious hope, to be cast down again into the blackest despair, to which a shame unspeakable and a tortured pride were added.

Than hers, as I have said, there is in history no sadder story.

V. THE END OF THE "VERT GALANT"

The Assassination of Henry IV

In the year 1609 died the last Duke of Cleves, and King Henry IV. of France and Navarre fell in love with Charlotte de Montmorency.

In their conjunction these two events were to influence the destinies of Europe. In themselves they were trivial enough, since it was as much a commonplace that an old gentleman should die as that Henry of Bearn should fall in love. Love had been the main relaxation of his otherwise strenuous life, and neither the advancing years—he was fifty-six at this date—nor the recriminations of Maria de' Medici, his long-suffering Florentine wife, sufficed to curb his zest.

Possibly there may have been a husband more unfaithful than King Henry; probably there was not. His gallantries were outrageous, his taste in women catholic, and his illegitimate progeny outnumbered that of his grandson, the English sultan Charles II. He differs, however, from the latter in that he was not quite as Oriental in the manner of his self-indulgence. Charles, by comparison, was a mere dullard who turned Whitehall into a seraglio. Henry preferred the romantic manner, the high adventure, and knew how to be gallant in two senses.

This gallantry of his is not, perhaps, seen to best advantage in the affair of Charlotte de Montmorency To begin with he was, as I have said, in his fifty-sixth year, an age at which it is difficult, without being ridiculous, to unbridle a passion for a girl of twenty. Unfortunately for

him, Charlotte does not appear to have found him so. On the contrary, her lovely, empty head was so turned by the flattery of his addresses, that she came to reciprocate the passion she inspired.

Her family had proposed to marry her to the gay and witty Marshal de Bassompierre; and although his heart was not at all engaged, the marshal found the match extremely suitable, and was willing enough, until the King declared himself. Henry used the most impudent frankness.

"Bassompierre, I will speak to you as a friend," said he. "I am in love, and desperately in love, with Mademoiselle de Montmorency. If you should marry her I should hate you. If she should love me you would hate me. A breach of our friendship would desolate me, for I love you with sincere affection."

That was enough for Bassompierre. He had no mind to go further with a marriage of convenience which in the sequel would most probably give him to choose between assuming the ridiculous role of a complacent husband and being involved in a feud with his prince. He said as much, and thanked the King for his frankness, whereupon Henry, liking him more than ever for his good sense, further opened his mind to him.

"I am thinking of marrying her to my nephew, Conde. Thus I shall have her in my family to be the comfort of my old age, which is coming on. Conde, who thinks of nothing but hunting, shall have a hundred thousand livres a year with which to amuse himself."

Bassompierre understood perfectly the kind of bargain that was in Henry's mind. As for the Prince de Conde, he appears to have been less acute, no doubt because his vision was dazzled by the prospect of a hundred thousand livres a year. So desperately poor was he that for half that sum he would have taken Lucifer's own daughter to wife, without stopping to consider the disadvantages it might entail.

The marriage was quietly celebrated at Chantilly in February of 1609. Trouble followed fast. Not only did Conde perceive at last precisely what was expected of him, and indignantly rebel against it, but the Queen, too, was carefully instructed in the matter by Concino Concini and his wife Leonora Galigai, the ambitious adventurers who had come from Florence in her train, and who saw in the King's weakness their own opportunity.

The scandal that ensued was appalling. Never before had the relations between Henry and his queen been strained so nearly to breaking-point. And then, whilst the trouble of Henry's own making was growing about him until it threatened to overwhelm him, he received a letter from Vaucelas, his ambassador at Madrid, containing revelations that changed his annoyance into stark apprehension.

When the last Duke of Cleves died a few months before, "leaving all the world his heirs"—to use Henry's own phrase—the Emperor had stepped in, and over-riding the rights of certain German princes had bestowed the fief upon his own nephew, the Archduke Leopold. Now this was an arrangement that did not suit Henry's policy at all, and being then—as the result of a wise husbanding of resources—the most powerful prince in Europe, Henry was not likely to submit tamely to arrangements that did not suit him. His instructions to Vaucelas were to keep open the difference between France and the House of Austria arising out of this matter of Cleves. All Europe knew that Henry desired to marry the Dauphin to the heiress of Lorraine, so that this State might one day be united with France; and it was partly to support this claim that he was now disposed to attach the German princes to his interests.

Yet what Vaucelas told him in that letter was that certain agents at the court of Spain, chief among whom was the Florentine ambassador, acting upon instructions from certain members of the household of the

Queen of France, and from others whom Vaucelas said he dared not mention, were intriguing to blast Henry's designs against the house of Austria, and to bring him willy-nilly into a union with Spain. These agents had gone so far in their utter disregard of Henry's own intentions as to propose to the Council of Madrid that the alliance should be cemented by a marriage between the Dauphin and the Infanta.

That letter sent Henry early one morning hot-foot to the Arsenal, where Sully, his Minister of State, had his residence. Maximilien de Bethune, Duke of Sully, was not merely the King's servant, he was his closest friend, the very keeper of his soul; and the King leaned upon him and sought his guidance not only in State affairs, but in the most intimate and domestic matters. Often already had it fallen to Sully to patch up the differences created between husband and wife by Henry's persistent infidelities.

The King, arriving like the whirlwind, turned everybody out of the closet in which the duke—but newly risen—received him in bed-gown and night-cap. Alone with his minister, Henry came abruptly to the matter.

"You have heard what is being said of me?" he burst out. He stood with his back to the window, a sturdy, erect, soldierly figure, a little above the middle height, dressed like a captain of fortune in jerkin and long boots of grey leather, and a grey hat with a wine-coloured ostrich plume. His countenance matched his raiment. Keeneyed, broad of brow, with a high-bridged, pendulous nose, red lips, a tuft of beard and a pair of grizzled, bristling moustachios, he looked half-hero, half-satyr; half-Captain, half-Polichinelle.

Sully, tall and broad, the incarnation of respectability and dignity, despite bed-gown and slippers and the nightcap covering his high, bald crown, made no presence of misunderstanding him.

"Of you and the Princesse de Conde, you mean, sire?" quoth he, and gravely he shook his head. "It is a matter that has filled me with apprehension, for I foresee from it far greater trouble than from any former attachment of yours."

"So they have convinced you, too, Grand-Master?" Henry's tone was almost sorrowful. "Yet I swear that all is greatly exaggerated. It is the work of that dog Concini. Ventre St. Gris! If he has no respect for me, at least he might consider how he slanders a child of such grace and wit and beauty, a lady of her high birth and noble lineage."

There was a dangerous quiver of emotion in his voice that was not missed by the keen ears of Sully. Henry moved from the window, and flung into a chair.

"Concini works to enrage the Queen against me, and to drive her to take violent resolutions which might give colour to their pernicious designs."

"Sire!" It was a cry of protest from Sully.

Henry laughed grimly at his minister's incredulity, and plucked forth the letter from Vaucelas.

"Read that."

Sully read, and, aghast at what the letter told him, ejaculated: "They must be mad!"

"Oh, no," said the King. "They are not mad. They are most wickedly sane, which is why their designs fill me with apprehension. What do you infer, Grand-Master, from such deliberate plots against resolutions from which they know that nothing can turn me while I have life?"

"What can I infer?" quoth Sully, aghast.

"In acting thus—in daring to act thus," the King expounded, "they proceed as if they knew that I can have but a short time to live."

"Sire!"

"What else? They plan events which cannot take place until I am dead."

Sully stared at his master for a long moment, in stupefied silence, his loyal Huguenot soul refusing to discount by flattery the truth that he perceived.

"Sire," he said at last, bowing his fine head, "you must take your measures."

"Ay, but against whom? Who are these that Vaucelas says he dare not name? Can you suggest another than..." He paused, shrinking in horror from completing the utterance of his thought. Then, with an abrupt gesture, he went on, "... than the Queen herself?"

Sully quietly placed the letter on the table, and sat down. He took his chin in his hand and looked squarely across at Henry.

"Sire, you have brought this upon yourself. You have exasperated her Majesty; you have driven her in despair to seek and act upon the councils of this scoundrel Concini. There never was an attachment of yours that did not beget trouble with the Queen, but never such trouble as I have been foreseeing from your attachment to the Princess of Conde. Sire, will you not consider where you stand?"

"They are lies, I tell you," Henry stormed. But Sully the uncompromising gravely shook his head. "At least," Henry amended, "they are gross exaggerations. Oh, I confess to you, my friend, that I am sick with love of her. Day and night I see nothing but her gracious image. I sigh and fret and fume like any callow lad of twenty. I suffer the tortures of the damned. And yet... and yet, I swear to you, Sully,

that I will curb this passion though it kill me. I will stifle these fires, though they consume my soul to ashes. No harm shall come to her from me. No harm has come yet. I swear it. These stories that are put about are the inventions of Concini to set my wife against me. Do you know how far he and his wife have dared to go? They have persuaded the Queen to eat nothing that is not prepared in the kitchen they have set up for her in their own apartments. What can you conclude from that but that they suggest that I desire to poison her?"

"Why suffer it, sire?" quoth Sully gravely. "Send the pair packing back to Florence, and so be rid of them."

Henry rose in agitation. "I have a mind to. *Ventre St. Gris!* I have a mind to. Yes, it is the only thing. You can manage it, Sully. Disabuse her mind of her Suspicions regarding the Princess of Conde; make my peace with her; convince her of my sincerity, of my firm intention to have done with gallantry, so that she on her side will make me the sacrifice of banishing the Concinis. You will do this, my friend?"

It was no less than Sully had been expecting from past experience, and the task was one in which he was by now well-practiced; but the situation had never before been quite so difficult. He rose.

"Why, surely, sire," said he. "But her Majesty on her side may require something more to reconcile her to the sacrifice. She may reopen the question of her coronation so long and—in her view—so unreasonably postponed."

Henry's face grew overcast, his brows knit. "I have always had an instinct against it, as you know, Grand Master," said he, "and this instinct is strengthened by what that letter has taught me. If she will dare so much, having so little real power, what might she not do if..." He broke off, and fell to musing. "If she demands it we must yield, I suppose," he said at length. "But give her to understand that if I discover any more of her designs with Spain I shall be provoked to

the last degree against her. And as an antidote to these machinations at Madrid you may publish my intention to uphold the claims of the German Princes in the matter of Cleves, and let all the world know that we are arming to that end."

He may have thought—as was long afterwards alleged—that the threat itself should be sufficient, for there was at that time no power in Europe that could have stood against his armies in the field.

On that they parted, with a final injunction from Sully that Henry should see the Princesse de Conde no more.

"I swear to you, Grand Master, that I will use restraint and respect the sacred tie I formed between my nephew and Charlotte solely so that I might impose silence upon my own passion."

And the good Sully writes in comment upon this: "I should have relied absolutely upon these assurances had I not known how easy it is for a heart tender and passionate as was his to deceive itself"—which is the most amiable conceivable way of saying that he attached not the slightest faith to the King's promise.

Nevertheless he went about the task of making the peace between the royal couple with all the skill and tact that experience had taught him; and he might have driven a good bargain on his master's behalf but for his master's own weakness in supporting him. Maria de' Medici would not hear of the banishment of the Concinis, to whom she was so deeply attached. She insisted with perfect justice that she was a bitterly injured woman, and refused to entertain any idea of reconciliation save with the condition that arrangements for her coronation as Queen of France—which was no more than her due—should be made at once, and that the King should give an undertaking not to make himself ridiculous any longer by his pursuit of the Princess of Conde. Of the matters contained in the letter of Vaucelas she denied all knowledge, nor would suffer any further inquisition.

From Henry's point of view this was anything but satisfactory. But he yielded. Conscience made a coward of him. He had wronged her so much in one way that he must make some compensating concessions to her in another. This weakness was part of his mental attitude towards her, which swung constantly between confidence and diffidence, esteem and indifference, affection and coldness; at times he inclined to put her from him entirely; at others he opined that no one on his Council was more capable of the administration of affairs. Even in the indignation aroused by the proof he held of her disloyalty, he was too just not to admit the provocation he had given her. So he submitted to a reconciliation on her own terms, and pledged himself to renounce Charlotte. We have no right to assume from the sequel that he was not sincere in the intention.

By the following May events proved the accuracy of Sully's judgment. The court was at Fontainebleau when the last bulwark of Henry's prudence was battered down by the vanity of that lovely fool, Charlotte, who must be encouraging her royal lover to resume his flattering homage. But both appear to have reckoned without the lady's husband.

Henry presented Charlotte with jewels to the value of eighteen thousand livres, purchased from Messier, the jeweller of the Pont au Change; and you conceive what the charitable ladies of the Court had to say about it. At the first hint of scandal Monsieur de Conde put himself into a fine heat, and said things which pained and annoyed the King exceedingly. Henry had amassed a considerable and varied experience of jealous husbands in his time; but he had never met one quite so intolerable as this nephew of his. He complained of it in a letter to Sully.

"My friend,—Monsieur the Prince is here, but he acts like a man possessed. You will be angry and ashamed at the things he says of me. I shall end by losing all patience with him. In the meanwhile I am

obliged to taut to him with severity."

More severe than any talk was Henry's instruction to Sully to withhold payment of the last quarter of the prince's allowance, and to give refusals to his creditors and purveyors. Thus he intended also, no doubt, to make it clear to Conde that he did not receive a pension of a hundred thousand livres a year for nothing.

"If this does not keep him in bounds," Henry concluded, "we must think of some other method, for he says the most injurious things of me."

So little did it keep the prince in bounds—as Henry understood the phrase—that he immediately packed his belongings, and carried his wife off to his country house. It was quite in vain that Henry wrote to him representing that this conduct was dishonouring to them both, and that the only place for a prince of the blood was the court of his sovereign.

The end of it all was that the reckless and romantic Henry took to night-prowling about the grounds of Conde's chateau. In the disguise of a peasant you see his Majesty of France and Navarre, whose will was law in Europe, shivering behind damp hedges, ankle-deep in wet grass, spending long hours in love-lore, ecstatic contemplation of her lighted window, and all—so far as we can gather—for no other result than the aggravation of certain rheumatic troubles which should have reminded him that he was no longer of an age to pursue these amorous pernoctations.

But where his stiffening joints failed, the Queen succeeded. Henry had been spied upon, of course, as he always was when he strayed from the path of matrimonial rectitude. The Concinis saw to that. And when they judged the season ripe, they put her Majesty in possession of the facts. So inflamed was she by this fresh breach of trust that war was declared anew between the royal couple, and the best that Sully's

wit and labours could now accomplish was a sort of armed truce.

And then at last in the following November the Prince de Conde took the desperate resolve of quitting France with his wife, without troubling—as was his duty—to obtain the King's consent. On the last night of that month, as Henry was at cards in the Louvre, the Chevalier du Guet brought him the news of the prince's flight.

"I never in my life," says Bassompierre, who was present, "saw a man so distracted or in so violent a passion."

He flung down his cards, and rose, sending his chair crashing over behind him. "I am undone!" was his cry. "Undone! This madman has carried off his wife—perhaps to kill her." White and shaking, he turned to Bassompierre. "Take care of my money," he bade him, "and go on with the game."

He lurched out of the room, and dispatched a messenger to the Arsenal to fetch M. de Sully. Sully obeyed the summons and came at once, but in an extremely bad temper, for it was late at night, and he was overburdened with work.

He found the King in the Queen's chamber, walking backward and forward, his head sunk upon his breast, his hands clenched behind him. The Queen, a squarely-built, square-faced woman, sat apart, attended by a few of her ladies and one or two gentlemen of her train. Her countenance was set and inscrutable, and her brooding eyes were fixed upon the King.

"Ha, Grand Master!" was Henry's greeting, his voice harsh and strained. "What do you say to this? What is to be done now?"

"Nothing at all, sire," says Sully, as calm as his master was excited.

"Nothing! What sort of advice is that?"

"The best advice that you can follow, sire. This affair should be talked

of as little as possible, nor should it appear to be of any consequence to you, or capable of giving you the least uneasiness."

The Queen cleared her throat huskily. "Good advice, Monsieur le Duc," she approved him. "He will be wise to follow it." Her voice strained, almost threatening. "But in this matter I doubt wisdom and he have long since become strangers."

That put him in a passion, and in a passion he left her to do the maddest thing he had ever done. In the garb of a courier, and with a patch over one eye to complete his disguise, he set out in pursuit of the fugitives. He had learnt that they had taken the road to Landrecy, which was enough for him. Stage by stage he followed them in that flight to Flanders, picking up the trail as he went, and never pausing until he had reached the frontier without overtaking them.

It was all most romantic, and the lady, when she learnt of it, shed tears of mingled joy and rage, and wrote him impassioned letters in which she addressed him as her knight, and implored him, as he loved her, to come and deliver her from the detestable tyrant who held her in thrall. Those perfervid appeals completed his undoing, drove him mad, and blinded him to everything—even to the fact that his wife, too, was shedding tears, and that these were of rage undiluted by any more tender emotion.

He began by sending Praslin to require the Archduke to order the Prince of Conde to leave his dominions. And when the Archduke declined with dignity to be guilty of any such breach of the law of nations, Henry dispatched Coeuvres secretly to Brussels to carry off thence the princess. But Maria de' Medici was on the alert, anti frustrated the design by sending a warning of what was intended to the Marquis Spinola, as a result of which the Prince de Conde and his wife were housed for greater security in the Archduke's own palace.

Checkmated at all points, yet goaded further by the letters which he

continued to receive from that most foolish of princesses, Henry took the wild decision that to obtain her he would invade the Low Countries as the first step in the execution of that design of a war with Spain which hitherto had been little more than a presence. The matter of the Duchy of Cleves was a pretext ready to his hand. To obtain the woman he desired he would set Europe in a blaze.

He took that monstrous resolve at the very beginning of the new year, and in the months that followed France rang with preparations. It rang, too, with other things which should have given him pause. It rang with the voice of preachers giving expression to the popular view; that Cleves was not worth fighting for, that the war was unrighteous—a war undertaken by Catholic France to defend Protestant interests against the very champions of Catholicism in Europe. And soon it began to ring, too, with prophecies of the King's approaching end.

These prognostics rained upon him from every quarter. Thomassin, and the astrologer La Brosse, warned him of a message from the stars that May would be fraught with danger for him. From Rome—from the very pope himself came notice of a conspiracy against him in which he was told that the very highest in the land were engaged. From Embrun, Bayonne, and Douai came messages of like purport, and early in May a note was found one morning on the altar of the church of Montargis announcing the King's approaching death.

But that is to anticipate. Meanwhile, Henry had pursued his preparations undeterred by either warnings or prognostications. There had been so many conspiracies against his life already that he was become careless and indifferent in such matters. Yet surely there never had been one that was so abundantly heralded from every quarter, or ever one that was hatched under conditions so propitious as those which he had himself created now. In his soul he was not at ease, and the source of his uneasiness was the coronation of the Queen, for which the preparations were now going forward.

He must have known that if danger of assassination threatened him from any quarter it was most to be feared from those whose influence with the Queen was almost such as to give them a control over her—the Concinis and their unavowed but obvious ally the Duke of Epernon. If he were dead, and the Queen so left that she could be made absolute regent during the Dauphin's minority, it was those adventurers who would become through her the true rulers of France, and so enrich themselves and gratify to the full their covetous ambitions. He saw clearly that his safety lay in opposing this coronation—already fixed for the 13th May—which Maria de' Medici was so insistent should take place before his departure for the wars. The matter so preyed upon his mind that last he unburdened himself to Sully one day at the Arsenal.

"Oh, my friend," he cried, "this coronation does not please me. My heart tells me that some fatality will follow."

He sat down, grasping the case of his reading-glass, whilst Sully could only stare at him amazed by this out-burst. Thus he remained awhile in deep thought. Then he started up again.

"Pardieu!" he cried. "I shall be murdered in this city. It is their only resource. I see it plainly. This cursed coronation will be the cause of my death."

"What a thought, sir!"

"You think that I have been reading the almanach or paying heed to the prophets, eh? But listen to me now, Grand Master." And wrinkles deepened about the bold, piercing eyes. "It is four months and more since we announced our intention of going to war, and France has resounded with our preparations. We have made no secret of it. Yet in Spain not a finger has been lifted in preparation to resist us, not a sword has been sharpened. Upon what does Spain build? Whence her confidence that in despite of my firm resolve and my abundant

preparations, despite the fact announced that I am to march on the lath of this month, despite the fact that my troops are already in Champagne with a train of artillery so complete and well-furnished that France has never seen the like of it, and perhaps never will again—whence the confidence that despite all this there is no need to prepare defences? Upon what do they build, I say, when they assume, as assume they must, that there will be no war? Resolve me that, Grand Master."

But Sully, overwhelmed, could only gasp and ejaculate.

"You had not thought of it, eh? Yet it is clear enough Spain builds on my death. And who are the friends of Spain here in France? Who was it intrigued with Spain in such a way and to such ends as in my lifetime could never have been carried to an issue? Ha! You see."

"I cannot, sire. It is too horrible. It is impossible!" cried that loyal, honest gentleman. "And yet if you are convinced of it, you should break off this coronation, your journey, and your war. If you wish it so, it is not difficult to satisfy you."

"Ay, that is it." He came to his feet, and gripped the duke's shoulder in his strong, nervous hand. "Break off this coronation, and never let me hear of it again. That will suffice. Thus I can rid my mind of apprehensions, and leave Paris with nothing to fear."

"Very well. I will send at once to Notre Dame and to St. Denis, to stop the preparations and dismiss the workmen."

"Ah, wait." The eyes that for a moment had sparkled with new hope, grew dull again; the lines of care descended between the brows. "Oh, what to decide! What to decide! It is what I wish, my friend. But how will my wife take it?"

"Let her take it as she will. I cannot believe that she will continue obstinate when she knows what apprehensions you have of disaster."

"Perhaps not, perhaps not," he answered. But his tone was not sanguine. "Try to persuade her, Sully. Without her consent I cannot do this thing. But you will know how to persuade her. Go to her."

Sully suspended the preparations for the coronation, and sought the Queen. For three days, he tells us, he used prayers, entreaties, and arguments with which to endeavour to move her. But all was labour lost. Maria de' Medici was not to be moved. To all Sully's arguments she opposed an argument that was unanswerable.

Unless she were crowned Queen of France, as was her absolute right, she would be a person of no account and subject to the Council of Regency during the King's absence, a position unworthy and intolerable to her, the mother of the Dauphin.

And so it was Henry's part to yield. His hands were tied by the wrongs that he had done, and the culminating wrong that he was doing her by this very war, as he had himself openly acknowledged. He had chanced one day to ask the Papal Nuncio what Rome thought of this war.

"Those who have the best information," the Nuncio answered boldly, "are of opinion that the principal object of the war is the Princess of Conde, whom your Majesty wishes to bring back to France."

Angered by this priestly insolence, Henry's answer had been an impudently defiant acknowledgment of the truth of that allegation.

"Yes, by God!" he cried. "Yes—most certainly I want to have her back, and I will have her back; no one shall hinder me, not even God's viceregent on earth."

Having uttered those words, which he knew to have been carried to the Queen, and to have wounded her perhaps more deeply than anything that had yet happened in this affair, his conscience left him,

despite his fears, powerless now to thwart her even to the extent of removing those pernicious familiars of hers of whose plottings he had all but positive evidence.

And so the coronation was at last performed with proper pomp and magnificence at St. Denis on Thursday, the 13th May. It had been concerted that the festivities should last four days and conclude on the Sunday with the Queen's public entry into Paris. On the Monday the King was to set out to take command of his armies, which were already marching upon the frontiers.

Thus Henry proposed, but the Queen—convinced by his own admission of the real aim and object of the war, and driven by outraged pride to hate the man who offered her this crowning insult, and determined that at all costs it must be thwarted—had lent an ear to Concini's purpose to avenge her, and was ready to repay infidelity with infidelity. Concini and his fellow-conspirators had gone to work so confidently that a week before the coronation a courier had appeared in Liege, announcing that he was going with news of Henry's assassination to the Princes of Germany, whilst at the same time accounts of the King's death were being published in France and Italy.

Meanwhile, whatever inward misgivings Henry may have entertained, outwardly at least he appeared serene and good-humoured at his wife's coronation, gaily greeting her at the end of the ceremony by the title of "Madam Regent."

The little incident may have touched her, arousing her conscience. For that night she disturbed his slumbers by sudden screams, and when he sprang up in solicitous alarm she falteringly told him of a dream in which she had seen him slain, and fell to imploring him with a tenderness such as had been utterly foreign to her of late to take great care of himself in the days to come. In the morning she renewed those entreaties, beseeching him not to leave the Louvre that day,

urging that she had a premonition it would be fatal to him.

He laughed for answer. "You have heard of the predictions of La Brosse," said he. "Bah! You should not attach credit to such nonsense."

Anon came the Duke of Vendome, his natural son by the Marquise de Verneuil, with a like warning and a like entreaty, only to receive a like answer.

Being dull and indisposed as a consequence of last night's broken rest, Henry lay down after dinner. But finding sleep denied him, he rose, pensive and gloomy, and wandered aimlessly down, and out into the courtyard. There an exempt of the guard, of whom he casually asked the time, observing the King's pallor and listlessness, took the liberty of suggesting that his Majesty might benefit if he took the air.

That chance remark decided Henry's fate. His eyes quickened responsively. "You advise well," said he. "Order my coach. I will go to the Arsenal to see the Duc de Sully, who is indisposed."

On the stones beyond the gates, where lackeys were wont to await their masters, sat a lean fellow of some thirty years of age, in a dingy, clerkly attire, so repulsively evil of countenance that he had once been arrested on no better grounds than because it was deemed impossible that a man with such a face could be other than a villain.

Whilst the coach was being got ready, Henry re-entered the Louvre, and startled the Queen by announcing his intention. With fearful insistence she besought him to countermand the order, and not to leave the palace.

"I will but go there and back," he said, laughing at her fears. "I shall have returned before you realize that I have gone." And so he went, never to return alive.

He sat at the back of the coach, and the weather being fine all the curtains were drawn up so that he might view the decorations of the city against the Queen's public entry on Sunday. The Duc d'Epemon was on his right, the Duc de Montbazou and the Marquis de la Force on his left. Lavardin and Roquelaure were in the right boot, whilst near the left boot, opposite to Henry, sat Mirebeau and du Plessis Liancourt. He was attended only by a small number of gentlemen on horseback, and some footmen.

The coach turned from the Rue St. Honore into the narrow Rue de la Ferronnerie, and there was brought to a halt by a block occasioned by the meeting of two carts, one laden with hay, the other with wine. The footmen went ahead with the exception of two. Of these, one advanced to clear a way for the royal vehicle, whilst the other took the opportunity to fasten his garter.

At that moment, gliding like a shadow between the coach and the shops, came that shabby, hideous fellow who had been sitting on the stones outside the Louvre an hour ago. Raising himself by deliberately standing upon one of the spokes of the stationary wheel, he leaned over the Duc d'Epemon, and, whipping a long, stout knife from his sleeve, stabbed Henry in the breast. The King, who was in the act of reading a letter, cried out, and threw up his arms in an instinctive warding movement, thereby exposing his heart. The assassin stabbed again, and this time the blade went deep.

With a little gasping cough, Henry sank together, and blood gushed from his mouth.

The predictions were fulfilled; the tale borne by the courier riding through Liege a week ago was made true, as were the stories of his death already at that very hour circulating in Antwerp, Malines, Brussels, and elsewhere.

The murderer aimed yet a third blow, but this at last was parried by

Epernon, whereupon the fellow stepped back from the coach, and stood there, making no attempt to escape, or even to rid himself of the incriminating knife. St. Michel, one of the King's gentlemen-in-waiting, who had followed the coach, whipped out his sword and would have slain him on the spot had he not been restrained by Epernon. The footmen seized the fellow, and delivered him over to the captain of the guard. He proved to be a school-master of Angoulême—which was Epernon's country. His name was Ravailiac.

The curtains of the coach were drawn, the vehicle was put about, and driven back to the Louvre, whilst to avoid all disturbance it was announced to the people that the King was merely wounded.

But St. Michel went on to the Arsenal, taking with him the knife that had stabbed his master, to bear the sinister tidings to Henry's loyal and devoted friend. Sully knew enough to gauge exactly whence the blow had proceeded. With anger and grief in his heart he got to horse, ill as he was, and, calling together his people, set out presently for the Louvre, with a train one hundred strong, which was presently increased to twice that number by many of the King's faithful servants who joined his company as he advanced. In the Rue de la Pourpointière a man in passing slipped a note into his hand.

It was a brief scrawl: "Monsieur, where are ye going? It is done. I have seen him dead. If you enter the Louvre you will not escape any more than he did."

Nearing St. Innocent, the warning was repeated, this time by a gentleman named du Jon, who stopped to mutter:

"Monsieur le Duc, our evil is without remedy. Look to yourself, for this strange blow will have fearful consequences."

Again in the Rue St. Honore another note was thrown him, whose contents were akin to those of the first. Yet with misgivings mounting

swiftly to certainty, Sully rode amain towards the Louvre, his train by now amounting to some three hundred horse. But at the end of the street he was stopped by M. de Vitry, who drew rein as they met.

"Ah, monsieur," Vitry greeted him, "where are you going with such a following? They will never suffer you to enter the Louvre with more than two or three attendants, which I would not advise you to do. For this plot does not end here. I have seen some persons so little sensible of the loss they have sustained that they cannot even simulate the grief they should feel. Go back, monsieur. There is enough for you to do without going to the Louvre."

Persuaded by Vitry's solemnity, and by what he knew in his heart, Sully faced about and set out to retrace his steps. But presently he was overtaken by a messenger from the Queen, begging him to come at once to her at the Louvre, and to bring as few persons as possible with him. "This proposal," he writes, "to go alone and deliver myself into the hands of my enemies, who filled the Louvre, was not calculated to allay my suspicions."

Moreover he received word at that moment that an exempt of the guards and a force of soldiers were already at the gates of the Arsenal, that others had been sent to the Temple, where the powder was stored, and others again to the treasurer of the Exchequer to stop all the money there.

"Convey to the Queen my duty and service," he bade the messenger, "and assure her that until she acquaints me with her orders I shall continue assiduously to attend the affairs of my office." And with that he went to shut himself up in the Bastille, whither he was presently followed by a stream of her Majesty's envoys, all bidding him to the Louvre. But Sully, ill as he was, and now utterly prostrated by all that he had endured, put himself to bed and made of his indisposition a sufficient excuse.

Yet on the morrow he allowed himself to be persuaded to obey her summons, receiving certain assurances that he had no ground for any apprehensions. Moreover, he may by now have felt a certain security in the esteem in which the Parisians held him. An attempt against him in the Louvre itself would prove that the blow that had killed his master was not the independent act of a fanatic, as it was being represented; and vengeance would follow swiftly upon the heads of those who would thus betray themselves of having made of that poor wretch's fanaticism an instrument to their evil ends.

In that assurance he went, and he has left on record the burning indignation aroused in him at the signs of satisfaction, complacency, and even mirth that he discovered in that house of death. The Queen herself, however, overwrought by the events, and perhaps conscience-stricken by the tragedy which in the eleventh hour she had sought to avert, burst into tears at sight of Sully, and brought in the Dauphin, who flung himself upon the Duke's neck.

"My son," the Queen addressed him, "this is Monsieur de Sully. You must love him well, for he was one of the best and most faithful servants of the King your father, and I entreat him to continue to serve you in the same manner."

Words so fair might have convinced a man less astute that all his suspicions were unworthy. But, even then, the sequel would very quickly have undeceived him. For very soon thereafter his fall was brought about by the Concinis and their creatures, so that no obstacle should remain between themselves and the full gratification of their fell ambitions.

At once he saw the whole policy of the dead King subversed; he saw the renouncing of all ancient alliances, and the union of the crowns of France and Spain; the repealing of all acts of pacification; the destruction of the Protestants; the dissipation of the treasures amassed by Henry; the disgrace of those who would not receive the

yoke of the new favourites. All this Sully witnessed in his declining years, and he witnessed, too, the rapid rise to the greatest power and dignity in the State of that Florentine adventurer, Concino Concini—now bearing the title of Marshal d'Ancre—who had so cunningly known how to profit by a Queen's jealousy and a King's indiscretions.

As for the miserable Ravallac, it is pretended that he maintained under torture and to the very hour of his death that he had no accomplices, that what he had done he had done to prevent an unrighteous war against Catholicism and the Pope—which was, no doubt, the falsehood with which those who used him played upon his fanaticism and whetted him to their service. I say "pretended" because, after all, complete records of his examinations are not discoverable, and there is a story that when at the point of death, seeing himself abandoned by those in whom perhaps he had trusted, he signified a desire to confess, and did so confess; but the notary Voisin, who took his depositions in articulo mortis, set them down in a hand so slovenly as to be afterwards undecipherable.

That may or may not be true. But the statement that when the President du Harlay sought to pursue inquiries into certain allegations by a woman named d'Escoman, which incriminated the Duc d'Epernon, he received a royal order to desist, rests upon sound authority.

That is the story of the assassination of Henry IV. re-told in the light of certain records which appear to me to have been insufficiently studied. They should suggest a train of speculation leading to inferences which, whilst obvious, I hesitate to define absolutely.

"If it be asked," says Prefixe, "who were the friends that suggested to Ravallac so damnable a design, history replies that it is ignorant and that upon an action of Such consequences it is not permissible to give suspicions and conjectures for certain truths. The judges

themselves who interrogated him dared not open their mouths, and never mentioned the matter but with gestures of horror and amazement."

VI. THE BARREN WOOING

The Murder of Amy Robsart

There had been a banquet, followed by a masque, and this again by a dance in which the young queen had paired off with Lord Robert Dudley, who in repute was the handsomest man in Europe, just as in fact he was the vainest, shallowest, and most unscrupulous. There had been homage and flattery lavishly expressed, and there was a hint of masked hostility from certain quarters to spice the adventure, and to thrill her bold young spirit. Never yet in all the months of her reign since her coronation in January of last year had she felt so much a queen, and so conscious of the power of her high estate; never so much a woman, and so conscious of the weakness of her sex. The interaction of those conflicting senses wrought upon her like a heady wine. She leaned more heavily upon the silken arm of her handsome Master of the Horse, and careless in her intoxication of what might be thought or said, she—who by the intimate favour shown him had already loosed the tongue of Scandal and set it chattering in every court in Europe—drew him forth from that thronged and glittering chamber of the Palace of Whitehall into the outer solitude and friendly gloom.

And he, nothing loth to obey the suasion of that white hand upon his arm, exultant, indeed, to parade before them all the power he had with her, went willingly enough. Let Norfolk and Sussex scowl, let Arundel bite his lip until it bled, and sober Cecil stare cold disapproval. They should mend their countenances soon, and weigh their words or be for ever silenced, when he was master in England. And that he would

soon be master he was assured to-night by every glance of her blue eyes, by the pressure of that fair hand upon his arm, by the languishing abandonment with which that warm young body swayed towards him, as they passed out from the blaze of lights and the strains of music into the gloom and silence of the gallery leading to the terrace.

"Out—let us go out, Robin. Let me have air," she almost panted, as she drew him on.

Assuredly he would be master soon. Indeed, he might have been master already but for that wife of his, that stumbling-block to his ambition, who practiced the housewifely virtues at Cumnor Place, and clung so tenaciously and so inconsiderately to life in spite of all his plans to relieve her of the burden of it.

For a year and more his name had been coupled with the Queen's in a tale that hurt her honour as a woman and imperilled her dignity as a sovereign. Already in October of 1559 Alvarez de Quadra, the Spanish ambassador, had written home: "I have learnt certain things as to the terms on which the Queen and Lord Robert stand towards each other which I could not have believed."

That was at a time when de Quadra was one of a dozen ambassadors who were competing for her hand, and Lord Robert had, himself, appeared to be an ally of de Quadra and an advocate of the Spanish marriage with the Archduke Charles. But it was a presence which nowise deceived the astute Spaniard, who employed a legion of spies to keep him well informed.

"All the dallying with us," he wrote, "all the dallying with the Swede, all the dallying there will be with the rest, one after another, is merely to keep Lord Robert's enemies in play until his villainy about his wife can be executed."

What that particular villainy was, the ambassador had already stated earlier in his letter. "I have learnt from a person who usually gives me true information that Lord Robert has sent to have his wife poisoned."

What had actually happened was that Sir Richard Verney—a trusted retainer of Lord Robert's—had reported to Dr. Bayley, of New College, Oxford, that Lady Robert Dudley was "sad and ailing," and had asked him for a potion. But the doctor was learned in more matters than physic. He had caught an echo of the tale of Lord Robert's ambition; he had heard a whisper that whatever suitors might come from overseas for Elizabeth, she would marry none but "my lord"—as Lord Robert was now commonly styled. More, he had aforetime heard rumours of the indispositions of Lady Robert, yet had never found those rumours verified by the fact. Some months ago, it had been reported that her ladyship was suffering from cancer of the breast and likely soon to die of it. Yet Dr. Bayley had reason to know that a healthier woman did not live in Berkshire.

The good doctor was a capable deductive reasoner, and the conclusion to which he came was that if they poisoned her under cover of his potion—she standing in no need of physic—he might afterwards be hanged as a cover for their crime. So he refused to prescribe as he was invited, nor troubled to make a secret of invitation and refusal.

For awhile, then, Lord Robert had prudently held his hand; moreover, the urgency there had been a year ago, when that host of foreign suitors laid siege to Elizabeth of England, had passed, and his lordship could afford to wait. But now of a sudden the urgency was returned. Under the pressure brought to bear upon her to choose a husband, Elizabeth had half-committed herself to marry the Archduke Charles, promising the Spanish ambassador a definite answer within a few days.

Lord Robert had felt the earth to be quaking under him; he had seen

the ruin of his high ambitions; he had watched with rage the expanding mockery upon the countenances of Norfolk, Sussex, and those others who hated and despised him; and he had cursed that wife of his who knew not when to die. But for that obstinacy with which she clung to life he had been the Queen's husband these many months, so making an end to suspense and to the danger that lies in delay.

To-night the wantonness with which the Queen flaunted before the eyes of all her court the predilection in which she held him, came not merely to lull his recent doubts and fears, to feed his egregious vanity, and to assure him that in her heart he need fear no rival; it came also to set his soul quivering impotent rage. He had but to put forth his hands to possess himself of this splendid prize. Yet those hands of his were bound while that woman lived at Cumnor. Conceive his feelings as they stole away together like any pair of lovers.

Arm in arm they came by a stone gallery, where a stalwart scarlet sentinel, a yeoman of the guard, with a Tudor rose embroidered in gold upon his back, stood under a lamp set in the wall, with grounded pike and body stiffly erect.

The tall young Queen was in crimson satin with cunningly-wrought silver embroideries, trimmed with tufted silver fringe, her stomacher stiff with silver bullion studded with gold rosettes and Roman pearls, her bodice cut low to display her splendid neck, decked by a carcanet of pearls and rubies, and surmounted by a fan-like cuff of guipure, high behind and sloping towards the bust. Thus she appeared to the sentinel as the rays of the single lamp behind him struck fire from her red-gold hair. As if by her very gait to express the wantonness of her mood, she pointed her toes and walked with head thrown back, smiling up into the gipsy face of her companion, who was arrayed from head to foot in shimmering ivory satin, with an elegance no man in England could have matched.

They came by that stone gallery to a little terrace above the Privy Steps. A crescent moon hung low over the Lambeth marshes across the river. From a barge that floated gay with lights in mid-stream came a tinkle of lutes, and the sweet voice of a singing boy. A moment the lovers stood at gaze, entranced by the beauty of the soft, tepid September night, so subtly adapted to their mood. Then she fetched a sigh, and hung more heavily upon his arm, leaned nearer to his tall, vigorous, graceful figure.

"Robin, Robin!" was all she said, but in her voice throbbed a world of passionate longing, an exquisite blend of delight and pain.

Judging the season ripe, his arm flashed round her, and drew her fiercely close. For a moment she was content to yield, her head against his stalwart shoulder, a very woman nestling to the mate of her choice, surrendering to her master. Then the queen in her awoke and strangled nature. Roughly she disengaged herself from his arm, and stood away, her breathing quickened.

"God's Death, Robin!" There was a harsh note in the voice that lately had cooed so softly. "You are strangely free, I think."

But he, impudence incarnate, nothing abashed, accustomed to her gusty moods, to her alternations between the two natures she had inherited—from overbearing father and wanton mother—was determined at all costs to take the fullest advantage of the hour, to make an end of suspense.

"I am not free, but enslaved—by love and worship of you. Would you deny me; Would you?"

"Not I, but fate," she answered heavily, and he knew that the woman at Cumnor was in her mind.

"Fate will soon mend the wrong that fate has done—very soon now." He took her hand, and, melted again from her dignity, she let it lie in

his. "When that is done, sweet, then will I claim you for my own."

"When that is done, Robin?" she questioned almost fearfully, as if a sudden dread suspicion broke upon her mind. "When what is done?"

He paused a moment to choose his words, what time she stared intently into the face that gleamed white in the surrounding gloom.

"When that poor ailing spirit is at rest." And he added: "It will be soon."

"Thou hast said the same aforetime, Robin. Yet it has not so fallen out."

"She has clung to life beyond what could have been believed of her condition," he explained, unconscious of any sinister ambiguity. "But the end, I know, is very near—a matter but of days."

"Of days!" she shivered, and moved forward to the edge of the terrace, he keeping step beside her. Then she stood awhile in silence, looking down at the dark oily surge of water. "You loved her once, Robin?" she asked, in a queer, unnatural voice.

"I never loved but once," answered that perfect courtier.

"Yet you married her—men say it was a love marriage. It was a marriage, anyway, and you can speak so calmly of her death?" Her tone was brooding. She sought understanding that should silence her own lingering doubt of him.

"Where lies the blame? Who made me what I am?" Again his bold arm encompassed her. Side by side they peered down through the gloom at the rushing waters, and he seized an image from them. "Our love is like that seething tide," he said. "To resist it is to labour in agony awhile, and then to perish."

"And to yield is to be swept away."

"To happiness," he cried, and reverted to his earlier prayer. "Say that when... that afterwards, I may claim you for my own. Be true to yourself, obey the voice of instinct, and so win to happiness."

She looked up at him, seeking to scan the handsome face in that dim light that baffled her, and he observed the tumultuous heave of her white breast.

"Can I trust thee, Robin? Can I trust thee? Answer me true!" she implored him, adorably weak, entirely woman now.

"What does your own heart answer you?" quoth he, leaning close above her.

"I think I can, Robin. And, anyway, I must. I cannot help myself. I am but a woman, after all," she murmured, and sighed. "Be it as thou wilt. Come to me again when thou art free."

He bent lower, murmuring incoherently, and she put up a hand to pat his swarthy bearded cheek.

"I shall make thee greater than any man in England, so thou make me happier than any woman."

He caught the hand in his and kissed it passionately, his soul singing a triumph song within him. Norfolk and Sussex and those other scowling ones should soon be whistled to the master's heel.

As they turned arm in arm into the gallery to retrace their steps, they came suddenly face to face with a slim, sleek gentleman, who bowed profoundly, a smile upon his crafty, shaven, priestly face. In a smooth voice and an accent markedly foreign, he explained that he, too, sought the cool of the terrace, not thinking to intrude; and upon that, bowing again, he passed on and effaced himself. It was Alvarez de Quadra, Bishop of Aquila, the argus-eyed ambassador of Spain.

The young face of the Queen hardened.

"I would I were as well served abroad as the King of Spain is here," she said aloud, that the retreating ambassador might hear the dubious compliment; and for my lord's ear alone she added under her breath: "The spy! Philip of Spain will hear of this."

"So that he hears something more, what shall it signify?" quoth my lord, and laughed.

They paced the length of the gallery in silence, past the yeoman of the guard, who kept his watch, and into the first antechamber. Perhaps it was that meeting with de Quadra and my lord's answer to her comment that prompted what now she asked: "What is it ails her, Robin?"

"A wasting sickness," he answered, never doubting to whom the question alluded.

"You said, I think, that... that the end is very near."

He caught her meaning instantly. "Indeed, if she is not dead already, she is very nearly so."

He lied, for never had Amy Dudley been in better health. And yet he spoke the truth, for in so much as her life depended upon his will, it was as good as spent. This was, he knew, a decisive moment of his career. The hour was big with fate. If now he were weak or hesitant, the chance might slip away and be for ever lost to him. Elizabeth's moods were as uncertain as were certain the hostile activities of my lord's enemies. He must strike quickly whilst she was in her present frame of mind, and bring her to wedlock, be it in public or in private. But first he must shake off the paralysing encumbrance of that housewife down at Cumnor.

I believe—from evidence that I account abundant—that he considered

it with the cold remorselessness of the monstrous egotist he was. An upstart, great-grandson to a carpenter, noble only in two descents, and in both of them stained by the block, he found a queen—the victim of a physical passion that took no account of the worthlessness underlying his splendid exterior—reaching out a hand to raise him to a throne. Being what he was, he weighed his young wife's life at naught in the evil scales of his ambition. And yet he had loved her once, more truly perhaps than he could now pretend to love the Queen.

It was some ten years since, as a lad of eighteen, he had taken Sir John Robsart's nineteen-year-old daughter to wife. She had brought him considerable wealth and still more devotion. Because of this devotion she was content to spend her days at Cumnor, whilst he ruffled it at court; content to take such crumbs of attention as he could spare her upon occasion. And during the past year, whilst he had been plotting her death, she had been diligently caring for his interests and fostering the prosperity of the Berkshire estate. If he thought of this at all, he allowed no weakly sentiment to turn him from his purpose. There was too much at stake for that—a throne, no less.

And so, on the morning after that half-surrender of Elizabeth's, we find my lord closeted with his henchman, Sir Richard Verney. Sir Richard—like his master—was a greedy, unscrupulous, ambitious scoundrel, prepared to go to any lengths for the sake of such worldly advancement as it lay in my lord's power to give him. My lord perforce used perfect frankness with this perfect servant.

"Thou'lt rise or fall with me, Dick," quoth he. "Help me up, then, and so mount with me. When I am King, as soon now I shall be, look to me. Now to the thing that is to do. Thou'lt have guessed it."

To Sir Richard it was an easy guess, considering how much already he had been about this business. He signified as much.

My lord shifted in his elbow-chair, and drew his embroidered bedgown of yellow satin closer about his shapely limbs.

"Hast failed me twice before, Richard," said he. "God's death, man, fail me not again, or the last chance may go the way of the others. There's a magic in the number three. See that I profit by it, or I am undone, and thou with me."

"I'd not have failed before, but for that suspicious dotard Bayley," grumbled Verney. "Your lordship bade me see that all was covered."

"Aye, aye. And I bid thee so again. On thy life, leave no footprints by which we may be tracked. Bayley is not the only physician in Oxford. About it, then, and swiftly. Time is the very soul of fortune in this business, with the Spaniard straining at the leash, and Cecil and the rest pleading his case with her. Succeed, and thy fortune's made; fail, and trouble not to seek me again."

Sir Richard bowed, and took his leave. As he reached the door, his lordship stayed him. "If thou bungle, do not look to me. The court goes to Windsor to-morrow. Bring me word there within the week." He rose, magnificently tall and stately, in his bedgown of embroidered yellow satin, his handsome head thrown back, and went after his retainer. "Thou'lt not fail me, Dick," said he, a hand upon the lesser scoundrel's shoulder. "There is much at issue for me, and for thee with me."

"I will not fail you, my lord," Sir Richard rashly promised, and on that they parted.

Sir Richard did not mean to fail. He knew the importance of succeeding, and he appreciated the urgency of the business as much as did my lord himself. But between his cold, remorseless will to succeed and success itself there lay a gulf which it needed all his resource to bridge. He paid a short visit to Lady Robert at Cumnor,

and professed deepest concern to find in her a pallor and an ailing air which no one else had yet observed. He expressed himself on the subject to Mrs. Buttellar and the other members of her ladyship's household, reproaching them with their lack of care of their mistress. Mrs. Buttellar became indignant under his reproaches.

"Nay, now, Sir Richard, do you wonder that my lady is sad and downcast with such tales as are going of my lord's doings at court, and of what there is 'twixt the Queen and him? Her ladyship may be too proud to complain, but she suffers the more for that, poor lamb. There was talk of a divorce awhile ago that got to her ears."

"Old wives' tales," snorted Sir Richard.

"Likely," agreed Mrs. Buttellar. "Yet when my lord neither comes to Cumnor, nor requires her ladyship to go to him, what is she to think, poor soul?"

Sir Richard made light of all, and went off to Oxford to find a physician more accommodating than Dr. Bayley. But Dr. Bayley had talked too much, and it was in vain that Sir Richard pleaded with each of the two physicians he sought that her ladyship was ailing—"sad and heavy"—and that he must have a potion for her.

Each in turn shook his head. They had no medicine for sorrow, was their discreet answer. From his description of her condition, said each, it was plain that her ladyship's sickness was of the mind, and, considering the tales that were afloat, neither was surprised.

Sir Richard went back to his Oxford lodging with the feeling of a man checkmated. For two whole days of that precious time he lay there considering what to do. He thought of going to seek a physician in Abingdon. But fearing no better success in that quarter, fearing, indeed, that in view of the rumours abroad he would merely be multiplying what my lord called "footprints," he decided to take some

other way to his master's ends. He was a resourceful, inventive scoundrel, and soon he had devised a plan.

On Friday he wrote from Oxford to Lady Robert, stating that he had a communication for her on the subject of his lordship as secret as it was urgent. That he desired to come to her at Cumnor again, but dared not do so openly. He would come if she would contrive that her servants should be absent, and he exhorted her to let no one of them know that he was coming, else he might be ruined, out of his desire to serve her.

That letter he dispatched by the hand of his servant Nunweek, desiring him to bring an answer. It was a communication that had upon her ladyship's troubled mind precisely the effect that the rascal conceived. There was about Sir Richard's personality nothing that could suggest the villain. He was a smiling, blue-eyed, florid gentleman, of a kindly manner that led folk to trust him. And on the occasion of his late visit to Cumnor he had displayed such tender solicitude that her ladyship—starved of affection as she was—had been deeply touched.

His letter so cunningly couched filled her with vague alarm and with anxiety. She had heard so many and such afflicting rumours, and had received in my lord's cruel neglect of her such circumstantial confirmation of them, that she fastened avidly upon what she deemed the chance of learning at last the truth. Sir Richard Verney had my lord's confidence, and was much about the court in his attendance upon my lord. He would know the truth, and what could this letter mean but that he was disposed to tell it.

So she sent him back a line in answer, bidding him come on Sunday afternoon. She would contrive to be alone in the house, so that he need not fear being seen by any.

As she promised, so she performed, and on the Sunday packed off

her household to the fair that was being held at Abingdon that day, using insistence with the reluctant, and particularly with one of her women, a Mrs. Oddingsell, who expressed herself strongly against leaving her ladyship alone in that lonely house. At length, however, the last of them was got off, and my lady was left impatiently to await her secret visitor. It was late afternoon when he arrived, accompanied by Nunweek, whom he left to hold the horses under the chestnuts in the avenue. Himself he reached the house across the garden, where the blighting hand of autumn was already at work.

Within the porch he found her waiting, fretted by her impatience.

"It is very good in you to have come, Sir Richard," was her gracious greeting.

"I am your ladyship's devoted servant," was his sufficient answer, and he doffed his plumed bonnet, and bowed low before her. "We shall be private in your bower above stairs," he added.

"Why, we are private anywhere. I am all alone, as you desired."

"That is very wise—most wise," said he. "Will your ladyship lead the way?"

So they went up that steep, spiral staircase, which had loomed so prominently in the plans the ingenious scoundrel had evolved. Across the gallery on the first floor they entered a little room whose windows overlooked the garden. This was her bower—an intimate cosy room, reflecting on every hand the gentle, industrious personality of the owner. On an oak table near the window were spread some papers and account-books concerned with the estate—with which she had sought to beguile the time of waiting. She led the way towards this, and, sinking into the high-backed chair that stood before it, she looked up at him expectantly. She was pale, there were dark stains under her eyes, and wistful lines had crept into the sweet face of that

neglected wife.

Contemplating his poor victim now, Sir Richard may have compared her with the woman by whom my lord desired so impatiently to supplant her. She was tall and beautifully shaped, despite an almost maidenly slenderness. Her countenance was gentle and adorable, with its soft grey eyes and light brown hair, and tender, wistful mouth.

It was not difficult to believe that Lord Robert had as ardently desired her to wife five years ago as he now desired to be rid of her. Then he obeyed the insistent spur of passion; now he obeyed the remorseless spur of ambition. In reality, then as now, his beacon-light was love of self.

Seeing her so frail and trusting, trembling in her anxious impatience to hear the news of her lord which he had promised her, Sir Richard may have felt some pang of pity. But, like my lord, he was of those whose love of self suffers the rivalry of no weak emotion.

"Your news, Sir Richard," she besought him, her dove-like glance upon his florid face—less florid now than was its wont.

He leaned against the table, his back to the window. "Why, it is briefly this," said he. "My lord..." And then he checked, and fell into a listening attitude.

"What was that? Did you hear anything, my lady?"

"No. What is it?" Her face betrayed alarm, her anxiety mounting under so much mystery.

"Sh! Stay you here," he enjoined. "If we are spied upon..." He left the sentence there. Already he was moving quickly, stealthily, towards the door. He paused before opening it. "Stay where you are, my lady," he enjoined again, so gravely that she could have no thought of disobeying him. "I will return at once."

He stepped out, closed the door, and crossed to the stairs. There he stopped. From his pouch he had drawn a fine length of whipcord, attached at one end to a tiny bodkin of needle sharpness. That bodkin he drove into the edge of one of the panels of the wainscot, in line with the topmost step; drawing the cord taut at a height of a foot or so above this step, he made fast its other end to the newel-post at the stair-head. He had so rehearsed the thing in his mind that the performance of it occupied but a few seconds. Such dim light of that autumn afternoon as reached the spot would leave that fine cord invisible.

Sir Richard went back to her ladyship. She had not moved in his absence, so brief as scarcely to have left her time in which to resolve upon disobeying his injunction.

"We move in secret like conspirators," said he, "and so we are easily affrighted.. I should have known it could be none but my lord himself... here?"

"My lord!" she interrupted, coming excitedly to her feet. "Lord Robert?"

"To be sure, my lady. It was he had need to visit you in secret—for did the Queen have knowledge of his coming here, it would mean the Tower for him. You cannot think what, out of love for you, his lordship suffers. The Queen...

"But do you say that he is here, man," her voice shrilled up in excitement.

"He is below, my lady. Such is his peril that he dared not set foot in Cumnor until he was certain beyond doubt that you are here alone."

"He is below!" she cried, and a flush dyed her pale cheeks, a light of gladness quickened her sad eyes. Already she had gathered from his cunning words a new and comforting explanation of the things

reported to her. "He is below!" she repeated. "Oh!" She turned from him, and in an instant was speeding towards the door.

He stood rooted there, his nether lip between his teeth, his face a ghastly white, whilst she ran on.

"My lord! Robin! Robin!" he heard her calling, as she crossed the corridor. Then came a piercing scream that echoed through the silent house; a pause; a crashing thud below; and—silence.

Sir Richard remained by the table, immovable. Blood was trickling down his chin. He had sunk his teeth through his lip when that scream rang out. A long moment thus, as if entranced, awe-stricken. Then he braced himself, and went forward, reeling at first like a drunken man. But by the time he had reached the stairs he was master of himself again. Swiftly, for all his trembling fingers, he unfastened the cord's end from the newel-post. The wrench upon it had already pulled the bodkin from the wainscot. He went down that abrupt spiral staircase at a moderate pace, mechanically coiling the length of whip-cord, and bestowing it with the bodkin in his pouch again, and all the while his eyes were fixed upon the grey bundle that lay so still at the stairs' foot.

He came to it at last, and, pausing, looked more closely. He was thankful that there was not the need to touch it. The position of the brown-haired head was such as to leave no doubt of the complete success of his design. Her neck was broken. Lord Robert Dudley was free to marry the Queen.

Deliberately Sir Richard stepped over the huddled body of that poor victim of a knave's ambition, crossed the hall, and passed out, closing the door. An excellent day's work, thought he, most excellently accomplished. The servants, returning from Abingdon Fair on that Sunday evening, would find her there. They would publish the fact that in their absence her ladyship had fallen downstairs and broken her neck, and that was the end of the matter.

But that was not the end at all. Fate, the ironic interloper, had taken a hand in this evil game.

The court had moved a few days earlier to Windsor, and thither on the Friday—the 6th of September—came Alvarez de Quadra to seek the definite answer which the Queen had promised him on the subject of the Spanish marriage. What he had seen that night at Whitehall, coupled with his mistrust of her promises and experience of her fickleness, had rendered him uneasy. Either she was trifling with him, or else she was behaving in a manner utterly unbecoming the future wife of the Archduke. In either case some explanation was necessary. De Quadra must know where he stood. Having failed to obtain an audience before the court left London, he had followed it to Windsor, cursing all women and contemplating the advantages of the Salic law.

He found at Windsor an atmosphere of constraint, and it was not until the morrow that he obtained an audience with the Queen. Even then this was due to chance rather than to design on the part of Elizabeth. For they met on the terrace as she was returning from hunting. She dismissed those about her, including the stalwart Robert Dudley, and, alone with de Quadra, invited him to speak.

"Madame," he said, "I am writing to my master, and I desire to know whether your Majesty would wish me to add anything to what you have announced already as your intention regarding the Archduke."

She knit her brows. The wily Spaniard fenced so closely that there was no alternative but to come to grips.

"Why, sir," she answered dryly, "you may tell his Majesty that I have come to an absolute decision, which is that I will not marry the Archduke."

The colour mounted to the Spaniard's sallow cheeks. Iron self-control

alone saved him from uttering unpardonable words. Even so he spoke sternly:

"This, madame, is not what you had led me to believe when last we talked upon the subject."

At another time Elizabeth might have turned upon him and rent him for that speech. But it happened that she was in high good-humour that afternoon, and disposed to indulgence. She laughed, surveying herself in the small steel mirror that dangled from her waist.

"You are ungallant to remind me, my lord," said she. "My sex, you may have heard, is privileged to change of mind."

"Then, madame, I pray that you may change it yet again." His tone was bitter.

"Your prayer will not be heard. This time I am resolved."

De Quadra bowed. "The King, my master, will not be pleased, I fear."

She looked him straightly in the face, her dark eyes kindling.

"God's death!" said she, "I marry to please myself, and not the King your master."

"You are resolved on marriage then?" flashed he.

"And it please you," she mocked him archly, her mood of joyousness already conquering her momentary indignation.

"What pleases you must please me also, madame," he answered, in a tone so cold that it belied his words. "That it please you, is reason enough why you should marry... Whom did your Majesty say?"

"Nay. I named no names. Yet one so astute might hazard a shrewd guess." Half-challenging, half-coy, she eyed him over her fan.

"A guess? Nay, madame. I might affront your Majesty."

"How so?"

"If I were deluded by appearances. If I named a subject who signally enjoys your royal favour."

"You mean Lord Robert Dudley." She paled a little, and her bosom's heave was quickened. "Why should the guess affront me?"

"Because a queen—a wise queen, madame—does not mate with a subject—particularly with one who has a wife already."

He had stung her. He had wounded at once the pride of the woman and the dignity of the queen, yet in a way that made it difficult for her to take direct offense. She bit her lip and mastered her surge of anger. Then she laughed, a thought sneeringly.

"Why, as to my Lord Robert's wife, it seems you are less well-informed than usual, sir. Lady Robert Dudley is dead, or very nearly so."

And as blank amazement overspread his face, she passed upon her way and left him.

But anon, considering, she grew vaguely uneasy, and that very night expressed her afflicting doubt to my lord, reporting to him de Quadra's words. His lordship, who was mentally near-sighted, laughed.

"He'll change his tone before long," said he.

She set her hands upon his shoulders, and looked up adoringly into his handsome gipsy face. Never had he known her so fond as in these last days since her surrender to him that night upon the terrace at Whitehall, never had she been more the woman and less the queen in her bearing towards him.

"You are sure, Robin? You are quite sure?" she pleaded.

He drew her close, she yielding herself to his embrace. "With so much at stake could I be less than sure, sweet?" said he, and so convinced her—the more easily since he afforded her the conviction she desired.

That was on the night of Saturday, and early on Monday came the news which justified him of his assurances. It was brought him to Windsor by one of Amy's Cumnor servants, a fellow named Bowes, who, with the others, had been away at Abingdon Fair yesterday afternoon, and had returned to find his mistress dead at the stairs' foot—the result of an accident, as all believed.

It was not quite the news that my lord had been expecting. It staggered him a little that an accident so very opportune should have come to resolve his difficulties, obviating the need for recourse to those more dangerous measures with which he had charged Sir Richard Verney. He perceived how suspicion might now fall upon himself, how his enemies would direct it, and on the instant made provision. There and then he seized a pen, and wrote to his kinsman, Sir Thomas Blount, who even then was on his way to Cumnor. He stated in the letter what he had learnt from Bowes, bade Blount engage the coroner to make the strictest investigation, and send for Amy's natural brother, Appleyard. "Have no respect to any living person," was the final injunction of that letter which he sent Blount by the hand of Bowes.

And, then, before he could carry to the Queen the news of this accident which had broken his matrimonial shackles, Sir Richard Verney arrived with the true account. He had expected praise and thanks from his master. Instead, he met first dismay, and then anger and fierce reproaches.

"My lord, this is unjust," the faithful retainer protested. "Knowing the

urgency, I took the only way—contrived the accident."

"Pray God," said Dudley, "that the jury find it to have been an accident; for if the truth should come to be discovered, I leave you to the consequences. I warned you of that before you engaged in this. Look for no help from me."

"I look for none," said Sir Richard, stung to hot contempt by the meanness and cowardice so characteristic of the miserable egotist he served. "Nor will there be the need, for I have left no footprints."

"I hope that may be so, for I tell you, man, that I have ordered a strict inquiry, bidding them have no respect to any living person, and to that I shall adhere."

"And if, in spite of that, I am not hanged?" quoth Sir Richard, a sneer upon his white face.

"Come to me again when the affair is closed, and we will talk of it."

Sir Richard went out, rage and disgust in his heart, leaving my lord with rage and fear in his.

Grown calmer now, my lord dressed himself with care and sought the Queen to tell her of the accident that had removed the obstacle to their marriage. And that same night her Majesty coldly informed de Quadra that Lady Robert Dudley had fallen down a flight of stairs and broken her neck.

The Spaniard received the information with a countenance that was inscrutable.

"Your Majesty's gift of prophecy is not so widely known as it deserves to be," was his cryptic comment.

She stared at him blankly a moment. Then a sudden uneasy memory awakened by his words, she drew him forward to a window

embarrassment apart from those who had stood about her, and for greater security addressed him, as he tells us, in Italian.

"I do not think I understand you, sir. Will you be plain with me?" She stood erect and stiff, and frowned upon him after the manner of her bullying father. But de Quadra held the trumps, and was not easily intimidated.

"About the prophecy?" said he. "Why, did not your Majesty foretell the poor lady's death a full day before it came to pass? Did you not say that she was already dead, or nearly so?"

He saw her blench; saw fear stare from those dark eyes that could be so very bold. Then her ever-ready anger followed swiftly.

"Sblood, man! What do you imply?" she cried, and went on without waiting for his answer. "The poor woman was sick and ill, and must soon have succumbed; it will no doubt be found that the accident which anticipated nature was due to her condition."

Gently he shook his head, relishing her discomfiture, taking satisfaction in torturing her who had flouted him and his master, in punishing her whom he had every reason to believe guilty.

"Your Majesty, I fear, has been ill-informed on that score. The poor lady was in excellent health—and like to have lived for many years—at least, so I gather from Sir William Cecil, whose information is usually exact."

She clutched his arm. "You told him what I had said?"

"It was indiscreet, perhaps. Yet, how was I to know...?" He left his sentence there. "I but expressed my chagrin at your decision on the score of the Archduke—hardly a wise decision, if I may be so bold," he added slyly.

She caught the suggestion of a bargain, and became instantly

suspicious.

"You transcend the duties of your office, my lord," she rebuked him, and turned away.

But soon that night she was closeted with Dudley, and closely questioning him about the affair. My lord was mightily vehement.

"I take Heaven to be my witness," quoth he, when she all but taxed him with having procured his lady's death, "that I am innocent of any part in it. My injunctions to Blount, who has gone to Cumnor, are that the matter be sifted without respect to any person, and if it can be shown that this is other than the accident I deem it, the murderer shall hang."

She flung her arms about his neck, and laid her head on his shoulder. "Oh, Robin, Robin, I am full of fears," she wailed, and was nearer to tears than he had ever seen her.

But, anon, as the days passed their fears diminished, and finally the jury at Cumnor—delayed in their finding, and spurred by my lord to exhaustive inquiries—returned a verdict of "found dead," which in all the circumstances left his lordship—who was known, moreover, to have been at Windsor when his lady died—fully acquitted. Both he and the Queen took courage from that finding, and made no secret of it now that they would very soon be wed.

But there were many whom that finding did not convince, who read my lord too well, and would never suffer him to reap the fruits of his evil deed. Prominent among these were Arundel—who himself had aimed at the Queen's hand—Norfolk and Pembroke, and behind them was a great mass of the people. Indignation against Lord Robert was blazing out, fanned by such screaming preachers as Lever, who, from the London pulpits, denounced the projected marriage, hinting darkly at the truth of Amy Dudley's death.

What was hinted at home was openly expressed abroad, and in Paris Mary Stuart ventured a cruel witticism that Elizabeth was to conserve in her memory: "The Queen of England," she said, "is about to marry her horse-keeper, who has killed his wife to make a place for her."

Yet Elizabeth persisted in her intent to marry Dudley, until the sober Cecil conveyed to her towards the end of that month of September some notion of the rebellion that was smouldering.

She flared out at him, of course. But he stood his ground.

"There is," he reminded her, "this unfortunate matter of a prophecy, as the Bishop of Aquila persists in calling it."

"God's Body! Is the rogue blabbing?"

"What else did your Majesty expect from a man smarting under a sense of injury? He has published it broadcast that on the day before Lady Robert broke her neck, you told him that she was dead or nearly so. And he argues from it a guilty foreknowledge on your Majesty's part of what was planned."

"A guilty foreknowledge!" She almost choked in rage, and then fell to swearing as furiously in that moment as old King Harry at his worst.

"Madame!" he cried, shaken by her vehemence. "I but report the phrase he uses. It is not mine."

"Do you believe it?"

"I do not, madame. If I did I should not be here at present."

"Does any subject of mine believe it?"

"They suspend their judgment. They wait to learn the truth from the sequel."

"You mean?"

"That if your motive prove to be such as de Quadra and others allege, they will be in danger of believing."

"Be plain, man, in God's name. What exactly is alleged?"

He obeyed her very fully.

"That my lord contrived the killing of his wife so that he might have liberty to marry your Majesty, and that your Majesty was privy to the deed." He spoke out boldly, and hurried on before she could let loose her wrath. "It is still in your power, madame, to save your honour, which is now in peril. But there is only one way in which you can accomplish it. If you put from you all thought of marrying Lord Robert, England will believe that de Quadra and those others lied. If you persist and carry out your intention, you proclaim the truth of his report; and you see what must inevitably follow."

She saw indeed, and, seeing, was afraid.

Within a few hours of that interview she delivered her answer to Cecil, which was that she had no intention of marrying Dudley.

Because of her fear she saved her honour by sacrificing her heart, by renouncing marriage with the only man she could have taken for her mate of all who had wooed her. Yet the wound of that renunciation was slow to heal. She trifled with the notion of other marriages, but ever and anon, in her despair, perhaps, we see her turning longing eyes towards the handsome Lord Robert, later made Earl of Leicester. Once, indeed, some six years after Amy's death, there was again some talk of her marrying him, which was quickly quelled by a reopening of the question of how Amy died. Between these two, between the fulfilment of her desire and his ambition, stood the irreconcilable ghost of his poor murdered wife.

Perhaps it was some thought of this that found expression in her

passionate outburst when she learnt of the birth of Mary Stuart's child:
"The Queen of Scots is lighter of a fair son; and I am but a barren
stock."

VII. SIR JUDAS

The Betrayal of Sir Walter Raleigh

Sir Walter was met on landing at Plymouth from his ill-starred voyage to El Dorado by Sir Lewis Stukeley, which was but natural, seeing that Sir Lewis was not only Vice-Admiral of Devon, but also Sir Walter's very good friend and kinsman.

If Sir Walter doubted whether it was in his quality as kinsman or as Vice-Admiral that Sir Lewis met him, the cordiality of the latter's embrace and the noble entertainment following at the house of Sir Christopher Hare, near the port, whither Sir Lewis conducted him, set this doubt at rest and relighted the lamp of hope in the despairing soul of our adventurer. In Sir Lewis he saw only his kinsman—his very good friend and kinsman, to insist upon Stukeley's own description of himself—at a time when of all others in his crowded life he needed the support of a kinsman and the guidance of a friend.

You know the story of this Sir Walter, who had been one of the brightest ornaments of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and might have added lustre to that of King James, had not his Sowship—to employ the title bestowed upon that prince by his own queen—been too mean of soul to appreciate the man's great worth. Courtier, philosopher, soldier, man of letters and man of action alike, Raleigh was at once the greatest prose-writer, and one of the greatest captains of his age, the last survivor of that glorious company—whose other members were Drake and Frobisher and Hawkins—that had given England supremacy upon the seas, that had broken the power and lowered the pride of Spain.

His was a name that had resounded, to the honour and glory of England, throughout the world, a name that, like Drake's, was a thing of hate and terror to King Philip and his Spaniards; yet the King of Scots, unclean of body and of mind, who had succeeded to the throne of Elizabeth, must affect ignorance of that great name which shall never die while England lives.

When the splendid courtier stood before him—for at fifty Sir Walter was still handsome of person and magnificent of Apparel—James looked him over and inquired who he might be. When they had told him:

"I've rawly heard of thee," quoth the royal punster, who sought by such atrocities of speech to be acclaimed a wit.

It was ominous of what must follow, and soon thereafter you see this great and gallant gentleman arrested on a trumped-up charge of high treason, bullied, vituperated, and insulted by venal, peddling lawyers, and, finally, although his wit and sincerity had shattered every fragment of evidence brought against him, sentenced to death. Thus far James went; but he hesitated to go further, hesitated to carry out the sentence. Sir Walter had too many friends in England then; the memory of his glorious deeds was still too fresh in the public mind, and execution might have been attended by serious consequences for King James. Besides, one at least of the main objects was achieved. Sir Walter's broad acres were confiscate by virtue of that sentence, and King James wanted the land—filched thus from one who was England's pride—to bestow it upon one of those golden calves of his who were England's shame.

"I maun hae the land for Carr. I maun hae it," was his brazen and peevish answer to an appeal against the confiscation.

For thirteen years Sir Walter lay in the Tower, under that sentence of death passed in 1603, enjoying after a season a certain liberty,

visited there by his dear lady and his friends, among whom was Henry, Prince of Wales, who did not hesitate to publish that no man but his father—whom he detested—would keep such a bird in a cage. He beguiled the time in literary and scientific pursuits, distilling his essences and writing that stupendous work of his, "The History of the World." Thus old age crept upon him; but far from quenching the fires of enterprise within his adventurer's soul, it brought a restlessness that urged him at last to make a bid for liberty. Despairing of winning it from the clemency of James, he applied his wits to extracting it from the King's cupidity.

Throughout his life, since the day when first he had brought himself to the notice of a Queen by making of his cloak a carpet for her feet, he had retained side by side with the dignity of the sage and the greatness of the hero, the craft and opportunism of the adventurer. His opportunity now was the straitened condition of the royal treasury, a hint of which had been let fall by Winwood the Secretary of State. He announced at once that he knew of a gold mine in Guiana, the El Dorado of the Spaniards.

On his return from a voyage to Guiana in 1595, he had written of it thus:

"There the common soldier shall fight for gold instead of pence, pay himself with plates half a foot broad, whereas he breaks his bones in other wars for provant and penury Those commanders and chieftains that shoot at honour and abundance shall find here more rich and beautiful cities, more temples adorned with golden images, more sepulchres filled with treasure than either Cortez found in Mexico or Pizarro in Peru."

Winwood now reminded him that as a consequence many expeditions had gone out, but failed to discover any of these things.

"That," said Raleigh, "is because those adventurers were ignorant

alike of the country and of the art of conciliating its inhabitants. Were I permitted to go, I would make Guiana to England what Peru has been to Spain."

That statement, reported to James in his need, was enough to fire his cupidity, and when Raleigh had further added that he would guarantee to the Crown one-fifth of the treasure without asking any contribution towards the adventure either in money or in ships, he was permitted to come forth and prepare for the expedition.

His friends came to his assistance, and in March of 1617 he set sail for El Dorado with a well-manned and well-equipped fleet of fourteen ships, the Earls of Arundel and Pembroke standing sureties for his return.

From the outset the fates were unpropitious. Disaster closed the adventure. Gondomar, the Ambassador of Spain at Whitehall, too well-informed of what was afoot, had warned his master. Spanish ships waited to frustrate Sir Walter, who was under pledge to avoid all conflict with the forces of King Philip. But conflict there was, and bloodshed in plenty, about the city of Manoa, which the Spaniards held as the key to the country into which the English adventurers sought to penetrate. Among the slain were the Governor of Manoa, who was Gondomar's own brother, and Sir Walter's eldest son.

To Raleigh, waiting at the mouth of the Orinoco, came his beaten forces in retreat, with the terrible news of a happening that meant his ruin. Half-maddened, his anguish increased by the loss of his boy, he upbraided them so fiercely that Keymis, who had been in charge of the expedition, shut himself up in his cabin and shot himself with a pocket-pistol. Mutiny followed, and Whitney—most trusted of Sir Walter's captains—set sail for England, being followed by six other ships of that fleet, which meanwhile had been reduced to twelve. With the remaining five the stricken Sir Walter had followed more at leisure. What need to hurry? Disgrace, and perhaps death, awaited

him in England. He knew the power of Spain with James, who was so set upon a Spanish marriage for his heir, knew Spain's hatred of himself, and what eloquence it would gather in the mouth of Gondomar, intent upon avenging his brother's death.

He feared the worst, and so was glad upon landing to have by him a kinsman upon whom he could lean for counsel and guidance in this the darkest hour of all his life. Sitting late that night in the library of Sir Christopher Hare's house, Sir Walter told his cousin in detail the story of his misadventure, and confessed to his misgivings.

"My brains are broken," was his cry.

Stukeley combed his beard in thought. He had little comfort to offer.

"It was not expected," said he, "that you would return.

"Not expected?" Sir Walter's bowed white head was suddenly flung back. Indignation blazed in the eyes that age had left undimmed. "What act in all my life justified the belief I should be false to honour? My danger here was made quite plain, and Captain King would have had me steer a course for France, where I had found a welcome and a harbour. But to consent I must have been false to my Lords of Arundel and Pembroke, who were sureties to the King for my return. Life is still sweet to me, despite my three-score years and more, but honour is sweeter still."

And then, because life was sweet, he bluntly asked his cousin: "What is the King's intent by me?"

"Nay, now," said Stukeley, "who shall know what passes in the King's mind? From the signs, I judge your case to be none so desperate. You have good friends in plenty, among whom, although the poorest, count myself the first. Anon, when you are rested, we'll to London by easy stages, baiting at the houses of your friends, and enlisting their good offices on your behalf."

Raleigh took counsel on the matter with Captain King, a bluff, tawny-bearded seaman, who was devoted to him body and soul.

"Sir Lewis proposes it, eh?" quoth the hardy seaman. "And Sir Lewis is Vice-Admiral of Devon? He is not by chance bidden to escort you to London?"

The Captain, clearly, had escaped the spell of Stukeley's affability. Sir Walter was indignant. He had never held his kinsman in great esteem, and had never been on the best of terms with him in the past. Nevertheless, he was very far from suspecting him of what King implied. To convince him that he did Sir Lewis an injustice, Raleigh put the blunt question to his kinsman in King's presence.

"Nay," said Sir Lewis, "I am not yet bidden to escort you. But as Vice-Admiral of Devon I may at any moment be so bidden. It were wiser, I hold, not to await such an order. Though even if it come," he made haste to add, "you may still count upon my friendship. I am your kinsman first, and Vice-Admiral after."

With a smile that irradiated his handsome, virile countenance, Sir Walter held out his hand to clasp his cousin's in token of appreciation. Captain King expressed no opinion save what might be conveyed in a grunt and a shrug.

Guided now unreservedly by his cousin's counsel, Sir Walter set out with him upon that journey to London. Captain King went with them, as well as Sir Walter's body-servant, Cotterell, and a Frenchman named Manourie, who had made his first appearance in the Plymouth household on the previous day. Stukeley explained the fellow as a gifted man of medicine, whom he had sent for to cure him of a trivial but inconvenient ailment by which he was afflicted.

Journeying by slow stages, as Sir Lewis had directed, they came at last to Brentford. Sir Walter, had he followed his own bent, would have

journeyed more slowly still, for in a measure, as he neared London, apprehensions of what might await him there grew ever darker. He spoke of them to King, and the blunt Captain said nothing to dispel them.

"You are being led like a sheep to the shambles," he declared, "and you go like a sheep. You should have landed in France, where you have friends. Even now it is not too late. A ship could be procured..."

"And my honour could be sunk at sea," Sir Walter harshly concluded, in reproof of such counsel.

But at the inn at Brentford he was sought out by a visitor, who brought him the like advice in rather different terms. This was De Chesne, the secretary of the French envoy, Le Clerc. Cordially welcomed by Raleigh, the Frenchman expressed his deep concern to see Sir Walter under arrest.

"You conclude too hastily," laughed Sir Walter.

"Monsieur, I do not conclude. I speak of what I am inform'."

"Misinformed, sir. I am not a prisoner—at least, not yet," he added, with a sigh. "I travel of my own free will to London with my good friend and kinsman Stukeley to lay the account of my voyage before the King."

"Of your own free will? You travel of your own free will? And you are not a prisoner? Ha!" There was bitter mockery in De Chesne's short laugh. "C'est bien drôle!" And he explained: "Milord the Duke of Buckingham, he has write in his master's name to the ambassador Gondomar that you are taken and held at the disposal of the King of Spain. Gondomar is to inform him whether King Philip wish that you be sent to Spain to essay the justice of his Catholic Majesty, or that you suffer here. Meanwhile your quarters are being made ready in the Tower. Yet you tell me you are not prisoner! You go of your own free

will to London. Sir Walter, do not be deceive'. If you reach London, you are lost."

Now here was news to shatter Sir Walter's last illusion. Yet desperately he clung to the fragments of it. The envoy's secretary must be at fault.

"'Tis yourself are at fault, Sir Walter, in that you trust those about you," the Frenchman insisted.

Sir Walter stared at him, frowning. "D'ye mean Stukeley?" quoth he, half-indignant already at the mere suggestion.

"Sir Lewis, he is your kinsman." De Chesne shrugged. "You should know your family better than I. But who is this Manourie who accompanies you? Where is he come from? What you know of him?"

Sir Walter confessed that he knew nothing.

"But I know much. He is a fellow of evil reputation. A spy who does not scruple to sell his own people. And I know that letters of commission from the Privy Council for your arrest were give' to him in London ten days ago. Whether those letters were to himself, or he was just the messenger to another, imports nothing. The fact is everything. The warrant against you exists, and it is in the hands of one or another of those that accompany you. I say no more. As I have tol' you, you should know your own family. But of this be sure, they mean that you go to the Tower, and so to your death. And now, Sir Walter, if I show you the disease I also bring the remedy. I am command' by my master to offer you a French barque which is in the Thames, and a safe conduct to the Governor of Calais. In France you will find safety and honour, as your worth deserve'."

Up sprang Sir Walter from his chair, and flung off the cloak of thought in which he had been mantled.

"Impossible," he said. "Impossible! There is my plighted word to return, and there are my Lords of Arundel and Pembroke, who are sureties for me. I cannot leave them to suffer by my default."

"They will not suffer at all," De Chesne assured him. He was very well informed. "King James has yielded to Spain partly because he fears, partly because he will have a Spanish marriage for Prince Charles, and will do nothing to trouble his good relations with King Philip. But, after all, you have friends, whom his Majesty also fears. If you escape' you would resolve all his perplexities. I do not believe that any obstacle will be offer' to your escape—else why they permit you to travel thus without any guard, and to retain your sword?"

Half distracted as he was by what he had learnt, yet Sir Walter clung stoutly and obstinately to what he believed to be the only course for a man of honour. And so he dismissed De Chesne with messages of gratitude but refusal to his master, and sent for Captain King. Together they considered all that the secretary had stated, and King agreed with De Chesne's implied opinion that it was Sir Lewis himself who held the warrant.

They sent for him at once, and Raleigh straightly taxed him with it. Sir Lewis as straightly admitted it, and when King thereupon charged him with deceit he showed no anger, but only the profoundest grief. He sank into a chair, and took his head in his hands.

"What could I do? What could I do?" he cried. "The warrant came in the very moment we were setting out. At first I thought of telling you; and then I bethought me that to do so would be but to trouble your mind, without being able to offer you help."

Sir Walter understood what was implied. "Did you not say," he asked, "that you were my kinsman first and Vice-Admiral of Devon after?"

"Ay—and so I am. Though I must lose my office of Vice-Admiral,

which has cost me six hundred pounds, if I suffer you to escape, I'd never hesitate if it were not for Manourie, who watches me as closely as he watches you, and would balk us at the last. And that is why I have held my peace on the score of this warrant. What can it help that I should trouble you with the matter until at the same time I can offer you some way out?"

"The Frenchman has a throat, and throats can be slit," said the downright King.

"So they can; and men can be hanged for slitting them," returned Sir Lewis, and thereafter resumed and elaborated his first argument, using now such forceful logic and obvious sincerity that Sir Walter was convinced. He was no less convinced, too, of the peril in which he stood. He plied those wits of his, which had rarely failed him in an extremity. Manourie was the difficulty. But in his time he had known many of these agents who, without sentimental interest and purely for the sake of gold, were ready to play such parts; and never yet had he known one who was not to be corrupted. So that evening he desired Manourie's company in the room above stairs that had been set apart for Sir Walter's use. Facing him across the table at which both were seated, Sir Walter thrust his clenched fist upon the board, and, suddenly opening it, dazzled the Frenchman's beady eyes with the jewel sparkling in his palm.

"Tell me, Manourie, are you paid as much as that to betray me?"

Manourie paled a little under his tan. He was a swarthy, sharp-featured fellow, slight and wiry. He looked into Sir Walter's grimly smiling eyes, then again at the white diamond, from which the candlelight was striking every colour of the rainbow. He made a shrewd estimate of its price, and shook his black head. He had quite recovered from the shock of Sir Walter's question.

"Not half as much," he confessed, with impudence.

"Then you might find it more remunerative to serve me," said the knight. "This jewel is to be earned."

The agent's eyes flickered; he passed his tongue over his lips. "As how?" quoth he.

"Briefly thus: I have but learnt of the trammel in which I am taken. I must have time to concert my measures of escape, and time is almost at an end. You are skilled in drugs, so my kinsman tells me. Can you so drug me as to deceive physicians that I am in extremis?"

Manourie considered awhile.

"I... I think I could," he answered presently.

"And keep faith with me in this, at the price of, say.. two such stones?"

The venal knave gasped in amazement. This was not generosity; it was prodigality. He recovered again, and swore himself Sir Walter's.

"About it, then." Sir Walter rolled the gem across the board into the clutch of the spy, which pounced to meet it. "Keep that in earnest. The other will follow when we have cozened them."

Next morning Sir Walter could not resume the journey. When Cotterell went to dress him he found his master taken with vomits, and reeling like a drunkard. The valet ran to fetch Sir Lewis, and when they returned together they found Sir Walter on all fours gnawing the rushes on the floor, his face livid and horribly distorted, his brow glistening with sweat.

Stukeley, in alarm, ordered Cotterell to get his master back to bed and to foment him, which was done. But on the next day there was no improvement, and on the third things were in far more serious case. The skin of his brow and arms and breast was inflamed, and covered with horrible purple blotches—the result of an otherwise harmless

ointment with which the French empiric had supplied him.

When Stukeley beheld him thus disfigured, and lying apparently inert and but half-conscious upon his bed, he backed away in terror. The Vice-Admiral had seen afore-time the horrible manifestations of the plague, and could not be mistaken here. He fled from the infected air of his kinsman's chamber, and summoned what physicians were available to pronounce and prescribe. The physicians came—three in number—but manifested no eagerness to approach the patient closely. The mere sight of him was enough to lead them to the decision that he was afflicted with the plague in a singularly virulent form.

Presently one of them plucked up courage so far as to feel the pulse of the apparently delirious patient. Its feebleness confirmed his diagnosis; moreover the hand he held was cold and turgid. He was not to know that Sir Walter had tightly wrapped about his upper arm the ribbon from his poniard, and so he was entirely deceived.

The physicians withdrew, and delivered their verdict, whereupon Sir Lewis at once sent word of it to the Privy Council.

That afternoon the faithful Captain King, sorely afflicted by the news, came to visit his master, and was introduced to Sir Walter's chamber by Manourie, who was in attendance upon him. To the seaman's amazement he found Sir Walter sitting up in bed, surveying in a hand-mirror a face that was horrible beyond description with the complacent smile of one who takes satisfaction in his appearance. Yet there was no fevered madness in the smiling eyes. They were alive with intelligence, amounting, indeed, to craft.

"Ah, King!" was the glad welcome "The prophet David did make himself a fool, and suffered spittle to fall upon his beard, to escape from the hands of his enemies And there was Brutus, ay, and others as memorable who have descended to such artifice."

Though he laughed, it is clear that he was seeking to excuse an unworthiness of which he was conscious.

"Artifice?" quoth King, aghast. "Is this artifice?"

"Ay—a hedge against my enemies, who will be afraid to approach me."

King sat himself down by his master's bed. "A better hedge against your enemies, Sir Walter, would have been the strip of sea 'twixt here and France. Would to Heaven you had done as I advised ere you set foot in this ungrateful land."

"The omission may be repaired," said Sir Walter.

Before the imminence of his peril, as now disclosed to him, Sir Walter had been reconsidering De Chesne's assurance touching my Lords of Arundel and Pembroke, and he had come to conclude—the more readily, perhaps because it was as he would have it—that De Chesne was right; that to break faith with them were no such great matter after all, nor one for which they would be called upon to suffer. And so, now, when it was all but too late, he yielded to the insistence of Captain King, and consented to save himself by flight to France. King was to go about the business of procuring a ship without loss of time. Yet there was no need of desperate haste, as was shown when presently orders came to Brentford for the disposal of the prisoner. The King, who was at Salisbury, desired that Sir Walter should be conveyed to his own house in London. Stukeley reported this to him, proclaiming it a sign of royal favour. Sir Walter was not deceived. He knew the reason to be fear lest he should infect the Tower with the plague by which he was reported stricken.

So the journey was resumed, and Sir Walter was brought to London, and safely bestowed in his own house, but ever in the care of his loving friend and kinsman. Manourie's part being fulfilled and the aim

accomplished, Sir Walter completed the promised payment by bestowing upon him the second diamond—a form of eminently portable currency with which the knight was well supplied. On the morrow Manourie was gone, dismissed as a consequence of the part he had played.

It was Stukeley who told Sir Walter this—a very well informed and injured Stukeley, who asked to know what he had done to forfeit the knight's confidence that behind his back Sir Walter secretly concerted means of escape. Had his cousin ceased to trust him?

Sir Walter wondered. Looking into that lean, crafty face, he considered King's unquenchable mistrust of the man, bethought him of his kinsman's general neediness, remembered past events that shed light upon his ways and nature, and began now at last to have a sense of the man's hypocrisy and double-dealing. Yet he reasoned in regard to him precisely as he had reasoned in regard to Manourie. The fellow was acquisitive, and therefore corruptible. If, indeed, he was so base that he had been bought to betray Sir Walter, then he could be bought again to betray those who had so bought him.

"Nay, nay," said Sir Walter easily. "It is not lack of trust in you, my good friend. But you are the holder of an office, and knowing as I do the upright honesty of your character I feared to embarrass you with things whose very knowledge must give you the parlous choice of being false to that office or false to me."

Stukeley broke forth into imprecations. He was, he vowed, the most accursed and miserable of men that such a task as this should have fallen to his lot. And he was a poor man, too, he would have his cousin remember. It was unthinkable that he should use the knowledge he had gained to attempt to frustrate Sir Walter's plans of escape to France. And this notwithstanding that if Sir Walter escaped, it is certain he would lose his office of Vice-Admiral and the six hundred pounds he had paid for it.

"As to that, you shall be at no loss," Sir Walter assured him. "I could not suffer it. I pledge you my honour, Lewis, that you shall have a thousand pounds from my wife on the day that I am safely landed in France or Holland. Meanwhile, in earnest of what is to come, here is a toy of value for you." And he presented Sir Lewis with a jewel of price, a great ruby encrusted in diamonds.

Thus reassured that he would be immune from pecuniary loss, Sir Lewis was ready to throw himself whole-heartedly into Sir Walter's plans, and to render him all possible assistance. True, this assistance was a costly matter; there was this person to be bought and that one; there were expenses here and expenses there, incurred by Sir Lewis on his kinsman's behalf; and there were odd presents, too, which Stukeley seemed to expect and which Sir Walter could not deny him. He had no illusions now that King had been right; that here he was dealing with a rogue who would exact the uttermost farthing for his services, but he was gratified at the shrewdness with which he had taken his cousin's measure, and did not grudge the bribes by which he was to escape the scaffold.

De Chesne came again to the house in London, to renew his master's offer of a ship to carry Sir Walter overseas, and such other assistance as Sir Walter might require. But by now the knight's arrangements were complete. His servant Cotterell had come to inform him that his own boatswain, now in London, was the owner of a ketch, at present lying at Tilbury, admirably suited for the enterprise and entirely at Sir Walter's disposal. It had been decided, then, with the agreement of Captain King, that they should avail themselves of this; and accordingly Cotterell was bidden desire the boatswain to have the craft made ready for sea at once. In view of this, and anxious to avoid unnecessarily compromising the French envoy, Sir Walter gratefully declined the latter's offer.

And so we come at last to that July evening appointed for the flight.

Ralegh, who, having for some time discarded the use of Manourie's ointment, had practically recovered his normal appearance, covering his long white hair under a Spanish hat, and muffling the half of his face in the folds of a cloak, came to Wapping Stairs—that ill-omened place of execution of pirates and sea-rovers—accompanied by Cotterell, who carried the knight's cloak-bag, and by Sir Lewis and Sir Lewis's son. Out of solicitude for their dear friend and kinsman, the Stukeleys could not part from him until he was safely launched upon his voyage. At the head of the stairs they were met by Captain King; at the foot of them a boat was waiting, as concerted, the boatswain at the tiller.

King greeted them with an air of obvious relief.

"You feared perhaps we should not come," said Stukeley, with a sneer at the Captain's avowed mistrust of him. "Yet now, I trust, you'll do me the justice to admit that I have shown myself an honest man."

The uncompromising King looked at him and frowned, misliking the words.

"I hope that you'll continue so," he answered stiffly.

They went down the slippery steps to the boat, and then the shore glided slowly past them as they pushed off into the stream of the ebbing tide.

A moment later, King, whose suspicious eyes kept a sharp look-out, observed another boat put off some two hundred yards higher up the river. At first he saw it breast the stream as if proceeding towards London Bridge, then abruptly swing about and follow them. Instantly he drew the attention of Sir Walter to that pursuing wherry.

"What's this?" quoth Sir Walter harshly. "Are we betrayed?"

The watermen, taking fright at the words, hung now upon their oars.

"Put back," Sir Walter bade them. "I'll not betray my friends to no purpose. Put back, and let us home again."

"Nay, now," said Stukeley gravely, himself watching the wherry. "We are more than a match for them in oars, even if their purpose be such as you suspect—for which suspicion, when all is said, there is no ground. On then!" He addressed himself to the watermen, whipping out a pistol, and growing truculent in mien and voice. "To your oars! Row, you dogs, or I'll pistol you where you sit."

The men bent their backs forthwith, and the boat swept on. But Sir Walter was still full of apprehensions, still questioning the wisdom of keeping to their down-stream course if they were being followed.

"But are we followed?" cried the impatient Sir Lewis. "'Sdeath, cousin, is not the river a highway for all the world to use, and must every wherry that chances to go our way be in pursuit of us? If you are to halt at every shadow, faith, you'll never accomplish anything. I vow I am unfortunate in having a friend whom I would save so full of doubts and fears."

Sir Walter gave him reason, and even King came to conclude that he had suspected him unjustly, whilst the rowers, under Stukeley's suasion, now threw themselves heartily into their task, and onward sped the boat through the deepening night, taking but little account of that other wherry that hung ever in their wake. In this wise they came at length to Greenwich on the last of the ebb. But here finding the water beginning to grow against them, and wearied by the exertion into which Stukeley's enthusiasm had flogged them, the watermen paused again, declaring that they could not reach Gravesend before morning.

Followed a brief discussion, at the end of which Sir Walter bade them put him ashore at Purfleet.

"And that's the soundest counsel," quoth the boatswain. "For at Purfleet we can get horses on to Tilbury."

Stukeley was of the same opinion; but not so the more practical Captain King.

"'Tis useless," he declared to them. "At this hour how shall you get horses to go by land?"

And now, Sir Walter, looking over his shoulder, saw the other wherry bearing down upon them through the faintly opalescent mists of dawn. A hail came to them across the water.

"Oh, 'Sdeath! We are betrayed!" cried Raleigh bitterly, and Stukeley swore more fiercely still. Sir Walter turned to him. "Put ashore," he said shortly, "and let us home."

"Ay, perhaps 'twere best. For to-night there's an end to the enterprise, and if I am taken in your company now, what shall be said to me for this active assistance in your escape?" His voice was gloomy, his face drawn and white.

"Could you not plead that you had but pretended to go with me to seize on my private papers?" suggested the ingenious mind of Raleigh.

"I could. But shall I be believed? Shall I?" His loom was deepening to despair.

Raleigh was stricken almost with remorse on his cousin's account. His generous heart was now more concerned with the harm to his friends than with his own doom. He desired to make amends to Stukeley, but had no means save such as lay in the power of that currency he used. Having naught else to give, he must give that. He plunged his hand into an inner pocket, and brought forth a handful of jewels, which he thrust upon his kinsman.

"Courage," he urged him. "Up now, and we may yet win out and home, so that all will be well with you at least, and you shall not suffer for your friendship to me."

Stukeley embraced him then, protesting his love and desire to serve him.

They came to land at last, just below Greenwich bridge, and almost at the same moment the other wherry grounded immediately above them. Men sprang from her, with the obvious intent of cutting off their retreat.

"Too late!" said Raleigh, and sighed, entirely without passion now that the dice had fallen and showed that the game was lost. "You must act on my suggestion to explain your presence, Lewis."

"Indeed, there is no other course," Sir Lewis agreed. "And you are in the same case, Captain King. You must confess that you joined with me but to betray Sir Walter. I'll bear you out. Thus, each supporting the other..."

"I'll roast in Hell before I brand myself a traitor," roared the Captain furiously. "And were you an honest man, Sir Lewis, you'd understand my meaning."

"So, so?" said Stukeley, in a quiet, wicked voice. And it was observed that his son and one or two of the watermen had taken their stand beside him as if in readiness for action. "Why, then, since you will have it so, Captain, I arrest you, in the King's name, on a charge of abetting treason."

The Captain fell back a step, stricken a moment by sheer amazement. Then he groped for a pistol to do at last what he realized he should have done long since. Instantly he was overpowered. It was only then that Sir Walter understood the thing that had happened, and with understanding came fury. The old adventurer flung back his

cloak, and snatched at his rapier to put it through the vitals of his dear friend and kinsman. But he was too late. Hands seized upon him, and he found himself held by the men from the wherry, confronted by a Mr. William Herbert, whom he knew for Stukeley's cousin, and he heard Mr. Herbert formally asking him for the surrender of his sword.

Instantly he governed himself, repressed his fury. He looked coldly at his kinsman, whose face showed white and evil in the growing light of the early summer dawn "Sir Lewis," was all he said, "these actions will not turn out to your credit."

He had no illusion left. His understanding was now a very full one. His dear friend and kinsman had played him false throughout, intending first to drain him of his resources before finally flinging the empty husk to the executioner. Manourie had been in the plot; he had run with the hare and hunted with the hounds; and Sir Walter's own servant Cotterell had done no less. Amongst them they had "cozened the great cozeners"—to use Stukeley's own cynical expression. Even so, it was only on his trial that Sir Walter plumbed the full depth of Stukeley's baseness; for it was only then he learnt that his kinsman had been armed by a warrant of immunity to assist his projects of escape, so that he might the more effectively incriminate and betray him; and Sir Walter discovered also that the ship in which he had landed, and other matters, were to provide additional Judas' fees to this acquisitive betrayer.

If to escape his enemies Sir Walter had had recourse to artifices unworthy the great hero that he was, now that all hope was lost he conducted himself with a dignity and cheerfulness beyond equal. So calm and self-possessed and masterly was his defence from the charge of piracy preferred at the request of Spain, and so shrewd in its inflaming appeal to public opinion, that his judges were constrained to abandon that line of prosecution, and could discover no way of giving his head to King James save by falling back upon

the thirteen-year old sentence of death against him. Of this they now ordered execution.

Never a man who loved his life as dearly as Sir Walter loved it met death as blithely. He dressed himself for the scaffold with that elegance and richness which all his life he had observed. He wore a ruff band and black velvet wrought nightgown over a doublet of hair coloured satin, a black wrought waistcoat, black cut taffety breeches and ash-coloured silk stockings. Under his plumed hat he covered his white locks with a wrought nightcap. This last he bestowed on his way to the scaffold upon a bald-headed old man who had come to take a last look of him, with the observation that he was more in need of it than himself. When he had removed it, it was observed that his hair was not curled as usual. This was a matter that had fretted his barber Peter in the prison of the Gatehouse at Westminster that morning. But Sir Walter had put him off with a laugh and a jest.

"Let them comb it that shall have it," he had said of his own head.

Having taken his leave of the friends who had flocked about him with the observation that he had a long journey before him, he called for the axe, and, when presented to him, ran his fingers along the edge, and smiled.

"Sharp medicine," quoth he, "but a sound cure for all diseases."

When presently the executioner bade him turn his head to the East:

"It is no great matter which way a man's head stands, so that his heart lies right," he said.

Thus passed one of England's greatest heroes, indeed one of the very makers of this England, and than his death there is no more shameful blot upon the shameful reign of that pusillanimous James, unclean of body and of soul, who sacrificed him to the King of Spain.

A spectator of his death, who suffered for his words—as men must ever suffer for the regardless utterance of Truth—declared that England had not such another head to cut off.

As for Stukeley, the acquisitiveness which had made a Judas of him was destined, by a poetic justice, ever desired but rarely forthcoming for knaves, soon to be his ruin. He was caught diminishing the gold coin of the realm by the operation known to-day as "clipping," and with him was taken his creature Manourie, who, to save himself, turned chief witness against Stukeley. Sir Lewis was sentenced to death, but saved himself by purchasing his pardon at the cost of every ill-gotten shilling he possessed, and he lived thereafter as bankrupt of means as he was of honour.

Yet before all this happened, Sir Lewis had for his part in Sir Walter Raleigh's death come to be an object of execration throughout the land, and to be commonly known as "Sir Judas." At Whitehall he suffered rebuffs and insults that found a climax in the words addressed to him by the Lord Admiral, to whom he went to give an account of his office.

"Base fellow, darest thou who art the contempt and scorn of men offer thyself in my presence?"

For a man of honour there was but one course. Sir Judas was not a man of honour. He carried his grievance to the King. James leered at him.

"What wouldst thou have me do? Wouldst thou have me hang him? On my soul, if I should hang all that speak ill of thee, all the trees of the country would not suffice, so great is the number."

VIII. HIS INSOLENCE OF BUCKINGHAM

George Villier's Courtship of Ann of Austria

He was Insolence incarnate.

Since the day when, a mere country lad, his singular good looks had attracted the attention of King James—notoriously partial to good-looking lads—and had earned him the office of cup-bearer to his Majesty, the career of George Villiers is to be read in a series of acts of violent and ever-increasing arrogance, expressing the vanity and levity inherent in his nature. Scarcely was he established in the royal favour than he distinguished himself by striking an offending gentleman in the very presence of his sovereign—an act of such gross disrespect to royalty that his hand would have paid forfeit, as by law demanded, had not the maudlin king deemed him too lovely a fellow to be so cruelly maimed.

Over the mind and will of King Charles his ascendancy became even greater than it had been over that of King James; and it were easy to show that the acts of George Villiers' life supplied the main planks of that scaffold in Whitehall whereupon Charles Stuart came to lose his head. Charles was indeed a martyr; a martyr chiefly to the reckless, insolent, irresponsible vanity of this Villiers, who, from a simple country squire with nothing but personal beauty to recommend him, had risen to be, as Duke of Buckingham, the first gentleman in

England.

The heady wine of power had gone to his brain, and so addled it that, as John Chamberlain tells us, there was presently a touch of craziness in him—of the variety, no doubt, known to modern psychologists as megalomania. He lost the sense of proportion, and was without respect for anybody or anything. The Commons of England and the immensely dignified Court of Spain—during that disgraceful, pseudo-romantic adventure at Madrid—were alike the butts of this parvenu's unmeasured arrogance. But the crowning insolence of his career was that tragicomedy the second act of which was played on a June evening in an Amiens garden on the banks of the river Somme.

Three weeks ago—on the 14th May, 1625, to be precise—Buckingham had arrived in Paris as Ambassador Extra-ordinary, charged with the task of conducting to England the King of France's sister, Henrietta Maria, who three days earlier had been married by proxy to King Charles.

The occasion enabled Buckingham to fling the reins on to the neck of his mad vanity, to indulge to the very fullest his crazy passion for ostentation and magnificence. Because the Court of France was proverbially renowned for splendour and luxury, Buckingham felt it due to himself to extinguish its brilliance by his own. On his first coming to the Louvre he literally blazed. He wore a suit of white satin velvet with a short cloak in the Spanish fashion, the whole powdered over with diamonds to the value of some ten thousand pounds. An enormous diamond clasped the heron's plume in his hat; diamonds flashed in the hilt of his sword; diamonds studded his very spurs, which were of beaten gold; the highest orders of England, Spain, and France flamed on his breast. On the occasion of his second visit he wore a suit of purple satin, of intent so lightly sewn with pearls that as he moved he shook them off like raindrops, and left them to lie where

they fell, as largesse for pages and the lesser fry of the Court.

His equipages and retinue were of a kind to match his personal effulgence. His coaches were lined with velvet and covered with cloth of gold, and some seven hundred people made up his train. There were musicians, watermen, grooms of the chamber, thirty chief yeomen, a score of cooks, as many grooms, a dozen pages, two dozen footmen, six outriders, and twenty gentlemen, each with his own attendants, all arrayed as became the satellites of a star of such great magnitude.

Buckingham succeeded in his ambition. Paris, that hitherto had set the fashion to the world, stared mouth-agape, dazzled by the splendour of this superb and scintillating ambassador.

Another, by betraying consciousness of the figure that he cut, might have made himself ridiculous. But Buckingham's insolent assurance was proof against that peril. Supremely self-satisfied, he was conscious only that what he did could not be better done, and he ruffled it with an air of easy insouciance, as if in all this costly display there was nothing that was not normal. He treated with princes, and even with the gloomy Louis XIII., as with equals; and, becoming more and more intoxicated with his very obvious success, he condescended to observe approvingly the fresh beauty of the young Queen.

Anne of Austria, then in her twenty-fourth year, was said to be one of the most beautiful women in Europe. She was of a good height and carriage, slight, and very gracefully built, of a ravishing fairness of skin and hair, whilst a look of wistfulness had come to invest with an indefinable tenderness her splendid eyes. Her childless marriage to the young King of France, which had endured now for ten years, had hardly been successful. Gloomy, taciturn, easily moved to suspicion, and difficult to convince of error, Louis XIII. held his wife aloof, throwing up between himself and her a wall of coldness, almost of

dislike.

There is a story—and Tallemant des Raux gives credit to it—that in the early days of her reign as Queen of France, Richelieu had fallen deeply in love with her, and that she, with the mischief of an irresponsible young girl, had encouraged him, merely to betray him to a ridicule which his proud spirit had never been able to forgive. Be that or another the reason, the fact that Richelieu hated her, and subjected her to his vindictive persecution, is beyond dispute. And it was he who by a hundred suggestions poisoned against her the King's mind, and thus kept ever open the gulf between the two.

The eyes of that neglected young wife dilated a little, and admiration kindled in them, when they rested upon the dazzling figure of my Lord of Buckingham. He must have seemed to her a figure of romance, a prince out of a fairy-tale.

That betraying glance he caught, and it inflamed at once his monstrous arrogance. To the scalps already adorning the belt of his vanity he would add that of the love of a beautiful young queen. Perhaps he was thrilled in his madness by the thought of the peril that would spice such an adventure. Into that adventure he plunged forthwith. He wooed her during the eight days that he abode in Paris, flagrantly, openly, contemptuous of courtiers and of the very King himself. At the Louvre, at the Hotel de Chevreuse, at the Luxembourg, where the Queen-Mother held her Court, at the Hotel de Guise, and elsewhere he was ever at the Queen's side.

Richelieu, whose hard pride and self-love had been wounded by the Duke's cavalier behaviour, who despised the fellow for an upstart, and may even have resented that so shallow a man should have been sent to treat with a statesman of his own caliber—for other business beside the marriage had brought Buckingham to Paris—suggested to the King that the Duke's manner in approaching the Queen lacked a proper deference, and the Queen's manner of receiving him a

proper circumspection. Therefore the King's long face became longer, his gloomy eyes gloomier, as he looked on. Far, however, from acting as a deterrent, the royal scowl was mere incense to the vanity of Buckingham, a spur to goad him on to greater daring.

On the 2nd of June a splendid company of some four thousand French nobles and ladies, besides Buckingham and his retinue, quitted Paris to accompany Henrietta Maria, now Queen of England, on the first stage of her journey to her new home. The King was not of the party. He had gone with Richelieu to Fontainebleau, leaving it to the Queen and the Queen-Mother to accompany his sister.

Buckingham missed no chance upon that journey of pressing his attentions upon Anne of Austria. Duty dictated that his place should be beside the carriage of Henrietta Maria. But duty did not apply to His Insolence of Buckingham, so indifferent of whom he might slight or offend. And then the devil took a hand in the game.

At Amiens, the Queen-Mother fell ill, so that the Court was compelled to halt there for a few days to give her Majesty the repose she required. Whilst Amiens was thus honoured by the presence of three queens at one and the same time within its walls, the Duc de Chaulnes gave an entertainment in the Citadel. Buckingham attended this, and in the dance that followed the banquet it was Buckingham who led out the Queen.

Thereafter the royal party had returned to the Bishop's Palace, where it was lodged, and a small company went out to take the evening cool in the Bishop's fragrant gardens on the Somme, Buckingham ever at the Queen's side. Anne of Austria was attended by her Mistress of the Household, the beautiful, witty Marie de Rohan, Duchess of Chevreuse, and by her equerry, Monsieur de Putange. Madame de Chevreuse had for cavalier that handsome coxcomb, Lord Holland, who was one of Buckingham's creatures, between whom and herself a certain transient tenderness had sprung up. M. de Putange was

accompanied by Madame de Vernet, with whom at the time he was over head and ears in love. Elsewhere about the spacious gardens other courtiers sauntered.

Now either Madame de Chevreuse and M. de Putange were too deeply engrossed in their respective companions, or else the state of their own hearts and the tepid, languorous eventide disposed them complacently towards the affair of gallantry upon which their mistress almost seemed to wish to be embarked. They forgot, it would seem, that she was a queen, and remembered sympathetically that she was a woman, and that she had for companion the most splendid cavalier in all the world. Thus they committed the unpardonable fault of lagging behind, and allowing her to pass out of their sight round the bend of an avenue by the water.

No sooner did Buckingham realize that he was alone with the Queen, that the friendly dusk and a screen of trees secured them from observation, than, piling audacity up on audacity, he determined to accomplish here and now the conquest of this lovely lady who had used him so graciously and received his advances with such manifest pleasure.

"How soft the night! How exquisite!" he sighed.

"Indeed," she agreed. "And how still, but for the gentle murmur of the river."

"The river!" he cried, on a new note. "That is no gentle murmur. The river laughs, maliciously mocking. The river is evil."

"Evil?" quoth she. He had checked in his step, and they stood now side by side.

"Evil," he repeated. "Evil and cruel. It goes to swell the sea that soon shall divide me from you, and it mocks me, rejoicing wickedly in the pain that will presently be mine."

It took her aback. She laughed, a little breathlessly, to hide her discomposure, and scarce knew how to answer him, scarce knew whether she took pleasure or offense in his daring encroachment upon that royal aloofness in which she dwelt, and in which her Spanish rearing had taught her she must ever dwell.

"Oh, but Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, you will be with us again, perhaps before so very long."

His answer came in a swift, throbbing question, his lips so near her face that she could feel his breath hot upon her cheek.

"Do you wish it, madame? Do you wish it? I implore you, of your pity, say but that you wish it, and I will come, though I tear down half a world to reach you."

She recoiled in Wright and displeasure before a wooing so impetuous and violently outspoken; though the displeasure was perhaps but a passing emotion, the result of early training. Yet she contrived to answer him with the proper icy dignity due to her position as a princess of Spain, now Queen of France.

"Monsieur, you forget yourself. The Queen of France does not listen to such words. You are mad, I think."

"Yes, I am mad," he flung back. "Mad with love—so mad that I have forgot that you are a queen and I an ambassador. Under the ambassador there is a man, under the queen a woman—our real selves, not the titles with which Fate seeks to dissemble our true natures. And with the whole strength of my true nature do I love you, so potently, so overwhelmingly that I will not believe you sensible of no response."

Thus torrentially he delivered himself, and swept her a little off her feet. She was a woman, as he said; a queen, it is true; but also a

neglected, coldly-used wife; and no one had ever addressed her in anything approaching this manner, no one had ever so much as suggested that her existence could matter greatly, that in her woman's nature there was the magic power of awakening passion and devotion. He was so splendidly magnificent, so masterful and unrivalled, and he came thus to lay his being, as it were, in homage at her feet. It touched her a little, who knew so little of the real man. It cost her an effort to repulse him, and the effort was not very convincing.

"Hush, monsieur, for pity's sake! You must not talk so to me. It ... it hurts."

O fatal word! She meant that it was her dignity as Queen he wounded, for she clung to that as to the anchor of salvation. But he in his egregious vanity must of course misunderstand.

"Hurts!" he cried, and the rapture in his accents should have warned her. "Because you resist it, because you fight against the commands of your true self. Anne!" He seized her, and crushed her to him. "Anne!"

Wild terror gripped her at that almost brutal contact, and anger, too, her dignity surging up in violent outraged rebellion. A scream, loud and piercing, broke from her and rang through the still garden. It brought him to his senses. It was as if he had been lifted up into the air, and then suddenly allowed to fall.

He sprang away from her, an incoherent exclamation on his lips, and when an instant later Monsieur de Putange came running up in alarm, his hand upon his sword, those two stood with the width of the avenue between them, Buckingham erect and defiant, the Queen breathing hard and trembling, a hand upon her heaving breast as if to repress its tumult.

"Madame! Madame!" had been Putange's cry, as he sprang forward

in alarm and self-reproach.

He stood now almost between them, looking from one to the other in bewilderment. Neither spoke.

"You cried out, Madame," M. de Putange reminded her, and Buckingham may well have wondered whether presently he would be receiving M. de Putange's sword in his vitals. He must have known that his life now hung upon her answer.

"I called you, that was all," said the Queen, in a voice that she strove to render calm. "I confess that I was startled to find myself alone with M. L'Ambassadeur. Do not let it occur again, M. de Putange!"

The equerry bowed in silence. His itching fingers fell away from his sword-hilt, and he breathed more freely. He had no illusions as to what must have happened. But he was relieved there were to be no complications. The others now coming up with them, the party thereafter kept together until presently Buckingham and Lord Holland took their leave.

On the morrow the last stage of the escorting journey was accomplished. A little way beyond Amiens the Court took its leave of Henrietta Maria, entrusting her now to Buckingham and his followers, who were to convey her safely to Charles.

It was a very contrite and downcast Buckingham who came now to Anne of Austria as she sat in her coach with the Princesse de Conti for only companion.

"Madame," he said, "I am come to take my leave."

"Fare you well, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur," she said, and her voice was warm and gentle, as if to show him that she bore no malice.

"I am come to ask your pardon, madame," he said, in a low voice.

"Oh, monsieur—no more, I beg you." She looked down; her hands were trembling, her cheeks going red and white by turns.

He put his head behind the curtains of the coach, so that none might see him from outside, and looking at him now, she beheld tears in his eyes.

"Do not misunderstand me, madame. I ask your pardon only for having discomposed you, startled you. As for what I said, it were idle to ask pardon, since I could no more help saying it than I can help drawing breath. I obeyed an instinct stronger than the will to live. I gave expression to something that dominates my whole being, and will ever dominate it as long as I have life. Adieu, madame! At need you know where a servant who will gladly die for you is to be found." He kissed the hem of her robe, dashed the back of his hand across his eyes, and was gone before she could say a word in answer.

She sat pale, and very thoughtful, and the Princesse de Conti, watching her furtively, observed that her eyes were moist.

"I will answer for the Queen's virtue," she stated afterwards, "but I cannot speak so positively for the hardness of her heart, since without doubt the Duke's tears affected her spirits."

But it was not yet the end. As Buckingham was nearing Calais, he was met by a courier from Whitehall, with instructions for him regarding the negotiations he had been empowered to carry out with France in the matter of an alliance against Spain—negotiations which had not thriven with Louis and Richelieu, possibly because the ambassador was ill-chosen. The instructions came too late to be of use, but in time to serve as a pretext for Buckingham's return to Amiens. There he sought an audience of the Queen-Mother, and delivered himself to her of a futile message for the King. This chimerical business—as Madame de Motteville shrewdly calls it—being accomplished, he came to the real matter which had prompted

him to use that pretext for his return, and sought audience of Anne of Austria.

It was early morning, and the Queen was not yet risen. But the levées at the Court of France were precisely what the word implies, and they were held by royalty whilst still abed. It was not, therefore, amazing that he should have been admitted to her presence. She was alone save for her lady-in-waiting, Madame de Lannoi, who was, we are told, aged, prudent and virtuous. Conceive, therefore, the outraged feelings of this lady upon seeing the English duke precipitate himself wildly into the room, and on his knees at the royal bedside seize the coverlet and bear it to his lips.

Whilst the young Queen looked confused and agitated, Madame de Lannoi became a pillar of icy dignity.

"M. le Duc," says she, "it is not customary in France to kneel when speaking to the Queen."

"I care nothing for the customs of France, madame," he answered rudely. "I am not a Frenchman."

"That is too obvious, monsieur," snapped the elderly, prudent and virtuous countess. "Nevertheless, whilst in France perhaps monsieur will perceive the convenience of conforming to French customs. Let me call for a chair for Monsieur le Duc."

"I do not want a chair, madame."

The countess cast her eyes to Heaven, as if to say, "I suppose one cannot expect anything else in a foreigner," and let him kneel as he insisted, placing herself, however, protectingly at the Queen's pillow.

Nevertheless, entirely unabashed, heeding Madame de Lannoi's presence no more than if she had been part of the room's furniture, the Duke delivered himself freely of what was in his mind. He had

been obliged to return to Amiens on a matter of State. It was unthinkable that he should be so near to her Majesty and not hasten to cast himself at her feet; and whilst gladdening the eyes of his body with the sight of her matchless perfection, the image of which was ever before the eyes of his soul, allow himself the only felicity life now held for him—that of protesting himself her utter slave. This, and much more of the kind, did he pour out, what time the Queen, embarrassed and annoyed beyond utterance, could only stare at him in silence.

Apart from the matchless impudence of it, it was also of a rashness beyond pardon. Unless Madame de Lannoi were the most circumspect of women, here was a fine tale for Court gossips, and for the King's ears, a tale that must hopelessly compromise the Queen. For that, Buckingham, in his self-sufficiency and arrogance, appears to have cared nothing. One suspects that it would have pleased his vanity to have his name linked with the Queen's by the lips of scandal.

She found her tongue at last.

"Monsieur le Duc," she said in her confusion, "it was not necessary, it was not worth while, to have asked audience of me for this. You have leave to go."

He looked up in doubt, and saw only confusion; attributed it perhaps to the presence of that third party to which himself he had been so indifferent. He kissed the coverlet again, stumbled to his feet, and reached the door. Thence he sent her a flaming glance of his bold eyes, and hand on heart—

"Adieu, madame!" said he in tragic tones, and so departed.

Madame de Lannoi was discreet, and related at the time nothing of what had passed at that interview. But that the interview itself had taken place under such conditions was enough to set the tongue of gossip wagging. An echo of it reached the King, together with the

story of that other business in the garden, and he was glad to know that the Duke of Buckingham was back in London. Richelieu, to vent his own malice against the Queen, sought to feed the King's suspicions.

"Why did she cry out, sire?" he will have asked. "What did M. de Buckingham do to make her cry out?"

"I don't know. But whatever it was, she was no party to it since she did cry out."

Richelieu did not pursue the matter just then. But neither did he abandon it. He had his agents in London and elsewhere, and he desired of them a close report upon the Duke of Buckingham's movements, and the fullest particulars of his private life.

Meanwhile, Buckingham had left behind him in France two faithful agents of his own, with instructions to keep his memory green with the Queen. For he intended to return upon one pretext or another before very long, and complete the conquest. Those agents of his were Lord Holland and the artist Balthazar Gerbier. It is to be presumed that they served the Duke's interests well, and it is no less to be presumed from that which followed that they found her Majesty willing enough to hear news of that amazingly romantic fellow who had flashed across the path of her grey life, touching it for a moment with his own flaming radiance. In her loneliness she came to think of him with tenderness and pity, in which pity for herself and her dull lot was also blent. He was away, overseas; she might never see him again; therefore there could be little harm in indulging the romantic tenderness he had inspired.

So one day, many months after his departure, she begged Gerbier—as La Rochefoucauld tells us—to journey to London and bear the Duke a trifling memento of her—a set of diamond studs. That love-token—for it amounted to no less—Gerbier conveyed to England, and

delivered to the Duke.

Buckingham's head was so completely turned by the event, and his desire to see Anne of Austria again became thereupon so overmastering, that he at once communicated to France that he was coming over as the ambassador of the King of England to treat of certain matters connected with Spain. But Richelieu had heard from the French ambassador in London that portraits of the Queen of France were excessively abundant at York House, the Duke's residence, and he had considered it his duty to inform the King. Louis was angry, but not with the Queen. To have believed her guilty of any indiscretion would have hurt his gloomy pride too deeply. All that he believed was that this was merely an expression of Buckingham's fanfaronading, thrasonical disposition, a form of vain, empty boasting peculiar to megalomaniacs.

As a consequence, the King of England was informed that the Duke of Buckingham, for reasons well known to himself, would not be agreeable as Charles's ambassador to his Most Christian Majesty. Upon learning this, the vainglorious Buckingham was loud in proclaiming the reason ("well known to himself") and in protesting that he would go to France to see the Queen with the French King's consent or without it. This was duly reported to Richelieu, and by Richelieu to King Louis. But his Most Christian Majesty merely sneered, accounted it more empty boasting on the part of the parvenu, and dismissed it from his mind.

Richelieu found this attitude singularly exasperating in a King who was temperamentally suspicious. It so piqued and annoyed him, that when considered in addition to his undying rancour against Anne of Austria, it is easily believed he spared no pains to obtain something in the nature of a proof that the Queen was not as innocent as Louis insisted upon believing.

Now it happened that one of his London agents informed him, among

other matters connected with the Duke's private life, that he had a bitter and secret enemy in the Countess of Carlisle, between whom and himself there had been a passage of some tenderness too abruptly ended by the Duke. Richelieu, acting upon this information, contrived to enter into correspondence with Lady Carlisle, and in the course of this correspondence he managed her so craftily—says La Rochefoucauld—that very soon she was, whilst hardly realizing it, his Eminence's most valuable spy near Buckingham. Richelieu informed her that he was mainly concerned with information that would throw light upon the real relations of Buckingham and the Queen of France, and he persuaded her that nothing was too insignificant to be communicated. Her resentment of the treatment she had received from Buckingham, a resentment the more bitter for being stifled—since for her reputation's sake she dared not have given it expression—made her a very ready instrument in Richelieu's hands, and there was no scrap of gossip she did not carefully gather up and dispatch to him. But all was naught until one day at last she was able to tell him something that set his pulses beating more quickly than their habit.

She had it upon the best authority that a set of diamond studs constantly worn of late by the Duke was a love-token from the Queen of France sent over to Buckingham by a messenger of her own. Here, indeed, was news. Here was a weapon by which the Queen might be destroyed. Richelieu considered. If he could but obtain possession of the studs, the rest would be easy. There would be an end—and such an end!—to the King's obstinate, indolent faith in his wife's indifference to that boastful, flamboyant English upstart. Richelieu held his peace for the time being, and wrote to the Countess.

Some little time thereafter there was a sumptuous ball given at York House, graced by the presence of King Charles and his young French Queen. Lady Carlisle was present, and in the course of the evening Buckingham danced with her. She was a very beautiful, accomplished and ready-witted woman, and to-night his Grace found

her charms so alluring that he was almost disposed to blame himself for having perhaps treated her too lightly. Yet she seemed at pains to show him that it was his to take up again the affair at the point at which it had been dropped. She was gay, arch, provoking and irresistible. So irresistible that presently, yielding to the lure of her, the Duke slipped away from his guests with the lady on his arm, and they found themselves at the foot of the garden in the shadow of the water-gate that Inigo Jones had just completed for him. My lady languished at his side, permitted him to encircle her with a protecting arm, and for a moment lay heavily against him. He caught her violently to him, and now her ladyship, hitherto so yielding, with true feminine contrariness set herself to resist him. A scuffle ensued between them. She broke from him at last, and sped swift as a doe across the lawn towards the lights of the great house, his Grace in pursuit between vexation and amusement.

But he did not overtake her, and it was with a sense of having been fooled that he rejoined his guests. His questing eyes could discern her nowhere. Presently he made inquiries, to be told that she had desired her carriage to be called, and had left York House immediately upon coming in from the garden.

He concluded that she was gone off in a pet. It was very odd. It was, in fact, most flagrantly contradictory that she should have taken offense at that which she had so obviously invited. But then she always had been a perverse and provoking jade. With that reflection he put her from his mind.

But anon, when his guests had departed, and the lights in the great house were extinguished, Buckingham thought of the incident again. Cogitating it, he sat in his room, his fingers combing his fine, pointed, auburn beard. At last, with a shrug and a half-laugh, he rose to undress for bed. And then a cry escaped him, and brought in his valet from an adjoining room. The riband of diamond studs was gone.

Reckless and indifferent as he was, a sense of evil took him in the moment of his discovery of that loss, so that he stood there pale, staring, and moist of brow. It was no ordinary theft. There were upon his person a dozen ornaments of greater value, any one of which could have been more easily detached. This was the work of some French agent. He had made no secret of whence those studs had come to him.

There his thoughts checked on a sudden. As in a flash of revelation, he saw the meaning of Lady Carlisle's oddly contradictory behaviour. The jade had fooled him. It was she who had stolen the riband. He sat down again, his head in his hands, and swiftly, link by link, he pieced together a complete chain.

Almost as swiftly he decided upon the course of action which he must adopt so as to protect the Queen of France's honour. He was virtually the ruler of England, master in these islands of an almost boundless power. That power he would exert to the full this very night to thwart those enemies of his own and of the Queen's, who worked so subtly in concert. Many would be wronged, much harm would be done, the liberties of some thousands of freeborn Englishmen would be trampled underfoot. What did it matter? It was necessary that his Grace of Buckingham should cover up an indiscretion.

"Set ink and paper yonder," he bade his gaping valet. "Then go call M. Gerbier. Rouse Lacy and Thom, and send them to me at once, and leave word that I shall require a score of couriers to be in the saddle and ready to set out in half an hour."

Bewildered, the valet went off upon his errand. The Duke sat down to write. And next morning English merchants learnt that the ports of England were closed by the King's express command—delivered by his minister, the Duke of Buckingham—that measures were being taken—were already taken in all southern ports—so that no vessel of any kind should leave the island until the King's further pleasure were

made known. Startled, the people wondered was this enactment the forerunner of war. Had they known the truth, they might have been more startled still, though in a different manner. As swiftly as couriers could travel—and certainly well ahead of any messenger seeking escape overseas—did this blockade spread, until the gates of England were tight locked against the outgoing of those diamond studs whirls meant the honour of the Queen of France.

And meanwhile a diamond-cutter was replacing the purloined stones by others, matching them so closely that no man should be able to say which were the originals and which the copies. Buckingham and Gerbier between them guided the work. Soon it was accomplished, and a vessel slipped down the Thames, allowed to pass by those who kept close watch to enforce the royal decree, and made sail for Calais, which was beginning to manifest surprise at this entire cessation of traffic from England. From that vessel landed Gerbier, and rode straight to Paris, carrying the Queen of France the duplicate studs, which were to replace those which she had sent to Buckingham.

Twenty-four hours later the ports of England were unsealed, and commerce was free and unhampered once more. But it was twenty-four hours too late for Richelieu and his agent, the Countess of Carlisle. His Eminence deplored a fine chance lost through the excessive power that was wielded in England by the parvenu.

Yet that is not quite the end of the story. Buckingham's inflamed and reckless mind would stop at nothing now to achieve the object of his desires—go to France and see the Queen. Since the country was closed to him, he would force a way into it, the red way of war. Blood should flow, ruin and misery desolate the land, but in the end he would go to Paris to negotiate a peace, and that should be his opportunity. Other reasons there may have been, but none so dominant, none that could not have been removed by negotiation. The pretext *casus*

belli was the matter of the Protestants of La Rochelle, who were in rebellion against their king.

To their aid sailed Buckingham with an English expedition. Disaster and defeat awaited it. Its shattered remnant crept back in disgrace to England, and the Duke found himself more detested by the people than he had been already—which is saying much. He went off to seek comfort at the hands of the two persons who really loved him—his doting King and his splendid wife.

But the defeat had neither lessened his resolve nor chastened his insolence. He prepared a second expedition in the very teeth of a long-suffering nation's hostility, indifferent to the mutinies and mutterings about him. What signified to him the will of a nation? He desired to win to the woman whom he loved, and to accomplish that he nothing recked that he should set Europe in a blaze, nothing recked what blood should be poured out, what treasure dissipated.

Hatred of him by now was so widespread and vocal, that his friends, fearing that soon it would pass from words to deeds, urged him to take precautions, advised the wearing of a shirt of mail for greater safety.

But he laughed sneeringly, ever arrogant and scornful.

"It needs not. There are no Roman spirits left," was his contemptuous answer.

He was mistaken. One morning after breakfast, as he was leaving the house in the High Street, Portsmouth, where he lodged whilst superintending the final preparations for that unpopular expedition, John Felton, a self-appointed instrument of national vengeance, drove a knife to the hilt into the Duke's breast.

"May the Lord have mercy on your soul!" was the pious exclamation with which the slayer struck home. And, in all the circumstances, there

seems to have been occasion for the prayer.

IX. THE PATH OF EXILE

The Fall of Lord Clarendon

Tight-wrapped in his cloak against the icy whips of the black winter's night, a portly gentleman, well advanced in years, picked his way carefully down the wet, slippery steps of the jetty by the light of a lantern, whose rays gleamed lividly on crushed brown seaweed and trailing green sea slime. Leaning heavily upon the arm which a sailor held out to his assistance, he stepped into the waiting boat that rose and fell on the heaving black waters. A boathook scraped against the stones, and the frail craft was pushed off.

The oars dipped, and the boat slipped away through the darkness, steering a course for the two great poop lanterns that were swinging rhythmically high up against the black background of the night. The elderly gentleman, huddled now in the stern-sheets, looked behind him—to look his last upon the England he had loved and served and ruled. The lantern, shedding its wheel of yellow light upon the jetty steps, was all of it that he could now see.

He sighed, and settled down again to face the poop lights, dancing there above the invisible hull of the ship that was to carry Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, lately Lord Chancellor of England, into exile. As a dying man looks down the foreshortened vista of his active life, so may Edward Hyde—whose career had reached a finality but one degree removed from the finality of death—have reviewed in that moment those thirty years of sincere endeavour and high achievement since he had been a law student in the Temple when Charles I. was King.

That King he had served faithfully, so faithfully that when the desperate fortunes of the Royalist party made it necessary to place the Prince of Wales beyond the reach of Cromwell, it was in Sir Edward Hyde's care that the boy was sent upon his travels. The present was not to be Hyde's first experience of exile. He had known it, and of a bitter sort, in those impecunious days when the Second Charles, whose steps he guided, was a needy, homeless outcast. A man less staunch and loyal might have thrown over so profitless a service. He had talents that would have commanded a price in the Roundhead market. Yet staunchly adhering to the Stuart fortunes, labouring ceaselessly and shrewdly in the Stuart interest, employing his great ability and statecraft, he achieved at long length the restoration of the Stuarts to the Throne of England. And for all those loyal, self-denying labours in exile on the Stuart behalf, all the reward he had at the time was that James Stuart, Duke of York, debauched his daughter.

Nor did Hyde's labours cease when he had made possible the Restoration; it was Hyde who, when that Restoration was accomplished, took in hand and carried out the difficult task of welding together the old and the new conditions of political affairs. And it was Hyde who was the scapegoat when things did not run the course that Englishmen desired. As the head of the administration he was held responsible even for those acts which he had strongly but vainly reprobated in Council. It was Hyde who was blamed when Charles sold Dunkirk to the French, and spent the money in harlotry; it was Hyde who was blamed because the Queen was childless.

The reason for this last lay in the fact that the wrong done to Hyde's daughter Anne had now been righted by marriage with the Duke of York. Now the Duke of York was the heir-apparent, and the people, ever ready to attach most credit to that which is most incredible and fantastic, believed that to ensure the succession of his own grandchildren Hyde had deliberately provided Charles with a barren

wife.

When the Dutch, sailing up the Thames, had burnt the ships of war at Chatham, and Londoners heard the thunder of enemy guns, Hyde was openly denounced as a traitor by a people stricken with terror and seeking a victim in the blind, unreasoning way of public feeling. They broke his windows, ravaged his garden, and erected a gibbet before the gates of his superb mansion on the north side of Piccadilly.

Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, and Lord Chancellor of England, commanded the love of his intimates, but did not possess those qualities of cheap glitter that make for popularity with the masses. Nor did he court popularity elsewhere. Because he was austere in his morals, grave and sober in his conduct, he was hated by those who made up the debauched court of his prince. Because he was deeply religious in his principles, the Puritans mistrusted him for a bigot. Because he was autocratic in his policy he was detested by the Commons, the day of autocracy being done.

Yet might he have weathered the general hostility had Charles been half as loyal to him as he had ever been loyal to Charles. For a time, it is true, the King stood his friend, and might so have continued to the end had not the women become mixed up in the business. As Evelyn, the diarist, puts it, this great man's fall was the work of "the buffoons and ladys of pleasure."

It really is a very tangled story—this inner history of the fall of Clarendon, with which the school-books are not concerned. In a sense, it is also the story of the King's marriage and of Catherine of Braganza, his unfortunate little ugly Queen, who must have suffered as much as any woman wedded to a sultan in any country where the seraglio is not a natural and proper institution.

If Clarendon could not be said to have brought about the marriage, at least he had given it his suffrages when proposed by Portugal, which

was anxious to establish an alliance with England as some protection against the predatory designs of Spain. He had been influenced by the dowry offered—five hundred thousand pounds in money, Tangier, which would give England a commanding position on the Mediterranean, and the Island of Bombay. Without yet foreseeing that the possession of Bombay, and the freedom to trade in the East Indies—which Portugal had hitherto kept jealously to herself—were to enable England to build up her great Indian Empire, yet the commercial advantages alone were obvious enough to make the match desirable.

Catherine of Braganza sailed for England, and on the lath of May, 1662, Charles, attended by a splendid following, went to meet his bride at Portsmouth. He was himself a very personable man, tall—he stood a full six feet high—lean and elegantly vigorous. The ugliness of his drawn, harsh-featured face was mitigated by the glory of full, low-ridded, dark eyes, and his smile could be irresistibly captivating. He was as graceful in manner as in person, felicitous of speech, and of an indolent good temper that found expression in a charming urbanity.

Good temper and urbanity alike suffered rudely when he beheld the wife they brought him. Catherine, who was in her twenty-fifth year, was of an absurdly low stature, so long in the body and short in the legs that, dressed as she was in an outlandish, full-skirted farthingale, she had the appearance of being on her knees when she stood before him. Her complexion was sallow, and though her eyes, like his own, were fine, they were not fine enough to redeem the dull plainness of her face. Her black hair was grotesquely dressed, with a long fore-top and two great ribbon bows standing out, one on each side of her head, like a pair of miniature wings.

It is little wonder that the Merry Monarch, the fastidious voluptuary, with his nice discernment in women, should have checked in his long stride, and halted a moment in consternation.

"Lord!" was his wry comment to Etheredge, who was beside him. "They've brought me a bat, not a woman."

But if she lacked beauty, she was well cowered, and Charles was in desperate need of money.

"I suppose," he told Clarendon anon, "I must swallow this black draught to get the jam that goes with it."

The Chancellor's grave eyes considered him almost sternly what time he coldly recited the advantages of this marriage. If he did not presume to rebuke the ribaldry of his master, neither would he condescend to smile at it. He was too honest ever to be a sycophant.

Catherine was immediately attended—in the words of Grammont—by six frights who called themselves maids-of-honour, and a governess who was a monster. With this retinue she repaired to Hampton Court, where the honeymoon was spent, and where for a brief season the poor woman—entirely enamoured of the graceful, long-legged rake she had married—lived in a fool's paradise.

Disillusion was to follow soon enough. She might be, by the grace of her dowry, Queen of England, but she was soon to discover that to King Charles she was no more than a wife de jure. With wives de facto Charles would people his seraglio as fancy moved him; and the present wife defacto, the mistress of his heart, the first lady of his harem, was that beautiful termagant, Barbara Villiers, wife of the accommodating Roger Palmer, Earl of Castle-maine.

There was no lack—there never is in such cases—of those who out of concern and love for the happily deluded wife lifted the veil for her, and made her aware of the facts of his Majesty's association with my Lady Castle-maine—an association dating back to the time when he was still a homeless wanderer. The knowledge would appear to have troubled the poor soul profoundly; but the climax of her distress was

reached when, on her coming to Whitehall, she found at the head of the list of ladies-in-waiting assigned to her the name of my Lady Castlemaine. The forlorn little woman's pride rose up before this outrage. She struck out that offending name, and gave orders that the favourite was not to be admitted to her presence.

But she reckoned without Charles. For all his urbane, good-tempered, debonair ways, there was an ugly cynical streak in his nature, manifested now in the manner in which he dealt with this situation. Himself he led his boldly handsome favourite by the hand into his wife's presence, before the whole Court assembled, and himself presented her to Catherine, what time that Court, dissolute and profligate as it was, looked on in amazement at so outrageous a slight to the dignity of a queen.

What followed may well have exceeded all expectations. Catherine stiffened as if the blow dealt her had been physical. Gradually her face paled until it was grey and drawn; tears of outraged pride and mortification flooded her eyes. And then, as if something snapped within her brain under this stress of bitter emotion, blood gushed from her nostrils, and she sank back in a swoon into the arms of her Portuguese ladies.

Confusion followed, and under cover of it Charles and his light of love withdrew, realizing that if he lingered not all his easy skill in handling delicate situations could avail him to save his royal dignity.

Naturally the experiment was not to be repeated. But since it was his wish that the Countess of Castlemaine should be established as one of the Queen's ladies—or, rather, since it was her ladyship's wish, and since Charles was as wax in her ladyship's hands—it became necessary to have the Queen instructed in what was, in her husband's view, fitting. For this task he selected Clarendon. But the Chancellor, who had so long and loyally played Mentor to Charles's Telemachus, sought now to guide him in matters moral as he had hitherto guided

him in matters political.

Clarendon declined the office of mediator, and even expostulated with Charles upon the unseemliness of the course upon which his Majesty was bent.

"Surely, sire, it is for her Majesty to say who shall and who shall not be the ladies of her bedchamber. And I nothing marvel at her decision in this instance."

"Yet I tell you, my lord, that it is a decision that shall be revoked."

"By whom, sire?" the Chancellor asked him gravely.

"By her Majesty, of course."

"Under coercion, of which you ask me to be the instrument," said Clarendon, in the tutorly manner he had used with the King from the latter's boyhood. "Yourself, sire, at a time when your own wishes did not warp your judgment, have condemned the very thing that now you are urging. Yourself, sire, hotly blamed your cousin, King Louis, for thrusting Mademoiselle de Valliere upon his queen. You will not have forgotten the things you said then of King Louis."

Charles remembered those unflattering criticisms which he was now invited to apply to his own case. He bit his lip, admitting himself in check.

But anon—no doubt in obedience to the overbearing suasion of my Lady Castlemaine—he returned to the attack, and sent the Chancellor his orders in a letter demanding unquestioning obedience.

"Use your best endeavours," wrote Charles, "to facilitate what I am sure my honour is so much concerned in. And whosoever I find to be my Lady Castlemaine's enemy in this matter, I do promise upon my word to be his enemy so long as I live."

My Lord Clarendon had few illusions on the score of mankind. He knew his world from froth to dregs—having studied it under a variety of conditions. Yet that letter from his King was a bitter draught. All that Charles possessed and was he owed to Clarendon. Yet in such a contest as this, Charles did not hesitate to pen that bitter, threatening line: "Whosoever I find to be my Lady Castlemaine's enemy in this matter, I do promise upon my word to be his enemy so long as I live."

All that Clarendon had done in the past was to count for nothing unless he also did the unworthy thing that Charles now demanded. All that he had accomplished in the service of his King was to be swept into oblivion by the breath of a spiteful wanton.

Clarendon swallowed the draught and sought the Queen, upon that odious embassy with whose ends he was so entirely out of sympathy. He used arguments whose hollowness was not more obvious to the Queen than to himself.

That industrious and entertaining chronicler of trifles, Mr. Pepys, tells us, scandalized, in his diary that on the following day the talk of the Court was all upon a midnight scene between the royal couple in the privacy of their own apartments, so stormy that the sounds of it were plainly to be heard in the neighbouring chambers.

You conceive the poor little woman, smarting under the insult of Charles's proposal by the mouth of Clarendon, assailing her royal husband, and fiercely upbraiding him with his lack not merely of affection but even of the respect that was her absolute due. And Charles, his purpose set, urged to it by the handsome termagant whom he dared not refuse, stirred out of his indolent good-nature, turning upon her, storming back, and finally threatening her with the greater disgrace of seeing herself pack ed home to Portugal, unless she would submit to the lesser disgrace he thrust upon her here.

Whether by these or by other arguments he made his will prevail,

prevail it did. Catherine of Braganza swallowed her pride and submitted. And a very complete submission it was. Lady Castlemaine was not only installed as a Lady of the Bedchamber, but very soon we find the Queen treating her with a friendliness that provoked comment and amazement.

The favourite's triumph was complete, and marked by an increasing insolence, most marked in her demeanour towards the Chancellor, of whose views on the subject, as expressed to the King, she was aware. Consequently she hated him with all the spiteful bitterness that is inseparable from the nature of such women. And she hated him the more because, wrapped in his cold contempt, he moved in utter unconcern of her hostility. In this hatred she certainly did not lack for allies, members of that licentious court whose hostility towards the austere Chancellor was begotten of his own scorn of them. Among them they worked to pull him down.

The attempt to undermine his influence with the King proving vain—for Charles was as well aware of its inspiration as of the Chancellor's value to him—that crew of rakes went laboriously and insidiously to work upon the public mind, which is to say the public ignorance—most fruitful soil for scandal against the great. Who shall say how far my lady and the Court were responsible for the lampoon affixed one day to my Lord Clarendon's gatepost:

Three sights to be seen:
Dunkirk, Tangier, and a barren queen.

Her ladyship might well have considered the unpopularity of the Chancellor as the crown of her triumph, had this triumph been as stable as she could have wished. But, Charles being what he was, it follows that her ladyship had frequent, if transient, anxious jealousies to mar the perfection of her existence, to remind her how insecure is the tenure of positions such as hers, ever at the mercy of the very caprice to existence.

And then, at long length, there came a day of horrid dread for her, a day when she found herself bereft of her influence with her royal lover, when pleadings and railings failed alike to sway him. In part she owed it to an indiscretion of her own, but in far greater measure to a child of sixteen, of a golden-headed, fresh, youthful loveliness, and a nature that still found pleasure in dolls and kindred childish things, yet of a quick and lively wit, and a clear, intelligent mind, untroubled either by the assiduity of the royal attentions or the fact that she was become the toast of the day.

This was Miss Frances Stewart, the daughter of Lord Blantyre, newly come to Court as a Lady-in-Waiting to her Majesty. How profound an impression her beauty made upon the admittedly impressionable old Pepys you may study in his diary. He had a glimpse of her one day riding in the Park with the King, and a troop of ladies, among whom my Lady Castlemaine, looking, as he tells us, "mighty out of humour." There was a moment when Miss Stewart came very near to becoming Queen of England, and although she never reached that eminence, yet her effigy not only found its way into the coinage, but abides there to this day (more perdurable than that of any actual queen) in the figure of Britannia, for which she was the model.

Charles wooed her openly. It was never his way to study appearances in these matters. He was so assiduous that it became customary in that winter of 1666 for those seeking the King at Whitehall to inquire whether he were above or below—"below" meaning Miss Stewart's apartments on the ground-floor of the palace, in which apartments his Majesty was a constant visitor. And since where the King goes the Court follows, and where the King smiles there the Court fawns, it resulted that this child now found herself queering it over a court that flocked to her apartments. Gallants and ladies came there to flirt and to gossip, to gamble and to pay homage.

About a great table in her splendid salon, a company of rustling,

iridescent fops in satin and heavy periwigs, and of ladies with curled head-dresses and bare shoulders, played at basset one night in January. Conversation rippled, breaking here and there into laughter, white, jewelled hands reached out for cards, or for a share of the heaps of gold that swept this way and that with the varying fortunes of the game.

My Lady Castlemaine, seated between Etheredge and Rochester, played in silence, with lips tight-set and brooding eyes. She had lost, it is true, some L1500 that night; yet, a prodigal gamester, and one who came easily by money, she had been known to lose ten times that sum and yet preserve her smile. The source of her ill-humour was not the game. She played recklessly, her attention wandering; those handsome, brooding eyes of hers were intent upon watching what went on at the other end of the long room. There, at a smaller table, sat Miss Stewart, half a dozen gallants hovering near her, engaged upon a game of cards of a vastly different sort. Miss Stewart did not gamble. The only purpose she could find for cards was to build castles; and here she was building one with the assistance of her gallants, and under the superintendence of his Grace of Buckingham, who was as skilled in this as in other equally unstable forms of architecture.

Apart, over by the fire, in a great chair of gilt leather, lounged the King, languidly observing this smaller party, a faint, indolent smile on his swarthy, saturnine countenance. Absently, with one hand he stroked a little spaniel that was curled in his lap. A black boy in a gorgeous, plumed turban and a long, crimson surcoat arabesqued in gold—there were three or four such attendants about the room—proffered him a cup of posset on a golden salver.

The King rose, thrust aside the little blackamoor, and with his spaniel under his arm, sauntered across to Miss Stewart's table. Soon he found himself alone with her—the others having removed themselves

on his approach, as jackals fall back before the coming of the lion. The last to go, and with signs of obvious reluctance, was his Grace of Richmond, a delicately-built, uncomely, but very glittering gentleman.

Charles faced her across the table, the tall house of cards standing between them.

Miss invited his Majesty's admiration for my Lord of Buckingham's architecture. Pouf! His Majesty blew, and the edifice rustled down to a mere heap of cards again.

"Symbol of kingly power," said Miss, pertly. "You demolish better than you build, sire."

"Oddsfish! If you challenge me, it were easy to prove you wrong," quoth he.

"Pray do. The cards are here."

"Cards! Pooh! Card castles are well enough for Buckingham. But such is not the castle I'll build you if you command me."

"I command the King's Majesty? Mon Dieu! But it would be treason surely."

"Not greater treason than to have enslaved me." His fine eyes were oddly ardent. "Shall I build you this castle, child?"

Miss looked at him, and looked away. Her eyelids fluttered distractingly. She fetched a sigh.

"The castle that your Majesty would build for any but your Queen must prove a prison."

She rose, and, looking across the room, she met the handsome, scowling eyes of the neglected favourite. "My Lady Castlemaine looks as if she feared that fortune were not favouring her." She was

so artless that Charles could not be sure there was a double meaning to her speech. "Shall we go see how she is faring?" she added, with a disregard for etiquette, whose artlessness he also doubted.

He yielded, of course. That was his way with beauty, especially with beauty not yet reduced into possession. But the characteristic urbanity with which he sauntered beside her across the room was no more than a mask upon his chagrin. It was always thus that pretty Frances Stewart used him. She always knew how to elude him and, always with that cursed air of artlessness, uttered seemingly simple sentences that clung to his mind to tantalize him.

"The castle your Majesty would build for any but your Queen must prove a prison." What had she meant by that? Must he take her to queen before she would allow him to build a castle for her?

It was an insistent, haunting thought, wracking his mind. He knew there was a party hostile to the Duke of York and Clarendon, which, fearing the succession of the former, and, so, of the grandchildren of the latter, as a result of Catherine of Braganza's childlessness, strongly favoured the King's divorce.

It was a singular irony that my Lady Castlemaine should be largely responsible for the existence of that party. In her hatred for Clarendon, and her blind search for weapons that would slay the Chancellor, she had, if not actually invented, at least helped to give currency to the silly slander that Clarendon had deliberately chosen for Charles a barren queen, so as to ensure the ultimate succession of his own daughter's children. But she had never thought to see that slander recoil upon her as it now did; she had never thought that a party would come to rise up in consequence that would urge divorce upon the King at the very moment when he was consumed by passion for the unattainable, artlessly artful Frances Stewart.

It was Buckingham, greatly daring, who slyly made himself that party's

mouthpiece. The suggestion startled Charles, voicing, as perhaps it did, the temptation by which he was secretly assailed. He looked at Buckingham, frowning.

"I verily believe you are the wickedest dog in England."

The impudent gallant made a leg. "For a subject, sire, I believe I am."

Charles—with whom the amusing word seems ever to have been more compelling than the serious—laughed his soft, mellow laugh. Then he sighed, and the frown of thought returned.

"It would be a wicked thing to make a poor lady miserable only because she is my wife, and has no children by me, which is no fault of hers."

He was a thoroughly bad husband, but his indolent good-nature shrank from purchasing his desires at the price of so much ignominy to the Queen. Before that could come to pass it would be necessary to give the screw of temptation another turn or two. And it was Miss Stewart herself who—in all innocence—supplied what was required in that direction. Driven to bay by the importunities of Charles, she announced at last that it was her intention to retire from Court, so as to preserve herself from the temptations by which she was beset, and to determine the uneasiness which, through no fault of her own, her presence was occasioning the Queen; and she announced further, that, so desperate had she been rendered that she would marry any gentleman of fifteen hundred pounds a year who would have her in honour.

You behold Charles reduced to a state of panic. He sought to bribe her with offers of any settlements she chose to name, or any title she coveted, offering her these things at the nation's expense as freely and lightly as the jewels he had tossed into her lap, or the collar of pearls worth sixteen hundred pounds he had put about her neck. The

offers were ineffectual, and Charles, driven almost to distraction by such invulnerable virtue, might now have yielded to the insidious whispers of divorce and re-marriage had not my Lady Castlemaine taken a hand in the game.

Her ladyship, dwelling already, as a consequence of that royal infatuation for Miss Stewart, in the cold, rarefied atmosphere of a neglect that amounted almost to disgrace, may have considered with bitterness how her attempt to exploit her hatred of the Chancellor had recoiled upon herself.

In the blackest hour of her despair, when hope seemed almost dead, she made a discovery—or, rather, the King's page, the ineffable Chiffinch, Lord Keeper of the Back Stairs and Grand-Eunuch of the Royal Seraglio, who was her ladyship's friend, made it and communicated it to her. There had been one ardent respondent in the Duke of Richmond to that proclamation of Miss Stewart's that she would marry any gentleman of fifteen hundred pounds a year. Long enamoured of her, his Grace saw here his opportunity, and he seized it. Consequently he was now in constant attendance upon her, but very secretly, since he feared the King's displeasure.

My Lady Castlemaine, having discovered this, and being well served in the matter by Chiffinch, spied her opportunity. It came one cold night towards the end of February of that year 1667. Charles, going below at a late hour to visit Miss Stewart, when he judged that she would be alone, was informed by her maid that Miss was not receiving, a headache compelling her to keep her room.

His Majesty returned above in a very ill-humour, to find himself confronted in his own apartments by my Lady Castlemaine. Chiffinch had introduced her by the back-stairs entrance. Charles stiffened at sight of her.

"I hope I may be allowed to pay my homage," says she, on a note of

irony, "although the angelic Stewart has forbid you to see me at my own house. I come to condole with you upon the affliction and grief into which the new-fashioned chastity of the inhuman Stewart has reduced your Majesty."

"You are pleased to be amused, ma'am," says Charles frostily.

"I will not," she returned him, "make use of reproaches which would disgrace myself; still less will I endeavour to excuse frailties in myself which nothing can justify, since your constancy for me deprives me of all defence." Her ladyship, you see, had a considerable gift of sarcasm.

"In that case, may I ask you why you have come?"

"To open your eyes. Because I cannot bear that you should be made the jest of your own Court."

"Madam!"

"Ah! You didn't know, of course, that you are being laughed at for the gross manner in which you are being imposed upon by the Stewart's affectations, any more than you know that whilst you are denied admittance to her apartments, under the presence of some indisposition, the Duke of Richmond is with her now."

"That is false," he was beginning, very indignantly.

"I do not desire you to take my word for it. If you will follow me, you will no longer be the dupe of a false prude, who makes you act so ridiculous a part."

She took him, still half-resisting, by the hand, and in silence led him, despite his reluctance, back by the way he had so lately come. Outside her rival's door she left him, but she paused at the end of the gallery to make sure that he had entered.

Within he found himself confronted by several of Miss Stewart's chambermaids, who respectfully barred his way, one of them informing him scarcely above a whisper that her mistress had been very ill since his Majesty left, but that, being gone to bed, she was, God be thanked, in a very fine sleep.

"That I must see," said the King. And, since one of the women placed herself before the door of the inner room, his Majesty unceremoniously took her by the shoulders and put her aside.

He thrust open the door, and stepped without further ceremony into the well-lighted bedroom. Miss Stewart occupied the handsome, canopied bed. But far from being as he had been told, in "a very fine sleep," she was sitting up; and far from presenting an ailing appearance, she looked radiantly well and very lovely in her diaphanous sleeping toilet, with golden ringlets in distracting disarray. Nor was she alone. By her pillow sat one who, if at first to be presumed her physician, proved upon scrutiny to be the Duke of Richmond.

The King's swarthy face turned a variety of colours, his languid eyes lost all trace of languor. Those who knew his nature might have expected that he would now deliver himself with that sneering sarcasm, that indolent cynicism, which he used upon occasion. But he was too deeply stirred for acting. His self-control deserted him entirely. Exactly what he said has not been preserved for us. All that we are told is that he signified his resentment in such terms as he had never before used; and that his Grace, almost petrified by the King's most royal rage, uttered never a word in answer. The windows of the room overlooked the Thames. The King's eyes strayed towards them. Richmond was slight of build, Charles vigorous and athletic. His Grace took the door betimes lest the window should occur to his Majesty, and so he left the lady alone with the outraged monarch.

Thereafter Charles did not have it all quite his own way. Miss Stewart

faced him in an indignation nothing less than his own, and she was very far from attempting any such justification of herself, or her conduct, as he may have expected.

"Will your Majesty be more precise as to the grounds of your complaint?" she invited him challengingly.

That checked his wildness. It brought him up with a round turn. His jaw fell, and he stared at her, lost now for words. Of this she took the fullest advantage.

"If I am not allowed to receive visits from a man of the Duke of Richmond's rank, who comes with honourable intentions, then I am a slave in a free country. I know of no engagement that should prevent me from disposing of my hand as I think fit. But if this is not permitted me in your Majesty's dominions, I do not believe there is any power on earth can prevent me going back to France, and throwing myself into a convent, there to enjoy the peace denied me at this Court."

With that she melted into tears, and his discomfiture was complete. On his knees he begged her forgiveness for the injury he had done her. But Miss was not in a forgiving humour.

"If your Majesty would graciously consent to leave me now in peace," said she, "you would avoid offending by a longer visit those who accompanied or conducted you to my apartments."

She had drawn a bow at a venture but shrewdly, and the shaft went home. Charles rose, red in the face. Swearing he would never speak to her again, he stalked out.

Later, however, he considered. If he felt bitterly aggrieved, he must also have realized that he had no just grounds for this, and that in his conduct in Miss Stewart's room he had been entirely ridiculous. She was rightly resolved against being lightly won by any man. If anything, the reflection must have fanned his passion. It was impossible, he

thought, that she should love that knock-kneed fellow, Richmond, who had no graces either of body or of mind, and if she suffered the man's suit, it must be, as she had all but said, so that she might be delivered from the persecution to which his Majesty had submitted her. The thought of her marrying Richmond, or, indeed, anybody, was unbearable to Charles, and it may have stifled his last scruple in the matter of the divorce.

His first measure next morning was to banish Richmond from the Court. But Richmond had not stayed for the order to quit. The King's messenger found him gone already.

Then Charles took counsel in the matter with the Chancellor. Clarendon's habitual gravity was increased to sternness. He spoke to the King—taking the fullest advantage of the tutelary position in which for the last twenty-five years he had stood to him—much as he had spoken when Charles had proposed to make Barbara Palmer a Lady of the Queen's Bedchamber, saving that he was now even more uncompromising. The King was not pleased with him. But just as he had had his way, despite the Chancellor, in that other matter, so he would have his way despite him now. This time, however, the Chancellor took no risks. He feared too much the consequences for Charles, and he determined to spare no effort to avoid a scandal, and to save the already deeply-injured Queen. So he went secretly to work to outwit the King. He made himself the protector of those lovers, the Duke of Richmond and Miss Stewart, with the result that one dark night, a week or two later, the lady stole away from the Palace of White-hall, and made her way to the Bear Tavern, at the Bridge-foot, Westminster, where Richmond awaited her with a coach. And so, by the secret favour of the Lord Chancellor, they stole away to Kent and matrimony.

That was checkmate indeed to Charles who swore all manner of things in his mortification. But it was not until some six weeks later

that he learnt by whose agency the thing had been accomplished. He learnt it, not a doubt, from my Lady Castlemaine.

The estrangement between her ladyship and the King, which dated back to the time of his desperate courtship of Miss Stewart, was at last made up; and once again we see her ladyship triumphant, and firmly established in the amorous King's affections. She had cause to be grateful to the Chancellor for this. But her vindictive nature remembered only the earlier injury still unavenged. Here at last was her chance to pay off that score. Clarendon, beset by enemies on every hand, yet trusting in the King whom he had served so well, stood his ground unintimidated and unmoved—an oak that had weathered mightier storms than this. He did not dream that he was in the power of an evil woman. And that woman used her power. When all else failed, she told the King of Clarendon's part in the flight of Miss Stewart, and lest the King should be disposed to pardon the Chancellor out of consideration for his motives, represented him as a self-seeker, and charged him with having acted thus so as to make sure of keeping his daughter's children by the Duke of York in the succession.

That was the end. Charles withdrew his protection, threw Clarendon to the wolves. He sent the Duke of Albemarle to him with a command that he should surrender his seals of office. The proud old man refused to yield his seals to any but the King himself. He may have hoped that the memory of all that lay between them would rise up once more when they were face to face. So he came in person to Whitehall to make surrender. He walked deliberately, firmly, and with head erect, through the hostile throng of courtiers—"especially the buffoons and ladys of pleasure," as Evelyn says.

Of his departure thence, his disgrace now consummated, Pepys has left us a vivid picture:

"When he went from the King on Monday morning my Lady

Castlemaine was in bed (though about twelve o'clock), and ran out in her smock into her aviary looking into Whitehall Gardens; and thither her woman brought her her nightgown; and she stood, blessing herself at the old man's going away; and several of the gallants of Whitehall—of which there were many staying to see the Chancellor's return—did talk to her in her birdcage; among others Blandford, telling her she was the bird of passage."

Clarendon lingered, melancholy and disillusioned, at his fine house in Piccadilly until, impeached by Parliament, he remembered Strafford's fate, and set out to tread once more and for the remainder of his days the path of exile.

Time avenged him. Two of his granddaughters—Mary and Anne—reigned successively as queens in England.

X. THE TRAGEDY OF HERRENHAUSEN

Count Philip Königsmark and the Princess Sophia Dorothea

He was accounted something of a scamp throughout Europe, and particularly in England, where he had been associated with his brother in the killing of Mr. Thynne. But the seventeenth century did not look for excessively nice scruples in a soldier of fortune; and so it condoned the lack of virtue in Count Philip Christof Königsmark for the sake of his personal beauty, his elegance, his ready wit, and his magnificent address. The court of Hanover made him warmly welcome, counting itself the richer for his presence; whilst he, on his side, was retained there by the Colonelcy in the Electoral Guard to which he had been appointed, and by his deep and ill-starred affection for the Princess Sophia Dorothea, the wife of the Electoral Prince, who later was to reign in England as King George I.

His acquaintance with her dated back to childhood, for they had been playmates at her father's ducal court of Zell, where Königsmark had been brought up. With adolescence he had gone out into the world to seek the broader education which it offered to men of quality and spirit. He had fought bulls in Madrid, and the infidel overseas; he had wooed adventure wherever it was to be met, until romance hung about him like an aura. Thus Sophia met him again, a dazzling personality, whose effulgence shone the more brightly against the dull background of that gross Hanoverian court; an accomplished,

graceful, self-reliant man of the world, in whom she scarcely recognized her sometime playmate.

The change he found in her was no less marked, though of a different kind. The sweet child he had known—she had been married in 1682, at the age of sixteen—had come in her ten years of wedded life to the fulfilment of the handsome promise of her maidenhood. But her beauty was spiritualized by a certain wistfulness that had not been there before, that should not have been there now had all been well. The sprightliness inherent in her had not abated, but it had assumed a certain warp of bitterness; humour, which is of the heart, had given place in her to wit, which is of the mind, and this wit was barbed, and a little reckless of how or where it offended.

Königsmark observed these changes that the years had wrought, and knew enough of her story to account for them. He knew of her thwarted love for her cousin, the Duke of Wolfenbüttel, thwarted for the sake of dynastic ambition, to the end that by marrying her to the Electoral Prince George the whole of the Duchy of Luneberg might be united. Thus, for political reasons, she had been thrust into a union that was mutually loveless; for Prince George had as little affection to bring to it as herself. Yet for a prince the door to compensations is ever open. Prince George's taste, as is notorious, was ever for ugly women, and this taste he indulged so freely, openly, and grossly that the coldness towards him with which Sophia had entered the alliance was eventually converted into disgust and contempt.

Thus matters stood between that ill-matched couple; contempt on her side, cold dislike on his, a dislike that was fully shared by his father, the Elector, Ernest Augustus, and encouraged in the latter by the Countess von Platen.

Madame von Platen, the wife of the Elector's chief minister of state, was—with the connivance of her despicable husband, who saw therein the means to his own advancement—the acknowledged

mistress of Ernest Augustus. She was a fleshly, gauche, vain, and ill-favoured woman. Malevolence sat in the creases of her painted face, and peered from her mean eyes. Yet, such as she was, the Elector Ernest loved her. His son's taste for ugly women would appear to have been hereditary.

Between the Countess and Sophia there was a deadly feud. The princess had mortally offended her father-in-law's favourite. Not only had she never troubled to dissemble the loathing which that detestable woman inspired in her, but she had actually given it such free and stinging expression as had provoked against Madame von Platen the derision of the court, a derision so ill-concealed that echoes of it had reached its object, and made her aware of the source from whence it sprang.

It was into this atmosphere of hostility that the advent of the elegant, romantic Königsmark took place. He found the stage set for comedy of a grim and bitter kind, which he was himself, by his recklessness, to convert into tragedy.

It began by the Countess von Platen's falling in love with him. It was some time before he suspected it, though heaven knows he did not lack for self-esteem. Perhaps it was this very self-esteem that blinded him here to the appalling truth. Yet in the end understanding came to him. When the precise significance of the fond leer of that painted harridan's repellent coquetry was borne in upon him he felt the skin of his body creep and roughen. But he dissembled craftily. He was a venal scamp, after all, and in the court of Hanover he saw opportunities to employ his gifts and his knowledge of the great world in such a way as to win to eminence. He saw that the Elector's favourite could be of use to him; and it is not your adventurer's way to look too closely into the nature of the ladder by which he has the chance to climb.

Skilfully, craftily, then, he played the enamoured countess so long as

her fondness for him might be useful, her hostility detrimental. But once the Colonelcy of the Electoral Guards was firmly in his grasp, and an intimate friendship had ripened between himself and Prince Charles—the Elector's younger son—sufficiently to ensure his future, he plucked off the mask and allied himself with Sophia in her hostility towards Madame von Platen. He did worse. Some little time thereafter, whilst on a visit to the court of Poland, he made one night in his cups a droll story of the amorous persecution which he had suffered at Madame von Platen's hands.

It was a tale that set the profligate company in a roar. But there was one present who afterwards sent a report of it to the Countess, and you conceive the nature of the emotions it aroused in her. Her rage was the greater for being stifled. It was obviously impossible for her to appeal to her lover, the Elector, to avenge her. From the Elector, above all others, must the matter be kept concealed. But not on that account would she forgo the vengeance due. She would present a reckoning in full ere all was done, and bitterly should the presumptuous young adventurer who had flouted her be made to pay.

The opportunity was very soon to be afforded her. It arose more or less directly out of an act in which she indulged her spite against Sophia. This lay in throwing Melusina Schulemburg into the arms of the Electoral Prince. Melusina, who was years afterwards to be created Duchess of Kendal, had not yet attained to that completeness of lank, bony hideousness that was later to distinguish her in England. But even in youth she could boast of little attraction. Prince George, however, was easily attracted. A dull, undignified libertine, addicted to over-eating, heavy drinking, and low conversation, he found in Melusina von Schulemburg an ideal mate. Her installation as *maîtresse en-titre* took place publicly at a ball given by Prince George at Herrenhausen, a ball at which the Princess Sophia was present.

Accustomed, inured, as she was to the coarse profligacy of her

dullard husband, and indifferent to his philandering as her contempt of him now left her, yet in the affront thus publicly offered her, she felt that the limit of endurance had been reached. Next day it was found that she had disappeared from Herrenhausen. She had fled to her father's court at Zell.

But her father received her coldly; lectured her upon the freedom and levity of her manners, which he condemned as unbecoming the dignity of her rank; recommended her to use in future greater prudence, and a proper, wifely submission; and, the homily delivered, packed her back to her husband at Herrenhausen.

George's reception of her on her return was bitterly hostile. She had been guilty of a more than usual, of an unpardonable want of respect for him. She must learn what was due to her station, and to her husband. He would thank her to instruct herself in these matters against his return from Berlin, whither he was about to journey, and he warned her that he would suffer no more tantrums of that kind.

Thus he delivered himself, with cold hate in his white, flabby, frog-face and in the very poise of his squat, ungainly figure.

Thereafter he departed for Berlin, bearing hate of her with him, and leaving hate and despair behind.

It was then, in this despair, that Sophia looked about her for a true friend to lend her the aid she so urgently required; to rescue her from her intolerable, soul-destroying fate. And at her elbow, against this dreadful need, Destiny had placed her sometime playmate, her most devoted friend—as she accounted him, and as, indeed, he was—the elegant, reckless Königsmark, with his beautiful face, his golden mane, and his unfathomable blue eyes.

Walking with him one summer day between clipped hedges in the formal gardens of Herrenhausen—that palace as squat and

ungraceful as those who had built and who inhabited it—she opened her heart to him very fully, allowed him, in her overwhelming need of sympathy, to see things which for very shame she had hitherto veiled from all other eyes. She kept nothing back; she dwelt upon her unhappiness with her boorish husband, told him of slights and indignities innumerable, whose pain she had hitherto so bravely dissembled, confessed, even, that he had beaten her upon occasion.

Königsmark went red and white by turns, with the violent surge of his emotions, and the deep sapphire eyes blazed with wrath when she came at last to the culminating horror of blows endured.

"It is enough, madame," he cried. "I swear to you, as Heaven hears me, that he shall be punished."

"Punished?" she echoed, checking in her stride, and looked at him with a smile of sad incredulity. "It is not his punishment I seek, my friend, but my own salvation."

"The one can be accomplished with the other," he answered hotly, and struck the cut-steel hilt of his sword. "You shall be rid of this lout as soon as ever I can come to him. I go after him to Berlin to-night."

The colour all faded from her cheeks, her sensitive lips fell apart, as she looked at him aghast.

"Why, what would you do? What do you mean?" she asked him.

"I will send him the length of my sword, and so make a widow of you, madame."

She shook her head. "Princes do not fight," she said, on a note of contempt.

"I shall so shame him that he will have no alternative—unless, indeed, he is shameless. I will choose my occasion shrewdly, put an affront on him one evening in his cups, when drink shall have made him valiant

enough to commit himself to a meeting. If even that will not answer, and he still shields himself behind his rank—why, there are other ways to serve him." He was thinking, perhaps, of Mr. Thynne.

The heat of so much reckless, romantic fury on her behalf warmed the poor lady, who had so long been chilled for want of sympathy, and starved of love. Impulsively she caught his hand in hers.

"My friend, my friend!" she cried, on a note that quivered and broke. "You are mad—wonderfully beautifully mad, but mad. What would become of you if you did this?"

He swept the consideration aside by a contemptuous, almost angry gesture. "Does that matter? I am concerned with what is to become of you. I was born for your service, my princess, and the service being rendered..." He shrugged and smiled, threw out his hands and let them fall again to his sides in an eloquent gesture. He was the complete courtier, the knight-errant, the romantic preux-chevalier all in one.

She drew closer to him, took the blue lapels of his military coat in her white hands, and looked pathetically up into his beautiful face. If ever she wanted to kiss a man, she surely wanted to kiss Königsmark in that moment, but as she might have kissed a loving brother, in token of her deep gratitude for his devotion to her who had known so little true devotion.

"If you knew," she said, "what balsam this proof of your friendship has poured upon the wounds of my soul, you would understand my utter lack of words in which to thank you. You dumbfounded me, my friend; I can find no expression for my gratitude."

"I ask no gratitude," quoth he. "I am all gratitude myself that you should have come to me in the hour of your need. I but ask your leave to serve you in my own way."

She shook her head. She saw his blue eyes grow troubled.

He was about to speak, to protest, but she hurried on. "Serve me if you will—God knows I need the service of a loyal friend—but serve me as I shall myself decide—no other way."

"But what alternative service can exist?" he asked, almost impatiently.

"I have it in mind to escape from this horrible place—to quit Hanover, never to return."

"But to go whither?"

"Does it matter? Anywhere away from this hateful court, and this hateful life; anywhere, since my father will not let me find shelter at Zell, as I had hoped. Had it not been for the thought of my children, I should have fled long ago. For the sake of those two little ones I have suffered patiently through all these years. But the limit of endurance has been reached and passed. Take me away. Königsmark!" She was clutching his lapels again. "If you would really serve me, help me to escape."

His hands descended upon hers, and held them prisoned against his breast. A flush crept into his fair cheeks, there was a sudden kindling of the eyes that looked down into her own piteous ones. These sensitive, romantic natures are quickly stirred to passion, ever ready to yield to the adventure of it.

"My princess," he said, "you may count upon your Königsmark while he has life." Disengaging her hands from his lapels, but still holding them, he bowed low over them, so low that his heavy golden mane tumbled forward on either side of his handsome head to form a screen under cover of which he pressed his lips upon her fingers.

She let him have his will with her hands. It was little enough reward for so much devotion.

"I thank you again," she breathed. "And now I must think—I must consider where I can count upon finding refuge."

That cooled his ardour a little. His own high romantic notion was, no doubt, to fling her there and then upon the withers of his horse, and so ride out into the wide world to carve a kingdom for her with his sword. Her sober words dispelled the dream, revealed to him that it was not quite intended he should hereafter be her custodian. And there for the moment the matter was suspended.

Both had behaved quite recklessly. Each should have remembered that an Electoral Princess is not wise to grant a protracted interview, accompanied by lapel-holding, hand-holding, and hand-kissings, within sight of the windows of a palace. And, as it happened, behind one of those windows lurked the Countess von Platen, watching them jealously, and without any disposition to construe the meeting innocently. Was she not the deadly enemy of both? Had not the Princess whetted satire upon her, and had not Königsmark scorned the love she proffered him, and then unpardonably published it in a ribald story to excite the mirth of profligates?

That evening the Countess purposefully sought her lover, the Elector.

"Your son is away in Prussia," quoth she. "Who guards his honour in his absence?"

"George's honour?" quoth the Elector, bulging eyes staring at the Countess. He did not laugh, as might have been expected at the notion of guarding something whose existence was not easily discerned. He had no sense of humour, as his appearance suggested. He was a short, fat man with a face shaped like a pear—narrow in the brow and heavy in the jowl. "What the devil do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that this foreign adventurer, Königsmark, and Sophia grow

too intimate."

"Sophia!" Thick eyebrows were raised until they almost met the line of his ponderous peruke. His face broke into malevolent creases expressive of contempt.

"That white-faced ninny! Bah!" Her very virtue was matter for his scorn.

"It is these white-faced ninnies can be most sly," replied the Countess, out of her worldly wisdom. "Listen a moment now." And she related, with interest rather than discount, you may be sure, what she had witnessed that afternoon.

The malevolence deepened in his face. He had never loved Sophia, and he felt none the kinder towards her for her recent trip to Zell. Then, too, being a libertine, and the father of a libertine, it logically followed that unchastity in his women-folk was in his eyes the unpardonable sin.

He heaved himself out of his deep chair. "How far has this gone?" he demanded.

Prudence restrained the Countess from any over-statement that might afterwards be disproved. Besides, there was not the need, if she could trust her senses. Patience and vigilance would presently afford her all the evidence required to damn the pair. She said as much, and promised the Elector that she would exercise herself the latter quality in his son's service. Again the Elector did not find it grotesque that his mistress should appoint herself the guardian of his son's honour.

The Countess went about that congenial task with zeal—though George's honour was the least thing that concerned her. What concerned her was the dishonour of Sophia, and the ruin of Königsmark. So she watched assiduously, and set others, too, to watch for her and to report. And almost daily now she had for the

Elector a tale of whisperings and hand-pressings, and secret stolen meetings between the guilty twain. The Elector enraged, and would have taken action, but that the guileful Countess curbed him. All this was not enough. An accusation that could not be substantiated would ruin all chance of punishing the offenders, might recoil, indeed, upon the accusers by bringing the Duke of Zell to his daughter's aid. So they must wait yet awhile until they held more absolute proof of this intrigue.

And then at last one day the Countess sped in haste to the Elector with word that Königsmark and the Princess had shut themselves up together in the garden pavilion. Let him come at once, and he should so discover them for himself, and thus at last be able to take action. The Countess was flushed with triumph. Be that meeting never so innocent—and Madame von Platen could not, being what she was, and having seen what she had seen, conceive it innocent—it was in an Electoral Princess an unforgivable indiscretion, to take the most charitable view, which none would dream of taking. So the Elector, fiercely red in the face, hurried off to the pavilion with Madame von Platen following. He came too late, despite the diligence of his spy.

Sophia had been there, but her interview with the Count had been a brief one. She had to tell him that at last she was resolved in all particulars. She would seek a refuge at the court of her cousin, the Duke of Wolfenbüttele, who, she was sure—for the sake of what once had lain between them—would not now refuse to shelter and protect her. Of Königsmark she desired that he should act as her escort to her cousin's court.

Königsmark was ready, eager. In Hanover he would leave nothing that he regretted. At Wolfenbüttele, having served Sophia faithfully, his ever-growing, romantic passion for her might find expression. She would make all dispositions, and advise him when she was ready to set out. But they must use caution, for they were being spied upon.

Madame von Platen's over-eagerness had in part betrayed her. It was, indeed, their consciousness of espionage which had led to this dangerous meeting in the seclusion of the pavilion, and which urged him to linger after Sophia had left him. They were not to be seen to emerge together.

The young Dane sat alone on the window-seat, his chin in his hands, his eyes dreamy, a faint smile on his shapely lips, when Ernest Augustus burst furiously in, the Countess von Platen lingering just beyond the threshold. The Elector's face was apoplectically purple from rage and haste, his breath came in wheezing gasps. His bulging eyes swept round the chamber, and fastened finally, glaring, upon the startled Königsmark.

"Where is the Princess?" he blurted out.

The Count espied Madame von Platen in the back ground, and had the scent of mischief very strong. But he preserved an air of innocent mystification. He rose and answered with courteous ease:

"Your Highness is seeking her? Shall I ascertain for you?"

At a loss, Ernest Augustus stared a moment, then flung a glance over his shoulder at the Countess.

"I was told that her Highness was here," he said.

"Plainly," said Königsmark, with perfect calm, "you have been misinformed." And his quiet glance and gesture invited the Elector to look round for himself.

"How long have you been here yourself?" Feeling at a disadvantage, the Elector avoided the direct question that was in his mind.

"Half an hour at least."

"And in that time you have not seen the Princess?"

"Seen the Princess?" Königsmark's brows were knit perplexedly. "I scarcely understand your Highness."

The Elector moved a step and trod on a soft substance. He looked down, then stooped, and rose again, holding in his hand a woman's glove.

"What's this?" quoth he. "Whose glove is this?"

If Königsmark's heart missed a beat—as well it may have done—he did not betray it outwardly. He smiled; indeed he almost laughed.

"Your Highness is amusing himself at my expense by asking me questions that only a seer could answer."

The Elector was still considering him with his ponderously suspicious glance, when quick steps approached. A serving-maid, one of Sophia's women, appeared in the doorway of the pavilion.

"What do you want?" the Elector snapped at her.

"A glove her Highness lately dropped here," was the timid answer, innocently precipitating the very discovery which the woman had been too hastily dispatched to avert.

The Elector flung the glove at her, and there was a creak of evil laughter from him. When she had departed' he turned again to Königsmark.

"You fence skilfully," said he, sneering, "too skilfully for an honest man. Will you now tell me without any more of this, precisely what the Princess Sophia was doing here with you?"

Königsmark drew himself stiffly up, looking squarely into the furnace of the Elector's face.

"Your Highness assumes that the Princess was here with me, and a

prince is not to be contradicted, even when he insults a lady whose spotless purity is beyond his understanding. But your Highness can hardly expect me to become in never so slight a degree a party to that insult by vouchsafing any answer to your question."

"That is your last word, sir?" The Elector shook with suppressed anger.

"Your Highness cannot think that words are necessary?"

The bulging eyes grew narrow, the heavy nether lip was thrust forth in scorn and menace.

"You are relieved, sir, of your duties in the Electoral Guard, and as that is the only tie binding you to Hanover, we see no reason why your sojourn here should be protracted."

Königsmark bowed stiffly, formally. "It shall end, your Highness, as soon as I can make the necessary arrangements for my departure—in a week at most."

"You are accorded three days, sir." The Elector turned, and waddled out, leaving Königsmark to breathe freely again. The three days should suffice for the Princess also. It was very well.

The Elector, too, thought that it was very well. He had given this troublesome fellow his dismissal, averted a scandal, and placed his daughter-in-law out of the reach of harm. Madame von Platen was the only one concerned who thought that it was not well at all, the consummation being far from that which she had desired. She had dreamt of a flaming scandal, that should utterly consume her two enemies, Sophia and Königsmark. Instead, she saw them both escaping, and the fact that she was—as she may have supposed—effectively separating two loving hearts could be no sort of adequate satisfaction for such bitter spite as hers. Therefore she plied her wicked wits to force an issue more germane to her desires.

The course she took was fraught with a certain peril. Yet confident that at worst she could justify it, and little fearing that the worst would happen, she boldly went to work. She forged next day a brief note in which the Princess Sophia urgently bade Königsmark to come to her at ten o'clock that night in her own apartments, and with threat and bribe induced the waiting woman of the glove to bear that letter.

Now it so happened that Königsmark, through the kind offices of Sophia's maid-of-honour, Mademoiselle de Knesebeck, who was in the secret of their intentions, had sent the Princess a note that morning, briefly stating the urgency of departure, and begging her so to arrange that she could leave Herrenhausen with him on the morrow. He imagined the note now brought him to be in answer to that appeal of his. Its genuineness he never doubted, being unacquainted with Sophia's writing. He was aghast at the rashness which dictated such an assignation, yet never hesitated as to keeping it. It was not his way to hesitate. He trusted to the gods who watch over the destinies of the bold.

And meanwhile Madame von Platen was reproaching her lover with having dealt too softly with the Dane.

"Bah!" said the Elector. "To-morrow he goes his ways, and we are rid of him. Is not that enough?"

"Enough, if, soon as he goes, he goes not too late already," quoth she.

"Now what will you be hinting?" he asked her peevishly.

"I'll be more plain. I will tell you what I know. It is this. Königsmark has an assignation with the Princess Sophia this very night at ten o'clock—and where do you suppose? In her Highness's own apartments."

The Elector came to his feet with an oath. "That is not true!" he cried.

"It cannot be!"

"Then I'll say no more," quoth Jezebel, and snapped her thin lips.

"Ah, but you shall. How do you know this?"

"That I cannot tell you without betraying a confidence. Let it suffice you that I do know it. Consider now whether in banishing this profligate you have sufficiently avenged the honour of your son."

"My God, if I thought this were true...." He choked with rage, stood shaking a moment, then strode to the door, calling.

"The truth is easily ascertained," said Madame. "Conceal yourself in the Rittersaal, and await his coming forth. But you had best go attended, for it is a very reckless rogue, and he has been known aforetime to practice murder."

Whilst the Elector, acting upon this advice, was getting his men together, Königsmark was wasting precious moments in Sophia's antechamber, whilst Mademoiselle de Knesebeck apprised her Highness of his visit. Sophia had already retired to bed, and the amazing announcement of the Count's presence there startled her into a fear of untoward happenings. She was overwhelmed, too, by the rashness of this step of his, coming after the events of yesterday. If it should be known that he had visited her thus, terrible consequences might ensue. She rose, and with Mademoiselle de Knesebeck's aid made ready to receive him. Yet for all that she made haste, the precious irreclaimable moments sped.

She came to him at last, Mademoiselle de Knesebeck following, for propriety's sake.

"What is it?" she asked him breathlessly. "What brings you here at such an hour?"

"What brings me?" quoth he, surprised at that reception. "Why, your

commands—your letter."

"My letter? What letter?"

A sense of doom, of being trapped, suddenly awoke in him. He plucked forth the treacherous note, and proffered it.

"Why, what does this mean?" She swept a white hand over her eyes and brows, as if to brush away some thing that obscured her vision. "That is not mine. I never wrote it. How could you dream I should be imprudent as to bid you hither, and at such an hour How could you dream it?"

"You are right," said he, and laughed, perhaps to ease her alarm, perhaps in sheer bitter mirth. "It will be, no doubt, the work of our friend, Madame von Platen. I had best begone. For the rest, my travelling chaise will wait from noon until sunset to-morrow by the Markt Kirck in Hanover, and I shall wait within it. I shall hope to conduct you safely to Wolfenbuttely."

"I will come, I will come. But go now—oh, go!"

He looked very deeply into her eyes—a valedictory glance against the worst befalling him. Then he took her hand, bowed over it and kissed it, and so departed.

He crossed the outer ante-room, descended the short flight of stairs, and pushed open the heavy door of the Hall of Knights. He passed through, and thrust the door behind him, then stood a moment looking round the vast apartment. If he was too late to avoid the springs of the baited trap, it was here that they should snap upon him. Yet all was still. A single lamp on a table in the middle of the vast chamber shed a feeble, flickering light, yet sufficient to assure him that no one waited here. He sighed relief, wrapped his cloak about him, and set out swiftly to cross the hall.

But even as he passed, four shadows detached themselves from the tall stove, resolved themselves into armed men, and sprang after him.

He heard them, wheeled about, flung off his cloak, and disengaged his sword, all with the speed of lightning and the address of the man who for ten years had walked amid perils, and learned to depend upon his blade. That swift action sealed his doom. Their orders were to take him living or dead, and standing in awe of his repute, they were not the men to incur risks. Even as he came on guard, a partisan grazed his head, and another opened his breast.

He went down, coughing and gasping, blood dabbling his bright golden hair, and staining the priceless Mechlin at his throat, yet his right hand still desperately clutching his useless sword.

His assassins stood about him, their partisans levelled to strike again, and summoned him to yield. Then, beside one of them, he suddenly beheld the Countess von Platen materializing out of the surrounding shadows as it seemed, and behind her the squat, ungraceful figure of the Elector. He fought for breath. "I am slain," he gasped, "and as I am to appear before my Maker I swear to you that the Princess Sophia is innocent. Spare her at least, your Highness."

"Innocent!" said the Elector hoarsely. "Then what did you now in her apartments?"

"It was a trap set for us by this foul hag, who..."

The heel of the vindictive harridan ground viciously upon the lips of the dying man and choked his utterance. Thereafter the halberts finished him off, and he was buried there and then, in lime, under the floor of the Hall of Knights, under the very spot where he had fallen, which was long to remain imbrued with his blood.

Thus miserably perished the glittering Königsmark, a martyr to his own irrepressible romanticism.

As for Sophia, better might it have been for her had she shared his fate that night. She was placed under arrest next morning, and Prince George was summoned back from Berlin at once.

The evidence may have satisfied him that his honour had not suffered, for he was disposed to let the matter drop, content that they should remain in the forbidding relations which had existed between them before this happening. But Sophia was uncompromising in her demand for strict justice.

"If I am guilty, I am unworthy of you," she told him. "If innocent, you are unworthy of me."

There was no more to be said. A consistory court was assembled to divorce them. But since with the best intentions there was no faintest evidence of her adultery, this court had to be content to pronounce the divorce upon the ground of her desertion.

She protested against the iniquity of this. But she protested in vain. She was carried off into the grim captivity of a castle on the Ahlen, to drag out in that melancholy duress another thirty-two years of life.

Her death took place in November of 1726. And the story runs that on her death-bed she delivered to a person of trust a letter to her sometime husband, now King George I. of England. Seven months later, as King George was on his way to his beloved Hanover, that letter was placed in his carriage as it crossed the frontier into Germany. It contained Sophia's dying declaration of innocence, and her solemn summons to King George to stand by her side before the judgment-seat of Heaven within a year, and there make answer in her presence for the wrongs he had done her, for her blighted life and her miserable death.

King George's answer to that summons was immediate. The reading of that letter brought on the apoplectic seizure of which he died in his

carriage next day—the 9th of June, 1727—on the road to Osnabruck.

XI. THE TYRANNICIDE

Charlotte Corday and Jean Paul Morat

Tyrannicide was the term applied to her deed by Adam Lux, her lover in the sublimest and most spiritual sense of the word—for he never so much as spoke to her, and she never so much as knew of his existence.

The sudden spiritual passion which inflamed him when he beheld her in the tumbril on her way to the scaffold is a fitting corollary to her action. She in her way and he in his were alike sublime; her tranquil martyrdom upon the altar of Republicanism and his exultant martyrdom upon the altar of Love were alike splendidly futile.

It is surely the strangest love-story enshrined in history. It has its pathos, yet leaves no regrets behind, for there is no might-have-been which death had thwarted. Because she died, he loved her; because he loved her, he died. That is all, but for the details which I am now to give you.

The convent-bred Marie Charlotte Corday d'Armont was the daughter of a landless squire of Normandy, a member of the chétive noblesse, a man of gentle birth, whose sadly reduced fortune may have predisposed him against the law of entail or primogeniture—the prime cause of the inequality out of which were sprung so many of the evils that afflicted France. Like many of his order and condition he was among the earliest converts to Republicanism—the pure, ideal

republicanism, demanding constitutional government of the people by the people, holding monarchical and aristocratic rule an effete and parasitic anachronism.

From M. de Corday Charlotte absorbed the lofty Republican doctrines to which anon she was to sacrifice her life; and she rejoiced when the hour of awakening sounded and the children of France rose up and snapped the fetters in which they had been trammelled for centuries by an insolent minority of their fellow-countrymen.

In the early violence of the revolution she thought she saw a transient phase—horrible, but inevitable in the dread convulsion of that awakening. Soon this would pass, and the sane, ideal government of her dreams would follow—must follow, since among the people's elected representatives was a goodly number of unselfish, single-minded men of her father's class of life; men of breeding and education, impelled by a lofty altruistic patriotism; men who gradually came to form a party presently to be known as the Girondins.

But the formation of one party argues the formation of at least another. And this other in the National Assembly was that of the Jacobins, less pure of motive, less restrained in deed, a party in which stood pre-eminent such ruthless, uncompromising men as Robespierre, Danton,—and Marat.

Where the Girondins stood for Republicanism, the Jacobins stood for Anarchy. War was declared between the two. The Girondins arraigned Marat and Robespierre for complicity in the September massacres, and thereby precipitated their own fall. The triumphant acquittal of Marat was the prelude to the ruin of the Girondins, and the proscription of twenty-nine deputies followed at once as the first step. These fled into the country, hoping to raise an army that should yet save France, and several of the fugitives made their way to Caen. Thence by pamphlets and oratory they laboured to arouse true Republican enthusiasm. They were gifted, able men, eloquent

speakers and skilled writers, and they might have succeeded but that in Paris sat another man no less gifted, and with surer knowledge of the temper of the proletariat, tirelessly wielding a vitriolic pen, skilled in the art of inflaming the passions of the mob.

That man was Jean Paul Marat, sometime medical practitioner, sometime professor of literature, a graduate of the Scottish University of St. Andrews, author of some scientific and many sociological works, inveterate pamphleteer and revolutionary journalist, proprietor and editor of *L'Ami du Peuple*, and idol of the Parisian rabble, who had bestowed upon him the name borne by his gazette, so that he was known as *The People's Friend*.

Such was the foe of the Girondins, and of the pure, altruistic, Utopian Republicanism for which they stood; and whilst he lived and laboured, their own endeavours to influence the people were all in vain. From his vile lodging in the Rue de l'Ecole de Médecine in Paris he span with his clever, wicked pen a web that paralysed their high endeavours and threatened finally to choke them.

He was not alone, of course. He was one of the dread triumvirate in which Danton and Robespierre were his associates. But to the Girondins he appeared by far the most formidable and ruthless and implacable of the three, whilst to Charlotte Corday—the friend and associate now of the proscribed Girondins who had sought refuge in Caen—he loomed so vast and terrible as to eclipse his associates entirely. To her young mind, inflamed with enthusiasm for the religion of Liberty as preached by the Girondins, Marat was a loathly, dangerous heresiarch, threatening to corrupt that sublime new faith with false, anarchical doctrine, and to replace the tyranny that had been overthrown by a tyranny more odious still.

She witnessed in Caen the failure of the Girondin attempt to raise an army with which to deliver Paris from the foul clutches of the Jacobins. An anguished spectator of this failure, she saw in it a sign that Liberty

was being strangled at its birth. On the lips of her friends the Girondins she caught again the name of Marat, the murderer of Liberty; and, brooding, she reached a conclusion embodied in a phrase of a letter which she wrote about that time.

"As long as Marat lives there will never be any safety for the friends of law and humanity."

From that negative conclusion to its positive, logical equivalent it was but a step. That step she took. She may have considered awhile the proposition thus presented to her, or resolve may have come to her with realization. She understood that a great sacrifice was necessary; that who undertook to rid France of that unclean monster must go prepared for self-immolation. She counted the cost calmly and soberly—for calm and sober was now her every act.

She made her packages, and set out one morning by the Paris coach from Caen, leaving a note for her father, in which she had written:

"I am going to England, because I do not believe that it will be possible for a long time to live happily and tranquilly in France. On leaving I post this letter to you. When you receive it I shall no longer be here. Heaven denied us the happiness of living together, as it has denied us other happinesses. May it show itself more clement to our country. Good-by, dear Father. Embrace my sister for me, and do not forget me."

That was all. The fiction that she was going to England was intended to save him pain. For she had so laid her plans that her identity should remain undisclosed. She would seek Marat in the very Hall of the Convention, and publicly slay him in his seat. Thus Paris should behold Nemesis overtaking the false Republican in the very Assembly which he corrupted, and anon should adduce a moral from the spectacle of the monster's death. For herself she counted upon instant destruction at the hands of the furious spectators. Thus,

thinking to die unidentified, she trusted that her father, hearing, as all France must hear, the great tidings that Marat was dead, would never connect her with the instrument of Fate shattered by the fury of the mob.

You realize, then, how great and how terrible was the purpose of this maid of twenty-five, who so demurely took her seat in the Paris diligence on that July morning of the Year 2 of the Republic—1793, old style. She was becomingly dressed in brown cloth, a lace fichu folded across her well-developed breast, a conical hat above her light brown hair. She was of a good height and finely proportioned, and her carriage as full of dignity as of grace. Her skin was of such white loveliness that a contemporary compares it with the lily. Like Athene, she was gray-eyed, and, like Athene, noble-featured, the oval of her face squaring a little at the chin, in which there was a cleft. Calm was her habit, calm her slow-moving eyes, calm and deliberate her movements, and calm the mind reflected in all this.

And as the heavy diligence trundles out of Caen and takes the open country and the Paris road, not even the thought of the errand upon which she goes, of her death-dealing and death-receiving mission, can shake that normal calm. Here is no wild exaltation, no hysterical obedience to hotly-conceived impulse. Here is purpose, as cold as it is lofty, to liberate France and pay with her life for the privilege of doing so.

That lover of hers, whom we are presently to see, has compared her ineptly with Joan of Arc, that other maid of France. But Joan moved with pomp in a gorgeous pageantry, amid acclamations, sustained by the heady wine of combat and of enthusiasm openly indulged, towards a goal of triumph. Charlotte travelled quietly in the stuffy diligence with the quiet conviction that her days were numbered.

So normal did she appear to her travelling companions, that one among them, with an eye for beauty, pestered her with amorous

attentions, and actually proposed marriage to her before the coach had rolled over the bridge of Neuilly into Paris two days later.

She repaired to the Providence Inn in the Rue des Vieux Augustins, where she engaged a room on the first floor, and then she set out in quest of the Deputy Duperret. She had a letter of introduction to him from the Girondin Barbaroux, with whom she had been on friendly terms at Caen. Duperret was to assist her to obtain an interview with the Minister of the Interior. She had undertaken to see the latter on the subject of certain papers relating to the affairs of a nun of Caen, an old convent friend of her own, and she was in haste to discharge this errand, so as to be free for the great task upon which she was come.

From inquiries that she made, she learnt at once that Marat was ill, and confined to his house. This rendered necessary a change of plans, and the relinquishing of her project of affording him a spectacular death in the crowded hall of the Convention.

The next day, which was Friday, she devoted to furthering the business of her friend the nun. On Saturday morning she rose early, and by six o'clock she was walking in the cool gardens of the Palais Royal, considering with that almost unnatural calm of hers the ways and means of accomplishing her purpose in the unexpected conditions that she found.

Towards eight o'clock, when Paris was awakening to the business of the day and taking down its shutters, she entered a cutler's shop in the Palais Royal, and bought for two francs a stout kitchen knife in a shagreen case. She then returned to her hotel to breakfast, and afterwards, dressed in her brown travelling-gown and conical hat, she went forth again, and, hailing a hackney carriage, drove to Marat's house in the Rue de l'Ecole de Médecine.

But admittance to that squalid dwelling was denied her. The Citizen Marat was ill, she was told, and could receive no visitors. It was

Simonne Everard, the triumvir's mistress—later to be known as the Widow Marat—who barred her ingress with this message.

Checked, she drove back to the Providence Inn and wrote a letter to the triumvir:

"Paris, 13th July, Year 2 of the Republic.

"Citizen,—I have arrived from Caen. Your love for your country leads me to assume that you will be anxious to hear of the unfortunate events which are taking place in that part of the Republic. I shall therefore call upon you towards one o'clock. Have the kindness to receive me, and accord me a moment's audience. I shall put you in the way of rendering a great service to France.

"Marie Corday."

Having dispatched that letter to Marat, she sat until late afternoon waiting vainly for an answer. Despairing at last of receiving any, she wrote a second note, more peremptory in tone:

"I wrote to you this morning, Marat. Have you received my letter? May I hope for a moment's audience? If you have received my letter, I hope you will not refuse me, considering the importance of the matter. It should suffice for you that I am very unfortunate to give me the right to your protection."

Having changed into a gray-striped dimity gown—you observe this further manifestation of a calm so complete that it admits of no departure from the ordinary habits of life—she goes forth to deliver in person this second letter, the knife concealed in the folds of the muslin fichu crossed high upon her breast.

In a mean, brick-paved, ill-lighted, and almost unfurnished room of that house in the Rue de l'Ecole de Médecine, the People's Friend is seated in a bath. It is no instinct of cleanliness he is obeying, for in all

France there is no man more filthy in his person and his habits than this triumvir. His bath is medicated. The horrible, loathsome disease that corrodes his flesh demands these long immersions to quiet the gnawing pains which distract his active, restless mind. In these baths he can benumb the torment of the body with which he is encumbered.

For Marat is an intellect, and nothing more—leastways, nothing more that matters. What else there is to him of trunk and limbs and organs he has neglected until it has all fallen into decay. His very lack of personal cleanliness, the squalor in which he lives, the insufficient sleep which he allows himself, his habit of careless feeding at irregular intervals, all have their source in his contempt for the physical part of him. This talented man of varied attainments, accomplished linguist, skilled physician, able naturalist and profound psychologist, lives in his intellect alone, impatient of all physical interruptions. If he consents to these immersions, if he spends whole days seated in this medicated bath, it is solely because it quenches or cools the fires that are devouring him, and thus permits him to bend his mind to the work that is his life. But his long-suffering body is avenging upon the mind the neglect to which it has been submitted. The morbid condition of the former is being communicated to the latter, whence results that disconcerting admixture of cold, cynical cruelty and exalted sensibility which marked his nature in the closing years of his life.

In his bath, then, sat the People's Friend on that July evening, immersed to the hips, his head swathed in a filthy turban, his emaciated body cased in a sleeveless waistcoat. He is fifty years of age, dying of consumption and other things, so that, did Charlotte but know it, there is no need to murder him. Disease and Death have marked him for their own, and grow impatient.

A board covering the bath served him for writing-table; an empty wooden box at his side bore an inkstand, some pens, sheets of paper, and two or three copies of *L'Ami du Peuple*. There was no

sound in the room but the scratch and splutter of his quill. He was writing diligently, revising and editing a proof of the forthcoming issue of his paper.

A noise of voices raised in the outer room invaded the quiet in which he was at work, and gradually penetrated his absorption, until it disturbed and irritated him. He moved restlessly in his bath, listened a moment, then, with intent to make an end of the interruption, he raised a hoarse, croaking voice to inquire what might be taking place.

The door opened, and Simonne, his mistress and household drudge, entered the room. She was fully twenty years younger than himself, and under the slattern appearance which life in that house had imposed upon her there were vestiges of a certain comeliness.

"There is a young woman here from Caen, who demands insistently to see you upon a matter of national importance."

The dull eyes kindle at the mention of Caen; interest quickens in that leaden-hued countenance. Was it not in Caen that those old foes of his, the Girondins, were stirring up rebellion?

"She says," Simonne continued, "that she wrote a letter to you this morning, and she brings you a second note herself. I have told her that you will not receive anyone, and..."

"Give me the note," he snapped. Setting down his pen, he thrust out an unclean paw to snatch the folded sheet from Simonne's hand. He spread it, and read, his bloodless lips compressed, his eyes narrowing to slits.

"Let her in," he commanded sharply, and Simonne obeyed him without more ado. She admitted Charlotte, and left them alone together—the avenger and her victim. For a moment each regarded the other. Marat beheld a handsome young woman, elegantly attired. But these things had no interest for the People's Friend. What to him

was woman and the lure of beauty? Charlotte beheld a feeble man of a repulsive hideousness, and was full satisfied, for in this outward loathsomeness she imagined a confirmation of the vileness of the mind she was come to blot out.

Then Marat spoke. "So you are from Caen, child?" he said. "And what is doing in Caen that makes you so anxious to see me?"

She approached him.

"Rebellion is stirring there, Citizen Marat."

"Rebellion, ha!" It was a sound between a laugh and a croak. "Tell me what deputies are sheltered in Caen. Come, child, their names." He took up and dipped his quill, and drew a sheet of paper towards him.

She approached still nearer; she came to stand close beside him, erect and calm. She recited the names of her friends, the Girondins, whilst hunched there in his bath his pen scratched briskly.

"So many for the guillotine," he snarled, when it was done.

But whilst he was writing, she had drawn the knife from her fichu, and as he uttered those words of doom to others his own doom descended upon him in a lightning stroke. Straight driven by that strong young arm, the long, stout blade was buried to its black hilt in his breast.

He looked at her with eyes in which there was a faint surprise as he sank back. Then he raised his voice for the last time.

"Help, chère amie! Help!" he cried, and was for ever silent.

The hand still grasping the pen trailed on the ground beside the bath at the end of his long, emaciated arm. His body sank sideways in the same direction, the head lolling nervelessly upon his right shoulder, whilst from the great rent in his breast the blood gushed forth,

embruing the water of his bath, trickling to the brick-paved floor, bespattering—symbolically almost—a copy of *L'Ami du Peuple*, the journal to which he had devoted so much of his uneasy life.

In answer to that cry of his came now Simonne in haste. A glance sufficed to reveal to her the horrible event, and, like a tigress, she sprang upon the unresisting slayer, seizing her by the head, and calling loudly the while for assistance. Came instantly from the anteroom Jeanne, the old cook, the Fortress of the house, and Laurent Basse, a folder of Marat's paper; and now Charlotte found herself confronted by four maddened, vociferous beings, at whose hands she may well have expected to receive the death for which she was prepared.

Laurent, indeed, snatched up a chair, and felled her by a blow of it across her head. He would, no doubt, have proceeded in his fury to have battered her to death, but for the arrival of gens d'armes and the police commissioner of the district, who took her in their protecting charge.

The soul of Paris was convulsed by the tragedy when it became known. All night terror and confusion were abroad. All night the revolutionary rabble, in angry grief, surged about and kept watch upon the house wherein the People's Friend lay dead.

That night, and for two days and nights thereafter, Charlotte Corday lay in the Prison of the Abbaye, supporting with fortitude the indignities that for a woman were almost inseparable from revolutionary incarceration. She preserved throughout her imperturbable calm, based now upon a state of mind content in the contemplation of accomplished purpose, duty done. She had saved France, she believed; saved Liberty, by slaying the man who would have strangled it. In that illusion she was content. Her own life was a small price to pay for the splendid achievement.

Some of her time of waiting she spent in writing letters to her friends, in which tranquilly and sanely she dwelt upon what she had done, expounding fully the motives that had impelled her, dwelling upon the details of the execution, and of all that had followed. Among the letters written by her during those "days of the preparation of peace"—as she calls that period, dating in such terms a long epistle to Barbaroux—was one to the Committee of Public Safety, in which she begs that a miniature-painter may be sent to her to paint her portrait, so that she may leave this token of remembrance to her friends. It is only in this, as the end approaches, that we see in her conduct any thought for her own self, any suggestion that she is anything more than a instrument in the hands of Fate.

On the 15th, at eight o'clock in the morning, her trial began before the Revolutionary Tribunal. A murmur ran through the hall as she appeared in her gown of grey-striped dimity, composed and calm—always calm.

The trial opened with the examination of witnesses; into that of the cutler, who had sold her the knife, she broke impatiently.

"These details are a waste of time. It is I who killed Marat."

The audience gasped, and rumbled ominously. Montane turned to examine her.

"What was the object of your visit to Paris?" he asks.

"To kill Marat."

"What motives induced you to this horrible deed?"

"His many crimes."

"Of what crimes do you accuse him?"

"That he instigated the massacre of September; that he kept alive the

fires of civil war, so that he might be elected dictator; that he sought to infringe upon the sovereignty of the People by causing the arrest and imprisonment of the deputies to the Convention on May 31st."

"What proof have you of this?"

"The future will afford the proof. Marat hid his designs behind a mask of patriotism."

Montane shifted the ground of his interrogatory.

"Who were your accomplices in this atrocious act?"

"I have none."

Montane shook his head. "You cannot convince anyone that a person of your age and sex could have conceived such a crime unless instigated by some person or persons whom you are unwilling to name."

Charlotte almost smiled. "That shows but a poor knowledge of the human heart. It is easier to carry out such a project upon the strength of one's own hatred than upon that of others." And then, raising her voice, she proclaimed: "I killed one man to save a hundred thousand; I killed a villain to save innocents; I killed a savage Wild-beast to give repose to France. I was a Republican before the Revolution. I never lacked for energy."

What more was there to say? Her guilt was completely established. Her fearless self-obsession was not to be ruffled. Yet Fouquier-Tinville, the dread prosecutor, made the attempt. Beholding her so virginal and fair and brave, feeling perhaps that the Tribunal had not had the best of it, he sought with a handful of revolutionary filth to restore the balance. He rose slowly, his ferrety eyes upon her.

"How many children have you had?" he rasped, sardonic, his tone a slur, an insult.

Faintly her cheeks crimsoned. But her voice was composed, disdainful, as she answered coldly:

"Have I not stated that I am not married?"

A leer, a dry laugh, a shrug from Tinville to complete the impression he sought to convey, and he sat down again.

It was the turn of Chauveau de la Garde, the advocate instructed to defend her. But what defence was possible? And Chauveau had been intimidated. He had received a note from the jury ordering him to remain silent, another from the President bidding him declare her mad.

Yet Chauveau took a middle course. His brief speech is admirable; it satisfied his self-respect, without derogating from his client. It uttered the whole truth.

"The prisoner," he said, "confesses with calm the horrible crime she has committed; she confesses with calm its premeditation; she confesses its most dreadful details; in short, she confesses everything, and does not seek to justify herself. That, citizens of the jury, is her whole defence. This imperturbable calm, this utter abnegation of self, which displays no remorse even in the very presence of death, are contrary to nature. They can only be explained by the excitement of political fanaticism which armed her hand. It is for you, citizens of the jury, to judge what weight that moral consideration should have in the scales of justice."

The jury voted her guilty, and Tinville rose to demand the full sentence of the law.

It was the end. She was removed to the Conciergerie, the antechamber of the guillotine. A constitutional priest was sent to her, but she dismissed him with thanks, not requiring his ministrations.

She preferred the painter Hauer, who had received the Revolutionary Tribunal's permission to paint her portrait in accordance with her request. And during the sitting, which lasted half an hour, she conversed with him quietly on ordinary topics, the tranquillity of her spirit unruffled by any fear of the death that was so swiftly approaching.

The door opened, and Sanson, the public executioner, came in. He carried the red smock worn by those convicted of assassination. She showed no dismay; no more, indeed, than a faint surprise that the time spent with Hauer should have gone so quickly. She begged for a few moments in which to write a note, and, the request being granted, acquitted herself briskly of that task, then announcing herself ready, she removed her cap that Sanson might cut her luxuriant hair. Yet first, taking his scissors, she herself cut off a lock and gave it to Hauer for remembrance. When Sanson would have bound her hands, she begged that she might be allowed to wear gloves, as her wrists were bruised and cut by the cord with which she had been pinioned in Marat's house. He answered that she might do so if she wished, but that it was unnecessary, as he could bind her without causing pain.

"To be sure," she said, "those others had not your experience," and she proffered her bare wrists to his cord without further demur. "If this toilet of death is performed by rude hands," she commented, "at least it leads to immortality."

She mounted the tumbril awaiting in the prison yard, and, disdaining the chair offered her by Sanson, remained standing, to show herself dauntless to the mob and brave its rage. And fierce was that rage, indeed. So densely thronged were the streets that the tumbril proceeded at a crawl, and the people surging about the cart screamed death and insult at the doomed woman. It took two hours to reach the Place de la Révolution, and meanwhile a terrific summer thunderstorm had broken over Paris, and a torrential rain had

descended upon the densely packed streets. Charlotte's garments were soaked through and through, so that her red smock, becoming glued now to her body and fitting her like a skin, threw into relief its sculptural beauty, whilst a reflection of the vivid crimson of the garment faintly tinged her cheeks, and thus heightened her appearance of complete composure.

And it is now in the Rue St. Honoré that at long last we reach the opening of our tragic love-story.

A tall, slim, fair young man, named Adam Lux—sent to Paris by the city of Mayence as Deputy Extraordinary to the National Convention—was standing there in the howling press of spectators. He was an accomplished, learned young gentleman, doctor at once of philosophy and of medicine, although in the latter capacity he had never practiced owing to an extreme sensibility of nature, which rendered anatomical work repugnant to him. He was a man of a rather exalted imagination, unhappily married—the not uncommon fate of such delicate temperaments—and now living apart from his wife. He had heard, as all Paris had heard, every detail of the affair, and of the trial, and he waited there, curious to see this woman, with whose deed he was secretly in sympathy.

The tumbril slowly approached, the groans and execrations swelled up around him, and at last he beheld her—beautiful, serene, full of life, a still smile upon her lips. For a long moment he gazed upon her, standing as if stricken into stone. Then heedless of those about him, he bared his head, and thus silently saluted and paid homage to her. She did not see him. He had not thought that she would. He saluted her as the devout salute the unresponsive image of a saint. The tumbril crawled on. He turned his head, and followed her with his eyes for awhile; then, driving his elbows into the ribs of those about him, he clove himself a passage through the throng, and so followed, bare-headed now, with fixed gaze, a man entranced.

He was at the foot of the scaffold when her head fell. To the last he had seen that noble countenance preserve its immutable calm, and in the hush that followed the sibilant fall of the great knife his voice suddenly rang out.

"She is greater than Brutus!" was his cry; and he added, addressing those who stared at him in stupefaction: "It were beautiful to have died with her!"

He was suffered to depart unmolested. Chiefly, perhaps because at that moment the attention of the crowd was upon the executioner's attendant, who, in holding up Charlotte's truncated head, slapped the cheek with his hand. The story runs that the dead face reddened under the blow. Scientists of the day disputed over this, some arguing from it a proof that consciousness does not at once depart the brain upon decapitation.

That night, while Paris slept, its walls were secretly placarded with copies of a eulogy of Charlotte Corday, the martyr of Republicanism, the deliverer of France, in which occurs the comparison with Joan of Arc, that other great heroine of France. This was the work of Adam Lux. He made no secret of it. The vision of her had so wrought upon the imagination of this susceptible dreamer, had fired his spirit with such enthusiasm, that he was utterly reckless in yielding to his emotions, in expressing the phrenetic, immaterial love with which in her last moments of life she had inspired him.

Two days after her execution he issued a long manifesto, in which he urged the purity of her motive as the fullest justification of her act, placed her on the level of Brutus and Cato, and passionately demanded for her the honour and veneration of posterity. It is in this manifesto that he applies euphemistically to her deed the term "tyrannicide." That document he boldly signed with his own name, realizing that he would pay for that temerity with his life.

He was arrested on the 24th of July—exactly a week from the day on which he had seen her die. He had powerful friends, and they exerted themselves to obtain for him a promise of pardon and release if he would publicly retract what he had written. But he laughed the proposal to scorn, ardently resolved to follow into death the woman who had aroused the hopeless, immaterial love that made his present torment.

Still his friends strove for him. His trial was put off. A doctor named Wetekind was found to testify that Adam Lux was mad, that the sight of Charlotte Corday had turned his head. He wrote a paper on this plea, recommending that clemency be shown to the young doctor on the score of his affliction, and that he should be sent to a hospital or to America. Adam Lux was angry when he heard of this, and protested indignantly against the allegations of Dr. Wetekind. He wrote to the *Journal de la Montagne*, which published his declaration on the 26th of September, to the effect that he was not mad enough to desire to live, and that his anxiety to meet death half-way was a crowning proof of his sanity.

He languished on in the prison of La Force until the 10th of October, when at last he was brought to trial. He stood it joyously, in a mood of exultation at his approaching deliverance. He assured the court that he did not fear the guillotine, and that all ignominy had been removed from such a death by the pure blood of Charlotte.

They sentenced him to death, and he thanked them for the boon.

"Forgive me, sublime Charlotte," he exclaimed, "if I should find it impossible to exhibit at the last the courage and gentleness that were yours. I glory in your superiority, for it is right that the adored should be above the adorer."

Yet his courage did not fail him. Far from it, indeed; if hers had been a mood of gentle calm, his was one of ecstatic exaltation. At five o'clock

that same afternoon he stepped from the tumbril under the gaunt shadow of the guillotine. He turned to the people, his eyes bright, a flush on his cheeks.

"At last I am to have the happiness of dying for Charlotte," he told them, and mounted the scaffold with the eager step of the bridegroom on his way to the nuptial altar.

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ST. MARTIN'S SUMMER

By Rafael Sabatini

Originally published in 1921

Contents

<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	THE SENESCHAL OF DAUPHINY
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	THE DOWAGER'S COMPLIANCE
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	THE CHATEAU DE CONDILLAC
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE LOSES HIS TEMPER
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE KEEPS HIS TEMPER
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	THE OPENING OF THE TRAP
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	THE CLOSING OF THE TRAP
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	THE SENESCHAL'S ADVICE
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	THE RECRUIT
<u>CHAPTER XI.</u>	VALERIE'S GAOLER
<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	THE COURIER
<u>CHAPTER XIV.</u>	FLORIMOND'S LETTER
<u>CHAPTER XV.</u>	THE CONFERENCE
<u>CHAPTER XVI.</u>	THE UNEXPECTED
<u>CHAPTER XVII.</u>	HOW MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE LEFT CONDILLAC
<u>CHAPTER XVIII.</u>	IN THE MOAT
<u>CHAPTER XIX.</u>	THROUGH THE NIGHT
<u>CHAPTER XX.</u>	FLORIMOND DE CONDILLAC
<u>CHAPTER XXI.</u>	THE GHOST IN THE CUPBOARD

[CHAPTER XXII.](#) THE OFFICES OF MOTHER CHURCH

[CHAPTER XXIII.](#) THE JUDGMENT OF GARNACHE

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[CHAPTER
XXIV.](#) SAINT MARTIN'S EVE

SAINT MARTIN'S SUMMER

CHAPTER I. THE SENESCHAL OF DAUPHINY

My Lord of Tressan, His Majesty's Seneschal of Dauphiny, sat at his ease, his purple doublet all undone, to yield greater freedom to his vast bulk, a yellow silken undergarment visible through the gap, as is visible the flesh of some fruit that, swollen with over-ripeness, has burst its skin.

His wig—imposed upon him by necessity, not fashion lay on the table amid a confusion of dusty papers, and on his little fat nose, round and red as a cherry at its end, rested the bridge of his horn-rimmed spectacles. His bald head—so bald and shining that it conveyed an unpleasant sense of nakedness, suggesting that its uncovering had been an act of indelicacy on the owner's part—rested on the back of his great chair, and hid from sight the gaudy escutcheon wrought upon the crimson leather. His eyes were closed, his mouth open, and whether from that mouth or from his nose—or, perhaps, conflicting for issue between both—there came a snorting, rumbling sound to proclaim that my Lord the Seneschal was hard at work upon the King's business.

Yonder, at a meaner table, in an angle between two windows, a pale-faced thread-bare secretary was performing for a yearly pittance the duties for which my Lord the Seneschal was rewarded by emoluments disproportionately large.

The air of that vast apartment was disturbed by the sounds of Monsieur de Tressan's slumbers, the scratch and splutter of the secretary's pen, and the occasional hiss and crackle of the logs that

burned in the great, cavern-like fireplace. Suddenly to these another sound was added. With a rasp and rattle the heavy curtains of blue velvet flecked with silver fleurs-de-lys were swept from the doorway, and the master of Monsieur de Tressan's household, in a well filled suit of black relieved by his heavy chain of office, stepped pompously forward.

The secretary dropped his pen, and shot a frightened glance at his slumbering master; then raised his hands above his head, and shook them wildly at the head lackey.

"Sh!" he whispered tragically. "Doucement, Monsieur Anselme."

Anselme paused. He appreciated the gravity of the situation. His bearing lost some of its dignity; his face underwent a change. Then with a recovery of some part of his erstwhile resolution:

"Nevertheless, he must be awakened," he announced, but in an undertone, as if afraid to do the thing he said must needs be done.

The horror in the secretary's eyes increased, but Anselme's reflected none of it. It was a grave thing, he knew by former experience, to arouse His Majesty's Seneschal of Dauphiny from his after-dinner nap; but it was an almost graver thing to fail in obedience to that black-eyed woman below who was demanding an audience.

Anselme realized that he was between the sword and the wall. He was, however, a man of a deliberate habit that was begotten of inherent indolence and nurtured among the good things that fell to his share as master of the Tressan household. Thoughtfully he caressed his tuft of red beard, puffed out his cheeks, and raised his eyes to the ceiling in appeal or denunciation to the heaven which he believed was somewhere beyond it.

"Nevertheless, he must be awakened," he repeated.

And then Fate came to his assistance. Somewhere in the house a door banged like a cannon-shot. Perspiration broke upon the secretary's brow. He sank limply back in his chair, giving himself up for lost. Anselme started and bit the knuckle of his forefinger in a manner suggesting an inarticulate imprecation.

My Lord the Seneschal moved. The noise of his slumbers culminated in a sudden, choking grunt, and abruptly ceased. His eyelids rolled slowly back, like an owl's, revealing pale blue eyes, which fixed themselves first upon the ceiling, then upon Anselme. Instantly he sat up, puffing and scowling, his hands shuffling his papers.

"A thousand devils! Anselme, why am I interrupted?" he grumbled querulously, still half-asleep. "What the plague do you want? Have you no thought for the King's affairs? Babylas"—this to his secretary—"did I not tell you that I had much to do; that I must not be disturbed?"

It was the great vanity of the life of this man, who did nothing, to appear the busiest fellow in all France, and no audience—not even that of his own lackeys—was too mean for him to take the stage to in that predilect role.

"Monsieur le Comte," said Anselme, in tones of abject self-effacement, "I had never dared intrude had the matter been of less urgency. But Madame the Dowager of Condillac is below. She begs to see Your Excellency instantly."

At once there was a change. Tressan became wide-awake upon the instant. His first act was to pass one hand over the wax-like surface of his bald head, whilst his other snatched at his wig. Then he heaved himself ponderously out of his great chair. He donned his wig, awry in his haste, and lurched forward towards Anselme, his fat fingers straining at his open doublet and drawing it together.

"Madame la Douairiere here?" he cried. "Make fast these buttons, rascal! Quick! Am I to receive a lady thus? Am I—? Babyas," he snapped, interrupting himself and turning aside even as Anselme put forth hands to do his bidding. "A mirror, from my closet! Dispatch!"

The secretary was gone in a flash, and in a flash returned, even as Anselme completed his master's toilet. But clearly Monsieur de Tressan had awakened in a peevish humour, for no sooner were the buttons of his doublet secured than with his own fingers he tore them loose again, cursing his majordomo the while with vigour.

"You dog, Anselme, have you no sense of fitness, no discrimination? Am I to appear in this garment of the mode of a half-century ago before Madame la Marquise? Take it off; take it off, man! Get me the coat that came last month from Paris—the yellow one with the hanging sleeves and the gold buttons, and a sash—the crimson sash I had from Taillemant. Can you move no quicker, animal? Are you still here?"

Anselme, thus enjoined, lent an unwonted alacrity to his movements, waddling grotesquely like a hastening waterfowl. Between him and the secretary they dressed my Lord the Seneschal, and decked him out till he was fit to compare with a bird of paradise for gorgeousness of colouring if not for harmony of hues and elegance of outline.

Babyas held the mirror, and Anselme adjusted the Seneschal's wig, whilst Tressan himself twisted his black mustachios—how they kept their colour was a mystery to his acquaintance—and combed the tuft of beard that sprouted from one of his several chins.

He took a last look at his reflection, rehearsed a smile, and bade Anselme introduce his visitor. He desired his secretary to go to the devil, but, thinking better of it, he recalled him as he reached the door. His cherished vanity craved expression.

"Wait!" said he. "There is a letter must be written. The King's business may not suffer postponement—not for all the dowagers in France. Sit down."

Babylas obeyed him. Tressan stood with his back to the open door. His ears, strained to listen, had caught the swish of a woman's gown. He cleared his throat, and began to dictate:

"To Her Majesty the Queen-Regent—" He paused, and stood with knitted brows, deep in thought. Then he ponderously repeated—"To Her Majesty the Queen Regent—Have you got that?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Comte. 'To Her Majesty the Queen Regent.'"

There was a step, and a throat-clearing cough behind him.

"Monsieur de Tressan," said a woman's voice, a rich, melodious voice, if haughty and arrogant of intonation.

On the instant he turned, advanced a step, and bowed.

"Your humblest servant, madame," said he, his hand upon his heart. "This is an honour which—"

"Which necessity thrusts upon you," she broke in imperiously. "Dismiss that fellow."

The secretary, pale and shy, had risen. His eyes dilated at the woman's speech. He looked for a catastrophe as the natural result of her taking such a tone with this man who was the terror of his household and of all Grenoble. Instead, the Lord Seneschal's meekness left him breathless with surprise.

"He is my secretary, madame. We were at work as you came. I was on the point of inditing a letter to Her Majesty. The office of Seneschal in a province such as Dauphiny is *helas!*—no sinecure." He sighed like one whose brain is weary. "It leaves a man little time

even to eat or sleep."

"You will be needing a holiday, then," said she, with cool insolence. "Take one for once, and let the King's business give place for half an hour to mine."

The secretary's horror grew by leaps and bounds.

Surely the storm would burst at last about this audacious woman's head. But the Lord Seneschal—usually so fiery and tempestuous—did no more than make her another of his absurd bows.

"You anticipate, madame, the very words I was about to utter. Babylas, vanish!" And he waved the scribbler doorwards with a contemptuous hand. "Take your papers with you—into my closet there. We will resume that letter to Her Majesty when madame shall have left me."

The secretary gathered up his papers, his quills, and his inkhorn, and went his way, accounting the end of the world at hand.

When the door had closed upon him, the Seneschal, with another bow and a simper, placed a chair at his visitor's disposal. She looked at the chair, then looked at the man much as she had looked at the chair, and turning her back contemptuously on both, she sauntered towards the fireplace. She stood before the blaze, with her whip tucked under her arm, drawing off her stout riding-gloves. She was a tall, splendidly proportioned woman, of a superb beauty of countenance, for all that she was well past the spring of life.

In the waning light of that October afternoon none would have guessed her age to be so much as thirty, though in the sunlight you might have set it at a little more. But in no light at all would you have guessed the truth, that her next would be her forty-second birthday. Her face was pale, of an ivory pallor that gleamed in sharp contrast with the ebony of her lustrous hair. Under the long lashes of low lids a

pair of eyes black and insolent set off the haughty lines of her scarlet lips. Her nose was thin and straight, her neck an ivory pillar splendidly upright upon her handsome shoulders.

She was dressed for riding, in a gown of sapphire velvet, handsomely laced in gold across the stomacher, and surmounted at the neck, where it was cut low and square, by the starched band of fine linen which in France was already replacing the more elaborate ruff. On her head, over a linen coif, she wore a tall-crowned grey beaver, swathed with a scarf of blue and gold.

Standing by the hearth, one foot on the stone kerb, one elbow leaning lightly on the overmantel, she proceeded leisurely to remove her gloves.

The Seneschal observed her with eyes that held an odd mixture of furtiveness and admiration, his fingers—plump, indolent-looking stumps—plucking at his beard.

"Did you but know, Marquise, with what joy, with what a—"

"I will imagine it, whatever it may be," she broke in, with that brusque arrogance that marked her bearing. "The time for flowers of rhetoric is not now. There is trouble coming, man; trouble, dire trouble."

Up went the Seneschal's brows; his eyes grew wider.

"Trouble?" quoth he. And, having opened his mouth to give exit to that single word, open he left it.

She laughed lazily, her lip curling, her face twisting oddly, and mechanically she began to draw on again the glove she had drawn off.

"By your face I see how well you understand me," she sneered. "The trouble concerns Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye."

"From Paris—does it come from Court?" His voice was sunk.

She nodded. "You are a miracle of intuition today, Tressan."

He thrust his tiny tuft of beard between his teeth—a trick he had when perplexed or thoughtful. "Ah!" he exclaimed at last, and it sounded like an indrawn breath of apprehension. "Tell me more."

"What more is there to tell? You have the epitome of the story."

"But what is the nature of the trouble? What form does it take, and by whom are you advised of it?"

"A friend in Paris sent me word, and his messenger did his work well, else had Monsieur de Garnache been here before him, and I had not so much as had the mercy of this forewarning."

"Garnache?" quoth the Count. "Who is Garnache?"

"The emissary of the Queen-Regent. He has been dispatched hither by her to see that Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye has justice and enlargement."

Tressan fell suddenly to groaning and wringing his hands a pathetic figure had it been less absurd.

"I warned you, madame! I warned you how it would end," he cried. "I told you—"

"Oh, I remember the things you told me," she cut in, scorn in her voice. "You may spare yourself their repetition. What is done is done, and I'll not—I would not—have it undone. Queen-Regent or no Queen-Regent, I am mistress at Condillac; my word is the only law we know, and I intend that so it shall continue."

Tressan looked at her in surprise. This unreasoning, feminine obstinacy so wrought upon him that he permitted himself a smile and

a lapse into irony and banter.

"Parfaitement," said he, spreading his hands, and bowing. "Why speak of trouble, then?"

She beat her whip impatiently against her gown, her eyes staring into the fire. "Because, my attitude being such as it is, trouble will there be."

The Seneschal shrugged his shoulders, and moved a step towards her. He was cast down to think that he might have spared himself the trouble of donning his beautiful yellow doublet from Paris. She had eyes for no finery that afternoon. He was cast down, too, to think how things might go with him when this trouble came. It entered his thoughts that he had lain long on a bed of roses in this pleasant corner of Dauphiny, and he was smitten now with fear lest of the roses he should find nothing remaining but the thorns.

"How came the Queen-Regent to hear of—of mademoiselle's—ah—situation?" he inquired.

The Marquise swung round upon him in a passion.

"The girl found a dog of a traitor to bear a letter for her. That is enough. If ever chance or fate should bring him my way, by God! he shall hang without shift."

Then she put her anger from her; put from her, too, the insolence and scorn with which so lavishly she had addressed him hitherto. Instead she assumed a suppliant air, her beautiful eyes meltingly set upon his face.

"Tressan," said she in her altered voice, "I am beset by enemies. But you will not forsake me? You will stand by me to the end—will you not, my friend? I can count upon you, at least?"

"In all things, madame," he answered, under the spell of her gaze.

"What force does this man Garnache bring with him? Have you ascertained?"

"He brings none," she answered, triumph in her glance.

"None?" he echoed, horror in his. "None? Then—then—"

He tossed his arms to heaven, and stood a limp and shaken thing. She leaned forward, and regarded him stricken in surprise.

"Diable! What ails you?" she snapped. "Could I have given you better news?"

"If you could have given me worse, I cannot think what it might have been," he groaned. Then, as if smitten by a sudden notion that flashed a gleam of hope into this terrifying darkness that was settling down upon him, he suddenly looked up. "You mean to resist him?" he inquired.

She stared at him a second, then laughed, a thought unpleasantly.

"Pish! But you are mad," she scorned him. "Do you need ask if I intend to resist—I, with the strongest castle in Dauphiny? By God! sir, if you need to hear me say it, hear me then say that I shall resist him and as many as the Queen may send after him, for as long as one stone of Condillac shall stand upon another."

The Seneschal blew out his lips, and fell once more to the chewing of his beard.

"What did you mean when you said I could have given you no worse news than that of his coming alone?" she questioned suddenly.

"Madame," said he, "if this man comes without force, and you resist the orders of which he is the bearer, what think you will betide?"

"He will appeal to you for the men he needs that he may batter

down my walls," she answered calmly.

He looked at her incredulously. "You realize it?" he ejaculated. "You realize it?"

"What is there in it that should puzzle a babe?"

Her callousness was like a gust of wind upon the living embers of his fears. It blew them into a blaze of wrath, sudden and terrific as that of such a man at bay could be. He advanced upon her with the rolling gait of the obese, his cheeks purple, his arms waving wildly, his dyed mustachios bristling.

"And what of me, madame?" he spluttered. "What of me? Am I to be ruined, gaoled, and hanged, maybe, for refusing him men?—for that is what is in your mind. Am I to make myself an outlaw? Am I, who have been Lord Seneschal of Dauphiny these fifteen years, to end my days in degradation in the cause of a woman's matrimonial projects for a simpering school-girl? Seigneur du Ciel!" he roared, "I think you are gone mad—mad, mad! over this affair. You would not think it too much to set the whole province in flames so that you could have your way with this wretched child. But, Ventregris! to ruin me—to—to—"

He fell silent for very want of words; just gaped and gasped, and then, with hands folded upon his paunch, he set himself to pace the chamber.

Madame de Condillac stood watching him, her face composed, her glance cold. She was like some stalwart oak, weathering with unshaken front a hurricane. When he had done, she moved away from the fireplace, and, beating her side gently with her whip, she stepped to the door.

"Au revoir, Monsieur de Tressan," said she, mighty cool, her back towards him.

At that he halted in his feverish stride, stood still and threw up his head. His anger went out, as a candle is extinguished by a puff of wind. And in its place a new fear crept into his heart.

"Madame, madame!" he cried. "Wait! Hear me."

She paused, half-turned, and looked at him over her shoulder. Scorn in her glance, a sneer on her scarlet mouth, insolence in every line of her.

"I think, monsieur, that I have heard a little more than enough," said she. "I am assured, at least, that in you I have but a fair-weather friend, a poor lipserver."

"Ah, not that, madame," he cried, and his voice was stricken. "Say not that. I would serve you as would none other in all this world—you know it, Marquise; you know it."

She faced about, and confronted him, her smile a trifle broader, as if amusement were now blending with her scorn.

"It is easy to protest. Easy to say, 'I will die for you,' so long as the need for such a sacrifice be remote. But let me do no more than ask a favour, and it is, 'What of my good name, madame? What of my seneschalship? Am I to be gaoled or hanged to pleasure you?' Faugh!" she ended, with a toss of her splendid head. "The world is peopled with your kind, and I—alas! for a woman's intuitions—had held you different from the rest."

Her words were to his soul as a sword of fire might have been to his flesh. They scorched and shrivelled it. He saw himself as she would have him see himself—a mean, contemptible craven; a coward who made big talk in times of peace, but faced about and vanished into hiding at the first sign of danger. He felt himself the meanest, vilest thing a-crawl upon this sinful earth, and she—dear God!—had thought him different from the ruck. She had held him in high esteem,

and behold, how short had he not fallen of all her expectations! Shame and vanity combined to work a sudden, sharp revulsion in his feelings.

"Marquise," he cried, "you say no more than what is just. But punish me no further. I meant not what I said. I was beside myself. Let me atone—let my future actions make amends for that odious departure from my true self."

There was no scorn now in her smile; only an ineffable tenderness, beholding which he felt it in his heart to hang if need be that he might continue high in her regard. He sprang forward, and took the hand she extended to him.

"I knew, Tressan," said she, "that you were not yourself, and that when you bethought you of what you had said, my valiant, faithful friend would not desert me."

He stooped over her hand, and slobbered kisses upon her unresponsive glove.

"Madame," said he, "you may count upon me. This fellow out of Paris shall have no men from me, depend upon it."

She caught him by the shoulders, and held him so, before her. Her face was radiant, alluring; and her eyes dwelt on his with a kindness he had never seen there save in some wild daydream of his.

"I will not refuse a service you offer me so gallantly," said she. "It were an ill thing to wound you by so refusing it."

"Marquise," he cried, "it is as nothing to what I would do did the occasion serve. But when this thing 'tis done; when you have had your way with Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, and the nuptials shall have been celebrated, then—dare I hope—?"

He said no more in words, but his little blue eyes had an eloquence

that left nothing to mere speech.

Their glances met, she holding him always at arm's length by that grip upon his shoulders, a grip that was firm and nervous.

In the Seneschal of Dauphiny, as she now gazed upon him, she beheld a very toad of a man, and the soul of her shuddered at the sight of him combining with the thing that he suggested. But her glance was steady and her lips maintained their smile, just as if that ugliness of his had been invested with some abstract beauty existing only to her gaze; a little colour crept into her cheeks, and red being the colour of love's livery, Tressan misread its meaning.

She nodded to him across the little distance of her outstretched arms, then smothered a laugh that drove him crazed with hope, and breaking from him she sped swiftly, shyly it almost seemed to him, to the door.

There she paused a moment looking back at him with a coyness that might have become a girl of half her years, yet which her splendid beauty saved from being unbecoming even in her.

One adorable smile she gave him, and before he could advance to hold the door for her, she had opened it and passed out.

CHAPTER II. MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE

To promise rashly, particularly where a woman is the suppliant, and afterwards, if not positively to repent the promise, at least to regret that one did not hedge it with a few conditions, is a proceeding not uncommon to youth. In a man of advanced age, such as Monsieur de Tressan, it never should have place; and, indeed, it seldom has, unless that man has come again under the sway of the influences by which youth, for good or ill, is governed.

Whilst the flush of his adoration was upon him, hot from the contact of her presence, he knew no repentance, found room in his mind for no regrets. He crossed to the window, and pressed his huge round face to the pane, in a futile effort to watch her mount and ride out of the courtyard with her little troop of attendants. Finding that he might not—the window being placed too high—gratify his wishes in that connection, he dropped into his chair, and sat in the fast-deepening gloom, reviewing, fondly here, hurriedly there, the interview that had but ended.

Thus night fell, and darkness settled down about him, relieved only by the red glow of the logs smouldering on the hearth. In the gloom inspiration visited him. He called for lights and Babylas. Both came, and he dispatched the lackey that lighted the tapers to summon Monsieur d'Aubran, the commander of the garrison of Grenoble.

In the interval before the soldier's coming he conferred with Babylas concerning what he had in mind, but he found his secretary singularly dull and unimaginative. So that, perforce, he must fall back upon

himself. He sat glum and thoughtful, his mind in unproductive travail, until the captain was announced.

Still without any definite plan, he blundered headlong, nevertheless, into the necessary first step towards the fulfilment of his purpose.

"Captain," said he, looking mighty grave, "I have cause to believe that all is not as it should be in the hills in the district of Montelimar."

"Is there trouble, monsieur?" inquired the captain, startled.

"Maybe there is, maybe there is not," returned the Seneschal mysteriously. "You shall have your full orders in the morning. Meanwhile, make ready to repair to the neighbourhood of Montelimar to-morrow with a couple of hundred men."

"A couple of hundred, monsieur!" exclaimed d'Aubran. "But that will be to empty Grenoble of soldiers."

"What of it? We are not likely to require them here. Let your orders for preparation go round tonight, so that your knaves may be ready to set out betimes to-morrow. If you will be so good as to wait upon me early you shall have your instructions."

Mystified, Monsieur d'Aubran departed on his errand, and my Lord Seneschal went down to supper well pleased with the cunning device by which he was to leave Grenoble without a garrison. It was an astute way of escape from the awkward situation into which his attachment to the interests of the dowager of Condillac was likely to place him.

But when the morning came he was less pleased with the idea, chiefly because he had been unable to invent any details that should lend it the necessary colour, and d'Aubran—worse luck—was an intelligent officer who might evince a pardonable but embarrassing curiosity. A leader of soldiers has a right to know something at least of the enterprise upon which he leads them. By morning, too, Tressan

found that the intervening space of the night, since he had seen Madame de Condillac, had cooled his ardour very considerably.

He had reached the incipient stages of regret of his rash promise.

When Captain d'Aubran was announced to him, he bade them ask him to come again in an hour's time. From mere regrets he was passing now, through dismay, into utter repentance of his promise. He sat in his study, at his littered writing-table, his head in his hands, a confusion of thoughts, a wild, frenzied striving after invention in his brain.

Thus Anselme found him when he thrust aside the portiere to announce that a Monsieur de Garnache, from Paris, was below, demanding to see the Lord Seneschal at once upon an affair of State.

Tressan's flesh trembled and his heart fainted. Then, suddenly, desperately, he took his courage in both hands. He remembered who he was and what he was the King's Lord Seneschal of the Province of Dauphiny. Throughout that province, from the Rhone to the Alps, his word was law, his name a terror to evildoers—and to some others besides. Was he to blench and tremble at the mention of the name of a Court lackey out of Paris, who brought him a message from the Queen-Regent? Body of God! not he.

He heaved himself to his feet, warmed and heartened by the thought; his eye sparkled, and there was a deeper flush than usual upon his cheek.

"Admit this Monsieur de Garnache," said he with a fine loftiness, and in his heart he pondered what he would say and how he should say it; how he should stand, how move, and how look. His roving eye caught sight of his secretary. He remembered something—the cherished pose of being a man plunged fathoms-deep in business. Sharply he uttered his secretary's name.

Babylas raised his pale face; he knew what was coming; it had come so many times before. But there was no vestige of a smile on his drooping lips, no gleam of amusement in his patient eye. He thrust aside the papers on which he was at work, and drew towards him a fresh sheet on which to pen the letter which, he knew by experience, Tressan was about to indite to the Queen-mother. For these purposes Her Majesty was Tressan's only correspondent.

Then the door opened, the portiere was swept aside, and Anselme announced "Monsieur de Garnache."

Tressan turned as the newcomer stepped briskly into the room, and bowed, hat in hand, its long crimson feather sweeping the ground, then straightened himself and permitted the Seneschal to take his measure.

Tressan beheld a man of a good height, broad to the waist and spare thence to the ground, who at first glance appeared to be mainly clad in leather. A buff jerkin fitted his body; below it there was a glimpse of wine-coloured trunks, and hose of a slightly deeper hue, which vanished immediately into a pair of huge thighboots of untanned leather. A leather swordbelt, gold-embroidered at the edges, carried a long steel-halted rapier in a leather scabbard chaped with steel. The sleeves of his doublet which protruded from his leather casing were of the same colour and material as his trunks. In one hand he carried his broad black hat with its crimson feather, in the other a little roll of parchment; and when he moved the creak of leather and jingle of his spurs made pleasant music for a martial spirit.

Above all, this man's head, well set upon his shoulders, claimed some attention. His nose was hooked and rather large, his eyes were blue, bright as steel, and set a trifle wide. Above a thin-lapped, delicate mouth his reddish mustachios, slightly streaked with grey, stood out, bristling like a cat's. His hair was darker—almost brown

save at the temples, where age had faded it to an ashen colour. In general his aspect was one of rugged strength.

The Seneschal, measuring him with an adversary's eye, disliked his looks. But he bowed urbanely, washing his hands in the air, and murmuring:

"Your servant, Monsieur de—?"

"Garnache," came the other's crisp, metallic voice, and the name had a sound as of an oath on his lips. "Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache. I come to you on an errand of Her Majesty's, as this my warrant will apprise you." And he proffered the paper he held, which Tressan accepted from his hand.

A change was visible in the wily Seneschal's fat countenance. Its round expanse had expressed interrogation until now; but at the Parisian's announcement that he was an emissary of the Queen's, Tressan insinuated into it just that look of surprise and of increased deference which would have been natural had he not already been forewarned of Monsieur de Garnache's mission and identity.

He placed a chair at his visitor's disposal, himself resuming his seat at his writing-table, and unfolding the paper Garnache had given him. The newcomer seated himself, hitched his sword-belt round so that he could lean both hands upon the hilt, and sat, stiff and immovable, awaiting the Lord Seneschal's pleasure. From his desk across the room the secretary, idly chewing the feathered end of his goose-quill, took silent stock of the man from Paris, and wondered.

Tressan folded the paper carefully, and returned it to its owner. It was no more than a formal credential, setting forth that Garnache was travelling into Dauphiny on a State affair, and commanding Monsieur de Tressan to give him every assistance he might require in the performance of his errand.

"Parfaitement," purred the Lord Seneschal. "And now, monsieur, if you will communicate to me the nature of your affair, you shall find me entirely at your service."

"It goes without saying that you are acquainted with the Chateau de Condillac?" began Garnache, plunging straight into business.

"Perfectly." The Seneschal leaned back, and was concerned to feel his pulses throbbing a shade too quickly. But he controlled his features, and maintained a placid, bland expression.

"You are perhaps acquainted with its inhabitants?"

"Yes."

"Intimate with them?"

The Seneschal pursed his lips, arched his brows, and slowly waved his podgy hands, a combination of grimace and gesture that said much or nothing. But reflecting that Monsieur de Tressan had a tongue, Garnache apparently did not opine it worth his while to set a strain upon his own imagination, for—

"Intimate with them?" he repeated, and this time there was a sharper note in his voice.

Tressan leaned forward and brought his finger-tips together. His voice was as urbane as it lay within its power to be.

"I understood that monsieur was proposing to state his business, not to question mine."

Garnache sat back in his chair, and his eyes narrowed. He scented opposition, and the greatest stumbling-block in Garnache's career had been that he could never learn to brook opposition from any man. That characteristic, evinced early in life, had all but been the ruin of him. He was a man of high intellectual gifts, of military skill and great

resource; out of consideration for which had he been chosen by Marie de Medicis to come upon this errand. But he marred it all by a temper so ungovernable that in Paris there was current a byword, "Explosive as Garnache."

Little did Tressan dream to what a cask of gunpowder he was applying the match of his smug pertness. Nor did Garnache let him dream it just yet. He controlled himself betimes, bethinking him that, after all, there might be some reason in what this fat fellow said.

"You misapprehend my purpose, sir," said he, his lean brown hand stroking his long chin. "I but sought to learn how far already you may be informed of what is taking place up there, to the end that I may spare myself the pains of citing facts with which already you are acquainted. Still, monsieur, I am willing to proceed upon the lines which would appear to be more agreeable to yourself.

"This, then, is the sum of the affair that brings me: The late Marquis de Condillac left two sons. The elder, Florimond—who is the present marquis, and who has been and still continues absent, warring in Italy, since before his father's death—is the stepson of the present Dowager, she being the mother of the younger son, Marius de Condillac.

"Should you observe me to be anywhere at error, I beg, monsieur, that you will have the complaisance to correct me."

The Seneschal bowed gravely, and Monsieur de Garnache continued:

"Now this younger son—I believe that he is in his twenty-first year at present—has been something of a scapegrace."

"A scapegrace? Bon Dieu, no. That is a harsh name to give him. A little indiscreet at times, a little rash, as is the way of youth."

He would have said more, but the man from Paris was of no mind to waste time on quibbles.

"Very well," he snapped, cutting in. "We will say, a little indiscreet. My errand is not concerned with Monsieur Marius's morals or with his lack of them. These indiscretions which you belittle appear to have been enough to have estranged him from his father, a circumstance which but served the more to endear him to his mother. I am told that she is a very handsome woman, and that the boy favours her surprisingly."

"Ah!" sighed the Seneschal in a rapture. "A beautiful woman—a noble, splendid woman."

"Hum!" Garnache observed the ecstatic simper with a grim eye. Then he proceeded with his story.

"The late marquis possessed in his neighbour, the also deceased Monsieur de La Vauvraye, a very dear and valued friend. Monsieur de La Vauvraye had an only child, a daughter, to inherit his very considerable estates probably the wealthiest in all Dauphiny, so I am informed. It was the dearest wish of his heart to transform what had been a lifelong friendship in his own generation into a closer relationship in the next—a wish that found a very ready echo in the heart of Monsieur de Condillac. Florimond de Condillac was sixteen years of age at the time, and Valerie de La Vauvraye fourteen. For all their tender years, they were betrothed, and they grew up to love each other and to look forward to the consummation of the plans their fathers had laid for them."

"Monsieur, monsieur," the Seneschal protested, "how can you possibly infer so much? How can you say that they loved each other? What authority can you have for pretending to know what was in their inmost hearts?"

"The authority of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye," was the unanswerable rejoinder. "I am telling you, more or less, what she herself wrote to the Queen."

"Ah! Well, well—proceed, monsieur."

"This marriage should render Florimond de Condillac the wealthiest and most powerful gentleman in Dauphiny—one of the wealthiest in France; and the idea of it pleased the old marquis, inasmuch as the disparity there would be between the worldly possessions of his two sons would serve to mark his disapproval of the younger. But before settling down, Florimond signified a desire to see the world, as was fit and proper and becoming in a young man who was later to assume such wide responsibilities. His father, realizing the wisdom of such a step, made but slight objection, and at the age of twenty Florimond set out for the Italian wars. Two years afterwards, a little over six months ago, his father died, and was followed to the grave some weeks later by Monsieur de La Vauvraye. The latter, with a want of foresight which has given rise to the present trouble, misjudging the character of the Dowager of Condillac, entrusted to her care his daughter Valerie pending Florimond's return, when the nuptials would naturally be immediately celebrated. I am probably telling you no more than you already know. But you owe the infliction to your own unwillingness to answer my questions."

"No, no, monsieur; I assure you that in what you say there is much that is entirely new to me."

"I rejoice to hear it, Monsieur de Tressan," said Garnache very seriously, "for had you been in possession of all these facts, Her Majesty might have a right to learn how it chanced that you had nowise interfered in what is toward at Condillac."

"But to proceed: Madame de Condillac and her precious Benjamin—this Marius—finding themselves, in Florimond's absence, masters

of the situation, have set about turning it to their own best advantage. Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, whilst being nominally under their guardianship, finds herself practically gaoled by them, and odious plans are set before her to marry Marius. Could the Dowager but accomplish this, it would seem that she would not only be assuring a future of ease and dignity for her son, but also be giving vent to all her pent-up hatred of her stepson.

"Mademoiselle, however, withstands them, and in this she is aided by a fortuitous circumstance which has arisen out of the overbearing arrogance that appears to be madame's chief characteristic. Condillac after the marquis's death had refused to pay tithes to Mother Church and has flouted and insulted the Bishop. This prelate, after finding remonstrance vain, has retorted by placing Condillac under an Interdict, depriving all within it of the benefit of clergy. Thus, they have been unable to find a priest to venture thither, so that even had they willed to marry mademoiselle by force to Marius, they lacked the actual means of doing so.

"Florimond continues absent. We have every reason to believe that he has been left in ignorance of his father's death. Letters coming from him from time to time prove that he was alive and well at least until three months ago. A messenger has been dispatched to find him and urge him to return home at once. But pending his arrival the Queen has determined to take the necessary steps to ensure that Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye shall be released from her captivity, that she shall suffer no further molestation at the hands of Madame de Condillac and her son—enfin, that she shall run no further risks.

"My errand, monsieur, is to acquaint you with these facts, and to request you to proceed to Condillac and deliver thence Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, whom I am subsequently to escort to Paris and place under Her Majesty's protection until such time as the new marquis shall return to claim her."

Having concluded, Monsieur de Garnache sat back in his chair, and threw one leg over the other, fixing his eyes upon the Seneschal's face and awaiting his reply.

On that gross countenance before him he saw fall the shadow of perplexity. Tressan was monstrous ill-at-ease, and his face lost a good deal of its habitual plethora of colour. He sought to temporize.

"Does it not occur to you, monsieur, that perhaps too much importance may have been attached to the word of this child—this Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye?"

"Does it occur to you that such has been the case, that she has overstated it?" counter-questioned Monsieur de Garnache.

"No, no. I do not say that. But—but—would it not be better—more—ah—satisfactory to all concerned, if you yourself were to go to Condillac, and deliver your message in person, demanding mademoiselle?"

The man from Paris looked at him a moment, then stood up suddenly, and shifted the carriages of his sword back to their normal position. His brows came together in a frown, from which the Seneschal argued that his suggestion was not well received.

"Monsieur," said the Parisian very coldly, like a man who contains a rising anger, "let me tell you that this is the first time in my life that I have been concerned in anything that had to do with women and I am close upon forty years of age. The task, I can assure you, was little to my taste. I embarked upon it because, being a soldier and having received my orders, I was in the unfortunate position of being unable to help myself. But I intend, monsieur, to adhere rigidly to the letter of these commands. Already I have endured more than enough in the interests of this damsel. I have ridden from Paris, and that means close upon a week in the saddle—no little thing to a man who has

acquired certain habits of life and developed a taste for certain minor comforts which he is very reluctant to forgo. I have fed and slept at inns, living on the worst of fares and sleeping on the hardest, and hardly the cleanest, of beds. Ventregis! Figure to yourself that last night we lay at Luzan, in the only inn the place contained—a hovel, Monsieur le Seneschal, a hovel in which I would not kennel a dog I loved."

His face flushed, and his voice rose as he dwelt upon the things he had undergone.

"My servant and I slept in a dormitory'—a thousand devils! monsieur, in a dormitory! Do you realize it? We had for company a drunken vintner, a pedlar, a pilgrim on his way to Rome, and two peasant women; and they sent us to bed without candles, for modesty's sake. I ask you to conceive my feelings in such a case as that. I could tell you more; but that as a sample of what I have undergone could scarcely be surpassed."

"Truly-truly outrageous," sympathized the Seneschal; yet he grinned.

"I ask you—have I not suffered inconvenience enough already in the service of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye that you can blame me if I refuse to go a single step further than my orders bid me?"

The Seneschal stared at him now in increasing dismay. Had his own interests been less at issue he could have indulged his mirth at the other's fiery indignation at the inconveniences he recited. As it was, he had nothing to say; no thought or feeling other than what concerned finding a way of escape from the net that seemed to be closing in about him—how to seem to serve the Queen without turning against the Dowager of Condillac; how to seem to serve the Dowager without opposing the wishes of the Queen.

"A plague on the girl!" he growled, unconsciously uttering his thoughts aloud. "The devil take her!"

Garnache smiled grimly. "That is a bond of sympathy between us," said he. "I have said those very words a hundred times—a thousand times, indeed—between Paris and Grenoble. Yet I scarcely see that you can damn her with as much justice as can I.

"But there, monsieur; all this is unprofitable. You have my message. I shall spend the day at Grenoble, and take a well-earned rest. By this time to-morrow I shall be ready to start upon my return journey. I shall have then the honour to wait upon you again, to the end that I may receive from you the charge of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. I shall count upon your having her here, in readiness to set out with me, by noon to-morrow."

He bowed, with a flourish of his plumed hat, and would with that have taken his departure but that the Seneschal stayed him.

"Monsieur, monsieur," he cried, in piteous affright, "you do not know the Dowager of Condillac."

"Why, no. What of it?"

"What of it? Did you know her, you would understand that she is not the woman to be driven. I may order her in the Queen's name to deliver up Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. But she will withstand me."

"Withstand you?" echoed Garnache, frowning into the face of this fat man, who had risen also, brought to his feet by excitement. "Withstand you—you, the Lord Seneschal of Dauphiny? You are amusing yourself at my expense."

"But I tell you that she will," the other insisted in a passion. "You may look for the girl in vain tomorrow unless you go to Condillac yourself and take her."

Garnache drew himself up and delivered his answer in a tone that was final.

"You are the governor of the province, monsieur, and in this matter you have in addition the Queen's particular authority—nay, her commands are imposed upon you. Those commands, as interpreted by me, you will execute in the manner I have indicated."

The Seneschal shrugged his shoulders, and chewed a second at his beard.

"It is an easy thing for you to tell me what to do. Tell me, rather, how to do it, how to overcome her opposition."

"You are very sure of opposition—strangely sure, monsieur," said Garnache, looking him between the eyes. "In any case, you have soldiers."

"And so has she, and the strongest castle in southern France—to say nothing of the most cursed obstinacy in the world. What she says, she does."

"And what the Queen says her loyal servants do," was Garnache's rejoinder, in a withering tone. "I think there is nothing more to be said, monsieur," he added. "By this time to-morrow I shall expect to receive from you, here, the charge of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. A demain, donc, Monsieur le Seneschal."

And with another bow the man from Paris drew himself erect, turned on his heel, and went jingling and creaking from the room.

The Lord Seneschal sank back in his chair, and wondered to himself whether to die might not prove an easy way out of the horrid situation into which chance and his ill-starred tenderness for the Dowager of Condillac had thrust him.

At his desk sat his secretary, who had been a witness of the interview, lost in wonder almost as great as the Seneschal's own.

For an hour Tressan remained where he was, deep in thought and gnawing at his beard. Then with a sudden burst of passion, expressed in a round oath or two, he rose, and called for his horse that he might ride to Condillac.

CHAPTER III. THE DOWAGER'S COMPLIANCE

Promptly at noon on the morrow Monsieur de Garnache presented himself once more at the Seneschal's palace, and with him went Rabecque, his body-servant, a lean, swarthy, sharp-faced man, a trifle younger than his master.

Anselme, the obese master of the household, received them with profound respect, and at once conducted Garnache to Monsieur de Tressan's presence.

On the stairs they met Captain d'Aubran, who was descending. The captain was not in the best of humours. For four-and-twenty hours he had kept two hundred of his men under arms, ready to march as soon as he should receive his orders from the Lord Seneschal, yet those instructions were not forthcoming. He had been to seek them again that morning, only to be again put off.

Monsieur de Garnache had considerable doubt, born of his yesterday's interview with the Seneschal, that Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye would be delivered into his charge as he had stipulated. His relief was, therefore, considerable, upon being ushered into Tressan's presence, to find a lady in cloak and hat, dressed as for a journey, seated in a chair by the great fireplace.

Tressan advanced to meet him, a smile of cordial welcome on his lips, and they bowed to each other in formal greeting.

"You see, monsieur," said the Seneschal, waving a plump hand in the direction of the lady, "that you have been obeyed. Here is your

charge."

Then to the lady: "This is Monsieur de Garnache," he announced, "of whom I have already told you, who is to conduct you to Paris by order of Her Majesty.

"And now, my good friends, however great the pleasure I derive from your company, I care not how soon you set out, for I have some prodigious arrears of work upon my hands."

Garnache bowed to the lady, who returned his greeting by an inclination of the head, and his keen eyes played briskly over her. She was a plump-faced, insipid child, with fair hair and pale blue eyes, stolid and bovine in their expressionlessness.

"I am quite ready, monsieur," said she, rising as she spoke, and gathering her cloak about her; and Garnache remarked that her voice had the southern drawl, her words the faintest suggestion of a patois. It was amazing how a lady born and bred could degenerate in the rusticity of Dauphiny. Pigs and cows, he made no doubt, had been her chief objectives. Yet, even so, he thought he might have expected that she would have had more to say to him than just those five words expressing her readiness to depart. He had looked for some acknowledgment of satisfaction at his presence, some utterances of gratitude either to himself or to the Queen-Regent for the promptness with which she had been succoured. He was disappointed, but he showed nothing of it, as with a simple inclination of the head—

"Good!" said he. "Since you are ready and Monsieur le Seneschal is anxious to be rid of us, let us by all means be moving. You have a long and tedious journey before you, mademoiselle."

"I—I am prepared for that," she faltered.

He stood aside, and bending from the waist he made a sweeping gesture towards the door with the hand that held his hat. To the

invitation to precede him she readily responded, and, with a bow to the Seneschal, she began to walk across the apartment.

Garnache's eyes, narrowing slightly, followed her, like points of steel. Suddenly he shot a disturbing glance at Tressan's face, and the corner of his wild-cat mustachios twitched. He stood erect, and called her very sharply.

"Mademoiselle!"

She stopped, and turned to face him, an incredible shyness seeming to cause her to avoid his gaze.

"You have, no doubt, Monsieur le Seneschal's word for my identity. But I think it is as well that you should satisfy yourself. Before placing yourself entirely in my care, as you are about to do, you would be well advised to assure yourself, that I am indeed Her Majesty's emissary. Will you be good enough to glance at this?"

He drew forth as he spoke the letter in the queen's own hand, turned it upside down, and so presented it to her. The Seneschal looked on stolidly, a few paces distant.

"But certainly, mademoiselle, assure yourself that this gentleman is no other than I have told you."

Thus enjoined, she took the letter; for a second her eyes met Garnache's glittering gaze, and she shivered. Then she bent her glance to the writing, and studied it a moment, what time the man from Paris watched her closely.

Presently she handed it back to him.

"Thank you, monsieur," was all she said.

"You are satisfied that it is in order, mademoiselle?" he inquired, and a note of mockery too subtle for her or the Seneschal ran through

his question.

"I am quite satisfied."

Garnache turned to Tressan. His eyes were smiling, but unpleasantly, and in his voice when he spoke there was something akin to the distant rumble that heralds an approaching storm.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "has received an eccentric education."

"Eh?" quoth Tressan, perplexed.

"I have heard tell, monsieur, of a people somewhere in the East who read and write from right to left; but never yet have I heard tell of any—particularly in France—so oddly schooled as to do their reading upside down."

Tressan caught the drift of the other's meaning. He paled a little, and sucked his lip, his eyes wandering to the girl, who stood in stolid inapprehension of what was being said.

"Did she do that?" said he, and he scarcely knew what he was saying; all that he realized was that it urged him to explain this thing. "Mademoiselle's education has been neglected—a by no means uncommon happening in these parts. She is sensitive of it; she seeks to hide the fact."

Then the storm broke about their heads. And it crashed and thundered awfully in the next few minutes.

"O liar! O damned, audacious liar," roared Garnache uncompromisingly, advancing a step upon the Seneschal, and shaking the parchment threateningly in his very face, as though it were become a weapon of offence. "Was it to hide the fact that she had not been taught to write that she sent the Queen a letter pages-long? Who is this woman?" And the finger he pointed at the girl quivered with the rage that filled him at this trick they had thought to put upon

him.

Tressan sought refuge in offended dignity. He drew himself up, threw back his head, and looked the Parisian fiercely in the eye.

"Since you take this tone with me, monsieur—"

"I take with you—as with any man—the tone that to me seems best. You miserable fool! As sure as you're a rogue this affair shall cost you your position. You have waxed fat and sleek in your seneschalship; this easy life in Dauphiny appears to have been well suited to your health. But as your paunch has grown, so, of a truth, have your brains dwindled, else had you never thought to cheat me quite so easily.

"Am I some lout who has spent his days herding swine, think you, that you could trick me into believing this creature to be Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye—this creature with the mien of a peasant, with a breath reeking of garlic like a third-rate eating-house, and the walk of a woman who has never known footgear until this moment? Tell me, sir, for what manner of fool did you take me?"

The Seneschal stood with blanched face and gaping mouth, his fire all turned to ashes before the passion of this gaunt man.

Garnache paid no heed to him. He stepped to the girl, and roughly raised her chin with his hand so that she was forced to look him in the face.

"What is your name, wench?" he asked her.

"Margot," she blubbered, bursting into tears.

He dropped her chin, and turned away with a gesture of disgust.

"Get you gone," he bade her harshly. "Get you back to the kitchen or the onion-field from which they took you."

And the girl, scarce believing her good fortune, departed with a speed that bordered on the ludicrous. Tressan had naught to say, no word to stay her with; pretence, he realized, was vain.

"Now, my Lord Seneschal," quoth Garnache, arms akimbo, feet planted wide, and eyes upon the wretched man's countenance, "what may you have to say to me?"

Tressan shifted his position; he avoided the other's glance; he was visibly trembling, and when presently he spoke it was in faltering accents.

"It—it—seems, monsieur, that—ah—that I have been the victim of some imposture."

"It had rather seemed to me that the victim chosen was myself."

"Clearly we were both victims," the Seneschal rejoined. Then he proceeded to explain. "I went to Condillac yesterday as you desired me, and after a stormy interview with the Marquise I obtained from her—as I believed—the person of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. You see I was not myself acquainted with the lady."

Garnache looked at him. He did not believe him. He regretted almost that he had not further questioned the girl. But, after all, perhaps it might be easier and more expedient if he were to appear to accept the Seneschal's statement. But he must provide against further fraud.

"Monsieur le Seneschal," said he in calmer tones, putting his anger from him, "at the best you are a blunderer and an ass, at the worst a traitor. I will inquire no further at present; I'll not seek to discriminate too finely."

"Monsieur, these insults—" began the Seneschal, summoning dignity to his aid. But Garnache broke in:

"La, la! I speak in the Queen's name. If you have thought to aid the Dowager of Condillac in this resistance of Her Majesty's mandate, let me enjoin you, as you value your seneschalship—as you value your very neck—to harbour that thought no longer.

"It seems that, after all, I must deal myself with the situation. I must go myself to Condillac. If they should resist me, I shall look to you for the necessary means to overcome that resistance.

"And bear you this in mind: I have chosen to leave it an open question whether you were a party to the trick it has been sought to put upon the Queen, through me, her representative. But it is a question that I have it in my power to resolve at any moment—to resolve as I choose. Unless, monsieur, I find you hereafter—as I trust—actuated by the most unswerving loyalty, I shall resolve that question by proclaiming you a traitor; and as a traitor I shall arrest you and carry you to Paris. Monsieur le Seneschal, I have the honour to give you good-day!"

When he was gone, Monsieur de Tressan flung off his wig, and mopped the perspiration from his brow. He went white as snow and red as fire by turns, as he paced the apartment in a frenzy. Never in the fifteen years that were sped since he had been raised to the governorship of the province had any man taken such a tone with him and harangued him in such terms.

A liar and a traitor had he been called that morning, a knave and a fool; he had been browbeaten and threatened; and he had swallowed it all, and almost turned to lick the hand that administered the dose. Dame! What manner of cur was he become? And the man who had done all this—a vulgar upstart out of Paris, reeking of leather and the barrack-room still lived!

Bloodshed was in his mind; murder beckoned him alluringly to take her as his ally. But he put the thought from him, frenzied though he

might be. He must fight this knave with other weapons; frustrate his mission, and send him back to Paris and the Queen's scorn, beaten and empty-handed.

"Babylas's!" he shouted.

Immediately the secretary appeared.

"Have you given thought to the matter of Captain d'Aubran?" he asked, his voice an impatient snarl.

"Yes, monsieur, I have pondered it all morning."

"Well? And what have you concluded?"

"Helas! monsieur, nothing."

Tressan smote the table before him a blow that shook some of the dust out of the papers that cumbered it. "Ventregris! How am I served? For what do I pay you, and feed you, and house you, good-for-naught, if you are to fail me whenever I need the things you call your brains? Have you no intelligence, no thought, no imagination? Can you invent no plausible business, no likely rising, no possible disturbances that shall justify my sending Aubran and his men to Montelimar—to the very devil, if need be."

The secretary trembled in his every limb; his eyes shunned his master's as his master's had shunned Garnache's awhile ago. The Seneschal was enjoying himself. If he had been bullied and browbeaten, here, at least, was one upon whom he, in his turn, might taste the joys of bullying and browbeating.

"You lazy, miserable calf," he stormed, "I might be better served by a wooden image. Go! It seems I must rely upon myself. It is always so. Wait!" he thundered; for the secretary, only too glad to obey his last order, had already reached the door. "Tell Anselme to bid the Captain attend me here at once."

Babylas's bowed and went his errand.

A certain amount of his ill-humour vented, Tressan made an effort to regain his self-control. He passed his handkerchief for the last time over face and head, and resumed his wig.

When d'Aubran entered, the Seneschal was composed and in his wonted habit of ponderous dignity. "Ah, d'Aubran," said he, "your men are ready?"

"They have been ready these four-and-twenty hours, monsieur."

"Good. You are a brisk soldier, d'Aubran. You are a man to be relied upon."

D'Aubran bowed. He was a tall, active young fellow with a pleasant face and a pair of fine black eyes.

"Monsieur le Seneschal is very good."

With a wave of the hand the Seneschal belittled his own goodness.

"You will march out of Grenoble within the hour, Captain, and you will lead your men to Montelimar. There you will quarter them, and await my further orders. Babylas will give you a letter to the authorities, charging them to find you suitable quarters. While there, d'Aubran, and until my further orders reach you, you will employ your time in probing the feeling in the hill district. You understand?"

"Imperfectly," d'Aubran confessed.

"You will understand better when you have been in Montelimar a week or so. It may, of course, be a false alarm. Still, we must safeguard the King's interests and be prepared. Perhaps we may afterwards be charged with starting at shadows; but it is better to be on the alert from the moment the shadow is perceived than to wait

until the substance itself has overwhelmed us."

It sounded so very much as if the Seneschal's words really had some hidden meaning, that d'Aubran, if not content with going upon an errand of which he knew so little, was, at least, reconciled to obey the orders he received. He uttered words that conveyed some such idea to Tressan's mind, and within a half-hour he was marching out of Grenoble with beating drums, on his two days' journey to Montelimar.

CHAPTER IV. THE CHATEAU DE CONDILLAC

As Captain d'Aubran and his troop were speeding westwards from Grenoble, Monsieur de Garnache, ever attended by his man, rode briskly in the opposite direction, towards the grey towers of Condillac, that reared themselves towards the greyer sky above the valley of the Isere. It was a chill, dull, autumnal day, with a raw wind blowing from the Alps; its breath was damp, and foretold of the rain that was likely to come anon, the rain with which the clouds hanging low about the distant hills were pregnant.

But Monsieur de Garnache was totally insensible to his surroundings; his mind was very busy with the interview from which he had come, and the interview to which he was speeding. Once he permitted himself a digression, that he might point a moral for the benefit of his servant.

"You see, Rebecque, what a plague it is to have to do with women. Are you sufficiently grateful to me for having quelled your matrimonial ardour of two months ago? No, you are not. Grateful you may be; sufficiently grateful, never; it would be impossible. No gratitude could be commensurate with the benefit I conferred upon you. Yet if you had married, and discovered for yourself the troubles that come from too close an association with that sex which some wag of old ironically called the weaker, and of which contemporary fools with no sense of irony continue so to speak in good faith, you could have blamed only yourself. You would have shrugged your shoulders and made the best of it, realizing that no other man had put this wrong upon you. But with me—thousand devils!—it is very different. I am a man who, in one

particular at least, has chosen his way of life with care; I have seen to it that I should walk a road unencumbered by any petticoat. What happens? What comes of all my careful plans?

"Fate sends an infernal cut-throat to murder our good king—whose soul God rest eternally! And since his son is of an age too tender to wield the sceptre, the boy's mother does it in his name. Thus, I, a soldier, being subject to the head of the State, find myself, by no devising of my own, subject to a woman.

"In itself that is bad enough. Too bad, indeed—Ventregris!—too bad. Yet Fate is not content. It must occur to this woman to select me—me of all men—to journey into Dauphiny, and release another woman from the clutches of yet a third. And to what shifts are we not put, to what discomforts not subjected? You know them, Rabecque, for you have shared them with me. But it begins to break upon my mind that what we have endured may be as nothing to what may lie before us. It is an ill thing to have to do with women. Yet you, Rabecque, would have deserted me for one of them!"

Rabecque was silent. Maybe he was ashamed of himself; or maybe that, not agreeing with his master, he had yet sufficient appreciation of his position to be discreetly silent where his opinions might be at variance. Thus Garnache was encouraged to continue.

"And what is all this trouble about, which they have sent me to set right? About a marriage. There is a girl wants to marry one man, and a woman who wants to marry her to another. Ponder the possibilities of tragedy in such a situation. Half this world's upheavals have had their source in less. Yet you, Rabecque, would have married!"

Necessity at last turned his discourse to other matters.

"Tell me, now," said he abruptly, in a different tone, "is there hereabouts a ford?"

"There is a bridge up yonder, monsieur," returned the servant, thankful to have the conversation changed.

They rode towards it in silence, Garnache's eyes set now upon the grey pile that crowned the hillock, a half-mile away, on the opposite bank of the stream. They crossed the bridge and rode up the gently rising, bare, and rugged ground towards Condillac. The place wore an entirely peaceful air, strong and massive though it appeared. It was encircled by a ditch, but the drawbridge was down, and the rust on its chains argued that long had it been so.

None coming to challenge them, the pair rode across the planks, and the dull thud of their hooves started into activity some one in the gatehouse.

A fellow rudely clad—a hybrid between man-at-arms and lackey—lounged on a musket to confront them in the gateway. Monsieur de Garnache announced his name, adding that he came to crave an audience of Madame la Marquise, and the man stood aside to admit him. Thus he and Rabecque rode forward into the roughly paved courtyard.

From several doorways other men emerged, some of martial bearing, showing that the place was garrisoned to some extent. Garnache took little heed of them. He flung his reins to the man whom he had first addressed—the fellow had kept pace beside him—and leapt nimbly to the ground, bidding Rabecque await him there.

The soldier lackey resigned the reins to Rabecque, and requested Monsieur de Garnache to follow him. He led the way through a door on the left, down a passage and across an anteroom, and ushered the visitor finally into a spacious, gloomy hall, panelled in black oak and lighted as much by the piled-up fire that flared on the noble hearth as by the grey daylight that filtered through the tall mullioned windows.

As they entered, a liver-coloured hound that lay stretched before the fire growled lazily, and showed the whites of his eyes. Paying little attention to the dog, Garnache looked about him. The apartment was handsome beyond praise, in a sombre, noble fashion. It was hung with pictures of departed Condillacs—some of them rudely wrought enough—with trophies of ancient armour, and with implements of the chase. In the centre stood an oblong table of black oak, very richly carved about its massive legs, and in a china bowl, on this, an armful of late roses filled the room with their sweet fragrance.

Then Garnache espied a page on the window-seat, industriously burnishing a cuirass. He pursued his task, indifferent to the newcomer's advent, until the knave who had conducted thither the Parisian called the boy and bade him go tell the Marquise that a Monsieur de Garnache, with a message from the Queen-Regent, begged an audience.

The boy rose, and simultaneously, out of a great chair by the hearth, whose tall back had hitherto concealed him, there rose another figure. This was a stripling of some twenty summers—twenty-one, in fact—of a pale, beautifully featured face, black hair and fine black eyes, and very sumptuously clad in a suit of shimmering silk whose colour shifted from green to purple as he moved.

Monsieur de Garnache assumed that he was in the presence of Marius de Condillac. He bowed a trifle stiffly, and was surprised to have his bow returned with a graciousness that amounted almost to cordiality.

"You are from Paris, monsieur?" said the young man, in a gentle, pleasant voice. "I fear you have had indifferent weather for your journey."

Garnache thought of other things besides the weather that he had found indifferent, and he felt warmed almost to the point of anger at

the very recollection. But he bowed again, and answered amiably enough.

The young man offered him a seat, assuring him that his mother would not keep him waiting long. The page had already gone upon his errand.

Garnache took the proffered chair, and sank down with creak and jingle to warm himself at the fire.

"From what you have said, I gather that you are Monsieur Marius de Condillac," said he. "I, as you may have heard me announced by your servant, am Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache—at your service."

"We have heard of you, Monsieur de Garnache," said the youth as he crossed his shapely legs of silken violet, and fingered the great pearl that depended from his ear. "But we had thought that by now you would be on your way to Paris."

"No doubt—with Margot," was the grim rejoinder.

But Marius either gathered no suggestion from its grimness, or did not know the name Garnache uttered, for he continued:

"We understood that you were to escort Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye to Paris, to place her under the tutelage of the Queen Regent. I will not conceal from you that we were chagrined at the reflection cast upon Condillac; nevertheless, Her Majesty's word is law in Dauphiny as much as it is in Paris."

"Quite as much, and I am relieved to hear you confess it," said Garnache drily, and he scanned more closely the face of this young man. He found cause to modify the excellent impression he had received at first. Marius's eyebrows were finely pencilled, but they arched a shade too much, and his eyes were set a trifle too closely; the mouth, which had seemed beautiful at first, looked, in addition, on

this closer inspection, weak, sensual, and cruel.

There fell upon the momentary silence the sound of an opening door, and both men rose simultaneously to their feet.

In the splendid woman that entered, Monsieur de Garnache saw a wonderful likeness to the boy who stood beside him. She received the emissary very graciously. Marius set a chair for her between the two they had been occupying, and thus interchanging phrases of agreeable greeting the three sat down about the hearth with every show of the greatest amity.

A younger man might have been put out of countenance; the woman's surpassing beauty, her charm of manner, her melodious voice, falling on the ear soft and gentle as a caress, might have turned a man of less firmness a little from his purpose, a little perhaps from his loyalty and the duty that had brought him all the way from Paris. But Monsieur de Garnache was to her thousand graces as insensible as a man of stone. And he came to business briskly. He had no mind to spend the day at her fireside in pleasant, meaningless talk.

"Madame," said he, "monsieur your son informs me that you have heard of me and of the business that brings me into Dauphiny. I had not looked for the honour of journeying quite so far as Condillac; but since Monsieur de Tressan, whom I made my ambassador, appears to have failed so signally, I am constrained to inflict my presence upon you."

"Inflict?" quoth she, with a pretty look of make-believe dismay. "How harsh a word, monsieur!"

The smoothness of the implied compliment annoyed him.

"I will use any word you think more adequate, madame, if you will suggest it," he answered tartly.

"There are a dozen I might suggest that would better fit the case—and with more justice to yourself," she answered, with a smile that revealed a gleam of white teeth behind her scarlet lips. "Marcus, bid Benoit bring wine. Monsieur de Garnache will no doubt be thirsting after his ride."

Garnache said nothing. Acknowledge the courtesy he would not, refuse it he could not. So he sat, and waited for her to speak, his eyes upon the fire.

Madame had already set herself a course. Keener witted than her son, she had readily understood, upon Garnache's being announced to her, that his visit meant the failure of the imposture by which she had sought to be rid of him.

"I think, monsieur," she said presently, watching him from under her lids, "that we have, all of us who are concerned in Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye's affairs, been at cross-purposes. She is an impetuous, impulsive child, and it happened that some little time ago we had words—such things will happen in the most united families. Whilst the heat of her foolish anger was upon her, she wrote a letter to the Queen, in which she desired to be removed from my tutelage. Since then, monsieur, she has come to repent her of it. You, who no doubt understand a woman's mind—"

"Set out upon no such presumption, madame," he interrupted. "I know as little of a woman's mind as any man who thinks he knows a deal—and that is nothing."

She laughed as at an excellent jest, and Marius, overhearing Garnache's retort as he was returning to resume his seat, joined in her laugh.

"Paris is a fine whetstone for a man's wits," said he.

Garnache shrugged his shoulders.

"I take it, madame, that you wish me to understand that Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, repenting of her letter, desires no longer to repair to Paris; desires, in fact, to remain here at Condillac in your excellent care."

"You apprehend the position exactly, monsieur."

"To my mind," said he, "it presents few features difficult of apprehension."

Marius's eyes flashed his mother a look of relief; but the Marquise, who had an ear more finely trained, caught the vibration of a second meaning in the emissary's words.

"All being as you say, madame," he continued, "will you tell me why, instead of some message to this purport, you sent Monsieur de Tressan back to me with a girl taken from some kitchen or barnyard, whom it was sought to pass off upon me as Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye?"

The Marquise laughed, and her son, who had shown signs of perturbation, taking his cue from her, laughed too.

"It was a jest, monsieur"—she told him, miserably conscious that the explanation could sound no lamer.

"My compliments, madame, upon the humour that prevails in Dauphiny. But your jest failed of its purpose. It did not amuse me, nor, so far as I could discern, was Monsieur de Tressan greatly taken with it. But all this is of little moment, madame," he continued. "Since you tell me that Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye is content to remain here, I am satisfied that it is so."

They were the very words that she desired to hear from him; yet his manner of uttering them gave her little reassurance. The smile on her lips was forced; her watchful eyes smiled not at all.

"Still," he continued, "you will be so good as to remember that I am not my own master in this affair. Were that so, I should not fail to relieve you at once of my unbidden presence."

"Oh, monsieur—"

"But, being the Queen's emissary, I have her orders to obey, and those orders are to convey Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye to Paris. They make no allowance for any change that may have occurred in mademoiselle's inclinations. If the journey is now distasteful to her, she has but her own rashness to blame in having sought it herself. What imports is that she is bidden by the Queen to repair to Paris; as a loyal subject she must obey the Queen's commands; you, as a loyal subject, must see to it that she obeys them. So, madame, I count upon your influence with mademoiselle to see that she is ready to set out by noon to-morrow. One day already has been wasted me by your—ah—jest, madame. The Queen likes her ambassadors to be brisk."

The Dowager reclined in her chair, and bit her lip. This man was too keen for her. She had no illusions. He had seen through her as if she had been made of glass; he had penetrated her artifices and detected her falsehoods. Yet feigning to believe her and them, he had first neutralized her only weapons—other than offensive—then used them for her own defeat. Marius it was who took up the conversation.

"Monsieur," he cried—and there was a frown drawing together his fine brows—"what you suggest amounts to a tyranny on the Queen's part."

Garnache was on his feet, his chair grating the polished floor.

"Monsieur says?" quoth he, his glittering eye challenging the rash boy to repeat his words.

But the Dowager intervened with a little trill of laughter.

"Bon Dieu! Marius, what are you saying? Foolish boy! And you, Monsieur de Garnache, do not heed him, I beg you. We are so far from Court in this little corner of Dauphiny, and my son has been reared in so free an atmosphere that he is sometimes betrayed into expressions whose impropriety he does not realize."

Garnache bowed in token of his perfect satisfaction, and at that moment two servants entered bearing flagons and beakers, fruits and sweetmeats, which they placed upon the table. The Dowager rose, and went to do the honours of the board. The servants withdrew.

"You will taste our wine of Condillac, monsieur?"

He acquiesced, expressing thanks, and watched her fill a beaker for him, one for herself, and another for her son. She brought him the cup in her hands. He took it with a grave inclination of the head. Then she proffered him the sweetmeats. To take one, he set down the cup on the table, by which he had also come to stand. His left hand was gloved and held his beaver and whip.

She nibbled, herself, at one of the comfits, and he followed her example. The boy, a trifle sullen since the last words, stood on the hearth with his back to the fire, his hands clasped behind him.

"Monsieur," she said, "do you think it would enable you to comply with what I have signified to be not only our own wishes, but those of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye herself, if she were to state them to you?"

He looked up sharply, his lips parting in a smile that revealed his strong white teeth.

"Are you proposing another of your jests, madame?"

She laughed outright. A wonderful assurance was hers, thought Monsieur de Garnache. "Mon Dieu! no, monsieur," she cried. "If you

will, you may see the lady herself."

He took a turn in the apartment, idly, as does a man in thought.

"Very well," said he, at last. "I do not say that it will alter my determination. But perhaps—yes, I should be glad of an opportunity of the honour of making Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye's acquaintance. But no impersonations, I beg, madame!" He said it half-laughingly, taking his cue from her.

"You need have no fear of any."

She walked to the door, opened it, and called "Gaston!" In answer came the page whom Garnache had found in the room when he was admitted.

"Desire Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye to come to us here at once," she bade the boy, and closed the door.

Garnache had been all eyes for some furtive sign, some whispered word; but he had surprised neither.

His pacing had brought him to the opposite end of the board, where stood the cup of wine madame had poured for Marius. His own, Garnache, had left untouched. As if abstractedly, he now took up the beaker, pledged madame with his glance, and drank. She watched him, and suddenly a suspicion darted through her mind—a suspicion that he suspected them.

Dieu! What a man was this! He took no chances. Madame reflected that this augured ill for the success of the last resource upon which, should all else fail, she was counting to keep mademoiselle at Condillac. It seemed incredible that one so wary and watchful should have committed the rashness of venturing alone into Condillac without taking his precautions to ensure his ability to retreat.

In her heart she felt daunted by him. But in the matter of that wine—

the faintest of smiles hovered on her lips, her eyebrows went up a shade. Then she took up the cup that had been poured for the Parisian, and bore it to her son.

"Marius, you are not drinking," said she. And seeing a command in her eyes; he took the beaker from her hand and bore it to his lips, emptying the half of it, whilst with the faintest smile of scorn the Dowager swept Garnache a glance of protest, as of one repudiating an unworthy challenge.

Then the door opened, and the eyes of all three were centred upon the girl that entered.

CHAPTER V. MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE LOSES HIS TEMPER

"You sent for me, madame," said the girl, seeming to hesitate upon the threshold of the room, and her voice—a pleasant, boyish contralto—was very cold and conveyed a suggestion of disdain.

The Marquise detected that inauspicious note, and was moved by it to regret her already of having embarked upon so bold a game as to confront Monsieur de Garnache with Valerie. It was a step she had decided upon as a last means of convincing the Parisian of the truth of her statement touching the change that had taken place in mademoiselle's inclinations. And she had provided for it as soon as she heard of Garnache's arrival by informing mademoiselle that should she be sent for, she must tell the gentleman from Paris that it was her wish to remain at Condillac. Mademoiselle had incontinently refused, and madame, to win her compliance, had resorted to threats.

"You will do as you consider best, of course," she had said, in a voice that was ominously sweet. "But I promise you that if you do otherwise than as I tell you, you shall be married before sunset to Marius, whether you be willing or not. Monsieur de Garnache comes alone, and if I so will it alone he shall depart or not at all. I have men enough at Condillac to see my orders carried out, no matter what they be.

"You may tell yourself that this fellow will return to help you. Perhaps he will; but when he does, it will be too late so far as you shall be

concerned."

Terrified by that threat, Valerie had blanched, and had felt her spirit deserting her.

"And if I comply, madame?" she had asked. "If I do as you wish, if I tell this gentleman that I no longer desire to go to Paris—what then?"

The Dowager's manner had become more affectionate. She had patted the shrinking girl upon the shoulder. "In that case, Valerie, you shall suffer no constraint; you shall continue here as you have done."

"And has there been no constraint hitherto?" had been the girl's indignant rejoinder.

"Hardly, child," the Dowager had returned. "We have sought to guide you to a wise choice—no more than that. Nor shall we do more hereafter if you do my pleasure now and give this Monsieur de Garnache the answer that I bid you. But if you fail me, remember—you marry Marius before nightfall."

She had not waited for the girl to promise her compliance. She was too clever a woman to show anxiety on that score. She left her with that threat vibrating in her mind, confident that she would scare the girl into obedience by the very assurance she exhibited that Valerie would not dare to disobey.

But now, at the sound of that chill voice, at the sight of that calm, resolved countenance, madame was regretting that she had not stayed to receive the girl's promise before she made so very sure of her pliability.

She glanced anxiously at Garnache. His eyes were upon the girl. He was remarking the slender, supple figure, moderately tall and looking taller in its black gown of mourning; the oval face, a trifle pale now from the agitation that stirred her, with its fine level brows, its

clear, hazel eyes, and its crown of lustrous brown hair rolled back under the daintiest of white coifs. His glance dwelt appreciatively on the slender nose, with its delicate nostrils, the charming line of mouth and chin, the dazzling whiteness of her skin, conspicuous not only in neck and face but in the long, slender hands that were clasped before her.

These signs of breeding, everywhere proclaimed, left him content that here was no imposture; the girl before him was, indeed, Valerie de La Vauvraye.

At madame's invitation she came forward. Marius hastened to close the door and to set a chair for her, his manner an admirable suggestion of ardour restrained by deference.

She sat down with an outward calm under which none would have suspected the full extent of her agitation, and she bent her eyes upon the man whom the Queen had sent for her deliverance.

After all, Garnache's appearance was hardly suggestive of the role of Perseus which had been thrust upon him. She saw a tall, spare man, with prominent cheek-bones, a gaunt, high-bridged nose, very fierce mustachios, and a pair of eyes that were as keen as sword-blades and felt to her glance as penetrating. There was little about him like to take a woman's fancy or claim more than a moderate share of her attention, even when circumstances rendered her as interested in him as was now Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye.

There fell a silence, broken at last by Marius, who leaned, a supple, graceful figure, his elbow resting upon the summit of Valerie's chair.

"Monsieur de Garnache does us the injustice to find a difficulty in believing that you no longer wish to leave us."

That was by no means what Garnache had implied; still, since it really expressed his mind, he did not trouble to correct Marius.

Valerie said nothing, but her eyes travelled to madame's countenance, where she found a frown. Garnache observed the silence, and drew his own conclusions.

"So we have sent for you, Valerie," said the Dowager, taking up her son's sentence, "that you may yourself assure Monsieur de Garnache that it is so."

Her voice was stern; it bore to the girl's ears a subtle, unworded repetition of the threat the Marquise had already voiced. Mademoiselle caught it, and Garnache caught it too, although he failed to interpret it as precisely as he would have liked.

The girl seemed to experience a difficulty in answering. Her eyes roved to Garnache's, and fell away in affright before their glitter. That man's glance seemed to read her very mind, she thought; and suddenly the reflection that had terrified her became her hope. If it were as she deemed it, what matter what she said? He would know the truth, in spite of all.

"Yes, madame," she said at last, and her voice was wholly void of expression. "Yes, monsieur, it is as madame says. It is my wish to remain at Condillac."

From the Dowager, standing a pace or two away from Garnache, came the sound of a half-sigh. Garnache missed nothing. He caught the sound, and accepted it as an expression of relief. The Marquise stepped back a pace; idly, one might have thought; not so thought Garnache. It had this advantage: that it enabled her to stand where he might not watch her face without turning his head. He was content that such was her motive. To defeat her object, to show her that he had guessed it, he stepped back, too, also with that same idleness of air, so that he was once more in line with her. And then he spoke, addressing Valerie.

"Mademoiselle, that you should have written to the Queen in haste is deplorable now that your views have undergone this change. I am a stupid man, mademoiselle, just a blunt soldier with orders to obey and no authority to think. My orders are to conduct you to Paris. Your will was not taken into consideration. I know not how the Queen would have me act, seeing your reluctance; it may be that she would elect to leave you here, as you desire. But it is not for me to arrogate to determine the Queen's mind. I can but be guided by her orders, and those orders leave me no course but one—to ask you, mademoiselle, to make ready immediately to go with me."

The look of relief that swept into Valerie's face, the little flush of colour that warmed her cheeks, hitherto so pale, were all the confirmation that he needed of what he suspected.

"But, monsieur," said Marius, "it must be plain to you that since the Queen's orders are but a compliance with mademoiselle's wishes, now that mademoiselle's wishes have altered, so too would Her Majesty's commands alter to comply with them once more."

"That may be plain to you, monsieur; for me, unfortunately, there are my orders for only guide," Garnache persisted. "Does not mademoiselle herself agree with me?"

She was about to speak; her glance had looked eager, her lips had parted. Then, of a sudden, the little colour faded from her cheeks again, and she seemed stricken with a silence. Garnache's eyes, directed in a sidelong glance to the Marquise's face, surprised there a frown that had prompted that sudden change.

He half-turned, his manner changing suddenly to a freezing civility.

"Madame la Marquise," said he, "I beg with all deference to suggest that I am not allowed the interview you promised me with Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye."

The ominous coldness with which he had begun to speak had had a disturbing effect upon the Dowager; the words he uttered, when she had weighed them, brought an immense relief. It seemed, then, that he but needed convincing that this was Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. This argued that for the rest he was satisfied.

"There, monsieur, you are at fault," she cried, and she was smiling into his grave eyes. "Because once I put that jest upon you, you imagine—"

"No, no," he broke in. "You misapprehend me. I do not say that this is not Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye; I do not say that—"

He paused; he was at the end of his resources. He did not know how to put the thing without giving offence, and it had been his resolve—realizing the necessity for it—to conduct this matter with a grave courtesy.

To feel that after having carried the affair so far with a for him—commendable lightness of touch, he should be at a loss for a delicate word to convey a harsh accusation began to anger him. And once Garnache began to be angered, the rest followed quickly. It was just that flaw in his character that had been the ruin of him, that had blighted what otherwise might have been a brilliant career. Astute and wily as a fox, brave as a lion, and active as a panther, gifted with intelligence, insight and resource, he had carried a dozen enterprises up to the very threshold of success, there to have ruined them all by giving way to some sudden access of choler.

So was it now. His pause was but momentary. Yet in that moment, from calm and freezing that he had been, he became ruffled and hot. The change was visible in his heightened colour, in his flashing eyes, and in his twitching mustachios. For just a second he sought to smother his wrath; he had a glimmer of remembrance of the need for caution and diplomacy in the darkness of anger that was descending

over him. Then, without further warning, he exploded.

His nervous, sinewy hand clenched itself and fell with a crash upon the table, overturning a flagon and sending a lake of wine across the board, to trickle over at a dozen points and form in puddles at the feet of Valerie. Startled, they all watched him, mademoiselle the most startled of the three.

"Madame," he thundered, "I have been receiving dancing-lessons at your hands for long enough. It is time, I think, we did a little ordinary walking, else shall we get no farther along the road I mean to go and that is the road to Paris with mademoiselle for company."

"Monsieur, monsieur!" cried the startled Marquise, placing herself intrepidly before him; and Marius trembled for her, for so wild did the man seem that he almost feared he might strike her.

"I have heard enough," he blazed. "Not another word from any here in Condillac! I'll take this lady with me now, at once; and if any here raises a finger to resist me, as Heaven is my witness, it will be the last resistance he will ever offer any man. Let a hand be laid upon me, or a sword bared before my eyes, and I swear, madame, that I'll come back and burn this dunghill of rebellion to the ground."

In the blindness of his passion all his fine keenness was cast to the wind, his all-observing watchfulness was smothered in the cloud of anger that oppressed his brain. He never saw the sign that madame made to her son, never so much as noticed Marius's stealthy progress towards the door.

"Oh," he continued, a satirical note running now through his tempestuous voice, "it is a fine thing to cozen each other with honeyed words, with smirks and with grimaces. But we have done with that, madame." He towered grimly above her, shaking a threatening finger in her very face. "We have done with that. We shall

resort to deeds, instead."

"Aye, monsieur," she answered very coldly, sneering upon his red-hot fury, "there shall be deeds enough to satisfy even your outrageous thirst for them."

That cold, sneering voice, with its note of threat, was like a hand of ice upon his overheated brain. It cooled him on the instant. He stiffened, and looked about him. He saw that Marius had disappeared, and that mademoiselle had risen and was regarding him with singularly imploring eyes.

He bit his lip in mortified chagrin. He cursed himself inwardly for a fool and a dolt—the more pitiable because he accounted himself cunning above others. Had he but kept his temper, had he done no more than maintain the happy pretence that he was a slave to the orders he had received—a mere machine—he might have gained his ends by sheer audacity. At least, his way of retreat would have remained open, and he might have gone, to return another day with force at his heels.

As it was, that pretty whelp, her son, had been sent, no doubt, for men. He stepped up to Valerie.

"Are you ready, mademoiselle?" said he; for little hope though he might still have of winning through, yet he must do the best to repair the damage that was of his making.

She saw that the storm of passion had passed, and she was infected by the sudden, desperate daring that prompted that question of his.

"I am ready, monsieur," said she, and her boyish voice had an intrepid ring. "I will come with you as I am."

"Then, in God's name, let us be going."

They moved together towards the door, with never another glance for the Dowager where she stood, patting the head of the hound that had risen and come to stand beside her. In silence she watched them, a sinister smile upon her beautiful, ivory face.

Then came a sound of feet and voices in the anteroom. The door was flung violently open, and a half-dozen men with naked swords came blundering into the room, Marius bringing up the rear.

With a cry of fear Valerie shrank back against the panelled wall, her little hands to her cheeks, her eyes dilating with alarm.

Garnache's sword rasped out, an oath rattled from his clenched teeth, and he fell on guard. The men paused, and took his measure. Marius urged them on, as if they had been a pack of dogs.

"At him!" he snapped, his finger pointing, his handsome eyes flashing angrily. "Cut him down!"

They moved; but mademoiselle moved at the same moment. She sprang before them, between their swords and their prey.

"You shall not do it; you shall not do it!" she cried, and her face looked drawn, her eyes distraught. "It is murder—murder, you curs!" And the memory of how that dainty little lady stood undaunted before so much bared steel, to shield him from those assassins, was one that abode ever after with Garnache.

"Mademoiselle," said he, in a quiet voice, "if you will but stand aside there will be some murder done among them first."

But she did not move. Marius clenched his hands, fretted by the delay. The Dowager looked on and smiled and patted her dog's head. To her mademoiselle now turned in appeal.

"Madame," she exclaimed, "you'll not allow it. You'll not let them do

this thing. Bid them put up their swords, madame. Bethink you that Monsieur de Garnache is here in the Queen's name."

Too well did madame bethink her of it. Garnache need not plague himself with vexation that his rash temper alone had wrought his ruin now. It had but accelerated it. It was just possible, perhaps, that suavity might have offered him opportunities; but, for the rest, from the moment that he showed himself firm in his resolve to carry mademoiselle to Paris, his doom was sealed. Madame would never willingly have allowed him to leave Condillac alive, for she realized that did she do so he would stir up trouble enough to have them outlawed. He must perish here, and be forgotten. If questions came to be asked later, Condillac would know nothing of him.

"Monsieur de Garnache promised us some fine deeds on his own account," she mocked him. "We but afford him the opportunity to perform them. If these be not enough for his exceeding valour, there are more men without whom we can summon."

A feeling of pity for mademoiselle—perhaps of no more than decency—now overcame Marius. He stepped forward.

"Valerie," he said, "it is not fitting you should remain."

"Aye, take her hence," the Dowager bade him, with a smile. "Her presence is unmanning our fine Parisian."

Eager to do so, over-eager, Marius came forward, past his men-at-arms, until he was but some three paces from the girl and just out of reach of a sudden dart of Garnache's sword.

Softly, very warily, Garnache slipped his right foot a little farther to the right. Suddenly he threw his weight upon it, so that he was clear of the girl. Before they understood what he was about, the thing had taken place. He had leaped forward, caught the young man by the breast of his shimmering doublet, leaped back to shelter beyond

mademoiselle, hurled Marius to the ground, and planted his foot, shod as it was in his thickly mudded riding-boot, full upon the boy's long, shapely neck.

"Move so much as a finger, my pretty fellow," he snapped at him, "and I'll crush the life from you as from a toad."

There was a sudden forward movement on the part of the men; but if Garnache was vicious, he was calm. Were he again to lose his temper now, there would indeed be a speedy end to him. That much he knew, and kept repeating to himself, lest he should be tempted to forget it.

"Back!" he bade them in a voice so imperative that they stopped, and looked on with gaping mouths. "Back, or he perishes!" And dropping the point of his sword, he lightly rested it upon the young man's breast.

In dismay they looked to the Dowager for instruction. She craned forward, the smile gone from her lips, a horror in her eyes, her bosom heaving. A moment ago she had smiled upon mademoiselle's outward signs of fear; had mademoiselle been so minded, she might in her turn have smiled now at the terror written large upon the Dowager's own face. But her attention was all absorbed by the swiftly executed act by which Garnache had gained at least a temporary advantage.

She had turned and looked at the strange spectacle of that dauntless man, erect, his foot upon Marius's neck, like some fantastic figure of a contemporary Saint George and a contemporary dragon. She pressed her hands tighter upon her bosom; her eyes sparkled with an odd approval of that brisk deed.

But Garnache's watchful eyes were upon the Dowager. He read the anxious fear that marred the beauty of her face, and he took heart at

the sight, for he was dependent upon the extent to which he might work upon her feelings.

"You smiled just now, madame, when it was intended to butcher a man before your eyes. You smile no longer, I observe, at this the first of the fine deeds I promised you."

"Let him go," she said, and her voice was scarce louder than a whisper, horror-laden. "Let him go, monsieur, if you would save your own neck."

"At that price, yes—though, believe me, you are paying too much for so poor a life as this. Still, you value the thing, and I hold it; and so you'll forgive me if I am extortionate."

"Release him, and, in God's name, go your ways. None shall stay you," she promised him.

He smiled. "I'll need some security for that. I do not choose to take your word for it, Madame de Condillac."

"What security can I give you?" she cried, wringing her hands, her eyes on the boy's ashen face ashen from mingling fear and rage—where it showed beyond Garnache's heavy boot.

"Bid one of your knaves summon my servant. I left him awaiting me in the courtyard."

The order was given, and one of the cut-throats departed.

In a tense and anxious silence they awaited his return, though he kept them but an instant.

Rabecque's eyes took on a startled look when he had viewed the situation. Garnache called to him to deprive those present of their weapons.

"And let none refuse, or offer him violence," he added, "or your master's life shall pay the price of it."

The Dowager with a ready anxiety repeated to them his commands. Rabecque, understanding nothing, went from man to man, and received from each his weapons. He placed the armful on the windowseat, at the far end of the apartment, as Garnache bade him. At the other end of the long room, Garnache ordered the disarmed men to range themselves. When that was done, the Parisian removed his foot from his victim's neck.

"Stand up," he commanded, and Marius very readily obeyed him.

Garnache placed himself immediately behind the boy. "Madame," said he, "no harm shall come to your son if he is but wise. Let him disobey me, or let any man in Condillac lift a hand against us, and that shall be the signal for Monsieur de Condillac's death. Mademoiselle, it is your wish to accompany me to Paris?"

"Yes, monsieur," she answered fearlessly, her eyes sparkling now.

"We will be going then. Place yourself alongside of Monsieur de Condillac. Rabecque, follow me. Forward, Monsieur de Condillac. You will be so good as to conduct us to our horses in the courtyard."

They made an odd procession as they marched out of the hall, under the sullen eyes of the baulked cut-throats and their mistress. On the threshold Garnache paused, and looked over his shoulder.

"Are you content, madame? Have you seen fine deeds enough for one day?" he asked her, laughing. But, white to the lips with chagrin, she returned no answer.

Garnache and his party crossed the anteroom, after having taken the precaution to lock the door upon the Marquise and her men, and proceeding down a gloomy passage they gained the courtyard. Here

Marius was consoled to find some men of the garrison of Condillac a half-score, or so—all more or less armed, surrounding the horses of Garnache and his lackey. At sight of the odd group that now appeared those ruffians stood at gaze, surprised, and with suspicions aroused by Garnache's naked sword, ready for anything their master might demand of them.

Marius had in that instant a gleam of hope. Thus far, Garnache had been master of the situation. But surely the position would be reversed when Garnache and his man came to mount their horses, particularly considering how hampered they must be by Valerie. This danger Garnache, however, was no less quick to perceive, and with a dismaying promptness did he take his measures.

"Remember," he threatened Monsieur de Condillac, "if any of your men show their teeth it will be the worse for you." They had come to a halt on the threshold of the courtyard. "You will be so good as to bid them retreat through that doorway across the yard yonder."

Marius hesitated. "And if I refuse?" he demanded hardily, but keeping his back to Garnache. The men stirred, and stray words of mingling wonder and anger reached the Parisian.

"You will not," said Garnache, with quiet confidence.

"I think you make too sure," Marius replied, and dissembled his misgivings in a short laugh. Garnache became impatient. His position was not being improved by delay.

"Monsieur de Condillac," said he, speaking quickly and yet with an incisiveness of tone that made his words sound deliberate, "I am a desperate man in a desperate position. Every moment that I tarry here increases my danger and shortens my temper. If you think to temporize in the hope of gaining an opportunity of turning the tables upon me, you must be mad to dream that I shall permit it. Monsieur,

you will at once order those men to leave the courtyard by that doorway, or I give you my word of honour that I shall run you through as you stand."

"That would be to destroy yourself," said Marius with an attempted note of confidence.

"I should be no less destroyed by delay," answered Garnache; and added more sharply, "Give the word, monsieur, or I will make an end."

From the movement behind him Marius guessed almost by instinct that Garnache had drawn back for a lunge. At his side Valerie looked over her shoulder, with eyes that were startled but unafraid. For a second Marius considered whether he might not attempt to elude Garnache by a wild and sudden dash towards his men. But the consequences of failure were too fearful.

He shrugged his shoulders, and gave the order. The men hesitated a moment, then shuffled away in the direction indicated. But they went slowly, with much half-whispered, sullen conferring and many a backward glance at Marius and those with him.

"Bid them go faster," snapped Garnache. Marius obeyed him, and the men obeyed Marius, and vanished into the gloom of the archway. After all, thought Monsieur de Condillac, they need go no farther than that doorway; they must have appreciated the situation by now; and he was confident they would have the sense to hold themselves in readiness for a rush in the moment of Garnache's mounting.

But Garnache's next order shattered that last hope.

"Rebecque," said he, without turning his head, "go and lock them in." Before bidding the men go that way, he had satisfied himself that there was a key on the outside of the door. "Monsieur de Condillac," he resumed to Marius, "you will order your men in no way to hinder my servant. I shall act upon any menace of danger to my lackey precisely

as I should were I, myself, in danger."

Marius's heart sank within him, as sinks a stone through water. He realized, as his mother had realized a little while before, that in Garnache they had an opponent who took no chances. In a voice thick with the torturing rage of impotence he gave the order upon which the grim Parisian insisted. There followed a silence broken by the fall of Rabecque's heavily shod feet upon the stones of the yard, as he crossed it to do his master's bidding. The door creaked on its hinges; the key grated screaming in its lock, and Rabecque returned to Garnache's side even as Garnache tapped Marius on the shoulder.

"This way, Monsieur de Condillac, if you please," said he, and as Marius turned at last to face him, he stood aside and waved his left hand towards the door through which they had lately emerged. A moment stood the youth facing his stern conqueror; his hands were clenched until the knuckles showed white; his face was a dull crimson. Vainly he sought for words in which to vent some of the malicious chagrin that filled his soul almost to bursting-point. Then, despairing, with a shrug and an inarticulate mutter, he flung past the Parisian, obeying him as the cur obeys, with pendant tail and teeth-revealing snarl.

Garnache closed the door upon him with a bang, and smiled quietly as he turned to Valerie.

"I think we have won through, mademoiselle," said he, with pardonable vanity. "The rest is easy, though you may be subjected to some slight discomfort between this and Grenoble."

She smiled back at him, a pale, timid smile, like a gleam of sunshine from a wintry sky. "That matters nothing," she assured him, and strove to make her voice sound brave.

There was need for speed, and compliments were set aside by

Garnache, who, at his best, was not felicitous with them. Valerie felt herself caught by the wrist, a trifle roughly she remembered afterwards, and hurried across the cobbles to the tethered horses, with which Rabecque was already busy. She saw Garnache raise his foot to the stirrup and hoist himself to the saddle. Then he held down a hand to her, bade her set her foot on his, and called with an oath to Rabecque to lend her his assistance. A moment later she was perched in front of Garnache, almost on the withers of his horse. The cobbles rattled under its hooves, the timbers of the drawbridge sent up a booming sound, they were across—out of Condillac—and speeding at a gallop down the white road that led to the river; after them pounded Rabecque, bumping horribly in his saddle, and attempting wildly, and with awful objurgations, to find his stirrups.

They crossed the bridge that spans the Isere and took the road to Grenoble at a sharp pace, with scarce a backward glance at the grey towers of Condillac. Valerie experienced an overwhelming inclination to weep and laugh, to cry and sing at one and the same time; but whether this odd emotion sprang from the happenings in which she had had her part, or from the exhilaration of that mad ride, she could not tell. No doubt it sprang from both, owing a part to each. She controlled herself, however. A shy, upward glance at the stern, set face of the man whose arm encircled and held her fast had a curiously sobering effect upon her. Their eyes met, and he smiled a friendly, reassuring smile, such as a father might have bestowed upon a daughter.

"I do not think that they will charge me with blundering this time," he said.

"Charge you with blundering?" she echoed; and the inflection of the pronoun might have flattered him had he not reflected that it was impossible she could have understood his allusion. And now she bethought her that she had not thanked him—and the debt was a

heavy one. He had come to her aid in an hour when hope seemed dead. He had come single-handed—save for his man Rabecque; and in a manner that was worthy of being made the subject of an epic, he had carried her out of Condillac, away from the terrible Dowager and her cut-throats. The thought of them sent a shiver through her.

"Do you feel the cold?" he asked concernedly; and that the wind might cut her less, he slackened speed.

"No, no," she cried, her alarm waking again at the thought of the folk of Condillac. "Make haste! Go on, go on! Mon Dieu! if they should overtake us!"

He looked over his shoulder. The road ran straight for over a half-mile behind them, and not a living thing showed upon it.

"You need have no alarm," he smiled. "We are not pursued. They must have realized the futility of attempting to overtake us. Courage, mademoiselle. We shall be in Grenoble presently, and once there, you will have nothing more to fear."

"You are sure of that?" she asked, and there was doubt in her voice.

He smiled reassuringly again. "The Lord Seneschal shall supply us with an escort," he promised confidently.

"Still," she said, "we shall not stay there, I hope, monsieur."

"No longer than may be necessary to procure a coach for you."

"I am glad of that," said she. "I shall know no peace until Grenoble is a good ten leagues behind us. The Marquise and her son are too powerful there."

"Yet their might shall not prevail against the Queen's," he made reply. And as now they rode amain she fell to thanking him, shyly at

first, then, as she gathered confidence in her subject, with a greater fervour. But he interrupted her ere she had gone far, "Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye," said he, "you overstate the matter." His tone was chilling almost; and she felt as she had been rebuked. "I am no more than the emissary of Her Majesty—it is to her that your thanks are due."

"Ah, but, monsieur," she returned to the assault, "I owe some thanks to you as well. What other in your place would have done what you have done?"

"I know not that, nor do I greatly care," said he, and laughed, but with a laugh that jarred on her. "That which I did I must have done, no matter whom it was a question of saving. I am but an instrument in this matter, mademoiselle."

His thought was to do no more than belittle the service he had rendered her, to stem her flow of gratitude, since, indeed, he felt, as he said, that it was to the Queen-Regent her thanks were due. All unwitting was it—out of his ignorance of the ways of thought of a sex with which he held the view that it is an ill thing to meddle—that he wounded her by his disclaimer, in which her sensitive maiden fancy imagined a something that was almost contemptuous.

They rode in silence for a little spell, broken at last by Garnache in expression of the thoughts that had come to him as a consequence of what she had said.

"On this same subject of thanks," said he—and as she raised her eyes again she found him smiling almost tenderly—"if any are due between us they are surely due from me to you."

"From you to me?" she asked in wonder.

"Assuredly," said he. "Had you not come between me and the Dowager's assassins there had been an end to me in the hall of

Condillac."

Her hazel eyes were very round for a moment, then they narrowed, and little humorous lines formed at the corners of her lips.

"Monsieur de Garnache," said she, with a mock coldness that was a faint echo of his own recent manner, "you overstate the case. That which I did I must have done, no matter whom it was a question of saving. I was but an instrument in this matter, monsieur."

His brows went up. He stared at her a moment, gathering instruction from the shy mockery of her glance. Then he laughed with genuine amusement.

"True," he said. "An instrument you were; but an instrument of Heaven, whereas in me you but behold the instrument of an earthly power. We are not quite quits, you see."

But she felt, at least, that she was quits with him in the matter of his repudiation of her own thanks, and the feeling bridged the unfriendly gap that she had felt was opening out between them; and for no reason in the world that she could think of, she was glad that this was so.

CHAPTER VI. MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE KEEPS HIS TEMPER

Night had fallen and it had begun to rain when Garnache and Valerie reached Grenoble. They entered the town afoot, the Parisian not desiring to attract attention by being seen in the streets with a lady on the withers of his horse.

With thought for her comfort, Monsieur de Garnache had divested himself of his heavy horseman's cloak and insisted upon her assuming it, so setting it about her that her head was covered as by a wimple. Thus was she protected not only from the rain, but from the gaze of the inquisitive.

They made their way in the drizzle, through the greasy, slippery streets ashine with the lights that fell from door and window, Rabecque following closely with the horses. Garnache made straight for his inn—the Auberge du Veau qui Tete—which enjoyed the advantage of facing the Palais Seneschal.

The ostler took charge of the nags, and the landlord conducted them to a room above-stairs, which he placed at mademoiselle's disposal. That done, Garnache left Rabecque on guard, and proceeded to make the necessary arrangements for the journey that lay before them. He began by what he conceived to be the more urgent measure, and stepping across to the Palais Seneschal, he demanded to see Monsieur de Tressan at once.

Ushered into the Lord Seneschal's presence, he startled that

obese gentleman by the announcement that he had returned from Condillac with Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, and that he would require an escort to accompany them to Paris.

"For I am by no means minded to be exposed to such measures as the tigress of Condillac and her cub may take to recover their victim," he explained with a grim smile.

The Seneschal combed his beard and screwed up his pale eyes until they vanished in the cushions of his cheeks. He was lost in amazement. He could only imagine that the Queen's emissary had been duped more successfully this time.

"I am to gather, then," said he, dissembling what was passing through his mind, "that you delivered the lady by force or strategy."

"By both, monsieur," was the short answer.

Tressan continued to comb his beard, and pondered the situation. If things were so, indeed, they could not have fallen out more to his taste. He had had no hand in it, one way or the other. He had run with the hare and hunted with the hounds, and neither party could charge him with any lack of loyalty. His admiration and respect for Monsieur de Garnache grew enormously. When the rash Parisian had left him that afternoon for the purpose of carrying his message himself to Condillac, Tressan had entertained little hope of ever again seeing him alive. Yet there he stood, as calm and composed as ever, announcing that singlehanded he had carried out what another might well have hesitated to attempt with a regiment at his heels.

Tressan's curiosity urged him to beg for the details of this marvel, and Garnache entertained him with a brief recital of what had taken place, whereat, realizing that Garnache had indeed outwitted them, the Seneschal's wonder increased.

"But we are not out of the quagmire yet," cried Garnache; "and that

is why I want an escort."

Tressan became uneasy. "How many men shall you require?" he asked, thinking that the Parisian would demand at least the half of a company.

"A half-dozen and a sergeant to command them."

Tressan's uneasiness was dissipated, and he found himself despising Garnache more for his rashness in being content with so small a number than he respected him for the boldness and courage he had so lately displayed. It was not for him to suggest that the force might prove insufficient; rather was it for him to be thankful that Garnache had not asked for more. An escort Tressan dared not refuse him, and yet refuse it him he must have done—or broken with the Condillacs—had he asked for a greater number. But six men! Pooh! they would be of little account. So he very readily consented, inquiring how soon Garnache would require them.

"At once," was the Parisian's answer. "I leave Grenoble to-night. I hope to set out in an hour's time. Meanwhile I'll have the troopers form a guard of honour. I am lodged over the way."

Tressan, but too glad to be quit of him, rose there and then to give the necessary orders, and within ten minutes Garnache was back at the Sucking Calf with six troopers and a sergeant, who had left their horses in the Seneschal's stables until the time for setting out. Meanwhile Garnache placed them on duty in the common-room of the inn.

He called for refreshment for them, and bade them remain there at the orders of his man Rabecque. His reason for this step was that it became necessary that he should absent himself for a while to find a carriage suitable for the journey; for as the Sucking Calf was not a post-house he must seek one elsewhere—at the Auberge de France,

in fact, which was situate on the eastern side of the town by the Porte de Savoie—and he was not minded to leave the person of Valerie unguarded during his absence. The half-dozen troopers he considered ample, as indeed they were.

On this errand he departed, wrapped tightly in his cloak, walking briskly through the now heavier rain.

But at the Auberge de France a disappointment awaited him. The host had no horses and no carriage, nor would he have until the following morning. He was sorrow-stricken that the circumstance should discompose Monsieur de Garnache; he was elaborate in his explanations of how it happened that he could place no vehicle at Monsieur de Garnache's disposal—so elaborate that it is surprising Monsieur de Garnache's suspicions should not have been aroused. For the truth of the matter was that the folk of Condillac had been at the Auberge de France before him—as they had been elsewhere in the town wherever a conveyance might be procurable—and by promises of reward for obedience and threats of punishment for disobedience, they had contrived that Garnache should hear this same story on every hand. His mistake had lain in his eagerness to obtain a guard from the Seneschal. Had he begun by making sure of a conveyance, anticipating, as he should have done, this move on the part of the Condillacs—a move which he did not even now suspect—it is possible that he might have been spared much of the trouble that was to follow.

An hour or so later, after having vainly ransacked the town for the thing he needed, he returned wet and annoyed to the Veau qui Tote. In a corner of the spacious common-room—a corner by the door leading to the interior of the inn—he saw the six troopers at table, waxing a trifle noisy over cards. Their sergeant sat a little apart, in conversation with the landlord's wife, eyes upturned adoringly, oblivious of the increasing scowl that gathered about her watchful

husband's brow.

At another table sat four gentlemen—seemingly travellers, by their air and garb—in a conversation that was hushed at Garnache's entrance. But he paid no heed to them as he stalked with ringing step across the rushstrewn floor, nor observed how covertly and watchfully their glances followed him as returning, in passing the sergeant's prompt salute he vanished through the doorway leading to the stairs.

He reappeared again a moment later, to call the host, and give him orders for the preparing of his own and Rabecque's supper.

On the landing above he found Rabecque awaiting him.

"Is all well?" he asked, and received from his lackey a reassuring answer.

Mademoiselle welcomed him gladly. His long absence, it appeared, had been giving her concern. He told her on what errand he had been, and alarm overspread her face upon hearing its result.

"But, monsieur," she cried, "you are not proposing that I should remain a night in Grenoble."

"What alternative have we?" he asked, and his brows met, impatient at what he accounted no more than feminine whimsey.

"It is not safe," she exclaimed, her fears increasing. "You do not know how powerful are the Condillacs."

He strode to the fire, and the logs hissed under the pressure of his wet boot. He set his back to the blaze, and smiled down upon her.

"Nor do you know how powerful are we," he answered easily. "I have below six troopers and a sergeant of the Seneschal's regiment; with myself and Rabecque we are nine men in all. That should be a sufficient guard, mademoiselle. Nor do I think that with all their power

the Condillacs will venture here to claim you at the sword point."

"And yet," she answered, for all that she was plainly reassured, at least in part, "I would rather you had got me a horse, that we might have ridden to Saint Marcellin, where no doubt a carriage might be obtained."

"I did not see the need to put you to so much discomfort," he returned. "It is raining heavily."

"Oh, what of that?" she flung back impatiently.

"Besides," he added, "it seems there are no horses at the post-house. A benighted place this Dauphiny of yours, mademoiselle."

But she never heeded the gibe at her native province. "No horses?" she echoed, and her hazel eyes looked up sharply, the alarm returning to her face. She rose, and approached him. "Surely that is impossible."

"I assure you that it is as I say—neither at the post-house nor at any of the inns I visited could I find me a spare horse."

"Monsieur," she cried, "I see the hand of Condillac in this."

"As how?" he inquired, and his tone again was quickened by impatience.

"They have anticipated you. They seek to keep you here—to keep us in Grenoble."

"But to what end?" he asked, his impatience growing. "The Auberge de France has promised me a carriage in the morning. What shall it avail them at Condillac to keep us here to-night?"

"They may have some project. Oh, monsieur! I am full of fears."

"Dismiss them," he answered lightly, and to reassure her he added,

smiling: "Rest assured we shall keep good watch over you, Rabecque and I and the troopers. A guard shall remain in the passage throughout the night. Rabecque and I will take turn about at sentry-go. Will that give you peace?"

"You are very good," she said, her voice quivering with feeling and real gratitude, and as he was departing she called after him. "You will be careful of yourself," she said.

He paused under the lintel, and turned, surprised. "It is a habit of mine," said he, with a glint of humour in his eye.

But there was no answering smile from her. Her face was all anxiety.

"Beware of pitfalls," she bade him. "Go warily; they are cruelly cunning, those folk of Condillac. And if evil should befall you..."

"There would still remain Rabecque and the troopers," he concluded.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I implore you to be careful," she insisted.

"You may depend upon me," he said, and closed the door.

Outside he called Rabecque, and together they went below. But mindful of her fears, he dispatched one of the troopers to stand sentry outside her door whilst he and his lackey supped. That done, he called the host, and set himself at table, Rabecque at his elbow in attendance to hand him the dishes and pour his wine.

Across the low-ceilinged room the four travellers still sat in talk, and as Garnache seated himself, one of them shouted for the host and asked in an impatient tone to know if his supper was soon to come.

"In a moment, sir," answered the landlord respectfully, and he

turned again to the Parisian. He went out to bring the latter's meal, and whilst he was gone Rabecque heard from his master the reason of their remaining that night in Grenoble. The inference drawn by the astute lackey—and freely expressed by him—from the lack of horses or carriages in Grenoble that night, coincided oddly with Valerie's. He too gave it as his opinion that his master had been forestalled by the Dowager's people, and without presuming to advise Garnache to go warily—a piece of advice that Garnache would have resented, to the extent perhaps of boxing the fellow's ears—he determined, there and then, to keep a close watch upon his master, and under no circumstances, if possible, permit him to leave the Sucking Calf that night.

The host returned, bearing a platter on which there steamed a ragout that gave out an appetizing odour; his wife followed with other dishes and a bottle of Armagnac under her arm. Rabecque busied himself at once, and his hungry master disposed himself to satisfy the healthiest appetite in France, when suddenly a shadow fell across the table. A man had come to stand beside it, his body screening the light of one of the lamps that hung from a rafter of the ceiling.

"At last!" he exclaimed, and his voice was harsh with ill-humour.

Garnache looked up, pausing in the very act of helping himself to that ragout. Rabecque looked up from behind his master, and his lips tightened. The host looked up from the act of drawing the cork of the flagon he had taken from his wife, and his eyes grew big as in his mind he prepared a judicious blend of apology and remonstrance wherewith to soothe this very impatient gentleman. But before he could speak, Garnache's voice cut sharply into the silence. An interruption at such a moment vexed him sorely.

"Monsieur says?" quoth he.

"To you, sir—nothing," answered the fellow impudently, and looked

him straight between the eyes.

With a flush mounting to his cheeks, and his brows drawn together in perplexity, Garnache surveyed him. He was that same traveller who had lately clamoured to know when he might sup, a man of rather more than middle height, lithe and active of frame, yet with a breadth of shoulder and depth of chest that argued strength and endurance as well. He had fair, wavy hair, which he wore rather longer than was the mode, brown eyes, and a face which, without being handsome, was yet more than ordinarily engaging by virtue of its strength and frank ingenuousness. His dress was his worst feature. It was flamboyant and showy; cheap, and tawdrily pretentious. Yet he bore himself with the easy dignity of a man who counts more inferiors than superiors.

Despite the arrogant manner of his address, Garnache felt prepossessed in the newcomer's favour. But before he could answer him, the host was speaking.

"Monsieur mistakes..." he began.

"Mistakes?" thundered the other in an accent slightly foreign. "It is you who mistake if you propose to tell me that this is not my supper. Am I to wait all night, while every jackanapes who follows me into your pigsty is to be served before me?"

"Jackanapes?" said Garnache thoughtfully, and looked the man in the face again. Behind the stranger pressed his three companions now, whilst the troopers across the room forgot their card-play to watch the altercation that seemed to impend.

The foreigner—for such, indeed, his French proclaimed him—turned half-contemptuously to the host, ignoring Garnache with an air that was studiously offensive.

"Jackanapes?" murmured Garnache again, and he, too, turned to the host. "Tell me, Monsieur l'Hôte," said he, "where do the

jackanapes bury their dead in Grenoble? I may need the information."

Before the distressed landlord could utter a word, the stranger had wheeled about again to face Garnache. "What shall that mean?" he asked sharply, a great fierceness in his glance.

"That Grenoble may be witnessing the funeral of a foreign bully by to-morrow, Monsieur l'Etranger," said Garnache, showing his teeth in a pleasant smile. He became conscious in that moment of a pressure on his shoulder blade, but paid no heed to it, intent on watching the other's countenance. It expressed surprise a moment, then grew dark with anger.

"Do you mean that for me, sir?" he growled.

Garnache spread his hands. "If monsieur feels that the cap fits him, I shall not stay him in the act of donning it."

The stranger set one hand upon the table, and leaned forward towards Garnache. "May I ask monsieur to be a little more definite?" he begged.

Garnache sat back in his chair and surveyed the man, smiling. Quick though his temper usually might be, it was checked at present by amusement. He had seen in his time many quarrels spring from the flimsiest of motives, but surely never had he seen one quite so self-begotten. It was almost as if the fellow had come there of set purpose to pick it with him.

A suspicion flashed across his mind. He remembered the warning mademoiselle had given him. And he wondered. Was this a trick to lure him to some guet-apens? He surveyed his man more closely; but the inspection lent no colour to his suspicions. The stranger looked so frank and honest; then again his accent was foreign. It might very well be that he was some Savoyard lordling unused to being kept waiting, and that his hunger made him irritable and impatient. If that were so,

assuredly the fellow deserved a lesson that should show him he was now in France, where different manners obtained to those that he displayed; yet, lest he should be something else, Garnache determined to pursue a policy of conciliation. It would be a madness to embroil himself just then, whether this fellow were of Condillac or not.

"I have asked you, monsieur," the stranger insisted, "to be a little more definite."

Garnache's smile broadened and grew more friendly. "Frankly," said he, "I experience difficulty. My remark was vague. I meant it so to be."

"But it offended me, monsieur," the other answered sharply.

The Parisian raised his eyebrows, and pursed his lips. "Then I deplore it," said he. And now he had to endure the hardest trial of all. The stranger's expression changed to one of wondering scorn.

"Do I understand that monsieur apologizes?"

Garnache felt himself crimsoning; his self-control was slipping from him; the pressure against his shoulder blade was renewed, and in time he became aware of it and knew it for a warning from Rabecque.

"I cannot conceive, sir, that I have offended," said he at length, keeping a tight hand upon his every instinct—which was to knock this impertinent stranger down. "But if I have, I beg that you will believe that I have done so unwittingly. I had no such intent."

The stranger removed his hand from the table and drew himself erect.

"So much for that, then," said he, provokingly contemptuous. "If you will be as amiable in the matter of the supper I shall be glad to terminate an acquaintance which I can see no honour to myself in

pursuing."

This, Garnache felt, was more than he could endure. A spasm of passion crossed his face, another instant and despite Rabecque's frantic proddings he might have flung the ragout in the gentleman's face; when suddenly came the landlord unexpectedly to the rescue.

"Monsieur, here comes your supper now," he announced, as his wife reentered from the kitchen with a laden tray.

For a moment the stranger seemed out of countenance. Then he looked with cold insolence from the dishes set before Garnache to those which were being set for himself.

"Ah," said he, and his tone was an insult unsurpassable, "perhaps it is to be preferred. This ragout grows cold, I think."

He sniffed, and turning on his heel, without word or sign of salutation to Garnache, he passed to the next table, and sat down with his companions. The Parisian's eyes followed him, and they blazed with suppressed wrath. Never in all his life had he exercised such self-control as he was exercising then—which was the reason why he had failed to achieve greatness—and he was exercising it for the sake of that child above-stairs, and because he kept ever-present in his mind the thought that she must come to grievous harm if ill befell himself. But he controlled his passion at the cost of his appetite. He could not eat, so enraged was he. And so he pushed the platter from him, and rose.

He turned to Rabecque, and the sight of his face sent the lackey back a pace or two in very fear. He waved his hand to the table.

"Sup, Rabecque," said he. "Then come to me above."

And followed, as before, by the eyes of the stranger and his companions, Garnache strode out of the room, and mounting the

stairs went to find solace in talk with Valerie. But however impossible he might find it to digest the affront he had swallowed, no word of the matter did he utter to the girl, lest it should cause her fears to reawaken.

CHAPTER VII. THE OPENING OF THE TRAP

Garnache spent a sleepless night at Grenoble, on guard throughout the greater part of it since nothing short of that would appease the fears of Valerie. Yet it passed without any bellicose manifestation on the part of the Condillacs such as Valerie feared and such as Garnache was satisfied would not—could not, indeed—take place.

Betimes next morning he dispatched Rabecque to the Auberge de France for the promised carriage, and broke his fast in the common-room what time he awaited his man's return. The chamber was again occupied by the stranger of yesternight, who sat apart, however, and seemed no longer disposed to interfere with the Parisian. Garnache wondered idly, might this be due to the circumstance that that same stranger was supported now by one single companion, and was therefore less valorous than when he had been in the company of three.

At another table were two gentlemen, sprung he knew not whence, quiet in dress and orderly in manner, to whom he paid little heed until one of them a slender, swarthy, hawk-faced fellow—looking up suddenly, started slightly at sight of the Parisian and addressed him instantly by name. Garnache paused in the act of rising from table, half-turned, and sharply scrutinized the swarthy gentleman, but failed to recognize him. He advanced towards him.

"I have the honour to be known to you, monsieur?" he half-stated, half-inquired.

"Parbleu, Monsieur de Garnache!" exclaimed the other with a

ready smile, the more winning since it lighted up a face that at rest was very sombre. "Lives there a Parisian to whom you are not known? I have seen you often at the Hotel de Bourgogne."

Garnache acknowledged the courtesy by a slight inclination of the head.

"And once," continued the other, "I had the honour to be presented to you by Monsieur le Duc himself. My name is Gaubert—Fabre Gaubert." And as he introduced himself he rose out of respect for Garnache, who had remained standing. Garnache knew him not at all, yet never doubted that his tale was true; the fellow had a very courtly, winning air; moreover, Garnache was beginning to feel lonely in the wilds of Dauphiny, so that it rejoiced him to come into the company of one whom he might regard as something of a fellow-creature. He held out his hand.

"I am honoured in that you should have borne me in your memory, monsieur," said he. He was about to add that he would be overjoyed if it should happen that Monsieur Gaubert was travelling to Paris, since he might give himself the pleasure of his company on that tedious journey; but he checked himself betimes. He had no reason to suspect this gentleman; and yet, all things considered, he bethought him suddenly that he would do well to observe the greatest circumspection. So with a pleasant but meaningless civility touching Monsieur Gaubert's presence in those parts, Garnache passed on and gained the door. He paused in the porch, above which the rebus-like sign of the Sucking Calf creaked and grated in each gust of the chill wind that was blowing from the Alps. The rain had ceased, but the sky was dark and heavy with great banks of scudding clouds. In the street the men of his escort sat their horses, having mounted at his bidding in readiness for the journey. A word or two he exchanged with the sergeant, and then with a great rumble the clumsy carriage from the Auberge de France heralded its approach. It rolled up the

street, a vast machine of wood and leather, drawn by three horses, and drew up at the door of the inn. Out sprang Rabecque, to be immediately sent by his master to summon mademoiselle. They would set out upon the instant.

Rabecque turned to obey; but in that same moment he was thrust rudely aside by a man with the air of a servant, who issued from the inn carrying a valise; after him, following close upon his heels, with head held high and eyes that looked straight before him and took no heed of Garnache, came the foreigner of yesternight.

Rabecque, his shoulders touching the timbers of the porch, against which he had been thrust, remained at gaze, following with resentful eye the fellow who had so rudely used him. Garnache, on the other side, watched with some wonder the advent of the ingenuous-looking stranger, but as yet with no suspicion of his intent.

Not until the servant had thrown open the door of the coach and deposited within the valise he carried, did Garnache stir. Not, indeed, until the foreigner's foot was on the step preparatory to mounting did Garnache speak.

"Hi! monsieur," he called to him, "what is your pleasure with my carriage?"

The stranger turned, and stared at Garnache with a look of wonder that artfully changed to one of disdainful recognition.

"Ah?" said he, and his eyebrows went up. "The apologetic gentleman! You said?"

Garnache approached him, followed a step not only by Rabecque, but also by Monsieur Gaubert, who had sauntered out a second earlier. Behind them, in the porch, lounged now the foreigner's friend, and behind him again was to be seen the great face and staring, somewhat startled eyes of the landlord.

"I asked you, monsieur," said Garnache, already at grips with that quick temper of his, "what might be your pleasure with my coach?"

"With your coach?" echoed the other, his superciliousness waxing more and more offensive. "Voyons! on! my apologetic friend, do all things in Grenoble belong to you?" He turned to the post-boy, who looked on stolidly. "You are from the Auberge de France, are you not?" quoth he.

"I am, monsieur," replied the man. "This carriage was ordered last night by a gentleman lodging at the Veau qui Tete?"

"Perfectly," replied the stranger, in a tone of finality. "It was ordered by me." And he was about to turn away, when Garnache approached him by yet another step.

"I will ask you to observe, monsieur," said he and for all that his tone and words were civil, that they were forcedly so was obvious from their quiver—"I will ask you to observe that the carriage was fetched by my own man there, who rode hither in it."

The stranger looked him up and down with a curling lip.

"It seems, sir," said he, with a broad sneer, "that you are one of those impertinent fellows who will be for ever thrusting themselves upon gentlemen with an eye to such profit as they can make." He produced a purse and opened it. "Last night it was my supper you usurped. I suffered that. Now you would do the same by my coach, and that I shall not suffer. But there is for your pains, and to be quit of your company." And he tossed a silver coin at the Parisian.

There was an exclamation of horror in the background, and Monsieur de Gaubert thrust himself forward.

"Sir, sir," he exclaimed in an agitated voice, "you cannot know whom you are addressing. This is Monsieur Martin Marie Rigobert de

Garnache, Mestre-de-Champ in the army of the King."

"Of all those names the one I should opine might fit him best, but for his ugliness, is that of Marie," answered the foreigner, leering, and with a contemptuous shrug he turned again to mount the carriage.

At that all Garnache's self-control deserted him, and he did a thing deplorable. In one of his blind accesses of fury, heedless of the faithful and watchful Rabecque's arresting tug at his sleeve, he stepped forward, and brought a heavy hand down upon the supercilious gentleman's shoulder. He took him in the instant in which, with one foot off the ground and the other on the step of the carriage, the foreigner was easily thrown off his balance; he dragged him violently backward, span him round and dropped him floundering in the mire of the street-kennel.

That done, there fell a pause—a hush that was ominous of things impending. A little crowd of idlers that had gathered was quickly augmenting now, and from some there came a cry of "Shame!" at Garnache's act of violence.

This is no moment at which to pause to moralize. And yet, how often is it not so? How often does not public sympathy go out to the man who has been assaulted without thought of the extent to which that man may have provoked and goaded his assailant.

That cry of "Shame!" did no more than increase the anger that was mastering Garnache. His mission in Grenoble was forgotten; mademoiselle above-stairs was forgotten; the need for caution and the fear of the Condillacs were forgotten; everything was thrust from his mind but the situation of the moment.

Amid the hush that followed, the stranger picked himself slowly up, and sought to wipe the filth from his face and garments. His servant and his friend flew to his aid, but he waved them aside, and advanced

towards Garnache, eyes blazing, lips sneering.

"Perhaps," said he, in that soft, foreign tone of his, laden now with fierce mock-politeness, "perhaps monsieur proposes to apologize again."

"Sir, you are mad," interposed Gaubert. "You are a foreigner, I perceive, else you would—"

But Garnache thrust him quietly aside. "You are very kind, Monsieur Gaubert," said he, and his manner now was one of frozen calm—a manner that betrayed none of the frenzy of seething passion underneath. "I think, sir," said he to the stranger, adopting something of that gentleman's sardonic manner, "that it will be a more peaceful world without you. It is that consideration restrains me from apologizing. And yet, if monsieur will express regret for having sought, and with such lack of manners, to appropriate my carriage—"

"Enough!" broke in the other. "We are wasting time, and I have a long journey before me. Courthon," said he, addressing his friend, "will you bring me the length of this gentleman's sword? My name, sir," he added to Garnache, "is Sanguinetti."

"Faith," said Garnache, "it sorts well with your bloody spirit."

"And will sort well, no doubt, with his condition presently," put in hawk-faced Gaubert. "Monsieur de Garnache, if you have no friend at hand to act for you, I shall esteem myself honoured." And he bowed.

"Why, thanks, sir. You are most opportunely met. You should be a gentleman since you frequent the Hotel de Bourgogne. My thanks."

Gaubert went aside to confer with Monsieur Courthon. Sanguinetti stood apart, his manner haughty and impressive, his eye roaming scornfully through the ranks of what had by now become a crowd. Windows were opening in the street, and heads appearing, and

across the way Garnache might have beheld the flabby face of Monsieur de Tressan among the spectators of that little scene.

Rabecque drew near his master.

"Have a care, monsieur," he implored him. "If this should be a trap."

Garnache started. The remark sobered him, and brought to his mind his own suspicions of yesternight, which his present anger had for the moment lulled. Still, he conceived that he had gone too far to extricate himself. But he could at least see to it that he was not drawn away from the place that sheltered mademoiselle. And so he stepped forward, joining Courthon and Gaubert, to insist that the combat should take place in the inn—either in the common room or in the yard. But the landlord, overhearing this, protested loudly that he could not consent to it. He had his house to think of. He swore that they should not fight on his premises, and implored them in the same breath not to attempt it.

At that Garnache, now thoroughly on his guard! was for putting off the encounter.

"Monsieur Courthon," said he—and he felt a flush of shame mounting to his brow, and realized that it may need more courage to avoid an encounter than to engage in one—"there is something that in the heat of passion I forgot; something that renders it difficult for me to meet your friend at present."

Courthon looked at him as he might look at an impertinent lackey.

"And what may that be?" he inquired, mightily contemptuous. There was a snigger from some in the crowd that pressed about them, and even Monsieur Gaubert looked askance.

"Surely, sir," he began, "if I did not know you for Monsieur de Garnache—"

But Garnache did not let him finish.

"Give me air," he cried, and cuffed out to right and left of him at the grinning spectators, who fell back and grinned less broadly. "My reason, Monsieur de Courthon," said he, "is that I do not belong to my self at present. I am in Grenoble on business of the State, as the emissary of the Queen-Regent, and so it would hardly become me to engage in private quarrels."

Courthon raised his brows.

"You should have thought of that before you rolled Monsieur Sanguinetti in the mud," he answered coldly.

"I will tender him my apologies for that," Garnache promised, swallowing hard, "and if he still insists upon a meeting he shall have it in, say, a month's time."

"I cannot permit—" began Courthon, very fiercely.

"You will be so good as to inform your friend of what I have said," Garnache insisted, interrupting him.

Cowed, Courthon shrugged and went apart to confer with his friend.

"Ah!" came Sanguinetti's soft voice, yet loud enough to be heard by all present. "He shall have a caning then for his impertinence." And he called loudly to the post-boy for his whip. But at that insult Garnache's brain seemed to take fire, and his cautious resolutions were reduced to ashes by the conflagration. He stepped forward, and, virulent of tone and terrific of mien, he announced that since Monsieur Sanguinetti took that tone with him, he would cut his throat for him at once and wherever they should please.

At last it was arranged that they should proceed there and then to the Champs aux Capuchins, a half-mile away behind the Franciscan

convent.

Accordingly they set out, Sanguinetti and Courthon going first, and Garnache following with Gaubert; the rear being brought up by a regiment of rabble, idlers and citizens, that must have represented a very considerable proportion of the population of Grenoble. This audience heartened Garnache, to whom some measure of reflection had again returned. Before such numbers it was unthinkable that these gentlemen—assuming them to be acting on behalf of Condillac—should dare to attempt foul measures with him. For the rest he had taken the precaution of leaving Rabecque at the Sucking Calf, and he had given the sergeant strict injunctions that he was not to allow any of his men to leave their posts during his absence, and that the troopers were to hold themselves entirely at the orders of Rabecque. Comparatively easy therefore in his mind, and but little exercised by any thought of the coming encounter, Garnache walked briskly along.

They came at last to the Champs aux Capuchins—a pleasant stretch of verdure covering perhaps half an acre and set about by a belt of beech-trees.

The crowd disposed itself on the fringe of the sward, and the duellists went forward, and set about the preparations. Principals and seconds threw off cloak and doublet, and Sanguinetti, Courthon, and Gaubert removed their heavy boots, whilst Garnache did no more than detach the spurs from his.

Sanguinetti, observing this, drew the attention of the others to it, and an altercation arose. It was Gaubert who came to beg Garnache that he should follow the example they had set him in that respect. But Garnache shook his head.

"The turf is sodden."

"But it is precisely on that account, sir," protested Gaubert very

earnestly. "In your boots you will be unable to stand firm; you will run the risk of slipping every time that you break ground."

"I venture to think, sir, that that is my affair," said Garnache stiffly.

"But it is not," the other cried. "If you fight in your boots, we must all do the same, and for myself—well, I have not come here to commit suicide."

"Look you, Monsieur Gaubert," said Garnache quietly, "your opponent will be Monsieur Courthon, and since he is in his stockinged feet, there is no reason why you yourself should not remain so too. As for me, I retain my boots, and Monsieur Sanguinetti may have all the advantage that may give him. Since I am content, in Heaven's name let the fight go forward. I am in haste."

Gaubert bowed in submission; but Sanguinetti, who had overheard, turned with an oath.

"By God, no!" said he. "I need no such advantage, sir. Courthon, be so good as to help me on with my boots again." And there was a fresh delay whilst he resumed them.

At last, however, the four men came together, and proceeded to the measurement of swords. It was found that Sanguinetti's was two inches longer than any of the other three.

"It is the usual length in Italy," said Sanguinetti with a shrug.

"If monsieur had realized that he was no longer in Italy, we might perhaps have been spared this very foolish business," answered Garnache testily.

"But what are we to do?" cried the perplexed Gaubert.

"Fight," said Garnache impatiently. "Is there never to be an end to these preliminaries?"

"But I cannot permit you to oppose yourself to a sword two inches longer than your own," cried Gaubert, almost in a temper.

"Why not, if I am satisfied?" asked Garnache. "Mine is the longer reach; thus matters will stand equal."

"Equal?" roared Gaubert. "Your longer reach is an advantage that you had from God, his longer sword is one he had from an armourer. Is that equality?"

"He may have my sword, and I'll take his," cut in the Italian, also showing impatience. "I too am in haste."

"In haste to die, then," snapped Gaubert.

"Monsieur, this is not seemly," Courthon reproved him.

"You shall teach me manners when we engage," snapped the hawk-faced gentleman.

"Sirs, sirs," Garnache implored them, "are we to waste the day in words? Monsieur Gaubert, there are several gentlemen yonder wearing swords; I make no doubt that you will find one whose blade is of the same length as your own, sufficiently obliging to lend it to Monsieur Sanguinetti."

"That is an office that my friend can do for me," interposed Sanguinetti, and thereupon Courthon departed, to return presently with a borrowed weapon of the proper length.

At last it seemed that they might proceed with the business upon which they were come; but Garnache was wrong in so supposing. A discussion now arose between Gaubert and Courthon as to the choice of spot. The turf was drenched and slippery, and for all that they moved from place to place testing the ground, their principals following, nowhere could they find the conditions sufficiently improved

to decide upon engaging. To Garnache the utility of this was apparent from the first. If these gentlemen had thought to avoid slippery ground, they should have elected to appoint the meeting elsewhere. But having chosen the Champs aux Capuchins, it was idle to expect that one stretch of turf would prove firmer than another.

Wearied at last by this delay, he gave expression to his thoughts.

"You are quite right, monsieur," said Courthon. "But your second is over-fastidious. It would simplify matters so much if you would remove your boots."

"Look you, sirs," said Garnache, taking a firm stand, "I will engage in my boots and on this very spot or not at all. I have told you that I am in haste. As for the slipperiness of the ground, my opponent will run no greater risks than I. I am not the only impatient one. The spectators are beginning to jeer at us. We shall have every scullion in Grenoble presently saying that we are afraid of one another. Besides which, sirs, I think I am taking cold."

"I am quite of monsieur's mind, myself," drawled Sanguinetti.

"You hear, sir," exclaimed Courthon, turning to Gaubert. "You can scarce persist in finding objections now."

"Why, since all are satisfied, so be it," said Gaubert, with a shrug. "I sought to do the best for my principal. As it is, I wash my hands of all responsibility, and by all means let us engage, sirs."

They disposed themselves accordingly, Gaubert engaging Courthon, on Garnache's right hand, and Garnache himself falling on guard to receive the attack of Sanguinetti. The jeers and murmurs that had been rising from the ever-growing crowd that swarmed about the outskirts of the place fell silent as the clatter of meeting swords rang out at last. And then, scarce were they engaged when a voice arose, calling angrily:

"Hold, Sanguinetti! Wait!"

A big, broad-shouldered man, in a suit of homespun and a featherless hat, thrust his way rudely through the crowd and broke into the space within the belt of trees. The combatants had fallen apart at this commanding cry, and the newcomer now dashed forward, flushed and out of breath as if with running.

"Vertudieu! Sanguinetti," he swore, and his manner was half-angry, half-bantering; "do you call this friendship?"

"My dear Francois" returned the foreigner, "you arrive most inopportunately."

"And is that all the greeting you have for me?"

Looking more closely, Garnache thought that he recognized in him one of Sanguinetti's companions of yesternight.

"But do you not see that I am engaged?"

"Ay; and that is my grievance that you should be engaged upon such an affair, and that I should have no share in it. It is to treat me like a lackey, and have the right to feel offended. Enfin! It seems I am not come too late."

Garnache cut in. He saw the drift of the fellow's intentions, and he was not minded to submit to fresh delays; already more than half an hour was sped since he had left the Sucking Calf. He put it plainly to them that more than enough delay had there been already and he begged the newcomer to stand aside and allow them to terminate the business on which they were met. But Monsieur Francois—as Sanguinetti had called him—would not hear of it. He proved, indeed, a very testy fellow, and he had, moreover, the support of the others, including even Monsieur Gaubert.

"Let me implore you not to spoil sport, sir," the latter begged Garnache. "I have a friend at the inn who would never forgive me if I permitted him to miss such a morning's diversion as this gentleman is willing to afford him. Suffer me to go for him."

"Look you, sir," answered Garnache sharply, "however you may view this meeting, it is not with me an affair of jest or sport. I am in a quarrel that has been forced upon me, and—"

"Surely not, sir," Courthon interrupted sweetly. "You forget that you rolled Monsieur Sanguinetti in the mud. That is hardly to have a quarrel forced upon you."

Garnache bit his lip to the blood in his vexation.

"However the quarrel may have originated," said Francois, with a great laugh, "I swear that it goes not forward until I am accommodated, too."

"You had better accede, monsieur," murmured Gaubert. "I shall not be gone five minutes, and it will save time in the end."

"Oh, very well," cried poor Garnache in his despair. "Anything to save time; anything! In God's name fetch your friend, and I hope you and he and every man here will get his fill of fighting for once."

Gaubert departed on his errand, and there were fresh murmurs in the mob until the reason of his going was understood. Five minutes sped; ten minutes, and yet he returned not. Grouped together were Sanguinetti and his two friends, in easy, whispered talk. At a little distance from them, Garnache paced up and down to keep himself warm. He had thrown his cloak over his shoulders again, and with sword tucked under arm and head thrust forward, he stamped backwards and forwards, the very picture of ill-humour. Fifteen minutes passed; twelve o'clock boomed from the Church of Saint Francois d'Assisi and still Monsieur Gaubert returned not. Garnache

stood still a moment, in angry thought. This must not go on. There must be an end, and at once. The tastes and inclinations of brawlers were no concern of his. He had business of State—however unworthy—to dispatch. He turned, intending to demand of Monsieur Sanguinetti that they should engage at once and be done, when suddenly a fellow roughly dressed, with dirty face and a shock head of fair hair, pushed his way through the throng and advanced towards Monsieur Sanguinetti and his friends. Garnache checked in his movement to look at the fellow, for he recognized in him the ostler of the Auberge de France: He spoke at that moment, and Garnache overheard the words he uttered.

"Monsieur Sanguinetti," said he, addressing that gentleman, "my master sends to inquire if you shall want the carriage you ordered for to-day. It has been standing for an hour at the door of the Auberge de France, awaiting you, and if you don't want it—"

"Standing where?" asked Sanguinetti harshly.

"At the door of the Auberge de France."

"Peste, fool!" cried the foreigner, "why is it there, when I bade it be sent to the Sucking Calf?"

"I don't know, sir. I know no more than Monsieur l'Hote told me."

"Now, a plague on Monsieur l'Hote," swore Sanguinetti, and in that moment his eye fell upon Garnache, standing there, attentive. At sight of the Parisian he seemed lost in confusion. He dropped his glance and appeared on the point of turning aside. Then to the ostler: "I shall want the carriage, and I shall come for it anon. Carry that message to your master." And with that he turned and advanced to Garnache. His whilom arrogance was all fallen from him; he wore instead an air of extreme contrition.

"Monsieur, what shall I say to you?" he asked in a voice that was

rather small. "It seems there has been an error. I am deeply grieved, believe me—"

"Say no more, I beg," cried Garnache, immensely relieved that at last there should be a conclusion to an affair which had threatened to be interminable. "Let me but express my regrets for the treatment you received at my hands."

"I accept your expressions, and I admire their generosity," returned the other as courteous now as subservient, indeed, in his courtesy—as he had been erstwhile fierce and intractable. "As for the treatment I received, I confess that my mistake and my opinionativeness deserved it me. I deplore to deprive these gentlemen of the entertainment to which they were looking forward, but unless you should prove of an excessive amiability I am afraid they must suffer with me the consequences of my error."

Garnache assured him very briefly, and none too politely that he did not intend to prove of any excessive amiability. He spoke whilst struggling into his doublet. He felt that he could cheerfully have caned the fellow for the inconvenience he had caused him, and yet he realized that he had other more pressing matters to attend to. He sheathed his sword, took up his cloak and hat, made those gentlemen the compliments that became the occasion, in terms a trifle more brief, perhaps, than were usual, and, still wondering why Monsieur de Gaubert had not yet returned, he stalked briskly away. Followed by the booings of the disappointed crowd, he set out for the Sucking Calf at a sharp pace, taking the shorter way behind the Church and across the graveyard of Saint Francois.

CHAPTER VIII. THE CLOSING OF THE TRAP

Upon leaving the Champs aux Capuchins, hawk-faced Monsieur Gaubert had run every foot of the way to the Sucking Calf, and he had arrived there within some five minutes, out of breath and wearing every appearance of distress—of a distress rather greater than his haste to find his friend should warrant.

At the door of the inn he found the carriage still waiting; the post-boy, however, was in the porch, leaning in talk with one of the drawers. The troopers sat their horses in stolid patience, keeping guard, and awaiting, as they had been bidden, the return of Monsieur de Garnache. Rabecque, very watchful, lounged in the doorway, betraying in his air none of the anxiety and impatience with which he looked for his master.

At sight of Monsieur Gaubert, running so breathlessly, he started forward, wondering and uneasy. Across the street, from the Palais Seneschal, came at that same moment Monsieur de Tressan with rolling gait. He reached the door of the inn together with Monsieur Gaubert.

Full of evil forebodings, Rabecque hailed the runner.

"What has happened?" he cried. "Where is Monsieur de Garnache?"

Gaubert came to a staggering halt; he groaned and wrung his hands.

"Killed!" he panted, rocking himself in a passion of distress. "He has been butchered! Oh! it was horrible!"

Rabecque gripped him by the shoulder, and steadied him with a hand that hurt. "What do you say?" he gasped, his face white to the lips.

Tressan halted, too, and turned upon Gaubert, a look of incredulity in his fat countenance. "Who has been killed?" he asked. "Not Monsieur de Garnache?"

"Helas! yes," groaned the other. "It was a snare, a guet-apens to which they led us. Four of them set upon us in the Champs aux Capuchins. As long as he lived, I stood beside him. But seeing him fallen, I come for help."

"My God!" sobbed Rabecque, and loosed his grasp of Monsieur Gaubert's shoulder.

"Who did it?" inquired Tressan, and his voice rumbled fiercely.

"I know not who they were. The man who picked the quarrel with Monsieur de Garnache called himself Sanguinetti. There is a riot down there at present. There was a crowd to witness the combat, and they have fallen to fighting among themselves. Would to Heaven they had stirred in time to save that poor gentleman from being murdered."

"A riot, did you say?" cried Tressan, the official seeming to awaken in him.

"Aye," answered the other indifferently; "they are cutting one another's throats."

"But... But... Are you sure that he is dead, monsieur?" inquired Rabecque; and his tone was one that implored contradiction.

Gaubert looked and paused, seeming to give the matter a

second's thought. "I saw him fall," said he. "It may be that he was no more than wounded."

"And you left him there?" roared the servant. "You left him there?"

Gaubert shrugged his shoulders. "What could I do against four? Besides, the crowd was interfering already, and it seemed best to me to come for help. These soldiers, now—"

"Aye," cut in Tressan, and he turned about and called the sergeant. "This becomes my affair." And he announced his quality to Monsieur Gaubert. "I am the Lord Seneschal of Dauphiny."

"I am fortunate in finding you," returned Gaubert, and bowed. "I could place the matter in no better hand."

But Tressan, without heeding him, was already ordering the sergeant to ride hard with his troopers for the Champs aux Capuchins. Rabecque, however, thrust himself suddenly forward.

"Not so, Monsieur le Seneschal," he interposed in fresh alarm, and mindful of his charge. "These men are here to guard Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. Let them remain. I will go to Monsieur de Garnache."

The Seneschal stared at him with contemptuously pouting underlip. "You will go?" said he. "And what can you do alone? Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Monsieur de Garnache's servant."

"A lackey? Ah!" And Tressan turned aside and resumed his orders as if Rabecque did not exist or had never spoken. "To the Champs aux Capuchins!" said he. "At the gallop, Pommier! I will send others after you."

The sergeant rose in his stirrups and growled an order. The troopers wheeled about; another order, and they were off, their

cantering hoofs thundering down the narrow street.

Rabecque clutched at the Lord Seneschal's arm.

"Stop them, monsieur!" he almost screamed in his excitement. "Stop them! There is some snare, some trick in this."

"Stop them?" quoth the Seneschal. "Are you mad?" He shook off Rabecque's detaining hand, and left him, to cross the street again with ponderous and sluggish haste, no doubt to carry out his purpose of sending more troopers to the scene of the disturbance.

Rabecque swore angrily and bitterly, and his vexation had two entirely separate sources. On the one hand his anxiety and affection for his master urged him to run at once to his assistance, whilst Tressan's removal of the troopers rendered it impossible for him to leave Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye unguarded—though what he should do with her if Garnache came not back at all, he did not at this stage pause to consider. On the other hand, an instinctive and growing suspicion of this Monsieur Gaubert—who was now entering the inn—inspired him with the opinion that the fat Seneschal had been duped by a wild tale to send the troopers from the spot where they might presently become very necessary.

Full of fears, anxiety, and mistrust, it was a very dispirited Rabecque that now slowly followed Monsieur Gaubert into the inn. But as he set his foot across the threshold of the common-room, a sight met his eyes that brought him to a momentary standstill, and turned to certainty all his rising suspicions. He found it tenanted by a half-dozen fellows of very rude aspect, all armed and bearing an odd resemblance in air and accoutrements to the braves he had seen at Condillac the day before. As to how they came there, he could only surmise that they had entered through the stable-yard, as otherwise he must have observed their approach. They were grouped now at the other end of the long, low chamber, by the door leading to the

interior of the inn. A few paces distant the landlord watched them with uneasy eyes.

But what dismayed Garnache's servant most of all was to see the man who called himself Gaubert standing in talk with a slender, handsome youth, magnificently arrayed, in whom he recognized Marius de Condillac.

Rabecque checked in his advance, and caught in that moment from Marius the words: "Let her be told that it is Monsieur de Garnache wishes her to descend."

At that Rabecque stepped towards them, very purposeful of mien. Gaubert turned at his approach, and smiled. Marius looked up quickly; then made a sign to the men. Instantly two of them went out by the door they guarded, and ere it swung back again Rabecque saw that they were making for the stairs. The remaining four ranged themselves shoulder to shoulder across the doorway, plainly with intent to bar the way. Gaubert, followed immediately by Marius, stepped aside and approached the landlord with arms akimbo and a truculent smile on his pale hawk face. What he and Marius said, Rabecque could not make out, but he distinctly heard the landlord's answer delivered with a respectful bow to Marius:

"Bien, Monsieur de Condillac. I would not interfere in your concerns—not for the world. I will be blind and deaf."

Marius acknowledged the servile protestation by a sneer, and Rabecque, stirring at last, went forward boldly towards the doorway and its ugly, human barrier.

"By your leave, sirs," said he—and he made to thrust one of them aside.

"You cannot pass this way, sir," he was answered, respectfully but firmly.

Rabecque stood still, clenching and unclenching his hands and quivering with anger. It was in that moment that he most fervently cursed Tressan and his stupid meddling. Had the troopers still been there, they could have made short work of these tatter-demalions. As it was, and with Monsieur de Garnache dead, or at least absent, everything seemed at an end. He might have contended that, his master being slain, it was no great matter what he did, for in the end the Condillacs must surely have their way with Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. But he never paused to think of that just then. His sense of trust was strong; his duty to his master plain. He stepped back, and drew his sword.

"Let me pass!" he roared. But at the same instant there came the soft slither of another weapon drawn, and Rabecque was forced to turn to meet the onslaught of Monsieur Gaubert.

"You dirty traitor," cried the angry lackey, and that was all they left him breath to say. Strong arms gripped him from behind. The sword was wrenched from his hand. He was flung down heavily, and pinned prone in a corner by one of those bullies who knelt on his spine. And then the door opened again, and poor Rabecque groaned in impotent anguish to behold Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye pause white-faced and wide-eyed on, the threshold at sight of Monsieur de Condillac bowing low before her.

She stood there a moment between the two ruffians who had been sent to fetch her, and her eyes travelling round that room discovered Rabecque in his undignified and half-strangled condition.

"Where... Where is Monsieur de Garnache?" she faltered.

"He is where all those who cross the will of Condillac must sooner or later find themselves," said Marius airily. "He is... disposed of."

"Do you mean that he is dead?" she cried.

"I think it very probable by now," he smiled. "So you see, mademoiselle, since the guardian the Queen appointed you has... deserted you, you would do well to return to my mother's roof. Let me assure you that we shall very gladly welcome your return. We blame none but Garnache for your departure, and he has paid for the brutality of his abduction of you."

She turned in despair from that mocking gentleman, and attempted to make appeal to the landlord, as though he could help her who could not help himself.

"Monsieur l'Hôte—" she began, but Marius cut in sharply.

"Take her out that way," he said, and pointed back down the passage by the stairs. "To the coach. Make haste."

She sought to resist them now; but they dragged her back, and there was a rush of the others following through the doorway, the rear being brought up by Gaubert.

"Follow presently," was his parting command to the man who still knelt upon Rabecque, and with that he vanished too.

Their steps died away in the passage; a door banged in the distance. There followed a silence, disturbed only by the sound of Rabecque's laboured breathing; then came a stir outside the door of the inn; some one shouted an order. There was a movement of hoofs, a creak and crunch of wheels, and presently the rumble of a heavy carriage being driven rapidly away. But too well did Rabecque surmise what had taken place.

The ruffian released him at last, and, leaping to his feet, was gone before Rabecque could rise. Once up, however, the lackey darted to the door. In the distance he saw his late assailant running hard; the coach had disappeared. He turned, and his smouldering eye fell upon the landlord.

"O pig!" he apostrophized him, snarling at him to vent some of his pent-up rage. "O cowardly pig."

"What would you?" expostulated the frightened taverner. "They had cut my throat if I resisted them."

Rabecque poured abuse upon him, until for very lack of words he was forced to cease, then, with a final bark of contempt, he went to recover his sword, which had been flung into a corner of the room. He was stooping in the act, when a quick step rang behind him on the threshold, an angry voice harsh and metallic pronounced his name:

"Rebecque!"

The sword clattered from Rabecque's hand suddenly gone nerveless—nerveless with sheer joy, all else forgotten in the perception that there, safe and sound, stood his beloved master.

"Monsieur!" he cried, and the tears welled up to the rough servant's eyes. "Monsieur!" he cried again, and then with the tears streaming down his cheeks, sallow and wrinkled as parchment, "Oh, thank God!" he blubbered. "Thank God!"

"For what?" asked Garnache, coming forward, a scowl like a thunder-cloud upon his brow. "Where is the coach, where the troopers? Where is mademoiselle? Answer me!"

He caught Rabecque's wrist in a grip that threatened to snap it. His face was livid, his eyes aflame.

"They—they—" stammered Rabecque. He had not the courage to tell the thing that had happened. He feared Garnache would strike him dead.

And then out of his terror he gathered an odd daring. He spoke to Garnache as never he had dreamt to speak to him, and it may well be

that by his tone and by what he said he saved his life just then.

"You fool," he cried to him. "I told you to be on your guard. I warned you to go warily. But you would not heed me. You know better than Rabecque. You would have your way. You must go a-brawling. And they duped you, they fooled you to the very top of their bent, monsieur."

Garnache dropped the servant's hand and stood back a pace. That counter-blast of passion and that plain speaking from a quarter so unexpected served, in part at least, to sober him. He understood the thing that had happened, the thing that already he suspected must have happened; but he understood too that he alone was to blame for it—he and his cursed temper.

"Who—who fooled me?" he stammered.

"Gaubert—the fellow that calls himself Gaubert. He and his friends. They fooled you away. Then Gaubert returned with a tale that you had been killed and that there was a disturbance in the Champs aux Capuchins. Monsieur de Tressan was here, as ill-luck would have it, and Gaubert implored him to send soldiers thither to quell the riot. He dispatched the escort. I sought in vain to stay them. He would not listen to me. The troopers went, and then Monsieur Gaubert entered the inn, to join Monsieur de Condillac and six of his braves who were waiting there. They overpowered me, and carried mademoiselle off in the coach. I did what I could, but—"

"How long have they been gone?" Garnache interrupted him to inquire.

"But few minutes before you came."

"It would be, then, the coach that passed me near the Porte de Savoie. We must go after them, Rabecque. I made a short cut across the graveyard of Saint Francis, or I must have met the escort. Oh,

perdition!" he cried, smiting his clenched right hand into his open left. "To have so much good work undone by a moment's unguardedness." Then abruptly he turned on his heels. "I am going to Monsieur de Tressan," said he over his shoulder, and went out.

As he reached the threshold of the porch, the escort rode up the street, returned at last. At sight of him the sergeant broke into a cry of surprise.

"At least you are safe, monsieur," he said. "We had heard that you were dead, and I feared it must be so, for all that the rest of the story that was told us was clearly part of a very foolish jest."

"Jest? It was no jest, Vertudieu!" said Garnache grimly. "You had best return to the Palais Seneschal. I have no further need of an escort," he added bitterly. "I shall require a larger force."

And he stepped out into the rain, which had begun again a few minutes earlier, and was now falling in a steady downpour.

CHAPTER IX. THE SENESCHAL'S ADVICE

Straight across the Palais Seneschal went Garnache. And sorely though his temper might already have been tried that day, tempestuously though it had been vented, there were fresh trials in store for him, fresh storms for Tressan.

"May I ask, Monsieur le Seneschal," he demanded arrogantly, "to what end it was that you permitted yourself to order from its post the escort you had placed under my command?"

"To what end?" returned the Seneschal, between sorrow and indignation. "Why, to the end that it might succour you if still in time. I had heard that if not dead already, you were in danger of your life."

The answer was one that disarmed Garnache, in spite of his mistrust of Tressan, and followed as it now was by the Seneschal's profuse expressions of joy at seeing Garnache safe and well, it left him clearly unable to pursue the subject of his grievance in this particular connection. Instead, he passed on to entertain Tressan with the recital of the thing that had been done; and in reciting it his anger revived again, nor did the outward signs of sympathetic perturbation which the Seneschal thought it judicious to display do aught to mollify his feelings.

"And now, monsieur," he concluded, "there remains but one course to be pursued—to return in force, and compel them at the sword-point to surrender me mademoiselle. That accomplished, I shall arrest the Dowager and her son and every jackanapes within that castle. Her men can lie in Grenoble gaol to be dealt with by yourself for

supporting her in an attempt to resist the Queen's authority. Madame and her son shall go with me to Paris to answer there for their offence."

The Seneschal looked grave. He thoughtfully combed his beard with his forefinger, and his little eyes peered a shade fearfully at Garnache through his horn-rimmed spectacles—Garnache had found him at his never-failing pretence of work.

"Why, yes," he agreed, speaking slowly, "that way lies your duty."

"I rejoice, monsieur, to hear you say so. For I shall need your aid."

"My aid?" The Seneschal's face assumed a startled look.

"I shall require of you the necessary force to reduce that garrison."

The Seneschal blew out his cheeks almost to bursting point, then wagged his head and smiled wistfully.

"And where," he asked, "am I to find such a force?"

"You have upwards of ten score men in quarters at Grenoble."

"If I had those men—which I have not—what, think you, could they do against a fortress such as Condillac? Monsieur deludes himself. If they resist, you'll need ten times that number to bring them to their senses. They are well victualled; they have an excellent water-supply. My friend, they would just draw up the bridge, and laugh at you and your soldiers from the ramparts."

Garnache looked at him from under lowering brows. But for all his mistrust of the man—a mistrust most excellently founded—he was forced to confess that there was wisdom in what Tressan said.

"I'll sit down and besiege them if need be," he announced.

Again the Seneschal wagged his head. "You would have to be

prepared to spend your winter there in that case, and it can be cold in the valley of Isere. Their garrison is small—some twenty men at most; but it is sufficient for their defence, and not too many mouths to feed. No, no, monsieur, if you would win your way by force you must count upon more than ten score men."

And now a flash of inspiration helped Tressan. It was his aim, as we know, to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. Break with Madame de Condillac his foolish hopeful heart would not permit him. Break with this man, who personified authority and the King, he dared not. He had sought—and it had given him much to do—to steer a middle course, serving the Dowager and appearing not to withstand the Parisian. Now it almost seemed to him as if he were come to an impasse beyond which he could no longer pursue that course, but must halt and declare his side. But the notion that now occurred to him helped him to win through this difficulty. For Madame de Condillac's schemes he cared not a jot; whether they came safe to harbour or suffered shipwreck on the way was all one to him; whether Valerie de La Vauvraye married Marius de Condillac or the meanest cobbler in Grenoble was, similarly, a matter that never disturbed his mind. He would not even be concerned if he, himself, were to help the Dowager's schemes to frustration, so long as she were to remain in ignorance of his defection, so long as outwardly he were to appear faithful to her interests.

"Monsieur," said he gravely, "the only course that promises you success is to return to Paris, and, raising sufficient men, with guns and other modern siege appliances such as we possess not here, come back and batter down the walls of Condillac."

There the Seneschal spoke good sense. Garnache realized it, so much so that he almost began to doubt whether he had not done the man an injustice in believing him allied to the other party. But, however fully he might perceive the wisdom of the advice, such a step

was one that must wound his pride, must be an acknowledgment that his own resources, upon which the Queen had relied when she sent him single-handed to deal with this situation, had proved insufficient.

He took a turn in the apartment without answering, tugging at his mustachios and pondering the situation what time the Seneschal furtively watched him in the candle-light. At last he came abruptly to a standstill by the Seneschal's writing-table, immediately opposite Tressan. His hand fell to his side, his eyes took on a look of determination.

"As a last resource your good advice may guide me, Monsieur le Seneschal," said he. "But first I'll see what can be done with such men as you have here."

"But I have no men," answered Tressan, dismayed to see the failure of his effort.

Garnache stared at him in an unbelief that was fast growing to suspicion. "No men?" he echoed dully. "No men?"

"I might muster a score—no more than that."

"But, monsieur, it is within my knowledge that you have at least two hundred. I saw at least some fifty drawn up in the courtyard below here yesterday morning."

"I had them, monsieur," the Seneschal made haste to cry, his hands upheld, his body leaning forward over his table. "I had them. But, unfortunately, certain disturbances in the neighbourhood of Montelimar have forced me to part with them. They were on the point of setting out when you saw them."

Garnache looked at him a moment without speaking. Then, sharply:

"They must be recalled, monsieur," said he.

And now the Seneschal took refuge in a fine pretence of indignation.

"Recalled?" he cried, and besides indignation there was some horror in his voice. "Recalled? And for what? That they may assist you in obtaining charge of a wretched girl who is so headstrong as to wish to marry other than her guardians have determined. A pretty affair that, as God's my life! And for the adjustment of such a family dispute as this, a whole province is to go to ruin, a conflagration of rebellion is to spread unquenched? On my soul, sir, I begin to think that this mission of yours has served to turn your head. You begin to see it out of all proportion to its size."

"Monsieur, it may have turned my head, or it may not; but I shall not be amazed if in the end it be the means of losing you yours. Tell me now: What is the disturbance you speak of in Montelimar?" That was a question all Tressan's ingenuity could not answer.

"What affair is it of yours?" he demanded. "Are you Seneschal of Dauphiny, or am I? If I tell you that there is a disturbance, let that suffice. In quelling it I do but attend to my own business. Do you attend to yours—which seems to be that of meddling in women's matters."

This was too much. There was such odious truth in it that the iron sank deep into Garnache's soul. The very reflection that such a business should indeed be his, was of itself enough to put him in a rage, without having it cast in his teeth as Tressan had none too delicately done.

He stormed and raged; he waved his arms and thumped the table, and talked of cutting men to ribbons—among which men no doubt he counted my Lord the Seneschal of Dauphiny. But from the storm of fierce invective, of threats and promises with which he filled the air, the Seneschal gathered with satisfaction the one clear statement that he would take his advice.

"I'll do as you say," Garnache had ended. "I'll get me back to Paris as fast as horse can carry me. When I return woe betide Condillac! And I shall send my emissaries into the district of Montelimar to inquire into these disturbances you tell of. Woe betide you if they find the country quiet. You shall pay a heavy price for having dispatched your soldiers thither to the end that they might not be here to further the Queen's business."

With that he caught up his rain-sodden hat, flung it on his head, and stalked out of the room, and, so, out of the Palace.

He left Grenoble next morning, and it was a very tame and crestfallen Garnache who quitted the Auberge du Veau qui Tete and rode out of the town to take the road to Paris. How they would laugh at him at the Luxembourg! Not even an affair of this kind was he fit to carry through; not even as a meddler in women's matters as Tressan had called him—could he achieve success. Rabecque, reflecting his master's mood—as becomes a good lackey—rode silent and gloomy a pace or two in the rear.

By noon they had reached Voiron, and here, at a quiet hostelry, they descended to pause awhile for rest and refreshment. It was a chill, blustering day, and although the rain held off, the heavens were black with the promise of more to come. There was a fire burning in the general-room of the hostelry, and Garnache went to warm him at its cheerful blaze. Moodily he stood there, one hand on the high mantel shelf, one foot upon an andiron, his eyes upon the flames.

He was disconsolately considering his position; considering how utterly, how irrevocably he had failed; pondering the gibes he would have to stomach on his return to Paris, the ridicule it would incumb him to live down. It had been a fine thing to breathe fire and blood and vengeance to Tressan yesterday, to tell him of the great deeds he would perform on his return. It was odds he never would return. They would send another in his place, if indeed they sent at all. For, after

all, before he could reach Paris and the force required be in Dauphiny, a fortnight must elapse, let them travel never so quickly. By that time they must be singularly sluggish at Condillac if they did not so contrive that no aid that came should come in time for mademoiselle, now that they were warned that the Queen was stirring in the matter.

Oh! he had blundered it all most cursedly. Had he but kept his temper yesterday at Grenoble; had he but had the wit to thwart their plans, by preserving an unruffled front to insult, he might have won through and carried mademoiselle out of their hands. As it was—! he let his arms fall to his sides in his miserable despair.

"Your wine, monsieur," said Rabecque at his elbow. He turned, and took the cup of mulled drink from his servant. The beverage warmed him in body; but it would need a butt of it to thaw the misery from his soul.

"Rabecque," he said with a pathetic grimness, "I think I am the most cursed blunderer that ever was entrusted with an errand."

The thing so obsessed his mind that he must speak of it, if it be only to his lackey. Rabecque's sharp face assumed a chastened look. He sighed most dutifully. He sought for words of consolation. At last:

"At least, monsieur has made them fear him up there at Condillac," said he.

"Fear me?" laughed Garnache. "Pish! Deride me, you would say."

"Fear you, I repeat, monsieur. Else why are they at such pains to strengthen the garrison?"

"Eh?" he questioned. But his tone was not greatly interested. "Are they doing that? Are they strengthening it? How know you?"

"I had it from the ostler at the Veau qui Tete that a certain Captain Fortunio—an Italian soldier of fortune who commands the men at Condillac—was at the Auberge de France last night, offering wine to whomsoever would drink with him, and paying for it out of Madame la Marquise's purse. To such as accepted his hospitality he talked of the glory of a military career, particularly a free-lance's; and to those who showed interest in what he said he offered a pike in his company."

"Enrolled he many, did you learn?"

"Not one, monsieur, the ostler told me; and it seems he spent the evening watching him weave his spider's web. But the flies were over-wary. They knew whence he came; they knew the business for which he desired to enrol them—for a rumour had gone round that Condillac was in rebellion against the Queen's commands—and there were none so desperate at the Auberge de France as to risk their necks by enlisting, no matter what the wage he offered."

Garnache shrugged his shoulders. "No matter," said he. "Get me another cup of wine." But as Rabecque turned away to obey him there came a sudden gleam into the eye of Monsieur de Garnache which lightened the depression of his countenance.

CHAPTER X. THE RECRUIT

In the great hall of the Chateau de Condillac sat the Dowager, her son, and the Lord Seneschal, in conference.

It was early in the afternoon of the last Thursday in October, exactly a week since Monsieur de Garnache all but broken-hearted at the failure of his mission—had departed from Grenoble. They had dined, and the table was still strewn with vessels and the fragments of their meal, for the cloth had not yet been raised. But the three of them had left the board—the Seneschal with all that reluctance with which he was wont to part company with the table, no matter how perturbed in spirit he might to—and they had come to group themselves about the great open fireplace.

A shaft of pale October sunshine entering through the gules of an escutcheon on the mullioned windows struck a scarlet light into silver and glass upon the forsaken board.

Madame was speaking. She was repeating words that she had uttered at least twenty times a day during the past week.

"It was a madness to let that fellow go. Had we but put him and his servant out of the way, we should be able now to sleep tranquil in our beds. I know their ways at Court. They might have marvelled a little at first that he should tarry so long upon his errand, that he should send them no word of its progress; but presently, seeing him no more, he would little by little have been forgotten, and with him the affair in which the Queen has been so cursedly ready to meddle.

"As it is, the fellow will go back hot with the outrage put upon him; there will be some fine talk of it in Paris; it will be spoken of as

treason, as defiance of the King's Majesty, as rebellion. The Parliament may be moved to make outlaws of us, and the end of it all—who shall foresee?"

"It is a long distance from Condillac to Paris, madame," said her son, with a shrug.

"And you will find them none so ready to send soldiers all this way, Marquise," the Seneschal comforted her.

"Bah! You make too sure of your security. You make too sure of what they will do, what leave undone. Time will show, my friends; and, mor-dieu! I am much at fault if you come not both to echo my regret that we did not dispose of Monsieur de Garnache and his lackey when we had them in our power."

Her eye fell with sinister promise upon Tressan, who shivered slightly and spread his hands to the blaze, as though his shiver had been of cold. But Marius did not so readily grow afraid.

"Madame," he said, "at the worst we can shut our gates and fling defiance at them. We are well-manned, and Fortunio is seeking fresh recruits."

"Seeking them, yes," she sneered. "For a week has the fellow been spending money like water, addling the brains of half Grenoble with the best wine at the Auberge de France, yet not a single recruit has come in, so far."

Marius laughed. "Your pessimism leads you into rash conclusions," he cried. "You are wrong. One recruit has come in."

"One!" she echoed. "A thousand devils! A brave number that! A fine return for the river of wine with which we have washed the stomachs of Grenoble."

"Still, it is a beginning," ventured the Seneschal.

"Aye, and, no doubt, an ending," she flashed back at him. "And what manner of fool may this one be, whose fortunes were so desperate that he could throw them in with ours?"

"He is an Italian—a Piedmontese who has tramped across Savoy and was on his way to Paris to make his fortune, when Fortunio caught him and made it clear to him that his fortune was made for him at Condillac. He is a lusty, stalwart fellow, speaking no word of French, who was drawn to Fortunio by discovering in him a fellow-countryman."

Mockery flashed from the Dowager's beautiful eyes.

"In that you have the reason of his enrolling himself. He knew no word of French, poor devil, so could not learn how rash his venture was. Could we find more such men as this one it might be well. But where shall we find them? Pish! my dear Marius, matters are little mended, nor ever will be, for the mistake we made in allowing Garnache to go his ways."

"Madame;" again ventured Tressan, "I think that you want for hopefulness."

"At least, I do not want for courage, Monsieur le Comte," she answered him; "and I promise you that while I live—to handle a sword if need be—no Paris men shall set foot in Condillac."

"Aye," grumbled Marius, "you can contemplate that, and it is all you do contemplate. You will not see, madame that our position is far from desperate; that, after all, there may be no need to resist the King. It is three months since we had news of Florimond. Much may happen in three months when a man is warring. It may well be that he is dead."

"I wish I knew he was—and damned," she snapped, with a tightening of her scarlet lips.

"Yes," agreed Marius, with a sigh, "that were an end to all our troubles."

"I'm none so sure. There is still mademoiselle, with her new-formed friends in Paris—may a pestilence blight them all! There are still the lands of La Vauvraye to lose. The only true end to our troubles as they stand at present lies in your marrying this headstrong baggage."

"That the step should be rendered impossible, you can but blame yourself," Marius reminded her.

"How so?" she cried, turning sharply upon him.

"Had you kept friends with the Church, had you paid tithes and saved us from this cursed Interdict, we should have no difficulty in getting hither a priest, and settling the matter out of hand, be Valerie willing or not."

She looked at him, scorn kindling in her glance. Then she swung round to appeal to Tressan.

"You hear him, Count," said she. "There is a lover for you! He would wed his mistress whether she love him or not—and he has sworn to me that he loves the girl."

"How else should the thing be done since she opposes it?" asked Marius, sulkily.

"How else? Do you ask me how else? God! Were I a man, and had I your shape and face, there is no woman in the world should withstand me if I set my heart on her. It is address you lack. You are clumsy as a lout where a woman is concerned. Were I in your place, I had taken her by storm three months ago, when first she came to us. I had carried her out of Condillac, out of France, over the border into Savoy, where there are no Interdicts to plague you, and there I would have married her."

Marius frowned darkly, but before he could speak, Tressan was insinuating a compliment to the Marquise.

"True, Marius," he said, with pursed lips. "Nature has been very good to you in that she has made you the very counterpart of your lady mother. You are as comely a gentleman as is to be found in France—or out of it."

"Pish!" snapped Marius, too angered by the reflection cast upon his address, to be flattered by their praises of his beauty. "It is an easy thing to talk; an easy thing to set up arguments when we consider but the half of a question. You forget, madame, that Valerie is betrothed to Florimond and that she clings faithfully to her betrothal."

"Vertudieu!" swore the Marquise, "and what is this betrothal, what this faithfulness? She has not seen her betrothed for three years. She was a child at the time of their fiancailles. Think you her faithfulness to him is the constancy of a woman to her lover? Go your ways, you foolish boy. It is but the constancy to a word, to the wishes of her father. Think you constancy that has no other base than that would stand between her and any man who—as you might do, had you the address—could make her love him?"

"I do say so," answered Marius firmly.

She smiled the pitying smile of one equipped with superior knowledge when confronted with an obstinate, uninformed mind.

"There is a droll arrogance about you, Marius," she told him, quietly. "You, a fledgling, would teach me, a woman, the ways of a woman's heart! It is a thing you may live to regret."

"As how?" he asked.

"Once already has mademoiselle contrived to corrupt one of our

men, and send him to Paris with a letter. Out of that has sprung our present trouble. Another time she may do better. When she shall have bribed another to assist her to escape; when she, herself, shall have made off to the shelter of the Queen-mother, perhaps you will regret that my counsel should have fallen upon barren ground."

"It is to prevent any such attempt that we have placed her under guard," said he. "You are forgetting that."

"Forgetting it? Not I. But what assurance have you that she will not bribe her guard?"

Marius laughed, rose, and pushed back his chair.

"Madame," said he, "you are back at your contemplation of the worst side of this affair; you are persisting in considering only how we may be thwarted. But set your mind at rest. Gilles is her sentinel. Every night he sleeps in her anteroom. He is Fortunio's most trusted man. She will not corrupt him."

The Dowager smiled pensively, her eyes upon the fire. Suddenly she raised them to his face. "Berthaud was none the less trusted. Yet, with no more than a promise of reward at some future time should she succeed in escaping from us, did she bribe him to carry her letter to the Queen. What happened to Berthaud that may not happen to Gilles?"

"You might change her sentry nightly," put in the Seneschal.

"Yes, if we knew whom we could trust; who would be above corruption. As it is"—she shrugged her shoulders "that would be but to afford her opportunities to bribe them one by one until they were all ready to act in concert."

"Why need she any sentinel at all?" asked Tressan, with some show of sense.

"To ward off possible traitors," she told him, and Marius smiled and wagged his head.

"Madame is never done foreseeing the worst, monsieur."

"Which shows my wisdom. The men in our garrison are mercenaries, all attached to us only because we pay them. They all know who she is and what her wealth."

"Pity you have not a man who is deaf and dumb," said Tressan, half in jest. But Marius looked up suddenly, his eyes serious.

"We have as good," said he. "There is the Italian knave Fortunio enrolled yesterday, as I have told you. He knows neither her wealth nor her identity; nor if he did could he enter into traffic with her, for he knows no French, and she no Italian."

The Dowager clapped her hands. "The very man!" she cried.

But Marius, either from sheer perverseness, or because he did not share her enthusiasm, made answer: "I have faith in Gilles."

"Yes," she mocked him, "and you had faith in Berthaud. Oh, if you have faith in Gilles, let him remain; let no more be said."

The obstinate boy took her advice, and shifted the subject, speaking to Tressan of some trivial business connected with the Seneschalship.

But madame, woman-like, returned to the matter whose abandoning she had herself suggested. Marius, for all his affected disdain of it, viewed it with a certain respect. And so in the end they sent for the recruit.

Fortunio—who was no other than the man Garnache had known as "Sanguinetti"—brought him, still clad in the clothes in which he had come. He was a tall, limber fellow, with a very swarthy skin and black,

oily-looking hair that fell in short ringlets about his ears and neck, and a black, drooping mustache which gave him a rather hang-dog look. There was a thick stubble of beard of several days' growth about his chin and face; his eyes were furtive in their glances, but of a deep blue that contrasted oddly with his blackness when he momentarily raised them.

He wore a tattered jerkin, and his legs, in default of stockings, were swathed in soiled bandages and cross-gartered from ankle to knee. He stood in a pair of wooden shoes, from one of which peeped forth some wisps of straw, introduced, no doubt, to make the footgear fit. He slouched and shuffled in his walk, and he was unspeakably dirty. Nevertheless, he was girt with a sword in a ragged scabbard hanging from a frayed and shabby belt of leather.

Madame scanned him with interest. The fastidious Marius eyed him with disgust. The Seneschal peered at him curiously through shortsighted eyes.

"I do not think I have ever seen a dirtier ruffian," said he.

"I like his nose," said madame quietly. "It is the nose of an intrepid man."

"It reminds me of Garnache's," laughed the Seneschal.

"You flatter the Parisian," commented Marius.

The mercenary, meanwhile, stood blandly smiling at the party, showing at least a fine array of teeth, and wearing the patient, attentive air of one who realizes himself to be under discussion, yet does not understand what is being said.

"A countryman of yours, Fortunio?" sneered Marius.

The captain, whose open, ingenuous countenance dissembled as villainous a heart as ever beat in the breast of any man, disowned the

compatriotism with a smile.

"Hardly, monsieur," said he. "'Battista' is a Piedmontese." Fortunio himself was a Venetian.

"Is he to be relied upon, think you?" asked madame. Fortunio shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands. It was not his habit to trust any man inordinately.

"He is an old soldier," said he. "He has trailed a pike in the Neapolitan wars. I have cross-questioned him, and found his answers bore out the truth of what he said."

"And what brings him to France?" asked Tressan. The captain smiled again, and there came again that expressive shrug of his. "A little over-ready with the steel," said he.

They told Fortunio that they proposed to place him sentry over mademoiselle instead of Gilles, as the Italian's absolute lack of French would ensure against corruption. The captain readily agreed with them. It would be a wise step. The Italian fingered his tattered hat, his eyes on the ground.

Suddenly madame spoke to him. She asked him for some account of himself and whence he came, using the Italian tongue, of which she had a passing knowledge. He followed her questions very attentively, at times with apparent difficulty, his eyes on her face, his head craned a little forward.

Now and then Fortunio had to intervene, to make plainer to this ignorant Piedmontese mind the Marquise's questions. His answers came in a deep, hoarse voice, slurred by the accent of Piedmont, and madame—her knowledge of Italian being imperfect—had frequently to have recourse to Fortunio to discover the meaning of what he said.

At last she dismissed the pair of them, bidding the captain see that

he was washed and more fittingly clothed.

An hour later, after the Seneschal had taken his departure to ride home to Grenoble, it was madame herself, accompanied by Marius and Fortunio, who conducted Battista—such was the name the Italian had given—to the apartments above, where mademoiselle was now confined practically a prisoner.

CHAPTER XI. VALERIE'S GAOLER

My child, said the Dowager, and her eyes dwelt on Valerie with a look of studied gentleness, "why will you not be reasonable?"

The constant reflection that Garnache was at large, making his way back to Paris to stir up vengeance for the outrage put upon him, was not without a certain chastening effect upon the Dowager. She had a way of saying that she had as good a stomach for a fight as any man in France, and a fight there should be if it came to it and Garnache should return to assail Condillac. Yet a certain pondering of the consequences, a certain counting of the cost—ordinarily unusual to her nature led her to have recourse to persuasion and to a gentleness no less unusual.

Valerie's eyes were raised to hers with a look that held more scorn than wonder. They were standing in the antechamber of Valerie's room. Yonder at his post lounged the recruit "Battista," looking a trifle cleaner than when first he had been presented to the Marquise, but still not clean enough for a lady's antechamber. He was leaning stolidly against the sill of the window, his eyes on the distant waters of the Isere, which shone a dull copper colour in the afterglow of the October sunset. His face was vacant, his eyes pensive, as he stood there undisturbed by the flow of a language he did not understand.

Fortunio and Marius had departed, and the Marquise—played upon by her unusual tremors—had remained behind for a last word with the obstinate girl.

"In what, madame," asked Valerie, "does my conduct fall short of

reasonableness?"

The Dowager made a movement of impatience. If at every step she were to be confronted by these questions, which had in them a savour of challenge, she was wasting time in remaining.

"You are unreasonable, in this foolish clinging to a promise given for you."

"Given by me, madame," the girl amended, knowing well to what promise the Dowager referred.

"Given by you, then; but given at an age when you could not understand the nature of it. They had no right to bind you so."

"If it is for any to question that right, it is for me," Valerie made answer, her eyes ever meeting the Dowager's unflinchingly. "And I am content to leave that right unquestioned. I am content to fill the promise given. In honour I could not do less."

"Ah! In honour!" The Dowager sighed. Then she came a step nearer, and her face grew sweetly wistful. "But your heart, child; what of your heart?"

"My heart concerns myself. I am the betrothed of Florimond—that is all that concerns the world and you. I respect and admire him more than any living man, and I shall be proud to become his wife when he returns, as his wife I shall become in spite of all that you and your son may do."

The Dowager laughed softly, as if to herself.

"And if I tell you that Florimond is dead?"

"When you give me proof of that, I shall believe it," the girl replied. The Marquise looked at her, her face manifesting no offence at the almost insulting words.

"And if I were to lay that proof before you?" she inquired, sadly almost.

Valerie's eyes opened a trifle wider, as if in apprehension. But her answer was prompt and her voice steady. "It still could have no effect upon my attitude towards your son."

"This is foolishness, Valerie—"

"In you it is, madame," the girl broke in; "a foolishness to think you can constrain a girl, compel her affections, command her love, by such means as you have employed towards me. You think that it predisposes me to be wooed, that it opens my heart to your son, to see myself gaoled that he may pay me his court."

"Gaoled, child? Who gaols you?" the Dowager cried, as if the most surprising utterance had fallen from Valerie's lips.

Mademoiselle smiled in sorrow and some scorn.

"Am I not gaoled, then?" she asked. "What call you this? What does that fellow there? He is to lie outside my door at nights to see that none holds communication with me. He is to go with me each morning to the garden, when, by your gracious charity I take the air. Sleeping and waking the man is ever within hearing of any word that I may utter—"

"But if he has no French!" the Dowager protested.

"To ensure, no doubt, against any attempt of mine to win him to my side, to induce him to aid me escape from this prison. Oh, madame, I tell you you do but waste time, and you punish me and harass yourself to little purpose. Had Marius been such a man as I might have felt it in my nature to love which Heaven forbid!—these means by which you have sought to bring that thing about could but have resulted in making me hate him as I do."

The Dowager's fears were banished from her mind at that, and with them went all thought of conciliating Valerie. Anger gleamed in her eyes; the set of her lips grew suddenly sneering and cruel, so that the beauty of her face but served to render it hateful the more.

"So that you hate him, ma mie?" a ripple of mockery on the current of her voice, "and he a man such as any girl in France might be proud to wed. Well, well, you are not to be constrained, you say." And the Marquise's laugh was menacing and unpleasant. "Be not so sure, mademoiselle. Be not so sure of that. It may well betide that you shall come to beg upon your knees for this alliance with a man whom you tell me that you hate. Be not so sure you cannot be constrained."

Their eyes met; both women were white to the lips, but it was curbed passion in the one, and deadly fear in the other; for what the Dowager's words left unsaid her eyes most eloquently conveyed. The girl shrank back, her hands clenched, her lip caught in her teeth.

"There is a God in heaven, madame," she reminded the Marquise.

"Aye—in heaven," laughed the Marquise, turning to depart. She paused by the door, which the Italian had sprung forward to open for her.

"Marius shall take the air with you in the morning if it is fine. Ponder meanwhile what I have said."

"Does this man remain here, madame?" inquired the girl, vainly seeking to render her voice steady.

"In the outer anteroom is his place: but as the key of this room is on his side of the door, he may enter here when he so pleases, or when he thinks that he has reason to. If the sight of him displeases you, you may lock yourself from it in your own chamber yonder."

The same she said in Italian to the man, who bowed impassively,

and followed the Dowager into the outer room, closing the door upon mademoiselle. It was a chamber almost bare of furniture, save for a table and chair which had been placed there, so that the gaoler might take his meals.

The man followed the Marquise across the bare floor, their steps resounding as they went, and he held the outer door for her.

Without another word she left him, and where he stood he could hear her steps as she tripped down the winding staircase of stone. At last the door of the courtyard closed with a bang, and the grating of a key announced to the mercenary that he and his charge were both imprisoned in that tower of the Chateau de Condillac.

Left alone in the anteroom, mademoiselle crossed to the window and dropped limply into a chair. Her face was still very white, her heart beating tumultuously, for the horrid threat that had been conveyed in the Dowager's words had brought her her first thrill of real fear since the beginning of this wooing-by-force three months ago, a wooing which had become more insistent and less like a wooing day by day, until it had culminated in her present helpless position.

She was a strong-souled, high-spirited girl, but tonight hope seemed extinguished in her breast. Florimond, too, seemed to have abandoned her. Either he had forgotten her, or he was dead, as the Dowager said. Which might be the true state of things she did not greatly care. The realization of how utterly she was in the power of Madame de Condillac and her son, and the sudden chance discovery of how unscrupulously that power might be wielded, filled her mind to the exclusion of all else.

By the window she sat, watching, without heeding them, the fading colours in the sky. She was abandoned to these monsters, and it seemed they would devour her. She could hope for no help from outside since they had as she believed—slain Monsieur de

Garnache. Her mind dwelt for a moment on that glimpse of rescue that had been hers a week ago, upon the few hours of liberty which she had enjoyed, but which only seemed now to increase the dark hopelessness of her imprisonment.

Again with the eyes of her mind she beheld that grim, stalwart figure, saw his great nose, his greying hair, his fierce mustachios and his stern, quick eyes. Again she heard the rasp of his metallic voice with its brisk derision. She saw him in the hall below, his foot upon the neck of that popinjay of Condillac daring them all to draw a breath, should he forbid it; again in fancy she rode on the withers of his horse at the gallop towards Grenoble. A sigh escaped her. Surely that was the first man who was indeed a man she had ever set eyes on since her father died. Had Garnache been spared, she would have felt courage and she would have hoped, for there was something about him that suggested energy and resource such as it is good to lean upon in times of stress. Again she heard that brisk, metallic voice: "Are you content, madame? Have you had fine deeds enough for one day?"

And then, breaking in upon her musings came the very voice of her day-dream, so suddenly, sounding so natural and lifelike that she almost screamed, so startled was she.

"Mademoiselle," it said, "I beg that you'll not utterly lose heart. I have come back to the thing Her Majesty bade me do, and I'll do it, in spite of that tigress and her cub."

She sat still as a statue, scarce breathing, her eyes fixed upon the violet sky. The voice had ceased, but still she sat on. Then it was slowly borne in upon her that that was no dream-voice, no trick of her overburdened mind. A voice, a living, actual voice had uttered those words in this room, here at her elbow.

She turned, and again she almost screamed; for there, just behind

her, his glittering eyes fixed upon her with singular intentness, stood the swarthy, black-haired Italian gaoler they had given her because he had no French.

He had come up so quietly behind her that she had not heard his approach, and he was leaning forward now, with an odd suggestion of crouching in his attitude, like a beast about to spring. Yet his gaze riveted hers as with a fascination. And so, while she looked, his lips moved, and from them, in that same voice of her dreams, came from this man who had no French, the words:

"Be not afraid, mademoiselle. I am that blunderer, Garnache, that unworthy fool whose temper ruined what chance of saving you he had a week ago."

She stared like one going mad.

"Garnache!" said she, in a husky whisper. "You Garnache?"

Yet the voice, she knew, was Garnache's and none other. It was a voice not easily mistaken. And now, as she looked and looked, she saw that the man's nose was Garnache's, though oddly stained, and those keen eyes, they were Garnache's too. But the hair that had been brown and flecked with grey was black; the reddish mustachios that had bristled like a mountain cat's were black, too, and they hung limp and hid from sight the fine lines of his mouth. A hideous stubble of unshorn beard defaced his chin and face, and altered its sharp outline; and the clear, healthy skin that she remembered was now a dirty brown.

Suddenly the face smiled, and it was a smile that reassured her and drove away the last doubt that she had. She was on her feet in an instant.

"Monsieur, monsieur," was all that she could say; but her longing was to fling her arms about the neck of this man, as she might have

flung them about the neck of a brother or a father, and sob out upon his shoulder the sudden relief and revulsion that his presence brought.

Garnache saw something of her agitation, and to relieve it he smiled and began to tell her the circumstances of his return and his presentation to Madame as a knave who had no French.

"Fortune was very good to me, mademoiselle," said he. "I had little hope that such a face as mine could be disguised, but I take no pride in what you see. It is the handiwork of Rabecque, the most ingenious lackey that ever served a foolish master. It helped me that having been ten years in Italy when I was younger, I acquired the language so well as to be able to impose even upon Fortunio. In that lay a circumstance which at once disarmed suspicion, and if I stay not so long as it shall take the dye to wear from my hair and beard and the staining from my face, I shall have little to fear."

"But, monsieur," she cried, "you have everything to fear!" And alarm grew in her eyes.

But he laughed again for answer. "I have faith in my luck, mademoiselle, and I think I am on the tide of it at present. I little hoped when I made my way into Condillac in this array that I should end, by virtue of my pretended ignorance of French, in being appointed gaoler to you. I had some ado to keep the joy from my eyes when I heard them planning it. It is a thing that has made all else easy."

"But what can you do alone, monsieur?" she asked him; and there was a note almost of petulance in her voice.

He moved to the window, and leaned his elbow on the sill. The light was fast fading. "I know not yet. But I am here to contrive a means. I shall think and watch."

"You know in what hourly peril I am placed," she cried, and suddenly remembering that he must have overheard and understood

the Dowager's words, a sudden heat came to her cheeks to recede again and leave them marble-pale. And she thanked Heaven that in the dusk and in the shadow where she stood he could but ill make out her face.

"If you think that I have been rash in returning—"

"No, no, not rash, monsieur; noble and brave above all praise. I would indeed I could tell you how noble and brave I account your action."

"It is as nothing to the bravery required to let Rabecque do this hideous work upon a face for which I have ever entertained some measure of respect."

He jested, sooner than enlighten her that it was his egregious pride had fetched him back when he was but a few hours upon his journey Pariswards, his inability to brook the ridicule that would be his when he announced at the Luxembourg that failure had attended him.

"Ah, but what can you do alone?" she repeated.

"Give me at least a day or two to devise some means; let me look round and take the measure of this gaol. Some way there must be. I have not come so far and so successfully to be beaten now. Still," he continued, "if you think that I overrate my strength or my resource, if you would sooner that I sought men and made an assault upon Condillac, endeavouring to carry it and to let the Queen's will prevail by force of arms, tell me so, and I am gone tomorrow."

"Whither would you go?" she cried, her voice strained with sudden affright.

"I might seek help at Lyons or Moulins. I might find loyal soldiers who would be willing to follow me by virtue of my warrant to levy such help as I may require, if I but tell them that the help was refused me in

Grenoble. I am not sure that it would be so, for, unfortunately, my warrant is for the Seneschal of Dauphiny only. Still, I might make the attempt."

"No, no," she implored him, and in her eagerness to have him put all thought of leaving her from his mind, she caught him by the arm and raised a pleading face to his. "Do not leave me here, monsieur, of your pity do not leave me alone amongst them. Think me a coward if you will, monsieur: I am no less. They have made a coward of me."

He understood the thing she dreaded, and a great pity welled up from his generous heart for this poor unfriended girl at the mercy of the beautiful witch of Condillac and her beautiful rascally son. He patted the hand that clutched his arm.

"I think, myself, that it will be best if I remain, now that I have come so far," he said. "Let me ponder things. It may well be that I shall devise some way."

"May Heaven inspire you, monsieur. I shall spend the night in prayer, I think, imploring God and His saints to show you the way you seek."

"Heaven, I think, should hear your prayers, mademoiselle," he answered musingly, his glance upon the white, saintly face that seemed to shine in the deepening gloom. Then, suddenly he stirred and bent to listen.

"Sh! Some one is coming," he whispered. And he sped quickly from her side and into the outer room, where he sank noiselessly on to his chair as the steps ascended the stone staircase and a glow of yellow light grew gradually in the doorway that opened on to it.

CHAPTER XII. A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

That he might inspire the more confidence in the Dowager and her son Garnache organized and performed a little comedy at Condillac a couple of nights after his appointment as mademoiselle's gaoler. He gave an alarm at dead midnight, and when half-clad men, followed presently by madame and Marian, rushed into the anteroom where he stood, a very picture of the wildest excitement, he drew their attention to two twisted sheets, tied end to end, hanging from the window which overlooked the moat; and in answer to the marquise's questions he informed her that he had been disturbed by sounds of movements and upon entering the chamber he had discovered mademoiselle making these preparations for departure.

Valerie, locked in the inner chamber, refused to come forth as the Marquise bade her, but her voice reassured Madame de Condillac of her presence, and so, since her attempt had failed, madame was content to let her be.

"The little fool," she said, peering down from the window into the night; "she would have been killed for certain. Her rope of sheets does not reach more than a third of the way down. She would have had over thirty feet to fall, and if that had not been enough to finish her, she would of a certainty have, been drowned in the moat."

She signified her satisfaction with the faithful "Battista's" vigilance by a present of some gold pieces in the morning, and since the height of the window and the moat beneath it did not appear sufficient obstacles to mademoiselle's attempts at effecting her escape, the

Dowager had the window nailed down. Thus, only by breaking it could egress be obtained, and the breaking of it could not be effected without such a noise as must arouse "Battista."

Under Garnache's instructions the comedy was carried a little further. Mademoiselle affected for her gaoler a most unconquerable aversion, and this she took pains to proclaim.

One morning, three days after her attempted escape, she was taking the air in the garden of Condillac, "Battista," ever watchful, a few paces behind her, when suddenly she was joined by Marius—a splendid, graceful figure in a riding-suit of brown velvet and biscuit-coloured hose, his points tipped with gold, his long boots of the finest marroquin leather, his liver-coloured hound at his heels. It was the last day of October, but the weather, from cold and wet that it had been for the past fortnight, had taken on a sudden improvement. The sun shone, the air was still and warm, and but for the strewn leaves and the faint smell of decay with which the breath of autumn is ever laden, one might have fancied it a day of early spring.

It was not Valerie's wont to pause when Marius approached. Since she might not prevent him from walking where he listed, she had long since abandoned the futility of bidding him begone when he came near her. But, at least, she had never stopped in her walk, never altered its pace; she had suffered what she might not avoid, but she had worn the outward air of suffering it with indifference. This morning, however, she made a departure from her long habit. Not only did she pause upon observing his approach, but she called to him as if she would have him hasten to her side. And hasten he did, a new light in his eyes that was mostly of surprise, but a little, also, of hope.

She was gracious to him for once, and gave him good morning in a manner that bordered upon the pleasant. Wondering, he fell into step beside her, and they paced together the yew-bordered terrace, the ever-vigilant but discreet "Battista" following them, though keeping

now a few paces farther in the rear.

For a little while they appeared constrained, and their talk was of the falling leaves and the grateful change that had so suddenly come upon the weather. Suddenly she stopped and faced him.

"Will you do me a favour, Marius?" she asked. He halted too, and turned to her, studying her gentle face, seeking to guess her mind in the clear hazel eyes she raised to his. His eyebrows lifted slightly with surprise. Nevertheless—

"There is in all the world, Valerie, nothing you could ask me that I would not do," he protested.

She smiled wistfully. "How easy it is to utter words!" she sighed.

"Marry me," he answered, leaning towards her, his eyes devouring her now, "and you shall find my words very quickly turned to deeds."

"Ah," said she, and her smile broadened and took on a scornful twist, "you make conditions now. If I will marry you, there is nothing you will not do for me; so that, conversely, I may take it that if I do not marry you, there is nothing you will do. But in the meantime, Marius, until I resolve me whether I will marry you or not, would you not do a little thing that I might ask of you?"

"Until you resolve?" he cried, and his face flushed with the sudden hope he gathered from those words. Hitherto there had been no suggestion of a possible modification of attitude towards his suit. It had been repulsion, definite and uncompromising. Again he studied her face. Was she fooling him, this girl with the angel-innocence of glance? The thought of such a possibility cooled him instantly. "What is it you want of me?" he asked, his voice ungracious.

"Only a little thing, Marius." Her glance travelled back over her shoulder to the tall, limber fellow in leather jerkin and with cross-

gartered legs who loured a dozen steps behind them. "Rid me of that ruffian's company," said she.

Marius looked back at "Battista," and from him to Valerie. Then he smiled and made a slight movement with his shoulders.

"But to what end?" he asked, as one who pleadingly opposes an argument that is unreasonable. "Another would replace him, and there is little to choose among the men that garrison Condillac."

"Little, perhaps; but that little matters." Sure of her ground, and gathering from his tone and manner that the more ardently she begged this thing the less likely would it be that she should prevail, she pursued her intercessions with a greater heat. "Oh," she cried, in a pretended rage, "it is to insult me to give me that unclean knave for perpetual company. I loathe and detest him. The very sight of him is too much to endure."

"You exaggerate," said he coldly.

"I do not; indeed I do not," she rejoined, looking frankly, pleadingly into his face. "You do not realize what it is to suffer the insolent vigilance of such as he; to feel that your every step is under surveillance; to feel his eyes ever upon you when you are within his sight. Oh, it is insufferable!"

Suddenly he gripped her arm, his face within a hand's breadth of her own, his words falling hot and quickly on her ear.

"It is yours to end it when you will, Valerie," he passionately reminded her. "Give yourself into my keeping. Let it be mine to watch over you henceforth. Let me—"

Abruptly he ceased. She had drawn back her head, her face was white to the lips, and in her eyes, as they dwelt on his at such close quarters, there appeared a look of terror, of loathing unutterable. He

saw it, and releasing her arm he fell back as if she had struck him. The colour left his face too.

"Or is it," he muttered thickly, "that I inspire you, with much the same feeling as does he?"

She stood before him with lowered eyelids, her bosom heaving still from the agitation of fear his closeness had aroused in her. He studied her in silence a moment, with narrowing eyes and tightening lips. Then anger stirred in him, and quenched the sorrow with which at first he had marked the signs of her repulsion. But anger in Marius de Condillac was a cold and deadly emotion that vented itself in no rantings, uttered no loud-voiced threats or denunciations, prompted no waving of arms or plucking forth of weapons.

He stooped towards her again from his stately, graceful height. The cruelty hidden in the beautiful lines of his mouth took instant prominence in the smile that flickered round it.

"I think that Battista makes a very excellent watchdog," he said, and you would have thought him amused, as if at the foolish subterfuge of some little child. "You may be right to dislike him. He knows no French, so that it may not be yours to pervert and bribe him with promises of what you will do if he assists you to escape; but you will see that this very quality which renders him detestable to you renders him invaluable to us."

He laughed softly, as one well pleased with his own astuteness, doffed his hat with a politeness almost exaggerated, and whistling his dog he abruptly left her.

Thus were Marius and his mother—to whom he bore the tale of Valerie's request—tricked further into reposing the very fullest trust in the watchful, incorruptible "Battista." Realizing that this would be so, Garnache now applied himself more unreservedly to putting into effect

the plans he had been maturing. And he went about it with a zest that knew no flagging, with a relish that nothing could impair. Not that it was other than usual for Garnache to fling himself whole-heartedly into the conduct of any enterprise he might have upon his hands; but he had come into this affair at Condillac against his will; stress of circumstances it was had driven him on, step by step, to take a personal hand in the actual deliverance of Valerie.

It was vanity and pride that had turned him back when already he was on the road to Paris; not without yet a further struggle would he accept defeat. To this end had he been driven, for the first time in his life, to the indignity of his foul disguise; and he, whose methods had ever been direct, had been forced to have recourse to the commonest of subterfuges. It was with anger in his heart that he had proceeded to play the part he had assumed. He felt it to be a thing unworthy of him, a thing that derogated from his self-respect. Had he but had the justification of some high political aim, he might have endured it with a better resignation; the momentous end to be served might have sanctioned the ignoble means adopted. But here was a task in itself almost as unworthy of him as the methods by which he now set about accomplishing it. He was to black his face and dye his beard and hair, stain his skin and garb himself in filthy rags, for no better end than that he might compass the enlargement of a girl from the captivity into which she had been forced by a designing lady of Dauphiny. Was that a task to set a soldier, a man of his years and birth and name? He had revolted at it; yet that stubborn pride of his that would not brook his return to Paris to confess himself defeated by a woman over this woman's business, held him relentlessly to his distasteful course.

And gradually the distaste of it had melted. It had begun to fall away five nights ago, when he had heard what passed between Madame de Condillac and Valerie. A great pity for this girl, a great indignation against those who would account no means too base to achieve their

ends with her, a proper realization of the indignities she was suffering, caused him to shed some of his reluctance, some of his sense of injury to himself.

His innate chivalry, that fine spirit of his which had ever prompted him to defend the weak against the oppressor, stirred him now, and stirred him to such purpose that, in the end, from taking up the burden of his task reluctantly, he came to bear it zestfully and almost gladly. He was rejoiced to discover himself equipped with histrionic gifts of which he had had no suspicion hitherto, and it delighted him to set them into activity.

Now it happened that at Condillac there was a fellow countryman of "Battista's," a mercenary from Northern Italy, a rascal named Arsenio, whom Fortunio had enlisted when first he began to increase the garrison a month ago. Upon this fellow's honesty Garnache had formed designs. He had closely observed him, and in Arsenio's countenance he thought he detected a sufficiency of villainy to augur well for the prosperity of any scheme of treachery that might be suggested to him provided the reward were adequate.

Garnache went about sounding the man with a wiliness peculiarly his own. Arsenio being his only compatriot at Condillac it was not wonderful that in his few daily hours of relief from his gaoler's duty "Battista" should seek out the fellow and sit in talk with him. The pair became intimate, and intercourse between them grew more free and unrestrained. Garnache waited, wishing to risk nothing by precipitancy, and watched for his opportunity. It came on the morrow of All Saints. On that Day of the Dead, Arsenio, whose rearing had been that of a true son of Mother Church, was stirred by the memory of his earthly mother, who had died some three years before. He was silent and moody, and showed little responsiveness to Garnache's jesting humour. Garnache, wondering what might be toward in the fellow's mind, watched him closely.

Suddenly the little man—he was a short, bowlegged, sinewy fellow—heaved a great sigh as he plucked idly at a weed that grew between two stones of the inner courtyard, where they were seated on the chapel steps.

"You are a dull comrade to-day, compatriot," said Garnache, clapping him on the shoulder.

"It is the Day of the Dead," the fellow answered him, as though that were an ample explanation. Garnache laughed.

"To those that are dead it no doubt is; so was yesterday, so will to-morrow be. But to us who sit here it is the day of the living."

"You are a scoffer," the other reproached him, and his rascally face was oddly grave. "You don't understand."

"Enlighten me, then. Convert me."

"It is the day when our thoughts turn naturally to the dead, and mine are with my mother, who has lain in her grave these three years. I am thinking of what she reared me and of what I am."

Garnache made a grimace which the other did not observe. He stared at the little cut-throat, and there was some dismay in his glance. What ailed the rogue? Was he about to repent him of his sins, and to have done with villainy and treachery; was he minded to slit no more gullets in the future, be faithful to the hand that paid him, and lead a godlier life? Peste! That was a thing that would nowise suit Monsieur de Garnache's ends just then. If Arsenio had a mind to reform, let him postpone that reformation until Garnache should have done with him. So he opened his lips and let out a deep guffaw of mockery.

"We shall have you turning monk," said he, "a candidate for canonization going barefoot, with flagellated back and shaven head."

No more wine, no more dice, no more wenches, no more—"

"Peace!" snapped the other.

"Say 'Pax,'" suggested Garnache, "'Pax tecum,' or `vobiscum.' It is thus you will be saying it later."

"If my conscience pricks me, is it aught to you? Have you no conscience of your own?"

"None. Men wax lean on it in this vale of tears. It is a thing invented by the great to enable them to pursue the grinding and oppression of the small. If your master pays you ill for the dirty work you do for him and another comes along to offer you some rich reward for an omission in that same service, you are warned that if you let yourself be tempted, your conscience will plague you afterwards. Pish! A clumsy, childish device that, to keep you faithful."

Arsenio looked up. Words that defamed the great were ever welcome to him; arguments that showed him he was oppressed and imposed upon sounded ever gratefully in his ears. He nodded his approval of "Battista's" dictum.

"Body of Bacchus!" he swore, "you are right in that, compatriot. But my case is different. I am thinking of the curse that Mother Church has put upon this house. Yesterday was All Saints, and never a Mass heard I. To-day is All Souls, and never a prayer may I offer up in this place of sin for the rest of my mother's soul."

"How so?" quoth Garnache, looking in wonder at this religiously minded cut-throat.

"How so? Is not the House of Condillac under excommunication, and every man who stays in it of his own free will? Prayers and Sacraments are alike forbidden here."

Garnache received a sudden inspiration. He leapt to his feet, his

face convulsed as if at the horror of learning of a hitherto undreamt-of state of things. He never paused to give a moment's consideration to the cut-throat's mind, so wonderfully constituted as to enable him to break with impunity every one of the commandments every day of the week for the matter of a louis d'or or two, and yet be afflicted by qualms of conscience at living under a roof upon which the Church had hurled her malediction.

"What are you saying, compatriot? What is it that you tell me?"

"The truth," said Arsenio, with a shrug. "Any man who wilfully abides in the services of Condillac"—and instinctively he lowered his voice lest the Captain or the Marquise should be within earshot—, "is excommunicate."

"By the Host!" swore the false Piedmontese. "I am a Christian man myself, Arsenio, and I have lived in ignorance of this thing?"

"That ignorance may be your excuse. But now that you know—" Arsenio shrugged his shoulders.

"Now that I know, I, had best have a care of my soul and look about me for other employment."

"Alas!" sighed Arsenio; "it is none so easy to find."

Garnache looked at him. Garnache began to have in his luck a still greater faith than hitherto. He glanced stealthily around; then he sat down again, so that his mouth was close to Arsenio's ear.

"The pay is beggarly here, yet I have refused a fortune offered me by another that I might remain loyal to my masters at Condillac. But this thing that you tell me alters everything. By the Host! yes."

"A fortune?" sneered Arsenio.

"Aye, a fortune—at least, fifty pistoles. That is a fortune to some of

us."

Arsenio whistled. "Tell me more," said he.

Garnache rose with the air of one about to depart.

"I must think of it," said he, and he made shift to go. But the other's hand fell with a clenching grip upon his arm.

"Of what must you think, fool?" said he. "Tell me this service you have been offered. I have a conscience that upbraids me. If you refuse these fifty pistoles, why should not I profit by your folly?"

"There would not be the need. Two men are required for the thing I speak of, and there are fifty pistoles for each. If I decide to undertake the task, I'll speak of you as a likely second."

He nodded gloomily to his companion, and shaking off his hold he set out to cross the yard. But Arsenio was after him and had fastened again upon his arm, detaining him.

"You fool!" said he; "you'd not refuse this fortune?"

"It would mean treachery," whispered Garnache.

"That is bad," the other agreed, and his face fell. But remembering what Garnache had said, he was quick to brighten again. "Is it to these folk here at Condillac?" he asked. Garnache nodded. "And they would pay—these people that seek our service would pay you fifty pistoles?"

"They seek my service only, as yet. They might seek yours were I to speak for you."

"And you will, compatriot. You will, will you not? We are comrades, we are friends, and we are fellow-countrymen in a strange land. There is nothing I would not do for you, Battista. Look, I would die for you if

there should come the need! Body of Bacchus! I would. I am like that when I love a man."

Garnache patted his shoulder. "You are a good fellow, Arsenio."

"And you will speak for me?"

"But you do not know the nature of the service," said Garnache. "You may refuse it when it is definitely offered you."

"Refuse fifty pistoles? I should deserve to be the pauper that I am if such had been my habits. Be the service what it may, my conscience pricks me for serving Condillac. Tell me how the fifty pistoles are to be earned, and you may count upon me to put my hand to anything."

Garnache was satisfied. But he told Arsenio no more that day, beyond assuring him he would speak for him and let him know upon the morrow. Nor on the morrow, when they returned to the subject at Arsenio's eager demand, did Garnache tell him all, or even that the service was mademoiselle's. Instead he pretended that it was some one in Grenoble who needed two such men as they.

"Word has been brought me," he said mysteriously. "You must not ask me how."

"But how the devil are we to reach Grenoble? The Captain will never let us go," said Arsenio, in an ill-humour.

"On the night that you are of the watch, Arsenio, we will depart together without asking the Captain's leave. You shall open the postern when I come to join you here in the courtyard."

"But what of the man at the door yonder?" And he jerked his thumb towards the tower where mademoiselle was a captive, and where at night "Battista" was locked in with her. At the door leading to the courtyard a sentry was always posted for greater security. That door and that sentry were obstacles which Garnache saw the futility of

attempting to overcome without aid. That was why he had been forced to enlist Arsenio's assistance.

"You must account for him, Arsenio," said he.

"Thus?" inquired Arsenio coolly, and he passed the edge of his hand significantly across his throat. Garnache shook his head.

"No," said he; "there will be no need for that. A blow over the head will suffice. Besides, it may be quieter. You will find the key of the tower in his belt. When you have felled him, get it and unlock the door; then whistle for me. The rest will be easy."

"You are sure he has the key?"

"I have it from madame herself. They were forced to leave it with him to provide for emergencies. Mademoiselle's attempted escape by the window showed them the necessity for it." He did not add that it was the implicit confidence they reposed in "Battista" himself that had overcome their reluctance to leave the key with the sentry.

To seal the bargain, and in earnest of all the gold to come, Garnache gave Arsenio a couple of gold louis as a loan to be repaid him when their nameless employer should pay him his fifty pistoles in Grenoble.

The sight and touch of the gold convinced Arsenio that the thing was no dream. He told Garnache that he believed he would be on guard-duty on the night of the following Wednesday—this was Friday—and so for Wednesday next they left the execution of their plans unless, meantime, a change should be effected in the disposition of the sentries.

CHAPTER XIII. THE COURIER

Monsieur de Garnache was pleased with the issue of his little affair with Arsenio.

"Mademoiselle," he told Valerie that evening, "I was right to have faith in my luck, right to believe that the tide of it is flowing. All we need now is a little patience; everything has become easy."

It was the hour of supper. Valerie was at table in her anteroom, and "Battista" was in attendance. It was an added duty they had imposed upon him, for, since her attempt to escape, mademoiselle's imprisonment had been rendered more rigorous than ever. No servant of the chateau was allowed past the door of the outer anteroom, now commonly spoken of as the guardroom of the tower. Valerie dined daily in the salon with Madame de Condillac and Marius, but her other meals were served her in her own apartments. The servants who brought the meals from the kitchen delivered them to "Battista" in the guardroom, and he it was who laid the cloth and waited upon mademoiselle. At first this added duty had irritated him more than all that he had so far endured. Had he Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache lived to discharge the duties of a lackey, to bear dishes to a lady's table and to remain at hand to serve her? The very thought had all but set him in a rage. But presently he grew reconciled to it. It afforded him particular opportunities of being in mademoiselle's presence and of conferring with her; and for the sake of such an advantage he might well belittle the unsavoury part of the affair.

A half-dozen candles burned in two gleaming silver sconces on the table; in her tall-backed leather chair mademoiselle sat, and ate and

drank but little, while Garnache told her of the preparations he had made.

"If my luck but holds until Wednesday next," he concluded, "you may count upon being well out of Condillac. Arsenio does not dream that you come with us, so that even should he change his mind, at least we have no cause to fear a betrayal. But he will not change his mind. The prospect of fifty pistoles has rendered it immutable."

She looked up at him with eyes brightened by hope and by the encouragement to count upon success which she gathered from his optimism.

"You have contrived it marvellously well," she praised him. "If we succeed—"

"Say when we succeed, mademoiselle," he laughingly corrected her.

"Very well, then—when we shall have succeeded in leaving Condillac, whither am I to go?"

"Why, with me, to Paris, as was determined. My man awaits me at Voiron with money and horses. No further obstacle shall rise to hamper us once our backs are turned upon the ugly walls of Condillac. The Queen shall make you welcome and keep you safe until Monsieur Florimond comes to claim his bride."

She sipped her wine, then set down the glass and leaned her elbow on the table, taking her chin in her fine white hand. "Madame tells me that he is dead," said she, and Garnache was shocked at the comparative calmness with which she said it. He looked at her sharply from under his sooted brows. Was she, after all, he wondered, no different from other women? Was she cold and calculating, and had she as little heart as he had come to believe was usual with her sex, that she could contemplate so calmly the possibility of her lover

being dead? He had thought her better, more natural, more large-hearted and more pure. That had encouraged him to stand by her in these straits of hers, no matter at what loss of dignity to himself. It began to seem that his conclusions had been wrong.

His silence caused her to look up, and in his face she read something of what was passing in his thoughts. She smiled rather wanly.

"You are thinking me heartless, Monsieur de Garnache?"

"I am thinking you—womanly."

"The same thing, then, to your mind. Tell me, monsieur, do you know much of women?"

"God forbid! I have found trouble enough in my life."

"And you pass judgment thus upon a sex with which you have no acquaintance?"

"Not by acquaintance only is it that we come to knowledge. There are ways of learning other than by the road of experience. One may learn of dangers by watching others perish. It is the fool who will be satisfied alone with the knowledge that comes to him from what he undergoes himself."

"You are very wise, monsieur," said she demurely, so demurely that he suspected her of laughing at him. "You were never wed?"

"Never, mademoiselle," he answered stiffly, "nor ever in any danger of it."

"Must you, indeed, account it a danger?"

"A deadly peril, mademoiselle," said he; whereupon they both laughed.

She pushed back her chair and rose slowly. Slowly she passed from the table and stepped towards the window. Turning she set her back to it, and faced him.

"Monsieur de Garnache," said she, "you are a good man, a true and noble gentleman. I would that you thought a little better of us. All women are not contemptible, believe me. I will pray that you may yet mate with one who will prove to you the truth of what I say."

He smiled gently, and shook his head.

"My child," said he, "I am not half the noble fellow you account me. I have a stubborn pride that stands me at times in the stead of virtue. It was pride brought me back here, for instance. I could not brook the laughter that would greet me in Paris did I confess that I was beaten by the Dowager of Condillac. I tell you this to the end that, thinking less well of me, you may spare me prayers which I should dread to see fulfilled. I have told you before, mademoiselle, Heaven is likely to answer the prayers of such a heart as yours."

"Yet but a moment back you deemed me heartless," she reminded him.

"You seemed so indifferent to the fate of Florimond de Condillac."

"I must have seemed, then, what I am not," she told him, "for I am far from indifferent to Florimond's fate. The truth is, monsieur, I do not believe Madame de Condillac. Knowing me to be under a promise that naught can prevail upon me to break, she would have me believe that nature has dissolved the obligation for me. She thinks that were I persuaded of Florimond's death, I might turn an ear to the wooing of Marius. But she is mistaken, utterly mistaken; and so I sought to convince her. My father willed that I should wed Florimond. Florimond's father had been his dearest friend. I promised him that I would do his will, and by that promise I am bound. But were Florimond

indeed dead, and were I free to choose, I should not choose Marius were he the only man in all the world."

Garnache moved nearer to her.

"You speak," said he, "as if you were indifferent in the matter of wedding Florimond, whilst I understand that your letter to the Queen professed you eager for the alliance. I may be impertinent, but, frankly, your attitude puzzles me."

"I am not indifferent," she answered him, but calmly, without enthusiasm. "Florimond and I were playmates, and as a little child I loved him and admired him as I might have loved and admired a brother perhaps. He is comely, honourable, and true. I believe he would be the kindest husband ever woman had, and so I am content to give my life into his keeping. What more can be needed?"

"Never ask me, mademoiselle; I am by no means an authority," said he. "But you appear to have been well schooled in a most excellent philosophy." And he laughed outright. She reddened under his amusement.

"It was thus my father taught me," said she, in quieter tones; "and he was the wisest man I ever knew, just as he was the noblest and the bravest."

Garnache bowed his head. "God rest his soul!" said he with respectful fervour.

"Amen," the girl replied, and they fell silent.

Presently she returned to the subject of her betrothed.

"If Florimond is living, this prolonged absence, this lack of news is very strange. It is three months since last we heard of him—four months, indeed. Yet he must have been apprised of his father's death, and that should have occasioned his return."

"Was he indeed apprised of it?" inquired Garnache. "Did you, yourself, communicate the news to him?"

"I?" she cried. "But no, monsieur. We do not correspond."

"That is a pity," said Garnache, "for I believe that the knowledge of the Marquis's death was kept from him by his stepmother."

"Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed, in horror. "Do you mean that he may still be in ignorance of it?"

"Not that. A month ago a courier was dispatched to him by the Queen-Mother. The last news of him some four months old, as you have said—reported him at Milan in the service of Spain. Thither was the courier sent to find him and to deliver him letters setting forth what was toward at Condillac."

"A month ago?" she said. "And still we have no word. I am full of fears for him, monsieur."

"And I," said Garnache, "am full of hope that we shall have news of him at any moment."

That he was well justified of his hope was to be proven before they were many days older. Meanwhile Garnache continued to play his part of gaoler to the entire satisfaction and increased confidence of the Condillacs, what time he waited patiently for the appointed night when it should be his friend Arsenio's turn to take the guard.

On that fateful Wednesday "Battista" sought out—as had now become his invariable custom—his compatriot as soon as the time of his noontide rest was come, the hour at which they dined at Condillac. He found Arsenio sunning himself in the outer courtyard, for it seemed that year that as the winter approached the warmth increased. Never could man remember such a Saint Martin's Summer as was this.

In so far as the matter of their impending flight was concerned, "Battista" was as brief as he could be.

"Is all well?" he asked. "Shall you be on guard to-night?"

"Yes. It is my watch from sunset till dawn. At what hour shall we be stirring?"

Garnache pondered a moment, stroking that firm chin of his, on which the erstwhile stubble had now grown into a straggling, unkempt beard—and it plagued him not a little, for a close observer might have discovered that it was of a lighter colour at the roots. His hair, too, was beginning to lose its glossy blackness. It was turning dull, and presently, no doubt, it would begin to pale, so that it was high time he spread his wings and took flight from Condillac.

"We had best wait until midnight. It will give them time to be soundly in their slumbers. Though, should there be signs of any one stirring even then, you had better wait till later. It were foolish to risk having our going prevented for the sake of leaving a half-hour earlier."

"Depend upon me," Arsenio answered him. "When I open the door of your tower I shall whistle to you. The key of the postern hangs on the guardroom wall. I shall possess myself of that before I come."

"Good," said Garnache, "we understand each other."

And on that they might have parted there and then, but that there happened in that moment a commotion at the gate. Men hurried from the guardhouse, and Fortunio's voice sounded loud in command. A horseman had galloped up to Condillac, walked his horse across the bridge—which was raised only at night—and was knocking with the butt of his whip an imperative summons upon the timbers of the gate.

By Fortunio's orders it was opened, and a man covered with dust, astride a weary, foam-flecked horse, rode under the archway of the

keep into the first courtyard of the chateau.

Garnache eyed him in surprise and inquiry, and he read in the man's appearance that he was a courier. The horseman had halted within a few paces of the spot where "Battista" and his companion stood, and seeing in the vilely clad Garnache a member of the Condillac household, he flung him his reins, then got down stiffly from his horse.

Fortunio, bristling with importance, his left hand on the hilt of his rapier, the fingers of his right twirling at his long fair mustachios, at once confronted him and craved his business.

"I am the bearer of letters for Madame the Dowager Marquise de Condillac," was the reply; whereupon, with an arrogant nod, Fortunio bade the fellow go with him, and issued an order that his horse should be cared for.

Arsenio was speaking in Garnache's ear. The man's nature was inquisitive, and he was indulging idle conjectures as to what might be the news this courier brought. Garnache's mind, actuated by very different motives, was engaged upon the same task, so much so that not a word heard he of what his supposed compatriot was whispering. Whence came this courier? Why had not that fool Fortunio asked him, so that Garnache might have overheard his answer? Was he from Paris and the Queen, or was he, perchance, from Italy and Florimond? These were questions to which it imported him to have the answers. He must know what letters the fellow brought. The knowledge might guide him now; might even cause him to alter the plans he had formed.

He stood in thought whilst, unheeded by him, Arsenio prattled at his elbow. He bethought him of the old minstrel's gallery at the end of the hall in which the Condillacs were dining and whither the courier would be conducted. He knew the way to that gallery, for he had made a

very close study of the chateau against the time when he might find himself in need of the knowledge.

With a hurried excuse to Arsenio he moved away, and, looking round to see that he was unobserved, he was on the point of making his way to the gallery when suddenly he checked himself. What went he there to do? To play the spy? To become fellow to the lackey who listens at keyholes? Ah, no! That was something no service could demand of him. He might owe a duty to the Queen, but there was also a duty that he owed himself, and this duty forbade him from going to such extremes. Thus spake his Pride, and he mistook its voice for that of Honour. Betide what might, it was not for Garnache to play the eavesdropper. Not that, Pardieu!

And so he turned away, his desires in conflict with that pride of his, and gloomily he paced the courtyard, Arsenio marvelling what might have come to him. And well was it for him that pride should have detained him; well would it seem as if his luck were indeed in the ascendant and had prompted his pride to save him from a deadly peril. For suddenly some one called "Battista!"

He heard, but for the moment, absorbed as he was in his own musings, he overlooked the fact that it was the name to which he answered at Condillac.

Not until it was repeated more loudly, and imperatively, did he turn to see Fortunio beckoning him. With a sudden dread anxiety, he stepped to the captain's side. Was he discovered? But Fortunio's words set his doubts to rest at once.

"You are to re-conduct Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye to her apartments at once."

Garnache bowed and followed the captain up the steps and into the chateau that he might carry out the order; and as he went he shrewdly

guessed that it was the arrival of that courier had occasioned the sudden removal of mademoiselle.

When they were alone together—he and she—in her anteroom in the Northern Tower, she turned to him before he had time to question her as he was intending.

"A courier has arrived," said she.

"I know; I saw him in the courtyard. Whence is he? Did you learn it?"

"From Florimond." She was white with agitation.

"From the Marquis de Condillac?" he cried, and he knew not whether to hope or fear. "From Italy?"

"No, monsieur. I do not think from Italy. From what was said I gathered that Florimond is already on his way to Condillac. Oh, it made a fine stir. It left them no more appetite for dinner, and they seem to have thought it could have left me none for mine, for they ordered my instant return to my apartments."

"Then you know nothing—save that the courier is from the Marquis?"

"Nothing; nor am I likely to," she answered, and her arms dropped limply to her sides, her eyes looked entreatingly up into his gloomy face.

But Garnache could do no more than rap out an oath. Then he stood still a moment, his eyes on the window, his chin in his hand, brooding. His pride and his desire to know more of that courier's message were fighting it out again in his mind, just as they fought it out in the courtyard below. Suddenly his glance fell on her, standing there, so sweet, so frail, and so disconsolate. For her sake he must do the thing, repulsive though it might be.

"I must know more," he exclaimed. "I must learn Florimond's whereabouts, if only that we may go to meet him when we leave Condillac to-night."

"You have arranged definitely for that?" she asked, her face lighting.

"All is in readiness," he assured her. Then, lowering his voice without apparent reason, and speaking quickly and intently, "I must go find out what I can," he said. "There may be a risk, but it is as nothing to the risk we run of blundering matters through ignorance of what may be afoot. Should any one come—which is unlikely, for all those interested will be in the hall until the courier is dealt with—and should they inquire into my absence, you are to know nothing of it since you have no Italian and I no French. All that you will know will be that you believe I went but a moment since to fetch water. You understand?"

She nodded.

"Then lock yourself in your chamber till I return."

He caught up a large earthenware vessel in which water was kept for his own and mademoiselle's use, emptied it through the guard-room window into the moat below, then left the room and made his way down the steps to the courtyard.

He peered out. Not a soul was in sight. This inner courtyard was little tenanted at that time of day, and the sentry at the door of the tower was only placed there at nightfall. Alongside this there stood another door, opening into a passage from which access might be gained to any part of the chateau. Thrusting behind that door the earthenware vessel that he carried, Garnache sped swiftly down the corridor on his eavesdropping errand. Still his mind was in conflict. At times he cursed his slowness, at times his haste and readiness to undertake so dirty a business, wishing all women at the devil since by

the work of women was he put to such a shift as this.

CHAPTER XIV. FLORIMOND'S LETTER

In the great hall of Condillac, where the Marquise, her son, and Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye had been at dinner, a sudden confusion had been spread by the arrival of that courier so soon as it was known that he bore letters from Florimond, Marquis de Condillac.

Madame had risen hastily, fear and defiance blending in her face, and she had at once commanded mademoiselle's withdrawal. Valerie had wondered might there not be letters—or, leastways, messages—for herself from her betrothed. But her pride had suppressed the eager question that welled up to her lips. She would too, have questioned the courier concerning Florimond's health; she would have asked him how the Marquis looked, and where the messenger had left him. But of all this that she craved to know, nothing could she bring herself to ask before the Marquise.

She rose in silence upon hearing the Dowager order Fortunio to summon Battista that he might re-conduct mademoiselle to her apartments, and she moved a few paces down the hall, towards the door, in proud, submissive readiness to depart. Yet she could not keep her eyes from the dust-stained courier, who, having flung his hat and whip upon the floor, was now opening his wallet, the Dowager standing before him to receive his papers.

Marius, affecting an insouciance he did not feel, remained at table, his page behind his chair, his hound stretched at his feet; and he now sipped his wine, now held it to the light that he might observe the beauty of its deep red colour.

At last Fortunio returned, and mademoiselle took her departure, head in the air and outwardly seeming nowise concerned in what was taking place. With her went Fortunio. And the Marquise, who now held the package she had received from the courier, bade the page depart also.

When the three were at last alone, she paused before opening the letter and turned again to the messenger. She made a brave figure in the flood of sunlight that poured through the gules and azures of the long blazoned windows, her tall, lissome figure clad in a close-fitting robe of black velvet, her abundant glossy black hair rolled back under its white coif, her black eyes and scarlet lips detaching from the ivory of her face, in which no trace of emotion showed, for all the anxiety that consumed her.

"Where left you the Marquis de Condillac?" she asked the fellow.

"At La Rochette, madame," the courier answered, and his answer brought Marius to his feet with an oath.

"So near?" he cried out. But the Dowager's glance remained calm and untroubled.

"How does it happen that he did not hasten himself, to Condillac?" she asked.

"I do not know, madame. I did not see Monsieur le Marquis. It was his servant brought me that letter with orders to ride hither."

Marius approached his mother, his brow clouded.

"Let us see what he says," he suggested anxiously. But his mother did not heed him. She stood balancing the package in her hand.

"Can you tell us, then, nothing of Monsieur le Marquis?"

"Nothing more than I have told you, madame."

She bade Marius call Fortunio, and then dismissed the courier, bidding her captain see to his refreshment.

Then, alone at last with her son, she hastily tore the covering from the letter, unfolded it and read. And Marius, moved by anxiety, came to stand beside and just behind her, where he too might read. The letter ran:

"MY VERY DEAR MARQUISE,—I do not doubt but that it will pleasure you to hear that I am on my way home, and that but for a touch of fever that has detained us here at La Rochette, I should be at Condillac as soon as the messenger who is the bearer of these presents. A courier from Paris found me a fortnight since in Milan, with letters setting forth that my father had been dead six months, and that it was considered expedient at Court that I should return home forthwith to assume the administration of Condillac. I am lost in wonder that a communication of this nature should have been addressed to me from Paris instead of from you, as surely it must have been your duty to advise me of my father's decease at the time of that untoward event. I am cast down by grief at this evil news, and the summons from Court has brought me in all haste from Milan. The lack of news from Condillac has been for months a matter of surprise to me. My father's death may be some explanation of this, but scarcely explanation enough. However, madame, I count upon it that you will be able to dispel such doubts as I am fostering. I count too, upon being at Condillac by the end of week, but I beg that neither you nor my dear Marius will allow this circumstance to make any difference to yourselves, just as, although I am returning to assume the government of Condillac as the Court has suggested to me, I hope that yourself and my dear brother will continue to make it your home for as long as it shall pleasure you. So long shall it pleasure me.

"I am, my dear marquise, your very humble and very affectionate servant and stepson,

"FLORIMOND"

When she had read to the end, the Dowager turned back and read aloud the passage: "However, madame, I count upon it that you will be able to dispel such doubts as I am fostering." She looked at her son, who had shifted his position, so that he was now confronting her.

"He has his suspicions that all is not as it should be," sneered Marius.

"Yet his tone is amiable throughout. It cannot be that they said too much in that letter from Paris." A little trill of bitter laughter escaped her. "We are to continue to make this our home for as long as it shall pleasure us. So long shall it pleasure him!"

Then, with a sudden seriousness, she folded the letter and, putting her hands behind her, looked up into her son's face.

"Well?" she asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Strange that he makes no mention of Valerie" said Marius pensively.

"Pooh! A Condillac thinks lightly of his women. What are you going to do?"

His handsome countenance, so marvellously like her own, was overcast. He looked gloomily at his mother for a moment; then with a slight twitch of the shoulders he turned and moved past her slowly in the direction of the hearth. He leaned his elbow on the overmantel and rested his brow against his clenched right hand, and stood so awhile in moody thought. She watched him, a frown between her arrogant eyes.

"Aye, ponder it," said she. "He is at La Rochette, within a day's ride, and only detained there by a touch of fever. In any case he

promises to be here by the end of the week. By Saturday, then, Condillac will have passed out of our power; it will be lost to you irretrievably. Will you lose La Vauvraye as well?"

He let his hand fall to his side, and turned, fully to face her.

"What can I do? What can we do?" he asked, a shade of petulance in his question.

She stepped close up to him and rested her hand lightly upon his shoulder.

"You have had three months in which to woo that girl, and you have tarried sadly over it, Marius. You have now at most three days in which to accomplish it. What will you do?"

"I have been maladroit perhaps," he said, with bitterness. "I have been over-patient with her. I have counted too much upon the chance of Florimond's being dead, as seemed from the utter lack of news of him. Yet what could I do? Carry her off by force and compel at the dagger's point some priest to marry us?"

She moved her hand from his shoulder and smiled, as if she derided him and his heat.

"You want for invention, Marius," said she. "And yet I beg that you will exert your mind, or Sunday next shall find us well-nigh homeless. I'll take no charity from the Marquis de Condillac, nor, I think, will you."

"If all fails," said he, "we have still your house in Touraine."

"My house?" she echoed, her voice shrill with scorn. "My hovel, you would say. Could you abide there—in such a sty?"

"Vertudieu! If all else failed, we might be glad of it."

"Glad of it? Not I, for one. Yet all else will fail unless you bestir

yourself in the next three days. Condillac is as good as lost to you already, since Florimond is upon the threshold. La Vauvraye most certainly will be lost to you as well unless you make haste to snatch it in the little moment that is left you."

"Can I achieve the impossible, madame?" he cried, and his impatience waxed beneath this unreasonable insistence of his mother's.

"Who asks it of you?"

"Do not you, madame?"

"I? Pish! All that I urge is that you take Valerie across the border into Savoy where you can find a priest to marry you, and get it done this side of Saturday."

"And is not that the impossible? She will not go with me, as you well know, madame."

There was a moment's silence. The Dowager shot him a glance; then her eyes fell. Her bosom stirred as if some strange excitement moved her. Fear and shame were her emotions; for a way she knew by which mademoiselle might be induced to go with him—not only willingly, but eagerly, she thought—to the altar. But she was his mother, and even her harsh nature shuddered before the task of instructing him in this vile thing. Why had the fool not wit enough to see it for himself?

Observing her silence Marius smiled sardonically.

"You may well ponder it," said he. "It is an easy matter to tell me what I should do. Tell me, rather, how it should be done."

His blindness stirred her anger, and her anger whelmed her hesitation.

"Were I in your place, Marius, I should find a way," said she, in a voice utterly expressionless, her eyes averted ever from his own.

He scanned her curiously. Her agitation was plain to him, and it puzzled him, as did the downcast glance of eyes usually so bold and insolent in their gaze. Then he pondered her tone, so laden with expression by its very expressionlessness, and suddenly a flood of light broke upon his mind, revealing very clearly and hideously her meaning. He caught his breath with a sudden gasp and blanched a little. Then his lips tightened suddenly.

"In that case, madame," he said, after a pause, and speaking as if he were still without revelation of her meaning, "I can but regret that you are not in my place. For, as it is, I am thinking we shall have to make the best of the hovel in Touraine."

She bit her lip in the intensity of her chagrin and shame. She was no fool, nor did she imagine from his words that her meaning had been lost upon him. She knew that he had understood, and that he chose to pretend that he had not. She looked up suddenly, her dark eyes blazing, a splash of colour in either cheek.

"Fool!" she snapped at him; "you lily-livered fool! Are you indeed my son? Are you—by God!—that you talk so lightly of yielding?" She advanced a step in his direction. "Through your cowardice you may be content to spend your days in beggary; not so am I; nor shall I be, so long as I have an arm and a voice. You may go hence if your courage fails you outright; but I'll throw up the bridge and entrench myself within these walls. Florimond de Condillac sets no foot in here while I live; and if he should come within range of musket-shot, it will be the worse for him."

"I think you are mad, madame—mad so to talk of resisting him, as you are mad to call me coward. I'll leave you till you are come to a more tranquil frame of mind." And turning upon his heel, his face on

fire from the lash of her contempt, he strode down the hall and passed out, leaving her alone.

White again, with heaving bosom and clenched hands, she stood a moment where he had left her, then dropped into a chair, and taking her chin in her hand she rested her elbow on her knee. Thus she remained, the firelight tinting her perfect profile, on which little might be read of the storm that was raging in her soul. Another woman in her place would have sought relief in tears, but tears came rarely to the beautiful eyes of the Marquise de Condillac.

She sat there until the sun had passed from the windows behind her and the corners of the room were lost in the quickening shadows. At last she was disturbed by the entrance of a lackey, who announced that Monsieur le Comte de Tressan, Lord Seneschal of Dauphiny, was come to Condillac.

She bade the fellow call help to clear the board, where still was set their interrupted noontide meal, and then to admit the Seneschal. With her back to the stirring, bustling servants she stood, pensively regarding the flames, and a smile that was mocking rather than aught else spread upon her face.

If all else failed her, she told herself, there would be no Touraine hovel for her. She could always be Comtesse de Tressan. Let Marius work out alone the punishment of his cowardice.

Away in the Northern Tower, where mademoiselle was lodged, she sat in eager talk with Garnache, who had returned unobserved and successful from his journey of espionage.

He had told her what from the conversation of Marius and his mother he had learned touching the contents of that letter. Florimond lay as near as La Rochette, detained there by a touch of fever, but promising to be at Condillac by the end of the week. Since that was

so, Valerie opined there was no longer the need to put themselves to the trouble of the escape they had planned. Let them wait until Florimond came.

But Garnache shook his head. He had heard more; and for all that he accounted her at present safe from Marius, yet he made no false estimate of that supple gentleman's character, was not deluded by his momentary show of niceness. As the time of Florimond's arrival grew nearer, he thought it very possible that Marius might be rendered desperate. There was grave danger in remaining. He said naught of this, yet he convinced mademoiselle that it were best to go.

"Though there will no longer be the need of a toilsome journey as far as Paris," he concluded. "A four hours' ride to La Rochette, and you may embrace your betrothed."

"Did he speak of me in his letter, know you, monsieur?" she inquired.

"I heard them say that he did not," Garnache replied. "But it may well be that he had good reason. He may suspect more than he has written."

"In that case," she asked—and there was a wounded note in her voice—"Why should a touch of fever keep him at La Rochette? Would a touch of fever keep you from the woman you loved, monsieur, if you knew, or even suspected, that she was in durance?"

"I do not know, mademoiselle. I am an old man who has never loved, and so it would be unfair of me to pass judgment upon lovers. That they think not as other folk is notorious; their minds are for the time disordered."

Nevertheless he looked at her where she sat by the window, so gentle, so lissome, so sweet, and so frail, and he had a shrewd notion that were he Florimond de Condillac, whether he feared her in

duration or not, not the fever, nor the plague itself should keep him for the best part of a week at La Rochette within easy ride of her.

She smiled gently at his words, and turned the conversation to the matter that imported most.

"Tonight then, it is determined that we are to go?"

"At midnight or a little after. Be in readiness, mademoiselle, and do not keep me waiting when I rap upon your door. Haste may be of importance."

"You may count upon me, my friend," she answered him, and stirred by a sudden impulse she held out her hand. "You have been very good to me, Monsieur de Garnache. You have made life very different for me since your coming. I had it in my mind to blame you once for your rashness in returning alone. I was a little fool. You can never know the peace that has come to me from having you at hand. The fears, the terrors that possessed me before you came have all been dispelled in this last week that you have been my sentry in two senses."

He took the hand she held out to him, and looked down at her out of his grimy, disfigured face, an odd tenderness stirring him. He felt as might have felt a father towards his daughter—at least, so thought he then.

"Child," he answered her, "you overrate it. I have done no less than I could do, no more than any other would have done."

"Yet more than Florimond has done—and he my betrothed. A touch of fever was excuse enough to keep him at La Rochette, whilst the peril of death did not suffice to deter you from coming hither."

"You forget, mademoiselle, that, maybe, he does not know your circumstances."

"Maybe he does not," said she, with a half-sigh. Then she looked up into his face again. "I am sad at the thought of going, monsieur," she surprised him by saying.

"Sad?" he cried. Then he laughed. "But what can there be to sadden you?"

"This, monsieur: that after to-night it is odds I shall never see you more." She said it without hesitation and without coquetry, for her upbringing had been simple and natural in an atmosphere different far from that in which had been reared the courtly women he had known. "You will return to Paris and the great world, and I shall live out my life in this, little corner of Dauphiny. You will forget me in the bustle of your career, monsieur; but I shall always hold your memory very dear and very gratefully. You are the only friend I have ever known since my father died excepting Florimond, though it is so long since I have seen him, and he never came to me in times of stress as you have done."

"Mademoiselle," he answered, touched despite himself more touched than he could have believed possible to his callous, world-worn nature—"you make me very proud; you make me feel a little better than I am, for if I have earned your regard and friendship, there must be some good in old Garnache. Believe me, mademoiselle, I too shall not forget."

And thereafter they remained a spell in silence, she sitting by the window, gazing out into the bright October sky, he standing by her chair, thoughtfully considering her brown head so gracefully set upon her little shoulders. A feeling came to him that was odd and unusual; he sought to interpret it, and he supposed it to mean that he wished that at some time in the dim past he might have married some woman who would have borne him for daughter such a one as this.

CHAPTER XV. THE CONFERENCE

The matter that brought Monsieur de Tressan to Condillac—and brought him in most fearful haste—was the matter of the courier who had that day arrived at the chateau.

News of it had reached the ears of my Lord Seneschal. His mind had been a prey to uneasiness concerning this business of rebellion in which he had so rashly lent a hand, and he was anxious to know whence came this courier and what news he brought. But for all his haste he had paused—remembering it was the Marquise he went to visit—to don the gorgeous yellow suit with the hanging sleeves which he had had from Paris, and the crimson sash he had bought at Taillemant's, all in the very latest mode.

Thus arrayed, his wig well curled and a clump of it caught in ribbon of flame-coloured silk on the left side, his sword hanging from belt and carriages richly wrought with gold, and the general courtier-like effect rather marred by the heavy riding-boots which he would have liked to leave behind yet was constrained to wear, he presented himself before the Dowager, hiding his anxiety in a melting smile, and the latter in the profoundest of bows.

The graciousness of his reception overwhelmed him almost, for in his supreme vanity he lacked the wit to see that this cordiality might be dictated by no more than the need they had of him at Condillac. A lackey placed a great chair for him by the fire that he might warm himself after his evening ride, and the Dowager, having ordered lights, sat herself opposite him with the hearth between them.

He simpered awhile and toyed with trivialities of speech before he gave utterance to the matter that absorbed him. Then, at last, when they were alone, he loosed the question that was bubbling on his lips.

"I hear a courier came to Condillac to-day."

For answer she told him what he sought to learn, whence came that courier, and what the message that he brought.

"And so, Monsieur de Tressan," she ended, "my days at Condillac are numbered."

"Why so?" he asked, "since you say that Florimond has adopted towards you a friendly tone. Surely he would not drive his father's widow hence?"

She smiled at the fire in a dreamy, pensive manner.

"No," said she, "he would not drive me hence. He has offered me the shelter of Condillac for as long as it may pleasure me to make it my home."

"Excellent!" he exclaimed, rubbing his little fat hands and screwing the little features of his huge red face into the grotesque semblance of a smile. "What need to talk of going, then?"

"What need?" she echoed, in a voice dull and concentrated. "Do you ask that, Tressan? Do you think I should elect to live upon the charity of this man?"

For all that the Lord Seneschal may have been dull-witted, yet he had wit enough to penetrate to the very marrow of her meaning.

"You must hate Florimond very bitterly," said he. She shrugged her shoulders.

"I possess, I think, the faculty of feeling strongly. I can love well,

monsieur, and I can hate well. It is one or the other with me. And as cordially as I love my own son Marius, as cordially do I detest this coxcomb Florimond."

She expressed no reasons for her hatred of her late husband's elder son. Hers were not reasons that could easily be put into words. They were little reasons, trivial grains of offence which through long years had accumulated into a mountain. They had their beginning in the foolish grievance that had its birth with her own son, when she had realized that but for that rosy-cheeked, well-grown boy borne to the Marquis by his first wife, Marius would have been heir to Condillac. Her love of her own child and her ambitions for him, her keen desire to see him fill an exalted position in the world, caused her a thousand times a day to wish his half-brother dead. Yet Florimond had flourished and grown, and as he grew he manifested a character which, with all its imperfections, was more lovable than the nature of her own offspring. And their common father had never seen aught but the faults of Marius and the virtues of Florimond. She had resented this, and Marius had resented it; and Marius, having inherited with his mother's beauty his mother's arrogant, dominant spirit, had returned with insolence such admonitions as from time to time his father gave him, and thus the breach had grown. Later, since he could not be heir to Condillac, the Marquise's eyes, greedy of advancement for him, had fallen covetously upon the richer La Vauvraye, whose lord had then no son, whose heiress was a little girl.

By an alliance easy to compass, since the lords of Condillac and La Vauvraye were lifelong friends, Marius's fortunes might handsomely have been mended. Yet when she herself bore the suggestion of it to the Marquis, he had seized upon it, approved it, but adopted it for Florimond's benefit instead.

Thereafter war had raged fiercely in the family of Condillac—a war between the Marquis and Florimond on the one side, and the

Marquise and Marius on the other. And so bitterly was it waged that it was by the old Marquis's suggestion that at last Florimond had gone upon his travels to see the world and carry arms in foreign service.

Her hopes that he would take his death, as was a common thing when warring, rose high—so high as to become almost assurance, a thing to be reckoned with. Florimond would return no more, and her son should fill the place to which he was entitled by his beauty of person and the high mental gifts his doting mother saw in him.

Yet the months grew into years, and at long intervals full of hope for the Marquise news came of Florimond, and the news was ever that he was well and thriving, gathering honours and drinking deep of life.

And now, at last, when matters seemed to have been tumbled into her lap that she might dispose of them as she listed; now, when in her anxiety to see her son supplant his step-brother in the possession of La Vauvraye—if not, perhaps, in that of Condillac as well she had done a rashness which might end in making her and Marius outlaws, news came that this hated Florimond was at the door; tardily returned, yet returned in time to overthrow her schemes and to make her son the pauper that her husband's will had seemed to aim at rendering him.

Her mind skimmed lightly over all these matters, seeking somewhere some wrong that should stand out stark and glaring, upon which she might seize, and offer it to the Seneschal as an explanation of her hatred. But nowhere could she find the thing she sought. Her hatred had for foundation a material too impalpable to be fashioned into words. Tressan's voice aroused her from her thoughts.

"Have you laid no plans, madame?" he asked her. "It were surely a madness now to attempt to withstand the Marquis."

"The Marquis? Ah yes—Florimond." She sat forward out of the

shadows in which her great chair enveloped her, and let candle and firelight play about the matchless beauty of her perfect face. There was a flush upon it, the flush of battle; and she was about to tell the Seneschal that not while one stone of Condillac should stand upon another, not while a gasp of breath remained in her frail body, would she surrender. But she checked her rashness. Well might it be that in the end she should abandon such a purpose. Tressan was ugly as a toad, the most absurd, ridiculous bridegroom that ever led woman to the altar. Yet rumour ran that he was rich, and as a last resource, for the sake of his possessions she might bring herself to endure his signal shortcomings.

"I have taken no resolve as yet," said she, in a wistful voice. "I founded hopes upon Marius which Marius threatens to frustrate. I think I had best resign myself to the poverty of my Touraine home."

And then the Seneschal realized that the time was now. The opportunity he might have sought in vain was almost thrust upon him. In the spirit he blessed Florimond for returning so opportunely; in the flesh he rose from the chair and, without more ado, he cast himself upon his knees before the Dowager. He cast himself down, and the Dowager experienced a faint stirring of surprise that she heard no flop such as must attend the violent falling of so fat a body. But the next instant, realizing the purpose of his absurd posture, she shrank back with a faint gasp, and her face was mercifully blurred to his sight once more amid the shadows of her chair. Thus was he spared the look of utter loathing, of unconquerable, irrepressible disgust that leapt into her countenance.

His voice quivered with ridiculous emotion, his little fat red fingers trembled as he outheld them in a theatrical gesture of supplication.

"Never contemplate poverty, madame, until you have discarded me," he implored her. "Say but that you will, and you shall be lady of Tressan. All that I have would prove but poor adornment to a beauty

such as yours, and I should shrink from offering it you, were it not that, with it all, I can offer you the fondest heart in France. Marquise—Clotilde, I cast myself humbly at your feet. Do with me as you will. I love you."

By an effort she crushed down her loathing of him—a loathing that grew a hundredfold as she beheld him now transformed by his amorousness into the semblance almost of a satyr—and listened to his foolish rantings.

As Marquise de Condillac it hurt her pride to listen and not have him whipped for his audacity; as a woman it insulted her. Yet the Marquise and the woman she alike repressed. She would give him no answer—she could not, so near was she to fainting with disdain of him—yet must she give him hope against the time when, should all else fail, she might have to swallow the bitter draught he was now holding to her lips. So she temporized.

She controlled her voice into a tone of gentle sadness; she set a mask of sorrow upon her insolent face.

"Monsieur, monsieur," she sighed, and so far overcame her nausea as for an instant to touch his hand in a little gesture of caress, "you must not speak so to a widow of six months, nor must I listen."

The quivering grew in his hands and voice; but no longer did they shake through fear of a rebuff: they trembled now in the eager strength of the hope he gathered from her words. She was so beautiful, so peerless, so noble, so proud—and he so utterly unworthy—that naught but her plight had given him courage to utter his proposal. And she answered him in such terms!

"You give me hope, Marquise? If I come again—?"

She sighed, and her face, which was once more within the light, showed a look of sad inquiry.

"If I thought that what you have said, you have said out of pity, because you fear lest my necessities should hurt me, I could give you no hope at all. I have my pride, mon ami. But if what you have said you would still have said though I had continued mistress of Condillac, then, Tressan, you may repeat it to me hereafter, at a season when I may listen."

His joy welled up and overflowed in him as overflows a river in time of spate.

He bent forward, caught her hand, and bore it to his lips.

"Clotilde!" he cried, in a smothered voice; then the door opened, and Marius stepped into the long chamber.

At the creaking sound of the opening door the Seneschal bestirred himself to rise. Even the very young care not so to be surprised, how much less, then, a man well past the prime of life? He came up laboriously—the more laboriously by virtue of his very efforts to show himself still nimble in his mistress's eyes. Upon the intruder he turned a crimson, furious face, perspiration gleaming like varnish on brow and nose. At sight of Marius, who stood arrested, scowling villainously upon the pair, the fire died suddenly from his glance.

"Ah, my dear Marius," said he, with a flourish and an air of being mightily at his ease. But the young man's eyes went over and beyond him to rest in a look of scrutiny upon his mother. She had risen too, and he had been in time to see the startled manner of her rising. In her cheeks there was a guilty flush, but her eyes boldly met and threw back her son's regard.

Marius came slowly down the room, and no word was spoken. The Seneschal cleared his throat with noisy nervousness. Madame stood hand on hip, the flush fading slowly, her glance resuming its habitual lazy insolence. By the fire Marius paused and kicked the logs into a

blaze, regardless of the delicate fabric of his rosetted shoes.

"Monsieur le Seneschal," said madame calmly, "came to see us in the matter of the courier."

"Ah!" said Marius, with an insolent lifting of his brows and a sidelong look at Tressan; and Tressan registered in his heart a vow that when he should have come to wed the mother, he would not forget to take payment for that glance from her pert son.

"Monsieur le Comte will remain and sup with us before riding back to Grenoble," she added.

"Ah!" said he again, in the same tone. And that for the moment was all he said. He remained by the fire, standing between them where he had planted himself in the flesh, as if to symbolize the attitude he intended in the spirit.

But one chance he had, before supper was laid, of a word alone with his mother, in her own closet.

"Madame," he said, his sternness mingling with alarm, "are you mad that you encourage the suit of this hedgehog Tressan?"

She looked him up and down with a deliberate eye, her lip curling a little.

"Surely, Marius, it is my own concern."

"Not so," he answered her, and his grasp fastened almost viciously on her wrist. "I think that it is mine as well. Mother, bethink you," and his tone changed to an imploring key, "bethink you what you would do! Would you—you—mate with such a thing as that?"

His emphasis of the pronoun was very eloquent. Not in all the words of the French language could he have told her better how high he placed her in his thoughts, how utterly she must fall, how unutterably

be soiled by an alliance with Tressan.

"I had hoped you would have saved me from it, Marius," she answered him, her eyes seeming to gaze down into the depths of his. "At La Vauvraye I had hoped to live out my widowhood in tranquil dignity. But—" She let her arms fall sharply to her sides, and uttered a little sneering laugh.

"But, mother," he cried, "between the dignity of La Vauvraye and the indignity of Tressan, surely there is some middle course?"

"Aye," she answered scornfully, "starvation on a dunghill in Touraine—or something near akin to it, for which I have no stomach."

He released her wrist and stood with bent head, clenching and unclenching his long white hands, and she watched him, watching in him the working of his proud and stubborn spirit.

"Mother," he cried at last, and the word sounded absurd between them, by so little did he seem the younger of the twain, "mother, you shall not do it you must not!"

"You leave me little alternative—alas!" sighed she. "Had you been more adroit you had been wed by now, Marius, and the future would give us no concern. As it is, Florimond comes home, and we—" She spread her hands and thrust out her nether lip in a grimace that was almost ugly. Then: "Come," she said briskly. "Supper is laid, and my Lord Seneschal will be awaiting us."

And before he could reply she had swept past him and taken her way below. He followed gloomily, and in gloom sat he at table, never heeding the reckless gaiety of the Seneschal and the forced mirth of the Marquise. He well understood the sort of tacit bargain that his mother had made with him. She had seen her advantage in his loathing of the proposed union with Tressan, and she had used it to the full. Either he must compel Valerie to wed him this side of

Saturday or resign himself to see his mother—his beautiful, peerless mother—married to this skin of lard that called itself a man.

Living, he had never entertained for his father a son's respect, nor, dead, did he now reverence his memory as becomes a son. But in that hour, as he sat at table, facing this gross wooer of his mother's, his eyes were raised to the portrait of the florid-visaged haughty Marquis de Condillac, where it looked down upon them from the panelled wall, and from his soul he offered up to that portrait of his dead sire an apology for the successor whom his widow destined him.

He ate little, but drank great draughts, as men will when their mood is sullen and dejected, and the heat of the wine, warming his veins and lifting from him some of the gloom that had settled over him, lent him anon a certain recklessness very different from the manner of his sober moments.

Chancing suddenly to raise his eyes from the cup into which he had been gazing, absorbed as gazes a seer into his crystal, he caught on the Seneschal's lips so odious a smile, in the man's eyes so greedy, hateful a leer as he bent them on the Marquise, that he had much ado not to alter the expression of that flabby face by hurling at it the cup he held.

He curbed himself; he smiled sardonically upon the pair; and in that moment he swore that be the cost what it might, he would frustrate the union of those two. His thoughts flew to Valerie, and the road they took was fouled with the mud of ugly deeds. A despair, grim at first, then mocking, took possession of him. He loved Valerie to distraction. Loved her for herself, apart from all worldly advantages that must accrue to him from an alliance with her. His mother saw in that projected marriage no more than the acquisition of the lands of La Vauvraye, and she may even have thought that he himself saw no more. In that she was wrong; but because of it she may have been

justified of her impatience with him at the tardiness, the very clumsiness with which he urged his suit. How was she to know that it was just the sincerity of his passion made him clumsy? For like many another, normally glib, self-assured, and graceful, Marius grew halting, shy, and clumsy only where he loved.

But in the despair that took him now the quality of his passion seemed to change. Partly it was the wine, partly the sight of this other lover—of whom there must be an end—whose very glance seemed to him an insult to his mother. His imagination had taken fire that night, and it had ripened him for any villainy. The Seneschal and the wine, between them, had opened the floodgates of all that was evil in his nature, and that evil thundered out in a great torrent that bid fair to sweep all before it.

And suddenly, unexpectedly for the others, who were by now resigned to his moody silence, the evil found expression. The Marquise had spoken of something—something of slight importance—that must be done before Florimond returned. Abruptly Marius swung round in his seat to face his mother. "Must this Florimond return?" he asked, and for all that he uttered no more words, so ample in their expression were those four that he had uttered and the tone of them, that his meaning left little work to the imagination.

Madame turned to stare at him, surprise ineffable in her glance—not at the thing that he suggested, but at the abruptness with which the suggestion came. The cynical, sneering tone rang in her ears after the words were spoken, and she looked in his face for a confirmation of their full purport.

She observed the wine-flush on his cheek, the wine-glitter in his eye, and she remarked the slight smile on his lips and the cynical assumption of nonchalance with which he fingered the jewel in his ear as he returned her gaze. She beheld now in her son a man more purposeful than she had ever known before.

A tense silence had followed his words, and the Lord Seneschal gaped at him, some of the colour fading from his plethoric countenance, suspecting as he did the true drift of Marius's suggestion. At last it was madame who spoke—very softly, with a narrowing of the eyes.

"Call Fortunio," was all she said, but Marius understood full well the purpose for which she would have Fortunio called.

With a half-smile he rose, and going to the door he bade his page who was idling in the anteroom go summon the captain. Then he paced slowly back, not to the place he had lately occupied at table, but to the hearth, where he took his stand with his shoulders squared to the overmantel.

Fortunio came, fair-haired and fresh-complexioned as a babe, his supple, not ungraceful figure tawdrily clad in showy clothes of poor material the worse for hard usage and spilt wine. The Countess bade him sit, and with her own hands she poured a cup of Anjou for him.

In some wonder, and, for all his ordinary self-possession, with a little awkwardness, the captain did her bidding, and with an apologetic air he took the seat she offered him.

He drank this wine, and here was a spell of silence till Marius, grown impatient, brutally put the thing for which the Marquise sought delicate words.

"We have sent for you, Fortunio," said he, in a blustering tone, "to inquire of you what price you'd ask to cut the throat of my brother, the Marquis de Condillac."

The Seneschal sank back in his chair with a gasp. The captain, a frown between his frank-seeming, wide-set eyes, started round to look at the boy. The business was by no means too strong for the

ruffler's stomach, but the words in which it was conveyed to him most emphatically were.

"Monsieur de Condillac," said he, with an odd assumption of dignity, "I think you have mistaken your man. I am a soldier, not a cut-throat."

"But yes," the Marquise soothed him, throwing herself instantly into the breach, and laying a long, slender hand upon the frayed green velvet of the captain's sleeve. "What my son means and what he says are vastly different things."

"It will sorely tax your wits, madame," laughed Marius brutally, "to make clear that difference."

And then the Seneschal nervously cleared his throat and muttering that it waxed late and he must be riding home, made shift to rise. Him, too, the Marquise at once subdued. She was not minded that he should go just yet. It might be useful to her hereafter to have had him present at this conference, into which she meant to draw him until she should have made him one with them, a party to their guilt. For the task she needed not over many words: just one or two and a melting glance or so, and the rebellion in his bosom was quelled at once.

But with the captain her wiles were not so readily successful. He had no hopes of winning her to wife—haply no desire, since he was not a man of very great ambitions. On the other hand, he had against him the very worst record in France, and for all that he might embark upon this business under the auspices of the Lord Seneschal himself, he knew not how far the Lord Seneschal might dare to go thereafter to save him from a hanging, should it come to that.

He said as much in words. In a business of this kind, he knew from experience, the more difficulties he advanced, the better a bargain he drove in the end; and if he was to be persuaded to risk his neck in

this, he should want good payment. But even for good payment on this occasion he was none too sure as yet that he would let himself be persuaded.

"Monsieur Fortunio," the Marquise said, very softly, "heed not Monsieur Marius's words. Attend to me. The Marquis de Condillac, as no doubt you will have learned for yourself, is lying at La Rochette. Now it happens that he is noxious to us—let the reasons be what they may. We need a friend to put him out of our way. Will you be that friend?"

"You will observe," sneered Marius, "how wide a difference there is between what the Marquise suggests and my own frank question of what price you would take to cut my brother's throat."

"I observe no difference, which is what you would say," Fortunio answered truculently, his head well back, his brown eyes resentful of offence—for none can be so resentful of imputed villainy as your villain who is thorough-paced. "And," he concluded, "I return you the same answer, madame—that I am no cut-throat."

She repressed her anger at Marius's sneering interference, and made a little gesture of dismay with her eloquent white hands.

"But we do not ask you to cut a throat."

"I have heard amiss, then," said he, his insolence abating nothing.

"You have heard aright, but you have understood amiss. There are other ways of doing these things. If it were but the cutting of a throat, should we have sent for you? There are a dozen in the garrison would have sufficed for our purpose."

"What is it, then, you need?" quoth he.

"We want an affair contrived with all decency. The Marquis is at the Sanglier Noir at La Rochette. You can have no difficulty in finding him,

and having found him, less difficulty still in giving or provoking insult."

"Excellent," murmured Marius from the background. "It is such an enterprise as should please a ready swordsman of your calibre, Fortunio."

"A duel?" quoth the fellow, and his insolence went out of him, thrust out by sheer dismay; his mouth fell open. A duel was another affair altogether. "But, Sangdieu! what if he should slay me? Have you thought of that?"

"Slay you?" cried the Marquise, her eyes resting on his face with an expression as of wonder at such a question. "You jest, Fortunio."

"And he with the fever," put in Marius, sneering.

"Ah!" muttered Fortunio. "He has the fever? The fever is something. But—but—accidents will happen."

"Florimond was ever an indifferent swordsman," murmured Marius dreamily, as if communing with himself.

The captain wheeled upon him once more.

"Why, then, Monsieur Marius," said he, "since that is so and you are skilled—as skilled as am I, or more—and he has a fever, where is the need to hire me to the task?"

"Where?" echoed Marius. "What affair may that be of yours? We ask you to name a price on which you will do this thing. Have done with counter-questions."

Marius was skilled with the foils, as Fortunio said, but he cared not for unbaited steel, and he was conscious of it, so that the captain's half-sneer had touched him on the raw. But he was foolish to take that tone in answer. There was a truculent, Southern pride in the ruffler which sprang immediately into life and which naught that they could

say thereafter would stamp out.

"Must I say again that you mistake your man?" was his retort, and as he spoke he rose, as though to signify that the subject wearied him and that his remaining to pursue it must be idle. "I am not of those to whom you can say: 'I need such an one killed, name me the price at which you'll be his butcher.'"

The Marquise wrung her hands in pretty mimicry of despair, and poured out soothing words, as one might pour oil upon stormy waters. The Seneschal sat in stolid silence, a half-scared spectator of this odd scene, what time the Marquise talked and talked until she had brought Fortunio back to some measure of subjection.

Such reasoning as she made use of she climaxed by an offer of no less a sum than a hundred pistoles. The captain licked his lips and pulled at his mustachios. For all his vaunted scorn of being a butcher at a price, now that he heard the price he seemed not half so scornful.

"Tell me again the thing that you need doing and the manner of it," said he, as one who was moved to reconsider. She told him, and when she had done he made a compromise.

"If I go upon this business, madame, I go not alone."

"Oh, as for that," said Marius, "it shall be as you will. Take what men you want with you."

"And hang with them afterwards, maybe," he sneered, his insolence returning. "The hundred pistoles would avail me little then. Look you, Monsieur de Condillac, and you, madame, if I go, I'll need to take with me a better hostage than the whole garrison of this place. I'll need for shield some one who will see to it that he is not hurt himself, just as I shall see to it that he is hurt before I am."

"What do you mean? Speak out, Fortunio," the Marquise bade him.

"I mean, madame, that I will go, not to do this thing, but to stand by and render help if help be needed. Let Monsieur de Condillac go, and I will go with him, and I will undertake to see to it that he returns unhurt and that we leave the other stark."

Both started, and the Seneschal leaned heavily upon the table. He was not, with all his faults, a man of blood, and this talk of butchery turned him sick and faint.

Vainly now did the Marquise seek to alter the captain's resolution; but in this she received a sudden check from Marius himself. He cut in upon her arguments to ask the captain:

"How can you promise so much? Do you mean that you and I must fall upon him? You forget that he will have men about him. A duel is one thing, a rough-and-tumble another, and we shall fare none so well in this, I'm thinking."

The captain closed one eye, and a leer of subtle cunning overspread his face.

"I've thought of that," said he. "Neither a duel nor a rough-and-tumble do I propose, but something between the two; something that shall seem a duel yet be a rough-and-tumble."

"Explain yourself."

"What further explanation does it ask? We come upon Monsieur le Marquis where his men are not. We penetrate, let us say, into his chamber. I turn the key in the door. We are alone with him and you provoke him. He is angry, and must fight you there and then. I am your friend; I must fill the office of second for both sides. You engage, and I stand aside and let you fight it out. You say he is indifferently skilled with the sword, and, in addition, that he has a fever. Thus you should contrive to put your steel through him, and a duel it will have been. But if by luck or skill he should have you in danger, I shall be at hand to

fllick in my sword at the right moment and make an opening through which you may send yours home."

"Believe me it were better—" began the Dowager. But Marius, who of a sudden was much taken with the notion, again broke in.

"Are you to be depended upon to make no mistake, Fortunio?"

"Per Bacco!" swore the ruffler. "A mistake must cost me a hundred pistoles. I think you may depend upon me there. If I err at all, it will be on the side of eagerness to see you make short work of him. You have my answer now, monsieur. If we talk all night, you shall not move me further. But if my proposal suits you, I am your man."

"And I yours, Fortunio," answered Marius, and there was a ring almost of exultation in his voice.

The Dowager looked from one to the other, as if she were weighing the men and satisfying herself that Marius ran no risk. She put a question or two to her son, another to the captain; then, seeming satisfied with what had been agreed, she nodded her head and told them they had best be stirring with the dawn.

"You will have light enough by half-past six. Do not delay later in taking the road. And see that you are back here by nightfall; I shall be anxious till you are returned."

She poured wine again for the captain, and Marius coming up to the table filled himself a glass, which he tossed off. The Marquise was speaking to Tressan.

"Will you not drink to the success of the venture?" she asked him, in a coaxing tone, her eyes upon his own. "I think we are like to see the end of our troubles now, monsieur, and Marius shall be lord both of Condillac and La Vauvraye."

And the gross, foolish Seneschal, under the spell of her magnificent

eyes, slowly raised his cup to his lips and drank to the success of that murderous business. Marius stood still, a frown between his eyes haled thither by the mention of La Vauvraye. He might be winning it, as his mother said, but he would have preferred to have won it differently. Then the frown was smoothed away; a sardonic smile replaced it; another cup of wine he poured himself. Then, without word to any there, he turned on his heel and went from the room, a trifle unsteady in his gait, yet with such lines of purposefulness in the way he bore himself that the three of them stared after him in dull surprise.

CHAPTER XVI. THE UNEXPECTED

In her apartments in the Northern Tower Valerie had supped, and—to spare Monsieur de Garnache the full indignity of that part of the offices he was charged with—she had herself removed the cloth and set the things in the guard-room, where they might lie till morning. When that was done—and despite her protests, Garnache had insisted upon lending a hand the Parisian reminded her that it was already after nine, and urged her to make such preparations as incumbered her for their journey.

"My preparations are soon made," she assured him with a smile. "I need but what I may carry in a cloak."

They fell to talking of their impending flight, and they laughed together at the discomfiture that would be the Dowager's and her son's when, in the morning, they came to discover the empty cage. From that they passed on to talk of Valerie herself, of her earlier life at La Vauvraye, and later the conversation shifted to Garnache, and she questioned him touching the warring he had seen in early youth, and afterwards asked him for particulars of Paris—that wonderful city which to her mind was the only earthly parallel of Paradise—and of the life at Court.

Thus in intimate talk did they while away the time of waiting, and in the hour that sped they came, perhaps, to know more of each other than they had done hitherto. Intimate, indeed, had they unconsciously become already. Their singular position, locked together in that tower—a position utterly impossible under any but the conditions that

attended it—had conduced to that good-fellowship, whilst the girl's trust and dependence upon the man, the man's observance of that trust, and his determination to show her that it had not been misplaced, had done the rest.

But to-night they seemed to have drawn nearer in spirit to each other, and that, maybe, it was that prompted Valerie to sigh, and in her sweet, unthinking innocence to say again:

"I am truly sorry, Monsieur de Garnache, that our sojourn here is coming to an end."

He was no coxcomb, and he set no false value on the words. He laughed for answer, as he rejoined:

"Not so am I, mademoiselle. Nor shall I know peace of mind again until this ill-omened chateau is a good three leagues or so behind us. Sh! What was that?"

He came instantly to his feet, his face intent and serious. He had been sitting at his ease in an armchair, over the back of which he had tossed the baldric from which his sword depended. The clang of the heavy door below, striking the wall as it was pushed open, had reached his ears.

"Can it be time already?" asked mademoiselle; yet a panic took her, and she blanched a little.

He shook his head.

"Impossible," said he; "it is not more than ten o'clock. Unless that fool Arsenio has blundered—" He stopped. "Sh!" he whispered. "Some one is coming here."

And suddenly he realized the peril that might lie in being found thus in her company. It alarmed him more than did the visit itself, so unusual at this hour. He saw that he had not time to reach the guard-

room; he would be caught in the act of coming forth, and that might be interpreted by the Dowager or her son—if it should happen to be one or the other of them—as a hurried act of flight such as guilt might prompt. Perhaps he exaggerated the risk; but their fortunes at Condillac had reached a point where they must not be jeopardized by any chance however slight.

"To your chamber, mademoiselle," he whispered fearfully, and he pointed to the door of the inner room. "Lock yourself in. Quick! Sh!" And he signed frantically to her to go silently.

Swift and quietly as a mouse she glided from the room and softly closed the door of her chamber and turned the key in a lock, which Garnache had had the foresight to keep well oiled. He breathed more freely when it was done.

A step sounded in the guard-room. He sank without a rustle into the chair from which he had risen, rested his head against the back of it, closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and dissembled sleep.

The steps came swiftly across the guard-room floor, soft, as of one lightly shod; and Garnache wondered was it the mother or the son, just as he wondered what this ill-come visitor might be seeking.

The door of the antechamber was pushed gently open it had stood ajar—and under the lintel appeared the slender figure of Marius, still in his brown velvet suit as Garnache last had seen him. He paused a moment to peer into the chamber. Then he stepped forward, frowning to behold "Battista" so cosily ensconced.

"Ola there!" he cried, and kicked the sentry's outstretched legs, the more speedily to wake him. "Is this the watch you keep?"

Garnache opened his eyes and stared a second dully at the disturber of his feigned slumbers. Then, as if being more fully awakened he recognized his master, he heaved himself suddenly to

his feet and bowed.

"Is this the watch you keep?" quoth Marius again, and Garnache, scanning the youth's face with foolishly smiling eyes, noted the flush on his cheek, the odd glitter in his handsome eyes, and even caught a whiff of wine upon his breath. Alarm grew in Garnache's mind, but his face maintained its foolish vacancy, its inane smile. He bowed again and, with a wave of the hands towards the inner chamber,

"La damigella a la," said he.

For all that Marius had no Italian he understood the drift of the words, assisted as they were by the man's expressive gesture. He sneered cruelly.

"It would be an ugly thing for you, my ugly friend, if she were not," he answered. "Away with you. I shall call you when I need you." And he pointed to the door.

Garnache experienced some dismay, some fear even. He plied his wits, and he determined that he had best seem to apprehend from his gestures Marius's meaning; but apprehend it in part only, and go no further than the other side of that door.

He bowed, therefore, for the third time, and with another of his foolish grins he shuffled out of the chamber, pulling the door after him, so that Marius should not see how near at hand he stayed.

Marius, without further heeding him, stepped to mademoiselle's door and rapped on a panel with brisk knuckles.

"Who is there?" she inquired from within.

"It is I—Marius. Open, I have something I must say to you."

"Will it not keep till morning?"

"I shall be gone by then," he answered impatiently, "and much depends upon my seeing you ere I go. So open. Come!"

There followed a pause, and Garnache in the outer room set his teeth and prayed she might not anger Marius. He must be handled skillfully, lest their flight should be frustrated at the last moment. He prayed, too, that there might be no need for his intervention. That would indeed be the end of all—a shipwreck within sight of harbour. He promised himself that he would not lightly intervene. For the rest this news of Marius's intended departure filled him with a desire to know something of the journey on which he was bound:

Slowly mademoiselle's door opened. White and timid she appeared.

"What do you want, Marius?"

"Now and always and above all things the sight of you, Valerie," said he, and the flushed cheek, the glittering eye, and wine-laden breath were as plain to her as they had been to Garnache, and they filled her with a deeper terror. Nevertheless she came forth at his bidding.

"I see that you were not yet abed," said he. "It is as well. We must have a talk." He set a chair for her and begged her to be seated; then he perched himself on the table, his hands gripping the edges of it on either side of him, and he turned his eyes upon her.

"Valerie," he said slowly, "the Marquis de Condillac, my brother, is at La Rochette."

"He is coming home!" she cried, clasping her hands and feigning surprise in word and glance.

Marius shook his head and smiled grimly.

"No," said he. "He is not coming home. That is—not unless you

wish it."

"Not unless I wish it? But naturally I wish it!"

"Then, Valerie, if you would have what you wish, so must I. If Florimond is ever to come to Condillac again, you must be my wife."

He leaned towards her now, supported by his elbow, so that his face was close to hers, a deeper flush upon it, a brighter glitter in his black eyes, his vinous breath enveloping and suffocating her. She shrank back, her hands locking themselves one in the other till the knuckles showed white.

"What—what is it you mean?" she faltered.

"No more than I have said; no less. If you love him well enough to sacrifice yourself," and his lips curled sardonically at the word, "then marry me and save him from his doom."

"What doom?" Her voice came mechanically, her lips seeming scarce to move.

He swung down from the table and stood before her.

"I will tell you," he said, in a voice very full of promise. "I love you, Valerie, above all else on earth or, I think, in heaven; and I'll not yield you to him. Say 'No' to me now, and at daybreak I start for La Rochette to win you from him at point of sword."

Despite her fears she could not repress a little smile of scorn.

"Is that all?" said she. "Why, if you are so rash, it is yourself, assuredly, will be slain."

He smiled tranquilly at that reflection upon his courage and his skill.

"So might it befall if I went alone," said he. She understood. Her eyes dilated with horror, with loathing of him. The angry words that

sprang to her lips were not to be denied.

"You cur, you cowardly assassin!" she blazed at him. "I might have guessed that in some such cutthroat manner would your vaunt of winning me at the sword-point be accomplished."

She watched the colour fade from his cheeks, and the ugly, livid hue that spread in its room to his very lips. Yet it did not daunt her. She was on her feet, confronting him ere he had time to speak again. Her eyes flashed, and her arm pointed quivering to the door.

"Go!" she bade him, her voice harsh for once. "Out of my sight! Go! Do your worst, so that you leave me. I'll hold no traffic with you."

"Will you not?" said he, through setting teeth, and suddenly he caught the wrist of that outstretched arm. But she saw nothing of immediate danger. The only danger that she knew was the danger that threatened Florimond, and little did that matter since at midnight she was to leave Condillac to reach La Rochette in time to warn her betrothed. The knowledge gave her confidence and an added courage.

"You have offered me your bargain," she told him. "You have named your price and you have heard my refusal. Now go."

"Not yet awhile," said he, in a voice so odiously sweet that Garnache caught his breath.

He drew her towards him. Despite her wild struggles he held her fast against his breast. Do what she would, he rained his hot kisses on her face and hair, till at last, freeing a hand, she smote him with all her might across the face.

He let her go then. He fell back with an oath, a patch of fingermarks showing red on his white countenance.

"That blow has killed Florimond de Condillac," he told her viciously.

"He dies at noon to-morrow. Ponder it, my pretty."

"I care not what you do so that you leave me," she answered defiantly, restraining by a brave effort the tears of angry distress that welled up from her stricken heart. And no less stricken, no less angry was Garnache where he listened. It was by an effort that he had restrained himself from bursting in upon them when Marius had seized her. The reflection that were he to do so all would irretrievably be ruined alone had stayed him.

Marius eyed the girl a moment, his face distorted by the rage that was in him.

"By God!" he swore, "if I cannot have your love, I'll give you cause enough to hate me."

"Already have you done that most thoroughly," said she. And Garnache cursed this pertness of hers which was serving to dare him on.

The next moment there broke from her a startled cry. Marius had seized her again and was crushing her frail body in his arms.

"I shall kiss your lips before I go, ma mie," said he, his voice thick now with a passion that was not all of anger. And then, while he still struggled to have his way with her, a pair of arms took him about the waist like hoops of steel.

In his surprise he let her free, and in that moment he was swung back and round and cast a good six paces down the room.

He came to a standstill by the table, at which he clutched to save himself from falling, and turned bewildered, furious eyes upon "Battista," by whom he now dimly realized that he had been assailed.

Garnache's senses had all left him in that moment when Valerie

had cried out. He cast discretion to the winds; reason went out of him, and only blind anger remained to drive him into immediate action. And as suddenly as that flood of rage had leaped, as suddenly did it ebb now that he found himself face to face with the outraged Condillac and began to understand the magnitude of the folly he had committed.

Everything was lost now, utterly and irretrievably—lost as a dozen other fine emprises had been by his sudden and ungoverned frenzy. God! What a fool he was! What a cursed, drivelling fool! What, after all, was a kiss or two, compared with all the evil that might now result from his interference? Haply Marius would have taken them and departed, and at midnight they would have been free to go from Condillac.

The future would not have been lacking in opportunities to seek out and kill Marius for that insult.

Why could he not have left the matter to the future? But now, with Florimond to be murdered on the morrow at La Rochette, himself likely to be murdered within the hour at Condillac, Valerie was at their mercy utterly.

Wildly and vainly did he strive even then to cover up the foolish thing that he had done. He bowed apologetically to Marius; he waved his hands and filled the air with Italian phrases, frenziedly uttered, as if by the very vigour of them he sought to drive explanation into his master's brain. Marius watched and listened, but his rage nowise abated; it grew, instead, as if that farrago of a language he did not understand were but an added insult. An oath was all he uttered. Then he swung round and caught Garnache's sword from the chair beside him, where it still rested, and Garnache in that moment cursed the oversight. Whipping the long, keen blade from its sheath, Marius bore down upon the rash meddler.

"Par Dieu!" he swore between his teeth. "We'll see the colour of your dirty blood, you that lay hands upon a gentleman."

But before he could send home the weapon, before Garnache could move to defend himself, Valerie had slipped between them. Marius looked into her white, determined face, and was smitten with surprise. What was this hind to her that she should interfere at the risk of taking the sword herself?

Then a slow smile spread upon his face. He was smarting still under her disdain and resistance, as well as under a certain sense of the discomfiture this fellow had put upon him. He saw a way to hurt her, to abase her pride, and cut her to the very soul with shame.

"You are singularly concerned in this man's life," said he, an odious undercurrent of meaning in his voice.

"I would not have you murder him," she answered, "for doing no more than madame your mother bade him."

"I make no doubt he has proved a very excellent guard," he sneered.

Even now all might have been well. With that insult Marius might consider that he had taken payment for the discomfiture he had suffered. He might have bethought him that, perhaps, as she said, "Battista" had done no more than observe the orders he had received—a trifle excessively, maybe, yet faithfully nevertheless. Thinking thus, he might even have been content to go his ways and take his fill of vengeance by slaying Florimond upon the morrow. But Garnache's rash temper, rising anew, tore that last flimsy chance to shreds.

The insult that mademoiselle might overlook might even not have fully understood—set him afire with indignation for her sake. He forgot his role, forgot even that he had no French.

"Mademoiselle," he cried, and she gasped in her affright at this ruinous indiscretion, "I beg that you will stand aside." His voice was low and threatening, but his words were woefully distinct.

"Par la mort Dieu!" swore Marius, taken utterly aback. "What may your name be—you who hitherto have had no French?"

Almost thrusting mademoiselle aside, Garnache stood out to face him, the flush of hot anger showing through the dye on his cheeks.

"My name," said he, "is Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache, and my business now to make an end of one at least of this obscene brood of Condillac."

And, without more ado, he caught up a chair and held it before him in readiness to receive the other's onslaught.

But Marius hung back an instant—at first in sheer surprise, later in fear. He had some knowledge of the fellow's methods. Even the sword he wielded gave him little confidence opposed to Garnache with a chair. He must have help. His eyes sought the door, measuring the distance. Ere he could reach it Garnache would cut him off. There was nothing for it but to attempt to drive the Parisian back. And so with a sudden rush he advanced to the attack. Garnache fell back and raised his chair, and in that instant mademoiselle once more intervened between them.

"Stand aside, mademoiselle," cried Garnache, who now, grown cool, as was his way when once he was engaged, saw clearly through the purpose formed by Marius. "Stand aside, or we shall have him giving the alarm."

He leapt clear of her to stop Marius's sudden rush for the door. On the very threshold the young man was forced to turn and defend himself, lest his brains be dashed out by that ponderous weapon Garnache was handling with a rare facility. But the mischief was done,

in that he had reached the threshold. Backing, he defended himself and gained the anteroom. Garnache followed, but the clumsy chair was defensive rather than offensive, and Marius's sword meanwhile darted above it and below it, forcing him to keep a certain distance.

And now Marius raised his voice and shouted with all the power of his lungs:

"To me! To me! Fortunio! Abdon! To me, you dogs! I am beset."

From the courtyard below rose an echo of his words, repeated in a shout by the sentinel, who had overheard them, and they caught the swift fall of the fellow's feet as he ran for help. Furious, picturing to himself how the alarm would spread like a conflagration through the chateau, cursing his headstrong folly yet determined that Marius at least should not escape him, Garnache put forth his energies to hinder him from gaining the door that opened on to the stairs. From the doorway of the antechamber mademoiselle, with a white face and terrified eyes, watched the unequal combat and heard the shouts for help. Anon despair might overwhelm her at the thought of how they had lost their opportunity of escaping; but for the present she had no thought save for the life of that brave man who was defending himself with an unwieldy chair.

Garnache leapt suddenly aside to take his opponent in the flank and thus turn him from his backward progress towards the outer door. The manoeuvre succeeded, and gradually, always defending himself, Garnache circled farther round him until he was between Marius and the threshold.

And now there came a sound of running feet on the uneven stones of the courtyard. Light gleamed on the staircase, and breathless voices were wafted up to the two men. Garnache bethought him that his last hour was assuredly at hand. Well, if he must take his death, he might as well take it here upon Marius's sword as upon another's. So

he would risk it for the sake of leaving upon Marius some token by which he might remember him. He swung his chair aloft, uncovering himself for a second. The young man's sword darted in like a shaft of light. Nimbly Garnache stepped aside to avoid it, and moved nearer his opponent. Down crashed the chair, and down went Marius, stunned and bleeding, under its terrific blow. The sword clattered from his hand and rolled, with a pendulum-like movement, to the feet of Garnache.

The Parisian flung aside his chair and stooped to seize that very welcome blade. He rose, grasping the hilt and gathering confidence from the touch of that excellently balanced weapon, and he swung round even as Fortunio and two of his braves appeared in the doorway.

CHAPTER XVII. HOW MONSIEUR DE GARNACHE LEFT CONDILLAC

Never was there a man with a better stomach for a fight than Martin de Garnache, nor did he stop to consider that here his appetite in that direction was likely to be indulged to a surfeit. The sight of those three men opposing him, swords drawn and Fortunio armed in addition with a dagger, drove from his mind every other thought, every other consideration but that of the impending battle.

He fell on guard to receive their onslaught, his eyes alert, his lips tight set, his knees like springs of steel, slightly flexed to support his well-poised body.

But they paused a moment in the extremity of their surprise, and Fortunio called to him in Italian to know the meaning of this attitude of his as well as that of Marius, who lay huddled where he had fallen.

Garnache, reckless now, disdaining further subterfuge nor seeking to have recourse to subtleties that could avail him nothing, retorted in French with the announcement of his true name. At that, perceiving that here was some deep treachery at work, they hesitated no longer.

Led by Fortunio they attacked him, and the din they made in the next few minutes with their heavy breathing, their frequent oaths, their stamping and springing this way and that, and, ringing above all, the clash and clatter of sword on sword, filled the chamber and could be heard in the courtyard below.

Minutes sped, yet they gained no advantage on this single man; not one, but a dozen swords did he appear to wield, so rapid were his passes, so ubiquitous his point. Had he but stood his ground there might have been a speedy end to him, but he retreated slowly towards the door of the antechamber. Valerie still stood there, watching with fearful eyes and bated breath that tremendous struggle which at any moment she expected to see terminate in the death of her only friend.

In her way she was helping Garnache, though she little realized it. The six tapers in the candle-branch she held aloft afforded the only light for that stormy scene, and that light was in the eyes of Garnache's assailants, showing him their faces yet leaving his own in shadow.

He fell back steadily towards that door. He could not see it; but there was not the need. He knew that it was in a direct line with the one that opened upon the stairs, and by the latter he steered his backward course. His aim was to gain the antechamber, although they guessed it not, thinking that he did but retreat through inability to stand his ground. His reasons were that here in this guardroom the best he could do would be to put his back to the wall, where he might pick off one or two before they made an end of him. The place was too bare to suit his urgent, fearful need. Within the inner room there was furniture to spare, with which he might contrive to hamper his opponents and give them such a lusty fight as would live in the memory of those who might survive it for as long as they should chance to live thereafter.

He had no thought of perishing himself, although, to any less concerned, his death, sooner or later, must seem inevitable—the only possible conclusion to this affray, taken as he was. His mind was concerned only with this fight; his business to kill, and not himself to be slain. He knew that presently others would come to support these

three. Already, perhaps, they were on their way, and he husbanded his strength against their coming. He was proudly conscious of his own superior skill, for he had studied the art of fence in Italy—its home—during his earlier years, and there was no trick of sword-play with which he was not acquainted, no ruse of service in a rough-and-tumble in which he was unversed. He was proudly conscious, too, of his supple strength, his endurance, and his great length of reach, and upon all these he counted to help him make a decent fight.

Valerie, watching him, guessed his purpose to be the gaining of the inner chamber, the crossing of the threshold on which she was standing. She drew back a pace or two, almost mechanically, to give him room. The movement went near to costing him his life. The light no longer falling so pitilessly upon Fortunio's eyes, the captain saw more clearly than hitherto, and shot a swift, deadly stroke straight at the region of Garnache's heart. The Parisian leapt back when it was within an inch of his breast; one of the braves followed up, springing a pace in advance of his companions and lengthening his arm in a powerful lunge. Garnache caught the blade almost on his hilt, and by the slightest turn of the wrist made a simultaneous presentment of his point at the other's outstretched throat. It took the fellow just above the Adam's apple, and with a horrid, gurgling cry he sank, stretched as he still was in the attitude of that murderous lunge that had proved fatal only to himself.

Garnache had come on guard again upon the instant. Yet in the briefest of seconds during which his sword had been about its work of death, Fortunio's rapier came at him a second time. He beat the blade aside with his bare left hand and stopped with his point the rush of the other bravo. Then he leapt back again, and his leap brought him to the threshold of the anteroom. He retreated quickly a pace, and then another. He was a sword's length within the chamber, and now he stood, firm as a rock and engaged Fortunio's blade which had followed him through the doorway. But he was more at his ease. The

doorway was narrow. Two men abreast could not beset him, since one must cumber the movements of the other. If they came at him one at a time, he felt that he could continue that fight till morning, should there still by then be any left to face him.

A wild exultation took him, an insane desire to laugh. Surely was sword-play the merriest game that was ever devised for man's entertainment. He straightened his arm, and his steel went out like a streak of lightning. But for the dagger on which he caught its edge, the blade had assuredly pierced the captain's heart. And now, fighting still, Garnache called to Valerie. He had need of her assistance to make his preparations ere others came.

"Set down your tapers, mademoiselle," he bade her, "on the mantel shelf at my back. Place the other candle branch there too."

Swiftly, yet with half-swimming senses, everything dim to her as to one in a nightmare, she ran to do his bidding; and now the light placed so at his back, gave him over his opponents the same slight advantage that he had enjoyed before. In brisk tones he issued his fresh orders.

"Can you move the table, mademoiselle?" he asked her. "Try to drag it here, to the wall on my left, as close to the door as you can bring it."

"I will try, monsieur," she panted through dry lips; and again she moved to do his bidding. Quickened by the need there was, her limbs, which awhile ago had seemed on the point of refusing their office, appeared to gather more than ordinary strength. She was unconsciously sobbing in her passionate anxiety to render him what help was possible. Frenziedly she caught at the heavy oaken table, and began to drag it across the room as Garnache had begged her. And now, Fortunio seeing what was toward, and guessing Garnache's intentions, sought by a rush to force his way into the

Chamber. But Garnache was ready for him. There was a harsh grind of steel on steel, culminating in a resounding lest, and Fortunio was back in the guard-room, whither he had leapt to save his skin. A pause fell at that, and Garnache lowered his point to rest his arm until they should again come at him. From beyond the doorway the captain called upon him to yield. He took the summons as an insult, and flew into a momentary passion.

"Yield?" he roared. "Yield to you, you cut-throat scum? You shall have my sword if you will come for it, but you shall have it in your throat."

Angered in his turn, Fortunio inclined his head to his companion's ear, issuing an order. In obedience to it, it was the bravo now who advanced and engaged Garnache. Suddenly he dropped on to his knees, and over his head Garnache found his blade suddenly opposed by Fortunio's. It was a clever trick, and it all but did Garnache's business then. Yet together with the surprise of it there came to him the understanding of what was intended. Under his guard the kneeling man's sword was to be thrust up into his vitals. As a cry of alarm broke from mademoiselle, he leapt aside and towards the wall, where he was covered from Fortunio's weapon, and turning suddenly he passed his sword from side to side through the body of the kneeling mercenary.

The whole thing he had performed mechanically, more by instinct than by reason; and when it was done, and the tables were thus effectively turned upon his assailants, he scarcely realized how he had accomplished it.

The man's body cumbered now the doorway, and behind him Fortunio stood, never daring to advance lest a thrust of that sword which he could not see—Garnache still standing close against the wall—should serve him likewise.

Garnache leaned there, in that friendly shelter, to breathe, and he smiled grimly under cover of his mustache. So long as he had to deal with a single assailant he saw no need to move from so excellent a position. Close beside him, leaning heavily against the table she had dragged thus far, stood Valerie, her face livid as death, her heart sick within her at the horror inspired her by that thing lying on the threshold. She could not take her eyes from the crimson stain that spread slowly on the floor, coming from under that limply huddled mass of arms and legs.

"Do not look, mademoiselle," Garnache implored her softly. "Be brave, child; try to be brave."

She sought to brace her flagging courage, and by an effort she averted her eyes from that horrid heap and fixed them upon Garnache's calm, intrepid face. The sight of his quietly watchful eyes, his grimly smiling lips, seemed to infuse courage into her anew.

"I have the table, monsieur," she told him. "I can bring it no nearer to the wall."

He understood that this was not because her courage or her strength might be exhausted, but because he now occupied the spot where he had bidden her place it. He motioned her away, and when she had moved he darted suddenly and swiftly aside and caught the table, his sword still fast in his two first fingers, which he had locked over the quillons. He had pushed its massive weight halfway across the door before Fortunio grasped the situation. Instantly the captain sought to take advantage of it, thinking to catch Garnache unawares. But no sooner did he show his nose inside the doorpost than Garnache's sword flashed before his eyes, driving him back with a bloody furrow in his cheek.

"Have a care, Monsieur le Capitaine," Garnache mocked him. "Had you come an inch farther it might have been the death of you."

A clatter of steps sounded upon the stairs, and the Parisian bent once more to his task, and thrust the table across the open doorway. He had a moment's respite now, for Fortunio stung—though lightly was not likely to come again until he had others to support him. And while the others came, while the hum of their voices rose higher, and finally their steps clattered over the bare boards of the guard-room floor, Garnache had caught up and flung a chair under the table to protect him from an attack from below, while he had piled another on top to increase and further strengthen the barricade.

Valerie watched him agonizedly, leaning now against the wall, her hands pressed across her bosom, as if to keep down its tempestuous heaving. Yet her anguish was tempered by a great wonder and a great admiration of this man who could keep such calm eyes and such smiling lips in the face of the dreadful odds by which he was beset, in the face of the certain death that must ultimately reach him before he was many minutes older. And in her imagination she conjured up a picture of him lying there torn by their angry swords and drenched in blood, his life gone out of him, his brave spirit, quenched for ever—and all for her unworthy sake. Because she little, worthless thing that she was—would not marry as they listed, this fine, chivalrous soul was to be driven from its stalwart body.

An agony of grief took her now, and she fell once more to those awful sobs that awhile ago had shaken her. She had refused to marry Marius that Florimond's life should be spared, knowing that before Marius could reach him she herself would have warned her betrothed. Yet even had that circumstance not existed, she was sure that still she would have refused to do the will of Marius. But equally sure was she that she would not so refuse him were he now to offer as the price of her compliance the life of Garnache, which she accounted irrevocably doomed.

Suddenly his steady, soothing voice penetrated her anguished

musings.

"Calm yourself, mademoiselle; all is far, from lost as yet."

She thought that he but spoke so to comfort her; she did not follow the working of his warlike mind, concentrated entirely upon the business of the moment, with little thought—or care, for that matter—for what might betide anon. Yet she made an effort to repress her sobs. She would be brave, if only to show herself worthy of the companionship and friendship of so brave a man.

Across his barricade he peered into the outer room to ascertain with what fresh opponents he might have to reckon, and he was surprised to see but four men standing by Fortunio, whilst behind them among the thicker shadows, he dimly made out a woman's figure and, beside her, another man who was short and squat.

He bethought him that the hour, and the circumstance that most of the mercenaries would be in their beds, accounted for the reinforcement not being greater.

The woman moved forward, and he saw as he had suspected, that it was the Dowager herself. The squat figure beside her, moving with her into the shaft of light that fell from the doorway Garnache defended, revealed to him the features of Monsieur de Tressan. If any doubt he had still entertained concerning the Seneschal's loyalty, that doubt was now dispelled.

And now the Dowager uttered a sudden cry of fear. She had caught sight of the fallen Marius, and she hurried to his side. Tressan sped after her and between them they raised the boy and helped him to a chair, where he now sat, passing a heavy hand across his no doubt aching brow. Clearly he was recovering, from which Garnache opined with regret that his blow had been too light. The Dowager turned to Fortunio, who had approached her, and her eyes seemed to take fire

at something that he told her.

"Garnache?" the Parisian heard her say, and he saw Fortunio jerk his thumb in the direction of the barricade.

She appeared to forget her son; she stepped suddenly from his side, and peered through the doorway at the stalwart figure of Garnache, dimly to be seen through the pile of furniture that protected him to the height of his breast. No word said she to the Parisian. She stood regarding him a moment with lips compressed and a white, startled, angry face. Then:

"It was by Marius's contrivance that he was placed sentry over the girl," he heard her tell Fortunio, and he thought she sneered.

She looked at the two bodies on the floor, one almost at her feet, the other just inside the doorway, now almost hidden in the shadows of the table. Then she issued her commands to the men, and fiercely she bade them pull down that barricade and take the dog alive.

But before they could move to do her bidding, Garnache's voice rang imperatively through the chamber.

"A word with you ere they begin, Monsieur de Tressan," he shouted, and such was the note of command he assumed that the men stood arrested, looking to the Dowager for fresh orders. Tressan changed colour, for all that there was surely naught to fear, and he fingered his beard perplexedly, looking to the Marquise for direction. She flashed him a glance, lifted one shoulder disdainfully, and to the men:

"Fetch him out," said she, and she pointed to Garnache. But again Garnache stayed them.

"Monsieur de Tressan," he called impressively, "to your dying day—and that will be none so distant—shall you regret it if you do not

hear me."

The Seneschal was stirred by those words and the half-threat, half-warning; they seemed to cover. He paused a moment, and this time his eyes avoided the Marquise's. At last, taking a step forward,

"Knave," said he, "I do not know you."

"You know me well enough. You have heard my name. I am Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache, Her Majesty's emissary into Dauphiny to procure the enlargement of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye from the Chateau de Condillac, where she is detained by force and for the serving of unscrupulous ends. Now you know me and my quality."

The Dowager stamped her foot.

"Fetch him out!" she commanded harshly.

"Hear me first, Monsieur le Seneschal, or it will be the worse for you." And the Seneschal, moved by that confident promise of evil, threw himself before the men-at-arms.

"A moment, I beseech you, Marquise," he cried, and the men, seeing his earnestness and knowing his quality, stood undecided, buffeted as they were between his will and the Marquise's. "What have you to say to me?" Tressan demanded, seeking to render arrogant his tone.

"This: That my servant knows where I am, and that should I fail within a very few days to come forth safe and sound from Condillac to rejoin him, he is to ride to Paris with certain letters I have given him. Those letters incriminate you to the full in this infamous matter here at Condillac. I have set forth in them how you refused me help, how you ignored the Queen's commands of which I was the bearer; and should it be proved, in addition, that through your treachery and insubordination my life has been lost, I promise you that nothing in all

this world will save you from a hanging."

"Never listen, monsieur," cried the Dowager, seeing Tressan start back like a man in sudden fear. "It is no more than the ruse of a desperate man."

"Heed me or not, at your choice," Garnache retorted, addressing himself ever to Tressan. "You have had your warning. I little thought to see you here to-night. But seeing you confirms my worst suspicions, and if I am to die, I can die easy in my conscience at the thought that in sacrificing you to Her Majesty's wrath I have certainly not sacrificed an innocent man."

"Madame—" the Seneschal began, turning to the Dowager. But she broke in impatiently upon his intended words, upon the prayer that bubbled to his lips that she should pause a while ere she made an end of this Parisian.

"Monsieur," said she, "you may bargain with him when he is taken. We will have him alive. Go in," she bade her men, her voice so resolute now that none dared tarry longer. "Fetch the knave out—alive."

Garnache smiled at mademoiselle as the words were uttered.

"They want me alive," said he. "That is a hopeful state of things. Bear up, child; I may need your help ere we are through."

"You shall find me ready, monsieur," she assured him for all her tremors. He looked at the pale face, composed now by an effort of her will, and at the beautiful hazel eyes which strove to meet his with calm and to reflect his smile, and he marvelled at her courage as much as did she at his.

Then the assault began, and he could have laughed at the way in which a couple of those cut-throats—neither wishing to have the

honour of meeting him singly—hindered each other by seeking to attack him at once.

At last the Dowager commanded one of them to go in. The fellow came, and he was driven back by the sword that darted at him from above the barricade.

There matters might have come to a deadlock, but that Fortunio came forward with one of his men to repeat the tactics which had cost him a life already. His fellow went down on his knees, and drove his sword under the table and through the frame of the chair, seeking to prick Garnache in the legs. Simultaneously the captain laid hold of an arm of the chair above and sought to engage Garnache across it. The ruse succeeded to the extent of compelling the Parisian to retreat. The table seemed likely to be his undoing instead of helping him. He dropped like lightning to one knee, seeking to force the fellow out from underneath. But the obstacles which should have hindered his assailants hindered Garnache even more at this juncture. In that instant Fortunio whipped the chair from the table-top, and flung it forward. One of its legs caught Garnache on the sword arm, deadening it for a second. The sword fell from his hand, and Valerie shrieked aloud, thinking the battle at an end. But the next moment he was on his feet, his rapier firmly gripped once more, for all that his arm still felt a trifle numbed. As seconds passed the numbness wore away, but before that had taken place the table had been thrust forward, and the man beneath it had made it impossible for Garnache to hinder this. Suddenly he called to Valerie.

"A cloak, mademoiselle! Get me a cloak!" he begged. And she, stemming her fears once more, ran to do his bidding.

She caught up a cloak that lay on a chair by the door of her bed-chamber, and brought it to him. He twisted it twice round his left arm, letting its folds hang loose, and advanced again to try conclusions with the gentleman underneath. He cast the garment so that it

enmeshed the sword when next it was advanced. Stepping briskly aside, he was up to the table, and his busy blade drove back the man who assailed him across it. He threw his weight against it, and thrust it back till it was jammed hard once more against the doorposts, leaving the chair at his very feet. The man beneath had recovered his sword by this, and again he sought to use it. That was the end of him. Again Garnache enmeshed it, kicked away the chair, or, rather, thrust it aside with his foot, stooped suddenly, and driving his blade under the table felt it sink into the body of his tormentor.

There was a groan and a spluttering cough, and then before Garnache could recover he heard mademoiselle crying out to him to beware. The table was thrust suddenly forward almost on top of him; its edge caught his left shoulder, and sent him back a full yard, sprawling upon the ground.

To rise again, gasping for air—for the fall had shaken him—was the work of an instant. But in that instant Fortunio had thrust the table clear of the doorway, and his men were pouring into the room.

They came at Garnache in a body, with wild shouts and fierce mockery, and he hurriedly fell on guard and gave way before them until his shoulders were against the wainscot and he had at least the assurance that none could take him in the rear. Three blades engaged his own. Fortunio had come no farther than the doorway, where he stood his torn cheek drenched in blood, watching the scene the Marquise beside him, and Tressan standing just behind them, very pale and scared.

Yet Garnache's first thought even in that moment of dire peril was for Valerie. He would spare her the sight that must before many moments be spread to view within that shambles.

"To your chamber, mademoiselle," he cried to her. "You hinder me," he added by way of compelling her obedience. She did his

bidding, but only in part. No farther went she than the doorway of her room, where she remained standing, watching the fray as earlier she had stood and watched it from the door of the antechamber.

Suddenly she was moved by inspiration. He had gained an advantage before, by retreating through a doorway into an inner room. Might he not do the same again, and be in better case if he were to retreat now to her own chamber? Impulsively she called to him.

"In here, Monsieur de Garnache. In here."

The Marquise looked across at her, and smiled in mockery. Garnache was too well occupied, she thought, to attempt any such rashness. If he but dared remove his shoulders from the wall there would be a speedier end to him than as things were.

Not so, however, thought Garnache. The cloak twisted about his left arm gave him some advantage, and he used it to the full. He flicked the slack of it in the face of one, and followed it up by stabbing the fellow in the stomach before he could recover guard, whilst with another wave of that cloak he enmeshed the sword that shot readily into the opening he had left.

Madame cursed, and Fortunio echoed her imprecations. The Seneschal gasped, his fears lost in amazement at so much valour and dexterity.

Garnache swung away from the wall now, and set his back to mademoiselle, determined to act upon her advice. But even in that moment he asked himself for the first time since the commencement of that carnage—to what purpose? His arms were growing heavy with fatigue, his mouth was parched, and great beads of perspiration stood upon his brow. Soon he would be spent, and they would not fail to take a very full advantage of it.

Hitherto his mind had been taken up with the battle only, and if he had thought of retreating, it was but to the end that he might gain a position of some vantage. Now, conscious of his growing fatigue, his thoughts turned them at last to the consideration of flight. Was there no way out of it? Must he kill every man in Condillac before he could hope to escape?

Whimsically, and almost mechanically, he set himself, in his mind, to count the men. There were twenty mercenaries all told, excluding Fortunio and himself. On Arsenio he might rely not to attack him, perhaps even to come to his assistance at the finish. That left nineteen. Four he had already either killed outright or effectively disabled; so that fifteen remained him. The task of dealing with those other fifteen was utterly beyond him. Presently, no doubt, the two now opposing him would be reinforced by others. So that if any possible way out existed, he had best set about finding it at once.

He wondered could he cut down these two, make an end of Fortunio, and, running for it, attempt to escape through the postern before the rest of the garrison had time to come up with him or guess his purpose. But the notion was too wild, its accomplishment too impossible.

He was fighting now with his back to mademoiselle and his face to the tall window, through the leaded panes of which he caught the distorted shape of a crescent moon. Suddenly the idea came to him. Through that window must lie his way. It was a good fifty feet above the moat, he knew, and if he essayed to leap it, it must be an even chance that he would be killed in leaping. But the chance of death was a certain one if he tarried where he was until others came to support his present opponents. And so he briskly determined upon the lesser risk.

He remembered that the window was nailed down, as it had remained since mademoiselle's pretended attempt at flight. But

surely that should prove no formidable obstacle.

And now that his resolve was taken his tactics abruptly changed. Hitherto he had been sparing of his movements, husbanding his strength against the long battle that seemed promised him. Suddenly he assumed the offensive where hitherto he had but acted in self-defence, and a most deadly offensive was it. He plied his cloak, untwisting it from his arm and flinging it over the head and body of one of his assailants, so that he was enmeshed and blinded by it. Leaping to the fellow's flank, Garnache, with a terrific kick, knocked his legs from under him so that he fell heavily. Then, stooping suddenly, the Parisian ran his blade under the other brave's guard and through the fellow's thigh. The man cried out, staggered, and then went down utterly disabled.

One swift downward thrust Garnache made at the mass that wriggled under his cloak. The activity of its wriggles increased in the next few seconds, then ceased altogether.

Tressan felt wet from head to foot with a sweat provoked by horror of what he saw. The Dowager's lips were pouring forth a horrid litany of guard-room oaths, and meanwhile Garnache had swung round to meet Fortunio, the last of all who had stood with him.

The captain came on boldly, armed with sword and dagger, and in that moment, feeling himself spent, Garnache bitterly repented having relinquished his cloak. Yet he made a stubborn fight, and whilst they fenced and stamped about that room, Marius came to watch them, staggering to his mother's side and leaning heavily upon Tressan's shoulder. The Marquise turned to him, her face livid to the lips.

"That man must be the very fiend," Garnache heard her tell her son. "Run for help, Tressan, or, God knows, he may escape us yet. Go for men, or we shall have Fortunio killed as well. Bid them bring muskets."

Tressan, moving like one bereft of wits, went her errand, while the two men fought on, stamping and panting, circling and lunging, their breath coming in gasps, their swords grinding and clashing till sparks leapt from them.

The dust rose up to envelop and almost choke them, and more than once they slipped in the blood with which the floor was spattered, whilst presently Garnache barely recovered and saved himself from stumbling over the body of one of his victims against which his swiftly moving feet had hurtled.

And the Dowager, who watched the conflict and who knew something of sword-play, realized that, tired though Garnache might be, unless help came soon or some strange chance gave the captain the advantage, Fortunio would be laid low with the others.

His circling had brought the Parisian round, so that his back was now to the window, his face to the door of the bedchamber, where mademoiselle still watched in ever-growing horror. His right shoulder was in line with the door of the antechamber, which madame occupied, and he never saw her quit Marius's side and creep slyly into the room to speed swiftly round behind him.

The only one from whom he thought that he might have cause to fear treachery was the man whom he had dropped with a thigh wound, and he was careful to keep beyond the reach of any sudden sword-thrust from that fellow.

But if he did not see the woman's movements, mademoiselle saw them, and the sight set her eyes dilating with a new fear. She guessed the Dowager's treacherous purpose. And no sooner had she guessed it than, with a choking sob, she told herself that what madame could do that could she also.

Suddenly Garnache saw an opening; Fortunio's eyes, caught by the

Dowager's movements, strayed for a moment past his opponent, and the thing would have been fatal to the captain but that in that moment, as Garnache was on the point of lunging, he felt himself caught from behind, his arms pinioned to his sides by a pair of slender ones that twined themselves about him, and over his shoulder, the breath of it fanning his hot cheek, came a vicious voice—

"Stab now, Fortunio!"

The captain asked nothing better. He raised his weary sword-arm and brought his point to the level of Garnache's breast, but in that instant its weight became leaden. Imitating the Marquise, Valerie had been in time. She seized Fortunio's half-lifted arm and flung all her weight upon it.

The captain cursed her horridly in a frenzy of fear, for he saw that did Garnache shake off the Marquise there would be an end of himself. He sought to wrench himself free of her detaining grasp, and the exertion brought him down, weary as he was, and with her weight hanging to him. He sank to his knees, and the girl, still clinging valiantly, sank with him, calling to Garnache that she held the captain fast.

Putting forth all his remaining strength, the Parisian twisted from the Dowager's encircling grasp and hurled her from him with a violence he nowise intended.

"Yours, madame, are the first woman's arms that ever Martin de Garnache has known," said he. "And never could embrace of beauty have been less welcome."

Panting, he caught up one of the overturned chairs. Holding it by the back he made for the window. He had dropped his sword, and he called to mademoiselle to hold the captain yet an instant longer. He swung his chair aloft and dashed it against the window. There was a

thundering crash of shivered glass and a cool draught of that November night came to sweeten the air that had been fouled by the stamping of the fighters.

Again he swung up his chair and dashed it at the window, and yet again, until no window remained, but a great, gaping opening with a fringe of ragged glass and twisted leadwork.

In that moment Fortunio struggled to his feet, free of the girl, who sank, almost in a swoon. He sprang towards Garnache. The Parisian turned and flung his now shattered chair toward the advancing captain. It dropped at his feet, and his flying shins struck against an edge of it, bringing him, hurt and sprawling, to the ground. Before he could recover, a figure was flying through the open gap that lately had been a window.

Mademoiselle sat up and screamed.

"You will be killed, Monsieur de Garnache! Dear God, you will be killed!" and the anguish in her voice was awful.

It was the last thing that reached the ears of Monsieur de Garnache as he tumbled headlong through the darkness of the chill November night.

CHAPTER XVIII. IN THE MOAT

Fortunio and the Marquise reached the window side by side, and they were in time to hear a dull splash in the waters fifty feet below them. There was a cloud over the little sickle of moon, and to their eyes, fresh from the blaze of candle-light, the darkness was impenetrable.

"He is in the moat," cried the Marquise excitedly, and Valerie, who sat on the floor whither she had slipped when Fortunio shook her off, rocked herself in an agony of fear.

To the horrors about her—the huddled bodies lying so still upon the floor, the bloody footprints everywhere, the shattered furniture, and the groans of the man with the wounded thigh—to all this she was insensible. Garnache was dead, she told herself; he was surely dead; and it seemed as if the very thought of it were killing, too, a part of her own self.

Unconsciously she sobbed her fears aloud. "He is dead," she moaned; "he is dead."

The Marquise overheard that piteous cry, and turned to survey the girl, her brows lifting, her lips parting in an astonishment that for a second effaced the horrors of that night. Suspicion spread like an oil stain in her evil mind. She stepped forward and caught the girl by one of her limp arms. Marius, paler than his stunning had left him, leaned more heavily against the door-post, and looked on with bloodshot eyes. If ever maiden avowed the secret of her heart, it seemed to him that Valerie avowed it then.

The Marquise shook her angrily.

"What was he to you, girl? What was he to you?" she demanded shrilly.

And the girl, no more than half conscious of what she was saying, made answer:

"The bravest gentleman, the noblest friend I have ever known."

Pah! The Dowager dropped her arm and turned to issue a command to Fortunio. But already the fellow had departed. His concern was not with women, but with the man who had escaped him. He must make certain that the fall had killed Garnache.

Breathless and worn as he was, all spattered now with blood from the scratch in his cheek, which lent him a terrific aspect, he dashed from that shambles and across the guard-room. He snatched up a lighted lantern that had been left in the doorway and leapt down the stairs and into the courtyard. Here he came upon Monsieur de Tressan with a half-dozen fellows at his heels, all more or less half clad, but all very fully armed with swords and knives, and one or two with muskets.

Roughly, with little thought for the dignity of his high office, he thrust the Lord Seneschal aside and turned the men. Some he ordered off to the stables to get horses, for if Garnache had survived his leap and swum the moat, they must give chase. Whatever betide, the Parisian must not get away. He feared the consequences of that as much for himself as for Condillac. Some five or six of the men he bade follow him, and never pausing to answer any of Tressan's fearful questions, he sped across the courtyard, through the kitchens—which was the nearest way—into the outer quadrangle. Never pausing to draw breath, spent though he was, he pursued his flight under the great archway of the keep and across the drawbridge, the raising of which had been that night postponed to await the Lord Seneschal's departure.

Here on the bridge he paused and turned in a frenzy to scream to his followers that they should fetch more torches. Meanwhile he snatched the only one at hand from the man-at-arms that carried it.

His men sprang into the guard-room of the keep, realizing from his almost hysterical manner the urgent need for haste. And while he waited for them, standing there on the bridge, his torch held high, he scanned by its lurid red light the water as far as eye could reach on either side of him.

There was a faint movement on the dark, oily surface for all that no wind stirred. Not more than four or five minutes could have elapsed since Garnache's leap, and it would seem as if the last ripple from the disturbance of his plunge had not yet rolled itself out. But otherwise there was nothing here, nor did Fortunio expect aught. The window of the Northern Tower abutted on to the other side of the chateau, and it was there he must look for traces of the fugitive or for his body.

"Hasten!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Follow me!" And without waiting for them he ran across the bridge and darted round the building, his torch scattering a shower of sparks behind him on the night, and sending little rills of blood-red light down the sword which he still carried.

He gained the spot where Garnache must have fallen, and he stood below the radiance that clove the night from the shattered window fifty feet above, casting the light of his torch this way and that over the black bosom of the moat. Not a ripple moved now upon that even, steely surface. Voices sounded behind him, and with them a great glare of ruddy light came to herald the arrival of his men. He turned to them and pointed with his sword away from the chateau.

"Spread yourselves!" he shouted. "Make search yonder. He cannot have gone far."

And they, but dimly realizing whom they sought, yet realizing that they sought a man, dashed off and spread themselves as he had bidden them, to search the stretch of meadowland, where ill must betide any fugitive, since no cover offered.

Fortunio remained where he was at the edge of the moat. He stooped, and waving his torch along the ground he moved to the far angle of the chateau, examining the soft, oozy clay. It was impossible that a man could have clambered out over that without leaving some impression. He reached the corner and found the clay intact; at least, nowhere could he discover a mark of hands or a footprint set as would be that of a man emerging from the water.

He retraced his steps and went back until he had reached the eastern angle of the chateau, yet always with the same result. He straightened himself at last, and his manner was more calm; his frenzied haste was gone, and deliberately he now raised his torch and let its light shine again over the waters. He pondered them a moment, his dark eyes musing almost regretfully.

"Drowned!" he said aloud, and sheathed his sword.

From the window overhead a voice hailed him. He looked up and saw the Dowager, and, behind her, the figure of her son. Away in the meadows the lights of his men's torches darted hither and thither like playful jack-o'-lanterns.

"Have you got him, Fortunio?"

"Yes, madame," he answered with assurance. "You may have his body when you will. He is underneath here." And he pointed to the water.

They appeared to take his word for it, for they questioned him no further. The Marquise turned to mademoiselle, who was still sitting on the floor.

"He is drowned, Valerie," she said slowly, watching the girl's face.

Valerie looked up. Her eyes were very wide, and her lips moved for a second. Then she fell forward without a word. This last horror, treading on the heels of all those that already had assailed her, proved too great a strain for her brave spirit. She had swooned.

Tressan entered at that moment, full of questions as to what might be toward, for he had understood nothing in the courtyard. The Marquise called to him to help her with the girl, Marius being still too faint, and between them they bore her to her chamber, laid her on the bed, and, withdrawing, closed the door upon her. Then she signed to Marius and the Seneschal.

"Come," she said; "let us go. The sight and smell of the place are turning me sick, although my stomach is strong enough to endure most horrors."

She took up one of the candle-branches to light them, and they went below and made their way to the hall, where they found Marius's page, Gaston, looking very pale and scared at the din that had filled the chateau during the past half-hour or so. With him was Marius's hound, which the poor boy had kept by him for company and protection in that dreadful time.

The Marquise spoke to him kindly, and she stooped to pat the dog's glossy head. Then she bade Gaston set wine for them, and when it was fetched the three of them drank in brooding, gloomy silence.

The draught invigorated Marius, it cheered Tressan's drooping spirits, and it quenched the Dowager's thirst. The Seneschal turned to her again with his unanswered questions touching the end of that butchery above-stairs. She told him what Fortunio had said that Garnache was drowned as a consequence of his mad leap from the

window.

Into Tressan's mind there sprang the memory of the thing Garnache had promised should befall him in such a case. It drove the colour from his cheeks and brought great lines of fearful care into sharp relief about his mouth and eyes.

"Madame, we are ruined!" he groaned.

"Tressan," she answered him contemptuously, "you are chicken-hearted. Listen to me. Did he not say that he had left his man behind him when he came to Condillac? Where think you that he left his man?"

"Maybe in Grenoble," answered the Seneschal, staring.

"Find out," she told him impressively, her eyes on his, and calm as though they had never looked upon such sights as that very night had offered them. "If not in Grenoble, certainly, at least, somewhere in this Dauphiny of which you are the King's Lord Seneschal. Turn the whole province inside out, man, but find the fellow. Yours is the power to do it. Do it, then, and you will have no consequences to fear. You have seen the man?"

"Ay, I have seen him. I remember him; and his name, I bethink me, is Rabecque."

He took courage; his face looked less dejected.

"You overlook nothing, madame," he murmured. "You are truly wonderful. I will start the search this very night. My men are almost all at Montelimar awaiting my commands. I'll dispatch a messenger with orders that they are to spread themselves throughout Dauphiny upon this quest."

The door opened, and Fortunio entered. He was still unwashed and terrible to look upon, all blood-bespattered. The sight of him drove a

shudder through Tressan. The Marquise grew solicitous.

"How is your wound, Fortunio?" was her first question.

He made a gesture that dismissed the matter.

"It is nothing. I am over full-blooded, and if I am scratched, I bleed without perceiving it, enough to drain another man."

"Here, drink, mon capitaine," she urged him, very friendly, filling him a cup with her own hands. "And you, Marius?" she asked. "Are you recovering strength?"

"I am well," answered Marius sullenly. His defeat that evening had left him glum and morose. He felt that he had cut a sorry figure in the affair, and his vanity was wounded. "I deplore I had so little share in the fight," he muttered.

"The lustiest fight ever I or any man beheld," swore Fortunio. "Dieu! But he was a fighter, that Monsieur de Garnache, and he deserved a better end than drowning."

"You are quite sure that he is drowned?"

Fortunio replied by giving his reasons for that conclusion, and they convinced both the Marquise and her son indeed they had never deemed it possible that the Parisian could have survived that awful leap. The Dowager looked at Marius, and from him to the captain.

"Do you think, you two, that you will be fit for tomorrow's business?"

"For myself," laughed Fortunio, "I am ready for it now."

"And I shall be when I have rested," answered Marius grimly.

"Then get you both to rest, you will be needing it," she bade them.

"And I, too, madame," said the Seneschal, bending over the hand

she held out to him. "Good-night to you all." He would have added a word to wish them luck in the morrow's venture; but for the life of him he dared not. He turned, made another of his bows, and rolled out of the room.

Five minutes later the drawbridge was being raised after his departure, and Fortunio was issuing orders to the men he had recalled from their futile search to go clear the guard-room and antechamber of the Northern Tower, and to bear the dead to the chapel, which must serve as a mortuary for the time. That done he went off to bed, and soon after the lights were extinguished in Condillac; and save for Arsenio, who was, on guard, sorely perturbed by all that had befallen and marvelling at the rashness of his friend "Battista"—for he had no full particulars of the business—the place was wrapped in sleep.

Had they been less sure that Garnache was drowned, maybe they had slumbered less tranquilly that night at Condillac. Fortunio had been shrewd in his conclusions, yet a trifle hasty; for whilst, as a matter of fact, he was correct in assuming that the Parisian had not crawled out of the moat—neither at the point he had searched, nor elsewhere—yet was he utterly wrong to assume him at the bottom of it.

Garnache had gone through that window prepared to leap into another—and, he hoped, a better world. He had spun round twice in the air and shot feet foremost through the chill waters of the moat, and down until his toes came in contact with a less yielding substance, yet yielding nevertheless. Marvelling that he should have retained until now his senses, he realized betimes that he was touching mud—that he was really ankle deep in it. A vigorous, frantic kick with both legs at once released him, and he felt himself slowly re-ascending to the surface.

It has been often said that a drowning man in his struggles sees his

whole life mirrored before him. In the instants of Garnache's ascent through the half stagnant waters of that moat he had reviewed the entire situation and determined upon the course he should pursue. When he reached the surface, he must see to it that he broke it gently, for at the window above were sure to be watchers, looking to see how he had fared. Madame, he remembered, had sent Tressan for muskets. If he had returned with them and they should perceive him from above, a bullet would be sent to dispose of him, and it were a pity to be shot now after having come through so much.

His head broke the surface and emerged into the chill darkness of the night. He took a deep breath of cold but very welcome air, and moving his arms gently under water, he swam quietly, not to the edge of the moat but to the chateau wall, close under which he thought he would be secure from observation. He found by good fortune a crevice between two stones; he did not see it, his fingers found it for him as they groped along that granite surface. He clung there a moment and pondered the situation. He heard voices above, and looking up he saw the glare of light through the opening he had battered.

And now he was surprised to feel new vigour running through him. He had hurled himself from that window with scarce the power to leap, bathed in perspiration and deeming his strength utterly spent. The ice-cold waters of the moat had served, it would seem, to brace him, to wash away his fatigue, and to renew his energies. His mind was singularly clear and his senses rendered superacute, and he set himself to consider what he had best do.

Swim to the edge of the moat and, clambering out, take to his legs was naturally the first impulse. But, reflecting upon the open nature of the ground, he realized that that must mean his ruin. Presently they would come to see how he had fared, and failing to find him in the water they would search the country round about. He set himself in

their place. He tried to think as they would think, the better that he might realize how they would act, and then an idea came to him that might be worth heeding. In any case his situation was still very desperate; on that score he allowed himself no illusions. That they would take his drowning for granted, and never come to satisfy themselves, he was not optimist enough to assume.

He abandoned his grip of the wall and began to swim gently toward the eastern angle. If they came out, they must lower the bridge; he would place himself so that in falling it should cover him and screen him from their sight. He rounded the angle of the building, and now the friendly cloud that had hung across the moon moved by, and a faint, silver radiance was upon the water under his eyes. But yonder, ahead of him, something black lay athwart the moat. At once he knew it for the bridge. It was down. And he had the explanation in that he remembered that the Lord Seneschal had not yet left Condillac. It mattered little to him one way or the other. The bridge was there, and he made the best of it.

A few swift, silent strokes brought him to it. He hesitated a moment before venturing into the darkness underneath; then, bethinking him that it was that or discovery, he passed under. He made for the wall, and as he groped along he found a chain depending and reaching down into the water. He caught at it with both hands and hung by it to await events.

And now, for the first time that night, his pulses really quickened. There in the dark he waited, and the moments that sped seemed very long to him, and they were very anxious. He had no good sword wherewith to defend himself were he attacked, no good, solid ground on which to take his stand. If he were discovered, he was helpless, at their mercy, to shoot, or take, or beat to death as best they listed. And so he waited, his pulses throbbing, his breath coming short and fast. The cold water that had invigorated him some minutes ago was

numbing him now, and seemed to be freezing his courage as it froze the blood in his veins, the very marrow in his bones.

Presently his ears caught a rush of feet, a sound of voices, and Fortunio's raised above the others. Heavy steps rang on the bridge over his head, and the thud of their fall was like thunder to the man beneath. A crimson splash of light fell on the moat on either side of him. The fellow on the bridge had halted. Then the steps went on. The light flared this way and that, and Garnache almost trembled, expecting at every moment that its rays would penetrate the spot where he was hanging and reveal him cowering there like a frightened water-rat. But the man moved on, and his light flared no longer.

Then others followed him. Garnache heard the sounds of their search. So overwrought was he that there was a moment when he thought of swimming to the edge and making across the country to the north while they were hunting the meadows to the east; but he repressed the impulse and stayed on. An eternity did it seem before those men returned and marched once more over his head. A further eternity was it until the clatter of hoofs on the courtyard stones and their thunder on the planks above him brought him the news that Tressan was riding home. He heard the hoofs quicken, and their loud rattle on the road that led down to the Isere, a half-mile away; and then, when the hoof-beats grew more distant, there came again the echo of voices up above.

Was it not over yet? Dear God! would it never end? He felt that a few moments more of this immersion and he should be done for utterly; his numbness must rob him of the power to cross the moat.

Suddenly the first welcome sound he had heard that night came to his ears. Chains creaked, hinges groaned, and the great black pall above him began gradually to rise. Faster it went, till, at last, it fell back into position, flat with the wall of the chateau, and such little light

as there was from the moon was beating down upon his frozen face.

He let the chain go, and, with strokes swift and silent as he could contrive, he crossed the water. He clambered up the bank, almost bereft of strength. A moment he crouched there listening. Had he moved too soon? Had he been incautious?

Nothing stirred behind him to confirm his fears. He crept softly across the hard ground of the road where he had landed. Then, when the yielding, silent turf was under his feet, he gave not another thought for his numbness, but started to run as a man runs in a nightmare, so little did the speed of his movements match the pace of his desire to set a distance between himself and Condillac.

CHAPTER XIX. THROUGH THE NIGHT

It wanted something over an hour to midnight when Monsieur de Garnache started out in his sodden clothes to run from Condillac. He bore away to the north, and continued running until he had covered a mile or so, when perforce he must slacken his pace lest presently he should have to give way to utter exhaustion. He trudged on bravely thereafter, at a good, swinging pace, realizing that in moving briskly lay his salvation from such ill effects as might otherwise attend his too long immersion. His run had set a pleasant glow upon his skin and seemed to have thawed the frozen condition of his joints. Yet he could not disguise from himself that he was sorely worn by that night's happenings, and that, if he would reach his goal, he must carefully husband such strength as yet remained him.

That goal of his was Voiron, some four leagues distant to the north, where, at the inn of the Beau Paon, his man, Rabecque, should be lodged, ready for his coming at any time. Once already, when repairing to Condillac, he had travelled by that road, and it was so direct that there seemed scant fear of his mistaking it. On he plodded through the night, his way lighted for him by the crescent moon, the air so still that, despite his wet garments, being warmed as he was by his brisk movements, he never felt the cold of it.

He had overheard enough of what had been said by Marius to Valerie to understand the business that was afoot for the morrow, and he doubted him that he had not sufficiently injured the Dowager's son to make him refrain from or adjourn his murderous ride across the border into Savoy.

Garnache's purpose now was to reach Voiron, there to snatch a brief rest, and then, equipped anew to set out with his man for La Rochette and anticipate the fell plans of Marius and Fortunio.

He might have experienced elation at his almost miraculous escape and at the circumstance that he was still at large to carry this duel with the Condillacs to a fitting finish, were it not for the reflection that but for his besetting sin of hastiness he might now be travelling in dry garments toward La Rochette, with mademoiselle beside him. Once again that rash temper of his had marred an enterprise that was on the point of succeeding. And yet, even as he regretted his rashness, rage stirred him again at the thought of Marius crushing that slender shape against him and seeking to force his odious kisses upon her pure, immaculate lips. And then the thought of her, left behind at Condillac at the mercy of Marius and that she-devil the Marquise, and the fears that of a sudden leapt up in his mind, brought him to a standstill, as though he were contemplating the incomparable folly of a return. He beat his hands together for a moment in a frenzy of anguish; he threw back his head and raised his eyes to the sky above with a burst of imprecations on his lips. And then reflection brought him peace. No, no; they dare offer her no hurt. To do so must irrevocably lose them La Vauvraye; and it was their covetousness had made them villains. Upon that covetousness did their villainy rest, and he need fear from them no wanton ruthlessness that should endanger their chance of profit.

He trudged on, reassured. He had been a fool so to give way to fear; as great a fool as he had been when he had laid hands on Marius to quell his excessive amorousness. Dieu! Was he bewitched? What ailed him? Again he paused there in the night to think the situation out.

A dozen thoughts, all centering about Valerie, came crowding in upon his brain, till in the end a great burst of laughter—the laughter of

a madman almost, eerie and terrific as it rang upon the silent night broke from his parted lips. That brief moment of introspection had revealed him to himself, and the revelation had fetched that peal of mocking laughter from him.

He realized now, at last, that not because the Queen had ordered him to procure Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye's enlargement had he submitted to assume a filthy travesty, to set his neck in jeopardy, to play the lackey and the spy. It was because something in Valerie's eyes, something in her pure, lily face had moved him to it; and simultaneously had come the thought of the relation in which she stood to that man at La Rochette whose life he now sought to save for her, and it had stabbed him with a bitterness no misfortune, no failure yet had brought him.

He trudged on, knowing himself for what he was a fool who, after close upon forty years of a strenuous life in which no petticoat had played a part, was come under the spell of a pair of innocent eyes belonging to a child almost young enough to have been his daughter.

He despised himself a little for his weakness; he despised himself for his apostasy from the faith that had governed his life—the faith to keep himself immune from the folly to which womanhood had driven so many a stout man.

And yet, mock himself, despise himself as he would, a great tenderness, a great desire grew strong in his soul that night as he trudged on toward distant Voiron. Mile after mile her image kept him company, and once, when he had left Voreppe behind him, the greater portion of his journey done, some devil whispered in his ear that he was weary; that he would be over-weary on the morrow for any ride to La Rochette. He had done all that mortal man could do; let him rest to-morrow whilst Marius and Fortunio accomplished by Florimond what the fever had begun.

A cold perspiration broke on him as he wrestled with that grim temptation. Valerie was his; she belonged to him by the right of dangers shared; never had mother in her labours been nearer death for the offspring's sake than had he for Valerie during the days that were sped and the hours that were but gone. She belonged to him by the title of those dangers he had been through. What had Florimond done to establish his claim to her? He had remained absent during long years, a-warring in a foreign land. With how many banal loves might not the fellow in that time have strewn his soldier's path! Garnache knew well how close does Cupid stalk in the wake of Mars, knew well the way of these gay soldiers and the lightness of their loves.

Was, then, this fellow to come now and claim her, when perils were past, when there was naught left to do but lead her to the altar? Could he be worthy of such a pearl of womanhood, this laggard who, because a fever touched him, sat him down in an inn within a few hours' ride of her to rest him, as though the world held no such woman as Valerie?

And she, herself, by what ties was she bound to him? By the ties of an old promise, given at an age when she knew not what love meant. He had talked of it with her, and he knew how dispassionately she awaited Florimond's return. Florimond might be betrothed to her—her father and his had encompassed that between them—but no lover of hers was he.

Thus far did his thoughts journey, and temptation gripped him ever more and more strongly. And then his manhood and his honour awoke with a shudder, as awakens a man from an ugly dream. What manner of fool was he? he asked himself again. Upon what presumptions did he base his silly musings? Did he suppose that even were there no Florimond, it would be left for a harsh, war-worn old greybeard such as he to awaken tenderness in the bosom of that

child? The tenderness of friendship perhaps—she had confessed to that; but the tenderness of her sweet love must be won by a younger, comelier man.

If love had indeed touched him at last, let him be worthy of it and of her who inspired it. Let him strain every sinew in her service, asking no guerdon; let him save the life of the man to whom she was affianced; let him save her from the clutches of the Marquise de Condillac and her beautiful, unscrupulous son.

He put his folly from him and went on, seeking to hold his mind to the planning of his to-morrow's journey and its business. He had no means to know that at that very hour Valerie was on her knees by her little white bed, in the Northern Tower of Condillac, praying for the repose of the soul of Monsieur de Garnache—the bravest gentleman, the noblest friend she had ever known. For she accounted him dead, and she thought with horror of his body lying in the slime under the cold waters of the moat beneath the window of her antechamber. A change seemed to have come upon her. Her soul was numb, her courage seemed dead, and little care had she in that hour of what might befall her now.

Florimond was coming, she remembered: coming to wed her. Ah, well! It mattered little, since Monsieur de Garnache was dead—as though it could have mattered had he been living!

Three hours of his long striding brought Garnache at last to Voiron, and the echo of his footsteps rang through the silent streets and scared a stray cat or two that were preying out of doors. There was no watch in the little township and no lights, but by the moon's faint glimmer Garnache sought the inn of the Beau Paon, and found it at the end of a little wandering. A gaudy peacock, with tail spread wide, was the sign above the door on which he thumped and kicked as if he would have beaten it down.

It opened after some delay, and a man, half clad, candle in hand, a night-cap on his hoary locks, showed an angry face at the opening.

At sight of the gaunt, bedraggled figure that craved admittance, the landlord would have shut the door again, fearing that he had to do with some wild bandit from the hills. But Garnache thrust his foot in the way.

"There is a man named Rabecque, from Paris, lodging here. I must have instant speech with him," said he; and his words, together with the crisp, commanding tones in which they were uttered, had their effect upon the host.

Rabecque had been playing the great lord during the week he had spent at Voiron, and had known how to command a certain deference and regard. That this tatterdemalion, with the haughty voice, should demand to see him at that hour of the night, with such scant unconcern of how far he might incommode the great Monsieur Rabecque, earned for him too a certain measure of regard, though still alloyed with some suspicion.

The landlord bade him enter. He did not know whether Monsieur Rabecque would forgive him for being disturbed; he could not say whether Monsieur Rabecque would consent to see this visitor at such an hour; very probably he would not. Still, monsieur might enter.

Garnache cut him short before he had half done, announced his name and bade him convey it to Rabecque. The alacrity with which the lackey stirred from his bed upon hearing who it was that had arrived impressed the host not a little, but not half so much as it impressed him presently to observe the deference with which this great Monsieur Rabecque of Paris confronted the scarecrow below stairs when he was brought into its presence.

"You are safe and sound, monsieur?" he cried, in deferential joy.

"Aye, by a miracle, mon fils," Garnache answered him, with a short laugh. "Help me to bed; then bring me a cup of spiced wine. I have swum a moat and done other wonders in these clothes."

The host and Rabecque bustled now to minister to his wants between them, and when, jaded and worn, Garnache lay at last between good-smelling sheets with the feeling in him that he was like to sleep until the day of judgment, he issued his final orders.

"Awake me at daybreak, Rabecque," said he drowsily. "We must be stirring then. Have horse ready and clothes for me. I shall need you to wash me clean and shave me and make me what I was before your tricks and dyes turned me into what I have been this week and more. Take away the light. At daybreak! Don't let me sleep beyond that as you value your place with me. We shall have brisk work to-morrow. At—daybreak—Rabecque!"

CHAPTER XX. FLORIMOND DE CONDILLAC

It was noon of the next day when two horsemen gained the heights above La Rochette and paused to breathe their nags and take a survey of the little township in the plain at their feet. One of these was Monsieur de Garnache, the other was his man Rabecque. But it was no longer the travestied Garnache that Condillac had known as "Battista" during the past days, it was that gentleman as he had been when first he presented himself at the chateau. Rabecque had shaved him, and by means of certain unguents had cleansed his skin and hair of the dyes with which he had earlier overlaid them.

That metamorphosis, of itself, was enough to set Garnache in a good humour; he felt himself again, and the feeling gave him confidence. His mustachios bristled as fiercely as of old, his skin was clear and healthy, and his dark brown hair showed ashen at the temples. He was becomingly arrayed in a suit of dark brown camlet, with rows of close-set gold buttons running up his hanging sleeves; a leather jerkin hid much of his finery, and his great boots encased his legs. He wore a brown hat, with a tallish crown and a red feather, and Rabecque carried his cloak for him, for the persistent Saint Martin's summer rendered that day of November rather as one of early autumn.

A flood of sunshine descended from a cloudless sky to drench the country at their feet, and all about them the trees preserved a green that was but little touched by autumnal browning.

Awhile he paused there on the heights; then he gave his horse a

touch of the spur, and they started down the winding road that led into La Rochette. A half-hour later they were riding under the porte cochere of the inn of the Black Boar. Of the ostler who hastened forward to take their reins Monsieur de Garnache inquired if the Marquis de Condillac were lodged there. He was answered in the affirmative, and he got down at once from his horse. Indeed, but for the formality of the thing, he might have spared himself the question, for lounging about the courtyard were a score of stalwart weather-tanned fellows, whose air and accoutrements proclaimed them soldiers. It required little shrewdness to guess in them the personal followers of the Marquis, the remainder of the little troop that had followed the young seigneur to the wars when, some three years ago, he had set out from Condillac.

Garnache gave orders for the horses to be cared for, and bade Rabecque get himself fed in the common room. Heralded by the host, the Parisian then mounted the stairs to Monsieur de Condillac's apartments.

The landlord led the way to the inn's best room, turned the handle, and, throwing wide the door, stood aside for Monsieur de Garnache to enter.

From within the chamber came the sounds of a scuffle, a man's soft laugh, and a girl's softer intercession.

"Let me go, monsieur. Of your pity, let me go. Some one is coming."

"And what care I who comes?" answered a voice that seemed oppressed by laughter.

Garnache strode into the chamber—spacious and handsomely furnished as became the best room of the Auberge du Sanglier Noir—to find a meal spread on the table, steaming with an odour

promising of good things, but neglected by the guest for the charms of the serving-wench, whose waist he had imprisoned. As Garnache's tall figure loomed before him he let the girl go and turned a half-laughing, half-startled face upon the intruder.

"Who the devil may you be?" he inquired, and a brown eye, rakish and roving in its glance, played briskly over the Parisian, whilst Garnache himself returned the compliment, and calmly surveyed this florid gentleman of middle height with the fair hair and regular features.

The girl scurried by and darted from the room, dodging the smiting hand which the host raised as she flew past him. The Parisian felt his gorge rising. Was this the sort of fever that had kept Monsieur le Marquis at La Rochette, whilst mademoiselle was suffering in durance at Condillac? His last night's jealous speculations touching a man he did not know had leastways led him into no exaggeration. He found just such a man as he had pictured—a lightly-loving, pleasure-taking roysterer, with never a thought beyond the amusement which the hour afforded him.

With curling lip Garnache bowed stiffly, and in a cold, formal voice he announced himself.

"My name is Martin Marie Rigobert de Garnache. I am an emissary dispatched from Paris by her Majesty the Queen-mother to procure the enlargement of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye from the durance in which she is held by madame your stepmother."

The pleasant gentleman's eyebrows went up; a smile that was almost insolent broke on his face.

"That being so, monsieur, why the devil are you here?"

"I am here, monsieur," answered him Garnache, throwing back his head, his nostrils quivering, "because you are not at Condillac."

The tone was truculent to the point of defiance, for despite the firm resolve he had taken last night never again to let his temper overmaster him, already Garnache's self-control was slipping away.

The Marquis noted the tone, and observed the man. In their way he liked both; in their way he disliked both. But he clearly saw that this peppery gentleman must be treated less cavalierly, or trouble would come of it. So he waved him gracefully to the table, where a brace of flagons stood amid the steaming viands.

"You will dine with me, monsieur," said he, the utmost politeness marking his utterance now. "I take it that since you have come here in quest of me you have something to tell me. Shall we talk as we eat? I detest a lonely meal."

The florid gentleman's tone and manner were mollifying in the extreme. Garnache had risen early and ridden far; the smell of the viands had quickened an appetite already very keen; moreover, since he and this gentleman were to be allies, it was as well they should not begin by quarrelling.

He bowed less stiffly, expressed his willingness and his thanks, laid hat and whip and cloak aside, unbuckled and set down his sword, and, that done, took at table the place which his host himself prepared him.

Garnache took more careful stock of the Marquis now. He found much to like in his countenance. It was frank and jovial; obviously that of a sensualist, but, leastways, an honest sensualist. He was dressed in black, as became a man who mourned his father, yet with a striking richness of material, whilst his broad collar of fine point and the lace cuffs of his doublet were worth a fortune.

What time they ate Monsieur de Garnache told of his journey from Paris and of his dealings with Tressan and his subsequent

adventures at Condillac. He dwelt passingly upon the manner in which they had treated him, and found it difficult to choose words to express the reason for his returning in disguise to play the knight-errant to Valerie. He passed on to speak of last night's happenings and of his escape. Throughout, the Marquis heard him with a grave countenance and a sober, attentive glance, yet, when he had finished a smile crept round the sensual lips.

"The letter that I had at Milan prepared me for some such trouble as this," said he, and Garnache was amazed at the lightness of his tone, just as he had been amazed to see the fellow keep his countenance at the narrative of mademoiselle's position. "I guessed that my beautiful stepmother intended me some such scurviness from the circumstance of her having kept me in ignorance of my father's death. But frankly, sir, your tale by far outstrips my wildest imaginings. You have behaved very—very bravely in this affair. You seem, in fact, to have taken a greater interest in Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye's enlargement than the Queen could have a right to expect of you." And he smiled, a world of suggestion in his eyes. Garnache sat back in his chair and stared at the man.

"This levity, monsieur, on such a subject, leaves me thunderstruck," he said at last.

"Diable!" laughed the other. "You are too prone, after your trials; to view its tragic rather than its comic side. Forgive me if I am smitten only with the humour of the thing."

"The humour of the thing!" gurgled Garnache, his eyes starting from his head. Then out leapt that temper of his like an eager hound that has been suddenly unleashed. He brought down his clenched hand upon the table, caught in passing a flagon, and sent it crashing to the floor. If there was a table near at hand when his temper went, he never failed to treat it so.

"Par la mort Dieu! monsieur, you see but the humour of it, do you? And what of that poor child who is lying there, suffering this incarceration because of her fidelity to a promise given you?"

The statement was hardly fully accurate. But it served its purpose. The other's face became instantly, grave.

"Calm yourself, I beg, monsieur," he cried, raising a soothing hand. "I have offended you somewhere; that is plain. There is something here that I do not altogether understand. You say that Valerie has suffered on account of a promise given me? To what are you referring?"

"They hold her a prisoner, monsieur, because they wish to wed her to Marius," answered Garnache, striving hard to cool his anger.

"Parfaitement! That much I understood."

"Well, then, monsieur, is the rest not plain? Because she is betrothed to you—" He paused. He saw, at last, that he was stating something not altogether accurate. But the other took his meaning there and then, lay back in his chair, and burst out laughing.

The blood hummed through Garnache's head as he tightened his lips and watched this gentleman indulge his inexplicable mirth. Surely Monsieur de Condillac was possessed of the keenest sense of humour in all France. He laughed with a will, and Garnache sent up a devout prayer that the laugh might choke him. The noise of it filled the hostelry.

"Sir," said Garnache, with an ever-increasing tartness, "there is a by-word has it 'Much laughter, little wit.' In confidence won, is that your case, monsieur?"

The other looked at him soberly a moment, then went off again.

"Monsieur, monsieur!" he gasped, "you'll be the death of me. For

the love of Heaven look less fierce. Is it my fault that I must laugh? The folly of it all is so colossal. Three years from home, yet there is a woman keeps faithful and holds to a promise given for her. Come, monsieur, you who have seen the world, you must agree that there is in this something that is passing singular, extravagantly amusing. My poor little Valerie!" he spluttered through his half-checked mirth "does she wait for me still? does she count me still betrothed to her? And because of that, says 'No' to brother Marius! Death of my life! I shall die of it."

"I have a notion that you may, monsieur," rasped Garnache's voice, and with it rasped Garnache's chair upon the boards. He had risen, and he was confronting his merry host very fiercely, white to the lips, his eyes aflame. There was no mistaking his attitude, no mistaking his words.

"Eh?" gasped the other, recovering himself at last to envisage what appeared to develop into a serious situation.

"Monsieur," said Garnache, his voice very cold, "do I understand that you no longer intend to carry out your engagement and wed Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye?"

A dull flush spread upon the Marquis's face. He rose too, and across the table he confronted his guest, his mien haughty, his eyes imperious.

"I thought, monsieur," said he, with a great dignity, "I thought when I invited you to sit at my table that your business was to serve me, however little I might be conscious of having merited the honour. It seems instead that you are come hither to affront me. You are my guest, monsieur. Let me beg that you will depart before I resent a question on a matter which concerns myself alone."

The man was right, and Garnache was wrong. He had no title to

take up the affairs of Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye. But he was past reason now, and he was not the man to brook haughtiness, however courteously it might be cloaked. He eyed the Marquis's flushed ace across the board, and his lip curled.

"Monsieur," said he, "I take your meaning very fully. Half a word with me is as good as a whole sentence with another. You have dubbed me in polite phrases an impertinent. That I am not; and I resent the imputation."

"Oh, that!" said the Marquis, with a half-laugh and a shrug. "If you resent it—" His smile and his gesture made the rest plain.

"Exactly, monsieur," was Garnache's answer. "But I do not fight sick men."

Florimond's brows grew wrinkled, his eyes puzzled.

"Sick men!" he echoed. "Awhile ago, monsieur, you appeared to cast a doubt upon my sanity. Is it a case of the drunkard who thinks all the world drunk but himself?"

Garnache gazed at him. That doubt he had entertained grew now into something like assurance.

"I know not whether it is the fever makes your tongue run so—" he began, when the other broke in, a sudden light of understanding in his eyes.

"You are at fault," he cried. "I have no fever."

"But then your letter to Condillac?" demanded Garnache, lost now in utter amazement.

"What of it? I'll swear I never said I had a fever."

"I'll swear you did."

"You give me the lie, then?"

But Garnache waved his hands as if he implored the other, to have done with giving and taking offence. There was some misunderstanding somewhere, he realized, and sheer astonishment had cooled his anger. His only aim now was to have this obscure thing made clear.

"No, no," he cried. "I am seeking enlightenment."

Florimond smiled.

"I may have said that we were detained by a fever; but I never said the patient was myself."

"Who then? Who else?" cried Garnache.

"Why, now I understand, monsieur. But it is my wife who has the fever."

"Your—!" Garnache dared not trust himself to utter the word.

"My wife, monsieur," the Marquis repeated. "The journey proved too much for her, travelling at the rate she did."

A silence fell. Garnache's long chin sank on to his breast, and he stood there, his eyes upon the tablecloth, his thoughts with the poor innocent child who waited at Condillac, so full of trust and faith and loyalty to this betrothed of hers who had come home with a wife out of Italy.

And then, while he stood so and Florimond was regarding him curiously, the door opened, and the host appeared.

"Monsieur le Marquis," said he, "there are two gentlemen below asking to see you. One of them is Monsieur Marius de Condillac."

"Marius?" cried the Marquis, and he started round with a frown.

"Marius?" breathed Garnache, and then, realizing that the assassins had followed so close upon his heels, he put all thoughts from his mind other than that of the immediate business. He had, himself, a score to settle with them. The time was now. He swung round on his heel, and before he knew what he had said the words were out:

"Bring them up, Monsieur l'Hôte."

Florimond looked at him in surprise.

"Oh, by all means, if monsieur wishes it," said he, with a fine irony.

Garnache looked at him, then back at the hesitating host.

"You have heard," said he coolly. "Bring them up."

"Bien, monsieur," replied the host, withdrawing and closing the door after him.

"Your interference in my affairs grows really droll, monsieur," said the Marquis tartly.

"When you shall have learned to what purpose I am interfering, you'll find it, possibly, not quite so droll," was the answer, no less tart. "We have but a moment, monsieur. Listen while I tell you the nature of their errand."

CHAPTER XXI. THE GHOST IN THE CUPBOARD

Garnache had but a few minutes in which to unfold his story, and he needed, in addition, a second or two in which to ponder the situation as he now found it.

His first reflection was that Florimond, since he was now married, might perhaps, instead of proving Valerie's saviour from Marius, join forces with his brother in coercing her into this alliance with him. But from what Valerie herself had told him he was inclined to think more favourably of Florimond and to suppress such doubts as these. Still he could incur no risks; his business was to serve Valerie and Valerie only; to procure at all costs her permanent liberation from the power of the Condillacs. To make sure of this he must play upon Florimond's anger, letting him know that Marius had journeyed to La Rochette for the purpose of murdering his half-brother. That he but sought to murder him to the end that he might be removed from his path to Valerie, was a circumstance that need not too prominently be presented. Still, presented it must be, for Florimond would require to know by what motive his brother was impelled ere he could credit him capable of such villainy.

Succinctly, but tellingly, Garnache brought out the story of the plot that had been laid for Florimond's assassination, and it joyed him to see the anger rising in the Marquis's face and flashing from his eyes.

"What reason have they for so damnable a deed?" he cried, between incredulity and indignation.

"Their overweening ambition. Marius covets Mademoiselle de La

Vauvraye's estates."

"And to gain his ends he would not stop at murdering me? Is it, indeed, the truth you tell me?"

"I pledge my honour for the truth of it," answered Garnache, watching him closely. Florimond looked at him a moment. The steady glance of those blue eyes and the steady tone of that crisp voice scattered his last doubt.

"The villains!" cried the Marquis. "The fools!" he added. "For me, Marius had been welcome to Valerie. He might have found in me an ally to aid him in the urging of his suit. But now—" He raised his clenched hand and shook it in the air, as if in promise of the battle he would deliver.

"Good," said Garnache, reassured. "I hear their steps upon the stairs. They must not find me with you."

A moment later the door opened, and Marius, very bravely arrayed, entered the room, followed closely by Fortunio. Neither showed much ill effects of last night's happenings, save for a long dark-brown scar that ran athwart the captain's cheek, where Garnache's sword had ploughed it.

They found Florimond seated quietly at table, and as they entered he rose and came forward with a friendly smile to greet his brother. His sense of humour was being excited; he was something of an actor, and the role he had adopted in the comedy to be played gave him a certain grim satisfaction. He would test for himself the truth of what Monsieur de Garnache had told him concerning his brother's intentions. Marius received his advances very coolly. He took his brother's hand, submitted to his brother's kiss; but neither kiss nor hand-pressure did he return. Florimond affected not to notice this.

"You are well, my dear Marius, I hope," said he, and thrusting him

out at arms' length, he held him by the shoulders and regarded him critically. "Ma foi, but you are changed into a comely well-grown man. And your mother—she is well, too, I trust."

"I thank you, Florimond, she is well," said Marius stiffly.

The Marquis took his hands from his brother's shoulders; his florid good-natured face smiling ever, as if this were the happiest moment of his life.

"It is good to see France again, my dear Marius," he told his brother. "I was a fool to have remained away so long. I am pining to be at Condillac once more."

Marius eyeing him, looked in vain for signs of the fever. He had expected to find a debilitated, emaciated man; instead, he saw a very lusty, healthy, hearty fellow, full of good humour, and seemingly full of strength. He began to like his purpose less, despite such encouragement as he gathered from the support of Fortunio. Still, it must be gone through with.

"You wrote us that you had the fever," he said, half inquiringly.

"Pooh! That is naught." And Florimond snapped a strong finger against a stronger thumb. "But whom have you with you?" he asked, and his eyes took the measure of Fortunio, standing a pace or two behind his master.

Marius presented his bravo.

"This is Captain Fortunio, the commander of our garrison of Condillac."

The Marquis nodded good-humouredly towards the captain.

"Captain Fortunio? He is well named for a soldier of fortune. My brother, no doubt, will have family matters to tell me of. If you will step

below, Monsieur le Capitaine, and drink a health or so while you wait, I shall be honoured."

The captain, nonplussed, looked at Marius, and Florimond surprised the look. But Marius's manner became still chillier.

"Fortunio here," said he, and he half turned and let his hand fall on the captain's shoulder, "is my very good friend. I have no secrets from him."

The instant lift of Florimond's eyebrows was full of insolent, supercilious disdain. Yet Marius did not fasten his quarrel upon that. He had come to La Rochette resolved that any pretext would serve his turn. But the sight of his brother so inflamed his jealousy that he had now determined that the quarrel should be picked on the actual ground in which it had its roots.

"Oh, as you will," said the Marquis coolly. "Perhaps your friend will be seated, and you, too, my dear Marius." And he played the host to them with a brisk charm. Setting chairs, he forced them to sit, and pressed wine upon them.

Marius cast his hat and cloak on the chair where Garnache's had been left. The Parisian's hat and cloak, he naturally assumed to belong to his brother. The smashed flagon and the mess of wine upon the floor he scarce observed, setting it down to some clumsiness, either his brother's or a servant's. They both drank, Marius in silence, the captain with a toast.

"Your good return, Monsieur le Marquis," said he, and Florimond thanked him by an inclination of the head. Then, turning to Marius:

"And so," he said, "you have a garrison at Condillac. What the devil has been taking place there? I have had some odd news of you. It would almost seem as if you were setting up as rebels in our quiet little corner of Dauphiny."

Marius shrugged his shoulders; his face suggested that he was ill-humoured.

"Madame the Queen-Regent has seen fit to interfere in our concerns. We Condillacs do not lightly brook interference."

Florimond showed his teeth in a pleasant smile.

"That is true, that is very true, Pardieu! But what warranted this action of Her Majesty's?"

Marius felt that the time for deeds was come. This fatuous conversation was but a futile waste of time. He set down his glass, and sitting back in his chair he fixed his sullen black eyes full upon his half-brother's smiling brown ones.

"I think we have exchanged compliments enough," said he, and Fortunio wagged his head approvingly. There were too many men in the courtyard for his liking, and the more time they waited, the more likely were they to suffer interruption. Their aim must be to get the thing done quickly, and then quickly to depart before an alarm could be raised. "Our trouble at Condillac concerns Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye."

Florimond started forward, with a ready assumption of lover-like solicitude.

"No harm has come to her?" he cried. "Tell me that no harm has come to her."

"Reassure yourself," answered Marius, with a sneer, a greyness that was of jealous rage overspreading his face. "No harm has come to her whatever. The trouble was that I sought to wed her, and she, because she is betrothed to you, would have none of me. So we brought her to Condillac, hoping always to persuade her. You will remember that she was under my mother's tutelage. The girl,

however, could not be constrained. She suborned one of our men to bear a letter to Paris for her, and in answer to it the Queen sent a hot-headed, rash blunderer down to Dauphiny to procure her liberation. He lies now at the bottom of the moat of Condillac."

Florimond's face had assumed a look of horror and indignation.

"Do you dare tell me this?" he cried.

"Dare?" answered Marius, with an ugly laugh. "Men enough have died over this affair already. That fellow Garnache left some bodies on our hands last night before he set out for another world himself. You little dream how far my daring goes in this matter. I'll add as many more as need be to the death roll that we have already, before you set foot in Condillac."

"Ah!" said Florimond, as one upon whose mind a light breaks suddenly. "So, that is the business on which you come to me. I doubted your brotherliness, I must confess, my dear Marius. But tell me, brother mine, what of our father's wishes in this matter? Have you no respect for those?"

"What respect had you?" flashed back Marius, his voice now raised in anger. "Was it like a lover to remain away for three years—to let all that time go by without ever a word from you to your betrothed? What have you done to make good your claim to her?"

"Nothing, I confess; yet—"

"Well, you shall do something now," exclaimed Marius, rising. "I am here to afford you the opportunity. If you would still win Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye, you shall win her from me—at point of sword. Fortunio, see to the door."

"Wait, Marius!" cried Florimond, and he looked genuinely aghast. "Do not forget that we are brothers, men of the same blood; that my

father was your father."

"I choose to remember rather that we are rivals," answered Marius, and he drew his rapier. Fortunio turned the key in the lock. Florimond gave his brother a long searching look, then with a sigh he picked up his sword where it lay ready to his hand and thoughtfully unsheathed it. Holding the hilt in one hand and the blade in the other he stood, bending the weapon like a whip, whilst again he searchingly regarded his brother.

"Hear me a moment," said he. "If you will force this unnatural quarrel upon me, at least let the thing be decently done. Not here, not in these cramped quarters, but out in the open let our meeting take place. If the captain, there, will act for you, I'll find a friend to do me the like service."

"We settle this matter here and now," Marius answered him, in a tone of calm finality.

"But if I were to kill you—" Florimond began.

"Reassure yourself," said Marius with an ugly smile.

"Very well, then; either alternative will suit the case I wish to put. If you were to kill me—it may be ranked as murder. The irregularity of it could not be overlooked."

"The captain, here, will act for both of us."

"I am entirely at your service, gentlemen," replied Fortunio pleasantly, bowing to each in turn.

Florimond considered him. "I do not like his looks," he objected. "He may be the friend of your bosom, Marius; you may have no secrets from him; but for my part, frankly, I should prefer the presence of some friend of my own to keep his blade engaged."

The Marquis's manner was affable in the extreme. Now that it was settled that they must fight, he appeared to have cast aside all scruples based upon their consanguinity, and he discussed the affair with the greatest bonhomie, as though he were disposing of a matter of how they should sit down to table.

It gave them pause. The change was too abrupt. They did not like it. It was as the calm that screens some surprise. Yet it was impossible he should have been forewarned; impossible he could have had word of how they proposed to deal with him.

Marius shrugged his shoulders.

"There is reason in what you say," he acknowledged; "but I am in haste. I cannot wait while you go in search of a friend."

"Why then," he answered, with a careless laugh, "I must raise one from the dead."

Both stared at him. Was he mad? Had the fever touched his brain? Was that healthy colour but the brand of a malady that rendered him delirious?

"Dieu! How you stare!" he continued, laughing in their faces. "You shall see something to compensate you for your journey, messieurs. I have learnt some odd tricks in Italy; they are a curious people beyond the Alps. What did you say was the name of the man the Queen had sent from Paris?—he who lies at the bottom of the moat of Condillac?"

"Let there be an end to this jesting," growled Marius. "On guard, Monsieur le Marquis!"

"Patience! patience!" Florimond implored him. "You shall have your way with me, I promise you. But of your charity, messieurs, tell me first the name of that man."

"It was Garnache," said Fortunio, "and if the information will serve you, it was I who slew him."

"You?" cried Florimond. "Tell me of it, I beg you."

"Do you fool us?" questioned Marius in a rage that overmastered his astonishment, his growing suspicion that here all was not quite as it seemed.

"Fool you? But no. I do but wish to show you something that I learned in Italy. Tell me how you slew him, Monsieur le Capitaine."

"I think we are wasting time," said the captain, angry too. He felt that this smiling gentleman was deriding the pair of them; it crossed his mind that for some purpose of his own the Marquis was seeking to gain time. He drew his sword.

Florimond saw the act, watched it, and his eyes twinkled. Suddenly Marius's sword shot out at him. He leapt back beyond the table, and threw himself on guard, his lips still wreathed in their mysterious smile.

"The time has come, messieurs," said he. "I should have preferred to know more of how you slew that Monsieur de Garnache; but since you deny me the information, I shall do my best without it. I'll try to conjure up his ghost, to keep you entertained, Monsieur le Capitaine." And then, raising his voice, his sword, engaging now his brother's:

"Ola, Monsieur de Garnache!" he cried. "To me!"

And then it seemed to those assassins that the Marquis had been neither mad nor boastful when he had spoken of strange things he had learned beyond the Alps, or else it was they themselves were turned light-headed, for the doors of a cupboard at the far end of the room flew open suddenly, and from between them stepped the stalwart figure of Martin de Garnache, a grim smile lifting the corners

of his mustachios, a naked sword in his hand flashing back the sunlight that flooded through the window.

They paused, aghast, and they turned ashen; and then in the mind of each arose the same explanation of this phenomenon. This Garnache wore the appearance of the man who had announced himself by that name when he came to Condillac a fortnight ago. Then, the sallow, black-haired knave who had last night proclaimed himself as Garnache in disguise was some impostor. That was the conclusion they promptly arrived at, and however greatly they might be dismayed by the appearance of this ally of Florimond's, yet the conclusion heartened them anew. But scarce had they arrived at it when Monsieur de Garnache's crisp voice came swiftly to dispel it.

"Monsieur le Capitaine," it said, and Fortunio shivered at the sound, for it was the voice he had heard but a few hours ago, "I welcome the opportunity of resuming our last night's interrupted sword-play." And he advanced deliberately.

Marius's sword had fallen away from his brother's, and the two combatants stood pausing. Fortunio without more ado made for the door. But Garnache crossed the intervening space in a bound.

"Turn!" he cried. "Turn, or I'll put my sword through your back. The door shall serve you presently, but it is odds that it will need a couple of men to bear you through it. Look to your dirty skin!"

CHAPTER XXII. THE OFFICES OF MOTHER CHURCH

A couple of hours after the engagement in the Marquis de Condillac's apartments at the Sanglier Noir at La Rochette, Monsieur de Garnache, attended only by Rabecque, rode briskly into France once more and made for the little town of Cheylas, which is on the road that leads down to the valley of the Isere and to Condillac. But not as far as the township did he journey. On a hill, the slopes all cultivated into an opulent vineyard, some two miles east of Cheylas, stood the low, square grey building of the Convent of Saint Francis. Thither did Monsieur de Garnache bend his horse's steps. Up the long white road that crept zigzag through the Franciscans' vineyards rode the Parisian and his servant under the welcome sunshine of that November afternoon.

Garnache's face was gloomy and his eyes sad, for his thoughts were all of Valerie, and he was prey to a hundred anxieties regarding her.

They gained the heights at last, and Rabecque got down to beat with his whip upon the convent gates.

A lay-brother came to open, and in reply to Garnache's request that he might have a word with the Father Abbot, invited him to enter.

Through the cloisters about the great quadrangle, where a couple of monks, their habits girt high as their knees, were busy at gardeners' work, Garnache followed his conductor, and up the steps to the Abbot's chamber.

The master of the Convent' of Saint Francis of Cheylas a tall, lean man with an ascetic face, prominent cheekbones, and a nose not unlike Garnache's own—the nose of a man of action rather than of prayer—bowed gravely to this stalwart stranger, and in courteous accents begged to be informed in what he might serve him.

Hat in hand, Garnache took a step forward in that bare, scantily furnished little room, permeated by the faint, waxlike odour that is peculiar to the abode of conventuals. Without hesitation he stated the reason of his visit.

"Father," said he, "a son of the house of Condillac met his end this morning at La Rochette."

The monk's eyes seemed to quicken, as though his interest in the outer world had suddenly revived.

"It is the Hand of God," he cried. "Their evil ways have provoked at last the anger of Heaven. How did this unfortunate meet his death?"

Garnache shrugged his shoulders.

"De mortuis nil nisi bonum," said he. His air was grave, his blue eyes solemn, and the Abbot had little cause to suspect the closeness with which that pair of eyes was watching him. He coloured faintly at the implied rebuke, but he inclined his head as if submissive to the correction, and waited for the other to proceed.

"There is the need, Father, to give his body burial," said Garnache gently.

But at that the monk raised his head, and a deeper flush the flush of anger—spread now upon his sallow cheeks. Garnache observed it, and was glad.

"Why do you come to me?" he asked.

"Why?" echoed Garnache, and there was hesitancy now in his voice. "Is not the burial of the dead enjoined by Mother Church? Is it not a part of your sacred office?"

"You ask me this as you would challenge my reply," said the monk, shaking his head. "It is as you say, but it is not within our office to bury the impious dead, nor those who in life were excommunicate and died without repentance."

"How can you assume he died without repentance?"

"I do not; but I assume he died without absolution, for there is no priest who, knowing his name, would dare to shrive him, and if one should do it in ignorance of his name and excommunication, why then it is not done at all. Bid others bury this son of the house of Condillac; it matters no more by what hands or in what ground he be buried than if he were the horse he rode or the hound that followed him."

"The Church is very harsh, Father," said Garnache sternly.

"The Church is very just," the priest answered him, more sternly still, a holy wrath kindling his sombre eyes.

"He was in life a powerful noble," said Garnache thoughtfully. "It is but fitting that, being dead, honour and reverence should be shown his body."

"Then let those who have themselves been honoured by the Condillacs honour this dead Condillac now. The Church is not of that number, monsieur. Since the late Marquis's death the house of Condillac has been in rebellion against us; our priests have been maltreated, our authority flouted; they paid no tithes, approached no sacraments. Weary of their ungodliness the Church placed its ban upon them under this ban it seems they die. My heart grieves for them; but—"

He spread his hands, long and almost transparent in their leanness, and on his face a cloud of sorrow rested.

"Nevertheless, Father," said Garnache, "twenty brothers of Saint Francis shall bear the body home to Condillac, and you yourself shall head this grim procession."

"I?" The monk shrank back before him, and his figure seemed to grow taller. "Who are you, sir, that say to me what I shall do, the Church's law despite?"

Garnache took the Abbot by the sleeve of his rough habit and drew him gently towards the window. There was a persuasive smile on his lips and in his keen eyes which the monk, almost unconsciously, obeyed.

"I will tell you," said Garnache, "and at the same time I shall seek to turn you from your harsh purpose."

At the hour at which Monsieur de Garnache was seeking to persuade the Abbot of Saint Francis of Cheylas to adopt a point of view more kindly towards a dead man, Madame de Condillac was at dinner, and with her was Valerie de La Vauvraye. Neither woman ate appreciably. The one was oppressed by sorrow, the other by anxiety, and the circumstance that they were both afflicted served perhaps to render the Dowager gentler in her manner towards the girl.

She watched the pale face and troubled eyes of Valerie; she observed the almost lifeless manner in which she came and went as she was bidden, as though a part of her had ceased to exist, and that part the part that matters most. It did cross her mind that in this condition mademoiselle might the more readily be bent to their will, but she dwelt not overlong upon that reflection. Rather was her mood charitable, no doubt because she felt herself the need of charity, the want of sympathy.

She was tormented by fears altogether disproportionate to their cause. A hundred times she told herself that no ill could befall Marius. Florimond was a sick man, and were he otherwise, there was still Fortunio to stand by and see to it that the right sword pierced the right heart, else would his pistoles be lost to him.

Nevertheless she was fretted by anxiety, and she waited impatiently for news, fuming at the delay, yet knowing full well that news could not yet reach her.

Once she reproved Valerie for her lack of appetite, and there was in her voice a kindness Valerie had not heard for months—not since the old Marquis died, nor did she hear it now, or, hearing it, she did not heed it.

"You are not eating, child," the Dowager said, and her eyes were gentle.

Valerie looked up like one suddenly awakened; and in that moment her eyes filled with tears. It was as if the Dowager's voice had opened the floodgates of her sorrow and let out the tears that hitherto had been repressed. The Marquise rose and waved the page and an attendant lackey from the room. She crossed to Valerie's side and put her arm about the girl's shoulder.

"What ails you, child?" she asked. For a moment the girl suffered the caress; almost she seemed to nestle closer to the Dowager's shoulder. Then, as if understanding had come to her suddenly, she drew back and quietly disengaged herself from the other's arms. Her tears ceased; the quiver passed from her lip.

"You are very good, madame," she said, with a coldness that rendered the courteous words almost insulting, "but nothing ails me save a wish to be alone."

"You have been alone too much of late," the Dowager answered,

persisting in her wish to show kindness to Valerie; for all that, had she looked into her own heart, she might have been puzzled to find a reason for her mood—unless the reason lay in her own affliction of anxiety for Marius.

"Perhaps I have," said the girl, in the same cold, almost strained voice. "It was not by my own contriving."

"Ah, but it was, child; indeed it was. Had you been reasonable you had found us kinder. We had never treated you as we have done, never made a prisoner of you."

Valerie looked up into the beautiful ivory-white face, with its black eyes and singularly scarlet lips, and a wan smile raised the corners of her gentle mouth.

"You had no right—none ever gave it you—to set constraint and restraint upon me."

"I had—indeed, indeed I had," the Marquise answered her, in a tone of sad protest. "Your father gave me such a right when he gave me charge of you."

"Was it a part of your charge to seek to turn me from my loyalty to Florimond, and endeavour to compel me by means gentle or ungentle into marriage with Marius?"

"We thought Florimond dead; or, if not dead, then certainly unworthy of you to leave you without news of him for years together. And if he was not dead then, it is odds he will be dead by now." The words slipped out almost unconsciously, and the Marquise bit her lip and straightened herself, fearing an explosion. But none came. The girl looked across the table at the fire that smouldered on the hearth in need of being replenished.

"What do you mean, madame?" she asked; but her tone was

listless, apathetic, as of one who though uttering a question is inquisitive as to what the answer may be.

"We had news some days ago that he was journeying homewards, but that he was detained by fever at La Rochette. We have since heard that his fever has grown so serious that there is little hope of his recovery."

"And it was to solace his last moments that Monsieur Marius left Condillac this morning?"

The Dowager looked sharply at the girl; but Valerie's face continued averted, her gaze resting on the fire. Her tone suggested nothing beyond a natural curiosity.

"Yes," said the Dowager.

"And lest his own efforts to help his brother out of this world should prove insufficient he took Captain Fortunio with him?" said Valerie, in the same indifferent voice.

"What do you mean?" the Marquise almost hissed into the girl's ear.

Valerie turned to her, a faint colour stirring in her white face.

"Just what I have said, madame. Would you know what I have prayed? All night was I upon my knees from the moment that I recovered consciousness, and my prayers were that Heaven might see fit to let Florimond destroy your son. Not that I desire Florimond's return, for I care not if I never set eyes on him again. There is a curse upon this house, madame," the girl continued, rising from her chair and speaking now with a greater animation, whilst the Marquise recoiled a step, her face strangely altered and suddenly gone grey, "and I have prayed that that curse might be worked out upon that assassin, Marius. A fine husband, madame, you would thrust upon the

daughter of Gaston de La Vauvraye."

And turning, without waiting for an answer, she moved slowly down the room, and took her way to her own desolate apartments, so full of memories of him she mourned—of him, it seemed to her, she must always mourn; of him who lay dead in the black waters of the moat beneath her window.

Stricken with a sudden, inexplicable terror, the Dowager, who for all her spirit was not without a certain superstition, felt her knees loosen, and she sank limply into a chair. She was amazed at the extent of Valerie's knowledge, and puzzled by it; she was amazed, too, at the seeming apathy of Valerie for the danger in which Florimond stood, and at her avowal that she did not care if she never again beheld him. But such amazement as came to her was whelmed fathoms-deep in her sudden fears for Marius. If he should die! She grew cold at the thought, and she sat there, her hands folded in her lap, her face grey. That mention of the curse the Church had put upon them had frozen her quick blood and turned her stout spirit to mere water.

At last she rose and went out into the open to inquire if no messenger had yet arrived, for all that she knew there was not yet time for any messenger to have reached the chateau. She mounted the winding staircase of stone that led to the ramparts, and there alone, in the November sunshine, she paced to and fro for hours, waiting for news, straining her eyes to gaze up the valley of the Isere, watching for the horseman that must come that way. Then, as time sped on and the sun approached its setting and still no one came, she bethought her that if harm had befallen Marius, none would ride that night to Condillac. This very delay seemed pregnant with news of disaster. And then she shook off her fears and tried to comfort herself. There was not yet time. Besides, what had she to fear for Marius? He was strong and quick, and Fortunio was by his side. A man was surely dead by now at La Rochette; but that man could not be Marius.

At last, in the distance, she espied a moving object, and down on the silent air of eventide came the far-off rattle of a horse's hoofs. Some one was riding, galloping that way. He was returned at last. She leaned on the battlements, her breath coming in quick, short gasps, and watched the horseman growing larger with every stride of his horse.

A mist was rising from the river, and it dimmed the figure; and she cursed the mist for heightening her anxiety, for straining further her impatience. Then a new fear was begotten in her mind. Why came one horseman only where two should have ridden? Who was it that returned, and what had befallen his companion? God send, at least, it might be Marius who rode thus, at such a breakneck pace.

At last she could make him out. He was close to the chateau now, and she noticed that his right arm was bandaged and hanging in a sling. And then a scream broke from her, and she bit her lip hard to keep another in check, for she had seen the horseman's face, and it was Fortunio's. Fortunio—and wounded! Then, assuredly, Marius was dead!

She swayed where she stood. She set her hand on her bosom, above her heart, as if she would have repressed the beating of the one, the heaving of the other; her soul sickened, and her mind seemed to turn numb, as she waited there for the news that should confirm her fears.

The hoofs of his horse thundered over the planks of the drawbridge, and came clatteringly to halt as he harshly drew rein in the courtyard below. There was a sound of running feet and men sprang to his assistance. Madame would have gone below to meet him; but her limbs seemed to refuse their office. She leaned against one of the merlons of the embattled parapet, her eyes on the spot where he should emerge from the stairs, and thus she waited, her eyes haggard, her face drawn.

He came at last, lurching in his walk, being overstiff from his long ride. She took a step forward to meet him. Her lips parted.

"Well?" she asked him, and her voice sounded harsh and strained. "How has the venture sped?"

"The only way it could," he answered. "As you would wish it."

At that she thought that she must faint. Her lungs seemed to writhe for air, and she opened her lips and took long draughts of the rising mist, never speaking for a moment or two until she had sufficiently recovered from this tremendous revulsion from her fears.

"Then, where is Marius?" she asked at last.

"He has remained behind to accompany the body home. They are bringing it here."

"They?" she echoed. "Who are they?"

"The monks of Saint Francis of Cheylas," he answered.

A something in his tone, a something in his shifty eyes, a cloud upon his fair and usually so ingenuous looking countenance aroused her suspicions and gave her resurrected courage pause.

She caught him viciously by the arms, and forced his glance to meet her own in the fading daylight.

"It is the truth you are telling me, Fortunio?" she snapped, and her voice was half-angry, half-fearful.

He faced her now, his eyes bold. He raised a hand to lend emphasis to his words.

"I swear, madame, by my salvation, that Monsieur Marius is sound and well."

She was satisfied. She released his arm.

"Does he come to-night?" she asked.

"They will be here to-morrow, madame. I rode on to tell you so."

"An odd fancy, this of his. But"—and a sudden smile overspread her face—"we may find a more useful purpose for one of these monks."

An hour ago she would willingly have set mademoiselle at liberty in exchange for the assurance that Marius had been successful in the business that had taken him over the border into Savoy. She would have done it gladly, content that Marius should be heir to Condillac. But now that Condillac was assured her son, she must have more for him; her insatiable greed for his advancement and prosperity was again upon her. Now, more than ever—now that Florimond was dead—must she have La Vauvraye for Marius, and she thought that mademoiselle would no longer be difficult to bend. The child had fallen in love with that mad Garnache, and when a woman is crossed in love, while her grief lasts it matters little to her where she weds. Did she not know it out of the fund of her own bitter experience? Was it not that—the compulsion her own father had employed to make her find a mate in a man so much older than herself as Condillac—that had warped her own nature, and done much to make her what she was?

A lover she had had, and whilst he lived she had resisted them, and stood out against this odious marriage that for convenience' sake they forced upon her. He was killed in Paris in a duel, and when the news of it came to her, she had folded her hands and let them wed her to whom they listed.

Of just such a dejection of spirit had she observed the signs in Valerie; let them profit by it while it lasted. They had been long enough

without Church ceremonies at Condillac. There should be two to-morrow to make up for the empty time—a wedding and a burial.

She was going down the stairs, Fortunio a step behind her, when her mind reverted to the happening at La Rochette.

"Was it well done?" she asked.

"It made some stir," said he. "The Marquis had men with him, and had the affair taken place in France ill might have come of it."

"You shall give me a full account of it," said she, rightly thinking that there was still something to be explained. Then she laughed softly. "Yes, it was a lucky chance for us, his staying at La Rochette. Florimond was born under an unlucky star, I think, and you under a lucky one, Fortunio."

"I think so, too, as regards myself," he answered grimly, and he thought of the sword that had ploughed his cheek last night and pierced his sword-arm that morning, and he thanked such gods as in his godlessness he owned for the luck that had kept that sword from finding out his heart.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE JUDGMENT OF GARNACHE

On the morrow, which was a Friday and the tenth of November—a date to be hereafter graven on the memory of all concerned in the affairs of Condillac—the Dowager rose betimes, and, for decency's sake, having in mind the business of the day, she gowned herself in black.

Betimes, too, the Lord Seneschal rode out of Grenoble, attended by a couple of grooms, and headed for Condillac, in doing which—little though he suspected it—he was serving nobody's interests more thoroughly than Monsieur de Garnache's.

Madame received him courteously. She was in a blithe—and happy mood that morning—the reaction from her yesterday's distress of mind. The world was full of promise, and all things had prospered with her and Marius. Her boy was lord of Condillac; Florimond, whom she had hated and who had stood in the way of her boy's advancement, was dead and on his way to burial; Garnache, the man from Paris who might have made trouble for them had he ridden home again with the tale of their resistance, was silenced for all time, and the carp in the moat would be feasting by now upon what was left of him; Valerie de La Vauvraye was in a dejected frame of mind that augured well for the success of the Dowager's plans concerning her, and by noon at latest there would be priests at Condillac, and, if Marius still wished to marry the obstinate baggage, there would be no difficulty as to that.

It was a glorious morning, mild and sunny as an April day, as

though Nature took a hand in the Dowager's triumph and wished to make the best of its wintry garb in honour of it.

The presence of this gross suitor of hers afforded her another source of satisfaction. There would no longer be the necessity she once had dreaded of listening to his suit for longer than it should be her pleasure to be amused by him. But when Tressan spoke, he struck the first note of discord in the perfect harmony which the Dowager imagined existed.

"Madame," said he, "I am desolated that I am not a bearer of better tidings. But for all that we have made the most diligent search, the man Rabecque has not yet been apprehended. Still, we have not abandoned hope," he added, by way of showing that there was a silver lining to his cloud of danger.

For just a moment madame's brows were knitted. She had forgotten Rabecque until now; but an instant's reflection assured her that in forgetting him she had done him no more than such honour as he deserved. She laughed, as she led the way down the garden steps—the mildness of the day and the brightness of her mood had moved her there to receive the Seneschal.

"From the sombreness of your tone one might fear your news to be of the nature of some catastrophe. What shall it signify that Rabecque eludes your men? He is but a lackey after all."

"True," said the Seneschal, very soberly; "but do not forget, I beg, that he is the bearer of letters from one who is not a lackey."

The laughter went out of her face at that. Here was something that had been lost sight of in the all-absorbing joy of other things. In calling the forgotten Rabecque to mind she had but imagined that it was no more than a matter of the tale he might tell—a tale not difficult to refute, she thought. Her word should always weigh against a lackey's.

But that letter was a vastly different matter.

"He must be found, Tressan," she said sharply.

Tressan smiled uneasily, and chewed at his beard.

"No effort shall be spared," he promised her. "Of that you may be very sure. The affairs of the province are at a standstill," he added, that vanity of his for appearing a man of infinite business rising even in an hour of such anxiety, for to himself, no less than to her, was there danger should Rabecque ever reach his destination with the papers Garnache had said he carried.

"The affairs of the province are at a standstill," he repeated, "while all my energies are bent upon this quest. Should we fail to have news of his capture in Dauphiny, we need not, nevertheless, despond. I have sent men after him along the three roads that lead to Paris. They are to spare neither money nor horses in picking up his trail and effecting his capture. After all, I think we shall have him."

"He is our only danger now," the Marquise answered, "for Florimond is dead—of the fever," she added, with a sneering smile which gave Tressan sensations as of cold water on his spine. "It were an irony of fate if that miserable lackey were to reach Paris now and spoil the triumph for which we have worked so hard."

"It were, indeed," Tressan agreed with her, "and we must see that he does not."

"But if he does," she returned, "then we must stand together." And with that she set her mind at ease once more, her mood that morning being very optimistic.

"Always, I hope, Clotilde," he answered, and his little eyes leered up out of the dimples of fat in which they were embedded. "I have stood by you like a true friend in this affair; is it not so?"

"Indeed; do I deny it?" she answered half scornfully.

"As I shall stand by you always when the need arises. You are a little in my debt concerning Monsieur de Garnache."

"I—I realize it," said she, and she felt again as if the sunshine were gone from the day, the blitheness from her heart. She was moved to bid him cease leering at her and to take himself and his wooing to the devil. But she bethought her that the need for him might not yet utterly be passed. Not only in the affair of Garnache—in which he stood implicated as deeply as herself—might she require his loyalty, but also in the matter of what had befallen yesterday at La Rochette; for despite Fortunio's assurances that things had gone smoothly, his tale hung none too convincingly together; and whilst she did not entertain any serious fear of subsequent trouble, yet it might be well not utterly to banish the consideration of such a possibility, and to keep the Seneschal her ally against it. So she told him now, with as much graciousness as she could command, that she fully realized her debt, and when, encouraged, he spoke of his reward, she smiled upon him as might a girl smile upon too impetuous a wooer whose impetuosity she deprecates yet cannot wholly withstand.

"I am a widow of six months," she reminded him, as she had reminded him once before. Her widowhood was proving a most convenient refuge. "It is not for me to listen to a suitor, however my foolish heart may incline. Come to me in another six months' time."

"And you will wed me then?" he bleated.

By an effort her eyes smiled down upon him, although her face was a trifle drawn.

"Have I not said that I will listen to no suitor? and what is that but a suitor's question?"

He caught her hand; he would have fallen on his knees there and

then, at her feet, on the grass still wet with the night's mist, but that he in time bethought him of how sadly his fine apparel would be the sufferer.

"Yet I shall not sleep, I shall know no rest, no peace until you have given me an answer. Just an answer is all I ask. I will set a curb upon my impatience afterwards, and go through my period of ah—probation without murmuring. Say that you, will marry me in six months' time—at Easter, say."

She saw that an answer she must give, and so she gave him the answer that he craved. And he—poor fool!—never caught the ring of her voice, as false as the ring of a base coin; never guessed that in promising she told herself it would be safe to break that promise six months hence, when the need of him and his loyalty would be passed.

A man approached them briskly from the chateau. He brought news that a numerous company of monks was descending the valley of the Isere towards Condillac. A faint excitement stirred her, and accompanied by Tressan she retraced her steps and made for the battlements, whence she might overlook their arrival.

As they went Tressan asked for an explanation of this cortege, and she answered him with Fortunio's story of how things had sped yesterday at La Rochette.

Up the steps leading to the battlements she went ahead of him, with a youthful, eager haste that took no thought for the corpulence and short-windedness of the following Seneschal. From the heights she looked eastwards, shading her eyes from the light of the morning sun, and surveyed the procession which with slow dignity paced down the valley towards Condillac.

At its head walked the tall, lean figure of the Abbot of Saint Francis of Cheylas, bearing on high a silvered crucifix that flashed and

scintillated in the sunlight. His cowl was thrown back, revealing his pale, ascetic countenance and shaven head. Behind him came a coffin covered by a black pall, and borne on the shoulders of six black-robed, black cowled monks, and behind these again walked, two by two, some fourteen cowled brothers of the order of Saint Francis, their heads bowed, their arms folded, and their hands tucked away in their capacious sleeves.

It was a numerous cortege, and as she watched its approach the Marquise was moved to wonder by what arguments had the proud Abbot been induced to do so much honour to a dead Condillac and bear his body home to this excommunicated roof.

Behind the monks a closed carriage lumbered down the uneven mountain way, and behind this rode four mounted grooms in the livery of Condillac. Of Marius she saw nowhere any sign, and she inferred him to be travelling in that vehicle, the attendant servants being those of the dead Marquis.

In silence, with the Seneschal at her elbow, she watched the procession advance until it was at the foot of the drawbridge. Then, while the solemn rhythm of their feet sounded across the planks that spanned the moat, she turned, and, signing to the Seneschal to follow her, she went below to meet them. But when she reached the courtyard she was surprised to find they had not paused, as surely would have been seemly. Unbidden, the Abbot had gone forward through the great doorway and down the gallery that led to the hall of Condillac. Already, when she arrived below, the coffin and its bearers had disappeared, and the last of the monks was passing from sight in its wake. Leaning against the doorway through which they were vanishing stood Fortunio, idly watching that procession and thoughtfully stroking his mustachios. About the yard lounged a dozen or so men-at-arms, practically all the garrison that was left them since the fight with Garnache two nights ago.

After the last monk had disappeared, she still remained there, expectantly; and when she saw that neither the carriage nor the grooms made their appearance, she stepped up to Fortunio to inquire into the reason of it.

"Surely Monsieur de Condillac rides in that coach," said she.

"Surely," Fortunio answered, himself looking puzzled. "I will go seek the reason, madame. Meanwhile will you receive the Abbot? The monks will have deposited their burden."

She composed her features into a fitting solemnity, and passed briskly through to the hall, Tressan ever at her heels. Here she found the coffin deposited on the table, its great black pall of velvet, silver-edged, sweeping down to the floor. No fire had been lighted that morning nor had the sun yet reached the windows, so that the place wore a chill and gloomy air that was perhaps well attuned to the purpose that it was being made to serve.

With a rare dignity, her head held high, she swept down the length of that noble chamber towards the Abbot, who stood erect as a pikestaff: at the tablehead, awaiting her. And well was it for him that he was a man of austere habit of mind, else might her majestic, incomparable beauty have softened his heart and melted the harshness of his purpose.

He raised his hand when she was within a sword's length of him, and with startling words, delivered in ringing tones, he broke the ponderous silence.

"Wretched woman," he denounced her, "your sins have found you out. Justice is to be done, and your neck shall be bent despite your stubborn pride. Derider of priests, despoiler of purity, mocker of Holy Church, your impious reign is at an end."

Tressan fell back aghast, his face blenching to the lips; for if justice

was at hand for her, as the Abbot said, then was justice at hand for him as well. Where had their plans miscarried? What flaw was there that hitherto she had not perceived? Thus he questioned himself in his sudden panic.

But the Marquise was no sharer in his tremors. Her eyes opened a trifle wider; a faint colour crept into her cheeks; but her only emotions were of amazement and indignation. Was he mad, this shaveling monk? That was the question that leapt into her mind, the very question with which she coldly answered his outburst.

"For madness only," she thought fit to add, "could excuse such rash temerity as yours."

"Not madness, madame," he answered, with chill haughtiness—"not madness, but righteous indignation. You have defied the power of Holy Church as you have defied the power of our sovereign lady, and justice is upon you. We are here to present the reckoning, and see its payment made in full."

She fancied he alluded to the body in the coffin—the body of her stepson—and she could have laughed at his foolish conclusions that she must account Florimond's death an act of justice upon her for her impiety. But her rising anger left her no room for laughter.

"I thought, sir priest, you were come to bury the dead. But it rather seems you are come to talk."

He looked at her long and sternly. Then he shook his head, and the faintest shadow of a smile haunted his ascetic face.

"Not to talk, madame; oh, not to talk," he answered slowly. "But to act, I have come, madame, to liberate from this shambles the gentle lamb you hold here prisoned."

At that some of the colour left her cheeks; her eyes grew startled: at

last she began to realize that all was not as she had thought—as she had been given to understand.—Still, she sought to hector it, from very instinct.

"Vertudieu!" she thundered at him. "What mean you?"

Behind her Tressan's great plump knees were knocking one against the other. Fool that he had been to come to Condillac that day, and to be trapped thus in her company, a partner in her guilt. This proud Abbot who stood there uttering denunciations had some power behind him, else had he never dared to raise his voice in Condillac within call of desperate men who would give little thought to the sacredness, of his office.

"What mean you?" she repeated—adding with a sinister smile, "in your zeal, Sir Abbot, you are forgetting that my men are within call."

"So, madame, are mine," was his astounding answer, and he waved a hand towards the array of monks, all standing with bowed heads and folded arms.

At that her laughter rang shrill through the chamber. "These poor shavelings?" she questioned.

"Just these poor shavelings, madame," he answered, and he raised his hand again and made a sign. And then an odd thing happened, and it struck a real terror into the heart of the Marquise and heightened that which was already afflicting her fat lover, Tressan.

The monks drew themselves erect. It was as if a sudden gust of wind had swept through their ranks and set them all in motion. Cowls fell back and habits were swept aside, and where twenty monks had stood, there were standing now a score of nimble, stalwart men in the livery of Condillac, all fully armed, all grinning in enjoyment of her and Tressan's dismay.

One of them turned aside and locked the door of the chamber. But his movement went unheeded by the Dowager, whose beautiful eyes, starting with horror, were now back upon the grim figure of the Abbot, marvelling almost to see no transformation wrought in him.

"Treachery!" she breathed, in an awful voice, that was no louder than a whisper, and again her eyes travelled round the company, and suddenly they fastened upon Fortunio, standing six paces from her to the right, pulling thoughtfully at his mustachios, and manifesting no surprise at what had taken place.

In a sudden, blind choler, she swept round, plucked the dagger from Tressan's belt and flung herself upon the treacherous captain. He had betrayed her in some way; he had delivered up Condillac—into whose power she had yet had no time to think. She caught him by the throat with a hand of such nervous strength as one would little have suspected from its white and delicate contour. Her dagger was poised in the air, and the captain, taken thus suddenly, was palsied with amazement and could raise no hand to defend himself from the blow impending.

But the Abbot stepped suddenly to her side and caught her wrist in his thin, transparent hand.

"Forbear," he bade her. "The man is but a tool."

She fell back—dragged back almost by the Abbot—panting with rage and grief; and then she noticed that during the moment that her back had been turned the pall had been swept from the coffin. The sight of the bare deal box arrested her attention, and for the moment turned aside her anger. What fresh surprise did they prepare her?

No sooner had she asked herself the question than herself she answered it, and an icy hand seemed to close about her heart. It was Marius who was dead. They had lied to her. Marius's was the body

they had borne to Condillac—those men in the livery of her stepson.

With a sudden sob in her throat she took a step towards the coffin. She must see for herself. One way or the other she must at once dispel this torturing doubt. But ere she had taken three paces, she stood arrested again, her hands jerked suddenly to the height of her breast, her lips parting to let out a scream of terror. For the coffin-lid had slowly raised and clattered over. And as if to pile terror for her, a figure rose from the box, and, sitting up, looked round with a grim smile; and the figure was the figure of a man whom she knew to be dead, a man who had died by her contriving—it was the figure of Garnache. It was Garnache as he had been on the occasion of his first coming to Condillac, as he had been on the day they had sought his life in this very room. How well she knew that great hooked nose and the bright, steely blue eyes, the dark brown hair, ash-coloured at the temples where age had paled it, and the fierce, reddish mustachios, bristling above the firm mouth and long, square chin.

She stared and stared, her beautiful face livid and distorted, till there was no beauty to be seen in it, what time the Abbot regarded her coldly and Tressan, behind her, turned almost sick with terror. But not the terror of ghosts was it afflicted him. He saw in Garnache a man who was still of the quick—a man who by some miracle had escaped the fate to which they supposed him to have succumbed; and his terror was the terror of the reckoning which that man would ask.

After a moment's pause, as if relishing the sensation he had created, Garnache rose to his feet and leapt briskly to the ground. There was nothing ghostly about the thud with which he alighted on his feet before her. A part of her terror left her; yet not quite all. She saw that she had but a man to deal with, yet she began to realize that this man was very terrible.

"Garnache again!" she gasped.

He bowed serenely, his lips smiling.

"Aye, madame," he told her pleasantly, "always Garnache. Tenacious as a leech, madame; and like a leech come hither to do a little work of purification."

Her eyes, now kindling again as she recovered from her recent fears, sought Fortunio's shifty glance. Garnache followed it and read what was in her mind.

"What Fortunio has done," said he, "he has done by your son's authority and sanction."

"Marius?" she inquired, and she was almost fearful lest she should hear that by her son he meant her stepson, and that Marius was dead.

"Yes, Marius," he answered her. "I bent him to my will. I threatened him that he and this fellow of his, this comrade in arms so worthy of his master, should be broken on the wheel together unless I were implicitly obeyed. If they would save their lives, this was their chance. They were wise, and they took it, and thus afforded me the means of penetrating into Condillac and rescuing Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye."

"Then Marius—?" She left her question unfinished, her hand clutching nervously at the bosom of her gown.

"Is sound and well, as Fortunio truthfully will have told you. But he is not yet out of my grasp, nor will be until the affairs of Condillac are settled. For if I meet with further opposition here, broken on the wheel he shall be yet, I promise you."

Still she made a last attempt at hectoring it. The long habit of mastership dies hard. She threw back her head; her courage revived now that she knew Marius to be alive and sound.

"Fine words," she sneered. "But who are you that you can threaten so and promise so?"

"I am the Queen-Regent's humble mouthpiece, madame. What I threaten, I threaten in her name. Ruffle it no longer, I beseech you. It will prove little worth your while. You are deposed, madame, and you had best take your deposition with dignity and calm—in all friendliness do I advise it."

"I am not yet come so low that I need your advice," she answered sourly.

"You may before the sun sets," he answered, with his quiet smile. "The Marquis de Condillac and his wife are still at La Rochette, waiting until my business here is done that they may come home."

"His wife?" she cried.

"His wife, madame. He has brought home a wife from Italy."

"Then—then—Marius?" She said no more than that. Maybe she had no intention of muttering even so much of her thoughts aloud. But Garnache caught the trend of her mind, and he marvelled to see how strong a habit of thought can be. At once upon hearing of the Marquis's marriage her mind had flown back to its wonted pondering of the possibilities of Marius's wedding Valerie.

But Garnache dispelled such speculations.

"No, madame," said he. "Marius looks elsewhere for a wife—unless mademoiselle of her own free will should elect to wed him—a thing unlikely." Then, with a sudden change to sternness—"Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye is well, madame?" he asked.

She nodded her head, but made no answer in words. He turned to Fortunio.

"Go fetch her," he bade the captain, and one of the men unlocked the door to let Fortunio out upon that errand.

The Parisian took a turn in the apartment, and came close to Tressan. He nodded to the Seneschal with a friendliness that turned him sick with fright.

"Well met, my dear Lord Seneschal. I am rejoiced to find you here. Had it been otherwise I must have sent for you. There is a little matter to be settled between us. You may depend upon me to settle it to your present satisfaction, if to your future grief." And, with a smile, he passed on, leaving the Seneschal too palsied to answer him, too stricken to disclaim his share in what had taken place at Condillac.

"You have terms to make with me?" the Marquise questioned proudly.

"Certainly," he answered, with his grim courtesy. "Upon your acceptance of those terms shall depend Marius's life and your own future liberty."

"What are they?"

"That within the hour all your people—to the last scullion—shall have laid down their arms and vacated Condillac."

It was beyond her power to refuse.

"The Marquis will not drive me forth?" she half affirmed, half asked.

"The Marquis, madame, has no power in this matter. It is for the Queen to deal with your insubordination—for me as the Queen's emissary."

"If I consent, monsieur, what then?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and smiled quietly.

"There is no 'if, madame. Consent you must, willingly or unwillingly. To make sure of that have I come back thus and with force. But should you deliver battle, you will be worsted—and it will be very ill for you. Bid your men depart, as I have told you, and you also shall have liberty to go hence."

"Aye, but whither?" she cried, in a sudden frenzy of anger.

"I realize, madame, from what I know of your circumstances that you will be well-nigh homeless. You should have thought of how one day you might come to be dependent upon the Marquis de Condillac's generosity before you set yourself to conspire against him, before you sought to encompass his death. You can hardly look for generosity at his hands now, and so you will be all but homeless, unless—" He paused, and his eyes strayed to Tressan and were laden with a sardonic look.

"You take a very daring tone with me," she told him. "You speak to me as no man has ever dared to speak."

"When the power was yours, madame, you dealt with me as none has ever dared to deal. The advantage now is mine. Behold how I use it in your own interests; observe how generously I shall deal with you who deal in murder. Monsieur de Tressan," he called briskly. The Seneschal started forward as if some one had prodded him suddenly.

"Mu—monsieur?" said he.

"With you, too, will I return good for evil. Come hither."

The Seneschal approached, wondering what was about to take place. The Marquise watched his coming, a cold glitter in her eye, for—keener of mental vision than Tressan—she already knew the hideous purpose that was in Garnache's mind.

The soldiers grinned; the Abbot looked on with an impassive face.

"The Marquise de Condillac is likely to be homeless henceforth," said the Parisian, addressing the Seneschal. "Will you not be gallant enough to offer her a home, Monsieur de Tressan?"

"Will I?" gasped Tressan, scarce daring to believe his own ears, his eyes staring with a look that was almost one of vacancy. "Madame well knows how readily."

"Oho?" crowed Garnache, who had been observing madame's face. "She knows? Then do so, monsieur; and on that condition I will forget your indiscretions here. I pledge you my word that you shall not be called to further account for the lives that have been lost through your treachery and want of loyalty, provided that of your own free will you lay down your Seneschalship of Dauphiny an office which I cannot consent to see you filling hereafter."

Tressan stared from the Dowager to Garnache and back to the Dowager. She stood there as if Garnache's words had turned her into marble, bereft of speech through very rage. And then the door opened, and Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye entered, followed closely by Fortunio.

At sight of Garnache she stood still, set her hand on her heart, and uttered a low cry. Was it indeed Garnache she saw—Garnache, her brave knight-errant? He looked no longer as he had looked during those days when he had been her gaoler; but he looked as she liked to think of him since she had accounted him dead. He advanced to meet her, a smile in his eyes that had something wistful in it. He held out both hands to her, and she took them, and there, under the eyes of all, before he could snatch them away, she had stooped and kissed them, whilst a murmur of "Thank God! Thank God!" escaped from her lips to heaven.

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle!" he remonstrated, when it was too late to stay her. "You must not; it is not seemly in me to allow it."

He saw in the act no more than an expression of the gratitude for what he had done to serve her, and for the risk in which his life had been so willingly placed in that service. Under the suasion of his words she grew calm again; then, suddenly, a fear stirred her once more in that place where she had known naught but fears.

"Why are you here, monsieur? You have come into danger again?"

"No, no," he laughed. "These are my own men at least, for the time being. I am come in power this time, to administer justice. What shall be done with this lady, mademoiselle?" he asked; and knowing well the merciful sweetness of the girl's soul, he added, "Speak, now. Her fate shall rest in your hands."

Valerie looked at her enemy, and then her eyes strayed round the room and took stock of the men standing there in silence, of the Abbot who still remained at the table-head, a pale, scarce-interested spectator of this odd scene.

The change had come so abruptly. A few minutes ago she had been still a prisoner, suffering tortures at having heard that Marius was to return that day, and that, willy-nilly, she must wed him now. And now she was free it seemed: her champion was returned in power, and he stood bidding her decide the fate of her late oppressors.

Madame's face was ashen. She judged the girl by her own self; she had no knowledge of any such infinite sweetness as that of this child's nature, a sweetness that could do no hurt to any. Death was what the Marquise expected, since she knew that death would she herself have pronounced had the positions been reversed. But—

"Let her go in peace, monsieur," she heard mademoiselle say, and she could not believe but that she was being mocked. And as if mockery were at issue, Garnache laughed.

"We will let her go, mademoiselle—yet not quite her own way. You

must not longer remain unrestrained, madame," he told the Marquise. "Natures such as yours need a man's guidance. I think you will be sufficiently punished if you wed this rash Monsieur de Tressan, just as he will be sufficiently punished later when disillusionment follows his present youthful ardour. Make each other happy, then," and he waved his arms from one to the other. "Our good Father, here, will tie the knot at once, and then, my Lord Seneschal, you may bear home your bride. Her son shall follow you."

But the Marquise blazed out now. She stamped her foot, and her eyes seemed to have taken fire.

"Never, sir! Never in life!" she cried. "I will not be so constrained. I am the Marquise de Condillac, monsieur. Do not forget it!"

"I am hardly in danger of doing that. It is because I remember it that I urge you to change your estate with all dispatch; and cease to be the Marquise de Condillac. That same Marquise has a heavy score against her. Let her evade payment by this metamorphosis. I have opened for you, madame, a door through which you may escape."

"You are insolent," she told him. "By God, sir! I am no baggage to be disposed of by the will of any man."

At that Garnache himself took fire. Her anger proved as the steel smiting the flint of his own nature, and one of his fierce bursts of blazing passion whirled about her head.

"And what of this child, here?" he thundered. "What of her, madame? Was she a baggage to be disposed of by the will of any man or woman? Yet you sought to dispose of her against her heart, against her nature, against her plighted word. Enough said!" he barked, and so terrific was his mien and voice that the stout-spirited Dowager was cowed, and recoiled as he advanced a step in her direction. "Get you married. Take you this man to husband, you who

with such calmness sought to drive others into unwilling wedlock. Do it, madame, and do it now, or by the Heaven above us, you shall come to Paris with me, and you'll not find them nice there. It will avail you little to storm and shout at them that you are Marquise de Condillac. As a murderess and a rebel shall you be tried, and as both or either it is odds you will be broken on the wheel—and your son with you. So make your choice, madame."

He ceased. Valerie had caught him by the arm. At once his fury fell from him. He turned to her.

"What is it, child?"

"Do not compel her, if she will not wed him," said she. "I know—and—she did not—how terrible a thing it is."

"Nay, patience, child," he soothed her, smiling now, his smile as the sunshine that succeeds a thunderstorm.

"It is none so bad with her. She is but coy. They had plighted their troth already, so it seems. Besides, I do not compel her. She shall marry him of her own free will—or else go to Paris and stand her trial and the consequences."

"They had plighted their troth, do you say?"

"Well—had you not, Monsieur le Seneschal?"

"We had, monsieur," said Tressan, with conscious pride; "and for myself I am ready for these immediate nuptials."

"Then, in God's name, let Madame give us her answer now. We have not the day to waste."

She stood looking at him, her toe tapping the ground, her eyes sullenly angry. And in the end, half-fainting in her great disdain, she consented to do his will. Paris and the wheel formed too horrible an

alternative; besides, even if that were spared her, there was but a hovel in Touraine for her, and Tressan, for all his fat ugliness, was wealthy.

So the Abbot, who had lent himself to the mummery of coming there to read a burial service, made ready now, by order of the Queen's emissary, to solemnize a wedding.

It was soon done. Fortunio stood sponsor for Tressan, and Garnache himself insisted upon handing the Lord Seneschal his bride, a stroke of irony which hurt the proud lady of Condillac more than all her sufferings of the past half-hour.

When it was over and the Dowager Marquise de Condillac had been converted into the Comtesse de Tressan, Garnache bade them depart in peace and at once.

"As I have promised, you shall be spared all prosecution, Monsieur de Tressan," he assured the Seneschal at parting. "But you must resign at once the King's Seneschalship of Dauphiny, else will you put me to the necessity of having you deprived of your office—and that might entail unpleasant consequences."

They went, madame with bowed head, her stubborn pride broken at last as the Abbot of Saint Francis had so confidently promised her. After them went the Abbot and the lackeys of Florimond, and Fortunio went with these to carry out Garnache's orders that the men of the Dowager's garrison be sent packing at once, leaving with the Parisian, in the great hall, just Mademoiselle de La Vauvraye.

CHAPTER XXIV. SAINT MARTIN'S EVE

Uneasy in his mind, seeking some way to tell the thing and acquit himself of the painful task before him, Garnache took a turn in the apartment.

Mademoiselle leaned against the table, which was still burdened by the empty coffin, and observed him. His ponderings were vain; he could find no way to tell, his story. She had said that she did not exactly love this Florimond, that her loyalty to him was no more than her loyalty to her father's wishes. Nevertheless, he thought, what manner of hurt must not her pride receive when she learned that Florimond had brought him home a wife? Garnache was full of pity for her and for the loneliness that must be hers hereafter, mistress of a vast estate in Dauphiny, alone and friendless. And he was a little sorry for himself and the loneliness which, he felt, would be his hereafter; but that was by the way.

At last it was she herself who broke the silence.

"Monsieur," she asked him, and her voice was strained and husky, "were you in time to save Florimond?"

"Yes, mademoiselle," he answered readily, glad that by that question she should have introduced the subject. "I was in time."

"And Marius?" she inquired. "From what I heard you say, I take it that he has suffered no harm."

"He has suffered none. I have spared him that he might participate

in the joy of his mother at her union with Monsieur de Tressan."

"I am glad it was so, monsieur. Tell me of it." Her voice sounded formal and constrained.

But either he did not hear or did not heed the question.

"Mademoiselle," he said slowly. "Florimond is coming—"

"Florimond?" she broke in, and her voice went shrill, as if with a sudden fear, her cheeks turned white as chalk. The thing that for months she had hoped and prayed for was come at last, and it struck her almost dead with terror.

He remarked the change, and set it down to a natural excitement. He paused a moment. Then:

"He is still at La Rochette. But he does no more than wait until he shall have learned that his stepmother has departed from Condillac."

"But—why—why—? Was he then in no haste to come to me?" she inquired, her voice faltering.

"He is—" He stopped and tugged at his mustachios, his eyes regarding her sombrely. He was close beside her now, where he had halted, and he set his hand gently upon her shoulder, looked down into that winsome little oval face she raised to his.

"Mademoiselle," he inquired, "would it afflict you very sorely if you were not destined, after all, to wed the Lord of Condillac?"

"Afflict me?" she echoed. The very question set her gasping with hope. "No—no, monsieur; it would not afflict me."

"That is true? That is really, really true?" he cried, and his tone seemed less despondent.

"Don't you know how true it is?" she said, in such accents and with

such a shy upward look that something seemed suddenly to take Garnache by the throat. The blood flew to his cheeks. He fancied an odd meaning in those words of hers—a meaning that set his pulses throbbing faster than joy or peril had ever set them yet. Then he checked himself, and deep down in his soul he seemed to hear a peal of mocking laughter—just such a burst of sardonic mirth as had broken from his lips two nights ago when on his way to Voiron. Then he went back to the business he had in hand.

"I am glad it is so with you," he said quietly. "Because Florimond has brought him home a wife."

The words were out, and he stood back as stands a man who, having cast an insult, prepares to ward the blow he expects in answer. He had looked for a storm, a wild, frantic outburst; the lightning of flashing, angry eyes; the thunder of outraged pride. Instead, here was a gentle calm, a wan smile overspreading her sweet, pale face, and then she hid that face in her hands, buried face and hands upon his shoulder and fell to weeping very quietly.

This, he thought, was almost worse than the tempest he had looked for. How was he to know that these tears were the overflow of a heart that was on the point of bursting from sheer joy? He patted her shoulder; he soothed her.

"Little child," he whispered in her ear. "What does it matter? You did not really love him. He was all unworthy of you. Do not grieve, child. So, so, that is better."

She was looking up at him, smiling through the tears that suffused her eyes.

"I am weeping for joy, monsieur," said she.

"For joy?" quoth he. "Vertudieu! There is no end to the things a woman weeps for!"

Unconsciously, instinctively almost, she nestled closer to him, and again his pulses throbbed, again that flush came to overspread his lean countenance. Very softly he whispered in her ear:

"Will you go to Paris with me, mademoiselle?"

He meant by that question no more than to ask whether, now that here in Dauphiny she would be friendless and alone, it were not better for her to place herself under the care of the Queen-Regent. But what blame to her if she misunderstood the question, if she read in it the very words her heart was longing to hear from him? The very gentleness of his tone implied his meaning to be the one she desired. She raised her hazel eyes again to his, she nestled closer to him, and then, with a shy fluttering of her lids, a delicious red suffusing her virgin cheek, she answered very softly:

"I will go anywhere with you, monsieur—anywhere."

With a cry he broke from her. There was no fancying now; no possibility of misunderstanding. He saw how she had misread his question, how she had delivered herself up to him in answer. His almost roughness startled her, and she stared at him as he stamped down the apartment and back to where she stood, seeking in vain to master the turbulence of his feelings. He stood still again. He took her by the shoulders and held her at arms' length, before him, thus surveying her, and there was trouble in his keen eyes.

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle!" he cried. "Valerie, my child, what are you saying to me?"

"What would you have me say?" she asked, her eyes upon the floor. "Was I too forward? It seemed to me there could not be question of such a thing between us now. I belong to you. What man has ever served a woman as you have served me? What better friend, what nobler lover did ever woman have? Why then need I take

shame at confessing my devotion?"

He swallowed hard, and there was a mist before his eyes—eyes that had looked unmoved on many a scene of carnage.

"You know not what you do," he cried out, and his voice was as the voice of one in pain. "I am old."

"Old?" she echoed in deep surprise, and she looked up at him, as if she sought evidence of what he stated.

"Aye, old," he assured her bitterly. "Look at the grey in my hair, the wrinkles in my face. I am no likely lover for you, child. You'll need a lusty, comely young gallant."

She looked at him, and a faint smile flickered at the corners of her lips. She observed his straight, handsome figure; his fine air of dignity and of strength. Every inch a man was he; never lived there one who was more a man; and what more than such a man could any maid desire?

"You are all that I would have you," she answered him, and in his mind he almost cursed her stubbornness, her want of reason.

"I am peevish and cross-grained," he informed her, "and I have grown old in ignorance of woman's ways. Love has never come to me until now. What manner of lover, think you, can I make?"

Her eyes were on the windows at his back. The sunshine striking through them seemed to give her the reply she sought.

"To-morrow will be Saint Martin's Day," she told him; "yet see with a warmth the sun is shining."

"A poor, make-believe Saint Martin's Summer," said he. "I am fitly answered by your allegory."

"Oh, not make-believe, not make-believe," she exclaimed. "There is no make-believe in the sun's brightness and its warmth. We see it and we feel it, and we are none the less glad of it because the time of year should be November; rather do we take the greater joy in it. And it is not yet November in your life, not yet by many months."

"What you say is apt, perhaps," said he, "and may seem more apt than it is since my name is Martin, though I am no saint." Then he shook off this mood that he accounted selfish; this mood that would take her—as the wolf takes the lamb—with no thought but for his own hunger.

"No, no!" he cried out. "It were unworthy in me!"

"When I love you, Martin?" she asked him gently.

A moment he stared at her, as if through those clear eyes he would penetrate to the very depths of her maiden soul. Then he sank on to his knees before her as any stripling lover might have done, and kissed her hands in token of the fact that he was conquered.

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THE SNARE

By Rafael Sabatini

Contents

THE SNARE

CHAPTER I.	THE AFFAIR AT TAVORA
CHAPTER II.	THE ULTIMATUM
CHAPTER III.	LADY O'MOY
CHAPTER IV.	COUNT SAMOVAL
CHAPTER V.	THE FUGITIVE
CHAPTER VI.	MISS ARMYTAGE'S PEARLS
CHAPTER VII.	THE ALLY
CHAPTER VIII.	THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER
CHAPTER IX.	THE GENERAL ORDER
CHAPTER X.	THE STIFLED QUARREL
CHAPTER XI.	THE CHALLENGE
CHAPTER XII.	THE DUEL
CHAPTER XIII.	POLICHINELLE
CHAPTER XIV.	THE CHAMPION
CHAPTER XV.	THE WALLET
CHAPTER XVI.	THE EVIDENCE
CHAPTER XVII.	BITTER WATER
CHAPTER XVIII.	FOOL'S MATE
CHAPTER XIX.	THE TRUTH
CHAPTER XX.	THE RESIGNATION

THE SNARE

CHAPTER I. THE AFFAIR AT TAVORA

It is established beyond doubt that Mr. Butler was drunk at the time. This rests upon the evidence of Sergeant Flanagan and the troopers who accompanied him, and it rests upon Mr. Butler's own word, as we shall see. And let me add here and now that however wild and irresponsible a rascal he may have been, yet by his own lights he was a man of honour, incapable of falsehood, even though it were calculated to save his skin. I do not deny that Sir Thomas Picton has described him as a "thieving blackguard." But I am sure that this was merely the downright, rather extravagant manner, of censure peculiar to that distinguished general, and that those who have taken the expression at its purely literal value have been lacking at once in charity and in knowledge of the caustic, uncompromising terms of speech of General Picton whom Lord Wellington, you will remember, called a rough, foulmouthed devil.

In further extenuation it may truthfully be urged that the whole hideous and odious affair was the result of a misapprehension; although I cannot go so far as one of Lieutenant Butler's apologists and accept the view that he was the victim of a deliberate plot on the part of his too-genial host at Regoa. That is a misconception easily explained. This host's name happened to be Souza, and the apologist in question has very rashly leapt at the conclusion that he was a member of that notoriously intriguing family, of which the chief members were the Principal Souza, of the Council of Regency at Lisbon, and the Chevalier Souza, Portuguese minister to the Court of St. James's. Unacquainted with Portugal, our apologist was evidently in ignorance of the fact that the name of Souza is almost as common

in that country as the name of Smith in this. He may also have been misled by the fact that Principal Souza did not neglect to make the utmost capital out of the affair, thereby increasing the difficulties with which Lord Wellington was already contending as a result of incompetence and deliberate malice on the part both of the ministry at home and of the administration in Lisbon.

Indeed, but for these factors it is unlikely that the affair could ever have taken place at all. If there had been more energy on the part of Mr. Perceval and the members of the Cabinet, if there had been less bad faith and self-seeking on the part of the Opposition, Lord Wellington's campaign would not have been starved as it was; and if there had been less bad faith and self-seeking of an even more stupid and flagrant kind on the part of the Portuguese Council of Regency, the British Expeditionary Force would not have been left without the stipulated supplies and otherwise hindered at every step.

Lord Wellington might have experienced the mental agony of Sir John Moore under similar circumstances fifteen months earlier. That he did suffer, and was to suffer yet more, his correspondence shows. But his iron will prevented that suffering from disturbing the equanimity of his mind. The Council of Regency, in its concern to court popularity with the aristocracy of Portugal, might balk his measures by its deliberate supineness; echoes might reach him of the voices at St. Stephen's that loudly dubbed his dispositions rash, presumptuous and silly; catch-halfpenny journalists at home and men of the stamp of Lord Grey might exploit their abysmal military ignorance in reckless criticism and censure of his operations; he knew what a passionate storm of anger and denunciation had arisen from the Opposition when he had been raised to the peerage some months earlier, after the glorious victory of Talavera, and how, that victory notwithstanding, it had been proclaimed that his conduct of the campaign was so incompetent as to deserve, not reward, but punishment; and he was aware of the growing unpopularity of the war in England, knew that the

Government—ignorant of what he was so laboriously preparing—was chafing at his inactivity of the past few months, so that a member of the Cabinet wrote to him exasperatedly, incredibly and fatuously—"for God's sake do something—anything so that blood be spilt."

A heart less stout might have been broken, a genius less mighty stifled in this evil tangle of stupidity, incompetence and malignity that sprang up and flourished about him can every hand. A man less single-minded must have succumbed to exasperation, thrown up his command and taken ship for home, inviting some of his innumerable critics to take his place at the head of the troops, and give free rein to the military genius that inspired their critical dissertations. Wellington, however, has been rightly termed of iron, and never did he show himself more of iron than in those trying days of 1810. Stern, but with a passionless sternness, he pursued his way towards the goal he had set himself, allowing no criticism, no censure, no invective so much as to give him pause in his majestic progress.

Unfortunately the lofty calm of the Commander-in-Chief was not shared by his lieutenants. The Light Division was quartered along the River Agueda, watching the Spanish frontier, beyond which Marshal Ney was demonstrating against Ciudad Rodrigo, and for lack of funds its fiery-tempered commander, Sir Robert Craufurd, found himself at last unable to feed his troops. Exasperated by these circumstances Sir Robert was betrayed into an act of rashness. He seized some church plate at Pinhel that he might convert it into rations. It was an act which, considering the general state of public feeling in the country at the time, might have had the gravest consequences, and Sir Robert was subsequently forced to do penance and afford redress. That, however, is another story. I but mention the incident here because the affair of Tavora with which I am concerned may be taken to have arisen directly out of it, and Sir Robert's behaviour may be construed as setting an example and thus as affording yet another extenuation of Lieutenant Butler's offence.

Our lieutenant was sent upon a foraging expedition into the valley of the Upper Douro, at the head of a half-troop of the 8th Dragoons, two squadrons of which were attached at the time to the Light Division. To be more precise, he was to purchase and bring into Pinhel a hundred head of cattle, intended some for slaughter and some for draught. His instructions were to proceed as far as Regoa and there report himself to one Bartholomew Bearsley, a prosperous and influential English wine-grower, whose father had acquired considerable vineyards in the Douro. He was reminded of the almost hostile disposition of the peasantry in certain districts; warned to handle them with tact and to suffer no straggling on the part of his troopers; and advised to place himself in the hands of Mr. Bearsley for all that related to the purchase of the cattle. Let it be admitted at once that had Sir Robert Craufurd been acquainted with Mr. Butler's feather-brained, irresponsible nature, he would have selected any officer rather than our lieutenant to command that expedition. But the Irish Dragoons had only lately come to Pinhel, and the general himself was not immediately concerned.

Lieutenant Butler set out on a blustering day of March at the head of his troopers, accompanied by Cornet O'Rourke and two sergeants, and at Pesqueira he was further reinforced by a Portuguese guide. They found quarters that night at Ervedoza, and early on the morrow they were in the saddle again, riding along the heights above the Cachao da Valleria, through which the yellow, swollen river swirled and foamed along its rocky way. The prospect, formidable even in the full bloom of fruitful and luxuriant summer, was forbidding and menacing now as some imagined gorge of the nether regions. The towering granite heights across the turgid stream were shrouded in mist and sweeping rain, and from the leaden heavens overhead the downpour was of a sullen and merciless steadiness, starting at every step a miniature torrent to go swell the roaring waters in the gorge, and drenching the troop alike in body and in spirit. Ahead, swathed to the chin in his blue cavalry cloak, the water streaming from his leather

helmet, rode Lieutenant Butler, cursing the weather, the country; the Light Division, and everything else that occurred to him as contributing to his present discomfort. Beside him, astride of a mule, rode the Portuguese guide in a caped cloak of thatched straw, which made him look for all the world like a bottle of his native wine in its straw sheath. Conversation between the two was out of the question for the guide spoke no English and the lieutenant's knowledge of Portuguese was very far from conversational.

Presently the ground sloped, and the troop descended from the heights by a road flanked with dripping pinewoods, black and melancholy, that for a while screened them off from the remainder of the sodden world. Thence they emerged near the head of the bridge that spanned the swollen river and led them directly into the town of Regoa. Through the mud and clay of the deserted, narrow, unpaved streets the dragoons squelched their way, under a super-deluge, for the rain was now reinforced by steady and overwhelming sheets of water descending on either side from the gutter-shaped tiles that roofed the houses.

Inquisitive faces showed here and there behind blurred windows; odd doors were opened that a peasant family might stare in questioning wonder—and perhaps in some concern—at the sodden pageant that was passing. But in the streets themselves the troopers met no living thing, all the world having scurried to shelter from the pitiless downpour.

Beyond the town they were brought by their guide to a walled garden, and halted at a gateway. Beyond this could be seen a fair white house set in the foreground of the vineyards that rose in terraces up the hillside until they were lost from sight in the lowering veils of mist. Carved on the granite lintel of that gateway, the lieutenant beheld the inscription, "BARTHOLOMEU BEARSLEY, 1744," and knew himself at his destination, at the gates of the son or

grandson—he knew not which, nor cared—of the original tenant of that wine farm.

Mr. Bearsley, however, was from home. The lieutenant was informed of this by Mr. Bearsley's steward, a portly, genial, rather priestly gentleman in smooth black broadcloth, whose name was Souza—a name which, as I have said, has given rise to some misconceptions. Mr. Bearsley himself had lately left for England, there to wait until the disturbed state of Portugal should be happily repaired. He had been a considerable sufferer from the French invasion under Soult, and none may blame him for wishing to avoid a repetition of what already he had undergone, especially now that it was rumoured that the Emperor in person would lead the army gathering for conquest on the frontiers.

But had Mr. Bearsley been at home the dragoons could have received no warmer welcome than that which was extended to them by Fernando Souza. Greeting the lieutenant in intelligible English, he implored him, in the florid manner of the Peninsula, to count the house and all within it his own property, and to command whatever he might desire.

The troopers found accommodation in the kitchen and in the spacious hall, where great fires of pine logs were piled up for their comfort; and for the remainder of the day they abode there in various states of nakedness, relieved by blankets and straw capotes, what time the house was filled with the steam and stench of their drying garments. Rations had been short of late on the Agueda, and, in addition, their weary ride through the rain had made the men sharp-set. Abundance of food was placed before them by the solicitude of Fernando Souza, and they feasted, as they had not feasted for many months, upon roast kid, boiled rice and golden maize bread, washed down by a copious supply of a rough and not too heady wine that the discreet and discriminating steward judged appropriate to their

palates and capable of supporting some abuse.

Akin to the treatment of the troopers in hall and kitchen, but on a nobler scale, was the treatment of Lieutenant Butler and Cornet O'Rourke in the dining-room. For them a well-roasted turkey took the place of kid, and Souza went down himself to explore the cellars for a well-sunned, time-ripened Douro table wine which he vowed—and our dragoons agreed with him—would put the noblest Burgundy to shame; and then with the dessert there was a Port the like of which Mr. Butler—who was always of a nice taste in wine, and who was coming into some knowledge of Port from his residence in the country—had never dreamed existed.

For four and twenty hours the dragoons abode at Mr. Bearsley's quinta, thanking God for the discomforts that had brought them to such comfort, feasting in this land of plenty as only those can feast who have kept a rigid Lent. Nor was this all. The benign Souza was determined that the sojourn there of these representatives of his country's deliverers should be a complete rest and holiday. Not for Mr. Butler to journey to the uplands in this matter of a herd of bullocks. Fernando Souza had at command a regiment of labourers, who were idle at this time of year, and whom his good nature would engage on behalf of his English guests. Let the lieutenant do no more than provide the necessary money for the cattle, and the rest should happen as by enchantment—and Souza himself would see to it that the price was fair and proper.

The lieutenant asked no better. He had no great opinion of himself either as cattle dealer or cattle drover, nor did his ambitions beget in him any desire to excel as one or the other. So he was well content that his host should have the bullocks fetched to Regoa for him. The herd was driven in on the following afternoon, by when the rain had ceased, and our lieutenant had every reason to be pleased when he beheld the solid beasts procured. Having disbursed the amount

demanded—an amount more reasonable far than he had been prepared to pay—Mr. Butler would have set out forthwith to return to Pinhel, knowing how urgent was the need of the division and with what impatience the choleric General Craufurd would be awaiting him.

"Why, so you shall, so you shall," said the priestly, soothing Souza. "But first you'll dine. There is good dinner—ah, but what good dinner!—that I have order. And there is a wine—ah, but you shall give me news of that wine."

Lieutenant Butler hesitated. Cornet O'Rourke watched him anxiously, praying that he might succumb to the temptation, and attempted suasion in the form of a murmured blessing upon Souza's hospitality.

"Sir Robert will be impatient," demurred the lieutenant.

"But half-hour," protested Souza. "What is half-hour? And in half-hour you will have dine."

"True," ventured the cornet; "and it's the devil himself knows when we may dine again."

"And the dinner is ready. It can be serve this instant. It shall," said Souza with finality, and pulled the bell-rope.

Mr. Butler, never dreaming—as indeed how could he?—that Fate was taking a hand in this business, gave way, and they sat down to dinner. Henceforth you see him the sport of pitiless circumstance.

They dined within the half-hour, as Souza had promised, and they dined exceedingly well. If yesterday the steward had been able without warning of their coming to spread at short notice so excellent a feast, conceive what had been accomplished now by preparation. Emptying his fourth and final bumper of rich red Douro, Mr. Butler

paid his host the compliment of a sigh and pushed back his chair.

But Souza detained him, waving a hand that trembled with anxiety, and with anxiety stamped upon his benignly rotund and shaven countenance.

"An instant yet," he implored. "Mr. Bearsley would never pardon me did I let you go without what he call a stirrup-cup to keep you from the ills that lurk in the wind of the Serra. A glass—but one—of that Port you tasted yesterday. I say but a glass, yet I hope you will do honour to the bottle. But a glass at least, at least!" He implored it almost with tears. Mr. Butler had reached that state of delicious torpor in which to take the road is the last agony; but duty was duty, and Sir Robert Craufurd had the fiend's own temper. Torn thus between consciousness of duty and the weakness of the flesh, he looked at O'Rourke. O'Rourke, a cherubic fellow, who had for his years a very pretty taste in wine, returned the glance with a moist eye, and licked his lips.

"In your place I should let myself be tempted," says he. "It's an elegant wine, and ten minutes more or less is no great matter."

The lieutenant discovered a middle way which permitted him to take a prompt decision creditable to his military instincts, but revealing a disgraceful though quite characteristic selfishness.

"Very well," he said. "Leave Sergeant Flanagan and ten men to wait for me, O'Rourke, and do you set out at once with the rest of the troop. And take the cattle with you. I shall overtake you before you have gone very far."

O'Rourke's crestfallen air stirred the sympathetic Souza's pity.

"But, Captain," he besought, "will you not allow the lieutenant—"

Mr. Butler cut him short. "Duty," said he sententiously, "is duty. Be

off, O'Rourke."

And O'Rourke, clicking his heels viciously, saluted and departed.

Came presently the bottles in a basket—not one, as Souza had said, but three; and when the first was done Butler reflected that since O'Rourke and the cattle were already well upon the road there need no longer be any hurry about his own departure. A herd of bullocks does not travel very quickly, and even with a few hours' start in a forty-mile journey is easily over-taken by a troop of horse travelling without encumbrance.

You understand, then, how easily our lieutenant yielded himself to the luxurious circumstances, and disposed himself to savour the second bottle of that nectar distilled from the very sunshine of the Douro—the phrase is his own. The steward produced a box of very choice cigars, and although the lieutenant was not an habitual smoker, he permitted himself on this exceptional occasion to be further tempted. Stretched in a deep chair beside the roaring fire of pine logs, he sipped and smoked and drowsed away the greater part of that wintry afternoon. Soon the third bottle had gone the way of the second, and Mr. Bearsley's steward being a man of extremely temperate habit, it follow: that most of the wine had found its way down the lieutenant's thirsty gullet.

It was perhaps a more potent vintage than he had at first suspected, and as the torpor produced by the dinner and the earlier, fuller wine was wearing off, it was succeeded by an exhilaration that played havoc with the few wits that Mr. Butler could call his own.

The steward was deeply learned in wines and wine growing and in very little besides; consequently the talk was almost confined to that subject in its many branches, and he could be interesting enough, like all enthusiasts. To a fresh burst of praise from Butler of the ruby vintage to which he had been introduced, the steward presently

responded with a sigh:

"Indeed, as you say, Captain, a great wine. But we had a greater."

"Impossible, by God," swore Butler, with a hiccup.

"You may say so; but it is the truth. We had a greater; a wonderful, clear vintage it was, of the year 1798—a famous year on the Douro, the quite most famous year that we have ever known. Mr. Bearsley sell some pipes to the monks at Tavora, who have bottle it and keep it. I beg him at the time not to sell, knowing the value it must come to have one day. But he sell all the same. Ah, meu Deus!" The steward clasped his hands and raised rather prominent eyes to the ceiling, protesting to his Maker against his master's folly. "He say we have plenty, and now"—he spread fat hands in a gesture of despair—"and now we have none. Some sons of dogs of French who came with Marshal Soult happen this way on a forage they discover the wine and they guzzle it like pigs." He swore, and his benignity was eclipsed by wrathful memory. He heaved himself up in a passion.

"Think of that so priceless vintage drink like hogwash, as Mr. Bearsley say, by those god-damned French swine, not a drop—not a spoonful remain. But the monks at Tavora still have much of what they buy, I am told. They treasure it for they know good wine. All priests know good wine. Ah yes! Goddam!" He fell into deep reflection.

Lieutenant Butler stirred, and became sympathetic.

"San infern'l shame," said he indignantly. "I'll no forgerrit when I... meet the French." Then he too fell into reflection.

He was a good Catholic, and, moreover, a Catholic who did not take things for granted. The sloth and self-indulgence of the clergy in Portugal, being his first glimpse of conventuals in Latin countries, had deeply shocked him. The vows of a monastic poverty that was kept carefully beyond the walls of the monastery offended his sense of

propriety. That men who had vowed themselves to pauperism, who wore coarse garments and went barefoot, should batten upon rich food and store up wines that gold could not purchase, struck him as a hideous incongruity.

"And the monks drink this nectar?" he said aloud, and laughed sneeringly. "I know the breed—the fair found belly wi' fat capon lined. Tha's your poverty stricken Capuchin."

Souza looked at him in sudden alarm, bethinking himself that all Englishmen were heretics, and knowing nothing of subtle distinctions between English and Irish. In silence Butler finished the third and last bottle, and his thoughts fixed themselves with increasing insistence upon a wine reputed better than this of which there was great store in the cellars of the convent of Tavora.

Abruptly he asked: "Where's Tavora?" He was thinking perhaps of the comfort that such wine would bring to a company of war-worn soldiers in the valley of the Agueda.

"Some ten leagues from here," answered Souza, and pointed to a map that hung upon the wall.

The lieutenant rose, and rolled a thought unsteadily across the room. He was a tall, loose-limbed fellow, blue-eyed, fair-complexioned, with a thatch of fiery red hair excellently suited to his temperament. He halted before the map, and with legs wide apart, to afford him the steadying support of a broad basis, he traced with his finger the course of the Douro, fumbled about the district of Regoa, and finally hit upon the place he sought.

"Why," he said, "seems to me 'sif we should ha' come that way. I's shorrer road to Pesqueira than by the river."

"As the bird fly," said Souza. "But the roads be bad—just mule tracks, while by the river the road is tolerable good."

"Yet," said the lieutenant, "I think I shall go back tha' way."

The fumes of the wine were mounting steadily to addle his indifferent brains. Every moment he was seeing things in proportions more and more false. His resentment against priests who, sworn to self-abnegation, hoarded good wine, whilst soldiers sent to keep harm from priests' fat carcasses were left to suffer cold and even hunger, was increasing with every moment. He would sample that wine at Tavora; and he would bear some of it away that his brother officers at Pinhel might sample it. He would buy it. Oh yes! There should be no plundering, no irregularity, no disregard of general orders. He would buy the wine and pay for it—but himself he would fix the price, and see that the monks of Tavora made no profit out of their defenders.

Thus he thought as he considered the map. Presently, when having taken leave of Fernando Souza—that prince of hosts—Mr. Butler was riding down through the town with Sergeant Flanagan and ten troopers at his heels, his purpose deepened and became more fierce. I think the change of temperature must have been to blame. It was a chill, bleak evening. Overhead, across a background of faded blue, scudded ragged banks of clouds, the lingering flotsam of the shattered rainstorm of yesterday: and a cavalry cloak afforded but indifferent protection against the wind that blew hard and sharp from the Atlantic.

Coming from the genial warmth of Mr. Souza's parlour into this, the evaporation of the wine within him was quickened, its fumes mounted now overwhelmingly to his brain, and from comfortably intoxicated that he had been hitherto, the lieutenant now became furiously drunk; and the transition was a very rapid one. It was now that he looked upon the business he had in hand in the light of a crusade; a sort of religious fanaticism began to actuate him.

The souls of these wretched monks must be saved; the temptation to self-indulgence, which spelt perdition for them, must be removed from their midst. It was a Christian duty. He no longer thought of buying the wine and paying for it. His one aim now was to obtain possession of it not merely a part of it, but all of it—and carry it off, thereby accomplishing two equally praiseworthy ends: to rescue a conventful of monks from damnation, and to regale the much-enduring, half-starved campaigners of the Agueda.

Thus reasoned Mr. Butler with admirable, if drunken, logic. And reasoning thus he led the way over the bridge, and kept straight on when he had crossed it, much to the dismay of Sergeant Flanagan, who, perceiving the lieutenant's condition, conceived that he was missing his way. This the sergeant ventured to point out, reminding his officer that they had come by the road along the river.

"So we did," said Butler shortly. "Bu' we go back by way of Tavora."

They had no guide. The one who had conducted them to Regoa had returned with O'Rourke, and although Souza had urged upon the lieutenant at parting that he should take one of the men from the quinta, Butler, with wit enough to see that this was not desirable under the circumstances, had preferred to find his way alone.

His confused mind strove now to revisualise the map which he had consulted in Souza's parlour. He discovered, naturally enough, that the task was altogether beyond his powers. Meanwhile night was descending. They were, however, upon the mule track, which went up and round the shoulder of a hill, and by this they came at dark upon a hamlet.

Sergeant Flanagan was a shrewd fellow and perhaps the most sober man in the troop—for the wine had run very freely in Souza's kitchen, too, and the men, whilst awaiting their commander's pleasure, had taken the fullest advantage of an opportunity that was

all too rare upon that campaign. Now Sergeant Flanagan began to grow anxious. He knew the Peninsula from the days of Sir John Moore, and he knew as much of the ways of the peasantry of Portugal as any man. He knew of the brutal ferocity of which that peasantry was capable. He had seen evidence more than once of the unspeakable fate of French stragglers from the retreating army of Marshal Soult. He knew of crucifixions, mutilations and hideous abominations practised upon them in these remote hill districts by the merciless men into whose hands they happened to fall, and he knew that it was not upon French soldiers alone—that these abominations had been practised. Some of those fierce peasants had been unable to discriminate between invader and deliverer; to them a foreigner was a foreigner and no more. Others, who were capable of discriminating, were in the position of having come to look upon French and English with almost equal execration.

It is true that whilst the Emperor's troops made war on the maxim that an army must support itself upon the country it traverses, thereby achieving a greater mobility, since it was thus permitted to travel comparatively light, the British law was that all things requisitioned must be paid for. Wellington maintained this law in spite of all difficulties at all times with an unrelaxing rigidity, and punished with the utmost vigour those who offended against it. Nevertheless breaches were continual; men broke out here and there, often, be it said, under stress of circumstances for which the Portuguese were themselves responsible; plunder and outrage took place and provoked indiscriminating rancour with consequences at times as terrible to stragglers from the British army of deliverance as to those from the French army of oppressors. Then, too, there was the Portuguese Militia Act recently enforced by Wellington—acting through the Portuguese Government—deeply resented by the peasantry upon whom it bore, and rendering them disposed to avenge it upon such stray British soldiers as might fall into their hands.

Knowing all this, Sergeant Flanagan did not at all relish this night excursion into the hill fastnesses, where at any moment, as it seemed to him, they might miss their way. After all, they were but twelve men all told, and he accounted it a stupid thing to attempt to take a short cut across the hills for the purpose of overtaking an encumbered troop that must of necessity be moving at a very much slower pace. This was the way not to overtake but to outdistance. Yet since it was not for him to remonstrate with the lieutenant, he kept his peace and hoped anxiously for the best.

At the mean wine-shop of that hamlet Mr. Butler inquired his way by the simple expedient of shouting "Tavora?" with a strong interrogative inflection. The vintner made it plain by gestures—accompanied by a rattling musketry of incomprehensible speech that their way lay straight ahead. And straight ahead they went, following that mule track for some five or six miles until it began to slope gently towards the plain again. Below them they presently beheld a cluster of twinkling lights to advertise a township. They dropped swiftly down, and in the outskirts overtook a belated bullock-cart, whose ungreased axle was arousing the hillside echoes with its plangent wail.

Of the vigorous young woman who marched barefoot beside it, shouldering her goad as if it were a pikestaff, Mr. Butler inquired—by his usual method—if this were Tavora, to receive an answer which, though voluble, was unmistakably affirmative.

"Covento Dominicano?" was his next inquiry, made after they had gone some little way.

The woman pointed with her goad to a massive, dark building, flanked by a little church, which stood just across the square they were entering.

A moment later the sergeant, by Mr. Butler's orders, was knocking

upon the iron-studded main door. They waited awhile in vain. None came to answer the knock; no light showed anywhere upon the dark face of the convent. The sergeant knocked again, more vigorously than before. Presently came timid, shuffling steps; a shutter opened in the door, and the grille thus disclosed was pierced by a shaft of feeble yellow light. A quavering, aged voice demanded to know who knocked.

"English soldiers," answered the lieutenant in Portuguese. "Open!"

A faint exclamation suggestive of dismay was the answer, the shutter closed again with a snap, the shuffling steps retreated and unbroken silence followed.

"Now wharra devil may this mean?" growled Mr. Butler. Drugged wits, like stupid ones, are readily suspicious. "Wharra they hatching in here that they are afraid of lerring Bri'ish soldiers see? Knock again, Flanagan. Louder, man!"

The sergeant beat the door with the butt of his carbine. The blows gave out a hollow echo, but evoked no more answer than if they had fallen upon the door of a mausoleum. Mr. Butler completely lost his temper. "Seems to me that we've stumbled upon a hotbed o' treason. Hotbed o' treason!" he repeated, as if pleased with the phrase. "That's wharrit is." And he added peremptorily: "Break down the door."

"But, sir," began the sergeant in protest, greatly daring.

"Break down the door," repeated Mr. Butler. "Lerrus be after seeing wha' these monks are afraid of showing us. I've a notion they're hiding more'n their wine."

Some of the troopers carried axes precisely against such an emergency as this. Dismounting, they fell upon the door with a will. But the oak was stout, fortified by bands of iron and great iron studs;

and it resisted long. The thud of the axes and the crash of rending timbers could be heard from one end of Tavora to the other, yet from the convent it evoked no slightest response. But presently, as the door began to yield to the onslaught, there came another sound to arouse the town. From the belfry of the little church a bell suddenly gave tongue upon a frantic, hurried note that spoke unmistakably of alarm. Ding-ding-ding-ding it went, a tocsin summoning the assistance of all true sons of Mother Church.

Mr. Butler, however, paid little heed to it. The door was down at last, and followed by his troopers he rode under the massive gateway into the spacious close. Dismounting there, and leaving the woefully anxious sergeant and a couple of men to guard the horses, the lieutenant led the way along the cloisters, faintly revealed by a new-risen moon, towards a gaping doorway whence a feeble light was gleaming. He stumbled over the step into a hall dimly lighted by a lantern swinging from the ceiling. He found a chair, mounted it, and cut the lantern down, then led the way again along an endless corridor, stone-flagged and flanked on either side by rows of cells. Many of the doors stood open, as if in silent token of the tenants' hurried flight, showing what a panic had been spread by the sudden advent of this troop.

Mr. Butler became more and more deeply intrigued, more and more deeply suspicious that here all was not well. Why should a community of loyal monks take flight in this fashion from British soldiers?

"Bad luck to them!" he growled, as he stumbled on. "They may hide as they will, but it's myself 'll run the shavelings to earth."

They were brought up short at the end of that long, chill gallery by closed double doors. Beyond these an organ was pealing, and overhead the clapper of the alarm bell was beating more furiously than ever. All realised that they stood upon the threshold of the chapel

and that the conventuals had taken refuge there.

Mr. Butler checked upon a sudden suspicion. "Maybe, after all, they've taken us for French," said he.

A trooper ventured to answer him. "Best let them see we're not before we have the whole village about our ears."

"Damn that bell," said the lieutenant, and added: "Put your shoulders to the door."

Its fastenings were but crazy ones, and it yielded almost instantly to their pressure—yielded so suddenly that Mr. Butler, who himself had been foremost in straining against it, shot forward half-a-dozen yards into the chapel and measured his length upon its cold flags.

Simultaneously from the chancel came a great cry: "Libera nos, Domine!" followed by a shuddering murmur of prayer.

The lieutenant picked himself up, recovered the lantern that had rolled from his grasp, and lurched forward round the angle that hid the chancel from his view. There, huddled before the main altar like a flock of scared and stupid sheep, he beheld the conventuals—some two score of them perhaps and in the dim light of the heavy altar lamp above them he could make out the black and white habit of the order of St. Dominic.

He came to a halt, raised his lantern aloft, and called to them peremptorily:

"Ho, there!"

The organ ceased abruptly, but the bell overhead went clattering on.

Mr. Butler addressed them in the best French he could command: "What do you fear? Why do you flee? We are friends—English

soldiers, seeking quarters for the night."

A vague alarm was stirring in him. It began to penetrate his obfuscated mind that perhaps he had been rash, that this forcible rape of a convent was a serious matter. Therefore he attempted this peaceful explanation.

From that huddled group a figure rose, and advanced with a solemn, stately grace. There was a faint swish of robes, the faint rattle of rosary beads. Something about that figure caught the lieutenant's attention sharply. He craned forward, half sobered by the sudden fear that clutched him, his eyes bulging in his face.

"I had thought," said a gentle, melancholy woman's voice, "that the seals of a nunnery were sacred to British soldiers."

For a moment Mr. Butler seemed to be labouring for breath. Fully sobered now, understanding of his ghastly error reached him at the gallop.

"My God!" he gasped, and incontinently turned to flee.

But as he fled in horror of his sacrilege, he still kept his head turned, staring over his shoulder at the stately figure of the abbess, either in fascination or with some lingering doubt of what he had seen and heard. Running thus, he crashed headlong into a pillar, and, stunned by the blow, he reeled and sank unconscious to the ground.

This the troopers had not seen, for they had not lingered. Understanding on their own part the horrible blunder, they had turned even as their leader turned, and they had raced madly back the way they had come, conceiving that he followed. And there was reason for their haste other than their anxiety to set a term to the sacrilege of their presence. From the cloistered garden of the convent uproar reached them, and the metallic voice of Sergeant Flanagan calling loudly for help.

The alarm bell of the convent had done its work. The villagers were up, enraged by the outrage, and armed with sticks and scythes and bill-hooks, an army of them was charging to avenge this infamy. The troopers reached the close no more than in time. Sergeant Flanagan, only half understanding the reason for so much anger, but understanding that this anger was very real and very dangerous, was desperately defending the horses with his two companions against the vanguard of the assailants. There was a swift rush of the dragoons and in an instant they were in the saddle, all but the lieutenant, of whose absence they were suddenly made conscious. Flanagan would have gone back for him, and he had in fact begun to issue an order with that object when a sudden surge of the swelling, roaring crowd cut off the dragoons from the door through which they had emerged. Sitting their horses, the little troop came together, their sabres drawn, solid as a rock in that angry human sea that surged about them. The moon riding now clear overhead irradiated that scene of impending strife.

Flanagan, standing in his stirrups, attempted to harangue the mob. But he was at a loss what to say that would appease them, nor able to speak a language they could understand. An angry peasant made a slash at him with a billhook. He parried the blow on his sabre, and with the flat of it knocked his assailant senseless.

Then the storm burst, and the mob flung itself upon the dragoons.

"Bad cess to you!" cried Flanagan. "Will ye listen to me, ye murdering villains." Then in despair "Char-r-r-ge!" he roared, and headed for the gateway.

The troopers attempted in vain to reach it. The mob hemmed them about too closely, and then a horrid hand-to-hand fight began, under the cold light of the moon, in that garden consecrated to peace and piety. Two saddles had been emptied, and the exasperated troopers

were slashing now at their assailants with the edge, intent upon cutting a way out of that murderous press. It is doubtful if a man of them would have survived, for the odds were fully ten to one against them. To their aid came now the abbess. She stood on a balcony above, and called upon the people to desist, and hear her. Thence she harangued them for some moments, commanding them to allow the soldiers to depart. They obeyed with obvious reluctance, and at last a lane was opened in that solid, seething mass of angry clods.

But Flanagan hesitated to pass down this lane and so depart. Three of his troopers were down by now, and his lieutenant was missing. He was exercised to resolve where his duty lay. Behind him the mob was solid, cutting off the dragoons from their fallen comrades. An attempt to go back might be misunderstood and resisted, leading to a renewal of the combat, and surely in vain, for he could not doubt but that the fallen troopers had been finished outright.

Similarly the mob stood as solid between him and the door that led to the interior of the convent, where Mr. Butler was lingering alive or dead. A number of peasants had already invaded the actual building, so that in that connection too the sergeant concluded that there was little reason to hope that the lieutenant should have escaped the fate his own rashness had invoked. He had his remaining seven men to think of, and he concluded that it was his duty under all the circumstances to bring these off alive, and not procure their massacre by attempting fruitless quixotries.

So "Forward!" roared the voice of Sergeant Flanagan, and forward went the seven through the passage that had opened out before them in that hooting, angry mob.

Beyond the convent walls they found fresh assailants awaiting them, enemies these, who had not been soothed by the gentle, reassuring voice of the abbess. But here there was more room to manoeuvre.

"Trot!" the sergeant commanded, and soon that trot became a gallop. A shower of stones followed them as they thundered out of Tavora, and the sergeant himself had a lump as large as a duck-egg on the middle of his head when next day he reported himself at Pesqueira to Cornet O'Rourke, whom he overtook there.

When eventually Sir Robert Craufurd heard the story of the affair, he was as angry as only Sir Robert could be. To have lost four dragoons and to have set a match to a train that might end in a conflagration was reason and to spare.

"How came such a mistake to be made?" he inquired, a scowl upon his full red countenance.

Mr. O'Rourke had been investigating and was primed with knowledge.

"It appears, sir, that at Tavora there is a convent of Dominican nuns as well as a monastery of Dominican friars. Mr. Butler will have used the word 'convento,' which more particularly applies to the nunnery, and so he was directed to the wrong house."

"And you say the sergeant has reason to believe that Mr. Butler did not survive his folly?"

"I am afraid there can be no hope, sir."

"It's perhaps just as well," said Sir Robert. "For Lord Wellington would certainly have had him shot."

And there you have the true account of the stupid affair of Tavora, which was to produce, as we shall see, such far-reaching effects upon persons nowise concerned in it.

CHAPTER II. THE ULTIMATUM

News of the affair at Tavora reached Sir Terence O'Moy, the Adjutant-General at Lisbon, about a week later in dispatches from headquarters. These informed him that in the course of the humble apology and explanation of the regrettable occurrence offered by the Colonel of the 8th Dragoons in person to the Mother Abbess, it had transpired that Lieutenant Butler had left the convent alive, but that nevertheless he continued absent from his regiment.

Those dispatches contained other unpleasant matters of a totally different nature, with which Sir Terence must proceed to deal at once; but their gravity was completely outweighed in the adjutant's mind by this deplorable affair of Lieutenant Butler's. Without wishing to convey an impression that the blunt and downright O'Moy was gifted with any undue measure of shrewdness, it must nevertheless be said that he was quick to perceive what fresh thorns the occurrence was likely to throw in a path that was already thorny enough in all conscience, what a semblance of justification it must give to the hostility of the intriguers on the Council of Regency, what a formidable weapon it must place in the hands of Principal Souza and his partisans. In itself this was enough to trouble a man in O'Moy's position. But there was more. Lieutenant Butler happened to be his brother-in-law, own brother to O'Moy's lovely, frivolous wife. Irresponsibility ran strongly in that branch of the Butler family.

For the sake of the young wife whom he loved with a passionate and fearful jealousy such as is not uncommon in a man of O'Moy's temperament when at his age—he was approaching his forty-sixth birthday—he marries a girl of half his years, the adjutant had pulled his brother-in-law out of many a difficulty; shielded him on many an

occasion from the proper consequences of his incurable rashness.

This affair of the convent, however, transcended anything that had gone before and proved altogether too much for O'Moy. It angered him as much as it afflicted him. Yet when he took his head in his hands and groaned, it was only his sorrow that he was expressing, and it was a sorrow entirely concerned with his wife.

The groan attracted the attention of his military secretary, Captain Tremayne, of Fletcher's Engineers, who sat at work at a littered writing-table placed in the window recess. He looked up sharply, sudden concern in the strong young face and the steady grey eyes he bent upon his chief. The sight of O'Moy's hunched attitude brought him instantly to his feet.

"Whatever is the matter, sir?"

"It's that damned fool Richard," growled O'Moy. "He's broken out again."

The captain looked relieved. "And is that all?"

O'Moy looked at him, white-faced, and in his blue eyes a blaze of that swift passion that had made his name a byword in the army.

"All?" he roared. "You'll say it's enough, by God, when you hear what the fool's been at this time. Violation of a nunnery, no less." And he brought his massive fist down with a crash upon the document that had conveyed the information. "With a detachment of dragoons he broke into the convent of the Dominican nuns at Tavora one night a week ago. The alarm bell was sounded, and the village turned out to avenge the outrage. Consequences: three troopers killed, five peasants sabred to death and seven other casualties, Dick himself missing and reported to have escaped from the convent, but understood to remain in hiding—so that he adds desertion to the other crime, as if that in itself were not enough to hang him. That's all,

as you say, and I hope you consider it enough even for Dick Butler—bad luck to him."

"My God!" said Captain Tremayne.

"I'm glad that you agree with me."

Captain Tremayne stared at his chief, the utmost dismay upon his fine young face. "But surely, sir, surely—I mean, sir, if this report is correct some explanation—" He broke down, utterly at fault.

"To be sure, there's an explanation. You may always depend upon a most elegant explanation for anything that Dick Butler does. His life is made up of mistakes and explanations." He spoke bitterly, "He broke into the nunnery under a misapprehension, according to the account of the sergeant who accompanied him," and Sir Terence read out that part of the report. "But how is that to help him, and at such a time as this, with public feeling as it is, and Wellington in his present temper about it? The provost's men are beating the country for the blackguard. When they find him it's a firing party he'll have to face."

Tremayne turned slowly to the window and looked down the fair prospect of the hillside over a forest of cork oaks alive with fresh green shoots to the silver sheen of the river a mile away. The storms of the preceding week had spent their fury—the travail that had attended the birth of Spring—and the day was as fair as a day of June in England. Weaned forth by the generous sunshine, the burgeoning of vine and fig, of olive and cork went on apace, and the skeletons of trees which a fortnight since had stood gaunt and bare were already fleshed in tender green.

From the window of this fine conventual house on the heights of Monsanto, above the suburb of Alcantara, where the Adjutant-General had taken up his quarters, Captain Tremayne stood a moment

considering the panorama spread to his gaze, from the red-brown roofs of Lisbon on his left—that city which boasted with Rome that it was built upon a cluster of seven hills—to the lines of embarkation that were building about the fort of St. Julian on his left. Then he turned, facing again the spacious, handsome room with its heavy, semi-ecclesiastical furniture, and Sir Terence, who, hunched in his chair at the ponderously carved black writing-table, scowled fiercely at nothing.

"What are you going to do, sir?" he inquired.

Sir Terence shrugged impatiently and heaved himself up in his chair.

"Nothing," he growled.

"Nothing?"

The interrogation, which seemed almost to cover a reproach, irritated the adjutant.

"And what the devil can I do?" he rapped.

"You've pulled Dick out of scrapes before now."

"I have. That seems to, have been my principal occupation ever since I married his sister. But this time he's gone too far. What can I do?"

"Lord Wellington is fond of you," suggested Captain Tremayne. He was your imperturbable young man, and he remained as calm now as O'Moy was excited. Although by some twenty years the adjutant's junior, there was between O'Moy and himself, as well as between Tremayne and the Butler family, with which he was remotely connected, a strong friendship, which was largely responsible for the captain's present appointment as Sir Terence's military secretary.

O'Moy looked at him, and looked away. "Yes," he agreed. "But he's still fonder of law and order and military discipline, and I should only be imperilling our friendship by pleading with him for this young blackguard."

"The young blackguard is your brother-in-law," Tremayne reminded him.

"Bad luck to you, Tremayne, don't I know it? Besides, what is there I can do?" he asked again, and ended testily: "Faith, man, I don't know what you're thinking of."

"I'm thinking of Una," said Captain Tremayne in that composed way of his, and the words fell like cold water upon the hot iron of O'Moy's anger.

The man who can receive with patience a reproach, implicit or explicit, of being wanting in consideration towards his wife is comparatively rare, and never a man of O'Moy's temperament and circumstances. Tremayne's reminder stung him sharply, and the more sharply because of the strong friendship that existed between Tremayne and Lady O'Moy. That friendship had in the past been a thorn in O'Moy's flesh. In the days of his courtship he had known a fierce jealousy of Tremayne, beholding in him for a time a rival who, with the strong advantage of youth, must in the end prevail. But when O'Moy, putting his fortunes to the test, had declared himself and been accepted by Una Butler, there had been an end to the jealousy, and the old relations of cordial friendship between the men had been resumed.

O'Moy had conceived that jealousy of his to have been slain. But there had been times when from its faint, uneasy stirrings he should have taken warning that it did no more than slumber. Like most warm hearted, generous, big-natured men, O'Moy was of a singular humility where women were concerned, and this humility of his would often

breathe a doubt lest in choosing between himself and Tremayne Una might have been guided by her head rather than her heart, by ambition rather than affection, and that in taking himself she had taken the man who could give her by far the more assured and affluent position.

He had crushed down such thoughts as disloyal to his young wife, as ungrateful and unworthy; and at such times he would fall into self-contempt for having entertained them. Then Una herself had revived those doubts three months ago, when she had suggested that Ned Tremayne, who was then at Torres Vedras with Colonel Fletcher, was the very man to fill the vacant place of military secretary to the adjutant, if he would accept it. In the reaction of self-contempt, and in a curious surge of pride almost as perverse as his humility, O'Moy had adopted her suggestion, and thereafter—in the past-three months, that is to say—the unreasonable devil of O'Moy's jealousy had slept, almost forgotten. Now, by a chance remark whose indiscretion Tremayne could not realise, since he did not so much as suspect the existence of that devil, he had suddenly prodded him into wakefulness. That Tremayne should show himself tender of Lady O'Moy's feelings in a matter in which O'Moy himself must seem neglectful of them was gall and wormwood to the adjutant. He dissembled it, however, out of a natural disinclination to appear in the ridiculous role of the jealous husband.

"That," he said, "is a matter that you may safely leave to me," and his lips closed tightly upon the words when they were uttered.

"Oh, quite so," said Tremayne, no whit abashed. He persisted nevertheless. "You know Una's feelings for Dick."

"When I married Una," the adjutant cut in sharply, "I did not marry the entire Butler family." It hardened him unreasonably against Dick to have the family cause pleaded in this way. "It's sick to death I am of Master Richard and his escapades. He can get himself out of this

mess, or he can stay in it."

"You mean that you'll not lift a hand to help him."

"Devil a finger," said O'Moy.

And Tremayne, looking straight into the adjutant's faintly smouldering blue eyes, beheld there a fierce and rancorous determination which he was at a loss to understand, but which he attributed to something outside his own knowledge that must lie between O'Moy and his brother-in-law.

"I am sorry," he said gravely. "Since that is how you feel, it is to be hoped that Dick Butler may not survive to be taken. The alternative would weigh so cruelly upon Una that I do not care to contemplate it."

"And who the devil asks you to contemplate it?" snapped O'Moy. "I am not aware that it is any concern of yours at all."

"My dear O'Moy!" It was an exclamation of protest, something between pain and indignation, under the stress of which Tremayne stepped entirely outside of the official relations that prevailed between himself and the adjutant. And the exclamation was accompanied by such a look of dismay and wounded sensibilities that O'Moy, meeting this, and noting the honest manliness of Tremayne's bearing and countenance; was there and then the victim of reaction. His warm-hearted and impulsive nature made him at once profoundly ashamed of himself. He stood up, a tall, martial figure, and his ruggedly handsome, shaven countenance reddened under its tan. He held out a hand to Tremayne.

"My dear boy, I beg your pardon. It's so utterly annoyed I am that the savage in me will be breaking out. Sure, it isn't as if it were only this affair of Dick's. That is almost the least part of the unpleasantness contained in this dispatch. Here! In God's name, read it for yourself, and judge for yourself whether it's in human nature to be patient under

so much."

With a shrug and a smile to show that he was entirely mollified, Captain Tremayne took the papers to his desk and sat down to con them. As he did so his face grew more and more grave. Before he had reached the end there was a tap at the door. An orderly entered with the announcement that Dom Miguel Forjas had just driven up to Monsanto to wait upon the adjutant-general.

"Ha!" said O'Moy shortly, and exchanged a glance with his secretary. "Show the gentleman up."

As the orderly withdrew, Tremayne came over and placed the dispatch on the adjutant's desk. "He arrives very opportunely," he said.

"So opportunely as to be suspicious, bedad!" said O'Moy. He had brightened suddenly, his Irish blood quickening at the immediate prospect of strife which this visit boded. "May the devil admire me, but there's a warm morning in store for Mr. Forjas, Ned."

"Shall I leave you?"

"By no means."

The door opened, and the orderly admitted Miguel Forjas, the Portuguese Secretary of State. He was a slight, dapper gentleman, all in black, from his silk stockings and steel-buckled shoes to his satin stock. His keen aquiline face was swarthy, and the razor had left his chin and cheeks blue-black. His sleek hair was iron-grey. A portentous gravity invested him this morning as he bowed with profound deference first to the adjutant and then to the secretary.

"Your Excellencies," he said—he spoke an English that was smooth and fluent for all its foreign accent "Your Excellencies, this is a terrible affair."

"To what affair will your Excellency be alluding?" wondered O'Moy.

"Have you not received news of what has happened at Tavora? Of the violation of a convent by a party of British soldiers? Of the fight that took place between these soldiers and the peasants who went to succour the nuns?"

"Oh, and is that all?" said O'Moy. "For a moment I imagined your Excellency referred to other matters. I have news of more terrible affairs than the convent business with which to entertain you this morning."

"That, if you will pardon me, Sir Terence, is quite impossible."

"You may think so. But you shall judge, bedad. A chair, Dom Miguel."

The Secretary of State sat down, crossed his knees and placed his hat in his lap. The other two resumed their seats, O'Moy leaning forward, his elbows on the writing-table, immediately facing Senhor Forjas.

"First, however," he said, "to deal with this affair of Tavora. The Council of Regency will, no doubt, have been informed of all the circumstances. You will be aware, therefore, that this very deplorable business was the result of a misapprehension, and that the nuns of Tavora might very well have avoided all this trouble had they behaved in a sensible, reasonable manner. If instead of shutting themselves up in the chapel and ringing the alarm bell the Mother-Abbess or one of the sisters had gone to the wicket and answered the demand of admittance from the officer commanding the detachment, he would instantly have realised his mistake and withdrawn."

"What does your Excellency suggest was this mistake?" inquired the Secretary.

"You have had your report, sir, and surely it was complete. You must know that he conceived himself to be knocking at the gates of the monastery of the Dominican fathers."

"Can your Excellency tell me what was this officer's business at the monastery of the Dominican fathers?" quoth the Secretary, his manner frostily hostile.

"I am without information on that point," O'Moy admitted; "no doubt because the officer in question is missing, as you will also have been informed. But I have no reason to doubt that, whatever his business may have been, it was concerned with the interests which are common alike to the British and the Portuguese nation."

"That is a charitable assumption, Sir Terence."

"Perhaps you will inform me, Dom Miguel, of the uncharitable assumption which the Principal Souza prefers," snapped O'Moy, whose temper began to simmer.

A faint colour kindled in the cheeks of the Portuguese minister, but his manner remained unruffled.

"I speak, sir, not with the voice of Principal Souza, but with that of the entire Council of Regency; and the Council has formed the opinion, which your own words confirm, that his Excellency Lord Wellington is skilled in finding excuses for the misdemeanours of the troops under his command."

"That," said O'Moy, who would never have kept his temper in control but for the pleasant consciousness that he held a hand of trumps with which he would presently overwhelm this representative of the Portuguese Government, "that is an opinion for which the Council may presently like to apologise, admitting its entire falsehood."

Senhor Forjas started as if he had been stung. He uncrossed his black silk legs and made as if to rise.

"Falsehood, sir?" he cried in a scandalised voice.

"It is as well that we should be plain, so as to be avoiding all misconceptions," said O'Moy. "You must know, sir, and your Council must know, that wherever armies move there must be reason for complaint. The British army does not claim in this respect to be superior to others—although I don't say, mark me, that it might not claim it with perfect justice. But we do claim for ourselves that our laws against plunder and outrage are as strict as they well can be, and that where these things take place punishment inevitably follows. Out of your own knowledge, sir, you must admit that what I say is true."

"True, certainly, where the offenders are men from the ranks. But in this case, where the offender is an officer, it does not transpire that justice has been administered with the same impartial hand." "That, sir," answered O'Moy sharply, testily, "is because he is missing."

The Secretary's thin lips permitted themselves to curve into the faintest ghost of a smile. "Precisely," he said.

For answer O'Moy, red in the face, thrust forward the dispatch he had received relating to the affair.

"Read, sir—read for yourself, that you may report exactly to the Council of Regency the terms of the report that has just reached me from headquarters. You will be able to announce that diligent search is being made for the offender."

Forjas perused the document carefully, and returned it.

"That is very good," he said, "and the Council will be glad to hear of it. It will enable us to appease the popular resentment in some degree. But it does not say here that when taken this officer will not be

excused upon the grounds which yourself you have urged to me."

"It does not. But considering that he has since been guilty of desertion, there can be no doubt—all else apart—that the finding of a court martial will result in his being shot."

"Very well," said Forjas. "I will accept your assurance, and the Council will be relieved to hear of it." He rose to take his leave. "I am desired by the Council to express to Lord Wellington the hope that he will take measures to preserve better order among his troops and to avoid the recurrence of such extremely painful incidents."

"A moment," said O'Moy, and rising waved his guest back into his chair, then resumed his own seat. Under a more or less calm exterior he was a seething cauldron of passion. "The matter is not quite at an end, as your Excellency supposes. From your last observation, and from a variety of other evidence, I infer that the Council is far from satisfied with Lord Wellington's conduct of the campaign."

"That is an inference which I cannot venture to contradict. You will understand, General, that I do not speak for myself, but for the Council, when I say that many of his measures seem to us not merely unnecessary, but detrimental. The power having been placed in the hands of Lord Wellington, the Council hardly feels itself able to interfere with his dispositions. But it nevertheless deplores the destruction of the mills and the devastation of the country recommended and insisted upon by his lordship. It feels that this is not warfare as the Council understands warfare, and the people share the feelings of the Council. It is felt that it would be worthier and more commendable if Lord Wellington were to measure himself in battle with the French, making a definite attempt to stem the tide of invasion on the frontiers."

"Quite so," said O'Moy, his hand clenching and unclenching, and Tremayne, who watched him, wondered how long it would be before

the storm burst. "Quite so. And because the Council disapproves of the very measures which at Lord Wellington's instigation it has publicly recommended, it does not trouble to see that those measures are carried out. As you say, it does not feel itself able to interfere with his dispositions. But it does not scruple to mark its disapproval by passively hindering him at every turn. Magistrates are left to neglect these enactments, and because," he added with bitter sarcasm, "Portuguese valour is so red-hot and so devilish set on battle the Militia Acts calling all men to the colours are forgotten as soon as published. There is no one either to compel the recalcitrant to take up arms, or to punish the desertions of those who have been driven into taking them up. Yet you want battles, you want your frontiers defended. A moment, sir! there is no need for heat, no need for any words. The matter may be said to be at an end." He smiled—a thought viciously, be it confessed—and then played his trump card, hurled his bombshell. "Since the views of your Council are in such utter opposition to the views of the Commander-in-Chief, you will no doubt welcome Lord Wellington's proposal to withdraw from this country and to advise his Majesty's Government to withdraw the assistance which it is affording you."

There followed a long spell of silence, O'Moy sitting back in his chair, his chin in his hand, to observe the result of his words. Nor was he in the least disappointed. Dom Miguel's mouth fell open; the colour slowly ebbed from his cheeks, leaving them an ivory-yellow; his eyes dilated and protruded. He was consternation incarnate.

"My God!" he contrived to gasp at last, and his shaking hands clutched at the carved arms of his chair.

"Ye don't seem as pleased as I expected," ventured O'Moy.

"But, General, surely... surely his Excellency cannot mean to take so... so terrible a step?"

"Terrible to whom, sir?" wondered O'Moy.

"Terrible to us all." Forjas rose in his agitation. He came to lean upon O'Moy's writing-table, facing the adjutant. "Surely, sir, our interests—England's interests and Portugal's—are one in this."

"To be sure. But England's interests can be defended elsewhere than in Portugal, and it is Lord Wellington's view that they shall be. He has already warned the Council of Regency that, since his Majesty and the Prince Regent have entrusted him with the command of the British and Portuguese armies, he will not suffer the Council or any of its members to interfere with his conduct of the military operations, or suffer any criticism or suggestion of theirs to alter system formed upon mature consideration. But when, finding their criticisms fail, the members of the Council, in their wrongheadedness, in their anxiety to allow private interest to triumph over public duty, go the length of thwarting the measures of which they do not approve, the end of Lord Wellington's patience has been reached. I am giving your Excellency his own words. He feels that it is futile to remain in a country whose Government is determined to undermine his every endeavour to bring this campaign to a successful issue.

"Yourself, sir, you appear to be distressed. But the Council of Regency will no doubt take a different view. It will rejoice in the departure of a man whose military operations it finds so detestable. You will no doubt discover this when you come to lay Lord Wellington's decision before the Council, as I now invite you to do."

Bewildered and undecided, Forjas stood there for a moment, vainly seeking words. Finally:

"Is this really Lord Wellington's last word?" he asked in tones of profoundest consternation.

"There is one alternative—one only," said O'Moy slowly.

"And that?" Instantly Forjas was all eagerness.

O'Moy considered him. "Faith, I hesitate to state it."

"No, no. Please, please."

"I feel that it is idle."

"Let the Council judge. I implore you, General, let the Council judge."

"Very well." O'Moy shrugged, and took up a sheet of the dispatch which lay before him. "You will admit, sir, I think, that the beginning of these troubles coincided with the advent of the Principal Souza upon the Council of Regency." He waited in vain for a reply. Forjas, the diplomat, preserved an uncompromising silence, in which presently O'Moy proceeded: "From this, and from other evidence, of which indeed there is no lack, Lord Wellington has come to the conclusion that all the resistance, passive and active, which he has encountered, results from the Principal Souza's influence upon the Council. You will not, I think, trouble to deny it, sir."

Forjas spread his hands. "You will remember, General," he answered, in tones of conciliatory regret, "that the Principal Souza represents a class upon whom Lord Wellington's measures bear in a manner peculiarly hard."

"You mean that he represents the Portuguese nobility and landed gentry, who, putting their own interests above those of the State, have determined to oppose and resist the devastation of the country which Lord Wellington recommends."

"You put it very bluntly," Forjas admitted.

"You will find Lord Wellington's own words even more blunt," said O'Moy, with a grim smile, and turned to the dispatch he held. "Let me read you exactly what he writes:

"As for Principal Souza, I beg you to tell him from me that as I have had no satisfaction in transacting the business of this country since he has become a member of the Government, no power on earth shall induce me to remain in the Peninsula if he is either to remain a member of the Government or to continue in Lisbon. Either he must quit the country, or I will do so, and this immediately after I have obtained his Majesty's permission to resign my charge."

The adjutant put down the letter and looked expectantly at the Secretary of State, who returned the look with one of utter dismay. Never in all his career had the diplomat been so completely dumbfounded as he was now by the simple directness of the man of action. In himself Dom Miguel Forjas was both shrewd and honest. He was shrewd enough to apprehend to the full the military genius of the British Commander-in-Chief, fruits of which he had already witnessed. He knew that the withdrawal of Junot's army from Lisbon two years ago resulted mainly from the operations of Sir Arthur Wellesley—as he was then—before his supersession in the supreme command of that first expedition, and he more than suspected that but for that supersession the defeat of the first French army of invasion might have been even more signal. He had witnessed the masterly campaign of 1809, the battle of the Douro and the relentless operations which had culminated in hurling the shattered fragments of Soult's magnificent army over the Portuguese frontier, thus liberating that country for the second time from the thrall of the mighty French invader. And he knew that unless this man and the troops under his command remained in Portugal and enjoyed complete liberty of action there could be no hope of stemming the third invasion for which Massena—the ablest of all the Emperor's marshals was now gathering his divisions in the north. If Wellington were to execute his threat and withdraw with his army, Forjas beheld nothing but ruin for his country. The irresistible French would sweep forward in devastating conquest, and Portuguese independence would be

ground to dust under the heel of the terrible Emperor.

All this the clear-sighted Dom Miguel Forjas now perceived. To do him full justice, he had feared for some time that the unreasonable conduct of his Government might ultimately bring about some such desperate situation. But it was not for him to voice those fears. He was the servant of that Government, the "mere instrument and mouthpiece of the Council of Regency.

"This," he said at length in a voice that was awed, "is an ultimatum."

"It is that," O'Moy admitted readily.

Forjas sighed, shook his dark head and drew himself up like a man who has chosen his part. Being shrewd, he saw the immediate necessity of choosing, and, being honest, he chose honestly.

"Perhaps it is as well," he said.

"That Lord Wellington should go?" cried O'Moy.

"That Lord Wellington should announce intentions of going," Forjas explained. And having admitted so much, he now stripped off the official mask completely. He spoke with his own voice and not with that of the Council whose mouthpiece he was. "Of course it will never be permitted. Lord Wellington has been entrusted with the defence of the country by the Prince Regent; consequently it is the duty of every Portuguese to ensure that at all costs he shall continue in that office."

O'Moy was mystified. Only a knowledge of the minister's inmost thoughts could have explained this oddly sudden change of manner.

"But your Excellency understands the terms—the only terms upon which his lordship will so continue?"

"Perfectly. I shall hasten to convey those terms to the Council. It is also quite clear—is it not?—that I may convey to my Government and

indeed publish your complete assurance that the officer responsible for the raid on the convent at Tavora will be shot when taken?"

Looking intently into O'Moy's face, Dom Miguel saw the clear blue eyes flicker under his gaze, he beheld a grey shadow slowly overspreading the adjutant's ruddy cheek. Knowing nothing of the relationship between O'Moy and the offender, unable to guess the sources of the hesitation of which he now beheld such unmistakable signs, the minister naturally misunderstood it.

"There must be no flinching in this, General," he cried. "Let me speak to you for a moment quite frankly and in confidence, not as the Secretary of State of the Council of Regency, but as a Portuguese patriot who places his country and his country's welfare above every other consideration. You have issued your ultimatum. It may be harsh, it may be arbitrary; with that I have no concern. The interests, the feelings of Principal Souza or of any other individual, however high-placed, are without weight when the interests of the nation hang against them in the balance. Better that an injustice be done to one man than that the whole country should suffer. Therefore I do not argue with you upon the rights and wrongs of Lord Wellington's ultimatum. That is a matter apart. Lord Wellington demands the removal of Principal Souza from the Government, or, in the alternative, proposes himself to withdraw from Portugal. In the national interest the Government can come to only one decision. I am frank with you, General. Myself I shall stand ranged on the side of the national interest, and what my influence in the Council can do it shall do. But if you know Principal Souza at all, you must know that he will not relinquish his position without a fight. He has friends and influence—the Patriarch of Lisbon and many of the nobility will be on his side. I warn you solemnly against leaving any weapon in his hands."

He paused impressively. But O'Moy, grey-faced now and haggard, waited in silence for him to continue.

"From the message I brought you," Forjas resumed, "you will have perceived how Principal Souza has fastened upon this business at Tavora to support his general censure of Lord Wellington's conduct of the campaign. That is the weapon to which my warning refers. You must—if we who place the national interest supreme are to prevail—you must disarm him by the assurance that I ask for. You will perceive that I am disloyal to a member of my Council so that I may be loyal to my country. But I repeat, I speak to you in confidence. This officer has committed a gross outrage, which must bring the British army into odium with the people, unless we have your assurance that the British army is the first to censure and to punish the offender with the utmost rigour. Give me now, that I may publish everywhere, your official assurance that this man will be shot, and on my side I assure you that Principal Souza, thus deprived of his stoutest weapon, must succumb in the struggle that awaits us."

"I hope," said O'Moy slowly, his head bowed, his voice dull and even unsteady, "I hope that I am not behind you in placing public duty above private consideration. You may publish my official assurance that the officer in question will be... shot when taken."

"General, I thank you. My country thanks you. You may be confident of this issue." He bowed gravely to O'Moy and then to Tremayne. "Your Excellencies, I have the honour to wish you good-day." He was shown out by the orderly who had admitted him, and he departed well satisfied in his patriotic heart that the crisis which he had always known to be inevitable should have been reached at last. Yet, as he went, he wondered why the Adjutant-General had looked so downcast, why his voice had broken when he pledged his word that justice should be done upon the offending British officer. That, however, was no concern of Dom Miguel's, and there was more than enough to engage his thoughts when he came to consider the ultimatum to his Government with which he was charged.

CHAPTER III. LADY O'MOY

Across the frontier in the northwest was gathering the third army of invasion, some sixty thousand strong, commanded by Marshal Massena, Prince of Esslingen, the most skilful and fortunate of all Napoleon's generals, a leader who, because he had never known defeat, had come to be surnamed by his Emperor "the dear child of Victory."

Wellington, at the head of a British force of little more than one third of the French host, watched and waited, maturing his stupendous strategic plan, which those in whose interests it had been conceived had done so much to thwart. That plan was inspired by and based upon the Emperor's maxim that war should support itself; that an army on the march must not be hampered and immobilised by its commissariat, but that it must draw its supplies from the country it is invading; that it must, in short, live upon that country.

Behind the British army and immediately to the north of Lisbon, in an arc some thirty miles long, following the inflection of the hills from the sea at the mouth of the Zizandre to the broad waters of the Tagus at Alhandra, the lines of Torres Vedras were being constructed under the direction of Colonel Fletcher and this so secretly and with such careful measures as to remain unknown to British and Portuguese alike. Even those employed upon the works knew of nothing save the section upon which they happened to be engaged, and had no conception of the stupendous and impregnable whole that was preparing.

To these lines it was the British commander's plan to effect a slow retreat before the French flood when it should sweep forward, thus

luring the enemy onward into a country which he had commanded should be laid relentlessly waste, that there that enemy might fast be starved and afterwards destroyed. To this end had his proclamations gone forth, commanding that all the land lying between the rivers Tagus and Mondego, in short, the whole of the country between Beira and Torres Vedras, should be stripped naked, converted into a desert as stark and empty as the Sahara. Not a head of cattle, not a grain of corn, not a skin of vine, not a flask of oil, not a crumb of anything affording nourishment should be left behind. The very mills were to be rendered useless, bridges were to be broken down, the houses emptied of all property, which the refugees were to carry away with them from the line of invasion.

Such was his terrible demand upon the country for its own salvation. But such, as we have seen, was not war as Principal Souza and some of his adherents understood it. They had not the foresight to perceive the inevitable result of this strategic plan if effectively and thoroughly executed. They did not even realise that the devastation had better be effected by the British in this defensive—and in its results at the same time overwhelmingly offensive—manner than by the French in the course of a conquering onslaught. They did not realise these things partly because they did not enjoy Wellington's full confidence, and in a greater measure because they were blinded by self-interest, because, as O'Moy told Forjas, they placed private considerations above public duty. The northern nobles whose lands must suffer opposed the measure violently; they even opposed the withdrawal of labour from those lands which the Militia Act had rendered necessary. And Antonio de Souza made himself their champion until he was broken by Wellington's ultimatum to the Council. For broken he was. The nation had come to a parting of the ways. It had been brought to the necessity of choosing, and however much the Principal, voicing the outcry of his party, might argue that the British plan was as detestable and ruinous as a French invasion, the nation preferred to place its confidence in the conqueror of Vimeiro

and the Douro.

Souza quitted the Government and the capital as had been demanded. But if Wellington hoped that he would quit intriguing, he misjudged his man. He was a fellow of monstrous vanity, pride and self-sufficiency, of the sort than which there is none more dangerous to offend. His wounded pride demanded a salve to be procured at any cost. The wound had been administered by Wellington, and must be returned with interest. So that he ruined Wellington it mattered nothing to Antonio de Souza that he should ruin himself and his own country at the same time. He was like some blinded, ferocious and unreasoning beast, ready, even eager, to sacrifice its own life so that in dying it can destroy its enemy and slake its blood-thirst.

In that mood he passes out of the councils of the Portuguese Government into a brooding and secretly active retirement, of which the fruits shall presently be shown. With his departure the Council of Regency, rudely shaken by the ultimatum which had driven him forth, became more docile and active, and for a season the measures enjoined by the Commander-in-Chief were pursued with some show of earnestness.

As a result of all this life at Monsanto became easier, and O'Moy was able to breathe more freely, and to devote more of his time to matters concerning the fortifications which Wellington had left largely in his charge. Then, too, as the weeks passed, the shadow overhanging him with regard to Richard Butler gradually lifted. No further word had there been of the missing lieutenant, and by the end of May both O'Moy and Tremayne had come to the conclusion that he must have fallen into the hands of some of the ferocious mountaineers to whom a soldier—whether his uniform were British or French—was a thing to be done to death.

For his wife's sake O'Moy came thankfully to that conclusion. Under the circumstances it was the best possible termination to the

episode. She must be told of her brother's death presently, when evidence of it was forthcoming; she would mourn him passionately, no doubt, for her attachment to him was deep—extraordinarily deep for so shallow a woman—but at least she would be spared the pain and shame she must inevitably have felt had he been taken and, shot.

Meanwhile, however, the lack of news from him, in another sense, would have to be explained to Una sooner or later for a fitful correspondence was maintained between brother and sister—and O'Moy dreaded the moment when this explanation must be made. Lacking invention, he applied to Tremayne for assistance, and Tremayne glumly supplied him with the necessary lie that should meet Lady O'Moy's inquiries when they came.

In the end, however, he was spared the necessity of falsehood. For the truth itself reached Lady O'Moy in an unexpected manner. It came about a month after that day when O'Moy had first received news of the escapade at Tavora. It was a resplendent morning of early June, and the adjutant was detained a few moments from breakfast by the arrival of a mail-bag from headquarters, now established at Vizeu. Leaving Captain Tremayne to deal with it, Sir Terence went down to breakfast, bearing with him only a few letters of a personal character which had reached him from friends on the frontier.

The architecture of the house at Monsanto was of a semiclaustral character; three sides of it enclosed a sheltered luxuriant garden, whilst on the fourth side a connecting corridor, completing the quadrangle, spanned bridgewise the spacious archway through which admittance was gained directly from the parklands that sloped gently to Alcantara. This archway, closed at night by enormous wooden doors, opened wide during the day upon a grassy terrace bounded by a baluster of white marble that gleamed now in the brilliant sunshine. It was O'Moy's practice to breakfast out-of-doors in that genial climate, and during April, before the sun had reached its present intensity, the

table had been spread out there upon the terrace. Now, however, it was wiser, even in the early morning, to seek the shade, and breakfast was served within the quadrangle, under a trellis of vine supported in the Portuguese manner by rough-hewn granite columns. It was a delicious spot, cool and fragrant, secluded without being enclosed, since through the broad archway it commanded a view of the Tagus and the hills of Alemtejo.

Here O'Moy found himself impatiently awaited that morning by his wife and her cousin, Sylvia Armytage, more recently arrived from England.

"You are very late," Lady O'Moy greeted him petulantly. Since she spent her life in keeping other people waiting, it naturally fretted her to discover unpunctuality in others.

Her portrait, by Raeburn, which now adorns the National Gallery, had been painted in the previous year. You will have seen it, or at least you will have seen one of its numerous replicas, and you will have remarked its singular, delicate, rose-petal loveliness—the gleaming golden head, the flawless outline of face and feature, the immaculate skin, the dark blue eyes with their look of innocence awakening.

Thus was she now in her artfully simple gown of flowered muslin with its white fichu folded across her neck that was but a shade less white; thus was she, just as Raeburn had painted her, saving, of course, that her expression, matching her words, was petulant.

"I was detained by the arrival of a mail-bag from Vizeu," Sir Terence excused himself, as he took the chair which Mullins, the elderly, pontifical butler, drew out for him. "Ned is attending to it, and will be kept for a few moments yet."

Lady O'Moy's expression quickened. "Are there no letters for me?"

"None, my dear, I believe."

"No word from Dick?" Again there was that note of ever ready petulance. "It is too provoking. He should know that he must make me anxious by his silence. Dick is so thoughtless—so careless of other people's feelings. I shall write to him severely."

The adjutant paused in the act of unfolding his napkin. The prepared explanation trembled on his lips; but its falsehood, repellent to him, was not uttered.

"I should certainly do so, my dear," was all he said, and addressed himself to his breakfast.

"What news from headquarters?" Miss Armytage asked him. "Are things going well?"

"Much better now that Principal Souza's influence is at an end. Cotton reports that the destruction of the mills in the Mondego valley is being carried out systematically."

Miss Armytage's dark, thoughtful eyes became wistful.

"Do you know, Terence," she said, "that I am not without some sympathy for the Portuguese resistance to Lord Wellington's decrees. They must bear so terribly hard upon the people. To be compelled with their own hands to destroy their homes and lay waste the lands upon which they have laboured—what could be more cruel?"

"War can never be anything but cruel," he answered gravely. "God help the people over whose lands it sweeps. Devastation is often the least of the horrors marching in its train."

"Why must war be?" she asked him, in intelligent rebellion against that most monstrous and infamous of all human madnesses.

O'Moy proceeded to do his best to explain the unexplainable, and

since, himself a professional soldier, he could not take the sane view of his sane young questioner, hot argument ensued between them, to the infinite weariness of Lady O'Moy, who out of self-protection gave herself to the study of the latest fashion plates from London and the consideration of a gown for the ball which the Count of Redondo was giving in the following week.

It was thus in all things, for these cousins represented the two poles of womanhood. Miss Armytage without any of Lady O'Moy's insistent and excessive femininity, was nevertheless feminine to the core. But hers was the Diana type of womanliness. She was tall and of a clean-limbed, supple grace, now emphasised by the riding-habit which she was wearing—for she had been in the saddle during the hour which Lady, O'Moy had consecrated to the rites of toilet and devotions done before her mirror. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, vivacity and intelligence lent her countenance an attraction very different from the allurements of her cousin's delicate loveliness. And because her countenance was a true mirror of her mind, she argued shrewdly now, so shrewdly that she drove O'Moy to entrench himself behind generalisations.

"My dear Sylvia, war is most merciful where it is most merciless," he assured her with the Irish gift for paradox. "At home in the Government itself there are plenty who argue as you argue, and who are wondering when we shall embark for England. That is because they are intellectuals, and war is a thing beyond the understanding of intellectuals. It is not intellect but brute instinct and brute force that will help humanity in such a crisis as the present. Therefore, let me tell you, my child, that a government of intellectual men is the worst possible government for a nation engaged in a war."

This was far from satisfying Miss Armytage. Lord Wellington himself was an intellectual, she objected. Nobody could deny it. There was the work he had done as Irish Secretary, and there was the calculating genius he had displayed at Vimeiro, at Oporto, at

Talavera.

And then, observing her husband to be in distress, Lady O'Moy put down her fashion plate and brought up her heavy artillery to relieve him.

"Sylvia, dear," she interpolated, "I wonder that you will for ever be arguing about things you don't understand."

Miss Armytage laughed good-humouredly. She was not easily put out of countenance. "What woman doesn't?" she asked.

"I don't, and I am a woman, surely."

"Ah, but an exceptional woman," her cousin rallied her affectionately, tapping the shapely white arm that protruded from a foam of lace. And Lady O'Moy, to whom words never had any but a literal meaning, set herself to purr precisely as one would have expected. Complacently she discoursed upon the perfection of her own endowments, appealing ever and anon to her husband for confirmation, and O'Moy, who loved her with all the passionate reverence which Nature working inscrutably to her ends so often inspires in just such strong, essentially masculine men for just such fragile and excessively feminine women, afforded this confirmation with all the enthusiasm of sincere conviction.

Thus until Mullins broke in upon them with the announcement of a visit from Count Samoval, an announcement more welcome to Lady O'Moy than to either of her companions.

The Portuguese nobleman was introduced. He had attained to a degree of familiarity in the adjutant's household that permitted of his being received without ceremony there at that breakfast-table spread in the open. He was a slender, handsome, swarthy man of thirty, scrupulously dressed, as graceful and elegant in his movements as a fencing master, which indeed he might have been; for his skill with the

foils was, a matter of pride to himself and notoriety to all the world. Nor was it by any means the only skill he might have boasted, for Jeronymo de Samoval was in many things, a very subtle, supple gentleman. His friendship with the O'Moys, now some three months old, had been considerably strengthened of late by the fact that he had unexpectedly become one of the most hostile critics of the Council of Regency as lately constituted, and one of the most ardent supporters of the Wellingtonian policy.

He bowed with supremest grace to the ladies, ventured to kiss the fair, smooth hand of his hostess, undeterred by the frosty stare of O'Moy's blue eyes whose approval of all men was in inverse proportion to their approval of his wife—and finally proffered her the armful of early roses that he brought.

"These poor roses of Portugal to their sister from England," said his softly caressing tenor voice.

"Ye're a poet," said O'Moy tartly.

"Having found Castalia here," said, the Count, "shall I not drink its limpid waters?"

"Not, I hope, while there's an agreeable vintage of Port on the table. A morning whet, Samoval?" O'Moy invited him, taking up the decanter.

"Two fingers, then—no more. It is not my custom in the morning. But here—to drink your lady's health, and yours, Miss Armytage." With a graceful flourish of his glass he pledged them both and sipped delicately, then took the chair that O'Moy was proffering.

"Good news, I hear, General. Antonio de Souza's removal from the Government is already bearing fruit. The mills in the valley of the Mondego are being effectively destroyed at last."

"Ye're very well informed," grunted O'Moy, who himself had but received the news. "As well informed, indeed, as I am myself." There was a note almost of suspicion in the words, and he was vexed that matters which it was desirable be kept screened as much as possible from general knowledge should so soon be put abroad.

"Naturally, and with reason," was the answer, delivered with a rueful smile. "Am I not interested? Is not some of my property in question?" Samoval sighed. "But I bow to the necessities of war. At least it cannot be said of me, as was said of those whose interests Souza represented, that I put private considerations above public duty—that is the phrase, I think. The individual must suffer that the nation may triumph. A Roman maxim, my dear General."

"And a British one," said O'Moy, to whom Britain was a second Rome.

"Oh, admitted," replied the amiable Samoval. "You proved it by your uncompromising firmness in the affair of Tavora."

"What was that?" inquired Miss Armytage.

"Have you not heard?" cried Samoval in astonishment.

"Of course not," snapped O'Moy, who had broken into a cold perspiration. "Hardly a subject for the ladies, Count."

Rebuked for his intention, Samoval submitted instantly.

"Perhaps not; perhaps not," he agreed, as if dismissing it, whereupon O'Moy recovered from his momentary breathlessness. "But in your own interests, my dear General, I trust there will be no weakening when this Lieutenant Butler is caught, and—"

"Who?"

Sharp and stridently came that single word from her ladyship.

Desperately O'Moy sought to defend the breach.

"Nothing to do with Dick, my dear. A fellow named Philip Butler, who—"

But the too-well-informed Samoval corrected him. "Not Philip, General—Richard Butler. I had the name but yesterday from Forjas."

In the scared hush that followed the Count perceived that he had stumbled headlong into a mystery. He saw Lady O'Moy's face turn whiter and whiter, saw her sapphire eyes dilating as they regarded him.

"Richard Butler!" she echoed. "What of Richard Butler? Tell me. Tell me at once."

Hesitating before such signs of distress, Samoval looked at O'Moy, to meet a dejected scowl.

Lady O'Moy turned to her husband. "What is it?" she demanded. "You know something about Dick and you are keeping it from me. Dick is in trouble?"

"He is," O'Moy admitted. "In great trouble."

"What has he done? You spoke of an affair at Evora or Tavora, which is not to be mentioned before ladies. I demand to know." Her affection and anxiety for her brother invested her for a moment with a certain dignity, lent her a force that was but rarely displayed by her.

Seeing the men stricken speechless, Samoval from bewildered astonishment, O'Moy from distress, she jumped to the conclusion, after what had been said, that motives of modesty accounted for their silence.

"Leave us, Sylvia, please," she said. "Forgive me, dear. But you see they will not mention these things while you are present." She

made a piteous little figure as she stood trembling there, her fingers tearing in agitation at one of Samoval's roses.

She waited until the obedient and discreet Miss Armytage had passed from view into the wing that contained the adjutant's private quarters, then sinking limp and nerveless to her chair:

"Now," she bade them, "please tell me."

And O'Moy, with a sigh of regret for the lie so laboriously concocted which would never now be uttered, delivered himself huskily of the hideous truth.

CHAPTER IV. COUNT SAMOVAL

Miss Armytage's own notions of what might be fit and proper for her virginal ears were by no means coincident with Lady O'Moy's. Thus, although you have seen her pass into the private quarters of the adjutant's establishment, and although, in fact, she did withdraw to her own room, she found it impossible to abide there a prey to doubt and misgivings as to what Dick Butler might have done—doubt and misgivings, be it understood, entertained purely on Una's account and not at all on Dick's.

By the corridor spanning the archway on the southern side of the quadrangle, and serving as a connecting bridge between the adjutant's private and official quarters, Miss Armytage took her way to Sir Terence's work-room, knowing that she would find Captain Tremayne there, and assuming that he would be alone.

"May I come in?" she asked him from the doorway.

He sprang to his feet. "Why, certainly, Miss Armytage." For so imperturbable a young man he seemed oddly breathless in his eagerness to welcome her. "Are you looking for O'Moy? He left me nearly half-an-hour ago to go to breakfast, and I was just about to follow."

"I scarcely dare detain you, then."

"On the contrary. I mean... not at all. But... were you wanting me?"

She closed the door, and came forward into the room, moving with

that supple grace peculiarly her own.

"I want you to tell me something, Captain Tremayne, and I want you to be frank with me."

"I hope I could never be anything else."

"I want you to treat me as you would treat a man, a friend of your own sex."

Tremayne sighed. He had recovered from the surprise of her coming and was again his imperturbable self.

"I assure you that is the last way in which I desire to treat you. But if you insist—"

"I do." She had frowned slightly at the earlier part of his speech, with its subtle, half-jesting gallantry, and she spoke sharply now.

"I bow to your will," said Captain Tremayne.

"What has Dick Butler been doing?"

He looked into her face with sharply questioning eyes.

"What was it that happened at Tavora?"

He continued to look at her. "What have you heard?" he asked at last.

"Only that he has done something at Tavora for which the consequences, I gather, may be grave. I am anxious for Una's sake to know what it is."

"Does Una know?"

"She is being told now. Count Samoval let slip just what I have outlined. And she has insisted upon being told everything."

"Then why did you not remain to hear?"

"Because they sent me away on the plea that—oh, on the silly plea of my youth and innocence, which were not to be offended."

"But which you expect me to offend?"

"No. Because I can trust you to tell me without offending."

"Sylvia!" It was a curious exclamation of satisfaction and of gratitude for the implied confidence. We must admit that it betrayed a selfish forgetfulness of Dick Butler and his troubles, but it is by no means clear that it was upon such grounds that it offended her.

She stiffened perceptibly. "Really, Captain Tremayne!"

"I beg your pardon," said he. "But you seemed to imply—" He checked, at a loss.

Her colour rose. "Well, sir? What do you suggest that I implied or seemed to imply?" But as suddenly her manner changed. "I think we are too concerned with trifles where the matter on which I have sought you is a serious one."

"It is of the utmost seriousness," he admitted gravely.

"Won't you tell me what it is?"

He told her quite simply the whole story, not forgetting to give prominence to the circumstances extenuating it in Butler's favour. She listened with a deepening frown, rather pale, her head bowed.

"And when he is taken," she asked, "what—what will happen to him?"

"Let us hope that he will not be taken."

"But if he is—if he is?" she insisted almost impatiently.

Captain Tremayne turned aside and looked out of the window. "I should welcome the news that he is dead," he said softly. "For if he is taken he will find no mercy at the hands of his own people."

"You mean that he will be shot?" Horror charged her voice, dilated her eyes.

"Inevitably."

A shudder ran through her, and she covered her face with her hands. When she withdrew then Tremayne beheld the lovely countenance transformed. It was white and drawn.

"But surely Terence can save him!" she cried piteously.

He shook his head, his lips tight pressed. "There is no man less able to do so."

"What do you mean? Why do you say that?"

He looked at her, hesitating for a moment, then answered her: "'O'Moy has pledged his word to the Portuguese Government that Dick Butler shall be shot when taken."

"Terence did that?"

"He was compelled to it. Honour and duty demanded no less of him. I alone, who was present and witnessed the undertaking, know what it cost him and what he suffered. But he was forced to sink all private considerations. It was a sacrifice rendered necessary, inevitable for the success of this campaign." And he proceeded to explain to her all the circumstances that were interwoven with Lieutenant Butler's ill-timed offence. "Thus you see that from Terence you can hope for nothing. His honour will not admit of his wavering in this matter."

"Honour?" She uttered the word almost with contempt. "And what of

Una?"

"I was thinking of Una when I said I should welcome the news of Dick's death somewhere in the hills. It is the best that can be hoped for."

"I thought you were Dick's friend, Captain Tremayne."

"Why, so I have been; so I am. Perhaps that is another reason why I should hope that he is dead."

"Is it no reason why you should do what you to save him?"

He looked at her steadily for an instant, calm under the reproach of her eyes.

"Believe me, Miss Armytage, if I saw a way to save him, to do anything to help him, I should seize it, both for the sake of my friendship for himself and because of my affection for Una. Since you yourself are interested in him, that is an added reason for me. But it is one thing to admit willingness to help and another thing actually to afford help. What is there that I can do? I assure you that I have thought of the matter. Indeed for days I have thought of little else. But I can see no light. I await events. Perhaps a chance may come."

Her expression had softened. "I see." She put out a hand generously to ask forgiveness. "I was presumptuous, and I had no right to speak as I did."

He took the hand. "I should never question your right to speak to me in any way that seemed good to you," he assured her.

"I had better go to Una. She will be needing me, poor child. I am grateful to you, Captain Tremayne, for your confidence and for telling me." And thus she left him very thoughtful, as concerned for Una as she was herself.

Now Una O'Moy was the natural product of such treatment. There had ever been something so appealing in her lovely helplessness and fragility that all her life others had been concerned to shelter her from every wind that blew. Because it was so she was what she was; and because she was what she was it would continue to be so.

But Lady O'Moy at the moment did not stand in such urgent need of Miss Armytage as Miss Armytage imagined. She had heard the appalling story of her brother's escapade, but she had been unable to perceive in what it was so terrible as it was declared. He had made a mistake. He had invaded the convent under a misapprehension, for which it was ridiculous to blame him. It was a mistake which any man might have made in a foreign country. Lives had been lost, it is true; but that was owing to the stupidity of other people—of the nuns who had run for shelter when no danger threatened save in their own silly imaginations, and of the peasants who had come blundering to their assistance where no assistance was required; the latter were the people responsible for the bloodshed, since they had attacked the dragoons. Could it be expected of the dragoons that they should tamely suffer themselves to be massacred?

Thus Lady O'Moy upon the affair of Tavora. The whole thing appeared to her to be rather silly, and she refused seriously to consider that it could have any grave consequences for Dick. His continued absence made her anxious. But if he should come to be taken, surely his punishment would be merely a formal matter; at the worst he might be sent home, which would be a very good thing, for after all the climate of the Peninsula had never quite suited him.

In this fashion she nimbly pursued a train of vitiated logic, passing from inconsequence to inconsequence. And O'Moy, thankful that she should take such a view this—mercifully hopeful that the last had been heard of his peccant and vexatious brother-in-law—content, more than content, to leave her comforted such illusions.

And then, while she was still discussing the matter terms of comparative calm, came an orderly to summon him away, so that he left her in the company of Samoval.

The Count had been deeply shocked by the discover that Dick Butler was Lady O'Moy's brother, and a little confused that he himself in his ignorance should have been the means of bringing to her knowledge a painful matter that touched her so closely and that hitherto had been so carefully concealed from her by her husband. He was thankful that she should take so op optimistic a view, and quick to perceive O'Moy's charitable desire to leave her optimism undisputed. But he was no less quick to perceive the opportunities which the circumstances afforded him to further a certain deep intrigue upon which he was engaged.

Therefore he did not take his leave just yet. He sauntered with Lady O'Moy on the terrace above the wooded slopes that screened the village of Alcantara, and there discovered her mind to be even more frivolous and unstable than his perspicuity had hitherto suspected. Under stress Lady O'Moy could convey the sense that she felt deeply. She could be almost theatrical in her displays of emotion. But these were as transient as they were intense. Nothing that was not immediately present to her senses was ever capable of a deep impression upon her spirit, and she had the facility characteristic of the self-loving and self-indulgent of putting aside any matter that was unpleasant. Thus, easily self-persuaded, as we have seen, that this escapade of Richard's was not to be regarded too seriously, and that its consequences were not likely to be gave, she chattered with gay inconsequence of other things—of the dinner-party last week at the house of the Marquis of Minas, that prominent member of the council of Regency, of the forthcoming ball to be given by the Count of Redondo, of the latest news from home, the latest fashion and the latest scandal, the amours of the Duke of York and the shortcomings of Mr. Perceval.

Samoval, however, did not intend that the matter of her brother should be so entirely forgotten, so lightly treated. Deliberately at last he revived it.

Considering her as she leant upon the granite balustrade, her pink sunshade aslant over her shoulder, her flimsy lace shawl festooned from the crook of either arm and floating behind her, a wisp of cloudy vapour, Samoval permitted himself a sigh.

She flashed him a sidelong glance, arch and rallying.

"You are melancholy, sir—a poor compliment," she told him.

But do not misunderstand her. Hers was an almost childish coquetry, inevitable fruit of her intense femininity, craving ever the worship of the sterner sex and the incense of its flattery. And Samoval, after all, young, noble, handsome, with a half-sinister reputation, was something of a figure of romance, as a good many women had discovered to their cost.

He fingered his snowy stock, and bent upon her eyes of glowing adoration. "Dear Lady O'Moy," his tenor voice was soft and soothing as a caress, "I sigh to think that one so adorable, so entirely made for life's sunshine and gladness, should have cause for a moment's uneasiness, perhaps for secret grief, at the thought of the peril of her brother."

Her glance clouded under this reminder. Then she pouted and made a little gesture of impatience. "Dick is not in peril," she answered. "He is foolish to remain so long in hiding, and of course he will have to face unpleasantness when he is found. But to say that he is in peril is... just nonsense. Terence said nothing of peril. He agreed with me that Dick will probably be sent home. Surely you don't think —"

"No, no." He looked down, studying his hessians for a moment.

then his dark eyes returned to meet her own. "I shall see to it that he is in no danger. You may depend upon me, who ask but the happy chance to serve you. Should there be any trouble, let me know at once, and I will see to it that all is well. Your brother must not suffer, since he is your brother. He is very blessed and enviable in that."

She stared at him, her brows knitting. "But I don't understand."

"Is it not plain? Whatever happens, you must not suffer, Lady O'Moy. No man of feeling, and I least of any, could endure it. And since if your brother were to suffer that must bring suffering to you, you may count upon me to shield him."

"You are very good, Count. But shield him from what?"

"From whatever may threaten. The Portuguese Government may demand in self-protection, to appease the clamour of the people stupidly outraged by this affair, that an example shall be made of the offender."

"Oh, but how could they? With what reason?" She displayed a vague alarm, and a less vague impatience of such hypotheses.

He shrugged. "The people are like that—a fierce, vengeful god to whom appeasing sacrifices must be offered from time to time. If the people demand a scapegoat, governments usually provide one. But be comforted." In his eagerness of reassurance he caught her delicate mittened hand in his own, and her anxiety rendering her heedless, she allowed it to lie there gently imprisoned. "Be comforted. I shall be here to guard him. There is much that I can do and you may depend upon me to do it—for your sake, dear lady. The Government will listen to me. I would not have you imagine me capable of boasting. I have influence with the Government, that is all; and I give you my word that so far as the Portuguese Government is concerned your brother shall take no harm."

She looked at him for a long moment with moist eyes, moved and flattered by his earnestness and intensity of homage. "I take this very kindly in you, sir. I have no thanks that are worthy," she said, her voice trembling a little. "I have no means of repaying you. You have made me very happy, Count."

He bent low over the frail hand he was holding.

"Your assurance that I have made you happy repays me very fully, since your happiness is my tenderest concern. Believe me, dear lady, you may ever count Jeronymo de Samoval your most devoted and obedient slave."

He bore the hand to his lips and held it to them for a long moment, whilst with heightened colour and eyes that sparkled, more, be it confessed, from excitement than from gratitude, she stood passively considering his bowed dark head.

As he came erect again a movement under the archway caught his eye, and turning he found himself confronting Sir Terence and Miss Armytage, who were approaching. If it vexed him to have been caught by a husband notoriously jealous in an attitude not altogether uncompromising, Samoval betrayed no sign of it.

With smooth self-possession he hailed O'Moy:

"General, you come in time to enable me to take my leave of you. I was on the point of going."

"So I perceived," said O'Moy tartly. He had almost said: "So I had hoped."

His frosty manner would have imposed constraint upon any man less master of himself than Samoval. But the Count ignored it, and ignoring it delayed a moment to exchange amiabilities politely with Miss Armytage, before taking at last an unhurried and unperturbed

departure.

But no sooner was he gone than O'Moy expressed himself full frankly to his wife.

"I think Samoval is becoming too attentive and too assiduous."

"He is a dear," said Lady O'Moy.

"That is what I mean," replied Sir Terence grimly.

"He has undertaken that if there should be any trouble with the Portuguese Government about Dick's silly affair he will put it right."

"Oh!" said O'Moy, "that was it?" And out of his tender consideration for her said no more.

But Sylvia Armytage, knowing what she knew from Captain Tremayne, was not content to leave the matter there. She reverted to it presently as she was going indoors alone with her cousin.

"Una," she said gently, "I should not place too much faith in Count Samoval and his promises."

"What do you mean?" Lady O'Moy was never very tolerant of advice, especially from an inexperienced young girl.

"I do not altogether trust him. Nor does Terence."

"Pooh! Terence mistrusts every man who looks at me. My dear, never marry a jealous man," she added with her inevitable inconsequence.

"He is the last man—the Count, I mean—to whom, in your place, I should go for assistance if there is trouble about Dick." She was thinking of what Tremayne had told her of the attitude of the Portuguese Government, and her clear-sighted mind perceived an obvious peril in permitting Count Samoval to become aware of Dick's

whereabouts should they ever be discovered.

"What nonsense, Sylvia! You conceive the oddest and most foolish notions sometimes. But of course you have no experience of the world." And beyond that she refused to discuss the matter, nor did the wise Sylvia insist.

CHAPTER V. THE FUGITIVE

Although Dick Butler might continue missing in the flesh, in the spirit he and his miserable affair seem to have been ever present and ubiquitous, and a most fruitful source of trouble.

It would be at about this time that there befell in Lisbon the deplorable event that nipped in the bud the career of that most promising young officer, Major Berkeley of the famous Die-Hards, the 29th Foot.

Coming into Lisbon on leave from his regiment, which was stationed at Abrantes, and formed part of the division under Sir Rowland Hill, the major happened into a company that contained at least one member who was hostile to Lord Wellington's conduct of the campaign, or rather to the measures which it entailed. As in the case of the Principal Souza, prejudice drove him to take up any weapon that came to his hand by means of which he could strike a blow at a system he deplored.

Since we are concerned only indirectly with the affair, it may be stated very briefly. The young gentleman in question was a Portuguese officer and a nephew of the Patriarch of Lisbon, and the particular criticism to which Major Berkeley took such just exception concerned the very troublesome Dick Butler. Our patrician ventured to comment with sneers and innuendoes upon the fact that the lieutenant of dragoons continued missing, and he went so far as to indulge in a sarcastic prophecy that he never would be found.

Major Berkeley, stung by the slur thus slyly cast upon British honour, invited the young gentleman to make himself more explicit.

"I had thought that I was explicit enough," says young impudence, leering at the stalwart red-coat. "But if you want it more clearly still, then I mean that the undertaking to punish this ravisher of nunneries is one that you English have never intended to carry out. To save your faces you will take good care that Lieutenant Butler is never found. Indeed I doubt if he was ever really missing."

Major Berkeley was quite uncompromising and downright. I am afraid he had none of the graces that can exalt one of these affairs.

"Ye're just a very foolish liar, sir, and you deserve a good caning," was all he said, but the way in which he took his cane from under his arm was so suggestive of more to follow there and then that several of the company laid preventive hands upon him instantly.

The Patriarch's nephew, very white and very fierce to hear himself addressed in terms which—out of respect for his august and powerful uncle—had never been used to him before, demanded instant satisfaction. He got it next morning in the shape of half-an-ounce of lead through his foolish brain, and a terrible uproar ensued. To appease it a scapegoat was necessary. As Samoval so truly said, the mob is a ferocious god to whom sacrifices must be made. In this instance the sacrifice, of course, was Major Berkeley. He was broken and sent home to cut his pigtail (the adornment still clung to by the 29th) and retire into private life, whereby the British army was deprived of an officer of singularly brilliant promise. Thus, you see, the score against poor Richard Butler—that foolish victim of wine and circumstance—went on increasing.

But in my haste to usher Major Berkeley out of a narrative which he touches merely at a tangent, I am guilty of violating the chronological order of the events. The ship in which Major Berkeley went home to England and the rural life was the frigate *Telemachus*, and the *Telemachus* had but dropped anchor in the Tagus at the date with which I am immediately concerned. She came with certain stores and

a heavy load of mails for the troops, and it would be a full fortnight before she would sail again for home. Her officers would be ashore during the time, the welcome guests of the officers of the garrison, bearing their share in the gaieties with which the latter strove to kill the time of waiting for events, and Marcus Glennie, the captain of the frigate, an old friend of Tremayne's, was by virtue of that friendship an almost daily visitor at the adjutant's quarters.

But there again I am anticipating. The Telemachus came to her moorings in the Tagus, at which for the present we may leave her, on the morning of the day that was to close with Count Redondo's semi-official ball. Lady O'Moy had risen late, taking from one end of the day what she must relinquish to the other, that thus fully rested she might look her best that night. The greater part of the afternoon was devoted to preparation. It was amazing even to herself what an amount of detail there was to be considered, and from Sylvia she received but very indifferent assistance. There were times when she regretfully suspected in Sylvia a lack of proper womanliness, a taint almost of masculinity. There was to Lady O'Moy's mind something very wrong about a woman who preferred a canter to a waltz. It was unnatural; it was suspicious; she was not quite sure that it wasn't vaguely immoral.

At last there had been dinner—to which she came a full half-hour late, but of so ravishing and angelic an appearance that the sight of her was sufficient to mollify Sir Terence's impatience and stifle the withering sarcasms he had been laboriously preparing. After dinner—which was taken at six o'clock—there was still an hour to spare before the carriage would come to take them into Lisbon.

Sir Terence pleaded stress of work, occasioned by the arrival of the Telemachus that morning, and withdrew with Tremayne to the official quarters, to spend that hour in disposing of some of the many matters awaiting his attention. Sylvia, who to Lady O'Moy's exasperation seemed now for the first time to give a thought to what

she should wear that night, went off in haste to gown herself, and so Lady O'Moy was left to her own resources—which I assure you were few indeed.

The evening being calm and warm, she sauntered out into the open. She was more or less annoyed with everybody—with Sir Terence and Tremayne for their assiduity to duty, and with Sylvia for postponing all thought of dressing until this eleventh hour, when she might have been better employed in beguiling her ladyship's loneliness. In this petulant mood, Lady O'Moy crossed the quadrangle, loitered a moment by the table and chairs placed under the trellis, and considered sitting there to await the others. Finally, however, attracted by the glory of the sunset behind the hills towards Abrantes, she sauntered out on to the terrace, to the intense thankfulness of a poor wretch who had waited there for the past ten hours in the almost despairing hope that precisely such a thing might happen.

She was leaning upon the balustrade when a rustle in the pines below drew her attention. The rustle worked swiftly upwards and round to the bushes on her right, and her eyes, faintly startled, followed its career, what time she stood tense and vaguely frightened.

Then the bushes parted and a limping figure that leaned heavily upon a stick disclosed itself; a shaggy, red-bearded man in the garb of a peasant; and marvel of marvels!—this figure spoke her name sharply, warningly almost, before she had time to think of screaming.

"Una! Una! Don't move!"

The voice was certainly the voice of Mr. Butler. But how came that voice into the body of this peasant? Terrified, with drumming pulses, yet obedient to the injunction, she remained without speech or movement, whilst crouching so as to keep below the level of the balustrade the man crept forward until he was immediately before and

below her.

She stared into that haggard face, and through the half-mask of stubbly beard gradually made out the features of her brother.

"Richard!" The name broke from her in a scream.

"Sh!" He waved his hands in wild alarm to repress her. "For God's sake, be quiet! It's a ruined man I am they find me here. You'll have heard what's happened to me?"

She nodded, and uttered a half-strangled "Yes."

"Is there anywhere you can hide me? Can you get me into the house without being seen? I am almost starving, and my leg is on fire. I was wounded three days ago to make matters worse than they were already. I have been lying in the woods there watching for the chance to find you alone since sunrise this morning, and it's devil a bite or sup I've had since this time yesterday."

"Poor, poor Richard!" She leaned down towards him in an attitude of compassionate, ministering grace. "But why? Why did you not come up to the house and ask for me? No one would have recognised you."

"Terence would if he had seen me."

"But Terence wouldn't have mattered. Terence will help you."

"Terence!" He almost laughed from excess of bitterness, labouring under an egotistical sense of wrong. "He's the last man I should wish to meet, as I have good reason to know. If it hadn't been for that I should have come to you a month ago—immediately after this trouble of mine. As it is, I kept away until despair left me no other choice. Una, on no account a word of my presence to Terence."

"But... he's my husband!"

"Sure, and he's also adjutant-general, and if I know him at all he's the very man to place official duty and honour and all the rest of it above family considerations."

"Oh, Richard, how little you know Terence! How wrong you are to misjudge him like this!"

"Right or wrong, I'd prefer not to take the risk. It might end in my being shot one fine morning before long."

"Richard!"

"For God's sake, less of your Richard! It's all the world will be hearing you. Can you hide me, do you think, for a day or two? If you can't, I'll be after shifting for myself as best I can. I've been playing the part of an English overseer from Bearsley's wine farm, and it has brought me all the way from the Douro in safety. But the strain of it and the eternal fear of discovery are beginning to break me. And now there's this infernal wound. I was assaulted by a footpad near Abrantes, as if I was worth robbing. Anyhow I gave the fellow more than I took. Unless I have rest I think I shall go mad and give myself up to the provost-marshal to be shot and done with."

"Why do you talk of being shot? You have done nothing to deserve that. Why should you fear it?"

Now Mr. Butler was aware—having gathered the information lately on his travels—of the undertaking given by the British to the Council of Regency with regard to himself. But irresponsible egotist though he might be, yet in common with others he was actuated by the desire which his sister's fragile loveliness inspired in every one to spare her unnecessary pain or anxiety.

"It's not myself will take any risks," he said again. "We are at war, and when men are at war killing becomes a sort of habit, and one life

more or less is neither here nor there." And upon that he renewed his plea that she should hide him if she could and that on no account should she tell a single soul—and Sir Terence least of any—of his presence.

Having driven him to the verge of frenzy by the waste of precious moments in vain argument, she gave him at last the promise he required. "Go back to the bushes there," she bade him, "and wait until I come for you. I will make sure that the coast is clear."

Contiguous to her dressing-room, which overlooked the quadrangle, there was a small alcove which had been converted into a storeroom for the array of trunks and dress boxes that Lady O'Moy had brought from England. A door opening directly from her dressing room communicated with this alcove, and of that door Bridget, her maid, was in possession of the key.

As she hurried now indoors she happened to meet Bridget on the stairs. The maid announced herself on her way to supper in the servants' quarters, and apologised for her presumption in assuming that her ladyship would no further require her services that evening. But since it fell in so admirably with her ladyship's own wishes, she insisted with quite unusual solicitude, with vehemence almost, that Bridget should proceed upon her way.

"Just give me the key of the alcove," she said. "There are one or two things I want to get."

"Can't I get them, your ladyship?"

"Thank you, Bridget. I prefer to get them, myself."

There was no more to be said. Bridget produced a bunch of keys, which she surrendered to her mistress, having picked out for her the one required.

Lady O'Moy went up, to come down again the moment that Bridget had disappeared. The quadrangle was deserted, the household disposed of, and it wanted yet half-an-hour to the time for which the carriage was ordered. No moment could have been more propitious. But in any case no concealment was attempted—since, if detected it must have provoked suspicions hardly likely to be aroused in any other way.

When Lady O'Moy returned indoors in the gathering dusk she was followed at a respectful distance by the limping fugitive, who might, had he been seen, have been supposed some messenger, or perhaps some person employed about the house or gardens coming to her ladyship for instructions. No one saw them, however, and they gained the dressing-room and thence the alcove in complete safety.

There, whilst Richard, allowing his exhaustion at last to conquer him, sank heavily down upon one of his sister's many trunks, recking nothing of the havoc wrought in its priceless contents, her ladyship all a-tremble collapsed limply upon another.

But there was no rest for her. Richard's wound required attention, and he was faint for want of meat and drink. So having procured him the wherewithal to wash and dress his hurt—a nasty knife-slash which had penetrated to the bone of his thigh, the very sight of which turned her ladyship sick and faint—she went to forage for him in a haste increased by the fact that time was growing short.

On the dining-room sideboard, from the remains of dinner, she found and furtively abstracted what she needed—best part of a roast chicken, a small loaf and a half-flask of Collares. Mullins, the butler, would no doubt be exercised presently when he discovered the abstraction. Let him blame one of the footmen, Sir Terence's orderly, or the cat. It mattered nothing to Lady O'Moy.

Having devoured the food and consumed the wine, Richard's

exhaustion assumed the form of a lethargic torpor. To sleep was now his overmastering desire. She fetched him rugs and pillows, and he made himself a couch upon the floor. She had demurred, of course, when he himself had suggested this. She could not conceive of any one sleeping anywhere but in a bed. But Dick made short work of that illusion.

"Haven't I been in hiding for the last six weeks?" he asked her. "And haven't I been thankful to sleep in a ditch? And wasn't I campaigning before that? I tell you I couldn't sleep in a bed. It's a habit I've lost entirely."

Convinced, she gave way.

"We'll talk to-morrow, Una," he promised her, as he stretched himself luxuriously upon that hard couch. "But meanwhile, on your life, not a word to any one. You understand?"

"Of course I understand, my poor Dick."

She stooped to kiss him. But he was fast asleep already.

She went out and locked the door, and when, on the point of setting out for Count Redondo's, she returned the bunch of keys to Bridget the key of the alcove was missing.

"I shall require it again in the morning, Bridget," she explained lightly. And then added kindly, as it seemed: "Don't wait for me, child. Get to bed. I shall be late in coming home, and I shall not want you."

CHAPTER VI. MISS ARMYTAGE'S PEARLS

Lady O'Moy and Miss Armytage drove alone together into Lisbon. The adjutant, still occupied, would follow as soon as he possibly could, whilst Captain Tremayne would go on directly from the lodgings which he shared in Alcantara with Major Carruthers—also of the adjutant's staff—whither he had ridden to dress some twenty minutes earlier.

"Are you ill, Una?" had been Sylvia's concerned greeting of her cousin when she came within the range of the carriage lamps. "You are pale as a ghost." To this her ladyship had replied mechanically that a slight headache troubled her.

But now that they sat side by side in the well upholstered carriage Miss Armytage became aware that her companion was trembling.

"Una, dear, whatever is the matter?"

Had it not been for the dominant fear that the shedding of tears would render her countenance unsightly, Lady O'Moy would have yielded to her feelings and wept. Heroically in the cause of her own flawless beauty she conquered the almost overmastering inclination.

"I—I have been so troubled about Richard," she faltered. "It is preying upon my mind."

"Poor dear!" In sheer motherliness Miss Armytage put an arm about her cousin and drew her close. "We must hope for the best."

Now if you have understood anything of the character of Lady

O'Moy you will have understood that the burden of a secret was the last burden that such a nature was capable of carrying. It was because Dick was fully aware of this that he had so emphatically and repeatedly impressed upon her the necessity for saying not a word to any one of his presence. She realised in her vague way—or rather she believed it since he had assured her—that there would be grave danger to him if he were discovered. But discovery was one thing, and the sharing of a confidence as to his presence another. That confidence must certainly be shared.

Lady O'Moy was in an emotional maelstrom that swept her towards a cataract. The cataract might inspire her with dread, standing as it did for death and disaster, but the maelstrom was not to be resisted. She was helpless in it, unequal to breasting such strong waters, she who in all her futile, charming life had been borne snugly in safe crafts that were steered by others.

Remained but to choose her confidant. Nature suggested Terence. But it was against Terence in particular that she had been warned. Circumstance now offered Sylvia Armytage. But pride, or vanity if you prefer it, denied her here. Sylvia was an inexperienced young girl, as she herself had so often found occasion to remind her cousin. Moreover, she fostered the fond illusion that Sylvia looked to her for precept, that upon Sylvia's life she exercised a precious guiding influence. How, then, should the supporting lean upon the supported? Yet since she must, there and then, lean upon something or succumb instantly and completely, she chose a middle course, a sort of temporary assistance.

"I have been imagining things," she said. "It may be a premonition, I don't know. Do you believe in premonitions, Sylvia?"

"Sometimes," Sylvia humoured her.

"I have been imagining that if Dick is hiding, a fugitive, he might

naturally come to me for help. I am fanciful, perhaps," she added hastily, lest she should have said too much. "But there it is. All day the notion has clung to me, and I have been asking myself desperately what I should do in such a case."

"Time enough to consider it when it happens, Una. After all—"

"I know," her ladyship interrupted on that ever-ready note of petulance of hers. "I know, of course. But I think I should be easier in my mind if I could find an answer to my doubt. If I knew what to do, to whom to appeal for assistance, for I am afraid that I should be very helpless myself. There is Terence, of course. But I am a little afraid of Terence. He has got Dick out of so many scrapes, and he is so impatient of poor Dick. I am afraid he doesn't understand him, and so I should be a little frightened of appealing to Terence again."

"No," said Sylvia gravely, "I shouldn't go to Terence. Indeed he is the last man to whom I should go."

"You say that too!" exclaimed her ladyship.

"Why?" quoth Sylvia sharply. "Who else has said it?"

There was a brief pause in which Lady O'Moy shuddered. She had been so near to betraying herself. How very quick and shrewd Sylvia was! She made, however, a good recovery.

"Myself, of course. It is what I have thought myself. There is Count Samoval. He promised that if ever any such thing happened he would help me. And he assured me I could count upon him. I think it may have been his offer that made me fanciful."

"I should go to Sir Terence before I went to Count Samoval. By which I mean that I should not go to Count Samoval at all under any circumstances. I do not trust him."

"You said so once before, dear," said Lady O'Moy.

"And you assured me that I spoke out of the fullness of my ignorance and inexperience."

"Ah, forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive. No doubt you were right. But remember that instinct is most alive in the ignorant and inexperienced, and that instinct is often a surer guide than reason. Yet if you want reason, I can supply that too. Count Samoval is the intimate friend of the Marquis of Minas, who remains a member of the Government, and who next to the Principal Souza was, and no doubt is, the most bitter opponent of the British policy in Portugal. Yet Count Samoval, one of the largest landowners in the north, and the nobleman who has perhaps suffered most severely from that policy, represents himself as its most vigorous supporter."

Lady O'Moy listened in growing amazement. Also she was a little shocked. It seemed to her almost indecent that a young girl should know so much about politics—so much of which she herself, a married woman, and the wife of the adjutant-general, was completely in ignorance.

"Save us, child!" she ejaculated. "You are so extraordinarily informed."

"I have talked to Captain Tremayne," said Sylvia. "He has explained all this."

"Extraordinary conversation for a young man to hold with a young girl," pronounced her ladyship. "Terence never talked of such things to me."

"Terence was too busy making love to you," said Sylvia, and there was the least suspicion of regret in her almost boyish voice.

"That may account for it," her ladyship confessed, and fell for a moment into consideration of that delicious and rather amusing past, when O'Moy's ferocious hesitancy and flaming jealousy had delighted her with the full perception of her beauty's power. With a rush, however, the present forced itself back upon her notice. "But I still don't see why Count Samoval should have offered me assistance if he did not intend to grant it when the time came."

Sylvia explained that it was from the Portuguese Government that the demand for justice upon the violator of the nunnery at Tavora emanated, and that Samoval's offer might be calculated to obtain him information of Butler's whereabouts when they became known, so that he might surrender him to the Government.

"My dear!" Lady O'Moy was shocked almost beyond expression. "How you must dislike the man to suggest that he could be such a—such a Judas."

"I do not suggest that he could be. I warn you never to run the risk of testing him. He maybe as honest in this matter as he pretends. But if ever Dick were to come to you for help, you must take no risk."

The phrase was a happier one than Sylvia could suppose. It was almost the very phrase that Dick himself had used; and its reiteration by another bore conviction to her ladyship.

"To whom then should I go?" she demanded plaintively. And Sylvia, speaking with knowledge, remembering the promise that Tremayne had given her, answered readily: "There is but one man whose assistance you could safely seek. Indeed I wonder you should not have thought of him in the first instance, since he is your own, as well as Dick's lifelong friend."

"Ned Tremayne?" Her ladyship fell into thought. "Do you know, I am a little afraid of Ned. He is so very sober and cold. You do mean Ned

—don't you?"

"Whom else should I mean?"

"But what could he do?"

"My dear, how should I know? But at least I know—for I think I can be sure of this—that he will not lack the will to help you; and to have the will, in a man like Captain Tremayne, is to find a way."

The confident, almost respectful, tone in which she spoke arrested her ladyship's attention. It promptly sent her off at a tangent:

"You like Ned, don't you, dear?"

"I think everybody likes him." Sylvia's voice was now studiously cold.

"Yes; but I don't mean quite in that way." And then before the subject could be further pursued the carriage rolled to a standstill in a flood of light from gaping portals, scattering a mob of curious sight-seers intersprinkled with chairmen, footmen, linkmen and all the valetaille that hovers about the functions of the great world.

The carriage door was flung open and the steps let down. A brace of footmen, plump as capons, in gorgeous liveries, bowed powdered heads and proffered scarlet arms to assist the ladies to alight.

Above in the crowded, spacious, colonnaded vestibule at the foot of the great staircase they were met-by Captain Tremayne, who had just arrived with Major Carruthers, both resplendent in full dress, and Captain Marcus Glennie of the Telemachus in blue and gold. Together they ascended the great staircase, lined with chatting groups, and ablaze with uniforms, military, naval and diplomatic, British and Portuguese, to be welcomed above by the Count and Countess of Redondo.

Lady O'Moy's entrance of the ballroom produced the effect to which custom had by now inured her. Soon she found herself the centre of assiduous attentions. Cavalrymen in blue, riflemen in green, scarlet officers of the line regiments, winged light-infantrymen, rakishly pelisséd, gold-braided hussars and all the smaller fry of court and camp fluttered insistently about her. It was no novelty to her who had been the recipient of such homage since her first ball five years ago at Dublin Castle, and yet the wine of it had gone ever to her head a little. But to-night she was rather pale and listless, her rose-petal loveliness emphasised thereby perhaps. An unusual air of indifference hung about her as she stood there amid this throng of martial jostlers who craved the honour of a dance and at whom she smiled a thought mechanically over the top of her slowly moving fan.

The first quadrille impended, and the senior service had carried off the prize from under the noses of the landsmen. As she was swept away by Captain Glennie, she came face to face with Tremayne, who was passing with Sylvia on his arm. She stopped and tapped his arm with her fan.

"You haven't asked to dance, Ned," she reproached him.

"With reluctance I abstained."

"But I don't intend that you shall. I have something to say to you." He met her glance, and found it oddly serious—most oddly serious for her. Responding to its entreaty, he murmured a promise in courteous terms of delight at so much honour.

But either he forgot the promise or did not conceive its redemption to be an urgent matter, for the quadrille being done he sauntered through one of the crowded ante-rooms with Miss Armytage and brought her to the cool of a deserted balcony above the garden. Beyond this was the river, agleam with the lights of the British fleet that rode at anchor on its placid bosom.

"Una will be waiting for you," Miss Armytage reminded him. She was leaning on the sill of the balcony. Standing erect beside her, he considered the graceful profile sharply outlined against a background of gloom by the light from the windows behind them. A heavy curl of her dark hair lay upon a neck as flawlessly white as the rope of pearls that swung from it, with which her fingers were now idly toying. It were difficult to say which most engaged his thoughts: the profile; the lovely line of neck; or the rope of pearls. These latter were of price, such things as it might seldom—and then only by sacrifice—lie within the means of Captain Tremayne to offer to the woman whom he took to wife.

He so lost himself upon that train of thought that she was forced to repeat her reminder.

"Una will be waiting for you, Captain Tremayne."

"Scarcely as eagerly," he answered, "as others will be waiting for you."

She laughed amusedly, a frank, boyish laugh. "I thank you for not saying as eagerly as I am waiting for others."

"Miss Armytage, I have ever cultivated truth."

"But we are dealing with surmise."

"Oh, no surmise at all. I speak of what I know."

"And so do I." And yet again she repeated: "Una will be waiting for you."

He sighed, and stiffened slightly. "Of course if you insist," said he, and made ready to reconduct her.

She swung round as if to go, but checked, and looked him frankly in the eyes.

"Why will you for ever be misunderstanding me?" she challenged him.

"Perhaps it is the inevitable result of my overanxiety to understand."

"Then begin by taking me more literally, and do not read into my words more meaning than I intend to give them. When I say Una is waiting for you, I state a simple fact, not a command that you shall go to her. Indeed I want first to talk to you."

"If I might take you literally now—"

"Should I have suffered you to bring me here if I did not?"

"I beg your pardon," he said, contrite, and something shaken out of his imperturbability. "Sylvia," he ventured very boldly, and there checked, so terrified as to be a shame to his brave scarlet, gold-laced uniform.

"Yes?" she said. She was leaning upon the balcony again, and in such a way now that he could no longer see her profile. But her fingers were busy at the pearls once more, and this he saw, and seeing, recovered himself.

"You have something to say to me?" he questioned in his smooth, level voice.

Had he not looked away as he spoke he might have observed that her fingers tightened their grip of the pearls almost convulsively, as if to break the rope. It was a gesture slight and trivial, yet arguing perhaps vexation. But Tremayne did not see it, and had he seen it, it is odds it would have conveyed no message to him.

There fell a long pause, which he did not venture to break. At last she spoke, her voice quiet and level as his own had been.

"It is about Una."

"I had hoped," he spoke very softly, "that it was about yourself."

She flashed round upon him almost angrily. "Why do you utter these set speeches to me?" she demanded. And then before he could recover from his astonishment to make any answer she had resumed a normal manner, and was talking quickly.

She told him of Una's premonitions about Dick. Told him, in short, what it was that Una desired to talk to him about.

"You bade her come to me?" he said.

"Of course. After your promise to me."

He was silent and very thoughtful for a moment. "I wonder that Una needed to be told that she had in me a friend," he said slowly.

"I wonder to whom she would have gone on her own impulse?"

"To Count Samoval," Miss Armytage informed him.

"Samoval!" he rapped the name out sharply. He was clearly angry. "That man! I can't understand why O'Moy should suffer him about the house so much."

"Terence, like everybody else, will suffer anything that Una wishes."

"Then Terence is more of a fool than I ever suspected."

There was a brief pause. "If you were to fail Una in this," said Miss Armytage presently, "I mean that unless you yourself give her the assurance that you are ready to do what you can for Dick, should the occasion arise, I am afraid that in her present foolish mood she may still avail herself of Count Samoval. That would be to give Samoval a hold upon her; and I tremble to think what the consequences might be. That man is a snake—a horror."

The frankness with which she spoke was to Tremayne full evidence of her anxiety. He was prompt to allay it.

"She shall have that assurance this very evening," he promised.

"I at least have not pledged my word to anything or to any one. Even so," he added slowly, "the chances of my services being ever required grow more slender every day. Una may be full of premonitions about Dick. But between premonition and event there is something of a gap."

Again a pause, and then: "I am glad," said Miss Armytage, "to think that Una has a friend, a trustworthy friend, upon whom she can depend. She is so incapable of depending upon herself. All her life there has been some one at hand to guide her and screen her from unpleasantness until she has remained just a sweet, dear child to be taken by the hand in every dark lane of life."

"But she has you, Miss Armytage."

"Me?" Miss Armytage spoke deprecatingly. "I don't think I am a very able or experienced guide. Besides, even such as I am, she may not have me very long now. I had letters from home this morning. Father is not very well, and mother writes that he misses me. I am thinking of returning soon."

"But—but you have only just come!"

She brightened and laughed at the dismay in his voice. "Indeed, I have been here six weeks." She looked out over the shimmering moonlit waters of the Tagus and the shadowy, ghostly ships of the British fleet that rode at anchor there, and her eyes were wistful. Her fingers, with that little gesture peculiar to her in moments of constraint, were again entwining themselves in her rope of pearls. "Yes," she said almost musingly, "I think I must be going soon."

He was dismayed. He realised that the moment for action had come. His heart was sounding the charge within him. And then that cursed rope of pearls, emblem of the wealth and luxury in which she had been nurtured, stood like an impassable abattis across his path.

"You—you will be glad to go, of course?" he suggested.

"Hardly that. It has been very pleasant here." She sighed.

"We shall miss you very much," he said gloomily. "The house at Monsanto will not be the same when you are gone. Una will be lost and desolate without you."

"It occurs to me sometimes," she said slowly, "that the people about Una think too much of Una and too little of themselves."

It was a cryptic speech. In another it might have signified a spitefulness unthinkable in Sylvia Armytage; therefore it puzzled him very deeply. He stood silent, wondering what precisely she might mean, and thus in silence they continued for a spell. Then slowly she turned and the blaze of light from the windows fell about her irradiantly. She was rather pale, and her eyes were of a suspiciously excessive brightness. And again she made use of the phrase:

"Una will be waiting for you."

Yet, as before, he stood silent and immovable, considering her, questioning himself, searching her face and his own soul. All he saw was that rope of shimmering pearls.

"And after all, as yourself suggested, it is possible that others may be waiting for me," she added presently.

Instantly he was crestfallen and contrite. "I sincerely beg your pardon, Miss Armytage," and with a pang of which his imperturbable exterior gave no hint he proffered her his arm.

She took it, barely touching it with her finger-tips, and they re-entered the ante-room.

"When do you think that you will be leaving?" he asked her gently.

There was a note of harshness in the voice that answered him.

"I don't know yet. But very soon. The sooner the better, I think."

And then the sleek and courtly Samoval, detaching from, seeming to materialise out of, the glittering throng they had entered, was bowing low before her, claiming her attention. Knowing her feelings, Tremayne would not have relinquished her, but to his infinite amazement she herself slipped her fingers from his scarlet sleeve, to place them upon the black one that Samoval was gracefully proffering, and greeted Samoval with a gay raillery as oddly in contrast with her grave demeanour towards the captain as with her recent avowal of detestation for the Count.

Stricken and half angry, Tremayne stood looking after them as they receded towards the ballroom. To increase his chagrin came a laugh from Miss Armytage, sharp and rather strident, floating towards him, and Miss Armytage's laugh was wont to be low and restrained. Samoval, no doubt, had resources to amuse a woman—even a woman who instinctively, disliked him—resources of which Captain Tremayne himself knew nothing.

And then some one tapped him on the shoulder. A very tall, hawk-faced man in a scarlet coat and tightly strapped blue trousers stood beside him. It was Colquhoun Grant, the ablest intelligence officer in Wellington's service.

"Why, Colonel!" cried Tremayne, holding out his hand. "I didn't know you were in Lisbon."

"I arrived only this afternoon." The keen eyes flashed after the

disappearing figures of Sylvia and her cavalier. "Tell me, what is the name of the irresistible gallant who has so lightly ravished you of your quite delicious companion?"

"Count Samoval," said Tremayne shortly.

Grant's face remained inscrutable. "Really!" he said softly. "So that is Jeronymo de Samoval, eh? How very interesting. A great supporter of the British policy; therefore an altruist, since himself he is a sufferer by it; and I hear that he has become a great friend of O'Moy's."

"He is at Monsanto a good deal certainly," Tremayne admitted.

"Most interesting." Grant was slowly nodding, and a faint smile curled his thin, sensitive lips. "But I'm keeping you, Tremayne, and no doubt you would be dancing. I shall perhaps see you to-morrow. I shall be coming up to Monsanto."

And with a wave of the hand he passed on and was gone.

CHAPTER VII. THE ALLY

Tremayne elbowed his way through the gorgeous crowd exchanging greetings here and there as he went, and so reached the ballroom during a pause in the dancing. He looked round for Lady O'Moy, but he could see her nowhere, and would never have found her had not Carruthers pointed out a knot of officers and assured him that the lady was in the heart of it and in imminent peril of being suffocated.

Thither the captain bent his steps, looking neither to right nor left in his singleness of purpose. Thus it happened that he saw neither O'Moy, who had just arrived, nor the massive, decorated bulk of Marshal Beresford, with whom the adjutant stood in conversation on the skirts of the throng that so assiduously worshipped at her ladyship's shrine.

Captain Tremayne went through the group with all a sapper's skill at piercing obstacles, and so came face to face with the lady of his quest. Seeing her so radiant now, with sparkling eyes and ready laugh, it was difficult to conceive her haunted by any such anxieties as Miss Armytage had mentioned. Yet the moment she perceived him, as if his presence acted as a reminder to lift her out of the delicious present, something of her gaiety underwent eclipse.

Child of impulse that she was, she gave no thought to her action and the construction it might possibly bear in the minds of men chagrined and slighted.

"Why, Ned," she cried, "you have kept me waiting." And with a complete and charming ignoring of the claims of all who had been before him, and who were warring there for precedence of one

another, she took his arm in token that she yielded herself to him before even the honour was so much as solicited.

With nods and smiles to right and left—a queen dismissing her court—she passed on the captain's arm through the little crowd that gave way before her dismayed and intrigued, and so away.

O'Moy, who had been awaiting a favourable moment to present the marshal by the marshal's own request, attempted to thrust forward now with Beresford at his side. But the bowing line of officers whose backs were towards him effectively barred his progress, and before they had broken up that formation her ladyship and her cavalier were out of sight, lost in the moving crowd.

The marshal laughed good-humouredly. "The infallible reward of patience," said he. And O'Moy laughed with him. But the next moment he was scowling at what he overheard.

"On my soul, that was impudence!" an Irish infantryman had protested.

"Have you ever heard," quoth a heavy dragoon, who was also a heavy jester, "that in heaven the last shall be first? If you pay court to an angel you must submit to celestial customs."

"And bedad," rejoined the infantryman, "as there's no marryin' in heaven ye've got to make the best of it with other men's wives. Sure it's a great success that fellow should be in paradise. Did ye remark the way she melted to him beauty swooning at the sight of temptation! Bad luck to him! Who is he at all?"

They dispersed laughing and followed by O'Moy's scowling eyes. It annoyed him that his wife's thoughtless conduct should render her the butt of such jests as these, and perhaps a subject for lewd gossip. He would speak to her about it later. Meanwhile the marshal had linked arms with him.

"Since the privilege must be postponed," said he, "suppose that we seek supper. I have always found that a man can best heal in his stomach the wounds taken by his heart." His fleshy bulk afforded a certain prima-facie confirmation of the dictum.

With a roll more suggestive of the quarter-deck than the saddle, the great man bore off O'Moy in quest of material consolation. Yet as they went the adjutant's eyes raked the ballroom in quest of his wife. That quest, however, was unsuccessful, for his wife was already in the garden.

"I want to talk to you most urgently, Ned. Take me somewhere where we can be quite private," she had begged the captain. "Somewhere where there is no danger of being overheard."

Her agitation, now uncontrolled, suggested to Tremayne that the matter might be far more serious and urgent than Miss Armytage had represented it. He thought first of the balcony where he had lately been. But then the balcony opened immediately from the ante-room and was likely at any moment to be invaded. So, since the night was soft and warm, he preferred the garden. Her ladyship went to find a wrap, then arm in arm they passed out, and were lost in the shadows of an avenue of palm-trees.

"It is about Dick," she said breathlessly.

"I know—Miss Armytage told me."

"What did she tell you?"

"That you had a premonition that he might come to you for assistance."

"A premonition!" Her ladyship laughed nervously. "It is more than a premonition, Ned. He has come."

The captain stopped in his stride, and stood quite still.

"Come?" he echoed. "Dick?"

"Sh!" she warned him, and sank her voice from very instinct. "He came to me this evening, half an hour before we left home. I have put him in an alcove adjacent to my dressing-room for the present."

"You have left him there?" He was alarmed.

"Oh, there's no fear. No one ever goes there except Bridget. And I have locked the alcove. He's fast asleep. He was asleep before I left. The poor fellow was so worn and weary." Followed details of his appearance and a recital of his wanderings so far as he had made them known to her. "And he was so insistent that no one should know, not even Terence."

"Terence must not know," he said gravely.

"You think that too!"

"If Terence knows—well, you will regret it all the days of your life, Una."

He was so stern, so impressive, that she begged for explanation. He afforded it. "You would be doing Terence the utmost cruelty if you told him. You would be compelling him to choose between his honour and his concern for you. And since he is the very soul of honour, he must sacrifice you and himself, your happiness and his own, everything that makes life good for you both, to his duty."

She was aghast, for all that she was far from understanding. But he went on relentlessly to make his meaning clear, for the sake of O'Moy as much as for her own—for the sake of the future of these two people who were perhaps his dearest friends. He saw in what danger of shipwreck their happiness now stood, and he took the determination of clearly pointing out to her every shoal in the water

through which she must steer her course.

"Since this has happened, Una, you must be told the whole truth; you must listen, and, above all, be reasonable. I am Dick's friend, as I am your own and Terence's. Your father was my best friend, perhaps, and my gratitude to him is unbounded, as I hope you know. You and Dick are almost as brother and sister to me. In spite of this—indeed, because of this, I have prayed for news that Dick was dead."

Her grasp interrupted him, and he felt the tightening clutch of her hands upon his arm in the gloom.

"I have prayed this for Dick's sake, and more than all for the sake of your happiness and Terence's. If Dick is taken the choice before Terence is a tragic one. You will realise it when I tell you that duty forced him to pledge his word to the Portuguese Government that Dick should be shot when found."

"Oh!" It was a gasp of horror, of incredulity. She loosed his arm and drew away from him. "It is infamous! I can't believe it. I can't."

"It is true. I swear it to you. I was present, and I heard."

"And you allowed it?"

"What could I do? How could I interfere? Besides, the minister who demanded that undertaking knew nothing of the relationship between O'Moy and this missing officer."

"But—but he could have been told."

"That would have made no difference—unless it were to create fresh difficulties."

She stood there ghostly white against the gloom. A dry sob broke from her. "Terence did that! Terence did that!" she moaned. And then in a surge of anger: "I shall never speak to Terence again. I shall not

live with him another day. It was infamous! Infamous!"

"It was not infamous. It was almost noble, almost heroic," he amazed her. "Listen, Una, and try to understand." He took her arm again and drew her gently on down that avenue of moonlight-fretted darkness.

"Oh, I understand," she cried bitterly. "I understand perfectly. He has always been hard on Dick! He has always made mountains out of molehills where Dick was concerned. He forgets that Dick is young a mere boy. He judges Dick from the standpoint of his own sober middle age. Why, he's an old man—a wicked old man!"

Thus her rage, hurling at O'Moy what in the insolence of her youth seemed the last insult.

"You are very unjust, Una. You are even a little stupid," he said, deeming the punishment necessary and salutary.

"Stupid! I stupid! I have never been called stupid before."

"But you have undoubtedly deserved to be," he assured her with perfect calm.

It took her aback by its directness, and for a moment left her without an answer. Then: "I think you had better leave me," she told him frostily. "You forget yourself."

"Perhaps I do," he admitted. "That is because I am more concerned to think of Dick and Terence and yourself. Sit down, Una."

They had reached a little circle by a piece of ornamental water, facing which a granite-hewn seat had been placed. She sank to it obediently, if sulkily.

"It may perhaps help you to understand what Terence has done when I tell you that in his place, loving Dick as I do, I must have

pledged myself precisely as he did or else despised myself for ever. And being pledged, I must keep my word or go in the same self-contempt." He elaborated his argument by explaining the full circumstances under which the pledge had been exacted. "But be in no doubt about it," he concluded. "If Terence knows of Dick's presence at Monsanto he has no choice. He must deliver him up to a firing party—or to a court-martial which will inevitably sentence him to death, no matter what the defence that Dick may urge. He is a man prejudged, foredoomed by the necessities of war. And Terence will do this although it will break his heart and ruin all his life. Understand me, then, that in enjoining you never to allow Terence to suspect that Dick is present, I am pleading not so much for you or for Dick, but for Terence himself—for it is upon Terence that the hardest and most tragic suffering must fall. Now do you understand?"

"I understand that men are very stupid," was her way of admitting it.

"And you see that you were wrong in judging Terence as you did?"

"I—I suppose so."

She didn't understand it all. But since Tremayne was so insistent she supposed there must be something in his point of view. She had been brought up in the belief that Ned Tremayne was common sense incarnate; and although she often doubted it—as you may doubt the dogmas of a religion in which you have been bred—yet she never openly rebelled against that inculcated faith. Above all she wanted to cry. She knew that it would be very good for her. She had often found a singular relief in tears when vexed by things beyond her understanding. But she had to think of that flock of gallants in the ballroom waiting to pay court to her and of her duty towards them of preserving her beauty unimpaired by the ravages of a vented sorrow.

Tremayne sat down beside her. "So now that we understand each other on that score, let us consider ways and means to dispose of

Dick."

At once she was uplifted and became all eagerness.

"Yes, Yes. You will help me, Ned?"

"You can depend upon me to do all in human power."

He thought rapidly, and gave voice to some of his thoughts. "If I could I would take him to my lodgings at Alcantara. But Carruthers knows him and would see him there. So that is out of the question. Then again it is dangerous to move him about. At any moment he might be seen and recognised."

"Hardly recognised," she said. "His beard disguises him, and his dress—" She shuddered at the very thought of the figure he had cut, he, the jaunty, dandy Richard Butler.

"That is something, of course," he agreed. And then asked: "How long do you think that you could keep him hidden?"

"I don't know. You see, there's Bridget. She is the only danger, as she has charge of my dressing-room."

"It may be desperate, but—Can you trust her?"

"Oh, I am sure I can. She is devoted to me; she would do anything—"

"She must be bought as well. Devotion and gain when linked together will form an unbreakable bond. Don't let us be stingy, Una. Take her into your confidence boldly, and promise her a hundred guineas for her silence—payable on the day that Dick leaves the country."

"But how are we to get him out of the country?"

"I think I know a way. I can depend on Marcus Glennie. I may tell him

the whole truth and the identity of our man, or I may not. I must think about that. But, whatever I decide, I am sure I can induce Glennie to take our fugitive home in the Telemachus and land him safely somewhere in Ireland, where he will have to lose himself for awhile. Perhaps for Glennie's sake it will be safer not to disclose Dick's identity. Then if there should be trouble later, Glennie, having known nothing of the real facts, will not be held responsible. I will talk to him to-night."

"Do you think he will consent?" she asked in strained anxiety—
anxiety to have her anxieties dispelled.

"I am sure he will. I can almost pledge my word on it. Marcus would do anything to serve me. Oh, set your mind at rest. Consider the thing done. Keep Dick safely hidden for a week or so until the Telemachus is ready to sail—he mustn't go on board until the last moment, for several reasons—and I will see to the rest."

Under that confident promise her troubles fell from her, as lightly as they ever did.

"You are very good to me, Ned. Forgive me what I said just now. And I think I understand about Terence—poor dear old Terence."

"Of course you do." Moved to comfort her as he might have been moved to comfort a child, he flung his arm along the seat behind her, and patted her shoulder soothingly. "I knew you would understand. And not a word to Terence, not a word that could so much as awaken his suspicions. Remember that."

"Oh, I shall."

Fell a step upon the patch behind them crunching the gravel. Captain Tremayne, his arm still along the back of the seat, and seeming to envelop her ladyship, looked over her shoulder. A tall figure was advancing briskly. He recognised it even in the gloom by

its height and gait and swing for O'Moy's.

"Why, here is Terence," he said easily—so easily, with such frank and obvious honesty of welcome, that the anger in which O'Moy came wrapped fell from him on the instant, to be replaced by shame.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, my dear," he said to Una. "Marshal Beresford is anxious to pay you his respects before he leaves, and you have been so hedged about by gallants all the evening that it's devil a chance he's had of approaching you." There was a certain constraint in his voice, for a man may not recover instantly from such feelings as those which had fetched him hot-foot down that path at sight of those two figures sitting so close and intimate, the young man's arm so proprietorially about the lady's shoulders—as it seemed.

Lady O'Moy sprang up at once, with a little silvery laugh that was singularly care-free; for had not Tremayne lifted the burden entirely from her shoulders?

"You should have married a dowd," she mocked him. "Then you'd have found her more easily accessible."

"Instead of finding her dallying in the moonlight with my secretary," he rallied back between good and ill humour. And he turned to Tremayne: "Damned indiscreet of you, Ned," he added more severely. "Suppose you had been seen by any of the scandalmongering old wives of the garrison? A nice thing for Una and a nice thing for me, begad, to be made the subject of fly-blown talk over the tea-cups."

Tremayne accepted the rebuke in the friendly spirit in which it appeared to be conveyed. "Sorry, O'Moy," he said. "You're quite right. We should have thought of it. Everybody isn't to know what our relations are." And again he was so manifestly honest and so

completely at his ease that it was impossible to harbour any thought of evil, and O'Moy felt again the glow of shame of suspicions so utterly unworthy and dishonouring.

CHAPTER VIII. THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER

In a small room of Count Redondo's palace, a room that had been set apart for cards, sat three men about a card-table. They were Count Samoval, the elderly Marquis of Minas, lean, bald and vulturine of aspect, with a deep-set eye that glared fiercely through a single eyeglass rimmed in tortoise-shell, and a gentleman still on the fair side of middle age, with a clear-cut face and iron-grey hair, who wore the dark green uniform of a major of Cacadores.

Considering his Portuguese uniform, it is odd that the low-toned, earnest conversation amongst them should have been conducted in French.

There were cards on the table; but there was no pretence of play. You might have conceived them a group of players who, wearied of their game, had relinquished it for conversation. They were the only tenants of the room, which was small, cedar-panelled and lighted by a girandole of sparkling crystal. Through the closed door came faintly from the distant ballroom the strains of the dance music.

With perhaps the single exception of the Principal Souza, the British policy had no more bitter opponent in Portugal than the Marquis of Minas. Once a member of the Council of Regency—before Souza had been elected to that body—he had quitted it in disgust at the British measures. His chief ground of umbrage had been the appointment of British officers to the command of the Portuguese regiments which formed the division under Marshal Beresford. In this he saw a deliberate insult and slight to his country

and his countrymen. He was a man of burning and blinded patriotism, to whom Portugal was the most glorious nation in the world. He lived in his country's splendid past, refusing to recognise that the days of Henry the Navigator, of Vasco da Gama, of Manuel the Fortunate—days in which Portugal had been great indeed among the nations of the Old World were gone and done with. He respected Britons as great merchants and industrious traders; but, after all, merchants and traders are not the peers of fighters on land and sea, of navigators, conquerors and civilisers, such as his countrymen had been, such as he believed them still to be. That the descendants of Gamas, Cunhas, Magalhaes and Albuquerque—men whose names were indelibly written upon the very face of the world—should be passed over, whilst alien officers had been brought in to train and command the Portuguese legions, was an affront to Portugal which Minas could never forgive.

It was thus that he had become a rebel, withdrawing from a government whose supineness he could not condone. For a while his rebellion had been passive, until the Principal Souza had heated him in the fire of his own rage and fashioned him into an intriguing instrument of the first power. He was listening intently now to the soft, rapid speech of the gentleman in the major's uniform.

"Of course, rumours had reached the Prince of this policy of devastation," he was saying, "but his Highness has been disposed to treat these rumours lightly, unable to see, as indeed are we all, what useful purpose such a policy could finally serve. He does not underrate the talents of milord Wellington as a commander. He does not imagine that he would pursue such operations out of pure wantonness; yet if such operations are indeed being pursued, what can they be but wanton? A moment, Count," he stayed Samoval, who was about to interrupt. His mind and manner were authoritative. "We know most positively from the Emperor's London agents that the war is unpopular in England; we know that public opinion is being

prepared for a British retreat, for the driving of the British into the sea, as must inevitably happen once Monsieur le Prince decides to launch his bolt. Here in the Tagus the British fleet lies ready to embark the troops, and the British Cabinet itself" (he spoke more slowly and emphatically) "expects that embarkation to take place at latest in September, which is just about the time that the French offensive should be at its height and the French troops under the very walls of Lisbon. I admit that by this policy of devastation if, indeed, it be true—added to a stubborn contesting of every foot of ground, the French advance may be retarded. But the process will be costly to Britain in lives and money."

"And more costly still to Portugal," croaked the Marquis of Minas.

"And, as you, say, Monsieur le Marquis, more costly still to Portugal. Let me for a moment show you another side of the picture. The French administration, so sane, so cherishing, animated purely by ideas of progress, enforcing wise and beneficial laws, making ever for the prosperity and well-being of conquered nations, knows how to render itself popular wherever it is established. This Portugal knows already—or at least some part of it. There was the administration of Soult in Oporto, so entirely satisfactory to the people that it was no inconsiderable party was prepared, subject to the Emperor's consent, to offer him the crown and settle down peacefully under his rule. There was the administration of Junot in Lisbon. I ask you: when was Lisbon better governed?

"Contrast, for a moment, with these the present British administration—for it amounts to an administration. Consider the burning grievances that must be left behind by this policy of laying the country waste, of pauperising a million people of all degrees, driving them homeless from the lands on which they were born, after compelling them to lend a hand in the destruction of all that their labour has built up through long years. If any policy could better serve

the purposes of France, I know it not. The people from here to Beira should be ready to receive the French with open arms, and to welcome their deliverance from this most costly and bitter British protection.

"Do you, Messieurs, detect a flaw in these arguments?"

Both shook their heads.

"Bien!" said the major of Portuguese Cacadores. "Then we reach one or two only possible conclusions: either these rumours of a policy of devastation which have reached the Prince of Esslingen are as utterly false as he believes them to be, or—"

"To my cost I know them to be true, as I have already told you," Samoval interrupted bitterly.

"Or," the major persisted, raising a hand to restrain the Count, "or there is something further that has not been yet discovered—a mystery the enucleation of which will shed light upon all the rest. Since you assure me, Monsieur le Comte, that milord Wellington's policy is beyond doubt, as reported to Monsieur, le Marechal, it but remains to address ourselves to the discovery of the mystery underlying it. What conclusions have you reached? You, Monsieur de Samoval, have had exceptional opportunities of observation, I understand."

"I am afraid my opportunities have been none so exceptional as you suppose," replied Samoval, with a dubious shake of his sleek, dark head. "At one time I founded great hopes in Lady O'Moy. But Lady O'Moy is a fool, and does not enjoy her husband's confidence in official matters. What she knows I know. Unfortunately it does not amount to very much. One conclusion, however, I have reached: Wellington is preparing in Portugal a snare for Massena's army."

"A snare? Hum!" The major pursed his full lips into a smile of scorn. "There cannot be a trap with two exits, my friend. Massena enters

Portugal at Almeida and marchesto Lisbon and the open sea. He may be inconvenienced or hampered in his march; but its goal is certain. Where, then, can lie the snare? Your theory presupposes an impassable barrier to arrest the French when they are deep in the country and an overwhelming force to cut off their retreat when that barrier is reached. The overwhelming force does not exist and cannot be manufactured; as for the barrier, no barrier that it lies within human power to construct lies beyond French power to over-stride."

"I should not make too sure of that," Samoval warned him. "And you have overlooked something."

The major glanced at the Count sharply and without satisfaction. He accounted himself—trained as he had been under the very eye of the great Emperor—of some force in strategy and tactics, a player too well versed in the game to overlook the possible moves of an opponent.

"Ha!" he said, with the ghost of a sneer. "Far instance, Monsieur le Comte?"

"The overwhelming force exists," said Samoval.

"Where is it then? Whence has it been created? If you refer to the united British and Portuguese troops, you will be good enough to bear in mind that they will be retreating before the Prince. They cannot at once be before and behind him."

The man's cool assurance and cooler contempt of Samoval's views stung the Count into some sharpness.

"Are you seeking information, sir, or are you bestowing it?" he inquired.

"Ah! Your pardon, Monsieur le Comte. I inquire of course. I put forward arguments to anticipate conditions that may possibly be

erroneous."

Samoval waived the point. "There is another force besides the British and Portuguese troops that you have left out of your calculations."

"And that?" The major was still faintly incredulous.

"You should remember what Wellington obviously remembers: that a French army depends for its sustenance upon the country it is invading. That is why Wellington is stripping the French line of penetration as bare of sustenance as this card-table. If we assume the existence of the barrier—an impassable line of fortifications encountered within many marches of the frontier—we may also assume that starvation will be the overwhelming force that will cut off the French retreat."

The other's keen eyes flickered. For a moment his face lost its assurance, and it was Samoval's turn to smile. But the major made a sharp recovery. He slowly shook his iron-grey head.

"You have no right to assume an impassable barrier. That is an inadmissible hypothesis. There is no such thing as a line of fortifications impassable to the French."

"You will pardon me, Major, but it is yourself have no right to your own assumptions. Again you overlook something. I will grant that technically what you say is true. No fortifications can be built that cannot be destroyed—given adequate power, with which it is yet to prove that Massena not knowing what may await him, will be equipped.

"But let us for a moment take so much for granted, and now consider this: fortifications are unquestionably building in the region of Torres Vedras, and Wellington guards the secret so jealously that not even the British—either here or in England—are aware of their

nature. That is why the Cabinet in London takes for granted an embarkation in September. Wellington has not even taken his Government into his confidence. That is the sort of man he is. Now these fortifications have been building since last October. Best part of eight months have already gone in their construction. It may be another two or three months before the French army reaches them. I do not say that the French cannot pass them, given time. But how long will it take the French to pull down what it will have taken ten or eleven months to construct? And if they are unable to draw sustenance from a desolate, wasted country, what time will they have at their disposal? It will be with them a matter of life or death. Having come so far they must reach Lisbon or perish; and if the fortifications can delay them by a single month, then, granted that all Lord Wellington's other dispositions have been duly carried out, perish they must. It remains, Monsieur le Major, for you to determine whether, with all their energy, with all their genius and all their valour, the French can—in an ill-nourished condition—destroy in a few weeks the considered labour of nearly a year."

The major was aghast. He had changed colour, and through his eyes, wide and staring, his stupefaction glared forth at them.

Minas uttered a dry cough under cover of his hand, and screwed up his eyeglass to regard the major more attentively. "You do not appear to have considered all that," he said.

"But, my dear Marquis," was the half-indignant answer, "why was I not told all this to begin with? You represented yourself as but indifferently informed, Monsieur de Samoval. Whereas—"

"So I am, my dear Major, as far as information goes. If I did not use these arguments before, it was because it seemed to me an impertinence to offer what, after all, are no more than the conclusions of my own constructive and deductive reasoning to one so well versed in strategy as yourself."

The major was silenced for a moment. "I congratulate you, Count," he said. "Monsieur le Marechal shall have your views without delay. Tell me," he begged. "You say these fortifications lie in the region of Torres Vedras. Can you be more precise?"

"I think so. But again I warn you that I can tell you only what I infer. I judge they will run from the sea, somewhere near the mouth of the Zizandre, in a semicircle to the Tagus, somewhere to the south of Santarem. I know that they do not reach as far north as San, because the roads there are open, whereas all roads to the south, where I am assuming that the fortifications lie, are closed and closely guarded."

"Why do you suggest a semicircle?"

"Because that is the formation of the hills, and presumably the line of heights would be followed."

"Yes," the major approved slowly. "And the distance, then, would be some thirty or forty miles?"

"Fully."

The major's face relaxed its gravity. He even smiled. "You will agree, Count, that in a line of that extent a uniform strength is out of the question. It must perforce present many weak, many vulnerable, places."

"Oh, undoubtedly."

"Plans of these lines must be in existence."

"Again undoubtedly. Sir Terence O'Moy will have plans in his possession showing their projected extent. Colonel Fletcher, who is in charge of the construction, is in constant communication with the adjutant, himself an engineer; and—as I partly imagine, partly infer from odd phrases that I have overheard—especially entrusted by Lord

Wellington with the supervision of the works."

"Two things, then, are necessary," said the major promptly. "The first is, that the devastation of the country should be retarded, and as far as possible hindered altogether."

"That," said Minas, "you may safely leave to myself and Souza's other friends, the northern noblemen who have no intention of becoming the victims of British disinclination to pitched battles."

"The second—and this is more difficult—is that we should obtain by hook or by crook a plan of the fortifications." And he looked directly at Samoval.

The Count nodded slowly, but his face expressed doubt.

"I am quite alive to the necessity. I always have been. But—"

"To a man of your resource and intelligence—an intelligence of which you have just given such veer signal proof—the matter should be possible." He paused a moment. Then: "If I understand you correctly, Monsieur de Samoval, your fortunes have suffered deeply, and you are almost ruined by this policy of Wellington's. You are offered the opportunity of making a magnificent recovery. The Emperor is the most generous paymaster in the world, and he is beyond measure impatient at the manner in which the campaign in the Peninsula is dragging on. He has spoken of it as an ulcer that is draining the Empire of its resources. For the man who could render him the service of disclosing the weak spot in this armour, the Achilles heel of the British, there would be a reward beyond all your possible dreams. Obtain the plans, then, and—"

He checked abruptly. The door had opened, and in a Venetian mirror facing him upon the wall the major caught the reflection of a British uniform, the stiff gold collar surmounted by a bronzed hawk face with which he was acquainted.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said the officer in Portuguese, "I was looking for—"

His voice became indistinct, so that they never knew who it was that he had been seeking when he intruded upon their privacy. The door had closed again and the reflection had vanished from the mirror. But there were beads of perspiration on the major's brow.

"It is fortunate," he muttered breathlessly, "that my back was towards him. I would as soon meet the devil face to face. I didn't dream he was in Lisbon."

"Who is he?" asked Minas.

"Colonel Grant, the British Intelligence officer. Phew! Name of a Name! What an escape!" The major mopped his brow with a silk handkerchief. "Beware of him, Monsieur de Samoval."

He rose. He was obviously shaken by the meeting.

"If one of you will kindly make quite sure that he is not about I think that I had better go. If we should meet everything might be ruined." Then with a change of manner he stayed Samoval, who was already on his way to the door. "We understand each other, then?" he questioned them. "I have my papers, and at dawn I leave Lisbon. I shall report your conclusions to the Prince, and in anticipation I may already offer you the expression of his profoundest gratitude. Meanwhile, you know what is to do. Opposition to the policy, and the plans of the fortifications—above all the plans."

He shook hands with them, and having waited until Samoval assured him that the corridor outside was clear, he took his departure, and was soon afterwards driving home, congratulating himself upon his most fortunate escape from the hawk eye of Colquhoun Grant.

But when in the dead of that night he was awakened to find a British sergeant with a halbert and six redcoats with fixed bayonets surrounding his bed it occurred to him belatedly that what one man can see in a mirror is also visible to another, and that Marshal Massena, Prince of Esslingen, waiting for information beyond Ciudad Rodrigo, would never enjoy the advantages of a report of Count Samoval's masterly constructive and deductive reasoning.

CHAPTER IX. THE GENERAL ORDER

Sir Terence sat alone in his spacious, severely furnished private room in the official quarters at Monsanto. On the broad carved writing-table before him there was a mass of documents relating to the clothing and accoutrement of the forces, to leaves of absence, to staff appointments; there were returns from the various divisions of the sick and wounded in hospital, from which a complete list was to be prepared for the Secretary of State for War at home; there were plans of the lines at Torres Vedras just received, indicating the progress of the works at various points; and there were documents and communications of all kinds concerned with the adjutant-general's multifarious and arduous duties, including an urgent letter from Colonel Fletcher suggesting that the Commander-in-Chief should take an early opportunity of inspecting in person the inner lines of fortification.

Sir Terence, however, sat back in his chair, his work neglected, his eyes dreamily gazing through the open window, but seeing nothing of the sun-drenched landscape beyond, a heavy frown darkening his bronzed and rugged face. His mind was very far from his official duties and the mass of reminders before him—this Augean stable of arrears. He was lost in thought of his wife and Tremayne.

Five days had elapsed since the ball at Count Redondo's, where Sir Terence had surprised the pair together in the garden and his suspicions had been fired by the compromising attitude in which he had discovered them. Tremayne's frank, easy bearing, so unassociable with guilt, had, as we know, gone far, to reassure him,

and had even shamed him, so that he had trampled his suspicions underfoot. But other things had happened since to revive his bitter doubts. Daily, constantly, had he been coming upon Tremayne and Lady O'Moy alone together in intimate, confidential talk which was ever silenced on his approach. The two had taken to wandering by themselves in the gardens at all hours, a thing that had never been so before, and O'Moy detected, or imagined that he detected, a closer intimacy between them, a greater warmth towards the captain on the part of her ladyship.

Thus matters had reached a pass in which peace of mind was impossible to him. It was not merely what he saw, it was his knowledge of what was; it was his ever-present consciousness of his own age and his wife's youth; it was the memory of his ante-nuptial jealousy of Tremayne which had been awakened by the gossip of those days—a gossip that pronounced Tremayne Una Butler's poor suitor, too poor either to declare himself or to be accepted if he did. The old wound which that gossip had dealt him then was reopened now. He thought of Tremayne's manifest concern for Una; he remembered how in that very room some six weeks ago, when Butler's escapade had first been heard of, it was from avowed concern for Una that Tremayne had urged him to befriend and rescue his rascally brother-in-law. He remembered, too, with increasing bitterness that it was Una herself had induced him to appoint Tremayne to his staff.

There were moments when the conviction of Tremayne's honesty, the thought of Tremayne's unswerving friendship for himself, would surge up to combat and abate the fires of his devastating jealousy.

But evidence would kindle those fires anew until they flamed up to scorch his soul with shame and anger. He had been a fool in that he had married a woman of half his years; a fool in that he had suffered her former lover to be thrown into close association with her.

Thus he assured himself. But he would abide by his folly, and so must she. And he would see to it that whatever fruits that folly yielded, dishonour should not be one of them. Through all his darkening rage there beat the light of reason. To avert, he bethought him, was better than to avenge. Nor were such stains to be wiped out by vengeance. A cuckold remains a cuckold though he take the life of the man who has reduced him to that ignominy.

Tremayne must go before the evil transcended reparation. Let him return to his regiment and do his work of sapping and mining elsewhere than in O'Moy's household.

Eased by that resolve he rose, a tall, martial figure, youth and energy in every line of it for all his six and forty years. Awhile he paced the room in thought. Then, suddenly, with hands clenched behind his back, he checked by the window, checked on a horrible question that had flashed upon his tortured mind. What if already the evil should be irreparable? What proof had he that it was not so?

The door opened, and Tremayne himself came in quickly.

"Here's the very devil to pay, sir," he announced, with that odd mixture of familiarity towards his friend and deference to his chief.

O'Moy looked at him in silence with smouldering, questioning eyes, thinking of anything but the trouble which the captain's air and manner heralded.

"Captain Stanhope has just arrived from headquarters with messages for you. A terrible thing has happened, sir. The dispatches from home by the Thunderbolt which we forwarded from here three weeks ago reached Lord Wellington only the day before yesterday."

Sir Terence became instantly alert.

"Garfield, who carried them, came into collision at Penalva with an

officer of Anson's Brigade. There was a meeting, and Garfield was shot through the lung. He lay between life and death for a fortnight, with the result that the dispatches were delayed until he recovered sufficiently to remember them and to have them forwarded by other hands. But you had better see Stanhope himself."

The aide-de-camp came in. He was splashed from head to foot in witness of the fury with which he had ridden, his hair was caked with dust and his face haggard. But he carried himself with soldierly uprightness, and his speech was brisk. He repeated what Tremayne had already stated, with some few additional details.

"This wretched fellow sent Lord Wellington a letter dictated from his bed, in which he swore that the duel was forced upon him, and that his honour allowed him no alternative. I don't think any feature of the case has so deeply angered Lord Wellington as this stupid plea. He mentioned that when Sir John Moore was at Herrerias, in the course of his retreat upon Corunna, he sent forward instructions for the leading division to halt at Lugo, where he designed to deliver battle if the enemy would accept it. That dispatch was carried to Sir David Baird by one of Sir John's aides, but Sir David forwarded it by the hand of a trooper who got drunk and lost it. That, says Lord Wellington, is the only parallel, so far as he is aware, of the present case, with this difference, that whilst a common trooper might so far fail to appreciate the importance of his mission, no such lack of appreciation can excuse Captain Garfield."

"I am glad of that," said Sir Terence, who had been bristling. "For a moment I imagined that it was to be implied I had been as indiscreet in my choice of a messenger as Sir David Baird."

"No, no, Sir Terence. I merely repeated Lord Wellington's words that you may realise how deeply angered he is. If Garfield recovers from his wound he will be tried by court-martial. He is under open arrest meanwhile, as is his opponent in the duel—a Major Sykes of

the 23rd Dragoons. That they will both be broke is beyond doubt. But that is not all. This affair, which might have had such grave consequences, coming so soon upon the heels of Major Berkeley's business, has driven Lord Wellington to a step regarding which this letter will instruct you."

Sir Terence broke the seal. The letter, penned by a secretary, but bearing Wellington's own signature, ran as follows:

"The bearer, Captain Stanhope, will inform you of the particulars of this disgraceful business of Captain Garfield's. The affair following so soon upon that of Major Berkeley has determined me to make it clearly understood to the officers in his Majesty's service that they have been sent to the Peninsula to fight the French and not each other or members of the civilian population. While this campaign continues, and as long as I am in charge of it, I am determined not to suffer upon any plea whatever the abominable practice of duelling among those under my command. I desire you to publish this immediately in general orders, enjoining upon officers of all ranks without exception the necessity to postpone the settlement of private quarrels at least until the close of this campaign. And to add force to this injunction you will make it known that any infringement of this order will be considered as a capital offence; that any officer hereafter either sending or accepting a challenge will, if found guilty by a general court-martial, be immediately shot."

Sir Terence nodded slowly.

"Very well," he said. "The measure is most wise, although I doubt if it will be popular. But, then, unpopularity is the fate of wise measures. I am glad the matter has not ended more seriously. The dispatches in question, so far as I can recollect, were not of great urgency."

"There is something more," said Captain Stanhope. "The dispatches bore signs of having been tampered with."

"Tampered with?" It was a question from Tremayne, charged with incredulity. "But who would have tampered with them?"

"There were signs, that is all. Garfield was taken to the house of the parish priest, where he lay lost until he recovered sufficiently to realise his position for himself. No doubt you will have a schedule of the contents of the dispatch, Sir Terence?"

"Certainly. It is in your possession, I think, Tremayne."

Tremayne turned to his desk, and a brief search in one of its well-ordered drawers brought to light an oblong strip of paper folded and endorsed. He unfolded and spread it on Sir Terence's table, whilst Captain Stanhope, producing a note with which he came equipped, stooped to check off the items. Suddenly he stopped, frowned, and finally placed his finger under one of the lines of Tremayne's schedule, carefully studying his own note for a moment.

"Ha!" he said quietly at last. "What's this?" And he read: "Note from Lord Liverpool of reinforcements to be embarked for Lisbon in June or July." He looked at the adjutant and the adjutant's secretary. "That would appear to be the most important document of all—indeed the only document of any vital importance. And it was not included in the dispatch as it reached Lord Wellington."

The three looked gravely at one another in silence.

"Have you a copy of the note, sir?" inquired the aide-de-camp.

"Not a copy—but a summary of its contents, the figures it contained, are pencilled there on the margin," Tremayne answered.

"Allow me, sir," said Stanhope, and taking up a quill from the adjutant's table he rapidly copied the figures. "Lord Wellington must have this memorandum as soon as possible. The rest, Sir Terence, is of course a matter for yourself. You will know what to do. Meanwhile I

shall report to his lordship what has occurred. I had best set out at once."

"If you will rest for an hour, and give my wife the pleasure of your company at luncheon, I shall have a letter ready for Lord Wellington," replied Sir Terence. "Perhaps you'll see to it, Tremayne," he added, without waiting for Captain Stanhope's answer to an invitation which amounted to a command.

Thus Stanhope was led away, and Sir Terence, all other matters forgotten for the moment, sat down to write his letter.

Later in the day, after Captain Stanhope had taken his departure, the duty fell to Tremayne of framing the general order and seeing to the dispatch of a copy to each division.

"I wonder," he said to Sir Terence, "who will be the first to break it?"

"Why, the fool who's most anxious to be broke himself," answered Sir Terence.

There appeared to be reservations about it in Tremayne's mind.

"It's a devilish stringent regulation," he criticised.

"But very salutary and very necessary."

"Oh, quite." Tremayne's agreement was unhesitating. "But I shouldn't care to feel the restraint of it, and I thank heaven I have no enemy thirsting for my blood."

Sir Terence's brow darkened. His face was turned away from his secretary. "How can a man be confident of that?" he wondered.

"Oh, a clean conscience, I suppose," laughed Tremayne, and he gave his attention to his papers.

Frankness, honesty and light-heartedness rang so clear in the

words that they sowed in Sir Terence's mind fresh doubts of the galling suspicion he had been harbouring.

"Do you boast a clean conscience, eh, Ned?" he asked, not without a lurking shame at this deliberate sly searching of the other's mind. Yet he strained his ears for the answer.

"Almost clean," said Tremayne. "Temptation doesn't stain when it's resisted, does it?"

Sir Terence trembled. But he controlled himself.

"Nay, now, that's a question for the casuists. They right answer you that it depends upon the temptation." And he asked point-blank: "What's tempting you?"

Tremayne was in a mood for confidences, and Sir Terence was his friend. But he hesitated. His answer to the question was an irrelevance.

"It's just hell to be poor, O'Moy," he said.

The adjutant turned to stare at him. Tremayne was sitting with his head resting on one hand, the fingers thrusting through the crisp fair hair, and there was gloom in his clear-cut face, a dullness in the usually keen grey eyes.

"Is there anything on your mind?" quoth Sir Terence.

"Temptation," was the answer. "It's an unpleasant thing to struggle against."

"But you spoke of poverty?"

"To be sure. If I weren't poor I could put my fortunes to the test, and make an end of the matter one way or the other."

There was a pause. "Sure I hope I am the last man to force a

confidence, Ned, said O'Moy. "But you certainly seem as if it would do you good to confide."

Tremayne shook himself mentally. "I think we had better deal with the matter of this dispatch that was tampered with at Penalva."

"So we will, to be sure. But it can wait a minute." Sir Terence pushed back his chair, and rose. He crossed slowly to his secretary's side. "What's on your mind, Ned?" he asked with abrupt solicitude, and Ned could not suspect that it was the matter on Sir Terence's own mind that was urging him—but urging him hopefully.

Captain Tremayne looked up with a rueful smile. "I thought you boasted that you never forced a confidence." And then he looked away. "Sylvia Armytage tells me that she is thinking of returning to England."

For a moment the words seemed to Sir Terence a fresh irrelevance; another attempt to change the subject. Then quite suddenly a light broke upon his mind, shedding a relief so great and joyous that he sought to check it almost in fear.

"It is more than she has told me," he answered steadily. "But then, no doubt, you enjoy her confidence."

Tremayne flashed him a wry glance and looked away again.

"Alas!" he said, and fetched a sigh.

"And is Sylvia the temptation, Ned?"

Tremayne was silent for a while, little dreaming how Sir Terence hung upon his answer, how impatiently he awaited it.

"Of course," he said at last. "Isn't it obvious to any one?" And he grew rhapsodical: "How can a man be daily in her company without succumbing to her loveliness, to her matchless grace of body and of

mind, without perceiving that she is incomparable, peerless, as much above other women as an angel perhaps might be above herself?"

Before his glum solemnity, and before something else that Tremayne could not suspect, Sir Terence exploded into laughter. Of the immense and joyous relief in it his secretary caught no hint; all he heard was its sheer amusement, and this galled and shamed him. For no man cares to be laughed at for such feelings as Tremayne had been led into betraying.

"You think it something to laugh at?" he said tartly.

"Laugh, is it?" spluttered Sir Terence. "God grant I don't burst a blood-vessel."

Tremayne reddened. "When you've indulged your humour, sir," he said stiffly, "perhaps you'll consider the matter of this dispatch."

But Sir Terence laughed more uproariously than ever. He came to stand beside Tremayne, and slapped him heartily on the shoulder.

"Ye'll kill me, Ned!" he protested. "For God's sake, not so glum. It's that makes ye ridiculous."

"I am sorry you find me ridiculous."

"Nay, then, it's glad ye ought to be. By my soul, if Sylvia tempts you, man, why the devil don't ye just succumb and have done with it? She's handsome enough and well set up with her air of an Amazon, and she rides uncommon straight, begad! Indeed it's a broth of a girl she is in the hunting-field, the ballroom, or at the breakfast-table, although riper acquaintance may discover her not to be quite all that you imagine her at present. Let your temptation lead you then, entirely, and good luck to you, my boy."

"Didn't I tell you, O'Moy," answered the captain, mollified a little by the sympathy and good feeling peeping through the adjutant's

boisterousness, "that poverty is just hell. It's my poverty that's in the way."

"And is that all? Then it's thankful you should be that Sylvia Armytage has got enough for two."

"That's just it."

"Just what?"

"The obstacle. I could marry a poor woman. But Sylvia—"

"Have you spoken to her?"

Tremayne was indignant. "How do you suppose I could?"

"It'll not have occurred to you that the lady may have feelings which having aroused you ought to be considering?"

A wry smile and a shake of the head was Tremayne only answer; and then Carruthers came in fresh from Lisbon, where he had been upon business connected with the commissariat, and to Tremayne's relief the subject was perforce abandoned.

Yet he marvelled several times that day that the hilarity he should have awakened in Sir Terence continued to cling to the adjutant, and that despite the many vexatious matters claiming attention he should preserve an irrepressible and almost boyish gaiety.

Meanwhile, however, the coming of Carruthers had brought the adjutant a moment's seriousness, and he reverted to the business of Captain Garfield. When he had mentioned the missing note, Carruthers very properly became grave. He was a short, stiffly built man with a round, good-humoured, rather florid face.

"The matter must be probed at once, sir," he ventured. "We know that we move in a tangle of intrigues and espionage. But such a thing

as this has never happened before. Have you anything to go upon?"

"Captain Stanhope gave us nothing," said the adjutant.

"It would be best perhaps to get Grant to look into it," said Tremayne.

"If he is still in Lisbon," said Sir Terence.

"I passed him in the street an hour ago," replied Carruthers.

"Then by all means let a note be sent to him asking him if he will step up to Monsanto as soon as he conveniently can. You might see to it, Tremayne."

CHAPTER X. THE STIFLED QUARREL

It was noon of the next day before Colonel Grant came to the house at Monsanto from whose balcony floated the British flag, and before whose portals stood a sentry in the tall bearskin of the grenadiers.

He found the adjutant alone in his room, and apologised for the delay in responding to his invitation, pleading the urgency of other matters that he had in hand.

"A wise enactment this of Lord Wellington's," was his next comment. "I mean this prohibition of duelling. It may be resented by some of our young bloods as an unwarrantable interference with their privileges, but it will do a deal of good, and no one can deny that there is ample cause for the measure."

"It is on the subject of the cause that I'm wanting to consult you," said Sir Terence, offering his visitor a chair. "Have you been informed of the details? No? Let me give you them." And he related how the dispatch bore signs of having been tampered with, and how the only document of any real importance came to be missing from it.

Colonel Grant, sitting with his sabre across his knees, listened gravely and thoughtfully. In the end he shrugged his shoulders, the keen hawk face unmoved.

"The harm is done, and cannot very well be repaired. The information obtained, no doubt on behalf of Massena, will by now be on its way to him. Let us be thankful that the matter is not more grave, and thankful, too, that you were able to supply a copy of Lord

Liverpool's figures. What do you want me to do?"

"Take steps to discover the spy whose existence is disclosed by this event."

Colquhoun Grant smiled. "That is precisely the matter which has brought me to Lisbon."

"How?" Sir Terence was amazed. "You knew?"

"Oh, not that this had happened. But that the spy—or rather a network of espionage—existed. We move here in a web of intrigue wrought by ill-will, self-interest, vindictiveness and every form of malice. Whilst the great bulk of the Portuguese people and their leaders are loyally co-operating with us, there is a strong party opposing us which would prefer even to see the French prevail. Of course you are aware of this. The heart and brain of all this is—as I gather the Principal Souza. Wellington has compelled his retirement from the Government. But if by doing so he has restricted the man's power for evil, he has certainly increased his will for evil and his activities.

"You tell me that Garfield was cared for by the parish priest at Penalva. There you are. Half the priesthood of the country are on Souza's side, since the Patriarch of Lisbon himself is little more than a tool of Souza's. What happens? This priest discovers that the British officer whom he has so charitably put to bed in his house is the bearer of dispatches. A loyal man would instantly have communicated with Marshal Beresford at Thomar. This fellow, instead, advises the intriguers in Lisbon. The captain's dispatches are examined and the only document of real value is abstracted. Of course it would be difficult to establish a case against the priest, and it is always vexatious and troublesome to have dealings with that class, as it generally means trouble with the peasantry. But the case is as clear as crystal."

"But the intriguers here? Can you not deal with them?"

"I have them under observation," replied the colonel. "I already knew the leaders, Souza's lieutenants in Lisbon, and I can put my hand upon them at any moment. If I have not already done so it is because I find it more profitable to leave them at large; it is possible indeed, that I may never proceed to extremes against them. Conceive that they have enabled me to seize La Fleche, the most dangerous, insidious and skilful of all Napoleon's agents. I found him at Redondo's ball last week in the uniform of a Portuguese major, and through him I was able to track down Souza's chief instrument—I discovered them closeted with him in one of the card-rooms."

"And you didn't arrest them?"

"Arrest them! I apologised for my intrusion, and withdrew. La Fleche took his leave of them. He was to have left Lisbon at dawn equipped with a passport countersigned by yourself, my dear adjutant."

"What's that?"

"A passport for Major Vieira of the Portuguese Cacadores. Do you remember it?"

"Major Vieira!" Sir Terence frowned thoughtfully. Suddenly he recollected. "But that was countersigned by me at the request of Count Samoval, who represented himself a personal friend of the major's."

"So indeed he is. But the major in question was La Fleche nevertheless."

"And Samoval knew this?"

Sir Terence was incredulous.

Colonel Grant did not immediately answer the question. He preferred to continue his narrative. "That night I had the false major arrested very quietly. I have caused him to disappear for the present. His Lisbon friends believe him to be on his way to Massena with the information they no doubt supplied him. Massena awaits his return at Salamanca, and will continue to wait. Thus when he fails to be seen or heard of there will be a good deal of mystification on all sides, which is the proper state of mind in which to place your opponents. Lord Liverpool's figures, let me add, were not among the interesting notes found upon him—possibly because at that date they had not yet been obtained."

"And you say that Samoval was aware of the man's real identity?" insisted Sir Terence, still incredulous. "Aware of it?" Colonel Grant laughed shortly. "Samoval is Souza's principal agent—the most dangerous man in Lisbon and the most subtle. His sympathies are French through and through."

Sir Terence stared at him in frank amazement, in utter unbelief. "Oh, impossible!" he ejaculated at last.

"I saw Samoval for the first time," said Colonel Grant by way of answer, "in Oporto at the time of Soult's occupation. He did not call himself Samoval just then, any more than I called myself Colquhoun Grant. He was very active therein the French interest; I should indeed be more precise and say in Bonaparte's interest, for he was the man instrumental in disclosing to Soult the Bourbon conspiracy which was undermining the marshal's army. You do not know, perhaps, that French sympathy runs in Samoval's family. You may not be aware that the Portuguese Marquis of Alorna, who holds a command in the Emperor's army, and is at present with Massena at Salamanca, is Samoval's cousin."

"But," faltered Sir Terence, "Count Samoval has been a regular visitor here for the past three months."

"So I understand," said Grant coolly. "If I had known of it before I should have warned you. But, as you are aware, I have been in Spain on other business. You realise the danger of having such a man about the place. Scraps of information—"

"Oh, as to that," Sir Terence interrupted, "I can assure you that none have fallen from my official table."

"Never be too sure, Sir Terence. Matters here must ever be under discussion. There are your secretaries and the ladies—and Samoval has a great way with the women. What they know you may wager that he knows."

"They know nothing."

"That is a great deal to say. Little odds and ends now; a hint at one time; a word dropped at another; these things picked up naturally by feminine curiosity and retailed thoughtlessly under Samoval's charming suasion and display of Britannic sympathies. And Samoval has the devil's own talent for bringing together the pieces of a puzzle. Take the lines now: you may have parted with no details. But mention of them will surely have been made in this household. However," he broke off abruptly, "that is all past and done with. I am as sure as you are that any real indiscretions in this household are unimaginable and so we may be confident that no harm has yet been done. But you will gather from what I have now told you that Samoval's visits here are not a mere social waste of time. That he comes, acquires familiarity and makes himself the friend of the family with a very definite aim in view."

"He does not come again," said Sir Terence, rising.

"That is more than I should have ventured to suggest. But it is a very wise resolve. It will need tact to carry it out, for Samoval is a man to be handled carefully."

"I'll handle him carefully, devil a fear," said Sir Terence. "You can depend upon my tact."

Colonel Grant rose. "In this matter of Penalva, I will consider further. But I do not think there is anything to be done now. The main thing is to stop up the outlets through which information reaches the French, and that is my chief concern. How is the stripping of the country proceeding now?"

"It was more active immediately after Souza left the Government. But the last reports announce a slackening again."

"They are at work in that, too, you see. Souza will not slumber while there's vengeance and self-interest to keep him awake." And he held out his hand to take his leave.

"You'll stay to luncheon?" said Sir Terence. "It is about to be served."

"You are very kind, Sir Terence."

They descended, to find luncheon served already in the open under the trellis vine, and the party consisted of Lady O'Moy, Miss Armytage, Captain Tremayne, Major Carruthers, and Count Samoval, of whose presence this was the adjutant's first intimation.

As a matter of fact the Count had been at Monsanto for the past hour, the first half of which he had spent most agreeably on the terrace with the ladies. He had spoken so eulogistically of the genius of Lord Wellington and the valour of the British soldier, and, particularly of the Irish soldier, that even Sylvia's instinctive distrust and dislike of him had been lulled a little for the moment.

"And they must prevail," he had exclaimed in a glow of enthusiasm, his dark eyes flashing. "It is inconceivable that they should ever yield to the French, although the odds of numbers may lie so heavily

against them."

"Are the odds of numbers so heavy?" said Lady O'Moy in surprise, opening wide those almost childish eyes of hers.

"Alas! anything from three to five to one. Ah, but why should we despond on that account?" And his voice vibrated with renewed confidence. "The country is a difficult one, easy to defend, and Lord Wellington's genius will have made the best of it. There are, for example, the fortifications at Torres Vedras."

"Ah yes! I have heard of them. Tell me about them, Count."

"Tell you about them, dear lady? Shall I carry perfumes to the rose? What can I tell you that you do not know so much better than myself?"

"Indeed, I know nothing. Sir Terence is ridiculously secretive," she assured him, with a little frown of petulance. She realised that her husband did not treat her as an intelligent being to be consulted upon these matters. She was his wife, and he had no right to keep secrets from her. In fact she said so.

"Indeed no," Samoval agreed. "And I find it hard to credit that it should be so."

"Then you forget," said Sylvia, "that these secrets are not Sir Terence's own. They are the secrets of his office."

"Perhaps so," said the unabashed Samoval. "But if I were Sir Terence I should desire above all to allay my wife's natural anxiety. For I am sure you must be anxious, dear Lady O'Moy."

"Naturally," she agreed, whose anxieties never transcended the fit of her gowns or the suitability of a coiffure. "But Terence is like that."

"Incredible!" the Count protested, and raised his dark eyes to heaven as if invoking its punishment upon so unnatural a husband.

"Do you tell me that you have never so much as seen the plans of these fortifications?"

"The plans, Count!" She almost laughed.

"Ah!" he said. "I dare swear then that you do not even know of their existence." He was jocular now.

"I am sure that she does not," said Sylvia, who instinctively felt that the conversation was following an undesirable course.

"Then you are wrong," she was assured. "I saw them once, a week ago, in Sir Terence's room."

"Why, how would you know them if you saw them?" quoth Sylvia, seeking to cover what might be an indiscretion.

"Because they bore the name: 'Lines of Torres Vedras.' I remember."

"And this unsympathetic Sir Terence did not explain them to you?" laughed Samoval.

"Indeed, he did not."

"In fact, I could swear that he locked them away from you at once?" the Count continued on a jocular note.

"Not at once. But he certainly locked them away soon after, and whilst I was still there."

"In your place, then," said Samoval, ever on the same note of banter, "I should have been tempted to steal the key."

"Not so easily done," she assured him. "It never leaves his person. He wears it on a gold chain round his neck."

"What, always?"

"Always, I assure you."

"Too bad," protested Samoval. "Too bad, indeed. What, then, should you have done, Miss Armytage?"

It was difficult to imagine that he was drawing information from them, so bantering and frivolous was his manner; more difficult still to conceive that he had obtained any. Yet you will observe that he had been placed in possession of two facts: that the plans of the lines of Torres Vedras were kept locked up in Sir Terence's own room—in the strong-box, no doubt—and that Sir Terence always carried the key on a gold chain worn round his neck.

Miss Armytage laughed. "Whatever I might do, I should not be guilty of prying into matters that my husband kept hidden."

"Then you admit a husband's right to keep matters hidden from his wife?"

"Why not?"

"Madam," Samoval bowed to her, "your future husband is to be envied on yet another count."

And thus the conversation drifted, Samoval conceiving that he had obtained all the information of which Lady O'Moy was possessed, and satisfied that he had obtained all that for the moment he required. How to proceed now was a more difficult matter, to be very seriously considered—how to obtain from Sir Terence the key in question, and reach the plans so essential to Marshal Massena.

He was at table with them, as you know, when Sir Terence and Colonel Grant arrived. He and the colonel were presented to each other, and bowed with a gravity quite cordial on the part of Samoval, who was by far the more subtle dissembler of the two. Each knew the other perfectly for what he was; yet each was in complete ignorance

of the extent of the other's knowledge of himself; and certainly neither betrayed anything by his manner.

At table the conversation was led naturally enough by Tremayne to Wellington's general order against duelling. This was inevitable when you consider that it was a topic of conversation that morning at every table to which British officers sat down. Tremayne spoke of the measure in terms of warm commendation, thereby provoking a sharp disagreement from Samoval. The deep and almost instinctive hostility between these two men, which had often been revealed in momentary flashes, was such that it must invariably lead them to take opposing sides in any matter admitting of contention.

"In my opinion it is a most arbitrary and degrading enactment," said Samoval. "I say so without hesitation, notwithstanding my profound admiration and respect for Lord Wellington and all his measures."

"Degrading?" echoed Grant, looking across at him. "In what can it be degrading, Count?"

"In that it reduces a gentleman to the level of the clod," was the prompt answer. "A gentleman must have his quarrels, however sweet his disposition, and a means must be afforded him of settling them."

"Ye can always thrash an impudent fellow," opined the adjutant.

"Thrash?" echoed Samoval. His sensitive lip curled in disdain. "To use your hands upon a man!" He shuddered in sheer disgust. "To one of my temperament it would be impossible, and men of my temperament are plentiful, I think."

"But if you were thrashed yourself?" Tremayne asked him, and the light in his grey eyes almost hinted at a dark desire to be himself the executioner.

Samoval's dark, handsome eyes considered the captain steadily.

"To be thrashed myself?" he questioned. "My dear Captain, the idea of having hands laid upon me, soiling me, brutalising me, is so nauseating, so repugnant, that I assure you I should not hesitate to shoot the man who did it just as I should shoot any other wild beast that attacked me. Indeed the two instances are exactly parallel, and my country's courts would uphold in such a case the justice of my conduct."

"Then you may thank God," said O'Moy, "that you are not under British jurisdiction."

"I do," snapped Samoval, to make an instant recovery: "at least so far as the matter is concerned." And he elaborated: "I assure you, sirs, it will be an evil day for the nobility of any country when its Government enacts against the satisfaction that one gentleman has the right to demand from another who offends him."

"Isn't the conversation rather too bloodthirsty for a luncheon-table?" wondered Lady O'Moy. And tactlessly she added, thinking with flattery to mollify Samoval and cool his obvious heat: "You are yourself such a famous swordsman, Count."

And then Tremayne's dislike of the man betrayed him into his deplorable phrase.

"At the present time Portugal is in urgent need of her famous swordsmen to go against the French and not to increase the disorders at home."

A silence complete and ominous followed the rash words, and Samoval, white to the lips, pondered the imperturbable captain with a baleful eye.

"I think," he said at last, speaking slowly and softly, and picking his words with care, "I think that is innuendo. I should be relieved, Captain Tremayne, to hear you say that it is not."

Tremayne was prompt to give him the assurance. "No innuendo at all. A plain statement of fact."

"The innuendo I suggested lay in the application of the phrase. Do you make it personal to myself?"

"Of course not," said Sir Terence, cutting in and speaking sharply. "What an assumption!"

"I am asking Captain Tremayne," the Count insisted, with grim firmness, notwithstanding his deferential smile to Sir Terence.

"I spoke quite generally, sir," Tremayne assured him, partly under the suasion of Sir Terence's interposition, partly out of consideration for the ladies, who were looking scared. "Of course, if you choose to take it to yourself, sir, that is a matter for your own discretion. I think," he added, also with a smile, "that the ladies find the topic tiresome."

"Perhaps we may have the pleasure of continuing it when they are no longer present."

"Oh, as you please," was the indifferent answer. "Carruthers, may I trouble you to pass the salt? Lady O'Callaghan was complaining the other night of the abuse of salt in Portuguese cookery. It is an abuse I have never yet detected."

"I can't conceive Lady O'Callaghan complaining of too much salt in anything, begad," quoth O'Moy, with a laugh. "If you had heard the story she told me about—"

"Terence, my dear!" his wife checked him, her fine brows raised, her stare frigid.

"Faith, we go from bad to worse," said Carruthers. "Will you try to improve the tone of the conversation, Miss Armytage? It stands in urgent need of it."

With a general laugh, breaking the ice of the restraint that was in danger of settling about the table, a semblance of ease was restored, and this was maintained until the end of the repast. At last the ladies rose, and, leaving the men at table, they sauntered off towards the terrace. But under the archway Sylvia checked her cousin.

"Una," she said gravely, "you had better call Captain Tremayne and take him away for the present."

Una's eyes opened wide. "Why?" she inquired.

Miss Armytage was almost impatient with her. "Didn't you see? Resentment is only slumbering between those men. It will break out again now that we have left them unless you can get Captain Tremayne away."

Una continued to look at her cousin, and then, her mind fastening ever upon the trivial to the exclusion of the important, her glance became arch. "For whom is your concern? For Count Samoval or Ned?" she inquired, and added with a laugh: "You needn't answer me. It is Ned you are afraid for."

"I am certainly not afraid for him," was the reply on a faint note of indignation. She had reddened slightly. "But I should not like to see Captain Tremayne or any other British officer embroiled in a duel. You forget Lord Wellington's order which they were discussing, and the consequences of infringing it."

Lady O'Moy became scared.

"You don't imagine—"

Sylvia spoke quickly: "I am certain that unless you take Captain Tremayne away, and at once, there will be serious trouble."

And now behold Lady O'Moy thrown into a state of alarm that

bordered upon terror. She had more reason than Sylvia could dream, more reason she conceived than Sylvia herself, to wish to keep Captain Tremayne out of trouble just at present. Instantly, agitatedly, she turned and called to him.

"Ned!" floated her silvery voice across the enclosed garden. And again: "Ned! I want you at once, please."

Captain Tremayne rose. Grant was talking briskly at the time, his intention being to cover Tremayne's retreat, which he himself desired. Count Samoval's smouldering eyes were upon the captain, and full of menace. But he could not be guilty of the rudeness of interrupting Grant or of detaining Captain Tremayne when a lady called him.

CHAPTER XI. THE CHALLENGE

Rebuke awaited Captain Tremayne at the hands of Lady O'Moy and it came as soon as they were alone together sauntering in the thicket of pine and cork-oak on the slope of the hill below the terrace.

"How thoughtless of you, Ned, to provoke Count Samoval at such a time as this!"

"Did I provoke him? I thought it was the Count himself who was provoking." Tremayne spoke lightly.

"But suppose anything were to happen to you? You know the man's dreadful reputation."

Tremayne looked at her kindly. This apparent concern for himself touched him. "My dear Una, I hope I can take care of myself, even against so formidable a fellow; and after all a man must take his chances a soldier especially."

"But what of Dick?" she cried. "Do you forget that he is depending entirely upon you—that if you should fail him he will be lost?" And there was something akin to indignation in the protesting eyes she turned upon him.

For a moment Tremayne was so amazed that he was at a loss for an answer. Then he smiled. Indeed his inclination was to laugh outright. The frank admission that her concern which he had fondly imagined to be for himself was all for Dick betrayed a state of mind that was entirely typical of Una. Never had she been able to command more than one point of view of any question, and that point of view invariably of her own interest. All her life she had been accustomed to

sacrifices great and small made by others on their own behalf, until she had come to look upon such sacrifices her absolute right.

"I am glad you reminded me," he said with an irony that never touched her. "You may depend upon me to be discreetness itself, at least until after Dick has been safely shipped."

"Thank you, Ned. You are very good to me." They sauntered a little way in silence. Then: "When does Captain Glennie sail?" she asked him. "Is it decided yet?"

"Yes. I have just heard from him that the Telemachus will put to sea on Sunday morning at two o'clock."

"At two o'clock in the morning! What an uncomfortable hour!"

"Tides, as King Canute discovered, are beyond mortal control. The Telemachus goes out with the ebb. And, after all, for our purposes surely no hour could be more suitable. If I come for Dick at midnight tomorrow that will just give us time to get him snugly aboard before she sails. I have made all arrangements with Glennie. He believes Dick to be what he has represented himself—one of Bearsley's overseers named Jenkinson, who is a friend of mine and who must be got out of the country quietly. Dick should thank his luck for a good deal. My chief anxiety was lest his presence here should be discovered by any one."

"Beyond Bridget not a soul knows that he is here not even Sylvia."

"You have been the soul of discreetness."

"Haven't I?" she purred, delighted to have him discover a virtue so unusual in her.

Thereafter they discussed details; or, rather, Tremayne discussed them. He would come up to Monsanto at twelve o'clock to-morrow night in a curricule in which he would drive Dick down to the river at a

point where a boat would be waiting to take him out to the Telemachus. She must see that Dick was ready in time. The rest she could safely leave to him. He would come in through the official wing of the building. The guard would admit him without question, accustomed to seeing him come and go at all hours, nor would it be remarked that he was accompanied by a man in civilian dress when he departed. Dick was to be let down from her ladyship's balcony to the quadrangle by a rope ladder with which Tremayne would come equipped, having procured it for the purpose from the Telemachus.

She hung upon his arm, overwhelming him now with her gratitude, her parasol sheltering them both from the rays of the sun as they emerged from the thicket into the meadowland in full view of the terrace where Count Samoval and Sir Terence were at that moment talking earnestly together.

You will remember that O'Moy had undertaken to provide that Count Samoval's visits to Monsanto should be discontinued. About this task he had gone with all the tact of which he had boasted himself master to Colquhoun Grant. You shall judge of the tact for yourself. No sooner had the colonel left for Lisbon, and Carruthers to return to his work, than, finding himself alone with the Count, Sir Terence considered the moment a choice one in which to broach the matter.

"I take it ye're fond of walking, Count," had been his singular opening move. They had left the table by now, and were sauntering together on the terrace.

"Walking?" said Samoval. "I detest it."

"And is that so? Well, well! Of course it's not so very far from your place at Bispo."

"Not more than half-a-league, I should say."

"Just so," said O'Moy. "Half-a-league there, and half-a-league

back: a league. It's nothing at all, of course; yet for a gentleman who detests walking it's a devilish long tramp for nothing."

"For nothing?" Samoval checked and looked at his host in faint surprise. Then he smiled very affably. "But you must not say that, Sir Terence. I assure you that the pleasure of seeing yourself and Lady O'Moy cannot be spoken of as nothing."

"You are very good." Sir Terence was the very quintessence of courtliness, of concern for the other. "But if there were not that pleasure?"

"Then, of course, it would be different." Samoval was beginning to be slightly intrigued.

"That's it," said Sir Terence. "That's just what I'm meaning."

"Just what you're meaning? But, my dear General, you are assuming circumstances which fortunately do not exist."

"Not at present, perhaps. But they might."

Again Samoval stood still and looked at O'Moy. He found something in the bronzed, rugged face that was unusually sardonic. The blue eyes seemed to have become hard, and yet there were wrinkles about their corners suggestive of humour that might be mockery. The Count stiffened; but beyond that he preserved his outward calm whilst confessing that he did not understand Sir Terence's meaning.

"It's this way," said Sir Terence. "I've noticed that ye're not looking so very well lately, Count."

"Really? You think that?" The words were mechanical. The dark eyes continued to scrutinise that bronzed face suspiciously.

"I do, and it's sorry I am to see it. But I know what it is. It's this

walking backwards and forwards between here and Bispo that's doing the mischief. Better give it up, Count. Better not come toiling up here any more. It's not good for your health. Why, man, ye're as white as a ghost this minute."

He was indeed, having perceived at last the insult intended. To be denied the house at such a time was to checkmate his designs, to set a term upon his crafty and subtle espionage, precisely in the season when he hoped to reap its harvest. But his chagrin sprang not at all from that. His cold anger was purely personal. He was a gentleman—of the fine flower, as he would have described himself—of the nobility of Portugal; and that a probably upstart Irish soldier—himself, from Samoval's point of view, a guest in that country—should deny him his house, and choose such terms of ill-considered jocularly in which to do it, was an affront beyond all endurance.

For a moment passion blinded him, and it was only by an effort that he recovered and kept his self-control. But keep it he did. You may trust your practised duellist for that when he comes face to face with the necessity to demand satisfaction. And soon the mist of passion clearing from his keen wits, he sought swiftly for a means to fasten the quarrel upon Sir Terence in Sir Terence's own coin of galling mockery. Instantly he found it. Indeed it was not very far to seek. O'Moy's jealousy, which was almost a byword, as we know, had been apparent more than once to Samoval. Remembering it now, it discovered to him at once Sir Terence's most vulnerable spot, and cunningly Samoval proceeded to gall him there.

A smile spread gradually over his white face—a smile of immeasurable malice.

"I am having a very interesting and instructive morning in this atmosphere of Irish boorishness," said he. "First Captain Tremayne —"

"Now don't be after blaming old Ireland for Tremayne's shortcomings. Tremayne's just a clumsy mannered Englishman."

"I am glad to know there is a distinction. Indeed I might have perceived it for myself. In motives, of course, that distinction is great indeed, and I hope that I am not slow to discover it, and in your case to excuse it. I quite understand and even sympathise with your feelings, General."

"I am glad of that now," said Sir Terence, who had understood nothing of all this.

"Naturally," the Count pursued on a smooth, level note of amiability, "when a man, himself no longer young, commits the folly of taking a young and charming wife, he is to be forgiven when a natural anxiety drives him to lengths which in another might be resented." He bowed before the empurpling Sir Terence.

"Ye're a damned coxcomb, it seems," was the answering roar.

"Of course you would assume it. It was to be expected. I condone it with the rest. And because I condone it, because I sympathise with what in a man of your age and temperament must amount to an affliction, I hasten to assure you upon my honour that so far as I am concerned there are no grounds for your anxiety."

"And who the devil asks for your assurances? It's stark mad ye are to suppose that I ever needed them."

"Of course you must say that," Samoval insisted, with a confident and superior smile. He shook his head, his expression one of amused sorrow. "Sir Terence, you have knocked at the wrong door. You are youthful at least in your impulsiveness, but you are surely as blind as old Pantaloon in the comedy or you would see where your industry would be better employed in shielding your wife's honour and your own."

Goaded to fury, his blue eyes aflame now with passion, Sir Terence considered the sleek and subtle gentleman before him, and it was in that moment that the Count's subtlety soared to its finest heights. In a flash of inspiration he perceived the advantages to be drawn by himself from conducting this quarrel to extremes.

This is not mere idle speculation. Knowledge of the real motives actuating him rests upon the evidence of a letter which Samoval was to write that same evening to La Fleche—afterwards to be discovered—wherein he related what had passed, how deliberately he had steered the matter, and what he meant to do. His object was no longer the punishing of an affront. That would happen as a mere incident, a thing done, as it were, in passing. His real aim now was to obtain the keys of the adjutant's strong-box, which never left Sir Terence's person, and so become possessed of the plans of the lines of Torres Vedras. When you consider in the light of this the manner in which Samoval proceeded now you will admire with me at once the opportunism and the subtlety of the man.

"You'll be after telling me exactly what you mean," Sir Terence had said.

It was in that moment that Tremayne and Lady O'Moy came arm in arm into the open on the hill-side, half-a-mile away—very close and confidential. They came most opportunely to the Count's need, and he flung out a hand to indicate them to Sir Terence, a smile of pity on his lips.

"You need but to look to take the answer for yourself," said he.

Sir Terence looked, and laughed. He knew the sect of Ned Tremayne's heart and could laugh now with relish at that which hitherto had left him darkly suspicious.

"And who shall blame Lady O'Moy?" Count Samoval pursued. "A

lady so charming and so courted must seek her consolation for the almost unnatural union Fate has imposed upon her. Captain Tremayne is of her own age, convenient to her hand, and for an Englishman not ill-looking."

He smiled at O'Moy with insolent compassion, and O'Moy, losing all his self-control, struck him slapped him resoundingly upon the cheek.

"Ye're a dirty liar, Samoval, a muck-rake," said he.

Samoval stepped back, breathing hard, one cheek red, the other white. Yet by a miracle he still preserved his self-control.

"I have proved my courage too often," he said, "to be under the necessity of killing you for this blow. Since my honour is safe I will not take advantage of your overwrought condition."

"Ye'll take advantage of it whether ye like it or not," blazed Sir Terence at him. "I mean you to take advantage of it. D' ye think I'll suffer any man to cast a slur upon Lady O'Moy? I'll be sending my friends to wait on you to-day, Count; and—by God!—Tremayne himself shall be one of them."

Thus did the hot-headed fellow deliver himself into the hands of his enemy. Nor was he warned when he saw the sudden gleam in Samoval's dark eyes.

"Ha!" said the Count. It was a little exclamation of wicked satisfaction. "You are offering me a challenge, then?"

"If I may make so bold. And as I've a mind to shoot you dead—"

"Shoot, did you say?" Samoval interrupted gently.

"I said 'shoot'—and it shall be at ten paces, or across a handkerchief, or any damned distance you please."

The Count shook his head. He sneered. "I think not—not shoot." And he waved the notion aside with a hand white and slender as a woman's. "That is too English, or too Irish. The pistol, I mean—appropriately a fool's weapon." And he explained himself, explained at last his extraordinary forbearance under a blow. "If you think I have practised the small-sword every day of my life for ten years to suffer myself to be shot at like a rabbit in the end—ho, really!" He laughed aloud. "You have challenged me, I think, Sir Terence. Because I feared the predilection you have discovered, I was careful to wait until the challenge came from you. The choice of weapons lies, I think, with me. I shall instruct my friends to ask for swords."

"Sorry a difference will it make to me," said Sir Terence. "Anything from a horsewhip to a howitzer." And then recollection descending like a cold hand upon him chilled his hot rage, struck the fine Irish arrogance all out of him, and left him suddenly limp. "My God!" he said, and it was almost a groan. He detained Samoval, who had already turned to depart. "A moment, Count," he cried. "I—I had forgotten. There is the general order—Lord Wellington's enactment."

"Awkward, of course," said Samoval, who had never for a moment been oblivious of that enactment, and who had been carefully building upon it. "But you should have considered it before committing yourself so irrevocably."

Sir Terence steadied himself. He recovered his truculence. "Irrevocable or not, it will just have to be revocable. The meeting's impossible."

"I do not see the impossibility. I am not surprised you should shelter yourself behind an enactment; but you will remember this enactment does not apply to me, who am not a soldier."

"But it applies to me, who am not only a soldier, but the Adjutant-General here, the man chiefly responsible for seeing the order carried

out. It would be a fine thing if I were the first to disregard it."

"I am afraid it is too late. You have disregarded it already, sir."

"How so?"

"The letter of the law is against sending or receiving a challenge, I think."

O'Moy was distracted. "Samoval," he said, drawing himself up, "I will admit that I have been a fool. I will apologise to you for the blow and for the word that accompanied it."

"The apology would imply that my statement was a true one and that you recognised it. If you mean that—"

"I mean nothing of the kind. Damme! I've a mind to horsewhip you, and leave it at that. D' ye think I want to face a firing party on your account?"

"I don't think there is the remotest likelihood of any such contingency," replied Samoval.

But O'Moy went headlong on. "And another thing. Where will I be finding a friend to meet your friends? Who will dare to act for me in view of that enactment?"

The Count considered. He was grave now. "Of course that is a difficulty," he admitted, as if he perceived it now for the first time. "Under the circumstances, Sir Terence, and entirely to accommodate you, I might consent to dispense with seconds."

"Dispense with seconds?" Sir Terence was horrified at the suggestion. "You know that that is irregular—that a charge of murder would lie against the survivor."

"Oh, quite so. But it is for your own convenience that I suggest it,

though I appreciate your considerate concern on the score of what may happen to me afterwards should it come to be known that I was your opponent."

"Afterwards? After what?"

"After I have killed you."

"And is it like that?" cried O'Moy, his countenance inflaming again, his mind casting all prudence to the winds.

It followed, of course, that without further thought for anything but the satisfaction of his rage Sir Terence became as wax in the hands of Samoval's desires.

"Where do you suggest that we meet?" he asked.

"There is my place at Bispo. We should be private in the gardens there. As for time, the sooner the better, though for secrecy's sake we had better meet at night. Shall we say at midnight?"

But Sir Terence would agree to none of this.

"To-night is out of the question for me. I have an engagement that will keep me until late. To-morrow night, if you will, I shall be at your service." And because he did not trust Samoval he added, as Samoval himself had almost reckoned: "But I should prefer not to come to Bispo. I might be seen going or returning."

"Since there are no such scruples on my side, I am ready to come to you here if you prefer it."

"It would suit me better."

"Then expect me promptly at midnight to-morrow, provided that you can arrange to admit me without my being seen. You will perceive my reasons."

"Those gates will be closed," said O'Moy, indicating the now gaping massive doors that closed the archway at night. "But if you knock I shall be waiting for you, and I will admit you by the wicket."

"Excellent," said Samoval suavely. "Then—until to-morrow night, General." He bowed with almost extravagant submission, and turning walked sharply away, energy and suppleness in every line of his slight figure, leaving Sir Terence to the unpleasant, almost desperate, thoughts that reflection must usher in as his anger faded.

CHAPTER XII. THE DUEL

It was a time of stress and even of temptation for Sir Terence. Honour and pride demanded that he should keep the appointment made with Samoval; common sense urged him at all costs to avoid it. His frame of mind, you see, was not at all enviable. At moments he would consider his position as adjutant-general, the enactment against duelling, the irregularity of the meeting arranged, and, consequently, the danger in which he stood on every score; at others he could think of nothing but the unpardonable affront that had been offered him and the venomously insulting manner in which it had been offered, and his rage welled up to blot out every consideration other than that of punishing Samoval.

For two days and a night he was a sort of shuttlecock tossed between these alternating moods, and he was still the same when he paced the quadrangle with bowed head and hands clasped behind him awaiting Samoval at a few minutes before twelve of the following night. The windows that looked down from the four sides of that enclosed garden were all in darkness. The members of the household had withdrawn over an hour ago and were asleep by now. The official quarters were closed. The rising moon had just mounted above the eastern wing and its white light fell upon the upper half of the facade of the residential site. The quadrangle itself remained plunged in gloom.

Sir Terence, pacing there, was considering the only definite conclusion he had reached. If there were no way even now of avoiding this duel, at least it must remain secret. Therefore it could not take place here in the enclosed garden of his own quarters, as he had so rashly consented. It should be fought upon neutral ground, where the

presence of the body of the slain would not call for explanations by the survivor.

From distant Lisbon on the still air came softly the chimes of midnight, and immediately there was a sharp rap upon the little door set in one of the massive gates that closed the archway.

Sir Terence went to open the wicket, and Samoval stepped quickly over the sill. He was wrapped in a dark cloak, a broad-brimmed hat obscured his face. Sir Terence closed the door again. The two men bowed to each other in silence, and as Samoval's cloak fell open he produced a pair of duelling-swords swathed together in a skin of leather.

"You are very punctual, sir," said O'Moy.

"I hope I shall never be so discourteous as to keep an opponent waiting. It is a thing of which I have never yet been guilty," replied Samoval, with deadly smoothness in that reminder of his victorious past. He stepped forward and looked about the quadrangle. "I am afraid the moon will occasion us some delay," he said. "It were perhaps better to wait some five or ten minutes, by then the light in here should have improved."

"We can avoid the delay by stepping out into the open," said Sir Terence. "Indeed it is what I had to suggest in any case. There are inconveniences here which you may have overlooked."

But Samoval, who had purposes to serve of which this duel was but a preliminary, was of a very different mind.

"We are quite private here, your household being abed," he answered, "whilst outside one can never be sure even at this hour of avoiding witnesses and interruption. Then, again, the turf is smooth as a table on that patch of lawn, and the ground well known to both of us; that, I can assure you, is a very necessary condition in the dark and

one not to be found haphazard in the open."

"But there is yet another consideration, sir. I prefer that we engage on neutral ground, so that the survivor shall not be called upon for explanations that might be demanded if we fought here."

Even in the gloom Sir Terence caught the flash of Samoval's white teeth as he smiled.

"You trouble yourself unnecessarily on my account," was the smoothly ironic answer. "No one has seen me come, and no one is likely to see me depart."

"You may be sure that no one shall, by God," snapped O'Moy, stung by the sly insolence of the other's assurance.

"Shall we get to work, then?" Samoval invited.

"If you're set on dying here, I suppose I must be after humouring you, and make the best of it. As soon as you please, then." O'Moy was very fierce.

They stepped to the patch of lawn in the middle of the quadrangle, and there Samoval threw off altogether his cloak and hat. He was closely dressed in black, which in that light rendered him almost invisible. Sir Terence, less practised and less calculating in these matters, wore an undress uniform, the red coat of which showed greyish. Samoval observed this rather with contempt than with satisfaction in the advantage it afforded him. Then he removed the swathing from the swords, and, crossing them, presented the hilts to Sir Terence. The adjutant took one and the Count retained the other, which he tested, thrashing the air with it so that it hummed like a whip. That done, however, he did not immediately fall on.

"In a few minutes the moon will be more obliging," he suggested. "If you would prefer to wait—"

But it occurred to Sir Terence that in the gloom the advantage might lie slightly with himself, since the other's superior sword-play would perhaps be partly neutralised. He cast a last look round at the dark windows.

"I find it light enough," he answered.

Samoval's reply was instantaneous. "On guard, then," he cried, and on the words, without giving Sir Terence so much as time to comply with the invitation, he whirled his point straight and deadly at the greyish outline of his opponent's body. But a ray of moonlight caught the blade and its livid flash gave Sir Terence warning of the thrust so treacherously delivered. He saved himself by leaping backwards—just saved himself with not an inch to spare—and threw up his blade to meet the thrust.

"Ye murderous villain," he snarled under his breath, as steel ground on steel, and he flung forward to the attack.

But from the gloom came a little laugh to answer him, and his angry lunge was foiled by an enveloping movement that ended in a ripost. With that they settled down to it, Sir Terence in a rage upon which that assassin stroke had been fresh fuel; the Count cool and unhurried, delaying until the moonlight should have crept a little farther, so as to enable him to make quite sure that his stroke when delivered should be final.

Meanwhile he pressed Sir Terence towards the side where the moonlight would strike first, until they were fighting close under the windows of the residential wing, Sir Terence with his back to them, Samoval facing them. It was Fate that placed them so, the Fate that watched over Sir Terence even now when he felt his strength failing him, his sword arm turning to lead under the strain of an unwonted exercise. He knew himself beaten, realised the dexterous ease, the masterly economy of vigour and the deadly sureness of his

opponent's play. He knew that he was at the mercy of Samoval; he was even beginning to wonder why the Count should delay to make an end of a situation of which he was so completely master. And then, quite suddenly, even as he was returning thanks that he had taken the precaution of putting all his affairs in order, something happened.

A light showed; it flared up suddenly, to be as suddenly extinguished, and it had its source in the window of Lady O'Moy's dressing-room, which Samoval was facing.

That flash drawing off the Count's eyes for one instant, and leaving them blinded for another, had revealed him clearly at the same time to Sir Terence. Sir Terence's blade darted in, driven by all that was left of his spent strength, and Samoval, his eyes unseeing, in that moment had fumbled widely and failed to find the other's steel until he felt it sinking through his body, searing him from breast to back.

His arms sank to his sides quite nervelessly. He uttered a faint exclamation of astonishment, almost instantly interrupted by a cough. He swayed there a moment, the cough increasing until it choked him. Then, suddenly limp, he pitched forward upon his face, and lay clawing and twitching at Sir Terence's feet.

Sir Terence himself, scarcely realising what had taken place, for the whole thing had happened within the time of a couple of heart-beats, stood quite still, amazed and awed, in a half-crouching attitude, looking down at the body of the fallen man. And then from above, ringing upon the deathly stillness, he caught a sibilant whisper:

"What was that? 'Sh!"

He stepped back softly, and flattened himself instinctively against the wall; thence profoundly intrigued and vaguely alarmed on several scores he peered up at the windows of his wife's room whence the sound had come, whence the sudden light had come which—as he

now realised—had given him the victory in that unequal contest. Looking up at the balcony in whose shadow he stood concealed, he saw two figures there—his wife's and another's—and at the same time he caught sight of something black that dangled from the narrow balcony, and peered more closely to discover a rope ladder.

He felt his skin roughening, bristling like a dog's; he was conscious of being cold from head to foot, as if the flow of his blood had been suddenly arrested; and a sense of sickness overcame him. And then to turn that horrible doubt of his into still more horrible certainty came a man's voice, subdued, yet not so subdued but that he recognised it for Ned Tremayne's.

"There's some one lying there. I can make out the figure."

"Don't go down! For pity's sake, come back. Come back and wait, Ned. If any one should come and find you we shall be ruined."

Thus hoarsely whispering, vibrating with terror, the voice of his wife reached O'Moy, to confirm him the unsuspecting blind cuckold that Samoval had dubbed him to his face, for which Samoval—warning the guilty pair with his last breath even as he had earlier so mockingly warned Sir Terence—had coughed up his soul on the turf of that enclosed garden.

Crouching there for a moment longer, a man bereft of movement and of reason, stood O'Moy, conscious only of pain, in an agony of mind and heart that at one and the same time froze his blood and drew the sweat from his brow.

Then he was for stepping out into the open, and, giving flow to the rage and surging violence that followed, calling down the man who had dishonoured him and slaying him there under the eyes of that trull who had brought him to this shame. But he controlled the impulse, or else Satan controlled it for him. That way, whispered the Tempter,

was too straight and simple. He must think. He must have time to readjust his mind to the horrible circumstances so suddenly revealed.

Very soft and silently, keeping well within the shadow of the wall, he sidled to the door which he had left ajar. Soundlessly he pushed it open, passed in and as soundlessly closed it again. For a moment he stood leaning heavily against its timbers, his breath coming in short panting sobs. Then he steadied himself and turning, made his way down the corridor to the little study which had been fitted up for him in the residential wing, and where sometimes he worked at night. He had been writing there that evening ever since dinner, and he had quitted the room only to go to his assignation with Samoval, leaving the lamp burning on his open desk.

He opened the door, but before passing in he paused a moment, straining his ears to listen for sounds overhead. His eyes, glancing up and down, were arrested by a thin blade of light under a door at the end of the corridor. It was the door of the butler's pantry, and the line of light announced that Mullins had not yet gone to bed. At once Sir Terence understood that, knowing him to be at work, the old servant had himself remained below in case his master should want anything before retiring.

Continuing to move without noise, Sir Terence entered his study, closed the door and crossed to his desk. Wearily he dropped into the chair that stood before it, his face drawn and ghastly, his smouldering eyes staring vacantly ahead. On the desk before him lay the letters that he had spent the past hours in writing—one to his wife; another to Tremayne; another to his brother in Ireland; and several others connected with his official duties, making provision for their uninterrupted continuance in the event of his not surviving the encounter.

Now it happened that amongst the latter there was one that was destined hereafter to play a considerable part; it was a note for the

Commissary-General upon a matter that demanded immediate attention, and the only one of all those letters that need now survive. It was marked "Most Urgent," and had been left by him for delivery first thing in the morning. He pulled open a drawer and swept into it all the letters he had written save that one.

He locked that drawer; then unlocked another, and took thence a case of pistols. With shaking hands he lifted out one of the weapons to examine it, and all the while, of course, his thoughts were upon his wife and Tremayne. He was considering how well-founded had been his every twinge of jealousy; how wasted, how senseless the reactions of shame that had followed them; how insensate his trust in Tremayne's honesty, and, above all, with what crafty, treacherous subtlety Tremayne had drawn a red herring across the trail of his suspicions by pretending to an unutterable passion for Sylvia Armytage. It was perhaps that piece of duplicity, worthy, he thought, of the Iscariot himself, that galled Sir Terence now most sorely; that and the memory of his own silly credulity. He had been such a ready dupe. How those two together must have laughed at him! Oh, Tremayne had been very subtle! He had been the friend, the quasi-brother, parading his affection for the Butler family to excuse the familiarities with Lady O'Moy which he had permitted himself under Sir Terence's very eyes. O'Moy thought of them as he had seen them in the garden on the night of Redondo's ball, remembered the air of transparent honesty by which that damned hypocrite when discovered had deflected his just resentment.

Oh, there was no doubt that the treacherous blackguard had been subtle. But—by God!—subtlety should be repaid with subtlety! He would deal with Tremayne as cruelly as Tremayne had dealt with him; and his wanton wife, too, should be repaid in kind. He beheld the way clear, in a flash of wicked inspiration. He put back the pistol, slapped down the lid of the box and replaced it in its drawer.

He rose, took up the letter to the Commissary-general, stepped briskly to the door and pulled it open.

"Mullins!" he called sharply. "Are you there? Mullins?"

Came the sound of a scraping chair, and instantly that door at the end of the corridor was thrown open, and Mullins stood silhouetted against the light behind him. A moment he stood there, then came forward.

"You called, Sir Terence?"

"Yes." Sir Terence's voice was miraculously calm. His back was to the light and his face in shadow, so that its drawn, haggard look was not perceptible to the butler. "I am going to bed. But first I want you to step across to the sergeant of the guard with this letter for the Commissary-General. Tell him that it is of the utmost importance, and ask him to arrange to have it taken into Lisbon first thing in the morning."

Mullins bowed, venerable as an archdeacon in aspect and bearing, as he received the letter from his master: "Certainly, Sir Terence."

As he departed Sir Terence turned and slowly paced back to his desk, leaving the door open. His eyes had narrowed; there was a cruel, an almost evil smile on his lips. Of the generous, good-humoured nature imprinted upon his face every sign had vanished. His countenance was a mask of ferocity restrained by intelligence, cold and calculating.

Oh, he would pay the score that lay between himself and those two who had betrayed him. They should receive treachery for treachery, mockery for mockery, and for dishonour death. They had deemed him an old fool! What was the expression that Samoval had used—Pantaloone in the comedy? Well, well! He had been Pantaloone in the comedy so far. But now they should find him Pantaloone in the tragedy

—nay, not Pantaloon at all, but Polichinelle, the sinister jester, the cynical clown, who laughs in murdering. And in anguished silence should they bear the punishment he would mete out to them, or else in no less anguished speech themselves proclaim their own dastardy to the world.

His wife he beheld now in a new light. It was out of vanity and greed that she had married him, because of the position in the world that he could give her. Having done so, at least she might have kept faith; she might have been honest, and abided by the bargain. If she had not done so, it was because honesty was beyond her shallow nature. He should have seen before what he now saw so clearly. He should have known her for a lovely, empty husk; a silly, fluttering butterfly; a toy; a thing of vanities, emotions, and nothing else.

Thus Sir Terence, cursing the day when he had mated with a fool. Thus Sir Terence whilst he stood there waiting for the outcry from Mullins that should proclaim the discovery of the body, and afford him a pretext for having the house searched for the slayer. Nor had he long to wait.

"Sir Terence! Sir Terence! For God's sake, Sir Terence!" he heard the voice of his old servant. Came the loud crash of the door thrust back until it struck the wall and quick steps along the passage.

Sir Terence stepped out to meet him.

"Why, what the devil—" he was beginning in his bluff, normal tones, when the servant, showing a white, scared face, cut him short.

"A terrible thing, Sir Terence! Oh, the saints protect us, a dreadful thing! This way, sir! There's a man killed—Count Samoval, I think it is!"

"What? Where?"

"Out yonder, in the quadrangle, sir."

"But—" Sir Terence checked. "Count Samoval, did ye say? Impossible!" and he went out quickly, followed by the butler.

In the quadrangle he checked. In the few minutes that were sped since he had left the place the moon had overtopped the roof of the opposite wing, so that full upon the enclosed garden fell now its white light, illumining and revealing.

There lay the black still form of Samoval supine, his white face staring up into the heavens, and beside him knelt Tremayne, whilst in the balcony above leaned her ladyship. The rope ladder, Sir Terence's swift glance observed, had disappeared.

He halted in his advance, standing at gaze a moment. He had hardly expected so much. He had conceived the plan of causing the house to be searched immediately upon Mullins's discovery of the body. But Tremayne's rashness in adventuring down in this fashion spared him even that necessity. True, it set up other difficulties. But he was not sure that the matter would not be infinitely more interesting thus.

He stepped forward, and came to a standstill beside the two—his dead enemy and his living one.

CHAPTER XIII. POLICHINELLE

"Why, Ned," he asked gravely, "what has happened?"

"It is Samoval," was Tremayne's quiet answer. "He is quite dead."

He stood up as he spoke, and Sir Terence observed with terrible inward mirth that his tone had the frank and honest ring, his bearing the imperturbable ease which more than once before had imposed upon him as the outward signs of an easy conscience. This secretary of his was a cool scoundrel.

"Samoval, is it?" said Sir Terence, and went down on one knee beside the body to make a perfunctory examination. Then he looked up at the captain.

"And how did this happen?"

"Happen?" echoed Tremayne, realising that the question was being addressed particularly to himself. "That is what I am wondering. I found him here in this condition."

"You found him here? Oh, you found him here in this condition! Curious!" Over his shoulder he spoke to the butler: "Mullins, you had better call the guard." He picked up the slender weapon that lay beside Samoval. "A duelling sword!" Then he looked searchingly about him until his eyes caught the gleam of the other blade near the wall, where himself he had dropped it. "Ah!" he said, and went to pick it up. "Very odd!" He looked up at the balcony, over the parapet of which his wife was leaning. "Did you see anything, my dear?" he asked, and neither Tremayne nor she detected the faint note of wicked mockery in the question.

There was a moment's pause before she answered him, faltering:

"N-no. I saw nothing." Sir Terence's straining ears caught no faintest sound of the voice that had prompted her urgently from behind the curtained windows.

"How long have you been there?" he asked her.

"A—a moment only," she replied, again after a pause. "I—I thought I heard a cry, and—and I came to see what had happened." Her voice shook with terror; but what she beheld would have been quite enough to account for that.

The guard filed in through the doors from the official quarters, a sergeant with a halbert in one hand and a lantern in the other, followed by four men, and lastly by Mullins. They halted and came to attention before Sir Terence. And almost at the same moment there was a sharp rattling knock on the wicket in the great closed gates through which Samoval had entered. Startled, but without showing any signs of it, Sir Terence bade Mullins go open, and in a general silence all waited to see who it was that came.

A tall man, bowing his shoulders to pass under the low lintel of that narrow door, stepped over the sill and into the courtyard. He wore a cocked hat, and as his great cavalry cloak fell open the yellow rays of the sergeant's lantern gleamed faintly on a British uniform. Presently, as he advanced into the quadrangle, he disclosed the aquiline features of Colquhoun Grant.

"Good-evening, General. Good-evening, Tremayne," he greeted one and the other. Then his eyes fell upon the body lying between them. "Samoval, eh? So I am not mistaken in seeking him here. I have had him under very close observation during the past day or two, and when one of my men brought me word tonight that he had left his place at Bispo on foot and alone, going along the upper Alcantara

road, if had a notion that he might be coming to Monsanto and I followed. But I hardly expected to find this. How has it happened?"

"That is what I was just asking Tremayne," replied Sir Terence. "Mullins discovered him here quite by chance with the body."

"Oh!" said Grant, and turned to the captain. "Was it you then—"

"I?" interrupted Tremayne with sudden violence. He seemed now to become aware for the first time of the gravity of his position. "Certainly not, Colonel Grant. I heard a cry, and I came out to see what it was. I found Samoval here, already dead."

"I see," said Grant. "You were with Sir Terence, then, when this—"

"Nay," Sir Terence interrupted. "I have been alone since dinner, clearing up some arrears of work. I was in my study there when Mullins called me to tell me what he had discovered. It looks as if there had been a duel. Look at these swords." Then he turned to his secretary. "I think, Captain Tremayne," he said gravely, "that you had better report yourself under arrest to your colonel."

Tremayne stiffened suddenly. "Report myself under arrest?" he cried. "My God, Sir Terence, you don't believe that I—"

Sir Terence interrupted him. The voice in which he spoke was stern, almost sad; but his eyes gleamed with fiendish mockery the while. It was Polichinelle that spoke—Polichinelle that mocks what time he slays. "What were you doing here?" he asked, and it was like moving the checkmating piece.

Tremayne stood stricken and silent. He cast a desperate upward glance at the balcony overhead. The answer was so easy, but it would entail delivering Richard Butler to his death. Colonel Grant, following his upward glance, beheld Lady O'Moy for the first time. He bowed, swept off his cocked hat, and "Perhaps her ladyship," he suggested

to Sir Terence, "may have seen something."

"I have already asked her," replied O'Moy.

And then she herself was feverishly assuring Colonel Grant that she had seen nothing at all, that she had heard a cry and had come out on to the balcony to see what was happening.

"And was Captain Tremayne here when you came out?" asked O'Moy, the deadly jester.

"Ye-es," she faltered. "I was only a moment or two before yourself."

"You see?" said Sir Terence heavily to Grant, and Grant, with pursed lips, nodded, his eyes moving from O'Moy to Tremayne.

"But, Sir Terence," cried Tremayne, "I give you my word—I swear to you—that I know absolutely nothing of how Samoval met his death."

"What were you doing here?" O'Moy asked again, and this time the sinister, menacing note of derision vibrated clearly in the question.

Tremayne for the first time in his honest, upright life found himself deliberately choosing between truth and falsehood. The truth would clear him—since with that truth he would produce witnesses to it, establishing his movements completely. But the truth would send a man to his death; and so for the sake of that man's life he was driven into falsehood.

"I was on my way to see you," he said.

"At midnight?" cried Sir Terence on a note of grim doubt. "To what purpose?"

"Really, Sir Terence, if my word is not sufficient, I refuse to submit to cross-examination."

Sir Terence turned to the sergeant of the guard, "How long is it

since Captain Tremayne arrived?" he asked.

The sergeant stood to attention. "Captain Tremayne, sir, arrived rather more than half-an-hour ago. He came in a curricule, which is still waiting at the gates."

"Half-an-hour ago, eh?" said Sir Terence, and from Colquhoun Grant there was a sharp and audible intake of breath, expressive either of understanding, or surprise, or both. The adjutant looked at Tremayne again. "As my questions seem only to entangle you further," he said, "I think you had better do as I suggest without more protests: report yourself under arrest to Colonel Fletcher in the morning, sir."

Still Tremayne hesitated for a moment. Then drawing himself up, he saluted curtly. "Very well, sir," he replied.

"But, Terence—" cried her ladyship from above.

"Ah?" said Sir Terence, and he looked up. "You would say—?" he encouraged her, for she had broken off abruptly, checked again—although none below could guess it—by the one behind who prompted her.

"Couldn't you—couldn't you wait?" she was faltering, compelled to it by his question.

"Certainly. But for what?" quoth he, grimly sardonic.

"Wait until you have some explanation," she concluded lamely.

"That will be the business of the court-martial," he answered. "My duty is quite clear and simple; I think. You needn't wait, Captain Tremayne."

And so, without another word, Tremayne turned and departed. The soldiers, in compliance with the short command issued by Sir

Terence, took up the body and bore it away to a room in the official quarters; and in their wake went Colonel Grant, after taking his leave of Sir Terence. Her ladyship vanished from the balcony and closed her windows, and finally Sir Terence, followed by Mullins, slowly, with bowed head and dragging steps, reentered the house. In the quadrangle, flooded now by the cold, white light of the moon, all was peace once more. Sir Terence turned into his study, sank into the chair by his desk and sat there awhile staring into vacancy, a diabolical smile upon his handsome, mobile mouth. Gradually the smile faded and horror overspread his face. Finally he flung himself forward and buried his head in his arms.

There were steps in the hall outside, a quick mutter of voices, and then the door of his study was flung open, and Miss Armytage came sharply to rouse him.

"Terence! What has happened to Captain Tremayne?"

He sat up stiffly, as she sped across the room to him. She was wrapped in a blue quilted bed-gown, her dark hair hung in two heavy plaits, and her bare feet had been hastily thrust into slippers.

Sir Terence looked at her with eyes that were dull and heavy and that yet seemed to search her white, startled face.

She set a hand on his shoulder, and looked down into his ravaged, haggard countenance. He seemed suddenly to have been stricken into an old man.

"Mullins has just told me that Captain Tremayne has been ordered under arrest for—for killing Count Samoval. Is it true? Is it true?" she demanded wildly.

"It is true," he answered her, and there was a heavy, sneering curl on his upper lip.

"But—" She stopped, and put a hand to her throat; she looked as if she would stifle. She sank to her knees beside him, and caught his hand in both her own that were trembling. "Oh, you can't believe it! Captain Tremayne is not the man to do a murder."

"The evidence points to a duel," he answered dully.

"A duel!" She looked at him, and then, remembering what had passed that morning between Tremayne and Samoval, remembering, too, Lord Wellington's edict, "Oh, God!" she gasped. "Why did you let them take him?"

"They didn't take him. I ordered him under arrest. He will report himself to Colonel Fletcher in the morning."

"You ordered him? You! You, his friend!" Anger, scorn, reproach and sorrow all blending in her voice bore him a clear message.

He looked down at her most closely, and gradually compassion crept into his face. He set his hands on her shoulders, she suffering it passively, insensibly.

"You care for him, Sylvia?" he said, between inquiry and wonder. "Well, well! We are both fools together, child. The man is a dastard, a blackguard, a Judas, to be repaid with betrayal for betrayal. Forget him, girl. Believe me, he isn't worth a thought."

"Terence!" She looked in her turn into that distorted face. "Are you mad?" she asked him.

"Very nearly," he answered, with a laugh that was horrible to hear.

She drew back and away from him, bewildered and horrified. Slowly she rose to her feet. She controlled with difficulty the deep emotion swaying her. "Tell me," she said slowly, speaking with obvious effort, "what will they do to Captain Tremayne?"

"What will they do to him?" He looked at her. He was smiling. "They will shoot him, of course."

"And you wish it!" she denounced him in a whisper of horror.

"Above all things," he answered. "A more poetic justice never overtook a blackguard."

"Why do you call him that? What do you mean?"

"I will tell you—afterwards, after they have shot him; unless the truth comes out before."

"What truth do you mean? The truth of how Samoval came by his death?"

"Oh, no. That matter is quite clear, the evidence complete. I mean—oh, I will tell you afterwards what I mean. It may help you to bear your trouble, thankfully."

She approached him again. "Won't you tell me now?" she begged him.

"No," he answered, rising, and speaking with finality. "Afterwards if necessary, afterwards. And now get back to bed, child, and forget the fellow. I swear to you that he isn't worth a thought. Later I shall hope to prove it to you."

"That you never will," she told him fiercely.

He laughed, and again his laugh was harsh and terrible in its bitter mockery. "Yet another trusting fool," he cried. "The world is full of them—it is made up of them, with just a sprinkling of knaves to batten on their folly. Go to bed, Sylvia, and pray for understanding of men. It is a possession beyond riches."

"I think you are more in need of it than I am," she told him, standing

by the door.

"Of course you do. You trust, which is why you are a fool. Trust," he said, speaking the very language of Polichinelle, "is the livery of fools."

She went without answering him and toiled upstairs with dragging feet. She paused a moment in the corridor above, outside Una's door. She was in such need of communion with some one that for a moment she thought of going in. But she knew beforehand the greeting that would await her; the empty platitudes, the obvious small change of verbiage which her ladyship would dole out. The very thought of it restrained her, and so she passed on to her own room and a sleepless night in which to piece together the puzzle which the situation offered her, the amazing enigma of Sir Terence's seeming access of insanity.

And the only conclusion that she reached was that intertwined with the death of Samoval there was some other circumstance which had aroused in the adjutant an unreasoning hatred of his friend, converting him into Tremayne's bitterest enemy, intent—as he had confessed—upon seeing him shot for that night's work. And because she knew them both for men of honour above all, the enigma was immeasurably deepened.

Had she but obeyed the transient impulse to seek Lady O'Moy she might have discovered all the truth at once. For she would have come upon her ladyship in a frame of mind almost as distraught as her own; and she might—had she penetrated to the dressing-room where her ladyship was—have come upon Richard Butler at the same time.

Now, in view of what had happened, her ladyship, ever impulsive, was all for going there and then to her husband to confess the whole truth, without pausing to reflect upon the consequences to others than Ned Tremayne. As you know, it was beyond her to see a thing from

two points of view at one and the same time. It was also beyond her brother—the failing, as I think I have told you, was a family one—and her brother saw this matter only from the point of view of his own safety.

"A single word to Terence," he had told her, putting his back to the door of the dressing-room to bar her intended egress, "and you realise that it will be a court-martial and a firing party for me."

That warning effectively checked her. Yet certain stirrings of conscience made her think of the man who had imperilled himself for her sake and her brother's.

"But, Dick, what is to become of Ned?" she had asked him.

"Oh, Ned will be all right. What is the evidence against him after all? Men are not shot for things they haven't done. Justice will out, you know. Leave Ned to shift for himself for the present. Anyhow his danger isn't grave, nor is it immediate, and mine is."

Helplessly distraught, she sank to an ottoman. The night had been a very trying one for her ladyship. She gave way to tears.

"It is all your fault, Dick," she reproached him.

"Naturally you would blame me," he said with resignation—the complete martyr.

"If only you had been ready at the time, as he told you to be, there would have been no delays, and you would have got away before any of this happened."

"Was it my fault that I should have reopened my wound—bad luck to it!—in attempting to get down that damned ladder?" he asked her. "Is it my fault that I am neither an ape nor an acrobat? Tremayne should have come up at once to assist me, instead of waiting until he had to come up to help me bandage my leg again. Then time would

not have been lost, and very likely my life with it." He came to a gloomy conclusion.

"Your life? What do you mean, Dick?"

"Just that. What are my chances of getting away now?" he asked her. "Was there ever such infernal luck as mine? The Telemachus will sail without me, and the only man who could and would have helped me to get out of this damned country is under arrest. It's clear I shall have to shift for myself again, and I can't even do that for a day or two with my leg in this state. I shall have to go back into that stuffy store-cupboard of yours till God knows when." He lost all self-control at the prospect and broke into imprecations of his luck.

She attempted to soothe him. But he wasn't easy to soothe.

"And then," he grumbled on, "you have so little sense that you want to run straight off to Terence and explain to him what Tremayne was doing here. You might at least have the grace to wait until I am off the premises, and give me the mercy of a start before you set the dogs on my trail."

"Oh, Dick, Dick, you are so cruel!" she protested. "How can you say such things to me, whose only thought is for you, to save you."

"Then don't talk any more about telling Terence," he replied.

"I won't, Dick. I won't." She drew him down beside her on the ottoman and her fingers smoothed his rather tumbled red hair, just as her words attempted to smooth the ruffles in his spirit. "You know I did didn't realise, or I should not have thought of it even. I was so concerned for Ned for the moment."

"Don't I tell you there's not the need?" he assured her. "Ned will be safe enough, devil a doubt. It's for you to keep to what you told them from the balcony; that you heard a cry, went out to see what was

happening and saw Tremayne there bending over the body. Not a word more, and not a word less, or it will be all over with me."

CHAPTER XIV. THE CHAMPION

With the possible exception of her ladyship, I do not think that there was much sleep that night at Monsanto for any of the four chief actors in this tragicomedy. Each had his own preoccupations. Sylvia's we know. Mr. Butler found his leg troubling him again, and the pain of the reopened wound must have prevented him from sleeping even had his anxieties about his immediate future not sufficed to do so. As for Sir Terence, his was the most deplorable case of all. This man who had lived a life of simple and downright honesty in great things and in small, a man who had never stooped to the slightest prevarication, found himself suddenly launched upon the most horrible and infamous course of duplicity to encompass the ruin of another. The offence of that other against himself might be of the most foul and hideous, a piece of treachery that only treachery could adequately avenge; yet this consideration was not enough to appease the clamours of Sir Terence's self-respect.

In the end, however, the primary desire for vengeance and vengeance of the bitterest kind proved master of his mind. Captain Tremayne had been led by his villainy into a coil that should presently crush him, and Sir Terence promised himself an infinite balm for his outraged honour in the entertainment which the futile struggles of the victim should provide. With Captain Tremayne lay the cruel choice of submitting in tortured silence to his fate, or of turning craven and saving his miserable life by proclaiming himself a seducer and a betrayer. It should be interesting to observe how the captain would decide, and his punishment was certain whatever the decision that he took.

Sir Terence came to breakfast in the open, grey-faced and

haggard, but miraculously composed for a man who had so little studied the art of concealing his emotions. Voice and glance were calm as he gave a good-morning to his wife and to Miss Armytage.

"What are you going to do about Ned?" was one of his wife's first questions.

It took him aback. He looked askance at her, marvelling at the steadiness with which she bore his glance, until it occurred to him that effrontery was an essential part of the equipment of all harlots.

"What am I going to do?" he echoed. "Why, nothing. The matter is out of my hands. I may be asked to give evidence; I may even be called to sit upon the court-martial that will try him. My evidence can hardly assist him. My conclusions will naturally be based upon the evidence that is laid before the court."

Her teaspoon rattled in her saucer. "I don't understand you, Terence. Ned has always been your best friend."

"He has certainly shared everything that was mine."

"And you know," she went on, "that he did not kill Samoval."

"Indeed?" His glance quickened a little. "How should I know that?"

"Well... I know it, anyway."

He seemed moved by that statement. He leaned forward with an odd eagerness, behind which there was something terrible that went unperceived by her.

"Why did you not say so before? How do you know? What do you know?"

"I am sure that he did not."

"Yes, yes. But what makes you so sure? Do you possess some

knowledge that you have not revealed?"

He saw the colour slowly shrinking from her cheeks under his burning gaze. So she was not quite shameless then, after all. There were limits to her effrontery.

"What knowledge should I possess?" she filtered.

"That is what I am asking."

She made a good recovery. "I possess the knowledge that you should possess yourself," she told him. "I know Ned for a man incapable of such a thing. I am ready to swear that he could not have done it."

"I see: evidence as to character." He sack back into his chair and thoughtfully stirred his chocolate. "It may weigh with the court. But I am not the court, and my mere opinions can do nothing for Ned Tremayne."

Her ladyship looked at him wildly. "The court?" she cried. "Do you mean that I shall have to give evidence?"

"Naturally," he answered. "You will have to say what you saw."

"But—but I saw nothing."

"Something, I think."

"Yes; but nothing that can matter."

"Still the court will wish to hear it and perhaps to examine you upon it."

"Oh no, no!" In her alarm shy half rose, then sank again to her chair. "You must keep me out of this, Terence. I couldn't—I really couldn't."

He laughed with an affectation of indulgence, masking something

else.

"Why," he said, "you would not deprive Tremayne of any of the advantages to be derived from your testimony? Are you not ready to bear witness as to his character? To swear that from your knowledge of the man you are sure he could not have done such a thing? That he is the very soul of honour, a man incapable of anything base or treacherous or sly?"

And then at last Sylvia, who had been watching them, and seeking to apply to what she heard the wild expressions that Sir Terence had used to herself last night, broke into the conversation.

"Why do you apply these words to Captain Tremayne?" she asked.

He turned sharply to meet the opposition he detected in her. "I don't apply them. On the contrary, I say that, as Una knows, they are not applicable."

"Then you make an unnecessary statement, a statement that has nothing to do with the case. Captain Tremayne has been arrested for killing Count Samoval in a duel. A duel may be a violation of the law as recently enacted by Lord Wellington, but it is not an offence against honour; and to say that a man cannot have fought a duel because a man is incapable of anything base or treacherous or sly is just to say a very foolish and meaningless thing."

"Oh, quite so," the adjutant, admitted. "But if Tremayne denies having fought, if he shelters himself behind a falsehood, and says that he has not killed Samoval, then I think the statement assumes some meaning."

"Does Captain Tremayne say that?" she asked him sharply.

"It is what I understood him to say last night when I ordered him under arrest."

"Then," said Sylvia, with full conviction, "Captain Tremayne did not do it."

"Perhaps he didn't," Sir Terence admitted. "The court will no doubt discover the truth. The truth, you know, must prevail," and he looked at his wife again, marking the fresh signs of agitation she betrayed.

Mullins coming to set fresh covers, the conversation was allowed to lapse. Nor was it ever resumed, for at that moment, with no other announcement save such as was afforded by his quick step and the click-click of his spurs, a short, slight man entered the quadrangle from the doorway of the official wing.

The adjutant, turning to look, caught his breath suddenly in an exclamation of astonishment.

"Lord Wellington!" he cried, and was immediately on his feet.

At the exclamation the new-comer checked and turned. He wore a plain grey undress frock and white stock, buckskin breeches and lacquered boots, and he carried a riding-crop tucked under his left arm. His features were bold and sternly handsome; his fine eyes singularly piercing and keen in their glance; and the sweep of those eyes now took in not merely the adjutant, but the spread table and the ladies seated before it. He halted a moment, then advanced quickly, swept his cocked hat from a brown head that was but very slightly touched with grey, and bowed with a mixture of stiffness and courtliness to the ladies.

"Since I have intruded so unwittingly, I had best remain to make my apologies," he said. "I was on my way to your residential quarters, O'Moy, not imagining that I should break in upon your privacy in this fashion."

O'Moy with a great deference made haste to reassure him on the score of the intrusion, whilst the ladies themselves rose to greet him.

He bore her ladyship's hand to his lips with perfunctory courtesy, then insisted upon her resuming her chair. Then he bowed—ever with that mixture of stiffness and deference—to Miss Armytage upon her being presented to him by the adjutant.

"Do not suffer me to disturb you," he begged them. "Sit down, O'Moy. I am not pressed, and I shall be monstrous glad of a few moments' rest. You are very pleasant here," and he looked about the luxuriant garden with approving eyes.

Sir Terence placed the hospitality of his table at his lordship's disposal. But the latter declined graciously.

"A glass of wine and water, if you will. No more. I breakfasted at Torres Vedras with Fletcher." Then to the look of astonishment on the faces of the ladies he smiled. "Oh yes," he assured them, "I was early astir, for time is very precious just at present, which is why I drop unannounced upon you from the skies, O'Moy." He took the glass that Mullins proffered on a salver, sipped from it, and set it down. "There is so much vexation, so much hindrance from these pestilential intriguers here in Lisbon, that I have thought it as well to come in person and speak plainly to the gentlemen of the Council of Regency." He was peeling off his stout riding-gloves as he spoke. "If this campaign is to go forward at all, it will go forward as I dispose. Then, too, I wanted to see Fletcher and the works. By gad, O'Moy, he has performed miracles, and I am very pleased with him—oh, and with you too. He told me how ably you have seconded him and counselled him where necessary. You must have worked night and day, O'Moy." He sighed. "I wish that I were as well served in every direction." And then he broke off abruptly. "But this is monstrous tedious for your ladyship, and for you, Miss Armytage. Forgive me."

Her ladyship protested the contrary, professing a deep interest in military matters, and inviting his lordship to continue. Lord Wellington, however, ignoring the invitation, turned the conversation upon life in

Lisbon, inquiring hopefully whether they found the place afforded them adequate entertainment.

"Indeed yes," Lady O'Moy assured him. "We are very gay at times. There are private theatricals and dances, occasionally an official ball, and we are promised picnics and water-parties now that the summer is here."

"And in the autumn, ma'am, we may find you a little hunting," his lordship promised them. "Plenty of foxes; a rough country, though; but what's that to an Irishwoman?" He caught the quickening of Miss Armytage's eye. "The prospect interests you, I see."

Miss Armytage admitted it, and thus they made conversation for a while, what time the great soldier sipped his wine and water to wash the dust of his morning ride from his throat. When at last he set down an empty glass Sir Terence took this as the intimation of his readiness to deal with official matters, and, rising, he announced himself entirely at his lordship's service.

Lord Wellington claimed his attention for a full hour with the details of several matters that are not immediately concerned with this narrative. Having done, he rose at last from Sir Terence's desk, at which he had been sitting, and took up his riding-crop and cocked hat from the chair where he had placed them.

"And now," he said, "I think I will ride into Lisbon and endeavour to come to an understanding with Count Redondo and Don Miguel Forjas."

Sir Terence advanced to open the door. But Wellington checked him with a sudden sharp inquiry.

"You published my order against duelling, did you not?"

"Immediately upon receiving it, sir."

"Ha! It doesn't seem to have taken long for the order to be infringed, then." His manner was severe, his eyes stern. Sir Terence was conscious of a quickening of his pulses. Nevertheless his answer was calmly regretful:

"I am afraid not."

The great man nodded. "Disgraceful! I heard of it from Fletcher this morning. Captain What's-his-name had just reported himself under arrest, I understand, and Fletcher had received a note from you giving the grounds for this. The deplorable part of these things is that they always happen in the most troublesome manner conceivable. In Berkeley's case the victim was a nephew of the Patriarch's. Samoval, now, was a person of even greater consequence, a close friend of several members of the Council. His death will be deeply resented, and may set up fresh difficulties. It is monstrous vexatious." And abruptly he asked "What did they quarrel about?"

O'Moy trembled, and his glance avoided the other's gimlet eye. "The only quarrel that I am aware of between them," he said, "was concerned with this very enactment of your lordship's. Samoval proclaimed it infamous, and Tremayne resented the term. Hot words passed between them, but the altercation was allowed to go no further at the time by myself and others who were present."

His lordship had raised his brows. "By gad, sir," he ejaculated, "there almost appears to be some justification for the captain. He was one of your military secretaries, was he not?"

"He was."

"Ha! Pity! Pity!" His lordship was thoughtful for a moment. Then he dismissed the matter. "But then orders are orders, and soldiers must learn to obey implicitly. British soldiers of all degrees seem to find the lesson difficult. We must inculcate it more sternly, that is all."

O'Moy's honest soul was in torturing revolt against the falsehoods he had implied—and to this man of all men, to this man whom he revered above all others, who stood to him for the very fount of military honour and lofty principle! He was in such a mood that one more question on the subject from Wellington and the whole ghastly truth must have come pouring from his lips. But no other question came. Instead his lordship turned on the threshold and held out his hand.

"Not a step farther, O'Moy. I've left you a mass of work, and you are short of a secretary. So don't waste any of your time on courtesies. I shall hope still to find the ladies in the garden so that I may take my leave without inconveniencing them."

And he was gone, stepping briskly with clicking spurs, leaving O'Moy hunched now in his chair, his body the very expression of the dejection that filled his soul.

In the garden his lordship came upon Miss Armytage alone, still seated by the table under the trellis, from which the cloth had by now been removed. She rose at his approach and in spite of gesture to her to remain seated.

"I was seeking Lady O'Moy," said he, "to take my leave of her. I may not have the pleasure of coming to Monsanto again."

"She is on the terrace, I think," said Miss Armytage. "I will find her for your lordship."

"Let us find her together," he said amiably, and so turned and went with her towards the archway. "You said your name is Armytage, I think?" he commented.

"Sir Terence said so."

His eyes twinkled. "You possess an exceptional virtue," said he.

"To be truthful is common; to be accurate rare. Well, then, Sir Terence said so. Once I had a great friend of the name of Armytage. I have lost sight of him these many years. We were at school together in Brussels."

"At Monsieur Goubert's," she surprised him by saying. "That would be John Armytage, my uncle."

"God bless my soul, ma'am!" he ejaculated. "But I gathered you were Irish, and Jack Armytage came from Yorkshire."

"My mother is Irish, and we live in Ireland now. I was born there. But father, none the less, was John Armytage's brother."

He looked at her with increased interest, marking the straight, supple lines of her, and the handsome, high-bred face. His lordship, remember, never lacked an appreciative eye for a fine woman. "So you're Jack Armytage's niece. Give me news of him, my dear."

She did so. Jack Armytage was well and prospering, had made a rich marriage and retired from the Blues many years ago to live at Northampton. He listened with interest, and thus out of his boyhood friendship for her uncle, which of late years he had had no opportunity to express, sprang there and then a kindness for the niece. Her own personal charms may have contributed to it, for the great soldier was intensely responsive to the appeal of beauty.

They reached the terrace. Lady O'Moy was nowhere in sight. But Lord Wellington was too much engrossed in his discovery to be troubled.

"My dear," he said, "if I can serve you at any timer both for Jack's sake and your own, I hope that you will let me know of it."

She looked at him a moment, and he saw her colour come and go, arguing a sudden agitation.

"You tempt me, sir," she said, with a wistful smile.

"Then yield to the temptation, child," he urged her kindly, those keen, penetrating eyes of his perceiving trouble here.

"It isn't for myself," she responded. "Yet there is something I would ask you if I dare—something I had intended to ask you in any case if I could find the opportunity. To be frank, that is why I was waiting there in the garden just now. It was to waylay you. I hoped for a word with you."

"Well, well," he encouraged her. "It should be the easier now, since in a sense we find that we are old friends."

He was so kind, so gentle, despite that stern, strong face of his, that she melted at once to his persuasion.

"It is about Lieutenant Richard Butler," she began.

"Ah," said he lightly, "I feared as much when you said it was not for yourself you had a favour to ask."

But, looking at him, she instantly perceived how he had misunderstood her.

"Mr. Butler," she said, "is the officer who was guilty of the affair at Tavora."

He knit his brow in thought. "Butler-Tavora?" he muttered questioningly. Suddenly his memory found what it was seeking. "Oh yes, the violated nunnery." His thin lips tightened; the sternness of his face increased. "Yes?" he inquired, but the tone was now forbidding.

Nevertheless she was not deterred. "Mr. Butler is Lady O'Moy's brother," she said.

He stared a moment, taken aback. "Good God! Ye don't say so,

child! Her brother! O'Moy's brother-in-law! And O'Moy never said a word to me about it.

"What should he say? Sir Terence himself pledged his word to the Council of Regency that Mr. Butler would be shot when taken."

"Did he, egad!" He was still further surprised out of his sternness "Something of a Roman this O'Moy in his conception of duty! Hum! The Council no doubt demanded this?"

"So I understand, my lord. Lady O'Moy, realising her brother's grave danger, is very deeply troubled."

"Naturally," he agreed. "But what can I do, Miss Armytage? What were the actual facts, do you happen to know?"

She recited them, putting the case bravely for the scapegrace Mr. Butler, dwelling particularly upon the error under which he was labouring, that he had imagined himself to be knocking at the gates of a monastery of Dominican friars, that he had broken into the convent because denied admittance, and because he suspected some treacherous reason for that denial.

He heard her out, watching her with those keen eyes of his the while.

"Hum! You make out so good a case for him that one might almost believe you instructed by the gentleman himself. Yet I gather that nothing has since been heard of him?"

"Nothing, sir, since he vanished from Tavora, nearly, two months ago. And I have only repeated to your lordship the tale that was told by the sergeant and the troopers who reported the matter to Sir Robert Craufurd on their return."

He was very thoughtful. Leaning on the balustrade, he looked out across the sunlit valley, turning his boldly chiselled profile to his

companion. At last he spoke slowly, reflectively: "But if this were really so—a mere blunder—I see no sufficient grounds to threaten him with capital punishment. His subsequent desertion, if he has deserted—I mean if nothing has happened to him—is really the graver matter of the two."

"I gathered, sir, that he was to be sacrificed to the Council of Regency—a sort of scapegoat."

He swung round sharply, and the sudden blaze of his eyes almost terrified her. Instantly he was cold again and inscrutable. "Ah! You are oddly well informed throughout. But of course you would be," he added, with an appraising look into that intelligent face in which he now caught a faint likeness of Jack Armytage. "Well, well, my dear, I am very glad you have told me of this. If Mr. Butler is ever taken and in danger—there will be a court-martial, of course—send me word of it, and I will see what I can do, both for your sake and for the sake of strict justice."

"Oh, not for my sake," she protested, reddening slightly at the gentle imputation. "Mr. Butler is nothing to me—that is to say, he is just my cousin. It is for Una's sake that I am asking this."

"Why, then, for Lady O'Moy's sake, since you ask it," he replied readily. "But," he warned her, "say nothing of it until Mr. Butler is found." It is possible he believed that Butler never would be found. "And remember, I promise only to give the matter my attention. If it is as you represent it, I think you may be sure that the worst that will befall Mr. Butler will be dismissal from the service. He deserves that. But I hope I should be the last man to permit a British officer to be used as a scapegoat or a burnt-offering to the mob or to any Council of Regency. By the way, who told you this about a scapegoat?"

"Captain Tremayne."

"Captain Tremayne? Oh, the man who killed Samoval?"

"He didn't," she cried.

On that almost fierce denial his lordship looked at her, raising his eyebrows in astonishment.

"But I am told that he did, and he is under arrest for it this moment—for that, and for breaking my order against duelling."

"You were not told the truth, my lord. Captain Tremayne says that he didn't, and if he says so it is so."

"Oh, of course, Miss Armytage!" He was a man of unparalleled valour and boldness, yet so fierce was she in that moment that for the life of him he dared not have contradicted her.

"Captain Tremayne is the most honourable man I know," she continued, "and if he had killed Samoval he would never have denied it; he would have proclaimed it to all the world."

"There is no need for all this heat, my dear," he reassured her. "The point is not one that can remain in doubt. The seconds of the duel will be forthcoming; and they will tell us who were the principals."

"There were no seconds," she informed him.

"No seconds!" he cried in horror. "D' ye mean they just fought a rough and tumble fight?"

"I mean they never fought at all. As for this tale of a duel, I ask your lordship: Had Captain Tremayne desired a secret meeting with Count Samoval, would he have chosen this of all places in which to hold it?"

"This?"

"This. The fight—whoever fought it—took place in the quadrangle there at midnight."

He was overcome with astonishment, and he showed it.

"Upon my soul," he said, "I do not appear to have been told any of the facts. Strange that O'Moy should never have mentioned that," he muttered, and then inquired suddenly: "Where was Tremayne arrested?"

"Here," she informed him.

"Here? He was here, then, at midnight? What was he doing here?"

"I don't know. But whatever he was doing, can your lordship believe that he would have come here to fight a secret duel?"

"It certainly puts a monstrous strain upon belief," said he. "But what can he have been doing here?"

"I don't know," she repeated. She wanted to add a warning of O'Moy. She was tempted to tell his lordship of the odd words that O'Moy had used to her last night concerning Tremayne. But she hesitated, and her courage failed her. Lord Wellington was so great a man, bearing the destinies of nations on his shoulders, and already he had wasted upon her so much of the time that belonged to the world and history, that she feared to trespass further; and whilst she hesitated came Colquhoun Grant clanking across the quadrangle looking for his lordship. He had come up, he announced, standing straight and stiff before them, to see O'Moy, but hearing of Lord Wellington's presence, had preferred to see his lordship in the first instance.

"And indeed you arrive very opportunely, Grant," his lordship confessed.

He turned to take his leave of Jack Armytage's niece.

"I'll not forget either Mr. Butler or Captain Tremayne," he promised

her, and his stern face softened into a gentle, friendly smile. "They are very fortunate in their champion."

CHAPTER XV. THE WALLET

"A queer, mysterious business this death of Samoval," said Colonel Grant.

"So I was beginning to perceive," Wellington agreed, his brow dark.

They were alone together in the quadrangle under the trellis, through which the sun, already high, was dappling the table at which his lordship sat.

"It would be easier to read if it were not for the duelling swords. Those and the nature of Samoval's wound certainly point unanswerably to a duel. Otherwise there would be considerable evidence that Samoval was a spy caught in the act and dealt with out of hand as he deserved."

"How? Count Samoval a spy?"

"In the French interest," answered the colonel without emotion, "acting upon the instructions of the Souza faction, whose tool he had become." And Colonel Grant proceeded to relate precisely what he knew of Samoval.

Lord Wellington sat awhile in silence, cogitating. Then he rose, and his piercing eyes looked up at the colonel, who stood a good head taller than himself.

"Is this the evidence of which you spoke?"

"By no means," was the answer. "The evidence I have secured is much more palpable. I have it here." He produced a little wallet of red

morocco bearing the initial "S" surmounted by a coronet. Opening it, he selected from it some papers, speaking the while. "I thought it as well before I left last night to make an examination of the body. This is what I found, and it contains, among other lesser documents, these to which I would draw your lordship's attention. First this." And he placed in Lord Wellington's hand a holograph note from the Prince of Esslingen introducing the bearer, M. de la Fleche, his confidential agent, who would consult with the Count, and thanking the Count for the valuable information already received from him.

His lordship sat down again to read the letter. "It is a full confirmation of what you have told me," he said calmly.

"Then this," said Colonel Grant, and he placed upon the table a note in French of the approximate number and disposition of the British troops in Portugal at the time. "The handwriting is Samoval's own, as those who know it will have no difficulty in discerning. And now this, sir." He unfolded a small sketch map, bearing the title also in French: Probable position and extent of the fortifications north of Lisbon.

"The notes at the foot," he added, "are in cipher, and it is the ordinary cipher employed by the French, which in itself proves how deeply Samoval was involved. Here is a translation of it." And he placed before his chief a sheet of paper on which Lord Wellington read:

"This is based upon my own personal knowledge of the country, odd scraps of information received from time to time, and my personal verification of the roads closed to traffic in that region. It is intended merely as a guide to the actual locale of the fortifications, an exact plan of which I hope shortly to obtain."

His lordship considered it very attentively, but without betraying the least discomposure.

"For a man working upon such slight data as he himself confesses," was the quiet comment, "he is damnably accurate. It is as well, I think, that this did not reach Marshal Massena."

"My own assumption is that he put off sending it, intending to replace it by the actual plan—which he here confesses to the expectation of obtaining shortly."

"I think he died at the right moment. Anything else?"

"Indeed," said Colonel Grant, "I have kept the best for the last." And unfolding yet another document, he placed it in the hands of the Commander-in-Chief. It was Lord Liverpool's note of the troops to be embarked for Lisbon in June and July—the note abstracted from the dispatch carried by Captain Garfield.

His lordship's lips tightened as he considered it. "His death was timely indeed, damned timely; and the man who killed him deserves to be mentioned in dispatches. Nothing else, I suppose?"

"The rest is of little consequence, sir."

"Very well." He rose. "You will leave these with me, and the wallet as well, if you please. I am on my way to confer with the members of the Council of Regency, and I am glad to go armed with so stout a weapon as this. Whatever may be the ultimate finding of the court-martial, the present assumption must be that Samoval met the death of a spy caught in the act, as you suggested. That is the only conclusion the Portuguese Government can draw when I lay these papers before it. They will effectively silence all protests."

"Shall I tell O'Moy?" inquired the colonel.

"Oh, certainly," answered his lordship, instantly to change his mind. "Stay!" He considered, his chin in his hand, his eyes dreamy. "Better not, perhaps. Better not tell anybody. Let us keep this to ourselves for

the present. It has no direct bearing on the matter to be tried. By the way, when does the court-martial sit?"

"I have just heard that Marshal Beresford has ordered it to sit on Thursday here at Monsanto."

His lordship considered. "Perhaps I shall be present. I may be at Torres Vedras until then. It is a very odd affair. What is your own impression of it, Grant? Have you formed any?"

Grant smiled darkly. "I have been piecing things together. The result is rather curious, and still very mystifying, still leaving a deal to be explained, and somehow this wallet doesn't fit into the scheme at all."

"You shall tell me about it as we ride into Lisbon. I want you to come with me. Lady O'Moy must forgive me if I take French leave, since she is nowhere to be found."

The truth was, that her ladyship had purposely gone into hiding, after the fashion of suffering animals that are denied expression of their pain. She had gone off with her load of sorrow and anxiety into the thicket on the flank of Monsanto, and there Sylvia found her presently, dejectedly seated by a spring on a bank that was thick with flowering violets. Her ladyship was in tears, her mind swollen to bursting-point by the secret which it sought to contain but felt itself certainly unable to contain much longer.

"Why, Una dear," cried Miss Armytage, kneeling beside her and putting a motherly arm about that full-grown child, "what is this?"

Her ladyship wept copiously, the springs of her grief gushing forth in response to that sympathetic touch.

"Oh, my dear, I am so distressed. I shall go mad, I think. I am sure I have never deserved all this trouble. I have always been considerate of others. You know I wouldn't give pain to any one. And—and Dick

has always been so thoughtless."

"Dick?" said Miss Armytage, and there was less sympathy in her voice. "It is Dick you are thinking about at present?"

"Of course. All this trouble has come through Dick. I mean," she recovered, "that all my troubles began with this affair of Dick's. And now there is Ned under arrest and to be court-martialled."

"But what has Captain Tremayne to do with Dick?"

"Nothing, of course," her ladyship agreed, with more than usual self-restraint. "But it's one trouble on another. Oh, it's more than I can bear."

"I know, my dear, I know," Miss Armytage said soothingly, and her own voice was not so steady.

"You don't know! How can you? It isn't your brother or your friend. It isn't as if you cared very much for either of them. If you did, if you loved Dick or Ned, you might realise what I am suffering."

Miss Armytage's eyes looked straight ahead into the thick green foliage, and there was an odd smile, half wistful, half scornful, on her lips.

"Yet I have done what I could," she said presently. "I have spoken to Lord Wellington about them both."

Lady O'Moy checked her tears to look at her companion, and there was dread in her eyes.

"You have spoken to Lord Wellington?"

"Yes. The opportunity came, and I took it."

"And whatever did you tell him?" She was all a-tremble now, as she clutched Miss Armytage's hand.

Miss Armytage related what had passed; how she had explained the true facts of Dick's case to his lordship; how she had protested her faith that Tremayne was incapable of lying, and that if he said he had not killed Samoval it was certain that he had not done so; and, finally, how his lordship had promised to bear both cases in his mind.

"That doesn't seem very much," her ladyship complained.

"But he said that he would never allow a British officer to be made a scapegoat, and that if things proved to be as I stated them he would see that the worst that happened to Dick would be his dismissal from the army. He asked me to let him know immediately if Dick were found."

More than ever was her ladyship on the very edge of confiding. A chance word might have broken down the last barrier of her will. But that word was not spoken, and so she was given the opportunity of first consulting her brother.

He laughed when he heard the story.

"A trap to take me, that's all," he pronounced it. "My dear girl, that stiff-necked martinet knows nothing of forgiveness for a military offence. Discipline is the god at whose shrine he worships." And he afforded her anecdotes to illustrate and confirm his assertion of Lord Wellington's ruthlessness. "I tell you," he concluded, "it's nothing but a trap to catch me. And if you had been fool enough to yield, and to have blabbed of my presence to Sylvia, you would have had it proved to you."

She was terrified and of course convinced, for she was easy of conviction, believing always the last person to whom she spoke. She sat down on one of the boxes that furnished that cheerless refuge of Mr. Butler's.

"Then what's to become of Ned?" she cried. "Oh, I had hoped that we had found a way out at last."

He raised himself on his elbow on the camp-bed they had fitted up for him.

"Be easy now," he bade her impatiently. "They can't do anything to Ned until they find him guilty; and how are they going to find him guilty when he's innocent?"

"Yes; but the appearances!"

"Fiddlesticks!" he answered her—and the expression chosen was a mere concession to her sex, and not at all what Mr. Butler intended. "Appearances can't establish guilt. Do be sensible, and remember that they will have to prove that he killed Samoval. And you can't prove a thing to be what it isn't. You can't!"

"Are you sure?"

"Certain sure," he replied with emphasis.

"Do you know that I shall have to give evidence before the court?" she announced resentfully.

It was an announcement that gave him pause. Thoughtfully he stroked his abominable tuft of red beard. Then he dismissed the matter with a shrug and a smile.

"Well, and what of it?" he cried. "They are not likely to bully you or cross-examine you. Just tell them what you saw from the balcony. Indeed you can't very well say anything else, or they will see that you are lying, and then heaven alone knows what may happen to you, as well as to me."

She got up in a pet. "You're callous, Dick—callous!" she told him. "Oh, I wish you had never come to me for shelter."

He looked at her and sneered. "That's a matter you can soon mend," he told her. "Call up Terence and the others and have me shot. I promise I shall make no resistance. You see, I'm not able to resist even if I would."

"Oh, how can you think it?" She was indignant.

"Well, what is a poor devil to think? You blow hot and cold all in a breath. I'm sick and ill and feverish," he continued with self-pity, "and now even you find me a trouble. I wish to God they'd shoot me and make an end. I'm sure it would be best for everybody."

And now she was on her knees beside him, soothing him; protesting that he had misunderstood her; that she had meant—oh, she didn't know what she had meant, she was so distressed on his account.

"And there's never the need to be," he assured her. "Surely you can be guided by me if you want to help me. As soon as ever my leg gets well again I'll be after fending for myself, and trouble you no further. But if you want to shelter me until then, do it thoroughly, and don't give way to fear at every shadow without substance that falls across your path."

She promised it, and on that promise left him; and, believing him, she bore herself more cheerfully for the remainder of the day. But that evening after they had dined her fears and anxieties drove her at last to seek her natural and legal protector.

Sir Terence had sauntered off towards the house, gloomy and silent as he had been throughout the meal. She ran after him now, and came tripping lightly at his side up the steps. She put her arm through his.

"Terence dear, you are not going back to work again?" she

pleaded.

He stopped, and from his fine height looked down upon her with a curious smile. Slowly he disengaged his arm from the clasp of her own. "I am afraid I must," he answered coldly. "I have a great deal to do, and I am short of a secretary. When this inquiry is over I shall have more time to myself, perhaps." There was something so repellent in his voice, in his manner of uttering those last words, that she stood rebuffed and watched him vanish into the building.

Then she stamped her foot and her pretty mouth trembled.

"Oaf!" she said aloud.

CHAPTER XVI. THE EVIDENCE

The board of officers convened by Marshal Beresford to form the court that was to try Captain Tremayne, was presided over by General Sir Harry Stapleton, who was in command of the British troops quartered in Lisbon. It included, amongst others, the adjutant-general, Sir Terence O'Moy; Colonel Fletcher of the Engineers, who had come in haste from Torres Vedras, having first desired to be included in the board chiefly on account of his friendship for Tremayne; and Major Carruthers. The judge-advocate's task of conducting the case against the prisoner was deputed to the quartermaster of Tremayne's own regiment, Major Swan.

The court sat in a long, cheerless hall, once the refectory of the Franciscans, who had been the first tenants of Monsanto. It was stone-flagged, the windows set at a height of some ten feet from the ground, the bare, whitewashed walls hung with very wooden portraits of long-departed kings and princes of Portugal who had been benefactors of the order.

The court occupied the abbot's table, which was set on a shallow dais at the end of the room—a table of stone with a covering of oak, over which a green cloth had been spread; the officers—twelve in number, besides the president—sat with their backs to the wall, immediately under the inevitable picture of the Last Supper.

The court being sworn, Captain Tremayne was brought in by the provost-marshal's guard and given a stool placed immediately before and a few paces from the table. Perfectly calm and imperturbable, he saluted the court, and sat down, his guards remaining some paces behind him.

He had declined all offers of a friend to represent him, on the grounds that the court could not possibly afford him a case to answer.

The president, a florid, rather pompous man, who spoke with a faint lisp, cleared his throat and read the charge against the prisoner from the sheet with which he had been supplied—the charge of having violated the recent enactment against duelling made by the Commander-in-Chief of his Majesty's forces in the Peninsula, in so far as he had fought: a duel with Count Jeronymo de Samoval, and of murder in so far as that duel, conducted in an irregular manner, and without any witnesses, had resulted in the death of the said Count Jeronymo de Samoval.

"How say you, then, Captain Tremayne?" the judge-advocate challenged him. "Are you guilty of these charges or not guilty?"

"Not guilty."

The president sat back and observed the prisoner with an eye that was officially benign. Tremayne's glance considered the court and met the concerned and grave regard of his colonel, of his friend Carruthers and of two other friends of his own regiment, the cold indifference of three officers of the Fourteenth—then stationed in Lisbon with whom he was unacquainted, and the utter inscrutability of O'Moy's rather lowering glance, which profoundly intrigued him, and, lastly, the official hostility of Major Swan, who was on his feet setting forth the case against him. Of the remaining members of the court he took no heed.

From the opening address it did not seem to Captain Tremayne as if this case—which had been hurriedly prepared by Major Swan, chiefly that same morning would amount to very much. Briefly the major announced his intention of establishing to the satisfaction of the court how, on the night of the 28th of May, the prisoner, in flagrant violation of an enactment in a general order of the 26th of that same

month, had engaged in a duel with Count Jeronymo de Samoval, a peer of the realm of Portugal.

Followed a short statement of the case from the point of view of the prosecution, an anticipation of the evidence to be called, upon which the major thought—rather sanguinely, opined Captain Tremayne—to convict the accused. He concluded with an assurance that the evidence of the prisoner's guilt was as nearly direct as evidence could be in a case of murder.

The first witness called was the butler, Mullins. He was introduced by the sergeant-major stationed by the double doors at the end of the hall from the ante-room where the witnesses commanded to be present were in waiting.

Mullins, rather less venerable than usual, as a consequence of agitation and affliction on behalf of Captain Tremayne, to whom he was attached, stated nervously the facts within his knowledge. He was occupied with the silver in his pantry, having remained up in case Sir Terence, who was working late in his study, should require anything before going to bed. Sir Terence called him, and—

"At what time did Sir Terence call you?" asked the major.

"It was ten minutes past twelve, sir, by the clock in my pantry."

"You are sure that the clock was right?"

"Quite sure, sir; I had put it right that same evening."

"Very well, then. Sir Terence called you at ten minutes past twelve. Pray continue."

"He gave me a letter addressed to the Commissary-general. 'Take that,' says he, 'to the sergeant of the guard at once, and tell him to be sure that it is forwarded to the Commissary-General first thing in the morning.' I went out at once, and on the lawn in the quadrangle I saw a

man lying on his back on the grass and another man kneeling beside him. I ran across to them. It was a bright, moonlight night—bright as day it was, and you could see quite clear. The gentleman that was kneeling looks up, at me, and I sees it was Captain Tremayne, sir. 'What's this, Captain dear?' says I. 'It's Count Samoval, and he's kilt,' says he, 'for God's sake, go and fetch somebody.' So I ran back to tell Sir Terence, and Sir Terence he came out with me, and mighty startled he was at what he found there. 'What's happened?' says he, and the captain answers him just as he had answered me: 'It's Count Samoval, and he's kilt. 'But how did it happen?' says Sir Terence. 'Sure and that's just what I want to know,' says the captain; 'I found him here.' And then Sir Terence turns to me, and 'Mullins,' says he, 'just fetch the guard,' and of course, I went at once."

"Was there any one else present?" asked the prosecutor.

"Not in the quadrangle, sir. But Lady O'Moy was on the balcony of her room all the time."

"Well, then, you fetched the guard. What happened when you returned?"

"Colonel Grant arrived, sir, and I understood him to say that he had been following Count Samoval..."

"Which way did Colonel Grant come?" put in the president.

"By the gate from the terrace."

"Was it open?"

"No, sir. Sir Terence himself went to open the wicket when Colonel Grant knocked."

Sir Harry nodded and Major Swan resumed the examination.

"What happened next?"

"Sir Terence ordered the captain under arrest."

"Did Captain Tremayne submit at once?"

"Well, not quite at once, sir. He naturally made some bother. 'Good God!' he says, 'ye'll never be after thinking I kilt him? I tell you I just found him here like this.' 'What were ye doing here, then?' says Sir Terence. 'I was coming to see you,' says the captain. 'What about?' says Sir Terence, and with that the captain got angry, said he refused to be cross-questioned and went off to report himself under arrest as he was bid."

That closed the butler's evidence, and the judge-advocate looked across at the prisoner.

"Have you any questions for the witness?" he inquired.

"None," replied Captain Tremayne. "He has given his evidence very faithfully and accurately."

Major Swan invited the court to question the witness in any manner it considered desirable. The only one to avail himself of the invitation was Carruthers, who, out of his friendship and concern for Tremayne—and a conviction of Tremayne's innocence begotten chiefly by that friendship desired to bring out anything that might tell in his favour.

"What was Captain Tremayne's bearing when he spoke to you and to Sir Terence?"

"Quite as usual, sir."

"He was quite calm, not at all perturbed?"

"Devil a bit; not until Sir Terence ordered him under arrest, and then he was a little hot."

"Thank you, Mullins."

Dismissed by the court, Mullins would have departed, but that upon being told by the sergeant-major that he was at liberty to remain if he chose he found a seat on one of the benches ranged against the wall.

The next witness was Sir Terence, who gave his evidence quietly from his place at the board immediately on the president's right. He was pale, but otherwise composed, and the first part of his evidence was no more than a confirmation of what Mullins had said, an exact and strictly truthful statement of the circumstances as he had witnessed them from the moment when Mullins had summoned him.

"You were present, I believe, Sir Terence," said Major Swan, "at an altercation that arose on the previous day between Captain Tremayne and the deceased?"

"Yes. It happened at lunch here at Monsanto."

"What was the nature of it?"

"Count Samoval permitted himself to criticise adversely Lord Wellington's enactment against duelling, and Captain Tremayne defended it. They became a little heated, and the fact was mentioned that Samoval himself was a famous swordsman. Captain Tremayne made the remark that famous swordsmen were required by Count Samoval's country to, save it from invasion. The remark was offensive to the deceased, and although the subject was abandoned out of regard for the ladies present, it was abandoned on a threat from Count Samoval to continue it later."

"Was it so continued?"

"Of that I have no knowledge."

Invited to cross-examine the witness, Captain Tremayne again declined, admitting freely that all that Sir Terence had said was strictly true. Then Carruthers, who appeared to be intent to act as the

prisoner's friend, took up the examination of his chief.

"It is of course admitted that Captain Tremayne enjoyed free access to Monsanto practically at all hours in his capacity as your military secretary, Sir Terence?"

"Admitted," said Sir Terence.

"And it is therefore possible that he might have come upon the body of the deceased just as Mullins came upon it?"

"It is possible, certainly. The evidence to come will no doubt determine whether it is a tenable opinion."

"Admitting this, then, the attitude in which Captain Tremayne was discovered would be a perfectly natural one? It would be natural that he should investigate the identity and hurt of the man he found there?"

"Certainly."

"But it would hardly be natural that he should linger by the body of a man he had himself slain, thereby incurring the risk of being discovered?"

"That is a question for the court rather than for me."

"Thank you, Sir Terence." And, as no one else desired to question him, Sir Terence resumed his seat, and Lady O'Moy was called.

She came in very white and trembling, accompanied by Miss Armytage, whose admittance was suffered by the court, since she would not be called upon to give evidence. One of the officers of the Fourteenth seated on the extreme right of the table made gallant haste to set a chair for her ladyship, which she accepted gratefully.

The oath administered, she was invited gently by Major Swan to tell the court what she knew of the case before them.

"But—but I know nothing," she faltered in evident distress, and Sir Terence, his elbow leaning on the table, covered his mouth with his hand that its movements might not betray him. His eyes glowered upon her with a ferocity that was hardly dissembled.

"If you will take the trouble to tell the court what you saw from your balcony," the major insisted, "the court will be grateful."

Perceiving her agitation, and attributing it to nervousness, moved also by that delicate loveliness of hers, and by deference to the adjutant-generals lady, Sir Harry Stapleton intervened.

"Is Lady O'Moy's evidence really necessary?" he asked. "Does it contribute any fresh fact regarding the discovery of the body?"

"No, sir," Major Swan admitted. "It is merely a corroboration of what we have already heard from Mullins and Sir Terence."

"Then why unnecessarily distress this lady?"

"Oh, for my own part, sir—" the prosecutor was submitting, when Sir Terence cut in:

"I think that in the prisoner's interest perhaps Lady O'Moy will not mind being distressed a little." It was at her he looked, and for her and Tremayne alone that he intended the cutting lash of sarcasm concealed from the rest of the court by his smooth accent. "Mullins has said, I think, that her ladyship was on the balcony when he came into the quadrangle. Her evidence therefore, takes us further back in point of time than does Mullins's." Again the sarcastic double meaning was only for those two. "Considering that the prisoner is being tried for his life, I do not think we should miss anything that may, however slightly, affect our judgment."

"Sir Terence is right, I think, sir," the judge-advocate supported.

"Very well, then," said the president. "Proceed, if you please."

"Will you be good enough to tell the court, Lady O'Moy, how you came to be upon the balcony?"

Her pallor had deepened, and her eyes looked more than ordinarily large and child-like as they turned this way and that to survey the members of the court. Nervously she dabbed her lips with a handkerchief before answering mechanically as she had been schooled:

"I heard a cry, and I ran out—"

"You were in bed at the time, of course?" quoth her husband, interrupting.

"What on earth has that to do with it, Sir Terence?" the president rebuked him, out of his earnest desire to cut this examination as short as possible.

"The question, sir, does not seem to me to be without point," replied O'Moy. He was judicially smooth and self-contained. "It is intended to enable us to form an opinion as to the lapse of time between her ladyship's hearing the cry and reaching the balcony."

Grudgingly the president admitted the point, and the question was repeated.

"Ye-es," came Lady O'Moy's tremulous, faltering answer, "I was in bed."

"But not asleep—or were you asleep?" rapped O'Moy again, and in answer to the president's impatient glance again explained himself: "We should know whether perhaps the cry might not have been repeated several times before her ladyship heard it. That is of value."

"It would be more regular," ventured the judge-advocate, "if Sir Terence would reserve his examination of the witness until she has

given her evidence."

"Very well," grumbled Sir Terence, and he sat back, foiled for the moment in his deliberate intent to torture her into admissions that must betray her if made.

"I was not asleep," she told the court, thus answering her husband's last question. "I heard the cry, and ran to the balcony at once. That—that is all."

"But what did you see from the balcony?" asked Major Swan.

"It was night, and of course—it—it was dark," she answered.

"Surely not dark, Lady O'Moy? There was a moon, I think—a full moon?"

"Yes; but—but—there was a good deal of shadow in the garden, and—and I couldn't see anything at first."

"But you did eventually?"

"Oh, eventually! Yes, eventually." Her fingers were twisting and untwisting the handkerchief they held, and her distressed loveliness was very piteous to see. Yet it seems to have occurred to none of them that this distress and the minor contradictions into which it led her were the result of her intent to conceal the truth, of her terror lest it should nevertheless be wrung from her. Only O'Moy, watching her and reading in her every word and glance and gesture the signs of her falsehood, knew the hideous thing she strove to hide, even, it seemed, at the cost of her lover's life. To his lacerated soul her torture was a balm. Gloating, he watched her, then, and watched her lover, marvelling at the blackguard's complete self-mastery and impassivity even now.

Major Swan was urging her gently.

"Eventually, then, what was it that you saw?"

"I saw a man lying on the ground, and another kneeling over him, and then—almost at once—Mullins came out, and—"

"I don't think we need take this any further, Major Swan," the president again interposed. "We have heard what happened after Mullins came out."

"Unless the prisoner wishes—" began the judge-advocate.

"By no means," said Tremayne composedly. Although outwardly impassive, he had been watching her intently, and it was his eyes that had perturbed her more than anything in that court. It was she who must determine for him how to proceed; how far to defend himself. He had hoped that by now Dick Butler might have been got away, so that it would have been safe to tell the whole truth, although he began to doubt how far that could avail him, how far, indeed, it would be believed in the absence of Dick Butler. Her evidence told him that such hopes as he may have entertained had been idle, and that he must depend for his life simply upon the court's inability to bring the guilt home to him. In this he had some confidence, for, knowing himself innocent, it seemed to him incredible that he could be proven guilty. Failing that, nothing short of the discovery of the real slayer of Samoval could save him—and that was a matter wrapped in the profoundest mystery. The only man who could conceivably have fought Samoval in such a place was Sir Terence himself. But then it was utterly inconceivable that in that case Sir Terence, who was the very soul of honour, should not only keep silent and allow another man to suffer, but actually sit there in judgment upon that other; and, besides, there was no quarrel, nor ever had been, between Sir Terence and Samoval.

"There is," Major Swan was saying, "just one other matter upon which I should like to question Lady O'Moy." And thereupon he

proceeded to do so: "Your ladyship will remember that on the day before the event in which Count Samoval met his death he was one of a small luncheon party at your house here in Monsanto."

"Yes," she replied, wondering fearfully what might be coming now.

"Would your ladyship be good enough to tell the court who were the other members of that party?"

"It—it was hardly a party, sir," she answered, with her unconquerable insistence upon trifles. "We were just Sir Terence and myself, Miss Armytage, Count Samoval, Colonel Grant, Major Carruthers and Captain Tremayne."

"Can your ladyship recall any words that passed between the deceased and Captain Tremayne on that occasion—words of disagreement, I mean?"

She knew that there had been something, but in her benumbed state of mind she was incapable of remembering what it was. All that remained in her memory was Sylvia's warning after she and her cousin had left the table, Sylvia's insistence that she should call Captain Tremayne away to avoid trouble between himself and the Count. But, search as she would, the actual subject of disagreement eluded her. Moreover, it occurred to her suddenly, and sowed fresh terror in her soul, that, whatever it was, it would tell against Captain Tremayne.

"I—I am afraid I don't remember," she faltered at last.

"Try to think, Lady O'Moy."

"I—I have tried. But I—I can't." Her voice had fallen almost to a whisper.

"Need we insist?" put in the president compassionately. "There are sufficient witnesses as to what passed on that occasion without

further harassing her ladyship."

"Quite so, sir," the major agreed in his dry voice. "It only remains for the prisoner to question the witness if he so wishes."

Tremayne shook his head. "It is quite unnecessary, sir," he assured the president, and never saw the swift, grim smile that flashed across Sir Terence's stern face.

Of the court Sir Terence was the only member who could have desired to prolong the painful examination of her ladyship. But he perceived from the president's attitude that he could not do so without betraying the vindictiveness actuating him; and so he remained silent for the present. He would have gone so far as to suggest that her ladyship should be invited to remain in court against the possibility of further evidence being presently required from her but that he perceived there was no necessity to do so. Her deadly anxiety concerning the prisoner must in itself be sufficient to determine her to remain, as indeed it proved. Accompanied and half supported by Miss Armytage, who was almost as pale as herself, but otherwise very steady in her bearing, Lady O'Moy made her way, with faltering steps to the benches ranged against the side wall, and sat there to hear the remainder of the proceedings.

After the uninteresting and perfunctory evidence of the sergeant of the guard who had been present when the prisoner was ordered under arrest, the next witness called was Colonel Grant. His testimony was strictly in accordance with the facts which we know him to have witnessed, but when he was in the middle of his statement an interruption occurred.

At the extreme right of the dais on which the table stood there was a small oaken door set in the wall and giving access to a small ante-room that was known, rightly or wrongly, as the abbot's chamber. That anteroom communicated directly with what was now the guardroom,

which accounts for the new-comer being ushered in that way by the corporal at the time.

At the opening of that door the members of the court looked round in sharp annoyance, suspecting here some impertinent intrusion. The next moment, however, this was changed to respectful surprise. There was a scraping of chairs and they were all on their feet in token of respect for the slight man in the grey undress frock who entered. It was Lord Wellington.

Saluting the members of the court with two fingers to his cocked hat, he immediately desired them to sit, peremptorily waving his hand, and requesting the president not to allow his entrance to interrupt or interfere with the course of the inquiry.

"A chair here for me, if you please, sergeant," he called and, when it was fetched, took his seat at the end of the table, with his back to the door through which he had come and immediately facing the prosecutor. He retained his hat, but placed his riding-crop on the table before him; and the only thing he would accept was an officer's notes of the proceedings as far as they had gone, which that officer himself was prompt to offer. With a repeated injunction to the court to proceed, Lord Wellington became instantly absorbed in the study of these notes.

Colonel Grant, standing very straight and stiff in the originally red coat which exposure to many weathers had faded to an autumnal brown, continued and concluded his statement of what he had seen and heard on the night of the 28th of May in the garden at Monsanto.

The judge-advocate now invited him to turn his memory back to the luncheon-party at Sir Terence's on the 27th, and to tell the court of the altercation that had passed on that occasion between Captain Tremayne and Count Samoval.

"The conversation at table," he replied, "turned, as was perhaps quite natural, upon the recently published general order prohibiting duelling and making it a capital offence for officers in his Majesty's service in the Peninsula. Count Samoval stigmatised the order as a degrading and arbitrary one, and spoke in defence of single combat as the only honourable method of settling differences between gentlemen. Captain Tremayne dissented rather sharply, and appeared to resent the term 'degrading' applied by the Count to the enactment. Words followed, and then some one—Lady O'Moy, I think, and as I imagine with intent to soothe the feelings of Count Samoval, which appeared to be ruffled—appealed to his vanity by mentioning the fact that he was himself a famous swordsman. To this Captain Tremayne's observation was a rather unfortunate one, although I must confess that I was fully in sympathy with it at the time. He said, as nearly as I remember, that at the moment Portugal was in urgent need of famous swords to defend her from invasion and not to increase the disorders at home."

Lord Wellington looked up from the notes and thoughtfully stroked his high-bridged nose. His stern, handsome face was coldly impassive, his fine eyes resting upon the prisoner, but his attention all to what Colonel Grant was saying.

"It was a remark of which Samoval betrayed the bitterest resentment. He demanded of Captain Tremayne that he should be more precise, and Tremayne replied that, whilst he had spoken generally, Samoval was welcome to the cap if he found it fitted him. To that he added a suggestion that, as the conversation appeared to be tiresome to the ladies, it would be better to change its topic. Count Samoval consented, but with the promise, rather threateningly delivered, that it should be continued at another time. That, sir, is all, I think."

"Have you any questions for the witness, Captain Tremayne?"

inquired the judge-advocate.

As before, Captain Tremayne's answer was in the negative, coupled with the now usual admission that Colonel Grant's statement accorded perfectly with his own recollection of the facts.

The court, however, desired enlightenment on several subjects. Came first of all Carruthers's inquiries as to the bearing of the prisoner when ordered under arrest, eliciting from Colonel Grant a variant of the usual reply.

"It was not inconsistent with innocence," he said.

It was an answer which appeared to startle the court, and perhaps Carruthers would have acted best in Tremayne's interest had he left the question there. But having obtained so much he eagerly sought for more.

"Would you say that it was inconsistent with guilt?" he cried.

Colonel Grant smiled slowly, and slowly shook his head. "I fear I could not go so far, as that," he answered, thereby plunging poor Carruthers into despair.

And now Colonel Fletcher voiced a question agitating the minds of several members of the court.

"Colonel Grant," he said, "you have told us that on the night in question you had Count Samoval under observation, and that upon word being brought to you of his movements by one of your agents you yourself followed him to Monsanto. Would you be good enough to tell the court why you were watching the deceased's movements at the time?"

Colonel Grant glanced at Lord Wellington. He smiled a little reflectively and shook his head.

"I am afraid that the public interest will not allow me to answer your question. Since, however, Lord Wellington himself is present, I would suggest that you ask his lordship whether I am to give you the information you require."

"Certainly not," said his lordship crisply, without awaiting further question. "Indeed, one of my reasons for being present is to ensure that nothing on that score shall transpire."

There followed a moment's silence. Then the president ventured a question. "May we ask, sir, at least whether Colonel Grant's observation of Count Samoval resulted from any knowledge of, or expectation of, this duel that was impending?"

"Certainly you may ask that," Lord Wellington, consented.

"It did not, sir," said Colonel Grant in answer to the question.

"What grounds had you, Colonel Grant, for assuming that Count Samoval was going to Monsanto?" the president asked.

"Chiefly the direction taken."

"And nothing else?"

"I think we are upon forbidden ground again," said Colonel Grant, and again he looked at Lord Wellington for direction.

"I do not see the point of the question," said Lord Wellington, replying to that glance. "Colonel Grant has quite plainly informed the court that his observation of Count Samoval had no slightest connection with this duel, nor was inspired by any knowledge or suspicion on his part that any such duel was to be fought. With that I think the court should be content. It has been necessary for Colonel Grant to explain to the court his own presence at Monsanto at midnight on the 28th. It would have been better, perhaps, had he simply stated that it was fortuitous, although I can understand that the

court might have hesitated to accept such a statement. That, however, is really all that concerns the matter. Colonel Grant happened to be there. That is all that the court need remember. Let me add the assurance that it would not in the least assist the court to know more, so far as the case under consideration is concerned."

In view of that the president notified that he had nothing further to ask the witness, and Colonel Grant saluted and withdrew to a seat near Lady O'Moy.

There followed the evidence of Major Carruthers with regard to the dispute between Count Samoval and Captain Tremayne, which substantially bore out what Sir Terence and Colonel Grant had already said, notwithstanding that it manifested a strong bias in favour of the prisoner.

"The conversation which Samoval threatened to resume does not appear to have been resumed," he added in conclusion.

"How can you say that?" Major Swan asked him.

"I may state my opinion, sir," flashed Carruthers, his chubby face reddening.

"Indeed, sir, you may not," the president assured him. "You are upon oath to give evidence of facts directly within your own personal knowledge."

"It is directly within my own personal knowledge that Captain Tremayne was called away from the table by Lady O'Moy, and that he did not have another opportunity of speaking with Count Samoval that day. I saw the Count leave shortly after, and at the time Captain Tremayne was still with her ladyship—as her ladyship can testify if necessary. He spent the remainder of the afternoon with me at work, and we went home together in the evening. We share the same lodging in Alcantara."

"There was still all of the next day," said Sir Harry. "Do you say that the prisoner was never out of your sight on that day too?"

"I do not; but I can't believe—"

"I am afraid you are going to state opinions again," Major Swan interposed.

"Yet it is evidence of a kind," insisted Carruthers, with the tenacity of a bull-dog. He looked as if he would make it a personal matter between himself and Major Swan if he were not allowed to proceed. "I can't believe that Captain Tremayne would have embroiled himself further with Count Samoval. Captain Tremayne has too high a regard for discipline and for orders, and he is the least excitable man I have ever known. Nor do I believe that he would have consented to meet Samoval without my knowledge."

"Not perhaps unless Captain Tremayne desired to keep the matter secret, in view of the general order, which is precisely what it is contended that he did."

"Falsely contended, then," snapped Major Carruthers, to be instantly rebuked by the president.

He sat down in a huff, and the judge-advocate called Private Bates, who had been on sentry duty on the night of the 28th, to corroborate the evidence of the sergeant of the guard as to the hour at which the prisoner had driven up to Monsanto in his curricule.

Private Bates having been heard, Major Swan announced that he did not propose to call any further witnesses, and resumed his seat. Thereupon, to the president's invitation, Captain Tremayne replied that he had no witnesses to call at all.

"In that case, Major Swan," said Sir Harry, "the court will be glad to hear you further."

And Major Swan came to his feet again to address the court for the prosecution.

CHAPTER XVII. BITTER WATER

Major Swan may or may not have been a gifted soldier. History is silent on the point. But the surviving records of the court-martial with which we are concerned go to show that he was certainly not a gifted speaker. His vocabulary was limited, his rhetoric clumsy, and Major Carruthers denounces his delivery as halting, his very voice dull and monotonous; also his manner, reflecting his mind on this occasion, appears to have been perfectly unimpassioned. He had been saddled with a duty and he must perform it. He would do so conscientiously to the best of his ability, for he seems to have been a conscientious man; but he could not be expected to put his heart into the matter, since he was not inflamed by any zeal born of conviction, nor had he any of the incentives of a civil advocate to sway his audience by all possible means.

Nevertheless the facts themselves, properly marshalled, made up a dangerous case against the prisoner. Major Swan began by dwelling upon the evidence of motive: there had been a quarrel, or the beginnings of a quarrel, between the deceased and the accused; the deceased had shown himself affronted, and had been heard quite unequivocally to say that the matter could not be left at the stage at which it was interrupted at Sir Terence's luncheon-table. Major Swan dwelt for a moment upon the grounds of the quarrel. They were by no means discreditable to the accused, but it was singularly unfortunate, ironical almost, that he should have involved himself in a duel as a result of his out-spoken defence of a wise measure which made duelling in the British army a capital offence. With that, however, he did not think that the court was immediately concerned. By the duel itself the accused had offended against the recent enactment, and, moreover, the irregular manner in which the encounter had been

conducted, without seconds or witnesses, rendered the accused answerable to a charge of murder, if it could be proved that he actually did engage and kill the deceased. Major Swan thought this could be proved.

The irregularity of the meeting must be assigned to the enactment against which it offended. A matter which, under other circumstances, considering the good character borne by Captain Tremayne, would have been quite incomprehensible, was, he thought, under existing circumstances, perfectly clear. Because Captain Tremayne could not have found any friend to act for him, he was forced to forgo witnesses to the encounter, and because of the consequences to himself of the encounter's becoming known, he was forced to contrive that it should be held in secret. They knew, from the evidence of Colonel Grant and Major Carruthers, that the meeting was desired by Count Samoval, and they were therefore entitled to assume that, recognising the conditions arising out of the recent enactment, the deceased had consented that the meeting should take place in this irregular fashion, since otherwise it could not have been held at all, and he would have been compelled to forgo the satisfaction he desired.

He passed to the consideration of the locality chosen, and there he confessed that he was confronted with a mystery. Yet the mystery would have been no less in the case of any other opponent than Captain Tremayne, since it was clear beyond all doubt that a duel had been fought and Count Samoval killed, and no less clear that it was a premeditated combat, and that the deceased had gone to Monsanto expressly to engage in it, since the duelling swords found had been identified as his property and must have been carried by him to the encounter.

The mystery, he repeated, would have been no less in the case of any other opponent than Captain Tremayne; indeed, in the case of some other opponent it might even have been deeper. It must be

remembered, after all, that the place was one to which the accused had free access at all hours.

And it was clearly proven that he availed himself of that access on the night in question. Evidence had been placed before the court showing that he had come to Monsanto in a curricule at twenty minutes to twelve at the latest, and there was abundant evidence to show that he was found kneeling beside the body of the dead man at ten minutes past twelve—the body being quite warm at the time and the breath hardly out of it, proving that he had fallen but an instant before the arrival of Mullins and the other witnesses who had testified.

Unless Captain Tremayne could account to the satisfaction of the court for the manner in which he had spent that half-hour, Major Swan did not perceive, when all the facts of motive and circumstance were considered, what conclusion the court could reach other than that Captain Tremayne was guilty of the death of Count Jeronymo de Samoval in a single combat fought under clandestine and irregular conditions, transforming the deed into technical murder.

Upon that conclusion the major sat down to mop a brow that was perspiring freely. From Lady O'MOY in the background came faintly, the sound of a half-suppressed moan. Terrified, she clutched the hand of Miss Armytage,—and found that hand to lie like a thing of ice in her own, yet she suspected nothing of the deep agitation under her companion's, outward appearance of calm.

Captain Tremayne rose slowly to address the court in reply to the prosecution. As he faced his, judges now he met the smouldering eyes of Sir Terence considering him with such malevolence that he was shocked and bewildered. Was he prejudged already, and by his best friend? If so, what must be the attitude of the others? But the kindly, florid countenance of the president was friendly and encouraging; there was eager anxiety for him in the gaze of his friend Caruthers. He glanced at Lord Wellington sitting at the table's end

sternly inscrutable, a mere spectator, yet one whose habit of command gave him an air that was authoritative and judicial.

At length he began to speak. He had considered his defence, and he had based it mainly upon a falsehood—since the strict truth must have proved ruinous to Richard Butler.

"My answer, gentlemen," he said, "will be a very brief one as brief, indeed, as the prosecution merits—for I entertain the hope than no member of this court is satisfied that the case made out against me is by any means complete." He spoke easily, fluently, and calmly: a man supremely self-controlled. "It amounts, indeed, to throwing upon me the onus of proving myself innocent, and that is a burden which no British laws, civil or miliary, would ever commit the injustice of imposing upon an accused.

"That certain words of disagreement passed between Count Samoval and myself on the eve of the affair in which the Count met his death, as you have heard from various witnesses, I at once and freely admitted. Thereby I saved the court time and trouble, and some other witnesses who might have been caused the distress of having to testify against me. But that the dispute ever had any sequel, that the further subsequent discussion threatened at the time by Count Samoval ever took place, I most solemnly deny. From the moment that I left Sir Terence's luncheon-table on the Saturday I never set eyes on Count Samoval again until I discovered him dead or dying in the garden here at Monsanto on Sunday night. I can call no witnesses to support me in this, because it is not a matter susceptible to proof by evidence. Nor have I troubled to call the only witnesses I might have called—witnesses as to my character and my regard for discipline—who might have testified that any such encounter as that of which I am accused would be utterly foreign to my nature. There are officers in plenty in his Majesty's service who could bear witness that the practice of duelling is one that I hold in the utmost abhorrence,

since I have frequently avowed it, and since in all my life I have never fought a single duel. My service in his Majesty's army has happily afforded me the means of dispensing with any such proof of courage as the duel is supposed to give. I say I might have called witnesses to that fact and I have not done so. This is because, fortunately, there are several among the members of this court to whom I have been known for many years, and who can themselves, when this court comes to consider its finding, support my present assertion.

"Let me ask you, then, gentlemen, whether it is conceivable that, entertaining such feelings as these towards single combat, I should have been led to depart from them under circumstances that might very well have afforded me an ample shield for refusing satisfaction to a too eager and pressing adversary? It was precisely because I hold the duel in such contempt that I spoke with such asperity to the deceased when he pronounced Lord Wellington's enactment a degrading one to men of birth. The very sentiments which I then expressed proclaimed my antipathy to the practice. How, then, should I have committed the inconsistency of accepting a challenge upon such grounds from Count Samoval? There is even more irony than Major Swan supposes in a situation which himself has called ironical.

"So much, then, for the motives that are alleged to have actuated me. I hope you will conclude that I have answered the prosecution upon that matter.

"Coming to the question of fact, I cannot find that there is anything to answer, for nothing has been proved against me. True, it has been proved that I arrived at Monsanto at half-past eleven or twenty minutes to twelve on the night of the 28th, and it has been further proved that half-an-hour later I was discovered kneeling beside the dead body of Count Samoval. But to say that this proves that I killed him is more, I think, if I understood him correctly, than Major Swan himself dares to assert.

"Major Swan is quite satisfied that Samoval came to Monsanto for the purpose of fighting a duel that had been prearranged; and I admit that the two swords found, which have been proven the property of Count Samoval, and which, therefore, he must have brought with him, are a prima-facie proof of such a contention. But if we assume, gentlemen, that I had accepted a challenge from the Count, let me ask you, can you think of any place less likely to have been appointed or agreed to by me for the encounter than the garden of the adjutant-general's quarters? Secrecy is urged as the reason for the irregularity of the meeting. What secrecy was ensured in such a place, where interruption and discovery might come at any moment, although the duel was held at midnight? And what secrecy did I observe in my movements, considering that I drove openly to Monsanto in a curricule, which I left standing at the gates in full view of the guard, to await my return? Should I have acted thus if I had been upon such an errand as is alleged? Common sense, I think, should straightway acquit me on the grounds of the locality alone, and I cannot think that it should even be necessary for me, so as to complete my answer to an accusation entirely without support in fact or in logic, to account for my presence at Monsanto and my movements during the half-hour in question."

He paused. So far his clear reasoning had held and impressed the court. This he saw plainly written on the faces of all—with one single exception. Sir Terence alone the one man from whom he might have looked for the greatest relief—watched him ever malevolently, sardonically, with curling lip. It gave him pause now that he stood upon the threshold of falsehood; and because of that inexplicable but obvious hostility, that attitude of expectancy to ensnare and destroy him, Captain Tremayne hesitated to step from the solid ground of reason, upon which he had confidently walked thus far, on to the uncertain bogland of mendacity.

"I cannot think," he said, "that the court should consider it necessary for me to advance an alibi, to make a statement in proof of my

innocence where I contend that no proof has been offered of my guilt."

"I think it will be better, sir, in your own interests, so that you may be the more completely cleared," the president replied, and so compelled him to continue.

"There was," he resumed, then, "a certain matter connected with the Commissary-General's department which was of the greatest urgency, yet which, under stress of work, had been postponed until the morrow. It was concerned with some tents for General Picton's division at Celorico. It occurred to me that night that it would be better dealt with at once, so that the documents relating to it could go forward early on Monday morning to the Commissary-General. Accordingly, I returned to Monsanto, entered the official quarters, and was engaged upon that task when a cry from the garden reached my ears. That cry in the dead of night was sufficiently alarming, and I ran out at once to see what might have occasioned it. I found Count Samoval either just dead or just dying, and I had scarcely made the discovery when Mullins, the butler, came out of the residential wing, as he has testified.

"That, sirs, is all that I know of the death of Count Samoval, and I will conclude with my solemn affirmation, on my honour as a soldier, that I am as innocent of having procured it as I am ignorant of how it came about.

"I leave myself with confidence in your hands, gentlemen," he ended, and resumed his seat.

That he had favourably impressed the court was clear. Miss Armytage whispered it to Lady O'Moy, exultation quivering in her whisper.

"He is safe!" And she added: "He was magnificent."

Lady O'Moy pressed her hand in return. "Thank God! Oh, thank

God!" she murmured under her breath.

"I do," said Miss Armytage.

There was silence, broken only by the rustle of the president's notes as he briefly looked them over as a preliminary to addressing the court. And then suddenly, grating harshly upon that silence, came the voice of O'Moy.

"Might I suggest, Sir Harry, that before we hear you three of the witnesses be recalled? They are Sergeant Flynn, Private Bates and Mullins."

The president looked round in surprise, and Carruthers took advantage of the pause to interpose an objection.

"Is such a course regular, Sir Harry?" He too had become conscious at last of Sir Terence's relentless hostility to the accused. "The court has been given an opportunity of examining those witnesses, the accused has declined to call any on his own behalf, and the prosecution has already closed its case."

Sir Harry considered a moment. He had never been very clear upon matters of procedure, which he looked upon as none of a soldier's real business. Instinctively in this difficulty he looked at Lord Wellington as if for guidance; but his lordship's face told him absolutely nothing, the Commander-in-Chief remaining an impassive spectator. Then, whilst the president coughed and pondered, Major Swan came to the rescue.

"The court," said the judge-advocate, "is entitled at any time before the finding to call or recall any witnesses, provided that the prisoner is afforded an opportunity of answering anything further that may be elicited in re-examination of these witnesses."

"That is the rule," said Sir Terence, "and rightly so, for, as in the

present instance, the prisoner's own statement may make it necessary."

The president gave way, thereby renewing Miss Armytage's terrors and shaking at last even the prisoner's calm.

Sergeant Flynn was the first of the witnesses recalled at Sir Terence's request, and it was Sir Terence who took up his re-examination.

"You said, I think, that you were standing in the guardroom doorway when Captain Tremayne passed you at twenty minutes to twelve on the night of the 28th?"

"Yes, sir. I had turned out upon hearing the curricie draw up. I had come to see who it was."

"Naturally. Well, now, did you observe which way Captain Tremayne went?—whether he went along the passage leading to the garden or up the stairs to the offices?"

The sergeant considered for a moment, an Captain Tremayne became conscious for the first time that morning that his pulses were throbbing. At last his dreadful suspense came to an end.

"No, sir. Captain Tremayne turned the corner, and was out of my sight, seeing that I didn't go beyond the guardroom doorway."

Sir Terence's lips parted with a snap of impatience. "But you must have heard," he insisted. "You must have heard his steps—whether they went upstairs or straight on."

"I am afraid I didn't take notice, sir."

"But even without taking notice it seems impossible that you should not have heard the direction of his steps. Steps going up stairs sound quite differently from steps walking along the level. Try to think."

The sergeant considered again. But the president interposed. The testiness which Sir Terence had been at no pains to conceal annoyed Sir Harry, and this insistence offended his sense of fair play.

"The witness has already said that the didn't take notice. I am afraid it can serve no good purpose to compel him to strain his memory. The court could hardly rely upon his answer after what he has said already."

"Very well," said Sir Terence curtly. "We will pass on. After the body of Count Samoval had been removed from the courtyard, did Mullins, my butler, come to you?"

"Yes, Sir Terence."

"What was his message? Please tell the court."

"He brought me a letter with instructions that it was to be forwarded first thing in the morning to the Commissary-General's office."

"Did he make any statement beyond that when he delivered that letter?"

The sergeant pondered a moment. "Only that he had been bringing it when he found Count Samoval's body."

"That is all I wish to ask, Sir Harry," O'Moy intimated, and looked round at his fellow-members of that court as if to inquire whether they had drawn any inference from the sergeant's statements.

"Have you any questions to ask the witness, Captain Tremayne?" the president inquired.

"None, sir," replied the prisoner.

Came Private Bates next, and Sir Terence proceeded to question him..

"You said in your evidence that Captain Tremayne arrived at Monsanto between half-past eleven and twenty minutes to twelve?"

"Yes, sir."

"You told us, I think, that you determined this by the fact that you came on duty at eleven o'clock, and that it would be half-an-hour or a little more after that when Captain Tremayne arrived?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is quite in agreement with the evidence of your sergeant. Now tell the court where you were during the half-hour that followed—until you heard the guard being turned out by the sergeant."

"Pacing in front of quarters, sir."

"Did you notice the windows of the building at all during that time?"

"I can't say that I did, sir."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" echoed the private.

"Yes—why not? Don't repeat my words. How did it happen that you didn't notice the windows?"

"Because they were in darkness, sir."

O'Moy's eyes gleamed. "All of them?"

"Certainly, sir, all of them."

"You are quite certain of that?"

"Oh, quite certain, sir. If a light had shown from one of them I couldn't have failed to notice it."

"That will do."

"Captain Tremayne—" began the president.

"I have no questions for the witness, sir," Tremayne announced.

Sir Harry's face expressed surprise. "After the statement he has just made?" he exclaimed, and thereupon he again invited the prisoner, in a voice that was as grave as his countenance, to cross-examine the witness; he did more than invite—he seemed almost to plead. But Tremayne, preserving by a miracle his outward calm, for all that inwardly he was filled with despair and chagrin to see what a pit he had dug for himself by his falsehood, declined to ask any questions.

Private Bates retired, and Mullins was recalled. A gloom seemed to have settled now upon the court. A moment ago their way had seemed fairly clear to its members, and they had been inwardly congratulating themselves that they were relieved from the grim necessity of passing sentence upon a brother officer esteemed by all who knew him. But now a subtle change had crept in. The statement drawn by Sir Terence from the sentry appeared flatly to contradict Captain Tremayne's own account of his movements on the night in question.

"You told the court," O'Moy addressed the witness Mullins, consulting his notes as he did so, "that on the night on which Count Samoval met his death, I sent you at ten minutes past twelve to take a letter to the sergeant of the guard, an urgent letter which was to be forwarded to its destination first thing on the following morning. And it was in fact in the course of going upon this errand that you discovered the prisoner kneeling beside the body of Count Samoval. This is correct, is it not?"

"It is, sir."

"Will you now inform the court to whom that letter was addressed?"

"It was addressed to the Commissary-General."

"You read the superscription?"

"I am not sure whether I did that, but I clearly remember, sir, that you told me at the time that it was for the Commissary-General."

Sir Terence signified that he had no more to ask, and again the president invited the prisoner to question the witness, to receive again the prisoner's unvarying refusal.

And now O'Moy rose in his place to announce that he had himself a further statement to, make to the court, a statement which he had not conceived necessary until he had heard the prisoner's account of his movements during the half-hour he had spent at Monsanto on the night of the duel.

"You have heard from Sergeant Flynn and my butler Mullins that the letter carried from me by the latter to the former on the night of the 28th was a letter for the Commissary-General of an urgent character, to be forwarded first thing in the morning. If the prisoner insists upon it, the Commissary-General himself may be brought before this court to confirm my assertion that that communication concerned a complaint from headquarters on the subject of the tents supplied to the third division Sir Thomas Picton's—at Celorico. The documents concerning that complaint—that is to say, the documents upon which we are to presume that the prisoner was at work during the half-hour in question—were at the time in my possession in my own private study and in another wing of the building altogether."

Sir Terence sat down amid a rustling stir that ran through the court, but was instantly summoned to his feet again by the president.

"A moment, Sir Terence. The prisoner will no doubt desire to

question you on that statement." And he looked with serious eyes at Captain Tremayne.

"I have no questions for Sir Terence, sir," was his answer.

Indeed, what question could he have asked? The falsehoods he had uttered had woven themselves into a rope about his neck, and he stood before his brother officers now in an agony of shame, a man discredited, as he believed.

"But no doubt you will desire the presence of the Commissary-General?" This was from Colonel Fletcher his own colonel and a man who esteemed him—and it was asked in accents that were pleadingly insistent.

"What purpose could it serve, sir? Sir Terence's words are partly confirmed by the evidence he has just elicited from Sergeant Flynn and his butler Mullins. Since he spent the night writing a letter to the Commissary, it is not to be doubted that the subject would be such as he states, since from my own knowledge it was the most urgent matter in our hands. And, naturally, he would not have written without having the documents at his side. To summon the Commissary-General would be unnecessarily to waste the time of the court. It follows that I must have been mistaken, and this I admit."

"But how could you be mistaken?" broke from the president.

"I realise your difficulty in crediting, it. But there it is. Mistaken I was."

"Very well, sir." Sir Harry paused and then added "The court will be glad to hear you in answer to the further evidence adduced to refute your statement in your own defence."

"I have nothing further to say, sir," was Tremayne's answer.

"Nothing further?" The president seemed aghast. "Nothing, sir."

And now Colonel Fletcher leaned forward to exhort him. "Captain Tremayne," he said, "let me beg you to realise the serious position in which you are placed."

"I assure you, sir, that I realise it fully."

"Do you realise that the statements you have made to account for your movements during the half-hour that you were at Monsanto have been disproved? You have heard Private Bates's evidence to the effect that at the time when you say you were at work in the offices, those offices remained in darkness. And you have heard Sir Terence's statement that the documents upon which you claim to have been at work were at the time in his own hands. Do you realise what inference the court will be compelled to draw from this?"

"The court must draw whatever inference it pleases," answered the captain without heat.

Sir Terence stirred. "Captain Tremayne," said he, "I wish to add my own exhortation to that of your colonel! Your position has become extremely perilous. If you are concealing anything that may extricate you from it, let me enjoin you to take the court frankly and fully into your confidence."

The words in themselves were kindly, but through them ran a note of bitterness, of cruel derision, that was faintly perceptible to Tremayne and to one or two others.

Lord Wellington's piercing eyes looked a moment at O'Moy, then turned upon the prisoner. Suddenly he spoke, his voice as calm and level as his glance.

"Captain Tremayne—if the president will permit me to address you in the interests of truth and justice—you bear, to my knowledge, the reputation of an upright, honourable man. You are a man so

unaccustomed to falsehood that when you adventure upon it, as you have obviously just done, your performance is a clumsy one, its faults easily distinguished. That you are concealing something the court must have perceived. If you are not concealing something other than that Count Samoval fell by your hand, let me enjoin you to speak out. If you are shielding any one—perhaps the real perpetrator of this deed—let me assure you that your honour as a soldier demands, in the interests of truth and justice, that you should not continue silent."

Tremayne looked into the stern face of the great soldier, and his glance fell away. He made a little gesture of helplessness, then drew himself stiffly up.

"I have nothing more to say."

"Then, Captain Tremayne," said the president, "the court will pass to the consideration of its finding. And if you cannot account for the half-hour that you spent at Monsanto while Count Samoval was meeting his death, I am afraid that, in view of all the other evidences against you, your position is likely to be one of extremest gravity.

"For the last time, sir, before I order your removal, let me add my own to the exhortations already addressed to you, that you should speak. If still you elect to remain silent, the court, I fear, will be unable to draw any conclusion but one from your attitude."

For a long moment Captain Tremayne stood there in tense, expectant silence. Yet he was not considering; he was waiting. Lady O'Moy he knew to be in court, behind him. She had heard, even as he had heard, that his fate hung perhaps upon whether Richard Butler's presence were to be betrayed or not. Not for him to break faith with her. Let her decide. And, awaiting that decision, he stood there, silent, like a man considering. And then, because no woman's voice broke the silence to proclaim at once his innocence, and the alibi that must ensure his acquittal, he spoke at last.

"I thank you, sir. Indeed, I am very grateful to the court for the consideration it has shown me. I appreciate it deeply, but I have nothing more to say."

And then, when all seemed lost, a woman's voice rang out at last:

"But I have!"

Its sharp, almost strident note acted like an electric discharge upon the court; but no member of the assembly was more deeply stricken than Captain Tremayne. For though the voice was a woman's, yet it was not the voice for which he had been waiting.

In his excitement he turned, to see Miss Armytage standing there, straight and stiff, her white face stamped with purpose; and beside her, still seated, clutching her arm in an agony of fear, Lady O'Moy, murmuring for all to hear her:

"No, no, Sylvia. Be silent, for God's sake!"

But Sylvia had risen to speak, and speak she did, and though the words she uttered were such as a virgin might wish to whisper with veiled countenance and averted glance, yet her utterance of them was bold to the point of defiance.

"I can tell you why Captain Tremayne is silent. I can tell you whom he shields."

"Oh God!" gasped Lady O'Moy, wondering through her anguish how Sylvia could have become possessed of her secret.

"Miss Armytage—I implore you!" cried Tremayne, forgetting where he stood, his voice shaking at last, his hand flung out to silence her.

And then the heavy voice of O'Moy crashed in:

"Let her speak. Let us have the truth—the truth!" And he smote the

table with his clenched fist.

"And you shall have it," answered Miss Armytage. "Captain Tremayne keeps silent to shield a woman—his mistress."

Sir Terence sucked in his breath with a whistling sound. Lady O'Moy desisted from her attempts to check the speaker and fell to staring at her in stony astonishment, whilst Tremayne was too overcome by the same emotion to think of interrupting. The others preserved a watchful, unbroken silence.

"Captain Tremayne spent that half-hour at Monsanto in her room. He was with her when he heard the cry that took him to the window. Thence he saw the body in the courtyard, and in alarm went down at once—without considering the consequences to the woman. But because he has considered them since, he now keeps silent."

"Sir, sir," Captain Tremayne turned in wild appeal to the president, "this is not true." He conceived at once the terrible mistake that Miss Armytage had made. She must have seen him climb down from Lady O'Moy's balcony, and she had come to the only possible, horrible conclusion. "This lady is mistaken, I am ready to—"

"A moment, sir. You are interrupting," the president rebuked.

And then the voice of O'Moy on the note of terrible triumph sounded again like a trumpet through the long room.

"Ah, but it is the truth at last. We have it now. Her name! Her name!" he shouted. "Who was this wanton?"

Miss Armytage's answer was as a bludgeon-stroke to his ferocious exultation.

"Myself. Captain Tremayne was with me."

CHAPTER XVIII FOOL'S MATE

Writing years afterwards of this event—in the rather tedious volume of reminiscences which he has left us—Major Carruthers ventures the opinion that the court should never have been deceived; that it should have perceived at once that Miss Armytage was lying. He argues this opinion upon psychological grounds, contending that the lady's deportment in that moment of self-accusation was the very last that in the circumstances she alleged would have been natural to such a character as her own.

"Had she indeed," he writes, "been Tremayne's mistress, as she represented herself, it was not in her nature to have announced it after the manner in which she did so. She bore herself before us with all the effrontery of a harlot; and it was well known to most of us that a more pure, chaste, and modest lady did not live. There was here a contradiction so flagrant that it should have rendered her falsehood immediately apparent."

Major Carruthers, of course, is writing in the light of later knowledge, and even, setting that aside, I am very far from agreeing with his psychological deduction. Just as a shy man will so overreach himself in his efforts to dissemble his shyness as to assume an air of positive arrogance, so might a pure lady who had succumbed as Miss Armytage pretended, upon finding herself forced to such self-accusation, bear herself with a boldness which was no more than a mask upon the shame and anguish of her mind.

And this, I think, was the view that was taken by those present. The court it was—being composed of honest gentlemen—that felt the shame which she dissembled. There were the eyes that fell away

before the spurious effrontery of her own glance. They were disconcerted one and all by this turn of events, without precedent in the experience of any, and none more disconcerted—though not in the same sense—than Sir Terence. To him this was checkmate—fool's mate indeed. An unexpected yet ridiculously simple move had utterly routed him at the very outset of the deadly game that he was playing. He had sat there determined to have either Tremayne's life or the truth, publicly avowed, of Tremayne's dastardly betrayal. He could not have told you which he preferred. But one or the other he was fiercely determined to have, and now the springs of the snare in which he had so cunningly taken Tremayne had been forced apart by utterly unexpected hands.

"It's a lie!" he bellowed angrily. But he bellowed, it seemed, upon deaf ears. The court just sat and stared, utterly and hopelessly at a loss how to proceed. And then the dry voice of Wellington followed Sir Terence, cutting sharply upon the dismayed silence.

"How can you know that?" he asked the adjutant. "The matter is one upon which few would be qualified to contradict Miss Armytage. You will observe, Sir Harry, that even Captain Tremayne has not thought it worth his while to do so."

Those words pulled the captain from the spell of sheer horrified amazement in which he had stood, stricken dumb, ever since Miss Armytage had spoken.

"I—I am so overwhelmed by the amazing falsehood with which Miss Armytage has attempted to save me from the predicament in which I stand. For it is that, gentlemen. On my oath as a soldier and a gentleman, there is not a word of truth in what Miss Armytage has said."

"But if there were," said Lord Wellington, who seemed the only person present to retain a cool command of his wits, "your honour as

a soldier and a gentleman—and this lady's honour—must still demand of you the perjury."

"But, my lord, I protest—"

"You are interrupting me, I think," Lord Wellington rebuked him coldly, and under the habit of obedience and the magnetic eye of his lordship the captain lapsed into anguished silence.

"I am of opinion, gentlemen," his lordship addressed the court, "that this affair has gone quite far enough. Miss Armytage's testimony has saved a deal of trouble. It has shed light upon much that was obscure, and it has provided Captain Tremayne with an unanswerable alibi. In my view—and without wishing unduly to influence the court in its decision—it but remains to pronounce Captain Tremayne's acquittal, thereby enabling him to fulfil towards this lady a duty which the circumstances would seem to have rendered somewhat urgent."

They were words that lifted an intolerable burden from Sir Harry's shoulders.

In immense relief, eager now to make an end, he looked to right and left. Everywhere he met nodding heads and murmurs of "Yes, Yes." Everywhere with one exception. Sir Terence, white to the lips, gave no sign of assent, and yet dared give none of dissent. The eye of Lord Wellington was upon him, compelling him by its eagle glance.

"We are clearly agreed," the president began, but Captain Tremayne interrupted him.

"But you are wrongly agreed."

"Sir, sir!"

"You shall listen. It is infamous that I should owe my acquittal to the sacrifice of this lady's good name."

"Damme! That is a matter that any parson can put right," said his lordship.

"Your lordship is mistaken," Captain Tremayne insisted, greatly daring. "The honour of this lady is more dear to me than my life."

"So we perceive," was the dry rejoinder. "These outbursts do you a certain credit, Captain Tremayne. But they waste the time of the court."

And then the president made his announcement

"Captain Tremayne, you are acquitted of the charge of killing Count Samoval, and you are at liberty to depart and to resume your usual duties. The court congratulates you and congratulates itself upon having reached this conclusion in the case of an officer so estimable as yourself."

"Ah, but, gentlemen, hear me yet a moment. You, my lord—"

"The court has pronounced. The matter is at an end," said Wellington, with a shrug, and immediately upon the words he rose, and the court rose with him. Immediately, with rattle of sabres and sabretaches, the officers who had composed the board fell into groups and broke into conversation out of a spirit of consideration for Tremayne, and definitely to mark the conclusion of the proceedings.

Tremayne, white and trembling, turned in time to see Miss Armytage leaving the hall and assisting Colonel Grant to support Lady O'Moy, who was in a half-swooning condition.

He stood irresolute, prey to a torturing agony of mind, cursing himself now for his silence, for not having spoken the truth and taken the consequences together with Dick Butler. What was Dick Butler to him, what was his own life to him—if they should they should demand it for the grave breach of duty he had committed by his readiness to

assist a proscribed offender to escape—compared with the honour of Sylvia Armytage? And she, why had she done this for him? Could it be possible that she cared, that she was concerned so much for his life as to immolate her honour to deliver him from peril? The event would seem to prove it. Yet the overmastering joy that at any other time, and in any other circumstances, such a revelation must have procured him, was stifled now by his agonised concern for the injustice to which she had submitted herself.

And then, as he stood there, a suffering, bewildered man, came Carruthers to grasp his hand and in terms of warm friendship to express satisfaction at his acquittal.

"Sooner than have such a price as that paid—" he said bitterly, and with a shrug left his sentence unfinished.

O'Moy came stalking past him, pale-faced, with eyes that looked neither to right nor left.

"O'Moy!" he cried.

Sir Terence checked, and stood stiffly as if to attention, his handsome blue eyes blazing into the captain's own. Thus a moment. Then:

"We will talk of this again, you and I," he said grimly, and passed on and out with clanking step, leaving Tremayne to reflect that the appearances certainly justified Sir Terence's resentment.

"My God, Carruthers! What must he think of me?" he ejaculated.

"If you ask me, I think that he has suspected this from the very beginning. Only that could account for the hostility of his attitude towards you, for the persistence with which he has sought either to convict or wring the truth from you."

Tremayne looked askance at the major. In such a tangle as this it

was impossible to keep the attention fixed upon any single thread.

"His mind must be disabused at once," he answered. "I must go to him."

O'Moy had already vanished.

There were one or two others would have checked the adjutant's departure, but he had heeded none. In the quadrangle he nodded curtly to Colonel Grant, who would have detained him. But he passed on and went to shut himself up in his study with his mental anguish that was compounded of so many and so diverse emotions. He needed above all things to be alone and to think, if thought were possible to a mind so distraught as his own. There were now so many things to be faced, considered, and dealt with. First and foremost—and this was perhaps the product of inevitable reaction—was the consideration of his own duplicity, his villainous betrayal of trust undertaken deliberately, but with an aim very different from that which would appear. He perceived how men must assume now, when the truth of Samoval's death became known as become known it must—that he had deliberately fastened upon another his own crime. The fine edifice of vengeance he had been so skilfully erecting had toppled about his ears in obscene ruin, and he was a man not only broken, but dishonoured. Let him proclaim the truth now and none would believe it. Sylvia Armytage's mad and inexplicable self-accusation was a final bar to that. Men of honour would scorn him, his friends would turn from him in disgust, and Wellington, that great soldier whom he worshipped, and whose esteem he valued above all possessions, would be the first to cast him out. He would appear as a vulgar murderer who, having failed by falsehood to fasten the guilt upon an innocent man, sought now by falsehood still more damnable, at the cost of his wife's honour, to offer some mitigation of his unspeakable offence.

Conceive this terrible position in which his justifiable jealousy—his

naturally vindictive rage—had so irretrievably ensnared him. He had been so intent upon the administration of poetic justice, so intent upon condignly punishing the false friend who had dishonoured him, upon finding a balm for his lacerated soul in the spectacle of Tremayne's own ignominy, that he had never paused to see whither all this might lead him.

He had been a fool to have adopted these subtle, tortuous ways; a fool not to have obeyed the earlier and honest impulse which had led him to take that case of pistols from the drawer. And he was served as a fool deserves to be served. His folly had recoiled upon him to destroy him. Fool's mate had checked his perfidious vengeance at a blow.

Why had Sylvia Armytage discarded her honour to make of it a cloak for the protection of Tremayne? Did she love Tremayne and take that desperate way to save a life she accounted lost, or was it that she knew the truth, and out of affection for Una had chosen to immolate herself?

Sir Terence was no psychologist. But he found it difficult to believe in so much of self-sacrifice from a woman for a woman's sake, however dear. Therefore he held to the first alternative. To confirm it came the memory of Sylvia's words to him on the night of Tremayne's arrest. And it was to such a man that she gave the priceless treasure of her love; for such a man, and in such a sordid cause, that she sacrificed the inestimable jewel of her honour? He laughed through clenched teeth at a situation so bitterly ironical. Presently he would talk to her. She should realise what she had done, and he would wish her joy of it. First, however, there was something else to do. He flung himself wearily into the chair at his writing-table, took up a pen and began to write.

CHAPTER XIX. THE TRUTH

To Captain Tremayne, fretted with impatience in the diningroom, came, at the end of a long hour of waiting, Sylvia Armytage. She entered unannounced, at a moment when for the third time he was on the point of ringing for Mullins, and for a moment they stood considering each other mutually ill at ease. Then Miss Armytage closed the door and came forward, moving with that grace peculiar to her, and carrying her head erect, facing Captain Tremayne now with some lingering signs of the defiance she had shown the members of the court-martial.

"Mullins tells me that you wish to see me," she said the merest conventionality to break the disconcerting, uneasy silence.

"After what has happened that should not surprise you," said Tremayne. His agitation was clear to behold, his usual imperturbability all departed. "Why," he burst out suddenly, "why did you do it?"

She looked at him with the faintest ghost of a smile on her lips, as if she found the question amusing. But before she could frame any answer he was speaking again, quickly and nervously.

"Could you suppose that I should wish to purchase my life at such a price? Could you suppose that your honour was not more precious to me than my life? It was infamous that you should have sacrificed yourself in this manner."

"Infamous of whom?" she asked him coolly.

The question gave him pause. "I don't know!" he cried desperately.

"Infamous of the circumstances, I suppose."

She shrugged. "The circumstances were there, and they had to be met. I could think of no other way of meeting them."

Hastily he answered her out of his anger for her sake: "It should not have been your affair to meet them at all."

He saw the scarlet flush sweep over her face and leave it deathly white, and instantly he perceived how horribly he had blundered.

"I'm sorry to have been interfering," she answered stiffly, "but, after all, it is not a matter that need trouble you." And on the words she turned to depart again. "Good-day, Captain Tremayne."

"Ah, wait!" He flung himself between her and the door. "We must understand each other, Miss Armytage."

"I think we do, Captain Tremayne," she answered, fire dancing in her eyes. And she added: "You are detaining me."

"Intentionally." He was calm again; and he was masterful for the first time in all his dealings with her. "We are very far from any understanding. Indeed, we are overhead in a misunderstanding already. You misconstrue my words. I am very angry with you. I do not think that in all my life I have ever been so angry with anybody. But you are not to mistake the source of my anger. I am angry with you for the great wrong you have done yourself."

"That should not be your affair," she answered him, thus flinging back the offending phrase.

"But it is. I make it mine," he insisted.

"Then I do not give you the right. Please let me pass." She looked him steadily in the face, and her voice was calm to coldness. Only the heave of her bosom betrayed the agitation under which she was

labouring.

"Whether you give me the right or not, I intend to take it," he insisted.

"You are very rude," she reproved him.

He laughed. "Even at the risk of being rude, then. I must make myself clear to you. I would suffer anything sooner than leave you under any misapprehension of the grounds upon which I should have preferred to face a firing party rather than have been rescued at the sacrifice of your good name."

"I hope," she said, with faint but cutting irony, "you do not intend to offer me the reparation of marriage."

It took his breath away for a moment. It was a solution that in his confused and irate state of mind he had never even paused to consider. Yet now that it was put to him in this scornfully reproachful manner he perceived not only that it was the only possible course, but also that on that very account it might be considered by her impossible.

Her testiness was suddenly plain to him. She feared that he was come to her with an offer of marriage out of a sense of duty, as an amende, to correct the false position into which, for his sake, she had placed herself. And he himself by his blundering phrase had given colour to that hideous fear of hers.

He considered a moment whilst he stood there meeting her defiant glance. Never had she been more desirable in his eyes; and hopeless as his love for her had always seemed, never had it been in such danger of hopelessness as at this present moment, unless he proceeded here with the utmost care. And so Ned Tremayne became subtle for the first time in his honest, straightforward, soldierly life. "No," he answered boldly, "I do not intend it."

"I am glad that you spare me that," she answered him, yet her pallor seemed to deepen under his glance.

"And that," he continued, "is the source of all my anger, against you, against myself, and against circumstances. If I had deemed myself remotely worthy of you," he continued, "I should have asked you weeks ago to be my wife. Oh, wait, and hear me out. I have more than once been upon the point of doing so—the last time was that night on the balcony at Count Redondo's. I would have spoken then; I would have taken my courage in my hands, confessed my unworthiness and my love. But I was restrained because, although I might confess, there was nothing I could ask. I am a poor man, Sylvia, you are the daughter of a wealthy one; men speak of you as an heiress. To ask you to marry me—" He broke off. "You realise that I could not; that I should have been deemed a fortune-hunter, not only by the world, which matters nothing, but perhaps by yourself, who matter everything. I—I—" he faltered, fumbling for words to express thoughts of an overwhelming intricacy. "It was not perhaps that so much as the thought that, if my suit should come to prosper, men would say you had thrown yourself away on a fortune-hunter. To myself I should have accounted the reproach well earned, but it seemed to me that it must contain something slighting to you, and to shield you from all slights must be the first concern of my deep worship for you. That," he ended fiercely, "is why I am so angry, so desperate at the slight you have put upon yourself for my sake—for me, who would have sacrificed life and honour and everything I hold of any account, to keep you up there, enthroned not only in my own eyes, but in the eyes of every man."

He paused, and looked at her and she at him. She was still very white, and one of her long, slender hands was pressed to her bosom as if to contain and repress tumult. But her eyes were smiling, and yet it was a smile he could not read; it was compassionate, wistful, and yet tinged, it seemed to him, with mockery.

"I suppose," he said, "it would be expected of me in the circumstances to seek words in which to thank you for what you have done. But I have no such words. I am not grateful. How could I be grateful? You have destroyed the thing that I most valued in this world."

"What have I destroyed?" she asked him.

"Your own good name; the respect that was your due from all men."

"Yet if I retain your own?"

"What is that worth?" he asked almost resentfully.

"Perhaps more than all the rest." She took a step forward and set her hand upon his arm. There was no mistaking now her smile. It was all tenderness, and her eyes were shining. "Ned, there is only one thing to be done."

He looked down at her who was only a little less tall than himself, and the colour faded from his own face now.

"You haven't understood me after all," he said. "I was afraid you would not. I have no clear gift of words, and if I had, I am trying to say something that would overtax any gift."

"On the contrary, Ned, I understand you perfectly. I don't think I have ever understood you until now. Certainly never until now could I be sure of what I hoped."

"Of what you hoped?" His voice sank as if in awe. "What?" he asked.

She looked away, and her persisting, yet ever-changing smile grew slightly arch.

"You do not then intend to ask me to marry you?" she said.

"How could I?" It was an explosion almost of anger. "You yourself suggested that it would be an insult; and so it would. It is to take advantage of the position into which your foolish generosity has betrayed you. Oh!" he clenched his fists and shook them a moment at his sides.

"Very well," she said. "In that case I must ask you to marry me."

"You?" He was thunderstruck.

"What alternative do you leave me? You say that I have destroyed my good name. You must provide me with a new one. At all costs I must become an honest woman. Isn't that the phrase?"

"Don't!" he cried, and pain quivered in his voice. "Don't jest upon it."

"My dear," she said, and now she held out both hands to him, "why trouble yourself with things of no account, when the only thing that matters to us is within our grasp? We love each other, and—"

Her glance fell away, her lip trembled, and her smile at last took flight. He caught her hands, holding them in a grip that hurt her; he bent his head, and his eyes sought her own, but sought in vain.

"Have you considered—" he was beginning, when she interrupted him. Her face flushed upward, surrendering to that questing glance of his, and its expression was now between tears and laughter.

"You will be for ever considering, Ned. You consider too much, where the issues are plain and simple. For the last time—will you marry me?"

The subtlety he had employed had been greater than he knew, and it had achieved something beyond his utmost hopes.

He murmured incoherently and took her to his arms. I really do not

see that he could have done anything else. It was a plain and simple issue, and she herself had protested that the issue was plain and simple.

And then the door opened abruptly and Sir Terence came in. Nor did he discreetly withdraw as a man of feeling should have done before the intimate and touching spectacle that met his eyes. On the contrary, he remained like the infernal marplot that he intended to be.

"Very proper," he sneered. "Very fit and proper that he should put right in the eyes of the world the reputation you have damaged for his sake, Sylvia. I suppose you're to be married."

They moved apart, and each stared at O'Moy Sylvia in cold anger, Tremayne in chagrin.

"You see, Sylvia," the captain cried, at this voicing of the world's opinion he feared so much on her behalf.

"Does she?" said Sir Terence, misunderstanding. "I wonder? Unless you've made all plain."

The captain frowned.

"Made what plain?" he asked. "There is something here I don't understand, O'Moy. Your attitude towards me ever since you ordered me under arrest has been entirely extraordinary. It has troubled me more than anything else in all this deplorable affair."

"I believe you," snorted O'Moy, as with his hands behind his back he strode forward into the room. He was pale, and there was a set, malignant sneer upon his lip, a malignant look in the blue eyes that were habitually so clear and honest.

"There have been moments," said Tremayne, "when I have almost felt you to be vindictive."

"D'ye wonder?" growled O'Moy. "Has no suspicion crossed your mind that I may know the whole truth?"

Tremayne was taken aback. "That startles you, eh?" cried O'Moy, and pointed a mocking finger at the captain's face, whose whole expression had changed to one of apprehension.

"What is it?" cried Sylvia. Instinctively she felt that under this troubled surface some evil thing was stirring, that the issues perhaps were not quite as simple as she had deemed them.

There was a pause. O'Moy, with his back to the window now, his hands still clasped behind him, looked mockingly at Tremayne and waited.

"Why don't you answer her?" he said at last. "You were confidential enough when I came in. Can it be that you are keeping something back, that you have secrets from the lady who has no doubt promised by now to become your wife as the shortest way to mending her recent folly?"

Tremayne was bewildered. His answer, apparently an irrelevance, was the mere enunciation of the thoughts O'Moy's announcement had provoked.

"Do you mean to say that you have known throughout that I did not kill Samoval?" he asked.

"Of course. How could I have supposed you killed him when I killed him myself?"

"You? You killed him!" cried Tremayne, more and more intrigued. And—

"You killed Count Samoval?" exclaimed Miss Armytage.

"To be sure I did," was the answer, cynically delivered,

accompanied by a short, sharp laugh. "When I have settled other accounts, and put all my affairs in order, I shall save the provost-marshal the trouble of further seeking the slayer. And you didn't know then, Sylvia, when you lied so glibly to the court, that your future husband was innocent of that?"

"I was always sure of it," she answered, and looked at Tremayne for explanation.

O'Moy laughed again. "But he had not told you so. He preferred that you should think him guilty of bloodshed, of murder even, rather than tell you the real truth. Oh, I can understand. He is the very soul of honour, as you remarked yourself, I think, the other night. He knows how much to tell and how much to withhold. He is master of the art of discreet suppression. He will carry it to any lengths. You had an instance of that before the court this morning. You may come to regret, my dear, that you did not allow him to have his own obstinate way; that you should have dragged your own spotless purity in the mud to provide him with an alibi. But he had an alibi all the time, my child; an unanswerable alibi which he preferred to withhold. I wonder would you have been so ready to make a shield of your honour could you have known what you were really shielding?"

"Ned!" she cried. "Why don't you speak? Is he to go on in this fashion? Of what is he accusing you? If you were not with Samoval that night, where were you?"

"In a lady's room, as you correctly informed the court," came O'Moy's bitter mockery. "Your only mistake was in the identity of the lady. You imagined that the lady was yourself. A delusion purely. But you and I may comfort each other, for we are fellow-sufferers at the hands of this man of honour. My wife was the lady who entertained this gallant in her room that night."

"My God, O'Moy!" It was a strangled cry from Tremayne. At last he

saw light; he understood, and, understanding, there entered his heart a great compassion for O'Moy, a conception that he must have suffered all the agonies of the damned in these last few days. "My God, you don't believe that I—"

"Do you deny it?"

"The imputation? Utterly."

"And if I tell you that myself with these eyes I saw you at the window of her room with her; if I tell you that I saw the rope ladder dangling from her balcony; if I tell you that crouching there after I had killed Samoval—killed him, mark me, for saying that you and my wife betrayed me; killed him for telling me the filthy truth—if I tell you that I heard her attempting to restrain you from going down to see what had happened—if I tell you all this, will you still deny it, will you still lie?"

"I will still say that all that you imply is false as hell and your own senseless jealousy can make it.

"All that I imply? But what I state—the facts themselves, are they true?"

"They are true. But—"

"True!" cried Miss Armytage in horror.

"Ah, wait," O'Moy bade her with his heavy sneer. "You interrupt him. He is about to construe those facts so that they shall wear an innocent appearance. He is about to prove himself worthy of the great sacrifice you made to save his life. Well?" And he looked expectantly at Tremayne.

Miss Armytage looked at him too, with eyes from which the dread passed almost at once. The captain was smiling, wistfully, tolerantly, confidently, almost scornfully. Had he been guilty of the thing imputed he could not have stood so in her presence.

"O'Moy," he said slowly, "I should tell you that you have played the knave in this were it not clear to me that you have played the fool." He spoke entirely without passion. He saw his way quite clearly. Things had reached a pass in which for the sake of all concerned, and perhaps for the sake of Miss Armytage more than any one, the whole truth must be spoken without regard to its consequences to Richard Butler.

"You dare to take that tone?" began O'Moy in a voice of thunder.

"Yourself shall be the first to justify it presently. I should be angry with you, O'Moy, for what you have done. But I find my anger vanishing in regret. I should scorn you for the lie you have acted, for your scant regard to your oath in the court-martial, for your attempt to combat an imagined villainy by a real villainy. But I realise what you have suffered, and in that suffering lies the punishment you fully deserve for not having taken the straight course, for not having taxed me there and then with the thing that you suspected."

"The gentleman is about to lecture me upon morals, Sylvia." But Tremayne let pass the interruption.

"It is quite true that I was in Una's room while you were killing Samoval. But I was not alone with her, as you have so rashly assumed. Her brother Richard was there, and it was on his behalf that I was present. She had been hiding him for a fortnight. She begged me, as Dick's friend and her own, to save him; and I undertook to do so. I climbed to her room to assist him to descend by the rope ladder you saw, because he was wounded and could not climb without assistance. At the gates I had the curricule waiting in which I had driven up. In this I was to have taken him on board a ship that was leaving that night for England, having made arrangements with her captain. You should have seen, had you reflected, that—as I told the court—had I been coming to a clandestine meeting, I should hardly have

driven up in so open a fashion, and left the curricule to wait for me at the gates.

"The death of Samoval and my own arrest thwarted our plans and prevented Dick's escape. That is the truth. Now that you have it I hope you like it, and I hope that you thoroughly relish your own behaviour in the matter."

There was a fluttering sigh of relief from Miss Armytage. Then silence followed, in which O'Moy stared at Tremayne, emotion after emotion sweeping across his mobile face.

"Dick Butler?" he said at last, and cried out: "I don't believe a word of it! Ye're lying, Tremayne."

"You have cause enough to hope so."

The captain was faintly scornful.

"If it were true, Una would not have kept it from me. It was to me she would have come."

"The trouble with you, O'Moy, is that jealousy seems to have robbed you of the power of coherent thought, or else you would remember that you were the last man to whom Una could confide Dick's presence here. I warned her against doing so. I told her of the promise you had been compelled to give the secretary, Forjas, and I was even at pains to justify you to her when she was indignant with you for that. It would perhaps be better," he concluded, "if you were to send for Una."

"It's what I intend," said Sir Terence in a voice that made a threat of the statement. He strode stiffly across the room and pulled open the door. There was no need to go farther. Lady O'Moy, white and tearful, was discovered on the threshold. Sir Terence stood aside, holding the door for her, his face very grim.

She came in slowly, looking from one to another with her troubled glance, and finally accepting the chair that Captain Tremayne made haste to offer her. She had so much to say to each person present that it was impossible to know where to begin. It remained for Sir Terence to give her the lead she needed, and this he did so soon as he had closed the door again. Planted before it like a sentry, he looked at her between anger and suspicion.

"How much did you overhear?" he asked her.

"All that you said about Dick," she answered without hesitation.

"Then you stood listening?"

"Of course. I wanted to know what you were saying."

"There are other ways of ascertaining that without stooping to keyholes," said her husband.

"I didn't stoop," she said, taking him literally. "I could hear what was said without that—especially what you said, Terence. You will raise your voice so on the slightest provocation."

"And the provocation in this instance was, of course, of the slightest. Since you have heard Captain Tremayne's story of course you'll have no difficulty in confirming it."

"If you still can doubt, O'Moy," said Tremayne, "it must be because you wish to doubt; because you are afraid to face the truth now that it has been placed before you. I think, Una, it will spare a deal of trouble, and save your husband from a great many expressions that he may afterwards regret, if you go and fetch Dick. God knows, Terence has enough to overwhelm him already."

At the suggestion of producing Dick, O'Moy's anger, which had begun to simmer again, was stilled. He looked at his wife almost in

alarm, and she met his look with one of utter blankness.

"I can't," she said plaintively. "Dick's gone."

"Gone?" cried Tremayne.

"Gone?" said O'Moy, and then he began to laugh. "Are you quite sure that he was ever here?"

"But—" She was a little bewildered, and a frown puckered her perfect brow. "Hasn't Ned told you, then?"

"Oh, Ned has told me. Ned has told!" His face was terrible.

"And don't you believe him? Don't you believe me?" She was more plaintive than ever. It was almost as if she called heaven to witness what manner of husband she was forced to endure. "Then you had better call Mullins and ask him. He saw Dick leave."

"And no doubt," said Miss Armytage mercilessly, "Sir Terence will believe his butler where he can believe neither his wife nor his friend."

He looked at her in a sort of amazement. "Do you believe them, Sylvia?" he cried.

"I hope I am not a fool," said she impatiently.

"Meaning—" he began, but broke off. "How long do you say it is since Dick left the house?"

"Ten minutes at most," replied her ladyship.

He turned and pulled the door open again. "Mullins?" he called. "Mullins!"

"What a man to live with!" sighed her ladyship, appealing to Miss Armytage. "What a man!" And she applied a vinaigrette delicately to her nostrils.

Tremayne smiled, and sauntered to the window. And then at last came Mullins.

"Has any one left the house within the last ten minutes, Mullins?" asked Sir Terence.

Mullins looked ill at ease.

"Sure, sir, you'll not be after—"

"Will you answer my question, man?" roared Sir Terence.

"Sure, then, there's nobody left the house at all but Mr. Butler, sir."

"How long had he been here?" asked O'Moy, after a brief pause.

"'Tis what I can't tell ye, sir. I never set eyes on him until I saw him coming downstairs from her ladyship's room as it might be."

"You can go, Mullins."

"I hope, sir—"

"You can go." And Sir Terence slammed the door upon the amazed servant, who realised that some unhappy mystery was perturbing the adjutant's household.

Sir Terence stood facing them again. He was a changed man. The fire had all gone out of him. His head was bowed and his face looked haggard and suddenly old. His lip curled into a sneer.

"Pantaloon in the comedy," he said, remembering in that moment the bitter gibe that had cost Samoval his life.

"What did you say?" her ladyship asked him.

"I pronounced my own name," he answered lugubriously.

"It didn't sound like it, Terence."

"It's the name I ought to bear," he said. "And I killed that liar for it—the only truth he spoke."

He came forward to the table. The full sense of his position suddenly overwhelmed him, as Tremayne had said it would. A groan broke from him and he collapsed into a chair, a stricken, broken man.

CHAPTER XX. THE RESIGNATION

At once, as he sat there, his elbows on the table, his head in his hands, he found himself surrounded by those three, against each of whom he had sinned under the spell of the jealousy that had blinded him and led him by the nose.

His wife put an arm about his neck in mute comfort of a grief of which she only understood the half—for of the heavier and more desperate part of his guilt she was still in ignorance. Sylvia spoke to him kindly words of encouragement where no encouragement could avail. But what moved him most was the touch of Tremayne's hand upon his shoulder, and Tremayne's voice bidding him brace himself to face the situation and count upon them to stand by him to the end.

He looked up at his friend and secretary in an amazement that overcame his shame.

"You can forgive me, Ned?"

Ned looked across at Sylvia Armytage. "You have been the means of bringing me to such happiness as I should never have reached without these happenings," he said. "What resentment can I bear you, O'Moy? Besides, I understand, and who understands can never do anything but forgive. I realise how sorely you have been tried. No evidence more conclusive that you were being wronged could have been placed before you."

"But the court-martial," said O'Moy in horror. He covered his face with his hand. "Oh, my God! I am dishonoured. I—I—" He rose,

shaking off the arm of his wife and the hand of the friend he had wronged so terribly. He broke away from them and strode to the window, his face set and white. "I think I was mad;" he said. "I know I was mad. But to have done what I did—" He shuddered in very horror of himself now that he was bereft of the support of that evil jealousy that had fortified him against conscience itself and the very voice of honour. Lady O'Moy turned to them, pleading for explanation.

"What does he mean? What has he done?"

Himself he answered her: "I killed Samoval. It was I who fought that duel. And then believing what I did, I fastened the guilt upon Ned, and went the lengths of perjury in my blind effort to avenge myself. That is what I have done. Tell me, one of you, of your charity, what is there left for me to do?"

"Oh!" It was an outcry of horror and indignation from Una, instantly repressed by the tightening grip of Sylvia's hand upon her arm. Miss Armytage saw and understood, and sorrowed for Sir Terence. She must restrain his wife from adding to his present anguish. Yet, "How could you, Terence! Oh, how could you!" cried her ladyship, and so gave way to tears, easier than words to express such natures.

"Because I loved you, I suppose," he answered on a note of bitter self-mockery. "That was the justification I should have given had I been asked; that was the justification I accounted sufficient."

"But then," she cried, a new horror breaking on her mind—"if this is discovered—Terence, what will become of you?"

He turned and came slowly back until he stood beside her. Facing now the inevitable, he recovered some of his calm.

"It must be discovered," he said quietly. "For the sake of everybody concerned it must—"

"Oh, no, no!" She sprang up and clutched his arm in terror. "They may fail to discover the truth."

"They must not, my dear," he answered her; stroking the fair head that lay against his breast. "They must not fail. I must see to that."

"You? You?" Her eyes dilated as she looked at him. She caught her breath on a gasping sob. "Ah no, Terence," she cried wildly. "You must not; you must not. You must say nothing—for my sake, Terence, if you love me, oh, for my sake, Terence!"

"For honour's sake, I must," he answered her. "And for the sake of Sylvia and of Tremayne, whom I have wronged, and—"

"Not for my sake, Terence," Sylvia interrupted him.

He looked at her, and then at Tremayne.

"And you, Ned—what do you say?" he asked.

"Ned could not wish—" began her ladyship.

"Please let him speak for himself, my dear," her husband interrupted her.

"What can I say?" cried Tremayne, with a gesture that was almost of anger. "How can I advise? I scarcely know. You realise what you must face if you confess?"

"Fully, and the only part of it I shrink from is the shame and scorn I have deserved. Yet it is inevitable. You agree, Ned?"

"I am not sure. None who understands as I understand can feel anything but regret. Oh, I don't know. The evidence of what you suspected was overwhelming, and it betrayed you into this mistake. The punishment you would have to face is surely too heavy, and you have suffered far more already than you can ever be called upon to

suffer again, no matter what is done to you. Oh, I don't know! The problem is too deep for me. There is Una to be considered, too. You owe a duty to her, and if you keep silent it may be best for all. You can depend upon us to stand by you in this."

"Indeed, indeed," said Sylvia.

He looked at them and smiled very tenderly.

"Never was a man blessed with nobler friends who deserved so little of them," he said slowly. "You heap coals of fire upon my head. You shame me through and through. But have you considered, Ned, that all may not depend upon my silence? What if the provost-marshal, investigating now, were to come upon the real facts?"

"It is impossible that sufficient should be discovered to convict you."

"How can you be sure of that? And if it were possible, if it came to pass, what then would be my position? You see, Ned! I must accept the punishment I have incurred lest a worse overtake me—to put it at its lowest. I must voluntarily go forward and denounce myself before another denounces me. It is the only way to save some rag of honour."

There was a tap at the door, and Mullins came to announce that Lord Wellington was asking to see Sir Terence.

"He is waiting in the study, Sir Terence."

"Tell his lordship I will be with him at once."

Mullins departed, and Sir Terence prepared to follow. Gently he disengaged himself from the arms her ladyship now flung about him.

"Courage, my dear," he said. "Wellington may show me more mercy than I deserve."

"You are going to tell him?" she questioned brokenly.

"Of course, sweetheart. What else can I do? And since you and Tremayne find it in your hearts to forgive me, nothing else matters very much." He kissed her tenderly and put her from him. He looked at Sylvia standing beside her and at Tremayne beyond the table. "Comfort her," he implored them, and, turning, went out quickly.

Awaiting him in the study he found not only Lord Wellington, but Colonel Grant, and by the cold gravity of both their faces he had an inspiration that in some mysterious way the whole hideous truth was already known to them.

The slight figure of his lordship in its grey frock was stiff and erect, his booted leg firmly planted, his hands behind him clutching his riding-crop and cocked hat. His face was set and his voice as he greeted O'Moy sharp and staccato.

"Ah, O'Moy, there are one or two matters to be discussed before I leave Lisbon."

"I had written to you, sir," replied O'Moy. "Perhaps you will first read my letter." And he went to fetch it from the writing-table, where he had left it when completed an hour earlier.

His lordship took the letter in silence, and after one piercing glance at O'Moy broke the seal. In the background, near the window, the tall figure of Colquhoun Grant stood stiffly erect, his hawk face inscrutable.

"Ah! Your resignation, O'Moy. But you give no reasons." Again his keen glance stabbed into the adjutant's face. "Why this?" he asked sharply.

"Because," said Sir Terence, "I prefer to tender it before it is asked of me." He was very white, yet by an effort those deep blue eyes of his met the terrible gaze of his chief without flinching.

"Perhaps you'll explain," said his lordship coldly.

"In the first place," said O'Moy, "it was myself killed Samoval, and since your lordship was a witness of what followed, you will realise that that was the least part of my offence."

The great soldier jerked his head sharply backward, tilting forward his chin. "So!" he said. "Ha! I beg your pardon, Grant, for having disbelieved you." Then, turning to O'Moy again: "Well," he demanded, his voice hard, "have you nothing to add?"

"Nothing that can matter," said O'Moy, with a shrug, and they stood facing each other in silence for a long moment.

At last when Wellington spoke his voice had assumed a gentler note.

"O'Moy," he said, "I have known you these fifteen years, and we have been friends. Once you carried your friendship, appreciation, and understanding of me so far as nearly to ruin yourself on my behalf. You'll not have forgotten the affair of Sir Harry Burrard. In all these years I have known you for a man of shining honour, an honest, upright gentleman, whom I would have trusted when I should have distrusted every other living man. Yet you stand there and confess to me the basest, the most dishonest villainy that I have ever known a British officer to commit, and you tell me that you have no explanation to offer for your conduct. Either I have never known you, O'Moy, or I do not know you now. Which is it?"

O'Moy raised his arms, only to let them fall heavily to his sides again.

"What explanation can there be?" he asked. "How can a man who has been—as I hope I have—a man of honour in the past explain such an act of madness? It arose out of your order against duelling," he went on. "Samoval offended me mortally. He said such things to me

of my wife's honour that no man could suffer, and I least of any man. My temper betrayed me. I consented to a clandestine meeting without seconds. It took place here, and I killed him. And then I had, as I imagined—quite wrongly, as I know now—overwhelming evidence that what he had told me was true, and I went mad." Briefly he told the story of Tremayne's descent from Lady O'Moy's balcony and the rest.

"I scarcely know," he resumed, "what it was I hoped to accomplish in the end. I do not know—for I never stopped to consider—whether I should have allowed Captain Tremayne to have been shot if it had come to that. All that I was concerned to do was to submit him to the ordeal which I conceived he must undergo when he saw himself confronted with the choice of keeping silence and submitting to his fate, or saving himself by an avowal that could scarcely be less bitter than death itself."

"You fool, O'Moy—you damned, infernal fool!" his lordship swore at him. "Grant overheard more than you imagined that night outside the gates. His conclusions ran the truth very close indeed. But I could not believe him, could not believe this of you."

"Of course not," said O'Moy gloomily. "I can't believe it of myself."

"When Miss Armytage intervened to afford Tremayne an alibi, I believed her, in view of what Grant had told me; I concluded that hers was the window from which Tremayne had climbed down. Because of what I knew I was there to see that the case did not go to extremes against Tremayne. If necessary Grant must have given full evidence of all he knew, and there and then left you to your fate. Miss Armytage saved us from that, and left me convinced, but still not understanding your own attitude. And now comes Richard Butler to surrender to me and cast himself upon my mercy with another tale which completely gives the lie to Miss Armytage's, but confirms your own."

"Richard Butler!" cried O'Moy. "He has surrendered to you?"

"Half-an-hour ago."

Sir Terence turned aside with a weary shrug. A little laugh that was more a sob broke from him. "Poor Una!" he muttered.

"The tangle is a shocking one—lies, lies everywhere, and in the places where they were least to be expected." Wellington's anger flashed out. "Do you realise what awaits you as a result of all this damned insanity?"

"I do, sir. That is why I place my resignation in your hands. The disregard of a general order punishable in any officer is beyond pardon in your adjutant-general."

"But that is the least of it, you fool."

"Sure, don't I know? I assure you that I realise it all."

"And you are prepared to face it?" Wellington was almost savage in an anger proceeding from the conflict that went on within him. There was his duty as commander-in-chief, and there was his friendship for O'Moy and his memory of the past in which O'Moy's loyalty had almost been the ruin of him.

"What choice have I?"

His lordship turned away, and strode the length of the room, his head bent, his lips twitching. Suddenly he stopped and faced the silent intelligence officer.

"What is to be done, Grant?"

"That is a matter for your lordship. But if I might venture—"

"Venture and be damned," snapped Wellington.

"The signal service rendered the cause of the allies by the death of

Samoval might perhaps be permitted to weigh against the offence committed by O'Moy."

"How could it?" snapped his lordship. "You don't know, O'Moy, that upon Samoval's body were found certain documents intended for Massena. Had they reached him, or had Samoval carried out the full intentions that dictated his quarrel with you, and no doubt sent him here depending upon his swordsmanship to kill you, all my plans for the undoing of the French would have been ruined. Ay, you may stare. That is another matter in which you have lacked discretion. You may be a fine engineer, O'Moy, but I don't think I could have found a less judicious adjutant-general if I had raked the ranks of the army on purpose to find an idiot. Samoval was a spy—the cleverest spy that we have ever had to deal with. Only his death revealed how dangerous he was. For killing him when you did you deserve the thanks of his Majesty's Government, as Grant suggests. But before you can receive those you will have to stand a court-martial for the manner in which you killed him, and you will probably be shot. I can't help you. I hope you don't expect it of me."

"The thought had not so much as occurred to me. Yet what you tell me, sir, lifts something of the load from my mind."

"Does it? Well, it lifts no load from mine," was the angry retort. He stood considering. Then with an impatient gesture he seemed to dismiss his thoughts. "I can do nothing," he said, "nothing without being false to my duty and becoming as bad as you have been, O'Moy, and without any of the sentimental justification that existed in your case. I can't allow the matter to be dropped, stifled. I have never been guilty of such a thing, and I refuse to become guilty of it now. I refuse—do you understand? O'Moy, you have acted; and you must take the consequences, and be damned to you."

"Faith, I've never asked you to help me, sir," Sir Terence protested.

"And you don't intend to, I suppose?"

"I do not."

"I am glad of that." He was in one of those rages which were as terrible as they were rare with him. "I wouldn't have you suppose that I make laws for the sake of rescuing people from the consequences of disobeying them. Here is this brother-in-law of yours, this fellow Butler, who has made enough mischief in the country to imperil our relations with our allies. And I am half pledged to condone his adventure at Tavora. There's nothing for it, O'Moy. As your friend, I am infernally angry with you for placing yourself in this position; as your commanding officer I can only order you under arrest and convene a court-martial to deal with you."

Sir Terence bowed his head. He was a little surprised by all this heat. "I never expected anything else," he said. "And it's altogether at a loss I am to understand why your lordship should be vexing yourself in this manner."

"Because I've a friendship for you, O'Moy. Because I remember that you've been a loyal friend to me. And because I must forget all this and remember only that my duty is absolutely rigid and inflexible. If I condoned your offence, if I suppressed inquiry, I should be in duty and honour bound to offer my own resignation to his Majesty's Government. And I have to think of other things besides my personal feelings, when at any moment now the French may be over the Agueda and into Portugal."

Sir Terence's face flushed, and his glance brightened.

"From my heart I thank you that you can even think of such things at such a time and after what I have done."

"Oh, as to what you have done—I understand that you are a fool, O'Moy. There's no more to be said. You are to consider yourself

under arrest. I must do it if you were my own brother, which, thank God, you're not. Come, Grant. Good-bye, O'Moy." And he held out his hand to him.

Sir Terence hesitated, staring.

"It's the hand of your friend, Arthur Wellesley, I'm offering you, not the hand of your commanding officer," said his lordship savagely.

Sir Terence took it, and wrung it in silence, perhaps more deeply moved than he had yet been by anything that had happened to him that morning.

There was a knock at the door, and Mullins opened it to admit the adjutant's orderly, who came stiffly to attention.

"Major Carruthers's compliments, sir," he said to O'Moy, "and his Excellency the Secretary of the Council of Regency wishes to see you very urgently."

There was a pause. O'Moy shrugged and spread his hands. This message was for the adjutant-general and he no longer filled the office.

"Pray tell Major Carruthers that I—" he was beginning, when Lord Wellington intervened.

"Desire his Excellency to step across here. I will see him myself."

CHAPTER XXI. SANCTUARY

"I will withdraw, sir," said Terence.

But Wellington detained him. "Since Dom Miguel asked for you, you had better remain, perhaps."

"It is the adjutant-general Dom Miguel desires to see, and I am adjutant-general no longer."

"Still, the matter may concern you. I have a notion that it may be concerned with the death of Count Samoval, since I have acquainted the Council of Regency with the treason practised by the Count. You had better remain."

Gloomy and downcast, Sir Terence remained as he was bidden.

The sleek and supple Secretary of State was ushered in. He came forward quickly, clicked his heels together and bowed to the three men present.

"Sirs, your obedient servant," he announced himself, with a courtliness almost out of fashion, speaking in his extraordinarily fluent English. His sallow countenance was extremely grave. He seemed even a little ill at ease.

"I am fortunate to find you here, my lord. The matter upon which I seek your adjutant-general is of considerable gravity—so much that of himself he might be unable to resolve it. I feared you might already have departed for the north."

"Since you suggest that my presence may be of service to you, I am happy that circumstances should have delayed my departure,"

was his lordship's courteous answer. "A chair, Dom Miguel."

Dom Miguel Forjas accepted the proffered chair, whilst Wellington seated himself at Sir Terence's desk. Sir Terence himself remained standing with his shoulders to the overmantel, whence he faced them both as well as Grant, who, according to his self-effacing habit, remained in the background by the window.

"I have sought you," began Dom Miguel, stroking his square chin, "on a matter concerned with the late Count Samoval, immediately upon hearing that the court-martial pronounced the acquittal of Captain Tremayne."

His lordship frowned, and his eagle glance fastened upon the Secretary's face.

"I trust, sir, you have not come to question the finding of the court-martial."

"Oh, on the contrary—on the contrary!" Dom Miguel was emphatic. "I represent not only the Council, but the Samoval family as well. Both realise that it is perhaps fortunate for all concerned that in arresting Captain Tremayne the military authorities arrested the wrong man, and both have reason to dread the arrest of the right one."

He paused, and the frown deepened between Wellington's brows.

"I am afraid," he said slowly, "that I do not quite perceive their concern in this matter."

"But is it not clear?" cried Dom Miguel.

"If it were I should perceive it," said his lordship dryly.

"Ah, but let me explain, then. A further investigation of the manner in which Count Samoval met his death can hardly fail to bring to light the deplorable practices in which he was engaged; for no doubt Colonel

Grant, here, would consider it his duty in the interests of justice to place before the court the documents found upon the Count's dead body. If I may permit myself an observation," he continued, looking round at Colonel Grant, "it is that I do not quite understand how this has not already happened."

There was a pause in which Grant looked at Wellington as if for direction. But his lordship himself assumed the burden of the answer.

"It was not considered expedient in the public interest to do so at present," he said. "And the circumstances did not place us under the necessity of divulging the matter."

"There, my lord, if you will allow me to say so, you acted with a delicacy and wisdom which the circumstances may not again permit. Indeed any further investigation must almost inevitably bring these matters to light, and the effect of such revelation would be deplorable."

"Deplorable to whom?" asked his lordship.

"To the Count's family and to the Council of Regency."

"I can sympathise with the Count's family, but not with the Council."

"Surely, my lord, the Council as a body deserves your sympathy in that it is in danger of being utterly discredited by the treason of one or two of its members."

Wellington manifested impatience. "The Council has been warned time and again. I am weary of warning, and even of threatening, the Council with the consequences of resisting my policy. I think that exposure is not only what it deserves, but the surest means of providing a healthier government in the future. I am weary of picking my way through the web of intrigue with which the Council entangles my movements and my dispositions. Public sympathy has enabled it

to hamper me in this fashion. That sympathy will be lost to it by the disclosures which you fear."

"My lord, I must confess that there is much reason in what you say." He was smoothly conciliatory. "I understand your exasperation. But may I be permitted to assure you that it is not the Council as a body that has withstood you, but certain self-seeking members, one or two friends of Principal Souza, in whose interests the unfortunate and misguided Count Samoval was acting. Your lordship will perceive that the moment is not one in which to stir up public indignation against the Portuguese Government. Once the passions of the mob are inflamed, who can say to what lengths they may not go, who can say what disastrous consequences may not follow? It is desirable to apply the cautery, but not to burn up the whole body."

Lord Wellington considered a moment, fingering an ivory paper-knife. He was partly convinced.

"When I last suggested the cautery, to use your own very apt figure, the Council did not keep faith with me."

"My lord!"

"It did not, sir. It removed Antonio de Souza, but it did not take the trouble to go further and remove his friends at the same time. They remained to carry on his subversive treacherous intrigues. What guarantees have I that the Council will behave better on this occasion?"

"You have our solemn assurances, my lord, that all those members suspected of complicity in this business or of attachment to the Souza faction, shall be compelled to resign, and you may depend upon the reconstituted Council loyally to support your measures."

"You give me assurances, sir, and I ask for guarantees."

"Your lordship is in possession of the documents found upon Count Samoval. The Council knows this, and this knowledge will compel it to guard against further intrigues on the part of any of its members which might naturally exasperate you into publishing those documents. Is not that some guarantee?"

His lordship considered, and nodded slowly. "I admit that it is. Yet I do not see how this publicity is to be avoided in the course of the further investigations into the manner in which Count Samoval came by his death."

"My lord, that is the pivot of the whole matter. All further investigation must be suspended."

Sir Terence trembled, and his eyes turned in eager anxiety upon the inscrutable, stern face of Lord Wellington.

"Must!" cried his lordship sharply.

"What else, my lord, in all our interests?" exclaimed the Secretary, and he rose in his agitation.

"And what of British justice, sir?" demanded his lordship in a forbidding tone.

"British justice has reason to consider itself satisfied. British justice may assume that Count Samoval met his death in the pursuit of his treachery. He was a spy caught in the act, and there and then destroyed—a very proper fate. Had he been taken, British justice would have demanded no less. It has been anticipated. Cannot British justice, for the sake of British interests as well as Portuguese interests, be content to leave the matter there?"

"An argument of expediency, eh?" said Wellington. "Why not, my lord! Does not expediency govern politicians?"

"I am not a politician."

"But a wise soldier, my lord, does not lose sight of the political consequences of his acts." And he sat down again.

"Your Excellency may be right," said his lordship. "Let us be quite clear, then. You suggest, speaking in the name of the Council of Regency, that I should suppress all further investigations into the manner in which Count Samoval met his death, so as to save his family the shame and the Council of Regency the discredit which must overtake one and the other if the facts are disclosed—as disclosed they would be that Samoval was a traitor and a spy in the pay of the French. That is what you ask me to do. In return your Council undertakes that there shall be no further opposition to my plans for the military defence of Portugal, and that all my measures however harsh and however heavily they may weigh upon the landowners, shall be punctually and faithfully carried out. That is your Excellency's proposal, is it not?"

"Not so much my proposal, my lord, as my most earnest intercession. We desire to spare the innocent the consequences of the sins of a man who is dead, and well dead." He turned to O'Moy, standing there tense and anxious. It was not for Dom Miguel to know that it was the adjutant's fate that was being decided. "Sir Terence," he cried, "you have been here for a year, and all matters connected with the Council have been treated through you. You cannot fail to see the wisdom of my recommendation."

His lordship's eyes flashed round upon O'Moy. "Ah yes!" he said. "What is your feeling in this matter, 'O'Moy?" he inquired, his tone and manner void of all expression.

Sir Terence faltered; then stiffened. "I—The matter is one that only your lordship can decide. I have no wish to influence your decision."

"I see. Ha! And you, Grant? No doubt you agree with Dom Miguel?"

"Most emphatically—upon every count, sir," replied the intelligence officer without hesitation. "I think Dom Miguel offers an excellent bargain. And, as he says, we hold a guarantee of its fulfilment."

"The bargain might be improved," said Wellington slowly.

"If your lordship will tell me how, the Council, I am sure, will be ready to do all that lies in its power to satisfy you."

Wellington shifted his chair round a little, and crossed his legs. He brought his finger-tips together, and over the top of them his eyes considered the Secretary of State.

"Your Excellency has spoken of expediency—political expediency. Sometimes political expediency can overreach itself and perpetrate the most grave injustices. Individuals at times are unnecessarily called upon to suffer in the interests of a cause. Your Excellency will remember a certain affair at Tavora some two months ago—the invasion of a convent by a British officer with rather disastrous consequences and the loss of some lives."

"I remember it perfectly, my lord. I had the honour of entertaining Sir Terence upon that subject on the occasion of my last visit here."

"Quite so," said his lordship. "And on the grounds of political expediency you made a bargain then with Sir Terence, I understand, a bargain which entailed the perpetration of an injustice."

"I am not aware of it, my lord."

"Then let me refresh your Excellency's memory upon the facts. To appease the Council of Regency, or rather to enable me to have my way with the Council and remove the Principal Souza, you stipulated for the assurance—so that you might lay it before your Council—that the offending officer should be shot when taken."

"I could not help myself in the matter, and—"

"A moment, sir. That is not the way of British justice, and Sir Terence was wrong to have permitted himself to consent; though I profoundly appreciate the loyalty to me, the earnest desire to assist me, which led him into an act the cost of which to himself your Excellency can hardly appreciate. But the wrong lay in that by virtue of this bargain a British officer was prejudged. He was to be made a scapegoat. He was to be sent to his death when taken, as a peace-offering to the people, demanded by the Council of Regency.

"Since all this happened I have had the facts of the case placed before me. I will go so far as to tell you, sir, that the officer in question has been in my hands for the past hour, that I have closely questioned him, and that I am satisfied that whilst he has been guilty of conduct which might compel me to deprive him of his Majesty's commission and dismiss him from the army, yet that conduct is not such as to merit death. He has chiefly sinned in folly and want of judgment. I reprove it in the sternest terms, and I deplore the consequences it had. But for those consequences the nuns of Tavora are almost as much to blame as he is himself. His invasion of their convent was a pure error, committed in the belief that it was a monastery and as a result of the porter's foolish conduct.

"Now, Sir Terence's word, given in response to your absolute demands, has committed us to an unjust course, which I have no intention of following. I will stipulate, sir, that your Council, in addition to the matters undertaken, shall relieve us of all obligation in this matter, leaving it to our discretion to punish Mr. Butler in such manner as we may consider condign. In return, your Excellency, I will undertake that there shall be no further investigation into the manner in which Count Samoval came by his death, and consequently, no disclosures of the shameful trade in which he was engaged. If your Excellency will give yourself the trouble of taking the sense of your Council upon this, we may then reach a settlement."

The grave anxiety of Dom Miguel's countenance was instantly dispelled. In his relief he permitted himself a smile.

"My lord, there is not the need to take the sense of the Council. The Council has given me *carte blanche* to obtain your consent to a suppression of the Samoval affair. And without hesitation I accept the further condition that you make. Sir Terence may consider himself relieved of his parole in the matter of Lieutenant Butler."

"Then we may look upon the matter as concluded."

"As happily concluded, my lord." Dom Miguel rose to make his valedictory oration. "It remains for me only to thank your lordship in the name of the Council for the courtesy and consideration with which you have received my proposal and granted our petition. Acquainted as I am with the crystalline course of British justice, knowing as I do how it seeks ever to act in the full light of day, I am profoundly sensible of the cost to your lordship of the concession you make to the feelings of the Samoval family and the Portuguese Government, and I can assure you that they will be accordingly grateful."

"That is very gracefully said, Dom Miguel," replied his lordship, rising also.

The Secretary placed a hand upon his heart, bowing. "It is but the poor expression of what I think and feel." And so he took his leave of them, escorted by Colonel Grant, who discreetly volunteered for the office.

Left alone with Wellington, Sir Terence heaved a great sigh of supreme relief.

"In my wife's name, sir, I should like to thank you. But she shall thank you herself for what you have done for me."

"What I have done for you, O'Moy?" Wellington's slight figure

stiffened perceptibly, his face and glance were cold and haughty. "You mistake, I think, or else you did not hear. What I have done, I have done solely upon grounds of political expediency. I had no choice in the matter, and it was not to favour you, or out of disregard for my duty, as you seem to imagine, that I acted as I did."

O'Moy bowed his head, crushed under that rebuff. He clasped and unclasped his hands a moment in his desperate anguish.

"I understand," he muttered in a broken voice, "I—I beg your pardon, sir."

And then Wellington's slender, firm fingers took him by the arm.

"But I am glad, O'Moy, that I had no choice," he added more gently. "As a man, I suppose I may be glad that my duty as Commander-in-Chief placed me under the necessity of acting as I have done."

Sir Terence clutched the hand in both his own and wrung it fiercely, obeying an overmastering impulse.

"Thank you," he cried. "Thank you for that!"

"Tush!" said Wellington, and then abruptly: "What are you going to do, O'Moy?" he asked.

"Do?" said O'Moy, and his blue eyes looked pleadingly down into the sternly handsome face of his chief, "I am in your hands, sir."

"Your resignation is, and there it must remain, O'Moy. You understand?"

"Of course, sir. Naturally you could not after this—" He shrugged and broke off. "But must I go home?" he pleaded.

"What else? And, by God, sir, you should be thankful, I think."

"Very well," was the dull answer, and then he flared out. "Faith, it's

your own fault for giving me a job of this kind. You knew me. You know that I am just a blunt, simple soldier—that my place is at the head of a regiment, not at the head of an administration. You should have known that by putting me out of my proper element I was bound to get into trouble sooner or later."

"Perhaps I do," said Wellington. "But what am I to do with you now?" He shrugged, and strode towards the window. "You had better go home, O'Moy. Your health has suffered out here, and you are not equal to the heat of summer that is now increasing. That is the reason of this resignation. You understand?"

"I shall be shamed for ever," said O'Moy. "To go home when the army is about to take the field!"

But Wellington did not hear him, or did not seem to hear him. He had reached the window and his eye was caught by something that he saw in the courtyard.

"What the devil's this now?" he rapped out. "That is one of Sir Robert Craufurd's aides."

He turned and went quickly to the door. He opened it as rapid steps approached along the passage, accompanied by the jingle of spurs and the clatter of sabretache and trailing sabre. Colonel Grant appeared, followed by a young officer of Light Dragoons who was powdered from head to foot with dust. The youth—he was little more—lurched forward wearily, yet at sight of Wellington he braced himself to attention and saluted.

"You appear to have ridden hard, sir," the Commander greeted him.

"From Almeida in forty-seven hours, my lord," was the answer. "With these from Sir Robert." And he proffered a sealed letter.

"What is your name?" Wellington inquired, as he took the package.

"Hamilton, my lord," was the answer; "Hamilton of the Sixteenth, aide-de-camp to Sir Robert Craufurd."

Wellington nodded. "That was great horsemanship, Mr. Hamilton," he commended him; and a faint tinge in the lad's haggard cheeks responded to that rare praise.

"The urgency was great, my lord," replied Mr. Hamilton.

"The French columns are in movement. Ney and Junot advanced to the investment of Ciudad Rodrigo on the first of the month."

"Already!" exclaimed Wellington, and his countenance set.

"The commander, General Herrasti, has sent an urgent appeal to Sir Robert for assistance."

"And Sir Robert?" The question came on a sharp note of apprehension, for his lordship was fully aware that valour was the better part of Sir Robert Craufurd's discretion.

"Sir Robert asks for orders in this dispatch, and refuses to stir from Almeida without instructions from your lordship."

"Ah!!" It was a sigh of relief. He broke the seal and spread the dispatch. He read swiftly. "Very well," was all he said, when he had reached the end of Sir Robert's letter. "I shall reply to this in person and at, once. You will be in need of rest, Mr. Hamilton. You had best take a day to recuperate, then follow me to Almeida. Sir Terence no doubt will see to your immediate needs."

"With pleasure, Mr. Hamilton," replied Sir Terence mechanically—for his own concerns weighed upon him at this moment more heavily than the French advance. He pulled the bell-rope, and into the fatherly hands of Mullins, who came in response to the summons, the young

officer was delivered.

Lord Wellington took up his hat and riding-crop from Sir Terence's desk. "I shall leave for the frontier at once," he announced. "Sir Robert will need the encouragement of my presence to keep him within the prudent bounds I have imposed. And I do not know how long Ciudad Rodrigo may be able to hold out. At any moment we may have the French upon the Agueda, and the invasion may begin. As for you, O'Moy, this has changed everything. The French and the needs of the case have decided. For the present no change is possible in the administration here in Lisbon. You hold the threads of your office and the moment is not one in which to appoint another adjutant to take them over. Such a thing might be fatal to the success of the British arms. You must withdraw this resignation." And he proffered the document.

Sir Terence recoiled. He went deathly white.

"I cannot," he stammered. "After what has happened, I—"

Lord Wellington's face became set and stern. His eyes blazed upon the adjutant.

"O'Moy," he said, and the concentrated anger of his voice was terrifying, "if you suggest that any considerations but those of this campaign have the least weight with me in what I now do, you insult me. I yield to no man in my sense of duty, and I allow no private considerations to override it. You are saved from going home in disgrace by the urgency of the circumstances, as I have told you. By that and by nothing else. Be thankful, then; and in loyally remaining at your post efface what is past. You know what is doing at Torres Vedras. The works have been under your direction from the commencement. See that they are vigorously pushed forward and that the lines are ready to receive the army in a month's time from now if necessary. I depend upon you—the army and England's honour

depend upon you. I bow to the inevitable and so shall you." Then his sternness relaxed. "So much as your commanding officer. Now as your friend," and he held out his hand, "I congratulate you upon your luck. After this morning's manifestations of it, it should pass into a proverb. Goodbye, O'Moy. I trust you, remember."

"And I shall not fail you," gulped O'Moy, who, strong man that he was, found himself almost on the verge of tears. He clutched the extended hand.

"I shall fix my headquarters for the present at Celorico. Communicate with me there. And now one other matter: the Council of Regency will no doubt pester you with representations that I should—if time still remains—advance to the relief of Ciudad Rodrigo. Understand, that is no part of my plan of campaign. I do not stir across the frontier of Portugal. Here let the French come and find me, and I shall be ready to receive them. Let the Portuguese Government have no illusions on that point, and stimulate the Council into doing all possible to carry out the destruction of mills and the laying waste of the country in the valley of the Mondego and wherever else I have required.

"Oh, and by the way, you will find your brother-in-law, Mr. Butler, in the guard-room yonder, awaiting my orders. Provide him with a uniform and bid him rejoin his regiment at once. Recommend him to be more prudent in future if he wishes me to forget his escapade at Tavora. And in future, O'Moy, trust your wife. Again, good-bye. Come, Grant!—I have instructions for you too. But you must take them as we ride."

And thus Sir Terence O'Moy found sanctuary at the altar of his country's need. They left him incredulously to marvel at the luck which had so enlisted circumstances to save him where all had seemed so surely lost an hour ago.

He sent a servant to fetch Mr. Butler, the prime cause of all this pothor—for all of it can be traced to Mr. Butler's invasion of the Tavora nunnery—and with him went to bear the incredible tidings of their joint absolution to the three who waited so anxiously in the dining-room.

POSTSCRIPTUM

The particular story which I have set myself to relate, of how Sir Terence O'Moy was taken in the snare of his own jealousy, may very properly be concluded here. But the greater story in which it is enshrined and with which it is interwoven, the story of that other snare in which my Lord Viscount Wellington took the French, goes on. This story is the history of the war in the Peninsula. There you may pursue it to its very end and realise the iron will and inflexibility of purpose which caused men ultimately to bestow upon him who guided that campaign the singularly felicitous and fitting sobriquet of the Iron Duke.

Ciudad Rodrigo's Spanish garrison capitulated on the 10th of July of that year 1810, and a wave of indignation such as must have overwhelmed any but a man of almost superhuman mettle swept up against Lord Wellington for having stood inactive within the frontiers of Portugal and never stirred a hand to aid the Spaniards. It was not only from Spain that bitter invective was hurled upon him; British journalism poured scorn and rage upon his incompetence, French journalism held his pusillanimity up to the ridicule of the world. His own officers took shame in their general, and expressed it. Parliament demanded to know how long British honour was to be imperilled by such a man. And finally the Emperor's great marshal, Massena, gathering his hosts to overwhelm the kingdom of Portugal, availed himself of all this to appeal to the Portuguese nation in terms which the facts would seem to corroborate.

He issued his proclamation denouncing the British for the disturbers and mischief-makers of Europe, warning the Portuguese that they were the cat's-paw of a perfidious nation that was concerned

solely with the serving of its own interests and the gratification of its predatory ambitions, and finally summoning them to receive the French as their true friends and saviours.

The nation stirred uneasily. So far no good had come to them of their alliance with the British. Indeed Wellington's policy of devastation had seemed to those upon whom it fell more horrible than any French invasion could have been.

But Wellington held the reins, and his grip never relaxed or slackened. And here let it be recorded that he was nobly and stoutly served in Lisbon by Sir Terence O'Moy. Pressure upon the Council resulted in the measures demanded being carried out. But much time had been lost through the intrigues of the Souza faction, with the result that those measures, although prosecuted now more vigorously, never reached the full extent which Wellington had desired. Treachery, too, stepped in to shorten the time still further. Almeida, garrisoned by Portuguese and commanded by Colonel Cox and a British staff, should have held a month. But no sooner had the French appeared before it, on the 26th August, than a powder magazine traitorously fired exploded and breached the wall, rendering the place untenable.

To Wellington this was perhaps the most vexatious of all things in that vexatious time. He had hoped to detain Massena before Almeida until the rains should have set in, when the French would have found themselves struggling through a sodden, water-logged country, through bridgeless floods and a land bereft of all that could sustain the troops. Still, what could be done Wellington did, and did it nobly. Fighting a rearguard action, he fell back upon the grim and naked ridges of Busaco, where at the end of September he delivered battle and a murderous detaining wound upon the advancing hosts of France. That done, he continued the retreat through Coimbra. And now as he went he saw to it that the devastation was completed along the line of march. What corn and provisions could not be carried off

were burnt or buried, and the people forced to quit their dwellings and march with the army—a pathetic, southward exodus of men and women, old and young, flocks of sheep, and herds of cattle, creaking bullock-carts laden with provender and household goods, leaving behind them a country bare as the Sahara, where hunger before long should grip the French army too far committed now to pause. In advancing and overtaking must lie Massena's hope. Eventually in Lisbon he must bring the British to bay, and, breaking them, open out at last his way into a land of plenty.

Thus thought Massena, knowing nothing of the lines of Torres Vedras; and thus, too, thought the British Government at home, itself declaring that Wellington was ruining the country to no purpose, since in the end the British must be driven out with terrible loss and infamy that must make their name an opprobrium in the world.

But Wellington went his relentless way, and at the end of the first week of October brought his army and the multitude of refugees safely within the amazing lines. The French, pressing hard upon their heels and confident that the end was near, were brought up sharply before those stupendous, unsuspected, impregnable fortifications.

After spending best part of a month in vain reconnoitering, Massena took up his quarters at Santarem, and thence the country was scoured for what scraps of victuals had been left to relieve the dire straits of the famished host of France. How the great marshal contrived to hold out so long in Santarem against the onslaught of famine and concomitant disease remains something of a mystery. An appeal to the Emperor for succour eventually brought Drouet with provisions, but these were no more than would keep his men alive on a retreat into Spain, and that retreat he commenced early in the following March, by when no less than ten thousand of his army had fallen sick.

Instantly Wellington was up and after him. The French retreat

became a flight. They threw away baggage and ammunition that they might travel the lighter. Thus they fled towards Spain, harassed by the British cavalry and scarcely less by the resentful peasantry of Portugal, their line of march defined by an unbroken trail of carcasses, until the tattered remnants of that once splendid army found shelter across the Coira. Beyond this Wellington could not continue the pursuit for lack of means to cross the swollen river and also because provisions were running short.

But there for the moment he might rest content, his immediate object achieved and his stern strategy supremely vindicated.

On the heights above the yellow, turgid flood rode Wellington with a glittering staff that included O'Moy and Murray, the quartermaster-general. Through his telescope he surveyed with silent satisfaction the straggling columns of the French that were being absorbed by the evening mists from the sodden ground.

O'Moy, at his side, looked on without satisfaction. To him the close of this phase of the campaign which had justified his remaining in office meant the reopening of that painful matter that had been left in suspense by circumstances since that June day of last year at Monsanto. The resignation then refused from motives of expediency must again be tendered and must now be accepted.

Abruptly upon the general stillness came a sharply humming sound. Within a yard of the spot where Wellington sat his horse a handful of soil heaved itself up and fell in a tiny scattered shower. Immediately elsewhere in a dozen places was the phenomenon repeated. There was too much glitter about the staff uniforms and vindictive French sharpshooters were finding them an attractive mark.

"They are firing on us, sir!" cried O'Moy on a note of sharp alarm.

"So I perceive," Lord Wellington answered calmly, and leisurely he

closed his glass, so leisurely that O'Moy, in impatient fear of his chief, spurred forward and placed himself as a screen between him and the line of fire.

Lord Wellington looked at him with a faint smile. He was about to speak when O'Moy pitched forward and rolled headlong from the saddle.

They picked him up unconscious but alive, and for once Lord Wellington was seen to blench as he flung down from his horse to inquire the nature of O'Moy's hurt. It was not fatal, but, as it afterwards proved, it was grave enough. He had been shot through the body, the right lung had been grazed and one of his ribs broken.

Two days later, after the bullet had been extracted, Lord Wellington went to visit him in the house where he was quartered. Bending over him and speaking quietly, his lordship said that which brought a moisture to the eyes of Sir Terence and a smile to his pale lips. What actually were his lordship's words may be gathered from the answer he received.

"Ye're entirely wrong, then, and it's mighty glad I am. For now I need no longer hand you my resignation. I can be invalided home."

So he was; and thus it happens that not until now—when this chronicle makes the matter public—does the knowledge of Sir Terence's single but grievous departure from the path of honour go beyond the few who were immediately concerned with it. They kept faith with him because they loved him; and because they had understood all that went to the making of his sin, they condoned it.

If I have done my duty as a faithful chronicler, you who read, understanding too, will take satisfaction in that it was so.

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THE TRAMPLING OF THE LILIES

By Rafael Sabatini

Contents

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD RULE

MONSIEUR THE SECRETARY

LORDS OF LIFE AND DEATH

THE WORD OF BELLECOUR

THE DISCIPLES OF ROUSSEAU

PART II.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAPTER XV.

THE NEW RULE

THE SHEEP TURNED WOLVES

THE CITIZEN COMMISSIONER

LA BOULAYE DISCHARGES A DEBT

THE INVALIDS AT BOISVERT

THE CAPTIVES

THE BAISER LAMOURETTE

THE ESCAPE

THE AWAKENING

THE ROAD TO LIEGE

THE COURIER

LA BOULAYE BAITS HIS HOOK

PART III.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EVERLASTING RULE

CECILE DESHAIX

LA BOULAYE'S PROMISE

THE INCORRUPTIBLE

<u>CHAPTER XIX.</u>	THE THEFT
<u>CHAPTER XX.</u>	THE GRATITUDE OF OMBREVAL
<u>CHAPTER XXI.</u>	THE ARREST
<u>CHAPTER XXII.</u>	THE TRIBUNAL
<u>CHAPTER XXIII.</u>	THE CONCIERGERIE

PART I. THE OLD RULE

These are they
Who ride on the court gale, control its tides;

Whose frown abases and whose smile exalts.
They shine like any rainbow—and, perchance,
Their colours are as transient.

Old Play

CHAPTER I. MONSIEUR THE SECRETARY

It was spring at Bellecour—the spring of 1789, a short three months before the fall of the Bastille came to give the nobles pause, and make them realise that these new philosophies, which so long they have derided, were by no means the idle vapours they had deemed them.

By the brook, plashing its glittering course through the park of Bellecour, wandered La Boulaye, his long, lean, figure clad with a sombreness that was out of harmony in that sunlit, vernal landscape. But the sad-hued coat belied that morning a heart that sang within his breast as joyously as any linnet of the woods through which he strayed. That he was garbed in black was but the outward indication of his clerkly office, for he was secretary to the most noble the Marquis de Fresnoy de Bellecour, and so clothed in the livery of the ink by which he lived. His face was pale and lean and thoughtful, but within his great, intelligent eyes there shone a light of new-born happiness. Under his arm he carried a volume of the new philosophies which Rousseau had lately given to the world, and which was contributing so vastly to the mighty change that was impending. But within his soul there dwelt in that hour no such musty subject as the metaphysical dreams of old Rousseau. His mood inclined little to the "Discourses upon the Origin of Inequality" which his elbow hugged to his side. Rather was it a mood of song and joy and things of light, and his mind was running on a string of rhymes which mentally he offered up to his divinity. A high-born lady was she, daughter to his lordly employer, the most noble Marquis of Bellecour. And he a secretary, a clerk! Ave, but a clerk with a great soul, a secretary with a

great belief in the things to come, which in that musty tome beneath his arm were dimly prophesied.

And as he roamed beside the brook, his feet treading the elastic, velvety turf, and crushing heedlessly late primrose and stray violet, his blood quickened by the soft spring breeze, fragrant with hawthorn and the smell of the moist brown earth, La Boulaye's happiness gathered strength from the joy that on that day of spring seemed to invest all Nature. An old-world song stole from his firm lips—at first timidly, like a thing abashed in new surroundings, then in bolder tones that echoed faintly through the trees

"Si le roi m'avait donne
Paris, sa grande ville,
Et qui'il me fallut quitter
L'amour de ma mie,
Je dirais au roi Louis
Reprenez votre Paris.
J'aime mieux ma mie, O gai!
J'aime mieux ma mie!"

How mercurial a thing is a lover's heart! Here was one whose habits were of solemnity and gloomy thought turned, so joyous that he could sing aloud, alone in the midst of sunny Nature, for no better reason than that Suzanne de Bellecour had yesternight smiled as—for some two minutes by the clock—she had stood speaking with him.

"Presumptuous that I am," said he to the rivulet, to contradict himself the next moment. "But no; the times are changing. Soon we shall be equals all, as the good God made us, and—"

He paused, and smiled pensively. And as again the memory of her yesternight's kindness rose before him, his smile broadened; it became a laugh that went ringing down the glade, scaring a noisy thrush into silence and sending it flying in affright across the scintillant waters of the brook. Then that hearty laugh broke sharply off, as,

behind him, the sweetest voice in all the world demanded the reason of this mad-sounding mirth.

La Boulaye's breath seemed in that instant to forsake him and he grew paler than Nature and the writer's desk had fashioned him. Awkwardly he turned and made her a deep bow.

"Mademoiselle! You—you see that you surprised me!" he faltered, like a fool. For how should he, whose only comrades had been books, have learnt to bear himself in the company of a woman, particularly when she belonged to the ranks of those whom—despite Rousseau and his other dear philosophers—he had been for years in the habit of accounting his betters?

"Why, then, I am glad, Monsieur, that I surprised you in so gay a humour—for, my faith, it is a rare enough thing."

"True, lady," said he foolishly, yet politely agreeing with her, "it is a rare thing." And he sighed—"Helas!"

At that the laughter leapt from her young lips, and turned him hot and cold as he stood awkwardly before her.

"I see that we shall have you sad at the thought of how rare is happiness, you that but a moment back were—or so it seemed—so joyous. Or is it that my coming has overcast the sky of your good humour?" she demanded archly.

He blushed like a school-girl, and strenuously protested that it was not so. In his haste he fell headlong into the sin of hastiness—as was but natural—and said perhaps too much.

"Your coming, Mademoiselle?" he echoed. "Nay but even had I been sad, your coming must have dispelled my melancholy as the coming of the sun dispels the mist upon the mountains."

"A poet?" She mocked him playfully, with a toss of black curls and

a distracting glance of eyes blue as the heavens above them. "A poet, Monsieur, and I never suspected it, for all that I held you a great scholar. My father says you are."

"Are we not all poets at some season of our lives?" quoth he, for growing accustomed to her presence—ravished by it, indeed—his courage was returning fast and urging him beyond the limits of discretion.

"And in what season may this rhyming fancy touch us?" she asked. "Enlighten me, Monsieur."

He smiled, responsive to her merry mood, and his courage ever swelling under the suasion of it, he answered her in a fearless, daring fashion that was oddly unlike his wont. But then, he was that day a man transformed.

"It comes, Mademoiselle, upon some spring morning such as this—for is not spring the mating season, and have not poets sung of it, inspired and conquered by it? It comes in the April of life, when in our hearts we bear the first fragrant bud of what shall anon blossom into a glorious summer bloom red as is Love's livery and perfumed beyond all else that God has set on earth for man's delight and thankfulness."

The intensity with which he spoke, and the essence of the speech itself, left her a moment dumb with wonder and with an incomprehensible consternation, born of some intuition not yet understood.

"And so, Monsieur, the Secretary," said she at last, a nervous laugh quivering in her first words, "from all this wondrous verbiage I am to take it that you love?"

"Aye, that I love, dear lady," he cried, his eyes so intent upon her that her glance grew timid and fell before them. And then, a second later, she could have screamed aloud in apprehension, for the book

of Jean Jacques Rousseau lay tumbled in the grass where he had flung it, even as he flung himself upon his knees before her. "You may take it indeed that I love—that I love you, Mademoiselle."

The audacious words being spoken, his courage oozed away and anti-climax, followed. He paled and trembled, yet he knelt on until she should bid him rise, and furtively he watched her face. He saw it darken; he saw the brows knit; he noted the quickening breath, and in all these signs he read his doom before she uttered it.

"Monsieur, monsieur," she answered him, and sad was her tone, "to what lengths do you urge this springtime folly? Have you forgotten so your station—yes, and mine—that because I talk with you and laugh with you, and am kind to you, you must presume to speak to me in this fashion? What answer shall I make you, Monsieur—for I am not so cruel that I can answer you as you deserve."

An odd thing indeed was La Boulaye's courage. An instant ago he had felt a very coward, and had quivered, appalled by the audacity of his own words. Now that she assailed him thus, and taxed him with that same audacity, the blood of anger rushed to his face—anger of the quality that has its source in shame. In a second he was on his feet before her, towering to the full of his lean height. The words came from him in a hot stream, which for reckless passion by far outvied his erstwhile amatory address.

"My station?" he cried, throwing wide his arms. "What fault lies in my station? I am a secretary, a scholar, and so, by academic right, a gentleman. Nay, Mademoiselle, never laugh; do not mock me yet. In what do you find me less a man than any of the vapid caperers that fill your father's salon? Is not my shape as good? Are not my arms as strong, my hands as deft, my wits as keen, and my soul as true? Aye," he pursued with another wild wave of his long arms, "my attributes have all these virtues, and yet you scorn me—you scorn me because of my station, so you say!"

How she had angered him! All the pent-up gall of years against the superciliousness of the class from which she sprang surged in that moment to his lips. He bethought him now of the thousand humiliations his proud spirit had suffered at their hands when he noted the disdain with which they addressed him, speaking to him—because he was compelled to carve his living with a quill—as though he were less than mire. It was not so much against her scorn of him that he voiced his bitter grievance, but against the entire noblesse of France, which denied him the right to carry a high head because he had not been born of Madame la Duchesse, Madame la Marquise, or Madame la Comtesse. All the great thoughts of a wondrous transformation, which had been sown in him by the revolutionary philosophers he had devoured with such appreciation, welled up now, and such scraps of that infinity of thought as could find utterance he cast before the woman who had scorned him for his station. Presumptuous he had accounted himself—but only until she had found him so. By that the presumption, it seemed, had been lifted from him, and he held that what he had said to her of the love he bore her was no more than by virtue of his manhood he had the right to say.

She drew back before him, and shrank in some measure of fear, for he looked very fierce. Moreover, he had said things which professed him a revolutionist, and the revolutionists, whilst being a class which she had been taught to despise and scorn, dealt, she knew, in a violence which it might be ill to excite.

"Monsieur," she faltered, and with her hand she clutched at her riding-habit of green velvet, as if preparing to depart, "you are not yourself. I am beyond measure desolated that you should have so spoken to me. We have been good friends, M. La Boulaye. Let us forget this scene. Shall we?" Her tones grew seductively conciliatory.

La Boulaye half turned from her, and his smouldering eye fell upon "The Discourses" lying on the grass. He stooped and picked up the

volume. The act might have seemed symbolical. For a moment he had cast aside his creed to woo a woman, and now that she had denied him he returned to Rousseau, and gathered up the tome almost in penitence at his momentary defection.

"I am quite myself, Mademoiselle," he answered quietly. His cheeks were flushed, but beyond that, his excitement seemed to have withered. "It is you who yesternight, for one brief moment and again to-day—were not yourself, and to that you owe it that I have spoken to you as I have done."

Between these two it would seem as the humour of the one waned, that of the other waxed. Her glance kindled anew at his last words.

"I?" she echoed. "I was not myself? What are you saying, Monsieur the Secretary?"

"Last night, and again just now, you were so kind, you—you smiled so sweetly—"

"Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed, angrily interrupting him. "See what you are for all your high-sounding vaunts of yourself and your attributes! A woman may not smile upon you, may not say one kind word to you, but you must imagine you have made a conquest. Ma foi, you and yours do not deserve to be treated as anything but vassals. When we show you a kindness, see how you abuse it. We extend to you our little finger and you instantly lay claim to the whole arm. Because last night I permitted myself to exchange a jest with you, because I chance to be kind to you again to-day, you repay me with insults!"

"Stop!" he cried, rousing himself once more. "That is too much to say, Mademoiselle. To tell a woman that you love her is never to insult her. To be loved is never to be slighted. Upon the meanest of His creatures it is enjoined to love the same God whom the King loves, and there is no insult to God in professing love for Him. Would you

make a woman more than that?"

"Monsieur, you put questions I have no mind to answer; you suggest a discussion I have no inclination to pursue. For you and me let it suffice that I account myself affronted by your words, your tone, and your manner. You drive me to say these things; by your insistence you compel me to be harsh. We will end this matter here and now, Monsieur, and I will ask you to understand that I never wish it reopened, else shall I be forced to seek protection at the hands of my father or my brother."

"You may seek it now, Suzanne," quoth a voice from the thicket at her back, a voice which came to startle both of them though in different ways. Before they had recovered from their surprise the Marquis de Bellecour stood before them. He was a tall man of some fifty years of age, but so powerful of frame and so scrupulous in dress that he might have conveyed an impression of more youth. His face, though handsome in a high-bred way, was puffed and of an unhealthy yellow. But the eyes were as keen as the mouth was voluptuous, and in his carefully dressed black hair there were few strands of grey.

He came slowly forward, and his lowering glance wandered from his daughter to his secretary in inquiry. At last—

"Well?" he demanded. "What is the matter?"

"It is nothing, Monsieur," his daughter answered him. "A trifling affair 'twixt M. la Boulaye and me, with which I will not trouble you."

"It is not nothing, my lord," cried La Boulaye, his voice vibrating oddly. "It is that I love your daughter and that I have told her of it." He was in a very daring mood that morning.

The Marquis glanced at him in dull amazement. Then a flush crept into his sallow cheeks and mounted to his brow. An inarticulate grunt came from his thick lips.

"Canaille!" he exclaimed, through set teeth. "Can you have presumed so far?"

He carried a riding-switch, and he seemed to grasp it now in a manner peculiarly menacing. But La Boulaye was nothing daunted. Lost he already accounted himself, and on the strength of the logic that if a man must hang, a sheep as well as a lamb may be the cause of it, he took what chances the time afforded him to pile up his debt.

"There is neither insolence nor presumption in what I have done," he answered, giving back the Marquis look for look and scowl for scowl. "You deem it so because I am the secretary to the Marquis de Bellecour and she is the daughter of that same Marquis. But these are no more than the fortuitous circumstances in which we chance to find ourselves. That she is a woman must take rank before the fact that she is your daughter, and that I am a man must take rank before the fact that I am your secretary. Not, then, as your secretary speaking to your daughter have I told this lady that I love her, but as a man speaking to a woman. To utter that should be—nay, is—the right of every man; to hear it should be honouring to every woman worthy of the name. In a primitive condition—"

"A thousand devils!" blazed the Marquis, unable longer to contain himself. "Am I to have my ears offended by this braying? Miserable scum, you shall be taught what is due to your betters."

His whip cracked suddenly, and the lash leapt serpentlike into the air, to descend and coil itself about La Boulaye's head and face. A cry broke from the young man, as much of pain as of surprise, and as the lash was drawn back, he clapped his hands to his seared face. But again he felt it, cutting him now across the hand with which he had masked himself. With a maddened roar he sprang upon his aggressor. In height he was the equal of the Marquis, but in weight he seemed to be scarce more than the half of his opponent's. Yet a

nervous strength dwelt unsuspected in those lean arms and steely wrists.

Mademoiselle stood by looking on, with parted lips and eyes that were intent and anxious. She saw that figure, spare and lithe as a greyhound, leap suddenly upon her father, and the next instant the whip was in the secretary's hands, and he sprang back from the nobleman, who stood white and quivering with rage, and perhaps, too, with some dismay.

"That I do not break it across your back, M. le Marquis, said the young man," as he snapped the whip on his knee, "you may thank your years." With that he flung the two pieces wide into the sunlit waters of the brook. "But I will have satisfaction, Monsieur. I will take payment for this." And he pointed to the weal that disfigured his face.

"Satisfaction?" roared the Marquis, hoarse in his passion. "Would you demand satisfaction of me, animal?"

"No," answered the young man, with a wry smile. "Your years again protect you. But you have a son, and if by to-morrow it should come to pass that you have a son no more, you may account yourself, through this"—and again he pointed to the weal—"his murderer."

"Do you mean that you would seek to cross swords with the Vicomte?" gasped the nobleman, in an unbelief so great that it gained the ascendancy over his anger.

"That is what I mean, Monsieur. In practice he has often done so. He shall do so for once in actual earnest."

"Fool!" was the contemptuous answer, more coldly delivered now, for the Marquis was getting himself in hand. "If you come near Bellecour again, if you are so much as found within the grounds of the park, I'll have you beaten to death by my grooms for your presumption. Keep you the memory of that promise in mind, Sir Secretary, and let it

warn you to avoid Bellecour, as you would a plague-house. Come, Suzanne," he said, turning abruptly to his daughter, "Enough of this delightful morning have we already wasted on this canaille."

With that he offered her his wrist, and so, without so much as another glance at La Boulaye, she took her departure.

The secretary remained where they had left him, pale of face—saving the fortuitous crimson mark which the whip had cut—and very sick at heart. The heat of the moment being spent, he had leisure to contemplate his plight. A scorned lover, a beaten man, a dismissed secretary! He looked sorrowfully upon his volume of "The Discourses," and for the first time a doubt crossed his mind touching the wisdom of old Jean Jacques. Was there would there ever be any remedy for such a condition of things as now prevailed?

Already the trees had hidden the Marquis and his daughter from La Boulaye's sight. The young revolutionist felt weary and lonely—dear God, how lonely! neither kith nor kin had he, and of late all the interest of his life—saving always that absorbed by Jean Jacques—had lain in watching Suzanne de Bellecour, and in loving her silently and distantly. Now that little crumb of comfort was to be his no more, he was to go away from Bellecour, away from the sight of her for all time. And he loved her, loved her, loved her!

He tossed his arms to Heaven with a great sigh that was a sob almost, then he passed his hands over his face, and as they came in contact with the swollen ridge that scored it, love faded from his mind, and vindictiveness came to fill its room.

"But for this," he cried aloud. "I shall take payment—aye, as there is a God!"

Then turning, and with "The Discourses" held tightly to his side, he moved slowly away, following the course of the gleaming waters.

CHAPTER II. LORDS OF LIFE AND DEATH

One friend did La Boulaye count in the village of Bellecour. This was old Duhamel, the schoolmaster, an eccentric pedant and a fellow-worshipper of the immortal Jean Jacques. It was to him that La Boulaye now repaired intent upon seeking counsel touching a future that wore that morning a singularly gloomy outlook.

He found Duhamel's door open, and he stepped across the threshold into the chief room of the house. But there he paused, and hesitated. The chamber was crowded with people in holiday attire, and the centre of attraction was a well-set-up peasant with a happy, sun-tanned face, whose golden locks were covered by a huge round hat decked with a score of gaily-coloured ribbons.

At sight of him La Boulaye remembered that it was Charlot's wedding-day. Popular amongst the women by virtue of his comeliness, and respected by the men by virtue of his strength, Charlot Tardivet was a general favourite of the countryside, and here, in the room of old Duhamel, the schoolmaster, was half the village gathered to do him honour upon his wedding morn. It was like Duhamel, who, in fatherliness towards the villagers, went near out-rivalling M. le Cure, to throw open his house for the assembling of Charlot's friends, and La Boulaye was touched by this fresh sign of kindness from a man whose good heart he had not lacked occasion to observe and appreciate. But it came to the secretary that there was no place for him in this happy assemblage. His advent would, probably, but serve to cast a gloom upon them, considering the conditions under which he came, with the signs of violence upon his

face to remind them of the lords of life and death who dwelt at the Chateau up yonder. And such a reminder must fall upon them as does the reminder of some overhanging evil clutch suddenly at our hearts in happy moments of forgetfulness. To let them be happy that day, to leave their feasts free of a death's head, La Boulaye would have withdrawn had he not already been too late. Duhamel had espied him, and the little, wizened old man came hurrying forward, his horn-rimmed spectacles perched on the very end of his nose, his keen little eyes beaming with delight and welcome.

"Ah, Caron, you are very choicely come," he cried, holding out both hands to La Boulaye. "You shall embrace our happy Hercules yonder, and wish him joy of the wedded life he has the audacity to exploit." Then, as he espied the crimson ridge across the secretary's countenance, "Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed, "what have you done to yourself, Caron?"

"Pish! It is nothing," answered La Boulaye hurriedly, and would have had the subject dismissed, but that one of the onlooking peasants swore by the memory of some long-dead saint that it was the cut of a whip. Duhamel's eyes kindled and his parchment-like skin was puckered into a hundred evil wrinkles.

"Who did it, Caron?" he demanded.

"Since you insist, old master," answered the secretary, still endeavouring to make light of it, "learn that is the lord Marquis's signature to his order of my dismissal from his service."

"The dog!" ejaculated the school-master.

"Sh! let it be. Perhaps I braved him overmuch. I will tell you of it when these good folks have gone. Do not let us cast a gloom over their happiness, old master. And now to embrace this good Charlot."

Though inwardly burning with curiosity and boiling with indignation,

Duhamel permitted himself to be guided by La Boulaye, and for the moment allowed the matter to rest. La Boulaye himself laughingly set aside the many questions with which they pressed him. He drank the health of the bride-elect—who was not yet of the party—and he pledged the happiness of the pair. He embraced Charlot, and even went so far as to urge upon him, out of his own scanty store, a louis d'or with which to buy Marie a trinket in memory of him.

Then presently came one with the announcement that M. le Cure was waiting, and in answer to that reminder that there was a ceremony to be gone through, Charlot and his friends flung out of the house in joyous confusion, and went their way with laughter and jest to the little church of St. Ildefonse.

"We will follow presently—M. la Boulaye and I—Charlot," Duhamel had said, as the sturdy bridegroom was departing. "We shall be there to shake Madame by the hand and wish her joy of you."

When at last they were alone in the schoolmaster's room, the old man turned to La Boulaye, the very embodiment of a note of interrogation. The secretary told him all that had passed. He reddened slightly when it came to speaking of his love for Mlle. de Bellecour, but he realised that if he would have guidance he must withhold nothing from his friend.

Duhamel's face grew dark as the young man spoke, and his eyes became sad and very thoughtful.

"Alas!" he sighed, when La Boulaye had ended. "What shall I say to you, my friend? The time is not yet for such as we—you and I—to speak of love for a daughter of the Seigneurie. It is coming, I doubt it not. All things have their climax, and France is tending swiftly to the climax of her serfdom. Very soon we shall have the crisis, this fire that is already smouldering, will leap into a great blaze, that shall lick the old regime as completely from the face of history as though it had

never been. A new condition of things will spring up, of that I am convinced. Does not history afford us many instances? And what is history but the repetition of events under similar circumstances with different peoples. It will come in France, and it will come soon, for it is very direly needed."

"I know, I know, old master," broke in La Boulaye; "but how shall all this help me? For all that I have the welfare of France at heart, it weighs little with me at the moment by comparison with my own affairs. What am I to do, Duhamel? How am I to take payment for this?" And he pressed his finger to his seared cheek.

"Wait," said the old man impressively. "That is the moral you might have drawn from what I have said. Be patient. I promise you your patience shall not be overtaxed. To-day they say that you presume; that you are not one of them—although, by my soul, you have as good an air as any nobleman in France." And he eyed the lean height of the secretary with a glance of such pride as a father might take in a well-grown son.

Elegant of figure, La Boulaye was no less elegant in dress, for all that, from head to foot—saving the silver buckles on his shoes and the unpretentious lace at throat and wrists—he was dressed in the black that his office demanded. His countenance, too, though cast in a mould of thoughtfulness that bordered on the melancholy, bore a lofty stamp that might have passed for birth and breeding, and this was enhanced by the careful dressing of his black unpowdered hair, gathered into a club by a broad ribbon of black silk.

"But what shall waiting avail me?" cried the young man, with some impatience. "What am I to do in the meantime?"

"Go to Amiens," said the other. "You have learning, you have eloquence, you have a presence and an excellent address. For success no better attributes could be yours." He approached the

secretary, and instinctively lowered his voice. "We have a little club there—a sort of succursal to the Jacobins. We are numerous, but we have no very shining member yet. Come with me, and I will nominate you. Beginning thus, I promise you that you shall presently become a man of prominence in Picardy. Anon we may send you to Paris to represent us in the States-General. Then, when the change comes who shall say to what heights it may not be yours to leap?"

"I will think of it," answered La Boulaye cordially, "and not a doubt of it but that I will come. I did not know that you had gone so far—"

"Sh! You know now. Let that suffice. It is not good to talk of these things just yet."

"But in the meantime," La Boulaye persisted, "what of this?" And again he pointed to his cheek.

"Why, let it heal, boy."

"I promised the Marquis that I would demand satisfaction of his son, and I am tempted to do so and risk the consequences."

"I am afraid the consequences will be the only satisfaction that you will get. In fact, they will be anticipations rather than consequences, for they'll never let you near the boy."

"I know not that," he answered. "The lad is more generous than his sire, and if I were to send him word that I have been affronted, he might consent to meet me. For the rest, I could kill him blindfolded," he added, with a shrug.

"Bloodthirsty animal!" rejoined Duhamel. "Unnatural tutor! Do you forget that you were the boy's preceptor?"

With that Duhamel carried the argument into new fields, and showed La Boulaye that to avenge upon the young Vicomte the insults received at the hands of the old Marquis was hardly a worthy

method of taking vengeance. At last he won him to his way, and it was settled that on the morrow La Boulaye should journey with him to Amiens.

"But, Caron, we are forgetting our friend Charlot and his bride," he broke off suddenly. "Come, boy; the ceremony will be at an end by this."

He took La Boulaye by the arm, and led him out and down the street to the open space opposite St. Ildefonse. The wedding-party was streaming out through the door of the little church into the warm sunshine of that April morning. In the churchyard they formed into a procession of happy be-ribboned and nosegayed men and women—the young preceding, the old following, the bridal couple. Two by two they came, and the air rang with their laughter and joyous chatter. Then another sound arose, and if the secretary and the pedagogue could have guessed of what that beating of hoofs was to be the prelude, they had scarce smiled so easily as they watched the approaching cortege.

From a side street there now emerged a gaily apparelled cavalcade. At its head rode the Marquis de Bellecour, the Vicomte, and a half-dozen other gentlemen, followed by, perhaps, a dozen lacqueys. It was a hunting party that was making its way across the village to the open country beyond. The bridal procession crossing their path caused them to draw rein, and to wait until it should have passed—which argued a very condescending humour, for it would not have been out of keeping with their habits to have ridden headlong through it. Their presence cast a restraint upon the peasants. The jests were silenced, the laughter hushed, and like a flight of pigeons under the eye of the hawk, they scurried past the Seigneurie, and some of them prayed God that they might be suffered to pass indeed.

Bellecour eyed them in cold disdain, until presently Charlot and his bride were abreast of him. Then his eye seemed to take life and his

sallow face to kindle into expression. He leant lightly from the saddle.

"Stay!" he commanded coldly, and as they came to a halt, daring not to disobey him—"approach, girl," he added.

Charlot's brows grew black. He looked up at the Marquis, but if his glance was sullen and threatening, it was also not free from fear. Marie obeyed, with eyes downcast and a heightened colour. If she conjectured at all why they had been stopped, it was but to conclude that M. le Marquis was about to offer her some mark of appreciation. Uneasiness, in her dear innocence, she knew none.

"What is your name, child?" inquired the Marquis more gently.

"It was Marie Michelin, Monseigneur," she made answer timidly. "But it has just been changed to Marie Tardivet."

"You have just been wed, eh?"

"We are on our way from church, Monseigneur."

"C'est ca," he murmured, as if to himself, and his eyes taking such stock of her as made Charlot burn to tear him from his horse. Then, in a kindly, fatherly voice, he added: "My felicitations, Marie; may you be a happy wife and a happier mother."

"Merci, Monseigneur," she murmured, with crimson cheeks, whilst Charlot breathed once more, and from his heart gave thanks to Heaven, believing the interview at an end. But he went too fast.

"Do you know, Marie, that you are a very comely child?" quoth the Marquis, in tones which made the bridegroom's blood run cold.

Some in that noble company nudged one another, and one there was who burst into a loud guffaw.

"Charlot has often told me so," she laughed, all unsuspecting.

The Marquis moved on his horse that he might bend lower. With his forefinger he uptilted her chin, and now, as she met his glance thus at close quarters, an unaccountable fear took possession of her, and the colour died out of her plump cheeks.

"Yes," said Bellecour, with a smile, "this Tardivet has good taste. My congratulations, to him. We must find you a wedding gift, little woman," he continued more briskly. "It is an ancient and honoured custom that is falling somewhat into neglect. Go up to the Chateau with Blaise and Jean there. This good Tardivet must curb his impatience until to-morrow."

He turned in his saddle, and beckoning the two servants he had named, he bade Marie to mount behind Blaise.

She drew back now, her cheeks white as those of the dead. With a wild terror in her eyes she turned to Charlot, who stood the very picture of anguish and impotent rage. In the cortege, where but a few moments ago all had been laughter, a sob or two sounded now from some of the women.

"By my faith," laughed Bellecour contemptuously eyeing their dejection, "you have more the air of a burial than a bridal party."

"Mercy my lord!" cried the agonised voice of Charlot, as, distraught with grief, he flung himself before the Marquis.

"Who seeks to harm you, fool?" was Bellecour's half-derisive rejoinder.

"Do not take her from me, my lord," the young man pleaded piteously.

"She shall return to-morrow, booby," answered the noble. "Out of the way!"

But Charlot was obstinate. The Marquis might be claiming no more

than by ancient law was the due of the Seigneur, but Charlot was by no means minded to submit in craven acquiescence to that brutal, barbarous law.

"My lord," he cried, "you shall not take her. She is my wife. She belongs to me. You shall not take her!"

He caught hold of the Marquis's bridle with such a strength and angry will that the horse was forced to back before him.

"Insolent clod!" exclaimed Bellecour, with an angry laugh and a sharp, downward blow of the butt of his whip upon the peasant's head. Charlot's hand grew nerveless and released the bridle as he sank stunned to the ground. Bellecour touched his horse with the spur and rode over the prostrate fellow with no more concern than had he been a dog's carcase. "Blaise, see to the girl," he called over his shoulder, adding to his company: "Come, messieurs, we have wasted time enough."

Not a hand was raised to stay him, not a word of protest uttered, as the nobles rode by, laughing, and chatting among themselves, with the utmost unconcern of the tragedy that was being enacted.

Like a flock of frightened sheep the peasants stood huddled together and watched them go. In the same inaction—for all that not a little grief was blent with the terror on their countenances—they stood by and allowed Blaise to lift the half-swooning girl to the withers of his horse. No reply had they to the coarse jest with which he and his fellow-servant rode off. But La Boulaye, who, from the point where he and Duhamel had halted, had observed the whole scene from its inception, turned now a livid face upon his companion.

"Shall such things be?" he cried passionately. "Merciful God! Are we men, Duhamel, and do we permit such things to take place?"

The old pedagogue shrugged his shoulders in despair. His face

was heavily scored by sorrow.

"Helas!" he sighed. "Are they not masters of all that they may take? The Marquis goes no further than is by ancient law allowed his class. It is the law needs altering, my friend, and then the men will alter. Meanwhile, behold them—lords of life and death."

"Lords of hell are they!" blazed the young revolutionist. "That is where they belong, whence they are come, and whither they shall return. Poltroons!" he cried, shaking his fist at the group of cowed peasants that surrounded the prostrate Charlot "Sheep! Worthless clods! The nobles do well to despise you, for, by my faith, you invite nothing but contempt, you that will suffer rape and murder to be done under your eyes, and never do more than look scared encouragement upon your ravishers!"

"Blame not these poor wretches, Caron," sighed the old man. "They dare not raise a hand."

"Then, pardieu! here, at least, is one who does dare," he cried furiously, as from the breast pocket of his coat he drew a pistol.

Blaise, with the girl across the withers of his horse, was approaching them, followed by Jean.

"What would you do?" cried the old man fearfully, setting a restraining hand upon La Boulaye's sleeve. But Caron shook himself free.

"This," was all he answered, and simultaneously, he levelled his pistol and fired at Blaise.

Shot through the head, the servant collapsed forward; then, as the horse reared and started off at a gallop, he toppled sideways and fell. The girl went down with him and lay in the road whilst he was dragged along, his head bumping horribly on the stones as faster and faster

went the frightened horse.

With a shout that may have been either anger or dismay Jean reined in his horse, and sat for a second hesitating whether to begin by recovering the girl, or avenging his comrade. But his doubts were solved for him by La Boulaye, who took a deliberate aim at him.

"Begone!" cried the secretary, "unless you prefer to go by the road I've sent your fellow." And being a discreet youth, Jean made off in silence by the street down which poor Blaise had been dragged.

"Carom" cried Duhamel, in a frenzy of apprehension. "I tremble for you, my son. Fly from Bellecour at once—now, this very instant. Go to my friends at Amiens; they will—"

But Caron had already left his side to repair to the spot where Marie was lying. The peasantry followed him, though leisurely, in their timid hesitation. They were asking themselves whether, even so remotely as by tending the girl, they dared participate in the violence La Boulaye had committed. That a swift vengeance would be the Seigneur's answer they were well assured, and a great fear possessed them that in that vengeance those of the Chateau might lack discrimination. Charlot was amongst them, and on his feet, but still too dazed to have a clear knowledge of the circumstances. Presently, however, his faculties awakening and taking in the situation, he staggered forward, and came lurching towards La Boulaye, who was assisting the frightened Marie to rise. With a great sob the girl flung herself into her husband's arms.

"Charlot, mon Charlot!" she cried, and added a moment later: "It was he—this brave gentleman—who rescued me."

"Monsieur," said Charlot, "I shall remember it to my dying day."

He would have said more, but the peasants, stirred by fear, now roused themselves and plucked at his coat.

"Get you gone, Charlot, Get you gone quickly," they advised him. "And if you are wise you will leave Bellecour without delay. It is not safe for you here."

"It is not safe for any of us," exclaimed one. "I have no mind to be caught when the Seigneur returns. There will be a vengeance. Ah Dieu! what a vengeance!"

The warning acted magically. There were hurried leave-takings, and then, like a parcel of scuttling rabbits, they made for their burrows to hide from the huntsman that would not be long in coming. And ere the last of them was out of sight there arose a stamping of hoofs and a chorus of angry voices. Down the street thundered the Marquis's cavalcade, brought back by the servant who had escaped and who had ridden after them. Some anger there was—particularly in the heart of the Lord of Bellecour—but greater than their anger was their excitement at the prospect of a man-hunt, with which the chase on which they had been originally bent made but a poor comparison.

"There he is, Monseigneur" cried Jean, as he pointed to La Boulaye. "And yonder are the girl and her husband."

"Ah! The secretary again, eh?" laughed the nobleman, grimly, as he came nearer. "Ma foi, life must have grown wearisome to him. Secure the woman, Jean."

Caron stood before him, pale in his impotent rage, which was directed as much against the peasants who had fled as against the nobles who approached. Had these clods but stood there, and defended themselves and their manhood with sticks and stones and such weapons as came to their hands, they might have taken pride in being trampled beneath the hoofs of the Seigneurie. Thus, at least, might they have proved themselves men. But to fly thus—some fifty of them from the approach of less than a score—was to confess unworthiness of a better fate than that of which their seigneurs

rendered themselves the instruments.

Himself he could do no more than the single shot in his pistol would allow. That much, however, he would do, and like him whose resources are reduced, and yet who desires to spend the little that he has to best advantage, he levelled the weapon boldly at the advancing Marquis, and pulled the trigger. But Bellecour was an old campaigner, and by an old campaigner's trick he saved himself at the last moment. At sight of that levelled barrel he pulled his horse suddenly on to its haunches, and received the charge in the animal's belly. With a shriek of pain the horse sought to recover its feet, then tumbled forward hurling the Marquis from the saddle. La Boulaye had an inspiration to fling himself upon the old roue and seek with his hands to kill him before they made an end of himself. But ere he could move to execute his design a horseman was almost on top of him. He received a stunning blow on the head. The daylight faded in his eyes, he felt a sensation of sinking, and a reverberating darkness engulfed him.

CHAPTER III. THE WORD OF BELLECOUR

When La Boulaye recovered consciousness he was lying on his back in the middle of the courtyard of the Chateau de Bellecour. From a great stone balcony above, a little group, of which Mademoiselle de Bellecour was the centre, observed the scene about the captive, who was being resuscitated that he might fittingly experience the Seigneur's vengeance.

She had returned from the morning's affair in the park with a conscience not altogether easy. To have stood by whilst her father had struck Caron, and moreover, to have done so without any sense of horror, or even of regret, was a matter in which she asked herself whether she had done well. Certainly La Boulaye had presumed unpardonably in speaking to her as he had spoken, and for his presumption it was fitting that he should be punished. Had she interfered she must have seemed to sympathise, and thus the lesson might have suffered in salutariness. And yet Caron La Boulaye was a man of most excellent exterior, and, when passion had roused him out of his restraint and awkwardness, of most ardent and eloquent address. The very sombreness that—be it from his mournful garments or from a mind of thoughtful habit—seemed to envelop him was but an additional note of poetry in a personality which struck her now as eminently poetical. In the seclusion of her own chamber, as she recalled the burning words and the fall of her father's whip upon the young man's pale face, she even permitted herself to sigh. Had he but been of her own station, he had been such a man as she would have taken pride in being wooed by. As it was—she halted there and laughed disdainfully, yet with never so faint a note of regret. It was

absurd! She was Mademoiselle de Bellecour, and he her father's secretary; educated, if you will—aye, and beyond his station—but a vassal withal, and very humbly born. Yes, it was absurd, she told herself again: the eagle may not mate with the sparrow.

And when presently she had come from her chamber, she had been greeted with the story of a rebellion in the village, and an attempted assassination of her father. The ringleader, she was told, had been brought to the Chateau, and he was even then in the courtyard and about to be hanged by the Marquis. Curious to behold this unfortunate, she had stepped out on to the balcony where already an idle group had formed. Inexpressible had been her shock upon seeing him that lay below, his white face upturned to the heavens, his eyes closed.

"Is he dead?" she asked, when presently she had overcome her feelings.

"Not yet Mademoiselle," answered the graceful Chevalier de Jacquelin, toying with his *solitaire*. "Your father is bringing him to life that he may send him back to death."

And then she heard her father's voice behind her. The Marquis had stepped out on to the balcony to ascertain whether La Boulaye had yet regained consciousness.

"He seems to be even now recovering," said someone.

"Ah, you are there, Suzanne," cried Bellecour. "You see your friend the secretary there. He has chosen to present himself in a new role to-day. From being my servant, it seems that he would constitute himself my murderer."

However unfilial it might be, she could not stifle a certain sympathy for this young man. She imagined that his rebellion, whatever shape it had assumed, had been provoked by that weal upon his face; and it

seemed to her then that he had been less than a man had he not attempted to exact some reparation for the hurt the whip had inflicted at once upon his body and his soul.

"But what is it that he has done, Monsieur?" she asked, seeking more than the scant information which so far she had received.

"Enough, at least, to justify my hanging him," answered Bellecour grimly. "He sought to withstand my authority; he incited the peasants of Bellecour to withstand it; he has killed Blaise, and he would have killed me but that I preferred to let him kill my horse."

"In what way did he seek to withstand your authority!" she persisted.

He stared at her, half surprised, half angry.

"What does the manner of it signify?" he asked impatiently. "Is not the fact enough? Is it not enough that Blaise is dead, and that I have had a narrow escape, at his hands?"

"Insolent hound that he is!" put in Madame la Marquise—a fleshly lady monstrously coiffed. "If we allow such men as thus to live in France our days are numbered."

"They say that you are going to hang him," said Suzanne, heedless of her mother's words, and there was the faintest note of horror in her voice.

"They are mistaken. I am not."

"You are not?" cried the Marquise. "But what, then, do you intend to do?"

"To keep my word, madame," he answered her. "I promised that canaille that if he ever came within the grounds of Bellecour I would have him flogged to death. That is what I propose."

"Father," gasped Suzanne, in horror, a horror that was echoed by the other three or four ladies present. But the Marquise only laughed.

"He will be; richly served," she approved, with a sage nod of her pumpkin-like head-dress—"most richly served."

A great pity arose now in the heart of Mademoiselle, as her father went below that he might carry out his barbarous design. She was deaf to the dainty trifles which the most elegant Chevalier de Jacquelin was murmuring into her ear. She stood, a tall, queenly figure, at the balcony's parapet and watched the preparations that were being made.

She heard her father's harshly-voiced commands. She saw them literally tear the clothes from the unfortunate secretary's back, and lash him—naked to the waist—to the pump that stood by the horse-trough at the far end of the yard. His body was now hidden from her sight, but his head appeared surmounting the pillar of the pump, his chin seeming to rest upon its summit, and his face was towards her. At his side stood a powerful knave armed with a stout, leather-thonged whip.

"How many strokes, Monseigneur?" she heard the man inquire.

"How many?" echoed the Marquise. "Do I know how many it will take to make an end of him? Beat him to death, man. Allons! Set about it."

She saw the man uncoil his lash and step forward. In that instant Caron's eyes were raised, and they met hers across the intervening space. He smiled a valedictory smile that seemed to make her heart stand still. She and her mother were now the only women on the balcony. The others had made haste to withdraw as soon as La Boulaye had been pilloried. The Marquise remained because she seemed to find entertainment in the spectacle. Suzanne remained

because horror rooted her to the spot—horror and a great pity for this unfortunate who had looked so strong and brave that morning, when he had had the audacity to tell her that he loved her.

The lash sang through the air, quivered, hummed, and cut with a sickening crackle into the young man's flesh.

The hideous sound roused her. She shuddered from head to foot, and turning she put her hands to her face and rushed within, followed by the Marquise's derisive laughter.

"Mon Dieu! It is horrible! Horrible!" she cried as she sank into the nearest chair, and clapped her hands to her ears. But she could not shut it out. Still she heard the humming of the whip and the cruel sound of the falling blows. Mechanically she counted them, unconsciously almost, and at twenty she heard them cease. Was it over? Was he dead, this poor unfortunate? Moved by a curiosity that was greater than her loathing, she rose and went to the threshold of the balcony.

"Is it ended?" she asked.

"Ended?" echoed Monsieur de Jacquelin, with a shrug. "It is scarce begun, it seems. The executioner is pausing for breath, that is all. The fellow has not uttered a sound. He is as obstinate as a mule."

"As enduring as a Spartan," more generously put in the Vicomte, her brother. "Look at him, Suzanne."

Almost involuntarily she obeyed, and moved forward a step that she might behold him. A face, deathly pale, she saw, which in the sunshine glistened with the sweat of agony that bedewed it; but the lips were tightly closed and the countenance grimly expressionless. Even as she looked she heard her father command the man to lay on anew. Then, as before, his eyes met hers; but this time no smile did she see investing them.

Again the whip cracked and fell. She drew back, but his glance seemed to haunt her even when she no longer saw his face. A sudden resolution moved her, and in a frenzy of anger and compassion she flung out of the room. A moment later she burst like a beautiful virago into the courtyard.

"Stop!" she commanded shrilly, causing both her father and the executioner to turn, and the latter pausing in his hideous work. But a glance from the Marquis bade him resume, and resume he did, as though there had been no interruption.

"What is this?" demanded Bellecour, half amused, half vexed, whilst a sudden new light leapt to the eyes of La Boulaye, which but a moment back had been so full of agony.

But Mademoiselle never paused to answer her father. Seeing the executioner proceeding, despite her call to cease, she sprang upon him, caught him by the arms and wrested the whip from hands that dared not resist her.

"Did I not bid you stop?" she blazed, her face white, her eyes on fire; and raising the whip she brought it down upon his head and shoulders, not once but half-a-dozen times in quick succession, until he fled, howling, to the other side of the horse trough for shelter. "It stings you, does it?" she cried, whilst the Marquis, from angered that at first he had been, now burst into a laugh at her fury and at this turning of tables upon the executioner. She made shift to pursue the fellow to his place of refuge, but coming of a sudden upon the ghastly sight presented by La Boulaye's lacerated back, she drew back in horror. Then, mastering herself—for girl though she was, her courage was of a high order—she turned to her father.

"Give this man to me, Monsieur," she begged.

"To you!" he exclaimed. "What will you do with him?"

"I will see that you are rid of him," she promised. "What more can you desire? You have tortured him enough."

"Maybe. But am I to blame that he dies so hard?"

She answered him with renewed insistence, and unexpectedly she received an ally in M. des Cadoux—an elderly gentleman who had been observing the flogging with disapproval, and who had followed her into the courtyard.

"He is too brave a man to die like this, Bellecour," put in the newcomer. "I doubt if he can survive the punishment he has already received. Yet I would ask you, in the name of courage, to give him the slender chance he may have."

"I promised him he should be flogged to death—" began the Marquis, when Des Cadoux and Mademoiselle jointly interrupted him to renew their intercessions.

"But, sangdieu," the Marquis protested "you seem to forget that he has killed one of my servants."

"Why, then, you should have hanged him out of hand, not tortured him thus," answered Des Cadoux shortly.

For a moment it almost seemed as if the pair of them would have fallen a-quarrelling. Their words grew more heated, and then, while they were still wrangling, the executioner came forward to solve matters with the news that the secretary had expired. To Bellecour this proved a very welcome conclusion.

"Most opportunely!" he laughed "Had the rascal lived another minute I think we had quarrelled, Cadoux." He turned to the servant, "You are certain that it is so?" he asked.

"Look, Monsieur," said the fellow, as he pointed with his whip to the

pilloried figure of La Boulaye. The Marquis looked, and saw that the secretary had collapsed, and hung limp in his bonds, his head fallen back upon his shoulders and his eyes closed.

With a shrug and a short laugh Bellecour turned to his daughter.

"You may take the carrion, if you want to. But I think you can do no more than order it to be flung into a ditch and buried there."

But she had no mind to be advised by him. She had the young man's body cut down from the pump, and she bade a couple of servants convey it to the house of Master Duhamel, she for remembered that La Boulaye and the old pedagogue were friends.

"An odd thing is a woman's heart," grumbled the Marquis, who begrudged La Boulaye even his last act of mercy. "She may care never a fig for a man, and yet, if he has but told her that he loves her, be he never so mean and she never so exalted, he seems thereby to establish some measure of claim to her."

CHAPTER IV. THE DISCIPLES OF ROUSSEAU

The Marquis of Bellecour would, perhaps have philosophised less complacently had he known that the secretary was far from dead, and that what the executioner had, genuinely enough, mistaken for death was no more than a passing swoon. Under ordinary circumstances he might not have been satisfied to have taken the fellow's word; he would himself have ascertained the truth of the statement by a close inspection of the victim. But, as we have seen, the news came as so desirable a solution to the altercation that was waxing 'twixt himself and Des Cadoux that he was more than glad to avail himself of it.

The discovery that Caron lived was made while they were cutting him down from his pillory, and just as the Marquis was turning to go within. A flutter of the eyelids and a gasp for breath announced the fact, and the executioner was on the point of crying out his discovery when Mademoiselle's eyes flashed him a glance of warning, and her voice whispered feverishly:

"Hush! There are ten louis for each of you if you but keep silent and carry him to Master Duhamel as I told you."

The secretary opened his eyes but saw nothing, and a low moan escaped him. She shot a fearful glance at the retreating figure of her father, whilst Gilles—the executioner—hissed sharply into his ear:

"Mille diables! be still, man. You are dead."

Thus did he escape, and thus was he borne—a limp, agonised, and bleeding mass, to the house of Duhamel. The old schoolmaster

received them with tears in his eyes—nor were they altogether tears of sorrow, for all that poor Caron's mangled condition grieved him sorely; they were in a measure tears of thankfulness; for Duhamel had not dared hope to see the young man alive again.

At the pedagogue's door stood a berline, and within his house there was a visitor. This was a slight young man of medium stature, who had not the appearance of more than twenty-five years of age, for all that, as a matter of fact, he was just over thirty. He was dressed with so scrupulous a neatness as to convey, in spite of the dark colour of his garments, an impression almost of foppishness. There was an amplitude about his cravat, an air of extreme care about the dressing of his wig and the powdering of it, and a shining brightness about his buttons and the buckles of his shoes which seemed to proclaim the dandy, just as the sombreness of the colour chosen seemed to deny it. In his singularly pale countenance a similar contradiction was observable. The weak, kindly eyes almost appeared to give the lie to the astute prominence of his cheekbones; the sensitiveness of the mouth seemed neutralised by the thinness of the lips, whilst the oddly tip-tilted nose made a mock of the austerity of the brow.

He was perfectly at ease in his surroundings, and as La Boulaye was carried into the schoolmaster's study and laid on a couch, he came forward and peered curiously at the secretary's figure, voicing an inquiry concerning him.

"It is the young man of whom I was telling you, Maximilien," answered Duhamel. "I give thanks to God that they have not killed him outright. It is a mercy I had not expected from those wolves, and one which, on my soul, I cannot understand."

"Monsieur," said Gilles, "will understand it better perhaps if I tell you that the Marquis believes him to be dead. He was cut down for dead, and when we discovered that he still lived it was Mademoiselle who prevailed upon us to save him. She is paying us to keep the secret,

but not a fortune would tempt me if I thought the Seigneur were ever likely to hear of it. He must be got away from Bellecour; indeed, he must be got out of Picardy at once, Monsieur. And you must promise me that this shall be done or we will carry him back to the Chateau and tell the Marquis that he has suddenly revived. I must insist, Monsieur; for if ever it should transpire that he was not dead the Seigneur would hang us."

The stranger's weak eyes seemed to kindle in anger, and his lips curled until they exaggerated the already preposterous tilt of his nose.

"He would hang you, eh?" said he. "Ma foi, Duhamel, we shall change all this very soon, I promise you."

"God knows it needs changing," growled Duhamel. "It seems that it was only in the Old Testament that Heaven interfered with human iniquity. Why it does not rain fire and brimstone on the Chateau de Bellecour passes the understanding of a good Christian. I'll swear that in neither Sodom nor Gomorrah was villainy more rampant."

The stranger plucked at his sleeve to remind him of the presence of the servants from the Chateau. Duhamel turned to them.

"I will keep him concealed here until he is able to get about," he assured them. "Then I shall find him the means to leave the province."

But Gilles shook his head, and his companion grunted an echo of his disapproval.

"That will not serve, master," he answered sullenly. "What if the Seigneur should have word of his presence here? It is over-dangerous. Someone may see him. No, no, Either he leaves Bellecour this very night, and you swear that he shall, or else we carry him back to the Chateau."

"But how can I swear this?" cried Duhamel impatiently.

"Why, easily enough," put in the stranger. "Let me take him in my berline. I can leave him at Amiens or at Beauvais, or any one of the convenient places that I pass. Or I can even carry him on to Paris with me."

"You are very good, Maximilien," answered the old man, to which the other returned a gesture of deprecation.

In this fashion, then, was the matter settled to the satisfaction of the Seigneur's retainers, and upon having received Duhamel's solemn promise that Caron should be carried out of Bellecour, and, for that matter, out of Picardy, before the night was spent, they withdrew.

Within the schoolmaster's study he whom Duhamel called Maximilien strode to and fro, his hands clasped behind his back, his head bent, his chin thrust forward, denouncing the seigneurial system, of whose atrocity he had received that evening instances enough—for he had heard the whole story of La Boulaye's rebellion against the power of Bellecour and the causes that had led to it.

"We will mend all this, I promise you, Duhamel," he was repeating. "But not until we have united to shield the weak from oppression, to restrain the arrogant and to secure to each the possession of what belongs to him; not until all men are free and started upon equal terms in the race of life; not until we shall have set up rules of justice and of peace, to which all—rich and poor, noble and simple alike—shall be obliged to conform. Thus only can we repair the evil done by the caprice of fortune, which causes the one to be born into silk and the other into fustian. We must subject the weak and the mighty alike to mutual duties, collecting our forces into the supreme power to govern us all impartially by the same laws, to protect alike all members of the community, to repel our common foes and preserve us in never-ending concord. How many crimes, murders, wars, miseries, horrors shall thus be spared us, Duhamel? And it will come; it will come soon, never fear."

Caron stirred on the couch where Duhamel was tending him, and raised his head to glance at the man who was voicing the doctrines that for years had dwelt in his heart.

"Dear Jean Jacques," he murmured.

The stranger turned sharply and stepped to the young man's side.

"You have read the master?" he inquired, with a sudden, new-born interest in the secretary.

"Read him?" cried Carom forgetting for the moment the sore condition of his body in the delight of discovering one who was bound to him by such bonds of sympathy as old Rousseau established.

"Read him, Monsieur? There is scarce a line in all his 'Discourses' that I do not know by heart, and that I do not treasure, vaguely hoping and praying that some day such a state as he dreamt of may find itself established, and may sweep aside these corrupt, tyrannical conditions."

Maximilien's eyes kindled.

"Boy," he answered impressively, "Your hopes are on the eve of fruition, your prayers are about to be heard. Yes—even though it should entail trampling the Lilies of France into the very dust.

"Who are you, Monsieur?" asked La Boulaye, eyeing this prophet with growing interest.

"Robespierre is my name," was the answer, and to La Boulaye it conveyed no enlightenment, for the name of Maximilien Marie Isidore de Robespierre, which within so very short a time was to mean so much in France, as yet meant nothing.

La Boulaye inclined his head as if acknowledging an introduction,

then turned his attention to Duhamel who was offering him a cup of wine. He drank gratefully, and the invigorating effects were almost instantaneous.

"Now let us see to your hurts," said the schoolmaster, who had taken some linen and a pot of unguents from a cupboard. La Boulaye sat up, and what time Duhamel was busy dressing his lacerated back, the young man talked with Robespierre.

"You are going to Paris, you say, Monsieur?"

"Yes, to the States-General," answered Maximilien.

"As a deputy?" inquired Caron, with ever-heightening interest.

"As a deputy, Monsieur. My friends of Arras have elected me to the Third Estate of Artois."

"Dieu! How I envy you!" exclaimed La Boulaye, to cry out a moment later in the pain to which Duhamel's well-intentioned operations were subjecting him. "I would it might be mine," he added presently, "to take a hand in legislation, and the mending of it; for as it stands at present it is inferior far to the lawless anarchy of the aborigines. Among them, at least, the conditions are more normal, they offer better balance between faculty and execution; they are by far more propitious to happiness and order than is this broken wreck of civilisation that we call France. It is to equality alone," he continued, warming to his subject, "that Nature has attached the preservation of our social faculties, and all legislation that aims at being efficient should be directed to the establishment of equality. As it is, the rich will always prefer their own fortune to that of the State, whilst the poor will never love—nor can love—a condition of laws that leaves them in misery."

Robespierre eyed the young man in some surprise. His delivery was impassioned, and although in what he said there was perhaps

nothing that was as fresh to the lawyer of Arras, yet the manner in which he said it was impressive to a degree.

"But Duhamel," he cried to the schoolmaster, "you did not tell me this young patriot was an orator."

"Nor am I, Monsieur," smiled La Boulaye. "I am but the mouthpiece of the great Rousseau. I have so assimilated his thoughts that they come from me as spontaneously as if they were my own, and often I go so far as to delude myself into believing that they are."

No better recommendation than this could he have had to the attention of Robespierre, who was himself much in the same case, imbued with and inspired by those doctrines, so ideal in theory, but, alas! so difficult, so impossible in practice. For fully an hour they sat and talked, and each improved in his liking of the other, until at last, bethinking him of the flight of time, Robespierre announced that he must start.

"You will take him to Paris with you, Maximilien?" quoth the old pedagogue.

"Ma foi, yes; and if with such gifts as Nature appears to have given him, and such cultivation of them as, through the teachings of Rousseau, he has effected, I do not make something of him, why, then, I am unworthy of the confidence my good friends of Arras repose in me."

They made their adieux, and the schoolmaster, opening his door, peered out. The street was deserted save for de Robespierre's berline and his impatient postillion. Between them Duhamel and Maximilien assisted Caron to the door of the carriage. The moving subjected him to an excruciating agony, but he caught his nether lip in his teeth, and never allowed them to suspect it. As they raised him into the berline, however, he toppled forward, fainting. Duhamel

hastened indoors for a cordial, and brought also some pillows with which to promote the young man's comfort on the journey that was before him—or, rather, to lessen the discomfort which the jolting was likely to occasion him.

Caron recovered before they started, and with tears in his eyes he thanked old Duhamel and voiced a hope that they might meet again ere long.

Then Robespierre jumped nimbly into the berline. The door closed, the postillion's whip cracked briskly, and they set out upon a journey which to La Boulaye was to be as the passing from one life to another.

PART II. THE NEW RULE

Allons! Marchons!
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons!
La Marseillaise.

CHAPTER V. THE SHEEP TURNED WOLVES

There were roars of anger and screams of terror in the night, and above the Chateau de Bellecour the inky blackness of the heavens was broken by a dull red glow, which the distant wayfarer might have mistaken for the roseate tint of dawn, were it possible for the dawn to restrict itself to so narrow an area.

Ever and anon a tongue of flame would lick up into the night towards that russet patch of sky, betraying the cause of it and proclaiming that incendiaries were at work. Above the ominous din that told of the business afoot there came now and again the crack of a musket, and dominating all other sounds was the sullen roar of the revolted peasants, the risen serfs, the rebellious vassals of the Siegneur de Bellecour.

For time has sped and has much altered in the speeding. Four years have gone by since the night on which the lacerated Caron la Boulaye was smuggled out of Bellecour in Robespierre's berline and in that four years much of the things that were prophesied have come to pass—aye, and much more besides that was undreamt of at the outset by the revolutionaries. A gruesome engine that they facetiously called the National Razor—invented and designed some years ago by one Dr. Guillotin—is but an item in the changes that have been, yet an item that in its way has become a very factor. It stands not over-high, yet the shadow of it has fallen athwart the whole length and breadth of France, and in that shadow the tyrants have trembled, shaken to the very souls of them by the rude hand of fear; in that shadow the spurned and downtrodden children of the soil have taken

heart of grace. The bonds of servile cowardice that for centuries had trammelled them have been shaken off like cobwebs, and they that were as sheep are now become the wolves that prey on those that preyed on them for generations.

There is, in the whole of France, no corner so remote but that, sooner or later, this great upheaval has penetrated to it. Louis XVI.—or Louis Capet, as he is now more generally spoken of—has been arraigned, condemned and executed. The aristocrats are in full emigratory flight across the frontiers—those that have not been rent by the vassals they had brought to bay, the people they had outraged. The Lilies of France lie trampled under foot in the shambles they have made of that fair land, whilst overhead the tricolour—that symbol of the new trinity, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—is flaunted in the breeze.

A few of the more proud and obstinate—so proud and obstinate as to find it a thing incredible that the order should indeed change and the old regime pass away—still remain, and by their vain endeavours to lord it in their castles provoke such scenes as that enacted at Bellecour in February of '93 (by the style of slaves) or Pluviose of the year One of the French Republic, as it shall presently come to be known in the annals of the Revolution.

Bellecour, the most arrogant of arrogants, had stood firm, and desperately contrived through all these months of revolution to maintain his dominion in his corner of Picardy. But even he was beginning to realise that the end was at hand, and he made his preparations to emigrate. Too proud, however, to permit his emigration to savour of a flight, he carried the leisureliness of his going to dangerous extremes. And now, on the eve of departure, he must needs pause to give a fete at once of farewell and in honour of his daughter's betrothal to the Vicomte Anatole d'Ombreval. This very betrothal at so unpropitious a season was partly no more than contrived by the Marquis that he might mark his ignoring and his

serene contempt of the upheaval and the new rule which it had brought.

All that was left of the noblesse in Picardy had flocked that day to the Chateau de Bellecour, and the company there assembled numbered perhaps some thirty gallants and some twenty ladies. A banquet there had been, which in the main was a gloomy function, for the King's death was too recent a matter to be utterly lost sight of. Later, however, as the generous supply of wine did its work and so far thawed the ice of apprehension that bound their souls as to dispose them to enjoy, at least, the present hour in forgetfulness, there was a better humour in the air. This developed, and so far indeed did it go that in the evening a Pavane was suggested, and, the musicians being found, it was held in the great salon of the Chateau.

It was then that the first alarm had penetrated to their midst. It had found them a recklessly merry crew, good to behold in their silks and satins, powder and patches, gold lace and red heels, moving with waving fans, or hand on sword, and laced beaver under elbow, through the stately figures of the gavotte.

Scared, white-faced lackeys had brought the news, dashing wildly in upon that courtly assembly. The peasants had risen and were marching on Bellecour.

Some of his sudden rage the Marquis vented by striking the servants' spokesman in the face.

"Dare you bring me such a message?" he cried furiously.

"But, my lord, what are we to do?" gasped the frightened lackey.

"Do, fool?" returned Bellecour. "Why, close the gates and bid them return home as they value their lives. For if they give me trouble I'll hang a round dozen of them."

Still was there that same big talk of hanging men. Still did it seem that the Marquis of Bellecour accounted himself the same lord of life and death that he and his forbears had been for generations. But there were others who thought differently. The music had ceased abruptly, and a little knot of gentlemen now gathered about the host, and urged him to take some measures of precaution. In particular they desired to ensure the safety of the ladies who were being thrown into a great state of alarm, so that of some of these were the screams that were heard in that night of terror. Bellecour's temper was fast gaining, and as he lost control of himself the inherent brutality of his character came uppermost.

"Mesdames," he cried rudely, "this screeching will profit us nothing. Even if we must die, let us die becomingly, not shrieking like butchered geese."

A dozen men raised their voices angrily against him in defence of the women he had slighted. But he waved them impatiently away.

"Is this an hour in which to fall a-quarrelling among ourselves?" he exclaimed. "Or do you think it one in which a man can stop to choose his words? Sang-dieu! That screaming is a more serious matter than at first may seem. If these rebellious dogs should chance to hear it, it will be but so much encouragement to them. A fearless front, a cold contempt, are weapons unrivalled if you would prevail against these mutinous cravens."

But his guests were insistent that something more than fearless fronts and cold contempts should be set up as barriers between themselves and the advancing peasantry. And in the end Bellecour impatiently quitted the room to give orders for the barricading of the gates and the defending of the Chateau, leaving behind him in the salon the very wildest of confusions.

From the windows the peasantry could now be seen, by the light of

their torches, marching up the long avenue that fronted the Chateau, and headed by a single drum on which the bearer did no more than beat the step. They were a fierce, unkempt band, rudely armed—some with scythes, some with sickles, some with hedge-knives, and some with hangers; whilst here and there was one who carried a gun, and perhaps a bayonet as well. Nor were there men only in the rebellious ranks. There were an almost equal number of women in crimson caps, their bosoms bare, their heads dishevelled, their garments filthy and in rags—for the tooth of poverty had bitten deeply into them during the past months.

As they swung along to the rhythmical thud of the drum, their voices were raised in a fearful chorus that must have made one think of the choirs of hell, and the song they sang was the song of Rouget de l'Isle, which all France had been singing these twelve months past:

"Aux armes, citozens!
Formez vos bataillons.
Allons, marchons!
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons!"

Ever swelling as they drew nearer came the sound of that terrible hymn to the ears of the elegant, bejewelled, bepowdered company in the Chateau. The gates were reached and found barred. An angry roar went up to Heaven, followed by a hail of blows upon the stout, ironbound oak, and an imperious call to open.

In the courtyard below the Marquis had posted the handful of servants that remained faithful—for reasons that Heaven alone may discern—to the fortunes of the house. He had armed them with carbines and supplied them with ammunition. He had left them orders to hold off the mob from the outer gates as long as possible; but should these be carried, they were to fall back into the Chateau itself, and make fast the doors. Meanwhile, he was haranguing the

gentlemen—some thirty of them, as we have seen—in the salon and urging them to arm themselves so that they might render assistance.

His instances were met with a certain coldness, which at last was given expression by the most elegant Vicomte d'Ombreval—the man who was about to become his son-in-law.

"My dear Marquis," protested the young man, his habitually supercilious mouth looking even more supercilious than usual as he now spoke, "I beg that you will consider what you are proposing. We are your guests, we others, and you ask us to defend your gates against your own people for you! Surely, surely, sir, your first duty should have been to have ensured our safety against such mutinies on the part of the rabble of Bellecour."

The Seigneur angrily stamped his foot. In his choler he was within an ace of striking Ombreval, and might have done so had not the broad-minded and ever-reasonable old Des Cadoux interposed at that moment to make clear to the Marquis's guests a situation than which nothing could have been clearer. He put it to them that the times were changed, and that France was no longer what France had been; that allowances must be made for M. de Bellecour, who was in no better case than any other gentleman in that unhappy country! and finally, that either they must look to arming and defending themselves or they must say their prayers and submit to being butchered with the ladies.

"For ourselves," he concluded calmly, tapping his gold snuffbox and holding it out to Bellecour, for all the world with the air of one who was discussing the latest fashion in wigs, "I can understand your repugnance at coming to blows with this obscene canaille. It is doing them an honour of which they are not worthy. But we have these ladies to think of, Messieurs, and—" he paused to apply the rappee to his nostrils—"and we must exert ourselves to save them, however disagreeable the course we may be compelled to pursue. Messieurs,

I am the oldest here; permit that I show you the way."

His words were not without effect; they kindled chivalry in hearts that, after all, were nothing if not prone to chivalry—according to their own lights—and presently something very near enthusiasm prevailed. But the supercilious and very noble Ombreval still grumbled.

"To ask me to fight this scum!" he ejaculated in horror "Pardi! It is too much. Ask me to beat them off with a whip like a pack of curs, and I'll do it readily. But fight them—!"

"Nothing could delight us more, Vicomte, than to see you beat them off with a whip," Des Cadoux assured him. "Arm yourself with a whip, by all means, my friend, and let us witness the prodigies you can perform with it."

"See what valour inflames the Vicomte, Suzanne," sneered a handsome woman into Mademoiselle's ear. "With what alacrity he flies to arms that he may defend you, even with his life."

"M. d'Ombreval is behaving according to his lights," answered Suzanne coldly.

"Ma foi, then his lights are unspeakably dim," was the contemptuous answer.

Mademoiselle gave no outward sign of the deep wound her pride was receiving. The girl of nineteen, who had scorned the young secretary-lover in the park of Bellecour that morning four years ago, was developed into a handsome lady of three-and-twenty.

"It would be beneath the dignity of his station to soil his hands in such a conflict as my father has suggested," she said at last.

"I wonder would it be beneath the dignity of his courage," mused the same caustic friend. "But surely not, for nothing could be beneath that."

"Madame!" exclaimed Suzanne, her cheeks reddening; for as of old, and like her father, she was quickly moved to anger. "Will it please you to remember that M. d'Ombreval is my affianced husband?"

"True," confessed the lady, no whit abashed. "But had I not been told so I had accounted him your rejected suitor, who, broken-hearted, gives no thought either to his own life or to yours."

In a pet, Mademoiselle gave her shoulder to the speaker and turned away. In spite of the words with which she had defended him, Suzanne was disappointed in her betrothed, and yet, in a way, she understood his bearing to be the natural fruit of that indomitable pride of which she had observed the outward signs, and for which, indeed as much as for the beauty of his person, she had consented to become his wife. After all, it was the outward man she knew. The marriage had been arranged, and this was but their third meeting, whilst never for an instant had they been alone together. By her mother she had been educated up to the idea that it was eminently desirable she should become the Vicomtesse d'Ombreval. At first she had endured dismay at the fact that she had never beheld the Vicomte, and because she imagined that he would be, most probably, some elderly roue, as did so often fall to the lot of maidens in her station. But upon finding him so very handsome to behold, so very noble of bearing, so lofty and disdainful that as he walked he seemed to spurn the very earth, she fell enamoured of him out of very relief, as well as because he was the most superb specimen of the other sex that it had ever been hers to observe.

And now that she had caught a glimpse of the soul that dwelt beneath that mass of outward perfections it had cost her a pang of disappointment, and the poisonous reflection cast upon his courage by that sardonic lady with whom she had talked was having its effect.

But the time was too full of other trouble to permit her to indulge her thoughts overlong upon such a matter. A volley of musketry from below came to warn them of the happenings there. The air was charged with the hideous howls of the besieging mob, and presently there was a cry from one of the ladies, as a sudden glare of light crimsoned the window-panes.

"What is that?" asked Madame de Bellecour of her husband.

"They have fired the stables," he answered, through set teeth. "I suppose they need light to guide them in their hell's work."

He strode to the glass doors opening to the balcony the same balcony from which four years ago his guests had watched the flogging of La Boulaye—and, opening them, he passed out. His appearance was greeted by a storm of execration. A sudden shot rang out, and the bullet, striking the wall immediately above him, brought down a shower of plaster on his head. It had been fired by a demoniac who sat astride the great gates waving his discharged carbine and yelling such ordures of speech as it had never been the most noble Marquis's lot to have stood listening to. Bellecour never flinched. As calmly as if nothing had happened, he leant over the parapet and called to his men below.

"Hold, there! Of what are you dreaming slumberers. Shoot me that fellow down."

Their guns had been discharged, but one of them, who had now completed his reloading, levelled the carbine and fired. The figure on the gates seemed to leap up from his sitting posture, and then with a scream he went over, back to his friends without.

The fired stables were burning gaily by now, and the cheeriest bonfire man could have desired on a dark night, and in the courtyard it was become as light as day.

The Marquis on the balcony was taking stock of his defences and making rapid calculations in his mind. He saw no reason why, so well protected by those stout oaken gates they should not—if they were but resolute—eventually beat back the mob. And then, even as his courage was rising at the thought, a deafening explosion seemed to shake the entire Chateau, and the gates—their sole buckler, upon whose shelter he had been so confidently building—crashed open, half blown away by the gunpowder keg that had been fired against it.

He had a fleeting glimpse of a stream of black fiends pouring through the dark gap and dashing with deafening yells into the crimson light of the courtyard. He saw his little handful of servants retreat precipitately within the Chateau. He heard the clang of the doors that were swung to just as the foremost of the rabble reached the threshold—With all this clearly stamped upon his mind, he turned, and springing into the salon he drew his sword.

"To the stairs, Messieurs!" he cried "To the stairs!"

And to the stairs they went. The extremity was now too great for argument. They dared not so much as look at their women-folk, lest they should be unmanned by the sight of those huddled creatures—their finery but serving to render them the more pitiable in their sickly affright. In a body the whole thirty of them swept from the room, and with Bellecour at their head and Ombreval somewhere in the rearmost rank, they made their way to the great staircase.

Here, armed with their swords and a brace of pistols to each man, whilst for a few the Marquis had even found carbines, they waited, with faces set and lips tight pressed for the end that they knew approached.

Nor was their waiting long. As the peasants had blown down the gates so now did they blow down the doors of the Chateau, and in the explosion three of Bellecour's servants—who had stood too near—

were killed. Over the threshold they swarmed into the dark gulf of the great hall to the foot of the staircase. But here they were at a disadvantage. The light of the burning stables, shining through the open doorway, revealed them to the defenders, whilst they themselves looked up into the dark. There was a sudden cracking of pistols and a few louder reports from the guns, and the mob fled screaming, back into the yard, leaving a score of dead and wounded on the polished floor of the hall.

Old M. des Cadoux laughed in the dark, as with his sword hanging from his wrist he tapped his snuff-box.

"Ma foi," said he to his neighbour, "they are discovering that it is not to be the triumphal march they had expected. A pinch of rappee, Stanislas?"

But the respite was brief. In a moment they saw the glare increase at the door, and presently a half-dozen of the rabble entered with torches, followed by some scores of their comrades. They paused at sight of that company ranged upon the stairs, as well they might, for a more incongruous sight could scarcely be imagined. Across the bodies of the slain, and revealed by the lifting powder smoke, stood that little band of thirty men, a blaze of gay colours, a sheen of silken hose, their wigs curled and powdered, their costly ruffles scintillant with jewels; calm, and supercilious, mocking to a man. There was a momentary gasp of awe, and then the spell was broken by the aristocrats themselves. A pistol spoke, and a volley followed. In the hall some stumbled forward, some hurtled backward, and some sank down in nerveless heaps. But those that remained did not again retreat. Reinforced by others, that crowded in behind, they charged boldly up the stairs, headed by a ragged, red capped giant named Souvestre—a man whom the Marquis had once irreparably wronged.

The sight of him was a revelation to Bellecour. This assault was Souvestre's work; the fellow had been inciting the people of Bellecour

for the past twelve months, long indeed before the outbreak of the revolution proper, and at last he had roused them to the pitch of accompanying him upon his errand of tardy but relentless vengeance.

With a growl the Marquis raised his pistol. But Souvestre saw the movement, and with a laugh he did the like. Simultaneously there were two reports, and Bellecour's arm fell shattered to his side. Souvestre continued to advance, his smoking pistol in one hand and brandishing a huge sabre with the other. Behind him, howling and roaring like the beasts of prey they were become, surged the tenantry of Bellecour to pay the long-standing debt of hate to their seigneur.

"Here," said Des Cadoux, with a grimace, "endeth the chapter of our lives. I wonder, do they keep rappee in heaven?" He snapped down the lid of his gold snuffbox—that faithful companion and consoler of so many years—and cast it viciously at the head of one of the oncoming peasants. Then tossing back the lace from his wrist he brought his sword into guard and turned aside a murderous stroke which an assailant aimed at him.

"Animal," he snapped viciously, as he set to work, "it is the first time that my chaste blade has been crossed with such dirty steel as yours. I hope, for the honour of Cadoux, that it may not be quite the last."

Up, and ever up, swept that murderous tide. The half of those that had held the stairs lay weltering upon them as if in a last attempt to barricade with their bodies what they could no longer defend with their hands. A bare half-score remained standing, and amongst these that gallant old Cadoux, who had by now accounted for a half-dozen sans-culottes, and was hence in high glee, a man rejuvenesced. His sallies grew livelier and more barbed as the death-tide rose higher about him. His one regret was that he had been so hasty in casting his snuff box from him, for he was missing its familiar stimulus. At his side the Marquis was fighting desperately, fencing with his left arm, and in the

not excitement seeming oblivious of the pain his broken right must be occasioning.

"It is ended, old friend," he groaned at last, to Des Cadoux. "I am losing strength, and I shall be done for in a moment. The women," he almost sobbed, "mon Dieu, the women!"

Des Cadoux felt his old eyes grow moist, and the odd, fierce mirth that seemed to have hitherto infected him went out like a candle that is snuffed. But suddenly before he could make any answer, a new and unexpected sound, which dominated the din of combat, and seemed to cause all—assailants and defenders alike—to pause that they might listen, was wafted to their ears.

It was the roll of the drum. Not the mere thudding that had beaten the step for the mob, but the steady and vigorous tattoo of many sticks upon many skins.

"What is it? Who comes?" were the questions that men asked one another, as both aristocrats and sansculottes paused in their bloody labours. It was close at hand. So close at hand that they could discern the tramp of marching feet. In the infernal din of that fight upon the stairs they had not caught the sound of this approach until now that the new-comers—whoever they might be—were at the very gates of Bellecour.

From the mob in the yard there came a sudden outcry. Men sprang to the door of the Chateau and shouted to those within.

"Aux Armes," was the cry. "A nous, d nous!"

And in response to it the assailants turned tail, and dashed down the stairs, overleaping the dead bodies that were piled upon them, and many a man slipping in that shambles and ending the descent on his back. Out into the courtyard they swept: leaving that handful of gentlemen, their fine clothes disordered, splashed with blood and

grimed with powder, to question one another touching this portent,
this miracle that seemed wrought by Heaven for their salvation.

CHAPTER VI. THE CITIZEN COMMISSIONER

It was, after all, no miracle, unless the very timely arrival upon the scene of a regiment of the line might be accepted in the light of Heaven-directed. As a matter of fact, a rumour of the assault that was to be made that night upon the Chateau de Bellecour had travelled as far as Amiens, and there, that evening, it had reached the ears of a certain Commissioner of the National Convention, who was accompanying this regiment to the army of Dumouriez, then in Belgium.

Now it so happened that this Commissioner had meditated making a descent upon the Chateau on his own account, and he was not minded that any peasantry should forestall or baulk him in the business which he proposed to carry out there. Accordingly, he issued certain orders to the commandant, from which it resulted that a company, two hundred strong, was immediately despatched to Bellecour, to either defend or rescue it from the mob, and thereafter to await the arrival of the Commissioner himself.

This was the company that had reached Bellecour in the eleventh hour, to claim the attention of the assailants. But the peasants, as we have seen, were by no means disposed to submit to interference, and this they signified by the menacing front they showed the military, abandoning their attack upon the Chateau until they should be clear concerning the intentions of the newcomers. Of these intentions the Captain did not leave them long in doubt. A brisk word of command brought his men into a bristling line of attack, which in itself should have proved sufficient to ensure the peasantry's respect.

"Citizens" cried the officer, stepping forward, "in the name of the French Republic I charge you to withdraw and to leave us unhampered in the business we are here to discharge."

"Citizen-captain," answered the giant Souvestre, constituting himself the spokesman of his fellows, "we demand to know by what right you interfere with honest patriots of France in the act of ridding it of some of the aristocratic vermin that yet lingers on its soil?"

The officer stared at his interlocutor, amazed by the tone of the man as much as by the sudden growls that chorused it, but nowise intimidated by either the one or the other.

"I proclaimed my right when I issued my charge in the name of the Republic," he answered shortly.

"We are the Republic," Souvestre retorted, with a wave of the hand towards the ferocious crowd of men and women behind him. "We are the Nation—the sacred people of France. In our own name, Citizen-soldier, we charge you to withdraw and leave us undisturbed."

Here lay the basis of an argument into which, however, the Captain, being neither politician nor dialectician, was not minded to be drawn. He shrugged his shoulders and turned to his men.

"Present arms!" was the answer he delivered, in a voice of supreme unconcern.

"Citizen-captain, this is an outrage," screamed a voice in the mob. "If blood is shed, upon your own head be it."

"Will you withdraw?" inquired the Captain coldly.

"To me, my children," cried Souvestre, brandishing his sabre, and seeking to encourage his followers. "Down with these traitors who dishonour the uniform of France! Death to the blue-coats!"

He leapt forward towards the military, and with a sudden roar his followers, a full hundred strong sprang after him to the charge.

"Fire!" commanded the Captain, and from the front line of his company fifty sheets of flame flashed from fifty carbines.

The mob paused; for a second it wavered; then before the smoke had lifted it broke, and shrieking in terror, it fled for cover, leaving the valorous Souvestre alone, to revile them for a swarm of cowardly rats.

The Captain put his hands to his sides and laughed till the tears coursed down his cheeks. Checking his mirth at last, he called to Souvestre, who was retreating in disgust and anger.

"Hi! My friend the patriot! Are you still of the same mind or will you withdraw your people?"

"We will not withdraw," answered the giant sullenly. "You dare not fire upon free citizens of the French Republic."

"Dare I not? Do you delude yourself with that, nor think that because this time I fired over your heads I dare not fire into your ranks. I give you my word that if I have to command my men to fire a second time it shall not be mere make-believe, and I also give you my word that if at the end of a minute I have not your reply and you are not moving out of this—every rogue of you shall have a very bitter knowledge of how much I dare."

Souvestre was headstrong and angry. But what can one man, however headstrong and however angry, do against two hundred, when his own followers refuse to support him. The valour of the peasants was distinctly of that quality whose better part is discretion. The thunder of that fusillade had been enough to shatter their nerve, and to Souvestre's exhortations that they should become martyrs in the noble cause, of the people against tyranny, in whatsoever guise it came, they answered with the unanswerable logic of caution.

The end was that a very few moments later saw them in full retreat, leaving the military in sole and undisputed possession of Bellecour.

The officer's first thought was for the blazing stables, and he at once ordered a detachment of his company to set about quenching the fire, a matter in which they succeeded after some two hours of arduous labour.

Meanwhile, leaving the main body bivouacked in the courtyard, he entered the Chateau with a score of men, and came upon the ten gentlemen still standing in the shambles that the grand staircase presented. With the Marquis de Bellecour the Captain had a brief and not over courteous interview. He informed the nobleman that he was acting under the orders of a Commissioner, who had heard at Amiens, that evening, of the attack that was to be made upon Bellecour. Not unnaturally the Marquis was mistrustful of the ends which that Commissioner, whoever he might be, looked to serve by so unusual an act. Far better did it sort with the methods of the National Convention and its members to leave the butchering of aristocrats to take its course. He sought information at the Captain's hands, but the officer was reticent to the point of curtness, and so, their anxiety but little relieved, since it might seem that they had but escaped from Scylla to be engulfed in Charbydis, the aristocrats at Bellecour spent the night in odious suspense. Those that were tending the wounded had perhaps the best of it, since thus their minds were occupied and saved the torture of speculation.

The proportion of slain was mercifully small: of twenty that had fallen it was found that but six were dead, the others being more or less severely hurt. Conspicuous among the men that remained, and perhaps the bravest of them all was old Des Cadoux. He had recovered his snuff-box, than which there seemed to be nothing of greater importance in the world, and he moved from group to group with here a jest and there a word of encouragement, as seemed best

suitied to those he addressed. Of the women, Mademoiselle de Bellecour and her sharp tongued mother, showed certainly the most undaunted fronts.

Suzanne had not seen her betrothed since the fight upon the stairs. But she was told that he was unhurt, and that he was tending a cousin of his who had been severely wounded in the head.

It was an hour or so after sunrise when he sought her out, and they stood in conversation together—a very jaded pair—looking down from one of the windows upon the stalwart blue-coats that were bivouacked in the quadrangle.

Suddenly on the still morning air came the sound of hoof-beats, and as they looked they espied a man in a cocked hat and an ample black cloak riding briskly up the avenue.

"See?" exclaimed Ombreval; "yonder at last comes the great man we are awaiting—the Commissioner of that rabble they call the National Convention. Now we shall know what fate is reserved for us."

"But what can they do?" she asked.

"It is the fashion to send people of our station to Paris," he replied, "to make a mock of us with an affair they call a trial before they murder us."

She sighed.

"Perhaps this gentleman is more merciful," was the hope she expressed.

"Merciful?" he mocked. "Ma foi, a ravenous tiger may be merciful before one of these. Had your father been wise he had ordered the few of us that remained to charge those soldiers when they entered, and to have met our end upon their bayonets. That would have been a merciful fate compared with the mercy of this so-called

Commissioner is likely to extend us."

It seemed to be his way to find fault, and that warp in his character rendered him now as heroic—in words—as he had been erstwhile scornful.

Suzanne shuddered, brave girl though she was.

"Unless you can conceive thoughts of a pleasanter complexion," she said, "I should prefer your silence, M. d'Ombreval."

He laughed in his disdainful way—for he disdained all things, excepting his own person and safety—but before he could make any answer they were joined by the Marquis and his son.

In the courtyard the horseman was now dismounting, and a moment or two later they heard the fall of feet, upon the stairs. A soldier threw open the door, and holding it, announced:

"The Citizen-deputy La Boulaye, Commissioner of the National Convention to the army of General Dumouriez."

"This," mocked Ombreval, to whom the name meant nothing, "is the representative of a Government of strict equality, and he is announced with as much pomp as was ever an ambassador of his murdered Majesty's."

Then a something out of the common in the attitude of his companions arrested his attention. Mademoiselle was staring with eyes full of the most ineffable amazement, her lips parted, and her cheeks whiter than the sleepless night had painted them. The Marquis was scowling in a surprise that seemed no whit less than his daughter's, his head thrust forward, and his jaw fallen. The Vicomte, too, though in a milder degree, offered a countenance that was eloquent with bewilderment. From this silent group Ombreval turned his tired eyes to the door and took stock of the two men that had

entered. One of these was Captain Juste, the officer in command of the military; the other was a tall man, with a pale face, an aquiline nose, a firm jaw, and eyes that were very stern—either of habit or because they now rested upon the man who four years ago had used him so cruelly.

He stood a moment in the doorway as if enjoying the amazement which had been sown by his coming. There was no mistaking him. It was the same La Boulaye of four years ago, and yet it was not quite the same. The face had lost its boyishness, and the strenuous life he had lived had scored it with lines that gave him the semblance of a greater age than was his. The old, poetic melancholy that had dwelt in the secretary's countenance was now changed to strength and firmness. Although little known as yet to the world at large, the great ones of the Revolution held him in high esteem, and looked upon him as a power to be reckoned with in the near future. Of Robespierre—who, it was said, had discovered him and brought him to Paris—he was the protege and more than friend, a protection and friendship this which in '93 made any man almost omnipotent in France.

He was dressed in a black riding-suit, relieved only by the white neck-cloth and the tricolour sash of office about his waist. He removed his cocked hat, beneath which the hair was tied in a club with the same scrupulous care as of old.

Slowly he advanced into the salon, and his sombre eyes passed from the Marquis to Mademoiselle. As they rested upon her some of the sternness seemed to fade from their glance. He found in her a change almost as great as that which she had found in him. The lighthearted, laughing girl of nineteen, who had scorned his proffered love when he had wooed her that April morning to such disastrous purpose, was now ripened into a stately woman of three-and-twenty. He had thought his boyish passion dead and buried, and often in the years that were gone had he smiled softly to himself at the memory of

his ardour, as we smile at the memory of our youthful follies. Yet now, upon beholding her again, so wondrously transformed, so tall and straight, and so superbly beautiful, he experienced an odd thrill and a weakening of the stern purpose that had brought him to Bellecour.

Then his glance moved on. A moment it rested on the supercilious, high-bred countenance of the Vicomte d'Ombreval, standing with so proprietary an air beside her, then it passed to the kindly old face of Des Cadoux, and he recalled how this gentleman had sought to stay the flogging of him. An instant it hovered on the Marquis, who—haggard of face and with his arm in a sling—was observing him with an expression in which scorn and wonder were striving for the mastery; it seemed to shun the gaze of the pale-faced Vicomte, whose tutor he had been in the old days of his secretaryship, and full and stern it returned at last to settle upon the Marquis.

"Citizen Bellecour," he said, and his voice, like his face, seemed to have changed since last the Marquis had heard it, and to have grown more deep and metallic, "you may marvel, now that you behold the Commissioner who sent a company of soldiers to rescue you and your Chateau from the hands of the mob last night, what purpose I sought to serve by extending to you a protection which none of your order merits, and you least of any, in my eyes."

"The times may have wrought sad and overwhelming changes," answered the Marquis, with cold contempt, "but it has not yet so utterly abased us that we bring ourselves to speculate upon the purposes of the rabble."

A faint crimson flush crept into Caron's sallow cheeks.

"Indeed, I see how little you have changed!" he answered bitterly. "You are of those that will not learn, Citizen. The fault lies here," he added, tapping his head, "and it will remain until we remove the ones with the other. But now for the business that brings me," he

proceeded, more briskly. "Four years ago, Citizen Bellecour, you laid your whip across my face in the woods out yonder, and when I spoke of seeking satisfaction action you threatened me with your grooms. I will not speak of your other brutalities on that same day. I will confine myself to that first affront."

"Be brief, sir," cried the Marquis offensively. "Since you have the force to compel us to listen to you, let me beg that you will at least display the generosity of detaining us no longer than you need."

"I will be as brief as it lies within the possibility of words," answered Caron coldly. "I am come, Citizen Bellecour, to demand of you to-day the satisfaction which four years ago you refused me."

"Of me?" cried the Marquis.

"Through the person of your son, the Vicomte, as I asked for it four years ago," said Caron. "You are an old man, Citizen, and I do not fight old men."

"I am yet young enough to cut you into ribbons, you dog, if I were minded to dishonour myself by meeting you." And turning to Ombreval for sympathy, he vented a low laugh of contemptuous wonder.

"Insolence!" sneered Ombreval sympathetically, whilst Mademoiselle stood looking on with cheeks that were growing paler, for that this event would end badly for either her father or her brother she never doubted.

"Citizen Bellecour," said Caron, still very coldly, "you have heard what I propose, as have you also, Citizen-vicomte."

"For myself," began the youth "I am—"

"Silence, Armand!" his father commanded, laying a hand upon his sleeve. "Understand me, citizen-deputy, or citizen-commissioner, or citizen-blackguard or whatever you call your vile self, you are come on

a fruitless journey to Bellecour. Neither I nor my son is so lost to the duty which we owe our rank as to so much as dream of acceding to your preposterous request. I think, sir, that you had been better advised to have left the mob to its work last night, if you but restrained it for this purpose."

"Is that your last word?" asked La Boulaye, still calmly weathering that storm of insults.

"My very last, sir."

"There are more ways than one of taking satisfaction for that affront, Citizen Bellecour," rejoined La Boulaye, "and if the course which I now pursue should prove more distasteful to you than that which I last suggested, the blame of it must rest with you." He turned to the bluecoat at the door. "Citizen-soldier, my whip."

There was a sudden movement among the aristocrats—a horrified recoiling—and even Bellecour was shaken out of his splendid arrogance.

"Insolent cur!" exclaimed Ombreval with withering scorn; "to what lengths is presumption driving you?"

"To the length of a horsewhip," answered La Boulaye pleasantly.

He received the whip from the hands of the soldier and he now advanced towards Bellecour, unwinding the lash as he came. Ombreval barred his way with an oath.

"By Heaven: you shall not!" he cried.

"Shall not?" echoed La Boulaye, his lips curling. "You had best stand aside—you that are steeped in musk and fierceness." And before the stern and threatening contempt of La Boulaye's glance the young nobleman fell back. But his place was taken by the Vicomte de

Bellecour, who advanced to confront Caron.

"Monsieur la Boulaye," he announced, "I am ready and willing to meet you." And considering the grim alternative with which the Republicans had threatened him, the old Marquis had not the courage to interfere again.

"Ah!" It was an exclamation of satisfaction from the Commissioner. "I imagined that you would change your minds. I shall await you, Citizen, in the garden in five minutes' time."

"I shall not keep you waiting, Monsieur," was the Vicomte's answer.

Very formally La Boulaye bowed and left the room accompanied by the officer and followed by the soldier.

"Mon Dieu!" gasped the Marquise, fanning herself as the door closed after the Republicans. "Open me a window or I shall stifle! How the place reeks with them. I am a calm woman, Messieurs, but, on my honour, had he addressed any of you by his odious title of 'citizen' again, I swear that I had struck him with my own hands."

There were some that laughed. But Mademoiselle was not of those.

Her eyes travelled to her brother's pale face and weakly frame, and her glance was such a glance as we bend upon the beloved dead, for in him she saw one who was going inevitably to his death.

CHAPTER VII. LA BOULAYE DISCHARGES A DEBT

Along the northern side of the Chateau ran a terrace bordered by a red sandstone balustrade, and below this the Italian garden, so called perhaps in consequence of the oddly clipped box-trees, its only feature that suggested Italy. At the far end of this garden there was a strip of even turf that might have been designed for a fencing ground, and which Caron knew of old. Thither he led Captain Juste, and there in the pale sunshine of that February morning they awaited the arrival of the Vicomte and his sponsor.

But the minutes went by and still they waited-five, ten, fifteen minutes elapsed, yet no one came. Juste was on the point of returning within to seek the reason of this delay when steps sounded on the terrace above. But they were accompanied by the rustle of a gown, and presently it was Mademoiselle who appeared before them. The two men eyed her with astonishment, which in the case of La Boulaye, was tempered by another feeling.

"Monsieur la Boulaye," said she, her glance wandering towards the Captain, "may I speak with you alone?"

Outwardly impassive the Commissioner bowed.

"Your servant, Citoyenne," said he, removing his cocked hat. "Juste, will you give us leave?"

"You will find me on the terrace when you want me, Citizen-deputy," answered the officer, and saluting, he departed.

For a moment or two after he was gone Suzanne and Caron stood confronting each other in silence. She seemed smitten with a sudden awkwardness, and she looked away from him what time he waited, hat in hand, the chill morning breeze faintly stirring a loose strand of his black hair.

"Monsieur," she faltered at last, "I am come to intercede."

At that a faint smile hovered a second on the Republican's thin lips.

"And is the noblesse of France fallen so low that it sends its women to intercede for the lives of its men? But, perhaps," he added cynically, "it had not far to fall."

Her cheeks reddened. His insult to her class acted upon her as a spur and overcame the irresoluteness that seemed to have beset her.

"To insult the fallen, sir, is worthy of the new regime, whose representative you are, Enfine! We must take it, I suppose, as we take everything else in these disordered times—with a bent head and a meek submission."

"From the little that I have seen, Citoyenne," he answered, very coldly, roused in his turn, "it rather seems that you take things on your knees and with appeals for mercy."

"Monsieur," she cried, and her eyes now met his in fearless anger, "if you persist in these gratuitous insults I shall leave you."

He laughed in rude amusement, and put on his hat. The spell that for a moment her beauty had cast over him when first she had appeared had been attenuating. It now broke suddenly, and as he covered himself his whole manner changed.

"Is this interview of my seeking?" he asked. "It is your brother I am awaiting. Name of a name, Citoyenne, do you think my patience inexhaustible? The ci-devant Vicomte promised to attend me here. It

was the boast of your order that whatever sins you might be guilty of you never broke your word. Have you lost even that virtue, which served you as a cloak for untold vices? And is your brother fled into the woods whilst you, his sister, come here to intercede with me for his wretched life? Pah! In the old days you aroused my hatred by your tyrannies and your injustices; to-day you weary and disgust me by your ineffable cowardices, from that gentleman in Paris who now calls himself Orleans-Egalite downwards."

"Monsieur," she began But he was not yet done. His cheeks were flushed with a reflection of the heart within.

"Citoyenne, I have a debt to discharge, and I will discharge it in full. Intercessions are vain with me. I cannot forget. Send me your brother within ten minutes to meet me here, man to man, and he shall have—all of you shall have—the chance that lies in such an encounter. But woe unto every man at Bellecour if he should fail me. Citoyenne, you know my mind."

But she overlooked the note of dismissal in his voice.

"You speak of a debt that you must discharge," said she, with no whit less heat than he had exhibited. "You refer to the debt of vengeance which you look to discharge by murdering that boy, my brother. But do you not owe me a debt also?"

"You?" he questioned. "My faith! Unless it be a debt of scorn, I know of none."

"Aye," she returned wistfully, "you are like the rest. You have a long memory for injuries, but a short one for benefits. Had it not been for me, Monsieur, you would not be here now to demand this that you call satisfaction. Have you forgotten how I—"

"No," he broke in. "I well remember how you sought to stay them when they were flogging me in the yard there. But you came too late.

You might have come before, for from the balcony above you had been watching my torture. But you waited overlong. I was cast out for dead."

She flashed him a searching glance, as though she sought to read his thoughts, and to ascertain whether he indeed believed what he was saying.

"Cast out for dead?" she echoed. "And by whose contrivance? By mine, M. la Boulaye. When they were cutting you down they discovered that you were not dead, and but that I bribed the men to keep it secret and carry you to Duhamel's house, they had certainly informed my father and you would have been finished off."

His eyes opened wide now, and into them there came a troubled look—the look of one who is endeavouring to grasp an elusive recollection.

"Ma foi," he muttered. "It seems to come to me as if I had heard something of the sort in a dream. It was—" He paused, and his brows were knit a moment. Then he looked up suddenly, and gradually his face cleared. "Why, yes—I have it!" he exclaimed. "It was in Duhamel's house. While I was lying half unconscious on the couch I heard one of the men telling Duhamel that you had paid them to carry me there and to keep a secret."

"And you had forgotten that?" she asked, with the faintest note of contempt.

"Not forgotten," he answered, "for it was never really there to be remembered. That I had heard such words had more than once occurred to me, but I have always looked upon it as the recollection of something that I had dreamt. I had never looked upon it as a thing that had had a real happening."

"How, then, did you explain your escape?"

"I always imagined that I had been assumed dead."

There was a brief spell of silence. Then—

"And now that you know, Monsieur—?"

She left the question unfinished, and held out her hands to him in a gesture of supplication. His face paled slightly and overclouded. Her influence, against which so long he had steeled himself, reinforced by the debt in which she had shown him that he stood towards her, was prevailing with him despite himself. Stirred suddenly out of the coldness that he had hitherto assumed, he caught the outstretched hands and drew her a step nearer. That was his undoing. Strong man though he unquestionably was, like many another strong man his strength seemed to fall from him at a woman's touch. He had led so austere and stern a life during the past four years; of women he had but had the most passing of glances, and intercourse with none save an old female who acted as his housekeeper in Paris. And here was a woman who was not only beautiful, but the woman who years ago had embodied all his notions of what was most perfect in womanhood; the woman who ever since, and despite all that was past, had reigned in his heart and mind almost in spite of himself, almost unknown to him.

The touch of her hand now, the closeness of her presence, the faint perfume that reached him from her, and that was to him as a symbol of her inherent sweetness, the large blue eyes meeting his in expectation, and the imploring half-pout of her lips, were all seductions against which he had not been human had he prevailed.

Very white in the intensity of the long-quietescent passion she had resuscitated, he cried:

"Mademoiselle, what shall I say to you?"

The four years that were gone seemed suddenly to have slipped away. It was as if they stood again by the brook in the park on that April morn when first he had dared to word his presumptuous love. Even the vocabulary of the Republic was forgotten, and the interdicted title of "Mademoiselle" fell naturally from his lips.

"Say that you can be generous," she implored him softly. "Say that you prefer the debt you owe to the injury you received."

"You do not know the sacrifice you ask," he exclaimed still fighting with himself. "I have waited four years for this, and now—"

"He is my brother," she whispered, in so wonderful a tone that words which of themselves may have seemed no argument at all became the crowning argument of her intercession.

"Soit!" he consented. "For your sake, Mademoiselle, and in payment of the debt I owe you, I will go as I came. I shall not see the Citizen-marquis again. But do you tell him from me that if he sets any value on his life, he had best shake the dust of France from his feet. Too long already has he tarried, and at any moment those may arrive who will make him emigrate not only out of France but out of the world altogether. Besides, the peasantry that has risen once may rise again, and I shall not be here to protect him from its violence. Tell him he had best depart at once."

"Monsieur, I am grateful—very, very deeply grateful. I can say no more. May Heaven reward you. I shall pray the good God to watch over you always. Adieu, Monsieur!"

He stood looking at her a moment still retaining his hold of her hands.

"Adieu, Mademoiselle," he said at last. Then, very slowly—as if so that realising his intent she might frustrate it were she so minded—he raised her right hand. It was not withdrawn, and so he bent low, and

pressed his lips upon it.

"God guard you, Mademoiselle," he said at last, and if they were strange words for a Republican and a Deputy, it must be remembered that his bearing during the past few moments had been singularly unlike a Republican's.

He released her hand, and stepping back, doffed his hat. With a final inclination of the head, she turned and walked away in the direction of the terrace.

At a distance La Boulaye followed, so lost in thought that he did not observe Captain Juste until the fellow's voice broke upon his ear.

"You have been long enough, Citizen-deputy," was the soldier's greeting. "I take it there is to be no duel."

"I make you my compliments upon the acuteness of your perception," answered La Boulaye tartly. "You are right. There is to be no encounter."

Juste's air was slightly mocking, and words of not overdilicate banter rose to his lips, to be instantly quelled by La Boulaye.

"Let your drums beat a rally, Citizen-captain," he commanded briskly. "We leave Bellecour in ten minutes."

And indeed, in less than that time the blue-coats were swinging briskly down the avenue. In the rear rode La Boulaye, his cloak wrapped about him, his square chin buried in his neck-cloth, and his mind deep in meditation.

From a window of the Chateau the lady who was the cause of the young Revolutionist's mental absorption watched the departing soldiers. On either side of her stood Ombreval and her father.

"My faith, little one," said Bellecour good-humouredly. "I wonder

what magic you have exercised to rid us of that infernal company."

"Women have sometimes a power of which men know nothing," was her cryptic answer.

Ombreval turned to her with a scowl of sudden suspicion.

"I trust, Mademoiselle, that you did not—" he stopped short. His thoughts were of a quality that defied polite utterance.

"That I did not what, Monsieur?" she asked.

"I trust you remembered that you are to become the Vicomtesse d'Ombreval" he answered, constructing his sentence differently.

"Monsieur!" exclaimed Bellecour angrily.

"I was chiefly mindful of the fact that I had my brother's life to save," said the girl, very coldly, her eye resting upon her betrothed in a glance of so much contempt that it forced him into an abashed silence.

In her mind she was contrasting this supercilious, vacillating weakling with the stern, strong man who loomed yonder. A sigh fluttered across her lips. Had things but been different. Had Ombreval been the Revolutionist and La Boulaye the Vicomte, how much better pleased might she not have been. But since it was not so, why sigh? It was not as if she had loved this La Boulaye. How was that possible? Was he not of the canaille, basely born, and a Revolutionist—the enemy of her order—in addition? It were a madness to even dream of the possibility of such a thing, for Suzanne de Bellecour came of too proud a stock, and knew too well the respect that was due to it.

CHAPTER VIII. THE INVALIDS AT BOISVERT

There had been friction between the National Convention and General Dumouriez, who, though a fine soldier, was a remarkably indifferent Republican. The Convention had unjustly ordered the arrest of his commissariat officers, Petit-Jean and Malus, and in other ways irritated a man whose patience was never of the longest.

On the eve, however, of war with Holland, the great ones in Paris had suddenly perceived their error, and had sought—despite the many enemies, from Marat downwards, that Dumouriez counted among their numbers—to conciliate a general whose services they found that they could not dispense with. This conciliation was the business upon which the Deputy La Boulaye had been despatched to Antwerp, and as an ambassador he proved signally successful, as much by virtue of the excellent terms he was empowered to offer as in consequence of the sympathy and diplomacy he displayed in offering them.

The great Republican General started upon his campaign in the Low Countries as fully satisfied as under the circumstances he could hope to be. Malus and Petit-Jean were not only enlarged but reinstated, he was promised abundant supplies of all descriptions, and he was assured that the Republic approved and endorsed his plan of campaign.

La Boulaye, his mission satisfactorily discharged, turned homewards once more, and with an escort of six men and a corporal he swiftly retraced his steps through that blackened, war-ravaged

country. They had slept a night at Mons, and they were within a short three leagues of French soil when they chanced to ride towards noon into the little hamlet of Boisvert. Probably they would have gone straight through without drawing rein, but that, as they passed the Auberge de l'Aigle, La Boulaye espied upon the green fronting the wayside hostelry a company of a half-dozen soldiers playing at bowls with cannon-balls.

The sight brought Caron to a sudden halt, and he sat his horse observing them and wondering how it chanced that these men should find themselves so far from the army. Three of them showed signs of having been recently wounded. One carried his arm in a sling, another limped painfully and by the aid of a stick, whilst the head of the third was swathed in bandages. But most remarkable were they by virtue of their clothes. One fellow—he of the bandaged head—wore a coat of yellow brocaded silk, which, in spite of a rent in the shoulder, and sundry stains of wine and oil, was unmistakably of a comparative newness. Beneath this appeared the nankeens and black leggings of a soldier. Another covered his greasy locks with a three-cornered hat, richly laced in gold. A third flaunted under his ragged blue coat a gold-broidered waistcoat and a Brussels cravat. A valuable ring flashed from the grimy finger of a fourth, who, instead of the military white nankeens, wore a pair of black silk breeches. There was one—he of the injured arm—resplendent in a redingote of crimson velvet, whilst he of the limp supported himself upon a gold-headed cane of ebony, which was in ludicrous discord with the tattered blue coat, the phrygian cap, and the toes that peeped through his broken boots.

They paused in their game to inspect, in their turn, the newcomers, and to La Boulaye it seemed that their glances were not free from uneasiness.

"A picturesque company on my life," he mused aloud. Then beckoned the one in the crimson coat.

"Hola, Citizen," he called to him.

The fellow hesitated a moment, then shuffled forward with a sullen air, and stood by Caron's stirrup.

"In God's name, what are you and who are you?" the Deputy demanded.

"We are invalided soldiers from the army of Dumouriez," the man answered him.

"But what are you doing here, at Boisvert?"

"We are in hospital, Citizen."

"Yonder?" asked La Boulaye derisively, pointing with his whip to the "Eagle Inn."

The fellow nodded.

"Yes, Citizen, yonder," he answered curtly.

La Boulaye looked surprised. Then his eyes strayed to the others on the green.

"But you are not all invalids?" he questioned.

"Many of us are convalescent."

"Convalescent? But those three braves yonder are something more than convalescent. They are as well as I am. Why do they not rejoin the troops?"

The fellow looked up with a scowl.

"We take our orders from our officer," he answered sourly.

"Ah!" quoth the Deputy. "There is someone in charge here, then? Who may it be?"

"Captain Charlot," the fellow answered, with an impudent air, which clearly seemed to ask: "What have you to say to that?"

"Captain Charlot?" echoed La Boulaye, in astonishment, for the name was that of the sometime peasant of Bellecour, who had since risen in life, and who, as an officer, had in a few months acquired a brilliant fame for deeds of daring. "Charlot Tardivet?" he inquired.

"Is there any other Captain Charlot in the army of the Republic?" the fellow asked insolently.

"Is he invalided too?" inquired Caron, without heeding the soldier's offensiveness of manner.

"He was severely wounded at Jemappes," was the answer.

"At Jemappes? But, voyons my friend, Jemappes was fought three months ago."

"Why, so all the world knows. What then? The General sent Captain Charlot here to rest and be cured, giving him charge of the invalided soldiers who came with him and of others who were already here."

"And of these," cried La Boulaye, his amazement growing, "have none returned to Dumouriez?"

"Have I not said that we are invalids?"

Caron eyed him with cold contempt.

"How many of you are there?" he asked. And for all that the man began to dislike this questioning, he had not the hardihood to refuse an answer to the stern tones of that stern man on horseback.

"Some fifty, or thereabouts."

La Boulaye said nothing for a moment, then touching the fellow's

sleeve with his whip.

"How came you into this masquerade?" he inquired.

"Ma foi," answered the man, shrugging his shoulders, "we were in rags. The commissariat was demoralised, and supplies were not forthcoming. We had to take what we could find, or else go naked."

"And where did you find these things?"

"Diable! Will your questions never come to an end, Citizen? Would you not be better advised in putting them to the Captain himself?"

"Why, so I will. Where is he?"

In the distance a cloud of dust might be perceived above the long, white road. The soldier espied it as La Boulaye put his question.

"I am much at fault if he does not come yonder." And he pointed to the dust-cloud.

"I think," said La Boulaye, turning to his men, "that we will drink a cup of wine at the 'Eagle Inn.'"

Mean though the place was, it was equipped with a stable-yard, to which admittance was gained by a porte-cochere on the right. Wheeling his horse, La Boulaye, without another word to the soldier he had been questioning, rode through it, followed by his escort.

The hostess, who came forward to receive them, was a tall, bony woman of very swarthy complexion, with beady eyes and teeth prominent as a rat's. But if ill-favoured, she seemed, at least, well-intentioned, in addition to which the tricolour scarf of office round La Boulaye's waist was a thing that commanded respect and servility, however much it might be the insignia of a Government of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

She bade the ostler care for their horses, and she brought them her best wine, seeking under an assumed geniality to conceal the unrest born of her speculations as to what might happen did Captain Charlot return ere the Deputy departed.

Charlot did return. Scarce were they seated at their wine when the confused sounds that from the distance had been swelling took more definite shape. The hostess looked uneasy as La Boulaye rose and went to the door of the inn. Down the road marched now a numerous company from which—to judge by their odd appearance—the players at bowls had been drawn. They numbered close upon threescore, and in the centre of them came a great lumbering vehicle, which puzzled La Boulaye. He drew away from the door and posted himself at the window, so that unobserved he might ascertain what was toward. Into the courtyard came that company, pele-mele, an odd mixture of rags and gauds, yet a very lusty party, vigorous of limb and loud of voice. With them came the coach, and there was such a press about the gates that La Boulaye looked to see some of them crushed to death. But with a few shouts and oaths and threats at one another they got through in safety, and the unwieldy carriage was brought to a standstill.

They were clamouring about its doors, and to La Boulaye it seemed that they were on the point of quarrelling among themselves some wanting to enter the coach and others seeking to restrain them, when through the porte-cochere rode Charlot Tardivet himself.

He barked out a sharp word of command, and they grew silent and still, testifying to a discipline which said much for the strength of character of their captain. He was strangely altered, was this Tardivet, and his appearance now was worthy of his followers. Under a gaudily-laced, three-cornered hat his hair hung dishevelled and unkempt, like wisps of straw. He wore a coat of flowered black silk, with a heavy gold edging, and a very bright plum-coloured waistcoat showed

above the broad tricolour scarf that sashed his middle. His breeches were white (or had been white in origin), and disappeared into a pair of very lustrous lacquered boots that rose high above his knees. A cavalry sabre of ordinary dimensions hung from a military belt, and a pistol-butt, peeping from his sash, completed the astonishing motley of his appearance. For the rest, he was the same tall and well-knit fellow; but there was more strength in his square chin, more intelligence in the keen blue eyes, and, alas! more coarseness in the mouth, which bristled with a reddish beard of some days' growth.

La Boulaye watched him with interest. He had become intimate with him in the old days in Paris, whither Tardivet had gone, and where, fired by the wrongs he had suffered, he had been one of the apostles of the Revolution. When the frontiers of France had been in danger Tardivet had taken up arms, and by the lustre which he had shed upon the name of Captain Charlotas he was come to be called throughout the army—he had eclipsed the fame of Citizen Tardivet, the erstwhile prophet of liberty. Great changes these in the estate of one who had been a simple peasant; but then the times were times of great changes. Was not Santerre, the brewer, become a great general, and was not Robespierre, the obscure lawyer of Arras, by way of becoming a dictator? Was it, therefore, wonderful that Charlot should have passed from peasant to preacher, from preacher to soldier, and from soldier to—what?

A shrewd suspicion was being borne in upon La Boulaye's mind as he stood by that window, his men behind him watching also, with no less intentness and some uneasiness for themselves—for they disliked the look of the company.

In five seconds Charlot had restored order in the human chaos without. In five minutes there were but ten men left in the yard. The others were gone at Charlot's bidding—a bidding, couched in words that went to confirm La Boulaye's suspicions.

"You will get back to your posts at once," he had said. "Because we have made one rich capture is no reason why you should neglect the opportunities of making others no less rich. You, Moulinet, with twenty men, shall patrol the road to Charleroi, and get as near France as possible. You Boligny, station yourself in the neighbourhood of Conde, with ten men, and guard the road from Valenciennes. You Aigreville, spread your twenty men from Conde to Tournay, and watch the frontiers closely. Make an inspection of any captures you may take, and waste no time in bringing hither worthless ones. Now go. I will see that each man's share of this is assured him. March!"

There were some shouts of "Vive la Republique!" some of "Vive le Capitaine Charlot!" and so they poured out of the yard, and left him to give a few hurried directions to the ten men that remained.

"Sad invalids these, as I live!" exclaimed La Boulaye over his shoulder to his followers. "Ha! There is my friend of the red redingote!"

The fellow with the bandaged head had approached Charlot and was tugging at his sleeve.

"Let be, you greasy rascal," the Captain snapped at him, to add: "What do you say? A Deputy? Where?" The fellow pointed with his thumb in the direction of the hostelry.

"Sacred name of a name!" growled Charlot, and, turning suddenly from the men to whom he had been issuing directions, he sprang up the steps and entered the inn. As he crossed the threshold of the common room he was confronted by the tall figure of La Boulaye.

"I make you my compliments, Charlot," was Caron's greeting, "upon the vigorous health that appears to prevail in your hospital."

Tardivet stood a moment within the doorway, staring at the Deputy. Then his brow cleared, and with a laugh, at once of welcome and

amusement, he strode forward and put out his hand.

"My good Caron!" he cried. "To meet you at Boisvert is a pleasure I had not looked for."

"Are you so very sure," asked La Boulaye sardonically, as he took the outstretched hand, "that it is a pleasure?"

"How could it be else, old friend? By St. Guillotine!" he added, clapping the Deputy on the back, "you shall come to my room, and we will broach a bottle of green seal."

In some measure of wonder, La Boulaye permitted himself to be led up the crazy stairs to a most untidy room above, which evidently did duty as the Captain's parlour. A heavy brass lamp, hanging from the ceiling, a few untrustworthy chairs and a deal table, stained and unclean, were the only articles of furniture. But in almost every corner there were untidy heaps of garments Of all sorts and conditions; strewn about the floor were other articles of apparel, a few weapons, a saddle, and three or four boots; here an empty bottle, lying on its side, yonder a couple of full ones by the hearth; an odd book or two and an infinity of playing cards, cast there much as a sower scatters his seeds upon the ground.

There may be a hundred ways of apprehending the character of a man, but none perhaps is more reliable than the appearance of his dwelling, and no discerning person that stepped into Captain Tardivet's parlour could long remain in doubt of its inhabitant's pursuits and habits.

When Dame Capoulade had withdrawn, after bringing them their wine and casting a few logs upon the fire, La Boulaye turned his back to the hearth and confronted his host.

"Why are you not with the army, Charlot?" he asked in a tone which made the question sound like a demand.

"Have they not told you," rejoined the other airily, engrossed in filling the glasses.

"I understand you were sent here to recover from a wound you received three months ago at Jemappes, and to take charge of other invalided soldiers. But seemingly, your invalids do not number more than a half-dozen out of the fifty or sixty men that are with you. How is it then, that you do not return with these to Dumouriez?"

"Because I can serve France better here," answered Charlot, "and at the same time enrich myself and my followers."

"In short," returned La Boulaye coldly, "because you have degenerated from a soldier into a brigand."

Charlot looked up, and for just a second his glance was not without uneasiness. Then he laughed. He unbuckled his sword and tossed it into a corner, throwing his hat after it.

"It was ever your way to take extreme views, Caron," he observed, with a certain whimsical regret of tone. "That, no doubt, is what has made a statesman of you. You had chosen more wisely had you elected to serve the Republic with your sword instead. Come, my friend," and he pointed to the wine, "let us pledge the Nation."

La Boulaye shrugged his shoulders slightly, and sighed. In the end he came forward and took the wine.

"Long live the Republic!" was Charlot's toast, and with a slight inclination of the head La Boulaye drained his glass.

"It is likely to live without you, Charlot, unless you mend your conduct."

"Diable!" snapped the Captain, a trifle peevishly. "Can you not understand that in my own way I am serving my country. You have

called me a brigand. But you might say the same of General Dumouriez himself. How many cities has he not sacked?"

"That is the way of war."

"And so is this. He makes war upon the enemies of France that dwell in cities, whilst I, in a smaller way, make war upon those that travel in coaches. I confine myself to emigres—these damned aristocrats whom it is every good Frenchman's duty to aid in stamping out. Over the frontiers they come with their jewels, their plate, and their money-chests. To whom belongs this wealth? To France. Too long already have they withheld from the sons of the soil that which belongs equally to them, and now they have the effrontery to attempt to carry these riches out of the country. Would any true Republican dare to reproach me for what I do? I am but seizing that which belongs to France, and here dividing it among the good patriots that are with me, the soldiers that have bled for France."

"A specious argument," sneered La Boulaye.

"Specious enough to satisfy the Convention itself if ever I should be called to task," answered Charlot, with heat. "Do you propose to draw the attention of the Executive to my doings?"

La Boulaye's grey eyes regarded him steadily for a moment.

"Know you of any reason why I should not?" he asked.

"Yes, Caron, I do," was the ready answer. "I am well aware of the extent of your power with the Mountain. In Paris I can see that it might go hard with me if you were minded that it should, and you were able to seize me. On the other hand, that such arguments that I have advanced to you would be acceptable to the Government I do not doubt. But whilst they would approve of this that you call brigandage, I also do not doubt that they would claim that the prizes I have seized are by right the property of the Convention, and they might compel me

to surrender them. Thus they would pass from my hands into those of some statesman-brigand, who, under the plea of seizing these treasures for the coffers of the nation, would transfer them to his own. Would you rather help such an one to profit than me, Caron? Have you so far forgotten how we suffered together—almost in the self-same cause—at Bellecour, in the old days? Have you forgotten the friendship that linked us later, in Paris, when the Revolution was in its dawn? Have you forgotten what I have endured at the hands of this infernal class that you can feel no sympathy for me? Caron, it is a measure of revenge, and as there is a Heaven, a very mild one. Me they robbed of more than life; them I deprive but of their jewels and their plate, turning them destitute upon the world. Bethink you of my girl-wife, Caron," he added, furiously, "and of how she died of grief and shame a short three months after our hideous nuptials. God in Heaven! When the memory of it returns to me I marvel at my own forbearance. I marvel that I do not take every man and woman of them that fall into my hands and flog them to death as they would have flogged you when you sought—alas to so little purpose—to intervene on my behalf."

He grew silent and thoughtful, and the expression of his face was not nice. At last: "Have I given you reason enough," he asked, "why you should not seek to thwart me?"

"Why, yes," answered La Boulaye, "more than was necessary. I am desolated that I should have brought you to re-open a sorrow that I thought was healed."

"So it is, Caron. How it is I do not know. Perhaps it is my nature; perhaps it is that in youth sorrow is seldom long-enduring; perhaps it is the strenuous life I have lived and the changes that have been wrought in me—for, after all, there is a little in this Captain Tardivet that is like the peasant poor Marie took to husband, four years ago. I am no longer the same man, and among the other things that I have

put from me are the sorrows that were of the old Charlot. But some memories cannot altogether die, and if to-day I no longer mourn that poor child, yet the knowledge of the debt that lies 'twixt the noblesse of France and me is ever present, and I neglect no opportunity of discharging a part of it. But enough of that, Caron. Tell me of yourself. It is a full twelvemonth since last we met, and in that time, from what I have heard, you have done much and gone far. Tell me of it, Caron."

They drew their chairs to the hearth, and they sat talking so long that the early February twilight came down upon them while they were still at their reminiscences. La Boulaye had intended reaching Valenciennes that night; but rather than journey forward in the dark he now proposed to lie at Boisvert, a resolution in which he did not lack for encouragement from Charlot.

CHAPTER IX. THE CAPTIVES

Amid the sordid surroundings of Charlot's private quarters the Captain and the Deputy supped that evening. The supper sorted well with the house—a greasy, ill-cooked meal that proved little inviting to the somewhat fastidious La Boulaye. But the wine, plundered, no doubt, in common with the goblets out of which they drank it—was more than good, and whilst La Boulaye showed his appreciation of it, Charlot abused it like a soldier. They sat facing each other across the little deal table, whose stains were now hidden by a cloth, and to light them they had four tapers set in silver candlesticks of magnificent workmanship, and most wondrous weight, which Tardivet informed his guest had been the property of a *ci-devant* prince of the blood.

As the night wore on Captain Charlot grew boisterous and more confidential. He came at length to speak of the last capture they had made.

"I have taken prizes, Caron," said he, "which a king might not despise. But to-day—" He raised his eyes to the ceiling and wagged his head.

"Well?" quoth La Boulaye. "What about to-day?"

"I have made a capture worth more than all the others put together. It was an indifferent-looking berline, and my men were within an ace of allowing it to pass. But I have a nose, *mon cher*"—and he tapped the organ with ludicrous significance—"and, *bon Dieu*, what affair! I can smell an aristocrat a league off. Down upon that coach I swooped like a hawk upon a sparrow. Within it sat two women, thickly veiled, and I give you my word that in a sense I pitied them, for not a doubt of it, but they were in the act of congratulating themselves upon their

escape from France. But sentiment may become fatal if permitted to interfere with enterprise. Stifling my regrets I desired them to alight, and they being wise obeyed me without demur. I allowed them to retain their veils. I sought the sight of things other than women's faces, and a brief survey of the coach showed me where to bestow my attention. I lifted the back seat. It came up like the lid of the chest it was, and beneath it I discovered enough gold and silver plate to outweigh in value almost everything that I had ever taken. But that was by no means all. Under the front seat there was a chest of gold—louis d'ors they were, some two or three thousand at least—and, besides that, a little iron-bound box of gems which in itself was worth more than all the rest of the contents of that treasure-casket of a coach. I tell you, Caron, I dropped the lid of that seat in some haste, for I was not minded that my men should become as wise as I. I stepped down and bade, the women re-enter, and hither under strong escort I have brought them."

"And these treasures?" asked La Boulaye.

"They are still in the coach below, with the women. I have told these that they shall spend the night there. To-morrow I shall see to them and give them their liberty—which is a more generous proceeding than might befall them at the hands of another. When they are gone comes the division of the spoil." He closed one eye slowly, in a very ponderous wink. "To my men I shall relegate the gold and silver plate as well as the money. For myself I shall only retain the little iron-bound box. My followers will account me more than generous and themselves more than satisfied. As for me, La Boulaye—by St. Guillotine, I am tempted to emigrate also and set up as an aristocrat myself in Prussia or England, for in that little box there is something more than a fortune. I asked you to-day whether you were minded to lay information against me in Paris. My faith, I am little concerned whether you do or not, for I think that before you can reach Paris, Captain Charlot Tardivet will be no more than a name in the

Republican army. Abroad I shall call myself Charlot du Tardivet, and I shall sleep in fine linen and live on truffles and champagne. Caron, your health!"

He drained his glass, and laughed softly to himself as he set it down.

"Do you trust your men?" asked La Boulaye.

"Eh? Trust them? Name of a name! They know me. I have placed the ten most faithful ones on guard. They answer to the rest of us with their necks for the safety of their charge. Come hither, Caron."

He rose somewhat unsteadily, and lurched across to the window. La Boulaye followed him, and gazing out under his indication, he beheld the coach by the blaze of a fire which the men had lighted to keep them from freezing at their post.

"Does that look secure?"

"Why, yes—secure enough. But if those fellows were to take it into their heads that it would be more profitable to share the prize among ten than among sixty?"

"Secreanom!!" swore Charlot impatiently. "You do my wits poor credit. For what do you take me? Have I gone through so much, think you, without learning how little men are to be trusted? Faugh! Look at the porte-cochere. The gates are closed—aye, and locked, mon cher, and the keys are here, in my pocket. Do you imagine they are to be broken through without arousing anyone? And then, the horses. They are in the stables over there, and again, the keys are in my pocket. So that, you see, I do not leave everything to the honesty of my ten most faithful ones."

"You have learned wisdom, not a doubt of it," laughed the Deputy.

"In a hard school, Caron," answered the Captain soberly. "Aye,

name of a name, in a monstrous hard school."

He turned from the window, and the light of the tapers falling on his face, showed it heavily scored with lines of pain, testifying to the ugly memories which the Deputy's light words had evoked. Then suddenly he laughed, half-bitterly, half humourously.

"La, la!" said he. "The thing's past. Charlot Tardivet the bridegroom of Bellecour and Captain Charlot of Dumouriez' army are different men-very different."

He strode back to the table, filled his goblet, and gulped down the wine. Then he crossed to the fire and stood with his back to La Boulaye for a spell. When next he faced his companion all signs of emotion had cleared from his countenance. It was again the callous, reckless face of Captain Charlot, rendered a trifle more reckless and a trifle more callous by the wine-flush on his cheeks and the wine-glitter in his eye.

"Caron" said he, with a half-smile, "shall we have these ladies in to supper?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated La Boulaye.

"Nay, but I will," the other insisted, and he moved across to the window.

As he passed him, La Boulaye laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Not that, Charlot," he begged impressively, his dark face very set. "Plunder them, turn them destitute upon the world, if you will, but remember, at least, that they are women."

Charlot laughed in his face.

"It is something to remember, is it not? They remembered it of our women, these aristocrats!"

There was so much ugly truth in the Captain's words, and such a suggestion of just, if bitter, retribution in his mental attitude, that La Boulaye released his arm, at a loss for further arguments wherewith to curb him.

"Paydi!" Charlot continued, "I have a mind for a frolic. Does not justice give me the right to claim that these aristocrats shall amuse me?"

With an oath he turned abruptly, and pulled the casement open.

"Guyot!" he called, and a voice from below made answer to him.

"You will make my compliments to the citoyennes in the coach, Guyot, and tell them that the Citizen-captain Tardivet requests the honour of their company to supper."

Then he went to the door, and calling Dame Capoulade, he bade her set two fresh covers; in which he was expeditiously obeyed. La Boulaye stood by the fire, his pale face impassive now and almost indifferent. Charlot returned to the window to learn from Guyot that the citoyennes thanked the Citizen-captain, but that they were tired and sought to be excused, asking nothing better than to be allowed to remain at peace in their carriage.

"Sacred name of a name!" he croaked, a trifle thickly, for the wine he had taken was mastering him more and more. "Are they defying us? Since they will not accept an invitation, compel them to obey a command. Bring them up at once, Guyot."

"At once, Captain," was the answer, and Guyot went about the business.

Charlot closed the window and approached the table.

"They are coquettish these scented dames," he mocked, as he

poured himself out some wine. "You are not drinking Caron."

"It is perhaps wise that one of us should remain sober," answered the Deputy quietly, for in spite of a certain sympathy with the feelings by which Charlot was actuated, he was in dead antipathy to this baiting of women that seemed toward.

Charlot made no answer. He drained his goblet and set it down with a bang. Then he flung himself into a chair, and stretching out his long, booted legs he began to hum the refrain of the "Marseillaise." Thus a few moments went by. Then there came a sound of steps upon the creaking stairs, and the gruff voice of the soldier urging the ladies to ascend more speedily.

At last the door opened and two women entered, followed by Guyot. Charlot lurched to his feet.

"You have come, Mesdames," said he, forgetting the mode of address prescribed by the Convention, and clumsily essaying to make a leg. "Be welcome! Guyot, go to the devil."

For a moment or two after the soldier's departure the women remained in the shadow, then, at the Captain's invitation, which they dared not disobey, they came forward into the halo of candle-light. Simultaneously La Boulaye caught his breath, and took a step forward. Then he drew back again until his shoulders touched the overmantel and there he remained, staring at the newcomers, who as yet, did not appear to have observed him.

They wore no headgear, and their scarfs were thrown back upon their shoulders, revealing to the stricken gaze of La Boulaye the countenances of the Marquise de Bellecour and her daughter.

And now, as they advanced into the light, Charlot recognised them too. In the act of offering a chair he stood, arrested, his eyes devouring first one, then the other of them, with a glance that seemed

to have grown oddly sobered. The flush died from his face, and his lips twitched like those of a man who seeks to control his emotions. Then slowly the colour crept back into his cheeks, a curl of mockery appeared on the coarse mouth, and the eyes beamed evilly.

They tense silence was broken by the bang with which he dropped the chair he had half raised. As he leaned forward now, La Boulaye read in his face the thought that had leapt into the Captain's mind, and had it been a question of any woman other than Zuzanne de Bellecour, the Deputy might have indulged in the consideration of what a wonderful retribution was there here. Into the hands of the man whose bride the Marquis de Bellecour had torn from him were now delivered by a wonderful chance the wife and daughter of that same Bellecour. And at Boisvert this briganding Captain was as much to-night the lord of life and death, and all besides, as had been the Marquis of Bellecour of old. But he pondered not these things, for all that the stern irony of the coincidence did not escape him. That evil look in Charlot's eyes, that sinister smile on Charlot's lips, more than suggested what manner of vengeance the Captain would exact—and that, for the time, was matter enough to absorb the Deputy's whole attention.

And the women did not see him. They were too much engrossed in the figure fronting them, and agonisedly, with cheeks white and bosoms heaving, they waited, in their dread suspense. At last, drawing himself to the full of his stalwart height, the Captain laughed grimly and spoke.

"Mesdames," said he, his very tone an insult in its brutal derision, "we Republicans have abolished God, and until tonight I have held the Republic right, arguing that if a God there was, His leanings must be aristocratic, since He never seemed to concern Himself with the misfortunes of the lowly-born. But tonight, mesdames, I know that the Republic is at fault. There is a God—a God of justice and retribution,

who has delivered you, of all people in the world, into my hands. Look on me well, Ci-devant Marquise de Bellecour, and you, Mademoiselle de Bellecour. Look in my face and see if you know me again. Not you. You never heeded me as you rode by in those proud days. But heard you ever tell of one Charlot Tardivet, a base vassal whose wife your husband, Madame, and your father, Mademoiselle, took from him on his bridal morn? Heard you ever tell of that poor girl—one Marie Tardivet—who died of grief as a consequence of that brutality? But no; such matters were too trivial for your notice if you saw them, or for your memory if you ever heard tell of them. What was the life of a peasant more than that of any other animal of the land, that the concern of it should perturb the sereneness of your aristocratic being? Mesdames, that Charlot Tardivet am I; that Marie Tardivet was my wife. I knew not whom you were when I bade you sup at my table but now that I know it—what do you look for at my hands?"

It was the Marquise who answered him. She was deathly pale, and her words came breathlessly: for all that their import was very bold.

"We look for the recollection that we are women and unless you are as cowardly as—"

"Citoyenne," he broke in harshly, answering her as he had answered La Boulaye, "was my wife less a woman think you? Pah! There is yet another here who was wronged," he announced, and he waved his hand in the direction of La Boulaye, who stood, stiff and pale, by the hearth.

The women turned, and at sight of the Deputy a cry escaped Suzanne. It was a cry of hope, for here was one who would surely lend them aid. It was a fact, she thought, upon which the Captain had not counted. But La Boulaye stood straight and cold, and not by so much as an inclination of the head did he acknowledge that grim introduction. Charlot, mistaking Mademoiselle's exclamation, laughed softly.

"Well may you cry out, Citoyenne," said he, "for him I see you recognise. He is the man who sought to rescue my wife from the clutches of your lordly and most noble father. For his pains he was flogged until they believed him dead. Is it not very fitting that he should be with me now to receive you?"

"But he, at least, is in my debt," cried Mademoiselle, now making a step forward, and sustained by an excitement born of hope. "Whatever may be my father's sins, M. la Boulaye, at least, will not seek to visit them upon the daughter, for he owes his life to me, and he will not forget the debt."

Charlot's brows were suddenly knit with vexation. He half-turned to La Boulaye, as if to speak; but ere he could utter a word—

"The debt has been paid, Citoyenne," said Caron impassively.

Before that cold answer, so coldly delivered, Mademoiselle recoiled.

"Paid!" she echoed mechanically.

"Aye, paid," he rejoined. "You claimed your brother's life in payment, and I gave it to you. Do you not think that we are quits? Besides," he ended suddenly, "Captain Tardivet is the master here. Address your appeals to him, Citoyenne."

With terror written on her face, she turned from him to meet the flushed countenance of Charlot, who, with arms akimbo and his head on one side, was regarding her at once with mockery and satisfaction.

"What do you intend by us, Monsieur?" she questioned in a choking voice.

He smiled inscrutably.

"Allay your fears, Citoyenne; you will find me very gentle."

"I knew you would prove generous," she cried.

"But, yes, Citoyenne," he rejoined, in the tones we employ to those who fear unreasonably. "I shall prove generous; as generous as—as was my lord your father."

La Boulaye trembled, but his face remained calmly expressionless as he watched that grim scene.

"Monsieur!" Suzanne cried out in horror.

"You will not dare, you scum!" blazed the Marchioness.

Charlot shrugged his shoulders and laughed, whereupon Madame de Bellecour seemed to become a being transformed. Her ample flesh, which but a moment back had quivered in fear, quivered now more violently still in anger. The colour flowed back into her cheeks until they flamed an angry crimson, and her vituperations rang in so loud and fierce a voice that at last, putting his hands to his ears, Charlot crossed to the door.

"Silence!" he roared at her, so savagely that her spirit forsook her on the instant. "I will put an end to this," he swore, as he opened the door. "Hold there! Is Guyot below?"

"Here, Captain," came a voice.

Charlot retraced his steps, leaving the door wide, his eyes dwelling upon Suzanne until she shrank under its gaze, as she might have done from the touch of some unclean thing. She drew near to her mother, in whom the brief paroxysm of rage was now succeeded by a no less violent paroxysm of weeping. On the stairs sounded Guyot's ascending steps.

"Mother," whispered Suzanne, setting her arms about her in a vain

attempt to comfort. Then she heard Charlot's voice curtly bidding Guyot to reconduct the Marquise to her carriage.

Madame de Bellecour heard it also, and roused herself once more.

"I will not go," she stormed, anger flashing again from the tear-laden eyes. "I will not leave my daughter."

Charlot shrugged his shoulders callously.

"Take her away, Guyot," he said, shortly, and the sturdy soldier obeyed him with a roughness that took no account of either birth or sex.

When the Marquise's last scream had died away in the distance, Charlot turned once more to Suzanne, and it seemed that he sought to compose his features into an expression of gentleness beyond their rugged limitations. But the glance of his blue eyes was kind, and mistaking the purport of that kindness, Mademoiselle began an appeal to his better feelings.

Straight and tall, pale and delicate she stood, her beauty rendered, perhaps, the more appealing by virtue of the fear reflected on her countenance. Her blue eyes were veiled behind their long black lashes, her lips were tremulous, and her hands clasped and unclasped as she now made her prayer to the Republican. But in the hardened heart of Charlot no breath of pity stirred. He beheld her beauty and he bethought him of his wrongs. For the rest, perhaps, had she been less comely he had been less vengeful.

And yonder by the hearth stood La Boulaye like a statue, unmoved and immovable. The Captain was speaking to her, gently and soothingly, but her thoughts became more taken with the silence of La Boulaye than with the speech of Charlot. Even in that parlous moment she had leisure to despise herself for having once—on the day on which, in answer to her intercessions, he had spared her brother's life

—entertained a kindly, almost wistful, thought concerning this man whom she now deemed a dastard.

CHAPTER X. THE BAISER LAMOURETTE

Presently Charlot turned to La Boulaye, and for all that he uttered no word, his glance left nothing to be said. In response to it Caron stirred at last, and came leisurely over to the table.

"A mouthful of wine, and I'm gone, Charlot," said he in level, colourless tones, as taking up a flagon he filled himself a goblet.

"Fill for me, too," cried the Captain; "aye, and for the Citoyenne here. Come, my girl, a cup of wine will refresh you."

But Suzanne shrank from the invitation as much as from the tenor of it and the epithet he had applied to her. Observing this, he laughed softly.

"Oh! As you will. But the wine is good—from cellar of a ci-devant Duke. My service to you, Citoyenne," he pledged her, and raising his cup, he poured the wine down a throat that was parched by the much that he had drunk already. But ere the goblet was half-empty, a sharp, sudden cry from La Boulaye came to interrupt his quaffing. He glanced round, and at what he saw he spilled the wine down his waistcoat, then let the cup fall to the ground, as with an oath he flung himself upon the girl.

She had approached the table whilst both men were drinking, and quietly possessed herself of a knife; and, but that it was too blunt to do the service to which she put it, Charlot's intervention would have come too late. As it was he caught her wrist in time, and in a rage he tore the weapon from her fingers, and flung it far across the room.

"So, pretty lady!" he gasped, now gripping both her wrists. "So! we are suicidally inclined, are we! We would cheat Captain Charlot, would we? Fi donc!" he continued with horrid playfulness. "To shed a blood so blue upon a floor so unclean! Name of a name of a name!"

Accounting herself baffled at every point, this girl, who had hitherto borne herself so stoutly as to have stoically sought death as a last means of escape, began to weep softly. Whereupon:

"Nay, nay, little-woman," murmured the Captain, in such accents as are employed to a petted child, and instinctively, in his intent to soothe he drew her nearer. And now the close contact thrilled him; her beauty, and some subtle perfume that reached him from her, played havoc with his senses. Nearer he drew her in silence, his face white and clammy, and his hot, wine laden breath coming quicker every second. And unresisting she submitted, for she was beyond resistance now, beyond tears even. From between wet lashes her great eyes gazed into his with a look of deadly, piteous affright; her lips were parted, her cheeks ashen, and her mind was dimly striving to formulate a prayer to the Holy Mother, the natural protectress of all imperilled virgins.

Nearer she felt herself drawn to her tormentor, in whose thoughts there dwelt now little recollection of the vengeful character of his purpose. For a second her wrists were released; then she felt his arms going round her as the coils of a snake go round its prey. With a sudden reassertion of self, with a panting gasp of horror, she tore herself free. An oath broke from him as he sprang after her. Then the unexpected happened. Above his head something bright flashed up, then down. There was a dull crack, and the Captain stopped short in his rush; his hands were jerked to the height of his breast, and like a pole-axed beast he dropped and lay prone at her feet.

Across his fallen body she beheld La Boulaye standing

impassively, the ghost of a smile on his thin lips, and in his hand one of the heavy silver candlesticks from the table.

Whilst a man might count a dozen they stood so with no word spoken. Then:

"It was a cowardly blow, Citoyenne," said the Deputy in accents of regret; "but what choice had I?" He set down the candlestick, and kneeling beside Charlot, he felt for the Captain's heart. "The door, Citoyenne," he muttered. "Lock it."

Mechanically, and without uttering a word, she hastened to do his bidding. As the key grated in the lock he rose.

"It has only stunned him," he announced. "Now to prepare an explanation for it."

He drew a chair under the old brass lamp, that hung from the ceiling. He mounted the chair, and with both hands he seized the chain immediately above the lamp. Drawing himself up, he swung there for just a second; then the hook gave way, and amid a shower of plaster La Boulaye half-tumbled to the ground.

"There," said he, as he dropped the lamp with its chain and hook upon the floor by Charlot. "It may not be as convincing as we might wish, but I think that it will prove convincing enough to the dull wits of the landlady, and of such of Charlot's followers as may enter here. I am afraid," he deplored, "that it will be some time before he recovers. He was so far gone in wine that it needed little weight to fell him."

Her glance met his once more, and she took a step towards him with hands outstretched.

"Monsieur, Monsieur!" she cried. "If you but knew how in my thoughts I wronged you a little while ago."

"You had all reason to," he answered, taking her hands, and there

came the least softening of his stern countenance. "It grieved me to add to your affliction. But had I permitted him to do so much as suspect that I was anything but your implacable enemy, I had no chance of saving you. He would have dismissed me, and I must have obeyed or been compelled, for he is master here, and has men enough to enforce what he desires."

And now she would have thanked him for having saved her, but he cut her short almost roughly.

"You owe me no thanks," he said. "I have but done for you what my manhood must have bidden me do for any woman similarly situated. For to-night I have saved you, Citoyenne. I shall make an effort to smuggle you and your mother out of Boisvert before morning, but after that you must help yourselves."

"You will do this?" she cried, her eyes glistening.

"I will attempt it."

"By what means, Monsieur Caron?"

"I do not yet know. I must consider. In the meantime you had best return to your coach. Later to-night I shall have you and your mother brought to me, and I will endeavour to so arrange matters that you shall not again return to your carriage.

"Not return to it?" she exclaimed. "But are we then to leave it here?"

"I am afraid there is no help for that."

"But, Monsieur, you do not know; there is a treasure in that carriage. All that we have is packed in it, and if we go without it we go destitute."

"Better, perhaps, to go destitute than not to go at all, Mademoiselle. I am afraid there is no choice for you."

His manner was a trifle impatient. It irritated him that in such a moment she should give so much thought to her valuables. But in reality she was thinking of them inasmuch as they concerned her mother, who was below, and her father and brother who awaited them in Prussia, whither they had separately emigrated. The impatience in his tone stung her into a feeling of resentment, that for the moment seemed to blot out the much that she owed him. A reproachful word was trembling on her lips, when suddenly he put out his hand.

"Hist!" he whispered, the concentrated look of one who listens stamped upon his face. His sharp ears had detected some sound which—perhaps through her preoccupation—she had not noticed. He stepped quickly to the Captain's side, and taking up the lamp by its chain, he leapt into the air like a clown, and came down on his heels with a thud that shook the chamber. Simultaneously he dropped the lamp with a clatter, and sent a shout re-echoing through the house.

The girl stared at him with parted lips and the least look of fear in her eyes. Was he gone clean mad of a sudden?

But now the sound which had warned him of someone's approach reached her ears as well. There were steps on the stairs, which at that alarming noise were instantly quickened. Yet ere they had reached the top La Boulaye was at the door vociferating wildly.

Into the room came the hostess, breathless and grinning with anxiety, and behind her came Guyot, who, startled by the din, had hastened up to inquire into its cause.

At sight of the Captain stretched upon the floor there was a scream from Mother Capoulade and an oath from the soldier.

"Mon Dieu! what has happened?" she cried, hurrying forward.

"Miserable!" exclaimed La Boulaye, with well-feigned anger. "It

seems that your wretched hovel is tumbling to pieces, and that men are not safe beneath its roof." And he indicated the broken plaster and the fallen lamp.

"How did it happen, Citoyenne-deputy?" asked Guyot; for all that he drew the only possible inference from what he saw.

"Can you not see how it happened?" returned La Boulaye, impatiently. "As for you, wretched woman, you will suffer for it, I promise you. The nation is likely to demand a high price for Captain Charlot's injuries."

"But, bon Dieu, how am I to blame?" wailed the frightened woman.

"To blame," echoed La Boulaye, in a furious voice. "Are you not to blame that you let rooms in a crazy hovel? Let them to emigres as much as you will, but if you let them to good patriots and thereby endanger their lives you must take the consequences. And the consequences in this case are likely to be severe, malheureuse."

He turned now to Guyot, who was kneeling by the Captain, and looking to his hurt.

"Here, Guyot," he commanded sharply, "reconduct the Citoyenne to her coach. I will perhaps see her again later, when the Captain shall have recovered consciousness. You, Citoyenne Capoulade, assist me to carry him to bed."

Each obeyed him, Guyot readily, as became a soldier, and the hostess trembling with the dread which La Boulaye's words had instilled into her. They got Charlot to bed, and when a half-hour or so later he recovered consciousness, it was to find Guyot watching at his bed-side. Bewildered, he demanded an explanation of his present position and of the pain in his head, which brought him the memory of a sudden and unaccountable blow he had received, which was the last thing that he remembered. Guyot, who had never for a moment

entertained a doubt of the genuineness of the mise-en-scene La Boulaye had prepared, answered him with the explanation of how he had been struck by the falling lamp, whereupon Charlot fell to cursing lamps and crumbings with horrid volubility. That done he would have risen, but that La Boulaye, entering at that moment, insisted that he should remain abed.

"Are you mad?" the Deputy expostulated, "or is it that you do not appreciate the nature of your hurt? Diable! I have known a man die through insisting to be about with a cracked skull that was as nothing to yours."

"Name of a name!" gasped Charlot, who in such matters was profoundly ignorant and correspondingly credulous. "Is it so serious?"

"Not serious if you lie still and sleep. You will probably be quite well by to-morrow. But if you move to-night the consequences may well be fatal."

"But I cannot sleep at this hour," the Captain complained. "I am very wakeful."

"We will try to find you a sleeping potion, then," said La Boulaye. "I hope the hosteen may have something that will answer the purpose. Meanwhile, Guyot, do not allow the Captain to talk. If you would have him well to-morrow, remember that it is of the first importance that he should have utter rest tonight."

With that he went in quest of Dame Capoulade to ascertain whether she possessed any potion that would induce sleep. He told her that the Captain was seriously injured, and that unless he slept he might die, and, quickened by the terror of what might befall her in such a case, the woman presently produced a small phial full of a brown, viscous fluid. What it might be he had no notion, being all unversed in the mysteries of the pharmacopoeia; but she told him that it had

belonged to her now defunct husband, who had always said that ten drops of it would make a man sleep the clock round.

He experimented on the Captain with ten drops, and within a quarter of an hour of taking the draught of red wine in which it was administered, Charlot's deep breathing proclaimed him fast asleep.

That done, La Boulaye sent Guyot below to his post once more, and returning to the room in which they had supped, he paced up and down for a full hour, revolving in his mind the matter of saving Mademoiselle and her mother. At last, towards ten o'clock, he opened the casement, and calling down to Guyot, as Charlot had done, he bade him bring the women up again. Now Guyot knew of the high position which Caron occupied in the Convention, and he had seen the intimate relations in which he stood to Tardivet, so that unhesitatingly he now obeyed him.

La Boulaye closed the window, and crossed slowly to the fire. He stirred the burning logs with his boot, then stood there waiting. Presently the stairs creaked, next the door opened, and Guyot ushered in Mademoiselle.

"The elder citoyenne refuses to come, Citizen-deputy," said the soldier. "They both insisted that it was not necessary, and that the Citoyenne here would answer your questions."

Almost on the point of commanding the soldier to return for the Marquise, Caron caught the girl's eye, and her glance was so significant that he thought it best to hear first what motives she had for thus disobeying him.

"Very well," he said shortly. "You may go below, Guyot. But hold yourself in readiness lest I should have need of you."

The soldier saluted and disappeared. Scarce was he gone when Mademoiselle came hurrying forward.

"Monsieur Caron," she cried "Heaven is surely befriending us. The soldiers are drinking themselves out of their wits. They will be keeping a slack watch presently."

He looked at her for a moment, fathoming the purport of what she said.

"But," he demanded at last, "why did not the Marquise obey my summons, and accompany you?"

"She was afraid to leave the coach, Monsieur. Moreover, she agreed with me that it would not be necessary."

"Not necessary?" he echoed. "But it is necessary. When last you were here I told you I did not intend you should return to the coach. This is my plan, Citoyenne. I shall keep Guyot waiting below while you and your mother are fortifying yourselves by supper here. Then I shall dismiss him with a recommendation that he keep a close watch upon the carriage, and the information that you will not be returning to it to-night. A half-hour later or so, when things are quiet, I shall find a way out for you by the back, after which the rest must remain in your hands. More I cannot do."

"You can," she cried; "you can."

"If you will enlighten me," said he, with the faintest touch of irony.

She looked at his stern, sardonic face and solemn grey eyes, and for a moment it almost seemed to her that she hated him more than anybody in the world. He was so passionless, so master of himself, and he addressed her in a tone which, whilst it suggested that he accounted himself most fully her equal, made her feel that he was really her better by much. If one of these two was an aristocrat, surely that one was the Citizen-deputy La Boulaye.

"If you had but the will you would do it, Monsieur," she answered

him. "It is not mine to enlighten you; I know not how."

"I have the very best will in the world, Citoyenne," said he. "Of that I think that I am giving proof."

"Aye, the will to do nothing that will shame your manhood," she rejoined. "That is all you think of. It was because your manhood bade you that you came to my rescue—so you said when you declined my thanks. It is this manhood of yours, I make no doubt, that is now prevailing upon you to deliver two unprotected women out of the hands of these brigands."

"In Heaven's name, Citoyenne," quoth the astonished Deputy, "out of what sentiment would you have me act, and, indeed, so that I save you, how can it concern you by what sentiment I am prompted?"

She paused a moment before replying. Her eyes were downcast, and some of the colour faded from her cheeks. She came a step nearer, which brought her very close to him.

"Monsieur," she faltered very shyly, "in the old days at Bellecour you would have served me out of other sentiments."

He started now in spite of himself, and eyed her with a sudden gleam of hope, or triumph, or mistrust, or perhaps of all three. Then his glance fell, and his voice was wistful.

"But the old days are dead, Mademoiselle."

"The days, yes," she answered, taking courage from his tone. "But love Monsieur, is everlasting—it never dies, they say."

And now it was La Boulaye who drew closer, and this man who had so rigidly schooled himself out of all emotions, felt his breath quickening, and his pulses throbbing faster and faster. To him it seemed that she was right, and that love never died—for the love for her, which he believed he had throttled out of existence long ago,

seemed of a sudden to take life as vigorously as ever. And then it was as if some breeze out of the past bore to his nostrils the smell of the violets and of the moist earth of that April morning when she had repulsed him in the woods of Bellecour. His emotion died down. He drew back, and stood rigid before her.

"And if it were to live, Citoyenne," he said—the resumption of the Republican form of address showed that he had stepped back into the spirit as well as in the flesh "what manner of fool were I to again submit it to the lash of scorn it earned when first it was discovered?"

"But that belonged to the old days," she cried, "and it is dead with the old days.'

"It is vain to go back, Citoyenne," he cut in, and his voice rang harsh with determination.

She bit her lip under cover of her bent head. If she had hated him before how much more did she not hate him now? And but a moment back it had seemed to her that she had loved him. She had held out her hands to him and he had scorned them; in her eagerness she had been unmaidenly, and all that she had earned had been humiliation. She quivered with shame and anger, and sinking into the nearest chair she burst into a passion of tears.

Thus by accident did she stumble upon the very weapon wherewith to make an utter rout of all Caron's resolutions. For knowing nothing of the fountain from which those tears were springing, and deeming them the expression of a grief pure and unalloyed—saving, perhaps, by a worthy penitence—he stepped swiftly to her side.

"Mademoiselle," he murmured, and his tone was as gentle and beseeching as it had lately been imperious. "Nay, Mademoiselle, I implore you!"

But her tears continued, and her sobs shook the slender frame as if

to shatter it. He dropped upon his knees. Scarcely knowing what he did, he set his arm about her waist in a caress of protection.

A long curl of her black, unpowdered hair lay against his cheek.

"Mademoiselle," he murmured, and she took comfort at the soothing tone.

From it she judged him malleable now, that had been so stern and unyielding before. She raised her eyes, and through her tears she turned their heavenly blue full upon the grey depths of his.

"You will not believe me, Monsieur," she complained softly. "You will not believe that I can have changed with the times; that I see things differently now. If you were to come to me again as in the woods at Bellecour—" She paused abruptly, her cheeks flamed scarlet, and she covered them with her hands.

"Suzanne!" he cried, seeking to draw those hands away. "Is it true, this? You care, beloved!"

She uncovered her face at last. Again their eyes met.

"I was right," she whispered. "Love never dies, you see."

"And you will marry me, Suzanne?" he asked incredulously.

She inclined her head, smiling through her tears, and he would have caught her to him but that she rose of a sudden.

"Hist!" she cried, raising her finger: "someone is coming."

He listened, holding his breath, but no sound stirred. He went to the door and peered out. All was still. But the interruption served to impress him with the fact that time was speeding, and that all unsuspecting though Guyot might be as yet, it was more than possible that his suspicions would be aroused if she remained there much

longer.

He mentioned this, and he was beginning to refer to his plan for their escape when she thrust it aside, insisting that they must depart in their coach, so that their treasure might also be saved.

"Be reasonable, Suzanne," he cried. "It is impossible."

A cloud of vexation swept across her averted face.

"Nay, surely not impossible," she answered. "Listen, Caron, there are two treasures in that coach. One is in money and in gold and silver plate; the other is in gems, and amounts to thrice the value of the rest. This latter is my dowry. It is a fortune with which we can quit France and betake ourselves wherever our fancy leads us. Would you ask me to abandon that and come to you penniless, compelled thereby to live in perpetual terror in a country where at any moment an enemy might cast at me the word aristocrate, and thereby ruin me?"

There was no cupidity in La Boulaye's nature, and even the prospect of an independent fortune would have weighed little with him had it not been backed by the other argument she employed touching the terror that would be ever with her did they dwell in France.

He stood deep in thought, his hand to his brow, thrusting back the long black hair from his white forehead, what time she recapitulated her argument.

"But how?" he exclaimed, in exasperation "Tell me how?"

"That is for you to discover, Caron."

He thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and set himself to pace the chamber. And now his fingers came in contact with something foreign. Idly he drew it forth, and it proved to be the phial Mother Capoulade had given him, and from which he had poured the ten drops for the Captain's sleeping potion. His eyes brightened with

inspiration. Here was a tool whose possibilities were vast. Then his brows were knit again.

"Wait," he said slowly. "Let me think."

CHAPTER XI. THE ESCAPE

Resting his elbow on the table, and with his hand to his brow, Caron sat deep in thought, his forefinger and thumb pressed against his closed eyelids. From beyond the board Mademoiselle watched him anxiously and waited. At last he looked up.

"I think I have it," he announced, rising. "You say that the men are drinking heavily. That should materially assist us."

She asked him what plan he had conceived, but he urged that time pressed; she should know presently; meanwhile, she had best return immediately to her carriage. He went to the door to call Guyot, but she stayed him.

"No, no, Monsieur," she exclaimed. "I will not pass through the common-room again in that fellow's company. They are all in there, carousing, and—and I dare not."

As if to confirm her words, now that he held the door open, he caught some sounds of mirth and the drone of voices from below.

"Come with me, then," said he, taking up one of the candles. "I will escort you."

Together they descended the narrow staircase, La Boulaye going first, to guide her, since two might not go abreast. At the foot there was a door, which he opened, and then, at the end of a short passage—in which the drone of voices sounded very loud and in particular one, cracked voice that was raised in song—they gained the door of the common-room. As La Boulaye pushed it open they came upon a scene of Bacchanalian revelry. On a chair that had been set upon the

table they beheld Mother Capoulade enthroned like a Goddess of Liberty, and wearing a Phrygian cap on her dishevelled locks. Her yellow cheeks were flushed and her eyes watery, whilst hers was the crazy voice that sang.

Around the table, in every conceivable attitude of abandonment, sat Captain Charlot's guard—every man of the ten—and with them the six men and the corporal of La Boulaye's escort, all more or less in a condition of drunkenness.

"Le jour de gloire est arrive?" sang the croaking voice of Dame Capoulade, and there it stopped abruptly upon catching sight of La Boulaye and his companion in the doorway. Mademoiselle shivered out of loathing; but La Boulaye felt his pulses quickened with hope, for surely all this was calculated to assist him in his purpose.

At the abrupt interruption of the landlady's version of the "Marseillaise" the men swung round, and upon seeing the Deputy they sought in ludicrous haste to repair the disorder of their appearance.

"So!" thundered Caron. "This is the watch you keep? This is how you are to be trusted? And you, Guyot," he continued, pointing his finger at the man. "Did I not bid you await my orders? Is this how you wait? You see that I am compelled to reconduct the Citoyenne myself, for I might have called you in vain all night."

Guyot came forward sheepishly, and a trifle unsteady in his gait.

"I did not hear you call, Citizen," he muttered.

"It had been a miracle if you had with this din," answered La Boulaye. "Here, take the Citoyenne back to her carriage."

Obediently Guyot led the Citoyenne across the room and out into the courtyard, and the men, restrained by La Boulaye's severe

presence, dared scarcely so much as raise their eyes to her as she passed out.

"And now to your posts," was Caron's stern command. "By my soul, if you were men of mine I would have you flogged for this. Out with you!" And he pointed imperiously to the door.

"It is a bitter night, Citizen," grumbled one of them.

"Do you call yourself soldiers, and does a touch of frost make cowards of you? Outside, you old wives, at once! I'll see you at your post before I go to bed."

And with that he set himself to drive them out, and they went, until none but his own half-dozen remained. These he bade dispose themselves about the hearth, in which they very readily obeyed him.

On a side-table stood a huge steaming can which had attracted La Boulaye's attention from the moment that he had entered the room. He went to peer into this, and found it full almost to the brim of mulled red wine.

With his back to those in the room, so as to screen his actions, he had uncorked the phial as he was approaching the can. Now, as he made pretence first to peer into it and then to smell its contents, he surreptitiously emptied the potion into it, wondering vaguely to himself whether the men would ever wake again if they had drunk it. Slipping the phial into his sash he turned to Mother Capoulade, who had descended from the table and stood looking very foolish.

"What is this?" he demanded angrily.

"It was a last cup of wine for the men," she faltered. "The night is bitterly cold, Citizen," she added, by way of excusing herself.

"Bah!" snarled Caron, and for a moment he stood there as if deliberating. "I am minded to empty it into the kennel," he announced.

"Citizen!" cried the woman, in alarm. "It is good wine, and I have spiced it."

"Well," he relented, "they may have it. But see that it is the last to-night."

And with that he strode across the room, and with a surly "Good-night" to his men, he mounted the stairs once more.

He waited perhaps ten minutes in the chamber above, then he went to the casement, and softly opened the window. It was as he expected. With the exception of the coach standing in the middle of the yard, and just discernible by the glow of the smouldering fire they had built there but allowed to burn low, the place was untenanted. Believing him to have retired for the night, the men were back again in the more congenial atmosphere of the hostelry, drinking themselves no doubt into a stupor with that last can of drugged wine. He sat down to quietly mature his plans, and to think out every detail of what he was about to do. At the end of a half-hour, silence reigning throughout the house, he rose. He crept softly into Charlot's chamber and possessed himself of the Captain's outer garments. These he carried back to the sitting-room, and extracted from the coat pocket two huge keys tied together with a piece of string. He never doubted that they were the keys he sought, one opening the stable door and the other the gates of the porte-cochere.

He replaced the garments, and then to make doubly sure, he waited yet—in a fever of impatience—another half-hour by his watch.

It wanted a few minutes to midnight when, taking up his cloak and a lantern he had lighted, he went below once more. In the common-room he found precisely the scene he had expected. Both Charlot's men and his own followers lay about the floor in all conceivable manner of attitudes, their senses locked deep in the drunken stupor

that possessed them. Two or three had remained seated, and had fallen across the table, when overcome. Of these was Mother Capoulade, whose head lay sideways on her curled arms, and from whose throat there issued a resonant and melodious snore. Most of the faces that La Boulaye could see were horribly livid and bedewed with sweat, and again it came into his mind to wonder whether he had overdone things, and they would wake no more. On the other hand, an even greater fear beset him, that the drug might have been insufficient. By way of testing it, he caught one fellow who lay across his path a violent kick in the side. The man grunted in his sleep, and stirred slightly, to relapse almost at once into his helpless attitude, and to resume his regular breathing, which the blow had interrupted.

La Boulaye smiled his satisfaction, and without further hesitancy passed out into the yard. He had yet a good deal to say to Mademoiselle, but he could not bring himself to speak to her before her mother, particularly as he realised how much the Marquise might be opposed to him. He opened the carriage door.

"Mademoiselle," he called softly, "will you do me the favour to alight for an instant? I must speak to you."

"Can you not say what you have to say where you are?" came the Marquise's voice.

"No, Madame," answered La Boulaye coldly, "I cannot."

"Oh, it is 'Madame' and 'Mademoiselle' now, eh? What have you done to the man, child, to have earned us so much deference."

"May I remind Mademoiselle," put in La Boulaye firmly, "that time presses, and that there is much to be done?"

"I am here, Monsieur" she answered, as without more ado, and heedless of her mother's fresh remarks, she stepped from the carriage.

La Boulaye proffered his wrist to assist her to alight, then reclosed the door, and led her slowly towards the stable.

"Where are the soldiers?" she whispered.

"Every soul in the inn is asleep," he answered. "I have drugged them all, from the Captain down to the hostess. The only one left is the ostler, who is sleeping in one of the outhouses here. Him you must take with you, not only because it is not possible to drug him as well, but also because the blame of your escape must rest on someone, and it may as well rest on him as another."

"But why not on you?" she asked.

"Because I must remain."

"Ah!" It was no more than a breath of interrogation, and her face was turned towards him as she awaited an explanation.

"I have given it much thought, Suzanne, and unless someone remains to cover, as it were, your retreat, I am afraid that your flight might be vain, and that you would run an overwhelming risk of recapture. You must remember the resourcefulness of this fellow, Tardivet, and his power in the country here. If he were to awake to the discovery that I had duped him, he would be up and after us, and I make little doubt that it would not be long ere he found the scent and ran us to earth. Tomorrow I shall discover your flight and the villainy of the ostler, and I shall so organise the pursuit that you shall not be overtaken."

There was a moment's pause, during which La Boulaye seemed to expect some question. But none came, so he proceeded:

"Your original intention was to make for Prussia, where you say that your father and your brother are awaiting you."

"Yes, Monsieur. Beyond the Moselle—at Treves."

"You must alter your plans," said he shortly. "Your mother, no doubt, will insist upon repairing thither, and I will see that the road is left open for her escape. At Soignies you, Suzanne, can hire yourself a berline, that will take you back to France."

"Back to France?" she echoed.

"Yes, back to France. That is the unlikeliest road on which to think of pursuing you, and thus you will baffle Charlot. Let your mother proceed on her journey to Prussia, but tell her to avoid Charleroi, and to go round by Liege. Thus only can she hope to escape Tardivet's men that are patrolling the road from France. As for you, Suzanne, you had best go North as far as Oudenarde, so as to circumvent the Captain's brigands on that side. Then make straight for Roubaix, and await me at the 'Hotel des Cloches.'"

"But, Monsieur, I shudder at the very thought of re-entering France."

"As Mademoiselle de Bellecour, a proscribed aristocrat, that is every reason for your fears. But I have given the matter thought and I can promise you that as the Citoyenne La Boulaye, wife of the Citizen-deputy Caron La Boulaye, you will be as safe as I should be myself, if you are questioned, and, in response, you will find nothing but eagerness to serve you on every hand."

She spoke now of the difficulties her mother would make, but he dismissed the matter by reminding her that her mother could not detain her by force. Again she alluded to her dowry, but that also he dismissed, bidding her leave it behind. Her family would need the money, to be realised by the jewels. As for herself, he assured her that as his wife she would not want, and showed her how idle was her dread of living in France.

"And now, Mademoiselle," he said, more briskly, "let us see to this

ostler."

He opened the door of the outhouse, and uncovering his lantern he raised it above his head. Its yellow light revealed to them a sleeper on the straw in a corner. La Boulaye entered and stirred the man with his foot.

The fellow sat up blinking stupidly and dragging odd wisps of straw from his grey hair.

"What's amiss?" he grunted.

As briefly as might be La Boulaye informed him that he was to receive a matter of five hundred francs if he would journey into Prussia with the ci-devant Marquise de Bellecour.

Five hundred francs? It was a vast sum, the tenth of which had never been his at any one time of his wretched life. For five hundred francs he would have journeyed into Hades, and La Boulaye found him willing enough to go to Prussia, and had no need to resort to the more forcible measures he had come prepared to employ.

Accompanied by the ostler, they now passed to the stables, and when La Boulaye had unlocked the door and cut the bonds that pinioned the Marquis's coachman, they got the horses, and together they harnessed them as quietly as might be.

Then working with infinite precaution, and as little sound as possible, they brought them out into the yard and set them in the shafts of the carriage. The rest was easy work, and a quarter of an hour later the heavy vehicle rumbled through the porte-cochere and started on its way to Soignies.

La Boulaye dropped the keys into a bucket and went within. In the common-room nothing had changed, and the men lay about precisely as he had left them. Reassured, he went above and took a peep at

the Captain, whom he found snoring lustily.

Satisfied that all was well, Caron passed quietly to his own chamber, and with an elation of soul such as had never been his since boyhood, he fell asleep amid visions of Suzanne and the new life he was to enter upon in her sweet company.

CHAPTER XII. THE AWAKENING

La Boulaye awakened betimes next morning. It may be that the matter on his mind and the business that was toward aroused him; certainly it was none of the sounds that are common to an inn at early morn, for the place was as silent as a tomb.

Some seconds he remained on his back, staring at the whitewashed ceiling and listening to the patter of the rain against his window. Then, as his mind gathered up the threads of recollection, he leapt from his bed and made haste to assume a garment or two.

He stood a moment at his casement, looking out into the empty courtyard. From a leaden sky the rain was descending in sheets, and the gargoyle at the end of the eaves overhead was discharging a steady column of water into the yard. Caron shivered with the cold of that gloomy February morning, and turned away from the window. A few moments later he was in Tardivet's bedchamber, vigorously shaking the sleeping Captain.

"Up, Charlot! Awake!" he roared in the man's ear.

"What o'clock?" he asked with a yawn. Then a sudden groan escaped him, and he put his hand to his head. "Thousand devils!" he swore, "what a headache!"

But La Boulaye was not there on any mission of sympathy, nor did he waste words in conveying his news.

"The coach is gone," he announced emphatically.

"Coach? What coach?" asked the Captain, knitting his brows.

"What coach?" echoed La Boulaye testily. "How many coaches were there? Why, the Bellecour coach; the coach with the treasure."

At that Charlot grew very wide-awake. He forgot his headache and his interest in the time of day.

"Gone?" he bellowed. "How gone? Pardieu, it is not possible!"

"Look for yourself," was La Boulaye's answer as he waved his hand in the direction of the window. "I don't know what manner of watch your men can have kept that such a thing should have come about. Probably, knowing you ill a-bed, they abused the occasion by getting drunk, and probably they are still sleeping it off. The place is silent enough."

But Tardivet scarcely heard him. From his window he was staring into the yard below, too thunderstruck by its emptiness to even have recourse to profanity. Stable door and porte-cochere alike stood open. He turned suddenly and made for his coat. Seizing it, he thrust his hand in one pocket after another. At last:

"Treachery!" he cried, and letting the garment fall to the ground, he turned upon La Boulaye a face so transfigured by anger that it looked little like the usually good-humoured countenance of Captain Tardivet. "My keys have been stolen. By St. Guillotine, I'll have the thief hanged."

"Did anybody know that the keys were in your pocket?" asked the ingenuous Caron.

"I told you last night."

"Yes, yes; I remember that. But did anybody else know?"

"The ostler knew. He saw me lock the doors."

"Why, then, let us find the ostler," urged Caron. "Put on some clothes and we will go below."

Mechanically Charlot obeyed him, and as he did so he gave his feelings vent at last. From between set teeth came now a flow of oaths and imprecations as steady as the flow of water from the gargoyle overhead.

At last they hastened down the stairs together, and in the common-room they found the sleeping company much as La Boulaye had left it the night before. In an access of rage at what he saw, and at the ample evidences of the debauch that had reduced them to this condition, Charlot began by kicking the chair from under Mother Capoulade. The noise of her fall and the scream with which she awoke served to arouse one or two others, who lifted their heads to gaze stupidly about them.

But Charlot was busy stirring the other slumberers. He had found a whip, and with this he was now laying vigorously about him.

"Up, you swine!" he blazed at them. "Afoot, you drunken scum!"

His whip cracked, and his imprecations rang high and lurid. And La Boulaye assisted him in his labours with kicks and cuffs and a tongue no less vituperative.

At last they were on their feet—a pale, bewildered, shamefaced company—receiving from the infuriated Charlot the news that whilst they had indulged themselves in their drunken slumbers their prisoners had escaped and carried off the treasure with them. The news was received with a groan of dismay, and several turned to the door to ascertain for themselves whether it was indeed exact. The dreary emptiness of the rain-washed yard afforded them more than ample confirmation.

"Where is your pig of an ostler, Mother Capoulade?" demanded the angry Captain.

Quivering with terror, she answered him that the rascal should be in the shed by the stables, where it was his wont to sleep. Out into the rain, despite the scantiness of his attire, went Charlot, followed closely by La Boulaye and one or two stragglers. The shed proved empty, as Caron could have told him—and so, too, did the stables. Here, at the spot where Madame de Bellecour's coachman had been left bound, the Captain turned to La Boulaye and those others that had followed him.

"It is the ostler's work," he announced. "There was knavery and treachery writ large upon his ugly face. I always felt it, and this business proves how correct were my instincts. The rogue was bribed when he discovered how things were with you, you greasy sots. But you, La Boulaye," he cried suddenly, "were you drunk, too?"

"Not I," answered the Deputy.

"Then, name of a name, how came that lumbering coach to leave the yard without awakening you?"

"You ask me to explain too much," was La Boulaye's cool evasion. "I have always accounted myself a light sleeper, and I could not have believed that such a thing could really have taken place without disturbing me. But the fact remains that the coach has gone, and I think that instead of standing here in idle speculation as to how it went, you might find more profitable employment in considering how it is to brought back again. It cannot have gone very far."

If any ray of suspicion had begun to glimmer in Charlot's brain, that suggestion of La Boulaye's was enough to utterly extinguish it.

They returned indoors, and without more ado Tardivet set himself to plan the pursuit. He knew, he announced, that Prussia was their

destination. He had discovered it at the time of their capture from certain papers that he had found in a portmanteau of the Marquise's. He discussed the matter with La Boulaye, and it was now that Caron had occasion to congratulate himself upon his wisdom in having elected to remain behind.

The Captain proposed to recall the fifty men that were watching the roads from France, and to spread them along the River Sambre, as far as Liege, to seek information of the way taken by the fugitives. As soon as any one of the parties struck the trail it was to send word to the others, and start immediately in pursuit.

Now, had Charlot been permitted to spread such a net as this, the Marquise must inevitably fall into it, and Caron had pledged his word that she should have an open road to Prussia. With a map spread upon the table he now expounded to the Captain how little necessity there was for so elaborate a scheme. The nearest way to Prussia was by Charleroi, Dinant, and Rochefort, into Luxembourg, and—he contended—it was not only unlikely, but incredible, that the Marquise should choose any but the shortest road to carry her out of Belgium, seeing the dangers that must beset her until the frontiers of Luxembourg were passed.

"And so," argued La Boulaye, "why waste time in recalling your men? Think of the captives you might miss by such an act! It were infinitely better advised to assume that the fugitives have taken the Charleroi-Dinant road, and to despatch, at once, say, half-a-dozen men in pursuit."

Tardivet pondered the matter for some moments.

"Yom are right," he agreed at last. "If they have resolved to continue their journey, a half-dozen men should suffice to recapture them. I will despatch these at once..."

La Boulaye looked up at that.

"If they have resolved to continue their journey?" he echoed. "What else should they have resolved?"

Tardivet stroked his reddish hair and smiled astutely.

"In organising a pursuit," said he, "the wise pursuer will always put himself in the place of the fugitives, and seek to reason as they would probably reason. Now, what more likely than that these ladies, or their coachman, or that rascally ostler, should have thought of doubling back into France? They might naturally argue that we; should never think of pursuing them in that direction. Similarly placed, that is how I should reason, and that is the course I should adopt, making for Prussia through Lorraine. Perhaps I do their intelligences too much honour—yet, to me, it seems such an obvious course."

La Boulaye grew cold with apprehension. Yet impassively he asked:

"But what of your men who are guarding the frontiers?"

"Pooh! A detour might circumvent them. The Marquise might go as far north as Roubaix or Comines, or as far south as Rocroy, or even Charlemont. Name of a name, but it is more than likely!" he exclaimed, with sudden conviction. "What do you say, Caron?"

"That you rave," answered La Boulaye coldly.

"Well, we shall see. I will despatch a message to my men, bidding them spread themselves as far north as Comines and as far south as Charlemont. Should the fugitives have made such a detour as I suggested there will be ample time to take them."

La Boulaye still contemned the notion with a fine show of indifference, but Tardivet held to his purpose, and presently despatched the messengers as he had proposed. At that Caron felt

his pulses quickening with anxiety for Mademoiselle. These astute measures must inevitably result in her capture—for was it not at Roubaix that he had bidden her await him? There was but one thing to be done, to ride out himself to meet her along the road from Soignies to Oudenarde, and to escort her into France. She should go ostensibly as his prisoner, and he was confident that not all the brigands of Captain Tardivet would suffice to take her from him.

Accordingly, he announced his intention of resuming his interrupted journey, and ordered his men to saddle and make ready. Meanwhile, having taken measures to recapture the Marquise should she have doubled back into France, Charlot was now organising an expedition to scour the road to Prussia, against the possibility of her having adhered to her original intention of journeying that way. Thus he was determined to take no risks, and leave her no loophole of escape.

Tardivet would have set himself at the head of the six horsemen of this expedition, but that La Boulaye interfered, and this time to some purpose. He assured the Captain that he was still far from recovered, and that to spend a day in the saddle might have the gravest of consequences for him.

"If the occasion demanded it," he concluded, "I should myself urge you to chance the matter of your health. But the occasion does not. The business is of the simplest, and your men can do as much without you as they could with you."

Tardivet permitted himself to be persuaded, and Caron had again good cause to congratulate himself that he had remained behind to influence him. He opined that the men, failing to pick up the trail at Charleroi, would probably go on as far as Dinant before abandoning the chase; then they would return to Boisvert to announce their failure, and by that time it would be too late to reorganise the pursuit. On the other hand, had Tardivet accompanied them, upon failing to find any trace of the Marquise at Charleroi, La Boulaye could imagine him

pushing north along the Sambre, and pressing the peasantry into his service to form an impassable cordon.

And so, having won his way in this at least, and seen the six men set out under the command of Tardivet's trusted Guyot, Caron took his leave of the Captain. He was on the very point of setting out when a courier dashed up to the door of the "Eagle," and called for a cup of wine. As it was brought him he asked the hostess whether the Citizen-deputy La Boulaye, Commissioner to the army of Dumouriez, had passed that way. Upon being informed that the Deputy was even then within the inn, the courier got down from his horse and demanded to be taken to him.

The hostess led him into the common-room, and pointed out the Deputy. The courier heaved a sigh of relief, and removing his sodden cloak he bade the landlady get it dried and prepare him as stout a meal as her hostelry afforded.

"Name of a name!" he swore, as he pitched his dripping hat into a corner. "But it is good to find you at last, Citizen-deputy? I had expected to meet you at Valenciennes. But as you were not there, and as my letters were urgent, I have been compelled to ride for the past six hours through that infernal deluge. Enfin, here you are, and here is my letter—from the Citizen-deputy Maximilien Robespierre—and here I'll rest me for the next six hours."

Bidding the fellow by all means rest and refresh himself, La Boulaye broke the seal, and read the following:

Dear Caron,

My courier should deliver you this letter as you are on the Point of reentering France, on your return from the mission which you have discharged with so much glory to yourself and credit to me who recommended you for the task. I make you my compliments on the tact and adroitness you have employed to bring this stubborn

Dumouriez into some semblance of sympathy with the Convention. And now, my friend, I have another task for you, which you can discharge on your homeward journey. You will make a slight detour, passing into Artois and riding to the Chateau d'Ombreval, which is situated some four miles south of Arras. Here I wish you not only to Possess yourself of the person of the ci-devant Vicomte d'Ombreval, bringing him to Paris as your Prisoner, but further, to make a very searching investigation of that aristocrat's papers, securing any documents that you may consider of a nature treasonable to the French Republic, One and Indivisible.

The letter ended with the usual greetings and Robespierre's signature.

La Boulaye swore softly to himself as he folded the epistle.

"It seems," he muttered to Charlot, "that I am to turn catch-poll in the service of the Republic."

"To a true servant of the Nation," put in the courier, who had overheard him, "all tasks that may tend to the advancement of the Republic should be eagerly undertaken. Diable! Have not I ridden in the rain these six hours past?"

La Boulaye paid no heed to him; he was too inured to this sort of insolence since the new rule had levelled all men. But Charlot turned slowly to regard the fellow.

He was a tall man of rather slender stature, but indifferently dressed in garments that were splashed from head to foot with mud, and from which a steam was beginning to rise as he stood now with his back to the fire. Charlot eyed him so narrowly that the fellow shifted his position and dropped his glance in some discomfort. His speech, though rough of purport, had not been ungentle of delivery. But his face was dirty—the sure sign of an ardent patriot—his hair hung untidy about his face, and he wore that latest abomination of the ultra-revolutionist, a dense black beard and moustache.

"My friend," said Charlot, "although we are ready to acknowledge you our equal, we should like you to understand that we do not take lessons in duty even from our equals. Bear you that in mind if you seek to have a peaceful time while you are here, for it so happens that I am quartered at this inn, and have a more important way with me than this good-natured Deputy here."

The fellow darted Charlot a malevolent glance.

"You talk of equality and you outrage equality in a breath," he growled. "I half suspect you of being a turncoat aristocrat." And he spat ostentatiously on the ground.

"Suspect what you will, but voice no suspicions here, else you'll become acquainted with the mighty short methods of Charlot Tardivet. And as for aristocrats, my friend, there are none so rabid as the newly-converted. I wonder how long it is since you became a patriot?"

Before the fellow could make any answer the corporal in command of La Boulaye's escort entered to inform Caron that the men were in the saddle.

At that the Deputy hurriedly took his leave of Tardivet, and wrapping his heavy cloak tightly about him he marched out into the rain, and mounted.

A few moments later they clattered briskly out of Boisvert, the thick grey mud flying from their horses' hoofs as they went, and took the road to France. For a couple of miles they rode steadily along under the unceasing rain and in the teeth of that bleak February wind. Then at a cross-road La Boulaye unexpectedly called a halt.

"My friends," he said to his escort, "we have yet a little business to discharge in Belgium before we cross the frontier."

With that he announced his intention of going North, and so briskly did he cause them to ride, that by noon—a short three hours after quitting Boisvert—they had covered a distance of twenty-five miles, and brought up their steaming horses before the Hotel de Flandres at Leuze.

At this, the only post-house in the place, La Boulaye made inquiries as to whether any carriage had arrived from Soignies that morning, to receive a negative answer. This nowise surprised him, for he hardly thought that Mademoiselle could have had time to come so far. She must, however, be drawing nearer, and he determined to ride on to meet her. From Leuze to Soignies is a distance of some eight or nine leagues by a road which may roughly be said to be the basis of a triangle having its apex at Boisvert.

After his men had hurriedly refreshed themselves, La Boulaye ordered them to horse again, and they now cantered out, along this road, to Soignes. But as mile after mile was covered without their coming upon any sign of such a carriage as Mademoiselle should be travelling in, La Boulaye almost unconsciously quickened the pace until in the end they found themselves careering along as fast as their jaded horses would bear them, and speculating mightily upon the Deputy's odd behaviour.

Soignies itself was reached towards four o'clock, and still they had not met her whom La Boulaye expected. Here, in a state of some wonder and even of some anxiety, Caron made straight for the Auberge des Postes. Bidding his men dismount and see to themselves and their beasts, he went in quest of the host, and having found him, bombarded him with questions.

In reply he elicited the information that at noon that day a carriage such as he described had reached Soignies in a very sorry condition. One of the wheels had come off on the road, and although the Marquise's men had contrived to replace it and to rudely secure it by

an improvised pin, they had been compelled to proceed at a walk for some fifteen miles of the journey, which accounted for the lateness of their arrival at Soignies. They had remained at the Auberge des Postes until the wheel had been properly mended, and it was not more than an hour since they had resumed their journey along the road to Liege.

"But did both the citoyennes depart?" cried La Boulaye, in amazement, and upon receiving an affirmative reply it at once entered his mind that the Marquise must have influenced her daughter to that end—perhaps even employed force.

"Did there appear to be any signs of disagreement between them?" was his next question.

"No, Citizen, I observed nothing. They seemed in perfect accord."

"The younger one did not by any chance inquire of you whether it would be possible to hire a berline?" asked Caron desperately.

"No," the landlord answered him, with wondering eyes. "She appeared as anxious as her mother for the repairing of the coach in which they came, that they might again depart in it."

La Boulaye stood a moment in thought, his brows drawn together, his breathing seeming suspended, for into his soul a suspicion had of a sudden been thrust—a hideous suspicion. Abruptly he drew himself up to the full of his active figure, and threw back his head, his resolve taken.

"Can I have fresh horses at once?" he inquired. "I need eight."

The landlord thoughtfully scratched his head.

"You can have two at once, and the other six in a half-hour."

"Very well," he answered. "Saddle me one at once, and have the

other seven ready for my men as soon as possible."

And whilst the host sent the ostler to execute the order, Caron called for a cup of wine and a crust of bread. Munching his crust he entered the common-room where his men were at table with a steaming ragout before them.

"Garin," he said to the corporal, "in a half-hour the landlord will be able to provide you with fresh horses. You will set out at once to follow me along the road to Liege. I am starting immediately."

Garin, with the easy familiarity of the Republican soldier, bade him take some thought of his exhausted condition, and snatch at least the half-hour's rest that was to be theirs. But La Boulaye was out of the room before he had finished. A couple of minutes later they heard a clatter of departing hoofs, and La Boulaye was gone along the road too Liege in pursuit of the ladies of Bellecour.

CHAPTER XIII. THE ROAD TO LIEGE

"Of what are you thinking, little fool?" asked the Marquise peevishly, her fat face puckered into a hundred wrinkles of ill-humour.

"Of nothing in particular, Madame," the girl answered patiently.

The Marquise sniffed contemptuously, and glanced through the window of the coach upon the dreary, rain sodden landscape.

"Do you call the sometime secretary Citizen-cutthroat La Boulaye, nothing in particular?" she asked. "Ma foi! I wonder that you do not die of self-contempt after what passed between you at Boisvert."

"Madame, I was not thinking of him," said Suzanne.

"More shame to you, then," was the sour retort, for the Marquise was bent upon disagreeing with her. "Have you a conscience, Suzanne, that you could have played such a Delilah part and never give a thought to the man you have tricked?"

"You will make me regret that I told you of it," said the girl quietly.

"You are ready enough to regret anything but the act itself. Perhaps you'll be regretting that you did not take a berline at Soignies, as you promised the citizen-scoundrel that you would, and set out to join him?"

"It is hardly generous to taunt me so, Madame, I do very bitterly regret what has taken place. But you might do me the justice to remember that what I did I did as much for others as for myself. As

much, indeed, for you as for myself."

"For me?" echoed the Marquise shrilly. "Tiens, that is droll now! For me? Was it for me that you made love to the citizen-blackguard? Are you so dead to shame that you dare remind me of it?"

Mademoiselle sighed, and seemed to shrink back into the shadows of the carriage. Her face was very pale, and her eyes looked sorely troubled.

"It is something that to my dying day I shall regret," she murmured. "It was vile, it was unworthy! Yet if I had not used the only weapon to my hand—" She ceased, the Marquise caught the sound of a sob.

"What are you weeping for, little fool?" she cried.

"As much as anything for what he must think of me when he realises how shamefully I have used him."

"And does it matter what the canaille thinks? Shall it matter what the citizen-assassin thinks?"

"A little, Madame," she sighed. "He will despise me as I deserve. I almost wish that I could undo it, and go back to that little room at Boisvert the prisoner of that fearful man, Tardivet, or else that—" Again she paused, and the Marquise turned towards her with a gasp.

"Or else that what?" she demanded. "Ma foi, it only remains that you should wish you had kept your promise to this scum."

"I almost wish it, Madame. I pledged my word to him."

"You talk as if you were a man," said her mother; "as if your word was a thing that bound you. It is a woman's prerogative to change her mind. As for this Republican scum—"

"You shall not call him that," was the rejoinder, sharply delivered; for

Suzanne was roused at last. "He is twenty times more noble and brave than any gentleman, that I have ever met. We owe our liberty to him at this moment, and sufficiently have I wronged him by my actions —"

"Fool, what are you saying?" cried the enraged Marquise. "He, more noble and brave than any gentleman that you ever met? He—this kennel-bred citizen-ruffian of a revolutionist? Are you mad, girl, or —" The Marquise paused a moment and took a deep breath that was as a gasp of sudden understanding. "Is it that you are in love with this wretch!"

"Madame!" The exclamation was laden with blended wonder, dignity, and horror.

"Well?" demanded Madame de Bellecour severely. "Answer me, Suzanne. Are you in love with this La Boulaye?"

"Is there the need to answer?" quoth the girl scornfully. "Surely you forget that I am Mademoiselle de Bellecour, daughter of the Marquise de Bellecour, and that this man is of the canaille, else you had never asked the question."

With an expression of satisfaction the Marquise was sinking back in the carriage, when of a sudden she sat bolt upright.

"Someone is riding very desperately," she cried, a note of alarm ringing in her voice.

Above the thud of the coach-horses' hoofs and the rumble of their vehicle sounded now the clatter of someone galloping madly in their wake. Mademoiselle looked from the window into the gathering dusk.

"It will be some courier, Madame," she answered calmly. "None other would ride at such a pace."

"I shall know no rest until we are safely in a Christian country again,"

the Marquise complained.

The hoof-beats grew nearer, and the dark figure of a horseman dashed suddenly past the window. Simultaneously, a loud, harsh command to halt rang out upon the evening air.

The Marquise clutched at her daughter's arm with one hand, whilst with the other she crossed herself, as though their assailant were some emissary of the powers of evil.

"Mother in Heaven, deliver us!" she gasped, turning suddenly devout.

"Mon Dieu!" cried Mademoiselle, who had recognised the voice that was now haranguing the men on the box—their driver and the ostler of the 'Eagle Inn.' "It is La Boulaye himself."

"La Boulaye?" echoed the Marquise. Then, in a frenzy of terror: "There are the pistols there, Suzanne," she cried. "You can shoot. Kill him! Kill him!"

The girl's lips came tightly together until her mouth seemed no more than a straight line. Her cheeks grew white as death, but her eyes were brave and resolute. She put forth her hand and seized one of the pistols as the carriage with a final jolt came to a standstill.

An instant later the door was dragged open, and La Boulaye stood bowing in the rain with mock ceremoniousness and a very contemptuous smile on his stern mouth. He had dismounted, and flung the reins of his horse over the bough of a tree by the roadside. The Marquise shuddered at sight of him, and sought to shrink farther back into the cushions of the carriage.

"Citoyenne," he was saying, very bitterly, "when I made my compact with you yesternight, I did not reckon upon being compelled to ride after you in this fashion. I have some knowledge of the ways of your

people, of their full words and empty deeds; but you I was fool enough to trust. By experience we learn. I must ask you to alight, Citoyenne."

"To what purpose, Monsieur?" she asked, in a voice which she strove to render cold and steady.

"To the purpose that your part of the bargain be carried out. Your mother and your treasure were to find their way into Prussia upon condition that you return with me to France."

"It was a bargain of coercion, Monsieur," she answered attempting to brazen it out. "I was a woman in a desperate situation."

"Surely your memory is at fault, Citoyenne," he answered, with a politeness that was in itself a mockery.

"Your situation was so little desperate that I had offered to effect the rescue both of your mother and yourself without asking any guerdon. Your miserable treasure alone it was that had to be sacrificed. You will recall that the bargain was of your own proposing."

There was a pause, during which he stood waiting for her reply. Her blue eyes made an attempt to meet his steady gaze, but failed. Her bosom rose and fell in the intensity of her agitation.

"I was a woman distraught, Monsieur. Surely you will not hold me to words uttered in an hour of madness. It was a bargain I had no right to make, for I am no longer free to dispose of myself. I am betrothed to the Vicomte Anatole d'Ombreval. The contract has already been signed, and the Vicomte will be meeting us at Treves."

It was as if she had struck him, and amazement left him silent a moment. In a dim, subconscious way he seemed to notice that the name she mentioned was that of the man he was bidden to arrest. Then, with an oath:

"I care naught for that," he cried. "As God lives, you shall fulfil your

word to me."

"Monsieur, I refuse," she answered, with finality. "Let me request you to close the door and suffer us to proceed."

"Your mother and your treasure may proceed—it was thus we bargained. But you shall come with me. I will be no girl's dupe, no woman's fool, Citoyenne."

When he said that he uttered the full truth. There was no love in his voice or in his heart at that moment. Than desire of her nothing was further from his mind. It was his pride that was up in arms, his wounded dignity that cried out to him to avenge himself upon her, and to punish her for having no miserably duped him. That she was unwilling to go with him only served to increase his purpose of taking her, since the more unwilling she was the more would she be punished.

"Citoyenne, I am waiting for you to alight," he said peremptorily.

"Monsieur, I am very well as I am," she answered him, and leaning slightly from the coach—"Drive on, Blaise," she commanded.

But La Boulaye cocked a pistol.

"Drive so much as a yard," he threatened "and I'll drive you to the devil." Then, turning once more to Suzanne: "Never in my life, Citoyenne have I employed force to a woman," he said. "I trust that you will not put me to the pain of commencing now."

"Stand back, Monsieur," was her imperious answer. But heedless he advanced, and thrusting his head under the lintel of the carriage door he leaned forward, to seize her. Then, before he could so much as conjecture what she was about, her hand went up grasping a heavy horse-pistol by the barrel, and she brought the butt of it down with a deadly precision between his brows.

He reeled backwards, threw up his arms, and measured his length in the thick grey mud of the road.

Her eyes had followed him with a look of horror, and until she saw him lying still on his back did she seem to realise what she had done.

"My dear, brave girl," murmured her mother's voice but she never heard it. With a sob she relaxed her grasp of the pistol and let it fall from the carriage.

"Shall I drive on, Mademoiselle?" inquired Blaise from the box.

But without answering him she had stepped down into the mud, and was standing bare-headed in the rain beside the body of Caron.

Silently, she stooped and groped for his heart. It was beating vigorously enough, she thought. She stooped lower and taking him under the arms, she half bore, half dragged him to the side of the road, as if the thin, bare hedge were capable of affording him shelter. There she stood a moment looking down at him. Then with a sob she suddenly stooped, and careless of the eyes observing her, she kissed him full upon the mouth.

A second later she fled like a frightened thing back to the carriage, and, closing the door, she called in a strangled voice too drive on.

She paid little heed to the praise that was being bestowed upon her by her mother—who had seen nothing of the kiss. But she lay back in her corner of the coach, and now her lashes were wet at the thought of Caron lying out there in the road. Now her cheeks grew red with shame at the thought that she, the nobly-born Mademoiselle de Bellecour, should have allowed even pity to have so far overcome her as to have caused her to touch with her lips the lips of a low-bred revolutionist.

CHAPTER XIV. THE COURIER

It was well for La Boulaye that he had tethered his horse to a tree before approaching the coach. That solitary beast standing by the roadside in the deepening gloom attracted the attention of his followers, when—a half-hour or so later—they rode that way, making for Liege, as La Boulaye had bidden them.

At their approach the animal neighed, and Garin, hearing the sound, reined in and peered forward into the gloom, to descry the horse's head and back outlined above the blur of the hedge. His men halted behind him whilst he approached the riderless beast and made—as well as he could in the darkness—an examination of the saddle. One holster he found empty, at which he concluded that the rider, whoever he had been, had met with trouble; from the other he drew a heavy pistol, which, however, gave him no clue.

"Get down," he ordered his men, "and search the roads hereabouts. I'll wager a horse to a horseshoe that you will find a body somewhere."

He was obeyed, and presently a cry from one of the searchers announced a discovery. It was succeeded by another exclamation.

"Sacre nom!" swore the trooper. "It is the Citizen-deputy!"

In an instant Garin had leapt to the ground and with the others crowding about him, their bridles over their arms and their horses in a bunch behind them, he was bending under the dripping hedge to examine the body that lay supine in the sodden road. A vigorous oath escaped him when he assured himself that it was indeed La Boulaye.

"Is he dead?" cried the men in chorus.

"No—not dead" grumbled the corporal. "But there is a lump on his brow the size of an egg, and God knows how long he has been lying here in this bed of mud."

They had no restoratives, and the only thing was to convey him to the nearest habitation and demand shelter. They held a short council on the matter, and in the end Garin bade four of them take him up and carry him in a cloak. Some two miles back they had passed a house, and thither the corporal now bade them retrace their steps. They made an odd procession; first went two mounted troopers leading the horses of the others, then the four on foot, carrying the Deputy in a cloak, and lastly, Garin riding in the rear.

In this manner they went back along the dark road, and for close upon a half-hour—for their progress was slow—they trudged along in silence. At last there was a short exclamation from one of the riders, as half a mile away an illuminated window beamed invitingly. Encouraged by it, they quickened their steps a little. But almost at the same time La Boulaye stirred on the cloak, and the men who carried him heard him speak. At first it was an incoherent mutter, then his words came more distinctly.

"Hold! Where are you carrying me? Who the devil are you?"

It was Garin's voice that came instantly to reassure him. Caron essayed to sit up, but finding it impracticable, he shortly bade his men set him down. They halted. Garin dismounted and came to the Deputy's side, and it was found that his condition was none so grave after all, for he was able to stand unaided. When, however, he attempted to walk, he reeled, and would of a certainty have fallen, but that Garin put out his arm to support him.

"Steady there, Citizen," the corporal admonished him.

"Get my horse!" he commanded briefly.

"But, name of a name! you are not fit to ride," Garin protested.

La Boulaye, however, would listen to no reason. With the recovery of his faculties came the consideration of how miserably Suzanne had duped him, and of how she had dealt with him when he had overtaken her. He burned now to be avenged, and at all costs he would ride after and recapture her. He announced, therefore, to the corporal that they must push on to Liege. Garin gasped at his obstinacy, and would have sought to have dissuaded him, but that La Boulaye turned on him with a fierceness that silenced his expostulations.

It was left to Nature to enforce what Garin could not achieve. When La Boulaye came to attempt to mount he found it impossible. He was stiff and numb from his long exposure in the rain, and when he moved with any vigour his head swam dizzily and throbbed with pain.

At last he was forced to realise—with inward girding—that he must relinquish his determination, and he acknowledged himself ready to take the corporal's advice and make for the house whose lighted window shone like a beacon in the darkness that had descended. He even allowed them to prevail upon him to lie down in the cloak again, and thus they carried him the remainder of the way. In his heart he still bore the hope that short rest, restoratives, and fresh clothes would fit him for the pursuit once more, and that if he set out within the next few hours he might yet come up with Mademoiselle before she had passed beyond his reach. Should the morning still find him unequal to the task of going after her, he would despatch Garin and his men.

At last they reached the cottage—it was little more—and Garin rapped on the door with his whip. It was opened by a woman, who told them, in answer to the corporal's request for shelter, that her husband was from home, and that she had no accommodation for them. It would seem that the woman had housed soldiers of the

Republic before, and that her experiences had not been of a nature calculated to encourage her in the practice. But La Boulaye now staggered forward and promised her generous payment if she would receive them.

"Payment?" she cried. "In worthless assignats that nobody will take from me. I know the ways of you."

"Not in assignats," La Boulaye promised her, "but in coin."

And having mollified her somewhat with that assurance, he proceeded to urge her to admit them. Yonder was a shed where the horses could be stabled for the night. But still the woman demurred.

"I lack the room," she said, with some firmness.

"But at least," put in Garin, "you could house the Citizen here. He has been hurt, and he is scarcely able to stand. Come, woman, if you will consent to that, we others can lie with the horses in the shed."

This in the end they gained by renewed promises of good payment. She brewed a broth for them, and for La Boulaye she found a suit of her absent husband's clothes, whilst his own wet garments were spread to dry before the fire. Some brandy, too, she found and brought him, and the draught did much to restore him.

When they had supped, Garin and the troopers withdrew to the outhouse, leaving La Boulaye in sole possession of the cottage hearth. And there, in a suit of the absent farmer's grey homespun, his legs encased in coarse woollen stockings and sabots upon his feet, sat the young Deputy alone with his unpleasant thoughts. The woman had brought him a pipe, and, although the habit was foreign to him as a rule, he had lighted it and found the smoking somewhat soothing. Ruefully he passed his hand across his bandaged brow, and in pondering over all that had taken place since yesternight at Boisvert, his cheeks grew flushed at once with anger and with shame.

"To have been so duped!"

And now—his mind growing clearer as he recovered in vigour—it occurred to him that by to-morrow it would be too late to give pursuit. Once she crossed the Sambre at Liege, or elsewhere, who could tell him by what road she would elect to continue her journey? He had not sufficient men at his disposal to send out parties along each of the possible roads. That her ultimate destination was Treves he knew. But once there she was beyond his reach, at safety from the talons of the French Republic.

He sat on and thought, what time his brows came closer together and his teeth fastened viciously upon the stem of the pipe. By the table sat the woman, knitting industriously, and ever and anon glancing inquiry at her stern, thoughtful guest, and the click of her needles was the only sound that disturbed the stillness of the room. Outside the wind was wailing like the damned, and the rain which had recommenced with new vigour, rattled noisily upon the panes.

Suddenly above the din of the elements a shout sounded in the night. The Deputy raised his head, and glanced towards the woman. A moment later they heard the gate creak, and steps upon the path that led to the cottage door.

"Your husband?" inquired La Boulaye.

"No, monsieur. He has gone to Liege, and will not return until to-morrow. I do not know who it can be."

There was alarm on her face, which La Boulaye now set himself to allay.

"At least you are well protected, Citoyenne. My men are close at hand, and we can summon them if there be the need."

Reassured she rose, and at the same moment a knock sounded on

the door. She went to open it, and from his seat by the hearth La Boulaye heard a gentle, mincing voice that was oddly familiar to him.

"Madame," it said, "we are two poor, lost wayfarers, and we crave shelter for the night. We will pay you handsomely."

"I am desolated that I have no room, Monsieur," she answered, with courteous firmness.

"Pardi!" interpolated another voice. "We need no room. A bundle of straw and a corner is all we seek. Of your charity, Madame, is this a night on which to leave a dog out of doors?"

A light of recollection leaped suddenly to La Boulaye's eyes, and with a sudden gasp he stooped to the hearth.

"But I cannot, Messieurs," the woman was saying, when the second voice interrupted her.

"I see your husband by the fire, Madame. Let us hear what he has to say."

The woman coloured to the roots of her hair. She stepped back a pace, and was about to answer them when, chancing to glance in La Boulaye's direction, she paused. He had risen, and was standing with his back to the fire. There was a black smudge across his face, which seemed to act as a mask, and his dark eyes glowed with an intensity of meaning which arrested her attention, and silenced the answer which was rising to her lips.

In the brief pause the new-comers had crossed the threshold, and stood within the rustic chamber. The first of these was he whose gentle voice La Boulaye had recognised—old M. des Cadoux, the friend of the Marquis de Bellecour. His companion, to the Deputy's vast surprise, was none other than the bearded courier who had that morning delivered him at Boisvert the letter from Robespierre. What

did these two together, and upon such manifest terms of equality? That, it should be his business to discover.

"Come in, Messieurs," he bade them, assuming the role of host. "We are unused to strangers, and Mathilde there is timid of robbers. Draw near the fire and dry yourselves. We will do the best we can for you. We are poor people, Messieurs; very poor."

"I have already said that we will pay you handsomely my friend," quoth Des Cadoux, coming forward with his companion. "Do your best for us and you shall not regret it. Have you aught to eat in the house?"

The woman was standing by the wall, her face expressing bewilderment and suspicion. Suspicious she was, yet that glance of La Boulaye's had ruled her strangely, and she was content to now await developments.

"We will see what we can do," answered La Boulaye, as he made room for them by the hearth. "Come, Mathilde, let us try what the larder will yield."

"I am afraid that Madame still mistrusts us," deplored Des Cadoux.

La Boulaye laughed for answer as he gently but firmly drew her towards the door leading to the interior of the house. He held it for her to pass, what time his eyes were set in an intent but puzzled glance upon the courier. There was something about the man that was not wholly strange to La Boulaye. That morning, when he had spoken in the gruff accents of one of the rabble, no suspicion had entered the Deputy's mind that he was other than he seemed, for all that he now recalled how Tardivet had found the fellow's patriotism a little too patriotic. Now that he spoke in the voice that was naturally usual to him, it seemed to La Boulaye that it contained a note that he had heard before.

Still puzzled, he passed out of the room to be questioned sharply by the woman of the house touching his motives for passing himself off as her husband and inviting the new-comers to enter.

"I promise you their stay will be a very brief one," he answered. "I have suspicions to verify the ends to serve, as you shall see. Will you do me the favour to go out by the back and call my men? Tell the corporal to make his way to the front of the house, and to hold himself in readiness to enter the moment I call him."

"What are you about to do?" she asked and the face, as he saw it by the light of the candle she held, wore an expression of sullen disapproval.

He reassured her that there would be no bloodshed, and suggested that the men were dangerous characters whom it might be ill for her to entertain. And so at last he won his way, and she went to do his errand, whilst he reentered the kitchen.

He found Des Cadoux by the fire, intent upon drying as much of himself as possible. The younger man had seized upon the bottle of brandy that had been left on the table, and was in the act of filling himself a second glass. Nothing could be further from the mind of either than a suspicion of the identity of this rustically-clad and grimy-faced fellow.

"Mathilde will be here in a moment," said Caron deferentially. "She is seeking something for you."

Had he told them precisely what she was seeking they had been, possibly, less at ease.

"Let her hasten," cried the courier, "for I am famished."

"Have patience, Anatole," murmured the ever-gentle Cadoux. "The good woman did not expect us."

Anatole! The name buzzed through Caron's brain. To whom did it belong? He knew of someone who bore it. Yet question himself though he might, he could at the moment find no answer. And then the courier created a diversion by addressing him.

"Fill yourself a glass, mon bonhomme," said he. "I have a toast for you."

"For me, Monsieur," cried La Boulaye, with surprised humility. "It were too great an honour."

"Do as you are bidden, man," returned this very peremptory courier. "There; now let us see how your favour runs. Cry 'Long Live the King!'"

Holding the brandy-glass, which the man had forced upon him, La Boulaye eyed him whimsically for a second.

"There is no toast I would more gladly drink," said he at last, "if I considered it availing. But—alas—you propose it over-late."

"Diable! What may you mean?"

"Why, that since the King is dead, it shall profit us little to cry, 'Long Live the King!'"

"The King, Monsieur, never dies," said Cadoux sententiously.

"Since you put it so, Monsieur," answered La Boulaye, as if convinced, "I'll honour the toast." And with the cry they asked of him he drained his glass.

"And so, my honest fellow," said Des Cadoux, producing his eternal snuff-box, "it seems that you are a Royalist. We did but test you with that toast, my friend."

"What should a poor fellow know of politics, Messieurs?" he

depreciated. "These are odd times. I doubt me the world has never seen their like. No man may safely know his neighbour. Now you, sir," he pursued, turning to the younger man, "you have the air of a sans-culotte, yet from your speech you seem an honest enough gentleman."

The fellow laughed with unction.

"The air of a sans-culotte?" he cried. "My faith, yes. So much so, that this morning I imposed myself as a courier from Paris upon no less an astute sleuth-hound of the Convention than the Citizen-deputy La Boulaye."

"Is it possible?" cried Caron, his eyes opening wide in wonder. "But how, Monsieurs? For surely a courier must bear letters, and—"

"So did I, so did I, my friend," the other interrupted, with vain glory. "I knocked a patriotic courier over the head to obtain them. He was genuine, that other courier, and I passed myself out of France with his papers."

"Monsieur is amusing himself at the expense of my credulity," La Boulaye complained.

"My good man, I am telling you facts," the other insisted.

"But how could such a thing be accomplished?" asked Caron, seating himself at the table, and resting his chin upon his hand, his gaze so full of admiration as to seem awestruck.

"How? I will tell you. I am from Artois."

"You'll be repeating that charming story once too often," Des Cadoux cautioned him.

"Pish, you timorous one!" he laughed, and resumed his tale. "I am from Artois, then. I have some property there, and it lately came to my

ears that this assembly of curs they call the Convention had determined to make an end of me. But before they could carry out their design, those sons of dogs, my tenants, incited by the choice examples set them by other tenantry, made a descent on my Chateau one night, and did themselves the pleasure of burning it to the ground. By a miracle I escaped with my life and lay hidden for three weeks in the house of an old peasant who had remained faithful. In that time I let my beard grow, and trained my hair into a patriotic unkemptness. Then, in filthy garments, like any true Republican, I set out to cross the frontier. As I approached it, I was filled with fears that I might not win across, and then, in the moment of my doubtings, I came upon that most opportune of couriers. I had the notion to change places with him, and I did. He was the bearer of a letter to the Deputy La Boulaye, of whom you may have heard, and this letter I opened to discover that it charged him to effect my arrest."

If La Boulaye was startled, his face never betrayed it, not by so much as the quiver of an eyelid. He sat on, his jaw in his palm, his eyes admiringly bent upon the speaker.

"You may judge of my honesty, and of how fully sensible I was of the trust I had undertaken, when I tell you that with my own hand I delivered the letter this morning to that animal La Boulaye at Boisvert." He seemed to swell with pride in his achievement. "Diable!" he continued. "Mine was a fine piece of acting. I would you could have seen me play the part of the patriot. Think of the irony of it! I won out of France with the very papers ordering my arrest. Ma foi! You should have seen me befool that dirt of a deputy! It was a performance worthy of Talma himself." And he looked from Cadoux to La Boulaye for applause.

"I doubt not," said the Deputy coldly. "It must have been worth witnessing. But does it not seem a pity to spoil everything and to neutralise so wonderful an achievement for the mere sake of boasting

of it to a poor, ignorant peasant, Monsieur le Vicomte Anatole d'Ombreval?"

With a sudden cry, the pseudo courier leapt to his feet, whilst Des Cadoux turned on the stool he occupied to stare alarmedly at the speaker.

"Name of God! Who are you?" demanded Ombreval advancing a step.

With his sleeve La Boulaye rubbed part of the disfiguring smear from his face as he stood up and made answer coolly:

"I am that dirt of a Deputy whom you befooled at Boisvert." Then, raising his voice, "Garin!" he shouted, and immediately the door opened and the soldiers filed in.

Ombreval stood like a statue, thunderstruck with amazement at this most unlooked-for turning of the tables, his face ashen, his weak mouth fallen open and his eyes fearful.

Des Cadoux, who had also risen, seemed to take in the situation at a glance. Like a well-bred gamester who knows how to lose with a good grace the old gentleman laughed drily to himself as he tapped his snuff-box.

"We are delightfully taken, cher Vicomte," he murmured, applying the tobacco to his nostril as he spoke. "It's odds you won't be able to repeat that pretty story to any more of your friends. I warned you that you inclined to relate it too often."

With a sudden oath, Ombreval—moved to valour by the blind rage that possessed him—sprang at La Boulaye. But, as suddenly, Garin caught his arms from behind and held him fast.

"Remove them both," La Boulaye commanded. "Place them in safety for the night, and see that they do not escape you, Garin, as

you value your neck."

Des Coudax shut his snuff-box with a snap.

"For my part, I am ready, Monsieur—your pardon—Citizen," he said, "and I shall give you no trouble. But since I am not, I take it, included in the orders you have received, I have a proposal to make which may prove mutually convenient."

"Pray make it, Citizen," said La Boulaye.

"It occurs to me that it may occasion you some measure of annoyance to carry me all the way to Paris—and certainly, for my part, I should much prefer not to undertake the journey. For one thing, it will be fatiguing, for another, I have no desire to look upon the next world through the little window of the guillotine. I wish, then, to propose, Citizen," pursued the old nobleman, nonchalantly dusting some fragments of tobacco from his cravat, "that you deal with me out of hand."

"How, Citizen?" inquired La Boulaye.

"Why, your men, I take it are tolerable marksmen. I think that it might prove more convenient to both of us if you were to have me shot as soon as there is light enough."

La Boulaye's eyes rested in almost imperceptible kindness upon Des Cadoux. Here, at least, was an aristocrat with a spirit to be admired and emulated.

"You are choosing the lesser of two evils, Citizen," said the Deputy.

"Precisely," answered Des Cadoux.

"But possibly, Citizen, it may be yours to avoid both. You shall hear from me in the morning. I beg that you will sleep tranquilly in the meantime. Garin, remove the prisoners."

CHAPTER XV. LA BOULAYE BAITS HIS HOOK

For fully an hour after their prisoners had been removed La Boulaye paced the narrow limits of the kitchen with face inscrutable and busy mind. He recalled what Suzanne had said touching her betrothal to Ombreval, whom she looked to meet at Treves. This miserable individual, then, was the man for whose sake she had duped him. But Ombreval at least was in Caron's power, and it came to him now that by virtue of that circumstance he might devise a way to bring her back without the need to go after her. He would send her word—aye, and proof—that he had taken him captive, and it should be hers to choose whether she would come to his rescue and humble herself to save him or leave him to his fate. In that hour it seemed all one to La Boulaye which course she followed, since by either, he reasoned, she must be brought to suffer. That he loved her was with him now a matter that had sunk into comparative insignificance. The sentiment that ruled his mind was anger, with its natural concomitant—the desire to punish.

And when morning came the Deputy's view of the situation was still unchanged. He was astir at an early hour, and without so much as waiting to break his fast, he bade Garin bring in the prisoners. Their appearance was in each case typical. Ombreval was sullen and his dress untidy, even when allowance had been made for the inherent untidiness of the Republican disguise which he had adopted to so little purpose. Des Cadoux looked well and fresh after his rest, and gave the Deputy an airy "Good morning" as he entered. He had been at some pains, too, with his toilet, and although his hair was slightly disarranged and most of the powder was gone from the right side,

suggesting that he had lain on it, his appearance in the main was creditably elegant.

"Citizen Ombreval," said La Boulaye, in that stern, emotionless voice that was becoming characteristic of him, "since you have acquainted yourself with the contents of the letter you stole from the man you murdered, you cannot be in doubt as to my intentions concerning you."

The Vicomte reddened with anger.

"For your intentions I care nothing," he answered hotly—rendered very brave by passion—"but I will have you consider your words. Do you say that I stole and murdered? You forget, M. le Republican, that I am a gentlemen."

"Meaning, of course, that the class that so described itself could do these things with impunity without having them called by their proper names, is it not so? But you also forget that the Republic has abolished gentlemen, and with them, their disgraceful privileges."

"Canaille!" growled the Vicomte, his eyes ablaze with wrath.

"Citizen-aristocrat, consider your words!" La Boulaye had stepped close up to him, and his voice throbbed with a sudden anger no whit less compelling than Ombreval's. "Fool! let me hear that word again, applied either to me or to any of my followers, and I'll have you beaten like a dog."

And as the lesser ever does give way before the greater, so now did the anger that had sustained Ombreval go down and vanish before the overwhelming passion of La Boulaye. He grew pale to the lips at the Deputy's threat, and his eyes cravenly avoided the steady gaze of his captor.

"You deserve little consideration at my hands, Citizen," said La

Boulaye, more quietly, "and yet I have a mind to give you a lesson in generosity. We start for Paris in half-an-hour. If anywhere you should have friends expecting you, whom you might wish to apprise of your position, you may spend the half-hour that is left in writing to them. I will see that your letter reaches its destination."

Ombreval's pallor seemed to intensify. His eyes looked troubled as they were raised to La Boulaye's. Then they fell again, and there was a pause. At last—

"I shall be glad to avail myself of your offer," he said, in a voice that for meekness was ludicrously at variance with his late utterances.

"Then pray do so at once." And La Boulaye took down an inkhorn a quill, and a sheaf of paper from the mantel-shelf behind him. These he placed on the table, and setting a chair, he signed to the aristocrat to be seated.

"And now, Citizen Cadoux," said La Boulaye, turning to the old nobleman, "I shall be glad if you will honour me by sharing my breakfast while Citizen Ombreval is at his writing."

Des Cadoux looked up in some surprise.

"You are too good, Monsieur," said he, inclining his head. "But afterwards?"

"I have decided," said La Boulaye, with the ghost of a smile, "to deal with your case myself, Citizen."

The old dandy took a deep breath, but the glance of his blue eyes was steadfast, and his lips smiled as he made answer:

"Again you are too good. I feared that you would carry me to Paris, and at my age the journey is a tiresome one. I am grateful, and meanwhile,—why, since you are so good as to invite me, let us breakfast, by all means."

They sat down at a small table in the embrasure of the window, and their hostess placed before them a boiled fowl, a dish of eggs, a stew of herbs, and a flask of red wine, all of which La Boulaye had bidden her prepare.

"Why, it is a feast," declared Des Cadoux, in excellent humour, and for all that he was under the impression that he was to die in half-an-hour he ate with the heartiest good-will, chatting pleasantly the while with the Republican—the first Republican with whom it had ever been his aristocratic lot to sit at table. And what time the meal proceeded Ombreval—with two soldiers standing behind his chair—penned his letter to Mademoiselle de Bellecour.

Had La Boulaye—inspired by the desire to avenge himself for the treachery of which he had been the victim—dictated that epistle, it could not have been indicted in a manner better suited to his ends. It was a maudlin, piteous letter, in which, rather than making his farewells, the Vicomte besought the aid of Suzanne. He was, he wrote, in the hands of men who might be bribed, and since she was rich—for he knew of the treasure with which she had escaped—he based his hopes upon her employing a portion of her riches to obtaining his enlargement. She, he continued, was his only hope, and for the sake of their love, for the sake of their common nobility, he besought her not to fail him now. Carried away by the piteousness of his entreaties the tears welled up to his eyes and trickled down his cheeks, one or two of them finding their way to the paper thus smearing it with an appeal more piteous still if possible than that of his maudlin words.

At last the letter was ended. He sealed it with a wafer and wrote the superscription:

"To Mademoiselle de Bellecour. At the 'Hotel des Trois Rois,' Treves."

He announced the completion of his task, and La Boulaye bade him go join Des Cadoux at the next table and take some food before setting out, whilst the Deputy himself now sat down to write.

"Citoyenne," he wrote, "the man to whom you are betrothed, for whose sake you stooped to treachery and attempted murder, is in my hands. Thus has Heaven set it in my power to punish you, if the knowledge that he travels to the guillotine is likely to prove a punishment. If you would rescue him, come to me in Paris, and, conditionally, I may give you his life."

That, he thought should humble her. He folded his letter round Ombreval's and having sealed the package, he addressed it as Ombreval had addressed his own missive.

"Garin," he commanded briefly, "remove the Citizen Ombreval."

When he had been obeyed, and Garin had conducted the Vicomte from the room, La Boulaye turned again to Des Cadoux. They were alone, saving the two soldiers guarding the door.

The old man rose, and making the sign of the cross, he stepped forward, calm and intrepid of bearing.

"Monsieur," he announced to La Boulaye, who was eyeing him with the faintest tinge of surprise, "I am quite ready."

"Have you always been so devout, Citizen?" inquired the Deputy.

"Alas! no Monsieur. But there comes a time in the life of every man when, for a few moments at least, he is prone to grow mindful of the lessons learnt in childhood."

The surprise increased in La Boulaye's countenance. At last he shrugged his shoulders, after the manner of one who abandons a problem that has grown too knotty.

"Citizen des Cadoux," said he, "I have deliberated that since I have received no orders from Paris concerning you, and also since I am not by profession a catch-poll there is no reason whatever why I should carry you to Paris. In fact, Citizen, I know of no reason why I should interfere with your freedom at all. On the contrary when I recall the kindness you sought to do me that day, years ago, at Bellecour, I find every reason why I should further your escape from the Revolutionary tribunal. A horse, Citizen, stands ready saddled for you, and you are free to depart, with the one condition, however, that you will consent to become my courier for once, and carry a letter for me—a matter which should occasion you, I think, no deviation from your journey."

The old dandy, in whose intrepid spirit the death which he had believed imminent had occasioned no trembling, turned pale as La Boulaye ceased. His blue eyes were lifted almost timidly to the Deputy's face, and his lip quivered.

"You are not going to have me shot, then?" he faltered.

"Shot?" echoed La Boulaye, and then he remembered the precise words of the request which Des Cadoux had preferred the night before, but which, at the time, he had treated lightly. "Ma foi, you do not flatter me!" he cried. "Am I a murderer, then? Come, come, Citizen, here is the letter that you are to carry. It is addressed to Mademoiselle de Bellecour, at Treves, and encloses Ombreval's farewell epistle to that lady."

"But, gladly, Monsieur," exclaimed Des Cadoux.

And then, as if to cover his sudden access of emotion, of which he was most heartily ashamed, he fumbled for his snuff-box, and, having found it, he took an enormous pinch.

They parted on the very best of terms did these two—the aristocrat

and the Revolutionary—actuated by a mutual esteem tempered in each case with gratitude.

When at last Des Cadoux had taken a sympathetic leave of Ombreval and departed, Caron ordered the Vicomte to be brought before him again, and at the same time bade his men make ready for the road.

"Citizen," said La Boulaye, "we start for Paris at once. If you will pass me your word of honour to attempt no escape you shall travel with us in complete freedom and with all dignity."

Ombreval looked at him with insolent surprise, his weak supercilious mouth growing more supercilious even than its wont. He had recovered a good deal of his spirit by now.

"Pass you my word of honour?" he echoed. "Mon Dieu! my good fellow a word of honour is a bond between gentlemen. I think too well of mine to pass it to the first greasy rascal of the Republic that asks it of me."

La Boulaye eyed him a second with a glance before which the aristocrat grew pale, and already regretted him of his words. The veins in the Deputy's temples were swollen.

"I warned you," said he, in a dull voice. Then to the soldiers standing on either side of Ombreval—"Take him out," he said, "mount him on horseback. Let him ride with his hands pinioned behind his back, and his feet lashed together under the horse's belly. Attend to it!"

"Monsieur," cried the young man, in an appealing voice, "I will give you my word of honour not to escape. I will—"

"Take him out," La Boulaye repeated, with a dull bark of contempt. "You had your chance, Citizen-aristocrat."

Ombreval set his teeth and clenched his hands.

"Canaille!" he snarled, in his fury.

"Hold!" Caron called after the departing men.

They obeyed, and now this wretched Vicomte, of such unstable spirit dropped all his anger again, as suddenly as he had caught it up. Fear paled his cheek and palsied his limbs once more, for La Boulaye's expression was very terrible.

"You know what I said that I would have done to you if you used that word again?" La Boulaye questioned him coldly.

"I—I was beside myself, Monsieur," the other gasped, in the intensity of his fear. And at the sight of his pitiable condition the anger fell away from La Boulaye, and he smiled scornfully.

"My faith," he sneered. "You are hot one moment and cold the next. Citizen, I am afraid that you are no better than a vulgar coward. Take him away," he ended, waving his hand towards the door, and as he watched them leading him out he reflected bitterly that this was the man to whom Suzanne was betrothed—the man whom, not a doubt of it, she loved, since for him she had stooped so low. This miserable craven she preferred to him, because the man, so ignoble of nature, was noble by the accident of birth.

PART III. THE EVERLASTING RULE

Love rules the court, the camp, the grove,
And men below and saints above,
For love is Heaven and Heaven is love.

—The Lay of the Last Minstrel.

CHAPTER XVI. CECILE DESHAIX.

In his lodgings at the corner of the Rue-St. Honore and the Rue de la Republique—lately changed, in the all-encompassing metamorphosis, from "Rue Royale" sat the Deputy Caron La Boulaye at his writing-table.

There was a flush on his face and a sparkle in the eyes that looked pensively before him what time he gnawed the feathered end of his quill. In his ears still rang the acclamations that had greeted his brilliant speech in the Assembly that day. He was of the party of the Mountain—as was but natural in a protege of the Seagreen Robespierre—a party more famed for its directness of purpose than elegance of expression, and in its ranks there was room and to spare for such orators as he. The season was March of '93—a season marked by the deadly feud raging 'twixt the Girondins and the Mountain, and in that battle of tongues La Boulaye was covering himself with glory and doing credit to his patron, the Incorruptible. He was of a rhetoric not inferior to Vergniaud's—that most eloquent Girondon—and of a quickness of wit and honesty of aim unrivalled in the whole body of the Convention, and with these gifts he harassed to no little purpose those smooth-tongued legislators of the Gironde, whom Dumouriez called the Jesuits of the Revolution. His popularity with the men of the Mountain and with the masses of Paris was growing daily, and the crushing reply he had that day delivered to the charges preferred by Vergniaud was likely to increase his fame.

Well, therefore, might he sit with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes chewing the butt of his pen and smiling to himself at the memory of

the enthusiasm of which he had been the centre a half-hour ago. Here, indeed, was something that a man might live for, something that a man might take pride in, and something that might console a man for a woman's treachery. What, indeed, could woman's love give him that might compare with this? Was it not more glorious far to make himself the admired, the revered, the very idol of those stern men than the beloved of a simpering girl? The latter any coxcomb with a well-cut coat might encompass, but the former achievement was a man's work.

And yet, for all that he reasoned thus speciously and philosophically, there was a moment when his brow grew clouded and his eyes lost their sparkle. He was thinking of that night in the inn at Boisvert, when he had knelt beside her and she had lied to him. He was thinking of the happiness, that for a few brief hours had been his, until he discovered how basely she had deceived him, and for all the full-flavour of his present elation it seemed to him that in that other happiness which he now affected to despise by contrast, there had dwelt a greater, a more contenting sweetness.

Would she come to Paris? He had asked himself that question every day of the twenty that were spent since his return. And in the meantime the Vicomte d'Ombreval lay in the prison of the Luxembourg awaiting trial. That he had not yet been arraigned he had to thank the efforts of La Boulaye. The young Deputy had informed Robespierre that for reasons of his own he wished the *ci-devant* Vicomte, to be kept in prison some little time, and the Incorruptible, peering at him over his horn-rimmed spectacles, had shrugged his shoulders and answered:

"But certainly, cher Caron, since it is your wish. He will be safe in the Luxembourg."

He had pressed his protege for a reason, but La Boulaye had evaded the question, promising to enlighten him later.

Since then Caron had waited, and now it was more than time that Mademoiselle made some sign. Or was it that neither Ombreval's craven entreaties nor his own short message had affected her? Was she wholly heartless and likely to prove as faithless to the Vicomte in his hour of need as she had proved to him?

With a toss of the head he dismissed her from his thoughts, and dipping his quill, he began to write.

From the street came the dull roll of beaten drums and the rhythmical fall of marching feet. But the sound was too common in revolutionary Paris to arrest attention, and he wrote on, heeding it as little as he did the gruff voice of a pastry-cook crying his wares, the shriller call of a milkman, or the occasional rumblings of passing vehicles. But of a sudden one of those rumblings ceased abruptly at his door. He heard the rattle of hoofs and the grind of the wheel against the pavement, and looking up, he glanced across at the ormolu timepiece on his overmantel. It was not yet four o'clock.

Wondering whether the visitor might be for him or for the tenant of the floor above, he sat listening until his door opened and his official—the euphemism of "servant" in the revolutionary lexicon—came to announce that a woman was below, asking to see him.

Now for all that he believed himself to have become above emotions where Mademoiselle de Bellecour was concerned, he felt his pulses quicken at the very thought that this might be she at last.

"What manner of woman, Brutus?" he asked.

"A pretty woman, Citizen," answered Brutus, with a grin. "It is the Citoyenne Deshaix."

La Boulaye made an impatient gesture.

"Fool, why did you not say so," he cried sharply.

"Fool, you did not ask me," answered the servant, with that touching, fraternal frankness adopted by all true patriots. He was a thin, under-sized man of perhaps thirty years of age, and dressed in black, with a decency—under La Boulaye's suasion—that was rather at variance with his extreme democracy. His real name was Ferdinand, but, following a fashion prevailing among the ultra republicans, he had renamed himself after the famous Roman patriot.

La Boulaye toyed a moment with his pen, a frown darkening his brow. Then:

"Admit her," he sighed wearily.

And presently she came, a pretty woman, as Brutus had declared, very fair, and with the innocent eyes of a baby. She was small of stature, and by the egregious height of her plume-crowned head-dress it would seem as if she sought by art to add to the inches she had received from Nature. For the rest she wore a pink petticoat, very extravagantly beflounced, and a pink corsage cut extravagantly low. In one hand she carried a fan—hardly as a weapon against heat, seeing that the winter was not yet out—in the other a huge bunch of early roses.

"Te voile!" was her greeting, merrily—roguishly—delivered, and if the Revolution had done nothing else for her, it had, at least, enabled her to address La Boulaye by the "Thou" of intimacy which the new vocabulary prescribed.

La Boulaye rose, laid aside his pen, and politely, if coolly, returned her greeting and set a chair for her.

"You are," said he, "a very harbinger of Spring, Citoyenne, with your flowers and your ravishing toilette."

"Ah! I please you, then, for once," said she without the least

embarrassment. "Tell me—how do you find me?" And, laughing, she turned about that he might admire her from all points of view.

He looked at her gravely for a moment, so gravely that the laughter began to fade from her eyes.

"I find you charming, Citoyenne," he answered at last. "You remind me of Diana."

"Compliments?" quoth she, her eyebrows going up and her eyes beaming with surprise and delight. "Compliments from La Boulaye! But surely it is the end of the world. Tell me, mon ami," she begged, greedily angling for more, "in what do I remind you of the sylvan goddess?"

"In the scantiness of your raiment, Citoyenne," he answered acidly. "It sorts better with Arcadia than with Paris."

Her eyebrows came down, her cheeks flushed with resentment and discomfiture. To cover this she flung her roses among the papers of his writing-table, and dropping into a chair she fanned herself vigorously.

"Citoyenne, you relieve my anxieties," said he. "I feared that you stood in danger of freezing."

"To freeze is no more than one might expect in your company," she answered, stifling her anger.

He made no reply. He moved to the window, and stood drumming absently on the panes. He was inured to these invasions on the part of Cecile Deshaix and to the bold, unwomanly advances that repelled him. To-day his patience with her was even shorter than its wont, haply because when his official had announced a woman he had for a moment permitted himself to think that it might be Suzanne. The silence grew awkward, and at last he broke it.

"The Citizen Robespierre is well?" he asked, without turning.

"Yes," said she, and for all that there was chagrin to spare in the glance with which she admired the back of his straight and shapely figure, she contrived to render her voice airily indifferent. "We were at the play last night."

"Ah!" he murmured politely. "And was Talma in veine?"

"More brilliant than ever," answered she.

"He is a great actor, Citoyenne."

A shade of annoyance crossed her face.

"Why do you always address me as Citoyenne?" she asked, with some testiness.

He turned at last and looked at her a moment.

"We live in a censorious world, Citoyenne," he answered gravely.

She tossed her head with an exclamation of impatience.

"We live in a free world, Citizen. Freedom is our motto. Is it for nothing that we are Republicans?"

"Freedom of action begets freedom of words," said he, "and freedom of words leads to freedom of criticism—and that is a thing to which no wise woman will expose herself, no matter under what regime we live. You would be well-advised, Citoyenne, in thinking of that when you come here."

"But you never come to us, Caron," she returned, in a voice of mild complaint. "You have not been once to Duplay's since your return from Belgium. And you seem different, too, since your journey to the army." She rose now and approached him. "What is it, cher Caron?" she asked, her voice a very caress of seductiveness, her eyes looking up

into his. "Is something troubling you?"

"Troubling me?" he echoed, musingly. "No. But then I am a busy man, Citoyenne."

A wave of red seemed to sweep across her face, and her heel beat the parquet floor.

"If you call me Citoyenne again I shall strike you," she threatened him.

He looked down at her, and she had the feeling that behind the inscrutable mask of his countenance he was laughing at her.

"It would sort well with your audacity," he made answer coolly.

She felt in that moment that she hated him, and it was a miracle that she did not do as she had threatened, for with all her meek looks she owned a very fiercest of tempers. She drew back a pace or two, and her glance fell.

"I shall not trouble you in future," she vowed. "I shall not come here again."

He bowed slightly.

"I applaud the wisdom of your resolve—Cit—Cecile. The world, as I have said, is censorious."

She looked at him a second, then she laughed, but it was laughter of the lips only; the eyes looked steely as daggers and as capable of mischief.

"Adieu, Citizen La Boulaye," she murmured mockingly.

"Au revoir, Citoyenne Deshaix," he replied urbanely.

"Ough!" she gasped, and with that sudden exclamation of pent-up

wrath, she whisked about and went rustling to the door.

"Citoyenne," he called after her, "you are forgetting your flowers."

She halted, and seemed for a second to hesitate, looking at him oddly. Then she came back to the table and took up her roses. Again she looked at him, and let the bouquet fall back among the papers.

"I brought them for you, Caron," she said, "and I'll leave them with you. We can at least be friends, can we not?"

"Friends? But were we ever aught else?" he asked.

"Alas! no," she said to herself, whilst aloud she murmured: "I thought that you would like them. Your room has such a gloomy, sombre air, and a few roses seem to diffuse some of the sunshine on which they have been nurtured."

"You are too good, Cecile" he answered, and, for all his coldness, he was touched a little by this thoughtfulness.

She looked up at the altered tone, and the expression of her face seemed to soften. But before she could make answer there was a rap at the door. It opened, and Brutus stood in the doorway.

"Citizen," he announced, in his sour tones, "there is another woman below asking to see you."

La Boulaye started, as again his thoughts flew to Suzanne, and a dull flush crept into his pale cheeks and mounted to his brow. Cecile's eyes were upon him, her glance hardening as she observed these signs. Bitter enough had it been to endure his coldness whilst she had imagined that it sprang from the austerity of his nature and the absorption of his soul in matters political. But now that it seemed she might have cause to temper her bitterness with jealousy her soul was turned to gall.

"What manner of woman, Brutus?" he asked after a second's pause.

"Tall, pale, straight, black hair, black eyes, silk gown—and savours the aristocrat a league off," answered Brutus.

"Your official seems gifted with a very comprehensive eye," said Cecile tartly.

But La Boulaye paid no heed to her. The flush deepened on his face, then faded again, and he grew oddly pale. His official's inventory of her characteristics fitted Mademoiselle de Bellecour in every detail.

"Admit her, Brutus," he commanded, and his voice had a husky sound. Then, turning to Cecile, "You will give me leave?" he said, cloaking rude dismissal in its politest form.

"Assuredly," she answered bitterly, making shift to go. "Your visitor is no doubt political?" she half-asked half-asserted.

But he made no answer as he held the door for her, and bowed low as she passed out. With a white face and lips tightly compressed she went, and half-way on the stairs she met a handsome woman, tall and of queenly bearing, who ascended. Her toilette lacked the elaborateness of Cecile's, but she carried it with an air which not all the modistes of France could have succeeded in imparting to the Citoyenne Deshaix.

So dead was Robespierre's niece to every sense of fitness that, having drawn aside to let the woman pass, she stood gazing after her until she disappeared round the angle of the landing. Then, in a fury, she swept from the house and into her waiting coach, and as she drove back to Duplay's in the Rue St. Honore she was weeping bitterly in her jealous rage.

CHAPTER XVII. LA BOULAYE'S PROMISE

La Boulaye remained a moment by the door after Cecile's departure; then he moved away towards his desk, striving to master the tumultuous throbbing of his pulses. His eye alighted on Cecile's roses, and, scarce knowing why he did it, he picked them up and flung them behind a bookcase. It was but done when again the door opened, and his official ushered in Mademoiselle de Bellecour.

Oddly enough, at sight of her, La Boulaye grew master of himself. He received her with a polite and very formal bow—a trifle overgraceful for a patriot.

"So, Citoyenne," said he, and so cold was his voice that it seemed even tinged with mockery, "you are come at last."

"I could not come before, Monsieur," she answered, trembling. "They would not let me." Then, after a second's pause: "Am I too late, Monsieur?" she asked.

"No," he answered her. "The ci-devant Vicomte d'Ombreval still lies awaiting trial. Will you not be seated?"

"I do not look to remain long."

"As you please, Citoyenne. I have delayed Ombreval's trial thinking that if not my letter why then his might bring you, sooner or later, to his rescue. It may interest you to hear," he continued with an unmistakable note of irony, "that that brave but hapless gentleman is much fretted at his incarceration."

A shadow crossed her face, which remained otherwise calm and composed —the beautiful, intrepid face that had more than once been La Boulaye's undoing.

"I am glad that you have waited, Monsieur. In so doing you need have no doubts concerning me. M. d'Ombreval is my betrothed, and the troth I plighted him binds me in honour to succour him now."

La Boulaye looked steadily at her for a moment.

"Upon my soul," he said at last, a note of ineffable sarcasm vibrating in his voice, "I shall never cease to admire the effrontery of your class, and the coolness with which, in despite of dishonourable action, you make high-sounding talk of honour and the things to which it binds you. I have a dim recollection, Citoyenne, of something uncommonly like your troth which you plighted me one night at Boisvert. But so little did that promise bind you that when I sought to enforce your fulfilment of it you broke my head and left me to die in the road."

His words shook her out of her calm. Her bosom rose and fell, her eyes seemed to grow haggard and her hands were clasped convulsively.

"Monsieur," she answered, "when I gave you my promise that night I had every intention of keeping it. I swear it, as Heaven is my witness."

"Your actions more than proved it," he said dryly.

"Be generous, Monsieur," she begged. "It was my mother prevailed upon me to alter my determination. She urged that I should be dishonoured if I did not."

"That word again!" he cried. "What part it plays in the life of the noblesse. All that it suits you to do, you do because honour bids you, all to which you have bound yourselves, but which is distasteful, you

discover that honour forbids, and that you would be dishonoured did you persist. But I am interrupting you, Citoyenne. Did your mother advance any arguments?"

"The strongest argument of all lay here, in my heart, Monsieur," she answered him, roused and hardened by his scorn. "You must see that it had become with me a matter of choosing the lesser of two evils. Upon reflection I discovered that I was bound to two men, and it behoved me to keep the more binding of my pledges."

"Which you discovered to be your word to Ombreval," he said, and his voice grew unconsciously softer, for he began to realise the quandary in which she had found herself.

She inclined her head assentingly.

"To him I had given the earlier promise, and then, again, he was of my own class whilst you—"

"Spare me, Citoyenne," he cried. "I know what you would say. I am of the rabble, and of little more account in a matter of honour than a beast of the field. It is thus that you reason, and yet, mon Dieu! I had thought that ere now such notions had died out with you, and that, stupid enough though your class has proved itself, it would at least have displayed the intelligence to perceive that its day is ended, its sun set." He turned and paced the apartment as he spoke. "The Lilies of France have been shorn from their stems, they have withered by the roadside, and they have been trampled into the dust by the men of the new regime, and yet it seems that you others of the noblesse have not learnt your lesson. You have not yet discovered that here in France the man who was born a tiller of the soil is still a man, and, by his manhood, the equal of a king, who, after all, can be no more than a man, and is sometimes less. Enfin!" he ended brusquely. "This is not the National Assembly, and I talk to ears untutored in such things. Let us deal rather with the business upon which you are come."

She eyed him out of a pale face, with eyes that seemed fascinated. That short burst of the fiery eloquence that had made him famous revealed him to her in a new light: the light of a strength and capacity above and beyond that which, already, she had perceived was his.

"Will you believe, Monsieur, that it cost me many tears to use you as I did? If you but knew—" And there she paused abruptly. She had all but told him of the kiss that she had left upon his unconscious lips that evening on the road to Liege. "Mon Dieu how I hated myself!" And she shuddered as she spoke.

He observed all this, and with a brusqueness that was partly assumed he hastened to her rescue.

"What is done is done, Citoyenne. Come, let us leave reminiscences. You are here to atone, I take it."

At that she started. His words reminded her of those of his letter.

"Monsieur La Boulaye—"

"If it is all one to you, Citoyenne, I should prefer that you call me citizen."

"Citizen, then," she amended. "I have brought with me the gems which I told you would constitute my dowry. In his letter to me the Vicomte suggested that—" She paused.

"That some Republican blackguard might be bribed," he concluded, very gently.

His gentleness deceived her. She imagined that it meant that he might not be unwilling to accept such a bribe, and thereupon she set herself to plead with him. He listened dispassionately, his hands behind his back, his eyes bent upon her, yet betraying nothing of his thoughts. At last she brought her prayer for Ombreval's life to an end,

and produced a small leather bag which she set upon the table, beseeching him to satisfy himself as to the value of the contents.

Now at last he stirred. His face grew crimson to the roots of his hair, and his eyes seemed of a sudden to take fire. He seized that little bag and held it in his hand.

"And so, Mademoiselle de Bellecour," said he, in a concentrated voice, "you have learnt so little of me that you bring me a bribe of gems. Am I a helot, that you should offer to buy my very soul? Do you think my honour is so cheap a thing that you can have it for the matter of some bits of glass? Or do you imagine that we of the new regime, because we do not mouth the word at every turn, have no such thing as honour? For shame!" He paused, his wrath boiling over as he sought words in which to give it utterance. And then, words failing him to express the half of what was in him, he lifted the bag high above his head, and hurled it at her feet with a force that sent half the glittering contents rolling about the parquet floor. "Citoyenne, your journey has been in vain. I will not treat with you another instant."

She recoiled before his wrath, a white and frightened thing that but an instant back had been so calm and self-possessed. She gave no thought to the flashing jewels scattered about the floor. Through all the fear that now possessed her rose the consideration of this man—this man whom she had almost confessed half-shamedly to herself that she loved, that night on the Liege road; this man who at every turn amazed her and filled her with a new sense of his strength and dignity.

Then, bethinking her of Ombreval and of her mission, she took her courage in both hands, and, advancing a step, she cast herself upon her knees before Caron.

"Monsieur, forgive me," she besought him. "I meant you no insult. How could I, when my every wish is to propitiate you? Bethink you,

Monsieur, I have journeyed all the way from Prussia to save that man, because my hon—because he is my betrothed. Remember, Monsieur, you held out to me the promise in your letter that if I came you would treat with me, and that I might buy his life from you."

"Why, so I did," he answered, touched by her humiliation and her tears. "But you went too fast in your conclusions."

"Forgive me that. See! I am on my knees to you. Am I not humbled enough? Have I not suffered enough for the wrong I may have done you?"

"It would take the sufferings of a generation to atone for the wrongs I have endured at the hands of your family, Citoyenne."

"I will do what you will, Monsieur. Bethink you that I am pleading for the life of the man I am to marry."

He looked down upon her now in an emotion that in its way was as powerful as her own. Yet his voice was hard and sternly governed as he now asked her,

"Is that an argument, Mademoiselle? Is it an argument likely to prevail with the man who, for his twice-confessed love of you, has suffered sore trials?"

He felt that in a way she had conquered him; his career, which but that day had seemed all-sufficing to him, was now fallen into the limbo of disregard. The one thing whose possession would render his life a happy one, whose absence would leave him now a lasting unhappiness, knelt here at his feet. Forgotten were the wrongs he had suffered, forgotten the purpose to humble and to punish. Everything was forgotten and silenced by the compelling voice of his blood, which cried out that he loved her. He stooped to her and caught her wrists in a grip that made her wince. His voice grew tense.

"If you would bribe me to save his life, Suzanne, there is but one price that you can pay."

"And that?" she gasped her eyes looking up with a scared expression into his masterful face.

"Yourself," he whispered, with an ardour that almost amounted to fierceness.

She gazed a second at him in growing alarm, then she dragged her hands from his grasp, and covering her face she fell a-sobbing.

"Do not misunderstand me," he cried, as he stood erect over her. "If you would have Ombreval saved and sent out of France you must become my wife."

"Your wife?" she echoed, pausing in her weeping, and for a moment an odd happiness seemed to fill her. But as suddenly as it had arisen did she stifle it. Was she not the noble daughter of the noble Marquis de Bellecour and was not this a lowly born member of a rabble government? There could be no such mating. A shudder ran through her. "I cannot, Monsieur, I cannot!" she sobbed.

He looked at her a moment with a glance that was almost of surprise, then, with a slight compression of the lips and the faintest raising of the shoulders, he turned from her and strode over to the window. There was a considerable concourse of people on their way to the Place de la Republique, for the hour of the tumbrils was at hand.

A half-dozen of those unsexed viragos produced by the Revolution, in filthy garments, red bonnets and streaming hair, were marching by to the raucous chorus of the "Ca ira!"

He turned from the sight in disgust, and again faced his visitor.

"Citoyenne," he said, in a composed voice, "I am afraid that your

journey has been in vain."

She rose now from her knees, and advanced towards him.

"Monsieur, you will not be so cruel as to send me away empty-handed?" she cried, scarce knowing what she was saying.

But he looked at her gravely, and without any sign of melting.

"On what," he asked, "do you base any claim upon me?"

"On what?" she echoed, and her glance was troubled with perplexity. Then of a sudden it cleared. "On the love that you have confessed for me," she cried.

He laughed a short laugh-half amazement, half scorn.

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed, tossing his arms to Heaven, "a fine claim that, as I live; a fine argument by which to induce me to place another man in your arms. I am to do it because I love you!"

They gazed at each other now, she with a glance of strained anxiety, he with the same look of half-contemptuous wonder. And then a creaking rumble from below attracted his attention, and he looked round. He moved forward and threw the window wide, letting in with the March air an odd medley of sounds to which the rolling of drums afforded a most congruous accompaniment.

"Look, Citoyenne," he said, and he pointed out the first tumbril, which was coming round the corner of the Rue St. Honore.

She approached with some shrinking begotten by a suspicion of what she was desired to see.

In the street below, among a vociferating crowd of all sorts and conditions, the black death-cart moved on its way to the guillotine. It was preceded by a company of National Guards, and followed by the

drummers and another company on foot. Within the fatal vehicle travelled three men and two women, accompanied by a constitutional priest—one of those renegades who had taken the oath imposed by the Convention. The two women sat motionless, more like statues than living beings, their faces livid and horribly expressionless, so numbed were their intelligences by fear. Of the men, one stood calm and dignified, another knelt at his prayers, and was subject, therefore, to the greater portion of the gibes the mob was offering these poor victims; the third, a very elegant gentleman in a green coat and buckskin breeches, leant nonchalantly upon the rail of the tumbril and exchanged gibes with the people. All five of them were in the prime of life, and, by their toilettes and the air that clung to them, belonged unmistakably to the noblesse.

One glance did Mademoiselle bestow upon that tragic spectacle, then with a shudder she drew back, her face going deathly white.

"Why did you bid me look?" she moaned.

"That for yourself you might see," he answered pitilessly, "the road by which your lover is to journey."

"Mon Dieu!" she cried, wringing her hands, "it is horrible. Oh! You are not men, you Revolutionists. You are beasts of prey, tigers in human semblance."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Great injustices beget great reactions. Great wrongs can only be balanced by great wrongs. For centuries the power has lain with the aristocrats, and they have most foully abused it. For centuries the people of France have writhed beneath the armed heel of the nobility, and their blood, unjustly and wantonly shed, has saturated the soil until from that seed has sprung this overwhelming retribution. Now—now, when it is too late—you are repenting; now, when at last some twenty-

five million Frenchmen have risen with weapons in their hands to purge the nation of you. We are no worse than were you; indeed, not so bad. It is only that we do in a little while—and, therefore, while it lasts in greater quantity—what you have been doing through countless generations."

"Spare me these arguments, Monsieur," she cried, recovering her spirit. "The 'whys' and 'wherefores' of it are nothing to me. I see what you are doing, and that is enough. But," and her voice grew gentle and pleading, her hands were held out to him, "you are good at heart, Monsieur; you are generous and you can be noble. You will give me the life that I have come to beg of you; the life you promised me."

"Yes, but upon terms, Mademoiselle, and those terms you have heard."

She looked a moment into that calm, set face, into the dark grey eyes that looked so solemn and betrayed so little of what was passing within.

"And you say that you love me?" she cried.

"Helas!" he sighed. "It is a weakness I cannot conquer."

"Look well down into your heart, M. La Boulaye," she answered him, "and you will find how egregious is your error. You do not love me; you love yourself, and only yourself. If you loved me you would not seek to have me when I am unwilling. Above all things, you would desire my happiness—it is ever so when we truly love—and you would seek to promote it. If, indeed, you loved me you would grant my prayer, and not torture me as you are doing. But since you only love yourself, you minister only to yourself, and seek to win me by force since you desire me."

She ceased, and her eyes fell before his glance, which remained riveted upon her face. Immovable he stood a moment or two, then he

turned from her with a little sigh, and leaning his elbow upon the window-sill, he gazed down into the crowds surging about the second tumbril. But although he saw much there that was calculated to compel attention, he heeded nothing. His thoughts were very busy, and he was doing what Mademoiselle had bidden him. He was looking into himself. And from that questioning he gathered not only that he loved her, but that he loved her so well and so truly that—in spite even of all that was passed—he must do her will, and deliver up to her the man she loved.

His resolve was but half taken when he heard her stirring in the room behind him. He turned sharply to find that she had gained the door.

"Mademoiselle!" he called after her. She stopped, and as she turned, he observed that her lashes were wet. But in her heart there arose now a fresh hope, awakened by the name by which he had recalled her. "Whither are you going?" he asked.

"Away, Monsieur," she answered. "I was realising that my journey had indeed been in vain."

He looked at her a second in silence. Then stepping forward:

"Mademoiselle," he said, very quietly, "your arguments have prevailed, and it shall be as you desire. The ci-devant Vicomte d'Ombreval shall go free."

Her face seemed to grow of a sudden paler, and for an instant she stood still as if robbed of understanding. Then she came forward with hands outheld.

"Said I not that you were good and generous? Said I not that you could be noble, Monsieur?" she cried, as she caught his resisting hand and sought to carry it to her lips. "God will bless you, Monsieur —"

He drew his hand away, but without roughness. "Let us say no more, Mademoiselle," he begged.

"But I will," she answered him. "I am not without heart, Monsieur, and now that you have given me this proof of the deep quality of your love, I—" She paused, as if at a loss for words.

"Well, Mademoiselle?" he urged her.

"I have it in my heart to wish that—that it were otherwise," she said, her cheeks reddening under his gaze. "If it were not that I account myself in honour bound to wed M. le Vicomte—"

"Stop!" he interrupted her. He had caught at last the drift of what she was saying. "There is no need for any comedy, Suzanne. Enough of that had we at Boisvert."

"It is not comedy," she cried with heat. "It was not altogether comedy at Boisvert."

"True," he said, wilfully misunderstanding her that he might the more easily dismiss the subject, "it went nearer to being tragedy." Then abruptly he asked her:

"Where are you residing?"

She paused before replying. She still wanted to protest that some affection for him dwelt in her heart, although curbed (to a greater extent even than she was aware) by the difference in their stations, and checked by her plighted word to Ombreval. At last, abandoning a purpose which his countenance told her would be futile:

"I am staying with my old nurse at Choisy," she answered him. "Henriette Godelliere is her name. She is well known in the village, and seems in good favour with the patriots, so that I account myself safe. I am believed to be her niece from the country."

"Hum!" he snorted. "The Citoyenne Godelliere's niece from the country in silks?"

"That is what someone questioned, and she answered that it was a gown plundered from the wardrobe of some emigrated aristocrats."

"Have a care, Suzanne," said he. "The times are dangerous, and it is a matter of a week ago since a man was lanterne for no other reason than because he was wearing gloves, which was deemed an aristocratic habit. Come, Mademoiselle, let us gather up your gems. You were going without them some moments ago."

And down upon his knees he went, and, taking up the little bag which had been left where he had flung it, he set himself to restore the jewels to it. She came to his assistance, in spite of his protestations, and so, within a moment or two, the task was completed, and the little treasure was packed away in the bosom of her gown.

"To-morrow," he said, as he took his leave of her at the door, "I shall hope to bring the ci-devant Vicomte to Choisy, and I will see that he is equipped with a laissez-passer that will carry both of you safely out of France."

She was beginning to thank him all over again, but he cut her short, and so they parted.

Long after she was gone did he sit at his writing-table, his head in his hands and his eyes staring straight before him. His face looked grey and haggard; the lines that seared it were lines of pain.

"They say," he murmured once, thinking aloud, as men sometimes will in moments of great stress, "that a good action brings its own reward. Perhaps my action is not a good one, after all, and that is why I suffer."

And, burying his head in his arms, he remained thus with his sorrow

until his official entered to inquire if he desired lights.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE INCORRUPTIBLE

It was towards noon of the following day when Caron La Boulaye presented himself at the house of Duplay, the cabinet-maker in the Rue St. Honore, and asked of the elderly female who admitted him if he might see the Citizen-deputy Robespierre.

A berline stood at the door, the postillion at the horses' heads, and about it there was some bustle, as if in preparation of a departure. But La Boulaye paid no heed to it as he entered the house.

He was immediately conducted upstairs to the Incorruptible's apartment—for he was too well known to so much as need announcing. In answer to the woman's knock a gentle, almost plaintive voice from within bade them enter, and thus was Caron ushered into the humble dwelling of the humble and ineffective-looking individual whose power already transcended that of any other man in France, and who was destined to become still more before his ephemeral star went out.

Into that unpretentious and rather close-smelling room—for it was bed-chamber as well as dining-room and study—stepped La Boulaye unhesitatingly, with the air of a man who is intimate with his surroundings and assured of his welcome in them. In the right-hand corner stood the bed on which the clothes were still tumbled; in the centre of the chamber was a table all littered with the disorder of a meal partaken; on the left, by the window, sat Robespierre at his writing-table, and from the overmantel at the back of the room a marble counterpart of Robespierre's own head and shoulders looked

down upon the newcomer. There were a few pictures on the whitewashed walls, and a few objects of art about the chamber, but in the main it had a comfortless air, which may in part have resulted from the fact that no fire had been lighted.

The great man tossed aside his pen, and rose as the door closed after the entering visitor. Pushing his horn-rimmed spectacles up on to his forehead he stretched out his hand to La Boulaye.

"It is you, Caron," he murmured in that plaintive voice of his. It was a voice that sorted well with the humane man who had resigned a judgeship at Arras sooner than pass a death-sentence, but hardly so well with him who, as Public Prosecutor in Paris, had brought some hundreds of heads to the sawdust. "I have been desiring to congratulate you upon your victory of yesterday," he continued, "even as I have been congratulating myself upon the fact that it was I who found you and gave you to the Nation. I feared that I might not see you ere I left."

"You are leaving Paris?" asked La Boulaye, without heeding the compliments in the earlier part of the other's speech.

"For a few days. Business of the Nation, my friend. But you—let us talk of you. Do you know that I am proud of you, cher Caron? Your eloquence turned Danton green with jealousy, and as for poor Vergniaud, it extinguished him utterly. Ma foi! If you continue as you have begun, the day may not be far distant when you will become the patron and I the Protege." And his weak eyes beamed pleasantly from out of that unhealthy pale face.

Outwardly he had changed little since his first coming to Paris, to represent the Third Estate of Artoise, saving, his cheeks were grown more hollow. Upon his dress he still bestowed the same unpretentious care that had always characterised it, which, in one of the most prominent patriots of the Mountain, amounted almost to

foppishness. Blue coat, white waistcoat, silk hose and shoes buckled with silver, gave him an elegant exterior that must have earned him many a covert sneer from his colleagues. His sloping forehead was crowned by a periwig, sedulously curled and powdered—for all that with the noblesse this was already a discarded fashion.

La Boulaye replied to his patron's compliments with the best grace he could command considering how full of another matter was his mind.

"I may congratulate myself, Maximilien," he added, "upon my good fortune in coming before you took your departure. I have a request to prefer, a favour to ask."

"Tut! Who talks of favours? Not you, Caron, I hope. You have but to name what you desire, and so that it lies within my power to accord it, the thing is yours."

"There is a prisoner in the Luxembourg in whom I am interested. I seek his enlargement."

"But is that all?" cried the little man, and, without more ado, he turned to his writing-table and drew a printed form from among the chaos of documents. "His name?" he asked indifferently, as he dipped his quill in the ink-horn and scratched his signature at the foot of it.

"An aristocrat," said Caron, with some slight hesitancy.

"Eh?" And the arched brows drew together for an instant. "But no matter. There are enough and to spare even for Fouquier-Tinville's voracious appetite. His name?"

"The ci-devant Vicomte Antole d'Ombreval."

"Qui-ca?" The question rang sharp as a pistol-shot, sounding the more fearful by virtue of the contrast with the gentle tones in which

Robespierre had spoken hitherto. The little man's face grew evil. "d'Ombreval?" he cried. "But what is this man to you? It is by your favour alone that I have let him live so long, but now—" He stopped short. "What is your interest in this man?" he demanded, and the question was so fiercely put as to suggest that it would be well for La Boulaye that he should prove that interest slight indeed.

But whatever feelings may have been swaying Caron at the moment, fear was not one of them.

"My interest in him is sufficiently great to cause me to seek his freedom at your hands," he answered, with composure.

Robespierre eyed him narrowly for a moment, peering at him over his spectacles which he had drawn down on to his tip-tilted nose. Then the fierceness died out of his mien and manner as suddenly as it had sprung up. He became once more the weak-looking, ineffectual man that had first greeted La Boulaye: urbane and quiet, but cold-cold as ice.

"I am desolated, my dear Caron, but you have asked me for the one man in the prisons of France whose life I cannot yield you. He is from Artois, and there is an old score 'twixt him and me, 'twixt his family and mine. They were the grands seigneurs of the land on which we were born, these Ombrevals, and I could tell you of wrongs committed by them which would make you shudder in horror. This one shall atone in the small measure we can enforce from him. It was to this end that I ordered you to effect his capture. Have patience, dear Caron, and forgive me that I cannot grant your request. As I have said, I am desolated that it should be so. Ask me, if you will, the life of any other—or any dozen others—and they are yours. But Ombreval must die."

Caron stood a moment in silent dismay. Here was an obstacle upon which he had not counted when he had passed his word to

Suzanne to effect the release of her betrothed. At all costs he must gain it, he told himself, and to that end he now set himself to plead, advancing, as his only argument—but advancing it with a fervour that added to its weight—that he stood pledged to save the ci-devant Vicomte. Robespierre looked up at him with a shade of polite regret upon his cadaverous face, and with polite regret he deplored that Caron should have so bound himself.

So absorbed were they, the one in pleading, the other in resisting, that neither noticed the opening of the door, nor yet the girl who stood observing them from the threshold.

"If this man dies," cried La Boulaye at last, "I am dishonoured.

"It is regrettable," returned Robespierre, "that you should have pledged your word in the matter. You will confess, Caron, that it was a little precipitate. Enfin," he ended, crumpling the document he had signed and tossing it under the table, "you must extricate yourself as best you can. I am sorry, but I cannot give him to you."

Caron's face was very white and his hands were clenched convulsively. It is questionable whether in that moment he had not flung himself upon the Incorruptible, and enforced that which hitherto he had only besought, but that in that instant the girl stepped into the room.

"And is it really you, Caron?" came the melodious voice of Cecile.

La Boulaye started round to confront her, and stifled a curse at the untimely interruption which Robespierre was blessing as most timely.

"It is—it is, Citoyenne," he answered shortly, to add more shortly still: "I am here on business with the Citizen, your uncle."

But before the girl could so much as appreciate the rebuke he levelled at her intrusion, her uncle had come to the rescue.

"The business, however, is at an end. Take charge of this good Caron, Cecile, whilst I make ready for my journey."

Thus, sore at heart, and chagrined beyond words, La Boulaye was forced to realise his defeat, and to leave the presence of the Incorruptible. But with Cecile he went no farther than the landing.

"If you will excuse me, Citoyenne," he said abstractedly, "I will take my leave of you."

"But I shall not excuse you, Caron," she said, refusing to see his abstraction. "You will stay to dinner—"

"I am sorry beyond measure, but—"

"You shall stay," she interrupted. "Come, Caron. It is months since you were with us. We will make a little fete in honour of your yesterday's triumph," she promised him, sidling up to him with a bewitching glance of blue eyes, and the most distracting toss of golden curls upon an ivory neck.

But to such seductions Caron proved as impervious as might a man of stone. He excused himself with cold politeness. The Nation's business was awaiting him; he might not stay.

"The Nation's business may await you a little longer," she declared, taking hold of his arm with both hands, and had she left it at that it is possible that she had won her way with him. But most indiscreetly she added:

"Come, Caron, you shall tell me who was your yesterday's visitor. Do you know that the sight of her made me jealous? Was it not foolish in me?"

And now, from cold politeness, La Boulaye passed to hot impoliteness. Roughly he shook her detaining hands from him, and

with hardly so much as a word of farewell, he passed down the stairs, leaving her white with passion at the slight he had thereby put upon her.

The beauty seemed to pass out of her face much as the meekness was wont to pass out of her uncle's when he was roused. Her blue eyes grew steely and cruel as she looked after him.

"Wait, Caron," she muttered to herself, "I will cry quits with you." And then, with a sob of anger, she turned and mounted the stairs to her apartments.

CHAPTER XIX. THE THEFT

La Boulaye sat once more in the Rue Nationale and with his head in his hands, his elbows supported by the writing-table, he stared before him, his face drawn with the pain and anger of the defeat he had sustained where no defeat had been expected.

He had been so assured that he had but to ask for Ombreval's life, and it would be accorded him; he had promised Suzanne with such confidence—boasting almost—that he could do this, and to do it he had pledged his word. And now? For very shame he could not go to her and tell her that despite his fine promises despite his bold bargaining, he was as powerless to liberate Ombreval as was she herself.

And with reflection he came to see that even did he bear her such a tale she would not believe it. The infinite assurance of his power, implicit in everything that he had said to her, must now arise in her memory, and give the lie to his present confession of powerlessness. She would not believe him, and disbelieving him, she would seek a motive for the words that she would deem untrue. And that motive she would not find far to seek. She would account his present attitude the consummation of a miserable subterfuge by which he sought to win her confidence and esteem. She would—she must—believe that he had but made a semblance of befriending her so disinterestedly only that he might enlist her kindness and regard, and turn them presently to his own purposes. She would infer that he had posed as unselfish—as self-sacrificing, almost—only that he might win her esteem, and that by telling her now that Robespierre was inflexible in his resolve to send Ombreval to the guillotine, he sought to retain that esteem whilst doing nothing for it. That he had ever intended to save Ombreval she

would not credit. She would think it all a cunning scheme to win his own ends. And now he bethought him of the grief that would beset her upon learning that her journey had indeed been fruitless. He smote the table a blow with his clenched hand, and cursed the whole Republic, from Robespierre down to the meanest sans-culotte that brayed the *Ca ira* in the streets of Paris.

He had pledged his word, and for all that he belonged to the class whose right to honour was denied by the aristocrats, his word he had never yet broken. That circumstance—as personified by Maximilien Robespierre—should break it for him now was matter enough to enrage him, for than this never had there been an occasion on which such a breach could have been less endurable.

He rose to his feet, and set himself to pace the chamber, driven to action of body by the agonised activity of his mind. From the street rose the cry of the pastry-cook going his daily rounds, as it had risen yesterday, he remembered, when Suzanne had been with him. And now of a sudden he stood still. His lips were compressed, his brows drawn together in a forbidding scowl, and his eyes narrowed until they seemed almost closed. Then with his clenched right hand he smote the open palm of the other. His resolve was taken. By fair means or foul, with Robespierre's sanction or without it, he would keep his word. After not only the hope but the assurance he had given Suzanne that her betrothed should go free, he could do no less than accomplish the Vicomte's enlargement by whatever means should present themselves.

And now to seek a way. He recalled the free pardon to which Robespierre had gone the length of appending his signature. He remembered that it had not been destroyed; Robespierre had crumpled it in his hand and tossed it aside. And by now Robespierre would have departed, and it should not be difficult for him—the protege and intimate of Robespierre—to gain access to the

Incorruptible's room.

If only he could find that document and fill in the name of Ombreval the thing would be as good as done. True, he would require the signatures of three other Deputies; but one of these he could supply himself, and another two were easily to be requisitioned, seeing that already it bore Robespierre's.

And then as suddenly as the idea of the means had come to him, came now the spectre of the consequences to affright him. How would it fare with him on Robespierre's return? How angered would not Robespierre be upon discovering that his wishes had been set at naught, his very measures contravened—and this by fraud? And than Robespierre's anger there were few things more terrible in '93. It was an anger that shore away heads as recklessly as wayside flowers are flicked from their stems by the idler's cane.

For a second it daunted him. If he did this thing he must seek refuge in flight; he must leave France, abandon the career which was so full of promise for him, and wander abroad, a penniless fortune-hunter. Well might the prospect give him pause. Well might it cause him to survey that pale, sardonic countenance that eyed him gloomily from the mirror above his mantel shelf, and ask it mockingly if it thought that Suzanne de Bellecour—or indeed, any woman living—were worthy of so great a sacrifice.

What had she done for him that he should cast away everything for her sake? Once she had told him that she loved him, only to betray him. Was that a woman for whom a man should wanton his fortunes? And then he smiled derisively, mocking his reflections in the mirror even as he mocked himself.

"Poor fool," he muttered, "it is not for the sake of what you are to her. Were it for that alone, you would not stir a finger to gratify her wishes. It is for the sake of what she is to you, Caron."

He turned from the mirror, his resolve now firm, and going to the door he called his official. Briefly he instructed Brutus touching the packing of a valise, which he would probably need that night.

"You are going a journey, Citizen?" inquired Brutus, to which La Boulaye returned a short answer in the affirmative. "Do I accompany you?" inquired the official, to which La Boulaye shook his head.

At that Brutus, who, for all his insolence of manner, was very devotedly attached to his employer, broke into remonstrances, impertinent of diction but affectionate of tenor. He protested that La Boulaye had left him behind, and lonely, during his mission to the army in Belgium, and he vowed that he would not be left behind again.

"Well, well; we shall see, Brutus," answered the Deputy, laying his hand upon the fellow's shoulder. "But I am afraid that this time I am going farther than you would care to come."

The man's ferrety eyes were raised of a sudden to La Boulaye's face in a very searching glance. Caron's tone had been laden with insinuation.

"You are running way," cried the official.

"Sh! My good Brutus, what folly! Why should I run away—and from whom, pray?"

"I know not that. But you are. I heard it in your voice. And you do not trust me, Citizen La Boulaye," the fellow added, in a stricken voice. "I have served you faithfully these two years, and yet you have not learnt to trust me."

"I do, I do, my friend. You go too fast with your conclusions. Now see to my valise, and on my return perhaps I'll tell you where I am going, and put your fidelity to the test."

"And you will take me with you?"

"Why, yes," La Boulaye promised him, "unless you should prefer to remain in Paris."

With that he got away and leaving the house, he walked briskly up the street, round the corner, and on until he stood once more before Duplay's.

"Has the Citizen Robespierre departed yet?" he inquired of the woman who answered his peremptory knock.

"He has been gone this hour, Citizen La Boulaye," she answered. "He started almost immediately after you left him."

"Diable!" grumbled Caron, with well-feigned annoyance. "Quel contretemps! I have left a most important document in his room, and, of course, it will be locked."

"But the Citoyenne Cecile has the key," answered the woman, eager to oblige him.

"Why, yes—naturally! Now that is fortunate. Will you do me the favour to procure the key from the Citoyenne for a few moments, telling her, of course, that it is I who need it?"

"But certainly, Montez, Citoyen." And with a wave of the hand towards the stairs she went before him.

He followed leisurely, and by the time he had reached Robespierre's door her voice floated down to him from above, calling the Incorruptible's niece. Next he heard Cecile's voice replying, and then a whispered conference on the landing overhead, to the accompaniment of the occasional tinkle of a bunch of keys.

Presently the domestic returned, and unlocking the door, she held it open for La Boulaye to pass. From her attitude it seemed to Caron as

if she were intended—probably she had been instructed—to remain there while he obtained what he sought. Now he had no mind that she should see him making his quest among the wasted papers on the floor, and so:

"I shall not be more than a few minutes," he announced quietly. "I will call you when I am ready to depart."

Thus uncompromisingly dismissed, she did not venture to remain, and, passing in, La Boulaye closed the door. As great as had been his deliberation hitherto was now the feverish haste with which he crossed to the spot where he had seen the document flung. He caught up a crumpled sheet and opened it out. It was not the thing he sought. He cast it aside and took up another with no better luck. To crumple discarded papers seemed the habit of the Incorruptible, for there was a very litter of them on the ground. One after another did Caron investigate without success. He was on his knees now, and his exploration had carried him as far as the table; another moment and he was grovelling under it, still at his search, which with each fresh disappointment grew more feverish.

Yonder—by the leg of the Incorruptible's chair—he espied the ball of paper, and to reach it he stretched to his full length, lying prone beneath a table in an attitude scarce becoming a Deputy of the French Republic. But it was worth the effort and the disregard of dignity, for when presently on his knees he smoothed out that document, he discovered it to be the one he sought: the order upon the gaolers of the Luxembourg to set at liberty a person or persons whose names were to be filled in, signed by Maximilien Robespierre.

He rose, absorbed in his successful find, and he pursued upon the table the process of smoothing the creases as much as possible from that priceless document. That done he took up a pen and attached his own signature alongside of Robespierre's; then into the blank space above he filled the name of Anatole d'Ombreval ci-devant Vicomte

d'Ombreval. He dropped the pen and took up the sand-box. He sprinkled the writing, creased the paper, and dusted the sand back into the receptacle. And then of a sudden his blood seemed to freeze, and beads of cold sweat stood out upon his brow. There had been the very slightest stir behind him, and with it had come a warm breath upon his bowed neck. Someone was looking over his shoulder. An instant he remained in that bowed attitude with head half-raised. Then suddenly straightening himself he swung round and came face to face with Cecile Deshaix.

Confronting each other and very close they now stood and each was breathing with more than normal quickness. Her cheeks were white, her nostrils dilated and quivering, her blue eyes baleful and cruel, whilst her lips wore never so faint a smile. For a second La Boulaye looked the very picture of foolishness and alarm. Then it seemed as if he drew a curtain, and his face assumed the expressionless mask that was habitual to it in moments of great tension. Instinctively he put behind him his hands which held the paper. Cecile's lips took on an added curl of scorn as she observed the act.

"You thief!" she said, very low, but very fiercely. "That was the paper that you left behind you, was it?"

"The paper that I have is certainly the paper that I left behind," he answered serenely, for he had himself well in hand by now. "And as for dubbing me a thief so readily"—he paused, and shrugged his shoulders—"you are a woman," he concluded, with an air suggesting that that fact was a conclusion to all things.

"Fool!" she blazed. "Do you think to overcome me by quibbles? Do you think to dupe me with words and shrugs?"

"My dear Cecile" he begged half-whimsically, "may I implore you to use some restraint? Inured as I am to the unbounded licence of your

tongue and to the abandon that seems so inherent in you, let me assure you that—"

"Ah! You can say Cecile now?" she cried, leaving the remainder of his speech unheeded. "Now that you need me; now that you want me to be a party to your treacherous designs against my uncle. Oh, you can say 'Cecile' and 'dear Cecile' instead of your everlasting 'Citoyenne'.

"It seems I am doomed to be always misunderstood by you," he laughed, and at the sound she started as if he had struck her.

Had she but looked in his eyes she had seen no laughter there; she might have realised that murder rather than mirth was in his soul—for, at all costs, he was determined to hold the paper he had been at such pains to get.

"I understand you well enough," she cried hotly, her cheeks flaming red of a sudden. "I understand you, you thief, you trickster. Do you think that I heard nothing of what passed this morning between my uncle and you? Do you think I do not know whose name you have written on that paper? Answer me," she commanded him.

"Since you know so much, what need for any questions?" quoth he coolly, transferring the coveted paper to his pocket as he spoke. "And since we are so far agreed that I am not contradicting anything you say—nor, indeed, intend to—perhaps you will see the convenience of ending an interview that promises to be fruitless. My dear Cecile, I am very grateful to you for the key of this room. I beg that you will make my compliments to the Citizen your uncle upon his return, and inform him of how thoroughly you ministered to my wants."

With that and a superb air of insouciance, he made shift to go. But fronting him she barred his way.

"Give me that paper, sclerat," she demanded imperiously. "You

shall not go until you surrender it. Give it to me or I will call Duplay."

"You may call the devil for aught I care, you little fool," he answered her, very pleasantly. "Do you think Duplay will be mad enough to lay hands upon a Deputy of the Convention in the discharge of the affairs of the Nation?"

"It is a lie!"

"Why, of course it is," he admitted sweetly. "But Duplay will not be aware of that."

"I shall tell him."

"Tut! He won't believe you. I'll threaten him with the guillotine if he does. And I should think that Duplay has sufficient dread of the national barber not to risk having his toilet performed by him. Now, be reasonable, and let me pass."

Enraged beyond measure by his persiflage and very manifest contempt of her, she sprang suddenly upon him, and caught at the lapels of his redingote.

"Give me that paper!" she screamed, exerting her entire strength in a vain effort to boldly shake him.

Coldly he eyed this golden-haired virago now, and looked in vain for some trace of her wonted beauty in the stormy distortion of her face.

"You grow tiresome with your repetitions," he answered her impatiently, as, snatching at her wrists, he made her release her hold. "Let me go." And with that he flung her roughly from him.

A second she staggered, then, recovering her balance and without an instant's hesitation, she sped to the door. Imagining her intent to be to lock him in La Boulaye sprang after her. But it seemed that his

mind had been more swift to fasten upon the wiser course than had hers. Instead, she snatched the key and closed the door on the inside. She wasted a moment fumbling at the lock, and even as he caught her by the waist the key slipped in, and before he dragged her back she had contrived to turn it, and now held it in her hand. He laughed a trifle angrily as she twisted out of his grasp, and stood panting before him.

"You shall not leave this room with that paper," she gasped, her anger ever swelling, and now rendering her speech almost incoherent.

He set his arms akimbo, and surveyed her whimsically.

"My dear Cecile," quoth he, "if you will take no thought for my convenience, I beg that, at least, you will take some for your good name. Thousand devils woman! Will you have it said in Paris that you were found locked in a room with me? What will your uncle—your virtuous, prudish, incorruptible uncle—say when he learns of it? If he does not demand a heavy price from you for so dishonouring him, he is not the man I deem him. Now be sensible, child, and open that door while there is yet time, and before anybody discovers us in this most compromising situation."

He struck the tone most likely to win him obedience, and that he had judged astutely her face showed him. In the place of the anger that had distorted it there came now into that countenance a look of surprise and fear. She saw herself baffled at every point. She had threatened him with Duplay—the only man available—and he had shown her how futile it must prove to summon him. And now she had locked herself in with him, thinking to sit there until he should do her will, and he showed her the danger to herself therein, which had escaped her notice.

There was a settle close behind her, and on to this she sank, and

bending her head she opened the floodgates of her passionate little soul, and let the rage that had so long possessed her dissolve in tears. At sight of that sudden change of front La Boulaye stamped his foot. He appreciated the fact that she was about to fight him with weapons that on a previous occasion—when, however, it is true, they were wielded by another—had accomplished his undoing.

And for all that he steeled his heart, and evoked the memory of Suzanne to strengthen him in his purpose: he approached her with a kindly exterior. He sat him down beside her; he encompassed her waist with his arm, and drawing her to him he set himself to soothe her as one soothes a wilful child. Had he then recalled what her attitude had been towards him in the past he had thought twice before adopting such a course. But in his mind there was no sentiment that was not brotherly, and far from his wishes was it to invest his action with any other than a fraternal kindness.

But she, feeling that caressing arm about her, and fired by it in her hapless passion for this man, was quick to misinterpret him, and to translate his attitude into one of a kindness far beyond his dreams. She nestled closer to him; at his bidding her weeping died down and ceased.

"There, Cecile, you will give me the key now?" he begged.

She glanced up at him shyly through wet lashes—as peeps the sun through April clouds.

"There is nothing I will not do for you, Caron," she murmured. "See, I will even help you to play the traitor on my uncle. For you love me a little, cher Caron, is it not so?"

He felt himself grow cold from head to foot, and he grew sick at the thought that by the indiscretion of his clumsy sympathy he had brought this down upon his luckless head. Mechanically his arm relaxed the

hold of her waist and fell away. Instinctively she apprehended that all was not as she had thought. She turned on the seat to face him squarely, and caught something of the dismay in his glance of the loathing almost (for what is more loathsome to a man than to be wooed by a woman he desires not?) Gradually, inch by inch, she drew away from him, ever facing him, and her eyes ever on his, as if fascinated by the horror of what she saw. Thus until the extremity of the settle permitted her to go no farther. She started, then her glance flickered down, and she gave a sudden gasp of passion. Simultaneously the key rang on the boards at Caron's feet angrily flung there by Cecile.

"Go!" she exclaimed, in a suffocating voice, "and never let me see your face again."

For a second or two he sat quite still, his eyes observing her with a look of ineffable pity, which might have increased her disorder had she perceived it. Then slowly he stooped, and took up the key.

He rose from the settle, and without a word—for words he realised, could do no more than heighten the tragic banality of the situation—he went to the door, unlocked it, and passed out.

Huddled in her corner sat Cecile, listening until his steps had died away on the stairs. Then she cast herself prone upon the settle, and in a frenzy of sobs and tears she vented some of the rage and shame that were distracting her.

CHAPTER XX. THE GRATITUDE OF OMBREVAL

What La Boulaye may have lacked in knowledge of woman's ways he made up for by his knowledge of Cecile, and from this he apprehended that there was no time to be lost if he would carry out his purpose. Touching her dismissal of him, he permitted himself no illusions. He rated it at its true value. He saw in it no sign of relenting of generosity, but only a desire to put an end to the shame which his presence was occasioning her.

He could imagine the lengths to which the thirst of vengeance would urge a scorned woman, and of all women he felt that Cecile scorned was the most to be feared. She would not sit with folded hands. Once she overcame the first tempestuous outburst of her passion she would be up and doing, straining every sense to outwit and thwart him in his project, whose scope she must have more than guessed.

Reasoning thus, he clearly saw not only that every moment was of value, but that flight was the only thing remaining him if he would save himself as well as Ombreval. And so he hired him a cabriolet, and drove in all haste to the house of Billaud Varennes, the Deputy, from whom he sought to obtain one of the two signatures still needed by his order of release. He was disappointed at learning that Varennes was not at home—though, had he been able to peep an hour or so into the future, he would have offered up thanks to Heaven for that same Deputy's absence. His insistent and impatient questions elicited the information that probably Verennes would be found at Fevrier's. And so to Fevrier's famous restaurant in the old Palais Royal went La Boulaye, and there he had the good fortune to find not

only Billaud Varennes, but also the Deputy Carnot. Nor did fortune end her favours there. She was smiling now upon Caron, as was proved by the fact that neither to Varennes nor Carnot did the name of Ombreval mean anything. Robespierre's subscription of the document was accepted by each as affording him a sufficient warrant to append his own signature, and although Carnot asked a question or two, it was done in an idle humour, and he paid little attention to such replies as Caron made him.

Within five minutes of entering the restaurant, La Boulaye was in the street again, driving, by way of the Pont Neuf, to the Luxembourg.

At the prison he encountered not the slightest difficulty. He was known personally to the officer, of whom he demanded the person of the ci-devant Vicomte, and his order of release was too correct to give rise to any hesitation on the part of the man to whom it was submitted. He was left waiting a few moments in a chamber that did duty as a guard-room, and presently the Vicomte, looking pale, and trembling with excitement at his sudden release, stood before him.

"You?" he muttered, upon beholding La Boulaye. But the Republican received him very coldly, and hurried him out of the prison with scant ceremony.

The officer attended the Deputy to the door of his cabriolet, and in his hearing Caron bade the coachman drive to the Porte St. Martin. This, however, was no more than a subterfuge to which he was resorting with a view to baffling the later possibility of their being traced. Ombreval naturally enough plied him with questions as they went, to which La Boulaye returned such curt answers that in the end, discouraged and offended, the nobleman became silent.

Arrived at the Porte St. Martin they alighted, and La Boulaye dismissed the carriage. On foot he now led his companion as far as the church of St. Nicholas des Champs, where he hired a second

cabriolet, bidding the man drive him to the Quai de la Greve. Having reached the riverside they once more took a short walk, crossing by the Pont au Change, and thence making their way towards Notre Dame, in the neighbourhood of which La Boulaye ushered the Vicomte into a third carriage, and thinking that by now they had done all that was needed to efface their tracks, he ordered the man to proceed as quickly as possible to Choisy.

They arrived at that little village on the Seine an hour or so later, and having rid themselves of their conveyance, Caron inquired and discovered the way to the house of Citoyenne Godelliere.

Mademoiselle was within, and at sound of Caron's voice questioning the erstwhile servant who had befriended her, she made haste to show herself. And at a word from her, Henriette admitted the two men and ushered them into a modest parlour, where she left them with Mademoiselle.

La Boulaye was the first to speak.

"I trust that I have not kept you waiting overlong, Citoyenne," he said, by way of saying something.

"Monsieur," she answered him, with a look that was full of gratitude and kindness "you have behaved nobly, and to my dying day I shall remember it."

This La Boulaye deprecated by a gesture, but uttered no word as the Vicomte now stepped forward and bore Suzanne's hand to his lips.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "Monsieur La Boulaye here was very reticent touching the manner in which my release has been gained. But I never doubted that I owed it to your good efforts, and that you had adopted the course suggested to you by my letter, and bought me from the Republic."

La Boulaye flushed slightly as much at the contemptuous tone as at the words in which Ombreval referred to the Republic.

"It is not to me but to our good friend, M. La Boulaye, that you should address your thanks, Monsieur."

"Ah? Vraiment?" exclaimed the Vicomte, turning a supercilious eye upon the Deputy, for with his freedom he seemed to have recovered his old habits.

"I have not sold you to the Citoyenne," said La Boulaye, the words being drawn from him by the other's manner. "I am making her a present of you—a sort of wedding gift." And his lips smiled, for all that his eyes remained hard.

Ombreval made him no answer, but stood looking from the Deputy to Suzanne in some hesitation. The expressions which his very lofty dignity prompted, his sense of fitness—feeble though it was—forbade him. And so there followed a pause, which, however, was but brief, for La Boulaye had yet something to say.

It had just come to him with a dismaying force that in the haste of his escape from Paris with the Vicomte he had forgotten to return to his lodging for a passport that he was fortunately possessed of. It was a laissez-passer, signed and left in blank, with which he had been equipped—against the possibility of the need for it arising—when he had started upon the Convention's errand to the Army of Dumouriez. Whilst on his way to Robespierre's house to secure the order of release, he had bethought him of filling in that passport for three persons, and thus, since to remain must entail his ruin and destruction, make his escape from France with Mademoiselle and the Vicomte. It was his only chance. Then in the hurry of the succeeding incidents, the excitement that had attended them, and the imperative need for haste in getting the Vicomte to Choisy, he had put the intended return to his lodging from his mind—overlooking until

now the fact that not only must he go back for the valise which he had bidden Brutus pack, but also for that far more precious passport.

It now became necessary to explain the circumstances to his companions, and in explaining them the whole affair, from Robespierre's refusal to grant him the life of the Vicomte down to the means to which he had had recourse, could not be kept from transpiring. As she listened, Suzanne's expression changed into one of ineffable wonder.

"And you have done this for me?" she cried, when at last he paused, "you have ruined your career and endangered your life?"

La Boulaye shrugged his shoulders.

"I spoke over-confidently when I said that I could obtain you the Vicomte's pardon. There proved to be a factor on which I had not counted. Nevertheless, what I had promised I must fulfil. I was by honour bound to leave nothing undone that might result in the Vicomte's enlargement."

Ombreval laughed softly, but with consummate amusement.

"A sans-culotte with a sense of honour is such an anomaly—" he began, when Mademoiselle interposed, a note of anger sounding in her voice.

"M. d'Ombreval means to pay you a compliment," she informed La Boulaye, "but he has such an odd way of choosing his expressions that I feared you might misunderstand him."

La Boulaye signified his indifference by a smile.

"I am afraid the ci-devant Vicomte has not yet learnt his lesson," said he; "or else he is like the sinner who upon recovering health forgot the penitence that had come to him in the days of sickness. But we have other matters to deal with, Citoyenne, and, in particular, the

matter of the passport. Fool that I am!" he cried bitterly.

"I must return to Paris at once," he announced briskly. "There is no help for it. We will hope that as yet the way is open to me, and that I shall be permitted to go and to return unmolested. In such a case the rest is easy—except that you will have to suffer my company as far as the frontier."

It was Mademoiselle who accompanied him to the door.

"Monsieur," she said, in a voice that shook with the sincere intensity of her feelings, "think me not ungrateful that I have said so little. But your act has overwhelmed me. It is so truly noble, that to offer you thanks that are but words, seems some little short of a banality."

"Tut!" he laughed. "I have not yet done half. It will be time to thank me when we are out of France."

"And you speak so lightly of leaving France?" she cried. "But what is to become of you? What of your career?"

"Other careers are possible in other countries," he answered, with a lightness he did not feel. "Who knows perhaps the English or the Prussians might be amenable to a change of government. I shall seek to induce one or the other of them to become a republic, and then I shall become once more a legislator."

With that, and vowing that every moment he remained their chances of leaving France grew more slender, he took his leave of her, expressing the hope that he might be back within a couple of hours. Mademoiselle watched him to the garden gate, then closing the door she returned within.

She discovered her betrothed—he whom La Boulaye had called her lover—standing with his back to the fire, his hands clasped behind him, the very picture of surliness. He made none of the

advances that one might look for in a man placed as he was at that moment. He greeted her, instead, with a complaint.

"Will you permit me, Mademoiselle, to say that in this matter you have hardly chosen the wiser course?"

"In what matter?" quoth she, at a loss to understand him.

"In the matter of my release. I advised you in my letter to purchase my freedom. Had you done so, we should now be in a position to start for the frontier—for you would have made a passport a part of your bargain. Instead of this, not only are we obliged to run the risk of waiting, but even if this fellow should return, we shall be affronted by his company for some days to come." And the Vicomte sniffed the air in token of disgust.

Suzanne looked at him in an amazement that left her speechless for a moment. At last:

"And this is your gratitude?" she demanded. "This is all that you have to say in thanks for the discomfort and danger that I have suffered on your behalf? Your tone is oddly changed since you wrote me that piteous, pitiable letter from Belgium, M. le Vicomte."

He reddened slightly.

"I am afraid that I have been clumsy in my expressions," he apologised. "But never doubt my gratitude, Mademoiselle. I am more grateful to you than words can tell. You have done your duty to me as few women could."

The word "duty" offended her, yet she let it pass. In his monstrous vanity it was often hopeless to make him appreciate the importance of anything or anybody outside of himself. Of this the present occasion was an instance.

"You must forgive me my seeming thanklessness, Mademoiselle,"

he pursued. "It was the company of that sans-culotte rascal that soured me. I had enough of him a month ago, when he brought me to Paris. It offended me to have him stand here again in the same room with me, and insolently refer to his pledged word as though he were a gentleman born."

"To whom do you refer?" quoth she.

"Ma foi! How many of them are there? Why, to this fellow, La Boulaye?"

"So it seemed, and yet I could not believe it of you. Do you not realise that your ingratitude approaches the base?"

He vouchsafed her a long, cold stare of amazement.

"Mordieu!" he ejaculated at last. "I am afraid that your reason has been affected by your troubles. You seem, Mademoiselle, to be unmindful of the station into which you have had the honour to be born."

"If your bearing is to be accepted as a sign that you remember it, I will pray God that I may, indeed, forget it—completely and for all time."

And then the door opened to admit the good Henriette, who came to announce that she had contrived a hasty meal, and that it was served and awaiting them.

"Diable!" he laughed. "Those are the first words of true wit that I have heard these many days. I swear," he added, with a pleasantness that was oddly at variance with his sullen humour of a moment back, "that I have not tasted human food these four weeks, and as for my appetite—it is capable of consuming the whole patrimony of St. Peter. Lead the way, my good Henriette. Come, Mademoiselle."

CHAPTER XXI. THE ARREST

Facts proved how correct had been La Boulaye's anticipations of the course that Cecile would adopt, Within a half-hour of his having quitted the house of Billaud Varennes, she presented herself there, and demanded to see the Deputy. Upon being told that he was absent she determined to await his return.

And so, for the matter of an hour, she remained in the room where the porter had offered her accommodation, fretting at the delay, and only restrained from repairing to some other member of the Convention by the expectation that the next moment would see Varennes arrive. Arrive he did at last, when her patience was all but exhausted, and excitedly she told her tale of what had taken place Varennes listened gravely, and cross-questioned her in his unbelief—for it seemed, indeed, monstrous that a man of La Boulaye's position should ruin so promising a future as was his by an act for which Varennes could not so much as divine a motive. But her story hung together so faithfully, and was so far borne out by the fact that Varennes himself had indeed signed such a document as she described, that in the end the Deputy determined to take some steps to neutralise the harm that might have been done.

Dismissing the girl with the assurance that the matter should have his attention, he began by despatching a courier to Robespierre at Chartres—where he knew the Incorruptible to be. That done, he resorted to measures for La Boulaye's detention. But this proved a grave matter. What if, after all, that half-hysterical girl's story should be inaccurate? In what case would he find himself if, acting upon it in the meantime, he should order Caron's arrest? The person of a Deputy was not one to be so lightly treated, and he might find himself

constrained to answer a serious charge in consequence. Thus partly actuated by patriotism and the fear of Robespierre, and partly restrained by patriotism and the fear of La Boulaye, he decided upon a middle course: that of simply detaining La Boulaye at his lodging until Robespierre should either return or send an answer to his message. Thus, whilst leaving him perfect freedom of movement within his own apartments, he would yet ensure against his escape so that should Robespierre demand him he could without difficulty be produced.

To this end he repaired with a sous-lieutenant and six men to La Boulaye's house in the Rue Nationale, intending to station the soldiers there with orders not to allow the Deputy to go out, and to detain and question all who sought admittance to him. He nourished the hope that the ci-devant Vicomte might still be with La Boulaye. At the Rue Nationale, however, he was to discover that neither Deputy nor aristocrat was to be found. Brutus informed him that he was expecting the Citizen La Boulaye, but beyond that he would say nothing, and he wisely determined to hold his peace touching the valise that he had been ordered to pack and the fact that he knew the Deputy meditated leaving Paris. Brutus had learnt the value of silence, especially when those who sought information were members of the Convention.

Alarmed at this further corroboration of Cecile's story of treachery Varennes left the military at Caron's house, with orders not to allow the Deputy to again depart if in the meantime he should happen to return, whilst to every barrier of Paris he sent instructions to have La Boulaye detained if he should present himself. By these measures he hoped still to be able to provide against the possibility of Caron's seeking to leave Paris.

But Caron had been gone over an hour, and as a matter of fact, he was back again in Paris within a very little time of these orders having been issued. At the Barriere d'Enfer, although recognised, he was not

molested, since the orders only, and distinctly, concerned his departure and nowise his arrival.

Thus, not until he had reached his lodgings did he realise that all was not as he had hoped. And even then it was only within doors that he made the discovery, when he found himself suddenly confronted by the sous-lieutenant, who was idling in the passage. The officer saluted him respectfully, and no less respectfully, though firmly, informed him that, by order of the Citizen-deputy Billaud Varennes, he must ask him to confine himself to his own apartments until further orders.

"But why, Citizen-officer?" La Boulaye demanded, striving to exclude from his voice any shade of the chagrin that was besetting him. "What do these orders mean?"

The officer was courtesy personified, but explanations he had none to give, for the excellent reason, he urged that he was possessed of none. He was a soldier, and he had received orders which he must obey, without questioning either their wisdom or their justice. Appreciating the futility of bearing himself otherwise, since his retreat was already blocked by a couple of gendarmes, Caron submitted to the inevitable.

He mounted leisurely to his study, and the ruin that stared him in the eyes was enough to have daunted the boldest of men. Yet, to do him justice, he was more concerned at the moment with the consequences this turn of affairs might have for Mademoiselle than with his own impending downfall. That he had Cecile to thank for his apprehension he never doubted. Yet it was a reflection that he readily dismissed from his mind. In such a pass as he now found himself none but a weakling could waste time and energy in bewailing the circumstances that had conspired to it. In a man of La Boulaye's calibre and mettle it was more befitting to seek a means to neutralise as much as possible the evil done.

He called Brutus and cross-questioned him regarding the attitude and behaviour of the soldiery since their coming. He learnt that nothing had been touched by them, and that they were acting with the utmost discreetness, taking scrupulous care not to exceed the orders they had received, which amounted to detaining La Boulaye and nothing more.

"You think, then, that you might come and go unmolested?" he asked.

"I think that I might certainly go. But whether they would permit me to return once I had left, I cannot say. So that they will let you pass out, that is all that signifies at the moment," said Caron. "Should they question you, you can tell them that you are going to dine and to fetch me my dinner from Berthon's. As a matter of fact, I shall want you to go to Choisy with a letter, which you must see does not fall into the hands of any of these people of the Convention."

"Give me the letter, Citizen, and trust me to do the rest," answered the faithful Brutus.

La Boulaye searched a drawer of his writing-table for the blank passport he required. Having found it, he hesitated for a moment how to fill it in. At last he decided, and set down three names—Pierre, Francois, and Julie Michael, players, going to Strasbourg—to which he added descriptions of himself, the Vicomte, and Mademoiselle. He reasoned that in case it should ultimately prove impossible for him to accompany them, the passport, thus indited, would still do duty for the other two. They could easily advance some excuse why the third person mentioned was not accompanying them. From this it will be seen that La Boulaye was far from having abandoned hope of effecting his escape, either by his own resourcefulness or by the favour of Robespierre himself, whose kindness for him, after all, was a factor worth reckoning upon.

To Mademoiselle he now wrote as follows:

I am sending you the laissez-passer filled in for the three of us. I am unfortunately unable to bring it myself as my abstraction of the order of release has already been discovered, and I am being detained pending the arrival of Robespierre. But I am at my own lodging, and I have every hope that, either by the use of my own wit, or else by the favour of my friend Robespierre, I shall shortly be able to join you. I would therefore ask you to wait a few days. But should I presently send you word not to do so any longer, or should you hear of events which will render it impossible for me to accompany you, you can then set out with Ombreval, travelling under the guise described in the passport, and informing any questioners that the other person mentioned has been forced by ill health to interrupt his journey. As I have said, I have every hope of winning through my present difficulties; but should I fail to do so, my most earnest prayer will be that you may make your way out of France in safety, and that lasting happiness may be your lot in whatever country you may elect to settle. You may trust the bearer implicitly, patriotic though he may appear.

He subscribed the letter with his initials, and, having enclosed the passport and sealed the package, he gave it to Brutus, with the most minute instructions touching its delivery.

These instructions Brutus carried out with speed and fidelity. He was allowed to quit the house without so much as a question, which left his plan for readmittance the greater likelihood of succeeding. In something less than an hour—for he hired himself a horse at the nearest post-house—he had delivered his letter to Mademoiselle at Choisy.

Its contents sowed in her heart the very deepest consternation—a consternation very fully shared by the Vicomte.

"Tenez!" he exclaimed, when he had read it. "Perhaps now you will admit the justice of my plaint that you did not make a simple purchase of my liberty, as I counselled you, instead of entering into this idiotic

compact with that sans-culotte."

She looked at him a moment in silence. She was suffering as it was at the very thought that La Boulaye's life might be in danger in consequence of what he had done for her. With reluctance had she accepted the sacrifice of his career which he had made to serve her. Now that it became the question of a sacrifice of life as well she was dismayed. All the wrongs that she and hers had done that man seemed to rise up and reproach her now. And so, when presently she answered the Vicomte, it was no more than natural that she should answer him impatiently.

"I thought, Monsieur, that we had already discussed and settled that?"

"Settled it?" he echoed, with a sneer. "It seems none so easy to settle. Do you think that words will settle it."

"By no means," she answered, her voice quivering. "It seems as if a man's life will be required for that."

He shrugged his shoulders, and his face put on a look of annoyance.

"I hope, Mademoiselle, that you are not proposing to introduce sentimentality. I think you would be better advised to leave that vulgarity to the vulgar."

"I do not propose to pursue the discussion at all, Monsieur," was her chilly answer.

"The way of woman," he reflected aloud. "Let her find that she is being worsted in argument, and she calmly tells you that she has no mind to pursue it. But, Mademoiselle, will you tell me at least what you intend?"

"What do I intend?" she questioned. "What choice have we?"

"Whenever we are asked to follow a given course, we have always the choice between two alternatives," he theorised. "We can comply, or not comply."

"In the present instance I am afraid your rule is inapplicable. There is no room for any alternative. We can do nothing but wait."

She looked at him impatiently, and wearily she sank on to a chair.

"Monsieur," she said, as calmly as might be, "I am almost distracted by my thoughts as it is. I don't know whether you are seeking to complete the rout of my senses. Let me beg of you at least not to deal in riddles with me. The time is ill-chosen. Tell me bluntly what is in your mind, if, indeed, anything."

He turned from her peevishly, and crossed to the window. The twilight was descending, and the little garden was looking grey in the now pallid light. Her seeming obtuseness was irritating him.

"Surely, Mademoiselle," he exclaimed at last, "it is not necessary that I should tell you what other course is open to us? It is a matter for our choice whether we depart at once. We have a passport, and—and, enfin, every hour that we remain here our danger is increased, and our chances of escape are lessened."

"Ah!" She breathed the syllable contemptuously. "And what of La Boulaye?"

"Pooh! he says himself that he is in no great danger. He is among his fellows. Leave him to extricate himself. After all, it is his fault that we are here. Why should we endanger our necks by waiting his convenience?"

"But surely you forget what he has done for us. You are forgetting that he has rescued you from the guillotine, dragged you out of the

very jaws of death. Do you think that to forsake him now would be a fair, an honest return?"

"But name of a name," rasped the Vicomte, "does he not say that he is far from despairing? His position is not half so dangerous as ours. If we are taken, there will be an end of us. With him matters are far from being so bad. He is one of the rabble himself, and the rabble will look after its own."

She rose impatiently.

"Monsieur, I am afraid the subject is not one that we may profitably discuss. I shall obey the voice of my conscience in the matter, and I shall wait until we hear again from La Boulaye. That is the message I am about to return him by his servant."

The Vicomte watched her fling out of the room, and his weak face was now white with anger. He rapped out an oath as he turned to the window again.

"Mad!" he muttered, through-set teeth. "Mad as a sun-struck dog. The troubles she has lately seen have turned her head—never a difficult matter with a woman. She talks as if she had been reading Rousseau on the 'Right of man'. To propose to endanger our lives for the sake of that scum, La Boulaye! Ciel! It passes belief."

But it was in vain that he was sullen and resentful. Suzanne's mind entertained no doubt of what she should do, and she had her way in the matter, sending back Brutus with the message that she would wait until La Boulaye communicated with her again.

That night Caron slept tranquilly. He had matured a plan of escape which he intended to carry out upon the morrow, and with confident hope to cradle him he had fallen asleep.

But the morrow—early in the forenoon—brought a factor with which

he had not reckoned, in the person of the Incorruptible himself. Robespierre had returned in hot haste to Paris upon receiving Varennes' message, and he repaired straight to the house of La Boulaye.

Caron was in his dressing-gown when Robespierre was ushered into his study, and the sight of that greenish complexion and the small eyes, looking very angry and menacing, caused the song that the young man had been humming to fade on his lips.

"You, Maximilien!" he exclaimed.

"Your cordial welcome flatters me," sneered the Incorruptible, coming forward. Then with a sudden change of voice: "What is that they tell me you have done, miserable?" he growled.

It would have been a madness on Caron's part to have increased an anger that was already mounting to very passionate heights. Contritely, therefore, and humbly he acknowledged his fault, and cast himself upon the mercy of Robespierre.

But the Incorruptible was not so easily to be shaken.

"Traitor that you are!" he inveighed. "Do you imagine that because it is yours to make high sounding speeches in the Convention you are to conspire with impunity against the Nation? Your loyalty, it seems, is no more than a matter of words, and they that would keep their heads on their shoulders in France to-day will find the need for more than words as their claim to be let live. If you would save your miserable neck, tell me what you have done with this damned aristocrat."

"He is gone," answered La Boulaye quietly.

"Don't prevaricate, Caron! Don't seek to befool me, Citizen-deputy. You have him in hiding somewhere. You can have supplied him with no papers, and a man may not travel out of France without them in

these times. Tell me—where is he?"

"Gone," repeated La Boulaye. "I have set him free, and he has availed himself of it to place himself beyond your reach. More than that I cannot tell you."

"Can you not?" snarled Robespierre, showing his teeth. "Of what are you dreaming fool? Do you think that I will so easily see myself cheated of this dog? Did I not tell you that rather would I grant you the lives of a dozen aristocrats than that of this single one? Do you think, then, that I am so lightly to be baulked? Name of God? Who are you, La Boulaye, what are you, that you dare thwart me in this?" He looked at the young man's impassive face to curb his anger. "Come, Caron," he added, in a wheedling tone. "Tell me what you have done with him?"

"I have already told you," answered the other quietly.

As swift and suddenly as it changed before did Robespierre's humour change again upon receiving that reply. With a snort of anger he strode to the door and threw it open.

"Citizen-lieutenant!" he called, in a rasping voice.

"Here, Citizen," came a voice from below.

"Give yourself the trouble of coming up with a couple of men. Now, Citizen La Boulaye," he said, more composedly, as he turned once more to the young man, "since you will not learn reason you may mount the guillotine in his place."

Caron paled slightly as he inclined his head in silent submission. At that moment the officer entered with his men at his heels.

"Arrest me that traitor," Maximilien commanded, pointing a shaking finger at Caron. "To the Luxembourg with him."

"If you will wait while I change my dressing-gown for a coat, Citizen-officer," said La Boulaye composedly, "I shall be grateful." Then, turning to his official, "Brutus," he called, "attend me."

He had an opportunity while Brutus was helping him into his coat to whisper in the fellow's ear:

"Let her know."

More he dared not say, but to his astute official that was enough, and with a sorrowful face he delivered to Suzanne, a few hours later, the news of La Boulaye's definite arrest and removal to the Luxembourg.

At Brutus's description of the scene there had been 'twixt Robespierre and Caron she sighed heavily, and her lashes grew wet.

"Poor, faithful La Boulaye!" she murmured. "God aid him now."

She bore the news to d'Ombreval, and upon hearing it he tossed aside the book that had been engrossing him and looked up, a sudden light of relief spreading on his weak face.

"It is the end," said he, as though no happier consummation could have attended matters, "and we have no more to wait for. Shall we set out to-day?" he asked, and urged the wisdom of making haste.

"I hope and I pray God that it may not be the end, as you so fondly deem it, Monsieur," she answered him. "But whether it is the end or not, I am resolved to wait until there is no room for any hope."

"As you will," he sighed wearily, "The issue of it all will probably be the loss of our heads. But even that might be more easily accomplished than to impart reason to a woman."

"Or unselfishness, it seems, to a man," she returned, as she swept angrily from the room.

CHAPTER XXII. THE TRIBUNAL

At the Bar of the Revolutionary Tribunal stood Deputy Caron La Boulaye upon his trial for treason to the Nation and contravention of the ends of justice. Fouquier-Tinville, the sleuth-hound Attorney-General, advanced his charges, and detailed the nature of the young revolutionist's crime. But there was in Fouquier-Tinville's prosecution a lack of virulence for once, just as among La Boulaye's fellows, sitting in judgment, there was a certain uneasiness, for the Revolution was still young, and it had not yet developed that Saturnian habit of devouring its own children which was later to become one of its main features.

The matter of La Boulaye's crime, however, was but too clear, and despite the hesitancy on the part of the jury, despite the unwonted tameness of Tinville's invective, the Tribunal's course was well-defined, and admitted of not the slightest doubt. And so, the production of evidence being dispensed with by Caron's ready concurrence and acknowledgment of the offence, the President was on the point of formally asking the jury for their finding, when suddenly there happened a commotion, and a small man in a blue coat and black-rimmed spectacles rose at Tinville's side, and began an impassioned speech for the defence.

This man was Robespierre, and the revolutionists sitting there listened to him in mute wonder, for they recalled that it was upon the Incorruptible's own charge their brother-deputy had been arrested. Ardently did Maximilien pour out his eloquence, enumerating the many virtues of the accused and dwelling at length upon his vast services to the Republic, his hitherto unfaltering fidelity to the nation and the people's cause, and lastly, deploring that in a moment of

weakness he should have committed the indiscretion which had brought him where he stood. And against this thing of which he was now accused, Robespierre bade the Deputies of the jury balance the young man's past, and the much that he had done for the Revolution, and to offer him, in consideration of all that, a chance of making atonement and regaining the position of trust and of brotherly affection which for a moment he had forfeited.

The Court was stirred by the address. They knew the young sansculotte's worth, and they were reluctant to pass sentence upon him and to send him to the death designed for aristocrats and traitors. And so they readily pronounced themselves willing to extend him the most generous measure of mercy, to open their arms and once more to clasp to their hearts the brother who had strayed and to reinstate him in their confidence and their councils. They pressed Robespierre to name the act of atonement by which he proposed La Boulaye should recover his prestige, and Robespierre in answer cried:

"Let him repair the evil he has done. Let him neutralise the treachery into which a moment of human weakness betrayed him. Let him return to us the aristocrat he has attempted to save, and we will forget his indiscretion and receive him back amongst us with open arms, as was the prodigal son received."

There was a salvo of applause. Men rose to their feet excitedly, and with arms outstretched in Caron's direction they vociferously implored him to listen to reason as uttered by the Incorruptible, to repent him and to atone while there was yet time. They loved him, they swore in voices of thunder, each seeking to be heard above his neighbour's din, and it would break their hearts to find him guilty, yet find him guilty they must unless he chose the course which this good patriot Maximilien pointed out to him.

La Boulaye stood pale but composed, his lips compressed, his keen eyes alert. Inwardly he was moved by this demonstration of

goodwill, this very storm of fraternity, but his purpose remained adamant, and when at last the President's bell had tinkled his noisy judges into silence, his voice rose clear and steady as he thanked them for leaning to clemency on his behalf.

"Helas," he ended, "words cannot tell you how deeply I deplore that it is a clemency of which I may not avail myself. What I have done I may not undo. And so, Citizens, whilst I would still retain your love and your sympathy, you must suffer me to let justice take its course. To delay would be but to waste your time the Nation's time."

"But this is rank defiance," roared Tinville, roused at last into some semblance of his habitual bloodthirstiness. "He whose heart can be so insensible to our affections merits no clemency at this bar."

And so the President turned with a shrug to his colleagues, and the verdict was taken. The finding was "Guilty," and the President was on the point of passing sentence, when again Robespierre sprang to his feet. The Incorruptible's complexion looked sicklier than its wont, for mortification had turned him green outright. A gust of passion swept through his soul, such as would have made another man call for the death of this defiant youth who had withstood his entreaties. But such was Robespierre's wonderful command of self, such was his power of making his inclinations subservient to the ends he had in view that he had but risen to voice a fresh appeal.

He demanded that the sentence should be passed with the reservation that the accused should have twenty-four hours for reflection. Should he at the end of that time be disposed to tell them where the *ci-devant* Vicomte d'Ombreval was to be found, let them reconsider his case. On the other hand, should he still continue obdurate by the noon of to-morrow, then let the sentence be consummated.

There was some demur, but Robespierre swept it fiercely aside

with patriotic arguments. La Boulaye was a stout servant of the Nation, whom it must profit France to let live that he might serve her; Ombreval was a base aristocrat, whose death all true Republicans should aim at encompassing. And so he won the day in the end, and when the sentence of death was passed, it was passed with the reservation that should the prisoner, upon reflection, be inclined to show himself more loyal to France and the interests of the Republic by telling them how Ombreval might be recaptured, he would find them still inclined to mercy and forgiveness. Allowing his eyes to stray round the Court at that moment, La Boulaye started at sight of an unexpected face. It was Mademoiselle de Bellecour, deathly pale and with the strained, piteous look that haunts the eyes of the mad. He shivered at the thought of the peril to herself in coming into that assembly; then, recovering himself, he turned to his judges.

"Citizen-President, Citizens all, I thank you; but I should be unappreciative of your kindness did I permit you to entertain false hopes. My purpose is unalterable."

"Take him away," the President commanded impatiently, and as they removed him Mademoiselle crept from the Court, weeping softly in her poignant grief, and realising that not so much for the President's ear as for her own had La Boulaye uttered those words. They were meant to fortify her and to give her courage with the assurance that Ombreval would not be betrayed. To give her courage! Her lip was twisted into an oddly bitter smile at the reflection, as she stepped into her cabriolet, and bade the driver return to Choisy. Caron was doing this for her. He was casting away his young, vigorous life, with all its wealth of promise, to the end that her betrothed—the man whom he believed she loved—might be spared. The greatness, the nobility of the sacrifice overwhelmed her. She remembered the thoughts that in the past she had entertained concerning this young revolutionist. Never yet had she been able to regard him as belonging to the same order of beings as herself—not

even when she had kissed his unconscious lips that evening on the Ridge road. An immeasurable gulf had seemed to yawn between them—the gulf between her nobility and his base origin. And now, as her carriage trundled out of Paris and took the dusty high road, she shuddered, and her cheeks burned with shame at the memory of the wrong that by such thoughts she had done him. Was she, indeed, the nobler? By accident of birth, perhaps, but by nature proper he was assuredly the noblest man that ever woman bore.

In the Place de la Revolution a gruesome engine they called the guillotine was levelling all things, and fast establishing the reign of absolute equality. But with all the swift mowing of its bloody scythe, not half so fast did it level men as Mademoiselle de Bellecour's thoughts were doing that afternoon.

So marked was the disorder in her countenance when she reached Choisy that even unobservant Ombreval whom continuous years of self-complacency had rendered singularly obtuse—could not help but notice it, and—fearing, no doubt, that this agitation might in some way concern himself—he even went the length of questioning her, his voice sounding the note of his alarm.

"It is nothing," she answered, in a dejected voice. "At least, nothing that need cause you uneasiness. They have sentenced La Boulaye to death," she announced, a spasm crossing her averted face.

He took a deep breath of relief.

"God knows they've sentenced innocent men enough. It is high time they began upon one another. It augurs well—extremely well."

They were alone in Henriette's kitchen; the faithful woman was at market. Mademoiselle was warming herself before the fire. Ombreval stood by the window. He had spent the time of her absence in the care of his clothes, and he had contrived to dress himself with some

semblance of his old-time elegance which enhanced his good looks and high-born air.

"You seem to utterly forget, Monsieur, the nature of the charge upon which he has been arraigned," she said, in a tired voice.

"Why, no," he answered, and he smiled airily; "he was sufficiently a fool to be lured by the brightest eyes in France into a service for their mistress. My faith! He's not the first by many a thousand whom a woman's soft glances have undone—"

"The degree in which you profit by the service he is doing those bright eyes, appears singularly beneath the dignity of your notice."

"What a jester you are becoming, ma mie," he laughed and at the sound she shuddered again and drew mechanically nearer to the fire as though her shuddering was the result of cold.

"It is yet possible that he may not die," she said almost as if speaking to herself. "They have offered him his liberty, and his reinstatement even—upon conditions."

"How interesting!" he murmured nonchalantly. "They have an odd way of dispensing justice."

"The conditions imposed are that he shall amend the wrong he has done, and deliver up to the Convention the person of one ci-devant Vicomte d'Ombreval."

"My God!"

It was a gasp of sudden dismay that broke from the young nobleman. The colour swept out of his face, and his eyes dilated with horror. Watching him Suzanne observed the sudden change, and took a fierce joy in having produced it.

"It interests you more closely now, Monsieur?" she asked.

"Suzanne," he cried, coming a step nearer, and speaking eagerly; "he knows my whereabouts. He brought me here himself. Are you mad, girl, that you can sit there so composedly and tell me this?"

"What else would you have me do?" she inquired.

"Do? Why, leave Choisy at once. Come; be stirring. In God's name, girl, bethink you that we have not a moment to lose. I know these Republicans, and how far they are to be trusted. This fellow would betray me to save his skin with as little compunction as—"

"You fool!" she broke in, an undercurrent of fierce indignation vibrating through her scorn. "What are you saying? He would betray you? He?" She tossed her arms to Heaven, and burst into a laugh of infinite derision. "Have no fear of that, M. le Vicomte, for you are dealing with a nature of a nobility that you cannot so much as surmise. If he were minded to betray you, why did he not do so to-day, when they offered him his liberty in exchange for information that would lead to your recapture?"

"But although he may have refused to-day," returned the Vicomte frenziedly, "he may think better of it to-morrow-perhaps even tonight. Ciel! Think of the risk we run; already it may be too late. Oh, why," he demanded reproachfully, "why didn't you listen to me when, days ago, I counselled flight?"

"Because it neither was, nor is, my intention to fly."

"What?" he cried, and, his jaw fallen and his eyes wide, he regarded her. Then suddenly he caught her by the arm and shook her roughly. "Are you mad?" he cried, in a frenzy of anger and fear. "Am I to die like a dog that a scum of a Republican may save his miserable neck? Is this canaille of a revolutionist to betray me to his rabble Tribunal?"

"Already have I told you that you need fear no betrayal."

"Need I not?" he sneered. "Ma foi! but I know these ruffians. There is not an ounce of honour in the whole National Convention."

"Fool!" she blazed, rising and confronting him with an anger before which he recoiled, appalled. "Do you dare to stand there and prate of honour—you? Do you forget why he stood his trial? Do you forget why he is dying, and can you not see the vile thing that you are doing in arguing flight, that you talk of honour thus, and deny his claim to it? Mon Dieu! Your effrontery stifles me! La Boulaye was right when he said that with us honour is but a word—just so much wind, and nothing more."

He stared at her in uncomprehending wonder. He drew away another step. He accounted her mad, and, that he might humour her, he put by his own fears for the moment—a wonderful unselfishness this in the most nobly-born Vicomte d'Ombreval.

"My poor Suzanne," he murmured. "Our trouble has demoralised your understanding. You take a false view of things. You do not apprehend the situation."

"In God's name, be silent!" she gasped.

"But the time is not one for silence," he returned.

"So I had thought," quoth she. "Yet since you can be silent and furtive in other matters, I beg that you will be silent in this also. You talk in vain, Monsieur, in any case. For I am not minded to leave Choisy. If you urge me further I shall burn our passport."

And with that she left him, to seek the solitude of her own room. In a passion of tears she flung herself upon the little bed, and there she lay, a prey to such an anguish as had never touched her life before.

And now, in that hour of her grief, it came to her—as the sun

pierces the mist—that she loved La Boulaye; that she had loved him, indeed, since that night at Boisvert, although she had stifled the very thought, and hidden it even from herself, as being unworthy in one of her station to love a man so lowly-born as Caron. But now, on the eve of his death, the truth would no longer be denied. It cried, perchance, the louder by virtue of the pusillanimity of the craven below stairs in whose place Caron was to die; but anyhow, it cried so loudly that it overbore the stern voice of the blood that had hitherto urged her to exclude the sentiment from her heart. No account now did she take of any difference in station. Be she nobler a thousand times, be he simpler a thousand times, the fact remained that she was a woman, he a man, and beyond that she did not seek to go.

Low indeed were the Lilies of France when a daughter of the race of their upholders heeded them so little and the caste they symbolised.

Henriette came to her that afternoon, and, all ignorant of the sources of her grief, she essayed to soothe and comfort her, in which, at last, she succeeded.

In the evening Ombreval sent word that he wished to speak to her—and that his need was urgent. But she returned him the answer that she would see him in the morning. She was indisposed that evening she added, in apology.

And in the morning they met, as she had promised him. Both pale, although from different causes, and both showing signs of having slept but little. They broke their fast together and in silence, which at last he ended by asking her whether the night had brought her reflection, and whether such reflection had made her appreciate their position and the need to set out at once.

"It needed no reflection to make me realise our position better than I did yesterday," she answered. "I had hoped that it would have

brought you to a different frame of mind. But I am afraid that it has not done so."

"I fail to see what change my frame of mind admits of," he answered testily.

"Have you thought," she asked at last, and her voice was cold and concentrated, "that this man is giving his life for you?"

"I have feared," he answered, with incredible callousness, "that to save his craven skin he might elect to do differently at the last moment."

She looked at him in a mighty wonder, her dark eyes open to their widest, and looking black by the extreme dilation of the pupils. So vast was her amazement at this unbounded egotism that it almost overruled her disgust.

"You cast epithets about you and bestow titles with a magnificent unconsciousness of how well they might fit you."

"Ah? For example?"

"In calling this man a craven, you take no thought for the cowardice that actuates you into hiding while he dies for you?"

"Cowardice?" he ejaculated. Then a flush spread on his face. "Ma foi, Mademoiselle," said he, in a quivering voice, "your words betray thoughts that would be scarcely becoming in the Vicomtesse d'Ombreval."

"That, Monsieur, is a point that need give you little thought. I am not likely to become the Vicomtesse."

He bestowed her a look of mingling wonder and anger. Had he, indeed, heard her aright? Did her words imply that she disdained the honour?

"Surely," he gasped, voicing those doubts of his, "you do not mean that you would violate your betrothal contract? You do not—"

"I mean, Monsieur," she cut in, "that I will give myself to no man I do not love."

"Your immodesty," said he, "falls in nothing short of the extraordinary frame of mind that you appear to be developing in connection with other matters. We shall have you beating a drum and screeching the *Ca ira* in the streets of Paris presently, like Mademoiselle de Mericourt."

She rose from the table, her face very white, her hand pressing upon her corsage. A moment she looked at him. Then:

"Do not let us talk of ourselves," she exclaimed at last. "There is a man in the Conciergerie who dies at noon unless you are forthcoming before then to save him. He himself will not betray you because he—No matter why, he will not. Tell me, Monsieur, how do you, who account yourself a man of honour above everything, intend to deal with this situation?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Once he is dead and done with—provided that he does not first betray me—I trust that, no longer having this subject to harp upon, you will consent to avail yourself of our passport, and accompany me out of France."

"Honour does not for instance, suggest to you that you should repair to the Conciergerie and take the place that belongs to you, and which another is filling?"

A sudden light of comprehension swept now into his face.

"At last I understand what has been in your mind since yesterday,

what has made you so odd in your words and manner. You have thought that it was perhaps my duty as a man of honour to go and effect the rescue of this fellow. But, my dear child, bethink you of what he is, and of what I am. Were he a gentleman—my equal—my course would stand clearly defined. I should not have hesitated a moment. But this canaille! Ma foi! let me beg of you to come to your senses. The very thought is unworthy in you."

"I understand you," she answered him, very coldly. "You use a coward's arguments, and you have the effrontery to consider yourself a man of honour—a nobleman. I no longer marvel that there is a revolution in France."

She stood surveying him for a moment, then she quietly left the room. He stared after her.

"Woman, woman!" he sighed, as he set down his napkin and rose in his turn.

His humour was one of pitying patience for a girl that had not the wit to see that to ask him—the most noble d'Ombreval—to die that La Boulaye might live was very much like asking him to sacrifice his life to save a dog's.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE CONCIERGERIE

It wanted but a few minutes to noon as the condemned of the day were being brought out of the Conciergerie to take their places in the waiting tumbrils. Fourteen they numbered, and there was a woman amongst them as composed as any of the men. She descended the prison steps in nonchalant conversation with a witty young man of some thirty years of age, who had been one of the ornaments of the prerevolutionary salons. Had the pair been on the point of mounting a wedding coach they could not have shown themselves in better spirits.

Aristocrats, too, were the remaining twelve, with one exception, and if they had not known how to live, at least they could set a very splendid example of how to die. They came mostly in pairs, and the majority of them emulating the first couple and treating the whole matter as a pleasantry that rather bored them by the element of coarseness introduced by the mob. One or two were pale, and their eyes wore a furtive, frightened look. But they valiantly fought down their fears, and for all that the hearts within them may have been sick with horror, they contrived to twist a smile on to their pale lips. They did not lack for stout patterns of high bearing, and in addition they had their own arrogant pride—the pride that had brought them at last to this pass—to sustain them in their extremity. Noblesse les obligeait. The rabble, the canaille of the new regime, might do what they would with their bodies, but their spirits they could not break, nor overcome their indomitable pride. By the brave manner of their death it remained for them to make amends for the atrocious manner of their lives, and such a glamour did they shed upon themselves by the same

brave manner, that it compelled sympathy and admiration of those that beheld them, and made upon humanity an impression deep enough to erase the former impression left by their misdeeds.

Like heroes, like sainted martyrs, they died, these men who, through generation after generation, had ground and crushed the people 'neath the iron heel of tyranny and oppression, until the people had, of a sudden, risen and reversed the position, going to excesses, in their lately-awakened wrath, that were begotten of the excesses which for centuries they had endured.

Last of this gallant and spruce company (for every man had donned his best, and dressed himself with the utmost care) came Caron La Boulaye. He walked alone, for although their comrade in death, he was their comrade in nothing else. Their heads might lie together in the sawdust of Sanson's basket, but while they lived, no contact would they permit themselves, of body or of soul, with this sans-culotte. Had they known why he died, perhaps, they had shown him fellowship. But in their nescience of the facts, it would need more than death to melt them into a kindness to a member of the Convention, for death was the only thing they had in common, and death, as we have seen, had not conquered them.

As he was about to pass out, a gaoler suddenly thrust forward a hand to detain him, and almost simultaneously the door, which had swung to behind the last of his death-fellows, re-opened to admit the dapper figure of the Incorruptible.

He eyed Caron narrowly as he advanced into the hall, and at the composure evident in the young man's bearing, his glance seemed to kindle with admiration, for all that his lips remained cruel in their tightened curves.

Caron gave him good-day with a friendly smile, and before Robespierre could utter a word the young man was expressing his

polite regrets at having balked him as he had done.

"I had a great object to serve, Maximilien," he concluded, "and my only regret is that it should have run counter to your wishes. I owe you so much—everything in fact—that I am filled with shame at the thought of how ill a return I am making you. My only hope is that by my death you will consider that I have sufficiently atoned for my ingratitude."

"Fool!" croaked Robespierre, "you are sacrificing yourself for some chimaera and the life you are saving is that of a very worthless and vicious individual. Of your ingratitude to me we will not speak. But even now, in the eleventh hour, I would have you bethink you of yourself."

He held out his hands to him, and entreaty was stamped upon Robespierre's countenance to a degree which perhaps no man had yet seen. "Bethink you, cher Caron—" he began again. But the young man shook his head.

"My friend, my best of friends," he exclaimed, "I beg that you will not make it harder for me. I am resolved, and your entreaties do but heighten my pain of thwarting your—the only pain that in this supreme hour I am experiencing. It is not a difficult thing to die, Maximilien. Were I to live, I must henceforth lead a life of unsatisfied desire. I must even hanker and sigh after a something that is unattainable. I die, and all this is extinguished with me. At the very prospect my desires fade immeasurably. Let me go in peace, and with your forgiveness."

Robespierre eyed him a moment or two in astonishment. Then he made an abrupt gesture of impatience.

"Fool that you are! It is suicide you are committing. And for what? For a dream a shadow. Is this like a man, Caron'? Is this—Will you be still, you animal?" he barked at a gaoler who had once before touched him upon the arm. "Do you not see that I am occupied?"

But the man leant forward, and said some words hurriedly into Robespierre's ear, which cast the petulance out of his face and mind, and caused him of a sudden to become very attentive.

"Ah?" he said at last. Then, with a sudden briskness: "Let the Citizen La Boulaye not go forth until I return," he bade the gaoler; and to Caron he said: "You will have the goodness to await my return."

With that he turned and stepped briskly across the hall and through the door, which the gaoler, all equality notwithstanding, hastened to open for him with as much servility as ever the haughtiest aristocrat had compelled.

Saving that single gaoler, La Boulaye was alone in the spacious hall of the Conciergerie. From without they heard the wild clamouring and Ca-iraing of the mob. Chafing at this fresh delay, which was as a prolongation of his death-agony, La Boulaye was pacing to and fro, the ring of his footsteps on the stone floor yielding a hollow, sepulchral echo.

"Is he never returning?" he cried at last; and as if in answer to his question, the drums suddenly began to roll, and the vociferations of the rabble swelled in volume and grew shriller. "What is that?" he inquired.

The gaoler, on whose dirty face some measure of surprise was manifested, approached the little grating that overlooked the yard and peered out.

"Sacrenom!" he swore. "The tumbrils are moving. They have left you behind, Citizen."

But La Boulaye gathered no encouragement, such as the gaoler thought he might, from that contingency. He but imagined that it was Robespierre's wish to put him back for another day in the hope that he might still loosen his tongue. An oath of vexation broke from him,

and he stamped his foot impatiently upon the floor.

Then the door opened suddenly, and Robespierre held it whilst into the room came a woman, closely veiled, whose tall and shapely figure caused the young Deputy's breath to flutter. The Incorruptible followed her, and turning to the gaoler:

"Leave us," he commanded briskly.

And presently, when those three stood alone, the woman raised her veil and disclosed the face he had expected—the beautiful face of Suzanne de Bellecour, but, alas! woefully pale and anguished of expression. She advanced a step towards Caron, and then stood still, encountering his steadfast, wonder-struck gaze, and seeming to falter. With a sob, at last she turned to Maximilien, who had remained a pace or two behind.

"Tell him, Monsieur," she begged.

Robespierre started out of his apparent abstraction. He peered at her with his short-sighted eyes, and from her to Caron. Then he came forward a step and cleared his throat, rather as a trick of oratory than to relieve any huskiness.

"To put it briefly, my dear Caron," said he, "the Citoyenne here has manifested a greater solicitude for your life than you did yourself, and she has done me the twofold service of setting it in my power to punish an enemy, and to preserve a friend from a death that was very imminent. In the eleventh hour she came to me to make terms for your pardon. She proposed to deliver up to me the person of the ci-devant Vicomte d'Ombreval provided that I should grant you an unconditional pardon. You can imagine, my good Caron, with what eagerness I agreed to her proposal, and with what pleasure I now announce to you that you are free."

"Free!" gasped La Boulaye, his eyes travelling fearfully from

Robespierre to Mademoiselle, and remaining riveted upon the latter as though he were attempting to penetrate into the secrets of her very soul.

"Practically free," answered the Incorruptible. "You may leave the Conciergerie when you please, thought I shall ask you to remain at your lodging in the Rue Nationale until this Ombreval is actually taken. Once he has been brought to Paris, I shall send you your papers that you may leave France, for, much though I shall regret your absence, I think that it will be wiser for you to make your fortune elsewhere after what has passed."

La Boulaye took a step in Suzanne's direction.

"You have done this?" he cried, in a quivering voice. "You have betrayed the man to whom you were betrothed?"

"Do not use that word, Monsieur," she cried, with a shudder. "My action cannot be ranked among betrayals. He would have let you go to the guillotine in his stead. He had not the virtue to come forward, for all that he knew that you must die if he did not. On the contrary, such a condition of things afforded him amusement, matter to scorn and insult you with. He would have complacently allowed a dozen men to have gone to the guillotine that his own worthless life might have been spared.

"But he was your betrothed!" La Boulaye protested.

"True!" she made answer; "but I had to choose between the man it had been arranged I should marry and the man I loved." A flush crimsoned her cheek, and her voice sank almost to a whisper. "And to save the man I love I have delivered up Ombreval."

"Suzanne"

The name burst from his lips in a shout of wonder and of joy

ineffable. In a stride he seemed to cover the distance between them, and he caught her to him as the door slammed on the discreetly departing Robespierre.

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THE LIFE OF CESARE BORGIA

Of France, Duke of Valentinois and Romagna, Prince of Andria and
Venafri
Count of Dyois, Lord of Piombino, Camerino and Urbino, Gonfalonier
and
Captain-General of Holy Church

A History and Some Criticisms

By Raphael Sabatini

Contents

[PREFACE](#)

[BOOK I.](#)

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

THE HOUSE OF THE BULL

THE RISE OF THE HOUSE OF BORGIA

THE REIGNS OF SIXTUS IV AND INNOCENT VIII

ALEXANDER VI

BORGIA ALLIANCES

[BOOK II.](#)

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

THE BULL PASCANT

THE FRENCH INVASION

THE POPE AND THE SUPERNATURAL

THE ROMAN BARONS

THE MURDER OF THE DUKE OF GANDIA

THE RENUNCIATION OF THE PURPLE

[BOOK III.](#)

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

[CHAPTER VI.](#)

[CHAPTER VII.](#)

THE BULL RAMPANT

THE DUCHESS OF VALENTINOIS

THE KNEEL OF THE TYRANTS

IMOLA AND FORLI

GONFALONIER OF THE CHURCH

THE MURDER OF ALFONSO OF ARAGON

RIMINI AND PESARO

THE SIEGE OF FAENZA

<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	ASTORRE MANFREDI
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	CASTEL BOLOGNESE AND PIOMBINO
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	THE END OF THE HOUSE OF ARAGON
<u>CHAPTER XI.</u>	THE LETTER TO SILVIO SAVELLI
<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	LUCREZIA'S THIRD MARRIAGE
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	URBINO AND CAMERINO
<u>CHAPTER XIV.</u>	THE REVOLT OF THE CONDOTTIERI
<u>CHAPTER XV.</u>	MACCHIAVELLI'S LEGATION
<u>CHAPTER XVI.</u>	RAMIRO DE LORQUA
<u>CHAPTER XVII.</u>	"THE BEAUTIFUL STRATAGEM"
<u>CHAPTER XVIII.</u>	THE ZENITH

<u>BOOK IV.</u>	THE BULL CADENT
<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	THE DEATH OF ALEXANDER VI
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	PIUS III
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	JULIUS II
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	ATROPOS

PREFACE

This is no Chronicle of Saints. Nor yet is it a History of Devils. It is a record of certain very human, strenuous men in a very human, strenuous age; a lustful, flamboyant age; an age red with blood and pale with passion at white-heat; an age of steel and velvet, of vivid colour, dazzling light and impenetrable shadow; an age of swift movement, pitiless violence and high endeavour, of sharp antitheses and amazing contrasts.

To judge it from the standpoint of this calm, deliberate, and correct century—as we conceive our own to be—is for sedate middle-age to judge from its own standpoint the reckless, hot, passionate, lustful humours of youth, of youth that errs grievously and achieves greatly.

So to judge that epoch collectively is manifestly wrong, a hopeless procedure if it be our aim to understand it and to be in sympathy with it, as it becomes broad-minded age to be tolerantly in sympathy with the youth whose follies it perceives. Life is an ephemeral business, and we waste too much of it in judging where it would beseem us better to accept, that we ourselves may come to be accepted by such future ages as may pursue the study of us.

But if it be wrong to judge a past epoch collectively by the standards of our own time, how much more is it not wrong to single out individuals for judgement by those same standards, after detaching them for the purpose from the environment in which they had their being? How false must be the conception of them thus obtained! We view the individuals so selected through a microscope of modern focus. They appear monstrous and abnormal, and we straight-way assume them to be monsters and abnormalities, never

considering that the fault is in the adjustment of the instrument through which we inspect them, and that until that is corrected others of that same past age, if similarly viewed, must appear similarly distorted.

Hence it follows that some study of an age must ever prelude and accompany the study of its individuals, if comprehension is to wait upon our labours. To proceed otherwise is to judge an individual Hottentot or South Sea Islander by the code of manners that obtains in Belgravia or Mayfair.

Mind being the seat of the soul, and literature being the expression of the mind, literature, it follows, is the soul of an age, the surviving and immortal part of it; and in the literature of the Cinquecento you shall behold for the looking the ardent, unmoral, naïve soul of this Renaissance that was sprawling in its lusty, naked infancy and bellowing hungrily for the pap of knowledge, and for other things. You shall infer something of the passionate mettle of this infant: his tempestuous mirth, his fierce rages, his simplicity, his naïveté, his inquisitiveness, his cunning, his deceit, his cruelty, his love of sunshine and bright gewgaws.

To realize him as he was, you need but to bethink you that this was the age in which the *Decamerone* of Giovanni Boccaccio, the *Facetiae* of Poggio, the *Satires* of Filelfo, and the *Hermaphroditus* of Panormitano afforded reading-matter to both sexes. This was the age in which the learned and erudite Lorenzo Valla—of whom more anon—wrote his famous indictment of virginity, condemning it as against nature with arguments of a most insidious logic. This was the age in which Casa, Archbishop of Benevento, wrote a most singular work of erotic philosophy, which, coming from a churchman's pen, will leave you cold with horror should you chance to turn its pages. This was the age of the Discovery of Man; the pagan age which stripped Christ of His divinity to bestow it upon Plato, so that Marsilio Ficino actually burnt an altar-lamp before an image of the Greek by whose teachings

—in common with so many scholars of his day—he sought to inform himself.

It was an age that had become unable to discriminate between the merits of the Saints of the Church and the Harlots of the Town. Therefore it honoured both alike, extolled the carnal merits of the one in much the same terms as were employed to extol the spiritual merits of the other. Thus when a famous Roman courtesan departed this life in the year 1511, at the early age of twenty-six, she was accorded a splendid funeral and an imposing tomb in the Chapel Santa Gregoria with a tablet bearing the following inscription:

"IMPERIA CORTISANA ROMANA QUAE DIGNA TANTO
NOMINE, RARAE INTER MORTALES FORMAE SPECIMEN
DEDIT."

It was, in short, an age so universally immoral as scarcely to be termed immoral, since immorality may be defined as a departure from the morals that obtain a given time and in a given place. So that whilst from our own standpoint the Cinquecento, taken collectively, is an age of grossest licence and immorality, from the standpoint of the Cinquecento itself few of its individuals might with justice be branded immoral.

For the rest, it was an epoch of reaction from the Age of Chivalry. an epoch of unbounded luxury, of the cult and worship of the beautiful externally; an epoch that set no store by any inward virtue, by truth or honour; an epoch that laid it down as a maxim that no inconvenient engagement should be kept if opportunity offered to evade it.

The history of the Cinquecento is a history developed in broken pledges, trusts dishonoured and basest treacheries, as you shall come to conclude before you have read far in the story that is here to be set down.

In a profligate age what can you look for but profligates? Is it just, is it reasonable, or is it even honest to take a man or a family from such an environment, for judgement by the canons of a later epoch? Yet is it not the method that has been most frequently adopted in dealing with the vast subject of the Borgias?

To avoid the dangers that must wait upon that error, the history of that House shall here be taken up with the elevation of Calixtus III to the Papal Throne; and the reign of the four Popes immediately preceding Roderigo Borgia—who reigned as Alexander VI—shall briefly be surveyed that a standard may be set by which to judge the man and the family that form the real subject of this work.

The history of this amazing Pope Alexander is yet to be written. No attempt has been made to exhaust it here. Yet of necessity he bulks large in these pages; for the history of his dazzling, meteoric son is so closely interwoven with his own that it is impossible to present the one without dealing at considerable length with the other.

The sources from which the history of the House of Borgia has been culled are not to be examined in a preface. They are too numerous, and they require too minute and individual a consideration that their precise value and degree of credibility may be ascertained. Abundantly shall such examination be made in the course of this history, and in a measure as the need arises to cite evidence for one side or for the other shall that evidence be sifted.

Never, perhaps, has anything more true been written of the Borgias and their history than the matter contained in the following lines of Rawdon Brown in his *Ragguagli sulla Vita e sulle Opere di Marino Sanuto*: "It seems to me that history has made use of the House of Borgia as of a canvas upon which to depict the turpitudes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries."

Materials for the work were very ready to the hand; and although

they do not signally differ from the materials out of which the histories of half a dozen Popes of the same epoch might be compiled, they are far more abundant in the case of the Borgia Pope, for the excellent reason that the Borgia Pope detaches from the background of the Renaissance far more than any of his compeers by virtue of his importance as a political force.

In this was reason to spare for his being libelled and lampooned even beyond the usual extravagant wont. Slanders concerning him and his son Cesare were readily circulated, and they will generally be found to spring from those States which had most cause for jealousy and resentment of the Borgia might—Venice, Florence, and Milan, amongst others.

No rancour is so bitter as political rancour—save, perhaps, religious rancour, which we shall also trace; no warfare more unscrupulous or more prone to use the insidious weapons of slander than political warfare. Of this such striking instances abound in our own time that there can scarce be the need to labour the point. And from the form taken by such slanders as are circulated in our own sedate and moderate epoch may be conceived what might be said by political opponents in a fierce age that knew no pudency and no restraint. All this in its proper place shall be more closely examined.

For many of the charges brought against the House of Borgia some testimony exists; for many others—and these are the more lurid, sensational, and appalling covering as they do rape and murder, adultery, incest, and the sin of the Cities of the Plain—no single grain of real evidence is forthcoming. Indeed, at this time of day evidence is no longer called for where the sins of the Borgias are concerned. Oft-reiterated assertion has usurped the place of evidence—for a lie sufficiently repeated comes to be credited by its very utterer. And meanwhile the calumny has sped from tongue to tongue, from pen to pen, gathering matter as it goes. The world absorbs the stories; it

devours them greedily so they be sensational, and writers well aware of this have been pandering to that morbid appetite for some centuries now with this subject of the Borgias. A salted, piquant tale of vice, a ghastly story of moral turpitude and physical corruption, a hair-raising narrative of horrors and abominations—these are the stock-in-trade of the sensation-monger. With the authenticity of the matters he retails such a one has no concern. "Se non é vero é ben trovato," is his motto, and in his heart the sensation-monger—of whatsoever age—rather hopes the thing be true. He will certainly make his public so believe it; for to discredit it would be to lose nine-tenths of its sensational value. So he trims and adjusts his wares, adds a touch or two of colour and what else he accounts necessary to heighten their air of authenticity, to dissemble any peeping spuriousness.

A form of hypnosis accompanies your study of the subject—a suggestion that what is so positively and repeatedly stated must of necessity be true, must of necessity have been proved by irrefutable evidence at some time or other. So much you take for granted—for matters which began their existence perhaps as tentative hypotheses have imperceptibly developed into established facts.

Occasionally it happens that we find some such sentence as the following summing up this deed or that one in the Borgia histories: "A deal of mystery remains to be cleared up, but the Verdict of History assigns the guilt to Cesare Borgia."

Behold how easy it is to dispense with evidence. So that your tale be well-salted and well-spiced, a fico for evidence! If it hangs not overwell together in places, if there be contradictions, lacunae, or openings for doubt, fling the Verdict of History into the gap, and so strike any questioner into silence.

So far have matters gone in this connection that who undertakes to set down to-day the history of Cesare Borgia, with intent to do just and honest work, must find it impossible to tell a plain and

straightforward tale—to present him not as a villain of melodrama, not a monster, ludicrous, grotesque, impossible, but as human being, a cold, relentless egotist, it is true, using men for his own ends, terrible and even treacherous in his reprisals, swift as a panther and as cruel where his anger was aroused, yet with certain elements of greatness: a splendid soldier, an unrivalled administrator, a man pre-eminently just, if merciless in that same justice.

To present Cesare Borgia thus in a plain straightforward tale at this time of day, would be to provoke the scorn and derision of those who have made his acquaintance in the pages of that eminent German scholar, Ferdinand Gregorovius, and of some other writers not quite so eminent yet eminent enough to serve serious consideration. Hence has it been necessary to examine at close quarters the findings of these great ones, and to present certain criticisms of those same findings. The author is overwhelmingly conscious of the invidious quality of that task; but he is no less conscious of its inevitability if this tale is to be told at all.

Whilst the actual sources of historical evidence shall be examined in the course of this narrative, it may be well to examine at this stage the sources of the popular conceptions of the Borgias, since there will be no occasion later to allude to them.

Without entering here into a dissertation upon the historical romance, it may be said that in proper hands it has been and should continue to be one of the most valued and valuable expressions of the literary art. To render and maintain it so, however, it is necessary that certain well-defined limits should be set upon the licence which its writers are to enjoy; it is necessary that the work should be honest work; that preparation for it should be made by a sound, painstaking study of the period to be represented, to the end that a true impression may first be formed and then conveyed. Thus, considering how much more far-reaching is the novel than any other form of

literature, the good results that must wait upon such endeavours are beyond question. The neglect of them—the distortion of character to suit the romancer's ends, the like distortion of historical facts, the gross anachronisms arising out of a lack of study, have done much to bring the historical romance into disrepute. Many writers frankly make no pretence—leastways none that can be discerned—of aiming at historical precision; others, however, invest their work with a spurious scholarliness, go the length of citing authorities to support the point of view which they have taken, and which they lay before you as the fruit of strenuous lucubrations.

These are the dangerous ones, and of this type is Victor Hugo's famous tragedy *Lucrezia Borgia*, a work to which perhaps more than to any other (not excepting *Les Borgia*s in *Crimes Célèbres* of Alexandre Dumas) is due the popular conception that prevails to-day of Cesare Borgia's sister.

It is questionable whether anything has ever flowed from a distinguished pen in which so many licences have been taken with the history of individuals and of an epoch; in which there is so rich a crop of crude, transpontine absurdities and flagrant, impossible anachronisms. Victor Hugo was a writer of rare gifts, a fertile romancer and a great poet, and it may be unjust to censure him for having taken the fullest advantages of the licences conceded to both. But it would be difficult to censure him too harshly for having—in his *Lucrezia Borgia*—struck a pose of scholarliness, for having pretended and maintained that his work was honest work founded upon the study of historical evidences. With that piece of charlatanism he deceived the great mass of the unlettered of France and of all Europe into believing that in his tragedy he presented the true *Lucrezia Borgia*.

"If you do not believe me," he declared, "read Tommaso Tommasi, read the *Diary of Burchard*."

Read, then, that Diary, extending over a period of twenty-three years, from 1483 to 1506, of the Master of Ceremonies of the Vatican (which largely contributes the groundwork of the present history), and the one conclusion to which you will be forced is that Victor Hugo himself had never read it, else he would have hesitated to bid you refer to a work which does not support a single line that he has written.

As for Tommaso Tommasi—oh, the danger of a little learning! Into what quagmires does it not lead those who flaunt it to impress you!

Tommasi's place among historians is on precisely the same plane as Alexandre Dumas's. His *Vita di Cesare Borgia* is on the same historical level as *Les Borgias*, much of which it supplied. Like *Crimes Célèbres*, Tommasi's book is invested with a certain air of being a narrative of sober fact; but like *Crimes Célèbres*, it is none the less a work of fiction.

This Tommaso Tommasi, whose real name was Gregorio Leti—and it is under this that such works of his as are reprinted are published nowadays—was a most prolific author of the seventeenth century, who, having turned Calvinist, vented in his writings a mordacious hatred of the Papacy and of the religion from which he had seceded. His *Life of Cesare Borgia* was published in 1670. It enjoyed a considerable vogue, was translated into French, and has been the chief source from which many writers of fiction and some writers of "fact" have drawn for subsequent work to carry forward the ceaseless defamation of the Borgias.

History should be as inexorable as Divine Justice. Before we admit facts, not only should we call for evidence and analyse it when it is forthcoming, but the very sources of such evidence should be examined, that, as far as possible, we may ascertain what degree of credit they deserve. In the study of the history of the Borgias, we repeat, there has been too much acceptance without question, too

much taking for granted of matters whose incredibility frequently touches and occasionally oversteps the confines of the impossible.

One man knew Cesare Borgia better, perhaps, than did any other contemporary, of the many who have left more or less valuable records; for the mind of that man was the acutest of its age, one of the acutest Italy and the world have ever known. That man was Niccolò Macchiavelli, Secretary of State to the Signory of Florence. He owed no benefits to Cesare; he was the ambassador of a power that was ever inimical to the Borgias; so that it is not to be dreamt that his judgement suffered from any bias in Cesare's favour. Yet he accounted Cesare Borgia—as we shall see—the incarnation of an ideal conqueror and ruler; he took Cesare Borgia as the model for his famous work *The Prince*, written as a grammar of statecraft for the instruction in the art of government of that weakling Giuliano de'Medici.

Macchiavelli pronounces upon Cesare Borgia the following verdict:

"If all the actions of the duke are taken into consideration, it will be seen how great were the foundations he had laid to future power. Upon these I do not think it superfluous to discourse, because I should not know what better precept to lay before a new prince than the example of his actions; and if success did not wait upon what dispositions he had made, that was through no fault of his own, but the result of an extraordinary and extreme malignity of fortune."

In its proper place shall be considered what else Macchiavelli had to say of Cesare Borgia and what to report of events that he witnessed connected with Cesare Borgia's career.

Meanwhile, the above summary of Macchiavelli's judgement is put forward as a justification for the writing of this book, which has for scope to present to you the Cesare Borgia who served as the model for *The Prince*.

Before doing so, however, there is the rise of the House of Borgia to be traced, and in the first two of the four books into which this history will be divided it is Alexander VI, rather than his son, who will hold the centre of the stage.

If the author has a mercy to crave of his critics, it is that they will not impute it to him that he has set out with the express aim of "whitewashing"—as the term goes—the family of Borgia. To whitewash is to overlay, to mask the original fabric under a superadded surface. Too much superadding has there been here already. By your leave, all shall be stripped away. The grime shall be removed and the foulness of inference, of surmise, of deliberate and cold-blooded malice, with which centuries of scribblers, idle, fantastic, sensational, or venal, have coated the substance of known facts.

But the grime shall be preserved and analysed side by side with the actual substance, that you may judge if out of zeal to remove the former any of the latter shall have been included in the scraping.

The author expresses his indebtedness to the following works which, amongst others, have been studied for the purposes of the present history:

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BOOK I. THE HOUSE OF THE BULL

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"Borgia stirps: BOS: atque Ceres transcendit Olympo, Cantabat
nomen saecula cuncta suum."

Michele Ferno

CHAPTER I. THE RISE OF THE HOUSE OF BORGIA

Although the House of Borgia, which gave to the Church of Rome two popes and at least one saint,(1) is to be traced back to the eleventh century, claiming as it does to have its source in the Kings of Aragon, we shall take up its history for our purposes with the birth at the city of Xativa, in the kingdom of Valencia, on December 30, 1378, of Alonso de Borja, the son of Don Juan Domingo de Borja and his wife Doña Francisca.

1 St. Francisco Borgia, S.J.—great-grandson of Pope Alexander VI, born at Gandia, in Spain, in 1510.

To this Don Alonso de Borja is due the rise of his family to its stupendous eminence. An able, upright, vigorous-minded man, he became a Professor and Doctor of Jurisprudence at the University of Lerida, and afterwards served Alfonso I of Aragon, King of Naples and the Two Sicilies, in the capacity of secretary. This office he filled with the distinction that was to be expected from one so peculiarly fitted for it by the character of the studies he had pursued.

He was made Bishop of Valencia, created Cardinal in 1444, and finally—in 1455—ascended the throne of St. Peter as Calixtus III, an old man, enfeebled in body, but with his extraordinary vigour of mind all unimpaired.

Calixtus proved himself as much a nepotist as many another Pope before and since. This needs not to be dilated upon here; suffice it that in February of 1456 he gave the scarlet hat of Cardinal-Deacon

of San Niccoló, in Carcere Tulliano, to his nephew Don Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja.

Born in 1431 at Xativa, the son of Juana de Borja (sister of Calixtus) and her husband Don Jofrè de Lanzol, Roderigo was in his twenty-fifth year at the time of his being raised to the purple, and in the following year he was further created Vice-Chancellor of Holy Church with an annual stipend of eight thousand florins. Like his uncle he had studied jurisprudence—at the University of Bologna—and mentally and physically he was extraordinarily endowed.

From the pen-portraits left of him by Gasparino of Verona, and Girolamo Porzio, we know him for a tall, handsome man with black eyes and full lips, elegant, courtly, joyous, and choicely eloquent, of such health and vigour and endurance that he was insensible to any fatigue. Giasone Maino of Milan refers to his "elegant appearance, serene brow, royal glance, a countenance that at once expresses generosity and majesty, and the genial and heroic air with which his whole personality is invested." To a similar description of him Gasparino adds that "all women upon whom he so much as casts his eyes he moves to love him; attracting them as the lodestone attracts iron;" which is, it must be admitted, a most undesirable reputation in a churchman.

A modern historian⁽¹⁾ who uses little restraint when writing of Roderigo Borgia says of him that "he was a man of neither much energy nor determined will," and further that "the firmness and energy wanting to his character were, however, often replaced by the constancy of his evil passions, by which he was almost blinded." How the constancy of evil passions can replace firmness and energy as factors of worldly success is not readily discernible, particularly if their possessor is blinded by them. The historical worth of the stricture may safely be left to be measured by its logical value. For the rest, to say that Roderigo Borgia was wanting in energy and in will is to say

something to which his whole career gives the loud and derisive lie, as will—to some extent at least—be seen in the course of this work.

1 Pasquale Villari in his *Machiavelli i suoi Tempi*

His honours as Cardinal-Deacon and Vice-Chancellor of the Holy See he owed to his uncle; but that he maintained and constantly improved his position—and he a foreigner, be it remembered—under the reigns of the four succeeding Popes—Pius II, Paul II, Sixtus IV, and Innocent VIII—until finally, six-and-twenty years after the death of Calixtus III, he ascended, himself, the Papal Throne, can be due only to the unconquerable energy and stupendous talents which have placed him where he stands in history—one of the greatest forces, for good or ill, that ever occupied St. Peter's Chair.

Say of him that he was ambitious, worldly, greedy of power, and a prey to carnal lusts. All these he was. But for very sanity's sake do not let it be said that he was wanting either in energy or in will, for he was energy and will incarnate.

Consider that with Calixtus III's assumption of the Tiara Rome became the Spaniard's happy hunting-ground, and that into the Eternal City streamed in their hundreds the Catalan adventurers—priests, clerks, captains of fortune, and others—who came to seek advancement at the hands of a Catalan Pope. This Spanish invasion Rome resented. She grew restive under it.

Roderigo's elder brother, Don Pedro Luis de Lanzol y Borja, was made Gonfalonier of the Church, Castellan of all pontifical fortresses and Governor of the Patrimony of St. Peter, with the title of Duke of Spoleto and, later, Prefect of Rome, to the displacement of an Orsini from that office. Calixtus invested this nephew with all temporal power that it was in the Church's privilege to bestow, to the end that he might use it as a basis to overset the petty tyrannies of Romagna, and to establish a feudal claim on the Kingdom of Naples.

Here already we see more than a hint of that Borgia ambition which was to become a byword, and the first attempt of this family to found a dynasty for itself and a State that should endure beyond the transient tenure of the Pontificate, an aim that was later to be carried into actual—if ephemeral—fulfilment by Cesare Borgia.

The Italians watched this growth of Spanish power with jealous, angry eyes. The mighty House of Orsini, angered by the supplanting of one of its members in the Prefecture of Rome, kept its resentment warm, and waited. When in August of 1458 Calixtus III lay dying, the Orsini seized the chance: they incited the city to ready insurrection, and with fire and sword they drove the Spaniards out.

Don Pedro Luis made haste to depart, contrived to avoid the Orsini, who had made him their special quarry, and getting a boat slipped down the Tiber to Civita Vecchia, where he died suddenly some six weeks later, thereby considerably increasing the wealth of Roderigo, his brother and his heir.

Roderigo's cousin, Don Luis Juan, Cardinal-Presbyter of Santi Quattro Coronati, another member of the family who owed his advancement to his uncle Calixtus, thought it also expedient to withdraw from that zone of danger to men of his nationality and name.

Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja alone remained—leastways, the only prominent member of his house—boldly to face the enmity of the majority of the Sacred College, which had looked with grim disfavour upon his uncle's nepotism. Unintimidated, he entered the Conclave for the election of a successor to Calixtus, and there the chance which so often prefers to bestow its favours upon him who knows how to profit by them, gave him the opportunity to establish himself as firmly as ever at the Vatican, and further to advance his interests.

It fell out that when the scrutiny was taken, two cardinals stood well

in votes—the brilliant, cultured Enea Silvio Bartolomeo de' Piccolomini, Cardinal of Siena, and the French Cardinal d'Estouteville—though neither had attained the minimum majority demanded. Of these two, the lead in number of votes lay with the Cardinal of Siena, and his election therefore might be completed by Accession—that is, by the voices of such cardinals as had not originally voted for him—until the minimum majority, which must exceed two-thirds, should be made up.

The Cardinal Vice-Chancellor Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja led this accession, with the result that the Cardinal of Siena became Pontiff—as Pius II—and was naturally enough disposed to advance the interests of the man who had been instrumental in helping him to that eminence. Thus, his position at the Vatican, in the very face of all hostility, became stronger and more prominent than ever.

A letter written two years later from the Baths at Petriolo by Pius II to Roderigo when the latter was in Siena—whither he had been sent by his Holiness to superintend the building of the Cathedral and the Episcopal and Piccolomini palaces—is frequently cited by way of establishing the young prelate's dissolute ways. It is a letter at once stern and affectionate, and it certainly leaves no doubt as to what manner of man was the Cardinal Vice-Chancellor in his private life, and to what manner of unecclesiastical pursuits he inclined. It is difficult to discover in it any grounds upon which an apologist may build.

"BELOVED SON,

"When four days ago, in the gardens of Giovanni de Bichis, were assembled several women of Siena addicted to worldly vanity, your worthiness, as we have learnt, little remembering the office which you fill, was entertained by them from the seventeenth to the twenty-second hour. For companion you had one of your colleagues, one whom his years if not the honour of the Holy See should have

reminded of his duty. From what we have heard, dancing was unrestrainedly indulged, and not one of love's attractions was absent, whilst your behaviour was no different from that which might have been looked for in any worldly youth. Touching what happened there, modesty imposes silence. Not only the circumstance itself, but the very name of it is unworthy in one of your rank. The husbands parents, brothers, and relations of these young women were excluded, in order that your amusements should be the more unbridled. You with a few servants undertook to direct and lead those dances. It is said that nothing is now talked of in Siena but your frivolity. Certain it is that here at the baths, where the concourse of ecclesiastics and laity is great, you are the topic of the day. Our displeasure is unutterable, since all this reflects dishonourably upon the sacerdotal estate and office. It will be said of us that we are enriched and promoted not to the end that we may lead blameless lives, but that we may procure the means to indulge our pleasures. Hence the contempt of us entertained by temporal princes and powers and the daily sarcasms of the laity. Hence also the reproof of our own mode of life when we attempt to reprove others. The very Vicar of Christ is involved in this contempt, since he appears to countenance such things. You, beloved son, have charge of the Bishopric of Valencia, the first of Spain; you are also Vice-Chancellor of the Church; and what renders your conduct still more blameworthy is that you are among the cardinals, with the Pope, one of the counsellors of the Holy See. We submit it to your own judgement whether it becomes your dignity to court young women, to send fruit and wine to her you love, and to have no thought for anything but pleasure. We are censured on your account; the blessed memory of your uncle Calixtus is vituperated, since in the judgement of many he was wrong to have conferred so many honours upon you. If you seek excuses in your youth, you are no longer so young that you cannot understand what duties are imposed upon you by your dignity. A cardinal should be irreproachable, a model of moral conduct to all.

And what just cause have we for resentment when temporal princes bestow upon us titles that are little honourable, dispute with us our possessions, and attempt to bend us to their will? In truth it is we who inflict these wounds upon ourselves, and it is we who occasion ourselves these troubles, undermining more and more each day by our deeds the authority of the Church. Our guerdon is shame in this world and condign punishment in the next. May your prudence therefore set a restraint upon these vanities and keep you mindful of your dignity, and prevent that you be known for a gallant among married and unmarried women. But should similar facts recur, we shall be compelled to signify that they have happened against our will and to our sorrow, and our censure must be attended by your shame. We have always loved you, and we have held you worthy of our favour as a man of upright and honest nature. Act therefore in such a manner that we may maintain such an opinion of you, and nothing can better conduce to this than that you should lead a well-ordered life. Your age, which is such as still to promise improvement, admits that we should admonish you paternally."

"PETRIOLO, June 11, 1460."

Such a letter is calculated to shock us in our modern notions of a churchman. To us this conduct on the part of a prelate is scandalous beyond words; that it was scandalous even then is obvious from the Pontiff's letter; but that it was scandalous in an infinitely lesser degree is no less obvious from the very fact that the Pontiff wrote that letter (and in such terms) instead of incontinently unfrocking the offender.

In considering Roderigo's conduct, you are to consider—as has been urged already—the age in which he lived. You are to remember that it was an age in which the passions and the emotions wore no such masks as they wear to-day, but went naked and knew no shame of their nudity; an age in which personal modesty was as little studied as hypocrisy, and in which men, wore their vices as openly as their

virtues.

No amount of simple statement can convey an adequate notion of the corrupt state of the clergy at the time. To form any just appreciation of this, it is necessary to take a peep at some of the documents that have survived—such a document, for instance, as that Bull of this Pope Pius II which forbade priests from plying the trades of keeping taverns, gaming-houses, and brothels.

Ponder also that under his successor, Sixtus IV, the tax levied upon the courtesans of Rome enriched the pontifical coffers to the extent of some 20,000 ducats yearly. Ponder further that when the vicar of the libidinous Innocent VIII published in 1490 an edict against the universal concubinage practised by the clergy, forbidding its continuation under pain of excommunication, all that it earned him was the severe censure of the Holy Father, who disagreed with the measure and who straightway repealed and cancelled the edict.⁽¹⁾

¹ See Burchard's *Diarium*, Thuasne Edition, Vol. II. p.442 et seq.

All this being considered, and man being admittedly a creature of his environment, can we still pretend to horror at this Roderigo and at the fact that being the man he was—prelate though he might be—handsome, brilliant, courted, in the full vigour of youth, and a voluptuary by nature, he should have succumbed to the temptations by which he was surrounded?

One factor only could have caused him to use more restraint—the good example of his peers. That example he most certainly had not.

Virtue is a comparative estate, when all is said; and before we can find that Roderigo was vile, that he deserves unqualified condemnation for his conduct, we must ascertain that he was more or less exceptional in his licence, that he was less scrupulous than his

fellows. Do we find that? To find the contrary we do not need to go beyond the matter which provoked that letter from the Pontiff. For we see that he was not even alone, as an ecclesiastic, in the adventure; that he had for associate on that amorous frolic one Giacompo Ammanati, Cardinal-Presbyter of San Crisogno, Roderigo's senior and an ordained priest, which—without seeking to make undue capital out of the circumstance—we may mention that Roderigo was not. He was a Cardinal-Deacon, be it remembered.(1) We know that the very Pontiff who admonished these young prelates, though now admittedly a man of saintly ways, had been a very pretty fellow himself in his lusty young days in Siena; we know that Roderigo's uncle—the Calixtus to whom Pius II refers in that letter as of "blessed memory"—had at least one acknowledged son.(2) We know that Piero and Girolamo Riario, though styled by Pope Sixtus IV his "nephews," were generally recognized to be his sons.(3) And we know that the numerous bastards of Innocent VIII—Roderigo's immediate precursor on the Pontifical Throne—were openly acknowledged by their father. We know, in short, that it was the universal custom of the clergy to forget its vows of celibacy, and to circumvent them by dispensing with the outward form and sacrament of marriage; and we have it on the word of Pius II himself, that "if there are good reasons for enjoining the celibacy of the clergy, there are better and stronger for enjoining them to marry."

1 He was not ordained priest until 1471, after the election of Sixtus IV.

2 Don Francisco de Borja, born at Valencia in 1441.

3 Macchiavelli, *Istorie Fiorentine*.

What more is there to say? If we must be scandalized, let us be scandalized by the times rather than by the man. Upon what reasonable grounds can we demand that he should be different from his fellows; and if we find him no different, what right or reason have

we for picking him out and rendering him the object of unparalleled obloquy?

If we are to deal justly with Roderigo Borgia, we must admit that, in so far as his concessions to his lusts are concerned, he was a typical churchman of his day; neither more nor less—as will presently grow abundantly clear.

It may be objected by some that had such been the case the Pope would not have written him such a letter as is here cited. But consider a moment the close relations existing between them. Roderigo was the nephew of the late Pope; in a great measure Pius II owed his election, as we have seen, to Roderigo's action in the Conclave. That his interest in him apart from that was paternal and affectionate is shown in every line of that letter. And consider further that Roderigo's companion is shown by that letter to be equally guilty in so far as the acts themselves are to be weighed, guilty in a greater degree when we remember his seniority and his actual priesthood. Yet to Cardinal Ammanati the Pope wrote no such admonition. Is not that sufficient proof that his admonition of Roderigo was dictated purely by his personal affection for him?

In this same year 1460 was born to Cardinal Roderigo a son—Don Pedro Luis de Borja—by a spinster (*mulier soluta*) unnamed. This son was publicly acknowledged and cared for by the cardinal.

Seven years later—in 1467—he became the father of a daughter—Girolama de Borja—by a spinster, whose name again does not transpire. Like Pedro Luis she too was openly acknowledged by Cardinal Roderigo. It was widely believed that this child's mother was Madonna Giovanna de' Catanei, who soon became quite openly the cardinal's mistress, and was maintained by him in such state as might have become a *maîtresse en titre*. But, as we shall see later, the fact of that maternity of Girolama is doubtful in the extreme. It was never established, and it is difficult to understand why not if it were the fact.

Meanwhile Paul II—Pietro Barbo, Cardinal of Venice—had succeeded Pius II in 1464, and in 1471 the latter was in his turn succeeded by the formidable Sixtus IV—Cardinal Francesco Maria della Rovere—a Franciscan of the lowest origin, who by his energy and talents had become general of his order and had afterwards been raised to the dignity of the purple.

It was Cardinal Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja who, in his official capacity of Archdeacon of Holy Church, performed the ceremony of coronation and placed the triple crown on the head of Pope Sixtus. It is probable that this was his last official act as Archdeacon, for in that same year 1471, at the age of forty, he was ordained priest and consecrated Bishop of Albano.

CHAPTER II. THE REIGNS OF SIXTUS IV AND INNOCENT VIII

The rule of Sixtus was as vigorous as it was scandalous. To say—as has been said—that with his succession to St. Peter's Chair came for the Church a still sadder time than that which had preceded it, is not altogether true. Politically, at least, Sixtus did much to strengthen the position of the Holy See and of the Pontificate. He was not long in giving the Roman factions a taste of his stern quality. If he employed unscrupulous means, he employed them against unscrupulous men—on the sound principle of *similia similibus curantur*—and to some extent they were justified by the ends in view.

He found the temporal throne of the Pontiffs tottering when he ascended it. Stefano Porcaro and his distinguished following already in 1453 had attempted the overthrow of the pontifical authority, inspired, no doubt, by the attacks that had been levelled against it by the erudite and daring Lorenzo Valla.

This Valla was the distinguished translator of Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides, who more than any one of his epoch advanced the movement of Greek and Latin learning, which, whilst it had the effect of arresting the development of Italian literature, enriched Europe by opening up to it the sources of ancient erudition, of philosophy, poetry, and literary taste. Towards the year 1435 he drifted to the court of Alfonso of Aragon, whose secretary he ultimately became. Some years later he attacked the Temporal Power and urged the secularization of the States of the Church. "*Ut Papa,*" he wrote, "*tantum Vicarius Christi sit, et non etiam Coesari.*" In his *De falso credita et ementita Constantini Donatione*, he showed that the

decretals of the Donation of Constantine, upon which rests the Pope's claim to the Pontifical States, was an impudent forgery, that Constantine had never had the power to give, nor had given, Rome to the Popes, and that they had no right to govern there. He backed up this terrible indictment by a round attack upon the clergy, its general corruption and its practices of simony; and as a result he fell into the hands of the Inquisition. There it might have gone very ill with him but that King Alfonso rescued him from the clutches of that dread priestly tribunal.

Meanwhile, he had fired his petard. If a pretext had been wanting to warrant the taking up of arms against the Papacy, that pretext Valla had afforded. Never was the temporal power of the Church in such danger, and ultimately it must inevitably have succumbed but for the coming of so strong and unscrupulous a man as Sixtus IV to stamp out the patrician factions that were heading the hostile movement.

His election, it is generally admitted, was simoniacal; and by simony he raised the funds necessary for his campaign to reestablish and support the papal authority. This simony of his, says Dr. Jacob Burckhardt, "grew to unheard-of proportions, and extended from the appointment of cardinals down to the sale of the smallest benefice."

Had he employed these means of raising funds for none but the purpose of putting down the assailants of the Pontificate, a measure of justification (political if not ecclesiastical) might be argued in his favour. Unfortunately, having discovered these ready sources of revenue, he continued to exploit them for purposes far less easy to condone.

As a nepotist Sixtus was almost unsurpassed in the history of the Papacy. Four of his nephews and their aggrandizement were the particular objects of his attentions, and two of these—as we have already said—Piero and Girolamo Riario, were universally recognized to be his sons.

Piero, who was a simple friar of twenty-six years of age at the time that his father became Pope, was given the Archbishopric of Florence, made Patriarch of Constantinople, and created Cardinal to the title of San Sisto, with a revenue of 60,000 crowns.

We have it on the word of Cardinal Ammanati(1)—the same gentleman who, with Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja made so scandalously merry in de Bichis' garden at Siena—that Cardinal Riario's luxury "exceeded all that had been displayed by our forefathers or that can even be imagined by our descendants"; and Macchiavelli tells us(2) that "although of very low origin and mean rearing, no sooner had he obtained the scarlet hat than he displayed a pride and ambition so vast that the Pontificate seemed too small for him, and he gave a feast in Rome which would have appeared extraordinary even for a king, the expense exceeding 20,000 florins."

1 In a letter to Francesco Gonzaga.

2 Istorie Florentine.

Knowing so much, it is not difficult to understand that in one year or less he should have dissipated 200,000 florins, and found himself in debt to the extent of a further 60,000.

In 1473, Sixtus being at the time all but at war with Florence, this Cardinal Riario visited Venice and Milan. In the latter State he was planning with Duke Galeazzo Maria that the latter should become King of Lombardy, and then assist him with money and troops to master Rome and ascend the Papal Throne—which, it appears, Sixtus was quite willing to yield to him—thus putting the Papacy on a hereditary basis like any other secular State.

It is as well, perhaps, that he should have died on his return to Rome in January of 1474—worn out by his excesses and debaucheries, say some; of poison administered by the Venetians,

say others—leaving a mass of debts, contracted in his transactions with the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, to be cleared up by the Vicar of Christ.

His brother Girolamo, meanwhile, had married Caterina Sforza, a natural daughter of Duke Galeazzo Maria. She brought him as her dowry the City of Imola, and in addition to this he received from his Holiness the City of Forlì, to which end the Ordelaffi were dispossessed of it. Here again we have a papal attempt to found a family dynasty, and an attempt that might have been carried further under circumstances more propitious and had not Death come to check their schemes.

The only one of the four "nephews" of Sixtus—and to this one was imputed no nearer kinship—who was destined to make any lasting mark in history was Giuliano della Rovere. He was raised by his uncle to the purple with the title of San Pietro in Vincoli, and thirty-two years later he was to become Pope (as Julius II). Of him we shall hear much in the course of this story.

Under the pontificate of Sixtus IV the position and influence of Cardinal Roderigo were greatly increased, for once again the Spanish Cardinal had made the most of his opportunities. As at the election of Pius II, so at the election of Sixtus IV it was Cardinal Roderigo who led the act of accession which gave the new Pope his tiara, and for this act Roderigo—in common with the Cardinals Orsini and Gonzaga who acceded with him—was richly rewarded and advanced, receiving as his immediate guerdon the wealthy Abbey of Subiaco.

At about this time, 1470, must have begun the relations between Cardinal Roderigo and Giovanna Catanei, or Vannozza Catanei, as she is styled in contemporary documents—Vannozza being a corruption or abbreviation of Giovannozza, an affectionate form of Giovanna.

Who she was, or whence she came, are facts that have never been ascertained. She is generally assumed to have been a Roman; but there are no obvious grounds for the assumption, her name, for instance, being common to many parts of Italy. And just as we have no sources of information upon her origin, neither have we any elements from which to paint her portrait. Gregorovius rests the probability that she was beautiful upon the known characteristics and fastidious tastes of the cardinal. Since it is unthinkable that such a man would have been captivated by an ugly woman or would have been held by a stupid one, it is fairly reasonable to conclude that she was beautiful and ready-witted.

All that we do know of her up to the time of her liaison with Cardinal Roderigo is that she was born on July 13, 1442, this fact being ascertainable by a simple calculation from the elements afforded by the inscription on her tomb in Santa Maria del Popolo:

Vix ann. LXXVI m. IV d. XII Obijt anno MDXVIII XXVI, Nov.

And again, just as we know nothing of her family origin, neither have we any evidence of what her circumstances were when she caught the magnetic eye of Cardinal Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja—or Borgia as by now his name, which had undergone italianization, was more generally spelled.

Infessura states in his diaries that Roderigo desiring later—as Pope Alexander VI—to create cardinal his son by her, Cesare Borgia, he caused false witness to be borne to the fact that Cesare was the legitimate son of one Domenico d'Arignano, to whom he, the Pope, had in fact married her. Guicciardini⁽¹⁾ makes the same statement, without, however, mentioning name of this d'Arignano.

¹ Istoria d'Italia.

Now, bastards were by canon law excluded from the purple, and it is probably upon this circumstance that both Infessura and Guicciardini have built the assumption that some such means as these had been adopted to circumvent the law, and—as so often happens in chronicles concerning the Borgias—the assumption is straightway stated as a fact. But there were other ways of circumventing awkward commandments, and, unfortunately for the accuracy of these statements of Infessura and Guicciardini, another way was taken in this instance. As early as 1480, Pope Sixtus IV had granted Cesare Borgia—in a Bull dated October 1(1)—dispensation from proving the legitimacy of his birth. This entirely removed the necessity for any such subsequent measures as those which are suggested by these chroniclers.

1 See the supplement to the Appendix of Thuasne's edition of Burchard's *Diarium*.

Moreover, had Cardinal Roderigo desired to fasten the paternity of Cesare on another, there was ready to his hand Vannozza's actual husband, Giorgio della Croce.⁽²⁾ When exactly this man became her husband is not to be ascertained. All that we know is that he was so in 1480, and that she was living with him in that year in a house in Piazza Pizzo di Merlo (now Piazza Sforza Cesarini) not far from the house on Banchi Vecchi which Cardinal Roderigo, as Vice-Chancellor, had converted into a palace for himself, and a palace so sumptuous as to excite the wonder of that magnificent age.

2 D'Arignano is as much a fiction as the rest of Infessura's story.

This Giorgio della Croce was a Milanese, under the protection of Cardinal Roderigo, who had obtained for him a post at the Vatican as apostolic secretary. According to some, he married him to Vannozza in order to afford her an official husband and thus cloak his own

relations with her. It is an assumption which you will hesitate to accept. If we know our Cardinal Roderigo at all, he was never the man to pursue his pleasures in a hole-and-corner fashion, nor one to bethink him of a cloak for his amusements. Had he but done so, scandalmongers would have had less to fasten upon in their work of playing havoc with his reputation. What is far more likely is that della Croce owed Cardinal Roderigo's protection and the appointment as apostolic secretary to his own complacency in the matter of his wife's relations with the splendid prelate. However we look at it, the figure cut in this story by della Croce is not heroic.

Between the years 1474 and 1476, Vannozza bore Roderigo two sons, Cesare Borgia (afterwards Cardinal of Valencia and Duke of Valentinois), the central figure of our story, and Giovanni Borgia (afterwards Duke of Gandia).

Lucrezia Borgia, we know from documentary evidence before us, was born on April 19, 1479.

But there is a mystery about the precise respective ages of Vannozza's two eldest sons, and we fear that at this time of day it has become impossible to establish beyond reasonable doubt which was the firstborn; and this in spite of the documents discovered by Gregorovius and his assertion that they remove all doubt and enable him definitely to assert that Giovanni was born in 1474 and Cesare in 1476.

Let us look at these documents. They are letters from ambassadors to their masters; probably correct, and the more credible since they happen to agree and corroborate one another; still, not so utterly and absolutely reliable as to suffice to remove the doubts engendered by the no less reliable documents whose evidence contradicts them.

The first letters quoted by Gregorovius are from the ambassador

Gianandrea Boccaccio to his master, the Duke of Ferrara, in 1493. In these he mentions Cesare Borgia as being sixteen to seventeen years of age at the time. But the very manner of writing—"sixteen to seventeen years"—is a common way of vaguely suggesting age rather than positively stating it. So we may pass that evidence over, as of secondary importance.

Next is a letter from Gerardo Saraceni to the Duke of Ferrara, dated October 26, 1501, and it is more valuable, claiming as it does to be the relation of something which his Holiness told the writer. It is in the post-scriptum that this ambassador says: "The Pope gave me to understand that the said Duchess [Lucrezia Borgia] will complete twenty-two years of age next April, and at that same time the Duke of Romagna will complete his twenty-sixth year." (1)

1 "Facendomi intendere the epsa Duchessa é di età di anni ventidui, li quali finiranno a questo Aprile; in el qual tempo anche lo Illmo. Duca di Romagna fornirá anni ventisei."

This certainly fixes the year of Cesare's birth as 1476; but we are to remember that Saraceni is speaking of something that the Pope had recently told him; exactly how recently does not transpire. An error would easily be possible in so far as the age of Cesare is concerned. In so far as the age of Lucrezia is concerned, an error is not only possible, but has actually been committed by Saraceni. At least the age given in his letter is wrong by one year, as we know by a legal document drawn up in February of 1491—Lucrezia's contract of marriage with Don Juan Cherubin de Centelles. (2)

2 A contract never executed.

According to this protocol in old Spanish, dated February 26, 1491, Lucrezia completed her twelfth year on April 19, 1491, (3) which

definitely and positively gives us the date of her birth as April 19, 1479.

3 "Item mes attenent que dita Dona Lucretia a XVIII de Abril prop. vinent entrarà in edat de dotze anys."

A quite extraordinary error is that made by Gregorovius when he says that Lucrezia Borgia was born on April 18, 1480, extraordinary considering that he made it apparently with this very protocol under his eyes, and cites it, in fact (Document IV in the Appendix to his Lucrezia Borgia) as his authority.

To return, however, to Cesare and Giovanni, there is yet another evidence quoted by Gregorovius in support of his contention that the latter was the elder and born in 1474; but it is of the same nature and of no more, nor less, value than those already mentioned.

Worthy of more consideration in view of their greater official and legal character are the Ossuna documents, given in the Supplement of the Appendix in Thuasne's edition of Burchard's Diary, namely:

(a) October 1, 1480.—A Bull from Sixtus IV, already mentioned, dispensing Cesare from proving his legitimacy. In this he is referred to as in his sixth year—"in sexto tuo aetatis anno."

This, assuming Boccaccio's letter to be correct in the matter of April being the month of Cesare's birth, fixes the year of his birth as 1475.

(b) August 16, 1482.—A Bull of Sixtus IV, appointing Roderigo Borgia administrator of Cesare's benefices. In this he is mentioned as being seven years of age (i.e., presumably in his eighth year), which again gives us his birth-year as 1475.

(c) September 12, 1484.—A Bull of Sixtus IV, appointing Cesare treasurer of the Church of Carthage. In this he is mentioned as in his

ninth year—"in nono tuo aetatis anno." This is at variance with the other two, and gives us 1476 as the year of his birth.

To these evidences, conflicting as they are, may be added Burchard's mention in his diary under date of September 12, 1491, that Cesare was then seventeen years of age. This would make him out to have been born in 1474.

Clearly the matter cannot definitely be settled upon such evidence as we have. All that we can positively assert is that he was born between the years 1474 and 1476, and we cannot, we think, do better for the purposes of this story than assume his birth-year to have been 1475.

We know that between those same years, or in one or the other of them, was born Giovanni Borgia; but just as the same confusion prevails with regard to his exact age, so is it impossible to determine with any finality whether he was Cesare's junior or senior.

The one document that appears to us to be the most important in this connection is that of the inscription on their mother's tomb. This runs:

FAUSTIAE CATHANAE, CESARE VALENTINAE, JOHANNAE CANDIAE, JUFFREDO SCYLATII, ET LUCRETIA FERRARIAE DUCIB. FILIIS NOBILI PROBITATE INSIGNI, RELIGIONE EXIMIA, ETC., ETC.

If Giovanni was, as is claimed, the eldest of her children, why does his name come second? If Cesare was her second son, why does his name take the first place on that inscription?

It has been urged that if Cesare was the elder of these two, he, and not Giovanni, would have succeeded to the Duchy of Gandia on the death of Pedro Luis—Cardinal Roderigo's eldest son, by an unknown mother. But that does not follow inevitably; for it is to be remembered

that Cesare was already destined for an ecclesiastical career, and it may well be that his father was reluctant to change his plans.

Meanwhile the turbulent reign of Sixtus IV went on, until his ambition to increase his dominions had the result of plunging the whole of Italy into war.

Lorenzo de'Medici had thwarted the Pope's purposes in Romagna, coming to the assistance of Città di Castello when this was attacked in the Pope's interest by the warlike Giuliano della Rovere. To avenge himself for this, and to remove a formidable obstacle to his family's advancement, the Pope inspired the Pazzi conspiracy against the lives of the famous masters of Florence. The conspiracy failed; for although Giuliano de'Medici fell stabbed to the heart—before Christ's altar, and at the very moment of the elevation of the Host—Lorenzo escaped with slight hurt, and, by the very risk to which he had been exposed, rallied the Florentines to him more closely than ever.

Open war was the only bolt remaining in the papal quiver, and open war he declared, preluding it by a Bull of Excommunication against the Florentines. Naples took sides with the Pope. Venice and Milan came to the support of Florence, whereupon Milan's attentions were diverted to her own affairs, Genoa being cunningly set in revolt against her.

In 1480 a peace was patched up; but it was short-lived. A few months later war flared out again from the Holy See, against Florence this time, and on the pretext of its having joined the Venetians against the Pope in the late war. A complication now arose, created by the Venetians, who seized the opportunity to forward their own ambitions and increase their territories on the mainland, and upon a pretext of the pettiest themselves declared war upon Ferrara. Genoa and some minor tyrannies were drawn into the quarrel on the one side, whilst on the other Florence, Naples, Mantua, Milan, and Bologna stood by Ferrara. Whilst the papal forces were holding in check the

Neapolitans who sought to pass north to aid Ferrara, whilst the Roman Campagna was being harassed by the Colonna, and Milan was engaged with Genoa, the Venetians invested Ferrara, forced her to starvation and to yielding-point. Thereupon the Pope, perceiving the trend of affairs, and that the only likely profit to be derived from the campaign would lie with Venice, suddenly changed sides that he might avoid a contingency so far removed from all his aims.

He made a treaty with Naples, and permitted the Neapolitan army passage through his territories, of which they availed themselves to convey supplies to Ferrara and neutralize the siege. At the same time the Pope excommunicated the Venetians, and urged all Italy to make war upon them.

In this fashion the campaign dragged on to every one's disadvantage and without any decisive battle fought, until at last the peace of Bagnolo was concluded in August of 1484, and the opposing armies withdrew from Ferrara.

The news of it literally killed Sixtus. When the ambassadors declared to him the terms of the treaty he was thrown into a violent rage, and declared the peace to be at once shameful and humiliating. The gout from which he suffered flew to his heart, and on the following day—August 12, 1484—he died.

Two things he did during his reign to the material advantage of the Church, however much he may have neglected the spiritual. He strengthened her hold upon her temporal possessions and he enriched the Vatican by the addition of the Sistine Chapel. For the decoration of this he procured the best Tuscan talent of his day—and of many days—and brought Alessandro Filipeppi (Botticelli), Pietro Vannuccio (Il Perugino), and Domenico Bigordi (Il Ghirlandajo) from Florence to adorn its walls with their frescoes.(1)

1 The glory of the Sistine Chapel, however, is Michelangelo's "Last

Judgement," which was added later, in the reign of Pope Julius II (Giuliano della Rovere).

In the last years of the reign of Pope Sixtus, Cardinal Roderigo's family had suffered a loss and undergone an increase.

In 1481 Vannozza bore him another son—Giuffredo Borgia, and in the following year died his eldest son (by an unknown mother) Pedro Luis de Borgia, who had reached the age of twenty-two and was betrothed at the time of his decease to the Princess Maria d'Aragona.

In January of that same year, 1482, Cardinal Roderigo had married his daughter Girolama—now aged fifteen—to Giovanni Andrea Cesarini, the scion of a patrician Roman house. The alliance strengthened the bonds of good feeling which for some considerable time had prevailed between the two families. Unfortunately the young couple were not destined to many years of life together, as in 1483 both died.

Of Cesare all that we know at this period is what we learn from the Papal Bulls conferring several benefices upon him. In July 1482 he was granted the revenues from the prebendals and canonries of Valencia; in the following month he was appointed Canon of Valencia and apostolic notary. In April 1484 he was made Provost of Alba, and in September of the same year treasurer of the Church of Carthage. No doubt he was living with his mother, his brothers, and his sister at the house in the Piazza Pizzo di Merlo, where an ample if not magnificent establishment was maintained.

By this time Cardinal Roderigo's wealth and power had grown to stupendous proportions, and he lived in a splendour well worthy of his lofty rank. He was now fifty-three years of age, still retaining the air and vigour of a man in his very prime, which, no doubt, he owed as much as to anything to his abstemious and singularly sparing table-habits. He derived a stupendous income from his numerous abbeys

in Italy and Spain, his three bishoprics of Valencia, Porto, and Carthage, and his ecclesiastical offices, among which the Vice-Chancellorship alone yielded him annually eight thousand florins.(1)

1 The gold florin, ducat, or crown was equal to ten shillings of our present money, and had a purchasing power of five times that amount.

Volterra refers with wonder to the abundance of his plate, to his pearls, his gold embroideries, and his books, the splendid equipment of his beds, the trappings of his horses, and other similar furnishings in gold, in silver, and in silk. In short, he was the wealthiest prince of the Church of his day, and he lived with a magnificence worthy of a king or of the Pope himself.

Of the actual man, Volterra, writing in 1586, says: "He is of a spirit capable of anything, and of a great intelligence. A ready speaker, and of distinction, notwithstanding his indifferent literary culture; naturally astute, and of marvellous talent in the conduct of affairs."

In the year in which Volterra wrote of Cardinal Roderigo in such terms Vannozza was left a widow by the death of Giorgio della Croce. Her widowhood was short, however, for in the same year—on June 6—she took a second husband, possibly at the instance of Roderigo Borgia, who did not wish to leave her unprotected; that, at least, is the general inference, although there is very little evidence upon which to base it. This second husband was Carlo Canale, a Mantovese scholar who had served Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga in the capacity of chamberlain, and who had come to Rome on the death of his patron.

The marriage contract shows that by this time Vannozza had removed her residence to Piazza Branchis. In addition to this she had by this time acquired a villa with its beautiful gardens and vineyards in the Suburra near S. Pietro in Vincoli. She is also known to have been the proprietor of an inn—the Albergo del Leone—in Via del Orso,

opposite the Torre di Nona, for she figures with della Croce in a contract regarding a lease of it in 1483.

With her entrance into second nuptials, her relations with Cardinal Roderigo came to an end, and his two children by her, then in Rome—Lucrezia and Giuffredo—went to take up their residence with Adriana Orsini (née de Mila) at the Orsini Palace on Monte Giordano. She was a cousin of Roderigo's, and the widow of Lodovico Orsini, by whom she had a son, Orso Orsini, who from early youth had been betrothed to Giulia Farnese, the daughter of a patrician family, still comparatively obscure, but destined through this very girl to rise to conspicuous eminence.

For her surpassing beauty this Giulia Farnese has been surnamed La Bella—and as Giulia La Bella was she known in her day—and she has been immortalized by Pinturicchio and Guglielmo della Porta. She sat to the former as a model for his Madonna in the Borgia Tower of the Vatican, and to the latter for the statue of Truth which adorns the tomb of her brother Alessandro Farnese, who became Pope Paul III.

Here in Adriana Orsini's house, where his daughter Lucrezia was being educated, Cardinal Roderigo, now at the mature age of some six-and-fifty years, made the acquaintance and became enamoured of this beautiful golden-headed Giulia, some forty years his junior. To the fact that she presently became his mistress—somewhere about the same time that she became Orso Orsini's wife—is due the sudden rise of the House of Farnese. This began with her handsome, dissolute brother Alessandro's elevation to the purple by her lover, and grew to vast proportions during his subsequent and eminently scandalous occupation of the Papal Throne as Paul III.

In the year 1490 Lucrezia was the only one of Roderigo's children by Vannozza who remained in Rome.

Giovanni Borgia was in Spain, whither he had gone on the death of his brother Pedro Luis, to take possession of the Duchy of Gandia, which the power of his father's wealth and vast influence at the Valencian Court had obtained for that same Pedro Luis. To this Giovanni now succeeded.

Cesare Borgia—now aged fifteen—had for some two years been studying his humanities in an atmosphere of Latinity at the Sapienza of Perugia. There, if we are to believe the praises of him uttered by Pompilio, he was already revealing his unusual talents and a precocious wit. In the preface of the *Syllabica* on the art of Prosody dedicated to him by Pompilio, the latter hails him as the hope and ornament of the House of Borgia—"Borgiae familiae spes et decus."

From Perugia he was moved in 1491 to the famous University of Pisa, a college frequented by the best of Italy. For preceptor he had Giovanni Vera of Arcilla, a Spanish gentleman who was later created a cardinal by Cesare's father. There in Pisa Cesare maintained an establishment of a magnificence in keeping with his father's rank and with the example set him by that same father.

It was Cardinal Roderigo's wish that Cesare should follow an ecclesiastical career; and the studies of canon law which he pursued under Filippo Decis, the most rated lecturer on canon law of his day, were such as peculiarly to fit him for that end and for the highest honours the Church might have to bestow upon him later. At the age of seventeen, while still at Pisa, he was appointed prothonotary of the Church and preconized Bishop of Pampeluna.

Sixtus IV died, as we have seen, in August 1482. The death of a Pope was almost invariably the signal for disturbances in Rome, and they certainly were not wanting on this occasion. The Riario palaces were stormed and looted, and Girolamo Riario—the Pope's "nepot"—threw himself into the castle of Sant' Angelo with his forces.

The Orsini and Colonna were in arms, "so that in a few days incendiarism, robbery, and murder raged in several parts of the city. The cardinals besought the Count to surrender the castle to the Sacred College, withdraw his troops, and deliver Rome from the fear of his forces; and he, that he might win the favour of the future Pope, obeyed, and withdrew to Imola."(1)

1 Macchiavelli, *Istorie Fiorentine*.

The cardinals, having thus contrived to restore some semblance of order, proceeded to the creation of a new Pontiff, and a Genoese, Giovanni Battista Cibo, Cardinal of Malfetta, was elected and took the name of Innocent VIII.

Again, as in the case of Sixtus, there is no lack of those who charge this Pontiff with having obtained his election by simony. The Cardinals Giovanni d' Aragona (brother to the King of Naples) and Ascanio Sforza (brother of Lodovico, Duke of Milan) are said to have disposed of their votes in the most open and shameless manner, practically putting them up for sale to the highest bidder. Italy rang with the scandal of it, we are told.

Under Innocent's lethargic rule the Church again began to lose much of the vigour with which Sixtus had inspired it. If the reign of Sixtus had been scandalous, infinitely worse was that of Innocent—a sordid, grasping sensualist, without even the one redeeming virtue of strength that had been his predecessor's. Nepotism had characterized many previous pontificates; open paternity was to characterize his, for he was the first Pope who, in flagrant violation of canon law, acknowledged his children for his own. He proceeded to provide for some seven bastards, and that provision appears to have been the only aim and scope of his pontificate.

Not content with raising money by the sale of preferments, Innocent established a traffic in indulgences, the like of which had never been

seen before. In the Rome of his day you might, had you the money, buy anything, from a cardinal's hat to a pardon for the murder of your father.

The most conspicuous of his bastards was Francesco Cibo—conspicuous chiefly for the cupidity which distinguished him as it distinguished the Pope his father. For the rest he was a poor-spirited fellow who sorely disappointed Lorenzo de'Medici, whose daughter Maddalena he received in marriage. Lorenzo had believed that, backed by the Pope's influence, Francesco would establish for himself a dynasty in Romagna. But father and son were alike too invertebrate—the one to inspire, the other to execute any such designs as had already been attempted by the nepots of Calixtus III and Sixtus IV.

Under the weak and scandalous rule of Innocent VIII Rome appears to have been abandoned to the most utter lawlessness. Anarchy, robbery, and murder preyed upon the city. No morning dawned without revealing corpses in the streets; and if by chance the murderer was caught, there was pardon for him if he could afford to buy it, or Tor di Nona and the hangman's noose if he could not.

It is not wonderful that when at last Innocent VIII died Infessura should have blessed the day that freed the world of such a monster.

But his death did not happen until 1492. A feeble old man, he had become subject to lethargic or cataleptic trances, which had several times already deceived those in attendance into believing him dead. He grew weaker and weaker, and it became impossible to nourish him upon anything but woman's milk. Towards the end came, Infessura tells us, a Hebrew physician who claimed to have a prescription by which he could save the Pope's life. For his infusion⁽¹⁾ he needed young human blood, and to obtain it he took three boys of the age of ten, and gave them a ducat apiece for as much as he might require of them. Unfortunately he took so much that the three

boys incontinently died of his phlebotomy, and the Hebrew was obliged to take to flight to save his own life, for the Pope, being informed of what had taken place, execrated the deed and ordered the physician's arrest. "Judeus quidem aufugit, et Papa sanatus not est," concludes Infessura.

1 The silly interpretation of this afforded by later writers, that this physician attempted transfusion of blood—silly, because unthinkable in an age which knew nothing of the circulation of the blood—has already been exploded.

Innocent VIII breathed his last on July 25, 1492.

CHAPTER III. ALEXANDER VI

The ceremonies connected with the obsequies of Pope Innocent VIII lasted—as prescribed—nine days; they were concluded on August 5, 1492, and, says Infessura naïvely, "*sic finita fuit eius memoria.*"

The Sacred College consisted at the time of twenty-seven cardinals, four of whom were absent at distant sees and unable to reach Rome in time for the immuring of the Conclave. The twenty-three present were, in the order of their seniority: Roderigo Borgia, Oliviero Caraffa, Giuliano della Rovere, Battista Zeno, Giovanni Michieli, Giorgio Costa, Girolamo della Rovere, Paolo Fregosi, Domenico della Rovere, Giovanni dei Conti, Giovanni Giacomo Sclafetani, Lorenzo Cibo, Ardicino della Porta, Antoniotto Pallavicino, Maffeo Gerardo, Francesco Piccolomini, Raffaele Riario, Giovanni Battista Savelli, Giovanni Colonna, Giovanni Orsini, Ascanio Maria Sforza, Giovanni de'Medici, and Francesco Sanseverino.

On August 6 they assembled in St. Peter's to hear the Sacred Mass of the Holy Ghost, which was said by Giuliano della Rovere on the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles, and to listen to the discourse "*Pro eligendo Pontefice*," delivered by the learned and eloquent Bishop of Carthage. Thereafter the Cardinals swore upon the Gospels faithfully to observe their trust, and thereupon the Conclave was immured.

According to the dispatches of Valori, the Ferrarese ambassador in Rome, it was expected that either the Cardinal of Naples (Oliviero Caraffa) or the Cardinal of Lisbon (Giorgio Costa) would be elected to the Pontificate; and according to the dispatch of Cavalieri the

ambassador of Modena, the King of France had deposited 200,000 ducats with a Roman banker to forward the election of Giuliano della Rovere. Nevertheless, early on the morning of August 11 it was announced that Roderigo Borgia was elected Pope, and we have it on the word of Valori that the election was unanimous, for he wrote on the morrow to the Council of Eight (the Signory of Florence) that after long contention Alexander VI was created "omnium consensus—ne li manco un solo voto."

The subject of this election is one with which we rarely find an author dealing temperately or with a proper and sane restraint. To vituperate in superlatives seems common to most who have taken in hand this and other episodes in the history of the Borgias. Every fresh writer who comes to the task appears to be mainly inspired by a desire to emulate his forerunners, allowing his pen to riot zestfully in the accumulation of scandalous matter, and seeking to increase if possible its lurid quality by a degree or two. As a rule there is not even an attempt made to put forward evidence in substantiation of anything that is alleged. Wild and sweeping statement takes the place that should be held by calm deduction and reasoned comment.

"He was the worst Pontiff that ever filled St. Peter's Chair," is one of these sweeping statements, culled from the pages of an able, modern, Italian author, whose writings, sound in all that concerns other matters, are strewn with the most foolish extravagances and flagrant inaccuracies in connection with Alexander VI and his family.

To say of him, as that writer says, that "he was the worst Pontiff that ever filled St. Peter's Chair," can only be justified by an utter ignorance of papal history. You have but to compare him calmly and honestly—your mind stripped of preconceptions—with the wretched and wholly contemptible Innocent VIII whom he succeeded, or with the latter's precursor, the terrible Sixtus IV.

That he was better than these men, morally or ecclesiastically, is

not to be pretended; that he was worse—measuring achievement by opportunity—is strenuously to be denied. For the rest, that he was infinitely more gifted and infinitely more a man of affairs is not to be gainsaid by any impartial critic.

If we take him out of the background of history in which he is set, and judge him singly and individually, we behold a man who, as a churchman and Christ's Vicar, fills us with horror and loathing, as a scandalous exception from what we are justified in supposing from his office must have been the rule. Therefore, that he may be judged by the standard of his own time if he is to be judged at all, if we are even to attempt to understand him, have we given a sketch of the careers of those Popes who immediately preceded him, with whom as Vice-Chancellor he was intimately associated, and whose examples were the only papal examples that he possessed.

That this should justify his course we do not pretend. A good churchman in his place would have bethought him of his duty to the Master whose Vicar he was, and would have aimed at the sorely needed reform. But we are not concerned to study him as a good churchman. It is by no means clear that we are concerned to study him as a churchman at all. The Papacy had by this time become far less of an ecclesiastical than a political force; the weapons of the Church were there, but they were being employed for the furtherance not of churchly, but of worldly aims. If the Pontiffs in the pages of this history remembered or evoked their spiritual authority, it was but to employ it as an instrument for the advancement of their temporal schemes. And personal considerations entered largely into these.

Self-aggrandizement, insufferable in a cleric, is an ambition not altogether unpardonable in a temporal prince; and if Alexander aimed at self-aggrandizement and at the founding of a permanent dynasty for his family, he did not lack examples in the careers of those among his predecessors with whom he had been associated.

That the Papacy was Christ's Vicarage was a fact that had long since been obscured by the conception that the Papacy was a kingdom of this world. In striving, then, for worldly eminence by every means in his power, Alexander is no more blameworthy than any other. What, then, remains? The fact that he succeeded better than any of his forerunners. But are we on that account to select him for the special object of our vituperation? The Papacy had tumbled into a slough of materialism in which it was to wallow even after the Reformation had given it pause and warning. Under what obligation was Alexander VI, more than any other Pope, to pull it out of that slough? As he found it, so he carried it on, as much a self-seeker, as much a worldly prince, as much a family man and as little a churchman as any of those who had gone immediately before him.

By the outrageous discrepancy between the Papacy's professed and actual aims it was fast becoming an object of execration, and it is Alexander's misfortune that, coming when he did, he has remained as the type of his class.

The mighty of this world shall never want for detractors. The mean and insignificant, writhing under the consciousness of his shortcomings, ministers to his self-love by vilifying the great that he may lessen the gap between himself and them. To achieve greatness is to achieve enemies. It is to excite envy; and as envy no seed can raise up such a crop of hatred.

Does this need labouring? Have we not abundant instances about us of the vulgar tittle-tattle and scandalous unfounded gossip which, born Heaven alone knows on what back-stairs or in what servants' hall, circulates currently to the detriment of the distinguished in every walk of life? And the more conspicuously great the individual, the greater the incentive to slander him, for the interest of the slander is commensurate with the eminence of the personage assailed.

Such to a great extent is the case of Alexander VI. He was too

powerful for the stomachs of many of his contemporaries, and he and his son Cesare had a way of achieving their ends. Since that could not be denied, it remained to inveigh loudly against the means adopted; and with pious uplifting of hands and eyes, to cry, "Shame!" and "Horror!" and "The like has never been heard of!" in wilful blindness to what had been happening at the Vatican for generations.

Later writers take up the tale of it. It is a fine subject about which to make phrases, and the passion for phrase-making will at times outweigh the respect for truth. Thus Villari with his "the worst Pontiff that ever filled St. Peter's Chair," and again, elsewhere, echoing what many a writer has said before him from Guicciardini downwards, in utter and diametric opposition to the true facts of the case: "The announcement of his election was received throughout Italy with universal dismay." To this he adds the ubiquitous story of King Ferrante's bursting into tears at the news—"though never before known to weep for the death of his own children."

Let us pause a moment to contemplate the grief the Neapolitan King. What picture is evoked in your minds by that statement of his bursting into tears at Alexander's election? We see—do we not?—a pious, noble soul, horror-stricken at the sight of the Papacy's corruption; a truly sublime figure, whose tears will surely stand to his credit in heaven; a great heart breaking; a venerable head bowed down with lofty, righteous grief, weeping over the grave of Christian hopes. Such surely is the image we are meant to see by Guicciardini and his many hollow echoers.

Turn we now for corroboration of that noble picture to the history of this same Ferrante. A shock awaits us. We find, in this bastard of the great and brilliant Alfonso a cruel, greedy, covetous monster, so treacherous and so fiendishly brutal that we are compelled to extend him the charity of supposing him to be something less than sane. Let us consider but one of his characteristics. He loved to have his

enemies under his own supervision, and he kept them so—the living ones caged and guarded, the dead ones embalmed and habited as in life; and this collection of mummies was his pride and delight. More, and worse could we tell you of him. But—ex pede, Herculem.

This man shed tears we are told. Not another word. It is left to our imagination to paint for us a picture of this weeping; it is left to us to conclude that these precious tears were symbolical of the grief of Italy herself; that the catastrophe that provoked them must have been terrible indeed.

But now that we know what manner of man was this who wept, see how different is the inference that we may draw from his sorrow. Can we still imagine it—as we are desired to do—to have sprung from a lofty, Christian piety? Let us track those tears to their very source, and we shall find it to be compounded of rage and fear.

Ferrante saw trouble ahead of him with Lodovico Sforza, concerning a matter which shall be considered in the next chapter, and not at all would it suit him at such a time that such a Pope as Alexander—who, he had every reason to suppose, would be on the side of Lodovico—should rule in Rome.

So he had set himself, by every means in his power, to oppose Roderigo's election. His rage at the news that all his efforts had been vain, his fear of a man of Roderigo's mettle, and his undoubted dread of the consequences to himself of his frustrated opposition of that man's election, may indeed have loosened the tears of this Ferrante who had not even wept at the death of his own children. We say "may" advisedly; for the matter, from beginning to end, is one of speculation. If we leave it for the realm of fact, we have to ask—Were there any tears at all? Upon what authority rests the statement of the Florentine historian? What, in fact, does he say?

"It is well known that the King of Naples, for all that in public he

dissembled the pain it caused him, signified to the queen, his wife, with tears—which were Unusual in him even on the death of his children—that a Pope had been created who would be most pernicious to Italy."

So that, when all is said, Ferrante shed his kingly tears to his wife in private, and to her in private he delivered his opinion of the new Pontiff. How, then, came Guicciardini to know of the matter? True, he says, "It is well known"—meaning that he had those tears upon hearsay. It is, of course, possible that Ferrante's queen may have repeated what passed between herself and the king; but that would surely have been in contravention of the wishes of her husband, who had, be it remembered, "dissembled his grief in public." And Ferrante does not impress one as the sort of husband whose wishes his wife would be bold enough to contravene.

It is surprising that upon no better authority than this should these precious tears of Ferrante's have been crystallized in history.

If this trivial instance has been dealt with at such length it is because, for one reason, it is typical of the foundation of so many of the Borgia legends, and, for another, because when history has been carefully sifted for evidence of the "universal dismay with which the election of Roderigo Borgia was received" King Ferrante's is the only case of dismay that comes through the mesh at all. Therefore was it expedient to examine it minutely.

That "universal dismay"—like the tears of Ferrante—rests upon the word of Guicciardini. He says that "men were filled with dread and horror by this election, because it had been effected by such evil ways [*con arte si brutte*]; and no less because the nature and condition of the person elected were largely known to many."

Guicciardini is to be read with the greatest caution and reserve when he deals with Rome. His bias against, and his enmity of, the

Papacy are as obvious as they are notorious, and in his endeavours to bring it as much as possible into discredit he does not even spare his generous patrons, the Medicean Popes—Leo X and Clement VII. If he finds it impossible to restrain his invective against these Pontiffs, who heaped favours and honours upon him, what but virulence can be expected of him when he writes of Alexander VI? He is largely to blame for the flagrant exaggeration of many of the charges brought against the Borgias; that he hated them we know, and that when he wrote of them he dipped his golden Tuscan pen in vitriol and set down what he desired the world to believe rather than what contemporary documents would have revealed to him, we can prove here and now from that one statement of his which we have quoted.

Who were the men who were filled with dismay, horror, or dread at Roderigo's election?

The Milanese? No. For we know that Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, the Duke of Milan's brother, was the most active worker in favour of Roderigo's election, and that this same election was received and celebrated in Milan with public rejoicings.

The Florentines? No. For the Medici were friendly to the House of Borgia, and we know that they welcomed the election, and that from Florence Manfredi—the Ferrarese ambassador—wrote home: "It is said he will be a glorious Pontiff" ("*Dicesi che sarà glorioso Pontefice*").

Were Venice, Genoa, Mantua, Siena, or Lucca dismayed by this election? Surely not, if the superlatively laudatory congratulations of their various ambassadors are of any account.

Venice confessed that "a better pastor could not have been found for the Church," since he had proved himself "a chief full of experience and an excellent cardinal."

Genoa said that "his merit lay not in having been elected, but in having been desired."

Mantua declared that it "had long awaited the pontificate of one who, during forty years, had rendered himself, by his wisdom and justice, capable of any office."

Siena expressed its joy at seeing the summit of eminence attained by a Pope solely upon his merits—"Pervenuto alla dignità pontificale meramente per meriti proprii."

Lucca praised the excellent choice made, and extolled the accomplishments, the wisdom, and experience of the Pontiff.

Not dismay, then, but actual rejoicing must have been almost universal in Italy on the election of Pope Alexander VI. And very properly—always considering the Pontificate as the temporal State it was then being accounted; for Roderigo's influence was vast, his intelligence was renowned, and had again and again been proved, and his administrative talents and capacity for affairs were known to all. He was well-born, cultured, of a fine and noble presence, and his wealth was colossal, comprising the archbishoprics of Valencia and Porto, the bishoprics of Majorca, Carthage, Agrigento, the abbeys of Subiaco, the Monastery of Our Lady of Bellefontaine, the deaconry of Sancta Maria in Via Lata, and his offices of Vice-Chancellor and Dean of Holy Church.

We are told that he gained his election by simony. It is very probable that he did. But the accusation has never been categorically established, and until that happens it would be well to moderate the vituperation hurled at him. Charges of that simony are common; conclusive proof there is none. We find Giacomo Trotti, the French ambassador in Milan, writing to the Duke of Ferrara a fortnight after Roderigo's election that "the Papacy has been sold by simony and a thousand rascalities, which is a thing ignominious and detestable."

Ignominious and detestable indeed, if true; but be it remembered that Trotti was the ambassador of France, whose candidate, backed by French influence and French gold, as we have seen, was della Rovere; and, even if his statement was true, the "ignominious and detestable thing" was at least no novelty. Yet Guicciardini, treating of this matter, says: "He gained the Pontificate owing to discord between the Cardinals Ascanio Sforza and Giuliano di San Pietro in Vincoli; and still more because, in a manner without precedent in that age [*con esempio nuovo in quella età*] he openly bought the votes of many cardinals, some with money, some with promises of his offices and benefices, which were very great."

Again Guicciardini betrays his bias by attempting to render Roderigo's course, assuming it for the moment to be truly represented, peculiarly odious by this assertion that it was without precedent in that age.

Without precedent! What of the accusations of simony against Innocent VIII, which rest upon a much sounder basis than these against Alexander, and what of those against Sixtus IV? Further, if a simoniacal election was unprecedented, what of Lorenzo Valla's fierce indictment of simony—for which he so narrowly escaped the clutches of the Inquisition some sixty years before this date?

Simony was rampant at the time, and it is the rankest hypocrisy to make this outcry against Alexander's uses of it, and to forget the others.

Whether he really was elected by simony or not depends largely—so far as the evidence available goes—upon what we are to consider as simony. If payment in the literal sense was made or promised, then unquestionably simony there was. But this, though often asserted, still awaits proof. If the conferring of the benefices vacated by a cardinal on his elevation to the Pontificate is to be considered simony, then there never was a Pope vet against whom the charge could not be

levelled and established.

Consider that by his election to the Pontificate his Archbishoprics, offices, nay, his very house itself—which at the time of which we write it was customary to abandon to pillage—are vacated; and remember that, as Pope, they are now in his gift and that they must of necessity be bestowed upon somebody. In a time in which Pontiffs are imbued with a spiritual sense of their office and duties, they will naturally make such bestowals upon those whom they consider best fitted to use them for the greater honour and glory of God. But we are dealing with no such spiritual golden age as that when we deal with the Cinquecento, as we have already seen; and, therefore, all that we can expect of a Pope is that he should bestow the preferment he has vacated upon those among the cardinals whom he believes to be devoted to himself. Considering his election in a temporal sense, it is natural that he should behave as any other temporal prince; that he should remember those to whom he owes the Pontificate, and that he should reward them suitably. Alexander VI certainly pursued such a course, and the greatest profit from his election was derived by the Cardinal Sforza who—as Roderigo himself admitted—had certainly exerted all his influence with the Sacred College to gain him the Pontificate. Alexander gave him the vacated Vice-Chancellorship (for which, when all is said, Ascanio Sforza was excellently fitted), his vacated palace on Banchi Vecchi, the town of Nepi, and the bishopric of Agri.

To Orsini he gave the Church of Carthage and the legation of Marche; to Colonna the Abbey of Subiaco; to Savelli the legation of Perugia (from which he afterwards recalled him, not finding him suited to so difficult a charge); to Raffaele Riario went Spanish benefices worth four thousand ducats yearly; to Sanseverino Roderigo's house in Milan, whilst he consented that Sanseverino's nephew—known as Fracassa—should enter the service of the Church with a condotta of a hundred men-at-arms and a stipend of thirteen thousand ducats

yearly.

Guicciardini says of all this that Ascanio Sforza induced many of the cardinals "to that abominable contract, and not only by request and persuasion, but by example; because, corrupt and of an insatiable appetite for riches, he bargained for himself, as the reward of so much turpitude, the Vice-Chancellorships, churches, fortresses [the very plurals betray the frenzy of exaggeration dictated by his malice] and his [Roderigo's] palace in Rome full of furniture of great value."

What possible proof can Guicciardini have—what possible proof can there be—of such a "bargain"? It rests upon purest assumption formed after those properties had changed hands—Ascanio being rewarded by them for his valuable services, and, also—so far as the Vice-Chancellorship was concerned—being suitably preferred. To say that Ascanio received them in consequence of a "bargain" and as the price of his vote and electioneering services is not only an easy thing to say, but it is the obvious thing for any one to say who aims at defaming.

It is surprising that we should find in Guicciardini no mention of the four mule-loads of silver removed before the election from Cardinal Roderigo's palace on Banchi Vecchi to Cardinal Ascanio's palace in Trastevere. This is generally alleged to have been part of the price of Ascanio's services. Whether it was so, or whether, as has also been urged, it was merely removed to save it from the pillaging by the mob of the palace of the cardinal elected to the Pontificate, the fact is interesting as indicating in either case Cardinal Roderigo's assurance of his election.

M. Yriarte does not hesitate to say: "We know to-day, by the dispatches of Valori, the narrative of Girolamo Porzio, and the *Diarium* of Burchard, the Master of Ceremonies, each of the stipulations made with the electors whose votes were bought."

Now whilst we do know from Valori and Porzio what benefices Alexander actually conferred, we do not know, nor could they possibly have told us, what stipulations had been made which these benefices were insinuated to satisfy.

Burchard's *Diarium* might be of more authority on this subject, for Burchard was the Master of Ceremonies at the Vatican; but, unfortunately for the accuracy of M. Yriarte's statement, Burchard is silent on the subject, for the excellent reason that there is no diary for the period under consideration. Burchard's narrative is interrupted on the death of Innocent VIII, on July 12, and not resumed until December 2, when it is not retrospective.

There is, it is true, the *Diarium of Infessura*. But that is of no more authority on such a matter than the narrative of Porzio or the letters of Valori.

Lord Acton—in his essay upon this subject—has not been content to rest the imputation of simony upon such grounds as satisfied M. Yriarte. He has realized that the only testimony of any real value in such a case would be the actual evidence of such cardinals as might be willing to bear witness to the attempt to bribe them. And he takes it for granted—as who would not at this time of day, and in view of such positive statements as abound?—that such evidence has been duly collected; thus, he tells us confidently that the charge rests upon the evidence of those cardinals who refused Roderigo's bribes.

That it most certainly does not. If it did there would be an end to the matter, and so much ink would not have been spilled over it; but no single cardinal has left any such evidence as Lord Acton supposes and alleges. It suffices to consider that, according to the only evidences available—the *Casanatense Codices*(1) and the dispatches of that same Valori(2) whom M. Yriarte so confidently cites, Roderigo Borgia's election was unanimous. Who, then, were

these cardinals who refused his bribes? Or are we to suppose that, notwithstanding that refusal—a refusal which we may justifiably suppose to have been a scandalized and righteously indignant one—they still afforded him their votes?

1 "...essendo concordi tutti i cardinali, quasi da contrari voti rivolti tutti in favore di uno solo, crearono lui sommo pontefice" (Casanatense MSS). See P. Leonetti, *Alessandro VI*. 2 "Fu pubblicato il Cardinale Vice-Cancelliere in Sommo Pontefice Alessandro VI(to) nuncupato, el quale dopo una lunga contentione fu creato omnium consensus—ne ii manco un solo voto" (Valori's letter to the Otto di Pratica, August 12, 1492). See Supplement to Appendix in E. Thuasne's edition of Burchard's *Diarium*.

This charge of simony was levelled with the object of making Alexander VI appear singularly heinous. So much has that object engrossed and blinded those inspired by it, that, of itself, it betrays them. Had their horror been honest, had it sprung from true principles, had it been born of any but a desire to befoul and bespatter at all costs Roderigo Borgia, it is not against him that they would have hurled their denunciations, but against the whole College of Cardinals which took part in the sacrilege and which included three future Popes.(1)

1 Cardinals Piccolomini, de'Medici, and Giuliano della Rovere.

Assuming not only that there was simony, but that it was on as wholesale a scale as was alleged, and that for gold—coined or in the form of benefices—Roderigo bought the cardinal's votes, what then? He bought them, true. But they—they sold him their sacred trust, their duty to their God, their priestly honour, their holy vows. For the gold he offered them they bartered these. So much admitted, then surely, in that transaction, those cardinals were the prostitutes! The man who

bought so much of them, at least, was on no baser level than were they. Yet invective singles him out for its one object, and so betrays the aforethought malice of its inspiration.

Our quarrel is with that; with that, and with those writers who have taken Alexander's simony for granted—eagerly almost—for the purpose of heaping odium upon him by making him appear a scandalous exception to the prevailing rule.

If, nevertheless, we hold, as we have said, that simony probably did take place, we do so, not so much upon the inconclusive evidence of the fact, as upon the circumstance that it had become almost an established custom to purchase the tiara, and that Roderigo Borgia—since his ambition clearly urged him to the Pontificate—would have been an exception had he refrained.

It may seem that to have disputed so long to conclude by admitting so much is no better than a waste of labour. Not so, we hope. Our aim has been to correct the adjustment of the focus and properly to trim the light in which Roderigo Borgia is to be viewed, to the end that you may see him as he was—neither better nor worse—the creature of his times, of his environment, and of the system in which he was reared and trained. Thus shall you also get a clearer view of his son Cesare, when presently he takes the stage more prominently.

During the seventeen days of the interregnum between the death of Innocent and the election of Alexander the wild scenes usual to such seasons had been taking place in Rome; and, notwithstanding the Cardinal-Chamberlain's prompt action in seizing the gates and bridges, and the patrols' endeavours to maintain order, crime was unfettered to such an extent that some 220 murders are computed to have taken place—giving the terrible average of thirteen a day.

It was a very natural epilogue to the lax rule of the lethargic Innocent. One of the first acts of Alexander's reign was to deal summarily with

this lawlessness. He put down violence with a hard hand that knew no mercy. He razed to the ground the house of a murderer caught red-handed, and hanged him above the ruins, and so dealt generally that such order came to prevail as had never before been known in Rome.

Infessura tells us how, in the very month of his election, he appointed inspectors of prisons and four commissioners to administer justice, and that he himself gave audience on Tuesdays and settled disputes, concluding, "*et justitiam mirabili modo facere coepit.*"

He paid all salaries promptly—a striking departure, it would seem, from what had been usual under his predecessor—and the effect of his improved and strenuous legislation was shortly seen in the diminished prices of commodities.

He was crowned Pope on August 6, on the steps of the Basilica of St. Peter, by the Cardinal-Archdeacon Piccolomini. The ceremony was celebrated with a splendour worthy of the splendid figure that was its centre. Through the eyes of Michele Ferno—despite his admission that he is unable to convey a worthy notion of the spectacle—you may see the gorgeous procession to the Lateran in which Alexander VI showed himself to the applauding Romans; the multitude of richly adorned men, gay and festive; the seven hundred priests and prelates, with their familiars the splendid cavalcade of knights and nobles of Rome; the archers and Turkish horsemen, and the Palatine Guard, with its great halberds and flashing shields; the twelve white horses, with their golden bridles, led by footmen; and then Alexander himself on a snow-white horse, "serene of brow and of majestic dignity," his hand uplifted—the Fisherman's Ring upon its forefinger—to bless the kneeling populace. The chronicler flings into superlatives when he comes to praise the personal beauty of the man, his physical vigour and health, "which go to increase the veneration shown him."

Thus in the brilliant sunshine of that Italian August, amid the plaudits of assembled Rome, amid banners and flowers, music and incense, the flash of steel and the blaze of decorations with the Borgian arms everywhere displayed—or, a grazing steer gules—Alexander VI passes to the Vatican, the aim and summit of his vast ambition.

Friends and enemies alike have sung the splendours of that coronation, and the Bull device—as you can imagine—plays a considerable part in those verses, be they paeans or lampoons. The former allude to Borgia as "the Bull," from the majesty and might of the animal that was displayed upon their shield; the latter render it the subject of much scurrilous invective, to which it lends itself as readily. And thereafter, in almost all verse of their epoch, writers ever say "the Bull" when they mean the Borgia.

CHAPTER IV. BORGIA ALLIANCES

At the time of his father's election to the throne of St. Peter, Cesare Borgia—now in his eighteenth year—was still at the University of Pisa.

It is a little odd, considering the great affection for his children which was ever one of Roderigo's most conspicuous characteristics, that he should not have ordered Cesare to Rome at once, to share in the general rejoicings. It has been suggested that Alexander wished to avoid giving scandal by the presence of his children at such a time. But that again looks like a judgement formed upon modern standards, for by the standards of his day one cannot conceive that he would have given very much scandal; moreover, it is to be remembered that Lucrezia and Giuffredo, at least, were in Rome at the time of their father's election to the tiara.

However that may be, Cesare did not quit Pisa until August of that year 1492, and even then not for Rome, but for Spoleto—in accordance with his father's orders—where he took up his residence in the castle. Thence he wrote a letter to Piero de'Medici, which is interesting, firstly, as showing the good relations prevailing between them; secondly, as refuting a story in Guicciardini, wherewith that historian, ready, as ever, to belittle the Borgias, attempts to show him cutting a poor figure. He tells us⁽¹⁾ that, whilst at Pisa, Cesare had occasion to make an appeal to Piero de'Medici in the matter of a criminal case connected with one of his familiars; that he went to Florence and waited several hours in vain for an audience, whereafter he returned to Pisa "accounting himself despised and not a little

injured."

1 Istoria d'Italia, tom. V.

No doubt Guicciardini is as mistaken in this as in many another matter, for the letter written from Spoleto expresses his regret that, on the occasion of his passage through Florence (on his way from Pisa to Spoleto), he should not have had time to visit Piero, particularly as there was a matter upon which he desired urgently to consult with him. He recommends to Piero his faithful Remolino, whose ambition it is to occupy the chair of canon law at the University of Pisa, and begs his good offices in that connection. That Juan Vera, Cesare's preceptor and the bearer of that letter, took back a favourable answer is highly probable, for in Fabroni's *Hist. Acad. Pisan* we find this Remolino duly established as a lecturer on canon law in the following year.

The letter is further of interest as showing Cesare's full consciousness of the importance of his position; its tone and its signature—"your brother, Cesar de Borgia, Elect of Valencia"—being such as were usual between princes.

The two chief aims of Alexander VI, from the very beginning of his pontificate, were to re-establish the power of the Church, which was then the most despised of the temporal States of Italy, and to promote the fortune of his children. Already on the very day of his coronation he conferred upon Cesare the bishopric of Valencia, whose revenues amounted to an annual yield of sixteen thousand ducats. For the time being, however, he had his hands very full of other matters, and it behoved him to move slowly at first and with the extremest caution.

The clouds of war were lowering heavily over Italy when Alexander came to St. Peter's throne, and it was his first concern to find for himself a safe position against the coming of the threatening storm. The chief menace to the general peace was Lodovico Maria Sforza, surnamed *Il Moro*,⁽¹⁾ who sat as regent for his nephew, Duke Gian

Galeazzo, upon the throne of Milan. That regency he had usurped from Gian Galeazzo's mother, and he was now in a fair way to usurp the throne itself. He kept his nephew virtually a prisoner in the Castle of Pavia, together with his young bride, Isabella of Aragon, who had been sent thither by her father, the Duke of Calabria, heir to the crown of Naples.

1 Touching Lodovico Maria's by-name of "Il Moro"—which is generally translated as "The Moor," whilst in one writer we have found him mentioned as "Black Lodovico," Benedetto Varchi's explanation (in his *Storia Fiorentina*) may be of interest. He tells us that Lodovico was not so called on account of any swarthiness of complexion, as is supposed by Guicciardini, because, on the contrary, he was fair; nor yet on account of his device, showing a Moorish squire, who, brush in hand, dusts the gown of a young woman in regal apparel, with the motto, "Per Italia nettare d'ogni bruttura"; this device of the Moor, he tells us, was a rébus or pun upon the word "moro," which also means the mulberry, and was so meant by Lodovico. The mulberry burgeons at the end of winter and blossoms very early. Thus Lodovico symbolized his own prudence and readiness to seize opportunity betimes.

Gian Galeazzo thus bestowed, Lodovico Maria went calmly about the business of governing, like one who did not mean to relinquish the regency save to become duke. But it happened that a boy was born to the young prisoners at Pavia, whereupon, spurred perhaps into activity by this parenthood and stimulated by the thought that they had now a son's interests to fight for as well as their own, they made appeal to King Ferrante of Naples that he should enforce his grandson-in-law's rights to the throne of Milan. King Ferrante could desire nothing better, for if his grandchild and her husband reigned in Milan, and by his favour and contriving, great should be his influence

in the North of Italy. Therefore he stood their friend.

Matters were at this stage when Alexander VI ascended the papal throne.

This election gave Ferrante pause, for, as we have seen, he had schemed for a Pope devoted to his interests, who would stand by him in the coming strife, and his schemes were rudely shaken now. Whilst he was still cogitating the matter of his next move, the wretched Francesco Cibo (Pope Innocent's son) offered to sell the papal fiefs of Cervetri and Anguillara, which had been made over to him by his father, to Gentile Orsini—the head of his powerful house. And Gentile purchased them under a contract signed at the palace of Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, on September 3, for the sum of forty thousand ducats advanced him by Ferrante.

Alexander protested strongly against this illegal transaction, for Cervetri and Anguillara were fiefs of the Church, and neither had Cibo the right to sell nor Orsini the right to buy them. Moreover, that they should be in the hands of a powerful vassal of Naples such as Orsini suited the Pope as little as it suited Lodovico Maria Sforza. It stirred the latter into taking measures against the move he feared Ferrante might make to enforce Gian Galeazzo's claims.

Lodovico Maria went about this with that sly shrewdness so characteristic of him, so well symbolized by his mulberry badge—a humorous shrewdness almost, which makes him one of the most delightful rogues in history, just as he was one of the most debonair and cultured. He may indeed be considered as one of the types of the subtle, crafty, selfish politician that was the ideal of Macchiavelli.

You see him, then, effacing the tight-lipped, cunning smile from his comely face and pointing out to Venice with a grave, sober countenance how little it can suit her to have the Neapolitan Spaniards ruffling it in the north, as must happen if Ferrante has his

way with Milan. The truth of this was so obvious that Venice made haste to enter into a league with him, and into the camp thus formed came, for their own sakes, Mantua, Ferrara, and Siena. The league was powerful enough thus to cause Ferrante to think twice before he took up the cudgels for Gian Galeazzo. If Lodovico could include the Pope, the league's might would be so paralysing that Ferrante would cease to think at all about his grandchildren's affairs.

Foreseeing this, Ferrante had perforce to dry the tears Guicciardini has it that he shed, and, replacing them by a smile, servile and obsequious, repaired, hat in hand, to protest his friendship for the Pope's Holiness.

And so, in December of 1492, came the Prince of Altamura—Ferrante's second son—to Rome to lay his father's homage at the feet of the Pontiff, and at the same time to implore his Holiness to refuse the King of Hungary the dispensation the latter was asking of the Holy See, to enable him to repudiate his wife, Donna Leonora—Ferrante's daughter.

Altamura was received in Rome and sumptuously entertained by the Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere. This cardinal had failed, as we have seen, to gain the Pontificate for himself, despite the French influence by which he had been supported. Writhing under his defeat, and hating the man who had defeated him with a hatred so bitter and venomous that the imprint of it is on almost every act of his life—from the facilities he afforded for the assignment to Orsini of the papal fiefs that Cibo had to sell—he was already scheming for the overthrow of Alexander. To this end he needed great and powerful friends; to this end had he lent himself to the Cibo-Orsini transaction; to this end did he manifest himself the warm well-wisher of Ferrante; to this end did he cordially welcome the latter's son and envoy, and promise his support to Ferrante's petition.

But the Holy Father was by no means as anxious for the friendship

of the old wolf of Naples. The matter of the King of Hungary was one that required consideration, and, meanwhile, he may have hinted slyly there was between Naples and Rome a little matter of two fiefs to be adjusted.

Thus his most shrewd Holiness thought to gain a little time, and in that time he might look about him and consider what alliances would suit his interests best.

At this Cardinal della Rovere, in high dudgeon, flung out of Rome and away to his Castle of Ostia to fortify—to wield the sword of St. Paul, since he had missed the keys of St. Peter. It was a shrewd move. He foresaw the injured dignity of the Spanish House of Naples, and Ferrante's wrath at the Pope's light treatment of him and apathy for his interests; and the cardinal knew that with Ferrante were allied the mighty houses of Colonna and Orsini. Thus, by his political divorcement from the Holy See, he flung in his lot with theirs, hoping for red war and the deposition of Alexander.

But surely he forgot Milan and Lodovico Maria, whose brother, Ascanio Sforza, was at the Pope's elbow, the energetic friend to whose efforts Alexander owed the tiara, and who was therefore hated by della Rovere perhaps as bitterly as Alexander himself.

Alexander went calmly about the business of fortifying the Vatican and the Castle of Sant' Angelo, and gathering mercenaries into his service. And, lest any attempt should be made upon his life when he went abroad, he did so with an imposing escort of men-at-arms; which so vexed and fretted King Ferrante, that he did not omit to comment upon it in scathing terms in a letter that presently we shall consider. For the rest, the Pope's Holiness preserved an unruffled front in the face of the hostile preparations that were toward in the kingdom of Naples, knowing that he could check them when he chose to lift his finger and beckon the Sforza into alliance. And presently Naples heard an alarming rumour that Lodovico Maria had, in fact,

made overtures to the Pope, and that the Pope had met these advances to the extent of betrothing his daughter Lucrezia to Giovanni Sforza, Lord of Pesaro and cousin to Lodovico.

So back to the Vatican went the Neapolitan envoys with definite proposals of an alliance to be cemented by a marriage between Giuffredo Borgia—aged twelve—and Ferrante's granddaughter Lucrezia of Aragon. The Pope, with his plans but half-matured as yet, temporized, was evasive, and continued to arm and to recruit. At last, his arrangements completed, he abruptly broke off his negotiations with Naples, and on April 25, 1493, publicly proclaimed that he had joined the northern league.

The fury of Ferrante, who realized that he had been played with and outwitted, was expressed in a rabid letter to his ambassador at the Court of Spain.

"This Pope," he wrote, "leads a life that is the abomination of all, without respect for the seat he occupies. He cares for nothing save to aggrandize his children, by fair means or foul, and this is his sole desire. From the beginning of his Pontificate he has done nothing but disturb the peace, molesting everybody, now in one way, now in another. Rome is more full of soldiers than of priests, and when he goes abroad it is with troops of men-at-arms about him, with helmets on their heads and lances by their sides, all his thoughts being given to war and to our hurt; nor does he overlook anything that can be used against us, not only inciting in France the Prince of Salerno and other of our rebels, but befriending every bad character in Italy whom he deems our enemy; and in all things he proceeds with the fraud and dissimulation natural to him, and to make money he sells even the smallest office and preferment."

Thus Ferrante of the man whose friendship he had been seeking some six weeks earlier, and who had rejected his advances. It is as well to know the precise conditions under which that letter was

indited, for extracts from it are too often quoted against Alexander. These conditions known, and known the man who wrote it, the letter's proper value is at once apparent.

It was Ferrante's hope, and no doubt the hope of Giuliano della Rovere, that the King of Spain would lend an ear to these grievances, and move in the matter of attempting to depose Alexander; but an event more important than any other in the whole history of Spain—or of Europe, for that matter—was at the moment claiming its full attention, and the trifling affairs of the King of Naples—trifling by comparison—went all unheeded. For this was the year in which the Genoese navigator, Cristoforo Colombo, returned to tell of the new and marvellous world he had discovered beyond the seas, and Ferdinand and Isabella were addressing an appeal to the Pope—as Ruler of the World—to establish them in the possession of the discovered continent. Whereupon the Pope drew a line from pole to pole, and granted to Spain the dominion over all lands discovered, or to be discovered, one hundred miles westward of Cape Verde and the Azores.

And thus Ferrante's appeal to Spain against a Pope who showed himself so ready and complaisant a friend to Spain went unheeded by Ferdinand and Isabella. And what time the Neapolitan nursed his bitter chagrin, the alliance between Rome and Milan was consolidated by the marriage of Lucrezia Borgia to Giovanni Sforza, the comely weakling who was Lord of Pesaro and Cotignola.

Lucrezia Borgia's story has been told elsewhere; her rehabilitation has been undertaken by a great historian⁽¹⁾ among others, and all serious-minded students must be satisfied at this time of day that the Lucrezia Borgia of Hugo's tragedy is a creature of fiction, bearing little or no resemblance to the poor lady who was a pawn in the ambitious game played by her father and her brother Cesare, before she withdrew to Ferrara, where eventually she died in child-birth in her

forty-first year. We know that she left the duke, her husband, stricken with a grief that was shared by his subjects, to whom she had so deeply endeared herself by her exemplary life and loving rule.(2)

1 Ferdinand Gregorovius, *Lucrezia Borgia*.

2 See, *inter alia*, the letters of Alfonso d'Este and Giovanni Gonzaga on her death, quoted in Gregorovius, *Lucrezia Borgia*.

Later, in the course of this narrative, where she crosses the story of her brother Cesare, it will be necessary to deal with some of the revolting calumnies concerning her that were circulated, and, in passing, shall be revealed the sources of the malice that inspired them and the nature of the evidence upon which they rest, to the eternal shame alike of those pretended writers of fact and those avowed writers of fiction who, as dead to scruples as to chivalry, have not hesitated to make her serve their base melodramatic or pornographic ends.

At present, however, there is no more than her first marriage to be recorded. She was fourteen years of age at the time, and, like all the Borgias, of a rare personal beauty, with blue eyes and golden hair. Twice before, already, had she entered into betrothal contracts with gentlemen of her father's native Spain; but his ever-soaring ambition had caused him successively to cancel both those unfulfilled contracts. A husband worthy of the daughter of Cardinal Roderigo Borgia was no longer worthy of the daughter of Pope Alexander VI, for whom an alliance must now be sought among Italy's princely houses. And so she came to be bestowed upon the Lord of Pesaro, with a dowry of 30,000 ducats.

Her nuptials were celebrated in the Vatican on June 12, 1493, in the splendid manner worthy of the rank of all concerned and of the reputation for magnificence which the Borgia had acquired. That night the Pope gave a supper-party, at which were present some ten

cardinals and a number of ladies and gentlemen of Rome, besides the ambassadors of Ferrara, Venice, Milan, and France. There was vocal and instrumental music, a comedy was performed, the ladies danced, and they appear to have carried their gaieties well into the dawn. Hardly the sort of scene for which the Vatican was the ideal stage. Yet at the time it should have given little or no scandal. But what a scandal was there not, shortly afterwards, in connection with it, and how that scandal was heaped up later, by stories so revolting of the doings of that night that one is appalled at the minds that conceived them and the credulity that accepted them.

Infessura writes of what he heard, and he writes venomously, as he betrays by the bitter sarcasm with which he refers to the fifty silver cups filled with sweetmeats which the Pope tossed into the laps of ladies present at the earlier part of the celebration. "He did it," says Infessura, "to the greater honour and glory of Almighty God and the Church of Rome." Beyond that he ventures into no great detail, checking himself betimes, however, with a suggested motive for reticence a thousand times worse than any formal accusation. Thus: "Much else is said, of which I do not write, because either it is not true, or, if true, incredible." (1)

1 "Et multa alia dicta sunt; que hic non scribo, que aut non sunt; vel si sunt, incredibilia" (Infessura, *Diarium*).

It is amazing that the veil which Infessura drew with those words should have been pierced—not indeed by the cold light of fact, but by the hot eye of prurient imagination; amazing that he should be quoted at all—he who was not present—considering that we have the testimony of what did take place from the pen of an eye-witness, in a letter from Gianandrea Boccaccio, the ambassador of Ferrara, to his master.

At the end of his letter, which describes the proceedings and the

wedding-gifts and their presentation, he tells us how the night was spent. "Afterwards the ladies danced, and, as an interlude, a worthy comedy was performed, with much music and singing, the Pope and all the rest of us being present throughout. What else shall I add? It would make a long letter. The whole night was spent in this manner; let your lordship decide whether well or ill."

Is not that sufficient to stop the foul mouth of inventive slander? What need to suggest happenings unspeakable? Yet it is the fashion to quote the last sentence above from Boccaccio's letter in the original—"totam noctem consumpsimus; judicet modo Ex(ma.) Dominatio vestra si bene o male"—as though decency forbade its translation; and at once this poisonous reticence does its work, and the imagination—and not only that of the unlettered—is fired, and all manner of abominations are speculatively conceived.

Infessura, being absent, says that the comedies performed were licentious ("lascive"). But what comedies of that age were not? It was an age which had not yet invented modesty, as we understand it. That Boccaccio, who was present, saw nothing unusual in the comedy—there was only one, according to him—is proved by his description of it as "worthy" ("una degna commedia.")

M. Yriarte on this same subject⁽¹⁾ is not only petty, but grotesque. He chooses to relate the incident from the point of view of Infessura, whom, by the way, he translates with an amazing freedom,⁽²⁾ and he makes bold to add regarding Gianandrea Boccaccio that: "It must also be said that the ambassador of Ferrara, either because he did not see everything, or because he was less austere than Infessura, was not shocked by the comedies, etc." ("soit qu'il n'ait pas tout vu, soit qu'il ait été moins austère qu'Infessura, n'est pas choqué....")

1 La Vie de César Borgia.

2 Thus in the matter of the fifty silver cups tossed by the Pope into

the ladies' laps, "sinum" is the word employed by Infessura—a word which has too loosely been given its general translation of "bosom," ignoring that it equally means "lap" and that "lap" it obviously means

in this instance. M. Yriarte, however, goes a step further, and prefers

to translate it as "corsage," which at once, and unpleasantly, falsifies

the picture; and he adds matter to dot the I's to an extent certainly

not warranted even by Infessura.

M. Yriarte, you observe, does not scruple to opine that Boccaccio, who was present, did not see everything; but he has no doubt that Infessura, who was not present, and who wrote from "hearsay," missed nothing.

Alas! Too much of the history of the Borgias has been written in this spirit, and the discrimination in the selection of authorities has ever been with a view to obtaining the more sensational rather than the more truthful narrative.

Although it is known that Cesare came to Rome in the early part of 1493—for his presence there is reported by Gianandrea Boccaccio in March of that year—there is no mention of him at this time in connection with his sister's wedding. Apparently, then, he was not present, although it is impossible to suggest where he might have been at the time.

Boccaccio draws a picture of him in that letter, which is worthy of attention, "On the day before yesterday I found Cesare at home in Trastevere. He was on the point of setting out to go hunting, and entirely in secular habit; that is to say, dressed in silk and armed. Riding together, we talked a while. I am among his most intimate acquaintances. He is man of great talent and of an excellent nature;

his manners are those of the son of a great prince; above everything, he is joyous and light-hearted. He is very modest, much superior to, and of a much finer appearance than, his brother the Duke of Gandia, who also is not short of natural gifts. The archbishop never had any inclination for the priesthood. But his benefice yields him over 16,000 ducats."

It may not be amiss—though perhaps no longer very necessary, after what has been written—to say a word at this stage on the social position of bastards in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to emphasize the fact that no stigma attached to Cesare Borgia or to any other member of his father's family on the score of the illegitimacy of their birth.

It is sufficient to consider the marriages they contracted to perceive that, however shocking the circumstances may appear to modern notions, the circumstance of their father being a Pope not only cannot have been accounted extraordinarily scandalous (if scandalous at all) but, on the contrary, rendered them eligible for alliances even princely.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we see the bastard born of a noble, as noble as his father, displaying his father's arms without debruisement and enjoying his rank and inheritance unchallenged on the score of his birth, even though that inheritance should be a throne—as witness Lucrezia's husband Giovanni, who, though a bastard of the house of Sforza, succeeded, nevertheless, his father in the Tyranny of Pesaro and Cotignola.

Later we shall see this same Lucrezia, her illegitimacy notwithstanding, married into the noble House of Este and seated upon the throne of Ferrara. And before then we shall have seen the bastard Cesare married to a daughter of the royal House of Navarre. Already we have seen the bastard Francesco Cibo take to wife the daughter of the great Lorenzo de'Medici, and we have seen the bastard Girolamo Riario married to Caterina Sforza—a natural

daughter of the ducal House of Milan—and we have seen the pair installed in the Tyranny of Imola and Forlì. A score of other instances might be added; but these should suffice.

The matter calls for the making of no philosophies, craves no explaining, and, above all, needs no apology. It clears itself. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—more just than our own more enlightened times—attributed no shame to the men and women born out of wedlock, saw no reason—as no reason is there, Christian or Pagan—why they should suffer for a condition that was none of their contriving.

To mention it may be of help in visualizing and understanding that direct and forceful epoch, and may even suggest some lenience in considering a Pope's carnal paternity. To those to whom the point of view of the Renaissance does not promptly suggest itself from this plain statement of fact, all unargued as we leave it, we recommend a perusal of Gianpietro de Crescenzi's *Il Nobile Romano*.

The marriage of Lucrezia Borgia to Giovanni Sforza tightened the relations between the Pope and Milan, as the Pope intended. Meanwhile, however, the crafty and mistrustful Lodovico, having no illusions as to the true values of his allies, and realizing them to be self-seekers like himself, with interests that were fundamentally different from his own, perceived that they were likely only to adhere to him for just so long as it suited their own ends. He bethought him, therefore, of looking about him for other means by which to crush the power of Naples. France was casting longing eyes upon Italy, and it seemed to Lodovico that in France was a ready catspaw. Charles VIII, as the representative of the House of Anjou, had a certain meagre claim upon the throne of Naples; if he could be induced to ride south, lance on thigh, and press that claim there would be an end to the dominion of the House of Aragon, and so an end to Lodovico's fears of a Neapolitan interference with his own occupation of the

throne of Milan.

To an ordinary schemer that should have been enough; but as a schemer Lodovico was wholly extraordinary. His plans grew in the maturing, and took in side-issues, until he saw that Naples should be to Charles VIII as the cheese within the mouse-trap. Let his advent into Italy to break the power of Naples be free and open; but, once within, he should find Milan and the northern allies between himself and his retreat, and Lodovico's should it be to bring him to his knees. Thus schemed Lodovico to shiver, first Naples and then France, before hurling the latter back across the Alps. A daring, bold, and yet simple plan of action. And what a power in Italy should not Lodovico derive from its success!

Forthwith he got secretly to work upon it, sending his invitation to Charles to come and make good his claim to Naples, offering the French troops free passage through his territory.⁽¹⁾ And in the character of his invitation he played upon the nature of malformed, ambitious Charles, whose brain was stuffed with romance and chivalric rhodomontades. The conquest of Naples was an easy affair, no more than a step in the glorious enterprise that awaited the French king, for from Naples he could cross to engage the Turk, and win back the Holy Sepulchre, thus becoming a second Charles the Great.

¹ See Corlo, *Storia di Milano*, and Lodovico's letter to Charles VIII, quoted therein, lib. vii.

Thus Lodovico Maria the crafty, to dazzle Charles the romantic, and to take the bull of impending invasion by the very horns.

We have seen the failure of the appeal to Spain against the Pope made by the King of Naples. To that failure was now added the tightening of Rome's relations with Milan by the marriage between Lucrezia Borgia and Giovanni Sforza, and Ferrante—rumours of a

French invasion, with Naples for its objective being already in the air—realized that nothing remained him but to make another attempt to conciliate the Pope's Holiness. And this time he went about his negotiations in a manner better calculated to serve his ends, since his need was grown more urgent. He sent the Prince of Altamura again to Rome for the ostensible purpose of settling the vexatious matter of Cervetri and Anguillara and making alliance with the Holy Father, whilst behind Altamura was the Neapolitan army ready to move upon Rome should the envoy fail this time.

But on the terms now put forward, Alexander was willing to negotiate, and so a peace was patched up between Naples and the Holy See, the conditions of which were that Orsini should retain the fiefs for his lifetime, but that they should revert to Holy Church on his death, and that he should pay the Church for the life-lease of them the sum of 40,000 ducats, which already he had paid to Francesco Cibo; that the peace should be consolidated by the marriage of the Pope's bastard, Giuffredo, with Sancia of Aragon, the natural daughter of the Duke of Calabria, heir to the throne of Naples, and that she should bring the Principality of Squillace and the County of Coriate as her dowry.

The other condition demanded by Naples—at the suggestion of Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere—was that the Pope should disgrace and dismiss his Vice-Chancellor, Ascanio Sforza, which would have shattered the pontifical relations with Milan. To this, however, the Pope would not agree, but he met Naples in the matter to the extent of consenting to overlook Cardinal della Rovere's defection and receive him back into favour.

On these terms the peace was at last concluded in August of 1493, and immediately afterwards there arrived in Rome the Sieur Peron de Basche, an envoy from the King of France charged with the mission to prevent any alliance between Rome and Naples.

The Frenchman was behind the fair. The Pope took the only course possible under the awkward circumstances, and refused to see the ambasssador. Thereupon the offended King of France held a grand council "in which were proposed and treated many things against the Pope and for the reform of the Church."

These royal outbursts of Christianity, these pious kingly frenzies to unseat an unworthy Pontiff and reform the Church, follow always, you will observe, upon the miscarriage of royal wishes.

In the Consistory of September 1493 the Pope created twelve new cardinals to strengthen the Sacred College in general and his own hand in particular.

Amongst these new creations were the Pope's son Cesare, and Alessandro Farnese, the brother of the beautiful Giulia. The grant of the red hat to the latter appears to have caused some scandal, for, owing to the Pope's relations with his sister, to which it was openly said that Farnese owed the purple, he received the by-name of Cardinal della Gonella—Cardinal of the Petticoat.

That was the first important step in the fortunes of the House of Farnese, which was to give dukes to Parma, and reach the throne of Spain (in the person of Isabella Farnese) before becoming extinct in 1758.

BOOK II. THE BULL PASCANT

Roma Bovem invenit tunc, cum fundatur aratro, Et nunc lapsa suo
est ecce renata Bove.

From an inscription quoted by Bernardino Coaxo.

CHAPTER I. THE FRENCH INVASION

You see Cesare Borgia, now in his nineteenth year, raised to the purple with the title of Cardinal-Deacon of Santa Maria Nuova—
notwithstanding which, however, he continues to be known in preference, and, indeed, to sign himself by the title of his archbishopric, Cardinal of Valencia.

It is hardly necessary to mention that, although already Bishop of Pampeluna and Archbishop of Valencia, he had received so far only his first tonsure. He never did receive any ecclesiastical orders beyond the minor and revocable ones.

It was said by Infessura, and has since been repeated by a multitude of historians, upon no better authority than that of this writer on hearsay and inveterate gossip, that, to raise Cesare to the purple, Alexander was forced to prove the legitimacy of that young man's birth, and that to this end he procured false witnesses to swear that he was "the son of Vannozza de' Catanei and her husband, Domenico d'Arignano." Already has this been touched upon in an earlier chapter, here it was shown that Vannozza never had a husband of the name of d'Arignano, and it might reasonably be supposed that this circumstance alone would have sufficed to restrain any serious writer from accepting and repeating Infessura's unauthoritative statement.

But if more they needed, it was ready to their hands in the Bull of Sixtus IV of October 1, 1480—to which also allusion has been made—dispensing Cesare from proving his legitimacy: "Super defectum natalium od ordines et quocumque beneficia."

Besides that, of what avail would any false swearing have been, considering that Cesare was openly named Borgia, that he was openly acknowledged by his father, and that in the very Bull above mentioned he is stated to be the son of Roderigo Borgia?

This is another instance of the lightness, the recklessness with which Alexander VI has been accused of unseemly and illicit conduct, which it may not be amiss to mention at this stage, since, if not the accusation itself, at least the matter that occasioned it belongs chronologically here.

During the first months of his reign—following in the footsteps of predecessors who had made additions to the Vatican—Alexander set about the building of the Borgia Tower. For its decoration he brought Perugino, Pinturicchio, Volterrano, and Peruzzi to Rome. Concerning Pinturicchio and Alexander, Vasari tells us, in his *Vita degli Artefici*, that over the door of one of the rooms in the Borgia Tower the artist painted a picture of the Virgin Mary in the likeness of Giulia Farnese (who posed to him as the model) with Alexander kneeling to her in adoration, arrayed in full pontificals.

Such a thing would have been horrible, revolting, sacrilegious. Fortunately it does not even amount to a truth untruly told; and well would it be if all the lies against the Borgias were as easy to refute. True, Pinturicchio did paint Giulia Farnese as the Madonna; true also that he did paint Alexander kneeling in adoration—but not to the Madonna, not in the same picture at all. The Madonna for which Giulia Farnese was the model is over a doorway, as Vasari says. The kneeling Alexander is in another room, and the object of his adoration is the Saviour rising from His tomb.

Yet one reputable writer after another has repeated that lie of Vasari's, and shocked us by the scandalous spectacle of a Pope so debauched and lewd that he kneels in pontificals, in adoration, at the feet of his mistress depicted as the Virgin Mary.

In October of that same year of 1493 Cesare accompanied his father on a visit to Orvieto, a journey which appears to have been partly undertaken in response to an invitation from Giulia Farnese's brother Alessandro.

Orvieto was falling at the time into decay and ruin, no longer the prosperous centre it had been less than a hundred years earlier; but the shrewd eye of Alexander perceived its value as a stronghold, to be used as an outpost of Rome or as a refuge in time of danger, and he proceeded to repair and fortify it. In the following summer Cesare was invested with its governorship, at the request of its inhabitants, who sent an embassy to the Pope with their proposal,—by way, no doubt, of showing their gratitude for his interest in the town.

But in the meantime, towards the end of 1493, King Ferrante's uneasiness at the ever-swelling rumours of the impending French invasion was quickened by the fact that the Pope had not yet sent his son Giuffredo to Naples to marry Donna Sancia, as had been contracted. Ferrante feared the intrigues of Milan with Alexander, and that the latter might be induced, after all, to join the northern league. In a frenzy of apprehension, the old king was at last on the point of going to Milan to throw himself at the feet of Lodovico Sforza, who was now his only hope, when news reached him that his ambassadors had been ordered to leave France.

That death-blow to his hopes was a death-blow to the man himself. Upon receiving the news he was smitten by an apoplexy, and upon January 25, 1494, he departed this life without the consolation of being able to suppose that any of his schemes had done anything to avert the impending ruin of his house.

In spite of all Alexander's intercessions and representations, calculated to induce Charles VIII to abandon his descent upon Italy; in spite, no less, of the counsel he received at home from such far-

seeing men as had his ear, the Christian King was now determined upon the expedition and his preparations were well advanced. In the month of March he assumed the title of King of Sicily, and sent formal intimation of it to Alexander, demanding his investiture at the hands of the Pope and offering to pay him a heavy annual tribute. Alexander was thus given to choose between the wrath of France and the wrath of Naples, and—to put the basest construction on his motives—he saw that the peril from an enemy on his very frontiers would be more imminent than that of an enemy beyond the Alps. It is also possible that he chose to be guided by his sense of justice and to do in the matter what he considered right. By whatever motive he was prompted, the result was that he refused to accede to the wishes of the Christian King.

The Consistory which received the French ambassador—Peron de Basche—became the scene of stormy remonstrances, Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, of course, supporting the ambassador and being supported in his act of insubordination by the Vice-Chancellor Ascanio Sforza (who represented his brother Lodovico in the matter) and the Cardinals Sanseverino, Colonna, and Savelli, all attached to French interests. Peron de Basche so far presumed, no doubt emboldened by this support, as to threaten the Pope with deposition if he persisted in his refusal to obey the King of France.

You see once more that kingly attitude, and you shall see it yet again presently and be convinced of its precise worth. In one hand a bribe of heavy annual tribute, in the other a threat of deposition; it was thus they conducted their business with the Holy Father. In this instance his Holiness took the threat, and dismissed the insolent ambassador. Della Rovere, conceiving that in France he had a stouter ally than in Naples, and seeing that he had once more incurred the papal anger by his open enmity, fled back to Ostia; and, not feeling safe there, for the pontifical forces were advancing upon his fortress, took ship to Genoa, and thence to France, to plot the Pope's

ruin with the exasperated Charles; and, the charge of simony being the only weapon with which they could attack Alexander's seat upon the papal throne, the charge of simony was once more brandished.

His Holiness took the matter with a becoming and stately calm. He sent his nephew, Giovanni Borgia, to Naples to crown Alfonso, and with him went Giuffredo Borgia to carry out the marriage contract with Alfonso's daughter, and thus strengthen the alliance between Rome and Naples.

By the autumn Charles had crossed the Alps with the most formidable army that had ever been sent out of France, full ninety thousand strong. And so badly was the war conducted by the Neapolitan generals who were sent to hold him in check that the appearance of the French under the very walls of Rome was almost such as to take the Pope by surprise. Charles's advance from the north had been so swift and unhindered that Alexander contemptuously said the French soldiers had come into Italy with wooden spurs and chalk in their hands to mark their lodgings.

Charles had been well received by the intriguing Lodovico Sforza, with whom he visited the Castle of Pavia and the unfortunate Gian Galeazzo, who from long confinement, chagrin, and other causes was now reduced to the sorriest condition. Indeed, on October 22, some days after that visit, the wretched prince expired. Whether or not Lodovico had him poisoned, as has been alleged—a charge, which, after all, rests on no proof, nor even upon the word of any person of reliance—his death most certainly lies at his ambitious uncle's door.

Charles was at Piacenza when the news of Gian Galeazzo's death reached him. Like the good Christian that he accounted himself, he ordered the most solemn and imposing obsequies for the poor youth for whom in life he had done nothing.

Gian Galeazzo left a heart-broken girl-widow and two children to

succeed him to the throne he had never been allowed to occupy—the eldest, Francesco Sforza, being a boy of five. Nevertheless, Lodovico was elected Duke of Milan. Not only did he suborn the Parliament of Milan to that end, but he induced the Emperor to confirm him in the title. To this the Emperor consented, seeking to mask the unscrupulous deed by a pitiful sophism. He expounded that the throne of Milan should originally have been Lodovico's, and never Galeazzo Maria's (Gian Galeazzo's father), because the latter was born before Francesco Sforza had become Duke of Milan, whereas Lodovico was born when he already was so.

The obsequies of Gian Galeazzo completed, Charles pushed on. From Florence he issued his manifesto, and although this confined itself to claiming the kingdom of Naples, and said no word of punishing the Pope for his disobedience in crowning Alfonso and being now in alliance with him, it stirred up grave uneasiness at the Vatican.

The Pope's position was becoming extremely difficult; nevertheless, he wore the boldest possible face when he received the ambassadors of France, and on December 9 refused to grant the letters patent of passage through the Pontifical States which the French demanded. Thereupon Charles advanced threateningly upon Rome, and was joined now by those turbulent barons Orsini, Colonna, and Savelli.

Alexander VI has been widely accused of effecting a volte-face at this stage and betraying his Neapolitan allies; but his conduct, properly considered, can hardly amount to that. What concessions he made to France were such as a wise and inadequately supported man must make to an army ninety thousand strong. To be recklessly and quixotically heroic is not within the function of Popes; moreover, Alexander had Rome to think of, for Charles had sent word that, if he were resisted he would leave all in ruins, whereas if a free passage

were accorded him he would do no hurt nor suffer any pillage to be done in Rome.

So the Pope did the only thing consistent with prudence: he made a virtue of necessity and gave way where it was utterly impossible for him to resist. He permitted Charles the passage through his territory which Charles was perfectly able to take for himself if refused. There ensued an interchange of compliments between Pope and King, and early in January Charles entered Rome in such warlike panoply as struck terror into the hearts of all beholders. Of that entrance Paolo Giovio has left us an impressive picture.

The vanguard was composed of Swiss and German mercenaries—tall fellows, these professional warriors, superb in their carriage and stepping in time to the beat of their drums; they were dressed in variegated, close-fitting garments that revealed all their athletic symmetry. A fourth of them were armed with long, square-bladed halberts, new to Italy; the remainder trailed their ten-foot pikes, and carried a short sword at their belts, whilst to every thousand of them there were a hundred arquebusiers. After them came the French infantry, without armour save the officers, who wore steel corselets and head-pieces. These, again, were followed by five thousand Gascon arbalisters, each shouldering his arbalest—a phalanx of short, rude fellows, not to be compared with the stately Swiss. Next came the cavalry, advancing in squadrons, glittering and resplendent in their steel casings; 2,500 of these were in full heavy armour, wielding iron maces and the ponderous lances that were usual also in Italy. Every man-at-arms had with him three horses, mounted by a squire and two valets (four men going to the lance in France). Some 5,000 of the cavalry were more lightly armed, in corselets and head-piece only, and they carried long wooden bows in the English fashion; whilst some were armed with pikes, intended to complete the work of the heavier cavalry. These were followed by 200 knights—the very flower of French chivalry for birth and valour—shouldering their heavy

iron maces, their armour covered by purple, gold-embroidered surcoats. Behind them came 400 mounted archers forming the bodyguard of the king.

The misshapen monarch himself was the very caricature of a man, hideous and grotesque as a gargoyle. He was short of stature, spindle-shanked, rachitic and malformed, and of his face, with its colossal nose, loose mouth and shallow brow, Giovio says that "it was the ugliest ever seen on man."

Such was the person of the young king—he was twenty-four years of age at the time—who poured his legions into Rome, and all full-armed as if for work of immediate destruction. Seen, as they were, by torchlight and the blaze of kindled bonfires—for night had fallen long before the rearguard had entered the city—they looked vague, fantastic, and terrifying. But the most awe-inspiring sight of all was kept for the end; it consisted of the thirty-six pieces of artillery which brought up the rear, each piece upon a carriage swiftly drawn by horses, and the longest measuring eight feet, weighing six thousand pounds, and discharging an iron ball as big as a man's head.

The king lay in the Palace of San Marco, where a lodging had been prepared for him, and thither on the day after his entrance came Cesare Borgia, with six Cardinals, from the Castle of Sant' Angelo, whither the Pope had withdrawn, to wait upon his Christian Majesty. Charles immediately revealed the full and exigent nature of his demands. He required the Pope's aid and counsel in the conquest of Naples, upon which he was proceeding; that Cesare Borgia be delivered into his hands as a hostage to ensure the Pope's friendliness; and that the Castle of Sant' Angelo be handed over to him to be used as a retreat in case of need or danger. Further, he demanded that Prince Djem—the brother of Sultan Bajazet, who was in the Pope's hands—should be delivered up to him as a further hostage.

This Djem (Gem, or Zizim, as his name is variously spelled) was the second son of Mahomet II, whose throne he had disputed with his brother Bajazet on their father's death. He had raised an army to enforce his claim, and had not lacked for partisans; but he was defeated and put to flight by his brother. For safety he had delivered himself up to the Knights of Rhodes, whom he knew to be Bajazet's implacable enemies. They made him very welcome, for d'Aubusson, the Grand Master of Rhodes, realized that the possession of the prince's person was a very fortunate circumstance for Christianity, since by means of such a hostage the Turk could be kept in submission. Accordingly d'Aubusson had sent him to France, and wrote: "While Djem lives, and is in our hands, Bajazet will never dare to make war upon Christians, who will thus enjoy great peace. Thus is it salutary that Djem should remain in our power." And in France Djem had been well received and treated with every consideration due to a person of his princely rank.

But he appears to have become a subject of contention among the Powers, several of which urged that he could be of greater service to Christianity in their hands than in those of France. Thus, the King of Hungary had demanded him because, being a neighbour of Bajazet's, he was constantly in apprehension of Turkish raids. Ferdinand of Spain had desired him because the possession of him would assist the Catholic King in the expulsion of the Moors. Ferrante of Naples had craved him because he lived in perpetual terror of a Turkish invasion.

In the end he had been sent to Rome, whither he went willingly under the advice of the Knights of Rhodes, whose prisoner he really considered himself. They had discovered that Bajazet was offering enormous bribes to Charles for the surrender of him, and they feared lest Charles should succumb to the temptation.

So Prince Djem had come to Rome in the reign of Pope Innocent

VIII, and there he had since remained, Sultan Bajazet making the Pope an annual allowance of forty thousand ducats for his brother's safe custody. He was a willing prisoner, or rather a willing exile, for, far from being kept a prisoner, he was treated at Rome with every consideration, associating freely with those about the Pontifical Court, and being frequently seen abroad in company with the Pope and the Duke of Gandia.

Now Charles was aware that the Pope, in his dread of a French invasion, and seeing vain all his efforts to dissuade Charles from making his descent upon Italy, had appealed for aid to Bajazet. For so doing he has been severely censured, and with some justice, for the picture of the Head of Christianity making appeal to the infidel to assist him against Christians is not an edifying one. Still, it receives some measure of justification when we reflect what was the attitude of these same Christians towards their Head.

Bajazet himself, thrown into a panic at the thought of Djem falling into the hands of a king who proposed to make a raid upon him, answered the Pope begging his Holiness to "have Djem removed from the tribulations of this world, and his soul transported to another, where he might enjoy a greater peace." For this service he offered the Pope 300,000 ducats, to be paid on delivery of the prince's body; and, if the price was high, so was the service required, for it would have ensured Bajazet a peace of mind he could not hope to enjoy while his brother lived.

This letter was intercepted by Giovanni della Rovere, the Prefect of Sinigaglia, who very promptly handed it to his brother, the Cardinal Giuliano. The cardinal, in his turn, laid it before the King of France, who now demanded of the Pope the surrender of the person of this Djem as a further hostage.

Alexander began by rejecting the king's proposals severally and collectively, but Charles pressed him to reconsider his refusal, and

so, being again between the sword and the wall, the Pope was compelled to submit. A treaty was drawn up and signed on January 15, the king, on his side, promising to recognize the Pope and to uphold him in all his rights.

On the following day Charles made solemn act of veneration to the Pontiff in Consistory, kissing his ring and his foot, and professing obedience to him as the kings of France, his forbears, had ever done. Words for deeds!

Charles remained twelve days longer in Rome, and set out at last, on January 28, upon the conquest of Naples. First he went solemnly to take his leave of the Pope, and they parted with every outward mark of a mutual esteem which they most certainly cannot have experienced. When Charles knelt for the Pope's blessing, Alexander raised him up and embraced him; whilst Cesare completed the show of friendliness by presenting Charles with six beautiful chargers.

They set out immediately afterwards, the French king taking with him his hostages, neither of which he was destined to retain for long, with Cesare riding in the place of honour on his right.

The army lay at Marino that night, and on the following at Velletri. In the latter city Charles was met by an ambassador of Spain—Antonio da Fonseca. Ferdinand and Isabella were moved at last to befriend their cousins of Naples, whom all else had now abandoned, and at the same time serve their own interests. Their ambassador demanded that Charles should abandon his enterprise and return to France, or else be prepared for war with Spain.

It is eminently probable that Cesare had knowledge of this ultimatum to Charles, and that his knowledge influenced his conduct. However that may be, he slipped out of Velletri in the dead of that same night disguised as a groom. Half a mile out of the town, Francesco del Sacco, an officer of the Podestá of Velletri, awaited

him with a horse, and on this he sped back to Rome, where he arrived on the night of the 30th. He went straight to the house of one Antonio Flores, an auditor of the Tribunal of the Ruota and a person of his confidence, who through his influence and protection was destined to rise to the eminence of the archbishopric of Avignon and Papal Nuncio to the Court of France.

Cesare remained at Flores's house, sending word to the Pope of his presence, but not attempting to approach the Vatican. On the following day he withdrew to the stronghold of Spoleto.

Meanwhile Rome was thrown into a panic by the young cardinal's action and the dread of reprisals on the part of France. The quaking municipality sent representatives to Charles to assure him that Rome had had nothing to do with this breach of the treaty, and to implore him not to visit it upon the city. The king replied by a special embassy to the Pope, and there apparently dropped the matter, for a few days later Cesare reappeared at the Vatican.

Charles, meanwhile, despite the threats of Spain, pushed on to accomplish his easy conquest.

King Alfonso had already fled the kingdom (January 25), abdicating in favour of his brother Federigo. His avowed object was to withdraw to Sicily, retire from the world, and do penance for his sins, for which no doubt there was ample occasion. The real spur was probably—as opined by Commynes—cowardice; for, says that Frenchman, "Jamais homme cruel ne fut hardi."

Federigo's defence of the realm consigned to him was not conspicuous, for the French entered Naples almost without striking a blow within twenty days of their departure from Rome.

Scarcely had Charles laid aside his armour when death robbed him of the second hostage he had brought from the Vatican. On

February 25, after a week's illness Prince Djem died of dysentery at the Castle of Capua, whither Charles had sent him.

Rumours that he had been poisoned by the Pope arose almost at once; but, considering that twentyeight days had elapsed since his parting from Alexander, it was, with the best intentions in the world, rather difficult to make that poisoning credible, until the bright notion was conceived, and made public, that the poison used was a "white powder" of unknown components, which did its work slowly, and killed the victim some time after it had been administered. Thus, by a bold and brazen invention, an impossible falsehood was made to wear a possible aspect.

And in that you have most probably the origin of the famous secret poison of the Borgias. Having been invented to fit the alleged poisoning of Prince Djem, which it was desired to fasten upon the Pope by hook or by crook, it was found altogether too valuable an invention not to be used again. By means of it, it became possible to lay almost any death in the world at the door of Alexander.

Before proceeding to inquire further into this particular case, let us here and now say that, just as to-day there is no inorganic toxin known to science that will either lie fallow for weeks in the human system, suddenly to become active and slay, or yet to kill by slow degrees involving some weeks in the process, so none was known in the Borgia or any other era. Science indeed will tell you that the very notion of any such poison is flagrantly absurd, and that such a toxic action is against all the laws of nature.

But a scientific disquisition is unnecessary. For our present needs arguments of common sense should abundantly suffice. This poison—this white powder—was said to be a secret of the Borgias. If that is so, by what Borgia was the secret of its existence ever divulged? Or, if it never was divulged, how comes it to be known that a poison so secret, and working at such distances of time, was ever wielded by

them?

The very nature of its alleged action was such as utterly to conceal the hand that had administered it; yet here, on the first recorded occasion of its alleged use, it was more or less common knowledge if Giovio and Guicciardini are to be believed!

Sagredo⁽¹⁾ says that Djem died at Terracina three days after having been consigned to Charles VIII, of poison administered by Alexander, to whom Bajazet had promised a large sum of money for the deed. The same is practically Giovio's statement, save that Giovio causes him to die at a later date and at Gaeta; Guicciardini and Corio tell a similar story, but inform us that he died in Naples.

¹ In *Mem. Storiche dei Monarchi Ottomani*.

It is entirely upon the authority of these four writers that the Pope is charged with having poisoned Djem, and it is noteworthy that in the four narratives we find different dates and three different places given as the date and place of the Turk's death, and more noteworthy still that in not one instance of these four is date or place correctly stated.

Now the place where Djem died, and the date of his death, were public facts about which there was no mystery; they were to be ascertained—as they are still—by any painstaking examiner. His poisoning, on the other hand, was admittedly a secret matter, the truth of which it was impossible to ascertain with utter and complete finality. Yet of this poisoning they know all the secrets, these four nimble writers who cannot correctly tell us where or when the man died!

We will turn from the fictions they have left us—which, alas! have but too often been preferred by subsequent writers to the true facts which lay just as ready to their hands, but of course were less sensational—and we will consider instead the evidence of those

contemporaries who do, at least, know the time and place of Djem's decease.

If any living man might have known of a secret poison of the Borgias at this stage, that man was Burchard the Caeremoniarius, and, had he known of it, not for a moment would he have been silent on the point. Yet not a word of this secret poison shall you find in his diaries, and concerning the death of Djem he records that "on February 25 died at the Castle of Capua the said Djem, through meat or drink that disagreed with him."

Panvinio, who, being a Neapolitan, was not likely to be any too friendly to the Pope—as, indeed, he proves again and again—tells us positively that Djem died of dysentery at Capua.(1)

1 Vitis Pontif. Rom.

Sanuto, writing to the Council of Ten, says that Djem took ill at Capua of a catarrh, which "descended to his stomach"; and that so he died.

And now mark Sanuto's reasoning upon his death, which is the very reasoning we should ourselves employ finally to dispose of this chatter of poisoning, did we not find it awaiting quotation, more authoritative therefore than it could be from us, and utterly irrefutable and conclusive in its logic. "This death is very harmful to the King of France, to all Italy, and chiefly to the Pope, who is thereby deprived of 40,000 ducats yearly, which was paid him by his [Djem's] brother for his custody. And the king showed himself greatly grieved by this death, and it was suspected that the Pope had poisoned him, which, however, was not to be believed, as it would have been to his own loss."

Just so—to his own infinite loss, not only of the 40,000 ducats yearly, but of the hold which the custody of Djem gave him upon the

Turks.

The reason assigned by those who charged Alexander with this crime was the bribe of 300,000 ducats offered by Bajazet in the intercepted letter. The offer—which, incidentally, had never reached the Pope—was instantly taken as proof of its acceptance—a singular case of making cause follow upon effect, a method all too prevalent with the Borgian chroniclers. Moreover, they entirely overlooked the circumstance that, for Djem's death in the hands of France, the Pope could make no claim upon Bajazet.

Finally—though the danger be incurred of becoming tedious upon this point—they also forgot that, years before, Bajazet had offered such bribes to Charles for the life of Djem as had caused the Knights of Rhodes to remove the Turk from French keeping. Upon that circumstance they might, had it sorted with their inclinations, have set up a stronger case of poisoning against Charles than against the Pope, and they would not have been put to the necessity of inventing a toxin that never had place in any earthly pharmacopoeia.

It is not, by this, suggested that there is any shadow of a case against Charles. Djem died a perfectly natural death, as is established by the only authorities competent to speak upon the matter, and his death was against the interests of everybody save his brother Bajazet; and against nobody's so much as the Pope's.

CHAPTER II. THE POPE AND THE SUPERNATURAL

By the middle of March of that year 1495 the conquest of Naples was a thoroughly accomplished fact, and the French rested upon their victory, took their ease, and made merry in the capital of the vanquished kingdom.

But in the north Lodovico Sforza—now Duke of Milan *de facto*, as we have seen—set about the second part of the game that was to be played. He had a valuable ally in Venice, which looked none too favourably on the French and was fully disposed to gather its forces against the common foe. The Council of Ten sent their ambassador, Zorzi, to the Pope to propose an alliance.

News reached Charles in Naples of the league that was being formed. He laughed at it, and the matter was made the subject of ridicule in some of the comedies that were being performed for the amusement of his Court. Meanwhile, the intrigue against him went forward; on March 26 his Holiness sent the Golden Rose to the Doge, and on Palm Sunday the league was solemnly proclaimed in St. Peter's. Its terms were vague; there was nothing in it that was directly menacing to Charles; it was simply declared to have been formed for the common good. But in the north the forces were steadily gathering to cut off the retreat of the French, and suddenly Lodovico Sforza threw aside the mask and made an attack upon the French navy at Genoa.

At last Charles awoke to his danger and began to care for his safety. Rapidly he organized the occupation of Naples, and, leaving

Montpensier as Viceroy and d'Aubigny as Captain-General, he set out for Rome with his army, intent upon detaching the Pope from the league; for the Pope, being the immediate neighbour of Naples, would be as dangerous as an enemy as he was valuable as an ally to Charles.

He entered Rome on June 1. The Pope, however, was not there to receive him. Alexander had left on May 28 for Orvieto, accompanied by Cesare, the Sacred College, 200 men-at-arms, and 1,000 horse and 3,000 foot, supplied by Venice. At Orvieto, on June 3, the Pontiff received an ambassador from the Emperor, who had joined the league, and on the 4th he refused audience to the ambassador of France, sent to him from Ronciglione, where the King had halted. Charles, insistent, sent again, determined to see the Pope; but Alexander, quite as determined not to see the king, pushed on to Perugia with his escort.

There his Holiness abode until the French and Italians had met on the River Taro and joined battle at Fornovo, of which encounter both sides claimed the victory. If Charles's only object was to win through, then the victory undoubtedly was his, for he certainly succeeded in cutting a way through the Italians who disputed his passage. But he suffered heavily, and left behind him most of his precious artillery, his tents and carriages, and the immense Neapolitan booty he was taking home, with which he had loaded (says Gregorovius) twenty thousand mules. All this fell into the hands of the Italian allies under Gonzaga of Mantua, whilst from Fornovo Charles's retreat was more in the nature of a flight. Thus he won back to France, no whit the better for his expedition, and the only mark of his passage which he left behind him was an obscene ailment, which, with the coming of the French into Italy, first manifested itself in Europe, and which the Italians paid them the questionable compliment of calling "the French disease"—*morbo gallico*, or *il mal francese*.

During the Pope's visit to Perugia an incident occurred which is not without importance to students of his character, and of the character left of him by his contemporaries and others.

There lived in Perugia at this time a young nun of the Order of St. Dominic, who walked in the way of St. Catherine of Siena, Colomba da Rieti by name. You will find some marvellous things about her in the Perugian chronicles of Matarazzo, which, for that matter, abound in marvellous things—too marvellous mostly to be true.

When he deals with events happening beyond the walls of his native town Matarazzo, as an historian, is contemptible to a degree second only to that of those who quote him as an authority. When he deals with matters that, so to speak, befell under his very eyes, he is worthy, if not of credit at least of attention, for his "atmosphere" is valuable.

Of this Sister Colomba Matarazzo tells us that she ate not nor drank, save sometimes some jujube fruit, and even these but rarely. "On the day of her coming to Perugia (which happened in 1488), as she was Crossing the Bridge of St. Gianni some young men attempted to lay hands upon her, for she was comely and beautiful; but as they did so, she showed them the jujube fruit which she carried in a white cloth, whereupon they instantly stood bereft of strength and wits."

Next he tells us how she would pass from life for an hour or two, and sometimes for half a day, and her pulse would cease to beat, and she would, seem all dead. And then she would quiver and come to herself again, and prophesy the future, and threaten disaster. And again: "One morning two of her teeth were found to have fallen out, which had happened in fighting with the devil; and, for the many intercessions which she made, and the scandals which she repaired by her prayers, the people came to call her saint."

Notwithstanding all this, and the fact that she lived without nourishment, he tells us that the brothers of St. Francis had little faith in her. Nevertheless, the community built her a very fine monastery, which was richly endowed, and many nuns took the habit of her Order.

Now it happened that whilst at Perugia in his student days, Cesare had witnessed a miracle performed by this poor ecstatic girl; or rather he had arrived on the scene—the Church of St. Catherine of Siena—to find her, with a little naked boy in her lap, the centre of an excited, frenzied crowd, which was proclaiming loudly that the child had been dead and that she had resurrected him. This was a statement which the Prior of the Dominicans did not seem disposed unreservedly to accept, for, when approached with a suggestion that the bells should be rung in honour of the event, he would not admit that he saw any cause to sanction such a course.

In the few years that were sped since then, however, sister Colomba had acquired the great reputation of which Matarazzo tells us, so that, throughout the plain of Tiber, the Dominicans were preaching her fame from convent to convent. In December of 1495 Charles VIII heard of her at Siena, and was stirred by a curiosity which he accounted devotional—the same curiosity that caused one of his gentlemen to entreat Savonarola to perform "just a little miracle" for the King's entertainment. You can picture the gloomy fanatic's reception of that invitation.

The Pope now took the opportunity of his sojourn in Perugia to pay Colomba da Rieti a visit, and there can be no doubt that he did so in a critical spirit. Accompanied by Cesare and some cardinals and gentlemen of his following, he went to the Church of St. Dominic and was conducted to the sister's cell by the Prior—the same who in Cesare's student-days had refused to have the bells rung.

Upon seeing the magnificent figure of the Pontiff filling the doorway of her little chamber, Sister Colomba fell at his feet, and, taking hold

of the hem of his gown, she remained prostrate and silent for some moments, when at last she timidly arose. Alexander set her some questions concerning the Divine Mysteries. These she answered readily at first, but, as his questions grew, she faltered, became embarrassed, and fell silent, standing before him white and trembling, no doubt a very piteous figure. The Pope, not liking this, turned to the Prior to demand an explanation, and admonished him sternly: "Caveto, Pater, quia ego Papa sum!"

This had the effect of throwing the Prior into confusion, and he set himself to explain that she was in reality very wonderful, that he himself had not at first believed in her, but that he had seen so much that he had been converted. At this stage Cesare came to his aid, bearing witness, as he could, that he himself had seen the Prior discredit her when others were already hailing her as a saint, wherefore, if he now was convinced, he must have had very good evidence to convince him. We can imagine the Prior's gratitude to the young cardinal for that timely word when he saw himself in danger perhaps of being called to account for fostering and abetting an imposture.

What was Alexander's opinion of her in the end we do not know; but we do know that he was not readily credulous. When, for instance, he heard that the stigmata were alleged to have appeared upon the body of Lucia di Narni he did what might be expected of a sceptic of our own times rather than of a churchman of his superstitious age—he sent his physicians to examine her.

That is but one instance of his common-sense attitude towards supernatural manifestations. His cold, calm judgement caused him to seek, by all available and practical means, to discriminate between the true and the spurious in an age in which men, by their credulity, were but too ready to become the prey of any impostor. It argues a breadth of mind altogether beyond the times in which he had his

being. Witches and warlocks, who elsewhere—and even in much later ages, and in Protestant as well as Catholic States—were given to the fire, he contemptuously ignored. The unfortunate Moors and Jews, who elsewhere in Europe were being persecuted by the Holy Inquisition and burnt at the stake as an act of faith for the good of their souls and the greater honour and glory of God, found in Alexander a tolerant protector and in Rome a safe shelter.

These circumstances concerning him are not sufficiently known; it is good to know them for their own sake. But, apart from that, they have a great historical value which it is well to consider. It is not to be imagined that such breadth of views could be tolerated in a Pope in the dawn of the sixteenth century. The times were not ripe for it; men did not understand it; and what men do not understand they thirst to explain, and have a way of explaining in their own fashion and according to their own lights.

A Pope who did such things could not be a good Pope, since such things must be abhorrent to God—as men conceived God then.

To understand this is to understand much of the bad feeling against Alexander and his family, for this is the source of much of it. Because he did not burn witches and magicians it was presently said that he was himself a warlock, and that he practised black magic. It was not, perhaps, wanton calumny; it was said in good faith, for it was the only reason the times could think of that should account for his restraint. Because he tolerated Moors and Jews it was presently said by some that he was a Moor, by others that he was a Jew, and by others still that he was both.

What wonder, then, if the rancorous Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere venomously dubbed him Moor and Jew, and the rabid fanatic Savonarola screamed that he was no Pope at all, that he was not a Christian, nor did he believe in any God?

Misunderstood in these matters, he was believed to be an infidel, and no crime was too impossible to be fastened upon the man who was believed to be that in the Italy of the Cinquecento.

Alexander, however, was very far from being an infidel, very far from not being a Christian, very far from not believing in God, as he has left abundant evidence in the Bulls he issued during his pontificate. It is certainly wrong to assume—and this is pointed out by l'Espinou—that a private life which seems to ignore the commandments of the Church must preclude the possibility of a public life devoted to the service of the Church. This is far from being the case. Such a state of things—such a dual personality—is by no means inconsistent with churchmen of the fifteenth, or, for that matter, of the twentieth century.

The whole truth of the matter is contained in a Portuguese rhyme, which may roughly be translated:

Soundly Father Thomas preaches.
Don't do as he does; do as he teaches.

A debauchee may preach virtue with salutary effect, just as a man may preach hygiene without practising the privations which it entails, or may save you from dyspepsia by pointing out to you what is indigestible without himself abstaining from it.

Such was the case of Alexander VI, as we are justified in concluding from the evidence that remains.

Let us consider the apostolic zeal revealed by his Bull granting America to Spain. This was practically conceded—as the very terms of it will show—on condition that Spain should employ the dominion accorded her over the New World for the purpose of propagating the Christian faith and the conversion and baptism of the heathen. This is strictly enjoined, and emphasized by the command that Spain shall

send out God-fearing men who are learned in religion and capable of teaching it to the people of the newly discovered lands.

Thus Alexander invented the missionary.

To King Manuel the Fortunate (of Portugal), who sought his authority for the conquest of Africa, he similarly enjoined that he should contrive that the name of the Saviour be adored there, and the Catholic faith spread and honoured, to the end that the king "might win eternal life and the blessing of the Holy See."

To the soldiers going upon this expedition his Holiness granted the same indulgences as to those who fought in the Holy Land, and he aided the kings of Spain and Portugal in this propagation of Christianity out of the coffers of the Church.

He sent to America a dozen of the children of St. Francis, as apostles to preach the Faith, and he invested them with the amplest powers.

He prosecuted with stern rigour the heretics of Bohemia, who were obscenely insulting Church and Sacraments, and he proceeded similarly against the "Picards" and "Vaudois." Against the Lombard demoniacs, who had grown bold, were banding themselves together and doing great evil to property, to life, and to religion, Alexander raised his mighty arm.

Then there is his Bull of June 1, 1501, against those who already were turning to evil purposes the newly discovered printing-press. In this he inveighed against the printing of matter prejudicial to healthy doctrine, to good manners, and, above all, to the Catholic Faith or anything that should give scandal to the faithful. He threatened the printers of impious works with excommunication should they persist, and enlisted secular weapons to punish them in a temporal as well as a spiritual manner. He ordered the preparation of indexes of all works

containing anything hurtful to religion, and pronounced a ban of excommunication against all who should peruse the books so indexed.

Thus Alexander invented the Index Expurgatorius.

There is abundant evidence that he was a fervid celebrant, and of his extreme devotion to the Blessed Virgin—in whose honour he revived the ringing of the Angelus Bell—shall be considered later.

Whatever his private life, it is idle to seek to show that his public career was other than devoted to the upholding of the dignity and honour of the Church.

CHAPTER III. THE ROMAN BARONS

Having driven Charles VIII out of Italy, it still remained for the allies to remove all traces of his passage from Naples and to restore the rule of the House of Aragon. In this they had the aid of Ferdinand and Isabella, who sent an army under the command of that distinguished soldier Gonzalo de Cordoba, known in his day as the Great Captain.

He landed in Calabria in the spring of 1496, and war broke out afresh through that already sorely devastated land. The Spaniards were joined by the allied forces of Venice and the Church under the condotta of the Marquis Gonzaga of Mantua, the leader of the Italians at Fornovo.

Lodovico had detached himself from the league, and again made terms with France for his own safety's sake. But his cousin, Giovanni Sforza, Tyrant of Pesaro—the husband of Lucrezia Borgia—continued in the pontifical army at the head of a condotta of 600 lances. Another command in the same ranks was one of 700 lances under the youthful Giuffredo Borgia, now Prince of Squillace and the husband of Doña Sancia of Aragon, a lady of exceedingly loose morals, who had brought to Rome the habits acquired in the most licentious Court of that licentious age.

The French lost Naples even more easily than they had conquered it, and by July 7 Ferdinand II was able to reenter his capital and reascend his throne. D'Aubigny, the French general, withdrew to France, whilst Montpensier, the Viceroy, retired to Pozzuoli, where he died in the following year.

Nothing could better have suited the purposes of Alexander than the state of things which now prevailed, affording him, as it did, the means to break the power of the insolent Roman barons, who already had so vexed and troubled him. So in the Consistory of June 1 he published a Bull whereby Gentile Virginio Orsini, Giangiordano Orsini, and his bastard Paolo Orsini and Bartolomeo d'Alviano, were declared outlawed for having borne arms with France against the Church, and their possessions were confiscated to the State. This decree was to be enforced by the sword, and, for the purposes of the impending war, the Duke of Gandia was recalled to Rome. He arrived early in August, having left at Gandia his wife Maria Enriquez, a niece of the Royal House of Spain. It was Cesare Borgia who took the initiative in the pomp with which his brother was received in Rome, riding out at the head of the entire Pontifical Court to meet and welcome the young duke.

In addition to being Duke of Gandia, Giovanni Borgia was already Duke of Sessa and Prince of Teano, which further dignities had been conferred upon him on the occasion of his brother Giuffredo's marriage to Donna Sancia. To these the Pope now added the governorship of Viterbo and of the Patrimony of St. Peter, dispossessing Cardinal Farnese of the latter office to bestow it upon this well-beloved son.

In Venice it was being related, a few months later,—in October—that Gandia had brought a woman from Spain for his father, and that the latter had taken her to live with him. The story is given in Sanuto, and of course has been unearthed and served up by most historians and essayists. It cannot positively be said that it is untrue; but it can be said that it is unconfirmed. There is, for instance, no word of it in Burchard's *Diarium*, and when you consider how ready a chronicler of scandalous matter was this Master of Ceremonies, you will no doubt conclude that, if any foundation there had been for that Venetian story, Burchard would never have been silent on the subject.

The Pope had taken into his pay that distinguished condottiero, Duke Guidobaldo of Urbino, who later was to feel the relentless might of Cesare. To Guidobaldo's command was now entrusted the punitive expedition against the Orsini, and with him was to go the Duke of Gandia, ostensibly to share the leadership, in reality that, under so able a master, he might serve his apprenticeship to the trade of arms. So on October 25 Giovanni Borgia was very solemnly created Gonfalonier of the Church and Captain-General of the pontifical troops. On the same day the three standards were blessed in St. Peter's—one being the Papal Gonfalon bearing the arms of the Church and the other two the personal banners of Guidobaldo and Gandia. The two condottieri attended the ceremony, arrayed in full armour, and received the white truncheons that were the emblems of their command.

On the following day the army set out, accompanied by the Cardinal de Luna as papal legate a latere, and within a month ten Orsini strongholds had surrendered.

So far all had been easy for the papal forces; but now the Orsini rallied in the last three fortresses that remained them—Bracciano, Trevignano, and Anguillara, and their resistance suddenly acquired a stubborn character, particularly that of Bracciano, which was captained by Bartolomeo d'Alviano, a clever, resourceful young soldier who was destined to go far. Thus the campaign, so easily conducted at the outset, received a check which caused it to drag on into the winter. And now the barons received further reinforcements. Vitellozzo Vitelli, the Tyrant of Città di Castello, came to the aid of the Orsini, as did also the turbulent Baglioni of Perugia, the della Rovere in Rome, and all those who were inimical to Alexander VI. On the other hand, however, the barons Colonna and Savelli ranged themselves on the side of the Pope.

Already Trevignano had fallen, and the attack of the pontifical army

was concentrated upon Bracciano. Hard pressed, and with all supplies cut off, Bartolomeo d'Alviano was driven to the very verge of surrender, when over the hills came Carlo Orsini, with the men of Vitellozzo Vitelli, to take the papal forces by surprise and put them to utter rout. Guidobaldo was made prisoner, whilst the Duke of Gandia, Fabrizio Colonna, and the papal legate narrowly escaped, and took shelter in Ronciglione, the Pope's son being slightly wounded in the face.

It was a severe and sudden conclusion to a war that had begun under such excellent auspices for the Pontificals. Yet, notwithstanding that defeat, which had left guns and baggage in the hands of the enemy, the Pope was the gainer by the campaign, having won eleven strongholds from the Orsini in exchange for one battle lost.

The barons now prepared to push home their advantage and complete the victory; but the Pope checkmated them by an appeal to Gonzalo de Cordoba, who promptly responded and came with Prospero Colonna to the aid of the Church. He laid siege to Ostia, which was being held for the Cardinal della Rovere, and compelled it to a speedy surrender, thereby bringing the Orsini resistance practically to an end. For the present the might of the barons was broken, and they were forced to pay Alexander the sum of 50,000 ducats to redeem their captured fortresses.

Gonzalo de Cordoba made a triumphal entry into Rome, bringing with him Monaldo da Guerra, the unfortunate defender of Ostia, in chains. He was received with great honour by the Duke of Gandia, accompanied by his brother-in-law, Giovanni Sforza, and they escorted him to the Vatican, where the Pope awaited him.

This was but one of the many occasions just then on which Giovanni Sforza was conspicuous in public in close association with his father-in-law, the Pope. Burchard mentions his presence at the blessing of the candles on the Feast of the Purification, and shows

him to us as a candle-bearer standing on the Pope's right hand. Again we see him on Palm Sunday in attendance upon Alexander, he and Gandia standing together on the steps of the pontifical throne in the Sistine Chapel during the Blessing of the Palms. There and elsewhere Lucrezia's husband is prominently in the public eye during those months of February and March of 1497, and we generally see him sharing, with the Duke of Gandia, the honour of close attendance upon the Pontiff, all of which but serves to render the more marked his sudden disappearance from that scene.

The matter of his abrupt and precipitate flight from Rome is one concerning which it is unlikely that the true and complete facts will ever be revealed. It was public gossip at this time that his marriage with Lucrezia was not a happy one, and that discord marred their life together. Lucrezia's reported grievance upon this subject reads a little vaguely to us now, whatever it may have conveyed at the time. She complained that Giovanni "did not fittingly keep her company,"⁽¹⁾ which may be taken to mean that a good harmony did not prevail between them, or, almost equally well, that there were the canonical grounds for complaint against him as a husband which were afterwards formally preferred and made the grounds for the divorce. It is also possible that Alexander's ambition may have urged him to dissolve the marriage to the end that she might be free to be used again as a pawn in his far-reaching game.

¹ "Che non gli faceva buona compagnia."

All that we do know positively is that, one evening in Holy Week, Sforza mounted a Turkish horse, and, on the pretext of going as far as the Church of Sant' Onofrio to take the air, he slipped out of Rome, and so desperately did he ride that, twenty-four hours later, he was home in Pesaro, his horse dropping dead as he reached the town.

Certainly some terrible panic must have urged him, and this rather

lends colour to the story told by Almerici in the *Memorie di Pesaro*. According to this, the Lord of Pesaro's chamberlain, Giacomino, was in Lucrezia's apartments one evening when Cesare was announced, whereupon, by Lucrezia's orders, Giacomino concealed himself behind a screen. The Cardinal of Valencia entered and talked freely with his sister, the essence of his conversation being that the order had been issued for her husband's death.

The inference to be drawn from this is that Giovanni had been given to choose in the matter of a divorce, and that he had refused to be a party to it, whence it was resolved to remove him in a still more effective manner.

Be that as it may, the chroniclers of Pesaro proceed to relate that, after Cesare had left her, Lucrezia asked Giacomino if he had heard what had been said, and, upon being answered in the affirmative, urged him to go at once and warn Giovanni. It was as a consequence of this alleged warning that Giovanni made his precipitate departure.

A little while later, at the beginning of June, Lucrezia left the Vatican and withdrew to the Convent of San Sisto, in the Appian Way, a step which immediately gave rise to speculation and to unbridled gossip, all of which, however, is too vague to be worthy of the least attention. Aretino's advices to the Cardinal Ippolito d'Este suggest that she did not leave the Vatican on good terms with her family, and it is very possible, if what the Pesaro chroniclers state is true, that her withdrawal arose out of her having warned Giovanni of his danger and enabled him to escape.

At about the same time that Lucrezia withdrew to her convent her brother Gandia was the recipient of further honours at the hands of his fond father. The Pope had raised the fief of Benevento to a dukedom, and as a dukedom conferred it upon his son, to him and to his legitimate heirs for ever. To this he added the valuable lordships of Terracina and Pontecorvo.

Cesare, meanwhile, had by no means been forgotten, and already this young cardinal was—with perhaps the sole exception of the Cardinal d'Estouteville—the richest churchman in Christendom. To his many other offices and benefices it was being proposed to add that of Chamberlain of the Holy See, Cardinal Riario, who held the office, being grievously ill and his recovery despaired of. Together with that office it was the Pope's avowed intention to bestow upon Cesare the palace of the late Cardinal of Mantua, and with it, no doubt, he would receive a proportion of the dead cardinal's benefices.

Cesare was twenty-two years of age at the time; tall, of an athletic slenderness, and exceedingly graceful in his movements, he was acknowledged to be the handsomest man of his age. His face was long and pale, his brow lofty, his nose delicately aquiline. He had long auburn hair, and his hazel eyes, large, quick in their movements, and singularly searching in their glance, were alive with the genius of the soul behind them. He inherited from his father the stupendous health and vigour for which Alexander had been remarkable in his youth, and was remarkable still in his old age. The chase had ever been Cesare's favourite pastime, and the wild boar his predilect quarry; and in the pursuit of it he had made good use of his exceptional physical endowments, cultivating them until—like his father before him—he was equal to the endurance of almost any degree of fatigue.

In the Consistory of June 8 he was appointed legate a latere to go to Naples to crown King Federigo of Aragon—for in the meanwhile another change had taken place on the Neapolitan throne by the death of young Ferdinand II, who had been succeeded by his uncle, Federigo, Prince of Altamura.

Cesare made ready for his departure upon this important mission, upon which he was to be accompanied by his brother Giovanni, Duke of Gandia. They were both to be back in Rome by September, when

Gandia was to return to Spain, taking with him his sister Lucrezia.

Thus had the Pope disposed; but the Borgia family stood on the eve of the darkest tragedy associated with its name, a tragedy which was to alter all these plans.

CHAPTER IV. THE MURDER OF THE DUKE OF GANDIA

On June 14, 1497, the eve of Cesare and Giovanni Borgia's departure for Naples, their mother Vannozza gave them a farewell supper in her beautiful vineyard in Trastevere. In addition to the two guests of honour several other kinsmen and friends were present, among whom were the Cardinal of Monreale and young Giuffredo Borgia. They remained at supper until an advanced hour of the night, when Cesare and Giovanni took their departure, attended only by a few servants and a mysterious man in a mask, who had come to Giovanni whilst he was at table, and who almost every day for about a month had been in the habit of visiting him at the Vatican.

The brothers and these attendants rode together into Rome and as far as the Vice-Chancellor Ascanio Sforza's palace in the Ponte Quarter. Here Giovanni drew rein, and informed Cesare that he would not be returning to the Vatican just yet, as he was first "going elsewhere to amuse himself." With that he took his leave of Cesare, and, with one single exception—in addition to the man in the mask—dismissed his servants. The latter continued their homeward way with the cardinal, whilst the Duke, taking the man in the mask upon the crupper of his horse and followed his single attendant, turned and made off in the direction of the Jewish quarter.

In the morning it was found that Giovanni had not yet returned, and his uneasy servants informed the Pope of his absence and of the circumstances of it. The Pope, however, was not at all alarmed. Explaining his son's absence in the manner so obviously suggested by Giovanni's parting words to Cesare on the previous night, he

assumed that the gay young Duke was on a visit to some complacent lady and that presently he would return.

Later in the day, however, news was brought that his horse had been found loose in the streets, in the neighbourhood of the Cardinal of Parma's palace, with only one stirrup-leather, the other having clearly been cut from the saddle, and, at the same time, it was related that the servant who had accompanied him after he had separated from the rest had been found at dawn in the Piazza della Giudecca mortally wounded and beyond speech, expiring soon after his removal to a neighbouring house.

Alarm spread through the Vatican, and the anxious Pope ordered inquiries to be made in every quarter where it was possible that anything might be learned. It was in answer to these inquiries that a boatman of the Schiavoni—one Giorgio by name—came forward with the story of what he had seen on the night of Wednesday. He had passed the night on board his boat, on guard over the timber with which she was laden. She was moored along the bank that runs from the Bridge of Sant' Angelo to the Church of Santa Maria Nuova.

He related that at about the fifth hour of the night, just before daybreak, he had seen two men emerge from the narrow street alongside the Hospital of San Girolamo, and stand on the river's brink at the spot where it was usual for the scavengers to discharge their refuse carts into the water. These men had looked carefully about, as if to make sure that they were not being observed. Seeing no one astir, they made a sign, whereupon a man well mounted on a handsome white horse, his heels armed with golden spurs, rode out of that same narrow street. Behind him, on the crupper of his horse, Giorgio beheld the body of a man, the head hanging in one direction and the legs in the other. This body was supported there by two other men on foot, who walked on either side of the horseman.

Arrived at the water's edge, they turned the horse's hind-quarters to

the river; then, taking the body between them, two of them swung it well out into the stream. After the splash, Giorgio had heard the horseman inquire whether they had thrown well into the middle, and had heard him receive the affirmative answer—"Signor, Si." The horseman then sat scanning the surface a while, and presently pointed out a dark object floating, which proved to be their victim's cloak. The men threw stones at it, and so sank it, whereupon they turned, and all five departed as they had come.

Such is the boatman's story, as related in the *Diarium* of Burchard. When the Pope had heard it, he asked the fellow why he had not immediately gone to give notice of what he had witnessed, to which this Giorgio replied that, in his time, he had seen over a hundred bodies thrown into the Tiber without ever anybody troubling to know anything about them.

This story and Gandia's continued absence threw the Pope into a frenzy of apprehension. He ordered the bed of the river to be searched foot by foot. Some hundreds of boatmen and fishermen got to work, and on that same afternoon the body of the ill-fated Duke of Gandia was brought up in one of the nets. He was not only completely dressed—as was to have been expected from Giorgio's story—but his gloves and his purse containing thirty ducats were still at his belt, as was his dagger, the only weapon he had carried; the jewels upon his person, too, were all intact, which made it abundantly clear that his assassination was not the work of thieves.

His hands were still tied, and there were from ten to fourteen wounds on his body, in addition to which his throat had been cut.

The corpse was taken in a boat to the Castle of Sant' Angelo, where it was stripped, washed, and arrayed in the garments of the Captain-General of the Church. That same night, on a bier, the body covered with a mantle of brocade, the face "looking more beautiful than in life," he was carried by torchlight from Sant' Angelo to Santa

Maria del Popolo for burial, quietly and with little pomp.

The Pope's distress was terrible. As the procession was crossing the Bridge of Sant' Angelo, those who stood there heard his awful cries of anguish, as is related in the dispatches of an eye-witness quoted by Sanuto. Alexander shut himself up in his apartments with his passionate sorrow, refusing to see anybody; and it was only by insistence that the Cardinal of Segovia and some of the Pope's familiars contrived to gain admission to his presence; but even then, not for three days could they induce him to taste food, nor did he sleep.

At last he roused himself, partly in response to the instances of the Cardinal of Segovia, partly spurred by the desire to avenge the death of his child, and he ordered Rome to be ransacked for the assassins; but, although the search was pursued for two months, it proved utterly fruitless.

That is the oft-told story of the death of the Duke of Gandia. Those are all the facts concerning it that are known or that ever will be known. The rest is speculation, and this speculation follows the trend of malice rather than of evidence.

Suspicion fell at first upon Giovanni Sforza, who was supposed to have avenged himself thus upon the Pope for the treatment he had received. There certainly existed that reasonable motive to actuate him, but not a particle of evidence against him.

Next rumour had it that Cardinal Ascanio Sforza's was the hand that had done this work, and with this rumour Rome was busy for months. It was known that he had quarrelled violently with Gandia, who had been grossly insulted by a chamberlain of Ascanio's, and who had wiped out the insult by having the man seized and hanged.

Sanuto quotes a letter from Rome on July 21, which states that "it is

certain that Ascanio murdered the Duke of Gandia." Cardinal Ascanio's numerous enemies took care to keep the accusation alive at the Vatican, and Ascanio, in fear for his life, had left Rome and fled to Grottaferrata. When summoned to Rome, he had refused to come save under safeconduct. His fears, however, appear to have been groundless, for the Pope attached no importance to the accusation against him, convinced of his innocence, as he informed him.

Thereupon public opinion looked about for some other likely person upon whom to fasten its indictment, and lighted upon Giuffredo Borgia, Gandia's youngest brother. Here, again, a motive was not wanting. Already has mention been made of the wanton ways of Giuffredo's Neapolitan wife, Doña Sancia. That she was prodigal of her favours there is no lack of evidence, and it appears that, amongst those she admitted to them, was the dead duke. Jealousy, then, it was alleged, was the spur that had driven Giuffredo to the deed; and that the rumour of this must have been insistent is clear when we find the Pope publicly exonerating his youngest son.

Thus matters stood, and thus had public opinion spoken, when in the month of August the Pope ordered the search for the murderer to cease. Bracci, the Florentine ambassador, explains this action of Alexander's. He writes that his Holiness knew who were the murderers, and that he was taking no further steps in the matter in the hope that thus, conceiving themselves to be secure, they might more completely discover themselves.

Bracci's next letter bears out the supposition that he writes from inference, and not from knowledge. He repeats that the investigations have been suspended, and that to account for this some say what already he has written, whilst others deny it; but that the truth of the matter is known to none.

Later in the year we find the popular voice denouncing Bartolomeo d'Alviano and the Orsini. Already in August the Ferrarese

ambassador, Manfredi, had written that the death of the Duke of Gandia was being imputed to Bartolomeo d'Alviano, and in December we see in Sanuto a letter from Rome which announces that it is positively stated that the Orsini had caused the death of Giovanni Borgia.

These various rumours were hardly worth mentioning for their own values, but they are important as showing how public opinion fastened the crime in turn upon everybody it could think of as at all likely to have had cause to commit it, and more important still for the purpose of refuting what has since been written concerning the immediate connection of Cesare Borgia with the crime in the popular mind.

Not until February of the following year was the name of Cesare ever mentioned in connection with the deed. The first rumour of his guilt synchronized with that of his approaching renunciation of his ecclesiastical career, and there can be little doubt that the former sprang from the latter. The world conceived that it had discovered on Cesare's part a motive for the murder of his brother. That motive—of which so very much has been made—shall presently be examined. Meanwhile, to deal with the actual rumour, and its crystallization into history. The Ferrarese ambassador heard it in Venice on February 12, 1498. Capello seized upon it, and repeated it two and a half years later, stating on September 28, 1500: "*etiam amazó il fratello.*"

And there you have the whole source of all the unbridled accusations subsequently launched against Cesare, all of which find a prominent place in Gregorovius's *Geschichte der Stadt Rom*, whilst the rumours accusing others, which we have mentioned here, are there slurred over.

One hesitates to attack the arguments and conclusions of the very eminent author of that mighty *History of Rome in the Middle Ages*, but conscience and justice demand that his chapter upon this subject be

dealt with as it deserves.

The striking talents of Gregorovius are occasionally marred by the egotism and pedantry sometimes characteristic of the scholars of his nation. He is too positive; he seldom opines; he asserts with finality the things that only God can know; occasionally his knowledge, transcending the possible, quits the realm of the historian for that of the romancer, as for instance—to cite one amid a thousand—when he actually tells us what passes in Cesare Borgia's mind at the coronation of the King of Naples. In the matter of authorities, he follows a dangerous and insidious eclecticism, preferring those who support the point of view which he has chosen, without a proper regard for their intrinsic values.

He tells us definitely that, if Alexander had not positive knowledge, he had at least moral conviction that it was Cesare who had killed the Duke of Gandia. In that, again, you see the God-like knowledge which he usurps; you see him clairvoyant rather than historical. Starting out with the positive assertion that Cesare Borgia was the murderer, he sets himself to prove it by piling up a mass of worthless evidence, whose worthlessness it is unthinkable he should not have realized.

"According to the general opinion of the day, which in all probability was correct, Cesare was the murderer of his brother."

Thus Gregorovius in his *Lucrezia Borgia*. A deliberate misstatement! For, as we have been at pains to show, not until the crime had been fastened upon everybody whom public opinion could conceive to be a possible assassin, not until nearly a year after Gandia's death did rumour for the first time connect Cesare with the deed. Until then the ambassadors' letters from Rome in dealing with the murder and reporting speculation upon possible murderers never make a single allusion to Cesare as the guilty person.

Later, when once it had been bruited, it found its way into the

writings of every defamer of the Borgias, and from several of these it is taken by Gregorovius to help him uphold that theory.

Two motives were urged for the crime. One was Cesare's envy of his brother, whom he desired to supplant as a secular prince, fretting in the cassock imposed upon himself which restrained his unbounded ambition. The other—and no epoch but this one under consideration, in its reaction from the age of chivalry, could have dared to level it without a careful examination of its sources—was Cesare's jealousy, springing from the incestuous love for their sister Lucrezia, which he is alleged to have disputed with his brother. Thus, as l'Espinois has pointed out, to convict Cesare Borgia of a crime which cannot absolutely be proved against him, all that is necessary is that he should be charged with another crime still more horrible of which even less proof exists.

This latter motive, it is true, is rejected by Gregorovius. "Our sense of honesty," he writes, "repels us from attaching faith to the belief spread in that most corrupt age." Yet the authorities urging one motive are commonly those urging the other, and Gregorovius quotes those that suit him, without considering that, if he is convinced they lie in one connection, he has not the right to assume them truthful in another.

The contemporary, or quasi-contemporary writers upon whose "authority" it is usual to show that Cesare Borgia was guilty of both those revolting crimes are: Sanazzaro, Capello, Macchiavelli, Matarazzo, Sanuto, Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, Guicciardini, and Panvinio.

A formidable array! But consider them, one by one, at close quarters, and take a critical look at what they actually wrote:

SANAZZARO was a Neapolitan poet and epigrammatist, who could not—his times being what they were—be expected to overlook

the fact that in these slanderous rumours of incest was excellent matter for epigrammatical verse. Therefore, he crystallized them into lines which, whilst doing credit to his wit, reveal his brutal cruelty. No one will seriously suppose that such a man would be concerned with the veracity of the matter of his verses—even leaving out of the question his enmity towards the House of Borgia, which will transpire later. For him a *ben trovato* was as good matter as a truth, or better. He measured its value by its piquancy, by its adaptability to epigrammatic rhymes.

Conceive the heartlessness of the man who, at the moment of Alexander's awful grief at the murder of his son—a grief which so moved even his enemies that the bitter Savonarola, and the scarcely less bitter Cardinal della Rovere, wrote to condole with him—could pen that terrible epigram:

*Piscatorem hominum ne te non, Sexte, putemus,
Piscaris notum retibus ecce tuum.*

Consider the ribaldry of that, and ask yourselves whether this is a man who would immolate the chance of a witticism upon the altar of Truth.

It is significant that Sanazzaro, for what he may be worth, confines himself to the gossip of incest. Nowhere does he mention that Cesare was the murderer, and we think that his silence upon the matter, if it shows anything, shows that Cesare's guilt was not so very much the "general opinion of the day," as Gregorovius asks us to believe.

CAPPELLO was not in Rome at the time of the murder, nor until three years later, when he merely repeated the rumour that had first sprung up some eight months after the crime.

The precise value of his famous "relation" (in which this matter is recorded, and to which we shall return in its proper place) and the

spirit that actuated him is revealed in another accusation of murder which he levels at Cesare, an accusation which, of course, has also been widely disseminated upon no better authority than his own. It is Capello who tells us that Cesare stabbed the chamberlain Perrotto in the Pope's very arms; he adds the details that the man had fled thither for shelter from Cesare's fury, and that the blood of him, when he was stabbed, spurted up into the very face of the Pope. Where he got the story is not readily surmised—unless it be assumed that he evolved it out of his feelings for the Borgias. The only contemporary accounts of the death of this Perrotto—or Pedro Caldes, as was his real name—state that he fell by accident into the Tiber and was drowned.

Burchard, who could not have failed to know if the stabbing story had been true, and would not have failed to report it, chronicles the fact that Perrotto was fished out of Tiber, having fallen in six days earlier—"non libenter." This statement, coming from the pen of the Master of Ceremonies at the Vatican, requires no further corroboration. Yet corroboration there actually is in a letter from Rome of February 20, 1498, quoted by Marino Sanuto in his *Diarii*. This states that Perrotto had been missing for some days, no one knowing what had become of him, and that now "he has been found drowned in the Tiber."

We mention this, in passing, with the twofold object of slaying another calumny, and revealing the true value of Capello, who happens to be the chief "witness for the prosecution" put forward by Gregorovius. "Is it not of great significance," inquires the German historian, "that the fact should have been related so positively by an ambassador who obtained his knowledge from the best sources?"

The question is frivolous, for the whole trouble in this matter is that there were no sources at all, in the proper sense of the word—good or bad. There was simply gossip, which had been busy with a dozen names already.

MACCHIAVELLI includes a note in his Extracts from Letters to the Ten, in which he mentions the death of Gandia, adding that "at first nothing was known, and then men said it was done by the Cardinal of Valencia."

There is nothing very conclusive in that. Besides, incidentally it may be mentioned, that it is not clear when or how these extracts were compiled by Macchiavelli (in his capacity of Secretary to the Signory of Florence) from the dispatches of her ambassadors. But it has been shown—though we are hardly concerned with that at the moment—that these extracts are confused by comments of his own, either for his own future use or for that of another.

MATARAZZO is the Perugian chronicler of whom we have already expressed the only tenable opinion. The task he set himself was to record the contemporary events of his native town—the stronghold of the blood-dripping Baglioni. He enlivened it by every scrap of scandalous gossip that reached him, however alien to his avowed task. The authenticity of this scandalmongering chronicle has been questioned; but, even assuming it to be authentic, it is so wildly inaccurate when dealing with matters happening beyond the walls of Perugia as to be utterly worthless.

Matarazzo relates the story of the incestuous relations prevailing in the Borgia family, and with an unsparing wealth of detail not to be found elsewhere; but on the subject of the murder he has a tale to tell entirely different from any other that has been left us. For, whilst he urges the incest as the motive of the crime, the murderer, he tells us, was Giovanni Sforza, the outraged husband; and he gives us the fullest details of that murder, time and place and exactly how committed, and all the other matters which have never been brought to light.

It is all a worthless, garbled piece of fiction, most obviously; as such it has ever been treated; but it is as plausible as it is untrue, and, at

least, as authoritative as any available evidence assigning the guilt to Cesare.

SANUTO we accept as a more or less careful and painstaking chronicler, whose writings are valuable; and Sanuto on the matter of the murder confines himself to quoting the letter of February 1498, in which the accusation against Cesare is first mentioned, after having given other earlier letters which accuse first Ascanio and then Orsini far more positively than does the latter letter accuse Cesare.

On the matter of the incest there is no word in Sanuto; but there is mention of Doña Sancia's indiscretions, and the suggestion that, through jealousy on her account, it was rumoured that the murder had been committed—another proof of how vague and ill-defined the rumours were.

PIETRO MARTIRE D'ANGHIERA writes from Burgos, in Spain, that he is convinced of the fratricide. It is interesting to know of that conviction of his; but difficult to conceive how it is to be accepted as evidence.

If more needs to be said of him, let it be mentioned that the letter in which he expresses that conviction is dated April 1497—two months before the murder took place! So that even Gregorovius is forced to doubt the authenticity of that document.

GUICCIARDINI is not a contemporary chronicler of events as they happened, but an historian writing some thirty years later. He merely repeats what Capello and others have said before him. It is for him to quote authorities for what he writes, and not to be set up as an authority. He is not reliable, and he is a notorious defamer of the Papacy, sparing nothing that will serve his ends. He dilates with gusto upon the accusation of incest.

Lastly, PANVINTO is in the same category as Guicciardini. He was

not born until some thirty years after these events, and his History of the Popes was not written until some sixty years after the murder of the Duke of Gandia. This history bristles with inaccuracies; he never troubles to verify his facts, and as an authority he is entirely negligible.

In the valuable Diarium of Burchard there is unfortunately a lacuna at this juncture, from the day after the murder (of which he gives the full particulars to which we have gone for our narrative of that event) until the month of August following. And now we may see Gregorovius actually using silence as evidence. He seizes upon that lacuna, and goes so far as to set up the tentative explanation that Burchard "perhaps purposely interrupted his Diary that he might avoid mentioning the fratricide."

If such were the case, it would be a strange departure from Burchard's invariable rule, which is one of cold, relentless, uncritical chronicling of events, no matter what their nature. Besides, any significance with which that lacuna might be invested is discounted by the fact that such gaps are of fairly common occurrence in the course of Burchard's record. Finally it remains to be shown that the lacuna in question exists in the original diaries, which have yet to be discovered.

So much for the valuable authorities, out of which—and by means of a selection which is not quite clearly defined—Gregorovius claims to have proved that the murderer of the Duke of Gandia was his brother Cesare Borgia, Cardinal of Valencia.(1)

1 It is rather odd that, in the course of casting about for a possible murderer of Gandia, public opinion should never have fastened upon Cardinal Alessandro Farnese. He had lately been stripped of the Patrimony of St. Peter that the governorship of this might be bestowed upon Gandia; his resentment had been provoked by that action of the Pope's, and the relations between himself and the Borgias were

strained
in consequence. Possibly there was clear proof that he could have
had no
connection with the crime.

Now to examine more closely the actual motives given by those
authorities and by later, critical writers, for attributing the guilt to
Cesare.

In September of the year 1497, the Pope had dissolved the
marriage of his daughter Lucrezia and Giovanni Sforza, and the
grounds for the dissolution were that the husband was *impotens et
frigidus natura*—admitted by himself.(2)

2 "El S. de Pesaro ha scripto qua de sua mano non haverla mai
cognosciuta et esser impotente, alias la sententia non se potea
dare. El
prefato S. dice pero haver scripto cosi per obedire el Duca de
Milano et
Aschanio" (Collenuccio's letter from Rome to the Duke of Ferrara,
Dec.
25, 1497).

If you know anything of the Italy of to-day, you will be able to
conceive for yourself how the Italy of the fifteenth century must have
held her sides and pealed her laughter at the contemptible spectacle
of an unfortunate who afforded such reason to be bundled out of a
nuptial bed. The echo of that mighty burst of laughter must have rung
from Calabria to the Alps, and well may it have filled the handsome
weakling who was the object of its cruel ridicule with a talion fury. The
weapons he took up wherewith to defend himself were a little obvious.
He answered the odious reflections upon his virility by a wholesale
charge of incest against the Borgia family; he screamed that what
had been said of him was a lie invented by the Borgias to serve their
own unutterable ends.(1) Such was the accusation with which the
squirming Lord of Pesaro retaliated, and, however obvious, yet it was
not an accusation that the world of his day would lightly cast aside, for

all that the perspicacious may have rated it at its proper value.

1 "Et mancho se e curato de fare prova de qua con Done per poterne
chiarire el Rev. Legato che era qua, sebbene sua Excellentia
tastandolo
sopra cio gli ne abbia facto offerta." And further: "Anzi haverla
conosciuta infinite volte, ma chel Papa non geiha tolta per altro se
non per usare con lei" (Costabili's letter from Milan to the Duke of
Ferrara, June 23, 1497).

What is of great importance to students of the history of the Borgias is that this was the first occasion on which the accusation of incest was raised. Of course it persisted; such a charge could not do otherwise. But now that we see in what soil it had its roots we shall know what importance to attach to it.

Not only did it persist, but it developed, as was but natural. Cesare and the dead Gandia were included in it, and presently it suggested a motive—not dreamed of until then—why Cesare might have been his brother's murderer.

Then, early in 1498, came the rumour that Cesare was intending to abandon the purple, and later Writers, from Capello down to our own times, have chosen to see in Cesare's supposed contemplation of that step a motive so strong for the crime as to prove it in the most absolutely conclusive manner. In no case could it be such proof, even if it were admitted as a motive. But is it really so to be admitted? Did such a motive exist at all? Does it really follow—as has been taken for granted—that Cesare must have remained an ecclesiastic had Gandia lived? We cannot see that it does. Indeed, such evidence as there is, when properly considered, points in the opposite direction, even if no account is taken of the fact that this was not the first occasion on which it was proposed that Cesare should abandon the ecclesiastical career, as is shown by the Ferrarese ambassador's dispatches of March 1493.

It is contended that Gandia was a stumbling-block to Cesare, and that Gandia held the secular possessions which Cesare coveted; but if that were really the case why, when eventually (some fourteen months after Gandia's death) Cesare doffed the purple to replace it by a soldier's harness, did he not assume the secular possessions that had been his brother's?

His dead brother's lands and titles went to his dead brother's son, whilst Cesare's career was totally different, as his aims were totally different, from any that had been Gandia's, or that might have been Gandia's had the latter lived. True, Cesare became Captain-General of the Church in his dead brother's place; but for that his brother's death was not necessary. Gandia had neither the will nor the intellect to undertake the things that awaited Cesare. He was a soft-natured, pleasure-loving youth, whose way of life was already mapped out for him. His place was at Gandia, in Spain, and, whilst he might have continued lord of all the possessions that were his, it would have been Cesare's to become Duke of Valentinois, and to have made himself master of Romagna, precisely as he did.

In conclusion, Gandia's death no more advanced, than his life could have impeded, the career which Cesare afterwards made his own, and to say that Cesare murdered him to supplant him is to set up a theory which the subsequent facts of Cesare's life will nowise justify.

It is idle of Gregorovius to say that the logic of the crime is inexorable—in its assigning the guilt to Cesare—fatuous of him to suppose that, as he claims, he has definitely proved Cesare to be his brother's murderer.

There is much against Cesare Borgia, but it never has been proved, and never will be proved, that he was a fratricide. Indeed the few really known facts of the murder all point to a very different conclusion—a conclusion more or less obvious, which has been discarded, presumably for no better reason than because it was

obvious.

Where was all this need to go so far afield in quest of a probable murderer imbued with political motives? Where the need to accuse in turn every enemy that Gandia could possibly possess before finally fastening upon his own brother?

Certain evidence is afforded by the known facts of the case, scant as they are. It may not amount to much, but at least it is sufficient to warrant a plausible conclusion, and there is no justification for discarding it in favour of something for which not a particle of evidence is forthcoming.

There is, first of all, the man in the mask to be accounted for. That he is connected with the crime is eminently probable, if not absolutely certain.

It is to be remembered that for a month—according to Burchard—he had been in the habit of visiting Gandia almost daily. He comes to Vannozza's villa on the night of the murder. Is it too much to suppose that he brought a message from some one from whom he was in the habit of bringing messages?

He was seen last on the crupper of Gandia's horse as the latter rode away towards the Jewish quarter.⁽¹⁾ Gandia himself announced that he was bound on pleasure—going to amuse himself. Even without the knowledge which we possess of his licentious habits, no doubt could arise as to the nature of the amusement upon which he was thus bound at dead of night; and there are the conclusions formed in the morning by his father, when it was found that Gandia had not returned.

¹ The Ghetto was not yet in existence. It was not built until 1556, under Paul IV.

Is it so very difficult to conceive that Gandia, in the course of the

assigination to which he went, should have fallen into the hands of an irate father, husband, or brother? Is it not really the obvious inference to draw from the few facts that we possess? That it was the inference drawn by the Pope and clung to even some time after the crime and while rumours of a different sort were rife, is shown by the perquisition made in the house of Antonio Pico della Mirandola, who had a daughter whom it was conceived might have been the object of the young duke's nocturnal visit, and whose house was near the place where Gandia was flung into the Tiber.

We could hazard speculations that would account for the man in the mask, but it is not our business to speculate save where the indications are fairly clear.

Let us consider the significance of Gandia's tied hands and the wounds upon his body in addition to the mortal gash across his throat. To what does this condition point? Surely not to a murder of expediency so much as to a fierce, lustful butchery of vengeance. Surely it suggests that Gandia may have been tortured before his throat was cut. Why else were his wrists pinioned? Had he been swiftly done to death there would have been no need for that. Had hired assassins done the work they would not have stayed to pinion him, nor do we think they would have troubled to fling him into the river; they would have slain and left him where he fell.

The whole aspect of the case suggests the presence of the master, of the personal enemy himself. We can conceive Gandia's wrists being tied, to the end that this personal enemy might do his will upon the wretched young man, dealing him one by one the ten or fourteen wounds in the body before making an end of him by cutting his throat. We cannot explain the pinioned wrists in any other way. Then the man on the handsome white horse, the man whom the four others addressed as men address their lord. Remember his gold spurs—a trifle, perhaps; but hired assassins do not wear gold spurs, even

though their bestriding handsome white horses may be explainable.

Surely that was the master, the personal enemy himself—and it was not Cesare, for Cesare at the time was at the Vatican.

There we must leave the mystery of the murder of the Duke of Gandia; but we leave it convinced that, such scant evidence as there is, points to an affair of sordid gallantry, and nowise implicates his brother Cesare.

CHAPTER V. THE RENUNCIATION OF THE PURPLE

At the Consistory of June 19, 1497 the Sacred College beheld a broken-hearted old man who declared that he had done with the world, and that henceforth life could offer him nothing that should endear it to him.

"A greater sorrow than this could not be ours, for we loved him exceedingly, and now we can hold neither the Papacy nor any other thing as of concern. Had we seven Papacies, we would give them all to restore the duke to life." So ran his bitter lament.

He denounced his course of life as not having been all that it should have been, and appeared to see in the murder of his son a punishment for the evil of his ways. Much has been made of this, and quite unnecessarily. It has been taken eagerly as an admission of his unparalleled guilt. An admission of guilt it undoubtedly was; but what man is not guilty? and how many men—ay, and saints even—in the hour of tribulation have cried out that they were being made to feel the wrath of God for the sins that no man is without?

If humanity contains a type that would not have been seen in such a cause for sorrow a visitation of God, it is the type of inhuman monster to which we are asked to believe that Alexander VI belonged. A sinner unquestionably he was, and a great one; but a human sinner, and not an incarnate devil, else there could have been no such outcry from him in such an hour as this.

He announced that henceforth the spiritual needs of the Church should be his only care. He inveighed against the corruption of the ecclesiastical estate, confessing himself aware of how far it had strayed from the ancient discipline and from the laws that had been framed to bridle licence and cupidity, which were now rampant and unchecked; and he proclaimed his intention to reform the Curia and the Church of Rome. To this end he appointed a commission consisting of the Cardinal-Bishops Oliviero Caraffa and Giorgio Costa, the Cardinal-Priests Antonietto Pallavicino and Gianantonio Sangiorgio, and the Cardinal-Deacons Francesco Piccolomini and Raffaele Riario.

There was even a suggestion that he was proposing to abdicate, but that he was prevailed upon to do nothing until his grief should have abated and his judgement be restored to its habitual calm. This suggestion, however, rests upon no sound authority.

Letters of condolence reached him on every hand. Even his arch-enemy, Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, put aside his rancour in the face of the Pope's overwhelming grief—and also because it happened to consort with his own interests, as will presently transpire. He wrote to Alexander from France that he was truly pained to the very soul of him in his concern for the Pope's Holiness—a letter which, no doubt, laid the foundations to the reconciliation that was toward between them.

Still more remarkable was it that the thaumaturgical Savonarola should have paused in the atrabilious invective with which he was inflaming Florence against the Pope, should have paused to send him a letter of condolence in which he prayed that the Lord of all mercy might comfort his Holiness in his tribulation.

That letter is a singular document; singularly human, yielding a singular degree of insight into the nature of the man who penned it. A whole chapter of intelligent speculation upon the character of

Savonarola, based upon a study of externals, could not reveal as much of the mentality of that fanatical demagogue as the consideration of just this letter.

The sympathy by which we cannot doubt it to have been primarily inspired is here overspread by the man's rampant fanaticism, there diluted by the prophecies from which he cannot even now refrain; and, throughout, the manner is that of the pulpit-thumping orator. The first half of his letter is a prelude in the form of a sermon upon Faith, all very trite and obvious; and the notion of this excommunicated friar holding forth to the Pope's Holiness in polemical platitudes delivered with all the authority of inspired discoveries of his own is one more proof that at the root of fanaticism in all ages and upon all questions, lies an utter lack of a sense of fitness and proportion. Having said that "the just man liveth in the Lord by faith," and that "the Lord in His mercy passeth over all our sins," he proclaims that he announces things of which he is assured, and for which he is ready to suffer all persecutions, and begs his Holiness to turn a favourable eye upon the work of faith in which he is labouring, and to give heed no more to the impious, promising the Holy Father that thus shall the Lord bestow upon him the essence of joy instead of the spirit of grief. Having begun, as we have seen, with an assurance that "the Lord in His mercy passeth over all our sins," he concludes by prophesying, with questionable logic, that "the thunders of His wrath will ere long be heard." Nor does he omit to mention—with an apparent arrogance that again betrays that same want of a sense of proportion—that all his predictions are true.

His letter, however, and that of Cardinal della Rovere, among so many others, show us how touched was the world by the Pope's loss and overwhelming grief, how shocked at the manner in which this had been brought about.

The commission which Alexander had appointed for the work of

reform had meanwhile got to work, and the Cardinal of Naples edited the articles of a constitution which was undoubtedly the object of prolonged study and consideration, as is revealed by the numerous erasures and emendations which it bears. Unfortunately—for reasons which are not apparent—it was never published by Alexander. Possibly by the time that it was concluded the aggrandizement of the temporal power was claiming his entire attention to the neglect of the spiritual needs of the Holy See. It is also possible—as has been abundantly suggested—that the stern mood of penitence had softened with his sorrow, and was now overpast.

Nevertheless, it may have been some lingering remnant of this fervour of reform that dictated the severe punishment which fell that year upon the flagitious Bishop of Cosenza. A fine trade was being driven in Rome by the sale of forged briefs of indulgence. Raynaldus cites a Bull on that score addressed by Alexander, in the first year of his pontificate, to the bishops of Spain, enjoining them to visit with punishment all who in that kingdom should be discovered to be pursuing such a traffic. On September 4, 1497, Burchard tells us, three servants of the Pontifical Secretary, the Archbishop of Cosenza (Bartolomeo Florido) were arrested in consequence of the discovery of twenty forged briefs issued by them. In their examination they incriminated their master the archbishop, who was consequently put upon his trial and found guilty. Alexander deposed, degraded, and imprisoned him in Sant' Angelo in a dark room, where he was supplied with oil for his lamp and bread and water for his nourishment until he died. His underlings were burnt in the Campo di Fiori in the following month.

The Duke of Gandia left a widow and two children—Giovanni, a boy of three years of age, and Isabella, a girl of two. In the interests of her son, the widowed duchess applied to the Governor of Valencia in the following September for the boy's investiture in the rights of his deceased father. This was readily granted upon authority from Rome,

and so the boy Giovanni was recognized as third Duke of Gandia, Prince of Sessa and Teano, and Lord of Cerignola and Montefoscolo, and the administration of his estates during his minority was entrusted to his uncle, Cesare Borgia.

The Lordship of Benevento—the last grant made to Giovanni Borgia—was not mentioned; nor was it then nor ever subsequently claimed by the widow. It is the one possession of Gandia's that went to Cesare, who was confirmed in it by the King of Naples.

The Gandia branch of the Borgia family remained in Spain, prospered and grew in importance, and, incidentally, produced St. Francis de Borgia. This Duke of Gandia was Master of the Household to Charles V, and thus a man of great worldly consequence; but it happened that he was so moved by the sight of the disfigured body of his master's beautiful queen that he renounced the world and entered the Society of Jesus, eventually becoming its General. He died in 1562, and in the fulness of time was canonized.

Cesare's departure for Naples as legate a latere to anoint and crown Federigo of Aragon was naturally delayed by the tragedy that had assailed his house, and not until July 22 did he take his leave of the Pope and set out with an escort of two hundred horse.

Naples was still in a state of ferment, split into two parties, one of which favoured France and the other Aragon, so that disturbances were continual. Alexander expressed the hope that Cesare might appear in that distracted kingdom in the guise of an "angel of peace," and that by his coronation of King Federigo he should set a term to the strife that was toward.

The city of Naples itself was now being ravaged by fever, and in consequence of this it was determined that Cesare should repair instead to Capua, where Federigo would await him. Arrived there, however, Cesare fell ill, and the coronation ceremony again suffered

a postponement until August 10. Cesare remained a fortnight in the kingdom, and on August 22 set out to return to Rome, and his departure appears to have been a matter of relief to Federigo, for so impoverished did the King of Naples find himself that the entertainment of the legate and his numerous escort had proved a heavy tax upon his flabby purse.

On the morning of September 6 all the cardinals in Rome received a summons to attend at the Monastery of Santa Maria Nuova to welcome the returned Cardinal of Valencia. In addition to the Sacred College all the ambassadors of the Powers were present, and, after the celebration of the Mass, the entire assembly proceeded to the Vatican, where the Pope was waiting to receive his son. When the young cardinal presented himself at the foot of the papal throne Alexander opened his arms to him, embraced, and kissed him, speaking no word.

This rests upon the evidence of two eye-witnesses,(1) and the circumstance has been urged and propounded into the one conclusive piece of evidence that Cesare had murdered his brother, and that the Pope knew it. In this you have some more of what Gregorovius terms "inexorable logic." He kissed him, but he spake no word to him; therefore, they reason, Cesare murdered Gandia. Can absurdity be more absurd, fatuity more fatuous? *Lucus a non lucendo!* To square the circle should surely present no difficulty to these subtle logicians.

1 "Non dixit verbum Pape Valentinus, nec Papa sibi, sed eo deosculato, descendit de solio" (Burchard's *Diarium*, and "Solo lo bació," in letter from Rome in Sanuto's *Diarii*)

It was, as we have seen, in February of 1498 that it was first rumoured that Cesare intended to put off the purple; and that the

rumour had ample foundation was plain from the circumstance that the Pope was already laying plans whose fulfilment must be dependent upon that step, and seeking to arrange a marriage for Cesare with Carlotta of Aragon, King Federigo of Naples's daughter, stipulating that her dowry should be such that Cesare, in taking her to wife, should become Prince of Altamura and Tarentum.

But Federigo showed himself unwilling, possibly in consideration of the heavy dowry demanded and of the heavy draft already made by the Borgias—through Giuffredo Borgia, Prince of Squillace—upon this Naples which the French invasion had so impoverished. He gave out that he would not have his daughter wedded to a priest who was the son of a priest and that he would not give his daughter unless the Pope could contrive that a cardinal might marry and yet retain his hat.

It all sounded as if he were actuated by nice scruples and high principles; but the opinion is unfortunately not encouraged when we find him, nevertheless, giving his consent to the marriage of his nephew Alfonso to Lucrezia Borgia upon the pronouncement of her divorce from Giovanni Sforza. The marriage, let us say in passing, was celebrated at the Vatican on June 20, 1498, Lucrezia receiving a dowry of 40,000 ducats. But the astute Alexander saw to it that his family should acquire more than it gave, and contrived that Alfonso should receive the Neapolitan cities of Biselli and Quadrata, being raised to the title of Prince of Biselli.

Nevertheless, there was a vast difference between giving in marriage a daughter who must take a weighty dowry out of the kingdom and receiving a daughter who would bring a handsome dowry with her. And the facts suggest that such was the full measure of Federigo's scruples.

Meanwhile, to dissemble his reluctance to let Cesare have his daughter to wife, Federigo urged that he must first take the feeling of Ferdinand and Isabella in this matter.

While affairs stood thus, Charles VIII died suddenly at Amboise in April of that year 1498. Some work was being carried out there by artists whom he had brought from Naples for the purpose, and, in going to visit this, the king happened to enter a dark gallery, and struck his forehead so violently against the edge of a door that he expired the same day—at the age of twenty-eight. He was a poor, malformed fellow, as we have seen, and "of little understanding," Commynes tells us, "but so good that it would have been impossible to have found a kinder creature."

With him the Valois dynasty came to an end. He was succeeded by his cousin, the Duke of Orleans, who, upon his coronation at Rheims, assumed the title of King of France and the Two Sicilies and Duke of Milan—a matter which considerably perturbed Federigo of Aragon and Lodovico Sforza. Each of these rulers saw in that assumption of his own title by Louis XII a declaration of enmity, the prelude to a declaration of open war; wherefore, deeming it idle to send their ambassadors to represent them at the Court of France, they refrained from doing so.

Louis XII's claim upon the Duchy of Milan was based upon his being the grandson of Valentina Visconti, and, considering himself a Visconti, he naturally looked upon the Sforza dominion as no better than a usurpation which too long had been left undisturbed. To disturb it now was the first aim of his kingship. And to this end, as well as in another matter, the friendship of the Pope was very desirable to Louis.

The other matter concerned his matrimonial affairs. No sooner did he find himself King of France than he applied to Rome for the dissolution of his marriage with Jeanne de Valois, the daughter of Louis XI. The grounds he urged were threefold: Firstly, between himself and Jeanne there existed a relationship of the fourth degree and a spiritual affinity, resulting from the fact that her father, Louis XI,

had held him at the baptismal font—which before the Council of Trent did constitute an impediment to marriage. Secondly, he had not been a willing party to the union, but had entered into it as a consequence of intimidation from the terrible Louis XI, who had threatened his life and possessions if not obeyed in this. Thirdly, Jeanne laboured under physical difficulties which rendered her incapable of maternity.

Of such a nature was the appeal he made to Alexander, and Alexander responded by appointing a commission presided over by the Cardinal of Luxembourg, and composed of that same cardinal and the Bishops of Albi and Ceuta, assisted by five other bishops as assessors, to investigate the king's grievance. There appears to be no good reason for assuming that the inquiry was not conducted fairly and honourably or that the finding of the bishops and ultimate annulment of the marriage was not in accordance with their consciences. We are encouraged to assume that all this was indeed so, when we consider that Jeanne de Valois submitted without protest to the divorce, and that neither then nor subsequently at any time did she prefer any complaint, accepting the judgement, it is presumable, as a just and fitting measure.

She applied to the Pope for permission to found a religious order, whose special aim should be the adoration and the emulation of the perfections of the Blessed Virgin, a permission which Alexander very readily accorded her. He was, himself, imbued with a very special devotion for the Mother of the Saviour. We see the spur of this special devotion of his in the votive offering of a silver effigy to her famous altar of the Santissima Nunziata in Florence, which he had promised in the event of Rome being freed from Charles VIII. Again, after the accident of the collapse of a roof in the Vatican, in which he narrowly escaped death, it is to Santa Maria Nuova that we see him going in procession to hold a solemn thanksgiving service to Our Lady. In a dozen different ways did that devotion find expression during his pontificate; and be it remembered that Catholics owe it to Alexander

VI that the Angelus-bell is rung thrice daily in honour of the Blessed Virgin.

To us this devotion to the Mother of Chastity on the part of a churchman openly unchaste in flagrant subversion of his vows is a strange and incongruous spectacle. But the incongruity of it is illumining. It reveals Alexander's simple attitude towards the sins of the flesh, and shows how, in common with most churchmen of his day, he found no conscientious difficulty in combining fervid devotion with perfervid licence. Whatever it may seem by ours, by his lights—by the light of the examples about him from his youth, by the light of the precedents afforded him by his predecessors in St. Peter's Chair—his conduct was a normal enough affair, which can have afforded him little with which to reproach himself.

In the matter of the annulment of the marriage of Louis XII it is to be conceded that Alexander made the most of the opportunity it afforded him. He perceived that the moment was propitious for enlisting the services of the King of France to the achievement of his own ends, more particularly to further the matter of the marriage of Cesare Borgia with Carlotta of Aragon, who was being reared at the Court of France. Accordingly Alexander desired the Bishop of Ceuta to lay his wishes in the matter before the Christian King, and, to the end that Cesare might find a fitting secular estate awaiting him when eventually he emerged from the clergy, the Pope further suggested to Louis, through the bishop's agency, that Cesare should receive the investiture of the counties of Valentinois and Dyois in Dauphiny. On the face of it this wears the look of inviting bribery. In reality it scarcely amounted to so much, although the opportunism that prompted the request is undeniable. Yet it is worthy of consideration that in what concerned the counties of Valentinois and Dyois, the Pope's suggestion constituted a wise political step. These territories had been in dispute between France and the Holy See for a matter of some two hundred years, during which the Popes had been claiming

dominion over them. The claims had been admitted by Louis XI, who had relinquished the counties to the Church; but shortly after his death the Parliament of Dauphiny had restored them to the crown of France. Charles VIII and Innocent VIII had wrangled over them, and an arbitration was finally projected, but never held.

Alexander now perceived a way to solve the difficulty by a compromise which should enrich his son and give the latter a title to replace that of cardinal which he was to relinquish. So his proposal to Louis XII was that the Church should abandon its claim upon the territories, whilst the king, raising Valentinois to the dignity of a duchy, should so confer it upon Cesare Borgia.

Although the proposal was politically sound, it constituted at the same time an act of flagrant nepotism. But let us bear in mind that Alexander did not lack a precedent for this particular act. When Louis XI had surrendered Valentinois to Sixtus IV, this Pope had bestowed it upon his nephew Girolamo, thereby vitiating any claim that the Holy See might subsequently have upon the territory. We judge it—under the circumstances that Louis XI had surrendered it to the Church—to be a far more flagrant piece of nepotism than was Alexander's now.

Louis XII, nothing behind the Pope in opportunism, saw in the concession asked of him the chance of acquiring Alexander's goodwill. He consented, accompanying his consent by a request for a cardinal's hat for Georges d'Amboise, Bishop of Rouen, who had been his devoted friend in less prosperous times, and the sharer of his misfortunes under the previous reign, and was now his chief counsellor and minister. In addition he besought—dependent, of course, upon the granting of the solicited divorce—a dispensation to marry Anne of Brittany, the beautiful widow of Charles VIII. This was Louis's way of raising the price, as it were, of the concession and services asked of him; yet, that there might be no semblance of bargaining, his consent to Cesare's being created Duke of

Valentinois was simultaneous with his request for further favours.

With the Royal Patents conferring that duchy upon the Pope's son, Louis de Villeneuve reached Rome on August 7, 1498. On the same day the young cardinal came before the Sacred College, assembled in Consistory, to crave permission to doff the purple.

After the act of adoration of the Pope's Holiness, he humbly submitted to his brother cardinals that his inclinations had ever been in opposition to his embracing the ecclesiastical dignity, and that, if he had entered upon it at all, this had been solely at the instances of his Holiness, just as he had persevered in it to gratify him; but that, his inclinations and desires for the secular estate persisting, he implored the Holy Father, of his clemency, to permit him to put off his habit and ecclesiastical rank, to restore his hat and benefices to the Church, and to grant him dispensation to return to the world and be free to contract marriage. And he prayed the very reverend cardinals to use their good offices on his behalf, adding to his own their intercessions to the Pope's Holiness to accord him the grace he sought.

The cardinals relegated the decision of the matter to the Pope. Cardinal Ximenes alone—as the representative of Spain—stood out against the granting of the solicited dispensation, and threw obstacles in the way of it. In this, no doubt, he obeyed his instructions from Ferdinand and Isabella, who saw to the bottom of the intrigue with France that was toward, and of the alliance that impended between Louis XII and the Holy See—an alliance not at all to the interests of Spain.

The Pope made a speedy rout of the cardinal's objections with the most apostolic and irresistible of all weapons. He pointed out that it was not for him to hinder the Cardinal of Valencia's renunciation of the purple, since that renunciation was clearly become necessary for the salvation of his soul—"Pro salutae animae suae"—to which, of course, Ximenes had no answer.

But, with the object of conciliating Spain, this ever-politic Pope indicated that, if Cesare was about to become a prince of France, his many ecclesiastical benefices, yielding some 35,000 gold florins yearly, being mostly in Spain, would be bestowed upon Spanish churchmen, and he further begged Ximenes to remember that he already had a "nephew" at the Court of Spain in the person of the heir of Gandia, whom he particularly commended to the favour of Ferdinand and Isabella.

Thus was Cesare Borgia's petition granted, and his return to the world accomplished. And, by a strange chance of homonymy, his title remained unchanged despite his change of estate. The Cardinal of Valencia, in Spain, became the Duke of Valence—or Valentinois—in France and in Italy Valentino remained Valentino.

BOOK III. THE BULL RAMPANT

"Cum numine Caesaris omen."

(motto on Cesare Borgia's sword.)

CHAPTER I. THE DUCHESS OF VALENTINOIS

King Louis XII dispatched the Sieur de Sarenon by sea, with a fleet of three ships and five galleys, to the end that he should conduct the new duke to France, which fleet was delayed so that it did not drop its anchors at Ostia until the end of September.

Meanwhile, Cesare's preparations for departure had been going forward, and were the occasion of a colossal expenditure on the part of his sire. For the Pope desired that his son, in going to France to assume his estate, and for the further purposes of marrying a wife, of conveying to Louis the dispensation permitting his marriage with Anne of Brittany, and of bearing the red hat to Amboise, should display the extraordinary magnificence for which the princes of cultured and luxurious Italy were at the time renowned.

His suite consisted of fully a hundred attendants, what with esquires, pages, lacqueys and grooms, whilst twelve chariots and fifty sumpter-mules were laden with his baggage. The horses of his followers were all sumptuously caparisoned with bridles and stirrups of solid silver; and, for the rest, the splendour of the liveries, the weapons and the jewels, and the richness of the gifts he bore with him were the amazement even of that age of dazzling displays.

In Cesare's train went Ramiro de Lorqua, the Master of his Household; Agabito Gherardi, his secretary; and his Spanish physician, Gaspare Torella—the only medical man of his age who had succeeded in discovering a treatment for the pudendagra which the French had left in Italy, and who had dedicated to Cesare his

learned treatise upon that disease.

As a body-guard, or escort of honour, Cesare took with him thirty gentlemen, mostly Romans, among whom were Giangiordano Orsini, Pietro Santa Croce, Mario di Mariano, Domenico Sanguigna, Giulio Alberini, Bartolomeo Capranica, and Gianbattista Mancini—all young, and all members of those patrician families which Alexander VI had skilfully attached to his own interest.

The latest of these was the Orsini family, with which an alliance was established by the marriage celebrated at the Vatican on September 28 of that same year between Fabio Orsini and Girolama Borgia, a niece of the Pope's.

Cesare's departure took place on October 1, in the early morning, when he rode out with his princely retinue, and followed the Tiber along Trastevere, without crossing the city. He was mounted on a handsome charger, caparisoned in red silk and gold brocade—the colours of France, in which he had also dressed his lacqueys. He wore a doublet of white damask laced with gold, and carried a mantle of black velvet swinging from his shoulders. Of black velvet, too, was the cap on his auburn head, its sable colour an effective background for the ruddy effulgence of the great rubies—"as large as beans"—with which it was adorned.

Of the gentlemen who followed him, the Romans were dressed in the French mode, like himself, whilst the Spaniards adhered to the fashions of their native Spain.

He was escorted as far as the end of the Banchi by four cardinals, and from a window of the Vatican the Pope watched the imposing cavalcade and followed it with his eyes until it was lost to view, weeping, we are told, for very joy at the contemplation of the splendour and magnificence which it had been his to bestow upon his beloved son—"the very heart of him," as he wrote to the King of

France in that letter of which Cesare was the bearer.

On October 12 the Duke of Valentinois landed at Marseilles, where he was received by the Bishop of Dijon, whom the king had sent to meet him, and who now accompanied the illustrious visitor to Avignon. There Cesare was awaited by the Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere. This prelate was now anxious to make his peace with Alexander—and presently we shall look into the motives that probably inspired him, a matter which has so far, we fancy, escaped criticism for reasons that we shall also strive to make apparent. To the beginnings of a reconciliation with the Pontiff afforded by his touching letter of condolence on the death of the Duke of Gandia, he now added a very cordial reception and entertainment of Cesare; and throughout his sojourn in France the latter received at the hands of della Rovere the very friendliest treatment, the cardinal missing no opportunity of working in the duke's interests and for the advancement of his ends.

The Pope wrote to the cardinal commending Cesare to his good graces, and the cardinal replied with protestations which he certainly proceeded to make good.

Della Rovere was to escort Cesare to the king, who was with his Court then at Chinon, awaiting the completion of the work that was being carried out at his Castle of Blois, which presently became his chief residence. But Cesare appears to have tarried in Avignon, for he was still there at the end of October, nor did he reach Chinon until the middle of December. The pomp of his entrance was a thing stupendous. We find a detailed relation of it in Brantôme, translated into prose from some old verses which, he tells us, that he found in the family treasury. He complains of their coarseness, and those who are acquainted with the delightful old Frenchman's own frankness of expression may well raise their brows at that criticism of his. Whatever the coarse liberties taken with the subject—of which we are

not allowed more than an occasional glimpse—and despite the fact that the relation was in verse, which ordinarily makes for the indulgence of the rhymers' fancy—the description appears to be fairly accurate, for it corresponds more or less with the particulars given in Sanuto.

At the head of the cavalcade went twenty-four sumpter-mules, laden with coffers and other baggage under draperies embroidered with Cesare's arms—prominent among which would be the red bull, the emblem of his house, and the three-pointed flame, his own particular device. Behind these came another twenty-four mules, caparisoned in the king's colours of scarlet and gold, to be followed in their turn by sixteen beautiful chargers led by hand, similarly caparisoned, and their bridles and stirrups of solid silver. Next came eighteen pages on horseback, sixteen of whom were in scarlet and yellow, whilst the remaining two were in cloth of gold. These were followed by a posse of lacqueys in the same liveries and two mules laden with coffers draped with cloth of gold, which contained the gifts of which Cesare was the bearer. Behind these rode the duke's thirty gentlemen, in cloth of gold and silver, and amongst them came the duke himself.

Cesare was mounted on a superb war-horse that was all empanoplied in a cuirass of gold leaves of exquisite workmanship, its head surmounted by a golden artichoke, its tail confined in a net of gold abundantly studded with pearls. The duke was in black velvet, through the slashings of which appeared the gold brocade of the undergarment. Suspended from a chain said by Brantôme's poet to be worth thirty thousand ducats, a medallion of diamonds blazed upon his breast, and in his black velvet cap glowed those same wonderful rubies that we saw on the occasion of his departure from Rome. His boots were of black velvet, laced with gold thread that was studded with gems.

The rear of the cavalcade was brought up by more mules and the

chariots bearing his plate and tents and all the other equipage with which a prince was wont to travel.

It is said by some that his horse was shod with solid gold, and there is also a story—pretty, but probably untrue—that some of his mules were shod in the same metal, and that, either because the shoes were loosely attached of intent, or because the metal, being soft, parted readily from the hoofs, these golden shoes were freely cast and left as largesse for those who might care to take them.

The Bishop of Rouen—that same Georges d'Amboise for whom he was bringing the red hat—the Seneschal of Toulouse and several gentlemen of the Court went to meet him on the bridge, and escorted him up through the town to the castle, where the king awaited him. Louis XII gave him a warm and cordial welcome, showing him then and thereafter the friendliest consideration. Not so, however, the lady he was come to woo. It was said in Venice that she was in love with a young Breton gentleman in the following of Queen Anne. Whether this was true, and Carlotta acted in the matter in obedience to her own feelings, or whether she was merely pursuing the instructions she had received from Naples, she obstinately and absolutely refused to entertain or admit the suit of Cesare.

Della Rovere, on January 18, wrote to the Pope from Nantes, whither the Court had moved, a letter in which he sang the praises of the young Duke of Valentinois.

"By his modesty his readiness, his prudence, and his other virtues he has known how to earn the affections of every one." Unfortunately, there was one important exception, as the cardinal was forced to add: "The damsel, either out of her own contrariness, or because so induced by others, which is easier to believe, constantly refuses to hear of the wedding."

Della Rovere was quite justified in finding it easier to believe that

Carlotta was acting upon instructions from others, for, when hard pressed to consent to the alliance, she demanded that the Neapolitan ambassador should himself say that her father desired her to do so—a statement which, it seems, the ambassador could not bring himself to make.

Baffled by the persistence of that refusal, Cesare all but returned a bachelor to Italy. So far, indeed, was his departure a settled matter that in February of 1489, at the Castle of Loches, he received the king's messages for the Pope. Yet Louis hesitated to let him go without having bound his Holiness to his own interests by stronger bonds.

In the task of tracing the annals of the Borgias, the honest seeker after truth is compelled to proceed axe in hand that he may hack himself a way through the tangle of irresponsible or malicious statements that have grown up about this subject, driving their roots deep into the soil of history. Not a single chance does malignity, free or chartered, appear to have missed for the invention of flagitious falsehoods concerning this family, or for the no less flagitious misinterpretation of known facts.

Amid a mass of written nonsense dealing with Cesare's sojourn in France is the oft-repeated, totally unproven statement that he withheld from Louis the dispensation enabling the latter to marry Anne of Brittany, until such time as he should have obtained from Louis all that he desired of him—in short, that he sold him the dispensation for the highest price he could extract. The only motive served by this statement is once more to show Alexander and his son in the perpetration of simoniacal practices, and the statement springs, beyond doubt, from a passage in Macchiavelli's *Extracts from Dispatches to the Ten*. Elsewhere has been mentioned the confusion prevailing in those extracts, and their unreliability as historical evidences. That circumstance can be now established. The passage

in question runs as follows:

"This dispensation was given to Valentinois when he went to France without any one being aware of its existence, with orders to sell it dearly to the king, and not until satisfied of the wife and his other desires. And, whilst these things were toward, the king learnt from the Bishop of Ceuta that the dispensation already existed, and so, without having received or even seen it the marriage was celebrated, and for revealing this the Bishop of Ceuta was put to death by order of Valentinois."

Now, to begin with, Macchiavelli admits that what passed between Pope and duke was secret. How, then, does he pretend to possess these details of it? But, leaving that out of the question, his statement—so abundantly repeated by later writers—is traversed by every one of the actual facts of the case.

That there can have been no secret at all about the dispensation is made plain by the fact that Manfredi, the Ferrarese ambassador, writes of it to Duke Ercole on October 2—the day after Cesare's departure from Rome. And as for the death of Fernando d'Almeida Bishop of Ceuta, this did not take place then, nor until two years later (on January 7, 1499) at the siege of Forlì, whither he had gone in Cesare's train—as is related in Bernardi's *Chronicles* and Bonoli's history of that town.

To return to the matter of Cesare's imminent departure unwed from France, Louis XII was not the only monarch to whom this was a source of anxiety. Keener far was the anxiety experienced on that score by the King of Naples, who feared that its immediate consequence would be to drive the Holy Father into alliance with Venice, which was paying its court to him at the time and with that end in view. Eager to conciliate Alexander in this hour of peril, Federigo approached him with alternative proposals, and offered to invest Cesare in the principalities of Salerno and Sanseverino, which had

been taken from the rebel barons. To this the Pope might have consented, but that, in the moment of considering it, letters reached him from Cesare which made him pause.

Louis XII had also discovered an alternative to the marriage of Cesare with Carlotta, and one that should more surely draw the Pope into the alliance with Venice and himself.

Among the ladies of the Court of Queen Anne—Louis had now been wedded a month—there were, besides Carlotta, two other ladies either of whom might make Cesare a suitable duchess. One of these was a niece of the king's, the daughter of the Comte de Foix; the other was Charlotte d'Albret, a daughter of Alain d'Albret, Duc de Guyenne, and sister to the King of Navarre. Between these two Cesare was now given to choose by Louis, and his choice fell upon Charlotte.

She was seventeen years of age and said to be the most beautiful maid in France, and she had been reared at the honourable and pious Court of Jeanne de Valois, whence she had passed into that of Anne of Brittany, which latter, says Hilarion de Coste,(1) was "a school of virtue, an academy of honour."

Negotiations for her hand were opened with Alain, who, it is said, was at first unwilling, but in the end won over to consent. Navarre had need of the friendship of the King of France, that it might withstand the predatory humours of Castille; and so, for his son's sake, Alain could not long oppose the wishes of Louis. Considering closely the pecuniary difficulties under which this Alain d'Albret was labouring and his notorious avarice, one is tempted to conclude that such difficulties as he may have made were dictated by his reduced circumstances, his impossibility, or unwillingness, to supply his daughter with a dowry fitting her rank, and an unworthy desire to drive in the matter the best bargain possible. And this is abundantly confirmed by the obvious care and hard-headed cunning with which the Sieur d'Albret investigated Cesare's circumstances and sources of revenue to verify their values to be what was alleged.

Eventually he consented to endow her with 30,000 livres Tournois (90,000 francs) to be paid as follows: 6,000 livres on the celebration of the marriage, and the balance by annual instalments of 1,500 livres until cleared off. This sum, as a matter of fact, represented her portion of the inheritance from her deceased mother, Françoise de Bretagne, and it was tendered subject to her renouncing all rights and succession in any property of her father's or her said deceased mother's.

Thus is it set forth in the contract drawn up by Alain at Castel-Jaloux on March 23, 1499, which contract empowers his son Gabriel and one Regnault de St. Chamans to treat and conclude the marriage urged by the king between the Duke of Valentinois and Alain's daughter, Charlotte d'Albret. But that was by no means all. Among other conditions imposed by Alain, he stipulated that the Pope should endow his daughter with 100,000 livres Tournois, and that for his son, Amanieu d'Albret, there should be a cardinal's hat—for the fulfilment

of both of which conditions Cesare took it upon himself to engage his father.

On April 15 the treaty between France and Venice was signed at Blois. It was a defensive and offensive alliance directed against all, with the sole exception of the reigning Pontiff, who should have the faculty to enter into it if he so elected. This was the first decisive step against the House of Sforza, and so secretly were the negotiations conducted that Lodovico Sforza's first intimation of them resulted from the capture in Milanese territory of a courier from the Pope with letters to Cesare in France. From these he learnt, to his dismay, not only of the existence of the league, but that the Pope had joined it. The immediate consequence of this positive assurance that Alexander had gone over to Sforza's enemies was Ascanio Sforza's hurried departure from Rome on July 13.

In the meantime Cesare's marriage had followed almost immediately upon the conclusion of the treaty. The nuptials were celebrated on May 12, and on the 19th he received at the hands of the King of France the knightly Order of St. Michael, which was then the highest honour that France could confer. When the news of this reached the Pope he celebrated the event in Rome with public festivities and illuminations.

Of Cesare's courtship we have no information. The fact that the marriage was purely one of political expediency would tend to make us conceive it as invested with that sordid lovelessness which must so often attend the marriages of princes. But there exists a little data from which we may draw certain permissible inferences. This damsel of seventeen was said to be the loveliest in France, and there is more than a suggestion in Le Feron's *De Gestis Regnum Gallorum*, that Cesare was by no means indifferent to her charms. He tells us that the Duke of Valentino entered into the marriage very heartily, not only for the sake of its expediency, but for "the beauty of the lady,

which was equalled by her virtues and the sweetness of her nature."

Cesare, we have it on more than one authority, was the handsomest man of his day. The gallantry of his bearing merited the approval of so fastidious a critic in such matters as Baldassare Castiglione, who mentions it in his *Il Cortigiano*. Of his personal charm there is also no lack of commendation from those who had his acquaintance at this time. Added to this, his Italian splendour and flamboyance may well have dazzled a maid who had been reared amid the grey and something stern tones of the Court of Jeanne de Valois.

And so it may well be that they loved, and that they were blessed in their love for the little space allotted them in each other's company. The sequel justifies in a measure the assumption. Just one little summer out of the span of their lives—brief though those lives were—did they spend together, and it is good to find some little evidence that, during that brief season at least, they inhabited life's rose-garden.

In September—just four short months after the wedding-bells had pealed above them—the trumpets of war blared out their call to arms. Louis's preparations for the invasion of Milan were complete and he poured his troops through Piedmont under the command of Giangiacomo Trivulzio.

Cesare was to accompany Louis into Italy. He appointed his seventeen-year-old duchess governor and administrator of his lands and lordships in France and Dauphiny under a deed dated September 8, and he made her heiress to all his moveable possessions in the event of his death. Surely this bears some witness, not only to the prevailing of a good understanding between them, but to his esteem of her and the confidence he reposed in her mental qualities. The rest her later mourning of him shows.

Thus did Cesare take leave of the young wife whom he was never to see again. Their child—born in the following spring—he was never to see at all. The pity of it! Ambition-driven, to fulfil the destiny expected of him, he turned his back upon that pleasant land of Dauphiny where the one calm little season of his manhood had been spent, where happiness and peace might have been his lifelong portion had he remained. He set his face towards Italy and the storm and stress before him, and in the train of King Louis he set out upon the turbulent meteoric course that was to sear so deep and indelible a brand across the scroll of history.

CHAPTER II. THE KNELL OF THE TYRANTS

In the hour of his need Lodovico Sforza found himself without friends or credit, and he had to pay the price of the sly, faithless egotistical policy he had so long pursued with profit.

His far-reaching schemes were flung into confusion because a French king had knocked his brow against a door, and had been succeeded by one who conceived that he had a legal right to the throne of Milan, and the intent and might to enforce it, be the right legal or not. It was in vain now that Lodovico turned to the powers of Italy for assistance, in vain that his cunning set fresh intrigues afoot. His neighbours had found him out long since; he had played fast and loose with them too often, and there was none would trust him now.

Thus he found himself isolated, and in no case to withstand the French avalanche which rolled down upon his duchy. The fall of Milan was a matter of days; of resistance there was practically none. Town after town threw up its gates to the invaders, and Lodovico, seeing himself abandoned on all sides, sought in flight the safety of his own person.

Cesare took no part in the war, which, after all, was no war—no more than an armed progress. He was at Lyons with the King, and he did not move into Italy until Louis went to take possession of his new duchy.

Amid the acclamations of the ever-fickle mob, hailing him as its deliverer, Louis XII rode triumphantly into Milan on October 6, attended by a little host of princes, including the Prince of Savoy, the

Dukes of Montferrat and Ferrara, and the Marquis of Mantua. But the place of honour went to Cesare Borgia, who rode at the king's side, a brilliant and arresting figure. This was the occasion on which Baldassare Castiglione—who was in the Marquis of Mantua's suite—was moved to such praise of the appearance and gallant bearing of the duke, and of the splendid equipment of his suite, which outshone those of all that little host of attendant princes.

From this time onward Cesare signs himself "Cesare Borgia of France," and quarters on his shield the golden lilies of France with the red bull of the House of Borgia.

The conditions on which Alexander VI joined the league of France and Venice became apparent at about this time. They were to be gathered from the embassy of his nephew, the Cardinal Giovanni Borgia, to Venice in the middle of September. There the latter announced to the Council of Ten that the Pope's Holiness aimed at the recovery to the Church of those Romagna tyrannies which originally were fiefs of the Holy See and held by her vicars, who, however, had long since repudiated the Pontifical authority, refused the payment of their tributes, and in some instances had even gone so far as to bear arms against the Church.

With one or two exceptions the violent and evil misgovernment of these turbulent princelings was a scandal to all Italy. They ruled by rapine and murder, and rendered Romagna little better than a nest of brigands. Their state of secession from the Holy See arose largely out of the nepotism practised by the last Popes—a nepotism writers are too prone to overlook when charging Alexander with the same abuse. Such Popes as Sixtus IV and Innocent VIII had broken up the States of the Church that they might endow their children and their nephews. The nepotism of such as these never had any result but to impoverish the Holy See; whilst, on the other hand, the nepotism of Alexander—this Pope who is held up to obloquy as the archetype of

the nepotist—had a tendency rather to enrich it. It was not to the States of the Church, not by easy ways of plundering the territories of the Holy See, that he turned to found dominions and dynasties for his children. He went beyond and outside of them, employing princely alliances as the means to his ends. Gandia was a duke in Spain; Giuffredo a prince in Naples, and Cesare a duke in France. For none of these could it be said that territories had been filched from Rome, whilst the alliances made for them were such as tended to strengthen the power of the Pope, and, therefore, of the Church.

The reconsolidation of the States of the Church, the recovery of her full temporal power, which his predecessors had so grievously dissipated, had ever been Alexander's aim; Louis XII afforded him, at last, his opportunity, since with French aid the thing now might be attempted.

His son Cesare was the Hercules to whom was to be given the labour of cleaning out the Augean stable of the Romagna.

That Alexander may have been single-minded in his purpose has never been supposed. It might, indeed, be to suppose too much; and the general assumption that, from the outset, his chief aim was to found a powerful State for his son may be accepted. But let us at least remember that such had been the aims of several Popes before him. Sixtus IV and Innocent VIII had similarly aimed at founding dynasties in Romagna for their families, but, lacking the talents and political acuteness of Alexander and a son of the mettle and capacity of Cesare Borgia, the feeble trail of their ambition is apt to escape attention. It is also to be remembered that, whatever Alexander's ulterior motive, the immediate results of the campaign with which he inspired his son were to reunite to the Church the States which had fallen away from her, and to re-establish her temporal sway in the full plenitude of its dominion. However much he may have been imbued with the desire to exalt and aggrandize his children politically, he did

nothing that did not at the same time make for the greater power and glory of the Church.

His formidable Bull published in October set forth how, after trial, it had been found that the Lords or Vicars of Rimini, Pesaro, Imola, Forlì, Camerino and Faenza, with other feudatories of the Holy See (including the duchy of Urbino) had never paid the yearly tribute due to the Church, wherefore he, by virtue of his apostolic authority, deprived them of all their rights, and did declare them so deprived.

It has been said again and again that this Bull amounting to a declaration of war, was no more than a pretext to indulge his rapacity; but surely it bears the impress of a real grievance, and, however blameable the results that followed out of it, for the measure itself there were just and ample grounds.

The effect of that Bull, issued at a moment when Cesare stood at arms with the might of France at his back, ready to enforce it, was naturally to throw into a state of wild dismay these Romagna tyrants whose acquaintance we shall make at closer quarters presently in the course of following Cesare's campaign. Cesare Borgia may have been something of a wolf; but you are not to suppose that the Romagna was a fold of lambs.

Giovanni Sforza—Cesare's sometime brother-in-law, and Lord of Pesaro—flies in hot haste to Venice for protection. There are no lengths to which he will not go to thwart the Borgias in their purpose, to save his tyranny from falling into the power of this family which he hates most rabidly, and of which he says that, having robbed him of his honour, it would now deprive him of his possessions. He even offers to make a gift of his dominions to the Republic.

There was much traders' blood in Venice, and, trader-like, she was avid of possessions. You can surmise how she must have watered at the mouth to see so fine a morsel cast thus into her lap, and yet to

know that the consumption of it might beget a woeful indigestion. Venice shook her head regretfully. She could not afford to quarrel with her ally, King Louis, and so she made answer—a thought contemptuously, it seems—that Giovanni should have made his offer while he was free to do so.

The Florentines exerted themselves to save Forlì from the fate that threatened it. They urged a league of Bologna, Ferrara, Forlì, Piombino, and Siena for their common safety—a proposal which came to nothing, probably because Ferrara and Siena, not being threatened by the Bull, saw no reason why, for the sake of others, they should call down upon themselves the wrath of the Borgias and their mighty allies.

Venice desired to save Faenza, whose tyrant, Manfredi, was also attainted for non-payment of his tributes, and to this end the Republic sent an embassy to Rome with the moneys due. But the Holy Father refused the gold, declaring that it was too late for payment.

Forlì's attempt to avert the danger was of a different sort, and not exerted until this danger—in the shape of Cesare himself—stood in arms beneath her walls. Two men, both named Tommaso—though it does not transpire that they were related—one a chamberlain of the Palace of Forlì, the other a musician, were so devoted to the Countess Sforza-Riario, the grim termagant who ruled the fiefs of her murdered husband, Girolamo Riario, as to have undertaken an enterprise from which they cannot have hoped to emerge with their lives. It imported no less than the murder of the Pope. They were arrested on November 21, and in the possession of one of them was found a hollow cane containing a letter "so impregnated with poison that even to unfold it would be dangerous." This letter was destined for the Holy Father.

The story reads like a gross exaggeration emanating from men who, on the subject of poisoning, display the credulity of the fifteenth

century, so ignorant in these matters and so prone to the fantastic. And our minds receive a shock upon learning that, when put to the question, these messengers actually made a confession—upon which the story rests—admitting that they had been sent by the countess to slay the Pope, in the hope that thus Forlì might be saved to the Riarii. At first we conclude that those wretched men, examined to the accompaniment of torture, confessed whatever was required of them, as so frequently happened in such cases. Such, indeed, is the very explanation advanced by more than one writer, coupled with the suggestion, in some instances, that the whole affair was trumped up by the Pope to serve his own ends.

They will believe the wildest and silliest of poisoning stories (such as those of Djem and Cardinal Giovanni Borgia) which reveal the Borgias as the poisoners; but, let another be accused and the Borgias be the intended victims, and at once they grow rational, and point out to you the wildness of the statement, the impossibility of its being true. Yet it is a singular fact that a thorough investigation of this case of the Countess Sforza-Riario's poisoned letter reveals it to be neither wild nor impossible but simply diabolical. The explanation of the matter is to be found in Andrea Bernardi's *Chronicles of Forlì*. He tells us exactly how the thing was contrived, with a precision of detail which we could wish to see emulated by other contemporaries of his who so lightly throw out accusations of poisoning. He informs us that a deadly and infectious disease was rampant in Forlì in that year 1499, and that, before dispatching her letter to the Pope, the Countess caused it to be placed upon the body of one who was sick of this infection—thus hoping to convey it to his Holiness.(1)

1 "Dite litre lei le aveva fate toccare et tenere adose ad uno nostro infetado."—Andrea Bernardi (*Cronache di Forlì*).

Alexander held a thanksgiving service for his escape at Santa Maria della Pace, and Cardinal Raffaele Riario fled precipitately from

Rome, justly fearful of being involved in the papal anger that must fall upon his house.

By that time, however, Cesare had already taken the field. The support of Louis, conqueror of Milan, had been obtained, and in this Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere had once more been helpful to the Borgias.

His reconciliation with the Pope, long since deserved by the services he had rendered the House of Borgia in forwarding Cesare's aims, as we have seen, was completed now by an alliance which bound the two families together. His nephew, Francesco della Rovere, had married Alexander's niece, Angela Borgia.

There is a letter from Giuliano to the Pope, dated October 12, 1499, in which he expresses his deep gratitude in the matter of this marriage, which naturally redounded to the advantage of his house, and pledges himself to exert all the influence which he commands with Louis XII for the purpose of furthering the Duke of Valentinois' wishes. So well does he keep this promise that we see him utterly abandoning his cousins the Riarii, who were likely to be crushed under the hoofs of the now charging bull, and devoting himself strenuously to equip Cesare for that same charge. So far does he go in this matter that he is one of the sureties—the other being the Cardinal Giovanni Borgia—for the loan of 45,000 ducats raised by Cesare in Milan towards the cost of his campaign.

This is the moment in which to pause and consider this man, who, because he was a bitter enemy of Alexander's, and who, because earlier he had covered the Pope with obloquy and insult and is to do so again later, is hailed as a fine, upright, lofty, independent, noble soul.

Not so fine, upright, or noble but that he can put aside his rancour when he finds that there is more profit in fawning than in snarling; not

so independent but that he can become a sycophant who writes panegyrics of Cesare and letters breathing devotion to the Pope, once he has realized that thus his interests will be better served. This is the man, remember, who dubbed Alexander a Jew and a Moor; this the man who agitated at the Courts of France and Spain for Alexander's deposition from the Pontificate on the score of the simony of his election; this the man whose vituperations of the Holy Father are so often quoted, since—coming from lips so honest—they must, from the very moment that he utters them, be merited. If only the historian would turn the medal about a little, and allow us a glimpse of the reverse as well as of the obverse, what a world of trouble and misconceptions should we not be spared!

Della Rovere had discovered vain his work of defamation, vain his attempts to induce the Kings of France and Spain to summon a General Council and depose the man whose seat he coveted, so he had sought to make his peace with the Holy See. The death of Charles VIII, and the succession of a king who had need of the Pope's friendship and who found a friend in Alexander, rendered it all the more necessary that della Rovere should set himself to reconquer, by every means in his power, the favour of Alexander.

And so you see this honourable, upright man sacrificing his very family to gain that personal end. Where now is that stubbornly honest conscience of his which made him denounce Alexander as no Christian and no Pope? Stifled by self-interest. It is as well that this should be understood, for this way lies the understanding of many things.

The funds for the campaign being found, Cesare received from Louis three hundred lances captained by Yves d'Allègre and four thousand foot, composed of Swiss and Gascons, led by the Bailie of Dijon. Further troops were being assembled for him at Cesena—the one fief of Romagna that remained faithful to the Church—by Achille

Tiberti and Ercole Bentivogli, and to these were to be added the Pontifical troops that would be sent to him; so that Cesare found himself ultimately at the head of a considerable army, some ten thousand strong, well-equipped and supported by good artillery.

Louis XII left Milan on November 7—one month after his triumphal entrance—and set out to return to France, leaving Trivulzio to represent him as ruler of the Milanese. Two days later Cesare's army took the road, and he himself went with his horse by way of Piacenza, whilst the foot, under the Bailie of Dijon, having obtained leave of passage through the territories of Ferrara and Cremona, followed the Po down to Argenta.

Thus did Cesare Borgia—personally attended by a caesarian guard, wearing his livery—set out upon the conquest of the Romagna. Perhaps at no period of his career is he more remarkable than at this moment. To all trades men serve apprenticeships, and to none is the apprenticeship more gradual and arduous than to the trade of arms. Yet Cesare Borgia served none. Like Minerva, springing full-grown and armed into existence, so Cesare sprang to generalship in the hour that saw him made a soldier. This was the first army in which he had ever marched, yet he marched at the head of it. In his twenty-four years of life he had never so much as witnessed a battle pitched; yet here was he riding to direct battles and to wrest victories. Boundless audacity and swiftest intelligence welded into an amazing whole!

CHAPTER III. IMOLA AND FORLI

Between his departure from Milan and his arrival before Imola, where his campaign was to be inaugurated, Cesare paid a flying visit to Rome and his father, whom he had not seen for a full year. He remained three days at the Vatican, mostly closeted with the Pope's Holiness. At the end of that time he went north again to rejoin his army, which by now had been swelled by the forces that had joined it from Cesena, some Pontifical troops, and a condotta under Vitellozzo Vitelli.

The latter, who was Lord of Castello, had gone to Milan to seek justice at the hands of Louis XII against the Florentines, who had beheaded his brother Paolo—deservedly, for treason in the conduct of the war against Pisa. This Vitellozzo was a valuable and experienced captain. He took service with Cesare, spurred by the hope of ultimately finding a way to avenge himself upon the Florentines, and in Cesare's train he now advanced upon Imola and Forli.

The warlike Countess Caterina Sforza-Riario had earlier been granted by her children full administration of their patrimony during their minority. To the defence of this she now addressed herself with all the resolution of her stern nature. Her life had been unfortunate, and of horrors she had touched a surfeit. Her father, Galeazzo Sforza, was murdered in Milan Cathedral by a little band of patriots; her brother Giangaleazzo had died, of want or poison, in the Castle of Pavia, the victim of her ambitious uncle, Lodovico; her husband, Girolamo Riario, she had seen butchered and flung naked from a

window of the very castle which she now defended; Giacomo Feo, whom she had secretly married in second nuptials, was done to death in Forli, under her very eyes, by a party of insurrectionaries. Him she had terribly avenged. Getting her men-at-arms together, she had ridden at their head into the quarter inhabited by the murderers, and there ordered—as Macchiavelli tells us—the massacre of every human being that dwelt in it, women and children included, whilst she remained at hand to see it done. Thereafter she took a third husband, in Giovanni di Pierfrancesco de'Medici, who died in 1498. By him this lusty woman had a son whose name was to ring through Italy as that of one of the most illustrious captains of his day—Giovanni delle Bande Nere.

Such was the woman whom Sanuto has called "great-souled, but a most cruel virago," who now shut herself into her castle to defy the Borgia.

She had begun by answering the Pope's Bull of attainder with the statement that, far from owing the Holy See the tribute which it claimed, the Holy See was actually in her debt, her husband, Count Girolamo Riario, having been a creditor of the Church for the provisions made by him in his office of Captain-General of the Pontifical forces. This subterfuge, however, had not weighed with Alexander, whereupon, having also been frustrated in her attempt upon the life of the Pope's Holiness, she had proceeded to measures of martial resistance. Her children and her treasures she had dispatched to Florence that they might be out of danger, retaining of the former only her son Ottaviano, a young man of some twenty years; but, for all that she kept him near her, it is plain that she did not account him worthy of being entrusted with the defence of his tyranny, for it was she, herself, the daughter of the bellicose race of Sforza, who set about the organizing of this.

Disposing of forces that were entirely inadequate to take the field

against the invader, she entrenched herself in her fortress of Forlì, provisioning it to withstand a protracted siege and proceeding to fortify it by throwing up outworks and causing all the gates but one to be built up.

Whilst herself engaged upon military measures she sent her son Ottaviano to Imola to exhort the Council to loyalty and the defence of the city. But his mission met with no success. Labouring against him was a mighty factor which in other future cases was to facilitate Cesare's subjection of the Romagna. The Riarii—in common with so many other of the Romagna tyrants—had so abused their rule, so ground the people with taxation, so offended them by violence, and provoked such deep and bitter enmity that in this hour of their need they found themselves deservedly abandoned by their subjects. The latter were become eager to try a change of rulers, in the hope of finding thus an improved condition of things; a worse, they were convinced, would be impossible.

So detested were the Riarii and so abhorred the memory they left behind them in Imola that for years afterwards the name of Cesare Borgia was blessed there as that of a minister of divine justice ("*tanquam minister divina justitiae*") who had lifted from them the harsh yoke by which they had been oppressed.

And so it came to pass that, before ever Cesare had come in sight of Imola, he was met by several of its gentlemen who came to offer him the town, and he received a letter from the pedagogue Flaminio with assurances that, if it should be at all possible to them, the inhabitants would throw open the gates to him on his approach. And Flaminio proceeded to implore the duke that should he, nevertheless, be constrained to have recourse to arms to win admittance, he should not blame the citizens nor do violence to the city by putting it to pillage, assuring him that he would never have a more faithful, loving city than Imola once this should be in his power.

The duke immediately sent forward Achille Tiberti with a squadron of horse to demand the surrender of the town. And the captain of the garrison of Imola replied that he was ready to capitulate, since that was the will of the people. Three days later—on November 27—Cesare rode in as conqueror.

The example of the town, however, was not followed by the citadel. Under the command of Dionigio di Naldo the latter held out, and, as the duke's army made its entrance into Imola, the castellan signified his resentment by turning his cannon upon the town itself, with such resolute purpose that many houses were set on fire and demolished. This Naldo was one of the best reputed captains of foot of his day, and he had seen much service under the Sforza; but his experience could avail him little here.

On the 28th Cesare opened the attack, training his guns upon the citadel; but it was not until a week later that, having found a weak spot in the walls on the side commanding the town, he opened a breach through which his men were able to force a passage, and so possess themselves of a half-moon. Seeing the enemy practically within his outworks, and being himself severely wounded in the head, Naldo accounted it time to parley. He begged a three-days' armistice, pledging himself to surrender at the end of that time should he not receive reinforcements in the meanwhile; and to this arrangement the duke consented.

The good faith of Naldo has been questioned, and it has been suggested that his asking for three days' grace was no better than a cloak to cover his treacherous sale of the fortress to the besieger. It seems, however, to be no more than one of those lightly-uttered, irresponsible utterances with which the chronicles of the time abound, for Naldo had left his wife and children at Forli in the hands of the Countess, as hostages for his good faith, and this renders improbable the unsupported story of his baseness.

On December 7, no reinforcements having reached him, Naldo made formal surrender of the citadel, safe-conduct having been granted to his garrison.

A week later there arrived at Imola Cesare's cousin, the Cardinal Giovanni Borgia, whom the Pope had constituted legate in Bologna and the Romagna in place of the Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, and whom he had sent to support Cesare's operations with ecclesiastical authority. Cardinal Giovanni, as the Pope's representative, received in the Church of San Domenico the oath of fealty of the city to the Holy See. This was pledged by four representative members of the Council of Thirty; and by that act the conquest and subjection of the town became a fully accomplished fact.

The lesser strongholds of the territory threw up their gates one by one before the advancing enemy, until only Forli remained to be taken. Cesare pushed forward to reduce it.

On his way he passed through Faenza, whose tyrant, Manfredi, deeming himself secure in the protection of Venice and in view of the circumstance that the republic had sent to Rome the arrears of tribute due from his fief, and anxious to conciliate the Pope, received and entertained Cesare very cordially.

At Forli the case of Imola was practically repeated. Notwithstanding that the inhabitants were under the immediate eye of the formidable countess, and although she sent her brother, Alessandro Sforza, to exhort the people and the Council to stand by her, the latter, weary as the rest of the oppressive tyranny of her family, dispatched their representatives to Cesare to offer him the town.

The Countess's valour was of the sort that waxes as the straits become more desperate. Since the town abandoned and betrayed her, she would depend upon her citadel, and by a stubborn resistance make Cesare pay as dearly as possible for the place. To the danger

which she seems almost eager to incur for her own part, this strong-minded, comely matron will not subject the son she has kept beside her until now; and so she packs Ottaviano off to Florence and safety. That done, she gives her mutinous subjects a taste of her anger by attempting to seize half a dozen of the principal citizens of Forli. As it happened, not only did this intent miscarry, but it went near being the means of involving her in battle even before the duke's arrival; for the people, getting wind of the affair, took up arms to defend their threatened fellow-citizens.

She consoled herself, however, by seizing the persons of Nicolo Tornielli and Lodovico Ercolani, whom the Council had sent to inform her that their representatives had gone to Cesare with the offer of the town. Further, to vent her rage and signify her humour, she turned her cannon upon the Communal Palace and shattered the tower of it.

Meanwhile Cesare advanced. It was again Tiberti who now rode forward with his horse to demand the surrender of Forli. This was accorded as readily as had been that of Imola, whereupon Cesare came up to take possession in person; but, despite the cordial invitation of the councillors, he refused to enter the gates until he had signed the articles of capitulation.

On December 19, under a deluge of rain, Cesare, in full armour, the banner of the Church borne ahead of him, rode into Forli with his troops. He was housed in the palace of Count Luffo Nomaglie (one of the gentlemen whom Caterina had hoped to capture), and his men were quartered through the town. These foreign soldiers of his seem to have got a little out of hand here at Forli, and they committed a good many abuses, to the dismay and discomfort of the Citizens.

Sanuto comments upon this with satisfaction, accounting the city well served for having yielded herself up like a strumpet. It is a comment more picturesque than just, for obviously Forli did not surrender through pusillanimity, but to the end that it might be

delivered from the detestable rule of the Riarii.

The city occupied, it now remained to reduce the fortress and bring its warrior-mistress to terms. Cesare set about this at once, nor allowed the Christmas festivities to interfere with his labours, but kept his men at work to bring the siege-guns into position. On Christmas Day the countess belatedly attempted a feeble ruse in the hope of intimidating them. She flew from her battlements a banner, bearing the device of the lion of St. Mark, thinking to trick Cesare into the belief that she had obtained the protection of Venice, or, perhaps, signifying thus that she threw herself into the arms of the republic, making surrender of her fiefs to the Venetians to the end that she might spite a force which she could not long withstand—as Giovanni Sforza had sought to do.

But Cesare, nowise disturbed by that banner, pursued his preparations, which included the mounting of seven cannons and ten falconets in the square before the Church of St. John the Baptist. When all was ready for the bombardment, he made an effort to cause her to realize the hopelessness of her resistance and the vain sacrifice of life it must entail. He may have been moved to this by the valour she displayed, or it may have been that he obeyed the instincts of generalship which made him ever miserly in the matter of the lives of his soldiers. Be that as it may, with intent to bring her to a reasonable view of the situation, he rode twice to the very edge of the ditch to parley with her; but all that came of his endeavours was that on the occasion of his second appeal to her, he had a narrow escape of falling a victim to her treachery, and so losing his life.

She came down from the ramparts, and, ordering the lowering of the bridge, invited him to meet her upon it that there they might confer more at their ease, having, meanwhile, instructed her castellan to raise the bridge again the moment the duke should set foot upon it. The castellan took her instructions too literally, for even as the duke

did set one foot upon it there was a grind and clank of machinery, and the great structure swung up and clattered into place. The duke remained outside, saved by a too great eagerness on the part of those who worked the winches, for had they waited but a second longer they must have trapped him.

Cesare returned angry to Forli, and set a price upon Caterina's head—20,000 ducats if taken alive, 10,000 if dead; and on the morrow he opened fire. For a fortnight this was continued without visible result, and daily the countess was to be seen upon the walls with her castellan, directing the defences. But on January 12, Cesare's cannon having been concentrated upon one point, a breach was opened at last. Instantly the waiting citizens, who had been recruited for the purpose, made forward with their faggots, heaping them up in the moat until a passage was practicable. Over this went Cesare's soldiers to force an entrance.

A stubborn fight ensued within the ravelin, where the duke's men were held in check by the defenders, and not until some four hundred corpses choked that narrow space did the besieged give ground before them.

Like most of the Italian fortresses of the period, the castle of Forli consisted of a citadel within a citadel. In the heart of the main fabric—but cut off from it again by its own moat—arose the great tower known as the Maschio. This was ever the last retreat of the besieged when the fortress itself had been carried by assault, and, in the case of the Maschio of the Citadel of Forli, so stout was its construction that it was held to be practically invulnerable.

Had the countess's soldiers made their retreat in good order to this tower, where all the munitions and provisions were stored, Cesare would have found the siege but in the beginning; but in the confusion of that grim hour, besieged and besiegers, Borgian and Riarian, swept forward interlocked, a writhing, hacking, bleeding mob of men-

at-arms. Thus they flung themselves in a body across the bridge that spanned the inner moat, and so into the Maschio, whilst the stream of Cesare's soldiers that poured uninterruptedly across in the immediate wake of that battling mass rendered it impossible for the defenders to take up the bridge.

Within the tower the carnage went on, and the duke's men hacked their way through what remained of the Forlivese until they had made themselves masters of that inner stronghold whither Caterina had sought her last refuge.

A Burgundian serving under the Bailie of Dijon was the first to come upon her in the room to which she had fled with a few attendants and a handful of men, amongst whom were Alessandro Sforza, Paolo Riario, and Scipione Riario—this last an illegitimate son of her first husband's, whom she had adopted. The Burgundian declared her his prisoner, and held her for the price that had been set upon her head until the arrival of Cesare, who entered the citadel with his officers a little while after the final assault had been delivered.

Cesare received and treated her with the greatest courtesy, and, seeing her for the moment destitute, he presented her with a purse containing two hundred ducats for her immediate needs. Under his escort she left the castle, and was conducted, with her few remaining servants, to the Nomaglie Palace to remain in the Duke's care, his prisoner. Her brother and the other members of her family found with her were similarly made prisoners.

After her departure the citadel was given over to pillage, and all hell must have raged in it if we may judge from an incident related by Bernardi in his chronicles. A young clerk, named Evangelista da Monsignane, being seized by a Burgundian soldier who asked him if he had any money, produced and surrendered a purse containing thirteen ducats, and so got out of the mercenaries' clutches, but only to fall into the hands of others, one of whom again declared him a

prisoner. The poor youth, terrified at the violence about him, and eager to be gone from that shambles, cried out that, if they would let him go, he would pay them a ransom of a hundred ducats.

Thereupon "Surrender to me!" cried one of the soldiers, and, as the clerk was about to do so, another, equally greedy for the ransom, thrust himself forward. "No. Surrender to me, rather," demanded this one.

The first insisted that the youth was his prisoner, whereupon the second brandished his sword, threatening to kill Evangelista. The clerk, in a panic, flung himself into the arms of a monk who was with him, crying out for mercy, and there in the monk's arms he was brutally slain, "to put an end," said his murderer, "to the dispute."

Forlimpopoli surrendered a few days later to Yves d'Allègre, whom Cesare had sent thither, whilst in Forli, as soon as he had reduced the citadel, and before even attempting to repair the damage done, the duke set about establishing order and providing for the dispensation of justice, exerting to that end the rare administrative ability which not even his bitterest detractors have denied him.

He sent a castellan to Forlimpopoli and fetched from Imola a Podestà for Forli.⁽¹⁾ He confirmed the Council of Forty that ruled Forli—being ten for each quarter of the city—and generally made sound and wise provision for the town's well-being, which we shall presently see bearing fruit.

¹ It was customary throughout Italy that the Podestà, or chief magistrate, should never be a native of the town—rarely of the State—in which he held his office. Thus, having no local interests or relationships, he was the likelier to dispense justice with desirable single-mindedness.

Next the repairing of the fortress claimed his attention, and he

disposed for this, entrusting the execution of his instructions to Ramiro de Lorqua, whom he left behind as governor. In the place where the breach was opened by his cannon he ordered the placing of a marble panel bearing his arms; and there it is to be seen to this day: Dexter, the sable bars of the House of Lenzol; Sinister, the Borgia bull in chief, and the lilies of France; and, superimposed, an inescutcheon bearing the Pontifical arms.

All measures being taken so far as Forli was concerned, Cesare turned his attention to Pesaro, and prepared to invade it. Before leaving, however, he awaited the return of his absent cousin, the Cardinal Giovanni Borgia, who, as papal legate, was to receive the oath of fealty of the town; but, instead of the cardinal whom he was expecting, came a messenger with news of his death of fever at Fossombrone.

Giovanni Borgia had left Forli on December 28 to go to Cesena, with intent, it was said, to recruit to his cousin's army those men of Rimini, who, exiled and in rebellion against their tyrant Malatesta, had sought shelter in that Pontifical fief. Thence he had moved on to Urbino, where—in the ducal palace—he awaited news of the fall of Forli, and where, whilst waiting, he fell ill. Nevertheless, when the tidings of Cesare's victory reached him, he insisted upon getting to horse, to repair to Forli; but, discovering himself too ill to keep the saddle, he was forced to abandon the journey at Fossombrone, whilst the outcome of the attempt was an aggravation of the fever resulting in the cardinal's death.

Cesare appears to have been deeply grieved by the loss of Giovanni, and there is every cause to suppose that a sincere attachment prevailed between the cousins. Yet Cesare has been charged with his death, and accused of having poisoned him, and, amidst the host of silly, baseless accusations levelled against Cesare, you shall find none more silly or baseless than this. In other

instances of unproven crimes with which he has been charged there may be some vestiges of matter that may do duty for evidence or be construed into motives; here there is none that will serve one purpose or the other, and the appalling and rabid unscrupulousness, the relentless malice of Borgian chroniclers is in nothing so completely apparent as in this accusation.

Sanuto mentions the advices received, and the rumours which say that Cesare murdered him through jealousy, knowing him beloved by the Pope, seeing him a legate, and fearing that he might come to be given the governorship of some Romagna fief.

When Gandia died and Cesare was accused of having murdered him, the motive advanced was that Cesare, a papal legate, resented a brother who was a duke. Now, Cesare, being a duke, resents a cousin's being a papal legate. You will observe that, if this method of discovering motives is pursued a little further, there is no man who died in Cesare's life-time whom Cesare could not be shown to have had motives for murdering.

Sillier even than Sanuto's is the motive with which Giovio attempts to bolster up the accusation which he reports: "He [Cesare] poisoned him because he [Giovanni] favoured the Duke of Gandia."

That, apparently, was the best that Giovio could think of. It is hardly intelligible—which is perhaps inevitable, for it is not easy to be intelligible when you don't quite know, yourself, what you mean, which must have been Giovio's case.

The whole charge is so utterly foolish, stupid, and malicious that it would scarcely be worth mentioning, were it not that so many modern writers have included this among the Borgia crimes. As a matter of fact—and as a comparison of the above-cited dates will show—eighteen days had elapsed between Giovanni Borgia's leaving Cesare at Forli and his succumbing at Urbino—which in itself

disposes of the matter. It may be mentioned that this is a circumstance which those foolish or deliberately malicious calumniators either did not trouble to ascertain or else thought it wiser to slur over. Although, had they been pressed, there was always the death of Djem to be cited and the fiction of the slow-working poison specially invented to meet and explain his case.

The preparations for the invasion of Pesaro were complete, and it was determined that on January 22 the army should march out of Forlì; but on the night of the 21st a disturbance occurred. The Swiss under the Bailie of Dijon became mutinous—they appear throughout to have been an ill-conditioned lot—and they clamoured now for higher pay if they were to go on to Pesaro, urging that already they had served the Duke of Valentinois as far as they had pledged themselves to the King of France.

Towards the third hour of the night the Bailie himself, with these mutineers at his heels, presented himself at the Nomaglie Palace to demand that the Countess Sforza-Riario should be delivered into his hands. His claim was that she was his prisoner, since she had been arrested by a soldier of his own, and that her surrender was to France, to which he added—a thought inconsequently, it seems—that the French law forbade that women should be made prisoners. Valentinois, taken utterly by surprise, and without the force at hand to resist the Bailie and his Swiss, was compelled to submit and to allow the latter to carry the countess off to his own lodging; but he dispatched a messenger to Forlimpopoli with orders for the immediate return of Allègre and his horse, and in the morning, after Mass, he had the army drawn up in the market-place; and so, backed by his Spanish, French, and Italian troops, he faced the threatening Swiss.

The citizens were in a panic, expecting to see battle blaze out at any moment, and apprehensive of the consequences that might

ensue for the town.

The Swiss had grown more mutinous than ever overnight, and they now refused to march until they were paid. It was Cesare's to quell and restore them to obedience. He informed them that they should be paid when they reached Cesena, and that, if they were retained thereafter in his employ, their pay should be on the improved scale which they demanded. Beyond that he made no concessions. The remainder of his harangue was matter to cow them into submission, for he threatened to order the ringing of the alarm-bells, and to have them cut to pieces by the people of Forlì whom their gross and predatory habits had already deeply offended.

Order was at last restored, and the Bailie of Dijon was compelled to surrender back the countess to Cesare. But their departure was postponed until the morrow. On that day, January 23, after receiving the oath of fealty from the Anziani in the Church of San Mercuriale, the duke marched his army out of Forlì and took the road to Pesaro.

Caterina Sforza Riario went with him. Dressed in black and mounted upon a white horse, the handsome amazon rode between Cesare Borgia and Yves d'Allègre.

At Cesena the duke made a halt, and there he left the countess in the charge of d'Allègre whilst he himself rode forward to overtake the main body of his army, which was already as far south as Cattolica. As for Giovanni Sforza, despite the fact that the Duke of Urbino had sent some foot to support him, he was far more likely to run than to fight, and in fact he had already taken the precaution of placing his money and valuables in safety and was disposing, himself, to follow them. But it happened that there was not yet the need. Fate—in the shape of his cousin Lodovico of Milan—postponed the occasion.

On the 26th Cesare lay at Montefiori, and there he was reached by couriers sent at all speed from Milan by Trivulzio. Lodovico Sforza

had raised an army of Swiss and German mercenaries to reconquer his dominions, and the Milanese were opening their arms to receive him back, having already discovered that, in exchanging his rule for that of the French, they had but exchanged King Log for King Stork. Trivulzio begged for the instant return of the French troops serving under Cesare, and Cesare, naturally compelled to accede, was forced to postpone the continuance of his campaign, a matter which must have been not a little vexatious at such a moment.

He returned to Cesena, where, on the 27th, he dismissed Yves d'Allègre and his men, who made all haste back to Milan, so that Cesare was left with a force of not more than a thousand foot and five hundred horse. These, no doubt, would have sufficed him for the conquest of Pesaro, but Giovanni Sforza, encouraged by his cousin's return, and hopeful now of assistance, would certainly entrench himself and submit to a siege which must of necessity be long-drawn, since the departure of the French had deprived Cesare of his artillery.

Therefore the duke disposed matters for his return to Rome instead, and, leaving Ercole Bentivogli with five hundred horse and Gonsalvo de Mirafuente with three hundred foot to garrison Forlì, he left Cesena with the remainder of his forces, including Vitelli's horse, on January 30. With him went Caterina Sforza-Riario, and of course there were not wanting those who alleged that, during the few days at Cesena he had carried his conquest of her further than the matter of her territories⁽¹⁾—a rumour whose parent was, no doubt, the ribald jest made in Milan by Trivulzio when he heard of her capture.

¹ "Teneva detta Madona (la qual é bellissima dona, fiola del Ducha Galeazo di Milan) di zorno e di note in la sna camera, con la quale—judicio omnium—si deva piacer" (Sanuto's Diarii).

He conducted her to Rome—in golden chains, "like another Palmyra," it is said—and there she was given the beautiful Belvedere for her prison until she attempted an escape in the following June;

whereupon, for greater safety, she was transferred to the Castle of Sant' Angelo. There she remained until May of 1501, when, by the intervention of the King of France, she was set at liberty and permitted to withdraw to Florence to rejoin her children. In the city of the lilies she abode, devoting herself to good works until she ended her turbulent, unhappy life in 1509.

The circumstance that she was not made to pay with her life for her attempt to poison the Pope is surely something in favour of the Borgias, and it goes some way towards refuting the endless statements of their fierce and vindictive cruelty. Of course, it has been urged that they spared her from fear of France; but, if that is admitted, what then becomes of the theory of that secret poison which might so well have been employed in such a case as this?

CHAPTER IV. GONFALONIER OF THE CHURCH

Although Cesare Borgia's conquest of Imola and Forli cannot seriously be accounted extraordinary military achievements—save by consideration of the act that this was the first campaign he had conducted—yet in Rome the excitement caused by his victory was enormous. Possibly this is to be assigned to the compelling quality of the man's personality, which was beginning to manifest and assert itself and to issue from the shadow into which it had been cast hitherto by that of his stupendous father.

The enthusiasm mounted higher and higher whilst preparations were being made for his reception, and reached its climax on February 26, when, with overpowering pomp, he made an entrance into Rome that was a veritable triumph.

Sanuto tells us that, as news came of his approach, the Pope, in his joyous impatience and excitement, became unable to discharge the business of his office, and no longer would give audience to any one. Alexander had ever shown himself the fondest of fathers to his children, and now he overflowed with pride in this son who already gave such excellent signs of his capacity as a condottiero, and justified his having put off the cassock to strap a soldier's harness to his lithe and comely body.

Cardinals Farnese and Borgia, with an imposing suite, rode out some way beyond the gates of Santa Maria del Popolo to meet the duke. At the gate itself a magnificent reception had been prepared him, and the entire Pontifical Court, prelates, priests, ambassadors of

the Powers, and officials of the city and curia down to the apostolic abbreviators and secretaries, waited to receive him.

It was towards evening—between the twenty-second and the twenty-third hours—when he made his entrance. In the van went the baggage-carts, and behind these marched a thousand foot in full campaign apparel, headed by two heralds in the duke's livery and one in the livery of the King of France. Next came Vitellozzo's horse followed by fifty mounted gentlemen-at-arms—the duke's Caesarean guard—immediately preceding Cesare himself.

The handsome young duke—"bello e biondo"—was splendidly mounted, but very plainly dressed in black velvet with a simple gold chain for only ornament, and he had about him a hundred guards on foot, also in black velvet, halbert on shoulder, and a posse of trumpeters in a livery that displayed his arms. In immediate attendance upon him came several cardinals on their mules, and behind these followed the ambassadors of the Powers, Cesare's brother Giuffredo Borgia, and Alfonso of Aragon, Duke of Biselli and Prince of Salerno—Lucrezia's husband and the father of her boy Roderigo, born some three months earlier. Conspicuous, too, in Cesare's train would be the imposing figure of the formidable Countess Sforza-Riario, in black upon her white horse, riding in her golden shackles between her two attendant women.

As the procession reached the Bridge of Sant' Angelo a salute was thundered forth by the guns from the castle, where floated the banners of Cesare and of the Church. The press of people from the Porta del Popolo all the way to the Vatican was enormous. It was the year of the Papal Jubilee, and the city was thronged, with pilgrims from all quarters of Europe who had flocked to Rome to obtain the plenary indulgence offered by the Pope. So great was the concourse on this occasion that the procession had the greatest difficulty in moving forward, and the progress through the streets, packed with shouting

multitudes, was of necessity slow. At last, however, the Bridge of Sant' Angelo being crossed, the procession pushed on to the Vatican along the new road inaugurated for the Jubilee by Alexander in the previous December.

From the loggia above the portals of the Vatican the Pope watched his son's imposing approach, and when the latter dismounted at the steps his Holiness, with his five attendant cardinals, descended to the Chamber of the Papagallo—the papal audiencechamber, contiguous to the Borgia apartments—to receive the duke. Thither sped Cesare with his multitude of attendants, and at sight of him now the Pope's eyes were filled with tears of joy. The duke advanced gravely to the foot of the throne, where he fell upon his knees, and was overheard by Burchard to express to his father, in their native Spanish, all that he owed to the Pope's Holiness, to which Alexander replied in the same tongue. Then Cesare stooped and kissed the Pope's feet and then his hand, whereupon Alexander, conquered no doubt by the paternal instincts of affection that were so strong in him, raised his son and took him fondly in his arms.

The festivities in honour of Cesare's return were renewed in Rome upon the morrow, and to this the circumstance that the season was that of carnival undoubtedly contributed and lent the displays a theatrical character which might otherwise have been absent. In these the duke's victories were made the subject of illustration. There was a procession of great chariots in Piazza Navona, with groups symbolizing the triumphs of the ancient Caesar, in the arrangement of which, no doubt, the assistance had been enlisted of that posse of valiant artists who were then flocking to Rome and the pontifical Court.

Yriarte, mixing his facts throughout with a liberal leaven of fiction, tells us that "this is the precise moment in which Cesare Borgia, fixing his eyes upon the Roman Caesar, takes him definitely for his model

and adopts the device 'Aut Caesar, aut nihil.'"

Cesare Borgia never adopted that device, and never displayed it. In connection with him it is only to be found upon the sword of honour made for him when, while still a cardinal, he went to crown the King of Naples. It is not at all unlikely that the inscription of the device upon that sword—which throughout is engraved with illustrations of the career of Julius Caesar—may have been the conceit of the sword-maker as a rather obvious play upon Cesare's name.⁽¹⁾ Undoubtedly, were the device of Cesare's own adoption we should find it elsewhere, and nowhere else is it to be found.

¹ The scabbard of this sword is to be seen in the South Kensington Museum; the sword itself is in the possession of the Caetani family.

Shortly after Cesare's return to Rome, Imola and Forli sent their ambassadors to the Vatican to beseech his Holiness to sign the articles which those cities had drawn up and by virtue of which they created Cesare their lord in the place of the deposed Riarii.

It is quite true that Alexander had announced that, in promoting the Romagna campaign, he had for object to restore to the Church the States which had rebelliously seceded from her. Yet there is not sufficient reason to suppose that he was flagrantly breaking his word in acceding to the request of which those ambassadors were the bearers and in creating his son Count of Imola and Forli. Admitted that this was to Cesare's benefit and advancement, it is still to be remembered that those fiefs must be governed for the Church by a Vicar, as had ever been the case.

That being so, who could have been preferred to Cesare for the dignity, seeing that not only was the expulsion of the tyrants his work, but that the inhabitants themselves desired him for their lord? For the rest, granted his exceptional qualifications, it is to be remembered that the Pope was his father, and—setting aside the guilt and scandal

of that paternity—it is hardly reasonable to expect a father to prefer some other to his son for a stewardship for which none is so well equipped as that same son. That Imola and Forlì were not free gifts to Cesare, detached, for the purpose of so making them, from the Holy See, is clear from the title of Vicar with which Cesare assumed control of them, as set forth in the Bull of investiture.

In addition to his receiving the rank of Vicar and Count of Imola and Forlì, it was in this same month of March at last—and after Cesare may be said to have earned it—that he received the Gonfalon of the Church. With the unanimous concurrence of the Sacred College, the Pope officially appointed him Captain-General of the Pontifical forces—the coveting of which position was urged, it will be remembered, as one of his motives for his alleged murder of the Duke of Gandia three years earlier.

On March 29 Cesare comes to St. Peter's to receive his new dignity and the further honour of the Golden Rose which the Pope is to bestow upon him—the symbol of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant.

Having blessed the Rose, the Pope is borne solemnly into St. Peter's, preceded by the College of Cardinals. Arrived before the High Altar, he puts off his tiara—the conical, richly jewelled cap, woven from the plumage of white peacocks—and bareheaded kneels to pray; whereafter he confesses himself to the Cardinal of Benevento, who was the celebrant on this occasion. That done, he ascends and takes his seat upon the Pontifical Throne, whither come the cardinals to adore him, while the organ peals forth and the choir gives voice. Last of all comes Cesare, dressed in cloth of gold with ermine border, to kneel upon the topmost step of the throne, whereupon the Pope, removing his tiara and delivering it to the attendant Cardinal of San Clemente, pronounces the beautiful prayer of the investiture. That ended, the Pope receives from the hands of

the Cardinal of San Clemente the splendid mantle of gonfalonier, and sets it about the duke's shoulders with the prescribed words: "May the Lord array thee in the garment of salvation and surround thee with the cloak of happiness." Next he takes from the hands of the Master of the Ceremonies—that same Burchard whose diary supplies us with these details—the gonfalonier's cap of scarlet and ermine richly decked with pearls and surmounted by a dove—the emblem of the Holy Spirit—likewise wrought in pearls. This he places upon Cesare's auburn head; whereafter, once more putting off his tiara, he utters the prescribed prayer over the kneeling duke.

That done, and the Holy Father resuming his seat and his tiara, Cesare stoops to kiss the Pope's feet, then rising, goes in his gonfalonier apparel, the cap upon his head, to take his place among the cardinals. The organ crashes forth again; the choir intones the "Introito ad altare Deum"; the celebrant ascends the altar, and, having offered incense, descends again and the Mass begins.

The Mass being over, and the celebrant having doffed his sacred vestments and rejoined his brother cardinals, the Cardinal of San Clemente repairs once more to the Papal Throne, preceded by two chamberlains who carry two folded banners, one bearing the Pope's personal arms, the other the arms of Holy Church. Behind the cardinal follows an acolyte with the censer and incense-boat and another with the holy water and the aspersorio, and behind these again two prelates with a Missal and a candle. The Pope rises, blesses the folded banners and incenses them, having received the censer from the hands of a priest who has prepared it. Then, as he resumes his seat, Cesare steps forward once more, and, kneeling, places both hands upon the Missal and pronounces in a loud, clear voice the words of the oath of fealty to St. Peter and the Pope, swearing ever to protect the latter and his successors from harm to life, limb, or possessions. Thereafter the Pope takes the blessed banners and gives the charge of them to Cesare, delivering into his hands the

white truncheon symbolic of his office, whilst the Master of Ceremonies hands the actual banners to the two deputies, who in full armour have followed to receive them, and who attach them to the lances provided for the purpose.

The investiture is followed by the bestowal of the Golden Rose, whereafter Cesare, having again kissed the Pope's feet and the Ring of the Fisherman on his finger, has the cap of office replaced upon his head by Burchard himself, and so the ceremonial ends.

The Bishop of Isernia was going to Cesena to assume the governorship of that Pontifical fief, and, profiting by this, Cesare appointed him his lieutenant-general in Romagna, with authority over all his other officers there and full judicial powers. Further, he desired him to act as his deputy and receive the oath of fealty of the duke's new subjects.

Meanwhile, Cesare abode in Rome, no doubt impatient of the interruption which his campaign had suffered, and which it seemed must continue yet awhile. Lodovico Sforza had succeeded in driving the French out of his dominions as easily as he, himself, had been driven out by them a few months earlier. But Louis XII sent down a fresh army under La Trémouille, and Lodovico, basely betrayed by his Swiss mercenaries at Novara in April, was taken prisoner.

That was the definite end of the Sforza rule in Milan. For ten years the crafty, scheming Lodovico was left to languish a prisoner in the Castle of Loches, at the end of which time he miserably died.

Immediately upon the return of the French to Milan, the Pope asked for troops that Cesare might resume his enterprise not only against Pesaro, Faenza, and Rimini, but also against Bologna, where Giovanni Bentivogli had failed to support—as in duty bound—the King of France against Lodovico Sforza. But Bentivogli repurchased the forfeited French protection at the price of 40,000 ducats, and so

escaped the impending danger; whilst Venice, it happened, was growing concerned to see no profit accruing to herself out of this league with France and Rome; and that was a matter which her trader spirit could not brook. Therefore, Venice intervened in the matter of Rimini and Faenza, which she protected in somewhat the same spirit as the dog protected the straw in the manger. Next, when, having conquered the Milanese, Louis XII turned his thoughts to the conquest of Naples, and called upon Venice to march with him as became a good ally, the Republic made it quite clear that she was not disposed to move unless there was to be some profit to herself. She pointed out that Mantua and Ferrara were in the same case as Bologna, for having failed to lend assistance to the French in the hour of need, and proposed to Louis XII the conquest and division of those territories.

Thus matters stood, and Cesare had perforce to await the conclusion of the Pisan War in which the French were engaged, confident, however, that, once that was at an end, Louis, in his anxiety to maintain friendly relations with the Pope, would be able to induce Venice to withdraw her protection from Rimini and Faenza. So much accomplished for him, he was now in a position to do the rest without the aid of French troops if necessary. The Jubilee—protracted for a further year, so vast and continuous was the concourse of the faithful, 200,000 of whom knelt in the square before St. Peter's on Easter Day to receive the Pope's blessing—was pouring vast sums of money into the pontifical coffers, and for money men were to be had in plenty by a young condottiero whose fame had been spreading ever since his return from the Romagna. He was now the hope of the soldiers of fortune who abounded in Italy, attracted thither from all quarters by the continual opportunities for employment which that tumultuous land afforded.

It is in speaking of him at about this time, and again praising his personal beauty and fine appearance, that Capello says of him that, if he lives, he will be one of Italy's greatest captains.

Such glimpses as in the pages of contemporary records we are allowed of Cesare during that crowded time of the Papal Jubilee are slight and fleeting. On April 13 we see him on horseback accompanying the Pope through Rome in the cavalcade that visited the four Basilicas to win the indulgence offered, and, as usual, he is attended by his hundred armed grooms in black.

On another occasion we behold him very differently engaged—giving an exhibition of his superb physical gifts, his strength, his courage, and his matchless address. On June 24, at a bull-fight held in Rome—Spanish tauromachia having been introduced from Naples, where it flourished under the Aragon dominion—he went down into the arena, and on horseback, armed only with a light lance, he killed five wild bulls. But the master-stroke he reserved for the end. Dismounting, and taking a doublehanded sword to the sixth bull that was loosed against him, he beheaded the great beast at one single stroke, "a feat which all Rome considered great."

Thus sped the time of waiting, and meanwhile he gathered about him a Court not only of captains of fortune, but of men of art and letters, whom he patronized with a liberality—indeed, a prodigality—so great that it presently became proverbial, and, incidentally, by its proportions provoked his father's disapproval. In the brilliant group of men of letters who enjoyed his patronage were such writers as Justolo, Sperulo, and that unfortunate poet Serafino Cimino da Aquila, known to fame and posterity as the great Aquilano. And it would be, no doubt, during these months that Pier di Lorenzo painted that portrait of Cesare which Vasari afterwards saw in Florence, but which, unfortunately, is not now known to exist. Bramante, too, was of his Court at this time, as was Michelangelo Buonarroti, whose superb group of "Mercy," painted for Cardinal de Villiers, had just amazed all Rome. With Pinturicchio, and Leonardi da Vinci—whom we shall see later beside Cesare—Michelangelo was ever held in the highest esteem by the duke.

The story of that young sculptor's leap into fame may not be so widely known but that its repetition may be tolerated here, particularly since, remotely at least, it touches Cesare Borgia.

When, in 1496, young Buonarroti, at the age of twenty-three, came from Florence to Rome to seek his fortune at the opulent Pontifical Court, he brought a letter of recommendation to Cardinal Sforza-Riario. This was the time of the great excavations about Rome; treasures of ancient art were daily being rescued from the soil, and Cardinal Sforza-Riario was a great dilettante and collector of the antique. With pride of possession, he conducted the young sculptor through his gallery, and, displaying his statuary to him, inquired could he do anything that might compare with it. If the cardinal meant to use the young Florentine cavalierly, his punishment was immediate and poetic, for amid the antiques Michelangelo beheld a sleeping Cupid which he instantly claimed as his own work. Riario was angry; no doubt suspicious, too, of fraud. This Cupid was—as its appearance showed—a genuine antique, which the cardinal had purchased from a Milanese dealer for two hundred ducats. Michelangelo, in a passion, named the dealer—one Baldassare—to whom he had sent the statue after treating it, with the questionable morality of the cinquecentist, so as to give it the appearance of having lain in the ground, to the end that Baldassare might dispose of it as an antique.

His present fury arose from his learning the price paid by the cardinal to Baldassare, from whom Michelangelo had received only thirty ducats. In his wrath he demanded—very arbitrarily it seems—the return of his statue. But to this the cardinal would not consent until Baldassare had been arrested and made to disgorge the money paid him. Then, at last, Sforza-Riario complied with Michelangelo's demands and delivered him his Cupid—a piece of work whose possession had probably ceased to give any pleasure to that collector of the antique.

But the story was bruited abroad, and cultured Rome was agog to see the statue which had duped so astute a judge as Sforza-Riario. The fame of the young sculptor spread like a ripple over water, and it was Cesare Borgia—at that time still Cardinal of Valencia who bought the Cupid. Years later he sent it to Isabella d'Este, assuring her that it had not its equal among contemporary works of art.

CHAPTER V. THE MURDER OF ALFONSO OF ARAGON

We come now to the consideration of an event which, despite the light that so many, and with such assurance, have shed upon it, remains wrapped in uncertainty, and presents a mystery second only to that of the murder of the Duke of Gandia.

It was, you will remember, in July of 1498 that Lucrezia took a second husband in Alfonso of Aragon, the natural son of Alfonso II of Naples and nephew of Federigo, the reigning king. He was a handsome boy of seventeen at the time of his marriage—one year younger than Lucrezia—and, in honour of the event and in compliance with the Pope's insistence, he was created by his uncle Duke of Biselli and Prince of Salerno. On every hand the marriage was said to be a love-match, and of it had been born, in November of 1499, the boy Roderigo.

On July 15, 1500, at about the third hour of the night, Alfonso was assaulted and grievously wounded—mortally, it was said at first—on the steps of St. Peter's.

Burchard's account of the affair is that the young prince was assailed by several assassins, who wounded him in the head, right arm, and knee. Leaving him, no doubt, for dead, they fled down the steps, at the foot of which some forty horsemen awaited them, who escorted them out of the city by the Pertusa Gate. The prince was residing in the palace of the Cardinal of Santa Maria in Portico, but so desperate was his condition that those who found him upon the steps of the Basilica bore him into the Vatican, where he was taken to

a chamber of the Borgia Tower, whilst the Cardinal of Capua at once gave him absolution in articulo mortis.

The deed made a great stir in Rome, and was, of course, the subject of immediate gossip, and three days later Cesare issued an edict forbidding, under pain of death, any man from going armed between Sant' Angelo and the Vatican.

News of the event was carried immediately to Naples, and King Federigo sent his own physician, Galieno, to treat and tend his nephew. In the care of that doctor and a hunchback assistant, Alfonso lay ill of his wounds until August 17, when suddenly he died, to the great astonishment of Rome, which for some time had believed him out of danger. In recording his actual death, Burchard is at once explicit and reticent to an extraordinary degree. "Not dying," he writes, "from the wound he had taken, he was yesterday strangled in his bed at the nineteenth hour."

Between the chronicling of his having been wounded on the steps of St. Peter's and that of his death, thirty-three days later, there is no entry in Burchard's diary relating to the prince, nor anything that can in any way help the inquirer to a conclusion; whilst, on the subject of the strangling, not another word does the Master of Ceremonies add to what has above been quoted. That he should so coldly—almost cynically—state that Alfonso was strangled, without so much as suggesting by whom, is singular in one who, however grimly laconic, is seldom reticent—notwithstanding that he may have been so accounted by those who despaired of finding in his diary the confirmation of such points of view as they happen to have chosen and of such matters as it pleased them to believe and propagate.

That same evening Alfonso's body was borne, without pomp, to St. Peter's, and placed in the Chapel of Santa Maria delle Febbre. It was accompanied by Francesco Borgia, Archbishop of Cosenza.

The doctor who had been in attendance upon the deceased and the hunchback were seized, taken to Sant' Angelo and examined, but shortly thereafter set at liberty.

So far we are upon what we may consider safe ground. Beyond that we cannot go, save by treading the uncertain ways of speculation, and by following the accounts of the various rumours circulated at the time. Formal and absolutely positive evidence of the author of Alfonso's murder there is none.

The Venetian ambassador, the ineffable, gossipmongering Paolo Capello, whom we have seen possessed of the fullest details concerning the Duke of Gandia's death—although he did not come to Rome until two and a half years after the crime—is again as circumstantial in this instance. You see in this Capello the forerunner of the modern journalist of the baser sort, the creature who prowls in quest of scraps of gossip and items of scandal, and who, having found them, does not concern himself greatly in the matter of their absolute truth so that they provide him with sensational "copy." It is this same Capello, bear in mind, who gives us the story of Cesare's murdering in the Pope's very arms that Pedro Caldes who is elsewhere shown to have fallen into Tiber and been drowned, down to the lurid details of the blood's spurting into the Pope's face.

His famous *Relazione* to the Senate in September of 1500 is little better than an epitome of all the scandal current in Rome during his sojourn there as ambassador, and his resurrection of the old affair of the murder of Gandia goes some way towards showing the spirit by which he was actuated and his love of sensational matter. It has pleased most writers who have dealt with the matter of the murder of Alfonso of Aragon to follow Capello's statements; consequently these must be examined.

He writes from Rome—as recorded by Sanuto—that on July 16 Alfonso of Biselli was assaulted on the steps of St. Peter's, and

received four wounds, "one in the head, one in the arm, one in the shoulder, and one in the back." That was all that was known to Capello at the time he wrote that letter, and you will observe already the discrepancy between his statement, penned upon hearsay, and Burchard's account—which, considering the latter's position at the Vatican, must always be preferred. According to Burchard the wounds were three, and they were in the head, right arm, and knee.

On the 19th Capello writes again, and, having stated that Lucrezia—who was really prostrate with grief at her husband's death—was stricken with fever, adds that "it is not known who has wounded the Duke of Biselli, but it is said that it was the same who killed and threw into Tiber the Duke of Gandia. My Lord of Valentinois has issued an edict that no one shall henceforth bear arms between Sant' Angelo and the Vatican."

On the face of it, that edict of Valentinois' seems to argue vexation at what had happened, and the desire to provide against its repetition—a provision hardly likely to be made by the man who had organized the assault, unless he sought, by this edict, to throw dust into the eyes of the world; and one cannot associate after the event and the fear of criticism with such a nature as Cesare's or with such a character as is given him by those who are satisfied that it was he who murdered Biselli.

The rumour that Alfonso had been assailed by the murderer of Gandia is a reasonable enough rumour, so long as the latter remains unnamed, for it would simply point to some enemy of the House of Borgia who, having slain one of its members, now attempts to slay another. Whether Capello actually meant Cesare when he penned those words on July 19, is not as obvious as may be assumed, for it is to be borne in mind that, at this date, Capello had not yet compiled the "relation" in which he deals with Gandia's murder.

On July 23 he wrote that the duke was very ill, indeed, from the

wound in his head, and on the 28th that he was in danger owing to the same wound although the fever had abated.

On August 18 he announces Alfonso's death in the following terms: "The Duke of Biselli, Madonna Lucrezia's husband, died to-day because he was planning the death of the Duke [of Valentinois] by means of an arbalest-bolt when he walked in the garden; and the duke has had him cut to pieces in his room by his archers."

This "cutting-to-pieces" form of death is one very dear to the imagination of Capello, and bears some witness to his sensation-mongering proclivities.

Coming to matters more public, and upon which his evidence is more acceptable, he writes on the 20th that some servants of the prince's have been arrested, and that, upon being put to the question, they confessed to the prince's intent to kill the Duke of Valentinois, adding that a servant of the duke's was implicated. On the 23rd Capello circumstantially confirms this matter of Alfonso's attempt upon Cesare's life, and states that this has been confessed by the master of Alfonso's household, "the brother of his mother, Madonna Drusa."

That is the sum of Capello's reports to the Senate, as recorded by Sanuto. The rest, the full, lurid, richly-coloured, sensational story, is contained in his "relation" of September 20. He prefaces the narrative by informing the Senate that the Pope is on very bad terms with Naples, and proceeds to relate the case of Alfonso of Aragon as follows:

"He was wounded at the third hour of night near the palace of the Duke of Valentinois, his brother-in-law, and the prince ran to the Pope, saying that he had been wounded and that he knew by whom; and his wife Lucrezia, the Pope's daughter, who was in the room, fell into anguish. He was ill for thirty-three days, and his wife and sister, who is

the wife of the Prince of Squillace another son of the Pope's, were with him and cooked for him in a saucepan for fear of his being poisoned, as the Duke of Valentinois so hated him. And the Pope had him guarded by sixteen men for fear that the duke should kill him. And when the Pope went to visit him Valentinois did not accompany him, save on one occasion, when he said that what had not been done at breakfast might be done at supper.... On August 17 he [Valentinois] entered the room where the prince was already risen from his bed, and, driving out the wife and sister, called in his man, named Michieli, and had the prince strangled; and that night he was buried."

Now the following points must arise to shake the student's confidence in this narrative, and in Capello as an authority upon any of the other matters that he relates:

(i) "He was wounded near the palace of the Duke of Valentinois." This looks exceedingly like an attempt to pile up evidence against Cesare, and shows a disposition to resort to the invention of it. Whatever may not have been known about Alfonso's death, it was known by everybody that he was wounded on the steps of St. Peter's, and Capello himself, in his dispatches, had said so at the time. A suspicion that Capello's whole relation is to serve the purpose of heaping odium upon Cesare at once arises and receives confirmation when we consider that, as we have already said, it is in this same relation that the fiction about Pedro Caldes finds place and that the guilt of the murder of the Duke of Gandia is definitely fixed upon Cesare.

(ii) "He ran to the Pope ['Corse dal Papa'] saying that he had been wounded, and that he knew by whom." A man with a wound in his head which endangered his life for over a week would hardly be conscious

on
receiving it, nor is it to be supposed that, had he been conscious, his
assailants would have departed. It cannot be doubted that they left him
for dead. He was carried into the palace, and we know, from Burchard,
that the Cardinal of Capua gave him absolution in articulo mortis, which
abundantly shows his condition. It is unthinkable that he should have
been able to "run to the Pope," doubtful that he should have been able
to speak; and, if he did, who was it reported his words to the Venetian
ambassador? Capello wisely refrains from saying.

(iii) Lucrezia and Sancia attempt to protect him from poison by cooking his food in his room. This is quite incredible. Even admitting
the readiness to do so on the part of these princesses, where was the
need, considering the presence of the doctor—admitted by Capello—sent
from Naples and his hunchback assistant?

(iv) "The Pope had him guarded by sixteen men for fear the duke should
kill him." Yet when, according to Capello, the duke comes on his murderous errand, attended only by Michieli (who has been generally
assumed by writers to have been Don Michele da Corella, one of Cesare's
captains), where were these sixteen guards? Capello mentions the dismissal only of Lucrezia and Sancia.

(v) "Valentinois...said that what had not been done at breakfast might
be done at supper." It will be observed that Capello never once considers it necessary to give his authorities for anything that he states. It becomes, perhaps, more particularly noteworthy than usual in
the case of this reported speech of Cesare's. He omits to say to whom
Cesare addressed those sinister words, and who reported them to him. The statement is hardly one to be accepted without that very

necessary
mention of authorities, nor can we conceive Capello omitting them
had he
possessed them.

It will be seen that it is scarcely necessary to go outside of Capello's own relation for the purpose of traversing the statements contained in it, so far as the death of Alfonso of Aragon is concerned.

It is, however, still to be considered that, if Alfonso knew who had attempted his life—as Capello states that he told the Pope—and knew that he was in hourly danger of death from Valentinois, it may surely be taken for granted that he would have imparted the information to the Neapolitan doctor sent him by his uncle, who must have had his confidence.

We know that, after the prince's death, the physician and his hunchback assistant were arrested, but subsequently released. They returned to Naples, and in Naples, if not elsewhere, the truth must have been known—definite and authentic facts from the lips of eye-witnesses, not mere matters of rumour, as was the case in Rome. It is to Neapolitan writings, then, that we must turn for the truth of this affair; and yet from Naples all that we find is a rumour—the echo of the Roman rumour—"They say," writes the Venetian ambassador at the Court of King Federigo, "that he was killed by the Pope's son."

A more mischievous document than Capello's *Relazione* can seldom have found its way into the pages of history; it is the prime source of several of the unsubstantiated accusations against Cesare Borgia upon which subsequent writers have drawn—accepting without criticism—and from which they have formed their conclusions as to the duke's character. Even in our own times we find the learned Gregorovius following Capello's relation step by step, and dealing out this matter of the murder of the Duke of Biselli in his own paraphrases, as so much substantiated, unquestionable fact. We find in his *Lucrezia Borgia* the following statement: "The affair was no

longer a mystery. Cesare himself publicly declared that he had killed the duke because his life had been attempted by the latter."

To say that Cesare "publicly declared that he had killed the duke" is to say a very daring thing, and is dangerously to improve upon Capello. If it is true that Cesare made this public declaration how does it happen that no one but Capello heard him? for in all other documents there is no more than offered us a rumour of how Alfonso died. Surely it is to be supposed that, had Cesare made any such declaration, the letters from the ambassadors would have rung with it. Yet they will offer you nothing but statements of what is being rumoured!

Nor does Gregorovius confine himself to that in his sedulous following of Capello's Relation. He serves up out of Capello the lying story of the murder of Pedro Caldes. "What," he says of Cesare, to support his view that Cesare murdered Alfonso of Aragon, "could be beyond this terrible man who had poignarded the Spaniard Pedro Caldes...under the Pope's very cloak, so that his blood spurted up into the Pope's face?" This in his History of Rome. In his Lucrezia Borgia he almost improves upon it when he says that "The Venetian ambassador, Paolo Capello, reports how Cesare Borgia stabbed the chamberlain Perotto, etc., but Burchard makes no mention of the fact." Of the fact of the stabbing, Burchard certainly makes no mention; but he does mention that the man was accidentally drowned, as has been considered. It is again—and more flagrantly than ever—a case of proving Cesare guilty of a crime of which there is no conclusive evidence by charging him with another, which—in this instance—there is actually evidence that he did not commit.

But this is by the way.

Burchard's entries in his diary relating to the assault upon Alfonso of Aragon can no more escape the criticism of the thoughtful than can Capello's relation. His forty horsemen, for instance, need explaining.

Apart from the fact that this employment of forty horsemen would be an altogether amazing and incredible way to set about the murder of a single man, it is to be considered that such a troop, drawn up in the square before St. Peter's, must of necessity have attracted some attention. It was the first hour of the night, remember—according to Burchard—that is to say, at dusk. Presumably, too, those horsemen were waiting when the prince arrived. How then, did he—and why was he allowed—to pass them, only to be assailed in ascending the steps? Burchard, presumably, did not himself see these horsemen; certainly he cannot have seen them escorting the murderers to the Pertusa Gate. Therefore he must have had the matter reported to him. Naturally enough, had the horsemen existed, they must have been seen. How, then, does it happen that Capello did not hear of them? nor the Florentine ambassador, who says that the murderers were four, nor any one else apparently?

To turn for a moment to the Florentine ambassador's letters upon the subject, we find in this other Capello—Francesco Capello was his name—accounts which differ alike from Paolo Capello's and from Burchard's stories. But he is careful to say that he is simply repeating the rumours that are abroad, and cites several different versions that are current, adding that the truth of the affair is not known to anybody. His conclusions, however, particularly those given in cipher, point to Cesare Borgia as the perpetrator of the deed, and hint at some such motive of retaliation for an attempt upon his own life as that which is given by the ambassador of Venice.

There is much mystery in the matter, despite Gregorovius's assertion to the contrary—mystery which mere assertion will not dissipate. This conclusion, however, it is fair to draw: if, on Capello's evidence, we are to accept it that Cesare Borgia is responsible for the death of Alfonso of Aragon, then, on the same evidence, we must accept the motive as well as the deed. We must accept as equally exact his thrice-repeated statement in letters to the Senate that the

prince had planned Cesare's death by posting crossbow-men to shoot him.(1)

1 It is extremely significant that Capello's Relazione contains no mention of Alfonso's plot against Cesare's life, a matter which, as we have seen, had figured so repeatedly in that ambassador's dispatches from Rome at the time of the event. This omission is yet another proof of the malicious spirit by which the "relation" was inspired. The suppression of anything that might justify a deed attributed to Cesare reveals how much defamation and detraction were the aims of this Venetian.

Either we must accept all, or we must reject all, that Capello tells us. If we reject all, then we are left utterly without information as to how Alfonso of Aragon died. If we accept all, then we find that it was as a measure of retaliation that Cesare compassed the death of his brother-in-law, which made it not a murder, but a private execution—justifiable under the circumstances of the provocation received and as the adjustment of these affairs was understood in the Cinquecento.

CHAPTER VI. RIMINI AND PESARO

In the autumn of 1500, fretting to take the field again, Cesare was occupied in raising and equipping an army—an occupation which received an added stimulus when, towards the end of August, Louis de Villeneuve, the French ambassador, arrived in Rome with the articles of agreement setting forth the terms upon which Louis XII was prepared further to assist Cesare in the resumption of his campaign. In these it was stipulated that, in return for such assistance, Cesare should engage himself, on his side, to aid the King of France in the conquest of Naples when the time for that expedition should be ripe. Further, Louis XII was induced to make representations to Venice to the end that the Republic should remove her protection from the Manfredi of Faenza and the Malatesta of Rimini.

Venice being at the time in trouble with the Turk, and more anxious than ever to conciliate France and the Pope, was compelled to swallow her reluctance and submit with the best grace she could assume. Accordingly she dispatched her ambassadors to Rome to convey her obedience to the Pope's Holiness, and formally to communicate the news that she withdrew her protection from the proscribed fiefs.

Later in the year—in the month of October—the Senate was to confer upon Cesare Borgia the highest honour in her gift, the honour of which the Venetians were jealous above all else—the honour of Venetian citizenship, inscribing his name in the Golden Book, bestowing upon him a palace in Venice and conferring the other marks of distinction usual to the occasion. One is tempted to ask,

Was it in consequence of Paolo Capello's lurid Relation that the proud Republic considered him qualified for such an honour?

To return, however, to the matter of the Republic's removal of her shield from Rimini and Faenza, Alexander received the news of this with open joy and celebrated it with festivities in the Vatican, whilst from being angry with Venice and from declaring that the Republic need never again look to him for favour, he now veered round completely and assured the Venetian envoys, in a burst of gratitude, that he esteemed no Power in the world so highly. Cesare joined in his father's expressions of gratitude and appreciation, and promised that Alexander should be succeeded in St. Peter's Chair by such a Pope as should be pleasing to Venice, and that, if the cardinals but remained united, the Pontificate should go to none but a Venetian.

Thus did Cesare, sincerely or otherwise, attempt to lessen the Republic's chagrin to see him ride lance-on-thigh as conqueror into the dominions which she so long had coveted.

France once more placed Yves d'Allègre at Cesare's disposal, and with him went six hundred lances and six hundred Swiss foot. These swelled the forces which already Cesare had assembled into an army some ten thousand strong. The artillery was under the command of Vitellozzo Vitelli, whilst Bartolomeo da Capranica was appointed camp-master. Cesare's banner was joined by a condotta under Paolo Orsini—besides whom there were several Roman gentlemen in the duke's following, including most of those who had formed his guard of honour on the occasion of his visit to France, and who had since then continued to follow his fortunes. Achille Tiberti came to Rome with a condotta which he had levied in the Romagna of young men who had been moved by Cesare's spreading fame to place their swords at his disposal. A member of the exiled Malvezzi family of Bologna headed a little troop of fellow-exiles which came to take service with the duke, whilst at Perugia a strong body of foot awaited him under Gianpaolo

Baglioni.

In addition to these condotte, numerous were the adventurers who came to offer Cesare their swords; indeed he must have possessed much of that personal magnetism which is the prime equipment of every born leader, for he stirred men to the point of wild enthusiasm in those days, and inspired other than warriors to bear arms for him. We see men of letters, such as Justolo, Calmeta, Sperulo, and others throwing down their quills to snatch up swords and follow him. Painters, and sculptors, too, are to be seen abandoning the ideals of art to pursue the ugly realities of war in this young condottiero's train. Among these artists, bulks the great Pietro Torrigiani. The astounding pen of his brother-sculptor, Benvenuto Cellini, has left us a sharp portrait of this man, in which he speaks of his personal beauty and tells us that he had more the air of a great soldier than a sculptor (which must have been, we fancy, Cellini's own case). Torrigiani lives in history chiefly for two pieces of work widely dissimilar in character—the erection of the tomb of Henry VII of England, and the breaking of the nose of Michelangelo Buonarroti in the course of a quarrel which he had with him in Florence when they were fellow-students under Masaccio. Of nothing that he ever did in life was he so proud—as we may gather from Cellini—as of having disfigured Michelangelo, and in that sentiment the naïve spirit of his age again peeps forth.

We shall also see Leonardo da Vinci joining the duke's army as engineer—but that not until some months later.

Meanwhile his forces grew daily in Rome, and his time was consumed in organizing, equipping, and drilling these, to bring about that perfect unity for which his army was to be conspicuous in spite of the variety of French, Italian, Spanish, and Swiss elements of which it was composed. So effectively were his troops armed and so excellent was the discipline prevailing among them, that their like had probably never before been seen in the peninsula, and they were to

excite—as much else of Cesare's work—the wonder and admiration of that great critic Macchiavelli.

So much, however, was not to be achieved without money, and still more would be needed for the campaign ahead. For this the Church provided. Never had the coffers of the Holy See been fuller than at this moment. Additional funds accrued from what is almost universally spoken of as "the sale of twelve cardinals' hats."

In that year—in September—twelve new cardinals were appointed, and upon each of those was levied, as a tax, a tithe of the first year's revenues of the benefices upon which they entered. The only justifiable exception that can be taken to this lies in the number of cardinals elected at one time, which lends colour to the assumption that the sole aim of that election was to raise additional funds for Cesare's campaign. Probably it was also Alexander's aim further to strengthen his power with the Sacred College, so that he could depend upon a majority to ensure his will in all matters. But we are at the moment concerned with the matter of the levied tax.

It has been dubbed "an atrocious act of simony;" but the reasoning that so construes it is none so clear. The cardinals' hats carried with them vast benefices. These benefices were the property of the Church; they were in the gift and bestowal of the Pope, and in the bestowing of them the Pope levied a proportionate tax. Setting aside the argument that this tax was not an invention of Alexander's, does such a proceeding really amount to a "sale" of benefices? A sale presupposes bargaining, a making of terms between two parties, an adjusting of a price to be paid. There is evidence of no such marketing of these benefices; indeed one cardinal, vowed to poverty, received his hat without the imposition of a tax, another was Cesare's brother-in-law, Amanieu d'Albret, who had been promised the hat a year ago. It is further to be borne in mind that, four months earlier, the Pope had levied a similar decima, or tax, upon the entire College of

Cardinals and every official in the service of the Holy See, for the purposes of the expedition against the Muslim, who was in arms against Christianity. Naturally that tax was not popular with luxurious, self-seeking, cinquecento prelates, who in the main cared entirely for their own prosperity and not at all for that of Christianity, and you may realize how, by levying it, Alexander laid himself open to harsh criticism.

The only impugnable matter in the deed lies, as has been said, in the number of cardinals so created at a batch. But the ends to be served may be held to justify, if not altogether, at least in some measure, the means adopted. The Romagna war for which the funds were needed was primarily for the advancement of the Church, to expunge those faithless vicars who, appointed by the Holy See and holding their fiefs in trust for her, refused payment of just tribute and otherwise so acted as to alienate from the Church the States which she claimed for her own. Their restoration to the Church—however much it might be a means of founding a Borgia dynasty in the Romagna—made for the greater power and glory of the Holy See. Let us remember this, and that such was the end which that tax, levied upon those newly elected cardinals, went to serve. The aggrandizement of the House of Borgia was certainly one of the results to be expected from the Romagna campaign, but we are not justified in accounting it the sole aim and end of that campaign.

Alexander had this advantage over either Sixtus IV or Innocent VIII—not to go beyond those Popes whom he had served as Vice-Chancellor, for instances of flagrant nepotism—that he at least served two purposes at once, and that, in aggrandizing his own family, he strengthened the temporal power of the Church, whereas those others had done nothing but undermine it that they might enrich their progeny.

And whilst on this subject of the "sale" of cardinals' hats, it may not

be amiss to say a word concerning the "sale" of indulgences with which Alexander has been so freely charged. Here again there has been too loud an outcry against Alexander—an outcry whose indignant stridency leads one to suppose that the sale of indulgences was a simony invented by him, or else practised by him to an extent shamefully unprecedented. Such is very far from being the case. The arch-type of indulgence-seller—as of all other simoniacal practices—is Innocent VIII. In his reign we have seen the murderer commonly given to choose between the hangman and the purchase of a pardon, and we have seen the moneys so obtained providing his bastard, the Cardinal Francesco Cibo, with the means for the luxuriously licentious life whose gross disorders prematurely killed him.

To no such flagitious lengths as these can it be shown that Alexander carried the "sale" of the indulgences he dispensed. He had no lack of precedent for the practice, and, so far as the actual practice itself is concerned, it would be difficult to show that it was unjustifiable or simoniacal so long as confined within certain well-defined bounds, and so long as the sums levied by it were properly employed to the benefit of Christianity. It is a practice comparable to the mulcting of a civil offender against magisterial laws. Because our magistrates levy fines, it does not occur to modern critics to say that they sell pardons and immunity from gaol. It is universally recognized as a wise and commendable measure, serving the twofold purpose of punishing the offender and benefiting the temporal State against which he has offended. Need it be less commendable in the case of spiritual offences against a spiritual State? It is more useful than the imposition of the pattering of a dozen prayers at bedtime, and since, no doubt, it falls more heavily upon the offender, it possibly makes to an even greater extent for his spiritual improvement.

Thus considered, this "sale" of indulgences loses a deal of the heinousness with which it has been invested. The funds so realized go into the coffers of the Church, which is fit and proper. What

afterwards becomes of them at the hands of Alexander opens up another matter altogether, one in which we cannot close our eyes to the fact that he was as undutiful as many another who wore the Ring of the Fisherman before him. Yet this is to be said for him: that, if he plunged his hands freely into the treasury of the Holy See, at least he had the ability to contrive that this treasury should be well supplied; and the circumstance that, when he died, he left the church far wealthier and more powerful than she had been for centuries, with her dominions which his precursors had wantonly alienated reconsolidated into that powerful State that was to endure for three hundred years, is an argument to the credit of his pontificate not lightly to be set aside.

Imola and Forlì had, themselves, applied to the Pontiff to appoint Cesare Borgia their ruler in the place of the deposed Riarii. To these was now added Cesena. In July disturbances occurred there between Guelphs and Ghibellines. Swords were drawn and blood flowed in the streets, until the governor was constrained to summon Ercole Bentivogli and his horse from Forlì to quell the rioting. The direct outcome of this was that—the Ghibellines predominating in council—Cesena sent an embassy to Rome to beg his Holiness to give the lordship of the fief to the Duke of Valentinois. To this the Pope acceded, and on August 2 Cesare was duly appointed Lord Vicar of Cesena. He celebrated his investiture by remitting a portion of the taxes, abolishing altogether the duty on flour, and by bringing about a peace between the two prevailing factions.

By the end of September Cesare's preparations for the resumption of the campaign were completed, and early in October (his army fortified in spirit by the Pope's blessing) he set out, and made his first halt at Nepi. Lucrezia was there, with her Court and her child Roderigo, having withdrawn to this her castle to mourn her dead husband Alfonso; and there she abode until recalled to Rome by her father some two months later.

Thence Cesare pushed on, as swiftly as the foul weather would allow him, by way of Viterbo, Assisi, and Nocera to cross the Apennines at Gualdo. Here he paused to demand the release of certain prisoners in the hill fortress of Fossate, and to be answered by a refusal. Angered by this resistance of his wishes and determined to discourage others from following the example of Fossate, he was swift and terrible in his rejoinder. He seized the Citadel, and did by force what had been refused to his request. Setting at liberty the prisoners in durance there, he gave the territory over to devastation by fire and pillage.

That done he resumed his march, but the weather retarded him more and more. The heavy and continuous rains had reduced the roads to such a condition that his artillery fell behind, and he was compelled to call a halt once more, at Deruta, and wait there four days for his guns to overtake him.

In Rimini the great House of Malatesta was represented by Pandolfo—Roberto Malatesta's bastard and successor—a degenerate so detested by his subjects that he was known by the name of Pandolfaccio (a contumelious augmentative, expressing the evil repute in which he was held).

Among his many malpractices and the many abuses to which he resorted for the purposes of extorting money from his long-suffering subjects was that of compelling the richer men of Rimini to purchase from him the estates which he confiscated from the fuorusciti—those who had sought in exile safety from the anger provoked by their just resentment of his oppressive misrule. He was in the same case as other Romagna tyrants, and now that Venice had lifted from him her protecting aegis, he had no illusions as to the fate in store for him. So when once more the tramp of Cesare Borgia's advancing legions rang through the Romagna, Pandolfaccio disposed himself, not for battle, but for surrender on the best terms that he might succeed in

making.

He was married to Violante, the daughter of Giovanni Bentivogli of Bologna, and in the first week of October he sent her, with their children, to seek shelter at her father's Court. Himself, he withdrew into his citadel—the famous fortress of his terrible grandfather Sigismondo. The move suggested almost that he was preparing to resist the Duke of Valentino, and it may have prompted the message sent him by the Council to inquire what might be his intention.

Honour was a thing unknown to this Pandolfaccio—even so much honour as may be required for a dignified retreat. Since all was lost it but remained—by his lights—to make the best bargain that he could and get the highest possible price in gold for what he was abandoning. So he replied that the Council must do whatever it considered to its best advantage, whilst to anticipate its members in any offer of surrender, and thus seek the favour and deserve good terms at the hands of this man who came to hurl him from the throne of his family, he dispatched a confidential servant to Cesare to offer him town and citadel.

In the meantime—as Pandolfo fully expected—the Council also sent proposals of surrender to Cesare, as well as to his lieutenant-general of Romagna, Bishop Olivieri, at Cesena. The communications had the effect of bringing Olivieri immediately to Rimini, and there, on October 10, the articles of capitulation were signed by the bishop, as the duke's representative, and by Pandolfo Malatesta. It was agreed in these that Malatesta should have safe-conduct for himself and his familiars, 3,000 ducats and the value—to be estimated—of the artillery which he left in the citadel. Further, for the price of 5,500 ducats he abandoned also the strongholds of Sarsina and Medola and the castles of the Montagna.

His tyranny thus disposed of, Pandolfaccio took ship to Ravenna,

where the price of his dishonour was to be paid him, and in security for which he took with him Gianbattista Baldassare, the son of the ducal commissioner.

On the day of his departure, to celebrate the bloodless conquest of Rimini, solemn High Mass was sung in the Cathedral, and Bishop Olivieri received the city's oath of allegiance to the Holy See, whither very shortly afterwards Rimini sent her ambassadors to express to the Pope her gratitude for her release from the thraldom of Pandolfaccio.

Like Rimini, Pesaro too fell without the striking of a blow, for all that it was by no means as readily relinquished on the part of its ruler. Giovanni Sforza had been exerting himself desperately for the past two months to obtain help that should enable him to hold his tyranny against the Borgia might. But all in vain. His entreaties to the emperor had met with no response, whilst his appeal to Francesco Gonzaga of Mantua—whose sister, it will be remembered, had been his first wife—had resulted in the Marquis's sending him a hundred men under an Albanian, named Giacopo.

What Giovanni was to do with a hundred men it is difficult to conceive, nor are the motives of Gonzaga's action clear. We know that at this time he was eagerly seeking Cesare's friendship, sorely uneasy as to the fate that might lie in store for his own dominions, once the Duke of Valentinois should have disposed of the feudatories of the Church. Early in that year 1500 he had asked Cesare to stand godfather for his child, and Cesare had readily consented, whereby a certain bond of relationship and good feeling had been established between them, which everything shows Gonzaga most anxious to preserve unsevered. The only reasonable conclusion in the matter of that condotta of a hundred men is that Gonzaga desired to show friendliness to the Lord of Pesaro, yet was careful not to do so to any extent that might be hurtful to Valentinois.

As for Giovanni Sforza of whom so many able pens have written so

feelingly as the constant, unfortunate victim of Borgia ambition, there is no need to enter into analyses for the purpose of judging him here. His own subjects did so in his own day. When a prince is beloved by all classes of his people, it must follow that he is a good prince and a wise ruler; when his subjects are divided into two factions, one to oppose and the other to support him, he may be good or bad, or good and bad; but when a prince can find none to stand by him in the hour of peril, it is to be concluded that he has deserved little at the hands of those whom he has ruled. The latter is the case of Giovanni Sforza—this prince whom, Yriarte tells us, "rendered sweet the lives of his subjects." The nobility and the proletariat of Pesaro abhorred him; the trader classes stood neutral, anxious to avoid the consequences of partisanship, since it was the class most exposed to those consequences.

On Sunday, October 11—the day after Pandolfo Malatesta had relinquished Rimini—news reached Pesaro that Ercole Bentivogli's horse was marching upon the town, in advance of the main body of Cesare's army. Instantly there was an insurrection against Giovanni, and the people, taking to arms, raised the cry of "Duca!" in acclamation of the Duke of Valentinois, under the very windows of their ruler's palace.

Getting together the three hundred men that constituted his army, Giovanni beat a hasty retreat to Pesaro's magnificent fortress, and that same night he secretly took ship to Ravenna accompanied by the Albanian Giacopo, and leaving his half-brother, Galeazzo Sforza di Cotignola, in command of the citadel. Thence Giovanni repaired to Bologna, and, already repenting his precipitate flight, he appealed for help to Bentivogli, who was himself uneasy, despite the French protection he enjoyed. Similarly, Giovanni addressed fresh appeals to Francesco Gonzaga; but neither of these tyrants could or dared avail him, and, whilst he was still imploring their intervention his fief had fallen into Cesare's power.

Ercole Bentivogli, with a small body of horse, had presented himself at the gates of Pesaro on October 21, and Galeazzo Sforza, having obtained safe-conduct for the garrison, surrendered.

Cesare, meanwhile, was at Fano, where he paused to allow his army to come up with him, for he had outridden it from Fossate, through foul wintry weather, attended only by his light horse. It was said that he hoped that Fano might offer itself to him as other fiefs had done, and—if Pandolfo Collenuccio is correct—he had been counselled by the Pope not to attempt to impose himself upon Fano, but to allow the town a free voice in the matter. If his hopes were as stated, he was disappointed in them, for Fano made no offer to him, and matters remained for the present as they were.

On the 27th, with the banners of the bull unfurled, he rode into Pesaro at the head of two thousand men, making his entrance with his wonted pomp, of whose dramatic values he was so fully aware. He was met at the gates by the Council, which came to offer him the keys of the town, and, despite the pouring rain under which he entered the city, the people of Pesaro thronged the streets to acclaim him as he rode.

He took up his lodgings at the Sforza Palace, so lately vacated by Giovanni—the palace where Lucrezia Borgia had held her Court when, as Giovanni's wife, she had been Countess of Pesaro and Cotignola. Early on the morrow he visited the citadel, which was one of the finest in Italy, rivalling that of Rimini for strength. On his arrival there, a flourish of trumpets imposed silence, while the heralds greeted him formally as Lord of Pesaro. He ordered one of the painters in his train to draw up plans of the fortress to be sent to the Pope, and issued instructions for certain repairs and improvements which he considered desirable.

Here in Pesaro came to him the famous Pandolfo Collenuccio, as

envoy from the Duke of Ferrara, to congratulate Cesare upon the victory. In sending Collenuccio at such a time Ercole d'Este paid the Duke of Valentino a subtle, graceful compliment. This distinguished poet, dramatist, and historian was a native of Pesaro who had been exiled ten years earlier by Giovanni—which was the tyrant's way of showing his gratitude to the man who, more than any other, had contributed to the bastard Sforza's succession to his father as Lord of Pesaro and Cotignola.

Collenuccio was one of the few literary men of his day who was not above using the Italian tongue, treating it seriously as a language and not merely as a debased form of Latin. He was eminent as a jurisconsult, and, being a man of action as well as a man of letters, he had filled the office of Podestá in various cities; he had found employment under Lorenzo dei Medici, and latterly under Ercole d'Este, whom we now see him representing.

Cesare received him with all honour, sending the master of his household, Ramiro de Lorqua, to greet him on his arrival and to bear him the usual gifts of welcome, of barley, wine, capons, candles, sweet-meats, etc., whilst on the morrow the duke gave him audience, treating him in the friendliest manner, as we see from Collenuccio's own report to the Duke of Ferrara. In this he says of Cesare: "He is accounted valiant, joyous, and open-handed, and it is believed that he holds honest men in great esteem. Harsh in his vengeance, according to many, he is great of spirit and of ambition, athirst for eminence and fame."

Collenuccio was reinstated by Cesare in the possessions of which Giovanni had stripped him, a matter which so excited the resentment of the latter that, when ultimately he returned to his dominions, one of his first acts was to avenge it. Collenuccio, fearing that he might not stand well with the tyrant, had withdrawn from Pesaro. But Giovanni, with all semblance of friendliness, treacherously lured him back to

cast him into prison and have him strangled—a little matter which those who, to the detriment of the Borgia, seek to make a hero of this Giovanni Sforza, would do well not to suppress.

A proof of the splendid discipline prevailing in Cesare's army is afforded during his brief sojourn in Pesaro. In the town itself, some two thousand of his troops were accommodated, whilst some thousands more swarmed in the surrounding country. Occupation by such an army was, naturally enough, cause for deep anxiety on the part of a people who were but too well acquainted with the ways of the fifteenth-century men-at-arms. But here was a general who knew how to curb and control his soldiers. Under the pain of death his men were forbidden from indulging any of the predations or violences usual to their kind; and, as a consequence, the inhabitants of Pesaro had little to complain of.

Justolo gives us a picture of the Duke of Valentinois on the banks of the River Montone, which again throws into relief the discipline which his very presence—such was the force of his personality—was able to enforce. A disturbance arose among his soldiers at the crossing of this river, which was swollen with rains and the bridge of which had been destroyed. It became necessary to effect the crossing in one small boat—the only craft available—and the men, crowding to the bank, stormed and fought for precedence until the affair grew threatening. Cesare rode down to the river, and no more than his presence was necessary to restore peace. Under that calm, cold eye of his the men instantly became orderly, and, whilst he sat his horse and watched them, the crossing was soberly effected, and as swiftly as the single craft would permit.

The duke remained but two days in Pesaro. On the 29th, having appointed a lieutenant to represent him, and a captain to the garrison, he marched out again, to lie that night at Cattolica and enter Rimini on the morrow.

There again he was received with open arms, and he justified the people's welcome of him by an immediate organization of affairs which gave universal satisfaction. He made ample provision for the proper administration of justice and the preservation of the peace; he recalled the fuorusciti exiled by the unscrupulous Pandolfaccio, and he saw them reinstated in the property of which that tyrant had dispossessed them. As his lieutenant in Rimini, with strict injunctions to preserve law and order, he left Ramiro de Lorqua, when, on November 2, he departed to march upon Faenza, which had prepared for resistance.

What Cesare did in Rimini was no more than he was doing throughout the Romagna, as its various archives bear witness. They bear witness no less to his vast ability as an administrator, showing how he resolved the prevailing chaos into form and order by his admirable organization and suppression of injustice. The same archives show us also that he found time for deeds of beneficence which endeared him to the people, who everywhere hailed him as their deliverer from thralldom. It would not be wise to join in the chorus of those who appear to have taken Cesare's altruism for granted. The rejection of the wild stories that picture him as a corrupt and murderous monster, utterly inhuman, and lay a dozen ghastly crimes to his account need not entail our viewing Cesare as an angel of deliverance, a divine agent almost, rescuing a suffering people from oppression out of sheer humanitarianism.

He is the one as little as the other. He is just—as Collenuccio wrote to Ercole d'Este—"great of spirit and of ambition, athirst for eminence and fame." He was consumed by the desire for power and worldly greatness, a colossus of egotism to whom men and women were pieces to be handled by him on the chess-board of his ambition, to be sacrificed ruthlessly where necessary to his ends, but to be husbanded and guarded carefully where they could serve him.

With his eyes upon the career of Cesare Borgia, Macchiavelli was anon to write of principalities newly-acquired, that "however great may be the military resources of a prince, he will discover that, to obtain firm footing in a province, he must engage the favour and interest of the inhabitants."

That was a principle self-evident to Cesare—the principle upon which he acted throughout in his conquest of the Romagna. By causing his new subjects to realize at once that they had exchanged an oppressive for a generous rule, he attached them to himself.

CHAPTER VII. THE SIEGE OF FAENZA

The second campaign of the Romagna had opened for Cesare as easily as had the first. So far his conquest had been achieved by little more than a proceSSIONal display of his armed legions. Like another Joshua, he reduced cities by the mere blare of his trumpets. At last, however, he was to receive a check. Where grown men had fled cravenly at his approach, it remained for a child to resist him at Faenza, as a woman had resisted him at Forli.

His progress north from Pesaro was of necessity slow. He paused, as we have seen, at Rimini, and he paused again, and for a rather longer spell, at Forli, so that it was not until the second week of November that Astorre Manfredi—the boy of sixteen who was to hold Faenza—caught in the distance the flash of arms and the banners with the bull device borne by the host which the Duke of Valentinois led against him.

At first it had been Astorre's intent to follow the examples set him by Malatesta and Sforza, and he had already gone so far as to remove his valuables to Ravenna, whither he, too, meant to seek refuge. But he was in better case than any of the tyrants so far deposed inasmuch as his family, which had ruled Faenza for two hundred years, had not provoked the hatred of its subjects, and these were now ready and willing to stand loyally by their young lord. But loyalty alone can do little, unless backed by the might of arms, against such a force as Cesare was prepared to hurl upon Faenza. This Astorre realized, and for his own and his subjects' sake was preparing to depart, when, to his undoing, support reached him from an unexpected quarter.

Bologna—whose ruler, Giovanni Bentivogli, was Astorre's grandfather—in common with Florence and Urbino, grew daily more and more alarmed at the continual tramp of armed multitudes about her frontiers, and at the steady growth in numbers and in capacity of this splendid army which followed Cesare—an army captained by such enemies of the Bentivogli as the Baglioni, the Orsini, and the exiled Malvezzi.

Bentivogli had good grounds for his anxiety, not knowing how long he might depend upon the protection of France, and well aware that, once that protection was removed, there would be no barrier between Bologna and Cesare's manifest intentions concerning her.

Next to Cesare's utter annihilation, to check his progress was the desire dearest just then to the heart of Bentivogli, and with this end in view he dispatched Count Guido Torella to Faenza, in mid-October, with an offer to assist Astorre with men and money.

Astorre, who had succeeded Galeotto Manfredi in the tyranny of Faenza at the age of three, had been and still continued under the tutelage of the Council which really governed his territories. To this Council came Count Torella with Bentivogli's offer, adding the proposal that young Astorre should be sent to Venice for his personal safety. But to this the Council replied that it would be useless, if that course were adopted, to attempt resistance, as the people could only be urged to it by their affection for their young lord, and that, if he were removed from their midst, they would insist upon surrender.

News of these negotiations reached Rome, and on October 24 Alexander sent Bentivogli his commands to refrain, under pain of excommunication, from interfering in the affairs of Faenza. Bentivogli made a feeble attempt to mask his disobedience. The troops with which he intended to assist his grandson were sent ostensibly to Castel Bolognese, but with instructions to desert thence and make for

Faenza. This they did, and thus was Astorre strengthened by a thousand men, whilst the work of preparing his city for resistance went briskly forward.

Meanwhile, ahead of Cesare Borgia, swept Vitellozzo Vitelli with his horse into Astorre's dominions. He descended upon the valley of the Lamone, and commenced hostilities by the capture and occupation of Brisghella on November 7. The other lesser strongholds and townships offered no resistance to Cesare's arms. Indeed they were induced into ready rebellion against their lord by Dionigio di Naldo—the sometime defender of Imola, who had now taken service with Cesare.

On November 10 Cesare himself halted his host beneath the walls of Faenza and called upon the town to surrender. Being denied, he encamped his army for the siege. He chose the eastern side of the town, between the rivers Lamone and Marzano, and, that his artillery might have free play, he caused several houses to be demolished.

In Faenza itself, meanwhile, the easy conquest of the valley had not produced a good effect. Moreover, the defenders had cause to fear treachery within their gates, for a paper had been picked up out of the moat containing an offer of terms of surrender. It had been shot into the castle attached to an arbalestbolt, and was intended for the castellan Castagnini. This Castagnini was arrested, thrown into prison, and his possessions confiscated, whilst the Council placed the citadel in the hands of four of its own members together with Gianevangelista Manfredi—Astorre's half-brother, and a bastard of Galeotto's. These set about defending it against Cesare, who had now opened fire. The duke caused the guns to be trained upon a certain bastion through which he judged that a good assault might be delivered and an entrance gained. Night and day was the bombardment of that bastion kept up, yet without producing visible effect until the morning of the 20th, when suddenly one of its towers

collapsed thunderously into the moat.

Instantly, and without orders, the soldiers, all eager to be among the first to enter, flung themselves forward in utter and fierce disorder to storm the breach. Cesare, at breakfast—as he himself wrote to the Duke of Urbino—sprang up at the great noise, and, surmising what was taking place, dashed out to restrain his men. But the task was no easy one, for, gathering excitement and the frenzy of combat as they ran, they had already gained the edge of the ditch, and thither Cesare was forced to follow them, using voice and hands to beat back again.

At last he succeeded in regaining control of them, and in compelling them to make an orderly retreat, and curb their impatience until the time for storming should have come, which was not yet. In the affair Cesare had a narrow escape from a stone-shot fired from the castle, whilst one of his officers—Onorio Savelli—was killed by a cannon-ball from the duke's own guns, whose men, unaware of what was taking place, were continuing the bombardment.

Hitherto the army had been forced to endure foul weather—rain, fogs, and wind; but there was worse come. Snow began to fall on the morning of the 22nd. It grew to a storm, and the blizzard continued all that day, which was a Sunday, all night, and all the following day, and lashed the men pitilessly and blindingly. The army, already reduced by shortness of victuals, was now in a miserable plight in its unsheltered camp, and the defenders of Faenza, as if realizing this, made a sortie on the 23rd, from which a fierce fight ensued, with severe loss to both sides. On the 25th the snow began again, whereupon the hitherto unconquerable Cesare, defeated at last by the elements and seeing that his men could not possibly continue to endure the situation, was compelled to strike camp on the 26th and go into winter quarters, no doubt with immense chagrin at leaving so much work unaccomplished.

So he converted the siege into a blockade, closing all roads that

lead to Faenza, with a view to shutting out supplies from the town; and he distributed troops throughout the villages of the territory with orders constantly to harass the garrison and allow it no rest.

He also sent an envoy with an offer of terms of surrender, but the Council rejected it with the proud answer that its members "had agreed, in general assembly, to defend the dominions of Manfredi to the death."

Thereupon Cesare withdrew to Forli with 150 lances and 2,500 foot, and here he affords a proof of his considerateness. The town had already endured several occupations and the severities of being the seat of war during the siege of the citadel. Cesare was determined that it should feel the present occupation as little as possible; so he issued an order to the inhabitants upon whom his soldiers were billeted to supply the men only with bed, light, and fire. What more they required must be paid for, and, to avoid disputes as to prices of victuals and other necessities, he ordered the Council to draw up a tariff, and issued an edict forbidding his soldiers, under pain of death, from touching any property of the townsfolk. Lest they should doubt his earnestness, he hanged two of his soldiers on December 7—a Piedmontese and a Gascon—and on the 13th a third, all from the windows of his own palace, and all with a label hanging from their feet proclaiming that they had been hanged for taking goods of others in spite of the ban of the Lord Duke, etc.

He remained in Forli until the 23rd, when he departed to Cesena, which was really his capital in Romagna, and in the huge citadel of which there was ample accommodation for the troops that accompanied him. In Forli he left, as his lieutenants, the Bishop of Trani and Don Michele da Corella—the "Michieli" of Capello's Relation and the "Michelotto" of so many Borgia fables. That this officer ruled the soldiers left with him in Forli in accordance with the stern example set him by his master we know from the chronicles of

Bernardi.

In Cesena the duke occupied the splendid palace of Malatesta Novello, which had been magnificently equipped for him, and there, on Christmas Eve, he entertained the Council of the town and other important citizens to a banquet worthy of the reputation for lavishness which he enjoyed. He was very different in this from his father, whose table habits were of the most sparing—to which, no doubt, his Holiness owed the wonderful, almost youthful vigour which he still enjoyed in this his seventieth year. It was notorious that ambassadors cared little for invitations to the Pope's table, where the meal never consisted of more than one dish.

On Christmas Day the duke attended Mass at the Church of San Giovanni Evangelista with great pomp, arrayed in the ducal chlamys and followed by his gentlemen. With these young patricians Cesare made merry during the days that followed. The time was spent in games and joustings, in all of which the duke showed himself freely, making display of his physical perfections, fully aware, no doubt, of what a short cut these afforded him to the hearts of the people, ever ready to worship physical beauty, prowess, and address.

Yet business was not altogether neglected, for on January 4 he went to Porto Cesenatico, and there published an edict against all who had practised with the fuorusciti from his States, forbidding the offence under pain of death and forfeiture of possessions.

He remained in winter quarters until the following April, from which, however, it is not to be concluded that Faenza was allowed to be at peace for that spell. The orders which he had left behind him, that the town was constantly to be harassed, were by no means neglected. On the night of January 21, by arrangement with some of the inhabitants of the beleaguered city, the foot surrounding Faenza attempted to surprise the garrison by a secret escalade. They were, however, discovered betimes in the attempt and repulsed, some who had the

mischance—as it happened—to gain the battlements before the alarm was raised being taken and hanged. The duke's troops, however, consoled themselves by capturing Russi and Solarolo, the last two strongholds in the valley that had held for Astorre.

Meanwhile, Cesare and his merry young patricians spent the time as agreeably as might be in Cesena during that carnival. The author of the *Diario Cesenate* is moved by the duke's pastimes to criticize him severely as indulging in amusements unbecoming the dignity of his station. He is particularly shocked to know that the duke should have gone forth in disguise with a few companions to repair to carnival festivities in the surrounding villages and there to wrestle with the rustics. It is not difficult to imagine the discomfiture suffered by many a village Hercules at the hands of this lithe young man, who could behead a bull at a single stroke of a spadoon and break a horseshoe in his fingers. The diary in question, you will have gathered, is that of a pedant, prim and easily scandalized. So much being obvious, it is noteworthy that Cesare's conduct should have afforded him no subject for graver strictures than these, Cesare being such a man as has been represented, and the time being that of carnival when licence was allowed full play.

The Pope accounted that the check endured by Cesare before Faenza was due not so much to the foul weather by which his army had been beset as to the assistance which Giovanni Bentivogli had rendered his grandson Astorre, and bitter were the complaints of it which he addressed to the King of France. Alarmed by this, and fearing that he might have compromised himself and jeopardized the French protection by his action in the matter, Bentivogli made haste to recall his troops, and did in fact withdraw them from Faenza early in December, shortly after Cesare had gone into winter quarters. Nevertheless, the Pope's complaints continued, Alexander in his secret, crafty heart no doubt rejoicing that Bentivogli should have afforded him so sound a grievance. As Louis XII desired, for several

reasons, to stand well with Rome, he sent an embassy to Bentivogli to express his regret and censure of the latter's intervention in the affairs of Faenza. He informed Bentivogli that the Pope was demanding the return of Bologna to the States of the Church, and, without expressing himself clearly as to his own view of the matter, he advised Bentivogli to refrain from alliances with the enemies of the Holy See and to secure Bologna to himself by some sound arrangement. This showed Bentivogli in what danger he stood, and his uneasiness was increased by the arrival at Modena of Yves d'Allègre, sent by the King of France with a condotta of 500 horse for purposes which were not avowed but which Bentivogli sorely feared might prove to be hostile to himself.

At the beginning of February Cesare moved his quarters from Cesena to Imola, and thence he sent his envoys to demand winter quarters for his troops in Castel Bolognese. This flung Bentivogli into positive terror, as he interpreted the request as a threat of invasion. Castel Bolognese was too valuable a stronghold to be so lightly placed in the duke's hands. Thence Bentivogli might, in case of need, hold the duke in check, the fortress commanding, as it did, the road from Imola to Faenza. He had the good sense, however, to compromise the matter by returning Cesare an offer of accommodation for his men with victuals, artillery, etc., but without the concession of Castel Bolognese. With this Cesare was forced to be content, there being no reasonable grounds upon which he could decline so generous an offer. It was a cunning concession on Bentivogli's part, for, without strengthening the duke's position, it yet gave the latter what he ostensibly required, and left no cause for grievance and no grounds upon which to molest Bologna. So much was this the case that on February 26 the Pope wrote to Bentivogli expressing his thanks at the assistance which he had thus given Cesare in the Faenza emprise.

It was during this sojourn of Cesare's at Imola that the abduction

took place of Dorothea Caracciolo, the young wife of Gianbattista Caracciolo, a captain of foot in the Venetian service. The lady, who was attached to the Duchess of Urbino, had been residing at the latter's Court, and in the previous December Caracciolo had begged leave of the Council of Ten that he might himself go to Urbino for the purpose of escorting her to Venice. The Council, however, had replied that he should send for her, and this the captain had done. Near Cervia, on the confines of the Venetian territory, towards evening of February 14, the lady's escort was set upon by ten wellarmed men, and rudely handled by them, some being wounded and one at least killed, whilst the lady and a woman who was with her were carried off.

The Podestá of Cervia reported to the Venetian Senate that the abductors were Spaniards of the army of the Duke of Valentinois, and it was feared in Venice—according to Sanuto—that the deed might be the work of Cesare.

The matter contained in that Relation of Capello's to the Senate must by now have been widespread, and of a man who could perpetrate the wickednesses therein divulged anything could be believed. Indeed, it seems to have followed that, where any act of wickedness was brought to light, at once men looked to see if Cesare might not be responsible, nor looked close enough to make quite sure. To no other cause can it be assigned that, in the stir which the Senate made, the name of Cesare was at once suggested as that of the abductor, and this so broadly that letters poured in upon him on all sides begging him to right this cruel wrong. So much do you see assumed, upon no more evidence than was contained in that letter from the Podestá of Cervia, which went no further than to say that the abductors were "Spaniards of the Duke of Valentinois' army." The envoy Manenti was dispatched at once to Cesare by the Senate, and he went persuaded, it is clear, that Cesare Borgia was the guilty person. He enlisted the support of Monsieur de Trans (the French

ambassador then on his way to Rome) and that of Yves d'Allègre, and he took them with him to the Duke at Imola.

There, acting upon his strong suspicions, Manenti appears to have taken a high tone, representing to the duke that he had done an unworthy thing, and imploring him to restore the lady to her husband. Cesare's patience under the insolent assumption in justification of which Manenti had not a single grain of evidence to advance, is—guilty or innocent—a rare instance of self-control. He condescended to take oath that he had not done this thing which they imputed to him. He admitted that he had heard of the outrage, and he expressed the belief that it was the work of one Diego Ramires—a captain of foot in his service. This Ramires, he explained, had been in the employ of the Duke of Urbino, and in Urbino had made the acquaintance and fallen enamoured of the lady; and he added that the fellow had lately disappeared, but that already he had set on foot a search for him, and that, once taken, he would make an example of him.

In conclusion he begged that the Republic should not believe this thing against him, assuring the envoy that he had not found the ladies of the Romagna so difficult that he should be driven to employ such rude and violent measures.

The French ambassador certainly appears to have attached implicit faith to Cesare's statement, and he privately informed Manenti that Ramires was believed to be at Medola, and that the Republic might rest assured that, if he were taken, exemplary justice would be done.

All this you will find recorded in Sanuto. After that his diary entertains us with rumours which were reaching Venice, now that the deed was the duke's, now that the lady was with Ramires. Later the two rumours are consolidated into one, in a report of the Podestá of Cervia to the effect that "the lady is in the Castle of Forli with Ramires, and that he took her there by order of the duke." The Podestá says

that a man whom he sent to gather news had this story from one Benfaremo. But he omits to say who and what is this Benfaremo, and what the source of his information.

Matters remaining thus, and the affair appearing in danger of being forgotten, Caracciolo goes before the Senate on March 16 and implores permission to deal with it himself. This permission is denied him, the Doge conceiving that the matter will best be dealt with by the Senate, and Caracciolo is ordered back to his post at Gradisca. Thence he writes to the Senate on March 30 that he is certain his wife is in the citadel of Forlì.

After this Sanuto does not mention the matter again until December of 1503—nearly three years later—when we gather that, under pressure of constant letters from the husband, the Venetian ambassador at the Vatican makes so vigorous a stir that the lady is at last delivered up, and goes for the time being into a convent. But we are not told where or how she is found, nor where the convent in which she seeks shelter. That is Sanuto's first important omission.

And now an odd light is thrown suddenly upon the whole affair, and it begins to look as if the lady had been no unwilling victim of an abduction, but, rather, a party to an elopement. She displays a positive reluctance to return to her husband; she is afraid to do so—"in fear for her very life"—and she implores the Senate to obtain from Caracciolo some security for her, or else to grant her permission to withdraw permanently to a convent.

The Senate summons the husband, and represents the case to him. He assures the Senate that he has forgiven his wife, believing her to be innocent. This, however, does not suffice to allay her uneasiness—or her reluctance—for on January 4, 1504, Sanuto tells us that the Senate has received a letter of thanks from her in which she relates her misfortunes, and in which again she begs that her husband be compelled to pledge security to treat her well ("darli

buona vita") or else that she should be allowed to return to her mother. Of the nature of the misfortunes which he tells us she related in her letter, Sanuto says nothing. That is his second important omission.

The last mention of the subject in Sanuto relates to her restoration to her husband. He tells us that Caracciolo received her with great joy; but he is silent on the score of the lady's emotions on that occasion.

There you have all that is known of Dorotea Caracciolo's abduction, which later writers—including Bembo in his *Historiae*—have positively assigned to Cesare Borgia, drawing upon their imagination to fill up the lacunae in the story so as to support their point of view.

Those lacunae, however, are invested with a certain eloquence which it is well not to disregard. Admitting that the construing of silence into evidence is a dangerous course, all fraught with pitfalls, yet it seems permissible to pose the following questions:

If the revelation of the circumstances under which she was found, the revelations contained in her letters to the Senate, and the revelations which one imagines must have followed her return to her husband, confirm past rumours and convict Cesare of the outrage, how does it happen that Sanuto—who has never failed to record anything that could tell against Cesare—should be silent on the matter? And how does it happen that so many pens that busied themselves greedily with scandal that touched the Borgias should be similarly silent? Is it unreasonable to infer that those revelations did not incriminate him—that they gave the lie to all the rumours that had been current? If that is not the inference, then what is?

It is further noteworthy that on January 16—after Dorotea's letter to the Senate giving the details of her misfortunes, which details Sanuto has suppressed—Diego Ramires, the real and known abductor, is still the object of a hunt set afoot by some Venetians. Would that be the case had her revelations shown Ramires to be no more than the

duke's instrument? Possibly; but not probably. In such a case he would not have been worth the trouble of pursuing.

Reasonably may it be objected: How, if Cesare was not guilty, does it happen that he did not carry out his threat of doing exemplary justice upon Ramires when taken—since Ramires obviously lay in his power for years after the event? The answer to that you will find in the lady's reluctance to return to Caracciolo, and the tale it tells. It is not in the least illogical to assume that, when Cesare threatened that vengeance upon Ramires for the outrage which it was alleged had been committed, he fully intended to execute it; but that, upon taking Ramires, and upon discovering that here was no such outrage as had been represented, but just the elopement of a couple of lovers, he found there was nothing for him to avenge. Was it for Cesare Borgia to set up as a protector and avenger of cuckolds? Rather would it be in keeping with the feelings of his age and race to befriend the fugitive pair who had planted the antlers upon the brow of the Venetian captain.

Lastly, Cesare's attitude towards women may be worth considering, that we may judge whether such an act as was imputed to him is consistent with it. Women play no part whatever in his history. Not once shall you find a woman's influence swaying him; not once shall you see him permitting dalliance to retard his advancement or jeopardize his chances. With him, as with egotists of his type, governed by cold will and cold intellect, the sentimental side of the relation of the sexes has no place. With him one woman was as another woman; as he craved women, so he took women, but with an almost contemptuous undiscrimination. For all his needs concerning them the lupanaria sufficed.

Is this mere speculation, think you? Is there no evidence to support it, do you say? Consider, pray, in all its bearings the treatise on pudendagra dedicated to a man of Cesare Borgia's rank by the

physician Torella, written to meet his needs, and see what inference you draw from that. Surely such an inference as will invest with the ring of truth—expressing as it does his intimate nature, and confirming further what has here been said—that answer of his to the Venetian envoy, "that he had not found the ladies of Romagna so difficult that he should be driven to such rude and violent measures."

CHAPTER VIII. ASTORRE MANFREDI

On March 29 Cesare Borgia departed from Cesena—whither, meanwhile, he had returned—to march upon Faenza, resume the attack, and make an end of the city's stubborn resistance.

During the past months, however, and notwithstanding the presence of the Borgia troops in the territory, the people of Faenza had been able to increase their fortifications by the erection of out-works and a stout bastion in the neighbourhood of the Osservanza Hospital, well beyond the walls. This bastion claimed Cesare's first attention, and it was carried by assault on April 12. Thither he now fetched his guns, mounted them, and proceeded to a steady bombardment of the citadel. But the resistance continued with unabated determination—a determination amounting to heroism, considering the hopelessness of their case and the straits to which the Faentini were reduced by now. Victuals and other necessities of life had long since been running low. Still the men of Faenza tightened their belts, looked to their defences, and flung defiance at the Borgia. The wealthier inhabitants distributed wine and flour at prices purely nominal, and lent Astorre money for the payment of his troops. It is written that to the same end the very priests, their patriotism surmounting their duty to the Holy Father in whose name this war was waged, consented to the despoiling of the churches and the melting down of the sacred vessels.

Even the women of Faenza bore their share of the burden of defence, carrying to the ramparts the heavy stones that were to be hurled down upon the besiegers, or actually donning casque and

body-armour and doing sentry duty on the walls while the men rested.

But the end was approaching. On April 18 the Borgia cannon opened at last a breach in the walls, and Cesare delivered a terrible assault upon the citadel. The fight upon the smoking ruins was fierce and determined on both sides, the duke's men pressing forward gallantly under showers of scalding pitch and a storm of boulders, launched upon them by the defenders, who used the very ruins of the wall for ammunition. For four hours was that assault maintained; nor did it cease until the deepening dusk compelled Cesare to order the retreat, since to continue in the failing light was but to sacrifice men to no purpose.

Cesare's appreciation of the valour of the garrison ran high. It inspired him with a respect which shows his dispassionate breadth of mind, and he is reported to have declared that with an army of such men as those who held Faenza against him he would have conquered all Italy. He did not attempt a second assault, but confined himself during the three days that followed to continuing the bombardment.

Within Faenza men were by now in desperate case. Weariness and hunger were so exhausting their endurance, so sapping their high valour that nightly there were desertions to the duke's camp of men who could bear no more. The fugitives from the town were well received, all save one—a man named Grammante, a dyer by trade—who, in deserting to the duke, came in to inform him that at a certain point of the citadel the defences were so weak that an assault delivered there could not fail to carry it.

This man afforded Cesare an opportunity of marking his contempt for traitors and his respect for the gallant defenders of Faenza. The duke hanged him for his pains under the very walls of the town he had betrayed.

On the 21st the bombardment was kept up almost without

interruption for eight hours, and so shattered was the citadel by that pitiless cannonade that the end was in sight at last. But the duke's satisfaction was tempered by his chagrin at the loss of Achille Tiberti, one of the most valiant of his captains, and one who had followed his fortunes from the first with conspicuous devotion. He was killed by the bursting of a gun. A great funeral at Cesena bore witness to the extent to which Cesare esteemed and honoured him.

Astorre, now seeing the citadel in ruins and the possibility of further resistance utterly exhausted, assembled the Council of Faenza to determine upon their course of action, and, as a result of their deliberations, the young tyrant sent his ambassadors to the duke to propose terms of surrender. It was a belated proposal, for there was no longer on Cesare's part the necessity to make terms. The city's defences were destroyed, and to talk of surrender now was to talk of giving something that no longer existed. Yet Cesare met the ambassadors in a spirit of splendid generosity.

The terms proposed were that the people of Faenza should have immunity for themselves and their property; that Astorre should have freedom to depart and to take with him his moveable possessions, his immoveables remaining at the mercy of the Pope. By all the laws of war Cesare was entitled to a heavy indemnity for the losses he had sustained through the resistance opposed to him. Considering those same laws and the application they were wont to receive in his day, no one could have censured him had he rejected all terms and given the city over to pillage. Yet not only does he grant the terms submitted to him, but in addition he actually lends an ear to the Council's prayer that out of consideration for the great suffering of the city in the siege he should refrain from exacting any indemnity. This was to be forbearing indeed; but he was to carry his forbearance even further. In answer to the Council's expressed fears of further harm at the hands of his troopers once these should be in Faenza, he actually consented to effect no entrance into the town.

We are not for a moment to consider Cesare as actuated in all this by any lofty humanitarianism. He was simply pursuing that wise policy of his, in refraining from punishing conquered States which were to be subject henceforth to his rule, and which, therefore, must be conciliated that they might be loyal to him. But it is well that you should at least appreciate this policy and the fruit it bore when you read that Cesare Borgia was a blood-glutted monster of carnage who ravaged the Romagna, rending and devouring it like some beast of prey.

On the 26th the Council waited upon Cesare at the Hospital of the Osservanza—where he was lodged—to tender the oath of fealty. That same evening Astorre himself, attended by a few of his gentlemen, came to the duke.

To this rather sickly and melancholy lad, who had behind him a terrible family history of violence, and to his bastard brother, Gianevangelista, the duke accorded the most gracious welcome. Indeed, so amiable did Astorre find the duke that, although the terms of surrender afforded him perfect liberty to go whither he listed, he chose to accept the invitation Cesare extended to him to remain in the duke's train.

It is eminently probable, however, that the duke's object in keeping the young man about him was prompted by another phase of that policy of his which Macchiavelli was later to formulate into rules of conduct, expedient in a prince:

"In order to preserve a newly acquired State particular attention should be given to two points. In the first place care should be taken entirely to extinguish the family of the ancient sovereign; in the second, laws should not be changed, nor taxes increased."

Thus Macchiavelli. The second point is all that is excellent; the first is all that is wise—cold, horrible, and revolting though it be to our twentieth-century notions.

Cesare Borgia, as a matter of fact, hardly went so far as Macchiavelli advises. He practised discrimination. He did not, for instance, seek the lives of Pandolfaccio Malatesta, or of Caterina Sforza-Riario. He saw no danger in their living, no future trouble to apprehend from them. The hatred borne them by their subjects was to Cesare a sufficient guarantee that they would not be likely to attempt a return to their dominions, and so he permitted them to keep their lives. But to have allowed Astorre Manfredi, or even his bastard brother, to live would have been bad policy from the appallingly egotistical point of view which was Cesare's—a point of view, remember, which receives Macchiavelli's horribly intellectual, utterly unsentimental, revoltingly practical approval.

So—to anticipate a little—we see Cesare taking Astorre and Gianevangelista Manfredi to Rome when he returned thither in the following June. A fortnight later—on June 26—the formidable amazon of Forlì, the Countess Sforza-Riario, was liberated, as we know, from the Castle of Sant' Angelo, and permitted to withdraw to Florence. But the gates of that grim fortress, in opening to allow her to pass out, opened also for the purpose of admitting Astorre and Gianevangelista, upon whom they closed.

All that is known positively of the fate of these unfortunate young men is that they never came forth again alive.

The record in Burchard (June 9, 1502) of Astorre's body having been found in the Tiber with a stone round his neck, suffers in probability from the addition that, "together with it were found the bodies of two young men with their arms tied, a certain woman, and many others."

The dispatch of Giustiniani to the effect that: "It is said that this night were thrown into Tiber and drowned the two lords of Faenza together with their seneschal," was never followed up by any other dispatch

confirming the rumour, nor is it confirmed by any dispatch so far discovered from any other ambassador, nor yet does the matter find place in the Chronicles of Faenza.

But that is of secondary importance. The ugliest feature of the case is not the actual assassination of the young men, but the fact that Cesare had pledged himself that Astorre should go free, and yet had kept him by him—at first, it would seem, in his train, and later as a prisoner—until he put an end to his life. It was an ugly, unscrupulous deed; but there is no need to exaggerate its heinousness, as is constantly done, upon no better authority than Guicciardini's, who wrote that the murder had been committed "*saziata prima la libidine di qualcuno*."

Of all the unspeakable calumnies of which the Borgias have been the subject, none is more utterly wanton than this foul exhalation of Guicciardini's lewd invention. Let the shame that must eternally attach to him for it brand also those subsequent writers who repeated and retailed that abominable and utterly unsupported accusation, and more particularly those who have not hesitated to assume that Guicciardini's "*qualcuno*" was an old man in his seventy-second year—Pope Alexander VI.

Others a little more merciful, a little more careful of physical possibilities (but no whit less salacious) have taken it that Cesare was intended by the Florentine historian.

But, under one form or another, the lie has spread as only such foulness can spread. It has become woven into the warp of history; it has grown to be one of those "facts" which are unquestioningly accepted, but it stands upon no better foundation than the frequent repetition which a charge so monstrous could not escape. Its source is not a contemporary one. It is first mentioned by Guicciardini; and there is no logical conclusion to be formed other than that Guicciardini invented it. Another story which owes its existence mainly, and its

particulars almost entirely, to Guicciardini's libellous pen—the story of the death of Alexander VI, which in its place shall be examined—provoked the righteous anger of Voltaire. Atheist and violent anti-clerical though he was, the story's obvious falseness so revolted him that he penned his formidable indictment in which he branded Guicciardini as a liar who had deceived posterity that he might vent his hatred of the Borgias. Better cause still was there in this matter of Astorre Manfredi for Voltaire's indignation, as there is for the indignation of all conscientious seekers after truth.

CHAPTER IX. CASTEL BOLOGNESE AND PIOMBINO

To return to the surrender of Faenza on April 26, 1501, we see Cesare on the morrow of that event, striking camp with such amazing suddenness that he does not even pause to provide for the government of the conquered tyranny, but appoints a vicar four days later to attend to it.

He makes his abrupt departure from Faenza, and is off like a whirlwind to sweep unexpectedly into the Bolognese territory, and, by striking swiftly, to terrify Bentivogli into submission in the matter of Castel Bolognese.

This fortress, standing in the duke's dominions, on the road between Faenza and Imola, must be a menace to him whilst in the hands of a power that might become actively hostile.

Ahead of him Cesare sent an envoy to Bentivogli, to demand its surrender.

The alarmed Lord of Bologna, having convened his Council (the Reggimento), replied that they must deliberate in the matter; and two days later they dispatched their ambassador to lay before Cesare the fruits of these deliberations. They were to seek the duke at Imola; but they got no farther than Castel S. Pietro, which to their dismay they found already in the hands of Vitellozzo Vitelli's men-at-arms. For, what time Bentivogli had been deliberating, Cesare Borgia had been acting with that promptness which was one of his most salient characteristics, and, in addition to Castel S. Pietro he had already captured Casalfiuminense, Castel Guelfo, and Medecina, which were

now invested by his troops.

When the alarming news of this swift action reached Bologna it caused Bentivogli to bethink him at last of Louis XII's advice, that he should come to terms with Cesare Borgia, and he realized that the time to do so could no longer be put off. He made haste, therefore, to agree to the surrender of Castel Bolognese to the duke, to concede him stipend for one hundred lances of three men each, and to enter into an undertaking to lend him every assistance for one year against any power with which he might be at war, the King of France excepted. In return, Cesare was to relinquish the captured strongholds and undertake that the Pope should confirm Bentivogli in his ancient privileges. On April 29 Paolo Orsini went as Cesare's plenipotentiary to Bologna to sign this treaty.

It was a crafty arrangement on Bentivogli's part, for, over and above the pacification of Cesare and the advantage of an alliance with him, he gained as a result the alliance also of those famous condottieri Vitelli and Orsini, both bitter enemies of Florence—the latter intent upon the restoration of the Medici, the former impatient to avenge upon the Signory the execution of his brother Paolo. As an instalment, on account of that debt, Vitelli had already put to death Pietro da Marciano—the brother of Count Rinuccio da Marciano—when this gentleman fell into his hands at Medicina.

Two days before the treaty was signed, Bentivogli had seized four members of the powerful House of Marescotti. This family was related to the exiled Malvezzi, who were in arms with Cesare, and Bentivogli feared that communications might be passing between the two to his undoing. On that suspicion he kept them prisoners for the present, nor did he release them when the treaty was signed, nor yet when, amid public rejoicings expressing the relief of the Bolognese, it was published on May 2.

Hermes Bentivogli—Giovanni's youngest son—was on guard at the

palace with several other young Bolognese patricians, and he incited these to go with him to make an end of the traitors who had sought to destroy the peace by their alleged plottings with Bentivogli's enemies in Cesare's camp. He led his companions to the chamber where the Marescotti were confined, and there, more or less in cold blood, those four gentlemen were murdered for no better reason—ostensibly—than because it was suspected they had been in communication with their relatives in the Duke of Valentinois's army. That was the way of the Cinquecento, which appears to have held few things of less account than human life.

In passing, it may be mentioned that Guicciardini, of course, does his ludicrous best to make this murder appear—at least indirectly, since directly it would be impossible—the work of Cesare Borgia.

As for Castel Bolognese itself, Cesare Borgia sent a thousand demolishers in the following July to raze it to the ground. It is said to have been the most beautiful castle in the Romagna; but Cesare had other qualities than beauty to consider in the matter of a stronghold. Its commanding position rendered it almost in the nature of a gateway controlling, as we know, the road from Faenza to Imola, and its occupation by the Bolognese or other enemies in time of disturbance might be of serious consequence to Cesare. Therefore he ruthlessly ordered Ramiro de Lorqua to set about its demolition.

The Council of Castel Bolognese made great protest, and implored Ramiro to stay his hand until they should have communicated with the duke petitioning for the castle's preservation; but Ramiro—a hard, stern man, and Cesare's most active officer in the Romagna—told them bluntly that to petition the duke in such a matter would be no better than a waste of time. He was no more than right; for Cesare, being resolved upon the expediency of the castle's destruction, would hardly be likely to listen to sentimental reasonings for its preservation. Confident of this, Ramiro without more ado set about the execution of

the orders he had received. He pulled down the walls and filled up the moat, until nothing remained so much as to show the place where the fortress had stood.

Another fortress which shared the fate of Castel Bolognese was the Castle of Sant' Arcangelo, and similarly would Cesare have disposed of Solarolo, but that, being of lesser importance and the inhabitants offering, in their petition for its preservation, to undertake, themselves, the payment of the Castellan, he allowed it to remain.

Scarcely was the treaty with Bologna signed than Cesare received letters from the Pope recalling him to Rome, and recommending that he should not molest the Florentines in his passage—a recommendation which Alexander deemed very necessary considering the disposition towards Florence of Vitelli and Orsini. He foresaw that they would employ arguments to induce Valentinois into an enterprise of which all the cost would be his, and all the possible profit their own.

The duke would certainly have obeyed and avoided Tuscany, but that—precisely as the shrewd Pope had feared—Vitelli and Orsini implored him to march through Florentine territory. Vitelli, indeed, flung himself on his knees before Cesare in the vehemence of his supplications, urging that his only motive was to effect the deliverance from his unjust imprisonment of Cerbone, who had been his executed brother's chancellor. Beyond that, he swore he would make no demands upon Florence, that he would not attempt to mix himself in the affairs of the Medici, and that he would do no violence to town or country.

Thus implored, Cesare gave way. Probably he remembered the very circumstances under which Vitelli had joined his banner, and considered that he could not now oppose a request backed by a promise of so much moderation; so on May 7 he sent his envoys to the Signory to crave leave of passage for his troops through

Florentine territory.

Whilst still in the Bolognese he was sought out by Giuliano de'Medici, who begged to be allowed to accompany him, a request which Cesare instantly refused, as being contrary to that to which he had engaged himself, and he caused Giuliano to fall behind at Lojano. Nor would he so much as receive in audience Piero de'Medici, who likewise sought to join him in Siennese territory, as soon as he perceived what was toward. Yet, however much the duke protested that he had no intention to make any change in the State of Florence, there were few who believed him. Florence, weary and sorely reduced by the long struggle of the Pisan war, was an easy prey. Conscious of this, great was her anxiety and alarm at Cesare's request for passage. The Signory replied granting him the permission sought, but imposing the condition that he should keep to the country, refraining from entering any town, nor bring with him into Florentine territory Vitelli, Orsini, or any other enemy of the existing government. It happened, however, that when the Florentine ambassador reached him with this reply the duke was already over the frontier of Tuscany with the excluded condottieri in his train.

It was incumbent upon him, as a consequence, to vindicate this high-handed anticipation of the unqualified Florentine permission which had not arrived. So he declared that he had been offended last year by Florence in the matter of Forlì, and again this year in the matter of Faenza, both of which cities he charged the Signory with having assisted to resist him, and he announced that, to justify his intentions so far as Florence was concerned, he would explain himself at Barberino.

There, on May 12, he gave audience to the ambassador. He declared to him that he desired a good understanding with Florence, and that she should offer no hindrance to the conquest of Piombino, upon which he was now bound; adding that since he placed no trust in

the present government, which already had broken faith with him, he would require some good security for the treaty to be made. Of reinstating the Medici he said nothing; but he demanded that some satisfaction be given Vitelli and Orsini, and, to quicken Florence in coming to a decision, he pushed forward with his army as far as Forno dei Campi—almost under her very walls.

The Republic was thrown into consternation. Instantly she got together what forces she disposed of, and proceeded to fling her artillery into the Arno, to the end that she should be constrained neither to refuse it to Cesare upon his demand, nor yet to deliver it.

Macchiavelli censures the Signory's conduct of this affair as impolitic. He contends that the duke, being in great strength of arms, and Florence not armed at all, and therefore in no case to hinder his passage, it would have been wiser and the Signory would better have saved its face and dignity, had it accorded Cesare the permission to pass which he demanded, rather than have been subjected to behold him enforce that passage by weight of arms. But all that now concerned the Florentines was to be rid of an army whose presence in their territory was a constant menace. And to gain that end they were ready to give any undertakings, just as they were resolved to fulfil none.

Similarly, it chanced that Cesare was in no less a hurry to be gone; for he had received another letter from the Pope commanding his withdrawal, and in addition, he was being plagued by Vitelli and Orsini—grown restive—with entreaties for permission to go into either Florence or Pistoja, where they did not lack for friends. To resist them Cesare had need of all the severity and resolution he could command; and he even went so far as to back his refusal by a threat himself to take up arms against them if they insisted.

On the 15th, at last, the treaty—which amounted to an offensive and defensive alliance—was signed. By the terms of this, Florence

undertook to give Cesare a condotta of 300 lances for three years, to be used in Florentine service, with a stipend of 36,000 ducats yearly. How much this really meant the duke was to discover two days later, when he sent to ask the Signory to lend him some cannon for the emprise against Piombino, and to pay him the first instalment of one quarter of the yearly stipend before he left Florentine territory. The Signory replied that, by the terms of the agreement, there was no obligation for the immediate payment of the instalment, whilst in the matter of the artillery they put him off from day to day, until Cesare understood that their only aim in signing the treaty had been the immediate one of being rid of his army.

The risk Florence incurred in so playing fast-and-loose with such a man, particularly in a moment of such utter unfitness to resist him, is, notwithstanding the French protection enjoyed by the Signory, amazing in its reckless audacity. It was fortunate for Florence that the Pope's orders tied the duke's hands—and it may be that of this the Signory had knowledge, and that it was upon such knowledge, in conjunction with France's protection, that it was presuming. Cesare took the matter in the spirit of an excellent loser.

Not a hint of his chagrin and resentment did he betray; instead, he set about furnishing his needs elsewhere, sending Vitelli to Pisa with a request for artillery, a request to which Pisa very readily responded as much on Vitelli's account as on the duke's. As for Florence, if Cesare Borgia could be terribly swift in punishing, he could also be formidably slow. If he could strike upon the instant where the opening for a blow appeared, he could also wait for months until the opening should be found. He waited now.

It would be at about this time that young Loenardo da Vinci sought employment in Cesare Borgia's service. Leonardo had been in Milan until the summer of 1500, when he repaired to Florence in quest of better fortune; but, finding little or no work to engage him there, he

took the chance of the duke of Valentinois's passage to offer his service to one whose liberal patronage of the arts was become proverbial. Cesare took him into his employ as engineer and architect, leaving him in the Romagna for the present. Leonardo may have superintended the repairs of the Castle of Forlì, whilst he certainly built the canal from Cesena to the Porto Cesenatico, before rejoining the duke in Rome.

On May 25 Cesare moved by the way of the valley of Cecina to try conclusions with Giacomo d'Appiano, Tyrant of Piombino, who with some Genoese and some Florentine aid, was disposed to offer resistance to the duke. The first strategic movement in this affair must be the capture of the Isle of Elba, whence aid might reach Piombino on its promontory thrusting out into the sea. For this purpose the Pope sent from Civita Vecchia six galleys, three brigantines, and two galleons under the command of Lodovico Mosca, captain of the papal navy, whilst Cesare was further reinforced by some vessels sent him from Pisa together with eight pieces of cannon. With these he made an easy capture of Elba and Pianosa. That done, he proceeded to lay siege to Piombino, which, after making a gallant resistance enduring for two months, was finally pressed to capitulate.

Long before that happened, however, Cesare had taken his departure. Being awaited in Rome, he was unable to conduct the siege operations in person. So he quitted Piombino in June to join the French under d'Aubigny, bound at last upon the conquest of Naples, and claiming—as their treaty with him provided—Cesare's collaboration.

CHAPTER X. THE END OF THE HOUSE OF ARAGON

Cesare arrived in Rome on June 13. There was none of the usual pomp on this occasion. He made his entrance quietly, attended only by a small body of men-at-arms, and he was followed, on the morrow, by Yves d'Allègre with the army—considerably reduced by the detachments which had been left to garrison the Romagna, and to lay siege to Piombino.

Repairing to his quarters in the Vatican, the duke remained so close there for the few weeks that he abode in Rome on this occasion⁽¹⁾ that, from now onward, it became a matter of the utmost difficulty to obtain audience from him. This may have been due to his habit of turning night into day and day into night, whether at work or at play, which in fact was the excuse offered by the Pope to certain envoys sent to Cesare from Rimini, who were left to cool their heels about the Vatican ante-chambers for a fortnight without succeeding in obtaining an audience.

¹ "Mansit in Palatio secreta," says Burchard.

Cesare Borgia was now Lord of Imola, Forlì, Rimini, Faenza and Piombino, warranting his assumption of the inclusive title of Duke of Romagna which he had taken immediately after the fall of Faenza.

As his State grew, so naturally did the affairs of government; and, during those four weeks in Rome, business claimed his attention and an enormous amount of it was dispatched. Chiefly was he engaged upon the administration of the affairs of Faenza, which he had so

hurriedly quitted. In this his shrewd policy of generosity is again apparent. As his representative and lieutenant he appointed a prominent citizen of Faenza named Pasi, one of the very members of that Council which had been engaged in defending the city and resisting Cesare. The duke gave it as his motive for the choice that the man was obviously worthy of trust in view of his fidelity to Astorre.

And there you have not only the shrewdness of the man who knows how to choose his servants—which is one of the most important factors of success—but a breadth of mind very unusual indeed in the Cinquecento.

In addition to the immunity from indemnity provided for by the terms of the city's capitulation, Cesare actually went so far as to grant the peasantry of the valley 2,000 ducats as compensation for damage done in the war. Further, he supported the intercessions of the Council to the Pope for the erection of a new convent to replace the one that had been destroyed in the bombardment. In giving his consent to this—in a brief dated July 12, 1501—the Pope announces that he does so in response to the prayers of the Council and of the duke.

Giovanni Vera, Cesare's erstwhile preceptor—and still affectionately accorded this title by the duke—was now Archbishop of Salerno, Cardinal of Santa Balbina, and papal legate in Macerata, and he was chosen by the Pope to go to Pesaro and Fano for the purpose of receiving the oath of fealty. With him Cesare sent, as his own personal representative, his secretary, Agabito Gherardi, who had been in his employ in that capacity since the duke's journey into France, and who was to follow his fortunes to the end.

However the people of Fano may have refrained from offering themselves to the duke's dominion when, in the previous October, he had afforded them by his presence the opportunity of doing so, their conduct now hardly indicated that the earlier abstention had been

born of reluctance, or else their minds had undergone, in the meanwhile, a considerable change. For, when they received the brief appointing him their lord, they celebrated the event by public rejoicings and illuminations; whilst on July 21 the Council, representing the people, in the presence of Vera and Gherardi, took oath upon the Gospels of allegiance to Cesare and his descendants for ever.

In the Consistory of June 25 of that year the French and Spanish ambassadors came formally to notify the Holy Father of the treaty of Granada, entered into in the previous November by Louis XII of the one part, and Ferdinand and Isabella of the other, concerning the conquest and division of the Kingdom of Naples. The rival claimants had come to a compromise by virtue of which they were to undertake together the conquest and thereafter share the spoil—Naples and the Abruzzi going to France, and Calabria and Puglia to Spain.

Alexander immediately published his Bull declaring Federigo of Naples deposed for disobedience to the Church, and for having called the Turk to his aid, either of which charges it would have taxed Alexander's ingenuity—vast though it was—convincingly to have established; or, being established, to censure when all the facts were considered. The charges were no better than pretexts for the spoliation of the unfortunate king who, in the matter of his daughter's alliance with Cesare, had conceived that he might flout the Borgias with impunity.

On June 28 d'Aubigny left Rome with the French troops, accompanied by the bulk of the considerable army with which Cesare supported his French ally, besides 1,000 foot raised by the Pope and a condotta of 100 lances under Morgante Baglioni. As the troops defiled before the Castle of Sant' Angelo they received the apostolic benediction from the Pope, who stood on the lower ramparts of the fortress.

Cesare himself cannot have followed to join the army until after July 10, for as late as that date there is an edict indited by him against all who should offer injury to his Romagna officers. At about the same time that he quitted Rome to ride after the French, Gonsalo de Cordoba landed a Spanish army in Calabria, and the days of the Aragon dominion in Naples were numbered.

King Federigo prepared to face the foe. Whilst himself remaining in Naples with Prospero Colonna, he sent the bulk of his forces to Capua under Fabrizio Colonna and Count Rinuccio Marciano—the brother of that Marciano whom Vitelli had put to death in Tuscany.

Ravaging the territory and forcing its strongholds as they came, the allies were under the walls of Capua within three weeks of setting out; but on July 17, when within two miles of the town, they were met by six hundred lances under Colonna, who attempted to dispute their passage. It was Cesare Borgia himself who led the charge against them. Jean d'Auton—in his *Chronicles of Louis XII*—speaks in warm terms of the duke's valour and of the manner in which, by words and by example, he encouraged his followers to charge the Colonna forces, with such good effect that they utterly routed the Neapolitans, and drove them headlong back to the shelter of Capua's walls.

The allies brought up their cannon, and opened the bombardment. This lasted incessantly from July 17—which was a Monday—until the following Friday, when two bastions were so shattered that the French were able to gain possession of them, putting to the sword some two hundred Neapolitan soldiers who had been left to defend those outworks. Thence admittance to the town itself was gained four days later—on the 25th—through a breach, according to some, through the treacherous opening of a gate, according to others. Through gate or breach the besiegers stormed to meet a fierce resistance, and the most horrible carnage followed. Back and back they drove the defenders, fighting their way through the streets and sparing none in

the awful fury that beset them. The defence was shattered; resistance was at an end; yet still the bloody work went on. The combat had imperceptibly merged into a slaughter; demoralized and panic-stricken in the reaction from their late gallantry, the soldiers of Naples flung down their weapons and fled, shrieking for quarter. But none was given. The invader butchered every human thing he came upon indiscriminant of age or sex, and the blood of some four thousand victims flowed through the streets of Capua like water after a thundershower. That sack of Capua is one of the most horrid pages in the horrid history of sacks. You will find full details in d'Auton's chronicle, if you have a mind for such horrors. There is a brief summary of the event in Burchard's diary under date of July 26, 1501, which runs as follows:

"At about the fourth hour last night the Pope had news of the capture of Capua by the Duke of Valentinois. The capture was due to the treason of one Fabrizio—a citizen of Capua—who secretly introduced the besiegers and was the first to be killed by them. After him the same fate was met by some three thousand foot and some two hundred horse-soldiers, by citizens, priests, conventuals of both sexes, even in the very churches and monasteries, and all the women taken were given in prey to the greatest cruelty. The total number of the slain is estimated at four thousand."

D'Auton, too, bears witness to this wholesale violation of the women, "which," he adds, "is the very worst of all war's excesses." He informs us further that "the foot-soldiers of the Duke of Valentinois acquitted themselves so well in this, that thirty of the most beautiful women went captive to Rome," a figure which is confirmed by Burchard.

"What an opportunity was not this for Guicciardini! The foot-soldiers of the Duke of Valentinois acquitted themselves so well in this, that thirty of the most beautiful women went captive to Rome."

Under his nimble, malicious, unscrupulous pen that statement is re-edited until not thirty but forty is the number of the captured victims taken to Rome, and not Valentinois's foot, but Valentinois himself the ravisher of the entire forty! But hear the elegant Florentine's own words:

"It was spread about [divulgossi]" he writes, "that, besides other wickednesses worthy of eternal infamy, many women who had taken refuge in a tower, and thus escaped the first fury of the assault, were found by the Duke of Valentinois, who, with the title of King's Lieutenant, followed the army with no more people than his gentlemen and his guards.(1) He desired to see them all, and, after carefully examining them [consideratele diligentemente] he retained forty of the most beautiful."

1 This, incidentally, is another misstatement. Valentinois had with him, besides the thousand foot levied by the Pope and the hundred lances under Morgante Baglioni, an army some thousands strong led for him by Yves d'Allègre.

Guicciardini's aim is, of course, to shock you; he considers it necessary to maintain in Cesare the character of ravenous wolf which he had bestowed upon him. The marvel is not that Guicciardini should have penned that utterly ludicrous accusation, but that more or less serious subsequent writers—and writers of our own time even—instead of being moved to contemptuous laughter at the wild foolishness of the story, instead of seeking in the available records the germ of true fact from which it was sprung, should sedulously and unblushingly have carried forward its dissemination.

Yriarte not only repeats the tale with all the sober calm of one utterly destitute of a sense of the ridiculous, but he improves upon it by a delicious touch, worthy of Guicciardini himself, when he assures us that Cesare took these forty women for his harem!

It is a nice instance of how Borgia history has grown, and is still growing.

If verisimilitude itself does not repudiate Guicciardini's story, there are the Capuan chronicles to do it—particularly that of Pellegrini, who witnessed the pillage. In those chronicles from which Guicciardini drew the matter for this portion of his history of Italy, you will seek in vain for any confirmation of that fiction with which the Florentine historian—he who had a pen of gold for his friends and one of iron for his foes—thought well to adorn his facts.

If the grotesque in history-building is of interest to you, you may turn the pages of the *Storia Civile di Capua*, by F. Granata, published in 1752. This writer has carefully followed the Capuan chroniclers in their relation of the siege; but when it comes to these details of the forty ladies in the tower (in which those chroniclers fail him) he actually gives Guicciardini as his authority, setting a fashion which has not lacked for unconscious, and no less egregious, imitators.

To return from the criticism of fiction to the consideration of fact, Fabrizio Colonna and Rinuccio da Marciano were among the many captains of the Neapolitan army that were taken prisoners. Rinuccio was the head of the Florentine faction which had caused the execution of Paolo Vitelli, and Giovio has it that Vitellozzo Vitelli, who had already taken an instalment of vengeance by putting Pietro da Marciano to death in Tuscany, caused Rinuccio's wounds to be poisoned, so that he died two days later.

The fall of Capua was very shortly followed by that of Gaeta, and, within a week, by that of Naples, which was entered on August 3 by Cesare Borgia in command of the vanguard of the army. "He who had come as a cardinal to crown King Federigo, came now as a condottiero to depose him."

Federigo offered to surrender to the French all the fortresses that still held for him, on condition that he should have safe-conduct to Ischia and liberty to remain there for six months. This was agreed, and Federigo was further permitted to take with him his moveable possessions and his artillery, which latter, however, he afterwards sold to the Pope.

Thus the last member of the House of Aragon to sit upon the throne of Naples took his departure, accompanied by the few faithful ones who loved him well enough to follow him into exile; amongst these was that poet Sanazzaro, who, to avenge the wrong suffered by the master whom he loved, was to launch his terrible epigrams against Alexander, Cesare, and Lucrezia, and by means of those surviving verses enable the enemies of the House of Borgia to vilify their memories through centuries to follow.

Federigo's captains Prospero and Fabrizio Colonna, upon being ransomed, took their swords to Gonzalo de Cordoba, hoping for the day when they might avenge upon the Borgia the ruin which, even in this Neapolitan conquest they attributed to the Pope and his son.

And here, so far as Naples is concerned, closes the history of the House of Aragon. In Italy it was extinct; and it was to become so, too, in Spain within the century.

CHAPTER XI. THE LETTER TO SILVIO SAVELLI

By September 15 Cesare was back in Rome, the richer in renown, in French favour, and in a matter of 40,000 ducats, which is estimated as the total of the sums paid him by France and Spain for the support which his condotta had afforded them.

During his absence two important events had taken place: the betrothal of his widowed sister Lucrezia to Alfonso d'Este, son of Duke Ercole of Ferrara, and the publication of the Bull of excommunication (of August 20) against the Savelli and Colonna in consideration of all that they had wrought against the Holy See from the pontificate of Sixtus IV to the present time. By virtue of that Bull the Pope ordered the confiscation of the possessions of the excommunicated families, whilst the Caetani suffered in like manner at the same time.

These possessions were divided into two parts, and by the Bull of September 17 they were bestowed, one upon Lucrezia's boy Roderigo, and with them the title of Duke of Sermoneta; the other to a child, Giovanni Borgia (who is made something of a mystery) with the title of Duke of Nepi and Palestrina.

The entire proceeding is undoubtedly open to grave censure, since the distribution of the confiscated fiefs subjects to impeachment the purity of the motives that prompted this confiscation. It was on the part of Alexander a gross act of nepotism, a gross abuse of his pontifical authority; but there is, at least, this to be said, that in perpetrating it he was doing no more than in his epoch it was customary for Popes to

do. Alexander, it may be said again in this connection, was part of a corrupt system, not the corrupter of a pure one.

Touching the boy Giovanni Borgia, the mystery attaching to him concerns his parentage, and arises out of the singular circumstance that there are two papal Bulls, both dated September 1, 1501, in each of which a different father is assigned to him, the second appearing to supplement and correct the first.

The first of these Bulls, addressed to "Dilecto Filio Nobili Joanni de Borgia, Infanti Romano," declares him to be a child of three years of age, the illegitimate son of Cesare Borgia, unmarried (as Cesare was at the time of the child's birth) and of a woman (unnamed, as was usual in such cases) also unmarried.

The second declares him, instead, to be the son of Alexander, and runs: "Since you bear this deficiency not from the said duke, but from us and the said woman, which we for good reasons did not desire to express in the preceding writing."

That the second Bull undoubtedly contains the truth of the matter is the only possible explanation of its existence, and the "good reasons" that existed for the first one are, no doubt, as Gregorovius says, that officially and by canon law the Pope was inhibited from recognizing children. (His other children, be it remembered, were recognized by him during his cardinalate and before his elevation to St. Peter's throne.) Hence the attempt by these Bulls to circumvent the law to the end that the child should not suffer in the matter of his inheritance.

Burchard, under date of November 3 of that year, freely mentions this Giovanni Borgia as the son of the Pope and "a certain Roman woman" ("quadam Romana").

On the same date borne by those two Bulls a third one was issued confirming the House of Este perpetually in the dominion of Ferrara

and its other Romagna possessions, and reducing by one-third the tribute of 4,000 ducats yearly imposed upon that family by Sixtus IV; and it was explicitly added that these concessions were made for Lucrezia and her descendants.

Three days later a courier from Duke Ercole brought the news that the marriage contract had been signed in Ferrara, and it was in salvos of artillery that day and illuminations after dark that the Pope gave expression to the satisfaction afforded him by the prospect of his daughter's entering one of the most ancient families and ascending one of the noblest thrones in Italy.

It would be idle to pretend that the marriage was other than one of convenience. Love between the contracting parties played no part in this transaction, and Ercole d'Este was urged to it under suasion of the King of France, out of fear of the growing might of Cesare, and out of consideration for the splendid dowry which he demanded and in the matter of which he displayed a spirit which Alexander contemptuously described as that of a tradesman. Nor would Ercole send the escort to Rome for the bride until he had in his hands the Bull of investiture in the fiefs of Cento and Pieve, which, with 100,000 ducats, constituted Lucrezia's dowry. Altogether a most unromantic affair.

The following letter from the Ferrarese ambassador in Rome, dated September 23, is of interest in connection with this marriage:

"MOST ILLUSTRIOUS PRINCE AND MOST NOBLE LORD,

"His Holiness the Pope, taking into consideration such matters as might occasion displeasure not only to your Excellency and to the Most Illustrious Don Alfonso, but also to the duchess and even to himself, has charged us to write to your Excellency to urge you so to contrive that the Lord Giovanni of Pesaro, who, as your Excellency is aware, is in Mantua, shall not be in Ferrara at the time of the nuptials.

Notwithstanding that his divorce from the said duchess is absolutely legitimate and accomplished in accordance with pure truth, as is publicly known not only from the proceedings of the trial but also from the free confession of the said Don Giovanni, it is possible that he may still be actuated by some lingering ill-will; wherefore, should he find himself in any place where the said lady might be seen by him her Excellency might, in consequence, be compelled to withdraw into privacy, to be spared the memory of the past. Wherefore, his Holiness exhorts your Excellency to provide with your habitual prudence against such a contingency."

Meanwhile, the festivities wherewith her betrothal was celebrated went merrily amain, and into the midst of them, to bear his share, came Cesare crowned with fresh laurels gained in the Neapolitan war. No merry-makings ever held under the auspices of Pope Alexander VI at the Vatican had escaped being the source of much scandalous rumour, but none had been so scandalous and disgraceful as the stories put abroad on this occasion. These found a fitting climax in that anonymous Letter to Silvio Savelli, published in Germany—which at the time, be it borne in mind, was extremely inimical to the Pope, viewing with jaundiced eyes his ever-growing power, and stirred perhaps to this unspeakable burst of venomous fury by the noble Este alliance, so valuable to Cesare in that it gave him a friend upon the frontier of his Romagna possessions.

The appalling publication, which is given in full in Burchard, was fictitiously dated from Gonzola de Cordoba's Spanish camp at Taranto on November 25. A copy of this anonymous pamphlet, which is the most violent attack on the Borgias ever penned, perhaps the most terrible indictment against any family ever published—a pamphlet which Gregorovius does not hesitate to call "an authentic document of the state of Rome under the Borgias"—fell into the hands of the Cardinal of Modena, who on the last day of the year carried it to the Pope.

Before considering that letter it is well to turn to the entries in Burchard's diary under the dates of October 27 and November 11 of that same year. You will find two statements which have no parallel in the rest of the entire diary, few parallels in any sober narrative of facts. The sane mind must recoil and close up before them, so impossible does it seem to accept them.

The first of these is the relation of the supper given by Cesare in the Vatican to fifty courtesans—a relation which possibly suggested to the debauched Regent d'Orléans his fêtes d'Adam, a couple of centuries later.

Burchard tells us how, for the amusement of Cesare, of the Pope, and of Lucrezia, these fifty courtesans were set to dance after supper with the servants and some others who were present, dressed at first and afterwards not so. He draws for us a picture of those fifty women on all fours, in all their plastic nudity, striving for the chestnuts flung to them in that chamber of the Apostolic Palace by Christ's Vicar—an old man of seventy—by his son and his daughter. Nor is that all by any means. There is much worse to follow—matter which we dare not translate, but must leave more or less discreetly veiled in the decadent Latin of the *Caerimoniarius*:

"Tandem exposita dona ultima, diploides de serico, paria caligarum, bireta ed alia pro illis qui pluries dictas meretrices carnaliter agnoscerent; que fuerunt ibidem in aula publice carnaliter tractate arbitrio presentium, dona distributa victoribus."

Such is the monstrous story!

Gregorovius, in his defence of Lucrezia Borgia, refuses to believe that she was present; but he is reluctant to carry his incredulity any further.

"Some orgy of that nature," he writes, "or something similar may

very well have taken place. But who will believe that Lucrezia, already the legal wife of Alfonso d'Este and on the eve of departure for Ferrara, can have been present as a smiling spectator?"

Quite so. Gregorovius puts his finger at once upon one of the obvious weaknesses of the story. But where there is one falsehood there are usually others; and if we are not to believe that Lucrezia was present, why should we be asked to believe in the presence of the Pope? If Burchard was mistaken in the one, why might he not be mistaken in the other? But the question is not really one of whom you will believe to have been present at that unspeakable performance, but rather whether you can possibly bring yourself to believe that it ever took place as it is related in the *Diarium*.

Gregorovius says, you will observe, "Some orgy of that nature, or something similar, may very well have taken place." We could credit that Cesare held "some orgy of that nature." He had apartments in the Vatican, and if it shock you to think that it pleased him, with his gentlemen, to make merry by feasting a parcel of Roman harlots, you are—if you value justice—to be shocked at the times rather than the man. The sense of humour of the Cinquecento was primitive, and in primitive humour prurience plays ever an important part, as is discernible in the literature and comedies of that age. If you would appreciate this to the full, consider Burchard's details of the masks worn at Carnival by some merry-makers ("*Venerunt ad plateam St. Petri larvati...habentes nasos longos et grossos in forma priaporum*") and you must realize that in Cesare's conduct in this matter there would have been nothing so very abnormal considered from the point of view of the Cinquecento, even though it were to approach the details given by Burchard.

But even so, you will hesitate before you accept the story of that saturnalia in its entirety, and before you believe that an old man of seventy, a priest and Christ's Vicar, was present with Cesare and his

friends. Burchard does not say that he himself was a witness of what he relates. But the matter shall presently be further considered.

Meanwhile, let us pass to the second of these entries in the diary, and (a not unimportant detail) on the very next page of it, under the date of November 11. In this it is related that certain peasants entered Rome by the Viridarian Gate, driving two mares laden with timber, that, in crossing the Square of St. Peter's, some servants of the Pope's ran out and cut the cords so that the timber was loosened and the beasts relieved of their burden; they were then led to a courtyard within the precincts of the palace, where four stallions were loosed upon them. "Ascenderunt equas et coierunt cum eis et eas graviter pistarunt et leserunt," whilst the Pope at a window above the doorway of the Palace, with Madonna Lucrezia, witnessed with great laughter and delight, the show which it is suggested was specially provided for their amusement.

The improbabilities of the saturnalia of the fifty courtesans pale before the almost utter impossibility of this narrative. To render it possible in the case of two chance animals as these must have been under the related circumstances, a biological coincidence is demanded so utterly unlikely and incredible that we are at once moved to treat the story with scorn, and reject it as a fiction. Yet not one of those many writers who have retailed that story from Burchard's *Diarium* as a truth incontestable as the Gospels, has paused to consider this—so blinded are we when it is a case of accepting that which we desire to accept.

The narrative, too, is oddly—suspiciously—circumstantial, even to the unimportant detail of the particular gate by which the peasants entered Rome. In a piece of fiction it is perfectly natural to fill in such minor details to the end that the picture shall be complete; but they are rare in narratives of fact. And one may be permitted to wonder how came the Master of Ceremonies at the Vatican to know the

precise gate by which those peasants came. It is not—as we have seen—the only occasion on which an excess of detail in the matter of a gate renders suspicious the accuracy of a story of Burchard's.

Both these affairs find a prominent place in the Letter to Silvio Savelli. Indeed Gregorovius cites the pamphlet as one of the authorities to support Burchard, and to show that what Burchard wrote must have been true; the other authority he cites is Matarazzo, disregarding not only the remarkable discrepancy between Matarazzo's relation and that of Burchard, but the circumstance that the matter of that pamphlet became current throughout Italy, and that it was thus—and only thus—that Matarazzo came to hear of the scandal.⁽¹⁾

¹ The frequency with which the German historian cites Matarazzo as an authority is oddly inconsistent, considering that when he finds Matarazzo's story of the murder of the Duke of Gandia upsetting the theory which Gregorovius himself prefers, by fastening the guilt upon Giovanni Sforza, he devotes some space to showing—with perfect justice—that Matarazzo is no authority at all.

The Letter to Silvio Savelli opens by congratulating him upon his escape from the hands of the robbers who had stripped him of his possessions, and upon his having found a refuge in Germany at the Emperor's Court. It proceeds to marvel that thence he should have written letters to the Pope begging for justice and reinstatement, his wonder being at the credulity of Savelli in supposing that the Pope—"betrayed of the human race, who has spent his life in betrayals"—will ever do any just thing other than through fear or force. Rather does the writer suggest the adoption of other methods; he urges Savelli to make known to the Emperor and all princes of the Empire the atrocious crimes of that "infamous wild beasts" which have been perpetrated in contempt of God and religion. He then proceeds to relate these crimes. Alexander, Cesare, and Lucrezia, among others

of the Borgia family, bear their share of the formidable accusations. Of the Pope are related perfidies, simonies, and ravishments; against Lucrezia are urged the matter of her incest, the supper of the fifty courtesans, and the scene of the stallions; against Cesare there are the death of Biselli, the murder of Pedro Caldes, the ruin of the Romagna, whence he has driven out the legitimate lords, and the universal fear in which he is held.

It is, indeed, a compendium of all the stories which from Milan, Naples, and Venice—the three States where the Borgias for obvious reasons are best hated—have been disseminated by their enemies, and a more violent work of rage and political malice was never uttered. This malice becomes particularly evident in the indictment of Cesare for the ruin of the Romagna. Whatever Cesare might have done, he had not done that—his bitterest detractor could not (without deliberately lying) say that the Romagna was other than benefiting under his sway. That is not a matter of opinion, not a matter of inference or deduction. It is a matter of absolute fact and irrefutable knowledge.

To return now to the two entries in Burchard's *Diarium* when considered in conjunction with the Letter to Silvio Savelli (which Burchard quotes in full), it is remarkable that nowhere else in the discovered writings of absolute contemporaries is there the least mention of either of those scandalous stories. The affair of the stallions, for instance, must have been of a fairly public character. Scandal-mongering Rome could not have resisted the dissemination of it. Yet, apart from the Savelli letter, no single record of it has been discovered to confirm Burchard.

At this time, moreover, it is to be remembered, Lucrezia's betrothal to Alfonso d'Este was already accomplished; preparations for her departure and wedding were going forward, and the escort from Ferrara was daily expected in Rome. If Lucrezia had never been

circumspect, she must be circumspect now, when the eyes of Italy were upon her, and there were not wanting those who would have been glad to have thwarted the marriage—the object, no doubt, of the pamphlet we are considering. Yet all that was written to Ferrara was in praise of her—in praise of her goodness and her modesty, her prudence, her devoutness, and her discretion, as presently we shall see.

If from this we are to conclude—as seems reasonable—that there was no gossip current in Rome of the courtesans' supper and the rest, we may assume that there was no knowledge in Rome of such matters; for with knowledge silence would have been impossible. So much being admitted, it becomes a matter of determining whether the author of the Letter to Silvio Savelli had access to the diary of Burchard for his facts, or whether Burchard availed himself of the Letter to Silvio Savelli to compile these particular entries. The former alternative being out of the question, there but remains the latter—unless it is possible that the said entries have crept into the copies of the "Diarium" and are not present in the original, which is not available.

This theory of interpolation, tentatively put forward, is justified, to some extent at least, by the following remarkable circumstances: that two such entries, having—as we have said—absolutely no parallel in the whole of the Diarium, should follow almost immediately the one upon the other; and that Burchard should relate them coldly, without reproof or comment of any kind—a most unnatural reticence in a writer who loosed his indignation one Easter-tide to see Lucrezia and her ladies occupying the choir of St. Peter's, where women never sat.

The Pope read the anonymous libel when it was submitted to him by the Cardinal of Modena—read it, laughed it to scorn, and treated it with the contempt which it deserved, yet a contempt which, considering its nature, asks a certain greatness of mind.

If the libel was true it is almost incredible that he should not have sought to avenge it, for an ugly truth is notoriously hurtful and provocative of resentment, far more so than is a lie. Cesare, however, was not of a temper quite as long-suffering as his father. Enough and more of libels and lampoons had he endured already. Early in December a masked man—a Neapolitan of the name of Mancioni—who had been going through Rome uttering infamies against him was seized and so dealt with that he should in future neither speak nor write anything in any man's defamation. His tongue was cut out and his right hand chopped off, and the hand, with the tongue attached to its little finger, was hung in sight of all and as a warning from a window of the Church of Holy Cross.

And towards the end of January, whilst Cesare's fury at that pamphlet out of Germany was still unappeased, a Venetian was seized in Rome for having translated from Greek into Latin another libel against the Pope and his son. The Venetian ambassador intervened to save the wretch, but his intervention was vain. The libeller was executed that same night.

Costabili—the Ferrara ambassador—who spoke to the Pope on the matter of this execution, reported that his Holiness said that more than once had he told the duke that Rome was a free city, in which any one was at liberty to say or write what he pleased; that of himself, too, much evil was being spoken, but that he paid no heed to it.

"The duke," proceeded Alexander, "is good-natured, but he has not yet learnt to bear insult." And he added that, irritated, Cesare had protested that, "However much Rome may be in the habit of speaking and writing, for my own part I shall give these libellers a lesson in good manners."

The lesson he intended was not one they should live to practise.

CHAPTER XII. LUCREZIA'S THIRD MARRIAGE

At about the same time that Burchard was making in his *Diarium* those entries which reflect so grossly upon the Pope and Lucrezia, Gianluca Pozzi, the ambassador of Ferrara at the Vatican, was writing the following letter to his master, Duke Ercole, Lucrezia's father-in-law elect:

"This evening, after supper, I accompanied Messer Gerardo Saraceni to visit the Most Illustrious Madonna Lucrezia in your Excellency's name and that of the Most Illustrious Don Alfonso. We entered into a long discussion touching various matters. In truth she showed herself a prudent, discreet, and good-natured lady."(1)

¹ See Gregorovius's *Lucrezia Borgia*.

The handsome, athletic Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, with his brothers Sigismondo and Fernando, had arrived in Rome on December 23 with the imposing escort that was to accompany their brother Alfonso's bride back to Ferrara.

Cesare was prominent in the welcome given them. Never, perhaps, had he made greater display than on the occasion of his riding out to meet the Ferrarese, accompanied by no fewer than 4,000 men-at-arms, and mounted on a great war-horse whose trappings of cloth of gold and jewels were estimated at 10,000 ducats.

The days and nights that followed, until Lucrezia's departure a fortnight later, were days and nights of gaiety and merry-making at the Vatican: in banquets, dancing, the performance of comedies,

masques, etc., was the time made to pass as agreeably as might be for the guests from Ferrara, and in all Cesare was conspicuous, either for the grace and zest with which he nightly danced, or for the skill and daring which he displayed in the daily joustings and entertainments, and more particularly in the bull-fight that was included in them.

Lucrezia was splendidly endowed, to the extent, it was estimated, of 300,000 ducats, made up by 100,000 ducats in gold, her jewels and equipage, and the value of the Castles of Pieve and Cento. Her departure from Rome took place on January 6, and so she passes out of this chronicle, which, after all, has been little concerned with her.

Of the honour done her everywhere on that journey to Ferrara, the details are given elsewhere, particularly in the book devoted to her history and rehabilitation by Herr Gregorovius. After all, the real Lucrezia Borgia fills a comparatively small place in the actual history of her house. It is in the fictions concerning her family that she is given such unenviable importance, and presented as a Maenad, a poisoner, and worse. In reality she appears to us, during her life in Rome, as a rather childish, naïve, and entirely passive figure, important only in so far as she found employment at her father's or brother's hands for the advancement of their high ambitions and unscrupulous aims.

In the popular imagination she lives chiefly as a terrific poisoner, an appalling artist in venenation. It is remarkable that this should be the case, for not even the scandal of her day so much as suggests that she was connected—directly or even indirectly—with a single case of poisoning. No doubt that popular conception owes its being entirely to Victor Hugo's drama.

Away from Rome and settled in Ferrara from the twenty-second year of her age, to become anon its duchess, her life is well known and admits of no argument. The archives of the State she ruled show

her devout, god-fearing, and beloved in life, and deeply mourned in death by a sorrowing husband and a sorrowing people. Not a breath of scandal touches her from the moment that she quits the scandalous environment of the Papal Court.

Cesare continued at the Vatican after her departure. His duchess was to have come to Rome in that Easter of 1502, and it had been disposed that the ladies and gentlemen who had gone as escort of honour with Lucrezia should proceed—after leaving her in Ferrara—to Lombardy, to do the like office by Charlotte d'Albret, and, meeting her there, accompany her to Rome. She was coming with her brother, the Cardinal Amanieu d'Albret, and bringing with her Cesare's little daughter, Louise de Valentinois, now two years of age. But the duchess fell ill at the last moment, and was unable to undertake the journey, of which Cardinal d'Albret brought word to Rome, where he arrived on February 7.

Ten days later Cesare set out with his father for Piombino, for which purpose six galleons awaited them at Civita Vecchia under the command of Lodovico Mosca, the captain of the Pontifical navy. On these the Pope and his son embarked, upon their visit to the scene of the latest addition to Cesare's ever-growing dominions.

They landed at Piombino on February 21, and made a solemn entrance into the town, the Pope carried in state in the Sedia Gestatoria, under a canopy, attended by six cardinals and six singers from the Sistine Chapel, whilst Cesare was accompanied by a number of his gentlemen.

They abode four days in Piombino, whence they crossed to Elba, for the purpose of disposing for the erection there of two fortresses—a matter most probably entrusted to Leonardo da Vinci, who continued in the ducal train as architect and engineer.

On March 1 they took ship to return to Rome; but they were

detained at sea for five days by a tempest which seems to have imperilled the vessels. The Pope was on board the captain's galley with his cardinals-in-waiting and servants, and when these were reduced by the storm and the imminent danger to a state of abject terror, the Pope—this old man of seventy-one—sat calm and intrepid, occasionally crossing himself and pronouncing the name of Jesus and encouraging the very sailors by his example as much as by his words.

In Piombino Cesare had left Michele da Corella as his governor. This Corella was a captain of foot, a soldier of fortune, who from the earliest days of Cesare's military career had followed the duke's fortunes—the very man who is alleged to have strangled Alfonso of Aragon by Cesare's orders. He is generally assumed to have been a Spaniard, and is commonly designated as Michelotto, or Don Miguel; but Alvisi supposes him, from his name of Corella, to have been a Venetian, and he tells us that by his fidelity to Cesare and the implicit manner in which he executed his master's orders, he earned—as is notorious—considerable hatred. He has been spoken of, indeed, as the âme damnée of Cesare Borgia; but that is a purely romantic touch akin to that which gave the same designation to Richelieu's Father Joseph.

The Romagna was at this time administered for Cesare Borgia by Ramiro de Lorqua, who, since the previous November, had held the office of Governor in addition to that of Lieutenant-General in which he had been earlier invested. His power in the Romagna was now absolute, all Cesare's other officers, even the very treasurers, being subject to him.

He was a man of some fifty years of age, violent and domineering, feared by all, and the dispenser of a harsh justice which had at least the merit of an impartiality that took no account of persons.

Bernardi gives us an instance of the man's stern, uncompromising,

pitiless nature. On January 29, 1502, two malefactors were hanged in Faenza. The rope suspending one of them broke while the fellow was alive, and the crowd into which he tumbled begged for mercy for him at first, then, swayed by pity, the people resolved to save him in spite of the officers of justice who demanded his surrender. Preventing his recapture, the mob bore him off to the Church of the Cerviti. The Lieutenant of Faenza came to demand the person of the criminal, but he was denied by the Prior, who claimed to extend him sanctuary.

But the days of sanctuary were overpast, and the laws of the time held that any church or consecrated place in which a criminal took refuge should ipso facto be deemed unconsecrated by his pursuers, and further, that any ecclesiastic sheltering such a fugitive did so under peril of excommunication from his bishop. This law Ramiro accounted it his duty to enforce when news was carried to him at Imola of what had happened.

He came at once to Faenza, and, compelling the Prior by actual force to yield up the man he sheltered, he hanged the wretch, for the second time, from a window of the Palace of the Podestá. At the same time he seized several who were alleged to have been ringleaders of the fellow's rescue from the hands of the officers, and made the citizens of Faenza compromise for the lives of these by payment of a fine of 10,000 ducats, giving them a month in which to find the money.

The Faentini sent their envoys to Ramiro to intercede with him; but that harsh man refused so much as to grant them audience—which was well for them, for, as a consequence, the Council sent ambassadors to Rome to submit the case to the Pope's Holiness and to the Duke of Valentino, together with a petition that the fine should be remitted—a petition that was readily granted.

Harsh as it was, however, Ramiro's rule was salutary, its very harshness necessary in a province where lawlessness had become a

habit through generations of misgovernment. Under Cesare's dominion the change already was remarkable. During his two years of administration—to count from its commencement—the Romagna was already converted from a seething hell of dissensions, disorders and crimes—chartered brigandage and murder—into a powerful State, law-abiding and orderly, where human life and personal possessions found zealous protection, and where those who disturbed the peace met with a justice that was never tempered by mercy.

A strong hand was wanted there, and the duke, supreme judge of the tools to do his work, ruled the Romagna and crushed its turbulence by means of the iron hand of Ramiro de Lorqua.

It was also under the patronage of Valentinois that the first printing-press of any consequence came to be established in Italy. This was set up at Fano by Girolamo Sancino in 1501, and began the issue of worthy books. One of the earliest works undertaken (says Alvisi) was the printing of the Statutes of Fano for the first time in January of 1502. And it was approved by the Council, civil and ecclesiastical, that Sancino should undertake this printing of the Statutes "*Ad perpetuam memoriam Illmi. Domini nostri Ducis.*"

CHAPTER XIII. URBINO AND CAMERINO

It may well be that it was about this time that Cesare, his ambition spreading—as men's ambition will spread with being gratified—was considering the consolidation of Central Italy into a kingdom of which he would assume the crown.

It was a scheme in the contemplation of which he was encouraged by Vitellozzo Vitelli, who no doubt conceived that in its fulfilment the ruin of Florence would be entailed—which was all that Vitelli cared about. What to Cesare would have been no more than the means, would have been to Vitelli a most satisfactory end.

Before, however, going so far there was still the work of subjugating the States of the Church to be completed, as this could not be so considered until Urbino, Camerino, and Sinigaglia should be under the Borgia dominion.

For this, no doubt, Cesare was disposing during that Easter of 1502 which he spent in Rome, and during which there were heard from the south the first rumblings of the storm of war whereof ill-starred Naples was once more—for the third time within ten years—to be the scene. The allies of yesterday were become the antagonists of to-day, and France and Spain were ready to fly at each other's throats over the division of the spoil, as a consequence of certain ill-definitions of the matter in the treaty of Granada. The French Viceroy, Louis d'Armagnac, and the great Spanish Captain, Gonzalo de Cordoba, were on the point of coming to blows.

Nor was the menace of disturbance confined to Naples. In

Florence, too, the torch of war was alight, and if—as he afterwards swore—Cesare Borgia had no hand in kindling it, it is at least undeniable that he complacently watched the conflagration, conscious that it would make for the fulfilment of his own ends. Besides, there was still that little matter of the treaty of Forno dei Campi between Cesare and Florence, a treaty which the Signory had never fulfilled and never intended to fulfil, and Cesare was not the man to forget how he had been fooled.

But for the protection of France which she enjoyed, Florence must long ere this have been called to account by him, and crushed out of all shape under the weight of his mailed hand. As it was she was to experience the hurt of his passive resentment, and find this rather more than she could bear.

Vitellozzo Vitelli, that vindictive firebrand whose original motive in allying himself with Cesare had been the hope that the duke might help him to make Florence expiate his brother's blood, finding that Cesare withheld the expected help, was bent at last upon dealing, himself, with Florence. He entered into plots with the exiled Piero de'Medici to restore the latter to his dominion; he set intrigues afoot in Pisa, where his influence was vast, and in Siena, whose tyrant, Pandolfo Petrucci, was ready and willing to forward his designs, and generally made so disturbing a stir in Tuscany that the Signory became gravely alarmed.

Cesare certainly took no apparent active part in the affair. He lent Vitelli no aid; but neither did he attempt to restrain him or any other of the Borgia condottieri who were allied with him.

The unrest, spreading and growing sullenly a while, burst suddenly forth in Arezzo on June 4, when the cries of "Medici!" and "Marzocco!" rang in its streets, to announce that the city was in arms against the government of Florence. Arezzo followed this up by summoning Vitelli, and the waiting, watchful condottiero was quick to

answer the desired call. He entered the town three days later at the head of a small body of foot, and was very shortly afterwards followed by his brother Giulio Vitelli, Bishop of Città di Castello, with the artillery, and, presently, by Gianpaolo Baglioni with a condotta of horse.

A few days later Vitelli was in possession of all the strongholds of the Val di Chiana, and panic-stricken Florence was speeding ambassadors hot-foot to Rome to lay her complaints of these matters before the Pope.

Alexander was able to reply that, far from supporting the belligerents, he had launched a Bull against them, provoked by the poisoning of the Bishop de'Pazzi.

Cesare looked on with the inscrutable calm for which Macchiavelli was presently to find him so remarkable. Aware as he was of the French protection which Florence enjoyed and could invoke, he perceived how vain must ultimately prove Vitelli's efforts, saw, perhaps, in all this the grave danger of ultimate ruin which Vitelli was incurring. Yet Vitelli's action served Cesare's own purposes, and, so that his purposes were served, there were no other considerations likely to weigh with that cold egotist. Let Vitelli be caught in the toils he was spinning, and be choked in them. Meanwhile, Florence was being harrowed, and that was all to Cesare's satisfaction and advantage. When sufficiently humbled, it might well befall that the Republic should come on her knees to implore his intervention, and his pardon for having flouted him.

While matters stood so in Arezzo, Pisa declared spontaneously for Cesare, and sent (on June 10) to offer herself to his dominion and to announce to him that his banner was already flying from her turrets—and the growth of Florence's alarm at this is readily conceived.

To Cesare it must have been a sore temptation. To accept such a

pied-à-terre in Tuscany as was now offered him would have been the first great step towards founding that kingdom of his dreams. An impulsive man had surely gulped the bait. But Cesare, boundless in audacity, most swift to determine and to act, was not impulsive. Cold reason, foresight and calculation were the ministers of his indomitable will. He looked ahead and beyond in the matter of Pisa's offer, and he perceived the danger that might await him in the acceptance. The time for that was not yet. To take what Pisa offered might entail offending France, and although Cesare was now in case to dispense with French support, he was in no case to resist her opposition.

And so, the matter being considered and determined, Cesare quitted Rome on the 12th and left it for the Pope to give answer to the Pisan envoys in the Consistory of June 14—that neither his Holiness nor the Duke of Valentino could assent to the proposals which Pisa made.

From Rome Cesare travelled swiftly to Spoleto, where his army, some ten thousand strong, was encamped. He was bent at last upon the conquest of Camerino, and, ever an opportunist, he had seized the moment when Florence, which might have been disposed to befriend Varano, Tyrant of Camerino, was over-busy with her own affairs.

In addition to the powerful army awaiting him at Spoleto, the duke had a further 2,000 men in the Romagna; another 1,000 men held themselves at his orders between Sinigaglia and Urbino, and Dionigio di Naldo was arming yet another 1,000 men at Verucchio for his service. Yet further to increase this force, Cesare issued an edict during his brief sojourn at Spoleto ordering every house in the Romagna to supply him with one man-at-arms.

It was whilst here—as he afterwards wrote to the Pope—that news reached him that Guidobaldo da Montefeltre, Duke of Urbino, was

arming men and raising funds for the assistance of Camerino. He wrote that he could not at first believe it, but that shortly afterwards—at Foligni—he took a chancellor of Camerino who admitted that the hopes of this State were all founded upon Urbino's assistance; and later, a messenger from Urbino falling into his hands, he discovered that there was a plot afoot to seize the Borgia artillery as it passed through Ugubio, it being known that, as Cesare had no suspicions, the guns would be guarded only by a small force. Of this treachery the duke strongly expressed his indignation in his letter to the Pope.

Whether the matter was true—or whether Cesare believed it to be true—it is impossible to ascertain with absolute conviction. But it is in the highest degree unlikely that Cesare would have written such a letter to his father solely by way of setting up a pretext. Had that been his only aim, letters expressing his simulated indignation would have been in better case to serve his ends had they been addressed to others.

If Guidobaldo did engage in such an act, amounting to a betrayal, he was certainly paid by Cesare in kind and with interest. If the duke had been short of a pretext for carrying a drawn sword into the dominions of Guidobaldo, he had that pretext now in this act of enmity against himself and the Holy See.

First, however, he disposed for the attack upon Camerino. This State, lying on the Eastern spurs of the Apennines, midway between Spoleto and Urbino, was ruled by Giulio Cesare Varano, an old war-dog of seventy years of age, ruthless and bloodthirsty, who owed his throne to his murder of his own brother.

He was aided in the government of his tyranny by his four sons, Venanzio, Annibale, Pietro, and Gianmaria.

Several times already had he been menaced by Cesare Borgia, for he was one of the Vicars proscribed for the non-payment of tribute

due to the Holy See, and at last his hour was come. Against him Cesare now dispatched an army under the command of Francesco Orsini, Duke of Gravina, and Oliverotto Eufreducci, another murderous, bloody gentleman who had hitherto served the duke in Vitelli's condotta, and who, by an atrocious act of infamy and brigandage, had made himself Lord of Fermo, which he pretended—being as sly as he was bloody—to hold as Vicar for the Holy See.

This Oliverotto Eufreducci—hereafter known as Oliverotto da Fermo—was a nephew of Giovanni Fogliano, Lord of Fermo. He had returned home to his uncle's Court in the early part of that year, and was there received with great honour and affection by Fogliano and his other relatives. To celebrate his home-coming, Oliverotto invited his uncle and the principal citizens of Fermo to a banquet, and at table contrived to turn the conversation upon the Pope and the Duke of Valentino; whereupon, saying that these were matters to be discussed more in private, he rose from table and begged them to withdraw with him into another room.

All unsuspecting—what should old Fogliano suspect from one so loved and so deeply in his debt?—they followed him to the chamber where he had secretly posted a body of his men-at-arms. There, no sooner had the door closed upon this uncle, and those others who had shown him so much affection, than he gave the signal for the slaughter that had been concerted. His soldiers fell upon those poor, surprised victims of his greed, and made a speedy and bloody end of all.

That first and chief step being taken, Oliverotto flung himself on his horse, and, gathering his men-at-arms about him, rode through Fermo on the business of butchering what other relatives and friends of Fogliano might remain. Among these were Raffaele della Rovere and two of his children, one of whom was inhumanly slaughtered in its mother's lap.

Thereafter he confiscated to his own uses the property of those whom he had murdered, and of those who, more fortunate, had fled his butcher's hands. He dismissed the existing Council and replaced it by a government of his own. Which done—to shelter himself from the consequences—he sent word to the Pope that he held Fermo as Vicar of the Church.

Whilst a portion of his army marched on Camerino, Cesare, armed with his pretext for the overthrow of Guidobaldo, set himself deliberately and by an elaborate stratagem to the capture of Urbino. Of this there can be little doubt. The cunning of the scheme is of an unsavoury sort, when considered by the notions that obtain to-day, for the stratagem was no better than an act of base treachery. Yet, lest even in this you should be in danger of judging Cesare Borgia by standards which cannot apply to his age, you will do well to consider that there is no lack of evidence that the fifteenth century applauded the business as a clever coup.

Guidobaldo da Montefeltre was a good prince. None in all Italy was more beloved by his people, towards whom he bore himself with a kindly, paternal bonhomie. He was a cultured, scholarly man, a patron of the arts, happiest in the splendid library of the Palace of Urbino. It happened, unfortunately, that he had no heir, which laid his dominions open to the danger of division amongst the neighbouring greedy tyrants after his death. To avoid this he had adopted Francesco Maria della Rovere, hereditary Prefect of Sinigaglia, his sister's child and a nephew of Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere's. There was wisdom and foresight in the adoption, considering the favour enjoyed in Rome and in France by the powerful cardinal.

From Nocera Cesare sent Guidobaldo a message calculated to allay whatever uneasiness he may have been feeling, and to throw him completely off his guard. The duke notified him that he was marching upon Camerino—which was at once true and untrue—and

begged Guidobaldo to assist him in this enterprise by sending him provisions to Gubbio, which he should reach on the morrow—since he was marching by way of Cagli and Sassoferrato. Further—and obviously with intent that the Duke of Urbino should reduce the forces at his disposal—he desired Guidobaldo to send Vitelli the support of a thousand men, which the latter had earlier solicited, but which Guidobaldo had refused to supply without orders from the Pope. Cesare concluded his letter with protestations of brotherly love—the Judas' kiss which makes him hateful to us in this affair.

It all proved very reassuring to Guidobaldo who set his mind at ease and never bethought him of looking to his defences, when, from Nocera, Cesare made one of those sudden movements, terrible in their swiftness as the spring of a tiger—enabling him to drive home his claws where least expected. Leaving all baggage behind him, and with provisions for only three days, he brought his troops by forced marches to Cagli, within the Urbino State, and possessed himself of it almost before the town had come to realize his presence.

Not until the citadel, taken entirely by surprise, was in Cesare's hands did a messenger speed to Guidobaldo with the unwelcome tidings that the Duke of Valentinois was in arms, as an enemy, within the territory. Together with that message came others into the garden of the Zoccolanti monastery—that favourite resort of Guidobaldo's—where he was indulging his not unusual custom of supping in the cool of that summer evening. They brought him word that, while Valentinois was advancing upon him from the south, a force of 1,000 men were marching upon Urbino from Isola di Fano in the east, and twice that number through the passes of Sant' Angelo and Verucchio in the north—all converging upon his capital.

The attack had been shrewdly planned and timed, and if anything can condone the treachery by which Guidobaldo was lulled into his false security, it is the circumstance that this conduct of the matter

avoided bloodshed—a circumstance not wholly negligible, and one that was ever a part of Cesare Borgia's policy, save where punishment had to be inflicted or reprisals taken.

Guidobaldo, seeing himself thus beset upon all sides at once, and being all unprepared for resistance, perceived that nothing but flight remained him; and that very night he left Urbino hurriedly, taking with him the boy Francesco Maria, and intending at first to seek shelter in his Castle of S. Leo—a fortress that was practically impregnable. But already it was too late. The passes leading thither were by now in the hands of the enemy, as Guidobaldo discovered at dawn. Thereupon, changing his plans, he sent the boy and his few attendants to Bagno, and, himself, disguised as a peasant, took to the hills, despite the gout by which he was tormented. Thus he won to Ravenna, which was fast becoming a home for dethroned princes.

Urbino, meanwhile, in no case to resist, sent its castellan to meet Cesare and to make surrender to him—whereof Cesare, in the letter already mentioned, gives news to the Pope, excusing himself for having undertaken this thing without the Pope's knowledge, but that "the treachery employed against me by Guidobaldo was so enormous that I could not suffer it."

Within a few hours of poor Guidobaldo's flight Cesare was housed in Urbino's splendid palace, whose stupendous library was the marvel of all scholars of that day. Much of this, together with many of the art-treasures collected by the Montefeltri, Cesare began shortly afterwards to transfer to Cesena.

In addition to publishing an edict against pillage and violence in the City of Urbino, Cesare made doubly sure that none should take place by sending his soldiers to encamp at Fermignano, retaining near him in Urbino no more than his gentlemen-at-arms. The capital being taken, the remainder of the duchy made ready surrender, all the strongholds announcing their submission to Cesare with the

exception of that almost inaccessible Castle of S. Leo, which capitulated only after a considerable resistance.

From Urbino Cesare now entered into communication with the Florentines, and asked that a representative should be sent to come to an agreement with him. In response to this request, the Republic sent him Bishop Soderini as her ambassador. The latter arrived in Urbino on June 25 and was immediately and very cordially received by the duke. With him, in the subordinate capacity of secretary, came a lean, small-headed, tight-lipped man, with wide-set, intelligent eyes and prominent cheek-bones—one Niccolò Macchiavelli, who, in needy circumstances at present, and comparatively obscure, was destined to immortal fame. Thus did Macchiavelli meet Cesare Borgia for the first time, and, for all that we have no records of it, it is not to be doubted that his study of that remarkable man began then in Urbino, to be continued presently, as we shall see, when Macchiavelli returns to him in the quality of an ambassador himself.

To Soderini the duke expounded his just grievance, founded upon the Florentines' unobservance of the treaty of Forno dei Campi; he demanded that a fresh treaty should be drawn up to replace the broken one, and that, for the purpose, Florence should change her government, as in the ruling one, after what had passed, he could repose no faith. He disclaimed all associations with the affair of Vitelli, but frankly declared himself glad of it, as it had, no doubt, led Florence to perceive what came of not keeping faith with him. He concluded by assuring Soderini that, with himself for their friend, the Florentines need fear no molestation from any one; but he begged that the Republic should declare herself in the matter, since, if she did not care to have him for her friend, she was, of course, at liberty to make of him her enemy.

So impressed was Soderini by Cesare Borgia that on that same night he wrote to the Signory:

"This lord is very magnificent and splendid, and so spirited in feats of arms that there is nothing so great but that it must seem small to him. In the pursuit of glory and in the acquisition of dominions he never rests, and he knows neither danger nor fatigue. He moves so swiftly that he arrives at a place before it is known that he has set out for it. He knows how to make himself beloved of his soldiers, and he has in his service the best men of Italy. These things render him victorious and formidable, and to these is yet to be added his perpetual good fortune. He argues," the Florentine envoy proceeds, "with such sound reason that to dispute with him would be a long affair, for his wit and eloquence never fail him" ("dello ingegno e della lingua si vale quanto vuole").

You are to remember that this homage is one of the few surviving impressions of one who came into personal contact with Cesare, and of one, moreover, representing a Government more or less inimical to him, who would therefore have no reason to draw a favourable portrait of him for that Government's benefit. One single page of such testimony is worth a dozen volumes of speculation and inference drawn afterwards by men who never knew him—in many cases by men who never began to know his epoch.

The envoy concludes by informing the Signory that he has the duke's assurances that the latter has no thought of attempting to deprive Florence of any of her possessions, as "the object of his campaign has not been to tyrannize, but to extirpate tyrants."

Whilst Cesare awaited the Florentines' reply to their ambassador's communication, he withdrew to the camp at Fermignano, where he was sought on July 6 by a herald from Louis XII. This messenger came to exhort Cesare to embark upon no enterprise against the Florentine Republic, because to offend Florence would be to offend the Majesty of France. Simultaneously, however, Florence received messages from the Cardinal d'Amboise, suggesting that they should

come to terms with Valentinois by conceding him at least a part of what had been agreed in the Treaty of Forno dei Campi.

As a consequence, Soderini was able to inform Cesare that the Republic was ready to treat with him, but that first he must withdraw Vitelli from Arezzo, and compel him to yield up the captured fortresses. The duke, not trusting—as he had frankly avowed—a Government which once already had broken faith with him, and perceiving that, if he whistled his war-dogs to heel as requested, he would have lost the advantages of his position, refused to take any such steps until the treaty should be concluded. He consented, however, to enforce meanwhile an armistice.

But now it happened that news reached Florence of the advance of Louis XII with an army of 20,000 men, bound for Naples to settle the dispute with Spain. So the Republic—sly and treacherous as any other Italian Government of the Cinquecento—instructed Soderini to temporize with the duke; to spend the days in amiable, inconclusive interviews and discussions of terms which the Signory did not mean to make. Thus they counted upon gaining time, until the arrival of the French should put an end to the trouble caused by Vitelli, and to the need for any compromise.

But Cesare, though forced to submit, was not fooled by Soderini's smooth, evasive methods. He too—having private sources of information in France—was advised of the French advance and of the imminence of danger to himself in consequence of the affairs of Florence. And it occasioned him no surprise to see Soderini come on July 19 to take his leave of him, advised by the Signory that the French vanguard was at hand, and that, consequently, the negotiations might now with safety be abandoned.

To console him, he had news on the morrow of the conquest of Camerino.

The septuagenarian Giulio Cesare Varano had opposed to the Borgia forces a stout resistance, what time he sent his two sons Pietro and Gianmaria to Venice for help. It was in the hope of this solicited assistance that he determined to defend his tyranny, and the war opened by a cavalry skirmish in which Venanzio Varano routed the Borgia horse under the command of the Duke of Gravina. Thereafter, however, the Varani had to endure a siege; and the old story of the Romagna sieges was repeated. Varano had given his subjects too much offence in the past, and it was for his subjects now to call the reckoning.

A strong faction, led by a patrician youth of Camerino, demanded the surrender of the State, and, upon being resisted, took arms and opened the gates to the troops of Valentinois. The three Varani were taken prisoners. Old Giulio Cesare was shut up in the Castle of Pergola, where he shortly afterwards died—which was not wonderful or unnatural at his time of life, and does not warrant Guicciardini for stating, without authority, that he was strangled. Venanzio and Annibale were imprisoned in the fortress of Cattolica.

In connection with this surrender of Camerino, Cesare wrote the following affectionate letter to his sister Lucrezia—who was dangerously ill at Ferrara in consequence of her delivery of a still-born child:

"Most Illustrious and most Excellent Lady, our very dear Sister,—
Confident of the circumstance that there can be no more efficacious and salutary medicine for the indisposition from which you are at present suffering than the announcement of good and happy news, we advise you that at this very moment we have received sure tidings of the capture of Camerino. We beg that you will do honour to this message by an immediate improvement, and inform us of it, because, tormented as we are to know you so ill, nothing, not even this felicitous event, can suffice to afford us pleasure. We beg you

also kindly to convey the present to the Illustrious Lord Don Alfonso, your husband and our beloved Brother-in-law, to whom we are not writing to-day."

CHAPTER XIV. THE REVOLT OF THE CONDOTTIERI

The coincidence of the arrival of the French army with the conquest of Urbino and Camerino and the Tuscan troubles caused one more to be added to that ceaseless stream of rumours that flowed through Italy concerning the Borgias. This time the envy and malice that are ever provoked by success and power gave voice in that rumour to the thing it hoped, and there ensued as pretty a comedy as you shall find in the pages of history.

The rumour had it that Louis XII, resentful and mistrustful of the growth of Cesare's might, which tended to weaken France in Italy and became a menace to the French dominions, was come to make an end of him. Instantly Louis's Court in Milan was thronged by all whom Cesare had offended—and they made up by now a goodly crowd, for a man may not rise so swiftly to such eminence without raising a rich crop of enemies.

Meanwhile, however, Valentinois in the Montefeltre Palace at Urbino remained extremely at ease. He was not the man to be without intelligences. In the train of Louis was Francesco Troche, the Pope's confidential chamberlain and Cesare's devoted servant, who, possessed of information, was able to advise Valentinois precisely what were the intentions of the King of France. Gathering from these advices that it was Louis's wish that the Florentines should not be molested further, and naturally anxious not to run counter to the king's intentions, Cesare perceived that the time to take action had arrived, the time for passivity in the affairs of Florence was at an end.

So he dispatched an envoy to Vitelli, ordering his instant evacuation of Arezzo and his withdrawal with his troops from Tuscany, and he backed the command by a threat to compel Vitelli by force of arms, and to punish disobedience by depriving him of his state of Città di Castello—"a matter," Cesare informed him, "which would be easily accomplished, as the best men of that State have already offered themselves to me."

It was a command which Vitelli had no choice but to obey, not being in sufficient force to oppose the duke. So on July 29, with Gianpaolo Baglioni, he relinquished the possession of Arezzo and departed out of Tuscany, as he had been bidden. But so incensed was he against the duke for this intervention between himself and his revenge, and so freely did he express himself in the matter, that it was put about at once that he intended to go against Cesare.

And that is the first hint of the revolt of the condottieri.

Having launched that interdict of his, Cesare, on July 25, in the garb of a knight of St. John of Jerusalem, and with only four attendants, departed secretly from Urbino to repair to Milan and King Louis. He paused for fresh horses at Forlì on the morrow, and on the 28th reached Ferrara, where he remained for a couple of hours to visit Lucrezia, who was now in convalescence. Ahead of him he dispatched, thence, a courier to Milan to announce his coming, and, accompanied by Alfonso d'Este, resumed his journey.

Meanwhile, the assembly of Cesare's enemies had been increasing daily in Milan, whither they repaired to support Louis and to vent their hatred of Cesare and their grievances against him. There, amongst others, might be seen the Duke of Urbino, Pietro Varano (one of the sons of the deposed Lord of Camerino), Giovanni Sforza of Pesaro, and Francesco Gonzaga of Mantua—which latter was ever ready to turn whichever way the wind was blowing, and was now loudest in his denunciations of Cesare and eagerly advocating

the formation of a league against him.

Louis received the news of Cesare's coming, and—endowed, it is clear, with a nice sense of humour—kept the matter secret until within a few hours of the duke's actual arrival. On the morning of August 5, according to Bernardi,(1) he whispered the information in Trivulzio's ear—and whispered it loudly enough to be overheard by those courtiers who stood nearest.

1 Cronache Forlivesi.

Whatever check their satisfaction at the supposed state of things may have received then was as nothing to their feelings a few hours later when they witnessed the greeting that passed between king and duke. Under their uneasy eyes Louis rode forth to meet his visitor, and gave him a glad and friendly welcome, addressing him as "cousin" and "dear relative," and so, no doubt, striking dismay into the hearts of those courtiers, who may well have deemed that perhaps they had expressed themselves too freely.

Louis, in person, accompanied Valentinois to the apartments prepared for him in the Castle of Milan, and on the morrow gave a banquet and commanded merry-makings in his visitor's honour.

Conceive the feelings of those deposed tyrants and their friends, and the sudden collapse of the hopes which they had imagined the king to be encouraging. They did, of course, the only thing there was to do. They took their leave precipitately and went their ways—all save Gonzaga, whom the king retained that he might make his peace with Cesare, and engage in friendship with him, a friendship consolidated there and then by the betrothal of their infant children: little Francesco Gonzaga and Louise de Valentinois, aged two, the daughter whom Cesare had never beheld and was never to behold.

Two factors were at work in the interests of Valentinois—the

coming war in Naples with the Spaniard, which caused Louis to desire to stand well with the Pope; and the ambition of Louis's friend and counsellor, the Cardinal d'Amboise, to wear the tiara, which caused this prelate to desire to stand well with Cesare himself, since the latter's will in the matter of a Pope to succeed his father should be omnipotent with the Sacred College.

Therefore, that they might serve their interests in the end, both king and cardinal served Cesare's in the meantime.

The Duke of Valentinois's visit to Milan had served to increase the choler of Vitelli, who accounted that by this action Cesare had put him in disgrace with the King of France; and Vitelli cried out that thus was he repaid for having sought to make Cesare King of Tuscany. In such high dudgeon was the fierce Tyrant of Città di Castello that he would not go to pay his court to Louis, and was still the more angry to hear of the warm welcome accorded in Milan to the Cardinal Orsini. In this he read approval of the Orsini for having stood neutral in the Florentine business, and, by inference from that, disapproval of himself.

Before accusing Valentinois of treachery to his condottieri, before saying that he shifted the blame of the Tuscan affair on to the shoulders of his captains, it would be well to ascertain that there was any blame to shift—that is to say, any blame that must originally have fallen upon Cesare. Certainly he made no effort to restrain Vitelli until the King of France had arrived and he had secret information which caused him to deem it politic to intervene. But of what avail until that moment, would any but an armed intervention have been with so vindictive and one-idea'd a man, and what manner of fool would not Cesare have been to have spent his strength in battle with his condottieri for the purpose of befriending a people who had never shown themselves other than his own enemies?

Like the perfect egotist he was, he sat on the fence, and took pleasure in the spectacle of the harassing of his enemies by his

friends, prepared to reap any advantages there might be, but equally prepared to avoid any disadvantages.

It was not heroic, it was not noble; but it was extremely human.

Cesare was with the King of France in Genoa at the end of August, and remained in his train until September 2, when finally he took his leave of him. When they heard of his departure from the Court of Louis, his numerous enemies experienced almost as much chagrin as that which had been occasioned them by his going thither. For they had been consoling themselves of late with a fresh rumour; and again they were believing what it pleased them to believe. Rumours, you perceive, were never wanting where the Borgias were concerned, and it may be that you are beginning to rate these voces populi at their proper value, and to apprehend the worth of many of those that have been embalmed as truths in the abiding records.

This last one had it that Louis was purposely keeping Cesare by him, and intended ultimately to carry him off to France, and so put an end to the disturbances the duke was creating in Italy. What a consolation would not that have been to those Italian princelings to whose undoing he had warred! And can you marvel that they believed and circulated so readily the thing for which they hoped so fondly? By your appreciation of that may you measure the fresh disappointment that was theirs.

So mistaken were they, indeed, as it now transpired, that Louis had actually, at last, removed his protection from Bologna, under the persuasion of Cesare and the Pope. Before the duke took his departure from King Louis's Court, the latter entered into a treaty with him in that connection to supply him with three hundred lances: "De bailler au Valentinois trois cents lances pour l'aider à conquérir Bologne au nome de l'Eglise, et opprimer les Ursins, Baillons et Vitellozze."

It was a double-dealing age, and Louis's attitude in this affair sorted well with it. Feeling that he owed Bologna some explanation, he presently sent a singularly lame one by Claude de Seyssel. He put it that the Bentivogli personally were none the less under his protection than they had been hitherto, but that the terms of the protection provided that it was granted exclusively of the rights and authority of the Holy Roman See over Bologna, and that the king could not embroil himself with the Pope. With such a shifty message went M. de Seyssel to make it quite clear to Bentivogli what his position was. And on the heels of it came, on September 2, a papal brief citing Bentivogli and his two sons to appear before the Pontiff within fifteen days for the purpose of considering with his Holiness the matter of the pacification and better government of Bologna, which for so many years had been so disorderly and turbulent. Thus the Pope's summons, with a menace that was all too thinly veiled.

But Bentivogli was not taken unawares. He was not even astonished. Ever since Cesare's departure from Rome in the previous spring he had been disposing against such a possibility as this—fortifying Bologna, throwing up outworks and erecting bastions beyond the city, and levying and arming men, in all of which he depended largely upon the citizens and particularly upon the art-guild, which was devoted to the House of Bentivogli.

Stronger than the affection for their lord—which, when all is said, was none too great in Bologna—was the deep-seated hatred of the clergy entertained by the Bolognese. This it was that rallied to Bentivogli such men as Fileno della Tuata, who actually hated him. But it was a choice of evils with Fileno and many of his kidney. Detesting the ruling house, and indignant at the injustices it practised, they detested the priests still more—so much that they would have taken sides with Satan himself against the Pontificals. In this spirit did they carry their swords to Bentivogli.

Upon the nobles Bentivogli could not count—less than ever since the cold-blooded murder of the Marescotti; but in the burghers' adherence he deemed himself secure, and indeed on September 17 he had some testimony of it.

On that date—the fortnight's grace expiring—the brief was again read to the Reggimento; but it was impossible to adopt any resolution. The people were in arms, and, with enormous uproar, protested that they would not allow Giovanni Bentivogli or his sons to go to Rome, lest they should be in danger once they had left their own State.

Italy was full of rumours at the time of Cesare's proposed emprise against Bologna, and it was added that he intended, further, to make himself master of Città di Castello and Perugia, and thus, by depriving them of their tyrannies, punish Vitelli and Baglioni for their defection.

This was the natural result of the terms of Cesare's treaty with France having become known; but the part of it which regarded the Orsini, Vitelli, and Baglioni was purely provisional. Considering that these condottieri were now at odds with Cesare, they might see fit to consider themselves bound to Bentivogli by the Treaty of Villafontana, signed by Vitelli and Orsini on the duke's behalf at the time of the capitulation of Castel Bolognese. They might choose to disregard the fact that this treaty had already been violated by Bentivogli himself, through the non-fulfilment of the terms of it, and refuse to proceed against him upon being so bidden by Valentinois.

It was for such a contingency as this that provision was made by the clause concerning them in Cesare's treaty with Louis.

The Orsini were still in the duke's service, in command of troops levied for him and paid by him, and considering that with them Cesare had no quarrel, it is by no means clear why they should have

gone over to the alliance of the condottieri that was now forming against the duke. Join it, however, they did. They, too, were in the Treaty of Villafontana; but that they should consider themselves bound by it, would have been—had they urged it—more in the nature of a pretext than a reason. But they chose a pretext even more slender. They gave out that in Milan Louis XII had told Cardinal Orsini that the Pope's intention was to destroy the Orsini.

To accept such a statement as true, we should have to believe in a disloyalty and a double-dealing on the part of Louis XII altogether incredible. To what end should he, on the one side, engage to assist Cesare with 300 lances to "oppress" the Orsini—if necessary, and among others—whilst, on the other, he goes to Orsini with the story which they attribute to him? What a mean, treacherous, unkingly figure must he not cut as a consequence! He may have been—we know, indeed, that he was—no more averse to doubledealing than any other Cinquecentist; but he was probably as averse to being found out in a meanness and made to look contemptible as any double-dealer of our own times. It is a consideration worth digesting.

When word of the story put about by the Orsini was carried to the Pope he strenuously denied the imputation, and informed the Venetian ambassador that he had written to complain of this to the King of France, and that, far from such a thing being true, Cesare was so devoted to the Orsini as to be "more Orsini than Borgian."

It is further worth considering that the defection of the Orsini was neither immediate nor spontaneous, as must surely have been the case had the story been true. It was the Baglioni and Vitelli only who first met to plot at Todi, to declare that they would not move against their ally of Bologna, and to express the hope that they might bring the Orsini to the same mind. They succeeded so well that the second meeting was held at Magione—a place belonging to the powerful Cardinal Orsini, situated near the Baglioni's stronghold of Perugia.

Vitelozzo was carried thither on his bed, so stricken with the morbo gallico—which in Italy was besetting most princes, temporal and ecclesiastical—that he was unable to walk.

Gentile and Gianpaolo Baglioni, Cardinal Gianbattista Orsini, Francesco Orsini, Duke of Gravina, Paolo Orsini, the bastard son of the Archbishop of Trani, Pandolfo Petrucci—Lord of Siena—and Hermes Bentivogli were all present. The last-named, prone to the direct methods of murder by which he had rid Bologna of the Marescotti, is said to have declared that he would kill Cesare Borgia if he but had the opportunity, whilst Vitelli swore solemnly that within a year he would slay or capture the duke, or else drive him out of Italy.

From this it will be seen that the Diet of Magione was no mere defensive alliance, but actually an offensive one, with the annihilation of Cesare Borgia for its objective.

They certainly had the power to carry out their resolutions, for whilst Cesare disposed at that moment of not more than 2,500 foot, 300 men-at-arms, and the 100 lances of his Caesarean guard of patricians, the confederates had in arms some 9,000 foot and 1,000 horse. Conscious of their superior strength, they determined to strike at once, before Cesare should be further supported by the French lances, and to make sure of him by assailing him on every side at once. To this end it was resolved that Bentivogli should instantly march upon Imola, where Cesare lay, whilst the others should possess themselves of Urbino and Pesaro simultaneously.

They even approached Florence and Venice in the matter, inviting the Republics to come into the league against Valentinois.

The Florentines, however, could not trust such enemies of their own as Vitelli and the Orsini, nor dared they join in an enterprise which had for scope to make war upon an ally of France; and they sent word to Cesare of their resolve to enter into no schemes against him.

The Venetians would gladly have moved to crush a man who had snatched the Romagna from under their covetous eyes; but in view of the league with France they dared not. What they dared, they did. They wrote to Louis at length of the evils that were befalling Italy at the hands of the Duke of Valentino, and of the dishonour to the French crown which lay for Louis in his alliance with Cesare Borgia. They even went so far—and most treacherously, considering the league—as to allow their famous captain, Bartolomeo d'Alviano, to reconduct Guidobaldo to Urbino, as we shall presently see.

Had the confederates but kept faith with one another Cesare's knell had soon been tolled. But they were a weak-kneed pack of traitors, irresolute in their enmity as in their friendships. The Orsini hung back. They urged that they did not trust themselves to attack Cesare with men actually in his pay; whilst Bentivogli—treacherous by nature to the back-bone of him—actually went so far as to attempt to open secret negotiations with Cesare through Ercole d'Este of Ferrara.

CHAPTER XV.

MACCHIAVELLI'S LEGATION

On October 2 news of the revolt of the condottieri and the diet of Magione had reached the Vatican and rendered the Pope uneasy. Cesare, however, had been informed of it some time before at Imola, where he was awaiting the French lances that should enable him to raid the Bolognese and drive out the Bentivogli.

Where another might have been paralyzed by a defection which left him almost without an army, and would have taken the course of sending envoys to the rebels to attempt to make terms and by concessions to patch up a treaty, Cesare, with characteristic courage, assurance, and promptitude of action, flung out officers on every side to levy him fresh troops.

His great reputation as a condottiero, the fame of his wealth and his notorious liberality, stood him now in excellent stead. The response to his call was instantaneous. Soldiers of fortune and mercenaries showed the trust they had in him, and flocked to his standard from every quarter. One of the first to arrive was Gasparo Sanseverino, known as Fracassa, a condottiero of great renown, who had been in the Pontifical service since the election of Pope Alexander. He was a valuable acquisition to Cesare, who placed him in command of the horse. Another was Lodovico Pico della Mirandola, who brought a small condotta of 60 lances and 60 light horse. Ranieri della Sassetta rode in at the head of 100 mounted arbalisters, and Francesco de Luna with a body of 50 arquebusiers.(1)

1 The arquebus, although it had existed in Italy for nearly a century, was only just coming into general use.

Valentinois sent out Raffaele dei Pazzi and Galeotto Pallavicini, the one into Lombardy to recruit 1,000 Gascons, the other to raise a body of Swiss mercenaries. Yet, when all is said, these were but supplementary forces; the main strength of Cesare's new army lay in the troops raised in the Romagna, which, faithful to him and confident of his power and success, rallied to him now in the hour of his need. Than this there can be no more eloquent testimony to the quality of his rule. In command of these Romagnuoli troops he placed such Romagnuoli captains as Dionigio di Naldo and Marcantonio da Fano, thereby again affording proof of his wisdom, by giving these soldiers their own compatriots and men with whom they were in sympathy for their leaders.

With such speed had he acted, and such was the influence of his name, that already, by October 14, he had assembled an army of upwards of 6,000 men, which his officers were diligently drilling at Imola, whilst daily now were the French lances expected, and the Swiss and Gascon mercenaries he had sent to levy.

It may well be that this gave the confederates pause, and suggested to them that they should reconsider their position and ask themselves whether the opportunity for crushing Cesare had not slipped by whilst they had stood undecided.

It was Pandolfo Petrucci who took the first step towards a reconciliation, by sending word to Valentinois that it was not his intention to take any measures that might displease his Excellency. His Excellency will no doubt have smiled at that belated assurance from the sparrow to the hawk. Then, a few days later, came news that Giulio Orsini had entered into an agreement with the Pope. This appeared to give the confederacy its death-blow, and Paolo Orsini

was on the point of setting out to seek Cesare at Imola for the purpose of treating with him—which would definitely have given burial to the revolt—when suddenly there befell an event which threw the scales the other way.

Cesare's people were carrying out some work in the Castle of S. Leo, in the interior of which a new wall was in course of erection. For the purposes of this, great baulks of timber were being brought into the castle from the surrounding country. Some peasants, headed by one Brizio, who had been a squire of Guidobaldo's, availed themselves of the circumstance to capture the castle by a stratagem. Bringing forward some great masses of timber and felled trees, they set them down along the drawbridge in such a manner as to prevent its being hoisted. That done, an attack in force was directed against the fortress. The place, whose natural defences rendered it practically impregnable, was but slightly manned; being thus surprised, and unable to raise the bridge, it was powerless to offer any resistance, so that the Montefeltre peasants, having killed every Borgia soldier of the garrison, took possession of it and held it for Duke Guidobaldo.

This capture of S. Leo was as a spark that fired a train. Instantly the hardy hillmen of Urbino were in arms to reconquer Guidobaldo's duchy for him. Stronghold after stronghold fell into their hands, until they were in Urbino itself. They made short work of the capital's scanty defenders, flung Cesare's governor into prison, and finally obtained possession of the citadel.

It was the news of this that caused the confederates once more to pause. Before declaring themselves, they waited to see what action Venice would take, whilst in the meantime they sought shelter behind a declaration that they were soldiers of the Church and would do nothing against the will of the Pontiff. They were confidently assured that Venice would befriend Guidobaldo, and help him back to his throne now that his own people had done so much towards that end. It

remained, however, to be seen whether Venice would at the same time befriend Pesaro and Rimini.

Instantly Cesare Borgia—who was assailed by grave doubts concerning the Venetians—took his measures. He ordered Bartolomeo da Capranica, who was chief in command of his troops in Urbino, to fall back upon Rimini with all his companies, whilst to Pesaro the duke dispatched Michele da Corella and Ramiro de Lorqua.

It was a busy time of action with the duke at Imola, and yet, amid all the occupation which this equipment of a new army must have given him, he still found time for diplomatic measures, and, taking advantage of the expressed friendliness of Florence, he had replied by desiring the Signory to send an envoy to confer with him. Florence responded by sending, as her representative, that same Niccolò Macchiavelli who had earlier accompanied Soderini on a similar mission to Valentino, and who had meanwhile been advanced to the dignity of Secretary of State.

Macchiavelli has left us, in his dispatches to his Government, the most precious and valuable information concerning that period of Cesare Borgia's history during which he was with the duke on the business of his legation. Not only is it the rare evidence of an eye-witness that Macchiavelli affords us, but the evidence, as we have said, of one endowed with singular acumen and an extraordinary gift of psychological analysis. The one clear and certain inference to be drawn, not only from those dispatches, but from the Florentine secretary's later writings, is that, at close quarters with Cesare Borgia, a critical witness of his methods, he conceived for him a transcending admiration which was later to find its fullest expression in his immortal book *The Prince*—a book, remember, compiled to serve as a guide in government to Giuliano de'Medici, the feeble brother of Pope Leo X, a book inspired by Cesare Borgia, who is the

model prince held up by Macchiavelli for emulation.

Does it serve any purpose, in the face of this work from the pen of the acknowledged inventor of state-craft, to describe Cesare's conquest of the Romagna by opprobrious epithets and sweeping statements of condemnation and censure—statements kept carefully general, and never permitted to enter into detail which must destroy their own ends and expose their falsehood?

Gregorovius, in this connection, is as full of contradictions as any man must be who does not sift out the truth and rigidly follow it in his writings. Consider the following scrupulously translated extracts from his *Geschichte der Stadt Rom*:

(a) "Cesare departed from Rome to resume his bloody work in the Romagna."

(b) "...the frightful deeds performed by Cesare on both sides of the Apennines. He assumes the semblance of an exterminating angel, and performs such hellish iniquities that we can only shudder at the contemplation of the evil of which human nature is capable."

And now, pray, consider and compare with those the following excerpt from the very next page of that same monumental work:

"Before him [Cesare] cities trembled; the magistrates prostrated themselves in the dust; sycophantic courtiers praised him to the stars. Yet it is undeniable that his government was energetic and good; for the first time Romagna enjoyed peace and was rid of her vampires. In the name of Cesare justice was administered by Antonio di Monte Sansovino, President of the Ruota of Cesena, a man universally beloved."

It is almost as if the truth had slipped out unawares, for the first period hardly seems a logical prelude to the second, by which it is largely contradicted. If Cesare's government was so good that

Romagna knew peace at last and was rid of her vampires, why did cities tremble before him? There is, by the way, no evidence of such trepidations in any of the chronicles of the conquered States, one and all of which hail Cesare as their deliverer. Why, if he was held in such terror, did city after city—as we have seen—spontaneously offer itself to Cesare's dominion?

But to rebut those statements of Gregorovius's there is scarce the need to pose these questions; sufficiently does Gregorovius himself rebut them. The men who praised Cesare, the historian tells us, were sycophantic courtiers. But where is the wonder of his being praised if his government was as good as Gregorovius admits it to have been? What was unnatural in that praise? What so untruthful as to deserve to be branded sycophantic? And by what right is an historian to reject as sycophants the writers who praise a man, whilst accepting every word of his detractors as the words of inspired evangelists, even when their falsehoods are so transparent as to provoke the derision of the thoughtful and analytic?

As l'Espinois points out in his masterly essay in the *Revue des Questions Historiques*, Gregorovius refuses to recognize in Cesare Borgia the Messiah of a united Central Italy, but considers him merely as a high-flying adventurer; whilst Villari, in his *Life and Times of Macchiavelli*, tells you bluntly that Cesare Borgia was neither a statesman nor a soldier but a brigand-chief.

These are mere words; and to utter words is easier than to make them good.

"High-flying adventurer," or "brigand-chief," by all means, if it please you. What but a high-flying adventurer was the wood-cutter, Muzio Attendolo, founder of the ducal House of Sforza? What but a high-flying adventurer was that Count Henry of Burgundy who founded the kingdom of Portugal? What else was the Norman bastard William, who conquered England? What else the artillery officer, Napoleon

Bonaparte, who became Emperor of the French? What else was the founder of any dynasty but a high-flying adventurer—or a brigand-chief, if the melodramatic term is more captivating to your fancy?

These terms are used to belittle Cesare. They achieve no more, however, than to belittle those who penned them; for, even as they are true, the marvel is that the admirable matter in these truths appears to have escaped those authors.

What else Gregorovius opines—that Cesare was no Messiah of United Italy—is true enough. Cesare was the Messiah of Cesare. The well-being of Italy for its own sake exercised his mind not so much as the well-being of the horse he rode. He wrought for his own aggrandisement—but he wrought wisely; and, whilst the end in view is no more to be censured than the ambition of any man, the means employed are in the highest degree to be commended, since the well-being of the Romagna, which was not an aim, was, nevertheless, an essential and praiseworthy incident.

When it can be shown that every other of those conquerors who cut heroic figures in history were purest altruists, it will be time to damn Cesare Borgia for his egotism.

What Villari says, for the purpose of adding rhetorical force to his "brigand-chief"—that Cesare was no statesman and no soldier—is entirely of a piece with the rest of the chapter in which it occurs⁽¹⁾—a chapter rich in sweeping inaccuracies concerning Cesare. But it is staggering to find the statement in such a place, amid Macchiavelli's letters on Cesare, breathing an obvious and profound admiration of the duke's talents as a politician and a soldier—an admiration which later is to go perilously near to worship. To Macchiavelli, Cesare is the incarnation of a hazy ideal, as is abundantly shown in *The Prince*. For Villari to reconcile all this with his own views must seem impossible. And impossible it is; yet Villari achieves it, with an audacity that leaves you breathless.

No—he practically tells you—this Macchiavelli, who daily saw and spoke with Cesare for two months (and during a critical time, which is when men best reveal their natures), this acute Florentine—the acutest man of his age, perhaps—who studied and analysed Cesare, and sent his Government the results of his analyses, and was inspired by them later to write *The Prince*—this man did not know Cesare Borgia. He wrote, not about Cesare himself, but about a creation of his own intellect.

That is what Villari pretends. Macchiavelli, the representative of a power unfriendly at heart under the mask of the expedient friendliness, his mind already poisoned by all the rumours current throughout Italy, comes on this mission to Valentinois. Florence, fearing and hating Valentinois as she does, would doubtless take pleasure in detractory advices. Other ambassadors—particularly those of Venice—pander to their Governments' wishes in this respect, conscious that there is a sycophancy in slander contrasted with which the ordinary sycophancy of flattery is as water to wine; they diligently send home every scrap of indecent or scandalous rumour they can pick up in the Roman ante-chambers, however unlikely, uncorroborated, or unconcerning the business of an ambassador.

But Macchiavelli, in Cesare Borgia's presence, is overawed by his greatness, his force and his intellect, and these attributes engage him in his dispatches. These same dispatches are a stumbling-block to all who prefer to tread the beaten, sensational track, and to see in Cesare Borgia a villain of melodrama, a monster of crime, brutal, and, consequently, of no intellectual force. But Villari contrives to step more or less neatly, if fatuously, over that formidable obstacle, by telling you that Macchiavelli presents to you not really Cesare Borgia, but a creation of his own intellect, which he had come to admire. It is a

simple, elementary expedient by means of which every piece of historical evidence ever penned may be destroyed—including all that which defames the House of Borgia.

Macchiavelli arrived at Imola on the evening of October 7, 1502, and, all travel-stained as he was, repaired straight to the duke, as if the message with which he was charged was one that would not brook a moment's delay in its deliverance. Actually, however, he had nothing to offer Cesare but the empty expressions of Florence's friendship and the hopes she founded upon Cesare's reciprocation. The crafty young Florentine—he was thirty-three at the time—was sent to temporize and to avoid committing himself or his Government.

Valentino listened to the specious compliments, and replied by similar protestations and by reminding Florence how he had curbed the hand of those very condottieri who had now rebelled against him as a consequence. He showed himself calm and tranquil at the loss of Urbino, telling Macchiavelli that he "had not forgotten the way to reconquer it," when it should suit him. Of the revolted condottieri he contemptuously said that he accounted them fools for not having known how to choose a more favourable moment in which to harm him, and that they would presently find such a fire burning under their feet as would call for more water to quench it than such men as these disposed of.

Meanwhile, the success of those rustics of Urbino who had risen, and the ease of their victories, had fired others of the territory to follow their example. Fossombrone and Pergola were the next to rebel and to put the Borgia garrisons to the sword; but, in their reckless audacity, they chose their moment ill, for Michele da Corella was at hand with his lances, and, although his orders had been to repair straight to Pesaro, he ventured to depart from them to the extent of turning aside to punish the insurgence of those towns by launching his men-at-arms upon them and subjecting them to an appalling and

pitiless sack.

When Cesare heard the news of it and the details of the horrors that had been perpetrated, he turned, smiling cruelly, to Macchiavelli, who was with him, and, "The constellations this year seem unfavourable to rebels," he observed.

A battle of wits was toward between the Florentines' Secretary of State and the Duke of Valentinois, each mistrustful of the other. In the end Cesare, a little out of patience at so much inconclusiveness, though outwardly preserving his immutable serenity, sought to come to grips by demanding that Florence should declare whether he was to account her his friend or not. But this was precisely what Macchiavelli's instructions forbade him from declaring. He answered that he must first write to the Signory, and begged the duke to tell him what terms he proposed should form the treaty. But there it was the duke's turn to fence and to avoid a direct answer, desiring that Florence should open the negotiations and that from her should come the first proposal.

He reminded Macchiavelli that Florence would do well to come to a decision before the Orsini sought to patch up a peace with him, since, once that was done, there would be fresh difficulties, owing, of course, to Orsini's enmity to the existing Florentine Government. And of such a peace there was now every indication, Paolo Orsini having at last sent Cesare proposals for rejoining him, subject to his abandoning the Bologna enterprise (in which, the Orsini argued, they could not bear a hand without breaking faith with Bentivogli) and turning against Florence. Vitelli, at the same time, announced himself ready to return to Cesare's service, but first he required some "honest security."

Well might it have pleased Cesare to oblige the Orsini to the letter, and to give a lesson in straight-dealing to these shuffling Florentine pedlars who sent a nimble-witted Secretary of State to hold him in

play with sweet words of barren meaning. But there was France and her wishes to be considered, and he could not commit himself. So his answer was peremptory and condescending. He told them that, if they desired to show themselves his friends, they could set about reconquering and holding Urbino for him.

It looked as if the condottieri agreed to this, for on October 11 Vitelli seized Castel Durante, and on the next day Baglioni was in possession of Cagli.

In view of this, Cesare bade the troops which he had withdrawn to advance again upon the city of Urbino and take possession of it. But suddenly, on the 12th, a messenger from Guidobaldo rode into Urbino to announce their duke's return within a few days to defend the subjects who had shown themselves so loyal to him. This, the shifty confederates accounted, must be done with the support of Venice, whence they concluded that Venice must have declared against Valentinois, and again they treacherously changed sides.

The Orsini proceeded to prompt action. Assured of their return to himself, and counting upon their support in Urbino, Cesare had contented himself with sending thither a small force of 100 lances and 200 light horse. Upon these fell the Orsini, and put them to utter rout at Calmazzo, near Fossombrone, capturing Ugo di Moncada, who commanded one of the companies, but missing Michele da Corella, who contrived to escape to Fossombrone.

The conquerors entered Urbino that evening, and, as if to put it on record that they burnt their boats with Valentinois, Paolo Orsini wrote that same night to the Venetian Senate advices of the victory won. Three days later—on October 18—Guidobaldo, accompanied by his nephews Ottaviano Fregioso and Gianmaria Varano, re-entered his capital amid the cheers and enthusiasm of his loyal and loving people.

Vitelli made haste to place his artillery at Guidobaldo's disposal for the reduction of Cagli, Pergola, and Fossombrone, which were still held for Valentinois, whilst Oliverotto da Fermo went with Gianmaria Varano to attempt the reconquest of Camerino, and Gianpaolo Baglioni to Fano, which, however, he did not attempt to enter as an enemy—an idle course, seeing how loyally the town held for Cesare—but as a ducal condottiero.

Fired by Orsini's example, Bentivogli also took the offensive, and began by ordering the canonists of Bologna University to go to the churches and encourage the people to disregard the excommunications launched against the city. He wrote to the King of France to complain that Cesare had broken the Treaty of Villafontana by which he had undertaken never again to molest Bologna—naïvely ignoring the circumstance that he himself had been the first to violate the terms of that same treaty, and that it was precisely upon such grounds that Cesare was threatening him.

Thus matters stood, the confederates turning anxious eyes towards Venice, and, haply, beginning to wonder whether the Republic was indeed going to move to their support as they had so confidently expected, and realizing perhaps by now their rashness, and the ruin that awaited them should Venice fail them. And fail them Venice did. The Venetians had received a reply from Louis XII to that letter in which they had heaped odium upon the Borgia and shown the king what dishonour to himself dwelt in his alliance with Valentinois. Their criticisms and accusations were ignored in that reply, which resolved itself into nothing more than a threat that "if they opposed themselves to the enterprise of the Church they would be treated by him as enemies," and of this letter he sent Cesare a copy, as Cesare himself told Macchiavelli.

So, whilst Valentinois in Imola was able to breathe more freely, the condottieri in Urbino may well have been overcome with horror at their

position and at having been thus left in the lurch by Venice. None was better aware than Pandolfo Petrucci of the folly of their action and of the danger that now impended, and he sent his secretary to Valentinois to say that if the duke would but reassure them on the score of his intentions they would return to him and aid him in recovering what had been lost.

Following upon this message came Paolo Orsini himself to Imola on the 25th, disguised as a courier, and having first taken the precaution of obtaining a safe-conduct. He left again on the 29th, bearing with him a treaty the terms of which had been agreed between himself and Cesare during that visit. These were that Cesare should engage to protect the States of all his allied condottieri, and they to serve him and the Church in return. A special convention was to follow, to decide the matter of the Bentivogli, which should be resolved by Cesare, Cardinal Orsini, and Pandolfo Petrucci in consultation, their judgment to be binding upon all.

Cesare's contempt for the Orsini and the rest of the shifty men who formed that confederacy—that "diet of bankrupts," as he had termed it—was expressed plainly enough to Macchiavelli.

"To-day," said he, "Messer Paolo is to visit me, and to-morrow there will be the cardinal; and thus they think to befool me, at their pleasure. But I, on my side, am only dallying with them. I listen to all they have to say and bide my own time."

Later, Macchiavelli was to remember those words, which meanwhile afforded him matter for reflection.

As Paolo Orsini rode away from Imola, the duke's secretary, Gherardi, followed and overtook him to say that Cesare desired to add to the treaty another clause—one relating to the King of France. To this Paolo Orsini refused to consent, but, upon being pressed in the matter by Gherardi, went so far as to promise to submit the clause

to the others.

On October 30 Cesare published a notice in the Romagna, intimating the return to obedience on the part of his captains.

Macchiavelli was mystified by this, and apprehensive—as men will be of the things they cannot fathom—of what might be reserved in it for Florence. It was Gherardi who reassured him, laughing in the face of the crafty Florentine, as he informed him that even children should come to smile at such a treaty as this. He added that he had gone after Paolo Orsini to beg the addition of another clause, intentionally omitted by the duke.

"If they accept that clause," concluded Messer Agabito, "it will open a window; if they refuse it, a door, by which the duke can issue from the treaty."

Macchiavelli's wonder increased. But the subject of it now was that the condottieri should be hoodwinked by a document in such terms, and well may he have bethought him then of those words which Cesare had used to him a few days earlier.

CHAPTER XVI. RAMIRO DE LORQUA

It really seemed as if the condottieri were determined to make their score as heavy as possible. For even whilst Paolo Orsini had been on his mission of peace to Cesare, and whilst they awaited his return, they had continued in arms against the duke. The Vitelli had aided Guidobaldo to reconquer his territory, and had killed, in the course of doing so, Bartolomeo da Capranica, Cesare's most valued captain and Vitelli's brother-in-arms of yesterday. The Baglioni were pressing Michele da Corella in Pesaro, but to little purpose; whilst the butcher Oliverotto da Fermo in Camerino—of which he had taken possession with Gianmaria Varano—was slaughtering every Spaniard he could find.

On the other side, Corella in Pesaro hanged five men whom he caught practising against the duke's government, and, having taken young Pietro Varano—who was on his way to join his brother in Camerino in view of the revolt there—he had him strangled in the market-place. There is a story that, with life not yet extinct, the poor youth was carried into church by the pitiful crowd. But here a friar, discovering that he still lived, called in the soldiers and bade them finish him. This friar, going later through Cagli, was recognized, set upon by a mob, and torn to pieces—in which, if the rest of the tale be true, he was richly served.

Into the theatre of bloodshed came Paolo Orsini from his mission to Valentino, bringing with him the treaty for signature by the condottieri. Accustomed as they were to playing fast and loose, they opined that, so far as Urbino was concerned, enough changes of

government had they contrived there already. Vitelli pointed out the unseemliness of once again deposing Guidobaldo, whom they had just resealed upon his throne. Besides, he perceived in the treaty the end of his hopes of a descent upon Florence, which was the cause of all his labours. So he rejected it.

But Valentinois had already got the Orsini and Pandolfo Petrucci on his side, and so the confederacy was divided. Another factor came to befriend the duke. On November 2 he was visited by Antonio Galeazzo Bentivogli, sent by his father Giovanni to propose a treaty with him—this state of affairs having been brought about by the mediation of Ercole d'Este. From the negotiations that followed it resulted that, on the 13th, the Orsini had word from Cesare that he had entered into an alliance with the Bentivogli—which definitely removed their main objection to bearing arms with him.

It was resigning much on Cesare's part, but the treaty, after all, was only for two years, and might, of course, be broken before then, as they understood these matters. This treaty was signed at the Vatican on the 23rd, between Borgia and Bentivogli, to guarantee the States of both. The King of France, the Signory of Florence, and the Duke of Ferrara guaranteed the alliance.

Inter alia, it was agreed between them that Bologna should supply Cesare with 100 lances and 200 light horse for one or two enterprises within the year, and that the condotta of 100 lances which Cesare held from Bologna by the last treaty should be renewed. The terms of the treaty were to be kept utterly secret for the next three months, so that the affairs of Urbino and Camerino should not be prejudiced by their publication.

The result was instantaneous. On November 27 Paolo Orsini was back at Imola with the other treaty, which bore now the signatures of all the confederates. Vitelli, finding himself isolated, had swallowed his chagrin in the matter of Florence, and his scruples in the matter of

Urbino, abandoning the unfortunate Guidobaldo to his fate. This came swiftly. From Imola, Paolo Orsini rode to Fano on the 29th, and ordered his men to advance upon Urbino and seize the city in the Duke of Valentinois's name, proclaiming a pardon for all rebels who would be submissive.

Guidobaldo and the ill-starred Lord of Faenza were the two exceptions in Romagna—the only two who had known how to win the affections of their subjects. For Guidobaldo there was nothing that the men of Urbino would not have done. They rallied to him now, and the women of Valbone—like the ladies of England to save Coeur-de-Lion—came with their jewels and trinkets, offering them that he might have the means to levy troops and resist. But this gentle, kindly Guidobaldo could not subject his country to further ravages of war; and so he determined, in his subjects' interests as much as in his own, to depart for the second time.

Early in December the Orsini troops are in his territory, and Paolo, halting them a few miles out of Urbino, sends to beg Guidobaldo's attendance in his camp. Guidobaldo, crippled by gout and unable at the time to walk a step, sends Paolo his excuses and begs that he will come to Urbino, where he awaits him. There Guidobaldo makes formal surrender to him, takes leave of his faithful friends, enjoins fidelity to Valentinois and trust in God, and so on December 19 he departs into exile, the one pathetic noble figure amid so many ignoble ones. Paolo, taking possession of the duchy, assumes the title of governor.

The Florentines had had their chance of an alliance with Cesare, and had deliberately neglected it. Early in November they had received letters from the King of France urging them to come to an accord with Cesare, and they had made known to the duke that they desired to reoccupy Pisa and to assure themselves of Vitelli; but, when he pressed that Florence should give him a condotta,

Macchiavelli—following his instructions not to commit the Republic in any way—had answered "that his Excellency must not be considered as other lords, but as a new potentate in Italy, with whom it is more seemly to make an alliance or a friendship than to grant him a condotta; and, as alliances are maintained by arms, and that is the only power to compel their observance, the Signory could not perceive what security they would have when three-quarters or three-fifths of their arms would be in the duke's hands." Macchiavelli added diplomatically that "he did not say this to impugn the duke's good faith, but to show him that princes should be circumspect and never enter into anything that leaves a possibility of their being put at a disadvantage."(1)

1 See the twenty-first letter from Macchiavelli on this legation.

Cesare answered him calmly ("senza segno d'alterazione alcuna") that without a condotta, he didn't know what to make of a private friendship whose first principles were denied him. And there the matter hung, for Macchiavelli's legation had for only aim to ensure the immunity of Tuscany and to safeguard Florentine interests without conceding any advantages to Cesare—as the latter had perceived from the first.

On December 10 Cesare moved from Imola with his entire army, intent now upon the conquest of Sinigaglia, which State Giuliano della Rovere had been unable to save for his nephew, as king and Pope had alike turned a deaf ear upon the excuses he had sought to make for the Prefetessa, Giovanna da Montefeltre—the mother of the young prefect—who had aided her brother Guidobaldo in the late war in Urbino.

On the morrow Valentinois arrived in Cesena and encamped his army there for Christmas, as in the previous year. The country was beginning to feel the effects of this prolonged vast military occupation,

and although the duke, with intent to relieve the people, had done all that was possible to provision the troops, and had purchased from Venice 30,000 bushels of wheat for the purpose, yet all had been consumed. "The very stones have been eaten," says Macchiavelli.

To account for this state of things—and possibly for certain other matters—Messer Ramiro de Lorqua, the Governor-General, was summoned from Pesaro; whilst to avert the threatened famine Cesare ordered that the cereals in the private granaries of Cesena should be sold at reduced prices, and he further proceeded, at heavy expense, to procure grain from without. Another, less far-seeing than Valentinois, might have made capital out of Urbino's late rebellion, and pillaged the country to provide for pressing needs. But that would have been opposed to Cesare's policy, of fostering the goodwill of the people he subjected.

On December 20 three of the companies of French lances that had been with Cesare took their leave of him and returned to Lombardy, so that Cesare was left with only one company. There appears to be some confusion as to the reasons for this, and it is stated by some that those companies were recalled to Milan by the French governor. Macchiavelli, ever inquisitive and inquiring, questioned one of the French officers in the matter, to be told that the lances were returning because the duke no longer needed them, the inference being that this was in consequence of the return of the condottieri to their allegiance. But the astute secretary did not at the time account this convincing, arguing that the duke could not yet be said to be secure, nor could he know for certain how far he might trust Vitelli and the Orsini. Presumably, however, he afterwards obtained more certain information, for he says later that Valentinois himself dismissed the French, and that the dismissal was part of the stratagem he was preparing, and had for object to reassure Vitelli and the other confederates, and to throw them off their guard, by causing them to suppose him indifferently supported.

But the departure of the French did not take place without much discussion being provoked, and rumour making extremely busy, whilst it was generally assumed that it would retard the Sinigaglia conquest. Nevertheless, the duke calmly pursued his preparations, and proceeded now to send forward his artillery. There was no real ground upon which to assume that he would adopt any other course. Cesare was now in considerable strength, apart from French lances, and even as these left him he was joined by a thousand Swiss, and another six hundred Romagnuoli from the Val di Lamone. Moreover, as far as the reduction of Sinigaglia was concerned, no resistance was to be expected, for Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere had written enjoining the people to surrender peacefully to the duke.

What matters Cesare may have found in Cesena to justify the arrest of his Governor-General we do not know to the full with absolute certainty. On December 22 Ramiro de Lorqua, coming from Pesaro in response to his master's summons, was arrested on his arrival and flung into prison. His examination was to follow.

Macchiavelli, reporting the arrest, says: "It is thought he [Cesare] may sacrifice him to the people, who have a very great desire of it."

Ramiro had made himself detested in Romagna by the ruthlessness of his rule, and a ruthless servant reflects upon his master, a matter which could nowise suit Borgia. To all who have read *The Prince* it will be clear that upon that ground alone—of having brought Valentino's justice into disrepute by the harshness which in Valentino's name he practised—Macchiavelli would have approved the execution of Ramiro. He would have accounted it perfectly justifiable that Ramiro should be sacrificed to the people for no better reason than because he had provoked their hatred, since this sacrifice made for the duke's welfare. He does, as a matter of fact, justify this execution, but upon much fuller grounds than these. Still, had the reasons been no better than are mentioned, he would still

have justified it upon those. So much is clear; and, when so much is clear, much more will be clear to you touching this strange epoch.

There was, however, more than a matter of sacrificing the Governor-General to the hatred of the people. There was, for one thing, the matter of that wheat which had disappeared. Ramiro was charged with having fraudulently sold it to his own dishonest profit, putting the duke to the heavy expense of importing fresh supplies for the nourishment of the people. The seriousness of the charge will be appreciated when it is considered that, had a famine resulted from this speculation, grave disorder might have ensued and perhaps even a rebellion against a government which could provide no better.

The duke published the news of the governor's arrest throughout Romagna. He announced his displeasure and regret at the harshnesses and corrupt practices of Ramiro de Lorqua, in spite of the most urgent admonishings that he should refrain from all undue exactions and the threat of grave punishment should he disobey. These frauds, corruption, extortion, and rapine practised by the governor were so grave, continuous and general, stated the duke in his manifesto, that "there is no city, country-side, or castle, nor any place in all Romagna, nor officer or minister of the duke's, who does not know of these abuses; and, amongst others, the famine of wheat occasioned by the traffic which he held against our express prohibition, sending out such quantities as would abundantly have sufficed for the people and the army."

He concludes with assurances of his intention that, in the future, they shall be ruled with justice and integrity, and he urges all who may have charges to prefer against the said governor to bring them forward immediately.

It was freely rumoured that the charges against Ramiro by no means ended there, and in Bologna—and from Bologna the truth of such a matter might well transpire, all things considered—it was

openly said that Ramiro had been in secret treaty with the Bentivogli, Orsini, and Vitelli, against the Duke of Valentinois: "Aveva provixione da Messer Zoane Bentivogli e da Orsini e Viteloazo contro el duca," writes Fileno della Tuata, who, it will be borne in mind, was no friend of the Borgia, and would be at no pains to find justification for the duke's deeds.

But of that secret treaty there was, for the moment, no official mention. Later the rumour of it was to receive the fullest confirmation, and, together with that, we shall give, in the next chapter, the duke's obvious reasons for having kept the matter secret at first. Matter enough and to spare was there already upon which to dispose of Messer Ramiro de Lorqua and disposed of he was, with the most summary justice.

On the morning of December 26 the first folk to be astir in Cesena beheld, in the grey light of that wintry dawn, the body of Ramiro lying headless in the square. It was richly dressed, with all his ornaments upon it, a scarlet cloak about it, and the hands were gloved. On a pike beside the body the black-bearded head was set up to view, and so remained throughout that day, a terrible display of the swift and pitiless justice of the duke.

Macchiavelli wrote: "The reason of his death is not properly known" ("non si sa bene la cagione della sua morte") "beyond the fact that such was the pleasure of the prince, who shows us that he can make and unmake men according to their deserts."

The Cronica Civitas Faventiae, the Diarium Caesenate, and the Cronache Forlivese, all express the people's extreme satisfaction at the deed, and endorse the charges of brutality against the man which are contained in Cesare's letter.

CHAPTER XVII. "THE BEAUTIFUL STRATAGEM"

Cesare left Cesena very early on the morning of December 26—the morning of Ramiro's execution—and by the 29th he was at Fano, where he received the envoys who came from Ancona with protestations of loyalty, as well as a messenger from Vitellozzo Vitelli, who brought him news of the surrender of Sinigaglia. The citadel itself was still being held by Andrea Doria—the same who was afterwards to become so famous in Genoa; this, it was stated, was solely because Doria desired to make surrender to the duke himself. The Prefectress, Giovanna da Montefeltre, had already departed from the city, which she ruled as regent for her eleven-year old boy, and had gone by sea to Venice.

The duke returned answer to Vitelli that he would be in Sinigaglia himself upon the morrow, and he invited the condottieri to receive him there, since he was decided to possess himself of the citadel at once, whether Doria chose to surrender it peacefully or not; and that, to provide for emergencies, he would bring his artillery with him. Lastly, Vitelli was bidden to prepare quarters within the new town for the troops that would accompany Cesare. To do this it was necessary to dispose the soldiers of Oliverotto da Fermo in the borgo. These were the only troops with the condottieri in Sinigaglia; the remainder of their forces were quartered in the strongholds of the territory at distances of from five to seven miles of the town.

On the last day of that year 1502 Cesare Borgia appeared before Sinigaglia to receive the homage of those men who had used him so treacherously, and whom—with the exception of Paolo Orsini—he

now met face to face for the first time since their rebellion. Here were Francesco Orsini, Duke of Gravina, with Paolo and the latter's son Fabio; here was Oliverotto, the ruffianly Lord of Fermo, who had won his lordship by the cold-blooded murder of his kinsman, and concerning whom a rumour ran in Rome that Cesare had sworn to choke him with his own hands; and here was Vitellozzo Vitelli, the arch-traitor of them all.

Gianpaolo Baglioni was absent through illness—a matter less fatal to him than was their health to those who were present—and the Cardinal and Giulio Orsini were in Rome.

Were these captains mad to suppose that such a man as Cesare Borgia could so forget the wrong they had done him, and forgive them in this easy fashion, exacting no amends? Were they mad to suppose that, after such proofs as they had given him of what manner of faith they kept, he would trust them hereafter with their lives to work further mischief against him? (Well might Macchiavelli have marvelled when he beheld the terms of the treaty the duke had made with them.) Were they mad to imagine that one so crafty as Valentinois would so place himself into their hands—the hands of men who had sworn his ruin and death? Truly, mad they must have been—rendered so by the gods who would destroy them.

The tale of that happening is graphically told by the pen of the admiring Macchiavelli, who names the affair "*Il Bellissimo Inganno*." That he so named it should suffice us and restrain us from criticisms of our own, accepting that criticism of his. To us, judged from our modern standpoint, the affair of Sinigaglia is the last word in treachery and iscariotism. But you are here concerned with the standpoint of the Cinquecento, and that standpoint Macchiavelli gives you when he describes this business as "*the beautiful stratagem*." To offer judgment in despite of that is to commit a fatuity, which too often already has been committed.

Here, then, is Macchiavelli's story of the event:

On the morning of December 31 Cesare's army, composed of 10,000 foot and 3,000 horse,(1) was drawn up on the banks of the River Metauro—some five miles from Sinigaglia—in accordance with his orders, awaiting his arrival. He came at daybreak, and immediately ordered forward 200 lances under the command of Don Michele da Corella; he bade the foot to march after these, and himself brought up the rear with the main body of the horse.

1 This is Macchiavelli's report of the forces; but, it appears to be an exaggeration, for, upon leaving Cesena, Cesare does not appear to have commanded more than 10,000 men in all.

In Sinigaglia, as we have seen, the condottieri had only the troops of Oliverotto—1,000 foot and 150 horse—which had been quartered in the borgo, and were now drawn up in the market-place, Oliverotto at their head, to do honour to the duke.

As the horse under Don Michele gained the little river Misa and the bridge that spanned it, almost directly opposite to the gates of Sinigaglia, their captain halted them and drew them up into two files, between which a lane was opened. Through this the foot went forward and straight into the town, and after came Cesare himself, a graceful, youthful figure, resplendent in full armour at the head of his lances. To meet him advanced now the three Orsini and Vitellozzo Vitelli. Macchiavelli tells us of the latter's uneasiness, of his premonitions of evil, and the farewells (all of which Macchiavelli had afterwards heard reported) which he had taken of his family before coming to Sinigaglia. Probably these are no more than the stories that grow up about such men after such an event as that which was about to happen.

The condottieri came unarmed, Vitelli mounted on a mule, wearing

a cloak with a green lining. In that group he is the only man deserving of any respect or pity—a victim of his sense of duty to his family, driven to his rebellion and faithlessness to Valentinois by his consuming desire to avenge his brother's death upon the Florentines. The others were poor creatures, incapable even of keeping faith with one another. Paolo Orsini was actually said to be in secret concert with Valentinois since his mission to him at Imola, and to have accepted heavy bribes from him. Oliverotto you have seen at work, making a holocaust of his family and friends under the base spur of his cupidity; whilst of the absent ones, Pandolfo Petrucci alone was a man of any steadfastness and honesty.

The duke's reception of them was invested with that gracious friendliness of which none knew the art better than did he, intent upon showing them that the past was forgiven and their offences against himself forgotten. As they turned and rode with him through the gates of Sinigaglia some of the duke's gentlemen hemmed them about in the preconcerted manner, lest even now they should be taken with alarm. But it was all done unostentatiously and with every show of friendliness, that no suspicions should be aroused.

From the group Cesare had missed Oliverotto, and as they now approached the market-square, where the Tyrant of Fermo sat on his horse at the head of his troops, Cesare made a sign with his eyes to Don Michele, the purport of which was plain to the captain. He rode ahead to suggest to Oliverotto that this was no time to have his men under arms and out of their lodgings, and to point out to him that, if they were not dismissed they would be in danger of having their quarters snatched from them by the duke's men, from which trouble might arise. To this he added that the duke was expecting his lordship.

Oliverotto, persuaded, gave the order for the dismissal of his troops, and the duke, coming up at that moment, called to him. In

response he went to greet him, and fell in thereafter with the others who were riding with Valentinois.

In amiable conversation with them all, and riding between Vitelli and Francesco Orsini, the duke passed from the borgo into the town itself, and so to the palace, where the condottieri disposed to take their leave of him. But Cesare was not for parting with them yet; he bade them in with him, and they perforce must accept his invitation. Besides, his mood was so agreeable that surely there could be nought to fear.

But scarce were they inside when his manner changed of a sudden, and at a sign from him they were instantly overpowered and arrested by those gentlemen of his own who were of the party and who came to it well schooled in what they were to do.

Buonaccorsi compiled his diary carefully from the letters of Macchiavelli to the Ten, in so far as this and other affairs are concerned; and to Buonaccorsi we must now turn for what immediately follows, which is no doubt from Macchiavelli's second letter of December 31, in which the full details of the affair are given. His first letter no more than briefly states the happening; the second unfortunately is missing; so that the above particulars—and some yet to follow—are culled from the relations which he afterwards penned ("Del modo tenuto," etc.), edited, however, by the help of his dispatches at the time in regard to the causes which led to the affair. Between these and the actual relation there are some minor discrepancies. Unquestionably the dispatches are the more reliable, so that, where such discrepancies occur, the version in the dispatches has been preferred.

To turn for a moment to Buonaccorsi, he tells us that, as the Florentine envoy (who was, of course, Macchiavelli) following the Duke of Valentinois entered the town later, after the arrest of the condottieri, and found all uproar and confusion, he repaired straight to

the palace to ascertain the truth. As he approached he met the duke, riding out in full armour to quell the rioting and restrain his men, who were by now all out of hand and pillaging the city. Cesare, perceiving the secretary, reined in and called him.

"This," he said, "is what I wanted to tell Monsignor di Volterra [Soderini] when he came to Urbino, but I could not entrust him with the secret. Now that my opportunity has come, I have known very well how to make use of it, and I have done a great service to your masters."

And with that Cesare left him, and, calling his captains about him, rode down into the town to put an end to the horrors that were being perpetrated there.

Immediately upon the arrest of the condottieri Cesare had issued orders to attack the soldiers of Vitelli and Orsini, and to dislodge them from the castles of the territory where they were quartered, and similarly to dislodge Oliverotto's men and drive them out of Sinigaglia. This had been swiftly accomplished. But the duke's men were not disposed to leave matters at that. Excited by the taste of battle that had been theirs, they returned to wreak their fury upon the town, and were proceeding to put it to sack, directing particular attention to the wealthy quarter occupied by the Venetian merchants, which is said to have been plundered by them to the extent of some 20,000 ducats. They would have made an end of Sinigaglia but for the sudden appearance amongst them of the duke himself. He rode through the streets, angrily ordering the pillage to cease; and, to show how much he was in earnest, with his own hands he cut down some who were insolent or slow to obey him; thus, before dusk, he had restored order and quiet.

As for the condottieri, Vitelli and Oliverotto were dealt with that very night. There is a story that Oliverotto, seeing that all was lost, drew a dagger and would have put it through his heart to save himself from dying at the hands of the hangman. If it is true, then that was his last

show of spirit. He turned craven at the end, and protested tearfully to his judges—for a trial was given them—that the fault of all the wrong wrought against the duke lay with his brother-in-law, Vitellozzo. More wonderful was it that the grim Vitelli's courage also should break down at the end, and that he should beg that the Pope be implored to grant him a plenary indulgence and that his answer be awaited.

But at dawn—the night having been consumed in their trial—they were placed back to back, and so strangled, and their bodies were taken to the church of the Misericordia Hospital.

The Orsini were not dealt with just yet. They were kept prisoners, and Valentino would go no further until he should have heard from Rome that Giulio Orsini and the powerful cardinal were also under arrest. To put to death at present the men in his power might be to alarm and so lose the others. They are right who say that his craft was devilish; but what else was to be expected of the times?

On the morrow—January 1, 1503—the duke issued dispatches to the Powers of Italy giving his account of the deed. It set forth that the Orsini and their confederates, notwithstanding the pardon accorded them for their first betrayal and revolt, upon learning of the departure of the French lances—and concluding that the duke was thereby weakened, and left with only a few followers of no account—had plotted a fresh and still greater treachery. Under pretence of assisting him in the taking of Sinigaglia, whither it was known that he was going, they had assembled there in their full strength, but displaying only one-third of it, and concealing the remainder in the castles of the surrounding country. They had then agreed with the castellan of Sinigaglia, that on that night they should attack him on every side of the new town, which, being small, could contain, as they knew, but few of his people. This treachery coming to his knowledge, he had been able to forestall it, and, entering Sinigaglia with all his troops, he had seized the traitors and taken the forces of Oliverotto by surprise. He

concluded by exhorting all to render thanks unto God that an end was set to the many calamities suffered in Italy in consequence of those malignant ones.(1)

1 See this letter in the documents appended to Alvisi's *Cesare Borgia*, document 76.

For once Cesare Borgia is heard giving his own side of an affair. But are the particulars of his version true? Who shall say positively? His statement is not by any means contrary to the known facts, although it sets upon them an explanation rather different to that afforded us by Macchiavelli. But it is to be remembered that, after all, Macchiavelli had to fall back upon the inferences which he drew from what he beheld, and that there is no scrap of evidence directly to refute any one of Cesare's statements. There is even confirmation of the statement that the condottieri conceived that he was weakened by the departure of the French lances and left with only a few followers of no account. For Macchiavelli himself dwells upon the artifice with which Cesare broke up his forces and disposed of them in comparatively small numbers here and there to the end that his full strength should remain concealed; and he admires the strategy of that proceeding.

Certainly the duke's narrative tends to increase his justification for acting as he did. But at best it can only increase it, for the actual justification was always there, and by the light of his epoch it is difficult to see how he should be blamed. These men had openly sworn to have his life, and from what has been seen of them there is little reason to suppose they would not have kept their word had they but been given the opportunity.

In connection with Cesare's version, it is well to go back for a moment to the execution of Ramiro de Lorqua, and to recall the alleged secret motives that led to it. Macchiavelli himself was not

satisfied that all was disclosed, and that the governor's harshness and dishonesty had been the sole causes of the justice done upon him. "The reason of his death is not properly known," wrote the Florentine secretary. Another envoy of that day would have filled his dispatches with the rumours that were current, with the matters that were being whispered at street corners. But Macchiavelli's habit was to disregard rumours as a rule, knowing their danger—a circumstance which renders his evidence the most valuable which we possess.

It is perhaps permissible to ask: What dark secrets had the torture of the cord drawn from Messer Ramiro? Had these informed the duke of the true state of affairs at Sinigaglia, and had the knowledge brought him straight from Cesena to deal with the matter?

There is justification for these questions, inasmuch as on January 4 the Pope related to Giustiniani—for which see his dispatches—that Ramiro de Lorqua, being sentenced to death, stated that he desired to inform the duke of certain matters, and informed him that he had concerted with the Orsini to give the latter the territory of Cesena; but that, as this could not now be done, in consequence of Cesare's treaty with the condottieri, Vitelli had arranged to kill the duke, in which design he had the concurrence of Oliverotto. They had planned that a crossbow-man should shoot the duke as he rode into Sinigaglia, in consequence of which the duke took great care of himself and never put off his armour until the affair was over. Vitellozzo, the Pope said, had confessed before he died that all that Ramiro had told the duke was true, and at the Consistory of January 6, when the Sacred College begged for the release of the old Cardinal Orsini—who had been taken with the Archbishop of Florence, Giacomo di Santacroce, and Gianbattista da Virginio—the Pope answered by informing the cardinals of this plot against the duke's life.

These statements by Cesare and his father are perfectly consistent with each other and with the events. Yet, for want of independent confirmation, they are not to be insisted upon as affording the true version—as, of course, the Pope may have urged what he did as a pretext to justify what was yet to follow.

It is readily conceivable that Ramiro, under torture, or in the hope perhaps of saving his life, may have betrayed the alleged plot to murder Cesare. And it is perfectly consistent with Cesare's character and with his age that he should have entered into a bargain to learn what Ramiro might have to disclose, and then have repudiated it and given him to the executioner. If Cesare, under such circumstances as these, had learnt what was contemplated, he would very naturally have kept silent on the score of it until he had dealt with the condottieri. To do otherwise might be to forewarn them. He was, as Macchiavelli says, a secret man, and the more dangerous for his closeness, since he never let it be known what he intended until he had executed his designs.

Guicciardini, of course, has called the Sinigaglia affair a villainy ("scelleragine") whilst Fabio Orsini and a nephew of Vitelli's who escaped from Sinigaglia and arrived two days later at Perugia, sought to engage sympathy by means of an extraordinary tale, so alien to all the facts—apart from their obvious reasons to lie and provoke resentment against Cesare—as not to be worth citing.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE ZENITH

Andrea Doria did not remain to make formal surrender of the citadel of Sinigaglia to the duke—for which purpose, be it borne in mind, had Cesare been invited, indirectly, to come to Sinigaglia. He fled during the night that saw Vitelli and Oliverotto writhing their last in the strangler's hands. And his flight adds colour to the versions of the affair that were afforded the world by Cesare and his father. Andrea Doria, waiting to surrender his trust, had nothing to fear from the duke, no reason to do anything but remain. Andrea Doria, intriguing against the duke's life with the condottieri, finding them seized by the duke, and inferring that all was discovered, had every reason to fly.

The citadel made surrender on that New Year's morning, when Cesare summoned it to do so, whilst the troops of the Orsini and Vitelli lodged in the castles of the territory, being taken unawares, were speedily disposed of. So, there being nothing more left to do in Sinigaglia, Cesare once more marshalled his men and set out for Città di Castello—the tyranny of the Vitelli, which he found undefended and of which he took possession in the name of the Church. Thence he rushed on towards Perugia, for he had word that Guidobaldo of Urbino, Fabio Orsini, Annibale and Venanzio Varano, and Vitelli's nephew were assembled there under the wing of Gianpaolo Baglioni, who, with a considerable condotta at his back, was making big talk of resisting the Duke of Romagna and Valentinois. In this, Gianpaolo persevered most bravely until he had news that the duke was as near as Gualdo, when precipitately he fled—leaving his guests to shift for themselves. He had remembered, perhaps, at the last moment how narrow an escape he had had of it at Sinigaglia, and he repaired to Siena to join Pandolfo Petrucci, who had been equally fortunate in that connection.

To meet the advancing and irresistible duke came ambassadors from Perugia with smooth words of welcome, the offer of the city, and their thanks for his having delivered them of the tyrants that oppressed them; and there is not the slightest cause to suppose that this was mere sycophancy, for a more bloody, murderous crew than these Baglioni—whose feuds not only with the rival family of the Oddi, but among their very selves, had more than once embrued the walls of that city in the hills—it would be difficult to find in Italy, or anywhere in Europe. The history of the Baglioni is one record of slaughter. Under their rule in Perugia human blood seems commonly to have flowed anywhere more freely than in human veins. It is no matter for wonder that the people sent their ambassador to thank Cesare for having delivered them from the yoke that had oppressed them.

Perugia having rendered him her oath of fealty, the duke left her his secretary, Agabito Gherardi, as his commissioner, whilst sending Vincenzo Calmeta to Fermo—Oliverotto's tyranny—another State which was very fervent in the thanks it expressed for this deliverance.

Scarcely was Cesare gone from Perugia when into the hands of his people fell the person of the Lady Panthasilea Baglioni d'Alviano—the wife of the famous Venetian condottiero Bartolomeo d'Alviano—and they, aware of the feelings prevailing between their lord and the Government of Venice, bethought them that here was a valuable hostage. So they shut her up in the Castle of Todi, together with her children and the women who had been with her when she was taken.

As in the case of Dorotea Caracciolo, the rumour is instantly put about that it was Cesare who had seized her, that he had taken her to his camp, and that this poor woman had fallen a prey to that lustful monster. So—and in some such words—ran the story, and such a hold did it take upon folks' credulity that we see Piero di Bibieno before the Council of Ten, laying a more or less formal charge against the duke in rather broader terms than are here set down. So much,

few of those who have repeated his story omit to tell you. But for some reason, not obviously apparent, they do not think it worth while to add that the Doge himself—better informed, it is clear, for he speaks with finality in the matter—reproved him by denying the rumour and definitely stating that it was not true, as you may read in the Diary of Marino Sanuto. That same diary shows you the husband—a person of great consequence in Venice—before the Council, clamouring for the enlargement of his lady; yet never once does he mention the name of Valentinois. The Council of Ten sends an envoy to wait upon the Pope; and the Pope expresses his profound regret and his esteem for Alviano, and informs the envoy that he is writing to Valentinois to demand her instant release—in fact, shows the envoy the letter.

To that same letter the duke replied on January 29 that he had known nothing of the matter until this communication reached him; that he has since ascertained that the lady was indeed captured and that she has since been detained in the Castle of Todi with all the consideration due to her rank; and that, immediately upon ascertaining this he had commanded that she should be set at liberty, which was done.

And so the Lady Panthasilea returned unharmed to her husband.

In Assisi Cesare received the Florentine ambassador Salviati, who came to congratulate the duke upon the affair of Sinigaglia and to replace Macchiavelli—the latter having been ordered home again. Congratulations indeed were addressed to him by all those Powers that had received his official intimation of the event. Amongst these were the felicitations of the beautiful and accomplished Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Gonzaga—whose relations with him were ever of the friendliest, even when Faenza by its bravery evoked her pity—and with these she sent him, for the coming carnival, a present of a hundred masks of rare variety and singular beauty, because she opined that "after the fatigues he had suffered in these glorious

enterprises, he would desire to contrive for some recreation."

Here in Assisi, too, he received the Siennese envoys who came to wait upon him, and he demanded that, out of respect for the King of France, they should drive out Pandolfo Petrucci from Siena. For, to use his own words, "having deprived his enemies of their weapons, he would now deprive them of their brain," by which he paid Petrucci the compliment of accounting him the "brain" of all that had been attempted against him. To show the Siennese how much he was in earnest, he leaves all baggage and stores at Assisi, and, unhampered, makes one of his sudden swoops towards Siena, pausing on January 13 at Castel della Pieve to publish, at last, his treaty with Bentivogli. The latter being now sincere, no doubt out of fear of the consequences of further insincerity, at once sends Cesare 30 lances and 100 arbalisters under the command of Antonio della Volta.

It was there in Assisi, on the morning of striking his camp again, that Cesare completed the work that had been begun at Sinigaglia by having Paolo Orsini and the Duke of Gravina strangled. There was no cause to delay the matter longer. He had word from Rome of the capture of Cardinal Orsini, of Gianbattista da Virginio, of Giacomo di Santacroce, and Rinaldo Orsini, Archbishop of Florence.

On January 27, Pandolfo Petrucci being still in Siena, and Cesare's patience exhausted, he issued an ultimatum from his camp at Sartiano in which he declared that if, within twenty-four hours, Petrucci had not been expelled from the city, he would loose his soldiers upon Siena to devastate the territory, and would treat every inhabitant "as a Pandolfo and an enemy."

Siena judged it well to bow before that threatening command, and Cesare, seeing himself obeyed, was free to depart to Rome, whither the Pope had recalled him and where work awaited him. He was required to make an end of the resistance of the barons, a task which

had been entrusted to his brother Giuffredo, but which the latter had been unable to carry out.

In this matter Cesare and his father are said to have violently disagreed, and it is reported that high words flew between them; for Cesare—who looked ahead and had his own future to consider, which should extend beyond the lifetime of Alexander VI—would not move against Silvio Savelli in Palombara, nor Gian Giordano in Bracciano, alleging, as his reason for the latter forbearance, that Gian Giordano, being a knight of St. Michael like himself, he was inhibited by the terms of that knighthood from levying war upon him. To that he adhered, whilst disposing, however, to lay siege to Ceri, where Giulio and Giovanni Orsini had taken refuge.

In the meantime, the Cardinal Gianbattista Orsini had breathed his last in the Castle of Sant' Angelo.

Soderini had written ironically to Florence on February 15: "Cardinal Orsini, in prison, shows signs of frenzy. I leave your Sublimities to conclude, in your wisdom, the judgment that is formed of such an illness."

It was not, however, until a week later—on February 22—that he succumbed, when the cry of "Poison!" grew so loud and general that the Pope ordered the cardinal's body to be carried on a bier with the face exposed, that all the world might see its calm and the absence of such stains as were believed usually to accompany venenation.

Nevertheless, the opinion spread that he had been poisoned—and the poisoning of Cardinal Orsini has been included in the long list of the Crimes of the Borgias with which we have been entertained. That the rumour should have spread is not in the least wonderful, considering in what bad odour were the Orsini at the Vatican just then, and—be it remembered—what provocation they had given. Although Valentinois dubbed Pandolfo Petrucci the "brain" of the

conspiracy against him, the real guiding spirit, there can be little doubt, was this Cardinal Orsini, in whose stronghold at Magione the diet had met to plot Valentino's ruin—the ruin of the Gonfalonier of the Church, and the fresh alienation from the Holy See of the tyrannies which it claimed for its own, and which at great cost had been recovered to it.

Against the Pope, considered as a temporal ruler, that was treason in the highest degree, and punishable by death; and, assuming that Alexander did cause the death of Cardinal Orsini, the only just censure that could fall upon him for the deed concerns the means employed. Yet even against that it might be urged that thus was the dignity of the purple saved the dishonouring touch of the hangman's hands.

Some six weeks later—on April 10—died Giovanni Michieli, Cardinal of Sant' Angelo, and Giustiniani, the Venetian ambassador, wrote to his Government that the cardinal had been ill for only two days, and that his illness had been attended by violent sickness. This—and the reticence of it—was no doubt intended to arouse the suspicion that the cardinal had been poisoned. Giustiniani adds that Michieli's house was stripped that very night by the Pope, who profited thereby to the extent of some 150,000 ducats, besides plate and other valuables; and this was intended to show an indecent eagerness on the Pope's part to possess himself of that which by the cardinal's death he inherited, whereas, in truth, the measure would be one of wise precaution against the customary danger of pillage by the mob.

But in March of the year 1504, under the pontificate of Julius II (Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere) a subdeacon, named Asquino de Colloredo, was arrested for defaming the dead cardinal ("interfactor bone memorie Cardinalis S. Angeli").(1) What other suspicions were entertained against him, what other revelations it was hoped to

extract from him, cannot be said; but Asquino was put to the question, to the usual accompaniment of the torture of the cord, and under this he confessed that he had poisoned Cardinal Michieli, constrained to it by Pope Alexander VI and the Duke of Valentino, against his will and without reward ("verumtamen non voluisse et pecunias non habuisse").

1Burchard's Diarium, March 6, 1504.

Now if Asquino defamed the memory of Cardinal Michieli it seems to follow naturally that he had hated the cardinal; and, if we know that he hated him, we need not marvel that, out of that hatred, he poisoned him. But something must have been suspected as a motive for his arrest in addition to the slanders he was uttering, otherwise how came the questions put to him to be directed so as to wring from him the confession that he had poisoned the cardinal? If you choose to believe his further statement that he was constrained to it by Pope Alexander and the Duke of Valentino, you are, of course, at liberty to do so. But you will do well first to determine precisely what degree of credit such a man might be worth when seeking to extenuate a fault admitted under pressure of the torture—and offering the extenuation likeliest to gain him the favour of the della Rovere Pope, whose life's task—as we shall see—was the defamation of the hated Borgias. You will also do well closely to examine the last part of his confession—that he was constrained to it "against his will and without reward." Would the deed have been so very much against the will of one who went about publishing his hatred of the dead cardinal by the slanders he emitted?

Upon such evidence as that the accusation of the Pope's murder of Cardinal Michieli has been definitely established—and it must be admitted that it is, if anything, rather more evidence than is usually forthcoming of the vampirism and atrocities alleged against him.

Giustiniani, writing to his Government in the spring of 1503, informs the Council of Ten that it is the Pope's way to fatten his cardinals before disposing of them—that is to say, enriching them before poisoning them, that he may inherit their possessions. It was a wild and sweeping statement, dictated by political animus, and it has since grown to proportions more monstrous than the original. You may read usque ad nauseam of the Pope and Cesare's constant practice of poisoning cardinals who had grown rich, for the purpose of seizing their possessions, and you are very naturally filled with horror at so much and such abominable turpitude. In this matter, assertion—coupled with whorling periods of vituperation—have ever been considered by the accusers all that was necessary to establish the accusations. It has never, for instance, been considered necessary to cite the names of the cardinals composing that regiment of victims. That, of course, would be to challenge easy refutation of the wholesale charge; and refutation is not desired by those who prefer the sensational manner.

The omission may, in part at least, be repaired by giving a list of the cardinals who died during the eleven years of the pontificate of Alexander VI. Those deaths, in eleven years, number twenty-one—representing, incidentally, a percentage that compares favourably with any other eleven years of any other pontificate or pontificates. They are:

Ardicino della Porta . . In 1493, at Rome
Giovanni de'Conti. . . In 1493, at Rome
Domenico della Rovere . . In 1494, at Rome
Gonzalo de Mendoza. . . In 1495, in Spain
Louis André d'Epinay . . In 1495, in France
Gian Giacomo Sclafetano. . In 1496, at Rome
Bernardino di Lunati . . In 1497, at Rome
Paolo Fregosi. . . . In 1498, at Rome
Gianbattista Savelli . . In 1498, at Rome
Giovanni della Grolaye . . In 1499, at Rome
Giovanni Borgia . . . In 1500, at Fossombrone

Bartolomeo Martini. . . . In 1500, at Rome
John Morton. . . . In 1500, in England
Battista Zeno. . . . In 1501, at Rome
Juan Lopez In 1501, at Rome
Gianbattista Ferrari . . In 1502, at Rome
Hurtado de Mendoza. . . In 1502, in Spain
Gianbattista Orsini. . . In 1503, at Rome
Giovanni Michieli. . . In 1503, at Rome
Giovanni Borgia (Seniore). . In 1503, at Rome
Federico Casimir . . . In 1503, in Poland

Now, search as you will, not only such contemporary records as diaries, chronicles, and dispatches from ambassadors in Rome during that period of eleven years but also subsequent writings compiled from them, and you shall find no breath of scandal attaching to the death of seventeen of those cardinals, no suggestion that they died other than natural deaths.

Four remain: Cardinals Giovanni Borgia (Giuniore), Gianbattista Ferrari (Cardinal of Modena), Gianbattista Orsini, and Giovanni Michieli, all of whom the Pope and Cesare have, more or less persistently, been accused of poisoning.

Giovanni Borgia's death at Fossombrone has been dealt with at length in its proper place, and it has been shown how utterly malicious and groundless was the accusation.

Giovanni Michieli's is the case that has just been reviewed, and touching which you may form your own conclusions.

Gianbattista Orsini's also has been examined. It rests upon rumour; but even if that rumour be true, it is unfair to consider the deed in any but the light of a political execution.

There remains the case of the Cardinal of Modena, a man who had amassed enormous wealth in the most questionable manner, and who was universally execrated. The epigrams upon his death, in the form of epitaphs, dealt most terribly with "his ignominious memory"—

as Burchard has it. Of these the Master of Ceremonies collected upwards of a score, which he gives in his Diarium. Let one suffice here as a fair example of the rest, the one that has it that the earth has the cardinal's body, the bull (i.e. the Borgia) his wealth, and hell his soul.

"Hac Janus Baptista jacet Ferrarius urna,
Terra habuit corpus, Bos bona, Styx animam."

The only absolutely contemporary suggestion of his having been poisoned emanated from the pen of that same Giustiniani. He wrote to the Venetian Senate to announce the cardinal's death on July 20. In his letter he relates how his benefices were immediately distributed, and how the lion's share fell to the cardinal's secretary, Sebastiano Pinzone, and that it was said ("é fama") that this man had received them as the price of blood ("in premium sanguinis"), "since it is held, from many evident signs, that the cardinal died from poison" ("ex veneno").

Already on the 11th he had written: "The Cardinal of Modena lies ill, with little hope of recovery. Poison is suspected" ("si dubita di veleno").

That was penned on the eighth day of the cardinal's sickness, for he was taken ill on the 3rd—as Burchard shows. Burchard, further, lays before us the whole course of the illness; tells us how, from the beginning, the cardinal refused to be bled or to take medicine of any kind, tells us explicitly and positively that the cardinal was suffering from a certain fever—so prevalent and deadly in Rome during the months of July and August; he informs us that, on the 11th (the day on which Giustiniani wrote the above-cited dispatch), the fever abated, to return on the 16th. He was attended (Burchard continues) by many able physicians, who strove to induce him to take their medicines; but he refused persistently until the following day, when he accepted a small proportion of the doses proposed. On July 20—after an illness

of seventeen days—he finally expired.

Those entries in the diary of the Master of Ceremonies constitute an incontrovertible document, an irrefutable testimony against the charges of poisoning when taken in conjunction with the evidence of fact afforded by the length of the illness.

It is true that, under date of November 20, 1504 (under the pontificate of Julius II), there is the following entry:

"Sentence was pronounced in the 'Ruota' against Sebastiano Pinzone, apostolic scribe, contumaciously absent, and he was deprived of all benefices and offices in that he had caused the death of the Cardinal of Modena, his patron, who had raised him from the dust."

But not even that can shake the conviction that must leap to every honest mind from following the entries in the diary contemporary with the cardinal's decease. They are too circumstantial and conclusive to be overthrown by this recorded sentence of the Ruota two years later against a man who was not even present to defend himself. Besides, it is necessary to discriminate. Burchard is not stating opinions of his own when he writes "in that he caused the death of the Cardinal of Modena," etc.; he is simply—and obviously—recording the finding of the Tribunal of the Ruota, without comment of his own. Lastly, it is as well to observe that in that verdict against Pinzone—of doubtful justice as it is—there is no mention made of the Borgias.

The proceedings instituted against Sebastiano Pinzone were of a piece with those instituted against Asquino de Colloredo and others yet to be considered; they were set on foot by Giuliano della Rovere—that implacable enemy of the House of Borgia—when he became Pope, for the purpose of heaping ignominy upon the family of his predecessor. But that shall be further dealt with presently.

Another instance of the unceasing growth of Borgia history is afforded in connection with this Sebastiano Pinzone by Dr. Jacob Burckhardt (in *Der Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*) who, in the course of the usual sweeping diatribe against Cesare, mentions "Michele da Corella, his strangler, and Sebastiano Pinzone, his poisoner." It is an amazing statement; for, whilst obviously leaning upon Giustiniani's dispatch for the presumption that Pinzone was a poisoner at all, he ignores the statement contained in it that Pinzone was the secretary and favourite of Cardinal Ferrari, nor troubles to ascertain that the man was never in Cesare Borgia's service at all, nor is ever once mentioned anywhere as connected in any capacity whatever with the duke. Dr. Burckhardt felt, no doubt, the necessity of linking Pinzone to the Borgias, that the alleged guilt of the former may recoil upon the latter, and so he accomplished it in this facile and irresponsible manner.

Now, notwithstanding the full and circumstantial evidence afforded by Burchard's *Diarium* of the Cardinal of Modena's death of a tertian fever, the German scholar Gregorovius does not hesitate to write of this cardinal's death: "It is certain that it was due to their [the Borgias'] infallible white powders."

Oh the art of writing history in sweeping statements to support a preconceived point of view! Oh that white powder of the Borgias!

Giovio tells us all about it. Cantarella, he calls it—Cantharides. Why Cantarella? Possibly because it is a pleasing, mellifluous word that will help a sentence hang together smoothly; possibly because the notorious aphrodisiac properties of that drug suggested it to Giovio as just the poison to be kept handy by folk addicted to the pursuits which he and others attribute to the Borgias. Can you surmise any better reason? For observe that Giovio describes the Cantarella for you—a blunder of his which gives the lie to his statement. "A white powder of a faint and not unpleasing savour," says he; and that, as

you know, is nothing like cantharides, which is green, intensely acrid, and burning. Yet who cares for such discrepancies? Who will ever question anything that is uttered against a Borgia? "Cantarella—a white powder of a faint and not unpleasing savour," answers excellently the steady purpose of supporting a defamation and pandering to the tastes of those who like sensations in their reading—and so, from pen to pen, from book to book it leaps, as unchallenged as it is impossible.

Whilst Cesare's troops were engaged in laying siege to Ceri, and, by engines contrived by Leonardo da Vinci, pressing the defenders so sorely that at the end of a month's resistance they surrendered with safe-conduct, the inimical and ever-jealous Venetians in the north were stirring up what trouble they could. Chafing under the restraint of France, they but sought a pretext that should justify them in the eyes of Louis for making war upon Cesare, and when presently envoys came to lay before the Pope the grievance of the Republic at the pillage by Borgian soldiery of the Venetian traders in Sinigaglia, Cesare had no delusions concerning their disposition towards himself.

Growing uneasy lest they should make this a reason for assailing his frontiers, he sent orders north recommending vigilance and instructing his officers to deal severely with all enemies of his State, whilst he proceeded to complete the provisions for the government of the Romagna. To replace the Governor-General he appointed four seneschals: Cristoforo della Torre for Forli, Faenza and Imola; Hieronimo Bonadies for Cesena, Rimini, and Pesaro; Andrea Cossa for Fano, Sinigaglia, Fossombrone, and Pergola; and Pedro Ramires for the duchy of Urbino. This last was to find a deal of work for his hands; for Urbino was not yet submissive, Majolo and S. Leo still holding for Guidobaldo.

Ramires began by reducing Majolo, and then proceeded to lay siege to S. Leo. But the Castellan—one Lattanzio—encouraged by

the assurances given him that the Venetians would render Guidobaldo assistance to reconquer his dominions, resisted stubbornly, and was not brought to surrender until the end of June, after having held the castle for six months.

If Venice was jealous and hostile in the north, Florence was scarcely less so in mid-Italy—though perhaps with rather more justification, for Cesare's growing power and boundless ambition kept the latter Republic in perpetual fear of being absorbed into his dominions—into that kingdom which it was his ultimate aim to found. There can be little doubt that Francesco da Narni, who appeared in Tuscany early in the March of that year, coming from the French Court for the purpose of arranging a league of Florence, Bologna, Siena, and Lucca—the four States more or less under French protection—had been besought by Florence, to the obvious end that these four States, united, might inter-defend themselves against Valentinois. And Florence even went so far as to avail herself of this to the extent of restoring Pandolfo Petrucci to the lordship of Siena—preferring even this avowed enemy to the fearful Valentinois. Thus came about Petrucci's restoration towards the end of March, despite the fact that the Siennese were divided on the subject of his return.

With the single exception of Camerino, where disturbances still continued, all was quiet in the States of the Church by that summer of 1503.

This desirable state of things had been achieved by Cesare's wise and liberal government, which also sufficed to ensure its continuance.

He had successfully combated the threatened famine by importing grain from Sicily. To Sinigaglia—his latest conquest—he had accorded, as to the other subjected States, the privilege of appointing her own native officials, with, of course, the exception of the Podestà (who never could be a native of any place where he dispensed justice) and the Castellan. In Cesena a liberal justice was measured

out by the Tribunal of the Ruota, which Cesare had instituted there, equipping it with the best jurisconsults of the Romagna.

In Rome he proceeded to a military organization on a new basis, and with a thoroughness never before seen in Italy—or elsewhere, for that matter—but which was thereafter the example all sought to copy. We have seen him issuing an edict that every house in the Romagna should furnish him one man-at-arms to serve him when necessary. The men so levied were under obligation to repair to the market-place of their native town when summoned thither by the ringing of the bells, and it was estimated that this method of conscription would yield him six or seven thousand men, who could be mobilized in a couple of days. He increased the number of arquebusiers, appreciating the power and value of a weapon which—although invented nearly a century earlier—was still regarded with suspicion. He was also the inventor of the military uniform, putting his soldiers into a livery of his own, and causing his men-at-arms to wear over their armour a smock, quartered red and yellow with the name CESARE lettered on the breast and back, whilst the gentlemen of his guard wore surcoats of his colours in gold brocade and crimson velvet.

He continued to levy troops and to arm them, and it is scarcely over-stating the case to say that hardly a tyrant of the Romagna would have dared to do so much for fear of the weapons being turned against himself. Cesare knew no such fear. He enjoyed a loyalty from the people he had subjected which was almost unprecedented in Italy. The very officers he placed in command of the troops of his levying were, for the most part, natives of the Romagna. Is there no inference concerning him to be drawn from that!

For every man in his service Cesare ordered a back-and-breast and headpiece of steel, and the armourers' shops of Brescia rang busily that summer with the clang of metal upon metal, as that defensive armour for Cesare's troops was being forged. At the same

time the foundries were turning out fresh cannon in that season which saw Cesare at the very height and zenith of his power, although he himself may not have accounted that, as yet, he was further than at the beginning.

But the catastrophe that was to hurl him irretrievably from the eminence to which in three short years he had climbed was approaching with stealthy, relentless foot, and was even now upon him.

BOOK IV. THE BULL CADENT

"Cesar Borgia che era della gente Per armi e per virtù tenuto un sole, Mancar dovendo andó dove andar sole Phebo, verso la sera, al Occidente.

"Girolamo Casio—Epitaffi."

CHAPTER I. THE DEATH OF ALEXANDER VI

Unfortunate Naples was a battle-field once more. France and Spain were engaged there in a war whose details belong elsewhere.

To the aid of France, which was hard beset and with whose arms things were going none too well, Cesare was summoned to fulfil the obligations under which he was placed by virtue of his treaty with King Louis.

Rumours were rife that he was negotiating secretly with Gonzalo de Cordoba, the Great Captain, and the truth of whether or not he was guilty of so base a treachery has never been discovered. These rumours had been abroad since May, and, if not arising out of, they were certainly stimulated by, an edict published by Valentinois concerning the papal chamberlain, Francesco Troche. In this edict Cesare enjoined all subjects of the Holy See to arrest, wherever found, this man who had fled from Rome, and whose flight "was concerned with something against the honour of the King of France."

Francesco Troche had been Alexander's confidential chamberlain and secretary; he had been a diligent servant of the House of Borgia, and when in France had acted as a spy for Valentinois, keeping the duke supplied with valuable information at a critical time, as we have seen.

Villari says of him that he was "one of the Borgias' most trusted assassins." That he has never been so much as alleged to have murdered anyone does not signify. He was a servant—a trusted servant—of the Borgias; therefore the title of "assassin" is, ipso facto,

to be bestowed upon him.

The flight of a man holding such an intimate position as Troche's was naturally a subject of much speculation and gossip, but a matter upon which there was no knowledge. Valentinois was ever secret. In common with his father—though hardly in so marked a degree, and if we except the case of the scurrilous Letter to Silvio Savelli—he showed a contemptuous indifference to public opinion on the whole which is invested almost with a certain greatness. At least it is rarely other than with greatness that we find such an indifference associated. It was not for him to take the world into his confidence in matters with which the world was not concerned. Let the scandalmongers draw what inferences they pleased. It was a lofty and dignified procedure, but one that was fraught with peril; and the Borgias have never ceased to pay the price of that excessive dignity of reserve. For tongues must be wagging, and, where knowledge is lacking, speculation will soon usurp its place, and presently be invested with all the authority of "fact."

Out of surmises touching that matter "which concerned the honour of the King of France" grew presently—and contradictorily—the rumour that Troche was gone to betray to France Valentinois's intention of going over to the Spanish side. A motive was certainly required to account for Troche's action; but the invention of motives does not appear ever to have troubled the Cinquecentist.

It was now said that Troche was enraged at having been omitted from the list of cardinals to be created at the forthcoming Consistory. It is all mystery, even to the end he made; for, whereas some said that, after being seized on board a ship that was bound for Corsica, Troche in his despair threw himself overboard and was drowned, others reported that he was brought back to Rome and strangled in a prison in Trastevere.

The following questions crave answer:

If it was Troche's design to betray such a treachery of the Borgias against France, what was he doing on board a vessel bound for Corsica a fortnight after his flight from Rome? Would not his proper goal have been the French camp in Naples, which he could have reached in a quarter of that time, and where not only could he have vented his desire for vengeance by betraying Alexander and Valentinois, but he could further have found complete protection from pursuit?

It is idle and unprofitable to dwell further upon the end of Francesco Troche. The matter is a complete mystery, and whilst theory is very well as theory, it is dangerous to cause it to fill the place of fact.

Troche was drowned or was strangled as a consequence of his having fled out of motives that were "against the honour of the King of France." And straightway the rumour spread of Valentinois's intended treachery, and the rumour was kept alive and swelled by Venice and Florence in pursuit of their never-ceasing policy of discrediting Cesare with King Louis, to the end that they might encompass his expedient ruin.

The lie was given to them to no small extent by the Pope, when, in the Consistory of July 28, he announced Cesare's departure to join the French army in Naples with five hundred horse and two thousand foot assembled for the purpose.

For this Cesare made now his preparations, and on the eve of departure he went with his father—on the evening of August 5—to sup at the villa of Cardinal Adriano Corneto, outside Rome.

Once before we have seen him supping at a villa of the Suburra on the eve of setting out for Naples, and we know the tragedy that followed—a tragedy which he has been accused of having brought about. Here again, in a villa of the Suburra, at a supper on the eve of setting out for Naples. Death was the unseen quest.

They stayed late at the vineyard of Cardinal Corneto, enjoying the treacherous cool of the evening, breathing the death that was omnipresent in Rome that summer, the pestilential fever which had smitten Cardinal Giovanni Borgia (Seniore) on the 1st of that month, and of which men were dying every day in the most alarming numbers.

On the morning of Saturday 12, Burchard tells us, the Pope felt ill, and that evening he was taken with fever. On the 15th Burchard records that he was bled, thirteen ounces of blood being taken from him. It relieved him somewhat, and, seeking distraction, he bade some of the cardinals to come and sit by his bed and play at cards.

Meanwhile, Cesare was also stricken, and in him the fever raged so fierce and violently that he had himself immersed to the neck in a huge jar of ice-cold water—a drastic treatment in consequence of which he came to shed all the skin from his body.

On the 17th the Pope was much worse, and on the 18th, the end being at hand, he was confessed by the Bishop of Culm, who administered Extreme Unction, and that evening he died.

That, beyond all manner of question, is the true story of the passing of Alexander VI, as revealed by the *Diarium* of Burchard, by the testimony of the physician who attended him, and by the dispatches of the Venetian, Ferrarese, and Florentine ambassadors. At this time of day it is accepted by all serious historians, compelled to it by the burden of evidence.

The ambassador of Ferrara had written to Duke Ercole, on August 14, that it was no wonder the Pope and the duke were ill, as nearly everybody in Rome was ill as a consequence of the bad air ("*Per la mala condicione de aere*").

Cardinal Soderini was also stricken with the fever, whilst Corneto

was taken ill on the day after that supper-party, and, like Cesare, is said to have shed all the skin of his body before he recovered.

Even Villari and Gregorovius, so unrestrained when writing of the Borgias, discard the extraordinary and utterly unwarranted stories of Guicciardini, Giovio, and Bembo, which will presently be considered. Gregorovius does this with a reluctance that is almost amusing, and with many a fond, regretful, backward glance—so very apparent in his manner—at the tale of villainy as told by Guicciardini and the others, which the German scholar would have adopted but that he dared not for his credit's sake. This is not stated on mere assumption. It is obvious to any one who reads Gregorovius's histories.

Burchard tells us—as certainly matter for comment—that, during his last illness, Alexander never once asked for Cesare nor ever once mentioned the name of Lucrezia. So far as Cesare is concerned, the Pope knew, no doubt, that he was ill and bedridden, for all that the gravity of the duke's condition would, probably, have been concealed from him. That he should not have mentioned Lucrezia—nor, we suppose, Giuffredo—is remarkable. Did he, with the hand of Death already upon him, reproach himself with this paternity which, however usual and commonplace in priests of all degrees, was none the less a scandal, and the more scandalous in a measure as the rank of the offender was higher? It may well be that in those last days that sinful worldly old man bethought him of the true scope and meaning of Christ's Vicarship, which he had so wantonly abused and dishonoured, and considered that to that Judge before whom he was summoned to appear the sins of his predecessors would be no justification or mitigation of his own. It may well be that, grown introspective upon his bed of death, he tardily sought to thrust from his mind the worldly things that had so absorbed it until the spiritual were forgotten, and had given rise to all the scandal concerning him that was spread through Christendom, to the shame and dishonour of the Church whose champion he should have been.

Thus may it have come to pass that he summoned none of his children in his last hours, nor suffered their names to cross his lips.

When the news of his father's death was brought to Cesare, the duke, all fever-racked as he was, more dead than living, considered his position and issued his orders to Michele da Corella, that most faithful of all his captains, who so richly shared with Cesare the execration of the latter's enemies.

Of tears for his father there is no record, just as at no time are we allowed to see that stern spirit giving way to any emotion, conceiving any affection, or working ever for the good of any but himself. Besides, in such an hour as this, the consciousness of the danger in which he stood by virtue of the Pope's death and his own most inopportune sickness, which disabled him from taking action to make his future secure, must have concerned him to the exclusion of all else.

Meanwhile, however, Rome was quiet, held so in the iron grip of Michele da Corella and the ducal troops. The Pope's death was being kept secret for the moment, and was not announced to the people until nightfall, by when Corella had carried out his master's orders, including the seizure of the Pope's treasure. And Burchard tells us how some of Valentino's men entered the Vatican—all the gates of which were held by the ducal troops—and, seizing Cardinal Casanova, they demanded, with a dagger at his throat and a threat to fling his corpse from the windows if he refused them, the Pope's keys. These the cardinal surrendered, and Corella possessed himself of plate and jewels to the value of some 200,000 ducats, besides two caskets containing about 100,000 ducats in gold. Thereafter the servants of the palace completed the pillage by ransacking the wardrobes and taking all they could find, so that nothing was left in the papal apartments but the chairs, a few cushions, and the tapestries of the walls.

All his life Alexander had been the victim of the most ribald calumnies. Stories had ever sprung up and thriven, like ill weeds, about his name and reputation. His sins, great and scandalous in themselves, were swelled by popular rumour, under the spur of malice, to monstrous and incredible proportions. As they had exaggerated and lied about the manner of his life, so—with a consistency worthy of better scope—they exaggerated and lied about the manner of his death, and, the age being a credulous one, the stories were such that writers of more modern and less credulous times dare not insist upon them, lest they should discredit—as they do—what else has been alleged against him.

Thus when, in his last delirium, the Pope uttered some such words as: "I am coming; I am coming. It is just. But wait a little," and when those words were repeated, it was straightway asserted that the Devil was the being he thus addressed in that supreme hour. The story grew in detail; that is inevitable with such matter. He had bargained with the devil, it was said, for a pontificate of twelve years, and, the time being completed, the devil was come for him. And presently, we even have a description of Messer the Devil as he appeared on that occasion—in the shape of a baboon. The Marquis Gonzaga of Mantua, in all seriousness, writes to relate this. The chronicler Sanuto, receiving the now popularly current story from another source, in all seriousness gives it place in his *Diarii*, thus:

"The devil was seen to leap out of the room in the shape of a baboon. And a cardinal ran to seize him, and, having caught him, would have presented him to the Pope; but the Pope said, 'Let him go, let him go. It is the devil,' and that night he fell ill and died." (1)

1 "Il diavolo sarebbe saltato fuori della camera in forma di babuino, et un cardinale corso per piarlo, e preso volendolo presentar al papa, il papa disse lasolo, lasolo ché ii diavolo. E poi la notte si amalò e

That story, transcending the things which this more practical age considers possible, is universally rejected; but it is of vast importance to the historical student; for it is to be borne in mind that it finds a place in the pages of those same Diarii upon the authority of which are accepted many defamatory stories without regard to their extreme improbability so long as they are within the bounds of bare possibility.

After Alexander was dead it was said that water boiled in his mouth, and that steam issued from it as he lay in St. Peter's, and much else of the same sort, which the known laws of physiology compel so many of us very reluctantly to account exaggerations. But, again, remember that the source of these stories was the same as the source of many other exaggerations not at issue with physiological laws.

The circumstances of Alexander's funeral are in the highest degree scandalous, and reflect the greatest discredit upon his age.

On the morrow, as the clergy were chanting the Libera me, Domine in St. Peter's, where the body was exposed on a catafalque in full pontificals, a riot occurred, set on foot by the soldiers present for reasons which Burchard—who records the event—does not make clear.

The clerics fled for shelter to the sacristy, the chants were cut short, and the Pope's body almost entirely abandoned.

But the most scandalous happening occurred twenty-four hours later. The Pope's remains were removed to the Chapel of Santa Maria delle Febbre by six bearers who laughed and jested at the expense of the poor corpse, which was in case to provoke the coarse mirth of the lower classes of an age which, setting no value upon human life, knew no respect for death. By virtue of the malady that had

killed him, of his plethoric habit of body, and of the sweltering August heat, the corpse was decomposing rapidly, so that the face had become almost black and assumed an aspect grotesquely horrible, fully described by Burchard:

"Factus est sicut pannus vel morus nigerrimus, livoris totus plenus, nasus plenus, os amplissimum, lingua duplex in ore, que labia tota implebat, os apertum et adeo horribile quod nemo viderit unquam vel esse tale dixerit."

Two carpenters waited in the chapel with the coffin which they had brought; but, either through carelessness it had been made too narrow and too short, or else the body, owing to its swollen condition, did not readily fit into this receptacle; whereupon, removing the mitre, for which there was no room, they replaced it by a piece of old carpet, and set themselves to force and pound the corpse into the coffin. And this was done "without candle or any light being burned in honour of the dead, and without the presence of any priest or other person to care for the Pope's remains." No explanation of this is forthcoming; it was probably due to the panic earlier occasioned the clergy by the ducal men-at-arms.

The story that he had been poisoned was already spreading like a conflagration through Rome, arising out of the appearance of the body, which was such as was popularly associated with venenation.

But a Borgia in the rôle of a victim was altogether too unusual to be acceptable, and too much opposed to the taste to which the public had been educated; so the story must be edited and modified until suitable for popular consumption. The supper-party at Cardinal Corneto's villa was remembered, and upon that a tale was founded, and trimmed by degrees into plausible shape.

Alexander had intended to poison Corneto—so ran this tale—that he might possess himself of the cardinal's vast riches; in the main a

well-worn story by now. To this end Cesare had bribed a butler to pour wine for the cardinal from a flask which he entrusted to him. Exit Cesare. Exit presently the butler, carelessly leaving the poisoned wine upon a buffet. (The drama, you will observe, is perfectly mechanical, full of author's interventions, and elementary in its "preparations"). Enter the Pope. He thirsts, and calls for wine. A servant hastens; takes up, of course, the poisoned flask in ignorance of its true quality, and pours for his Beatitude. Whilst the Pope drinks re-enters Cesare, also athirst, and, seating himself, he joins the Pope in the poisoned wine, all unsuspecting and having taken no precautions to mark the flask. Poetic justice is done, and down comes the curtain upon that preposterous tragi-farce.

Such is the story which Guicciardini and Giovio and a host of other more or less eminent historians have had the audacity to lay before their readers as being the true circumstances of the death of Alexander VI.

It is a noteworthy matter that in all that concerns the history of the House of Borgia, and more particularly those incidents in it that are wrapped in mystery, circumstantial elucidation has a habit of proceeding from the same quarters.

You will remember, for instance, that the Venetian Paolo Capello (though not in Rome at the time) was one of those who was best informed in the matter of the murder of the Duke of Gandia. And it was Capello again who was possessed of the complete details of the scarcely less mysterious business of Alfonso of Aragon. Another who on the subject of the murder of Gandia "had no doubts"—as he himself expressed it—was Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, in Spain at the time, whence he wrote to inform Italy of the true circumstances of a case that had happened in Italy.

It is again Pietro Martire d'Anghiera who, on November 10, 1503, writes from Burgos in Spain to inform Rome of the true facts of

Alexander's death—for it is in that letter of his that the tale of the flask of wine, as here set down, finds place for the first time.

It is unprofitable to pursue the matter further, since at this time of day even the most reluctant to reject anything that tells against a Borgia have been compelled to admit that the burden of evidence is altogether too overwhelming in this instance, and that it is proved to the hilt that Alexander died of the tertian fever then ravaging Rome.

And just as the Pope's death was the subject of the wildest fictions which have survived until very recent days, so too, was Cesare's recovery.

Again, it was the same Pietro Martire d'Anghiera who from Burgos wrote to inform Rome of what was taking place in the privacy of the Duke of Valentinois's apartments in the Vatican. Under his facile and magic pen, the jar of ice-cold water into which Cesare was believed to have been plunged was transmuted into a mule which was ripped open that the fever-stricken Cesare might be packed into the pulsating entrails, there to sweat the fever out of him.

But so poor and sexless a beast as this seeming in the popular mind inadequate to a man of Cesare's mettle, it presently improved upon and converted it into a bull—so much more appropriate, too, as being the emblem of his house.

Nor does it seem that even then the story has gone far enough. *Facilis inventis addere*. There comes a French writer with an essay on the Borgias, than which—submitted as sober fact—nothing more amazingly lurid has been written. In this, with a suggestive cleverness entirely Gallic, he causes us to gather an impression of Cesare in the intestinal sudatorium of that eviscerated bull, as of one who is at once the hierophant and devotee of a monstrous, foul, and unclean rite of some unspeakable religion—a rite by comparison with which the Black Mass of the Abbé Gribourg becomes a sweet and wholesome

thing.

But hear the man himself:

"Cet homme de meurtres et d'inceste, incarné dans l'animal des hécatombes et des bestialités antiques en évoque les monstrueuses images. Je crois entendre le taureau de Phalaris et le taureau de Pasiphaë répondre, de loin, par d'effrayants mugissements, aux cris humains de ce bucentaure."

That is the top note on this subject. Hereafter all must pale to anti-climax.

CHAPTER II. PIUS III

The fever that racked Cesare Borgia's body in those days can have been as nothing to the fever that racked his mind, the despairing rage that must have whelmed his soul to see the unexpected—the one contingency against which he had not provided—cutting the very ground from underneath his feet.

As he afterwards expressed himself to Macchiavelli, and as Macchiavelli has left on record, Cesare had thought of everything, had provided for everything that might happen on his father's death, save that in such a season—when more than ever he should have need for all his strength of body and of mind—he should, himself, be lying at the point of death.

Scarce was Alexander's body cold than the duke's enemies began to lift their heads. Already by the 20th of that month—two days after the Pope had breathed his last—the Orsini were in arms and had led a rising, in retort to which Michele da Corella fired their palace on Montegiordano.

Venice and Florence bethought them that the protection of France had been expressly for the Church and not for Cesare personally. So the Venetians at once supplied Guidobaldo da Montefeltre with troops wherewith to reconquer his dominions, and by the 24th he was master of S. Leo. In the city of Urbino itself Ramires, the governor, held out as long as possible, then beat a retreat to Cesena, whilst Valentino's partisans in Urbino were mercilessly slaughtered and their houses pillaged.

Florence supported the Baglioni in the conquest of Magione from the Borgias, and they aided Giacompo d'Appiano to repossess himself

of Piombino, which had so gladly seen him depart out of it eighteen months ago.

From Magione, Gianpaolo Baglioni marches his Florentine troops to Camerino to aid the only remaining Varano to regain the tyranny of his fathers. The Vitelli are back in Città di Castello, carrying a golden calf in triumph through the streets; and so by the end of August, within less than a fortnight, all the appendages of the Romagna are lost to Cesare, whilst at Cesare's very gates the Orsini men-at-arms are clamouring with insistent menace.

The Duke's best friend, in that crisis, was his secretary Agabito Gherardi. For it is eminently probable—as Alvisi opines—that it was Gherardi who urged his master to make an alliance with the Colonna, Gherardi himself being related to that powerful family. The alliance of these old enemies—Colonna and Borgia—was in their common interests, that they might stand against their common enemy, Orsini—the old friends of the Borgias.

On August 22 Prospero Colonna came to Rome, and terms were made and cemented, in the usual manner, by a betrothal—that of the little Rodrigo—(Lucrezia's child)—to a daughter of the House of Colonna. On the same day the Sacred College confirmed Cesare in his office of Captain-General and Gonfalonier of the Church, pending the election of a new Pope.

Meanwhile, sick almost to the point of death, and scarce able to stir hand or foot, so weak in body had he been left by the heroic treatment to which he had submitted, Cesare continued mentally a miracle of energy and self-possession. He issued orders for the fortifying of the Vatican, and summoned from Romagna 200 horse and 1,000 foot to his aid in Rome, bidding Remolino, who brought these troops, to quarter himself at Orvieto, and there await his further orders.

Considering that the Colonna were fighting in Naples under the

banner of Gonzalo de Cordoba, it was naturally enough supposed, from Cesare's alliance with the former, that this time he was resolved to go over to the side of Spain. Of this, M. de Trans came to protest to Valentinois on behalf of Louis XII, to be answered by the duke's assurances that the alliance into which he had entered was strictly confined to the Colonna, that it entailed no treaty with Spain; nor had he entered into any; that his loyalty to the King of France continued unimpaired, and that he was ready to support King Louis with the entire forces he disposed of, whenever his Majesty should desire him so to do. In reply, he was assured by the French ambassador and Cardinal Sanseverino of the continued protection of Louis, and that France would aid him to maintain his dominions in Italy and reconquer any that might have seceded; and of this declaration copies were sent to Florence, Venice, and Bologna on September 1, as a warning to those Powers not to engage in anything to the hurt of Valentinois.

Thus sped the time of the novendiali—the nine days' obsequies of the dead Pope—which were commenced on September 4.

As during the conclave that was immediately to follow it was against the law for armed men to be in Rome, Cesare was desired by the Sacred College to withdraw his troops. He did so on September 2, and himself went with them.

Cardinal Sanseverino and the French ambassador escorted him out of Rome and saw him take the road to Nepi—a weak, fever-ravaged, emaciated man, borne in a litter by a dozen of his halberdiers, his youth, his beauty, his matchless strength of body all sapped from him by the insidious disease which had but grudgingly spared his very life.

At Nepi he was awaited by his brother Giuffredo, who had preceded him thither from Rome. A shadowy personage this Giuffredo, whose unimportant personality is tantalizingly elusive in the pages where mention is made of him. His incontinent wife, Doña

Sancia, had gone to Naples under the escort of Prospero Colonna, having left the Castle of Sant' Angelo where for some time she had been confined by order of her father-in-law, the Pope, on account of the disorders of her frivolous life.

And now the advices of the fresh treaty between Cesare Borgia and the King of France were producing their effect upon Venice and Florence, who were given additional pause by the fierce jealousy of each other, which was second only to their jealousy of the duke.

From Venice—with or without the sanction of his Government—Bartolomeo d'Alviano had ridden south into the Romagna with his condotta immediately upon receiving news of the death of Alexander, and, finding Pandolfaccio Malatesta at Ravenna, he proceeded to accompany him back to that Rimini which the tyrant had sold to Cesare. Rimini, however, refused to receive him back, and showed fight to the forces under d'Alviano. So that, for the moment, nothing was accomplished. Whereupon the Republic, which at first had raised a feeble, make-believe protest at the action of her condottiero, now deemed it as well to find a pretext for supporting him. So Venice alleged that a courier of hers had been stripped of a letter, and, with such an overwhelming cause as that for hostilities, dispatched reinforcements to d'Alviano to the end that he might restore Pandolfaccio to a dominion in which he was abhorred. Further, d'Alviano was thereafter to proceed to do the like office for Giovanni Sforza, who already had taken ship for Pesaro, and who was restored to his lordship on September 3.

Thence, carrying the war into the Romagna itself, d'Alviano marched upon Cesena. But the Romagna was staunch and loyal to her duke. The governor had shut himself up in Cesena with what troops he could muster, including a thousand veterans under the valiant Dionigio di Naldo, and there, standing firm and resolute, he awaited the onslaught of the Venetians.

D'Alviano advanced rapidly and cruelly, a devastator laying waste the country in his passage, until to check him came suddenly the Borgia troops, which had ventured upon a sally. The Venetians were routed and put to flight.

On September 16 the restored tyrants of Rimini, Pesaro, Castello, Perugia, Camerino, Urbino, and Sinigaglia entered into and signed at Perugia a league, whose chiefs were Bartolomeo d'Alviano and Gianpaolo Baglioni, for their common protection.

Florence was invited to join the allies. Intimidated, however, by France, not only did the Signory refuse to be included, but—in her usual manner—actually went so far as to advise Cesare Borgia of that refusal and to offer him her services and help.

On the same date the Sacred College assembled in Rome, at the Mass of the Holy Spirit, to beseech the grace of inspiration in the election of the new Pontiff. The part usually played by the divine afflatus in these matters was so fully understood and appreciated that the Venetian ambassador received instructions from the Republic¹ to order the Venetian cardinals to vote for Giuliano della Rovere, whilst the King of France sent a letter—in his own hand—to the Sacred College desiring it to elect his friend the Cardinal d'Amboise, and Spain, at the same time, sought to influence the election of Carvajal.

¹ See Sanuto's *Diarrii*.

The chances of the last-named do not appear ever to have amounted to very much. The three best supported candidates were della Rovere, d'Amboise, and Ascanio Sforza—who made his reappearance in Rome, released from his French prison at last, in time to attend this Conclave.

None of these three factions was strong enough to ensure the

election of its own candidate, but any two were strong enough to prevent the election of the candidate of the third. Wherefore it happened that, as a result of so much jealousy and competition, recourse was had to temporizing by electing the oldest and feeblest cardinal in the College. Thus there should presently be another election, and meantime the candidates would improve the time by making their arrangements and canvassing their supporters so as to control the votes of the College at that future Conclave. Therefore Francesco Piccolomini, Cardinal of Siena (nephew of Pius II), a feeble octogenarian, tormented by an ulcer, which, in conjunction with an incompetent physician, was to cut his life even shorter than they hoped, was placed upon the throne of St. Peter, and assumed with the Pontificate the name of Pius III.

The new Pope was entirely favourable to Cesare Borgia, and confirmed him in all his offices, signifying his displeasure to Venice at her attempt upon the Romagna, and issuing briefs to the allied tyrants commanding them to desist from their opposition to the will of the Holy See.

Cesare returned to Rome, still weak on his legs and ghastly to behold, and on October 6 he received in St. Peter's his confirmation as Captain-General and Gonfalonier of the Church.

The Venetians had meanwhile been checked by a letter from Louis from lending further assistance to the allies. The latter, however, continued their hostilities in spite of that. They had captured Sinigaglia, and now they made an attempt on Fano and Fermo, but were repulsed in both places by Cesare's loyal subjects. At the same time the Ordelaffi—who in the old days had been deposed from the Tyranny of Forlì to make room for the Riarii—deemed the opportunity a good one to attempt to regain their lordship; but their attempt, too, was frustrated.

Cesare sat impotent in Rome, no doubt vexed by his own inaction.

He cannot have lacked the will to go to the Romagna to support the subjects who showed him such loyalty; but he lacked the means. Owing to the French and Spanish dispute in Naples, his army had practically melted away. The terms of his treaty with Louis compelled him to send the bulk of it to the camp at Garigliano to support the French, who were in trouble. The force that Remolino had quartered at Orvieto to await the duke's orders he had been unable to retain there. Growing uneasy at their position, and finding it impossible either to advance or to retreat, being threatened on the one side by the Baglioni and on the other by the Orsini, these troops had steadily deserted; whilst most of Cesare's Spanish captains and their followers had gone to the aid of their compatriots under Gonzalo de Cordoba in response to that captain's summons of every Spaniard in the peninsula.

Thus did it come about that Cesare had no force to afford his Romagna subjects. His commissioners in the north did what was possible to repair the damage effected by the allies, and they sent Dionigio di Naldo with six hundred of his foot, and, further, a condotta of two hundred horse, against Rimini. This was captured by them in one day and almost without resistance, Pandolfaccio flying for his life to Pesaro.

Next the allies, by attempting to avenge the rout they had suffered at Cesena, afforded the ducal troops an opportunity of scoring another victory. They prepared a second attack against Cesare's capital, and with an army of considerable strength they advanced to the very walls of the stronghold, laying the aqueduct in ruins and dismantling what other buildings they found in their way. But in Cesena the gallant Pedro Ramires lay in wait for them. Issuing to meet them, he not only put them to flight and drove them for shelter into the fortress of Montebello, but laid siege to them there and broke them utterly, with a loss, as was reputed, of some three hundred men in slain alone.

The news of this came to cheer Valentinois, who, moreover, had now the Pope and France to depend upon. Further, and in view of that same protection, the Orsini were already treating with him for a reconciliation, despite the fact that the Orsini blood was scarce dry upon his hands. But he had a resolute, sly, and desperate enemy in Venice, and on October 10 there arrived in Rome Bartolomeo d'Alviano and Gianpaolo Baglioni, who repaired to the Venetian ambassador and informed him that they were come in quest of the person of Valentinois, intending his death.

To achieve their ends they united themselves to the Orsini, who were now in arms in Rome, their attempted reconciliation with Cesare having aborted. Valentinois's peril became imminent, and from the Vatican he withdrew for shelter to the Castle of Sant' Angelo, going by way of the underground passage built by his father.

Thence he summoned Michele da Corella, who was at Rocca Soriana with his foot, and Taddeo della Volpe (a valiant captain and a great fighter, who had already lost an eye in Cesare's service) and Baldassare Scipione, who were in the Neapolitan territory with their men-at-arms. He was gathering his sinews for a spring, when suddenly the entire face of affairs was altered and all plans were checked by the death of Pius III on October 18, after a reign of twenty-six days.

Once more there was an end to Cesare's credit. No man might say what the future held in store. Giustiniani, indeed, wrote to his Government that Cesare was about to withdraw to France, and that he had besought a safe-conduct of the Orsini—which report is as true as many another communication from the same Venetian pen, ever ready to write what it hoped might be true; and it is flatly contradicted by the better-informed Macchiavelli, who was writing at the same time:

"The duke is in Sant' Angelo, and is more hopeful than ever of accomplishing great things, presupposing a Pope according to the wishes of his friends."

But the Romagna was stirred once more to the turbulence from which it had scarcely settled. Forli and Rimini were lost almost at once, the Ordelaffi succeeding in capturing the former in this their second attempt, whilst Pandolfaccio once more sat in his palace at Rimini, having cut his way to it through a sturdy resistance. Against Imola Bentivogli dispatched a force of two thousand foot; but this was beaten off.

The authority of France appeared to have lost its weight, and in vain did Cardinal d'Amboise thunder threats in the name of his friend King Louis, and send envoys to Florence, Venice, Bologna, and Urbino, to complain of the injuries that were being done to the Duke of Valentinois.

CHAPTER III. JULIUS II

Giuliano della Rovere, Cardinal of S. Pietro in Vincoli, had much in his character that was reminiscent of his terrible uncle, Sixtus IV. Like that uncle of his, he had many failings highly unbecoming any Christian—laic or ecclesiastic—which no one has attempted to screen; and, incidentally, he cultivated morality in his private life and observed his priestly vows of chastity as little as did any other churchman of his day. For you may see him, through the eyes of Paride de Grassi,⁽¹⁾ unable one Good Friday to remove his shoes for the adoration of the cross in consequence of his foot's affliction—*ex morbo gallico*. But with one great and splendid virtue was he endowed in the eyes of the enemies of the House of Borgia—contemporary, and subsequent down to our times—a most profound, unchristian, and mordacious hatred of all Borgias.

¹ Burchard's successor in the office of Master of Ceremonies.

Roderigo Borgia had defeated him in the Conclave of 1492, and for twelve years had kept him out of the coveted pontificate. You have seen how he found expression for his furious jealousy at his rival's success. You have seen him endeavouring to his utmost to accomplish the deposition of the Borgia Pope, wielding to that end the lever of simony and seeking a fulcrum for it, first in the King of France and later in Ferdinand and Isabella; but failing hopelessly in both instances. You have seen him, when he realized the failure of an attempt which had made Rome too dangerous for him and compelled him to remain in exile, suddenly veering round to fawn and flatter and win the friendship of one whom his enmity could not touch.

This man who, as Julius II, was presently to succeed Pius III, has

been accounted a shining light of virtue amid the dark turpitude of the Church in the Renaissance. An ignis fatuus, perhaps; a Jack-o'-lanthorn begotten of putrescence. Surely no more than that.

Dr. Jacob Burckhardt, in that able work of his to which reference already has been made, follows the well-worn path of unrestrained invective against the Borgias, giving to the usual empty assertions the place which should be assigned to evidence and argument. Like his predecessors along that path, he causes Giuliano della Rovere to shine heroically by contrast—a foil to throw into greater relief the blackness of Alexander. But he carries assertion rather further than do others when he says of Cardinal della Rovere that "He ascended the steps of St. Peter's Chair without simony and amid general applause, and with him ceased, at all events, the undisguised traffic in the highest offices of the Church."

Other writers in plenty have suggested this, but none has quite so plainly and resoundingly thrown down the gauntlet, which we will make bold to lift.

That Dr. Burckhardt wrote in other than good faith is not to be imputed. It must therefore follow that an entry in the *Diarium* of the *Caerimoniarius* under date of October 29, 1503, escaped him utterly in the course of his researches. For the *Diarium* informs us that on that day, in the Apostolic Palace, Giuliano della Rovere, Cardinal of S. Pietro in Vincoli, concluded the terms of an agreement with the Duke of Valentino and the latter's following of Spanish cardinals, by which he undertook that, in consideration of his receiving the votes of these Spanish cardinals and being elected Pope, he would confirm Cesare in his office of Gonfalonier and Captain-General, and would preserve him in the dominion of the Romagna. And, in consideration of that undertaking, the Spanish cardinals, on their side, promised to give him their suffrages.

Here are the precise words in which Burchard records the

transaction:

"Eadem die, 29 Octobris, Rmus. D. S. Petri ad Vincula venit in palatio apostolico cum duce Valentino et cardinalibus suis Hispanis et concluderunt capitula eorum per que, inter alia, cardinalis S. Petri ad Vincula, postquam esset papa, crearet confalonierum Ecclesiae generalem ducem ac ei faveret et in statibus suis (relinqueret) et vice versa dux pape; et promiserunt omnes cardinalis Hispani dare votum pro Cardinali S. Petri ad Vincula ad papatum."

If that does not entail simony and sacrilege, then such things do not exist at all. More, you shall hunt in vain for any accusation so authoritative, formal and complete, regarding the simony practised by Alexander VI on his election. And this same Julius, moreover, was the Pope who later was to launch his famous Bull de Simoniaca Electione, to add another stain to the besmirched escutcheon of the Borgia Pontiff.

His conciliation of Cesare and his obtaining, thus, the support of the Spanish cardinals, who, being Alexander's creatures, were now Cesare's very faithful servants, ensured the election of della Rovere; for, whilst those cardinals' votes did not suffice to place him in St. Peter's Chair, they would abundantly have sufficed to have kept him out of it had Cesare so desired them.

In coming to terms with Cardinal della Rovere, Cesare made the first great mistake of his career, took the first step towards ruin. He should have known better than to have trusted such a man. He should have remembered the ancient bitter rancour; should have recognized, in the amity of later times, the amity of the self-seeker, and mistrusted it. But della Rovere had acquired a reputation for honesty and for being a man of his word. How far he deserved it you may judge from what is presently to follow. He had acquired it, however, and Cesare, to his undoing, attached faith to that reputation. He may, to some extent, have counted upon the fact that, of Cardinal della Rovere's

bastard children, only a daughter—Felice della Rovere—survived. Raffaele, the last of his bastard boys, had died a year ago. Thus, Cesare may have concluded that the cardinal having no sons whose fortunes he must advance, would lack temptation to break faith with him.

From all this it resulted that, at the Conclave of November 1, Giuliano della Rovere was elected Pope, and took the name of Julius II; whilst Valentinois, confident now that his future was assured, left the Castle of Sant' Angelo to take up his residence at the Vatican, in the Belvedere, with forty gentlemen constituting his suite.

On November 3 Julius II issued briefs to the Romagna, ordering obedience to Cesare, with whom he was now in daily and friendliest intercourse.

In the Romagna, meanwhile, the disturbances had not only continued, but they had taken a fresh turn. Venice, having reseatd Malatesta on the throne, now vented at last the covetousness she had ever, herself, manifested of that dominion, and sent a force to drive him out again and conquer Rimini for the Republic.

Florence, in a spasm of jealous anger at this, inquired was the Pope to become the chaplain of Venice, and dispatched Macchiavelli to bear the tale of these doings to Julius.

Under so much perpetual strife the strength of the Romagna was gradually crumbling, and Cesare, angry with Florence for never going beyond lip-service, expressed that anger to Macchiavelli, informing the ambassador that the Signory could have saved the Romagna for him with a hundred men-at-arms.

The duke sent for Giustiniani, the ambassador of Venice, who, however, excused himself and did not go. This within a week of the new Pope's election, showing already how men discerned what was

in store for Valentinois. Giustiniani wrote to his Government that he had not gone lest his going should give the duke importance in the eyes of others.(1) The pettiness and meanness of the man, revealed in that dispatch, will enable you to attach to Giustiniani the label that belongs to him.

1 "Per non dar materia ad altri che fazino un po di lui mazor estimazion di quel che fanno quando lo vedessero in parte alcuna favorito."—Giustiniani, Dispatch of November 6, 1503.

To cheer Valentinois in those days of depression came news that his subjects of Imola had successfully resisted an attack on the part of the Venetians. So stimulated was he that he prepared at once to go, himself, into the Romagna, and obtained from the Pope, from d'Amboise, and from Soderini, letters to Florence desiring the Signory to afford him safe-conduct through Tuscany for himself and his army.

The Pope expressed himself, in his letter, that he would count such safe-conduct as a great favour to himself, and urged the granting of it out of his "love for Cesare," owing to the latter's "great virtues and shining merits."(2) Yet on the morrow of dispatching that brief, this man, who was accounted honest, straightforward, and imbued with a love of truth, informed Giustiniani—or else Giustiniani lied in his dispatches—that he understood that the Venetians were assailing the Romagna, not out of enmity to the Church, but to punish the demerits of Cesare, and he made it plain to Giustiniani that, if he complained of the conduct of the Venetians, it was on his own behalf and not on Cesare's, as his aim was to preserve the Romagna, not for the duke, but for the Church.

2 "In quo nobis rem gratissimam facietis ducis enim ipsum propter ejus insignes virtutes et praeclara merita praecipuo affectur et caritate

With the aim we have no quarrel. It was laudable enough in a Pontiff. But it foreshadows Cesare's ruin, in spite of the love-protesting letter to Florence, in spite of the bargain struck by virtue of which Julius had obtained the pontificate. Whether the Pope went further in his treachery, whether, having dispatched that brief to Florence, he sent other communications to the Signory, is not ascertainable; but the suspicion of some such secret action is inspired by what ensued.

On November 13 Cesare was ready to leave Rome; but no safe-conduct had arrived. Out of all patience at this, he begged the Pope that the captain of the pontifical navy should prepare him five galleons at Ostia, by which he could take his foot to Genoa, and thence proceed into Romagna by way of Ferrara.

Macchiavelli, at the same time, was frenziedly importuning Florence to grant the duke the desired safe-conduct lest in despair Cesare should make a treaty with Venice—"or with the devil"—and should go to Pisa, employing all his money, strength, and influence to vent his wrath upon the Signory. But the Signory knew more, perhaps, than did Macchiavelli, for no attention was paid to his urgent advice.

On the 19th Cesare left Rome to set out for Genoa by way of Ostia, and his departure threw Giustiniani into alarm—fearing that the duke would now escape.

But there was no occasion for his fears. On the very day of Cesare's departure Julius sent fresh briefs to the Romagna, different indeed from those of November 3. In these he now expressed his disapproval of Alexander's having conferred the vicarship of the Romagna upon Cesare Borgia, and he exhorted all to range themselves under the banner of the Church, under whose protection

he intended to keep them.

Events followed quickly upon that. Two days later news reached the Pope that the Venetians had captured Faenza, whereupon he sent a messenger after Valentinois to suggest to the latter that he should surrender Forli and the other fiefs into pontifical hands. With this Cesare refused to comply, and, as a result, he was detained by the captain of the navy, in obedience to the instructions from Julius. At the same time the Pope broke the last link of the treaty with Cesare by appointing a new Governor of Romagna in the person of Giovanni Sacchi, Bishop of Ragusa. He commanded the latter to take possession of the Romagna in the name of the Church, and he issued another brief—the third within three weeks—demanding the State's obedience to the new governor.

On November 26, Remolino, who had been at Ostia with Cesar; came to Rome, and, throwing himself at the feet of the Pontiff, begged for mercy for his lord, whom he now accounted lost. He promised Julius that Cesare should give him the countersigns of the strongholds, together with security for their surrender. This being all that the Pope could desire, he issued orders that Cesare be brought back to Rome, and in Consistory advised the Sacred College—by way, no doubt, of exculpating himself to men who knew that he was refusing to pay the price at which he had bought the Papacy—that the Venetians in the Romagna were not moving against the Church, but against Cesare himself—wherefore he had demanded of Cesare the surrender of the towns he held, that thus there might be an end to the war.

It was specious—which is the best that can be said for it.

As for putting an end to the war, the papal brief was far indeed from achieving any such thing, as was instantly plain from the reception it met with in the Romagna, which persisted in its loyalty to Cesare in despite of the very Pope himself. When that brief was read in Cesena

a wild tumult ensued, and the people ran through the streets clamouring angrily for their duke.

It was very plain what short work would have been made of such men as the Ordellaffi and the Malatesta had Cesare gone north. But Cesare was fast at the Vatican, treated by the Pope with all outward friendliness and consideration, but virtually a prisoner none the less. Julius continued to press for the surrender of the Romagna strongholds, which Remolino had promised in his master's name; but Cesare persisted obstinately to refuse, until the news reached him that Michele da Corella and della Volpe, who had gone north with seven hundred horse to support his Romagnuoli, had been cut to pieces in Tuscany by the army of Gianpaolo Baglioni.

Cesare bore his burning grievance to the Pope. The Pope sympathized with him most deeply; then went to write a letter to the Florentines to thank them for what had befallen and to beg them to send him Michele da Corella under a strong escort—that redoubtable captain having been taken prisoner together with della Volpe.

Corella was known to be fully in the duke's confidence, and there were rumours that he was accused of many things perpetrated on the duke's behalf. Julius, bent now on Cesare's ruin, desired to possess himself of this man in the hope of being able to put him upon his trial under charges which should reflect discredit upon Cesare.

At last the duke realized that he was betrayed, and that all was lost, and so he submitted to the inevitable, and gave the Pope the countersigns he craved. With these Julius at once dispatched an envoy into the Romagna, and, knowing the temper of Cesare's captains, he insisted that this envoy should be accompanied by Piero d'Orvieto, as Cesare's own commissioner, to demand that surrender.

But the intrepid Pedro Ramires, who held Cesena, knowing the true facts of the case, and conceiving how his duke had been constrained,

instead of making ready to yield, proceeded further to fortify for resistance. When the commissioners appeared before his gates he ordered the admission of Piero d'Orvieto. That done, he declared that he desired to see his duke at liberty before he would surrender the citadel which he held for him, and, taking d'Orvieto, he hanged him from the battlements as a traitor and a bad servant who did a thing which the duke, had he been at liberty, would never have had him do.

Moncalieri, the papal envoy, returned to Rome with the news, and this so inflamed the Pope that the Cardinals Lodovico Borgia and Francesco Remolino, together with other Borgia partisans, instantly fled from Rome, where they no longer accounted themselves safe, and sought refuge with Gonzalo de Cordoba in the Spanish camp at Naples, imploring his protection at the same time for Cesare.

The Pope's anger first vented itself in the confiscation of the Duke of Valentinois's property wherever possible, to satisfy the claims of the Riarii (the Pope's nephews) who demanded an indemnity of 50,000 ducats, of Guidobaldo, who demanded 200,000 ducats, and of the Florentine Republic, which claimed the same. The duke's ruin was by now—within six weeks of the election of Julius II—an accomplished fact; and many were those who chose to fall with him rather than abandon him in his extremity. They afford a spectacle of honour and loyalty that was exceedingly rare in the Italy of the Renaissance; clinging to their duke, even when the last ray of hope was quenched, they lightened for him the tedium of those last days at the Vatican during which he was no better than a prisoner of state.

Suddenly came news of Gonzalo de Cordoba's splendid victory at Garigliano—a victory which definitely broke the French and gave the throne of Naples to Spain. Naturally this set Spanish influence once more, and mightily, in the ascendant, and the Spanish cardinals, together with the ambassador of Spain, came to exert with the Pope an influence suddenly grown weighty.

As a consequence, Cesare, escorted by Carvajal, Cardinal of Santa Croce, was permitted to depart to Ostia, whence he was to take ship for France. Leastways, such was the understanding upon which he left the Vatican. But the Pope was not minded, even now, to part with him so easily, and his instructions to Carvajal were that at Ostia he should await further orders before sailing.

But on December 26, news reaching the Spanish cardinal that the Romagna fortresses—persuaded that Cesare had been liberated—had finally surrendered, Carvajal took it upon himself to allow Cesare to depart, upon receiving from him a written undertaking never to bear arms against Pope Julius II.

So the Duke of Valentinois at last regained his freedom. Whether, in repairing straight to Naples, as he did, he put a preconceived plan into execution, or whether, even now, he mistrusted his enlargement, and thought thus to make himself secure, cannot be ascertained. But straight to Gonzalo de Cordoba's Spanish camp he went, equipped with a safe-conduct from the Great Captain, obtained for Cesare by Cardinal Remolino.

There he found a court of friends already awaiting him, among whom were his brother Giuffredo and the Cardinal Lodovico Borgia, and he received from Gonzalo a very cordial welcome.

Spain was considering the invasion of Tuscany with the ultimate object of assailing Milan and driving the French out of the peninsula altogether. Piero de'Medici—killed at Garigliano—had no doubt been serving Spain with some such end in view as the conquest of Florence, and, though Piero was dead, there was no reason why the plan should be abandoned; rather, all the more reason to carry it forward, since now Spain would more directly profit by it. Bartolomeo d'Alviano was to have commanded the army destined for that campaign; but Cesare, by virtue of his friends and influence in Pisa, Siena, and Piombino, was so preferable a captain for such an

expedition that Gonzalo gave him charge of it within a few days of his arrival at the Spanish camp.

To Cesare this would have been the thin end of a mighty edge. Here was a chance to begin all over again, and, beginning thus, backed by Spanish arms, there was no saying how far he might have gone. Meanwhile, what a beginning! To avenge himself thus upon that Florentine Republic which, under the protection of France, had dared at every turn to flout him and had been the instrument of his ultimate ruin! Sweet to him would have been the poetic justice he would have administered—as sweet to him as it would have been terrible to Florence, upon which he would have descended like another scourge of God.

Briskly and with high-running hopes he set about his preparations during that spring of 1504 what time the Pope's Holiness in Rome was seeking to justify his treachery by heaping odium upon the Borgias. Thus he thought to show that if he had broken faith, he had broken faith with knaves deserving none. It was in pursuit of this that Michele da Corella was now pressed with questions, which, however, yielded nothing, and that Asquino de Colloredo (the sometime servant of Cardinal Michaeli) was tortured into confessing that he had poisoned his master at the instigation of Alexander and Cesare—as has been seen—which confession Pope Julius was very quick to publish.

But in Naples, it may well be that Cesare cared nought for these matters, busy and hopeful as he was just then. He dispatched Baldassare da Scipione to Rome to enlist what lances he could find, and Scipione put it about that his lord would soon be returning to his own and giving his enemies something to think about.

And then, suddenly, out of clearest heavens, fell a thunderbolt to shiver this last hope.

On the night of May 26, as Cesare was leaving Gonzalo's quarters, where he had supped, an officer stepped forward to demand his sword. He was under arrest.

Julius II had out-manoeuvred him. He had written to Spain setting forth what was his agreement with Valentinois in the matter of the Romagna—the original agreement which was the price of the Pontificate, had, of course, been conveniently effaced from the pontifical memory. He addressed passionate complaints to Ferdinand and Isabella that Gonzalo de Cordoba and Cardinal Carvajal between them were affording Valentinois the means to break that agreement, and to undertake matters that were hostile to the Holy See. And Ferdinand and Isabella had put it upon Gonzalo de Cordoba, that most honourable and gallant captain, to do this thing in gross violation of his safe-conduct and plighted word to Valentinois. It was a deed under the shame of which the Great Captain confessedly laboured to the end of his days, as his memory has laboured under it ever since. For great captains are not afforded the immunity enjoyed by priests and popes jointly with other wearers of the petticoat from the consequences of falsehood and violated trust.

Fierce and bitter were Valentinois's reproaches of the Great Captain for this treachery—as fierce and bitter as they were unavailing. On August 20, 1504, Cesare Borgia took ship for Spain—a prisoner bound for a Spanish dungeon. Thus, at the early age of twenty-nine, he passed from Italy and the deeds that well might have filled a lifetime.

Conspicuous amid those he left behind him who remained loyal to their duke was Baldassare Scipione, who published throughout Christendom a cartel, wherein he challenged to trial by combat any Spaniard who dared deny that the Duke of Valentinois had been detained a prisoner in Naples in spite of the safe-conduct granted him in the name of Ferdinand and Isabella, "with great shame and

infamy to their crown."(1)

¹ Quoted by Alvisi, on the authority of a letter of Luigi da Porto, March 16, 1510, in *Lettere Storiche*.

This challenge was never taken up.

Amongst other loyal ones was that fine soldier of fortune, Taddeo della Volpe, who, in his Florentine prison, refused all offers to enter the service of the Signory until he had learnt that his lord was gone from Italy.

Fracassa and Mirafuente had held Forli until they received guarantees for Cesare's safety (after he had left Ostia to repair to the Spanish camp). They then rode out, with the honours of war, lance on thigh. Dionigio di Naldo, that hardy captain of foot, entered the service of Venice; but to the end he wore the device of his dear lord, and imposed the same upon all who served under his banner.

Don Michele da Corella was liberated by Julius II after an interrogatory which can have revealed nothing defamatory to Cesare or his father; as it is unthinkable that a Pope who did all that man could do to ruin the House of Borgia and to befoul its memory, should have preserved silence touching any such revelations as were hoped for when Corella was put to torture. That most faithful of all Cesare's officers—and sharer of the odium that has been heaped upon Cesare's name—entered the service of the Signory of Florence.

CHAPTER IV. ATROPOS

Vain were the exertions put forth by the Spanish cardinals to obtain Cesare's enlargement, and vainer still the efforts of his sister Lucrezia, who wrote letter after letter to Francesco Gonzaga of Mantua—now Gonfalonier of the Church, and a man of influence at the Vatican—imploping him to use his interest with the Pope to the same end.

Julius II remained unmoved, fearing the power of Cesare Borgia, and resolved that he should trouble Italy no more. On the score of that, no blame attaches to the Pope. The States which Borgia had conquered in the name of the Church should remain adherent to the Church. Upon that Julius was resolved, and the resolve was highly laudable. He would have no duke who controlled such a following as did Cesare, using those States as stepping-stones to greater dominions in which, no doubt, he would later have absorbed them, alienating them, so, from the Holy See.

In all this Julius II was most fully justified. The odious matter in his conduct, however, is the abominable treachery it entailed, following as it did upon the undertaking by virtue of which he gained the tiara.

For some months after his arrival in Spain, Cesare was confined in the prison of Chinchilla, whence—as a result, it is said, of an attempt on his part to throw the governor bodily over the battlements—he was removed to the fortress of Medina del Campo, and kept well guarded by orders of the Pope.

Rumours that he had been liberated by the King of Spain overran the Romagna more than once, and set the country in a ferment, even reaching the Vatican and shaking the stout-hearted Julius into alarm.

One chance of regaining his ancient might, and wreaking a sweet and terrific vengeance upon his betrayers came very close to him, but passed him by. This chance occurred in 1505, when—Queen Isabella being dead—King Ferdinand discovered that Gonzalo de Cordoba was playing him false in Naples. The Spanish king conceived a plan—according to the chronicles of Zurita—to employ Cesare as a flail for the punishment of the Great Captain. He proposed to liberate the duke, set him at the head of an army, and loose him upon Naples, trusting to the formidable alliance of Cesare's military talents with his hatred of Gonzalo—who had betrayed him—to work the will of his Catholic Majesty.

Unfortunately for Cesare, there were difficulties. Ferdinand's power was no longer absolute in Castille now that Isabella was dead. He sought to overcome these difficulties; but the process was a slow one, and in the course of it, spurred also by increased proofs of his lieutenant's perfidy, Ferdinand lost patience, and determined—the case having grown urgent—to go to Naples in person to deal with Gonzalo.

Plainly, Cesare's good fortune, which once had been proverbial, had now utterly deserted him.

He had received news of what was afoot, and his hopes had run high once more, only to suffer cruel frustration when he learnt that Ferdinand had sailed, himself, for Naples. In his despair the duke roused himself to a last effort to win his freedom.

His treatment in prison was fairly liberal, such as is usually measured out to state prisoners of consideration. He was allowed his own chaplain and several attendants, and, whilst closely guarded and confined to the Homenaje Tower of the fortress, yet he was not oppressively restrained. He was accorded certain privileges and liberties; he enjoyed the faculty of corresponding with the outer world,

and even of receiving visits. Amongst his visitors was the Count of Benavente—a powerful lord of the neighbourhood, who, coming under the spell of Cesare's fascination, became so attached to him, and so resolved to do his will and effect his liberation, that—says Zurita—he was prepared even to go the length of accomplishing it by force of arms should no other way present itself.(1)

1 Sanuto confirms Zurita, in the main, by letters received by the Venetian Senate.

Another way, however, did present itself, and Benavente and the duke hatched a plot of evasion in which they had the collaboration of the chaplain and a servant of the governor's, named Garcia.

One September night a cord was let down from the crenels of the tower, and by this the duke was to descend from his window to the castle ditch, where Benavente's men awaited him. Garcia was to go with him since, naturally, it would not be safe for the servants to remain behind, and Garcia now let himself down that rope, hand over hand, from the terrible height of the duke's window. It was only when he had reached the end of it that he discovered that the rope was not long enough, and that below him there was still a chasm that might well have appalled even desperate men.

To return was impossible. The duke above was growing impatient. Garcia loosed his hold, and dropped the remainder of the distance, breaking both his legs in the fall. Groaning, he lay there in the ditch, whilst hand over hand now came the agile, athletic duke, unconscious of his predecessor's fate, and of what awaited him at the end. He reached it, and was dangling there, perhaps undecided whether or not to take that daring leap, when suddenly his doubts were resolved for him. His evasion was already discovered. The castle was in alarm, and some one above him cut the rope and precipitated him into the ditch.

Benavente's men—we do not know how many of them were at hand—ran to him instantly. They found him seriously injured, and that he, too, had broken bones is beyond doubt. They lifted him up, and bore him with all speed to the horses. They contrived, somehow, to mount him upon one, and, holding him in the saddle, they rode off as fast as was possible under the circumstances. There was no time to go back for the unfortunate Garcia. The castle was all astir by now to stop the fugitives, and to have returned would have been to suffer capture themselves as well as the duke, without availing the servant.

So poor Garcia was left to his fate. He was found by the governor where he had fallen, and he was immediately put to death.

If the people of Medina organized a pursuit it availed them nothing, for Cesare was carried safely to Benavente's stronghold at Villalon.

There he lay for some five or six weeks to recover from the hurts he had taken in escaping, and to allow his hands—the bones of which were broken—to become whole again. At last, being in the main recovered, though with hands still bandaged, he set out with two attendants and made for Santander. Thence they took ship to Castro Urdiales, Cesare aiming now at reaching the kingdom of Navarre and the protection of his brother-in-law the king.

At the inn at Santander, where, weary and famished, they sat down to dine after one of the grooms had made arrangements for a boat, they had a near escape of capture. The alcalde, hearing of the presence of these strangers, and his suspicions being aroused by the recklessly high price they had agreed to pay the owner of the vessel which they had engaged, came to examine them. But they had a tale ready that they were wheat-merchants in great haste to reach Bernico, that a cargo of wheat awaited them there, and that they would suffer great loss by delay. The tale was smooth enough to satisfy the alcalde, and they were allowed to depart. They reached Castro Urdiales safely, but were delayed there for two days, owing to

the total lack of horses; and they were forced, in the end, to proceed upon mules obtained from a neighbouring convent. On these they rode to Durango, where they procured two fresh mules and a horse, and so, after further similar vicissitudes, they arrived at Pampeluna on December 3, 1506, and Cesare startled the Court of his brother-in-law, King Jean of Navarre, by suddenly appearing in it—"like the devil."

The news of his evasion had already spread to Italy and set it in a ferment, inspiring actual fear at the Vatican. The Romagna was encouraged by it to break out into open and armed insurrection against the harsh rule of Julius II—who seems to have been rendered positively vindictive towards the Romagnuoli by their fidelity to Valentinois. Thus had the Romagna fallen again into the old state of insufferable oppression from which Cesare had once delivered it. The hopes of the Romagnuoli rose in a measure, as the alarm spread among the enemies of Cesare—for Florence and Venice shared now the anxiety of the Vatican. Zurita, commenting upon this state of things, pays Cesare the following compliment, which the facts confirm as just:

"The duke was such that his very presence was enough to set all Italy agog; and he was greatly beloved, not only by men of war, but also by many people of Tuscany and of the States of the Church."

Cesare's wife—Charlotte d'Albret—whom he had not seen since that September of 1499, was at Bourges at the Court of her friend, the saintly, repudiated first wife of Louis XII. It is to be supposed that she would be advised of her husband's presence at her brother's Court; but there is no information on this score, nor do we know that they ever met.

Within four days of reaching Pampeluna Cesare dispatched his secretary Federico into Italy to bear the news of his escape to his sister Lucrezia at Ferrara, and a letter to Francesco Gonzaga, of

Mantua, which was little more than one of introduction, the more important matters to be conveyed to Gonzaga going, no doubt, by word of mouth. Federico was arrested at Bologna by order of Julius II, after he had discharged his mission.

France was now Cesare's only hope, and he wrote to Louis begging his royal leave to come to take his rank as a prince of that country, and to serve her.

You may justly have opined, long since, that the story here set down is one never-ending record of treacheries and betrayals. But you will find little to surpass the one to come. The behaviour of Louis at this juncture is contemptible beyond words, obeying as it does the maxim of that age, which had it that no inconvenient engagement should be observed if there was opportunity for breaking it.

Following this detestable maxim, Louis XII had actually gone the length of never paying to Charlotte d'Albret the dot of 100,000 livres Tournois, to which he had engaged himself by written contract. When Cesare, in prison at Medina and in straits for money, had solicited payment through his brother-in-law of Navarre, his claim had been contemptuously disregarded.

But there was worse to follow. Louis now answered Cesare's request for leave to come to France by a letter (quoted in full by M. Yriarte from the Archives des Basses Pyrénées) in which his Very Christian Majesty announces that the duchy of Valentinois and the County of Dyois have been restored to the crown of France, as also the lordship of Issoudun. And then follows the pretext, of whose basely paltry quality you shall judge for yourselves. It runs:

"After the decease of the late Pope Alexander, when our people and our army were seeking the recovery of the kingdom of Naples, he [Cesare] went over to the side of our enemies, serving, favouring, and assisting them at arms and otherwise against ourselves and our said

people and army, which resulted to us in great and irrecoverable loss."

The climax is in the deliberate falsehood contained in the closing words. Poor Cesare, who had served France at her call—in spite of what was rumoured of his intentions—as long as he had a man-at-arms to follow him, had gone to Naples only in the hour of his extreme need. True, he had gone to offer himself to Spain as a condottiero when naught else was left to him; but he took no army with him—he went alone, a servant, not an ally, as that false letter pretends. He had never come to draw his sword against France, and certainly no loss had been suffered by France in consequence of any action of his. Louis's army was definitely routed at Garigliano, with Cesare's troops fighting in its ranks.

But Pope Alexander was dead; Cesare's might in Italy was dissipated; his credit gone. There lay no profit for Louis in keeping faith with him; there lay some profit in breaking it. Alas, that a king should stain his honour with base and vulgar lies to minister to his cupidity, and that he should set them down above his seal and signature to shame him through centuries still in the womb of Time!

Cesare Borgia, landless, without right to any title, he that had held so many, betrayed and abandoned on every side, had now nothing to offer in the world's market but his stout sword and his glad courage. These went to the first bidder for them, who happened to be his brother-in-law King Jean.

Navarre at the time was being snarled and quarrelled over by France and Spain, both menacing its independence, each pretending to claims upon it which do not, in themselves, concern us.

In addition, the country itself was torn by two factions—the Beaumontes and the Agramontes—and it was entrusted to Cesare to restore Navarre to peace and unity at home before proceeding—with

the aid upon which he depended from the Emperor Maximilian—to deal with the enemies beyond her frontiers.

The Castle of Viana was being held by Louis de Beaumont—chief of the faction that bore his name—and refused to surrender to the king. To reduce it and compel Beaumont to obedience went Cesare as Captain-General of Navarre, early in February of 1507. He commanded a considerable force, some 10,000 strong, and with this and his cannon he laid siege to the citadel.

The natural strength of the place was such as might have defied any attempt to reduce it by force; but victuals were running low, and there was every likelihood of its being speedily starved into surrender. To frustrate this, Beaumont conceived the daring plan of attempting to send in supplies from Mendavia. The attempt being made secretly, by night and under a strong escort, was entirely successful; but, in retreating, the Beaumontese were surprised in the dawn of that February morning by a troop of reinforcements coming to Cesare's camp. These, at sight of the rebels, immediately gave the alarm.

The most hopeless confusion ensued in the town, where it was at once imagined that a surprise attack was being made upon the Royalists, and that they had to do with the entire rebel army.

Cesare, being aroused by the din and the blare of trumpets calling men to arms, sprang for his weapons, armed himself in haste, flung himself on a horse, and, without pausing so much as to issue a command to his waiting men-at-arms, rode headlong down the street to the Puerta del Sol. Under the archway of the gate his horse stumbled and came down with him. With an oath, Cesare wrenched the animal to its feet again, gave it the spur, and was away at a mad, furious gallop in pursuit of the retreating Beaumont rearguard.

The citizens, crowding to the walls of Viana, watched that last reckless ride of his with amazed, uncomprehending eyes. The

peeping sun caught his glittering armour as he sped, so that of a sudden he must have seemed to them a thing of fire—meteoric, as had been his whole life's trajectory which was now swiftly dipping to its nadir.

Whether he was frenzied with the lust of battle, riding in the reckless manner that was his wont, confident that his men followed, yet too self-centred to ascertain, or whether—as seems more likely—it was simply that his horse had bolted with him, will never be known until all things are known.

Suddenly he was upon the rearguard of the fleeing rebels. His sword flashed up and down; again and again they may have caught the gleam of it from Viana's walls, as he smote the foe. Irresistible as a thunderbolt, he clove himself a way through those Beaumontese. He was alone once more, a flying, dazzling figure of light, away beyond that rearguard which he left scathed and disordered by his furious passage. Still his mad career continued, and he bore down upon the main body of the escort.

Beaumont sat his horse to watch, in such amazement as you may conceive, the wild approach of this unknown rider.

Seeing him unsupported, some of the count's men detached themselves to return and meet this single foe and oblige him with the death he so obviously appeared to seek.

They hedged him about—we do not know their number—and, engaging him, they drew him from the road and down into the hollow space of a ravine.

And so, in the thirty-second year of his age, and in all the glory of his matchless strength, his soul possessed of the lust of combat, sword in hand, warding off the attack that rains upon him, and dealing death about him, he meets his end. From the walls of Viana his

resplendent armour renders him still discernible, until, like a sun to its setting, he passes below the rim of that ravine, and is lost to the watcher's view.

Death awaited him amid the shadows of that hollow place.

Unhorsed by now, he fought with no concern for the odds against him, and did sore execution upon his assailants, ere a sword could find an opening in his guard to combine with a gap in his armour and so drive home. That blade had found, maybe, his lungs. Still he swung his sword, swaying now upon his loosening knees. His mouth was full of blood. It was growing dark. His hands began to fail him. He reeled like a drunkard, sapped of strength, and then the end came quickly. Blows unwarded showered upon him now.

He crashed down in all the glory of his rich armour, which those brigand-soldiers already coveted. And thus he died—mercifully, maybe happily, for he had no time in which to taste the bitterness of death—that awful draught which he had forced upon so many.

Within a few moments of his falling, this man who had been a living force, whose word had carried law from the Campagna to the Bolognese, was so much naked, blood-smeared carrion—for those human vultures stripped him to the skin; his very shirt must they have. And there, a stark, livid corpse, of no more account than any dog that died last Saturday, they left Cesare Borgia of France, Duke of Romagna and Valentinois, Prince of Andria, and Lord of a dozen Tyrannies.

The body was found there anon by those who so tardily rode after their leader, and his dismayed troopers bore those poor remains to Viana. The king, arriving there that very day, horror-stricken at the news and sight that awaited him, ordered Cesare a magnificent funeral, and so he was laid to rest before the High Altar of Sainte Marie de Viane.

To rest? May the soul of him rest at least, for men—Christian men—have refused to vouchsafe that privilege to his poor ashes.

Nearly two hundred years later—at the close of the seventeenth century, a priest of God and a bishop, one who preached a gospel of love and mercy so infinite that he dared believe by its lights no man to have been damned, came to disturb the dust of Cesare Borgia. This Bishop of Calahorra—lineal descendant in soul of that Pharisee who exalted himself in God's House, thrilled with titillations of delicious horror at the desecrating presence of the base publican—had his pietist's eyes offended by the slab that marked Cesare Borgia's resting-place.(1)

1 It bore the following legend:

AQUI YACE EN POCA TIERRA
AL QUE TODO LE TEMIA
EL QUE LA PAZ Y LA GUERRA
EN LA SUA MANO TENIA.
OH TU QUE VAS A BUSCAR
COSAS DIGNAS DE LOAR
SI TU LOAS LO MAS DIGNO
AQUI PARE TU CAMINO
NO CURES DE MAS ANDAR.

which, more or less literally may be Englished as follows: "Here in a little earth, lies one whom all did fear; one whose hands dispensed both peace and war. Oh, you that go in search of things deserving praise, if you would praise the worthiest, then let your journey end here, nor trouble to go farther."

The pious, Christian bishop had read of this man—perhaps that life of him published by the apostate Gregorio Leti under the pen-name of Tommaso Tommasi, which had lately seen the light—and he ordered the tomb's removal from that holy place. And thus it befell that the ashes of Cesare Borgia were scattered and lost.

Charlotte d'Albret was bereft of her one friend, Queen Jeanne, in that same year of Cesare's death. The Duchess of Valentinois withdrew to La MotteFeuilly, and for the seven years remaining of her life was never seen other than in mourning; her very house was equipped with sombre, funereal furniture, and so maintained until her end, which supports the view that she had conceived affection and respect for the husband of whom she had seen so little.

On March 14, 1514, that poor lady passed from a life which appears to have offered her few joys.

Louise de Valentinois—a handsome damsel of the age of fourteen—remained for three years under the tutelage of the Duchess of

Angoulême—the mother of King Francis I—to whom Charlotte d'Albret had entrusted her child. Louise married, at the age of seventeen, Louis de la Trémouille, Prince de Talmont and Vicomte de Thouars, known as the Knight Sans Peur et Sans Reproche. She maintained some correspondence with her aunt, Lucrezia Borgia, whom she had never seen, and ever signed herself "Louise de Valentinois." At the age of thirty—Trémouille having been killed at Pavia—she married, in second nuptials, Philippe de Bourbon-Busset.

Lucrezia died in 1519, one year after her mother, Vanozza de'Catanei, with whom she corresponded to the end.

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LOVE-AT-ARMS

Being a narrative excerpted from the chronicles of Urbino during the dominion of the High and Mighty Messer Guidobaldo da Montefeltro

By Raphael Sabatini

"Le donne, i cavalier', l'arme, gli amori,
Le cortesie, l'audace imprese io canto."

ARIOSTO

Contents

<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	VOX POPULI
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	ON A MOUNTAIN PATH
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	SACKCLOTH AND MOTLEY
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	MONNA VALENTINA
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	GIAN MARIA
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	THE AMOROUS DUKE
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	GONZAGA THE INSIDIOUS
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	AMONG THE DREGS OF WINE
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	THE "TRATTA DI CORDE"
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	THE BRAYING OF AN ASS
<u>CHAPTER XI.</u>	WANDERING KNIGHTS
<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	THE FOOL'S INQUISITIVENESS
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	GIAN MARIA MAKES A VOW
<u>CHAPTER XIV.</u>	FORTEMANI DRINKS WATER
<u>CHAPTER XV.</u>	THE MERCY OF FRANCESCO
<u>CHAPTER XVI.</u>	GONZAGA UNMASKS
<u>CHAPTER XVII.</u>	THE ENEMY
<u>CHAPTER XVIII.</u>	TREACHERY
<u>CHAPTER XIX.</u>	PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT
<u>CHAPTER XX.</u>	THE LOVERS
<u>CHAPTER XXI.</u>	THE PENITENT
<u>CHAPTER XXII.</u>	A REVELATION
<u>CHAPTER XXIII.</u>	IN THE ARMOURY TOWER

[CHAPTER XXIV.](#) THE INTERRUPTED MASS

[CHAPTER XXV.](#) THE CAPITULATION OF ROCCALEONE

CHAPTER I. VOX POPULI

From the valley, borne aloft on the wings of the evening breeze rose faintly the tolling of an Angelus bell, and in a goat-herd's hut on the heights above stood six men with heads uncovered and bowed, obeying its summons to evening prayer. A brass lamp, equipped with three beaks, swung from the grimy ceiling, and, with more smoke than flame, shed an indifferent light, and yet a more indifferent smell, throughout the darkening hovel. But it sufficed at least to reveal in the accoutrements and trappings of that company a richness that was the more striking by contrast with the surrounding squalor.

As the last stroke of the Ave Maria faded on the wind that murmured plaintively through the larches of the hillside, they piously crossed themselves, and leisurely resuming their head-gear, they looked at one another with questioning glances. Yet before any could voice the inquiry that was in the minds of all, a knock fell upon the rotten timbers of the door.

"At last!" exclaimed old Fabrizio da Lodi, in a voice charged with relief, whilst a younger man of good shape and gay garments strode to the door in obedience to Fabrizio's glance, and set it wide.

Across the threshold stepped a tall figure under a wide, featherless hat, and wrapped in a cloak which he loosened as he entered, revealing the very plainest of raiment beneath. A leather hacketon was tightened at the waist by a girdle of hammered steel, from which depended on his left a long sword with ringed, steel quillons, whilst from behind his right hip peeped the hilt of a stout Pistoja dagger. His hose of red cloth vanished into boots of untanned leather, laced in front and turned down at the knees, and completed in him the general

appearance of a mercenary in time of peace, in spite of which the six nobles, in that place of paradoxes, bared their heads anew, and stood in attitudes of deferential attention.

He paused a moment to throw off his cloak, of which the young man who had admitted him hastened to relieve him as readily as if he had been born a servitor. He next removed his hat, and allowed it to remain slung from his shoulders, displaying, together with a still youthful countenance of surpassing strength and nobility, a mane of jet-black hair coiffed in a broad net of gold thread—the only article of apparel that might have suggested his station to be higher than at first had seemed.

He stepped briskly to the coarse and grease-stained table, about which the company was standing, and his black eyes ran swiftly over the faces that confronted him.

"Sirs," he said at last, "I am here. My horse went lame a half-league beyond Sant' Angelo, and I was constrained to end the journey on foot."

"Your Excellency will be tired," cried Fabrizio, with that ready solicitude which is ever at the orders of the great. "A cup of Puglia wine, my lord. Here, Fanfulla," he called, to the young nobleman who had acted as usher. But the new-comer silenced him and put the matter aside with a gesture.

"Let that wait. Time imports as you little dream. It may well be, illustrious sirs, that had I not come thus I had not come at all."

"How?" cried one, expressing the wonder that rose in every mind, even as on every countenance some consternation showed. "Are we betrayed?"

"If you are in case to fear betrayal, it may well be, my friends. As I crossed the bridge over the Metauro and took the path that leads

hither, my eyes were caught by a crimson light shining from a tangle of bushes by the roadside. That crimson flame was a reflection of the setting sun flashed from the steel cap of a hidden watcher. The path took me nearer, and with my hat so set that it might best conceal my face, I was all eyes. And as I passed the spot where that spy was ambushed, I discerned among the leaves that might so well have screened him, but that the sun had found his helmet out, the evil face of Masuccio Torri." There was a stir among the listeners, and their consternation increased, whilst one or two changed colour. "For whom did he wait? That was the question that I asked myself, and I found the answer that it was for me. If I was right, he must also know the distance I had come, so that he would not look to see me afoot, nor yet, perhaps, in garments such as these. And so, thanks to all this and to the hat and cloak in which I closely masked myself, he let me pass unchallenged."

"By the Virgin!" exclaimed Fabrizio hotly, "I'll swear your conclusions were wrong. In all Italy it was known to no man beyond us six that you were to meet us here, and with my hand upon the Gospels I could swear that not one of us has breathed of it."

He looked round at his companions as if inviting them to bear out his words, and they were not slow to confirm what he had sworn, in terms as vehement as his own, until in the end the new-comer waved them into silence.

"Nor have I breathed it," he assured them, "for I respected your injunction, Messer Fabrizio. Still—what did Masuccio there, hidden like a thief, by the roadside? Sirs," he continued, in a slightly altered tone, "I know not to what end you have bidden me hither, but if aught of treason lurks in your designs, I cry you beware! The Duke has knowledge of it, or at least, suspicion. If that spy was not set to watch for me, why, then, he was set to watch for all, that he may anon inform his master what men were present at this meeting."

Fabrizio shrugged his shoulders in a contemptuous indifference which was voiced by his neighbour Ferrabraccio.

"Let him be informed," sneered the latter, a grim smile upon his rugged face. "The knowledge will come to him too late."

The new-comer threw back his head, and a look that was half wonder, half enlightenment gleamed in the black depths of his imperious eyes. He took a deep breath.

"It would seem, sirs, that I was right," said he, with a touch of sternness, "and that treason is indeed your business."

"My Lord of Aquila," Fabrizio answered him, "we are traitors to a man that we may remain faithful and loyal to a State."

"What State?" barked the Lord of Aquila contemptuously.

"The Duchy of Babbiano," came the answer.

"You would be false to the Duke that you may be faithful to the Duchy?" he questioned, scorn running ever stronger in his voice. "Sirs, it is a riddle I'll not pretend to solve."

There fell a pause in which they eyed one another, and their glances were almost as the glances of baffled men. They had not looked for such a tone from him, and they questioned with their eyes and minds the wisdom of going further. At last, with a half-sigh, Fabrizio da Lodi turned once more to Aquila.

"Lord Count," he began, in a calm, impressive voice, "I am an old man; the name I bear and the family from which I spring are honourable alike. You cannot think so vilely of me as to opine that in my old age I should do aught to smirch the fair fame of the one or of the other. To be named a traitor, sir, is to be given a harsh title, and one, I think, that could fit no man less than it fits me or any of these my companions. Will you do me the honour, then, to hear me out,

Excellency; and when you have heard me, judge us. Nay, more than judgment we ask of you, Lord Count. We ask for guidance that we may save our country from the ruin that threatens it, and we promise you that we will take no step that has not your sanction—that is not urged by you."

Francesco del Falco, Count of Aquila, eyed the old noble with a glance that had changed whilst he spoke, so that from scornful that it had been, it had now grown full of mild wonder and inquiry. He slightly inclined his head in token of acquiescence.

"I beg that you will speak," was all he said, and Fabrizio would forthwith have spoken but that Ferrabraccio intervened to demand that Aquila should pass them his knightly word not to betray them in the event of his rejection of the proposals they had to make. When he had given them his promise, and they had seated themselves upon such rude stools as the place afforded, Fabrizio resumed his office of spokesman, and unfolded the business upon which he had invited the Count among them.

In a brief preamble he touched upon the character of Gian Maria Sforza, the reigning Duke of Babbiano—seated upon its throne by his powerful uncle, Lodovico Sforza, Lord of Milan. He exposed the man's reckless extravagances, his continued self-indulgence, his carelessness in matters of statecraft, and his apparent disinclination to fulfil the duties which his high station imposed upon him. On all this Fabrizio touched with most commendable discretion and restraint, as was demanded by the circumstance that in Francesco del Falco he was addressing the Duke's own cousin.

"So far, Excellency," he continued, "you cannot be in ignorance of the general dissatisfaction prevailing among our most illustrious cousin's subjects. There was the conspiracy of Bacolino, a year ago, which, had it succeeded, would have cast us into the hands of Florence. It failed, but another such might not fail again. The

increased disfavour of his Highness may bring more adherents to a fresh conspiracy of this character, and we should be lost as an independent state. And the peril that menaces us is the peril of being so lost. Not only by defection of our own, but by the force of arms of another. That other is Caesar Borgia. His dominion is spreading like a plague upon the face of this Italy, which he has threatened to eat up like an artichoke—leaf by leaf. Already his greedy eyes are turned upon us, and what power have we—all unready as we are—wherewith successfully to oppose the overwhelming might of the Duke of Valentino? All this his Highness realises, for we have made it more than clear to him, as we have, too, made clear the remedy. Yet does he seem as indifferent to his danger as to his salvation. His time is spent in orgies, in dancing, in hawking and in shameful dalliance, and if we dare throw out a word of warning, threats and curses are the only answer we receive."

Da Lodi paused, as if growing conscious that his manner was becoming over-vehement. But of this, his companions, at least, were all unconscious, for they filled the pause with a murmur of angry confirmation. Francesco wrinkled his brow, and sighed.

"I am—alas!—most fully conscious of this danger you speak of. But—what do you expect of me? Why bear me your grievance? I am no statesman."

"Here is no statesman needed, lord. It is a soldier Babbiano requires; a martial spirit to organise an army against the invasion that must come—that is coming already. In short, Lord Count, we need such a warrior as are you. What man is there in all Italy—or, indeed, what woman or what child—that has not heard of the prowess of the Lord of Aquila? Your knightly deeds in the wars 'twixt Pisa and Florence, your feats of arms and generalship in the service of the Venetians, are matters for the making of epic song."

"Messer Fabrizio!" murmured Paolo, seeking to restrain his

eulogistic interlocutor, what time afaint tinge crept into his bronzed cheeks. But Da Lodi continued, all unheeding:

"And shall you, my lord, who have borne yourself so valiantly as a condottiero in the service of the stranger, hesitate to employ your skill and valour against the enemies of your own homeland? Not so, Excellency. We know the patriotic soul of Francesco del Falco, and we count upon it."

"And you do well," he answered firmly. "When the time comes you shall find me ready. But until then, and touching such preparation as must be made—why do you not address his Highness as you do me?"

A sad smile crossed the noble face of Lodi, whilst Ferrabracio laughed outright in chill contempt, and with characteristic roughness made answer:

"Shall we speak to him," he cried, "of knightly deeds, of prowess, and of valour? I would as lief enjoin Roderigo Borgia to fulfil the sacred duties of his Vicarship; I might as profitably sprinkle incense on a dunghill. What we could say to Gian Maria we have said, and since it had been idle to have appealed to him as we have appealed to you, we have shown him yet another way by which Babbiano might be saved and Valentino's onslaught averted."

"Ah! And this other way?" inquired the Count, his glance wandering back to Fabrizio.

"An alliance with the house of Urbino," answered Lodi. "Guidobaldo has two nieces. We have sounded him, and we have found him well disposed towards such a marriage as we suggested. Allied thus to the house of Montefeltro, we should receive not only assistance from Guidobaldo, but also from the lords of Bologna, Perugia, Camerino, and some smaller states whose fortunes are

linked already to that of Urbino. Thus we should present to Cesar Borgia a coalition so strong that he would never dare to bring a lance into our territory."

"I heard some talk of it," said Paolo. "It would have been a wise step indeed. Pity that the negotiations came to naught!"

"But why did they come to naught? Body of Satan!—why?" roared the impetuous Ferrabraccio, as with his mighty fist he smote the table a blow that well-nigh shattered it. "Because Gian Maria was not in a marrying mood! The girl we proposed to him was beautiful as an angel; but he would not so much as look. There was a woman in Babbiano who——"

"My lord," cut in Fabrizio hastily, fearing the lengths to which the other might go, "it is as Ferrabraccio says. His Highness would not marry. And this it is has led us to invite you to meet us here to-night. His Highness will do nothing to save the Duchy, and so we turn to you. The people are with us; in every street of Babbiano are you spoken of openly as the duke they would have govern them and defend their homes. In the sacred name of the people, then," the old man concluded, rising, and speaking in a voice shaken by emotion, "and with the people's voice, of which we are but the mouthpiece, we now offer you the crown of Babbiano. Return with us to-night, my lord, and to-morrow, with but twenty spears for escort, we shall ride into Babbiano and proclaim you Duke. Nor need you fear the slightest opposition. One man only of Babbiano—that same Masuccio whom you tell us that you saw to-night—remains faithful to Gian Maria; faithful because he and the fifty Swiss mercenaries at his heels are paid to be so. Up, my lord! Let your own good sense tell you whether an honest man need scruple to depose a prince whose throne knows no defence beyond the hired protection of fifty foreign spears."

A silence followed that impassioned speech. Lodi remained standing, the others sat, their eager glances turned upon the Count,

their ears anxiously alert for his reply. Thus they remained for a brief spell, Aquila himself so still that he scarcely seemed to breathe.

He sat, gripping the arms of his chair, his head fallen forward until his chin rested on his breast, a frown darkening his lofty brow. And whilst they waited for his answer, a mighty battle was fought out within his soul. The power so suddenly, so unexpectedly, thrust within his reach, and offered him if he would but open his hands to grasp it, dazzled him for one little moment. As in a flash he saw himself Lord of Babbiano. He beheld a proud career of knightly deeds that should cause his name and that of Babbiano to ring throughout the length and breadth of Italy. From the obscure state that it was, his patriotism and his skill as a condottiero should render it one of the great Italian powers—the rival of Florence, of Venice or Milan. He had a vision of widened territories, and of neighbouring lords becoming vassals to his might. He saw himself wresting Romagna mile by mile from the sway of the ribald Borgia, hunting him to the death as he was wont to hunt the boar in the marshes of Commachio, or driving him into the very Vatican to seek shelter within his father's gates—the last strip of soil that he would leave him to lord it over. He dreamt of a Babbiano courted by the great republics, and the honour of its alliance craved by them that they might withstand the onslaughts of French and Spaniard. All this he saw in that fleeting vision of his, and Temptation caught his martial spirit in a grip of steel. And then another picture rose before his eyes. What would he do in times of peace? His was a soul that pined in palaces. He was born to the camp, and not to the vapid air of courts. In exchange for this power that was offered him what must he give? His glorious liberty. Become their lord in many things, to be their slave in more. Nominally to rule, but actually to be ruled, until, should he fail to do his rulers' will, there would be some night another meeting such as this, in which men would plot to encompass his downfall and to supplant him as he was invited to supplant Gian Maria. Lastly, he bethought him of the man whose power he was bidden to usurp. His own cousin, his father's sister's

son, in whose veins ran the same blood as in his own.

He raised his head at last, and met those anxious faces on which the fitful light was casting harsh shadows. The pale ghost of a smile hovered for a second on the corners of his stern mouth.

"I thank you, sirs, for the honour you have done me," he made answer slowly, "an honour of which I fear I am all unworthy."

In strenuous chorus their voices rose to contradict him.

"At least, then, an honour which I cannot accept."

There was a moment's silence, and their faces from eager that they had been, grew downcast to the point of sullenness.

"But why, my lord?" cried old Fabrizio at last, his arms outstretched towards the Count, his voice quivering with intensity. "Santissima Vergine! Why?"

"Because—to give you but one reason out of many—the man you ask me to overthrow and supplant is of my own blood." And but that his tone was calm they might have held that he rebuked them.

"I had thought," hazarded seriously the gay Fanfulla, "that with such a man as your Excellency, patriotism and the love of Babbiano would have weighed even more than the ties of blood."

"And you had thought well, Fanfulla. Did I not say that the reason I gave you was but one of many? Tell me, sirs, what cause have you to believe that I should rule you wisely and well? It so chances that in the crisis now threatening Babbiano a captain is needed for its ruler. But let not this delude you, for there may come a season in the fortunes of the State when such a man might be as unfitted for dominion as is the present Duke in this. What then? A good knight-errant is an indifferent courtier and a bad statesman. Lastly, my friends—since you must know all that is in my heart—there remains the fact that I love myself a

little. I love my liberty too well, and I have no mind to stifle in the scented atmosphere of courts. You see I am frank with you. It is my pleasure to roam the world, my harness on my back, free as the blessed wind of heaven. Shall a ducal crown and a cloak of purple——" He broke off sharply with a laugh. "There, my friends! You have had reasons and to spare. Again I thank you, and deplore that being such as I am, I may not become such as you would have me."

He sank back in his chair, eyeing them with a glance never so wistful, and after a second's silence, Da Lodi's voice implored him, in accents that trembled with pathetic emphasis, to reconsider his resolve. The old man would have proceeded to fresh argument, but Aquila cut him short.

"I have already so well considered it, Messer Fabrizio," he answered resolutely, "that nothing now could sway me. But this, sirs, I will promise you: I will ride with you to Babbiano, and I will seek to reason with my cousin. More will I do; I will seek at his hands the office of Gonfalonier, and if he grant it me; I will so reorganise our forces, and enter into such alliances with our neighbours as shall ensure, at least in some degree, the safety of our State."

Still they endeavoured to cajole him, but he held firm against their efforts, until in the end, with a sorrowful mien, Da Lodi thanked him for his promise to use his influence with Gian Maria.

"For this, at least, we thank your Excellency, and on our part we shall exert such power as we still wield in Babbiano to the end that the high office of Gonfalonier be conferred upon you. We had preferred to see you fill with honour a position higher still, and should you later come to consider——"

"Dismiss your hopes of that," put in the Count, with a solemn shake of his head. And then, before another word was uttered, young Fanfulla degli Arcipreti leapt of a sudden to his feet, his brows knit,

and an expression of alarm spreading upon his comely face. A second he remained thus; then, going swiftly to the door, he opened it, and stood listening, followed by the surprised glances of the assembled company. But it needed not the warning cry with which he turned, to afford them the explanation of his odd behaviour. In the moment's tense silence that had followed his sudden opening of the door they had caught from without the distant fall of marching feet.

CHAPTER II. ON A MOUNTAIN PATH

"Armed men, my lords!" had been Fanfulla's cry. "We are betrayed!"

They looked at one another with stern eyes, and with that grimness that takes the place which fear would hold in meaner souls.

Then Aquila rose slowly to his feet, and with him rose the others, looking to their weapons. He softly breathed a name—"Masuccio Torri."

"Aye," cried Lodi bitterly, "would that we had heeded your warning! Masuccio it will be, and at his heels his fifty mercenaries."

"Not less, I'll swear, by the sound of them," said Ferrabraccio. "And we but six, without our harness."

"Seven," the Count laconically amended, resuming his hat and loosening his sword in its scabbard.

"Not so, my lord," exclaimed Lodi, laying a hand upon the Count's arm. "You must not stay with us. You are our only hope—the only hope of Babbiano. If we are indeed betrayed—though by what infernal means I know not—and they have knowledge that six traitors met here to-night to conspire against the throne of Gian Maria, at least, I'll swear, it is not known that you were to have met us. His Highness may conjecture, but he cannot know for sure, and if you but escape, all may yet be well—saving with us, who matter not. Go, my lord! Remember your promise to seek at your cousin's hand the gonfalon,

and may God and His blessed Saints prosper your Excellency."

The old man caught the young man's hand, and bending his head until his face was hidden in his long white hair, he imprinted a kiss of fealty upon it. But Aquila was not so easily to be dismissed.

"Where are your horses?" he demanded.

"Tethered at the back. But who would dare ride them at night adown this precipice?"

"I dare for one," answered the young man steadily, "and so shall you all dare. A broken neck is the worst that can befall us, and I would as lief break mine on the rocks of Sant' Angelo as have it broken by the executioner of Babbiano."

"Bravely said, by the Virgin!" roared Ferrabraccio. "To horse, sirs!"

"But the only way is the way by which they come," Fanfulla remonstrated. "The rest is sheer cliff."

"Why, then, my sweet seducer, we'll go to meet them," rejoined Ferrabraccio gaily. "They are on foot, and we'll sweep over them like a mountain torrent. Come, sirs, hasten! They draw nigh."

"We have but six horses, and we are seven," another objected.

"I have no horse," said Francesco, "I'll follow you afoot."

"What?" cried Ferrabraccio, who seemed now to have assumed command of the enterprise. "Let our St. Michael bring up the rear! No, no. You, Da Lodi, you are too old for this work."

"Too old?" blazed the old man, drawing himself up to the full height of what was still a very imposing figure, and his eyes seeming to take fire at this reflection upon his knightly worth. "Were the season other, Ferrabraccio, I could crave leave to show you how much of youth

there is still left in me. But——" He paused. His angry eyes had alighted upon the Count, who stood waiting by the door, and the whole expression of his countenance changed. "You are right, Ferrabraccio, I grow old indeed—a dotard. Take you my horse, and begone."

"But you?" quoth the Count solicitously.

"I shall remain. If you do your duty well by those hirelings they will not trouble me. It will not occur to them that one was left behind. They will think only of following you after you have cut through them. Go, go, sirs, or all is lost."

They obeyed him now with a rush that seemed almost to partake of panic. In a frenzied haste Fanfulla and another tore the tetherings loose, and a moment later they were all mounted and ready for that fearful ride. The night was dark, yet not too dark. The sky was cloudless and thickly starred, whilst a minguant moon helped to illumine the way by which they were to go. But on that broken and uncertain mountain path the shadows lay thickly enough to make their venture desperate.

Ferrabraccio claiming a better knowledge than his comrades of the way, placed himself at their head, with the Count beside him. Behind them, two by two, came the four others. They stood on a small ledge in the shadow of the great cliff that loomed on their left. Thence the mountain-side might be scanned—as well as in such a light it was to be discerned. The tramp of feet had now grown louder and nearer, and with it came the clank of armour. In front of them lay the path which sloped, for a hundred yards or more, to the first corner. Below them, on the right, the path again appeared at the point where it jutted out for some half-dozen yards in its zigzag course, and there Fanfulla caught the gleam of steel, reflecting the feeble moonlight. He drew Ferrabraccio's attention to it, and that stout warrior at once gave the word to start. But Francesco interposed.

"If we do so," he objected, "we shall come upon them past the corner, and at that corner we shall be forced to slacken speed to avoid being carried over the edge of the cliff. Besides, in such a strait our horses may fail us, and refuse the ground. In any event, we shall not descend upon them with the same force as we shall carry if we wait until they come into a straight line with us. The shadows here will screen us from them meanwhile."

"You are right, Lord Count. We will wait," was the ready answer. And what time they waited he grumbled lustily.

"To be caught in such a trap as this! Body of Satan! It was a madness to have met in a hut with but one approach."

"We might perhaps have retreated down the cliff behind," said Francesco.

"We might indeed—had we been sparrows or mountain cats. But being men, the way we go is the only way—and a mighty bad way it is. I should like to be buried at Sant' Angelo, Lord Count," he continued whimsically. "It will be conveniently near; for once I go over the mountain-side, I'll swear naught will stop me until I reach the valley—a parcel of broken bones."

"Steady, my friends," murmured the voice of Aquila. "They come."

And round that fateful corner they were now swinging into view—a company in steel heads and bodies with partisan on shoulder. A moment they halted now, so that the waiting party almost deemed itself observed. But it soon became clear that the halt was to the end that the stragglers might come up. Masuccio was a man who took no chances; every knave of his fifty would he have before he ventured the assault.

"Now," murmured the Count, tightening his hat upon his brow, so

that it might the better mask his features. Then rising in his stirrups, and raising his sword on high, he let his voice be heard again. But no longer in a whisper. Like a trumpet-call it rang, echoed and re-echoed up the mountain-side.

"Forward! St. Michael and the Virgin!"

That mighty shout, followed as it was by a thunder of hooves, gave pause to the advancing mercenaries. Masuccio's voice was heard, calling to them to stand firm; bidding them kneel and ward the charge with their pikes; assuring them with curses that they had but to deal with half-dozen men. But the mountain echoes were delusive, and that thunder of descending hooves seemed to them not of a half-dozen but of a regiment. Despite Masuccio's imprecations the foremost turned, and in that moment the riders were upon them, through them and over them, like the mighty torrent of which Ferrabraccio had spoken.

A dozen Swiss went down beneath that onslaught, and another dozen that had been swept aside and over the precipice were half-way to the valley before that cavalcade met any check. Masuccio's remaining men strove lustily to stem this human cataract, now that they realised how small was the number of their assailants. They got their partisans to work, and for a few moments the battle raged hot upon that narrow way. The air was charged with the grind and ring of steel, the stamping of men and horses and the shrieks and curses of the maimed.

The Lord of Aquila, ever foremost, fought desperately on. Not only with his sword fought he, but with his horse as well. Rearing the beast on its hind legs, he would swing it round and let it descend where least it was expected, laying about him with his sword at the same time. In vain they sought to bring down his charger with their pikes; so swift and furious was his action, that before their design could be accomplished, he was upon those that meditated it, scattering them out of reach to save their skins.

In this ferocious manner he cleared a way before him, and luck served him so well that what blows were wildly aimed at him as he dashed by went wide of striking him. At last he was all but through the press, and but three men now fronted him. Again his charger reared, snorting, and pawing the air like a cat, and two of the three knaves before him fled incontinently aside. But the third, who was of braver stuff, dropped on one knee and presented his pike at the horse's belly. Francesco made a wild attempt to save the roan that had served him so gallantly, but he was too late. It came down to impale itself upon that waiting partisan. With a hideous scream the horse sank upon its slayer, crushing him beneath its mighty weight, and hurling its rider forward on to the ground. In an instant he was up and had turned, for all that he was half-stunned by his fall and weakened by the loss of blood from a pike-thrust in the shoulder—of which he had hitherto remained unconscious in the heat of battle. Two mercenaries were bearing down upon him—the same two that had been the last to fall back before him. He braced himself to meet them, thinking that his last hour was indeed come, when Fanfulla degli Arcipreti, who had followed him closely through the press, now descended upon his assailants from behind, and rode them down. Beside the Count he reined up, and stretched down his hand.

"Mount behind me, Excellency," he urged him.

"There is not time," answered Francesco, who discerned a half-dozen figures hurrying towards them. "I will cling to your stirrup-leather, thus. Now spur!" And without waiting for Fanfulla to obey him, he caught the horse a blow with the flat of his sword across the hams, which sent it bounding forward. Thus they continued now that perilous descent, Fanfulla riding, and the Count half-running, half-swinging from his stirrup. At last, when they had covered a half-mile in this fashion, and the going had grown easier, they halted that the Count might mount behind his companion, and as they now rode along at an

easier pace Francesco realised that he and Fanfulla were the only two that had come through that ugly place. The gallant Ferrabraccio, hero of a hundred strenuous battles, had gone to the ignoble doom which half in jest he had prophesied himself. His horse had played him false at the outset of the charge, and taking fright it had veered aside despite his efforts to control it, until, losing its foothold, man and beast had gone hurtling over the cliff. Amerini, Fanfulla had seen slain, whilst the remaining two, being both unhorsed, would doubtless be the prisoners of Masuccio.

Some three miles beyond Sant' Angelo, Fanfulla's weary horse splashed across a ford of the Metauro, and thus, towards the second hour of night, they gained the territory of Urbino, where for the time they might hold themselves safe from all pursuit.

CHAPTER III. SACKCLOTH AND MOTLEY

The fool and the friar had fallen a-quarrelling, and—to the shame of the friar and the glory of the fool be it spoken—their subject of contention was a woman. Now the friar, finding himself no match for the fool in words, and being as broad and stout of girth and limb as the other was puny and misshapen, he had plucked off his sandal that with it he might drive the full force of his arguments through the jester's skull. At that the fool, being a very coward, had fled incontinently through the trees.

Running, like the fool he was, with his head turned to learn whether the good father followed him, he never saw the figure that lay half-hidden in the bracken, and might never have guessed its presence but that tripping over it he shot forward, with a tinkle of bells, on to his crooked nose.

He sat up with a groan, which was answered by an oath from the man into whose sides he had dug his flying feet. The two looked at one another in surprise, tempered with anger in the one and dismay in the other.

"A good awakening to you, noble sir," quoth the fool politely; for by the mien and inches of the man he had roused, he thought that courtesy might serve him best.

The other eyed him with interest, as well he might; for an odder figure it would be hard to find in Italy.

Hunched of back, under-sized, and fragile of limb, he was arrayed

in doublet, hose and hood, the half of which was black the other crimson, whilst on his shoulders fell from that same hood—which tightly framed his ugly little face—a foliated cape, from every point of which there hung a tiny silver bell that glimmered in the sunlight, and tinkled as he moved. From under bulging brows a pair of bright eyes, set wide as an owl's, took up the mischievous humour of his prodigious mouth.

"A curse on you and him that sent you," was the answering greeting he received. Then the man checked his anger and broke into a laugh at sight of the fear that sprang into the jester's eyes.

"I crave your pardon—most humbly do I crave it, Illustrious," said the fool, still in fear. "I was pursued."

"Pursued?" echoed the other, in a tone not free from a sudden uneasiness. "And, pray, by whom?"

"By the very fiend, disguised in the gross flesh and semblance of a Dominican brother."

"Do you jest?" came the angry question.

"Jest? Had you caught his villainous sandal between your shoulders, as did I, you would know how little I have a mind to jest."

"Now answer me a plain question, if you have the wit to answer with," quoth the other, anger ever rising in his voice. "Is there hereabouts a monk?"

"Aye, is there—may a foul plague rot him!—lurking in the bushes yonder. He is over-fat to run, or you had seen him at my heels, arrayed in that panoply of avenging wrath that is the cognisance of the Church Militant."

"Go bring him hither," was the short answer.

"Gesù!" gasped the fool, in very real affright. "I'll not go near him till his anger cools—not if you made me straight and bribed me with the Patrimony of St. Peter."

The man turned from him impatiently, and rising his voice:

"Fanfulla!" he called over his shoulder, and then, after a moment's pause, again: "Olá, Fanfulla!"

"I am here, my lord," came an answering voice from behind a clump of bushes on their right, and almost immediately the very splendid youth who had gone to sleep in its shadow stood up and came round to them. At sight of the fool he paused to take stock of him, what time the fool returned the compliment with wonder-stricken interest. For however much Fanfulla's raiment might have suffered in yesternight's affray, it was very gorgeous still, and in the velvet cap upon his head a string of jewels was entwined. Yet not so much by the richness of his trappings was the fool impressed, as by the fact that one so manifestly noble should address by such a title, and in a tone of so much deference, this indifferently apparelled fellow over whom he had stumbled. Then his gaze wandered back to the man who lay supported on his elbow, and he noticed now the gold net in which his hair was coiffed, and which was by no means common to mean folk. His little twinkling eyes turned their attention full upon the face before him, and of a sudden a gleam of recognition entered them. His countenance underwent a change, and from grotesque that it had been, it became more grotesque still in its hasty assumption of reverence.

"My Lord of Aquila!" he murmured, scrambling to his feet.

Scarcely had he got erect when a hand gripped him by the shoulder, and Fanfulla's dagger flashed before his startled eyes.

"Swear on the cross of this, never to divulge his Excellency's

presence here, or take you the point of it in your foolish heart."

"I swear, I swear!" he cried, in fearful haste, his hand upon the hilt, which Fanfulla now held towards him.

"Now fetch the priest, good fool," said the Count, with a smile at the hunchback's sudden terror. "You have nothing to fear from us."

When the jester had left them to go upon his errand, Francesco turned to his companion.

"Fanfulla, you are over-cautious," he said, with an easy smile. "What shall it matter that I am recognised?"

"I would not have it happen for a kingdom while you are so near Sant' Angelo. The six of us who met last night are doomed—those of us who are not dead already. For me, and for Lodi if he was not taken, there may be safety in flight. Into the territory of Babbiano I shall never again set foot whilst Gian Maria is Duke, unless I be weary of this world. But of the seventh—yourself—you heard old Lodi swear that the secret could not have transpired. Yet should his Highness come to hear of your presence in these parts and in my company, suspicion might set him on the road that leads to knowledge."

"Ah! And then?"

"Then?" returned the other, eyeing Francesco in surprise. "Why, then, the hopes we found on you—the hopes of every man in Babbiano worthy of the name—would be frustrated. But here comes our friend the fool, and, in his wake, the friar."

Fra Domenico—so was he very fitly named, this follower of St. Dominic—approached with a solemnity that proceeded rather from his great girth than from any inflated sense of the dignity of his calling. He bowed before Fanfulla until his great crimson face was hidden, and he displayed instead a yellow, shaven crown. It was as if the sun

had set, and the moon had risen in its place.

"Are you skilled in medicine?" quoth Fanfulla shortly.

"I have some knowledge, Illustrious."

"Then see to this gentleman's wounds."

"Eh? Dio mio! You are wounded, then?" he began, turning to the Count, and he would have added other questions as pregnant, but that Aquila, drawing aside his hackaton at the shoulder, answered him quickly:

"Here, sir priest."

His lips pursed in solicitude, the friar would have gone upon his knees, but that Francesco, seeing with what labour the movement must be fraught, rose up at once.

"It is not so bad that I cannot stand," said he, submitting himself to the monk's examination.

The latter expressed the opinion that it was nowise dangerous, however much it might be irksome, whereupon the Count invited him to bind it up. To this Fra Domenico replied that he had neither unguents nor linen, but Fanfulla suggested that he might get these things from the convent of Acquasparta, hard by, and proffered to accompany him thither.

This being determined, they departed, leaving the Count in the company of the jester. Francesco spread his cloak, and lay down again, whilst the fool, craving his permission to remain, disposed himself upon his haunches like a Turk.

"Who is your master, fool?" quoth the Count, in an idle spirit.

"There is a man who clothes and feeds me, noble sir, but Folly is

my only master."

"To what end does he do this?"

"Because I pretend to be a greater fool than he, so that by contrast with me he seems unto himself wise, which flatters his conceit. Again, perhaps, because I am so much uglier than he that, again by contrast he may account himself a prodigy of beauty."

"Odd, is it not?" the Count humoured him.

"Not half so odd as that the Lord of Aquila should lie here, roughly clad, a wound in his shoulder, talking to a fool."

Francesco eyed him with a smile.

"Give thanks to God that Fanfulla is not here to hear you, or they had been your last words for pretty though he be, Messer Fanfulla is a very monster of bloodthirstiness. With me it is different. I am a man of very gentle ways, as you may have heard, Messer Buffoon. But see that you forget at once my station and my name, or you may realise how little they need buffoons in the Court of Heaven."

"My lord, forgive. I shall obey you," answered the hunchback, with a stricken manner. And then through the glade came a voice—a woman's voice, wondrous sweet and rich—calling: "Peppino! Peppino!"

"It is my mistress calling me," quoth the fool, leaping to his feet.

"So that you own a mistress, though Folly be your only master," laughed the Count. "It would pleasure me to behold the lady whose property you have the honour to be, Ser Peppino."

"You may behold her if you but turn your head," Peppino whispered.

Idly, with a smile upon his lips that was almost scornful, the Lord of

Aquila turned his eyes in the direction in which the fool was already walking. And on the instant his whole expression changed. The amused scorn was swept from his countenance, and in its place there sat now a look of wonder that was almost awe.

Standing there, on the edge of the clearing, in which he lay, he beheld a woman. He had a vague impression of a slender, shapely height, a fleeting vision of a robe of white damask, a camorra of green velvet, and a choicely wrought girdle of gold. But it was the glory of her peerless face that caught and held his glance in such ecstatic awe; the miracle of her eyes, which, riveted on his, returned his glance with one of mild surprise. A child she almost seemed, despite her height and womanly proportions, so fresh and youthful was her countenance.

Raised on his elbow, he lay there for a spell, and gazed and gazed, his mind running on visions which godly men have had of saints from Paradise.

At last the spell was broken by Peppino's voice, addressing her, his back servilely bent. Francesco bethought him of the deference due to one so clearly noble, and leaping to his feet, his wound forgotten, he bowed profoundly. A second later he gasped for breath, reeled, and swooning, collapsed supine among the bracken.

CHAPTER IV. MONNA VALENTINA

In after years the Lord of Aquila was wont to aver in all solemnity that it was the sight of her wondrous beauty set up such a disorder in his soul that it overcame his senses, and laid him swooning at her feet. That he, himself, believed it so, it is not ours to doubt, for all that we may be more prone to agree with the opinion afterwards expressed by Fanfulla and the friar—and deeply resented by the Count—that in leaping to his feet in over-violent haste his wound re-opened, and the pain of this, combining with the weak condition that resulted from his loss of blood, had caused his sudden faintness.

"Who is this, Peppe?" she asked the fool, and he, mindful of the oath he had sworn, answered her brazenly that he did not know, adding that it was—as she might see—some poor wounded fellow.

"Wounded?" she echoed, and her glorious eyes grew very pitiful. "And alone?"

"There was a gentleman here, tending him, Madonna; but he is gone with Fra Domenico to the Convent of Acquasparta to seek the necessaries to mend his shoulder."

"Poor gentleman," she murmured, approaching the fallen figure. "How came he by his hurt?"

"That, Madonna, is more than I can tell."

"Can we do nothing for him until his friends return?" was her next question, bending over the Count as she spoke. "Come, Peppino,"

she cried, "lend me your aid. Get me water from the brook, yonder."

The fool looked about him for a vessel, and his eye falling upon the Count's capacious hat, he snatched it up, and went his errand. When he returned, the lady was kneeling with the unconscious man's head in her lap. Into the hatful of water that Peppe brought her she dipped a kerchief, and with this she bathed the brow on which his long black hair lay matted and disordered.

"See how he has bled, Peppe," said she. "His doublet is drenched, and he is bleeding still! Vergine Santa!" she cried, beholding now the ugly wound that gaped in his shoulder, and turning pale at the sight. "Assuredly he will die of it—and he so young, Peppino, and so comely to behold!"

Francesco stirred, and a sigh fluttered through his pallid lips. Then he raised his heavy lids, and their glances met and held each other. And so, eyes that were brown and tender looked down into feverish languid eyes of black, what time her gentle hand held the moist cloth to his aching brow.

"Angel of beauty!" he murmured dreamily, being but half-awake as yet to his position. Then, becoming conscious of her ministrations, "Angel of goodness!" he added, with yet deeper fervour.

She had no answer for him, saving such answer—and in itself it was eloquent enough—as her blushes made, for she was fresh from a convent and all innocent of worldly ways and tricks of gallant speech.

"Do you suffer?" she asked at last.

"Suffer?" quoth he, now waking more and more, and his voice sounding a note of scorn. "Suffer? My head so pillowed and a saint from Heaven ministering to my ills? Nay, I am in no pain, Madonna, but in a joy more sweet than I have ever known."

"Gesù! What a nimble tongue!" gibed the fool from the background.

"Are you there, too, Master Buffoon?" quoth Francesco. "And Fanfulla? Is he not here? Why, now I bethink me; he went to Acquasparta with the friar." He thrust his elbow under him for more support.

"You must not move," said she, thinking that he would essay to rise.

"I would not, lady, if I must," he answered solemnly. And then, with his eyes upon her face, he boldly asked her name.

"My name," she answered readily, "is Valentina della Rovere, and I am niece to Guidobaldo of Urbino."

His brows shot up.

"Do I indeed live," he questioned, "or do I but dream the memories of some old romancer's tale, in which a wandering knight is tended thus by a princess?"

"Are you a knight?" she asked, a wonder coming now into her eyes, for even into the seclusion of her convent-life had crept strange stories of these mighty men-at-arms.

"Your knight at least, sweet lady," answered he, "and ever your poor champion if you will do me so much honour."

A crimson flush stole now into her cheeks, summoned by his bold words and bolder glances, and her eyes fell. Yet, resentment had no part in her confusion. She found no presumption in his speech, nor aught that a brave knight might not say to the lady who had succoured him in his distress. Peppe, who stood listening and marking the Count's manner, knowing the knight's station, was filled now with wonder, now with mockery; yet never interfered.

"What is your name, sir knight?" she asked, after a pause.

His eyes looked troubled, and as they shot beyond her to the fool, they caught on Peppe's face a grin of sly amusement.

"My name," he said at last, "is Francesco." And then, to prevent that she should further question him—"But tell me, Madonna," he inquired, "how comes a lady of your station here, alone with that poor fraction of a man?" And he indicated the grinning Peppe.

"My people are yonder in the woods, where we have halted for a little space. I am on my way to my uncle's court, from the Convent of Santa Sofia, and for my escort I have Messer Romeo Gonzaga and twenty spears. So that, you see, I am well protected, without counting Ser Peppe here and the saintly Fra Domenico, my confessor."

There was a pause, ended at length by Francesco.

"You will be the younger niece of his Highness of Urbino?" said he.

"Not so, Messer Francesco," she answered readily. "I am the elder."

At that his brows grew of a sudden dark.

"Can you be she whom they would wed to Gian Maria?" he exclaimed, at which the fool pricked up his ears, whilst she looked at the Count with a gaze that plainly showed how far she was from understanding him.

"You said?" she asked.

"Why, nothing," he answered, with a sigh, and in that moment a man's voice came ringing through the wood.

"Madonna! Madonna Valentina!"

Francesco and the lady turned their eyes in the direction whence

the voice proceeded, and they beheld a superbly dazzling figure entering the glade. In beauty of person and richness of apparel he was well worthy of the company of Valentina. His doublet was of grey velvet, set off with scales of beaten gold, and revealing a gold-embroidered vest beneath; his bonnet matched his doublet, and was decked by a feather that sparkled with costly gems; his gold-hilted sword was sheathed in a scabbard also of grey velvet set with jewels. His face was comely as a damsel's, his eyes blue and his hair golden.

"Behold," announced Peppino gravely, "Italy's latest translation of the Golden Ass of Apuleius."

Upon seeing the noble niece of Guidobaldo kneeling there with Francesco's head still pillowed in her lap, the new-comer cast up his arms in a gesture of dismay.

"Saints in Heaven!" he exclaimed, hurrying towards them. "What occupation have you found? Who is this ugly fellow?"

"Ugly?" was all she answered him, in accents of profound surprise.

"Who is he?" the young man insisted, his tone growing heated. "And what does he here and thus, with you? Gesù! What would his Highness say? How would he deal with me were he to learn of this? Who is the man, Madonna?"

"Why, as you see, Messer Gonzaga," she answered, with some heat, "a wounded knight."

"A knight he?" gibed Gonzaga. "A thief more likely, a prowling masnadiero. What is your name?" he roughly asked the Count.

Drawing himself a little away from Valentina, and reclining entirely upon his elbow, Francesco motioned him with a wave of the hand to come no nearer.

"I beg, lady, that you will bid your pretty page stand back a little. I am still faint, and his perfumes overpower me."

Under the mask of the polite request Gonzaga detected the mocking, contemptuous note, and it gave fuel to his anger.

"I am no page, fool," he answered, then clapping his hands together, he raised his voice to shout—"Olá, Beltrame! To me!"

"What would you do?" cried the lady, rising to confront him.

"Carry this ruffian in bonds to Urbino, as is my duty."

"Sir, you may wound your pretty hands in grasping me," replied the Count, in chill indifference.

"Ah! You would threaten me with violence, vassal?" cried the other, retreating some paces farther as he spoke. "Beltrame!" he called again. "Are you never coming?" A voice answered him from the thicket, and with a clank of steel a half-dozen men flung themselves into the glade.

"Your orders, sir?" craved he that led them, his eyes wandering to the still prostrate Count.

"Tie me up this dog," Gonzaga bade him. But before the fellow could move a foot to carry out the order Valentina barred his way.

"You shall not," she commanded, and so transformed was she from the ingenuous child that lately had talked with him, that Francesco gaped in pure astonishment. "In my uncle's name, I bid you leave this gentleman where he lies. He is a wounded knight whom I have been pleased to tend—a matter which seems to have aroused Messer Gonzaga's anger against him."

Beltrame paused, and looked from Valentina to Gonzaga, undecided.

"Madonna," said Gonzaga, with assumed humility, "your word is law with us. But I would have you consider that, what I bid Beltrame do is in the interest of his Highness, whose territory is infested by these vagabonding robbers. It is a fact that may not have reached you in your convent retreat, no more than has sufficient knowledge reached you yet—in your incomparable innocence—to distinguish between rogues and honest men. Beltrame, do my bidding."

Valentina's foot tapped the ground impatiently, and into her eyes there came a look of anger that heightened her likeness to her martial uncle. But Peppe it was who spoke.

"For all that there seem to be fools enough, already, meddling in this business," he said, in tones of mock lament, "permit that I join their number, Ser Romeo, and listen to my counsel."

"Out, fool," cried Gonzaga, cutting at him with his riding-switch, "we need not your capers."

"No, but you need my wisdom," retorted Ser Peppe, as he leapt beyond Gonzaga's reach. "Hear me, Beltrame! For all that we do not doubt Messer Gonzaga's keen discrimination in judging 'twixt a rogue and an honest man, I do promise you, as surely as though I were Fate herself, that if you obey him now and tie up that gentleman, you will yourself be tied up for it, later on, in a yet uglier fashion."

Beltrame looked alarmed, Gonzaga incredulous. Valentina thanked Peppe with her eyes, thinking that he had but hit upon a subterfuge to serve her wishes, whilst Francesco, who had now risen to his feet, looked on with an amused smile as though the matter concerned him nowise personally. And then, in the very crux of the situation, Fanfulla and Fra Domenico appeared upon the scene.

"You are, well-returned, Fanfulla!" the Count called to him, "This pretty gentleman would have had me bound."

"Have you bound?" echoed Fanfulla, in angry horror. "Upon what grounds, pray?" he demanded, turning fiercely upon Gonzaga.

Impressed by Fanfulla's lordly air, Romeo Gonzaga grew amazingly humble for one that but a moment back had been so overbearing.

"It would seem, sir, that my judgment was at fault in esteeming his condition," he excused himself.

"Your judgment?" returned the hot Fanfulla. "And who bade you judge? Go cut your milk-teeth, boy, and meddle not with men if you would live to be a man yourself some day."

Valentina smiled, Peppe laughed outright, whilst even Beltrame and his followers grinned, all of which added not a little to Gonzaga's choler. But scant though his wisdom might be, it was yet enough to dictate prudence.

"The presence of Madonna here restrains me," he answered, with elaborate dignity. "But should we meet again, I shall make bold to show you what manhood means."

"Perhaps—if by then you shall have come to it." And with a shrug Fanfulla turned to give his attention to the Count, whom Fra Domenico was already tending.

Valentina, to relieve the awkwardness of the moment, proposed to Gonzaga that he should get his escort to horse, and have her litter in readiness, so that they might resume their journey as soon as Fra Domenico should have concluded his ministrations.

Gonzaga bowed, and with a vicious glance at the strangers and an angry "Follow me!" to Beltrame and the others, he departed with the men-at-arms at his heels.

Valentina remained with Fanfulla and Peppe, whilst Fra Domenico

dressed Francesco's wound, and, presently, when the task was accomplished, they departed, leaving Fanfulla amid the Count alone. But ere she went she listened to Francesco's thanks, and suffered him to touch her ivory fingers with his lips.

There was much he might have said but that the presence of the other three restrained him. Yet some little of that much she may have seen reflected in his eyes, for all that day she rode pensive, a fond, wistful smile at the corners of her lips. And although to Gonzaga she manifested no resentment, yet did she twit him touching that mistake of his. Sore in his dignity, he liked her playful mockery little yet he liked the words in which she framed it less.

"How came you into so grievous an error, Ser Romeo?" she asked him, more than once. "How could you deem him a rogue—he with so noble a mien and so beautiful a countenance?" And without heeding the sullenness of his answers, she would lapse with a sigh once more into reflection—a thing that galled Gonzaga more, perhaps, than did her gibes.

CHAPTER V. GIAN MARIA

It was a week after the meeting 'twixt the niece of Guidobaldo and the Count of Aquila, when the latter—his wound being wellnigh healed—rode one morning under the great archway that was the main entrance to the city of Babbiano. The Captain of the Gate saluted him respectfully as he rode by, and permitted himself to marvel at the pallor of his Excellency's face. And yet, the cause was not very far to seek. It stood upon four spears, among a noisy flock of circling crows, above that very Gate—called of San Bacolo—and consisted of four detruncated human heads.

The sight of those dead faces grinning horribly, their long, matted hair fluttering like rags in the April breeze, had arrested Francesco's attention as he drew nigh. But when presently he came nearer and looked with more intentness, a shudder of recognition ran through him, and a great horror filled his soul and paled his cheek. The first of those heads was that of the valiant and well-named Ferrabraccio; the next that of Amerino Amerini; and the other two, those of his captured companions on that night at Sant' Angelo.

So it would seem that Gian Maria had been busy during the week that was sped, and that there, on the walls of Babbiano, lay rotting the only fruits which that ill-starred conspiracy was likely to bear.

For a second it entered his mind to turn back. But his stout and fearless nature drove him on, all unattended as he was, and in despite of such vague forebodings as beset him. How much, he wondered, might Gian Maria know of his own share in that mountain meeting, and how would it fare with him if his cousin was aware that it had been proposed to the Count of Aquila to supplant him?

He was not long, however, in learning that grounds were wanting for such fears as he had entertained. Gian Maria received him with even more than wonted welcome, for he laid much store by Francesco's judgment and was in sore need of it at present.

Francesco found him at table, which had been laid for him amidst the treasures of art and learning that enriched the splendid Palace library. It was a place beloved by Gian Maria for the material comforts that it offered him, and so he turned it to a score of vulgar purposes of his own, yet never to that for which it was equipped, being an utter stranger to letters and ignorant as a ploughboy.

Ensconced in a great chair of crimson leather, at a board overladen with choice viands and sparkling with crystal flagons and with vessels and dishes of gold and enamel, Francesco found his cousin, and the air that had been heavy once with the scholarly smell of parchments and musty tomes was saturated now with pungent odours of the table.

In stature Gian Maria was short and inclining, young though he was, to corpulency. His face was round and pale and flabby; his eyes blue and beady; his mouth sensual and cruel. He was dressed in a suit of lilac velvet, trimmed with lynx fur, and slashed, Spanish fashion, in the sleeves, to show the shirt of fine Rheims linen underneath. About his neck hung a gold chain, bearing an Agnus Dei, which contained a relic of the True Cross—for Gian Maria pushed his devoutness to great lengths.

His welcome of Francesco was more effusive than its wont. He bade the two servants who attended him to lay a plate for his illustrious cousin, and when Aquila shortly yet courteously declined, with the assurance that he had dined already, the Duke insisted that, at least, he should drink a Cup of Malvasia. When out of a vessel of beaten gold they had filled a goblet for the Count, his Highness bade the servants go, and relaxed—if, indeed, so much may be said of one

who never knew much dignity—before his visitor.

"I hear," said Aquila, when the first compliments were spent, "strange stories of a conspiracy in your Duchy, and on the walls at the Gate of San Bacolo I beheld four heads, of men whom I have known and honoured."

"And who dishonoured themselves ere their heads were made a banquet for the crows. There, Francesco!" He shuddered, and crossed himself. "It is unlucky to speak of the dead at table."

"Let us speak, then, of their offence alone," persisted Francesco subtly. "In what did it lie?"

"In what?" returned the Duke amusedly. His voice was thin and inclining to shrillness. "It is more than I can say. Masuccio knew. But the dog would not disclose his secret nor the names of the conspirators until his task should be accomplished and he had taken them at the treason he knew they had gathered to ripen. But," he continued, an olive poised 'twixt thumb and forefinger, "it seems they were not to be captured as easily as he thought. He told me the traitors numbered six, and that they were to meet a seventh there. The men who returned from the venture tell me too, and without shame, that there were but some six or seven that beset them. Yet they gave the Swiss trouble enough, and killed some nine of them besides a half-score of more or less grievously wounded, whilst they but slew two of their assailants and captured another two. Those were the four heads you saw at the Porta San Bacolo."

"And Masuccio?" inquired Francesco. "Has he not told you since who were those others that escaped?"

His Highness paused to masticate the olive.

"Why, there lies the difficulty," said he at length. "The dog is dead. He was killed in the affray. May he rot in hell for his obstinate

reticence. No, no!" he checked himself hastily. "He's dead, and the secret of this treason, as well as the names of the traitors, have perished with him. Yet I am a clement man, Francesco, and sorely though that dog has wronged me by his silence, I thank Heaven for the grace to say—God rest his vile soul!"

The Count flung himself into a chair, as much to dissemble such signs of relief as might show upon his face, as because he wished to sit.

"But surely Masuccio left you some information!" he exclaimed.

"The very scantiest," returned Gian Maria, in chagrined accents. "It was ever the way of that secretive vassal. Damn him! He frankly told me that if I knew, I would talk. Heard you ever of such insufferable insolence to a prince? All that he would let me learn was that there was a conspiracy afoot to supplant me, and that he was going to capture the conspirators, together with the man whom they were inviting to take my place. Ponder it, Francesco! Such are the murderous plans my loving subjects form for my undoing—I who rule them with a rod of gold, the most clement, just and generous prince in Italy. Cristo buono! Do you marvel that I lost patience and had their hideous heads set upon spears?"

"But did you not say that two of these conspirators were brought back captive?"

The Duke nodded, his mouth too full for words.

"Then, at their trial, what transpired?"

"Trial? There was no trial." Gian Maria chewed vigorously for a moment. "I tell you I was so heated with anger at this base ingratitude, that I had not even the wit to have the names of their associates tortured out of them. Within a half-hour of their arrival in Babbiano, the heads of these men whom it had pleased Heaven to deliver up to me

were where you saw them to-day."

"You sent them thus to their death?" gasped Francesco, rising to his feet and eyeing his cousin with mingled wonder and anger. "You sent men of such families as these to the headsman, without a trial? I think, Gian Maria, that you must be mad if so rashly you can shed such blood as this."

The Duke sank back in his chair to gape at his impetuous cousin. Then, in sullen anger: "To whom do you speak?" he demanded.

"To a tyrant who calls himself the most clement, just and generous prince in Italy, and who lacks the wisdom to see that he is undermining with his own hands, and by his own rash actions, a throne that is already tottering. Can you not think that this might mean a revolution? It amounts to murder, and though dukes resort to it freely enough in Italy, it is not openly and defiantly wrought, as is this."

Anger there was in the Duke's soul, but there was still more fear—so much, that it shouldered the anger aside.

"I have provided against rebellion," he announced, with an ease that he vainly strove to feel. "I have given the command of my guards to Martino Armstadt, and he has engaged for me a company of five hundred Swiss lanzknechte that were lately in the pay of the Baglioni of Perugia."

"And you deem this security?" rejoined Francesco, with a smile of scorn. "To hedge your throne with foreign spears commanded by a foreigner?"

"This and God's grace," was the pious answer.

"Bah!" answered Francesco, impatient at the hypocrisy. "Win the hearts of your people. Let that be your buckler."

"Hush!" whispered Gian Maria. "You blaspheme. Does not every

act of my self-sacrificing life point to such an aim? I live for my people. But, by my soul, they ask too much when they ask that I should die for them. If I serve those who plot against my life, as I have served these men you speak of, who shall blame me? I tell you, Francesco, I wish I might have those others who escaped, that I might do as much by them. By the living God, I do! And as for the man who was to have supplanted me——" He paused, a deadly smile on his sensual mouth completing the sentence more effectively than lay within the power of words. "Who could it have been?" he mused. "I've vowed that if Heaven will grant me that I discover him, I'll burn a candle to Santa Fosca every Saturday for a twelvemonth and go fasting on the Vigil of the Dead. Who—who could it have been, Franceschino?"

"How should I know?" returned Francesco, evading the question.

"You know so much, Checco mio. Your mind is so quick to fathom matters of this kind. Think you, now, it might have been the Duca Valentino?"

Francesco shook his head.

"When Caesar Borgia comes he will know no need to resort to such poor means. He will come in arms to reduce you by his might."

"God and the saints protect me!" gasped the Duke. "You talk of it as if he were already marching."

"Then I talk of it advisedly. The event is none so remote as you would make yourself believe. Listen, Gian Maria! I have not ridden from Aquila for just the pleasure of passing the time of day with you. Fabrizio da Lodi and Fanfulla degli Arcipreti have been with me of late."

"With you?" cried the Duke, his little eyes narrowing themselves as they glanced up at his cousin. "With you—eh?" He shrugged his shoulders and spread his palms before him. "Pish! See into what

errors even so clear a mind as mine may fall. Do you know, Francesco, that marking their absence since that conspiracy was laid, I had a half-suspicion they were connected with it." And he devoted his attention to a honeycomb.

"You have not in all your Duchy two hearts more faithful to Babbiano," was the equivocal reply. "It was on the matter of this very peril that threatens you that they came to me."

"Ah!" Gian Maria's white face grew interested.

And now the Count of Aquila talked to the Duke of Babbiano much as Fabrizio da Lodi had talked to the Count that night at Sant' Angelo. He spoke of the danger that threatened from the Borgia, of the utter lack of preparation, and of Gian Maria's contempt of the counsels given him. He alluded to the discontent rife among his subjects at this state of things, and to the urgent need to set them right. When he had done, the Duke sat silent a while, his eyes bent thoughtfully upon his platter, on which the food lay now unheeded.

"An easy thing, is it not, Francesco, to say to a man: this is wrong, and that is wrong. But who is there, pray, to set it right for me?"

"That, if you will say but the word, I will attempt to do."

"You?" cried the Duke, and far from manifesting satisfaction at having one offer himself to undertake to right this very crooked business, Gian Maria's face reflected an incredulous anger and some little scorn. "And how, my marvellous cousin, would you set about it?" he inquired, a sneer lurking in his tone.

"I would place such matters as the levying of money by taxation in the hands of Messer Despuglio, and at whatever sacrifice to your own extravagance, I would see that for months to come the bulk of these moneys is applied to the levying and arming of suitable men. I have some skill as a condottiero—leastways, so more than one foreign

prince has been forced to acknowledge. I will lead your army when I have raised it, and I will enter into alliances for you with our neighbouring States, who, seeing us armed, will deem us a power worthy of their alliance. And so, what man can do to stem the impending flood of this invasion, that will I do to defend your Duchy. Make me your gonfalonier, and in a month I will tell you whether it lies in my power or not to save your State."

The eyes of Gian Maria had narrowed more and more whilst Francesco spoke, and into his shallow face had crept an evil, suspicious look. As the Count ceased, he gave vent to a subdued laugh, bitter with mockery.

"Make you my gonfalonier?" he muttered, in consummate amusement. "And since when has Babbiano been a republic—or is it your aim to make it one, and establish yourself as its chief magistrate?"

"If you misapprehend me so——" began Francesco, but his cousin interrupted him with heightening scorn.

"Misapprehend you, Messer Franceschino? No, no. I understand you but too well." He rose suddenly from his interrupted meal, and came a step nearer his cousin. "I hear rumours of this growing love my people are manifesting for the Count of Aquila, and I have let them go unheeded. That rogue Masuccio warned me ere he died, and I answered him with my whip across his face. But I am by no means sure that I have been proceeding wisely. I had a dream two nights ago—— But let that be! When it so happens that in any State there is a man whom the people prefer to him who rules them, and when it so happens that this man is of as good blood and high birth as are you, he becomes a danger to him that sits the throne. I need scarce remind you," he added, with a horrid grin, "of how the Borgias deal with such individuals, nor need I add that a Sforza may see fit to emulate those very conclusive measures of precaution. The family of

Sforza has bred as yet no fools, nor shall I prove myself the first by placing in another's hands the power to make himself my master. You see, my gentle cousin, how transparent your aims become under my eyes. I am keen of vision, Franceschino, keen of vision!" He tapped his nose and chuckled a malicious appreciation of his own acute perceptions.

Francesco regarded him with an eye of stony scorn. He might have answered, had he been so disposed, that the Duchy of Babbiano was his to take whenever he pleased. He might have told him that, and defied him. But he went more slowly than did this man of a family that bred no fools.

"Do you know me, then, so little, Gian Maria," said he, not without bitterness, "that you think I hunger for so empty a thing as this ducal pomp you clutch so fearfully? I tell you, man, that I prefer my liberty to an imperial throne. But I waste breath with you. Yet, some day, when your crown shall have passed from you and your power have been engulfed in the Borgia's rapacious maw, remember my offer which might have saved you and which with insults you disregarded, as you disregarded the advice your older counsellors gave you."

Gian Maria shrugged his fat shoulders.

"If by that other advice you mean the counsel that I should take Guidobaldo's niece to wife, you may give ease unto your patriotic soul. I have consented to enter into this alliance. And now," he ended, with another of his infernal chuckles, "you see how little I need dread this terrible son of Pope Alexander. Allied with Urbino and the other States that are its friends, I can defy the might of Caesar Borgia. I shall sleep tranquil of nights beside my beauteous bride, secure in the protection her uncle's armies will afford me, and never needing so much as my valiant cousin's aid as my gonfalonier."

The Count of Aquila changed colour despite himself, and the

Duke's suspicious eyes were as quick to observe it as was his mind to misinterpret its meaning. He registered a vow to set a watch on this solicitous cousin who offered so readily to bear his gonfalon.

"I felicitate you, at least," said Francesco gravely, "upon the wisdom of that step. Had I known of it I had not troubled you with other proposals for the safety of your State. But, may I ask you, Gian Maria, what influences led you to a course which, hitherto, you have so obstinately refused to follow?"

The Duke shrugged his shoulders.

"They plagued me so," he lamented, with a grimace, "that in the end I consented. I could withstand Lodi and the others, but when my mother joined them with her prayers—I should say, her commands—and pointed out again my peril to me, I gave way. After all a man must wed. And since in my station he need not let his marriage weigh too much upon him, I resolved on it for the sake of security and peace."

Since it was the salvation of Babbiano that he aimed at, the Count of Aquila should have rejoiced at Gian Maria's wise resolve, and no other consideration should have tempered so encompassing a thing as that joy of his should have been. Yet, when later he left his cousin's presence, the only feeling that he carried with him was a deep and bitter resentment against the Fate that willed such things, blent with a sorrowing pity for the girl that was to wed his cousin and a growing hatred for the cousin who made him pity her.

CHAPTER VI. THE AMOROUS DUKE

From a window of the Palace of Babbiano the Lord of Aquila watched the amazing bustle in the courtyard below, and at his side stood Fanfulla degli Arcipreti, whom he had summoned from Perugia with assurances that, Masuccio being dead, no peril now menaced him.

It was a week after that interview at which Gian Maria had made known his intentions to his cousin, and his Highness was now upon the point of setting out for Urbino, to perform the comedy of wooing the Lady Valentina. This was the explanation of that scurrying of servitors and pages, that parading of men-at-arms, and that stamping of horses and mules in the quadrangle below. Francesco watched the scene with a smile of some bitterness, his companion with one of supreme satisfaction.

"Praised be Heaven for having brought his Highness at last to a sense of his duty," remarked the courtier.

"It has often happened to me," said Francesco, disregarding his companion's words, "to malign the Fates for having brought me into the world a count. But in the future I shall give them thanks, for I see how much worse it might have been—I might have been born a prince, with a duchy to rule over. I might have been as that poor man, my cousin, a creature whose life is all pomp and no real dignity, all merrymaking and no real mirth—loveless, isolated and vain."

"But," cried the amazed Fanfulla, "assuredly there are compensations?"

"You see that bustle. You know what it portends. What compensation can there be for that?"

"It is a question you should be the last to ask, my lord. You have seen the niece of Guidobaldo, and having seen her, can you still ask what compensation does this marriage offer Gian Maria?"

"Do you, then, not understand?" returned Aquila, with a wan smile. "Do you not see the tragedy of it? Is it nothing that two States, having found that this marriage would be mutually advantageous, have determined that it shall take place? That meanwhile the chief actors—the victims, I might almost call them—have no opportunity of selecting for themselves. Gian Maria goes about it resignedly. He will tell you that he has always known that some day he must wed and do his best to beget a son. He held out long enough against this alliance, but now that necessity is driving him at last, he goes about it much as he would go about any other State affair—a coronation, a banquet, or a ball. Can you wonder now that I would not accept the throne of Babbiano when it was offered me? I tell you, Fanfulla, that were I at present in my cousin's shoes, I would cast crown and purple at whomsoever had a fancy for them ere they crushed the life out of me and left me a poor puppet. Sooner than endure that hollow mockery of a life I would become a peasant or a vassal; I would delve the earth and lead a humble life, but lead it in my own way, and thank God for the freedom of it; choose my own comrades; live as I list, where I list; love as I list, where I list, and die when God pleases with the knowledge that my life had not been altogether barren. And that poor girl, Fanfulla! Think of her. She is to be joined in loveless union to such a gross, unfeeling clod as Gian Maria. Have you no pity for her?"

Fanfulla sighed, his brow clouded.

"I am not so dull but that I can see why you should reason thus to-day," said he. "These thoughts have come to you since you have seen

her."

Francesco sighed deeply.

"Who knows?" he made answer wistfully. "In the few moments that we talked together, in the little time that I beheld her, it may be that she dealt me a wound far deeper than the one to which she so mercifully sought to minister."

Now for all that in what the Lord of Aquila said touching the projected union there was a deal of justice, yet when he asserted that the chief actors were to have no opportunity of selecting for themselves, he said too much. That opportunity they were to have. It occurred three days later at Urbino, when the Duke and Valentina were brought together at the banquet of welcome given by Guidobaldo to his intended nephew-in-law. The sight of her resplendent beauty came as a joyful shock to Gian Maria, and filled him with as much impatience to possess her as did his own gross ugliness render him offensive in her eyes. Averse had she been to this wedding from the moment that it had been broached to her. The sight of Gian Maria completed her loathing of the part assigned her, and in her heart she registered a vow that sooner than become the Duchess of Babbiano, she would return to her Convent of Santa Sofia and take the veil.

Gian Maria sat beside her at the banquet, and in the intervals of eating—which absorbed him mightily—he whispered compliments at which she shuddered and turned pale. The more strenuously did he strive to please, in his gross and clumsy fashion, the more did he succeed in repelling and disgusting her, until, in the end, with all his fatuousness, he came to deem her oddly cold. Of this, anon, he made complaint to that magnificent prince, her uncle. But Guidobaldo scoffed at his qualms.

"Do you account my niece a peasant girl?" he asked. "Would you

have her smirk and squirm at every piece of flattery you utter? So that she weds your Highness what shall the rest signify?"

"I would she loved me a little," complained Gian Maria foolishly.

Guidobaldo looked him over with an eye that smiled inscrutably, and it may have crossed his mind that this coarse, white-faced Duke was too ambitious.

"I doubt not that she will," he answered, in tones as inscrutable as his glance. "So that you woo with grace and ardour, what woman could withstand your Highness? Be not put off by such modesty as becomes a maid."

Those words of Guidobaldo's breathed new courage into him. Nor ever after could he think that her coldness was other than a cloak, a sort of maidenly garment behind which modesty bade her conceal the inclinations of her heart. Reasoning thus, and having in support of it his wondrous fatuity, it so befell that the more she shunned and avoided him, the more did he gather conviction of the intensity of her affection; the more loathing she betrayed, the more proof did it afford him of the consuming quality of her passion. In the end, he went even so far as to applaud and esteem in her this very maidenly conduct.

There were hunting-parties, hawking-parties, water-parties, banquets, comedies, balls, and revels of every description, and for a week all went well at Urbino. Then, as suddenly as if a cannon had been fired upon the Palace, the festivities were interrupted. The news that an envoy of Caesar Borgia's was at Babbiano with a message from his master came like a cold douche upon Gian Maria. It was borne to him in a letter from Fabrizio da Lodi, imploring his immediate return to treat with this plenipotentiary of Valentino's.

No longer did he disregard the peril that threatened him from the all-conquering Borgia, no longer deem exaggerated by his advisers

the cause for fear. This sudden presence of Valentino's messenger, coming, too, at a time when it would almost seem as if the impending union with Urbino had spurred the Borgia to act before the alliance was established, filled him with apprehension.

In one of the princely chambers that had been set aside for his use during his visit to Urbino he discussed the tragic news with the two nobles who had accompanied him—Alvaro de Alvari and Gismondo Santi—and both of them, whilst urging him to take the advice of Lodi and return at once, urged him, too, to establish his betrothal ere he left.

"Bring the matter to an issue at once, your Highness," said Santi, "and thus you will go back to Babbiano well-armed to meet the Duca Valentino's messenger."

Readily accepting this advice, Gian Maria went in quest of Guidobaldo, and laid before him his proposals, together with the news which had arrived and which was the cause of the haste he now manifested. Guidobaldo listened gravely. In its way the news affected him as well, for he feared the might of Caesar Borgia as much as any man in Italy, and he was, by virtue of it, the readier to hasten forward an alliance which should bring another of the neighbouring states into the powerful coalition he was forming.

"It shall be as you wish," answered him the gracious Lord of Urbino, "and the betrothal shall be proclaimed to-day, so that you can bear news of it to Valentino's messenger. When you have heard this envoy, deliver him an answer of such defiance or such caution as you please. Then return in ten days' time to Urbino, and all shall be ready for the nuptials. But, first of all, go you and tell Monna Valentina."

Confident of success, Gian Maria obeyed his host, and went in quest of the lady. He gained her ante-chamber, and thence he despatched an idling page to request of her the honour of an

audience.

As the youth passed through the door that led to the room beyond, Gian Maria caught for a moment the accents of an exquisite male voice singing a love-song to the accompaniment of a lute.

"Una donna più bella assai che 'l sole..."

came the words of Petrarch, and he heard them still, though muffled, for a moment or two after the boy had gone. Then it ceased abruptly, and a pause followed, at the end of which the page returned. Raising the portière of blue and gold, he invited Gian Maria to enter.

It was a room that spoke with eloquence of the wealth and refinement of Montefeltro, from the gilding and ultramarine of the vaulted ceiling with its carved frieze of delicately inlaid woodwork, to the priceless tapestries beneath it. Above a crimson prie-dieu hung a silver crucifix, the exquisite workmanship of the famous Anichino of Ferrara. Yonder stood an inlaid cabinet, surmounted by a crystal mirror and some wonders of Murano glass. There was a picture by Mantegna, some costly cameos and delicate enamels, an abundance of books, a dulcimer which a fair-haired page was examining with inquisitive eyes, and by a window on the right stood a very handsome harp that Guidobaldo had bought his niece in Venice.

In that choice apartment of hers the Duke found Valentina surrounded by her ladies, Peppe the fool, a couple of pages, and a half-dozen gentlemen of her uncle's court. One of these—that same Gonzaga who had escorted her from the Convent of Santa Sofia—most splendidly arrayed in white taby, his vest and doublet rich with gold, sat upon a low stool, idly fingering the lute in his lap, from which Gian Maria inferred that his had been the voice that had reached him in the ante-chamber.

At the Duke's advent they all rose saving Valentina and received

him with a ceremony that somewhat chilled his ardour. He advanced; then halted clumsily, and in a clumsy manner framed a request that he might speak with her alone. In a tired, long-suffering way she dismissed that court of hers, and Gian Maria stood waiting until the last of them had passed out through the tall windows that abutted on to a delightful terrace, where, in the midst of a green square, a marble fountain flashed and glimmered in the sunlight.

"Lady," he said, when they were at last alone, "I have news from Babbiano that demands my instant return." And he approached her by another step.

In truth he was a dull-witted fellow or else too blinded by fatuity to see and interpret aright the sudden sparkle in her eye, the sudden, unmistakable expression of relief that spread itself upon her face.

"My lord," she answered, in a low, collected voice, "we shall grieve at your departure."

Fool of a Duke that he was! Blind, crass and most fatuous of wooers! Had he been bred in courts and his ears attuned to words that meant nothing, that were but the empty echoes of what should have been meant; was he so new to courtesies in which the heart had no share, that those words of Valentina's must bring him down upon his knees beside her, to take her dainty fingers in his fat hands, and to become transformed into a boorish lover of the most outrageous type?

"Shall you so?" he lisped, his glance growing mighty amorous. "Shall you indeed grieve?"

She rose abruptly to her feet.

"I beg that your Highness will rise," she enjoined him coldly, a coldness which changed swiftly to alarm as her endeavours to release her hand proved vain. For despite her struggles he held on

stoutly. This was mere coyness, he assured himself, mere maidenly artifice which he must bear with until he had overcome it for all time.

"My lord, I implore you!" she continued. "Bethink you of where you are—of who you are."

"Here will I stay until the crack of doom," he answered, with an odd mixture of humour, ardour and ferocity, "unless you consent to listen to me."

"I am ready to listen, my lord," she answered, without veiling a repugnance that he lacked the wit to see. "But it is not necessary that you should hold my hand, nor fitting that you should kneel."

"Not fitting?" he exclaimed. "Lady, you do not apprehend me rightly. Is it not fitting that all of us—be we princes or vassals—shall kneel sometimes?"

"At your prayers, my lord, yes, most fitting."

"And is not a man at his prayers when he woos? What fitter shrine in all the world than his mistress's feet?"

"Release me," she commanded, still struggling. "Your Highness grows tiresome and ridiculous."

"Ridiculous?"

His great, sensual mouth fell open. His white cheeks grew mottled, and his little eyes looked up with a mighty evil gleam in their cruel blue. A moment he stayed so, then he rose up. He released her hands as she had bidden him, but he clutched her arms instead, which was yet worse.

"Valentina," he said, in a voice that was far from steady, "why do you use me thus unkindly?"

"But I do not," she protested wearily, drawing back with a shudder from the white face that was so near her own, inspiring her with a loathing she could not repress. "I would not have your Highness look foolish, and you cannot conceive how——"

"Can you conceive how deeply, how passionately I love you?" he broke in, his grasp tightening.

"My lord, you are hurting me!"

"And are you not hurting me?" he snarled. "What is a pinched arm when compared with such wounds as your eyes are dealing me? Are you not——"

She had twisted from his grasp, and in a bound she had reached the window-door through which her attendants had passed.

"Valentina!" he cried, as he sprang after her, and it was more like the growl of a beast than the cry of a lover. He caught her, and with scant ceremony he dragged her back into the room.

At this, her latent loathing, contempt and indignation rose up in arms. Never had she heard tell of a woman of her rank being used in this fashion. She abhorred him, yet she had spared him the humiliation of hearing it from her lips, intending to fight for her liberty with her uncle. But now, since he handled her as though she had been a serving-wench; since he appeared to know nothing of the deference due to her, nothing of the delicacies of people well-born and well-bred, she would endure his odious love-making no further. Since he elected to pursue his wooing like a clown, the high-spirited daughter of Urbino promised herself that in like fashion would she deal with him.

Swinging herself free from his grasp a second time, she caught him a stinging buffet on the ducal cheek which—so greatly did it take him by surprise—all but sent him sprawling.

"Madonna!" he panted. "This indignity to me!"

"And what indignities have not I suffered at your hands?" she retorted, with a fierceness of glance before which he recoiled. And as she now towered before him, a beautiful embodiment of wrath, he knew not whether he loved her more than he feared her, yet the desire to possess her and to tame her was strong within him.

"Am I a baggage of your camps," she questioned furiously, "to be so handled by you? Do you forget that I am the niece of Guidobaldo, a lady of the house of Rovere, and that from my cradle I have known naught but the respect of all men, be they born never so high? That to such by my birth I have the right? Must I tell you in plain words, sir, that though born to a throne, your manners are those of a groom? And must I tell you, ere you will realise it, that no man to whom with my own lips I have not given the right, shall set hands upon me as you have done?"

Her eyes flashed, her voice rose, and higher raged the storm; and Gian Maria was so tossed and shattered by it that he could but humbly sue for pardon.

"What shall it signify that I am a Duke," he pleaded timidly, "since I am become a lover? What is a Duke then? He is but a man, and as the meanest of his subjects his love must take expression. For what does love know of rank?"

She was moving towards the window again, and for all that he dared not a second time arrest her by force, he sought by words to do so.

"Madonna," he exclaimed, "I implore you to hear me. In another hour I shall be in the saddle, on my way to Babbiano."

"That, sir," she answered him, "is the best news I have heard since

your coming." And without waiting for his reply, she stepped through the open window on to the terrace.

For a second he hesitated, a sense of angry humiliation oppressing his wits. Then he started to follow her; but as he reached the window the little crook-backed figure of Ser Peppe stood suddenly before him with a tinkle of bells, and a mocking grin illumining his face.

"Out of the way, fool," growled the angry Duke. But the odd figure in its motley of red and black continued where it stood.

"If it is Madonna Valentina you seek," said he, "behold her yonder."

And Gian Maria, following the indication of Peppe's lean finger, saw that she had rejoined her ladies and that thus his opportunity of speaking with her was at an end. He turned his shoulder upon the jester, and moved ponderously towards the door by which he had originally entered the room. It had been well for Ser Peppe had he let him go. But the fool, who loved his mistress dearly, and had many of the instincts of the faithful dog, loving where she loved and hating where she hated, could not repress the desire to send a gibe after the retreating figure, and inflict another wound in that much wounded spirit.

"You find it a hard road to Madonna's heart, Magnificent," he called after him. "Where your wisdom is blind be aided by the keen eyes of folly."

The Duke stood still. A man more dignified would have left that treacherous tongue unheeded. But Dignity and Gian Maria were strangers. He turned, and eyed the figure that now followed him into the room.

"You have knowledge to sell," he guessed contemptuously.

"Knowledge I have—a vast store—but none for sale, Lord Duke. Such as imports you I will bestow if you ask me, for no more than the joy of beholding you smile."

"Say on," the Duke bade him, without relaxing the grimness that tightened his flabby face.

Peppe bowed.

"It were an easy thing, most High and Mighty, to win the love of Madonna if——" He paused dramatically.

"Yes, yes. E dunque! If——?"

"If you had the noble countenance, the splendid height, the shapely limbs, the courtly speech and princely manner of one I wot of."

"Are you deriding me?" the Duke questioned, unbelieving.

"Ah, no, Highness! I do but tell you how it were possible that my lady might come to love you. Had you those glorious attributes of him I speak of, and of whom she dreams, it might be easy. But since God fashioned you such as you are—gross of countenance, fat and stunted of shape, boorish of——"

With a roar the infuriated Duke was upon him. But the fool, as nimble of legs as he was of tongue, eluded the vicious grasp of those fat hands, and leaping through the window, ran to the shelter of his mistress's petticoats.

CHAPTER VII. GONZAGA THE INSIDIOUS

Well indeed had it been for Ser Peppe had he restrained his malicious mood and curbed the mocking speech that had been as vinegar to Gian Maria's wounds. For when Gian Maria was sore he was wont to be vindictive, and on the present occasion he was something even more.

There abode with him the memory of the fool's words, and the suggestion that in the heart of Valentina was framed the image of some other man. Now, loving her, in his own coarse way, and as he understood love, the rejected Duke waxed furiously jealous of this other at whose existence Peppe had hinted. This unknown stood in his path to Valentina, and to clear that path it suggested itself to Gian Maria that the simplest method was to remove the obstacle. But first he must discover it, and to this he thought, with a grim smile, the fool might—willy-nilly—help him.

He returned to his own apartments, and whilst the preparations for his departure were toward, he bade Alvaro summon Martin Armstadt—the captain of his guard. To the latter his orders were short and secret.

"Take four men," he bade him, "and remain in Urbino after I am gone. Discover the haunts of Peppe the fool. Seize him, and bring him after me. See that you do it diligently, and let no suspicion of your task arise."

The bravo—he was little better, for all that he commanded the guards of the Duke of Babbiano—bowed, and answered in his

foreign, guttural voice that his Highness should be obeyed.

Thereafter Gian Maria made shift to depart. He took his leave of Guidobaldo, promising to return within a few days for the nuptials, and leaving an impression upon the mind of his host that his interview with Valentina had been very different from the actual.

It was from Valentina herself that Guidobaldo was to learn, after Gian Maria's departure, the true nature of that interview, and what had passed between his niece and his guest. She sought him out in his closet, whither he had repaired, driven thither by the demon of gout that already inhabited his body, and was wont to urge him at times to isolate himself from his court. She found him reclining upon a couch, seeking distraction in a volume of the prose works of Piccinino. He was a handsome man, of excellent shape, scarce thirty years of age. His face was pale, and there were dark circles round his eyes, and lines of pain about his strong mouth.

He sat up at her advent, and setting his book upon the table beside him, he listened to her angry complaints.

At first, the courtly Montefeltro inclined to anger upon learning of the roughness with which Gian Maria had borne himself. But presently he smiled.

"When all is said, I see in this no great cause for indignation," he assured her. "I acknowledge that it may lack the formality that should attend the addresses of a man in the Duke's position to a lady in yours. But since he is to wed you, and that soon, why be angered at that he seeks to pay his court like any other man?"

"I have talked in vain, then," she answered petulantly, "and I am misunderstood. I do not intend to wed this ducal clod you have chosen to be my husband."

Guidobaldo stared at her with brows raised, and wonder in his fine

eyes. Then he shrugged his shoulders a trifle wearily. This handsome and well-beloved Guidobaldo was very much a prince, so schooled to princely ways as to sometimes forget that he was a man.

"We forgive much to the impetuosity of youth," said he, very coldly. "But there are bounds to the endurance of every one of us. As your uncle and your prince, I claim a double duty from you, and you owe a double allegiance to my wishes. By my twofold authority I have commanded you to wed with Gian Maria."

The princess in her was all forgotten, and it was just the woman who answered him, in a voice of protest:

"But, Highness, I do not love him."

A shade of impatience crossed his lofty face.

"I do not remember," he made answer wearily, "that I loved your aunt. Yet we were wed, and through habit came to love each other and to be happy together."

"I can understand that Monna Elizabetta should have come to love you," she returned. "You are not as Gian Maria. You were not fat and ugly, stupid and cruel, as is he."

It was an appeal that might have won its way to a man's heart through the ever-ready channel of his vanity. But it did not so with Guidobaldo. He only shook his head.

"The matter is not one that I will argue. It were unworthy in us both. Princes, my child, are not as ordinary folk."

"In what are they different?" she flashed back at him. "Do they not hunger and thirst as ordinary folk? Are they not subject to the same ills; do they not experience the same joys? Are they not born, and do they not die, just as ordinary folk? In what, then, lies this difference that forbids them to mate as ordinary folk?"

Guidobaldo tossed his arms to Heaven, his eyes full of a consternation that clearly defied utterance. The violence of his gesture drew a gasp of pain from him. At last, when he had mastered it:

"They are different," said he, "in that their lives are not their own to dispose of as they will. They belong to the State which they were born to govern, and in nothing else does this become of so much importance as in their mating. It behoves them to contract such alliances as shall redound to the advantage of their people." A toss of her auburn head was Valentina's interpolation, but her uncle continued relentlessly in his cold, formal tones—such tones as those in which he might have addressed an assembly of his captains:

"In the present instance we are threatened—Babbiano and Urbino—by a common foe. And whilst divided, neither of us could withstand him, united, we shall combine to his overthrow. Therefore does this alliance become necessary—imperative."

"I do not apprehend the necessity," she answered, in a voice that breathed defiance. "If such an alliance as you speak of is desirable, why may it not be made a purely political one—such a one, for instance, as now binds Perugia and Camerino to you? What need to bring me into question?"

"A little knowledge of history would afford you an answer. Such political alliances are daily made, and daily broken when more profit offers in another quarter. But cemented by marriage, the tie, whilst continuing political, becomes also one of blood. In the case of Urbino and Babbiano it enters also into consideration that I have no son. It might well be, Valentina," he pursued, with a calculating coldness that revolted her, "that a son of yours would yet more strongly link the two duchies. In time both might become united under him into one great power that might vie successfully with any in Italy. Now leave me, child. As you see, I am suffering, and when it is thus with me, and this

evil tyrant has me in its clutches, I prefer to be alone."

There was a pause, and whilst his eyes were upon hers, hers were upon the ground in avoidance of his glance. A frown marred her white brow, her lips were set and her hands clenched. Pity for his physical ills fought a while with pity for her own mental torment. At last she threw back her beautiful head, and the manner of that action was instinct with insubordination.

"It grieves me to harass your Highness in such a season," she assured him, "but I must beg your indulgence. These things may be as you say. Your plans may be the noblest that were ever conceived, since to their consummation would be entailed the sacrifice of your own flesh and blood—in the person of your niece. But I will have no part in them. It may be that I lack a like nobility of soul; it may be that I am all unworthy of the high station to which I was born, through no fault of my own. And so, my lord," she ended, her voice, her face, her gesture, all imparting an irrevocable finality to her words, "I will not wed this Duke of Babbiano—no, not to cement alliances with a hundred duchies."

"Valentina!" he exclaimed, roused out of his wonted calm. "Do you forget that you are my niece?"

"Since you appear to have forgotten it."

"These woman's whims——" he began, when she interrupted him.

"Perhaps they will serve to remind you that I am a woman, and perhaps if you remember that, you may consider how very natural it is that, being a woman, I should refuse to wed for—for political ends."

"To your chamber," he commanded, now thoroughly aroused. "And on your knees beg Heaven's grace to help you to see your duty, since no words of mine prevail."

"Oh, that the Duchess were returned from Mantua," she sighed. "The good Monna Elizabetta might melt you to some pity."

"Monna Elizabetta is too dutiful herself to do aught but urge you to dutifulness. There, child," he added, in a more wheedling tone, "set aside this disobedient mood, which is unlike you and becomes you ill. You shall be wed with a splendour and magnificence that will set every princess in Italy green with envy. Your dowry is set at fifty thousand ducats, and Giuliano della Rovere shall pronounce the benediction. Already I have sent orders to Ferrara, to the incomparable Anichino, for the majestate girdle; I will send to Venice for gold leaf and——"

"But do you not heed me that I will not wed?" she broke in with passionate calm, her face white, her bosom heaving.

He rose, leaning heavily upon a gold-headed cane, and looked at her a moment without speaking, his brows contracted. Then:

"Your betrothal to Gian Maria is proclaimed," he announced in a voice cold with finality. "I have passed my word to the Duke, and your marriage shall take place so soon as he returns. Now go. Such scenes as these are wearisome to a sick man, and they are undignified."

"But, your Highness," she began, an imploring note now taking the place that lately had been held by defiance.

"Go!" he blazed, stamping his foot, and then to save his dignity—for he feared that she might still remain—he himself turned on his heel and passed from the apartment.

Left to herself, she stood there a moment, allowed a sigh to escape her, and brushed an angry tear from her brown eyes. Then, with a sudden movement that seemed to imply suppression of her mood, she walked to the door by which she entered, and left the chamber.

She went down the long gallery, whose walls glowed with the new frescoes from the wonder-working brush of Andrea Mantegna; she crossed her ante-chamber and gained the very room where some hours ago she had received the insult of Gian Maria's odious advances. She passed through the now empty room, and stepped out on to the terrace that overlooked the paradise-like gardens of the Palace.

Close by the fountain stood a white marble seat, over which, earlier that day, one of her women had thrown a cloak of crimson velvet. There she now sat herself to think out the monstrous situation that beset her. The air was warm and balmy and heavy with the scent of flowers from the garden below. The splashing of the fountain seemed to soothe her, and for a little while her eyes were upon that gleaming water, which rose high in a crystal column, then broke and fell, a shower of glittering jewels, into the broad marble basin. Then, her eyes growing tired, they strayed to the marble balustrade, where a peacock strode with overweening dignity; they passed on to the gardens below, gay with early blossoms, in their stately frames of tall, boxwood hedges, and flanked by myrtles and tall cypresses standing gaunt and black against the deep saffron of the vesper sky.

Saving the splashing of the fountain, and the occasional harsh scream of the peacock, all was at peace, as if by contrast with the tumult that raged in Valentina's soul. Then another sound broke the stillness—a soft step, crunching the gravel of the walk. She turned, and behind her stood the magnificent Gonzaga, a smile that at once reflected pleasure and surprise upon his handsome face.

"Alone, Madonna?" he said, in accents of mild wonder, his fingers softly stirring the strings of the lute he carried, and without which he seldom appeared about the Court.

"As you see," she answered, and her tone was the tone of one

whose thoughts are taken up with other things.

Her glance moved away from him again, and in a moment it seemed as if she had forgotten his presence, so absorbed grew the expression of her face.

But Gonzaga was not easily discouraged. Patience was the one virtue that Valentina more than any woman—and there had been many in his young life—had inculcated into a soul that in the main was anything but virtuous. He came a step nearer, and leant lightly against the edge of her seat, his shapely legs crossed, his graceful body inclining ever so slightly towards her.

"You are pensive, Madonna," he murmured, in his rich, caressing voice.

"Why then," she reproved him, but in a mild tone, "do you intrude upon my thoughts?"

"Because they seem sad thoughts, Madonna," he answered, glibly, "and I were a poor friend did I not seek to rouse you out of them."

"You are that, Gonzaga?" she questioned, without looking at him. "You are my friend?"

He seemed to quiver and then draw himself upright, whilst across his face there swept a shade of something that may have been good or bad or partly both. Then he leant down until his head came very near her own.

"Your friend?" quoth he. "Ah, more than your friend. Count me your very slave, Madonna."

She looked at him now, and in his countenance she saw a reflection of the ardour that had spoken in his voice. In his eyes there was a glance of burning intensity. She drew away from him, and at first he accounted himself repulsed, but pointing to the space she had

left:

"Sit here beside me, Gonzaga," she said quietly, and he, scarce crediting his own good fortune that so much favour should be showered upon him, obeyed her in a half-timid fashion that was at odd variance with his late bold words.

He laughed lightly, perhaps to cover the embarrassment that beset him, and dropping his jewelled cap, he flung one white-cased leg over the other and took his lute in his lap, his fingers again wandering to the strings.

"I have a new song, Madonna," he announced, with a gaiety that was obviously forced. "It is in ottava rima, a faint echo of the immortal Niccolò Correggio, composed in honour of one whose description is beyond the flight of human song."

"Yet you sing of her?"

"It is no better than an acknowledgment of the impossibility to sing of her. Thus——" And striking a chord or two, he began, a mezza voce:

"Quando sorriderán' in ciel
Gli occhi tuoi ai santi—"

She laid a hand upon his arm to stay him.

"Not now, Gonzaga," she begged, "I am in no humour for your song, sweet though I doubt not that it be."

A shade of disappointment and ruffled vanity crossed his face. Women had been wont to listen greedily to his strambotti, enthralled by the cunning of the words and the seductive sweetness of his voice.

"Ah, never look so glum," she cried, smiling now at his crestfallen air. "If I have not hearkened now, I will again. Forgive me, good

Gonzaga," she begged him, with a sweetness no man could have resisted. And then a sigh fluttered from her lips; a sound that was like a sob came after it, and her hand closed upon his arm.

"They are breaking my heart, my friend. Oh, that you had left me at peace in the Convent of Santa Sofia!"

He turned to her, all solicitude and gentleness, to inquire the reason of her outburst.

"It is this odious alliance into which they seek to force me with that man from Babbiano. I have told Guidobaldo that I will not wed this Duke. But as profitably might I tell Fate that I will not die. The one is as unheeding as the other."

Gonzaga sighed profoundly, in sympathy, but said nothing.

Here was a grief to which he could not minister, a grievance that he could do nothing to remove. She turned from him with a gesture of impatience.

"You sigh," she exclaimed, "and you bewail the cruelty of the fate in store for me. But you can do nothing for me. You are all words, Gonzaga. You can call yourself more than my friend—my very slave. Yet, when I need your help, what do you offer me? A sigh!"

"Madonna, you are unjust," he was quick to answer, with some heat. "I did not dream—I did not dare to dream—that it was my help you sought. My sympathy, I believed, was all that you invited, and so, lest I should seem presumptuous, it was all I offered. But if my help you need; if you seek a means to evade this alliance that you rightly describe as odious, such help as it lies in a man's power to render shall you have from me."

He spoke almost fiercely and with a certain grim confidence, for all that as yet no plan had formed itself in his mind.

Indeed, had a course been clear to him, there had been perhaps less confidence in his tone, for, after all, he was not by nature a man of action, and his character was the very reverse of valiant. Yet so excellent an actor was he as to deceive even himself by his acting, and in this suggestion of some vague fine deeds that he would do, he felt himself stirred by a sudden martial ardour, and capable of all. He was stirred, too, by the passion with which Valentina's beauty filled him—a passion that went nearer to making a man of him than Nature had succeeded in doing.

That now, in the hour of her need, she should turn so readily to him for assistance, he accepted as proof that she was not deaf to the voice of this great love he bore her, but of which he never yet had dared to show a sign. The passing jealousy that he had entertained for that wounded knight they had met at Acquasparta was laid to rest by her present attitude towards him, the knight, himself forgotten.

As for Valentina, she listened to his ready speech and earnest tone with growing wonder both at him and at herself. Her own words had been little more than a petulant outburst. Of actually finding a way to elude her uncle's wishes she had no thought—unless it lay in carrying out that threat of hers to take the veil. Now, however, that Gonzaga spoke so bravely of doing what man could do to help her to evade that marriage, the thought of active resistance took an inviting shape.

A timid hope—a hope that was afraid of being shattered before it grew to any strength—peeped now from the wondering eyes she turned on her companion.

"Is there a way, Gonzaga?" she asked, after a pause.

Now during that pause his mind had been very busy. Something of a poet, he was blessed with wits of a certain quickness, and was a man of very ready fancy. Like an inspiration an idea had come to him; out of this had sprung another, and yet another, until a chain of events

by which the frustration of the schemes of Babbiano and Urbino might be accomplished, was complete.

"I think," he said slowly, his eyes upon the ground, "that I know a way."

Her glance was now eager, her lip tremulous, and her face a little pale. She leant towards him.

"Tell me," she besought him feverishly.

He set his lute on the seat beside him, and his eyes looked round in apprehensive survey.

"Not here," he muttered. "There are too many ears in the Palace of Urbino. Will it please you to walk in the gardens? I will tell you there."

They rose together, so ready was her assent. They looked at each other for a second. Then, side by side, they passed down the wide marble steps that led from the terrace to the box-flanked walks of the gardens. Here, among the lengthening shadows, they paced in silence for a while, what time Gonzaga sought for words in which to propound his plan. At length, grown impatient, Valentina urged him with a question.

"What I counsel, Madonna," he answered her, "is open defiance."

"Such a course I am already pursuing. But whither will it lead me?"

"I do not mean the mere defiance of words—mere protestations that you will not wed Gian Maria. Listen, Madonna! The Castle of Roccaleone is your property. It is perhaps the stoutest fortress in all Italy, to-day. Lightly garrisoned and well-provisioned it might withstand a year's siege."

She turned to him, having guessed already the proposal in his mind, and for all that at first her eyes looked startled, yet presently

they kindled to a light of daring that augured well for a very stout adventure. It was a wildly romantic notion, this of Gonzaga's, worthy of a poet's perfervid brain, and yet it attracted her by its unprecedented flavour.

"Could it be done?" she wondered, her eyes sparkling at the anticipation of such a deed.

"It could, indeed it could," he answered, with an eagerness no whit less than her own. "Immure yourself in Roccaleone, and thence hurl defiance at Urbino and Babbiano, refusing to surrender until they grant your terms—that you are to marry as you list."

"And you will help me in this?" she questioned, her mind—in its innocence—inclining more and more to the mad project.

"With all my strength and wit," he answered, readily and gallantly. "I will so victual the place that it shall be able to stand siege for a whole year, should the need arise, and I will find you the men to arm it—a score will, I should think, be ample for our needs, since it is mainly upon the natural strength of the place that we rely."

"And then," said she, "I shall need a captain."

Gonzaga made her a low bow.

"If you will honour me with the office, Madonna, I shall serve you loyally whilst I have life."

A smile quivered for a second on her lips, but was gone ere the courtier had straightened himself from his bow, for far was it from her wishes to wound his spirit. But the notion of this scented fop in the role of captain, ruling a handful of rough mercenaries, and directing the operations for the resistance of an assiduous siege, touched her with its ludicrous note. Yet, if she refused him this, it was more than likely he would deem himself offended, and refuse to advance their

plans. It crossed her mind—in the full confidence of youth—that if he should fail her when the hour of action came, she was of stout enough heart to aid herself. And so she consented, whereat again he bowed, this time in gratitude. And then a sudden thought occurred to her, and with it came dismay.

"But for all this, Gonzaga—for the men and the victualling—money will be needed."

"If you will let my friendship be proven also in that——" he began.

But she interrupted him, struck suddenly with a solution to the riddle.

"No, no!" she exclaimed. His face fell a little. He had hoped to place her in his debt in every possible way, yet here was one in which she raised a barrier. Upon her head she wore a fret of gold, so richly laced with pearls as to be worth a prince's ransom. This she now made haste to unfasten with fingers that excitement set a-tremble. "There!" she cried, holding it out to him. "Turn that to money, my friend. It should yield you ducats enough for this enterprise."

It next occurred to her that she could not go alone into that castle with just Gonzaga and the men he was about to enrol. His answer came with a promptness that showed he had considered, also, that.

"By no means," he answered her. "When the time comes you must select such of your ladies—say three or four—as appear suitable and have your trust. You may take a priest as well, a page or two, and a few servants."

Thus, in the gloaming, amid the shadows of that old Italian garden, was the plot laid by which Valentina was to escape alliance with his Highness of Babbiano. But there was more than that in it, although that was all that Valentina saw. It was, too, a plot by which she might become the wife of Messer Romeo Gonzaga.

He was an exiled member of that famous Mantua family, which has bred some scoundrels and one saint. With the money which, at parting, a doting mother had bestowed upon him, he was cutting a brave figure at the Urbino court, where he was tolerated by virtue of his kinship with Guidobaldo's Duchess, Monna Elizabetta. But his means were running low, and it behoved him to turn his attention to such quarters as might yield him profit. Being poor-spirited, and—since his tastes had not inclined that way—untrained in arms, it would have been futile for him to have sought the career common to adventurers of his age. Yet an adventurer at heart he was, and since the fields of Mars were little suited to his nature, he had long pondered upon the possibilities afforded him by the lists of Cupid. Guidobaldo—purely out of consideration for Monna Elizabetta—had shown him a high degree of favour, and upon this he had been vain enough to found great hopes—for Guidobaldo had two nieces. High had these hopes run when he was chosen to escort the lovely Valentina della Rovere from the Convent of Santa Sofia to her uncle's court. But of late they had withered, since he had learnt what were her uncle's plans for this lady's future. And now, by her own action, and by the plot into which she had entered with him, they rose once more.

To thwart Guidobaldo might prove a dangerous thing, and his life might pay the forfeit if his schemes miscarried—clement and merciful though Guidobaldo was. But if they succeeded, and if by love or by force he could bring Valentina to wed him, he was tolerably confident that Guidobaldo, seeing matters had gone too far—since Gian Maria would certainly refuse to wed Gonzaga's widow—would let them be. To this end no plan could be more propitious than that into which he had lured her. Guidobaldo might besiege them in Roccaleone and might eventually reduce them by force of arms—a circumstance, however, which, despite his words, he deemed extremely remote. But if only he could wed Valentina before they capitulated, he thought that he would have little cause to fear any consequences of Guidobaldo's

wrath. After all, in so far as birth and family were concerned, Romeo Gonzaga was nowise the inferior of his Highness of Urbino. Guidobaldo had yet another niece, and he might cement with her the desired alliance with Babbiano.

Alone in the gardens of the Palace, Gonzaga paced after night had fallen, and with his eyes to the stars that began to fleck the violet sky, he smiled a smile of cunning gratification. He bethought him how well advised had been his suggestion that they should take a priest to Roccaleone. Unless his prophetic sense led him deeply into error, they would find work for that priest before the castle was surrendered.

CHAPTER VIII. AMONG THE DREGS OF WINE

And so it befell that whilst by Guidobaldo's orders the preparations for Valentina's nuptials went forward with feverish haste—whilst painters, carvers, and artificers in gold and silver applied themselves to their hurried tasks; whilst messengers raced to Venice for gold leaf and ultramarine for the wedding-chests whilst the nuptial bed was being brought from Rome and the chariot from Ferrara; whilst costly stuffs were being collected, and the wedding-garments fashioned—the magnificent Romeo Gonzaga was, on his side, as diligently contriving to render vain all that toil of preparation.

On the evening of the third day of his conspiring he sat in the room allotted to him in the Palace of Urbino, and matured his plans. And so well pleased was he with his self-communion that, as he sat at his window, there was a contented smile upon his lips.

He allowed his glance to stray adown the slopes of that arid waste of rocks, to the River Metauro, winding its way to the sea, through fertile plains, and gleaming here silver and yonder gold in the evening light. Not quite so complacently would he have smiled had he deemed the enterprise upon which he was engaging to be of that warlike character which he had represented to Valentina. He did not want for cunning, nor for judgment of the working of human minds, and he very reasonably opined that once the Lady Valentina immured herself in Roccaleone and sent word to her uncle that she would not wed Gian Maria, nor return to the Court of Urbino until he passed her his ducal word that she should hear no more of the union, the Duke would be the first to capitulate.

He contended that this might not happen at once—nor did he wish it to; messages would pass, and Guidobaldo would seek by cajolery to win back his niece. This she would resist, and, in the end her uncle would see the impassable nature of the situation, and agree to her terms that it might be ended. That it should come to arms, and that Guidobaldo should move to besiege Roccaleone, he did not for a moment believe—for what manner of ridicule would he not draw upon himself from the neighbouring States? At the worst, even if a siege there was, it would never be carried out with the rigour of ordinary warfare; there would be no assaults, no bombarding; it would be a simple investment, with the object of intercepting resources, so as to starve the garrison into submission—for they would never dream of such victualling as Gonzaga was preparing.

Thus communed Gonzaga with himself, and the smile enlivening the corners of his weak mouth grew more thoughtful. He dreamed great dreams that evening; he had wondrous visions of a future princely power that should come to be his own by virtue of this alliance that he was so skilfully encompassing—a fool in a fool's paradise, with his folly for only company.

But for all that, his dreams were wondrous sweet to indulge and his visions truly alluring to contemplate. There were plans to be formed and means to be devised for the flight to Roccaleone. There were calculations to be made; the estimating of victuals, arms, and men; and once these calculations were complete, there were all these things to be obtained. The victuals he had already provided for, whilst of arms he had no need to think; Roccaleone should be well stocked with them. But the finding of the men gave him some concern. He had decided to enrol a score, which was surely the smallest number with which he could make a fair show of being martially in earnest. But even though the number was modest, where was he to find twenty fellows who reeked so little of their lives as to embark upon such an enterprise—even if lured by generous pay—and thereby incur the

ducal displeasure of Guidobaldo?

He dressed himself with sober rigour for once in his foppish life, and descended, after night had fallen, to a tavern in a poor street behind the Duomo, hoping that there, among the dregs of wine, he might find what he required.

By great good fortune he chanced upon an old freebooting captain, who once had been a meaner sort of condottiero, but who was sorely reduced by bad fortune and bad wine.

The tavern was a dingy, cut-throat place, which the delicate Gonzaga had not entered without a tremor, invoking the saints' protection, and crossing himself ere he set foot across the threshold. Some pieces of goat were being cooked on the embers, in a great fireplace at the end of the room farthest from the door. Before this, Ser Luciano—the taverner—squatted on his heels and fanned so diligently that a cloud of ashes rose ceiling high and spread itself, together with the noisome smoke, throughout the squalid chamber. A brass lamp swung from the ceiling, and shone freely through that smoke, as shines the moon through an evening mist. So foully stank the place that at first Gonzaga was moved to get him thence. Only the reflection that nowhere in Urbino was he as likely as here to find the thing he sought, impelled him to stifle his natural squeamishness and remain. He slipped upon some grease, and barely saved himself from measuring his length upon that filthy floor, a matter which provoked a malicious guffaw from a tattered giant who watched with interest his mincing advent.

Perspiring, and with nerves unstrung, the courtier picked his way to a table by the wall, and seated himself upon the coarse deal bench before it, praying that he might be left its sole occupant.

On the opposite wall hung a blackened crucifix and a small holy-water stoup that had been dry for a generation, and was now a

receptacle for dust and a withered sprig of rosemary. Immediately beneath this—in the company of a couple of tatterdemalions worthy of him—sat the giant who had mocked his escape from falling, and as Gonzaga took his seat he heard the fellow's voice, guttural, bottle-thickened and contentious.

"And this wine, Luciano? Sanguè della Madonna! Will you bring it before dropping dead, pig?"

Gonzaga shuddered and would have crossed himself again for protection against what seemed a very devil incarnate, but that the ruffian's blood-shot eye was set upon him in a stony stare.

"I come, cavaliere, I come," cried the timid host, leaping to his feet, and leaving the goat to burn while he ministered to the giant's unquenchable thirst.

The title caused Gonzaga to start, and he bent his eyes again on the man's face. He found it villainous of expression, inflamed and blotched; the hair hung matted about a bullet head, and the eyes glared fiercely from either side of a pendulous nose. Of the knightly rank by which the taverner addressed him the fellow bore no outward signs. Arms he carried, it is true; a sword and dagger at his belt, whilst beside him on the table stood a rusty steel-cap. But these warlike tools served only to give him the appearance of a roving masnadiero or a cut-throat for hire. Presently abandoning the contemplation of Gonzaga he turned to his companions, and across to the listener floated a coarse and boasting tale of a plunderous warfare in Sicily ten years ago. Gonzaga became excited. It seemed indeed as if this were man who might be useful to him. He made pretence to sip the wine Luciano had brought him, and listened avidly to that swashbuckling story, from which it appeared that this knave had once been better circumstanced and something of a leader. Intently he listened, and wondered whether such men as he boasted he had led in that campaign were still to be found and could

be brought together.

At the end of perhaps a half-hour the two companions of that thirsty giant rose and took their leave of him. They cast a passing glance upon Gonzaga, and were gone.

A little while he hesitated. The ruffian seemed to have lapsed into a reverie, or else he slept with open eyes. Calling up his courage the gallant rose at last and moved across the room. All unversed in tavern ways was the magnificent Gonzaga, and he who at court, in ballroom or in antechamber, was a very mirror of all the graces of a courtier, felt awkward here and ill at ease.

At length, summoning his wits to his aid:

"Good sir," said he, with some timidity, "will you do me the honour to share a flagon with me?"

The ruffian's eye, which but a moment back had looked vacuous and melancholy, now quickened until it seemed ablaze. He raised his bloodshot orbs and boldly encountered Gonzaga's uneasy glance. His lips fell apart with an anticipatory smack, his back stiffened, and his head was raised until his chin took on so haughty a tilt that Gonzaga feared his proffered hospitality was on the point of suffering a scornful rejection.

"Will I share a flagon?" gasped the fellow, as, being the sinner that he was and knew himself to be, he might have gasped: "Will I go to Heaven?" "Will I—will I——?" He paused, and pursed his lips. His eyebrows were puckered and his expression grew mighty cunning as again he took stock of this pretty fellow who offered flagons of wine to down-at-heel adventurers like himself. He had all but asked what was to be required of him in exchange for this, when suddenly he bethought him—with the knavish philosophy adversity had taught him—that were he told for what it was intended that the wine should bribe

him, and did the business suit him not, he should, in the confession of it, lose the wine; whilst did he but hold his peace until he had drunk, it would be his thereafter to please himself about the business when it came to be proposed.

He composed his rugged features into the rude semblance of a smile.

"Sweet young sir," he murmured, "sweet, gentle and most illustrious lord, I would share a hogshead with such a nobleman as you."

"I am to take it that you will drink?" quoth Gonzaga, who had scarce known what to make of the man's last words.

"Body of Bacchus! Yes. I'll drink with you gentile signorino, until your purse be empty or the world run dry." And he leered a mixture of mockery and satisfaction.

Gonzaga, still half uncertain of his ground, called the taverner and bade him bring a flagon of his best. While Luciano was about the fetching of the wine, constraint sat upon that oddly discordant pair.

"It is a chill night," commented Gonzaga presently, seating himself opposite his swashbuckler.

"Young sir, your wits have lost their edge. The night is warm.

"I said," spluttered Gonzaga, who was unused to contradiction from his inferiors, and wished now to assert himself, "that the night is chill."

"You lied, then," returned the other, with a fresh leer, "for, as I answered you, the night is warm. Piaghe di Cristo! I am an ill man to contradict, my pretty gallant, and if I say the night is warm, warm it shall be though there be snow on Mount Vesuvius."

The courtier turned pink at that, and but for the arrival of the taverner with the wine, it is possible he might have done an unconscionable

rashness. At sight of the red liquor the fury died out of the ruffler's face.

"A long life, a long thirst, a long purse, and a short memory!" was his toast, into whose cryptic meaning Gonzaga made no attempt to pry. As the fellow set down his cup, and with his sleeve removed the moisture from his unshorn mouth, "May I not learn," he inquired, "whose hospitality I have the honour of enjoying?"

"Heard you ever of Romeo Gonzaga?"

"Of Gonzaga, yes; though of Romeo Gonzaga never. Are you he?"

Gonzaga bowed his head.

"A noble family yours," returned the swashbuckler, in a tone that implied his own to be as good. "Let me name myself to you. I am Ercole Fortemani," he said, with the proud air of one who announced himself an emperor.

"A formidable name," said Gonzaga, in accents of surprise, "and it bears a noble sound."

The great fellow turned on him in a sudden anger.

"Why that astonishment?" he blazed. "I tell you my name is both noble and formidable, and you shall find me as formidable as I am noble. Diavolo! Seems it incredible?"

"Said I so?" protested Gonzaga.

"You had been dead by now if you had, Messer Gonzaga. But you thought so, and I may take leave to show you how bold a man it needs to think so without suffering."

Ruffled as a turkey-cock, wounded in his pride and in his vanity, Ercole hastened to enlighten Gonzaga on his personality.

"Learn, sir," he announced, "that I am Captain Ercole Fortemani. I held that rank in the army of the Pope. I have served the Pisans and the noble Baglioni of Perugia with honour and distinction. I have commanded a hundred lances of Gianinoni's famous free-company. I have fought with the French against the Spaniards, and with the Spaniards against the French, and I have served the Borgia, who is plotting against both. I have trailed a pike in the emperor's following, and I have held the rank of captain, too, in the army of the King of Naples. Now, young sir, you have learned something of me, and if my name is not written in letters of fire from one end of Italy to the other, it is—Body of God!—because the hands that hired me to the work garnered the glory of my deeds."

"A noble record," said Gonzaga, who had credulously absorbed that catalogue of lies, "a very noble record."

"Not so," the other contradicted, for the lust of contradiction that was a part of him. "A great record, if you will, to commend me to hireling service. But you may not call the service of a hireling noble."

"It is a matter we will not quarrel over," said Gonzaga soothingly. The man's ferocity was terrific.

"Who says that we shall not?" he demanded. "Who will baulk me if I have a mind to quarrel over it? Answer me!" and he half rose from his seat, moved by the anger into which he was lashing himself. "But patience!" he broke off, subsiding on a sudden. "I take it, it was not out of regard for my fine eyes, nor drawn by the elegance of my apparel"—and he raised a corner of his tattered cloak—"nor yet because you wish to throw a main with me, that you have sought my acquaintance, and called for this wine. You require service of me?"

"You have guessed it."

"A prodigious discernment, by the Host!" He seemed to incline

rather tediously to irony. Then his face grew stern, and he lowered his voice until it was no more than a growling whisper. "Heed me, Messer Gonzaga. If the service you require be the slitting of a gullet or some kindred foul business, which my seeming neediness leads you to suppose me ripe for, let me counsel you, as you value your own skin, to leave the service unmentioned, and get you gone."

In hasty, frantic, fearful protest were Gonzaga's hands outspread.

"Sir, sir—I—I could not have thought it of you," he spluttered, with warmth, much of which was genuine, for it rejoiced him to see some scruples still shining in the foul heap of this man's rascally existence. A knave whose knavery knew no limits would hardly have suited his ends. "I do need a service, but it is no dark-corner work. It is a considerable enterprise, and one in which, I think, you should prove the very man I need."

"Let me know more," quoth Ercole grandiloquently.

"I need first your word that should the undertaking prove unsuited to you, or beyond you, you will respect the matter, and keep it secret."

"Body of Satan! No corpse was ever half so dumb as I shall be."

"Excellent! Can you find me a score of stout fellows to form a bodyguard and a garrison, who, in return for good quarters—perchance for some weeks—and payment at four times the ordinary mercenaries' rate, will be willing to take some risk, and chance even a brush with the Duke's forces?"

Ercole blew out his mottled cheeks until Gonzaga feared that he would burst them.

"It's outlawry!" he roared, when he had found his voice. "Outlawry, or I'm a fool."

"Why, yes," confessed Gonzaga. "It is outlaw matter of a kind. But

the risk is slender."

"Can you tell me no more?"

"I dare not."

Ercole emptied his wine-cup at a draught and splashed the dregs on to the floor. Then, setting down the empty vessel, he sat steeped in thought awhile. Growing impatient:

"Well," cried Gonzaga at last, "can you help me? Can you find the men?"

"If you were to tell me more of the nature of this service you require, I might find a hundred with ease."

"As I have said—I need but a score."

Ercole looked mighty grave, and thoughtfully rubbed his long nose.

"It might be done," said he, after a pause. "But we shall have to look for desperate knaves; men who are already under a ban, and to whom it will matter little to have another item added to their indebtedness to the law should they fall into its talons. How soon shall you require this forlorn company?"

"By to-morrow night."

"I wonder——" mused Ercole. He was counting on his fingers, and appeared to have lapsed into mental calculations. "I could get half-a-score or a dozen within a couple of hours. But a score——" Again he paused, and again he fell to thinking. At last, more briskly: "Let us hear what pay you offer me, to thrust myself thus blindfolded into this business of yours as leader of the company you require?" he asked suddenly.

Gonzaga's face fell at that. Then he suddenly stiffened, and put on

an expression of haughtiness.

"It is my intent to lead this company myself," he loftily informed the ruffler.

"Body of God!" gasped Ercole, upon whose mind intruded a grotesque picture of such a company as he would assemble, being led by this mincing carpet-knight. Then recollecting himself: "If that be so," said he, "you had best, yourself, enrol it. Felicissima notte!" And he waved him a farewell across the table.

Here was a poser for Gonzaga. How was he to go about such a business as that? It was beyond his powers. Thus much he protested frankly.

"Now attend to me, young sir," was the other's answer. "The matter stands thus: If I can repair to certain friends of mine with the information that an affair is afoot, the particulars of which I may not give them, but in which I am to lead them myself, sharing such risk as there may be, I do not doubt but that by this time to-morrow I can have a score of them enrolled—such is their confidence in Ercole Fortemani. But if I take them to enter a service unknown, under a leader equally unknown, the forming of such a company would be a mighty tedious matter."

This was an argument to the force of which Gonzaga could not remain insensible. After a moment's consideration, he offered Ercole fifty gold florins in earnest of good faith and the promise of pay, thereafter, at the rate of twenty gold florins a month for as long as he should need his services and Ercole, who in all his free-lancing days had never earned the tenth of such a sum, was ready to fall upon this most noble gentleman's neck, and weep for very joy and brotherly affection.

The matter being settled, Gonzaga produced a heavy bag which

gave forth a jangle mighty pleasant to the ears of Fortemani, and let it drop with a chink upon the table.

"There are a hundred florins for the equipment of this company. I do not wish to have a regiment of out-at-elbow tatterdemalions at my heels." And his eye swept in an uncomplimentary manner over Ercole's apparel. "See that you dress them fittingly."

"It shall be done, Magnificent," answered Ercole, with a show of such respect as he had not hitherto manifested. "And arms?"

"Give them pikes and arquebuses, if you will; but nothing more. The place we are bound for is well stocked with armour—but even that may not be required."

"May not be required?" echoed the more and more astonished swashbuckler. Were they to be paid on so lordly a scale, clothed and fed, to induce them upon a business that might carry no fighting with it? Surely he had never sold himself into a more likely or promising service, and that night he dreamt in his sleep that he was become a gentleman's steward, and that at his heels marched an endless company of lacqueys in flamboyant liveries. On the morrow he awoke to the persuasion that at last, of a truth, was his fortune made, and that hereafter there would be no more pike-trailing for his war-worn old arms.

Conscientiously he set about enrolling the company, for, in his way, this Ercole Fortemani was a conscientious man—boisterous and unruly if you will; a rogue, in his way, with scant respect for property; not above cogging dice or even filching a purse upon occasion when hard driven by necessity—for all that he was gently born and had held honourable employment; a drunkard by long habit, and a swaggering brawler upon the merest provocation. But for all that, riotous and dishonest though he might be in the general commerce of life, yet to the hand that hired him he strove—not always successfully, perhaps,

but, at least, always earnestly—to be loyal.

CHAPTER IX. THE "TRATTA DI CORDE"

Whilst the bustle of preparation went on briskly in Urbino, Gian Maria, on his side, was rapidly disposing of affairs in Babbiano, that he might return to the nuptials for which he was impatient. But he had chanced upon a deeper tangle than he had reckoned with, and more to do than he had looked for.

On the day of his departure from Urbino, he had ridden as far as Cagli, and halted at the house of the noble Messer Valdicampo. This had been placed at his disposal, and there he proposed to lie the night. They had supped—the Duke, de' Alvares, Gismondo Santi, Messer Valdicampo, his wife and two daughters, and a couple of friends, potential citizens of Cagli, whom he had invited, that they might witness the honour that was being done his house. It waxed late, and the torpor that ensues upon the generous gratification of appetite was settling upon the company when Armstadt—Gian Maria's Swiss captain—entered and approached his master with the air of a man who is the bearer of news. He halted a pace or two from the Duke's high-backed chair, and stood eyeing Gian Maria in stupid patience.

"Well, fool?" growled the Duke, turning his head.

The Swiss approached another step. "They have brought him, Highness," he said in a confidential whisper.

"Am I a wizard that I must read your thoughts?" hectored Gian Maria. "Who has brought whom?"

Armstadt eyed the company in hesitation. Then, stepping close to the Duke, he murmured in his ear:

"The men I left behind have brought the fool—Ser Peppe."

A sudden brightening of the eye showed that Gian Maria understood. Without apology to the board, he turned and whispered back to his captain to have the fellow taken to his chamber, there to await him. "Let a couple of your knaves be in attendance, and do you come too, Martino."

Martin bowed, and withdrew, whereupon Gian Maria found grace to crave his host's pardon, with the explanation that the man had brought him news he had been expecting. Valdicampo, who for the honour of having a Duke sleep beneath his roof would have stomached improprieties far more flagrant, belittled the matter and dismissed it. And presently Gian Maria rose with the announcement that he had far to journey on the morrow, and so, with his host's good leave, would be abed.

Valdicampo, himself, then played the part of chamberlain, and taking up one of the large candle branches, he lighted the Duke to his apartments. He would have carried his good offices, and his candles, as far as Gian Maria's very bed-chamber, but that in the ante-room his Highness, as politely as might be, bade him set down the lights and leave him.

The Duke remained standing for a moment, deliberating whether to afford knowledge to Alvari and Santi—who had followed him and stood awaiting his commands—of what he was about to do. In the end he decided that he would act alone and upon his sole discretion. So he dismissed them.

When they had gone and he was quite alone, he clapped his hands together, and in answer to that summons the door of his bedroom

opened, revealing Martin Armstadt on the threshold.

"He is there?" inquired the Duke.

"Awaiting your Highness," answered the Swiss, and he held the door for Gian Maria to enter.

The bedchamber apportioned the Duke in the Palazzo Valdicampo was a noble and lofty room, in the midst of which loomed the great carved bed of honour, with its upright pillars and funereal canopy.

On the overmantel stood two five-armed sconces with lighted tapers. Yet Gian Maria did not seem to deem that there was light enough for such purpose as he entertained, for he bade Martin fetch him the candelabra that had been left behind. Then he turned his attention to the group standing by the window, where the light from the overmantel fell full upon it.

This consisted of three men, two being mercenaries of Armstadt's guard, in corselet and morion, and the third, who stood captive between, the unfortunate Ser Peppe. The fool's face was paler than its wont, whilst the usual roguery had passed from his eyes and his mouth, fear having taken possession of its room. He met the Duke's cruel glance with one of alarm and piteous entreaty.

Having assured himself that Peppe had no weapons, and that his arms were pinioned behind him, Gian Maria bade the two guards withdraw, but hold themselves in readiness in the ante-chamber with Armstadt. Then he turned to Peppe with a scowl on his low brow.

"You are not so merry as you were this morning, fool," he scoffed.

Peppino squirmed a little, but his nature, schooled by the long habit of jest, prompted a bold whimsicality in his reply.

"The circumstances are scarcely as propitious—to me. Your Highness, though, seems in excellent goodhumour."

Gian Maria looked at him angrily a moment. He was a slow-witted man, and he could devise no ready answer, no such cutting gibe as it would have pleased him to administer. He walked leisurely to the fire-place, and leant his elbow on the overmantel.

"Your humour led you into saying some things for which I should be merciful if I had you whipped."

"And, by the same reasoning, charitable if you had me hanged," returned the fool dryly, a pale smile on his lips.

"Ah! You acknowledge it?" cried Gian Maria, never seeing the irony intended. "But I am a very clement prince, fool."

"Proverbially clement," the jester protested, but he did not succeed this time in excluding the sarcasm from his voice.

Gian Maria shot him a furious glance.

"Are you mocking me, animal? Keep your venomous tongue in bounds, or I'll have you deprived of it."

Peppe's face turned grey at the threat, as well it might—for what should such a one as he do in the world without a tongue?

Seeing him dumb and stricken, the Duke continued:

"Now, for all that you deserve a hanging for your insolence, I am willing that you should come by no hurt so that you answer truthfully such questions as I have for you."

Peppino's grotesque figure was doubled in a bow.

"I await your questions, glorious lord," he answered.

"You spoke——" the Duke hesitated a moment, writhing inwardly at the memory of the exact words in which the fool had spoken. "You

spoke this morning of one whom the Lady Valentina had met."

The fear seemed to increase on the jester's face. "Yes," he answered, in a choking voice.

"Where did she meet this knight you spoke of, and in such wondrous words of praise described to me?"

"In the woods at Acquasparta, where the river Metauro is no better than a brook. Some two leagues this side of Sant' Angelo."

"Sant' Angelo!" echoed Gian Maria, starting at the very mention of the place where the late conspiracy against him had been hatched. "And when was this?"

"On the Wednesday before Easter, as Monna Valentina was journeying from Santa Sofia to Urbino."

No word spake the Duke in answer. He stood still, his head bowed, and his thoughts running again on that conspiracy. The mountain fight in which Masuccio had been killed had taken place on the Tuesday night, and the conviction—scant though the evidence might be—grew upon him that this man was one of the conspirators who had escaped.

"How came your lady to speak with this man—was he known to her?" he inquired at last.

"No, Highness; but he was wounded, and so aroused her compassion. She sought to minister to his hurt."

"Wounded?" cried Gian Maria, in a shout. "Now, by God, it is as I suspected. I'll swear he got that wound the night before at Sant' Angelo. What was his name, fool? Tell me that, and you shall go free."

For just a second the hunchback seemed to hesitate. He stood in awesome fear of Gian Maria, of whose cruelties some ghastly tales

were told. But in greater fear he stood of the eternal damnation he might earn did he break the oath he had plighted not to divulge that knight's identity.

"Alas!" he sighed, "I would it might be mine to earn my freedom at so light a price; yet it is one that ignorance will not let me pay. I do not know his name."

The Duke looked at him searchingly and suspiciously.

Dull though he was by nature, eagerness seemed now to have set a cunning edge upon his wits, and suspicion had led him to observe the fool's momentary hesitation.

"Of what appearance was he? Describe him to me. How was he dressed? What was the manner of his face?"

"Again, Lord Duke, I cannot answer you. I had but the most fleeting glimpse of him."

The Duke's sallow countenance grew very evil-looking, and an ugly smile twisted his lip and laid bare his strong white teeth.

"So fleeting that no memory of him is left you?" quoth he.

"Precisely, Highness."

"You lie, you filth," Gian Maria thundered in a towering rage. "It was but this morning that you said his height was splendid, his countenance noble, his manner princely, his speech courtly, and—I know not what besides. Yet now you tell me—you tell me—that your glimpse of him was so fleeting that you cannot describe him. You know his name, rogue, and I will have it from you, or else——"

"Indeed, indeed, most noble lord, be not incensed——" the fool began, in fearful protestation. But the Duke interrupted him.

"Incensed?" he echoed, his eyes dilating in a sort of horror at the notion. "Do you dare impute to me the mortal sin of choler? I am not incensed; there is no anger in me." He crossed himself, as if to exorcise the evil mood if it indeed existed, and devotedly bowing his head and folding his hands—"Libera me a malo, Domine!" he murmured audibly. Then, with a greater fierceness than before—"Now," he demanded, "will you tell me his name?"

"I would I could," the terrified hunchback began. But at that the Duke turned from him with a shrug of angry impatience, and clapping his hands together:

"Olá! Martino!" he called. Instantly the door opened, and the Swiss appeared. "Bring in your men and your rope."

The captain turned on his heel, and simultaneously the fool cast himself at Gian Maria's feet.

"Mercy, your Highness!" he wailed. "Do not have me hanged. I am _____"

"We are not going to hang you," the Duke broke in coldly. "Dead you would indeed be dumb, and avail us nothing. We want you alive, Messer Peppino—alive and talkative; we find you very reserved for a fool. But we hope to make you speak."

On his knees, Peppe raised his wild eyes to Heaven.

"Mother of the Afflicted," he prayed, at which the Duke broke into a contemptuous laugh.

"What has the Heavenly Mother to do with such filth as you? Make your appeals to me. I am the more immediate arbiter of your fate. Tell me the name of that man you met in the woods, and all may yet be well with you."

Peppino knelt in silence, a cold sweat gathering on his pale brow,

and a horrid fear tightening at his heart and throat.

And yet greater than this horror they were preparing for him was the horror of losing his immortal soul by a breach of the solemn oath he had sworn. Gian Maria turned from him, at last, to his bravi, who now entered silently and with the air of men who knew the work expected of them. Martino mounted the bed, and swung for an instant from the framework of the canopy.

"It will hold, Highness," he announced.

Gian Maria bade him, since that was so, remove the velvet hangings, whilst he despatched one of the men to see that the ante-chamber door was closed, so that no cry should penetrate to the apartments of the Valdicampo household.

In a few seconds all was ready, and Peppino was rudely lifted from his knees and from the prayers he had been pattering to the Virgin to lend him strength in this hour of need.

"For the last time, sir fool," quoth the Duke, "will you tell us his name?"

"Highness, I cannot," answered Peppe, for all that terror was freezing his very blood.

A light of satisfaction gleamed now in Gian Maria's eyes.

"So you know it!" he exclaimed. "You no longer protest your ignorance, but only that you cannot tell me. Up with him, Martino."

In a last pitiable struggle against the inevitable, the fool broke from his guards, and flung himself towards the door. One of the burly Swiss caught him by the neck in a grip that made him cry out with pain. Gian Maria eyed him with a sinister smile, and Martin proceeded to fasten one end of the rope to his pinioned wrists. Then they led him,

shivering to the great bed. The other end of the cord was passed over one of the bared arms of the canopy-frame. This end was grasped by the two men-at-arms. Martin stood beside the prisoner. The Duke flung himself into a great carved chair, an air of relish now investing his round, pale face.

"You know what is about to befall you," he said, in tones of chilling indifference. "Will you speak before we begin?"

"My lord," said the fool, in a voice that terror was throttling, "you are a good Christian, a loyal son of Mother Church, and a believer in the eternal fires of hell?"

A frown settled on Gian Maria's brow. Was the fool about to intimidate him with talk of supernatural vengeance?

"Thus," Peppe continued, "you will perhaps be merciful when I confess my position. I made most solemn oath to the man I met at Acquasparta on that luckless day, that I would never reveal his identity. What am I to do? If I keep my oath, you will torture me to death perhaps. If I break it, I shall be damned eternally. Have mercy, noble lord, since now you know how I am placed."

The smile broadened on Gian Maria's face, and the cruelty of his mouth and eyes seemed intensified by it. The fool had told him that which he would have given much to learn. He had told him that this man whose name he sought, had so feared that his presence that day at Acquasparta should become known, that he had bound the fool by oath not to divulge the secret of it. Of what he had before suspected he was now assured. The man in question was one of the conspirators; probably the very chief of them. Nothing short of the fool's death under torture would now restrain him from learning the name of that unknown who had done him the double injury of conspiring against him, and—if the fool were to be believed—of capturing the heart of Valentina.

"For the damnation of your soul I shall not be called to answer," he said at last. "Care enough have I to save my own—for temptations are many and this poor flesh is weak. But it is this man's name I need, and—by the five wounds of Lucia of Viterbo!—I will have it. Will you speak?"

Something like a sob shook the poor fool's deformed frame. But that was all. With bowed head he preserved a stubborn silence. The Duke made a sign to the men, and instantly the two of them threw their weight upon the rope, hoisting Peppe by his wrists until he was at the height of the canopy itself. That done, they paused, and turned their eyes upon the Duke for further orders. Again Gian Maria called upon the fool to answer his questions; but Peppe, a writhing, misshapen mass from which two wriggling legs depended, maintained a stubborn silence.

"Let him go," snarled Gian Maria, out of patience. The men released the rope, and allowed some three feet of it to run through their hands. Then they grasped it again, so that Peppe's sudden fall was as suddenly arrested by a jerk that almost wrenched his arms from their sockets. A shriek broke from him at that exquisite torture, and he was dragged once more to the full height of the canopy.

"Will you speak now?" asked Gian Maria coldly, amusedly almost. But still the fool was silent, his nether lip caught so tightly in his teeth that the blood trickled from it adown his chin. Again the Duke gave the signal, and again they let him go. This time they allowed him a longer drop, so that the wrench with which they arrested it was more severe than had been the first.

Peppe felt his bones starting from their joints, and it was as if a burning iron were searing him at shoulder, elbow and wrist.

"Merciful God!" he screamed. "Oh, have pity, noble lord."

But the noble lord had him hoisted anew to the canopy. Writhing there in the extremity of his anguish, the poor hunchback poured forth from frothing lips a stream of curses and imprecations, invoking Heaven and hell to strike his tormentors dead.

But the Duke, from whose demeanour it might be inferred that he was inured to the effect produced by this form of torture, looked on with a cruel smile, as of one who watches the progress of events towards the end that he desires and has planned. He was less patient, and his signal came more quickly now. For a third time the fool was dropped, and drawn up, now, a short three feet from the ground.

This time he did not so much as scream. He hung there, dangling at the rope's end, his mouth all bloody, his face ghastly in its glistening pallor, and of his eyes naught showing save the whites. He hung there, and moaned piteously and incessantly. Martin glanced questioningly at Gian Maria, and his eyes very plainly inquired whether they had not better cease. But Gian Maria paid no heed to him.

"Will that suffice you?" he asked the fool. "Will you speak now?"

But the fool's only answer was a moan, whereupon again, at the Duke's relentless signal, he was swung aloft. But at the terror of a fourth drop, more fearful than any of its three predecessors, he awoke very suddenly to the impossible horror of his position. That this agony would endure until he died or fainted, he was assured. And since he seemed incapable of either fainting or dying, suffer more he could not. What was heaven or hell to him then that the thought of either could efface the horror of this torture and strengthen him to continue to endure the agony of it? He could endure no more—no, not to save a dozen souls if he had had them:

"I'll speak," he screamed. "Let me down, and you shall have his

name, Lord Duke."

"Pronounce it first, or the manner of your descent shall be as the others."

Peppe passed his tongue over his bleeding lips, hung still and spoke.

"It was your cousin," he panted, "Francesco del Falco, Count of Aquila."

The Duke stared at him a moment, with startled countenance and mouth agape.

"You are telling me the truth, animal?" he demanded, in a quivering voice. "It was the Count of Aquila who was wounded and whom Monna Valentina tended?"

"I swear it," answered the fool. "Now, in the name of God and His blessed saints, let me down."

For a moment yet he was held there, awaiting Gian Maria's signal. The Duke continued to eye him with that same astonished look, what time he turned over in his mind the news he had gathered. Then conviction of the truth sank into his mind. It was the Lord of Aquila who was the idol of the Babbianians. What, then, more natural than that the conspirators should have sought to place him on the throne they proposed to wrest from Gian Maria? He dubbed himself a fool that he had not guessed so much before.

"Let him down," he curtly bade his men. "Then take him hence, and let him go with God. He has served his purpose."

Gently they lowered him, but when his feet touched the ground he was unable to stand. His legs doubled under him, and he lay—a little crook-backed heap—upon the rushes of the floor. His senses had deserted him.

At a sign from Armstadt the two men picked him up and carried him out between them.

Gian Maria moved across the room to a tapestried priedieu, and knelt down before an ivory crucifix to render thanks to God for the signal light of grace, by which He had vouchsafed to show the Duke his enemy.

Thereafter, drawing from the breast of his doublet a chaplet of gold and amber beads, he piously discharged his nightly devotions.

CHAPTER X. THE BRAYING OF AN ASS

When on the morrow, towards the twenty-second hour, the High and Mighty Gian Maria Sforza rode into his capital at Babbiano, he found the city in violent turmoil, occasioned, as he rightly guessed, by the ominous presence of Caesar Borgia's envoy.

A dense and sullen crowd met him at the Porta Romana, and preserved a profound silence as he rode into the city, accompanied by Alvari and Santi, and surrounded by his escort of twenty spears in full armour. There was a threat in that silence more ominous than any vociferations, and very white was the Duke's face as he darted scowls of impotent anger this way and that. But there was worse to come. As they rode up the Borgo dell' Annunziata the crowd thickened, and the silence was now replaced by a storm of hooting and angry cries. The people became menacing, and by Armstadt's orders—the Duke was by now too paralysed with fear to issue any—the men-at-arms lowered their pikes in order to open a way, whilst one or two of the populace, who were thrust too near the cavalcade by the surging human tide, went down and were trampled under foot.

Satirical voices asked the Duke derisively was he wed, and where might be his uncle-in-law's spears that were to protect them against the Borgia. Some demanded to know whither the last outrageous levy of taxes was gone, and where was the army it should have served to raise. To this, others replied for the Duke, suggesting a score of vile uses to which the money had been put.

Then, of a sudden, a cry of "Murderer!" arose, followed by angry

demands that he should restore life to the valiant Ferrabracio, to Amerini, the people's friend, and to those others whom he had lately butchered, or else follow them in death. Lastly the name of the Count of Aquila rang wildly in his ears, provoking a storm of "Ewiva! Live Francesco del Falco!" and one persistent voice, sounding loudly above the others, styled him already "il Duca Francesco." At that the blood mounted to Gian Maria's brain, and a wave of anger beat back the fear from his heart. He rose in his stirrups, his eyes ablaze with the jealous wrath that possessed him.

"Ser Martino!" he roared hoarsely to his captain. "Couch lances and go through them at the gallop!"

The burly Swiss hesitated, brave man though he was. Alvaro de' Alvares and Gismondo Santi looked at each other in alarm, and the intrepid old statesman, in whose heart no pang of fear had been awakened by the rabble's threatening bay, changed colour as he heard that order given.

"Highness," he implored the Duke, "You cannot mean this."

"Not mean it?" flashed back Gian Maria, his eye travelling from Santi to the hesitating captain. "Fool!" he blazed at the latter. "Brute beast, for what do you wait? Did you not hear me?"

Without a second's delay the captain now raised his sword, and his deep, guttural voice barked an order to his men which brought their lances below the horizontal. The mob, too, had heard that fierce command, and awakening to their peril, those nearest the cavalcade would have fallen back but that the others, pressing tightly from behind, held them in the death-tide that now swept by with clattering arms and hoarse cries.

Shrieks filled the air where lately threats had been loudly tossed. But some there were in that crowd that would be no passive

witnesses of this butchery. Half the stones of the borgo went after that cavalcade, and fell in a persistent shower upon them, rattling like giant hail upon their armour, dinting many a steel-cap to its wearer's sore discomfort. The Duke himself was struck twice, and on Santi's unprotected scalp an ugly wound was opened from which the blood flowed in profusion to dye his snowy locks.

In this undignified manner they reached, at last, the Palazzo Ducale, leaving a trail of dead and maimed to mark the way by which they had come.

In a white heat of passion Gian Maria sought his apartments, and came not forth again until, some two hours later, the presence was announced him of the emissary from Caesar Borgia, Duke of Valentinois, who sought an audience.

Still beside himself, and boiling with wrath at the indignities he had received, Gian Maria—in no mood for an interview that would have demanded coolness and presence of mind from a keener brain than his—received the envoy, a gloomy, priestly-faced Spaniard, in the throne-room of the Palace. The Duke was attended by Alvares, Santi, and Fabrizio da Lodi, whilst his mother, Caterina Colonna, occupied a chair of crimson velvet on which the Sforza lion was wrought in gold.

The interview was brief, and marked by a rudeness at its close that contrasted sharply with the ceremoniousness of its inception. It soon became clear that the ambassador's true mission was to pick a quarrel with Babbiano on his master's behalf, to the end that the Borgia might be afforded a sound pretext for invading the Duchy. He demanded, at first politely and calmly, and later—when denied—with arrogant insistence, that Gian Maria should provide the Duke of Valentinois with a hundred lances—equivalent to five hundred men—as some contribution on his part towards the stand which Caesar Borgia meant to make against the impending French invasion.

Gian Maria never heeded the restraining words which Lodi whispered in his ear, urging him to temporise, and to put off this messenger until the alliance with the house of Urbino should be complete and their position strengthened sufficiently to permit them to brave the anger of Caesar Borgia. But neither this nor the wrathful, meaning glances which his cunning mother bent upon him served to curb him. He obeyed only the voice of his headstrong mood, never dreaming of the consequences with which he might be visited.

"You will bear to the Duca Valentino this message from me," he said, in conclusion. "You will tell him that what lances I have in Babbiano I intend to keep, that with them I may defend my own frontiers against his briganding advances. Messer da Lodi," he added, turning to Fabrizio and without so much as waiting to see if the envoy had anything further to say, "let this gentleman be reconducted to his quarters, and see that he has safe conduct hence until he is out of our Duchy."

When the envoy, crimson of face and threatening of eye, had withdrawn under Lodi's escort, Monna Caterina rose, the very incarnation of outraged patience, and poured her bitter invective upon her rash son's head.

"Fool!" she stormed at him. "There goes your Duchy—in the hollow of that man's hand." Then she laughed in bitterness. "After all, in casting it from you, perhaps you have chosen the wiser course, for, as truly as there is a God in Heaven, you are utterly unfitted to retain it."

"My lady mother," he answered her, with such dignity as he could muster from the wretched heap in which his wits now seemed to lie, "you will be well advised to devote yourself to your woman's tasks, and not to interfere in a man's work."

"Man's work!" she sneered. "And you perform it like a petulant boy or a peevish woman."

"I perform it, Madonna, as best seems to me, for it happens that I am Duke of Babbiano," he answered sullenly. "I do not fear any Pope's son that ever stepped. The alliance with Urbino is all but completed. Let that be established, and if Valentino shows his teeth—by God we'll show ours."

"Aye, but with this difference, that his are a wolf's teeth, and yours a lamb's. Besides, this alliance with Urbino is all incomplete as yet. You had been better advised to have sent away the envoy with some indefinite promise that would have afforded you respite enough in which to seal matters with the house of Montefeltro. As it is, your days are numbered. Upon that message you have sent him Caesar will act at once. For my own part, I have no mind to fall a prey to the invader, and I shall leave Babbiano, and seek refuge in Naples. And if a last word of advice I may offer you, it is that you do the same."

Gian Maria rose and came down from the dais, eyeing her in a sort of dull amazement. Then he looked, as if for help, to Alvari, to Santi, and lastly to Lodi, who had returned while Caterina was speaking. But no word said any of them, and grave were the eyes of all.

"Poor-spirited are you all!" he sneered. Then his face grew dark and his tone concentrated. "Not so am I," he assured them, "if in the past I may have seemed it sometimes. I am aroused at length, sirs. I heard a voice in the streets of Babbiano to-day, and I saw a sight that has put a fire into my veins. This good-tempered, soft, indulgent Duke you knew is gone. The lion is awake at last, and you shall see such things as you had not dreamt of."

They regarded him now with eyes in which the gravity was increased by a light of fearsome wonder and inquiry. Was his mind giving way under the prodigious strain that had been set upon it that day? If not madness, what else did that wild boasting argue?

"Are you all dumb?" he asked them, his eyes feverish. "Or do you

deem that I promise more than is mine to fulfil. You shall judge, and soon. To-morrow, my lady mother, whilst you journey south, as you have told us, I go north again, hack to Urbino. Not a day will I now waste. Within the week, sirs, by God's grace, I shall be wed. That will give us Urbino for a buckler, and with Urbino comes Perugia and Camerino. But more than that. There is a princely dowry comes to us with the Lady Valentina. How think you will I spend it? To the last florin it shall go to the arming of men. I will hire me every free condotta in Italy. I will raise me such an army as has never before been seen at any one time, and with this I shall seek out the Duca Valentino. I'll not sit here at home awaiting the pleasure of his coming, but I'll out to meet him, and with that army I shall descend upon him as a thunderbolt out of Heaven. Aye, my lady mother," he laughed in his madness, "the lamb shall hunt the wolf, and rend it so that it shall never stand again to prey on other lambs. This will I do, my friends, and there shall be such fighting as has not been seen since the long-dead days of Castracani."

They stared at him, scarce believing now that he was sane, and marvelling deeply whence had sprung this sudden martial fervour in one whose nature was more indolent than active, more timid than warlike. And yet the reason was not far to seek, had they but cared to follow the line of thought to which he, himself, had given them the clue when he referred to the voice he had heard, and the sights he had seen in the streets of Babbiano. The voice was the voice that had acclaimed his cousin Francesco Duke. That it was through that a fierce jealousy had fired him. This man had robbed him at once of the love of his people and of Valentina, and thereby had set in his heart the burning desire to outdo him and to prove wrong in their preference both his people and Valentina. He was like a gamer who risks all on a single throw, and his stake was to be the dowry of his bride, the game a tilt with the forces of the Borgia. If he won he came out covered with glory, and not only the saviour of his people and the champion of their liberty, but a glorious figure that all Italy—or, at least, that part of it that

had known the iron heel of Valentino—should revere. Thus would he set himself right, and thus crush from their minds the memory of his rebellious cousin with whom he was about to deal.

His mother turned to him now, and her words were words of caution, prayers that he should adventure on naught so vast and appalling to her woman's mind, without due thought and argument in council. A servant entered at that moment, and approached the Duke.

"Madonna," Gian Maria announced, breaking in upon her earnest words, "I am fully resolved upon my course. If you will but delay a moment and resume your seat, you shall witness the first scene of this great drama that I am preparing." Then turning to the waiting servant: "Your message?" he demanded.

"Captain Armstadt has returned, Highness, and has brought his Excellency."

"Fetch lights and then admit them," he commanded briefly. "To your places, sirs, and you, my mother. I am about to sit in judgment."

Amazed and uncomprehending, they obeyed his wild gestures, and resumed their places by the throne even as he walked back to the dais and sat himself upon the ducal chair. Servants entered, bearing great candelabra of beaten gold which they set on table and overmantel. They withdrew, and when the doors opened again, a clank of mail, reaching them from without, increased the astonishment of the company.

This rose yet higher, and left them cold and speechless, when into the chamber stepped the Count of Aquila with a man-at-arms on either side of him, marking him a prisoner. With a swift, comprehensive glance that took in the entire group about the throne—and without manifesting the slightest surprise at Lodi's presence—Francesco stood still and awaited his cousin's words.

He was elegantly dressed, but without lavishness, and if he had the air of a great lord, it was rather derived from the distinction of his face and carriage. He was without arms, and bareheaded save for the gold coif he always wore, which seemed to accentuate the lustrous blackness of his hair. His face was impassive, and the glance as that of a man rather weary of the entertainment provided him.

There was an oppressive silence of some moments, during which his cousin regarded him with an eye that glittered oddly. At last Gian Maria broke into speech, his voice shrill with excitement.

"Know you of any reason," he demanded, "why your head should not be flaunted on a spear among those others on the Gate of San Bacio?"

Francesco's eyebrows shot up in justifiable astonishment.

"I know of many," he answered, with a smile, an answer which by its simplicity seemed to nonplus the Duke.

"Let us hear some of them," he challenged presently.

"Nay, let us hear, rather, some reason why my poor head should be so harshly dealt with. When a man is rudely taken, as I have been, it is a custom, which perhaps your Highness will follow, to afford him some reason for the outrage."

"You smooth-tongued traitor," quoth the Duke, with infinite malice, made angrier by his cousin's dignity. "You choicely-spoken villain! You would learn why you have been taken? Tell me, sir, what did you at Acquasparta on the morning of the Wednesday before Easter?"

The Count's impassive face remained inscrutable, a mask of patient wonder. By the sudden clenching of his hands alone did he betray how that thrust had smitten him, and his hands none there remarked. Fabrizio da Lodi, standing behind the Duke, went pale to

the lips.

"I do not recall that I did anything there of much account," he answered. "I breathed the good spring air in the woods."

"And nothing else?" sneered Gian Maria.

"I can bethink me of little else that signifies. I met a lady there with whom I had some talk, a friar, a fool, a popinjay, and some soldiers. But,"—he shifted abruptly, his tone growing haughty—"whatever I did, I did as best seemed to me, and I have yet to learn that the Count of Aquila must give account of what he does and where he does it. You have not told me yet, sir, by what right, or fancied right, you hold me prisoner."

"Have I not, indeed? See you no link between your offence and your presence near Sant' Angelo on that day?"

"If I am to apprehend that you have had me brought here with this indignity to set me riddles for your amusement, I am enlightened and yet amazed. I am no court buffoon."

"Words, words," snapped the Duke. "Do not think to beguile me with them." With a short laugh he turned from Francesco to those upon the dais. "You will be marvelling, sirs, and you, my lady mother, upon what grounds I have had this traitor seized. You shall learn. On the night of the Tuesday before Easter seven traitors met at Sant' Angelo to plot my overthrow. Of those, the heads of four may be seen on the walls of Babbiano now; the other three made off, but there stands one of them—the one that was to have occupied this throne after they had unseated me."

The eyes of all were now upon the young Count, whilst his own glance strayed to the face of Lodi, on which there was written a consternation so great that it must have betrayed him had the Duke but chanced to look his way. A pause ensued which none present

dared to break. Gian Maria seemed to await an answer from Francesco; but Francesco stood impassively regarding him, and made no sign that he would speak. At length, unable longer to endure the silence:

"E dunque?" cried the Duke. "Have you no answer?"

"I would submit," returned Francesco, "that I have heard no question. I heard a wild statement, extravagant and mad, the accusation of one demented, a charge of which no proofs can be forthcoming, else I take it you had not withheld them. I ask you, sirs, and you, Madonna," he continued, turning to the others, "has his Highness said anything to which an answer can by any means be necessary?"

"Is it proofs you lack?" cried Gian Maria, but less confidently than hitherto, and, so, less fiercely. A doubt had arisen in his mind born of this strange calm on the part of Francesco—a calm that to Gian Maria's perceptions seemed hardly the garb of guilt, but belonged rather to one who is assured that no peril threatens him. "Is it proofs you lack?" quoth the Duke again, and then with the air of a man launching an unanswerable question: "How came you by the wound you had that day in the woods?"

A smile quivered on Francesco's face, and was gone.

"I asked for proofs, not questions," he protested wearily. "What shall it prove if I had a hundred wounds?"

"Prove?" echoed the Duke, less and less confident of his ground, fearing already that he had perhaps gone too fast and too far upon the road of his suspicions. "It proves to me, when coupled with your presence there, that you were in the fight the night before."

Francesco stirred at that. He sighed and smiled at once. Then assuming a tone of brisk command:

"Bid these men begone," he said, pointing to his guards. "Then hear me scatter your foul suspicions as the hurricane scatters the leaves in autumn."

Gian Maria stared at him in stupefaction. That overwhelming assurance, that lofty, dignified bearing which made such a noble contrast with his own coarse hectoring, were gradually undermining more and more his confidence. With a wave of his hand he motioned the soldiers to withdraw, obeying almost unconsciously the master-mind of his cousin by which he was as unconsciously being swayed.

"Now, Highness," said Francesco, as soon as the men were gone, "before I refute the charge you make, let me clearly understand it. From the expressions you have used I gather it to be this: A conspiracy was laid a little time ago at Sant' Angelo which had for object to supplant you on the throne of Babbiano and set me in your place. You charge me with having had in that conspiracy a part—the part assigned to me. It is so, is it not?"

Gian Maria nodded.

"You have put it very clearly," he sneered. "If you can make out your innocence as clearly, I shall be satisfied that I have wronged you."

"That this conspiracy took place we will accept as proven, although to the people of Babbiano the proof may have seemed scant. A man, since dead, had told your Highness that such a plot was being hatched. Hardly, perhaps, in itself, evidence enough to warrant setting the heads of four very valiant gentlemen on spears, but no doubt your Highness had other proofs to which the rest of us had no access."

Gian Maria shivered at the words. He recalled what Francesco had said on the occasion of their last talk upon this very subject; he remembered the manner of his own reception that day in Babbiano.

"We must be content that it is so," calmly pursued Francesco. "Indeed, your Highness's action in the matter leaves no doubt. We will accept, then, that such a plot was laid, but that I had a part in it, that I was the man chosen to take your place—need I prove the idleness of such a charge?"

"You need, in truth. By God! you need, if you would save your head."

The Count stood in an easy posture, his hands clasped behind his back, and smiled up at his cousin's pale face and scowling brow.

"How mysterious are the ways of your justice, Cousin," he murmured, with infinite relish; "what a wondrous equity invests your methods! You have me dragged here by force, and sitting there, you say to me: 'Prove that you have not conspired against me, or the headsman shall have you!' By my faith! Solomon was a foolish prattler when compared with you."

Gian Maria smote the gilded arm of his chair a blow for which he was to find his hand blackened on the morrow.

"Prove it!" he screamed, like a child in a pet. "Prove it, prove it, prove it!"

"And have my words not already proven it?" quoth the Count, in a voice of such mild wonder and gentle protest that it left Gian Maria gasping.

Then the Duke made a hasty gesture of impatience.

"Messer Alvari," he said, in a voice of concentrated rage, "I think you had best recall the guard."

"Wait!" the Count compelled him, raising his hand. And now it was seen that the easy insouciance was gone from his face: the smile had vanished, and in its place there was a look of lofty and contemptuous

wrath. "I will repeat my words. You have dragged me here before you by force, and, sitting there on the throne of Babbiano, you say: 'Prove that you have not conspired against me if you would save your head.'" A second he paused, and noted the puzzled look with which all regarded him.

"Is this a parable?" sneered the uncomprehending Duke.

"You have said it," flashed back Francesco. "A parable it is. And if you consider it, does it not afford you proof enough?" he asked, a note of triumph in his voice. "Do not our relative positions irrefutably show the baselessness of this your charge? Should I stand here and you sit there if what you allege against me were true?" He laughed almost savagely, and his eyes flashed scornfully upon the Duke. "If more plainly still you need it, Gian Maria, I tell you that had I plotted to occupy your tottering throne, I should be on it now, not standing here defending myself against a foolish charge. But can you doubt it? Did you learn no lesson as you rode into Babbiano to-day? Did you not hear them acclaim me and groan at you. And yet," he ended, with a lofty pity, "you tell me that I plotted. Why, if I desired your throne, my only need would be to unfurl my banner in the streets of your capital, and within the hour Gian Maria would be Duke no more. Have I proved my innocence, Highness?" he ended quietly, sadly almost. "Are you convinced how little is my need for plots?"

But the Duke had no answer for him. Speechless, and in a sort of dazed horror, he sat and scowled before him at his cousin's handsome face, what time the others watched him furtively, in silence, trembling for the young man who, here, in his grasp, had dared say such things to him. Presently he covered his face with his hands, and sat so, as one deeply in thought, a little while. At last he withdrew them slowly and presented a countenance that passion and chagrin had strangely ravaged in so little time. He turned to Santi, who stood nearest.

"The guard," he said hoarsely, with a wave of the hand, and Santi went, none daring to utter a word. They waited thus an odd group, all very grave save one, and he the one that had most cause for gravity. Then the captain re-entered, followed by his two men, and Gian Maria waved a hand towards the prisoner.

"Take him away," he muttered harshly, his face ghastly, and passion shaking him like an aspen. "Take him away, and await my orders in the ante-chamber."

"If it is farewell, Cousin," said Francesco, "may I hope that you will send a priest to me? I have lived a faithful Christian."

Gian Maria returned him no answer, but his baleful eye was upon Martino. Reading the significance of that glance, the captain touched Francesco lightly on the arm. A moment the Count stood, looking from the Duke to the soldiers; a second his glance rested on those assembled there; then, with a light raising of his shoulders, he turned on his heel, and with his head high passed out of the ducal chamber.

And silence continued after he was gone until Caterina Colonna broke it with a laugh that grated on Gian Maria's now very tender nerves.

"You promised bravely," she mocked him, "to play the lion. But so far, we have only heard the braying of an ass."

CHAPTER XI. WANDERING KNIGHTS

That taunt of his mother's stirred Gian Maria. He rose from his ducal chair and descended from the dais on which it stood, possessed by a tempestuous mood that would not brook him to sit still.

"The braying of an ass?" he muttered, facing Caterina. Then he laughed unpleasantly. "The jaw-bone of an ass did sore execution on one occasion, Madonna, and it may again. A little patience, and you shall see." Next, and with a brisker air, he addressed the four silent courtiers, "You heard him, sirs," he exclaimed, "How do you say that I shall deal with such a traitor?" He waited some seconds for an answer, and it seemed to anger him that none came. "Have you, then, no counsel for me?" he demanded harshly.

"I had not thought," said Lodi hardily, "that this was a case in which your Highness needed counsel. You were drawn to conclude that the Lord of Aquila was a traitor, but from what we have all heard, your Highness should now see that he is not."

"Should I so?" the Duke returned, standing still and fixing upon Fabrizio an eye that was dull as a snake's. "Messer da Lodi, your loyalty is a thing that has given signs of wavering of late. Now, if by the grace of God and His blessed saints I have ruled as a merciful prince who errs too much upon the side of clemency, I would enjoin you not to try that clemency too far. I am but a man, after all."

He turned from the fearless front presented by the old statesman, to face the troubled glances of the others.

"Your silence, sirs, tells me that in this matter your judgement runs parallel with mine. And you are wise, for in such a case there can be but one course. My cousin has uttered words to-day which no man has ever said to a prince and lived. Nor shall we make exception to that rule. My Lord of Aquila's head must pay the price of his temerity."

"My son," cried Caterina, in a voice of horror. Gian Maria faced her in a passion, his countenance grown mottled.

"I have said it," he growled. "I will not sleep until he dies."

"Yet never may you wake again," she answered. And with that preamble she launched upon his head the bitterest criticism he had ever heard. By stinging epithets and contemptuous words, she sought to make him see the folly of what he meditated. Was he indeed tired of ruling Babbiano? If that were so, she told him, he had but to wait for Caesar Borgia's coming. He need not precipitate matters by a deed that must lead to a revolt, a rising of the people to avenge their idol.

"You have given me but added reasons," he answered her stoutly. "There is no room in my Duchy for a man whose death, if it pleased me to encompass it, would be avenged upon me by my own people."

"Then send him from your dominions," she urged. "Banish him, and all may be well. But if you slay him, I should not count your life worth a day's purchase."

This advice was sound, and in the end they prevailed upon him to adopt it. But it was not done save at the cost of endless prayers on the part of those courtiers, and the persuasions of Caterina's biting scorn and prophecies of the fate that surely awaited him did he touch the life of one so wellbeloved. At last, against his will, he sullenly consented that the banishment of his cousin should content him. But it was with infinite bitterness and regret that he passed his word, for his jealousy was of a quality that nothing short of Francesco's death could

have appeased. Certain it is that nothing but the fear of the consequences, which his mother had instilled into his heart, could have swayed him to be satisfied that the Count of Aquila should be banished.

He sent for Martino and bade him return the Count his sword, and he entrusted the message of exile to Fabrizio da Lodi, charging him to apprise Francesco that he was allowed twenty-four hours' grace in which to take himself beyond the dominions of Gian Maria Sforza.

That done—and with an exceedingly ill grace—the Duke turned on his heel, and with a sullen brow he left the ducal chamber, and passed, unattended, to his own apartments.

Rejoicing, Fabrizio da Lodi went his errand, which he discharged with certain additions that might have cost him his head had knowledge of them come to Gian Maria. In fact, he seized the opportunity to again press upon Francesco the throne of Babbiano.

"The hour is very ripe," he urged the Count, "and the people love you as surely prince was never loved. It is in their interests that I plead. You are their only hope. Will you not come to them?"

If for a moment Francesco hesitated, it was rather in consideration of the manner in which the crown was offered than in consequence of any allurements that the offer may have had for him. Once—that night at Sant' Angelo—he had known temptation, and for a moment had listened to the seductions in the voice that invited him to power. But not so now. A thought he gave to the people who had such faith in him, and showered upon him such admiring love, and whom, as a matter of reciprocity, he wished well, and would have served in any capacity but this. He shook his head, and with a smile of regret declined the offer.

"Have patience, old friend," he added. "I am not of the stuff that

goes to make good princes, although you think it. It is a bondage into which I would not sell myself. A man's life for me, Fabrizio—a free life that is not directed by councillors and at the mercy of the rabble."

Fabrizio's face grew sad. He sighed profoundly, yet since it might not be well for him that he should remain over-long in talk with one who, in the Duke's eyes, was attainted with treason, he had no leisure to insist with persuasions, which, after all, he clearly saw must in the end prove barren.

"What was the salvation of the people of Babbiano," he murmured, "was also your Excellency's, since did you adopt the course I urge there would be no need to go in banishment."

"Why, this exile suits me excellently well," returned Francesco. "Idle have I been over-long, and the wish to roam is in my veins again. I'll see the world once more, and when I weary of my vagrancy I can withdraw to my lands of Aquila, and in that corner of Tuscany, too mean to draw a conqueror's eye, none will molest me, and I shall rest. Babbiano, my friend, shall know me no more after to-night. When I am gone, and the people realise that they may not have what they would, they may rest content perhaps with what they may." And he waved a hand in the direction of the doors leading to the ducal chamber. With that he took his leave of his old friend, and, carrying in his hand the sword and dagger which Captain Armstadt had returned to him, he repaired briskly to the northern wing of the Palace, in which he had his lodging.

In the ante-room he dismissed those of his servants who had been taken from the ranks of the Duke's people, and bade his own Tuscan followers, Zaccaria and Lanciotto, see to the packing of his effects, and make all ready to set out within the hour.

He was no coward, but he had no wish to die just yet if it might be honourably avoided. Life had some sweets to offer Francesco del

Falco, and this spurred him to hasten, for he well knew his cousin's unscrupulous ways. He was aware that Gian Maria had been forced by weight of argument to let him go, and he shrewdly feared that did he linger, his cousin might veer round again, and without pausing to seek advice a second time, have him disposed of out of hand and reckless of consequences.

Whilst Lanciotto was left busy in the ante-room the Count passed into his bedchamber attended by Zaccaria, to make in his raiment such changes as were expedient. But scarce had he begun when he was interrupted by the arrival of Fanfulla degli Arcipreti, whom Lanciotto ushered in. Francesco's face lighted at sight of his friend, and he held out his hand.

"What is it that has happened?" cried the young gallant, adding that which showed his question to be unnecessary, for from Fabrizio da Lodi he had had the whole story of what was befallen. He sat himself upon the bed, and utterly disregarding the presence of Zaccaria—whom he knew to be faithful—he attempted to persuade the Count where Fabrizio had failed. But Paolo cut him short ere he had gone very far.

"Have done with that," he said, and for all that he said it with a laugh, determination sounded sturdy in his accents. "I am a knight-errant, not a prince, and I'll not be converted from one to the other. It were making a helot of a free man, and you do not love me, Fanfulla, if you drive this argument further. Do you think me sad, cast down, at the prospect of this banishment? Why, boy, the blood runs swifter through my veins since I heard the sentence. It frees me from Babbiano in an hour when perhaps my duty—the reciprocation of the people's love—might otherwise have held me here, and it gives me liberty to go forth, my good Fanfulla, in quest of such adventure as I chose to follow." He threw out his arms, and displayed his splendid teeth in a hearty laugh.

Fanfulla eyed him, infected by the boisterous gladness of his mood.

"Why, true indeed, my lord," he acknowledged, "you are too fine a bird to sing in a cage. But to go knight-erranting——" He paused, and spread his hands in protest. "There are no longer dragons holding princesses captive."

"Alas no. But the Venetians are on the eve of war, and they will find work for these hands of mine. I want not for friends among them."

Fanfulla sighed.

"And so we lose you. The stoutest arm in Babbiano leaves us in the hour of need, driven out by that loutish Duke. By my soul, Ser Francesco, I would I might go with you. Here is nothing to be done."

Francesco paused in the act of drawing on a boot, and raised his eyes to stare a moment at his friend.

"But if you wish it, Fanfulla, I shall rejoice to have your company."

And now the idea of it entered Fanfulla's mind in earnest, for his expression had been more or less an idle one. But since Francesco invited him, why not indeed?

And thus it came to pass that at the third hour of that warm May night a party of four men on horseback and two sumpter mules passed out of Babbiano and took the road that leads to Vinamare, and thence into the territory of Urbino. These riders were the Count of Aquila and Fanfulla degli Arcipreti, followed by Lanciotto leading a mule that bore the arms of those knights-errant, and Zaccaria leading another with their general baggage.

All night they rode beneath the stars, and on until some three hours after sunrise, when they made halt in a hollow of the hills not far from Fabriano. They tethered their horses in a grove of peaceful laurel and sheltering mulberry, at the foot of a slope that was set with olive trees,

grey, gnarled and bent as aged cripples, and beside the river Esino at a spot where it was so narrow that an agile man might leap its width. Here, then, they spread their cloaks, and Zaccaria unpacked his victuals, and set before them a simple meal of bread and wine and roasted fowl, which to their hunger made more appeal than a banquet at another season. And when they had eaten they laid them down beside the stream, and there beguiled in pleasant talk the time until they fell asleep. They rested them through the heat of the day, and waking some three hours after noon, the Count rose up and went some dozen paces down the stream to a spot where it fell into a tiny lake—a pool deep and blue as the cloudless heavens which it mirrored. Here he stripped off his garments and plunged headlong in, to emerge again, some moments later, refreshed and reinvigorated in body and in soul.

As Fanfulla awoke he beheld an apparition coming towards him, a figure lithe and stalwart as a sylvan god, the water shining on the ivory whiteness of his skin and glistening in his sable hair as the sunlight caught it.

"Tell me now, Fanfulla, lives there a man of so depraved a mind that he would prefer a ducal crown to this?"

And the courtier, seeing Francesco's radiant mien, understood perhaps, at last, how sordid was the ambition that could lure a man from such a god-like freedom, and from the holy all-consuming joys it brought him. His thoughts being started upon that course, it was of this they talked what time the Count resumed his garments—his hose of red, his knee-high boots of untanned leather, and his quilted brigandine of plain brown cloth, reputed dagger-proof. He rose at last to buckle on his belt of hammered steel, from which there hung, behind his loins, a stout, lengthy dagger, the only weapon that he carried.

At his command the horses were saddled and the sumpters laden

once more. Lanciotto held his stirrup, and Zaccaria did like service for Fanfulla, and presently they were cantering out of that fragrant grove on to the elastic sward of broad, green pasture-lands. They crossed the stream at a spot where the widened sheet of water scarce went higher than their horses' hocks; then veering to the east they rode away from the hills for a half-league or so until they gained a road. Here they turned northward again, and pushed on towards Cagli.

As the bells were ringing the Ave Maria the cavalcade drew up before the Palazzo Valdicampo, where two nights ago Gian Maria had been entertained. Its gates were now as readily thrown wide to welcome the illustrious and glorious Count of Aquila, who was esteemed by Messer Valdicampo no less than his more puissant cousin. Chambers were set at his disposal, and at Fanfulla's; servants were bidden to wait upon them; fresh raiment was laid out for them, and a noble supper was prepared to do honour to Francesco. Nor did the generous Valdicampo's manner cool when he learned that Francesco was in disgrace at the Court of Babbiano and banished from the dominions of Duke Gian Maria. He expressed sympathetic regret at so untoward a circumstance and discreetly refrained from passing any opinion thereupon.

Yet later, as they supped, and when perhaps the choice wines had somewhat relaxed his discretion, he permitted himself to speak of Gian Maria's ways in terms that were very far from laudatory.

"Here, in my house," he informed them, "he committed an outrage upon a poor unfortunate, for which an account may yet be asked of me—since it was under my roof that the thing befell, for all that I knew nothing of it."

Upon being pressed by Paolo to tell them more, he parted with the information that the unfortunate in question was Urbino's jester Peppe. At that, Paolo's glance became more intent. The memory of

his meeting with the fool and his mistress in the woods, a month ago, flashed now across his mind, and it came to him that he could rightly guess the source whence his cousin had drawn the information that had led to his own arrest and banishment.

"Of what nature was the outrage?" he inquired.

"From what Peppe himself has told me it would seem that the fool was possessed of some knowledge which Gian Maria sought, but on which Peppe was bound by oath to silence. Gian Maria caused him to be secretly taken and carried off from Urbino. His sbirri brought the fellow here, and to make him speak the Duke improvised in his bedchamber a *tratta di corde*, which had the desired result."

The Count's face grew dark with anger. "The coward!" he muttered. "The dastardly craven!"

"But bethink you, sir Count," exclaimed Valdicampo, "that this poor Peppe is a frail and deformed creature, lacking the strength of an ordinary man, and do not judge him over-harshly."

"It was not of him I spoke," replied Francesco, "but of my cousin, that cowardly tyrant, Gian Maria Sforza. Tell me, Messer Valdicampo—what has become of Ser Peppe?"

"He is still here. I have had him tended, and his condition is already much improved. It will not be long ere he is recovered, but for a few days yet his arms will remain almost useless. They were all but torn from his body."

When the meal was done Francesco begged his host to conduct him to Peppe's chamber. This Valdicampo did, and leaving Fanfulla in the company of the ladies of his house, he escorted the Count to the room where the poor, ill-used hunchback was abed tended by one of the women of Valdicampo's household.

"Here is a visitor to see you, Ser Peppe," the old gentleman announced, setting down his candle on a table by the bed. The jester turned his great head towards the newcomer's, and sought with melancholy eyes the face of his visitor. At sight of him a look of terror spread itself upon his countenance.

"My lord," he cried, struggling into a sitting posture, "my noble, gracious lord, have mercy on me. I could tear out this craven tongue of mine. But did you know what agonies I suffered, and to what a torture they submitted me to render me unfaithful, it may be that you, yourself, would pity me."

"Why, that I do," answered Francesco gently. "Indeed, could I have seen the consequences that oath would have for you, I had not bound you by it."

The fear in Peppe's face gave place to unbelief.

"And you forgive me, lord?" he cried. "I dreaded when you entered that you were come to punish me for what wrong I may have done you in speaking. But if you forgive me, it may be that Heaven will forgive me also, and that I may not be damned. And that were a thousand pities, for what, my lord, should I do in hell?"

"Deride the agonies of Gian Maria," answered Francesco, with a laugh.

"It were almost worth burning for," mused Peppe, putting forth a hand, whose lacerated, swollen wrist bore evidence to the torture he had suffered. At sight of it the Count made an exclamation of angry horror, and hastened to inquire into the poor fool's condition.

"It is not so bad now," Peppe answered him, "and it is only in consequence of Messer Valdicampo's insistence that I have kept my bed. I can scarce use my arms, it is true, but they are improving. Tomorrow I shall be up, and I hope to set out for Urbino, where my dear

mistress must be distressed with fears for my absence, for she is a very kind and tenderhearted lady."

This resolve of Peppe's prompted the Count to offer to conduct him to Urbino on the morrow, since he, himself, would be journeying that way—an offer which the fool accepted without hesitation and with lively gratitude.

CHAPTER XII. THE FOOL'S INQUISITIVENESS

In the morning Francesco set out once more, accompanied by his servants, Fanfulla, and the fool. The latter was now so far restored as to be able to sit a mule, but lest the riding should over-tire him they proceeded at little more than an ambling pace along the lovely valleys of the Metauro. Thus it befell that when night descended it found them still journeying, and some two leagues distant from Urbino. Another league they travelled in the moonlight, and the fool was beguiling the time for them with a droll story culled from the bright pages of Messer Boccaccio, when of a sudden his sharp ears caught a sound that struck him dumb in the middle of a sentence.

"Are you faint?" asked Francesco, turning quickly towards him, and mindful of the fellow's sore condition.

"No, no," answered the fool, with a readiness that dispelled the Count's alarm on that score. "I thought I heard a sound of marching in the distance."

"The wind in the trees, Peppino," explained Fanfulla.

"I do not think——" He stopped short and listened and now they all heard it, for it came wafted to them on a gust of the fitful breeze that smote their faces.

"You are right," said Francesco. "It is the tramp of men. But what of that, Peppe? Men will march in Italy. Let us hear the end of your story."

"But who should march in Urbino, and by night?" the fool persisted.

"Do I know or do I care?" quoth the Count. "Your story, man."

For all that he was far from satisfied, the fool resumed his narrative. But he no longer told it with his former irresistible humour. His mind was occupied with that sound of marching, which came steadily nearer. At length he could endure it no longer, and the apathy of his companions fired him openly to rebel.

"My lord," he cried, turning to the Count, and again leaving his story interrupted, "they are all but upon us."

"True!" agreed Francesco indifferently. "The next turn yonder should bring us into them."

"Then I beg you, Lord Count, to step aside. Let us pause here, under the trees, until they have passed. I am full of fears. Perhaps I am a coward, but I mislike these roving night-hands. It may be a company of masnadieri."

"What then?" returned the Count, without slackening speed. "What cause have we to fear a party of robbers?"

But Fanfulla and the servants joined their advice to Peppe's, and prevailed at last upon Francesco to take cover until this company should have passed. He consented, to pacify them, and wheeling to the right they entered the border of the forest, drawing rein well in the shadow, whence they could survey the road and see who passed across the patch of moonlight that illumined it. And presently the company came along and swung into that revealing flood of light. To the astonishment of the watchers they beheld no marauding party such as they had been led to expect, but a very orderly company of some twenty men, soberly arrayed in leather hacketons and salades of bright steel, marching sword on thigh and pike on shoulder. At the head of this company rode a powerfully-built man on a great sorrel horse, at sight of whom the fool swore softly in astonishment. In the

middle of the party came four litters borne by mules, and at the side of one of them rode a slender, graceful figure that provoked from Peppe a second oath. But the profoundest objurgation of all was wrung from him at sight of a portly bulk in the black habit of the Dominicans ambling in the rear, who just then was in angry altercation with a fellow that was urging his mule along with the butt of his partisan.

"May you be roasted on a gridiron like Saint Lawrence," gasped the irate priest. "Would you break my neck, brute beast that you are? Do you but wait until we reach Roccaleone, and by St. Dominic, I'll get your ruffianly commander to hang you for this ill-seasoned jest."

But his tormentor laughed for answer, and smote the mule again, a blow this time that almost caused it to rear up. The friar cried out in angry alarm, and then, still storming and threatening his persecutor, he passed on. After him came six heavily-laden carts, each drawn by a pair of bullocks, and the rear of the procession was brought up by a flock of a dozen bleating sheep, herded by a blasphemant man-at-arms. They passed the astonished watchers, who remained concealed until that odd company had melted away into the night.

"I could swear," said Fanfulla, "that that friar and I have met before."

"Nor would you do a perjury," answered him the fool. "For it is that fat hog Fra Domenico—he that went with you to the Convent of Acquasparta to fetch unguents for his Excellency."

"What does he in that company, and who are they?" asked the Count, turning to the fool as they rode out of their ambush.

"Ask me where the devil keeps his lures," quoth the fool, "and I'll make some shift to answer you. But as for what does Fra Domenico in that galley, it is more than I can hazard a guess on. He is not the only one known to me," Peppino added, "There was Ercole Fortemani, a great, dirty, blustering ruffian whom I never saw in aught

but rags, riding at their heads in garments of most unwonted wholeness; and there was Romeo Gonzaga, whom I never knew to stir by night save to an assignation. Strange things must be happening in Urbino."

"And the litters?" inquired Francesco, "Can you hazard no guess as to their meaning?"

"None," said he, "saving that they may account for the presence of Messer Gonzaga. For litters argue women."

"It seems, fool, that not even your wisdom shall avail us. But you heard the friar say they were bound for Roccaleone?"

"Yes, I heard that. And by means of it we shall probably learn the rest at the end of our journey."

And being a man of extremely inquisitive mind, the fool set his inquiries on foot the moment they entered the gates of Urbino in the morning—for they had reached the city over-late to gain admittance that same night, and were forced to seek shelter in one of the houses by the river. It was of the Captain of the Gate that he sought information.

"Can you tell me, Ser Capitan," he inquired, "what company was that that travelled yesternight to Roccaleone?"

The captain looked at him a moment.

"There was none that I know of," said he, "Certainly none from Urbino."

"You keep a marvellous watch," said the fool drily. "I tell you that a company of men-at-arms some twenty strong went last night from Urbino to Roccaleone."

"To Roccaleone?" echoed the captain, with a musing air, more

attentively than before, as if the repetition of that name had suggested something to his mind. "Why, it is the castle of Monna Valentina."

"True, sapient sir. But what of the company, and why was it travelling so, by night?"

"How know you it proceeded from Urbino?" quoth the captain earnestly.

"Because at its head I recognised the roaring warrior Ercole Fortemani, in the middle rode Romeo Gonzaga, in the rear came Fra Domenico, Madonna's confessor—men of Urbino all."

The officer's face grew purple at the news.

"Were there any women in the party?" he cried.

"I saw none," replied the fool, in whom this sudden eagerness of the captain's awakened caution and reflection.

"But there were four litters," put in Francesco, whose nature was less suspicious and alert than the wise fool's.

Too late Peppe scowled caution at him. The captain swore a great oath.

"It is she," he cried, with assurance. "And this company was travelling to Roccaleone, you say. How know you that?"

"We heard it from the friar," answered Francesco readily.

"Then, by the Virgin! we have them. Olá!" He turned from them, and ran shouting into the gatehouse, to re-emerge a moment later with half-dozen soldiers at his heels.

"To the Palace," he commanded, and as his men surrounded Francesco's party, "Come, sir," he said to the Count. "You must go with us, and tell your story to the Duke."

"There is no need for all this force," answered Francesco coldly. "In any case, I could not pass through Urbino without seeing Duke Guidobaldo. I am the Count of Aquila."

At once the captain's bearing grew respectful. He made his apologies for the violent measures of his zeal, and bade his men fall behind. Ordering them to follow him, he mounted a horse that was brought him, and rode briskly through the borgo at the Count's side. And as he rode he told them what the jester's quick intuition had already whispered to him. The lady Valentina was fled from Urbino in the night, and in her company were gone three of her ladies, and—it was also supposed, since they had disappeared—Fra Domenico and Romeo Gonzaga.

Aghast at what he heard, Francesco pressed his informer for more news; but there was little more that the captain could tell him, beyond the fact that it was believed she had been driven to it to escape her impending marriage with the Duke of Babbiano. Guidobaldo was distraught at what had happened, and anxious to bring the lady back before news of her behaviour should reach the ears of Gian Maria. It was, therefore, a matter of no little satisfaction to the captain that the task should be his to bear Guidobaldo this news of her whereabouts which from Francesco and the jester he had derived.

Peppe looked glum and sullen. Had he but bridled his cursed curiosity, and had the Count but taken the alarm in time and held his peace, all might have been well with his beloved patrona. As it was, he—the one man ready to die that he might serve her—had been the very one to betray her refuge. He heard the Count's laugh, and the sound of it was fuel to his anger. But Francesco only thought of the splendid daring of the lady's action.

"But these men-at-arms that she had with her?" he cried. "For what purpose so numerous a bodyguard?"

The captain looked at him a moment.

"Can you not guess?" he inquired. "Perhaps you do not know the Castle of Roccaleone."

"It were odd if I did not know the most impregnable fortress in Italy."

"Why, then, does it not become clear? She has taken this company for a garrison, and in Roccaleone she clearly intends to resist in rebel fashion the wishes of his Highness."

At that the Count threw back his head, and scared the passers-by with as hearty a peal of laughter as ever crossed his lips.

"By the Host!" he gasped, laughter still choking his utterance. "There is a maid for you! Do you hear what the captain says, Fanfulla? She means to resist this wedding by armed force if needs be. Now, on my soul, if Guidobaldo insists upon the union after this, why, then, he has no heart, no feeling. As I live, she is a kinswoman that such a warlike prince might well be proud of. Small wonder that they do not fear the Borgia in Urbino." And he laughed again. But the captain scowled at him, and Peppe frowned.

"She is a rebellious jade," quoth the captain sourly.

"Nay, softly," returned Francesco; for all that he still laughed. "If you were of knightly rank I'd break a lance with you on that score. As it is ——" he paused, his laughter ceased, and his dark eyes took the captain's measure in a curious way. "Best leave her uncensured, Ser Capitano. She is of the house of Rovere, and closely allied to that of Montefeltro."

The officer felt the rebuke, and silence reigned between them after that.

It was whilst Francesco, Fanfulla and Peppe waited in the ante-

chamber for admittance to the Duke that the jester vented some of the bitterness he felt at their babbling. The splendid room was thronged with a courtly crowd. There were magnificent nobles and envoys, dark ecclesiastics and purple prelates, captains in steel and court officers in silk and velvet. Yet, heedless of who might hear him, Peppe voiced his rebuke, and the terms he employed were neither as measured nor as respectful as the Count's rank dictated. Yet with that fairness of mind that made him so universally beloved, Francesco offered no resentment to the fool's reproof. He saw that it was deserved, for it threw upon the matter a light that was new and more searching. But he presently saw further than did the fool, and he smiled at the other's scowls.

"Not so loud Peppe," said he. "You over-estimate the harm. At worst, we have but anticipated by a little what the Duke must have learnt from other sources."

"But it is just that little—the few hours or days—that will do the mischief," snapped the jester testily, for all that he lowered his voice. "In a few days Gian Maria will be back. If he were met with the news that the Lady Valentina were missing, that she had run away with Romeo Gonzaga—for that, you'll see, will presently be the tale—do you think he would linger here, or further care to pursue his wooing? Not he. These alliances that are for State purposes alone, in which the heart plays no part, demand, at least, that on the lady's side there shall be a record unblemished by the breath of scandal. His Highness would have returned him home, and Madonna would have been rid of him."

"But at a strange price, Peppe," answered Francesco gravely. "Still," he added, "I agree that I would have served her purpose better by keeping silent. But that such an affair will cool the ardour of my cousin I do not think. You are wrong in placing this among the alliances in which the heart has no part. On my cousin's side—if all

they say be true—the heart plays a very considerable part indeed. But, for the rest—what harm have we done?"

"Time will show," said the hunchback.

"It will show, then, that I have done no hurt whatever to her interests. By now she is safe in Roccaleone. What, then, can befall her? Guidobaldo, no doubt, will repair to her, and across the moat he will entreat her to be a dutiful niece and to return. She will offer to do so on condition that he pass her his princely word not to further molest her with the matter of this marriage. And then?"

"Well?" growled the fool, "And then? Who shall say what may befall then? Let us say that his Highness reduces her by force."

"A siege?" laughed the Count. "Pooh! Where is your wisdom, fool! Do you think the splendid Guidobaldo is eager to become the sport of Italy, and go down to posterity as the duke who besieged his niece because she resisted his ordainings touching the matter of her wedding?"

"Guidobaldo da Montefeltro can be a violent man upon occasion," the fool was answering, when the officer who had left them reappeared with the announcement that his Highness awaited them.

They found the Prince in a very gloomy mood, and after greeting Francesco with cool ceremony, he questioned him on the matter of the company they had met yesternight. These inquiries he conducted with characteristic dignity, and no more show of concern than if it had been an affair of a strayed falcon. He thanked Francesco for his information, and gave orders that the seneschal should place apartments at his and Fanfulla's disposal for as long as it should please them to grace his court. With that he dismissed them, bidding the officer remain to receive his orders.

"And that," said Francesco to Peppe, as they crossed the ante-

chamber in the wake of a servant, "is the man who would lay siege to his niece's castle? For once, sir fool, your wisdom is at fault."

"You do not know the Duke, Excellency," answered the fool. "Beneath that frozen exterior burns a furnace, and there is no madness he would not commit."

But Francesco only laughed as, linking arms with Fanfulla, he passed down the gallery on his way to the apartments to which the servant was conducting them.

CHAPTER XIII. GIAN MARIA MAKES A VOW

In a measure the events that followed would almost tend to show that the fool was right. For even if the notion of besieging Valentina and reducing her by force of arms was not Guidobaldo's own in the first place, yet he lent a very willing ear to the counsel that they should thus proceed, when angrily urged two days thereafter by the Duke of Babbiano.

Upon hearing the news Gian Maria had abandoned himself to such a licence of rage as made those about him tremble from the highest to the meanest. The disappointment of his passion was in itself justification enough for this; but, in addition, Gian Maria beheld in the flight of Valentina the frustration of those bold schemes of which had talked so loudly to his councillors and his mother. It was his confidence in those same schemes that had induced him to send that defiant answer to Caesar Borgia. As a consequence of this there was haste—most desperate haste—that he should wed, since wedding was to lend him the power to carry out his brave promises of protecting his crown from the Duke of Valentinois, not to speak of the utter routing of the Borgia which he had wildly undertaken to accomplish.

That the destinies of States should be tossed to the winds of Heaven by a slip of a girl was to him something as insufferable as it had been unexpected.

"She must be brought back!" he had screeched, in his towering passion. "She must be brought back at once."

"True!" answered Guidobaldo, in his serene way; "she must be brought back. So far, I agree with you entirely. Tell me, now, how the thing is to be accomplished." And there was sarcasm in his voice.

"What difficulties does it present?" inquired Gian Maria.

"No difficulties," was the ironical reply. "She has shut herself up in the stoutest castle in Italy, and tells me that she will not come forth until I promise her freedom of choice in the matter of marriage. Clearly, there are no difficulties attached to her being brought back."

Gian Maria showed his teeth.

"Do you give me leave to go about it in my own way?" he asked.

"Not only do I give you leave, but I'll render you all the assistance in my power, if you can devise a means for luring her from Roccaleone."

"I hesitate no longer. Your niece, Lord Duke, is a rebel, and as a rebel is she to be treated. She has garrisoned a castle, and hurled defiance at the ruler of the land. It is a declaration of war, Highness, and war we shall have."

"You would resort to force?" asked Guidobaldo, disapproval lurking in his voice.

"To the force of arms, your Highness," answered Gian Maria, with prompt fierceness. "I will lay siege to this castle of hers, and I shall tear it stone from stone. Oh, I would have wooed her nicely had she let me, with gentle words and mincing ways that maidens love. But since she defies us, I'll woo her with arquebuse and cannon, and seek by starvation to make her surrender to my suit. My love shall put on armour to subject her, and I vow to God that I shall not shave my beard until I am inside her castle."

Guidobaldo looked grave.

"I should counsel gentler measures," said he. "Besiege her if you will, but do not resort to too much violence. Cut off their resources and let hunger be your advocate. Even so, I fear me, you will be laughed at by all Italy," he added bluntly.

"A fig for that! Let the fools laugh if they be minded to. What forces has she at Roccaleone?"

At the question Guidobaldo's brow grew dark. It was as if he had recalled some circumstance that had lain forgotten.

"Some twenty knaves led by a notorious ruffian of the name of Fortemani. The company was enrolled, they tell me, by a gentleman of my court, a kinsman of my Duchess, Messer Romeo Gonzaga."

"Is he with her now?" gasped Gian Maria.

"It would seem he is."

"By the Virgin's Ring of Perugia!" spluttered Gian Maria in increased dismay. "Do you suggest that they fled together?"

"My lord!" Guidobaldo's voice rang sharp and threatening. "It is of my niece that you are speaking. She took this gentleman with her just as she took three of her ladies and a page or two, to form such attendance as befits her birth."

Gian Maria took a turn in the apartment, a frown wrinkling his brow, and his lips pressed tight. Guidobaldo's proud words by no means convinced him. But the one preponderating desire in his heart just then was to humble the girl who had dared to flout him, to make her bend her stubborn neck. At last:

"I may indeed become the laughing-stock of Italy," he muttered, in a concentrated voice, "but I shall carry my resolve through, and my first act upon entering Roccaleone will be to hang this knave Gonzaga from its highest turret."

That very day Gian Maria began his preparations for the expedition against Roccaleone, and word of it was carried by Fanfulla to Francesco—for the latter had left his quarters at the palace upon hearing of Gian Maria's coming, and was now lodging at the sign of the "Sun."

Upon hearing the news he swore a mighty oath in which he consigned his cousin to the devil, by whom, in that moment, he pronounced him begotten.

"Do you think," he asked, when he was calmer, "that this man Gonzaga is her lover?"

"It is more than I can say," answered Fanfulla. "There is the fact that she fled with him. Though when I questioned Peppe on this same subject he first laughed the notion to scorn, and then grew grave. 'She loves him not, the popinjay,' he said; 'but he loves her, or I am blind else, and he's a villain, I know.'"

Francesco stood up, his face mighty serious, and his dark eyes full of uneasy thought.

"By the Host! It is a shameful thing," he cried out at last. "This poor lady so beset on every hand by a parcel of villains, each more unscrupulous than the other. Fanfulla, send for Peppe. We must despatch the fool to her with warning of Gian Maria's coming, and warning, too, against this man of Mantua she has fled with."

"Too late," answered Fanfulla. "The fool departed this morning for Roccaleone, to join his patrona."

Francesco looked his dismay.

"She will be undone," he groaned. "Thus between the upper and the nether stone—between Gian Maria and Romeo Gonzaga. Gesù!

she will be undone! And she so brave and so high-spirited!"

He moved slowly to the casement, and stood staring at the windows across the street, on which the setting sun fell in a ruddy glow. But it was not the windows that he saw. It was a scene in the woods at Acquasparta on that morning after the mountain fight; a man lying wounded in the bracken, and over him a gentle lady bending with eyes of pity and solicitude. Often since had his thoughts revisited that scene, sometimes with a smile, sometimes with a sigh, and sometimes with both at once.

He turned suddenly upon Fanfulla. "I will go myself," he announced.

"You?" echoed Fanfulla. "But the Venetians?"

By a gesture the Count signified how little the Venetians weighed with him when compared with the fortunes of this lady.

"I am going to Roccaleone," he insisted, "now—at once." And striding to the door he beat his hands together and called Lanciotto.

"You said, Fanfulla, that in these days there are no longer maidens held in bondage to whom a knight-errant may lend aid. You were at fault, for in Monna Valentina we have the captive maiden, in my cousin the dragon, in Gonzaga another, and in me the errant knight who is destined—I hope—to save her."

"You will save her from Gian Maria?" questioned Fanfulla incredulously.

"I will attempt it."

He turned to his servant, who entered as he spoke.

"We set out in a quarter of an hour, Lanciotto," said he. "Saddle for me and for yourself. You are to go with me. Zaccaria may remain with Messer degli Arcipreti. You will care for him, Fanfulla, and he will

serve you well."

"But what of me?" cried Fanfulla. "Do I not accompany you?"

"If you will, yes. But you might serve me better by returning to Babbiano and watching the events there, sending me word of what befalls—for great things will befall soon if my cousin returns not and the Borga advances. It is upon this that I am founding such hopes as I have."

"But whither shall I send you word? To Roccaleone?"

Francesco reflected a moment. "If you do not hear from me, then send your news to Roccaleone, for if I should linger there and we are besieged, it will perhaps be impossible to send a message to you. But if—as I hope—I go to Aquila, I will send you word of it."

"To Aquila?"

"Yes. It may be that I shall be at Aquila before the week is out. But keep it secret, Fanfulla, and I'll fool these dukes to the very top of their unhealthy bent."

A half-hour later the Count of Aquila, mounted on a stout Calabrian horse, and attended by Lanciotto on a mule, rode gently down towards the valley. They went unnoticed, for what cared for them the peasants that sang at their labours in the contado?

They met a merchant, whose servant was urging his laden sumpters up the hilly road to the city on the heights, and they passed him with a courteous greeting. Farther they came upon a mounted company of nobles and ladies, returning from a hawking party, and followed by attendants bearing their hooded falcons, and their gay laughter still rang in Francesco's ears after he had passed from their sight and vanished in the purple mists of eventide that came up to meet him from the river.

They turned westward towards the Apennines, and pushed on after night had fallen, until the fourth hour, when at Francesco's suggestion they drew rein before a sleepy, wayside locanda, and awoke the host to demand shelter. There they slept no longer than until matins, so that the grey light of dawn saw them once more upon their way, and by the time the sun had struck with its first golden shaft the grey crest of the old hills, they drew rein on the brink of the roaring torrent at the foot of the mighty crag that was crowned by the Castle of Roccaleone.

Grim and gaunt it loomed above the fertile vale, with that torrent circling it in a natural moat, like a giant sentinel of the Apennines that were its background. And now the sunlight raced down the slopes of the old mountains like a tide. It smote the square tower of the keep, then flowed adown the wall, setting the old grey stone a-gleaming, and flashing back from a mullioned window placed high up. Lower it came, revealing grotesque gargoyles, flooding the crenellated battlements and turning green the ivy and lichen that but a moment back had blackened the stout, projecting buttresses. Thence it leapt to the ground, and drove the shadow before it down the grassy slope, until it reached the stream and sparkled on its foaming, tumbling waters, scattering a hundred colours through the flying spray.

And all that time, until the sun had reached him and included him in the picture it was awakening, the Count of Aquila sat in his saddle, with thoughtful eyes uplifted to the fortress.

Then, Lanciotto following him, he walked his horse round the western side, where the torrent was replaced by a smooth arm of water, for which a cutting had been made to complete the isolation of the crag of Roccaleone. But here, where the castle might more easily have become vulnerable, a blank wall greeted him, broken by no more than a narrow slit or two midway below the battlements. He rode on towards the northern side, crossing a footbridge that spanned the river, and at last coming to a halt before the entrance tower. Here

again the moat was formed by the torrential waters of the mountain stream.

He bade his servant rouse the inmates, and Lanciotto hallooed in a voice that nature had made deep and powerful. The echo of it went booming up to scare the birds on the hillside, but evoked no answer from the silent castle.

"They keep a zealous watch," laughed the Count. "Again, Lanciotto."

The man obeyed him, and again and again his deep voice rang out like a trumpet-call before sign was made from within that it had been heard. At length, above the parapet of the tower appeared a stunted figure with head unkempt, as grotesque almost as any of the gargoyles beneath, and an owlish face peered at them from one of the crenels of the battlement, and demanded, in surly, croaking tones their business. Instantly the Count recognised Peppe.

"Good morrow, fool," he bade him.

"You, my lord?" exclaimed the jester.

"You sleep soundly at Roccaleone," quoth Francesco. "Bestir that knavish garrison of yours, and bid the lazy dogs let down the bridge. I have news for Monna Valentina."

"At once, Excellency," the fool replied, and would have gone upon the instant but that Francesco recalled him.

"Say, Peppe, a knight—the knight she met at Acquasparta, if you will. But leave my name unspoken."

With the assurance that he would obey his wishes Peppe went his errand. A slight delay ensued, and then upon the battlements appeared Gonzaga, sleepy and contentious, attended by a couple of Fortemani's knaves, who came to ask the nature of Francesco's

business.

"It is with Monna Valentina," answered him Francesco, raising head and voice, so that Gonzaga recognised him for the wounded knight of Acquasparta, remembered and scowled.

"I am Monna Valentina's captain here," he announced, with arrogance. "And you may deliver to me such messages as you bear."

There followed a contention, conducted ill-humouredly on the part of Gonzaga and scarcely less so on the Count's, Francesco stoutly refusing to communicate his business to any but Valentina, and Gonzaga as stoutly refusing to disturb the lady at that hour, or to lower the bridge. Words flew between them across the waters of the moat, and grew hotter at each fresh exchange, till in the end they were abruptly terminated by the appearance of Valentina herself, attended by Peppino.

"What is this, Gonzaga?" she inquired, her manner excited, for the fool had told her that it was the knight Francesco who sought admittance, and at the very mention of the name she had flushed, then paled, then started for the ramparts. "Why is this knight denied admittance since he bears a message for me?" And from where she stood she sought with admiring eyes the graceful shape of the Count of Aquila—the knight-errant of her dreams. Francesco bared his head, and bent to the withers of his horse in courteous greeting. She turned to Gonzaga impatiently.

"For what do you wait?" she cried. "Have you not understood my wishes? Let the bridge be lowered."

"Bethink you, Madonna," he remonstrated. "You do not know this man. He may be a spy of Gian Maria's—a hireling paid to betray us."

"You fool," she answered sharply. "Do you not see that it is the wounded knight we met that day you were escorting me to Urbino?"

"What shall that signify?" demanded he. "Is it proof of his honesty of purpose or loyalty to you? Be advised, Madonna, and let him deliver his message from where he is. He is safer there."

She measured him with a determined eye.

"Messer Gonzaga, order them to lower the bridge," she bade him.

"But, lady, bethink you of your peril."

"Peril?" she echoed. "Peril from two men, and we a garrison of over twenty? Surely the man is a coward who talks so readily of perils. Have the drawbridge lowered."

"But if——" he began, with a desperate vehemence, when again she cut him short.

"Am I to be obeyed? Am I mistress, and will you bid them lower the bridge, or must I, myself, go see to it?"

With a look of despairing anger and a shrug of the shoulders he turned from her, and despatched one of his men with an order. A few moments later, with a creaking of hinges and a clanking of chains, the great bridge swung down and dropped with a thud to span the gulf. Instantly the Count spurred his horse forward, and followed by Lanciotto rode across the plank and under the archway of the entrance tower into the first courtyard.

Now, scarcely had he drawn rein there when through a door at the far end appeared the gigantic figure of Fortemani, half-clad and sword in hand. At sight of Francesco the fellow leaped down a half-dozen steps, and advanced towards him with a burst of oaths.

"To me!" he shouted, in a voice that might have waked the dead. "Olá! Olá! What devil's work is this? How come you here? By whose orders was the bridge let down?"

"By the orders of Monna Valentina's captain," answered Francesco, wondering what madman might be this.

"Captain?" cried the other, coming to a standstill and his face turning purple. "Body of Satan! What captain? I am captain here."

The Count looked him over in surprise.

"Why, then," said he, "you are the very man I seek. I congratulate you on the watch you keep, Messer Capitano. Your castle is so excellently patrolled that had I been minded for a climb I had scaled your walls and got within your gates without arousing any of your slumbering sentries."

Fortemani eyed him with a lowering glance. The prosperity of the past four days had increased the insolence inherent in the man.

"Is that your affair?" he growled menacingly. "You are over-bold, sir stranger, to seek a quarrel with me, and over-pert to tell me how I shall discharge my captaincy. By the Passion! You shall be punished."

"Punished—I?" echoed Francesco, on whose brow there now descended a scowl as black as Ercole's own.

"Aye, punished, young sir. Ercole Fortemani is my name."

"I have heard of you," answered the Count contemptuously, "and of how you belie that name of yours, for they tell me that a more drunken, cowardly, good-for-nothing rogue is not to be found in Italy—no, not even in the Pope's dominions. And have a care how you cast the word 'punishment' at your betters, animal. The moat is none so distant, and the immersion may profit you. For I'll swear you've not been washed since they baptized you—if, indeed, you be a son of Mother Church at all."

"Sangue di Cristo!" spluttered the enraged bully, his face mottled.

"This to me? Come down from that horse."

He laid hold of Francesco's leg to drag him to the ground, but the Count wrenched it free by a quick motion that left a gash from his spur upon the captain's hands. Simultaneously he raised his whip, and would have laid the lash of it across the broad of Fortemani's back—for it had angered him beyond words to have a ruffian of this fellow's quality seeking to ruffle it with him—but at that moment a female voice, stern and imperative, bade them hold in their quarrel.

Fortemani fell back nursing his lacerated hand and muttering curses, whilst Francesco turned in the direction whence that voice had come. Midway on the flight of stone steps he beheld Valentina, followed by Gonzaga, Peppe, and a couple of men-at-arms, descending from the battlements.

Calm and queenly she stood, dressed in a camorra of grey velvet with black sleeves, which excellently set off her handsome height. Gonzaga was leaning forward, speaking into her ear, and for all that his voice was subdued, some of his words travelled down to Francesco on the still, morning air.

"Was I not wise, Madonna, in that I hesitated to admit him? You see what manner of man he is."

The blood flamed in Francesco's cheeks, nor did it soften his chagrin to note the look which Valentina flashed down at him.

Instantly he leapt to the ground, and flinging his reins to Lanciotto he went forward to the foot of that stone staircase, his broad hat slung back upon his shoulders, to meet that descending company.

"Is this seemly, sir?" she questioned angrily. "Does it become you to brawl with my garrison the moment you are admitted?"

The blood rose higher in Francesco's face, and now suffused his

temples and reached his hair. Yet his voice was well restrained as he made answer:

"Madonna, this knave was insolent."

"An insolence that you no doubt provoked," put in Gonzaga, a dimple showing on his woman's cheek. But the sterner rebuke fell from the lips of Valentina.

"Knave?" she questioned, with flushed countenance. "If you would not have me regret your admittance, Messer Francesco, I pray you curb your words. Here are no knaves. That, sir, is the captain of my soldiers."

Francesco bowed submissively, as patient under her reproof as he had been hasty under Fortemani's.

"It was on the matter of this captaincy that we fell to words," he answered, with more humility. "By his own announcement I understood this nobleman"—and his eyes turned to Gonzaga—"to be your captain."

"He is the captain of my castle," she informed him.

"As you see, Ser Francesco," put in Peppe, who had perched himself upon the balustrade, "we suffer from no lack of captains here. We have also Fra Domenico, who is captain of our souls and of the kitchen; myself am captain of——"

"Devil take you, fool," snapped Gonzaga, thrusting him roughly from his perch. Then turning abruptly to the Count: "You bear a message for us, sir?" he questioned loftily.

Swallowing the cavalier tone, and overlooking the pronoun Gonzaga employed, Francesco inclined his head again to the lady.

"I should prefer to deliver it in more privacy than this." And his eye

travelled round the court and up the steps behind, where was now collected the entire company of Fortemani. Gonzaga sneered and tossed his golden curls, but Valentina saw naught unreasonable in the request, and bidding Romeo attend her and Francesco follow, she led the way.

They crossed the quadrangle, and, mounting the steps down which Fortemani had dashed to meet the Count, they passed into the banqueting-hall, which opened directly upon the south side of the courtyard. The Count, following in her wake, ran the gauntlet of scowls of the assembled mercenaries. He stalked past them unmoved, taking their measure as he went, and estimating their true value with the unerring eye of the practised condottiero who has had to do with the enrolling of men and the handling of them. So little did he like their looks that on the threshold of the hall he paused and stayed Gonzaga.

"I am loath to leave my servant at the mercy of those ruffians, sir. May I beg that you will warn them against offering him violence?"

"Ruffians?" cried the lady angrily, before Gonzaga could offer a reply. "They are my soldiers."

Again he bowed, and there was a cold politeness in the tones in which he answered her:

"I crave your pardon, and I will say no more—unless it be to deplore that I may not felicitate you on your choice."

It was Gonzaga's turn to wax angry, for the choice had been his.

"Your message will have need to be a weighty one, sir, to earn our patience for your impertinence."

Francesco returned the look of those blue eyes which vainly sought to flash ferociously, and he made little attempt to keep his scorn from showing in his glance. He permitted himself even to shrug his

shoulders a trifle impatiently.

"Indeed, indeed, I think that I had best begone," he answered regretfully, "for it is a place whose inmates seem all bent on quarrelling with me. First your captain Fortemani greets me with an insolence hard to leave unpunished. You, yourself, Madonna, resent that I should crave protection for my man against those fellows whose looks give rise for my solicitation. You are angry that I should dub them ruffians, as if I had followed the calling of arms these ten years without acquiring knowledge of the quality of a man however much you may disguise him. And lastly, to crown all, this cicisbeo"—and he spread a hand contemptuously towards Gonzaga—"speaks of my impertinences."

"Madonna," cried Gonzaga, "I beg that you will let me deal with him."

Unwittingly, unwillingly, Gonzaga saved the situation by that prayer. The anger that was fast rising in Madonna's heart, stirred by the proud bearing of the Count, was scattered before the unconscious humour of her captain's appeal, in such ludicrous contrast was his mincing speech and slender figure with Francesco's firm tones and lean, active height. She did not laugh, for that would have been to have spoilt all, but she looked from one to the other with quiet relish, noting the glance of surprise and raised eyebrows with which the Count received the courtier's request to be let deal with him. And thus, being turned from anger, the balance of her mind was quick to adjust itself, and she bethought her that perhaps there was reason in what this knight advanced, and that his reception had lacked the courtesy that was his due. In a moment, with incomparable grace and skill, she had soothed Gonzaga's ruffled vanity, and appeased the Count's more sturdy resentment.

"And now, Messer Francesco," she concluded, "let us be friends, and let me hear your business. I beg that you will sit."

They had passed into the banqueting-hall—a noble apartment, whose walls were frescoed with hunting and pastoral scenes, one or two of which were the work of Pisaniello. There were, too, some stray trophies of the chase, and, here and there, a suit of costly armour that caught the sunlight pouring through the tall, mullioned windows. At the far end stood a richly carved screen of cedar, and above this appeared the twisted railing of the minstrels' gallery. In a tall armchair of untanned leather, at the head of the capacious board, Monna Valentina sat herself, Gonzaga taking his stand at her elbow, and Francesco fronting her, leaning lightly against the table.

"The news I bear you, lady, is soon told," said the Count. "I would its quality were better. Your suitor Gian Maria returning to Guidobaldo's court, eager for the nuptials that were promised him, has learnt of your flight to Roccaleone and is raising—indeed will have raised by now—an army to invest and reduce your fortress."

Gonzaga turned as pale as the vest of white silk that gleamed beneath his doublet of pearl-coloured velvet at this realisation of the prophecies he had uttered without believing. A sickly fear possessed his soul. What fate would they mete out to him who had been the leading spirit in Valentina's rebellion? He could have groaned aloud at this miscarriage of all his fine plans. Where now would be the time to talk of love, to press and carry his suit with Valentina and render himself her husband? These would be war in the air, and bloody work that made his skin creep and turn cold to ponder on. And the irony of it all was keenly cruel. It was the very contingency that he had prophesied, assured that neither Guidobaldo nor Gian Maria would be so mad as to court ridicule by engaging upon it.

For a second Francesco's eyes rested on the courtier's face, and saw the fear written there for all to read. The shadow of a smile quivered on his lips as his glance moved on to meet the eyes of Valentina, sparkling as sparkles frost beneath the sun.

"Why, let them come!" she exclaimed, almost in exultation. "This ducal oaf shall find me very ready for him. We are armed at all points. We have victuals to last us three months, if need be, and we have no lack of weapons. Let Gian Maria come, and he will find Valentina della Rovere none so easy to reduce. To you, sir," she continued, with more calm, "to you on whom I have no claim, I am more than grateful for your chivalrous act in riding here to warn me."

Francesco sighed; a look of regret crossed his face.

"Alas!" he said. "When I rode hither, Madonna, I had hoped to serve you to a better purpose. I had advice to offer and assistance if you should need it; but the sight of those men-at-arms of yours makes me fear that it is not advice upon which it would be wise to act. For the plan I had in mind, it would be of the first importance that your soldiers should be trustworthy, and this, I fear me, they are not."

"Nevertheless," put in Gonzaga feverishly, clinging to a slender hope, "let us hear it."

"I beg that you will," said Valentina.

Thus enjoined, Francesco pondered a moment.

"Are you acquainted with the politics of Babbiano?" he inquired.

"I know something of them."

"I will make the position quite clear to you, Madonna," he rejoined. And with that he told her of the threatened descent of Caesar Borgia upon Gian Maria's duchy, and hence, of the little time at her suitor's disposal; so that if he could but be held in check before the walls of Roccaleone for a little while, all might be well. "But seeing in what haste he is," he ended, "his methods are likely to be rough and desperate, and I had thought that meanwhile you need not remain here, Madonna."

"Not remain?" she cried, scorn of the notion in her voice. "Not remain?" quoth Gonzaga timorously, hope sounding in his.

"Precisely, Madonna. I would have proposed that you leave Gian Maria an empty nest, so that even if the castle should fall into his hands he would gain nothing."

"You would advise me to fly?" she demanded.

"I came prepared to do so, but the sight of your men restrains me. They are not trustworthy, and to save their dirty skins they might throw Roccaleone open to the besiegers, and thus your flight would be discovered, while yet there might be time to render it futile."

Before she could frame an answer there was Gonzaga feverishly urging her to act upon so wise and timely a suggestion, and seek safety in flight from a place that Gian Maria would tear stone from stone. His words pattered quickly and piteously in entreaty, till in the end, facing him squarely:

"Are you afraid, Gonzaga?" she asked him.

"I am—afraid for you, Madonna," he answered readily.

"Then let your fears have peace. For whether I stay or whether I go, one thing is certain: Gian Maria never shall set hands upon me." She turned again to Francesco. "I see a certain wisdom in the counsel of flight you would have offered me, no less than in what I take to be your advice that I should remain. Did I but consult my humour I should stay and deliver battle when this tyrant shows himself. But prudence, too, must be consulted, and I will give the matter thought." And now she thanked him with a generous charm for having come to her with this news and proffered his assistance, asking what motives brought him.

"Such motives as must ever impel a knight to serve a lady in distress," said he, "and perhaps, too, the memory of the charity with

which you tended my wounds that day at Acquasparta."

For a second their glances met, quivered in the meeting, and fell apart again, an odd confusion in the breast of each, all of which Gonzaga, sunk in moody rumination, observed not. To lighten the awkward silence that was fallen, she asked him how it had transpired so soon that it was to Roccaleone she had fled.

"Do you not know?" he cried. "Has not Peppe told you?"

"I have had no speech with him. He but reached the castle, himself, late last night, and I first saw him this morning when he came to announce your presence."

And then, before more could be said, there arose a din of shouting from without. The door was pushed suddenly open, and Peppe darted into the room.

"Your man, Ser Francesco," he cried, his face white with excitement. "Come quickly, or they will kill him."

CHAPTER XIV. FORTEMANI DRINKS WATER

The thing had begun with the lowering glances that Francesco had observed, and had grown to gibes and insults after he had disappeared. But Lanciotto had preserved an unruffled front, being a man schooled in the Count of Aquila's service to silence and a wondrous patience. This insensibility those hinds translated into cowardice, and emboldened by it—like the mongrels that they were—their offensiveness grew more direct and gradually more threatening. Lanciotto's patience was slowly oozing away, and indeed, it was no longer anything but the fear of provoking his master's anger that restrained him. At length one burly ruffian, who had bidden him remove his head-piece in the company of gentlemen, and whose request had been by Lanciotto as disregarded as the rest, advanced menacingly towards him and caught him by the leg, as Ercole had caught his master. Exasperated at that, Lanciotto had swung his leg free, and caught the rash fellow a vicious kick in the face that had felled him, stunned and bleeding.

The roar from the man's companions told Lanciotto what to expect. In an instant they were upon him, clamouring for his blood. He sought to draw his master's sword, which together with the Count's other armour was slung across his saddle-bow; but before he could extricate it, he was seized by a dozen hands, and cropped, fighting, from the saddle. On the ground they overpowered him, and a mailed hand was set upon his mouth, crushing back into his throat the cry for help he would have raised.

On the west side of the courtyard a fountain issuing from the wall

had once poured its water through a lion's head into a vast tank of moss-grown granite. But it had been disused for some time, and the pipe in the lion's mouth was dry. The tank, however, was more than half full of water, which, during the late untenancing of the castle, had turned foul and stagnant. To drown Lanciotto in this was the amiable suggestion that emanated from Fortemani himself—a suggestion uproariously received by his knaves, who set themselves to act upon it. They roughly dragged the bleeding and frantically struggling Lanciotto across the yard and gained the border of the tank, intending fully to sink him into it and hold him under, to drown there like a rat.

But in that instant a something burst upon him like a bolt from out of Heaven. In one or two, and presently in more, the cruel laughter turned to sudden howls of pain as a lash of bullock-hide caught them about head and face and shoulders.

"Back there, you beasts, you animals, back!" roared a voice of thunder, and back they went unquestioning before that pitiless lash, like the pack of craven hounds they were.

It was Francesco, who, single-handed, and armed with no more than a whip, was scattering them from about his maltreated servant, as the hawk scatters a flight of noisy sparrows. And now between him and Lanciotto there stood no more than the broad bulk of Ercole Fortemani, his back to the Count; for, as yet, he had not realised the interruption.

Francesco dropped his whip, and setting one hand at the captain's girdle, and the other at his dirty neck, he hoisted him up with a strength incredible, and hurled him from his path and into the slimy water of the tank.

There was a mighty roar drowned in a mightier splash as Fortemani, spread-eagle, struck the surface and sank from sight, whilst with the flying spray there came a fetid odour to tell of the

unsavouriness of that unexpected bath.

Without pausing to see the completion of his work, Francesco stooped over his prostrate servant.

"Have the beasts hurt you, Lanciotto?" he questioned. But before the fellow could reply, one of those hinds had sprung upon the stooping Count, and struck him with a dagger between the shoulder-blades.

A woman's alarmed cry rang out, for Valentina was watching the affray from the steps of the hall, with Gonzaga at her elbow.

But Francesco's quilted brigandine had stood the test of steel, and the point of that assassin's dagger glanced harmlessly aside, doing no worse hurt than a rent in the silk surface of the garment. A second later the fellow found himself caught as in a bond of steel. The dagger was wrenched from his grasp, and the point of it laid against his breast even as the Count forced him down upon his knees.

In a flash was the thing done, yet to the wretched man who saw himself upon the threshold of Eternity, and who—like a true son of the Church—had a wholesome fear of hell, it seemed an hour whilst, with livid cheeks and eyes starting from his head, he waited for that poniard to sink into his heart, as it was aimed. But not in his heart did the blow fall. With a sudden snort of angry amusement, the Count pitched the dagger from him and brought down his clenched fist with a crushing force into the ruffian's face. The fellow sank unconscious beneath that mighty blow, and Francesco, regaining the whip that lay almost at his feet, rose up to confront what others there might be.

From the tank, standing breast-deep in that stinking water, his head and face grotesquely masked in a vile green slime of putrid vegetation, Ercole Fortemani bellowed with horrid blasphemy that he would have his aggressor's blood, but stirred never a foot to take it.

Not that he was by nature wholly a coward; but inspired by a wholesome fear of the man who could perform such a miracle of strength, he remained out of Francesco's reach, well in the middle of that square basin, and lustily roared orders to his men to tear the fellow to pieces. But his men had seen enough of the Count's methods, and made no advance upon that stalwart, dauntless figure that stood waiting for them with a whip which several had already tasted. Huddled together, more like a flock of frightened sheep than a body of men of war, they stood near the entrance tower, the mock of Peppe, who from the stone-gallery above—much to the amusement of Valentina's ladies and two pert pages that were with him—applauded in high-flown terms their wondrous valour.

They stirred at last, but it was at Valentina's bidding. She had been conferring with Gonzaga, who—giving it for his reason that she, herself, might need protection—had remained beside her, well out of the fray. She had been urging him to do something, and at last he had obeyed her, and moved down the short flight of steps into the court; but so reluctantly and slowly, that with an exclamation of impatience, she suddenly brushed past him, herself to do the task she had begged of him. Past Francesco she went, with a word of such commendation of his valour and a look of such deep admiration, that the blood sprang, responsive, to his cheek. She paused with a solicitous inquiry for the now risen but sorely bruised Lanciotto. She flashed an angry look and an angry command of silence at the great Ercole, still bellowing from his tank, and then, within ten paces of his followers, she halted, and with wrathful mien, and hand outstretched towards their captain, she bade them arrest him.

That sudden, unexpected order struck dumb the vociferous Fortemani. He ceased, and gaped at his men, who eyed one another now in doubt; but the doubt was quickly dispelled by the lady's own words:

"You will make him prisoner, and conduct him to the guardroom, or I will have you and him swept out of my castle," she informed them, as confidently as though she had a hundred men-at-arms to do her bidding on them.

A pace or so behind her stood the lily-cheeked Gonzaga, gnawing his lip, timid and conjecturing. Behind him again loomed the stalwart height of Francesco del Falco with, at his side, Lanciotto, of mien almost as resolute as his own.

That was the full force with which the lady spoke of sweeping them—as if they had been so much foulness—from Roccaleone, unless they did her bidding. They were still hesitating, when the Count advanced to Valentina's side.

"You have heard the choice our lady gives you," he said sternly. "Let us know whether you will obey or disobey. This choice that is yours now, may not be yours again. But if you elect to disobey Madonna, the gate is behind you, the bridge still down. Get you gone!"

Furtively, from under lowering brows, Gonzaga darted a look of impotent malice at the Count. Whatever issue had the affair, this man must not remain in Roccaleone. He was too strong, too dominant, and he would render himself master of the place by no other title than that strength of his and that manner of command which Gonzaga accounted a coarse, swashbuckling bully's gift, but would have given much to be possessed of. Of how strong and dominant indeed he was never had Francesco offered a more signal proof. Those men, bruised and maltreated by him, would beyond doubt have massed together and made short work of one less dauntless but when a mighty courage such as his goes hand-in-hand with the habit of command, such hinds as they can never long withstand it. They grumbled something among themselves, and one of them at last made answer:

"Noble sir, it is our captain that we are bidden to arrest."

"True; but your captain, like yourselves, is in this lady's pay; and she, your true, your paramount commander, bids you arrest him." And now, whilst yet they hesitated, his quick wits flung them the bait that must prove most attractive. "He has shown himself to-day unfitted for the command entrusted him and it may become a question, when he has been judged, of choosing one of you to fill the place he may leave empty."

Hinds were they in very truth; the scum of the bravi that haunted the meanest borgo of Urbino. Their hesitation vanished, and such slight loyalty as they felt towards Ercole was overruled by the prospect of his position and his pay, should his disgrace become accomplished.

They called upon him to come forth from his refuge, where he still stood, dumb and stricken at this sudden turn events had taken. He sullenly refused to obey the call to yield, until Francesco—who now assumed command with a readiness that galled Gonzaga more and more—bade one of them go fetch an arquebuse and shoot the dog. At that he cried out for mercy, and came wading to the edge of the tank swearing that if the immersion had not drowned him, it were a miracle but he was poisoned.

Thus closed an incident that had worn a mighty ugly look, and it served to open Valentina's eyes to the true quality of the men Gonzaga had hired her. Maybe that it opened his own for that amiable lute-thrummer was green of experience in these matters. She bade Gonzaga care for Francesco, and called one of the grinning pages from the gallery to be his esquire. A room was placed at his disposal for the little time that he might spend at Roccaleone, whilst she debated what her course should be.

A bell tolled in the far southern wing of the castle, beyond the second courtyard, and summoned her to chapel, for there Fra

Domenico said Mass each morning. And so she took her leave of Francesco, saying she would pray Heaven to direct her to a wise choice, whether to fly from Roccaleone, or whether to remain and ward off the onslaught of Gian Maria.

Francesco, attended by Gonzaga and the page, repaired to a handsome room under the Lion's Tower, which rose upon the south-eastern angle of the fortress. His windows overlooked the second, or inner, courtyard, across which Valentina and her ladies were now speeding on their way to Mass.

Gonzaga made shift to stifle the resentment that he felt against this man, in whom he saw an interloper, and strove to treat him with the courtesy that was his due. He would even have gone the length of discussing with him the situation—prompted by a certain mistrust, and cunningly eager to probe the real motive that had brought this stranger to interest himself in the affairs of Valentina. But Francesco, wearily, yet with an unimpeachable politeness, staved him off, and requested that Lanciotto might be sent to attend him. Seeing the futility of his endeavours, Gonzaga withdrew in increased resentment, but with a heightened sweetness of smile and profoundness of courtesies.

He went below to issue orders for the raising of the bridge, and finding the men singularly meek and tractable after the sharp lesson Francesco had read them, he vented upon them some of the vast ill-humour that possessed him. Next he passed on to his own apartments, and there he sat himself by a window overlooking the castle gardens, with his unpleasant thoughts for only company.

But presently his mood lightened and he took courage, for he could be very brave when peril was remote. It was best, he reflected, that Valentina should leave Roccaleone. Such was the course he would advise and urge. Naturally, he would go with her, and so he might advance his suit as well elsewhere as in that castle. On the other

hand, if she remained, why, so would he, and, after all, what if Gian Maria came? As Francesco had said, the siege could not be protracted, thanks to the tangled affairs of Babbiano. Soon Gian Maria would be forced to turn him homeward, to defend his Duchy. If, then, for a little while they could hold him in check, all would yet be well. Surely he had been over-quick to despond.

He rose and stretched himself with indolent relish, then pushing wide his casement, he leaned out to breathe the morning air. A soft laugh escaped him. He had been a fool indeed to plague himself with fears when he had first heard of Gian Maria's coming. Properly viewed, it became a service Gian Maria did him—whether they remained, or whether they went. Love has no stronger promoter than a danger shared, and a week of such disturbances as Gian Maria was likely to occasion them should do more to advance his suit than he might hope to achieve in a whole month of peaceful wooing. Then the memory of Francesco set a wrinkle 'twixt his brows, and he bethought him how taken Valentina had been with the fellow when first she had beheld him at Acquasparta, and of how, as she rode that day, she had seen naught but the dark eyes of this Knight Francesco.

"Knight Francesco of what or where?" he muttered to himself. "Bah! A nameless, homeless adventurer; a swashbuckling bully, reeking of blood and leather, and fit to drive such a pack as Fortemani's. But with a lady—what shalt such an oaf attain, how shall he prevail?" He laughed the incipient jealousy to scorn, and his brow grew clear, for now he was in an optimistic mood—perhaps a reaction from his recent tremors. "Yet, by the Host!" he pursued, bethinking him of the amazing boldness Francesco had shown in the courtyard, "he has the strength of Hercules, and a way with him that makes him feared and obeyed. Pish!" he laughed again, as, turning, he unhooked his lute from where it hung upon the wall. "The by-blow of some condottiero, who blends with his father's bullying arrogance the peasant soul of his careless mother. And I fear that such a one as that

shall touch the heart of my peerless Valentina? Why, it is a thought that does her but poor honour."

And dismissing Francesco from his mind, he sought the strings with his fingers, and thrummed an accompaniment as he returned to the window, his voice, wondrous sweet and tender, breaking into a gentle love-song.

CHAPTER XV. THE MERCY OF FRANCESCO

Monna Valentina and her ladies dined at noon in a small chamber opening from the great hall, and thither were bidden Francesco and Gonzaga. The company was waited upon by the two pages, whilst Fra Domenico, with a snow-white apron girt about his portentous waist, brought up the steaming viands from the kitchen where he had prepared them; for, like a true conventual, he was something of a master in the confection—and a very glutton in the consumption—of delectable comestibles. The kitchen was to him as the shrine of some minor cult, and if his breviary and beads commanded from him the half of the ecstatic fervour of his devotions to pot and pan, to cauldron and to spit, then was canonisation indeed assured him.

He set before them that day a dinner than which a better no prince commanded, unless it were the Pope. There were ortolans, shot in the valley, done with truffles, that made the epicurean Gonzaga roll his eyes, translated through the medium of his palate into a very paradise of sensual delight. There was a hare, trapped on the hillside, and stewed in Malmsey, of a flavour so delicate that Gonzaga was regretting him his heavy indulgence in the ortolans; there was trout, fresh caught in the stream below, and a wondrous pasty that turned liquid in the mouth. To wash down these good things there was stout red wine of Puglia and more delicate Malvasia, for in his provisioning of the fortress Gonzaga had contrived that, at least, they should not go thirsty.

"For a garrison awaiting siege you fare mighty well at Roccaleone," was Francesco's comment on that excellent repast.

It was the fool who answered him. He sat out of sight upon the floor, hunched against the chair of one of Valentina's ladies, who now and again would toss him down a morsel from her plate, much as she might have treated a favourite hound.

"You have the friar to thank for it," said he, in a muffled voice, for his mouth was crammed with pasty. "Let me be damned when I die, if I make him not my confessor. The man who can so minister to bodies should deal amazingly well with souls. Fra Domenico, you shall confess me after sunset."

"You need me not," answered the monk, in disdainful wrath. "There is a beatitude for such as you—'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'"

"And is there no curse for such as you?" flashed back the fool. "Does it say nowhere—'Damned are the gross of flesh, the fat and rotund gluttons who fashion themselves a god of their own bellies'?"

With his sandalled foot the friar caught the fool a surreptitious kick.

"Be still, you adder, you bag of venom."

Fearing worse, the fool gathered himself up.

"Beware!" he cried shrilly. "Bethink you, friar, that anger is a cardinal sin. Beware, I say!"

Fra Domenico checked his upraised hand, and fell to muttering scraps of Latin, his lids veiling his suddenly downcast eyes. Thus Peppe gained the door.

"Say, friar; in my ear, now—Was that a hare you stewed, or an outworn sandal?"

"Now, God forgive me," roared the monk, springing towards him.

"For your cooking? Aye, pray—on your knees." He dodged a blow,

ducked, and doubled back into the room. "A cook, you? Pish! you tun of convent lard! Your ortolans were burnt, your trout swam in grease, your pasty——"

What the pasty may have been the company was not to learn, for Fra Domenico, crimson of face, had swooped down upon the fool, and would have caught him but that he dived under the table by Valentina's skirts, and craved her protection from this gross maniac that held himself a cook.

"Now, hold your wrath, father," she said, laughing with the rest. "He does but plague you. Bear with him for the sake of that beautitude you cited, which has fired him to reprisals."

Mollified, but still grumbling threats of a beating to be bestowed on Peppe when the opportunity should better serve him, the friar turned to his domestic duties. They rose soon after, and at Gonzaga's suggestion Valentina paused in the great hall to issue orders that Fortemani be brought before her for judgment. In a score of ways, since their coming to Roccaleone, had Ercole been wanting in that respect to which Gonzaga held himself entitled, and this opportunity he seized with eagerness to vent his vindictive rancour.

Valentina begged of Francesco that he, too, would stay, and help them with his wide experience, a phrase that sent an unpleasant pang through the heart of Romeo Gonzaga. It was perhaps as much to assert himself as to gratify his rancour against Fortemani, that, having despatched a soldier to fetch the prisoner, he turned to suggest curtly that Ercole should be hanged at once.

"What boots a trial?" he demanded. "We were all witnesses of his insubordination, and for that there can be but one punishment. Let the animal hang!"

"But the trial is of your own suggestion," she protested.

"Nay, Madonna. I but suggested judgment. It is since you have begged Messer Francesco, here, to assist us that I opine you mean to give the knave a trial."

"Would you credit this dear Gonzaga with so much bloodthirstiness?" she asked Francesco. "Do you, sir, share his opinion that the captain should hang unheard? I fear me you do, for, from what I have seen of them, your ways do not incline to gentleness."

Gonzaga smiled, gathering from that sentence how truly she apprised the coarse nature of this stranger. Francesco's answer surprised them.

"Nay, I hold Messer Gonzaga's an ill counsel. Show mercy to Fortemani now, where he expects none, and you will have made a faithful servant of him. I know his kind."

"Ser Francesco speaks without the knowledge that we have, Madonna," was Gonzaga's rude comment. "An example must be made if we would have respect and orderliness from these men."

"Then make it an example of mercy," suggested Francesco sweetly.

"Well, we shall see," was Valentina's answer. "I like your counsel, Messer Francesco, and yet I see a certain wisdom in Gonzaga's words. Though in such a case as this I would sooner consort with folly than have a man's death upon my conscience. But here he comes, and, at least, we'll give him trial. Maybe he is penitent by now."

Gonzaga sneered, and took his place on the right of Valentina's chair, Francesco standing on her left; and in this fashion they disposed themselves to hold judgment upon the captain of her forces.

He was brought in between two mailed men-at-arms, his hands

pinioned behind him, his tread heavy as that of a man in fear, his eyes directed sullenly upon the waiting trio, but sullenest of all upon Francesco, who had so signally encompassed his discomfiture. Valentina spread a hand to Gonzaga, and from Gonzaga waved it slightly in the direction of the Bully. Responsive to that gesture, Gonzaga faced the pinioned captain truculently.

"You know your offence, knave," he bawled at him. "Have you aught to urge that may deter us from hanging you?"

Fortemani raised his brows a moment in surprise at this ferocity from one whom he had always deemed a very woman. Then he uttered a laugh of such contempt that the colour sprang to Gonzaga's cheek.

"Take him out——" he began furiously, when Valentina interposed, setting a hand upon his arm.

"Nay, nay, Gonzaga, your methods are all wrong. Tell him—— Nay, I will question him myself. Messer Fortemani, you have been guilty of an act of gross abuse. You and your men were hired for me by Messer Gonzaga, and to you was given the honourable office of captain over them, that you might lead them in this service of mine in the ways of duty, submission, and loyalty. Instead of that, you were the instigator of that outrage this morning, when murder was almost done upon an inoffensive man who was my guest. What have you to say?"

"That I was not the instigator," he answered sullenly.

"It is all one," she returned, "for at least it was done with your sanction, and you took a share in that cruel sport, instead of restraining it, as was clearly your duty. It is upon you, the captain, that the responsibility rests."

"Lady," he explained, "they are wild souls, but very true."

"True to their wildness, maybe," she answered him disdainfully. Then she proceeded: "You will remember that twice before has Messer Gonzaga had occasion to admonish you. These last two nights your men have behaved riotously within my walls. There has been hard drinking, there has been dicing, and such brawling once or twice as led me to think there would be throats cut among your ranks. You were warned by Messer Gonzaga to hold your followers in better leash, and yet to-day, without so much as drunkenness to excuse them, we have this vile affair, with yourself for a ringleader in it."

There followed a pause, during which Ercole stood with bent head like one who thinks, and Francesco turned his wonder-laden glance upon this slight girl with the gentle brown eyes which had been so tender and pitiful. Marvelling at the greatness of her spirit, he grew—all unconsciously—the more enslaved.

Gonzaga, all unconcerned in this, eyed Fortemani in expectation of his answer.

"Madonna," said the bully at last, "what can you look for from such a troop as this? Messer Gonzaga cannot have expected me to enlist acolytes for a business that he told me bordered upon outlawry. Touching their drunkenness and the trifle of rioting, what soldiers have not these faults? When they have them not, neither have they merit. The man that is tame in times of peace is a skulking woman in times of war. For the rest, whence came the wine they drank? It was of Messer Gonzaga's providing."

"You lie, hound!" blazed Gonzaga. "I provided wine for Madonna's table, not for the men."

"Yet some found its way to them; which is well. For water on the stomach makes a man poor-spirited. Where is the sin of a little indulgence, Madonna?" he went on, turning again to Valentina. "These men of mine will prove their mettle when it comes to blows."

They are dogs perhaps—but mastiffs every one of them, and would lose a hundred lives in your service if they had them."

"Aye, if they had them," put in Gonzaga sourly; "but having no more than one apiece, they'll not care to spare it."

"Nay, there you wrong them," cried Fortemani, with heat. "Give them a leader strong enough to hold them, to encourage and subject them, and they will go anywhere at his bidding."

"And there," put in Gonzaga quickly, "you bring us back to the main issue. Such a leader you have shown us that you are not. You have done worse. You have been insubordinate when you should not only have been orderly, but have enforced orderliness in others. And for that, by my lights, you should be hanged. Waste no more time on him, Madonna," he concluded, turning to Valentina. "Let the example be made."

"But, Madonna——" began Fortemani, paling under the tan of his rugged countenance.

Gonzaga silenced him.

"Your words are vain. You have been insubordinate, and for insubordination there is but one penalty."

The bully hung his head, deeming himself lost, and lacking the wit to retort as Francesco unexpectedly retorted for him.

"Madonna, there your adviser is at fault. The charge against the man is wrong. There has been no insubordination."

"How?" she questioned, turning to the Count. "None, say you?"

"A Solomon is arisen," sneered Gonzaga. Then peevishly; "Waste not words with him, Madonna," he pursued. "Our business is with Fortemani."

"But stay, my good Gonzaga. He may be right."

"Your heart is over-tender," answered Romeo impatiently. But she had turned from him now, and was begging Francesco to make his meaning clearer.

"Had he raised his hand against you, Madonna, or even against Messer Gonzaga, or had he disobeyed an order given him by either of you, then, and then only, could there be question of insubordination. But he has done none of these things. He is guilty of grossly misusing my servant, it is true, but there is no insubordination in that, since he was under no promise of loyalty to Lanciotto."

They stared at him as though his words were words of recondite wisdom instead of the simple statement of a plain case. Gonzaga crestfallen, Fortemani with a light of hope and wonder shining in his eyes, and Madonna with a faint nodding of the head that argued agreement. They wrangled a while yet, Gonzaga bitter and vindictive and rashly scornful of both Francesco and Fortemani. But the Count so resolutely held the ground he had taken that in the end Valentina shrugged her shoulders, acknowledged herself convinced, and bade Francesco deliver judgment.

"You are in earnest, Madonna?" quoth Francesco in surprise, whilst a black scowl disfigured the serenity of Gonzaga's brow.

"I am indeed, Deal with him as you account best and most just, and it shall fare with him precisely as you ordain."

Francesco turned to the men-at-arms. "Unbind him, one of you," he said shortly.

"I believe that you are mad," cried Gonzaga, in a frenzy, but his mood sprang rather from the chagrin of seeing his interloper prevail where he had failed. "Madonna, do not heed him."

"I pray you let be, my good Gonzaga," she answered soothingly, and Gonzaga, ready to faint from spite, obeyed her.

"Leave him there, and go," was Paolo's next order to the men, and they departed, leaving the astonished Fortemani standing alone, unbound and sheepish.

"Now mark me well, Messer Fortemani," Francesco admonished him. "You did a cowardly thing, unworthy of the soldier that you would have men believe you. And for that, I think, the punishment you received at my hands has been sufficient, in that the indignity to which I submitted you has shaken your standing with your followers. Go back to them now and retrieve what you have lost, and see that in the future you are worthier. Let this be a lesson to you, Messer Fortemani. You have gone perilously near hanging, and you have had it proved to you that in moments of peril your men are ready to raise their hands against you. Why is that? Because you have not sought their respect. You have been too much a fellow of theirs in their drinking and their brawling, instead of holding yourself aloof with dignity."

"Lord, I have learnt my lesson!" answered the cowed bully.

"Then act upon it. Resume your command, and discipline your men to a better order. Madonna, here, and Messer Gonzaga will forget this thing. Is it not so, Madonna? Is it not so, Messer Gonzaga?"

Swayed by his will and by an intuition that told her that to whatever end he might be working, he was working wisely, Valentina gave Fortemani the assurance Francesco begged, and Gonzaga was forced grudgingly to follow her example.

Fortemani bowed low, his face pale and his limbs trembling as not even fear had made them tremble. He advanced towards Valentina, and sinking on one knee, he humbly kissed the hem of her gown.

"Your clemency, Madonna, shall give you no regret. I will serve you

to the death, lady, and you, lord." At the last words he raised his eyes to Francesco's calm face. Then, without so much as a glance at the disappointed Gonzaga, he rose, and bowing again—a very courtier—he withdrew.

The closing of the door was to Gonzaga a signal to break out in a torrent of bitter reproofs against Francesco, reproofs that were stemmed midway by Valentina.

"You are beside yourself, Gonzaga," she exclaimed. "What has been done, has been done with my sanction. I do not doubt the wisdom of it."

"Do you not? God send you never may! But that man will know no peace until he is avenged on us."

"Messer Gonzaga," returned Francesco, with an incomparable politeness, "I am an older man than are you, and maybe that I have seen more warring and more of such men. There is a certain valour lurks in that bully for all his blustering boastfulness and swagger, and there is, too, a certain sense of justice. Mercy he has had to-day, and time will show how right I am in having pardoned him in Madonna's name. I tell you, sir, that nowhere has Monna Valentina a more faithful servant than he is now likely to become."

"I believe you, Messer Francesco. Indeed, I am sure your act was wisdom itself."

Gonzaga gnawed his lip.

"I may be wrong," said he, in grudging acquiescence. "I hope, indeed, I may be."

CHAPTER XVI. GONZAGA UNMASKS

The four great outer walls of Roccaleone stood ranged into a mighty square, of which the castle proper occupied but half. The other half, running from north to south, was a stretch of garden, broken into three terraces. The highest of these was no more than a narrow alley under the southern wall, roofed from end to end by a trellis of vines on beams blackened with age, supported by uprights of granite, square and roughly hewn.

A steep flight of granite steps, weedy in the interstices of the old stone, and terminating in a pair of couchant lions at the base, led down to the middle terrace, which was called the upper garden. This was split in twain by a very gallery of gigantic box trees running down towards the lower terrace, and bearing eloquent witness to the age of that old garden. Into this gallery no sun ever penetrated by more than a furtive ray, and on the hottest day in summer a grateful cool dwelt in its green gloom. Rose gardens spread on either side of it, but neglect of late had left them rank with weeds.

The third and lowest of these terraces, which was longer and broader than either of those above, was no more than a smooth stretch of lawn, bordered by acacias and plane trees, from the extreme corner of which sprang a winding, iron-railed staircase of stone, leading to an eerie which corresponded diagonally with the Lion's Tower, where the Count of Aquila was lodged.

On this green lawn Valentina's ladies and a page beguiled the eventide in a game of bowls, their clumsiness at the unwonted

pastime provoking the good-humoured banter of Peppe, who looked on, and their own still better-humoured laughter.

Fortemani, too, was there, brazening out the morning's affair, which it almost seemed he must have forgotten, so self-possessed and mightily at his ease was he. He was of the kind with whom shame strikes never very deeply, and he ruffled it gaily there, among the women, rolling his fierce eyes to ogle them seductively, tossing his gaudy new cloak with a high-born disdain—gloriously conscious that it would not rend in the tossing, like the cloaks to which grim Circumstance had lately accustomed him—and strutting it like any cock upon a dunghill.

But the lesson he had learnt was not likely to share the same forgetfulness. Indeed, its fruits were to be observed already in the more orderly conduct of his men, four of whom, partisan on shoulder, were doing duty on the walls of the castle. They had greeted his return amongst them with sneers and derisive allusions to his immersion, but with a few choicely-aimed blows he had cuffed the noisiest into silence and a more subservient humour. He had spoken to them in a rasping, truculent tone, issuing orders that he meant should be obeyed, unless the disobeyer were eager for a reckoning with him.

Indeed, he was an altered man, and when that night his followers, having drunk what he accounted enough for their good, and disregarding his orders that they should desist and get them to bed, he went in quest of Monna Valentina. He found her in conversation with Francesco and Gonzaga, seated in the loggia of the dining-room. They had been there since supper, discussing the wisdom of going or remaining, of fleeing or standing firm to receive Gian Maria. Their conference was interrupted now by Ercole with his complaint.

She despatched Gonzaga to quell the men, a course that Fortemani treated to a covert sneer. The fop went rejoicing at this proof that her estimate of his commanding qualities had nowise

suffered by contrast with those of that swashbuckling Francesco. But his pride rode him to a bitter fall.

They made a mock of his remonstrances, and when he emulated Francesco's methods, addressing them with sharp ferocity, and dubbing them beasts and swine, they caught the false ring of his fierceness, which was as unlike the true as the ring of lead is unlike that of silver. They jeered him insults, they mimicked his tenor voice, which excitement had rendered shrill, and they bade him go thrum a lute for his lady's delectation, and leave men's work to men.

His anger rose, and they lost patience; and from showing their teeth in laughter, they began to show them in snarls. At this his ferocity deserted him. Brushing past Fortemani, who stood cold and contemptuous by the doorway, watching the failure he had expected, he returned with burning cheeks and bitter words to Madonna Valentina.

She was dismayed at the tale he bore her, magnified to cover his own shame. Francesco sat quietly drumming on the sill, his eyes upon the moonlit garden below, and never by word or sign suggesting that he might succeed where Romeo had failed. At last she turned to him.

"Could you——?" she began, and stopped, her eyes wandering back to Gonzaga, loath to further wound a pride that was very sore already. On the instant Francesco rose.

"I might try, Madonna," he said quietly, "although Messer Gonzaga's failure gives me little hope. And yet, it may be that he has taken the keen edge from their assurance, and that, thus, an easier task awaits me. I will try, Madonna." And with that he went.

"He will succeed, Gonzaga," she said, after he had gone. "He is a man of war, and knows the words to which these fellows have no answer."

"I wish him well of his errand," sneered Gonzaga, his pretty face white now with sullenness. "And I'll wager you he fails."

But Valentina disdained the offer whose rashness was more than proven when, at the end of some ten minutes, Francesco re-entered, as imperturbable as when he went.

"They are quiet now, Madonna," he announced.

She looked at him questioningly. "How did you accomplish it?" she inquired.

"I had a little difficulty," he said, "yet not over-much." His eye roved to Gonzaga, and he smiled. "Messer Gonzaga is too gentle with them. Too true a courtier to avail himself of the brutality that is necessary when we deal with brutes. You should not disdain to use your hands upon them," he admonished the fop in all seriousness, and without a trace of irony. Nor did Gonzaga suspect any.

"I, soil my hands on that vermin?" he cried, in a voice of horror. "I would die sooner."

"Or else soon after," squeaked Peppe, who had entered unobserved. "Patrona mia, you should have seen this paladin," he continued, coming forward. "Why, Orlando was never half so furious as he when he stood there telling them what manner of dirt they were, and bidding them to bed ere he drove them with a broomstick."

"And they went?" she asked.

"Not at first," said the fool. "They had drunk enough to make them very brave, and one who was very drunk was so brave as to assault him. But Ser Francesco fells him with his hands, and calling Fortemani he bids him have the man dropped in a dungeon to grow sober. Then, without waiting so much as to see his orders carried out, he stalks away, assured that no more was needed. Nor was it. They

rose up, muttering a curse or two, maybe—yet not so loud that it might reach the ears of Fortemani—and got themselves to bed."

She looked again at Francesco with admiring eyes, and spoke of his audacity in commending terms. This he belittled; but she persisted.

"You have seen much warring, sir," she half-asked, halfasserted.

"Why, yes, Madonna."

And here the writhing Gonzaga espied his opportunity.

"I do not call to mind your name, good sir," he purred.

Francesco half-turned towards him, and for all that his mind was working with a lightning quickness, his face was indolently calm. To disclose his true identity he deemed unwise, for all connected with the Sforza brood must earn mistrust at the hands of Valentina. It was known that the Count of Aquila stood high in the favour of Gian Maria, and the news of his sudden fall and banishment could not have reached Guidobaldo's niece, who had fled before the knowledge of it was in Urbino. His name would awaken suspicion, and any story of disgrace and banishment might be accounted the very mask to fit a spy. There was this sleek, venomous Gonzaga, whom she trusted and relied on, to whisper insidiously into her ear.

"My name," he said serenely, "is, as I have told you. Francesco."

"But you have another?" quoth Valentina, interest prompting the question.

"Why, yes, but so closely allied to the first as to be scarce worth reciting. I am Francesco Franceschi, a wandering knight."

"And a true one, as I know." She smiled at him so sweetly that Gonzaga was enraged.

"I have not heard the name before," he murmured, adding:

"Your father was——?"

"A gentleman of Tuscany."

"But not at Court?" suggested Romeo.

"Why, yes, at Court."

Then with a sly insolence that brought the blood to Francesco's cheeks, though to the chaste mind of Valentina's it meant nothing—"Ah!" he rejoined. "But then, your mother——?"

"Was more discriminating, sir, than yours," came the sharp answer, and from the shadows the fool's smothered burst of laughter added gall to it.

Gonzaga rose heavily, drawing a sharp breath, and the two men stabbed each other with their eyes. Valentina, uncomprehending, looked from one to the other.

"Sirs, sirs, what have you said?" she cried. "Why all this war of looks?"

"He is over-quick to take offence, Madonna, for an honest man," was Gonzaga's answer. "Like the snake in the grass, he is very ready with his sting when we seek to disclose him."

"For shame, Gonzaga," she cried, now rising too. "What are you saying? Are you turned witless? Come, sirs, since you are both my friends, be friends each with the other."

"Most perfect syllogism!" murmured the fool, unheeded.

"And you, Messer Francesco, forget his words. He means them not. He is very hot of fancy, but sweet at heart, this good Gonzaga."

On the instant the cloud lifted from Francesco's brow.

"Why, since you ask me," he answered, inclining his head, "if he'll but say he meant no malice by his words, I will confess as much for mine."

Gonzaga, cooling, saw that haply he had gone too fast, and was the readier to make amends. Yet in his bosom he nursed an added store of poison, a breath of which escaped him as he was leaving Valentina, and after Francesco had already gone:

"Madonna," he muttered, "I mistrust that man."

"Mistrust him? Why?" she asked, frowning despite her faith in the magnificent Romeo.

"I know not why; but it is here. I feel it." And with his hand he touched the region of his heart. "Say that he is no spy, and call me a fool."

"Why, I'll do both," she laughed. Then more sternly, added: "Get you to bed, Gonzaga. Your wits play you false. Peppino, call my ladies."

In the moment that they were left alone he stepped close up to her, spurred to madness by the jealous pangs he had that day endured. His face gleamed white in the candlelight, and in his eyes there was a lurking fierceness that gave her pause.

"Have your way, Madonna," he said, in a concentrated voice; "but to-morrow, whether we go hence, or whether we stay, he remains not with us."

She drew herself up to the full of her slender, graceful height, her eyes on a level with Gonzaga's own.

"That," she answered, "is as shall be decreed by me or him."

He breathed sharply, and his voice hardened beyond belief in one usually so gentle of tone and manner.

"Be warned, Madonna," he muttered, coming so close that with the slightest swaying she must touch him, "that if this nameless sbirro shall ever dare to stand 'twixt you and me, by God and His saints, I'll kill him! Be warned, I say."

And the door re-opening at that moment, he fell back, bowed, and brushing past the entering ladies, gained the threshold. Here someone tugged at the prodigious foliated sleeves that spread beside him on the air like the wings of a bird. He turned, and saw Peppino motioning him to lower his head.

"A word in your ear, Magnificent. There was a man once went out for wool that came back shorn."

Angrily cuffing the fool aside, he was gone.

Valentina sank down upon her window-seat, in a turmoil of mingled anger and amazement that paled her cheek and set her bosom heaving. It was the first hint of his aims respecting her that Gonzaga had ever dared let fall, and the condition in which it left her boded ill for his ultimate success. Her anger he could have borne, had he beheld it, for he would have laid it to the score of the tone he had taken with her. But her incredulity that he could indeed have dared to mean that which her senses told her he had meant, would have shown him how hopeless was his case and how affronted, how outraged in soul she had been left by this moment of passionate self-revealing. He would have understood then that in her eyes he never had been, was never like to be, aught but a servant—and one, hereafter, that, deeming presumptuous, she would keep at greater distance.

But he, dreaming little of this as he paced his chamber, smiled at his thoughts, which flowed with ready optimism. He had been a fool to

give way so soon, perhaps. The season was not yet; the fruit was not ripe enough for plucking; still, what should it signify that he had given the tree a slight premonitory shake? A little premature, perhaps, but it would predispose the fruit to fall. He bethought him of her never-varying kindness to him, her fond gentleness, and he lacked the wit to see that this was no more than the natural sweetness that flowed from her as freely as flows the perfume from the flower—because Nature has so fashioned it, and not because Messer Gonzaga likes the smell. Lacking that wit, he went in blissful confidence to bed, and smiled himself softly to his sleep.

Away in the room under the Lion's Tower, the Count of Aquila, too, paced his chamber ere he sought his couch, and in his pacing caught sight of something that arrested his attention, and provoked a smile. In a corner, among his harness which Lanciotto had piled there, his shield threw back the light, displaying the Sforza lion quartered with the Aquila eagle.

"Did my sweet Gonzaga get a glimpse of that he would have no further need to pry into my parentage," he mused. And dragging the escutcheon from amongst that heap of armour, he softly opened his window and flung it far out, so that it dropped with a splash into the moat. That done, he went to bed, and he, too, fell asleep with a smile upon his lips, and in his mind a floating vision of Valentina. She needed a strong and ready hand to guide her in this rebellion against the love-at-arms of Gian Maria, and that hand he swore should be his, unless she scorned the offer of it. And so, murmuring her name with a lingering fervour, of whose true significance he was all-nescent, he sank to sleep, nor waked again until a thundering at his door aroused him. And to his still dormant senses came the voice of Lanciotto, laden with hurry and alarm.

"Awake, lord! Up, afoot! We are beset."

CHAPTER XVII. THE ENEMY

The Count leapt from his bed, and hastened to throw wide the door to admit his servant, who with excited face and voice bore him the news that Gian Maria had reached Roccaleone in the night, and was now encamped in the plain before the castle.

He was still at his tale when a page came with the message that Monna Valentina besought Messer Francesco's presence in the great hall. He dressed in all haste, and then, with Lanciotto at his heels, he descended to answer her summons. As he crossed the second courtyard he beheld Valentina's ladies grouped upon the chapel-steps in excited discussion of this happening with Fra Domenico, who, in full canonicals, was waiting to say the morning's Mass. He gave them a courteous "Good morrow," and passed on to the banqueting-hall, leaving Lanciotto without.

Here he found Valentina in conference with Fortemani. She was pacing the great room as she talked; but, beyond that, there was no sign of excitement in her bearing, and if any fear of the issue touched her heart now that the moment for action was at hand, it was wondrously well-suppressed. At sight of Francesco, a look that was partly dismay and partly pleasure lighted her face. She greeted him with such a smile as she would bestow in that hour upon none but a trusted friend. Then, with a look of regret:

"I am beyond measure grieved, sir, that you should thus stand committed to my fortunes. They will have told you that already we are besieged, and so you will see how your fate is now bound up with ours. For I fear me there is no road hence for you until Gian Maria raises this siege. The choice of going or remaining is no longer mine.

We must remain, and fight this battle out."

"At least, lady," he answered readily, gaily almost, "I cannot share your regrets for me. The act of yours may be a madness, Madonna, but it is the bravest, sweetest madness that ever was, and I shall be proud to play my part if you'll assign me one."

"But, sir, I have no claim upon you!"

"The claim that every beset lady has upon a true knight," he assured her. "I could ask no better employment for these arms of mine than in your defence against the Duke of Babbiano. I am at your service, and with a glad heart, Monna Valentina. I have seen something of war, and you may find me useful."

"Make him Provost of Roccaleone, Madonna," urged Fortemani, whose gratitude to the man who had saved his life was blent with an admiring appreciation of his powers, of which the bully had had such practical experience.

"You hear what Ercole says?" she cried, turning to Francesco with a sudden eagerness that showed how welcome that suggestion was.

"It were too great an honour," he answered solemnly. "Yet, if you were to place in my hands that trust, I would defend it to my last breath."

And then, before she could answer him, Gonzaga entered by the side-door, and frowned to see Francesco there before him. He was a trifle pale, he carried his cloak on the right shoulder, instead of the left, and in general his apparel was less meticulous than usual, and showed signs of hasty donning. With a curt nod to the Count, and an utter ignoring of Fortemani—who was scowling upon him in memory of yesterday—he bowed low before Valentina.

"I am distraught, Madonna——" he began, when she cut him short.

"You have little cause to be. Have things fallen out other than we expected?"

"Perhaps not. Yet I had hoped that Gian Maria would not allow his humour to carry him so far."

"You had hoped that—after the message Messer Francesco brought us?" And she looked him over with an eye of sudden understanding. "Yet you expressed no such hope when you advised this flight to Roccaleone. You were all for fighting then. A martial ardour consumed you. Whence this change? Is it the imminence of danger that gives it a reality too grim for your appetite?"

There was a scorn in her words that wounded him as she meant it should. His last night's rashness had shown her the need to leave him in no false opinion of the extent of her esteem, and, in addition, those last words of his had shown him revealed in a new light, and she liked him the less by it.

He inclined his head slightly, shame blazing red in his cheeks, that he should be thus reproved before Fortemani and that upstart Francesco. That Francesco was an upstart was no longer a matter of surmise with him. His soul assured him of it.

"Madonna," he said, with some show of dignity, ignoring her gibes, "I came to bear you news that a herald from Gian Maria craves a hearing. Shall I hold parley with him for you?"

"You are too good," she answered sweetly. "I will hear the man myself."

He bowed submissively, and then his eye moved to Francesco.

"We might arrange with him for the safe-conduct of this gentleman," he suggested.

"There is no hope they would accord it," she answered easily. "Nor could I hope so if they would, for Messer Francesco has consented to fill the office of Provost of Roccaleone. But we are keeping the messenger waiting. Sirs, will you attend me to the ramparts?"

They bowed, and followed her, Gonzaga coming last, his tread heavy as a drunkard's, his face white to the lips in the bitter rage with which he saw himself superseded, and read his answer to the hot words that last night he had whispered in Valentina's ear.

As they crossed the courtyard Francesco discharged the first act of his new office in ordering a half-dozen men-at-arms to fall in behind them, to the end that they might make some show upon the wall when they came to parley with the herald.

They found a tall man on a tall, grey horse, whose polished helm shone like silver in the morning sun, and whose haubergeon was almost hidden under a crimson tabard ornamented with the Sforza lion. He bowed low as Valentina appeared, followed by her escort, foremost in which stood the Count of Aquila, his broad castor pulled down upon his brow, so that it left his face in shadow.

"In the name of my master, the High and Mighty Lord Gian Maria Sforza, Duke of Babbiano, I call upon you to yield, lady, laying down your arms and throwing open your gates."

There followed a pause, at the end of which she asked him was that the sum of his message, or was there something that he had forgotten. The herald, bowing gracefully upon the arched neck of his caracoling palfrey, answered her that what he had said was all he had been bidden say.

She turned with a bewildered and rather helpless look to those behind her. She wished that the matter might be conducted with due dignity, and her convent rearing left her in doubt of how this might best

be achieved. She addressed herself to Francesco.

"Will you give him his answer, my Lord Provost," she said, with a smile, and Francesco, stepping forward and leaning on a merlon of that embattled wall, obeyed her.

"Sir Herald," he said, in a gruff voice that was unlike his own, "will you tell me since when has the Duke of Babbiano been at war with Urbino that he should thus beset one of its fortresses, and demand the surrender of it?"

"His Highness," replied the herald, "is acting with the full sanction of the Duke of Urbino in sending this message to the Lady Valentina della Rovere."

At that Valentina elbowed the Count aside, and forgetting her purpose of conducting this affair with dignity, she let her woman's tongue deliver the answer of her heart.

"This message, sir, and the presence here of your master, is but another of the impertinences that I have suffered at his hands, and it is the crowning one. Take you that message back to him, and tell him that when I am instructed by what right he dares to send you upon such an errand, I may render him an answer more germane with his challenge."

"Would you prefer, Madonna, that his Highness should come himself to speak with you?"

"There is nothing I should prefer less. Already has necessity compelled me to have more to say to Gian Maria than I could have wished." And with a proud gesture she signified that the audience was at an end, and turned to quit the wall.

She had a brief conference with Francesco, during which he consulted her as to certain measures of defence to be taken, and

made suggestions, to all of which she agreed, her hopes rising fast to see that here, at least, she had a man with knowledge of the work to which he had set his hand. It lightened her heart and gave her a glad confidence to look on that straight, martial figure, the hand so familiarly resting on the hilt of the sword that seemed a part of him, and the eyes so calm; whilst when he spoke of perils, they seemed to dwindle 'neath the disdain of them so manifest in his tone.

With Fortemani at his heels he went about the execution of the measures he had suggested, the bully following him now with the faithful wonder of a dog for its master, realising that here, indeed, was a soldier of fortune by comparison with whom the likes of himself were no better than camp-followers. Confidence, too, did Ercole gather from that magnetism of Francesco's unfaltering confidence; for he seemed to treat the matter as a great jest, a comedy played for the Duke of Babbiano and at that same Duke's expense. And just as Francesco's brisk tone breathed confidence into Fortemani and Valentina, so, too, did it breathe it into Fortemani's wretched followers. They grew zestful in the reflection of his zest, and out of admiration for him they came to admire the business on which they were engaged, and, finally, to take a pride in the part he assigned to each of them. Within an hour there was such diligent bustle in Roccaleone, such an air of grim gaiety and high spirits, that Valentina, observing it, wondered what manner of magician was this she had raised to the command of her fortress, who in so little time could work so marvellous a change in the demeanour of her garrison.

Once only did Francesco's light-heartedness fail him, and this was when, upon visiting the armoury, he found but one single cask of gunpowder stored there. He turned to Fortemani to inquire where Gonzaga had bestowed it, and Fortemani being as ignorant as himself upon the subject he went forthwith in quest of Gonzaga. After ransacking the castle for him, he found him pacing the vine-alley in the garden in animated conversation with Valentina. At his approach the

courtier's manner grew more subdued, and his brows sullen.

"Messer Gonzaga," Francesco hailed him. The courtier, surprised, looked up. "Where have you hidden your store of powder?"

"Powder?" faltered Gonzaga, chilled by a sudden apprehension. "Is there none in the armoury?"

"Yes—one small cask, enough to load a cannon once or twice, leaving us nothing for our hand-guns. Is that your store?"

"If that is all there is in the armoury, that is all we have."

Francesco stood speechless, staring at him, a dull flush creeping into his cheeks. In that moment of wrath he forgot their positions, and gave never a thought to the smarting that must be with Gonzaga at the loss of rank he had suffered since Valentina had appointed a provost.

"And are these your methods of fortifying Roccaleone?" he asked, in a voice that cut like a knife. "You have laid in good store of wine, a flock of sheep, and endless delicacies, sir," he jeered. "Did you expect to pelt the enemy with these, or did you reckon upon no enemy at all?"

Now this question touched so closely upon the truth, that it fired in Gonzaga's bosom an anger that for the moment made a man of him. It was the last breath that blew into a blaze the smouldering wrath he carried in his soul.

His retort came fierce and hot. It was as unmeasured and contemptuous as Francesco's erst recriminations, and it terminated in a challenge to the Count to meet him on horse or foot, with sword or lance, and that as soon as might be.

But Valentina intervened, and rebuked them both. Yet to Francesco her rebuke was courteous, and ended in a prayer that he should do the best with such resources as Roccaleone offered; to Gonzaga it

was contemptuous in the last degree, for Francesco's question—which Gonzaga had left unanswered—coming at a moment when she was full of suspicions of Gonzaga, and the ends he had sought to serve in advising her upon a course which he had since shown himself so utterly unfitted to guide, had opened wide her eyes. She remembered how strangely moved he had been upon learning yesterday that Gian Maria was marching upon Roccaleone, and how ardently he had advised flight from the fortress—he that had so bravely talked of holding it against the Duke.

They were still wrangling there in a most unseemly fashion when a trumpet-blast reached them from beyond the walls.

"The herald again," she cried. "Come, Messer Francesco, let us hear what fresh message he brings."

She led Francesco away, leaving Gonzaga in the shadow of the vines, reduced well-nigh to tears in the extremity of his mortification.

The herald was returned with the announcement that Valentina's answer left Gian Maria no alternative but to await the arrival of Duke Guidobaldo, who was then marching to join him. The Duke of Urbino's presence would be, he thought, ample justification in her eyes for the challenge Gian Maria had sent, and which he would send again when her uncle arrived to confirm it.

Thereafter, the remainder of the day was passed in peace at Roccaleone, if we except the very hell of unrest that surged in the heart of Romeo Gonzaga. He sat disregarded at supper that evening, save by Valentina's ladies and the fool, who occasionally rallied him upon his glumness. Valentina herself turned her whole attention to the Count, and whilst Gonzaga—Gonzaga, the poet of burning fancy, the gay songster, the acknowledged wit, the mirror of courtliness—was silent and tongue-tied, this ruffling, upstart swashbuckler entertained them with a sprightliness that won him every heart—always excepting

that of Romeo Gonzaga.

Francesco made light of the siege in a manner that enlivened every soul present with relief. He grew merry at the expense of Gian Maria, and made it very plain that he could have found naught more captivating to his warlike fancy than this business upon which an accident had embarked him. He was as full of confidence for the issue as he was full of eager anticipation of the fray itself.

Is it wonderful that—never having known any but artificial men; men of court and ante-chamber; men of dainty ways and mincing, affected tricks of speech; in short, such men as circumstance ordains shall surround the great—Monna Valentina's eyes should open very wide, the better to behold this new pattern of a man, who, whilst clearly a gentleman of high degree, carried with him an air of the camp rather than the camerion, was imbued by a spirit of chivalry and adventure, and ignored with a certain lofty dignity, as if beneath his observance, the poses that she was wont to see characterising the demeanour of the gentlemen of his Highness, her uncle.

He was young, moreover, yet no longer callow; comely, yet with a strong male comeliness; he had a pleasantly modulated voice, yet one that they had heard swell into a compelling note of command; he had the most joyous, careless laugh in all the world—such a laugh as endears a man to all that hear it—and he indulged it without stint.

Gonzaga sat glum and moody, his heart bursting with the resentment of the mean and the incompetent for the man of brilliant parts. But the morrow was to bring him worse.

The Duke of Urbino arrived next morning, and rode up to the moat in person, attended only by a trumpeter, who, for the third time, wound a note of challenge to the fortress.

As on the previous day, Valentina answered the summons,

attended by Francesco, Fortemani and Gonzaga—the latter uninvited yet not denied, and following sullenly in her train, in a last, despairing attempt to assert himself one of her captains.

Francesco had put on his harness, and came arrayed from head to foot in resplendent steel, to do worthy honour to the occasion. A bunch of plumes nodded in his helm, and for all that his beaver was open, yet the shadows of the head-piece afforded at the distance sufficient concealment to his features.

The sight of her uncle left Valentina unmoved. Well-beloved though he was of his people, between himself and his niece he had made no effort ever to establish relations of affection. Less than ever did he now seek to prevail by the voice of kinship. He came in the panoply of war, as a prince to a rebel subject, and in precisely such a tone did he greet her.

"Monna Valentina," he said—seeming entirely to overlook the circumstance that she was his kinswoman—"deeply though this rebellion grieves me, you are not to think that your sex shall gain you any privileges or any clemency. We will treat you precisely as we would any other rebel subject who acted as you have done."

"Highness," she replied, "I solicit no privilege beyond that to which my sex gives me the absolute right, and which has no concern with war and arms. I allude to the privilege of disposing of myself, my hand and heart, as it shall please me. Until you come to recognise that I am a woman endowed with a woman's nature, and until, having realised it, you are prepared to submit to it, and pass me your princely word to urge the Duke of Babbiano's suit no further with me, here will I stay in spite of you, your men-at-arms, and your paltry ally, Gian Maria, who imagines that love may be made successfully in armour, and that a way to a woman's heart is to be opened with cannon-shot."

"I think we shall bring you to a more subjective and dutiful frame of

mind, Madonna," was the grim answer.

"Dutiful to whom?"

"To the State, a princess of which you have had the honour to be born."

"And what of my duty to myself, to my heart, and to my womanhood? Is no account to be taken of that?"

"These are matters, Madonna, that are not to be discussed in shouts from the walls of a castle—nor, indeed, do I wish to discuss them anywhere. I am here to summon you to surrender. If you resist us, you do so at your peril."

"Then at my peril I will resist you—gladly. I defy you. Do your worst against me, disgrace your manhood and the very name of chivalry by whatsoever violence may occur to you, yet I promise you that Valentina della Rovere never shall become the wife of his Highness of Babbiano."

"You refuse to open your gates?" he returned, in a voice that shook with anger.

"Utterly and finally."

"And you think to persist in this?"

"As long as I have life."

The Prince laughed sardonically.

"I wash my hands of the affair and of its consequences," he answered grimly. "I leave it in the care of your future husband, Gian Maria Sforza, and if, in his very natural eagerness for the nuptials, he uses your castle roughly, the blame of it must rest with you. But what he does, he does with my full sanction, and I have come hither to

advise you of it since you appeared in doubt. I beg that you will remain there for a few moments, to hear what his Highness himself may have to say. I trust his eloquence may prove more persuasive."

He saluted ceremoniously, and, wheeling his horse about, he rode away. Valentina would have withdrawn, but Francesco urged her to remain, and await the Duke of Babbiano's coming. And so they paced the battlements, Valentina in earnest talk with Francesco, Gonzaga following in moody silence with Fortemani, and devouring them with his eyes.

From their eminence they surveyed the bustling camp in the plain, where tents, green, brown, and white, were being hastily erected by half-stripped soldiers. The little army altogether, may have numbered a hundred men, which, in his vainglory, Gian Maria accounted all that would be needed to reduce Roccaleone. But the most formidable portion of his forces rolled into the field even as they watched. It was heralded by a hoarse groaning of the wheels of bullock-carts to the number of ten, on each of which was borne a cannon. Other carts followed with ammunition and victuals for the men encamped.

They looked on with interest at the busy scene that was toward, and as they watched they saw Guidobaldo ride into the heart of the camp, and dismount. Then from out of a tent more roomy and imposing than the rest advanced the short, stout figure of Gian Maria, not to be recognised at that distance save by the keen eyes of Francesco that were familiar with his shape.

A groom held a horse for him and assisted him to mount, and then, attended by the same trumpeter that had escorted Guidobaldo, he rode forward towards the castle. At the edge of the moat he halted, and at sight of Valentina and her company, he doffed his feathered hat, and bowed his straw-coloured head.

"Monna Valentina," he called, and when she stepped forth in

answer, he raised his little, cruel eyes in a malicious glance and showed the round moon of his white face to be whiter even, than its wont—a pallor atrabilious and almost green.

"I am grieved that his Highness, your uncle, should not have prevailed with you. Where he has failed, I may have little hope of succeeding—by the persuasion of words. Yet I would beg you to allow me to have speech of your captain, whoever he may be."

"My captains are here in attendance," she answered tranquilly.

"So! You have a plurality of them; to command—how many men?"

"Enough," roared Francesco, interposing, his voice sounding hollow from his helmet, "to blow you and your woman besieging scullions to perdition."

The Duke stirred on his horse, and peered up at the speaker. But there was too little of his face visible for recognition, whilst his voice was altered and his figure dissembled in its steel casing.

"Who are you, rogue?" he asked.

"Rogue in your teeth, be you twenty times a Duke," returned the other, at which Valentina laughed outright.

Never from the day when he had uttered his first wail had his Highness of Babbiano heard words of such import from the lips of living man. A purple flush mottled his cheeks at the indignity of it.

"Attend to me, knave!" he bellowed. "Whatever betide the rest of this misguided garrison when ultimately it falls into my hands, for you I can promise a rope and a cross-beam."

"Bah!" sneered the knight. "First catch your bird. Be none so sure that Roccaleone ever will fall into your hands. While I live you do not enter here, and my life, Highness, is for me a precious thing, which I'll

not part with lightly."

Valentina's eyes were mirthless now as she turned them upon that gleaming, martial figure standing so proudly at her side, and seeming so well-attuned to the proud defiance he hurled at the princely bully below.

"Hush, sir!" she murmured. "Do not anger him further."

"Aye," groaned Gonzaga, "in God's name say no more, or you'll undo us hopelessly."

"Madonna," said the Duke, without further heeding Francesco, "I give you twenty-four hours in which to resolve upon your action. Yonder you see them bringing the cannon into camp. When you wake to-morrow you shall find those guns trained upon your walls. Meanwhile, enough said. May I speak a word with Messer Gonzaga ere I depart."

"So that you depart, you may say a word to whom you will," she answered contemptuously. And, turning aside, she motioned Gonzaga to the crenel she abandoned.

"I'll swear that mincing jester is trembling already with the fear of what is to come," bawled the Duke, "and perhaps fear will show him the way to reason. Messer Gonzaga!" he called, raising his voice. "As I believe the men of Roccaleone are in your service, I call upon you to bid them throw down that drawbridge, and in the name of Guidobaldo as well as my own, I promise them free pardon and no hurt—saving only that rascal at your side. But if your knaves resist me, I promise you that when I shall have dashed Roccaleone stone from stone, not a man of you all will I spare."

Shaking like an aspen Gonzaga stood there, his voice palsied and making no reply, whereupon Francesco leant forward again.

"We have heard your terms," he answered, "and we are not like to heed them. Waste not the day in vain threats."

"Sir, my terms were not for you. I know you not; I addressed you not, nor will I suffer myself to be addressed by you."

"Linger there another moment," answered the vibrating voice of the knight, "and you will find yourself addressed with a volley of arquebuse-shot. Olá, there!" he commanded, turning and addressing an imaginary body of men on the lower ramparts of the garden, to his left. "Arquebusiers to the postern! Blow your matches! Make ready! Now, my Lord Duke, will you draw off, or must we blow you off?"

The Duke's reply took the form of a bunch of blasphemous threats of how he would serve his interlocutor when he came to set hands on him.

"Present arms!" roared the knight to his imaginary arquebusiers, whereupon, without another word, the Duke turned his horse and rode off in disgraceful haste, his trumpeter following hot upon his heels, pursued by a derisive burst of laughter from Francesco.

CHAPTER XVIII. TREACHERY

"Sir," gulped Gonzaga, as they were descending from the battlements, "you will end by having us all hanged. Was that a way to address a prince?"

Valentina frowned that he should dare rebuke her knight. But Francesco only laughed.

"By St. Paul! How would you have had me address him?" he inquired. "Would you have had me use cajolery with him—the lout? Would you have had me plead mercy from him, and beg him, in honeyed words, to be patient with a wilful lady? Let be, Messer Gonzaga, we shall weather it yet, never doubt it."

"Messer Gonzaga's courage seems of a quality that wanes as the need for it increases," said Valentina.

"You are confounding courage, Madonna, with foolhardy recklessness," the courtier returned. "You may learn it to your undoing."

That Gonzaga was not the only one entertaining this opinion they were soon to learn, for, as they reached the courtyard a burly, black-browed ruffian, Cappoccio by name, thrust himself in their path.

"A word with you, Messer Gonzaga, and you, Ser Ercole." His attitude was full of truculent insolence, and all paused, Francesco and Valentina turning from him to the two men whom he addressed, and waiting to hear what he might have to say to them. "When I accepted service under you, I was given to understand that I was entering a business that should entail little risk to my skin. I was told that

probably there would be no fighting, and that if there were, it would be no more than a brush with the Duke's men. So, too, did you assure my comrades."

"Did you indeed?" quoth Valentina, intervening, and addressing herself to Fortemani, to whom Cappoccio's words had been directed.

"I did, Madonna," answered Ercole. "But I had Messer Gonzaga's word for it."

"Did you," she continued, turning to Gonzaga, "permit their engagement on that understanding?"

"On some such understanding, yes, Madonna," he was forced to confess.

She looked at him a moment in amazement. Then:

"Msser Gonzaga," she said at length, "I think that I begin to know you."

But Cappoccio, who was nowise interested in the extent of Valentina's knowledge of the man, broke in impetuously:

"Now we have heard what has passed between this new Provost here and his Highness of Babbiano. We have heard the terms that were offered, and his rejection of them, and I am come to tell you, Ser Ercole, and you, Messer Gonzaga, that I for one will not remain here to be hanged when Roccaleone shall fall into the hands of Gian Maria. And there are others of my comrades who are of the same mind."

Valentina looked at the rugged, determined features of the man, and fear for the first time stole into her heart and was reflected on her countenance. She was half-turning to Gonzaga, to vent upon him some of the bitterness of her humour—for him she accounted to blame—when once again Francesco came to the rescue.

"Now, shame on you, Cappoccio, for a paltry hind! Are these words for the ears of a besieged and sorely harassed lady, craven?"

"I am no craven," the man answered hoarsely, his face flushing under the whip of Francesco's scorn. "Out in the open I will take my chances, and fight in any cause that pays me. But this is not my trade—this waiting for the death of a trapped rat."

Francesco met his eyes steadily for a moment, then glanced at the other men, to the number of a half-score or so—all, in fact, whom the duties he had apportioned them did not hold elsewhere. They hung in the rear of Cappoccio, all ears for what was being said, and their countenances plainly showing how their feelings were in sympathy with their spokesman.

"And you a soldier, Cappoccio?" sneered Francesco. "Shall I tell you in what Fortemani was wrong when he enlisted you? He was wrong in not hiring you for scullion duty in the castle kitchen."

"Sir Knight!"

"Bah! Do you raise your voice to me? Do you think I am of your kind, animal, to be affrighted by sounds—however hideous?"

"I am not affrighted by sounds."

"Are you not? Why, then, all this ado about a bunch of empty threats cast at us by the Duke of Babbiano? If you were indeed the soldier you would have us think you, would you come here and say, 'I will not die this way, or that'? Confess yourself a boaster when you tell us that you are ready to die in the open."

"Nay! That am I not."

"Then, if you are ready to die out there, why not in here? Shall it signify aught to him that dies where he gets his dying done? But reassure yourself, you woman," he added, with a laugh, and in a voice

loud enough to be heard by the others, "you are not going to die—neither here, nor there."

"When Roccaleone capitulates——"

"It will not capitulate," thundered Francesco.

"Well, then—when it is taken."

"Nor will it be taken," the Provost insisted, with an assurance that carried conviction. "If Gian Maria had time unlimited at his command, he might starve us into submission. But he has not. An enemy is menacing his own frontiers, and in a few days—a week, at most—he will be forced to get him hence to defend his crown."

"The greater reason for him to use stern measures and bombard us as he threatens," answered Cappoccio shrewdly but rather in the tone of a man who expects to have his argument disproved. And Francesco, if he could not disprove it, could at least contradict it.

"Believe it not," he cried, with a scornful laugh. "I tell you that Gian Maria will never dare so much. And if he did, are these walls that will crumble at a few cannon-shots? Assault he might attempt; but I need not tell a soldier that twenty men who are stout and resolute, as I will believe you are for all your craven words, could hold so strong a place as this against the assault of twenty times the men the Duke has with him. And for the rest, if you think I tell you more than I believe myself, I ask you to remember how I am included in Gian Maria's threat. I am but a soldier like you, and such risks as are yours are mine as well. Do you see any sign of faltering in me, any sign of doubting the issue, or any fear of a rope that shall touch me no more than it shall touch you? There, Cappoccio! A less merciful provost would have hanged you for your words—for they reek of sedition. Yet I have stood and argued with you, because I cannot spare a brave man such as you will prove yourself. Let us hear no more of your doubtings. They are

unworthy. Be brave and resolute, and you shall find yourself well rewarded when the baffled Duke shall be forced to raise this siege."

He turned without waiting for the reply of Cappoccio—who stood crestfallen, his cheeks reddened by shame of his threat to get him hence—and conducted Valentina calmly across the yard and up the steps of the hall.

It was his way never to show a doubt that his orders would be obeyed, yet on this occasion scarce had the door of the hall closed after them when he turned sharply to the following Ercole.

"Get you an arquebuse," he said quickly, "and take my man Lanciotto, with you. Should those dogs still prove mutinous, fire into any that attempt the gates—fire to kill—and send me word. But above all, Ercole, do not let them see you or suspect your presence; that were to undermine such effect as my words may have produced."

From out of a woefully pale face Valentina raised her brown eyes to his, in a look that was as a stab to the observing Gonzaga.

"I needed a man here," she said, "and I think that Heaven it must have been that sent you to my aid. But do you think," she asked, and with her eyes she closely scanned his face for any sign of doubt, "that they are pacified?"

"I am assured of it, Madonna. Come, there are signs of tears in your eyes, and—by my soul!—there is naught to weep at."

"I am but a woman, after all," she smiled up at him, "and so, subject to a woman's weakness. It seemed as if the end were indeed come just now. It had come, but for you. If they should mutiny——"

"They shall not, while I am here," he answered, with a cheering confidence. And she, full of faith in this true knight of hers, went to seek her ladies, and to soothe in her turn any alarm to which they

might have fallen a prey.

Francesco went to disarm, and Gonzaga to take the air upon the ramparts, his heart a very bag of gall. His hatred for the interloper was as nothing now to his rage against Valentina, a rage that had its birth in a wondering uncomprehension of how she should prefer that coarse, swashbuckling bully to himself, the peerless Gonzaga. And as he walked there, under the noontide sky, the memory of Francesco's assurance that the men would not mutiny returned to him, and he caught himself most ardently desiring that they might, if only to bear it home to Valentina how misplaced was her trust, how foolish her belief in that loud boaster. He thought next—and with increasing bitterness—of his own brave schemes, of his love for Valentina, and of how assured he had been that his affections were returned, before this ruffler came amongst them. He laughed in bitter scorn as the thought returned to her preferring Francesco to himself. Well, it might be so now—now that the times were warlike, and this Francesco was such a man as shone at his best in them. But what manner of companion would this sbirro make in times of peace? Had he the wit, the grace, the beauty even that was Gonzaga's? Circumstance, it seemed to him, was here to blame, and he roundly cursed that same Circumstance. In other surroundings, he was assured that she would not have cast an eye upon Francesco whilst he, himself, was by; and if he recalled their first meeting at Acquasparta, it was again to curse Circumstance for having placed the knight in such case as to appeal to the tenderness that is a part of woman's nature.

He reflected—assured that he was right—that if Francesco had not come to Roccaleone, he might by now have been wed to Valentina; and once wed, he could throw down the bridge and march out of Roccaleone, assured that Gian Maria would not care to espouse his widow, and no less assured that Guidobaldo—who was at heart a kind and clement prince—would be content to let be what was accomplished, since there would be naught gained beyond his

niece's widowhood in hanging Gonzaga. It was the specious argument that had lured him upon this rash enterprise, the hopes that he was confident would have fructified but for the interloping of Francesco.

He stood looking down at the tented plain, with black rage and black despair blotting the beauty from the sunlight of that May morning, and then it came to him that since there was naught to be hoped from his old plans, might it not be wise to turn his attention to new ones that would, at least, save him from hanging? For he was assured that whatever might betide the others, his own fate was sealed, whether Roccaleone fell or not. It would be remembered against him that the affair was of his instigating, and from neither Gian Maria nor Guidobaldo might he look for mercy.

And now the thought of extricating himself from his desperate peril turned him cold by its suddenness. He stood very still a moment; then looked about him as though he feared that some watching spy might read on him the ugly intention that of a sudden had leapt to life in his heart. Swiftly it spread, and took more definite shape, the reflection of it showing now upon his smooth, handsome face, and disfiguring it beyond belief. He drew away from the wall, and took a turn or two upon the ramparts, one hand behind him, the other raised to support his drooping chin. Thus he brooded for a little while. Then, with another of his furtive glances, he turned to the north-western tower, and entered the armoury. There he rummaged until he had found the pen, ink and paper that he sought, and with the door wide open—the better that he might hear the sound of approaching steps—he set himself feverishly to write. It was soon done, and he stood up, waving the sheet to dry the ink. Then he looked it over again, and this is what he had written:

"I have it in my power to stir the garrison to mutiny and to throw open the gates of Roccaleone. Thus shall the castle fall immediately

into your hands, and you shall have a proof of how little I am in sympathy with this rebellion of Monna Valentina's. What terms do you offer me if I accomplish this? Answer me now, and by the same means as I am employing, but dispatch not your answer if I show myself upon the ramparts.

"ROMEO GONZAGA."

He folded the paper, and on the back he wrote the superscription—"To the High and Mighty Duke of Babbiano." Then opening a large chest that stood against the wall, he rummaged a moment, and at last withdrew an arbalest quarrel. About the body of this he tied his note. Next, from the wall he took down a cross-bow, and from a corner a moulinet for winding it. With his foot in the stirrup he made the cord taut and set the shaft in position.

And now he closed the door, and, going to the window, which was little more than an arrow-slit, he shouldered his arbalest. He took careful aim in the direction of the ducal tent, and loosed the quarrel. He watched its light, and it almost thrilled him with pride in his archery to see it strike the tent at which he had aimed, and set the canvas shuddering.

In a moment there was a commotion. Men ran to the spot, others emerged from the tent, and amongst the latter Gonzaga recognised the figures of Gian Maria and Guidobaldo.

The bolt was delivered to the Duke of Babbiano, who, with an upward glance at the ramparts, vanished into the tent once more.

Gonzaga moved from his eerie, and set wide the door of the tower, so that his eyes could range the whole of the sun-bathed ramparts. Returning to his window, he waited impatiently for the answer. Nor was his impatience to endure long. At the end of some ten minutes Gian Maria reappeared, and, summoning an archer to his side, he

delivered him something and made a motion of his hand towards Roccaleone. Gonzaga moved to the door, and stood listening breathlessly. At the least sign of an approach, he would have shown himself, and thus, by the provision made in his letter have cautioned the archer against shooting his bolt. But all was quiet, and so Gonzaga remained where he was until something flashed like a bird across his vision, struck sharply against the posterior wall, and fell with a tinkle on the broad stones of the rampart. A moment later the answer from Gian Maria was in his hands.

He swiftly unwound it from the shaft that had brought it, and dropped the bolt into a corner. Then unfolding the letter, he read it, leaning against one of the merlons of the wall.

"If you can devise a means to deliver Roccaleone at once into my hands you shall earn my gratitude, full pardon for your share in Monna Valentina's rebellion, and the sum of a thousand gold florins.

"GIAN MARIA."

As he read, a light of joy leapt to his eyes. Gian Maria's terms were very generous. He would accept them, and Valentina should realise when too late upon what manner of broken reed she leaned in relying upon Messer Francesco. Would he save her now, as he so loudly boasted? Would there indeed be no mutiny, as he so confidently prophesied? Gonzaga chuckled evilly to himself. She should learn her lesson, and when she was Gian Maria's wife, she might perhaps repent her of her treatment of Romeo Gonzaga.

He laughed softly to himself. Then suddenly he turned cold, and he felt his skin roughening. A stealthy step sounded behind him.

He crumpled the Duke's letter in his hand, and in the alarm of the moment, he dropped it over the wall. Seeking vainly to compose the features that a chilling fear had now disturbed, he turned to see who

came.

Behind him stood Peppe, his solemn eyes bent with uncanny intentness upon Gonzaga's face.

"You were seeking me?" quoth Romeo, and the quaver in his voice sorted ill with his arrogance.

The fool made him a grotesque bow.

"Monna Valentina desires that you attend her in the garden, illustrious."

CHAPTER XIX. PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT

Peppe's quick eyes had seen Gonzaga crumple and drop the paper, no less than he had observed the courtier's startled face, and his suspicions had been aroused. He was by nature prying, and experience had taught him that the things men seek to conceal are usually the very things it imports most to have knowledge of. So when Gonzaga had gone, in obedience to Valentina's summons, the jester peered carefully over the battlements.

At first he saw nothing, and he was concluding with disappointment that the thing Gonzaga had cast from him was lost in the torrential waters of the moat. But presently, lodged on a jutting stone, above the foaming stream into which it would seem that a miracle had prevented it from falling, he espied a ball of crumpled paper. He observed with satisfaction that it lay some ten feet immediately below the postern-gate by the drawbridge.

Secretly, for it was not Peppy's way to take men into his confidence where it might be avoided, he got himself a coil of rope. Having descended and quietly opened the postern, he made one end fast and lowered the other to the water with extreme care, lest he should dislodge, and so lose, that paper.

Assuring himself again that he was unobserved, he went down, hand over hand, like a monkey, his feet against the rough-hewn granite of the wall. Then, with a little swinging of the rope, he brought himself nearer that crumpled ball, his legs now dangling in the angry water, and by a mighty stretch that all but precipitated him into the

torrent, he seized the paper and transferred it to his teeth. Then hand over hand again, and with a frantic haste, for he feared observation not only from the castle sentries but also from the watchers in the besieger's camp, he climbed back to the postern, exulting in that he had gone unobserved, and contemptuous for the vigilance of those that should have observed him.

Softly he closed the wicket, locked it and shot home the bolts at top and base, and went to replace the key on its nail in the guard-room, which he found untenanted. Next, with that mysterious letter in his hand, he scampered off across the courtyard and through the porch leading to the domestic quarters, nor paused until he had gained the kitchen, where Fra Domenico was roasting the quarter of a lamb that he had that morning butchered. For now that the siege was established, there was no more fish from the brook, nor hares and ortolans from the country-side.

The friar cursed the fool roundly, as was his wont upon every occasion, for he was none so holy that he disdained the milder forms of objurgatory oaths. But Peppe for once had no vicious answer ready, a matter that led the Dominican to ask him was he ill.

Never heeding him, the fool unfolded and smoothed the crumpled paper in a corner by the fire. He read it and whistled, then stuffed it into the bosom of his absurd tunic.

"What ails you?" quoth the friar. "What have you there?"

"A recipe for a dish of friar's brains. A most rare delicacy, and rendered costly by virtue of the scarcity of the ingredients." And with that answer Peppe was gone, leaving the monk with an ugly look in his eyes, and an unuttered imprecation on his tongue.

Straight to the Count of Aquila went the fool with his letter. Francesco read it, and questioned him closely as to what he knew of

the manner in which it had come into Gonzaga's possession. For the rest, those lines, far from causing him the uneasiness Peppe expected, seemed a source of satisfaction and assurance to him.

"He offers a thousand gold florins," he muttered, "in addition to Gonzaga's liberty and advancement. Why, then, I have said no more than was true when I assured the men that Gian Maria was but idly threatening us with bombardment. Keep this matter secret, Peppe."

"But you will watch Messer Gonzaga?" quoth the fool.

"Watch him? Why, where is the need? You do not imagine him so vile that this offer could tempt him?"

Peppe looked up, his great, whimsical face screwed into an expression of cunning doubt.

"You do not think, lord, that he invited it?"

"Now, shame on you for that thought. Messer Gonzaga may be an idle lute-thrummer, a poor-spirited coward; but a traitor——! And to betray Monna Valentina! No, no."

But the fool was far from reassured. He had had the longer acquaintance of Messer Gonzaga, and his shrewd eyes had long since taken the man's exact measure. Let Francesco scorn the notion of betrayal at Romeo's hands; Peppe would dog him like a shadow. This he did for the remainder of that day, clinging to Gonzaga as if he loved him dearly, and furtively observing the man's demeanour. Yet he saw nothing to confirm his suspicions beyond a certain preoccupied moodiness on the courtier's part.

That night, as they supped, Gonzaga pleaded toothache, and with Valentina's leave he quitted the table at the very outset of the meal. Peppe rose to follow him, but as he reached the door, his natural enemy, the friar—ever anxious to thwart him where he could—caught

him by the nape of the neck, and flung him unceremoniously back into the room.

"Have you a toothache too, good-for-naught?" quoth the frate. "Stay you here and help me to wait upon the company."

"Let me go, good Fra Domenico," the fool whispered, in a voice so earnest that the monk left his way clear. But Valentina's voice now bade him stay with them, and so his opportunity was lost.

He moved about the room a very dispirited, moody fool with no quip for anyone, for his thoughts were all on Gonzaga and the treason that he was sure he was hatching. Yet faithful to Francesco, who sat all unconcerned, and not wishing to alarm Valentina, he choked back the warning that rose to his lips, seeking to convince himself that his fears sprang perhaps from an excess of suspicion. Had he known how well-founded indeed they were he might have practised less self-restraint.

For whilst he moved sullenly about the room, assisting Fra Domenico with the dishes and platters, Gonzaga paced the ramparts beside Cappoccio, who was on sentry duty on the north wall.

His business called for no great diplomacy, nor did Gonzaga employ much. He bluntly told Cappoccio that he and his comrades had allowed Messer Francesco's glib tongue to befool them that morning, and that the assurances Francesco had given them were not worthy of an intelligent man's consideration.

"I tell you, Cappoccio," he ended, "that to remain here and protract this hopeless resistance will cost you your life at the unsavoury hands of the hangman. You see I am frank with you."

Now for all that what Gonzaga told him might sort excellently well with the ideas he had himself entertained, Cappoccio was of a suspicious nature, and his suspicions whispered to him now that

Gonzaga was actuated by some purpose he could not gauge.

He stood still, and leaning with both hands upon his partisan, he sought to make out the courtier's features in the dim light of the rising moon.

"Do you mean," he asked, and in his voice sounded the surprise with which Gonzaga's odd speech had filled him, "that we are foolish to have listened to Messer Francesco, and that we should be better advised to march out of Roccaleone?"

"Yes; that is what I mean."

"But why," he insisted, his surprise increasing, "do you urge such a course upon us?"

"Because, Cappoccio," was the plausible reply, "like yourselves, I was lured into this business by insidious misrepresentations. The assurances that I gave Fortemani, and with which he enrolled you into his service, were those that had been given to me. I did not bargain with such a death as awaits us here, and I frankly tell you that I have no stomach for it."

"I begin to understand," murmured Cappoccio, sagely wagging his head, and there was a shrewd insolence in his tone and manner. "When we leave Roccaleone you come with us?"

Gonzaga nodded.

"But why do you not say these things to Fortemani?" questioned Cappoccio, still doubting.

"Fortemani!" echoed Gonzaga. "By the Host, no! The man is bewitched by that plausible rogue, Francesco. Far from resenting the fellow's treatment of him, he follows and obeys his every word, like the mean-spirited dog that he is."

Again Cappoccio sought to scrutinise Gonzaga's face. But the light was indifferent.

"Are you dealing with me fairly?" he asked. "Or does some deeper purpose lie under your wish that we should rebel against the lady?"

"My friend," answered Gonzaga, "do you but wait until Gian Maria's herald comes for his answer in the morning. Then you will learn again the terms on which your lives are offered you. Do nothing until then. But when you hear yourselves threatened with the rope and the wheel, bethink you of what course you will be best advised in pursuing. You ask me what purpose inspires me. I have already told you—for I am as open as the daylight with you—that I am inspired by the purpose of saving my own neck. Is not that purpose enough?"

A laugh of such understanding as would have set a better man on fire with indignation was the answer he received.

"Why, yes, it is more than enough. To-morrow, then, my comrades and I march out of Roccaleone. Count upon that."

"But do not accept my word. Wait until the herald comes again. Do nothing until you have heard the terms he brings."

"Why, no, assuredly not."

"And do not let it transpire among your fellows that it is I who have suggested this."

"Why no. I'll keep your secret," laughed the bravo offensively, shouldering his partisan and resuming his sentinel's pacing.

Gonzaga sought his bed. A fierce joy consumed him at having so consummately planned Valentina's ruin, yet he did not wish to face her again that night.

But when on the morrow the herald wound his horn again beneath

the castle walls, Gonzaga was prominent in the little group that attended Monna Valentina. The Count of Aquila was superintending the work to which he had set a half-score of men. With a great show, and as much noise as possible—by which Francesco intended that the herald should be impressed—they were rolling forward four small culverins and some three cannons of larger calibre, and planting them so that they made a menacing show in the crenels of the parapet.

Whilst watching and directing the men, he kept his ears open for the message, and he heard the herald again recite the terms on which the garrison might surrender, and again the threat to hang every man from the castle-walls if they compelled him to reduce them by force of arms. He brought his message to an end by announcing that in his extreme clemency Gian Maria accorded them another half-hour's grace in which to resolve themselves upon their course. Should the end of that time still find them obstinate, the bombardment would commence. Such was the message that in another of his arrow-borne letters Gonzaga had suggested Gian Maria should send.

It was Francesco who stepped forward to reply. He had been stooping over one of the guns, as if to assure himself of the accuracy of its aim, and as he rose he pronounced himself satisfied in a voice loud enough for the herald's hearing. Then he advanced to Valentina's side, and whilst he stood there delivering his answer he never noticed the silent departure of the men from the wall.

"You will tell his Highness of Babbiano," he replied, "that he reminds us of the boy in the fable who cried 'Wolf!' too often. Tell him, sir, that his threats leave this garrison as unmoved as do his promises. If so be that he intends in truth to bombard us, let him begin forthwith. We are ready for him, as you perceive. Maybe he did not suppose us equipped with cannon; but there they stand. Those guns are trained upon his camp, and the first shot he fires upon us shall be a signal for such a reply as he little dreams of. Tell him, too, that we

expect no quarter, and will yield none. We are unwilling for bloodshed, but if he drives us to it and executes his purpose of employing cannon, then the consequences be upon his own head. Bear him that answer, and tell him to send you no more with empty threats."

The herald bowed upon the withers of his horse. The arrogance, the cold imperiousness of the message struck him dumb with amazement. Amazement was his, too, that Roccaleone should be armed with cannon, as with his own eyes he saw. That those guns were empty he could not guess, nor could Gian Maria when he heard a message that filled him with rage, and would have filled him with dismay, but that he counted upon the mutiny which Gonzaga had pledged himself to stir up.

As the herald was riding away a gruff laugh broke from Fortemani, who stood behind the Count.

Valentina turned to Francesco with eyes that beamed admiration and a singular tenderness.

"Oh, what had I done without you, Messer Francesco?" she cried, for surely the twentieth time since his coming. "I tremble to think how things had gone without your wit and valour to assist me." She never noticed the malicious smile that trembled on Gonzaga's pretty face. "Where did you find the powder?" she asked innocently, for her mind had not yet caught that humour of the situation that had drawn a laugh from Fortemani.

"I found none," answered Francesco, smiling from the shadow of his helm. "My threats"—and he waved his hand in the direction of that formidable array of guns—"are as empty as Gian Maria's. Yet I think they will impress him more than his do us. I will answer for it, Madonna, that they deter him from bombarding us—if so be that he ever intended to. So let us go and break our fast with a glad courage."

"Those guns are empty?" she gasped. "And you could talk so boldly and threaten so defiantly!"

Mirth crept now into her face, and thrust back the alarm, a little of which had peeped from her eyes even as she was extolling Francesco.

"There!" he cried joyously. "You are smiling now, Madonna. Nor have you cause for aught else. Shall we descend? This early morning work has given me the hunger of a wolf."

She turned to go with him, and in that moment, Peppe, his owl-like face spread over with alarm, dashed up the steps from the courtyard.

"Madonna!" he gasped, breathless. "Messer Francesco! The men—Cappuccio—— He is haranguing them. He—is inciting them to treachery."

So, in gasps, he got out his tale, which swept the mirth again from Valentina's eyes, and painted very white her cheek. Strong and brave though she was, she felt her senses swimming at that sudden revulsion from confidence to fear. Was all indeed ended at the very moment when hope had reached its high meridian?

"You are faint, Madonna; lean on me."

It was Gonzaga who spoke. But beyond the fact that the words had been uttered, she realised nothing. She saw an arm advanced, and she took it. Then she dragged Gonzaga with her to the side overlooking the courtyard, that with her own eyes she might have evidence of what was toward.

She heard an oath—a vigorous, wicked oath—from Francesco, followed by a command, sharp and rasping.

"To the armoury yonder, Peppe! Fetch me a two-handed sword—"

the stoutest you can find. Ercole, come with me. Gonzaga—— Nay, you had best stay here. See to Monna Valentina."

He stepped to her side now, and rapidly surveyed the surging scene below, where Cappoccio was still addressing the men. At sight of Francesco, they raised a fierce yell, as might a pack of dogs that have sighted their quarry.

"To the gates!" was the shout. "Down the drawbridge! We accept the terms of Gian Maria. We will not die like rats."

"By God, but you shall, if I so will it!" snarled Francesco through his set teeth. Then turning his head in a fever of impatience "Peppe," he shouted, "will you never bring that sword?"

The fool came up at that moment, staggering under the weight of a great, double-edged two-hander, equipped with lugs, and measuring a good six feet from point to pommel. Francesco caught it from him, and bending, he muttered a swift order in Peppino's ear.

"...In the box that stands upon the table in my chamber," Gonzaga overheard him say. "Now go, and bring it to me in the yard. Speed you, Peppino!"

A look of understanding flashed up from the hunchback's eyes, and as he departed at a run Francesco hoisted the mighty sword to his shoulder as though its weight were that of a feather. In that instant Valentina's white hand was laid upon the brassard that steeled his fore-arm.

"What will you do?" she questioned, in a whisper, her eyes dilating with alarm.

"Stem the treachery of that rabble," he answered shortly. "Stay you here, Madonna. Fortemani and I will pacify them—or make an end of them." And so grimly did he say it that Gonzaga believed it to lie

within his power.

"But you are mad!" she cried, and the fear in her eyes increased. "What can you do against twenty?"

"What God pleases," he answered, and for a second put the ferocity from his heart that he might smile reassurance.

"But you will be killed," she cried. "Oh! don't go, don't go! Let them have their way, Messer Francesco. Let Gian Maria invest the castle. I care not, so that you do not go."

Her voice, and the tale it told of sweet anxiety for his fate overruling everything else in that moment—even her horror of Gian Maria—quickenened his blood to the pace of ecstasy. He was taken by a wild longing to catch her in his arms—this lady hitherto so brave and daunted now by the fear of his peril only. Every fibre of his being urged him to gather her to his breast, whilst he poured courage and comfort into her ear. He fainted almost with desire to kiss those tender eyes, upturned to his in her piteous pleading that he should not endanger his own life. But suppressing all, he only smiled, though very tenderly.

"Be brave, Madonna, and trust in me a little. Have I failed you yet? Need you then fear that I shall fail you now?"

At that she seemed to gather courage. The words reawakened her confidence in his splendid strength.

"We shall laugh over this when we break our fast," he cried. "Come, Ercole!" And without waiting for more, he leapt down the steps with an agility surprising in one so heavily armed as he.

They were no more than in time. As they gained the courtyard the men came sweeping along towards the gates, their voices raucous and threatening. They were full of assurance. All hell they thought

could not have hindered them, and yet at sight of that tall figure, bright as an angel, in his panoply of glittering steel, with that great sword poised on his left shoulder, some of the impetuosity seemed to fall from them.

Still they advanced, Cappuccio's voice shouting encouragement. Almost were they within range of that lengthy sword, when of a sudden it flashed from his shoulder, and swept a half-circle of dazzling light before their eyes. Round his head it went, and back again before them, handled as though it had been a whip, and bringing them, silent, to a standstill. He bore it back to his shoulder, and alert for the first movement, his blood on fire, and ready to slay a man or two should the example become necessary, he addressed them.

"You see what awaits you if you persist in this," he said, in a dangerously quiet voice. "Have you no shame, you herd of cowardly animals! You are loud-voiced enough where treason to the hand that pays you is in question; but there, it seems, your valour ends."

He spoke to them now in burning words. He recapitulated the arguments which yesterday he had made use of to quell the mutinous spirit of Cappuccio. He assured them that Gian Maria threatened more than he could accomplish; and so, perhaps, more than he would fulfil if they were so foolish as to place themselves in his power. Their safety, he pointed out to them, lay here, behind these walls. The siege could not long endure. They had a stout ally in Caesar Borgia, and he was marching upon Babbiano by then, so that Gian Maria must get him home perforce ere long. Their pay was good, he reminded them, and if the siege were soon raised they should be well rewarded.

"Gian Maria threatens to hang you when he captures Roccaleone. But even should he capture it, do you think he would be allowed to carry out so inhuman a threat? You are mercenaries, after all, in the pay of Monna Valentina, on whom and her captains the blame must fall. This is Urbino, not Babbiano, and Gian Maria is not master here.

Do you think the noble and magnanimous Guidobaldo would let you hang? Have you so poor an opinion of your Duke? Fools! You are as safe from violence as are those ladies in the gallery up there. For Guidobaldo would no more think of harming you than of permitting harm to come to them. If any hanging there is it will be for me, and perhaps for Messer Gonzaga who hired you. Yet, do I talk of throwing down my arms? What think you holds me here? Interest—just as interest holds you—and if I think the risk worth taking, why should not you? Are you so tame and so poor-spirited that a threat is to vanquish you? Will you become a byword in Italy, and when men speak of cowardice, will you have them say: 'Craven as Monna Valentina's garrison'?"

In this strain he talked to them, now smiting hard with his scorn, now cajoling them with his assurances, and breeding confidence anew in their shaken spirits. It was a thing that went afterwards to the making of an epic that was sung from Calabria to Piedmont, how this brave knight, by his words, by the power of his will and the might of his presence, curbed and subdued that turbulent score of rebellious hinds.

And from the wall above Valentina watched him, her eyes sparkling with tears that had not their source in sorrow nor yet in fear, for she knew that he must prevail. How could it be else with one so dauntless?

Thus thought she now. But in the moment of his going, fear had chilled her to the heart, and when she first saw him take his stand before them, she had turned half-distraught, and begged Gonzaga not to linger at her side, but to go lend what aid he could to that brave knight who stood so sorely in need of it. And Gonzaga had smiled a smile as pale as January sunshine, and his soft blue eyes had hardened in their glance. Not weakness now was it that held him there, well out of the dangerous turmoil. For he felt that had he

possessed the strength of Hercules, and the courage of Achilles, he would not in that instant have moved a step to Francesco's aid. And as much he told her.

"Why should I, Madonna?" he had returned coldly. "Why should I raise a hand to help the man whom you prefer to me? Why should I draw sword in the cause of this fortress?"

She looked at him with troubled eyes. "What are you saying, my good Gonzaga?"

"Aye—your good Gonzaga!" he mocked her bitterly. "Your lap-dog, your lute-thrummer; but not man enough to be your captain; not man enough to earn a thought that is kinder than any earned by Peppe or your hounds. I may endanger my neck to serve you, to bring you hither to a place of safety from Gian Maria's persecution, and be cast aside for one who, it happens, has a little more knowledge of this coarse trade of arms. Cast me aside if you will," he pursued, with increasing bitterness, "but having done so, do not ask me to serve you again. Let Messer Francesco fight it out——"

"Hush, Gonzaga!" she interrupted. "Let me hear what he is saying."

And her tone told the courtier that his words had been lost upon the morning air. Engrossed in the scene below she had not so much as listened to his bitter tirade. For now Francesco was behaving oddly. The fool was returned from the errand on which he had been despatched, and Francesco called him to his side. Lowering his sword he received a paper from Peppe's hand.

Burning with indignation at having gone unheeded, Gonzaga stood gnawing his lip, whilst Valentina craned forward to catch Francesco's words.

"I have here a proof," he cried, "of what I tell you; proof of how little Gian Maria is prepared to carry out his threats of cannon. It is that

fellow Cappoccio has seduced you with his talk. And you, like the sheep you are, let yourselves be driven by his foul tongue. Now listen to the bribe that Gian Maria offers to one within these walls if he can contrive a means to deliver Roccaleone into his hands." And to Gonzaga's paralysing consternation, he heard Francesco read the letter with which Gian Maria had answered his proposed betrayal of the fortress. He went white with fear and he leant against the low wall to steady the tell-tale trembling that had seized him. Then Francesco's voice, scornful and confident, floated up to his ears. "I ask you, my friends, would his Highness of Babbiano be disposed to the payment of a thousand gold florins if by bombardment he thought to break a way into Roccaleone? This letter was written yesterday. Since then we have made a brave display of cannon ourselves; and if yesterday he dared not fire, think you he will to-day? But here, assure yourselves, if there is one amongst you that can read."

He held out the letter to them. Cappoccio took it, and calling one Aventano, he held it out in his turn. This Aventano, a youth who had been partly educated for the Church, but had fallen from that lofty purpose, now stood forward and took the letter. He scrutinised it, read it aloud, and pronounced it genuine.

"Whom is it addressed to?" demanded Cappoccio.

"Nay, nay!" cried Francesco. "What need for that?"

"Let be," Cappoccio answered, almost fiercely. "If you would have us remain in Roccaleone, let be. Aventano, tell me."

"To Messer Romeo Gonzaga," answered the youth, in a voice of wonder.

So evil a light leapt to Cappoccio's eye that Francesco carried his free hand to the sword which he had lowered. But Cappoccio only looked up at Gonzaga, and grinned malevolently. It had penetrated his

dull wits that he had been the tool of a judas, who sought to sell the castle for a thousand florins. Further than that Cappoccio did not see; nor was he very resentful, and his grin was rather of mockery than of anger. He was troubled by no lofty notions of honour that should cause him to see in this deed of Gonzaga's anything more than such a trickster's act as it is always agreeable to foil. And then, to the others who knew naught of what was passing in Cappoccio's mind, he did a mighty strange thing. From being the one to instigate them to treachery and mutiny, he was the one now to raise his voice in a stout argument of loyalty. He agreed with all that Messer Francesco had said, and he, for one, ranged himself on Messer Francesco's side to defend the gates from any traitors who sought to open them to Gian Maria Sforza.

His defection from the cause of mutiny was the signal for the utter abandoning of that cause itself, and another stout ally came opportunely to weigh in Francesco's favour was the fact that the half-hour of grace was now elapsed, and Gian Maria's guns continued silent. He drew their attention to the fact with a laugh, and bade them go in peace, adding the fresh assurance that those guns would not speak that day, nor the next, nor indeed ever.

Utterly conquered by Francesco and—perhaps even more—by his unexpected ally, Cappoccio, they slunk shamefacedly away to the food and drink that he bade them seek at Fra Domenico's hands.

CHAPTER XX. THE LOVERS

"How came that letter to your hands?" Valentina asked Gonzaga when presently they stood together in the courtyard, whither the courtier had followed her when she descended.

"Wrapped round an arbalest-bolt that fell on the ramparts yesterday whilst I was walking there alone," returned Gonzaga coolly.

He had by now regained his composure. He saw that stood in deadly peril, and the very fear that possessed him seemed, by an odd paradox, to lend him the strength to play his part.

Valentina eyed him with a something of mistrust in her glance. But on Francesco's clear countenance no shadow of suspicion showed. His eyes almost smiled as he asked Gonzaga:

"Why did you not bear it to Monna Valentina?"

A flush reddened the courtier's cheeks. He shrugged his shoulders impatiently, and in a voice that choked with anger he delivered his reply.

"To you, sir, who seem bred in camps and reared in guard-rooms, the fulness of this insult offered me by Gian Maria may not be apparent. It may not be yours to perceive that the very contact of that letter soiled my hands, that it shamed me unutterably to think that that loutish Duke should have deemed me a target for such a shaft. It were idle, therefore, to seek to make you understand how little I could bear to submit to the further shame of allowing another to see the affront that I was powerless to avenge. I did, sir, with that letter the only thing conceivable. I crumpled it in my hand and cast it from me, just as I

sought to cast its contents from my mind. But your watchful spies, Ser Francesco, bore it to you, and if my shame has been paraded before the eyes of that rabble soldiery, at least it has served the purpose of saving Monna Valentina. To do that, I would, if the need arose, immolate more than the pride that caused me to be silent on the matter of this communication."

He spoke with such heat of sincerity that he convinced both Francesco and Valentina, and the lady's eyes took on a softer expression as she surveyed Gonzaga—this poor Gonzaga whom, her heart told her, she had sorely wronged in thought. Francesco, ever generous, took his passionate utterances in excellent part.

"Messer Gonzaga, I understand your scruples. You do me wrong to think that I should fail in that."

He checked the suggestion he was on the point of renewing that, nevertheless, Gonzaga would have been better advised to have laid that letter at once before Monna Valentina. Instead, he dismissed the subject with a laugh, and proposed that they should break their fast so soon as he had put off his harness.

He went to do so, whilst Valentina bent her steps towards the dining-room, attended by Gonzaga, to whom she now sought to make amends for her suspicions by an almost excessive friendliness of bearing.

But there was one whom Gonzaga's high-sounding words in connection with that letter had left cold. This was Peppe, that most wise of fools. He hastened after Francesco, and while the knight was disarming he came to voice his suspicions. But Francesco drove him out with impatience, and Peppe went sorrowing and swearing that the wisdom of the fool was truly better than the folly of the wise.

Throughout that day Gonzaga hardly stirred from Valentina's side.

He talked with her in the morning at great length and upon subjects poetical or erudite, by which he meant to display his vast mental superiority over the swashbuckling Francesco. In the evening, when the heat of the day was spent, and whilst that same Messer Francesco was at some defensive measures on the walls, Gonzaga played at bowls with Valentina and her ladies—the latter having now recovered from the panic to which earlier they had been a prey.

That morning Gonzaga had stood at bay, seeing his plans crumble. That evening, after the day spent in Valentina's company—and she so sweet and kind to him—he began to take heart of grace once more, and his volatile mind whispered to his soul the hope that, after all, things might well be as he had first intended, if he but played his cards adroitly, and did not mar his chances by the precipitancy that had once gone near to losing him. His purpose gathered strength from a message that came that evening from Gian Maria, who was by then assured that Gonzaga's plan had failed. He sent word that, being unwilling to provoke the bloodshed threatened by the reckless madman who called himself Monna Valentina's Provost, he would delay the bombardment, hoping that in the meantime hunger would beget in that rebellious garrison a more submissive mood.

Francesco read the message to Madonna's soldiers, and they received it joyously. Their confidence in him increased a hundredfold by this proof of the accuracy of his foresight. They were a gay company at supper in consequence, and gayest of all was Messer Gonzaga, most bravely dressed in a purple suit of taby silk to honour so portentous an occasion.

Francesco was the first to quit the table, craving Monna Valentina's leave to be about some duty that took him to the walls. She let him go, and afterwards sat pensive, nor heeded now Romeo's light chatter, nor yet the sonnet of Petrarca that presently he sang the company. Her thoughts were all with him that had left the board. Scarcely a word

had she exchanged with Francesco since that delirious moment when they had looked into each other's eyes upon the ramparts, and seen the secret that each was keeping from the other. Why had he not come to her? she asked herself. And then she bethought her of how Gonzaga had all day long been glued to her side, and she realised, too, that it was she had shunned Francesco's company, grown of a sudden strangely shy.

But greater than her shyness was now her desire to be near him, and to hear his voice; to have him look again upon her as he had looked that morning, when in terror for him she had sought to dissuade him from opposing the craven impulse of her men-at-arms. A woman of mature age, or one riper in experience, would have waited for him to seek her out. But Valentina, in her sweet naturalness, thought never of subterfuge or of dalliant wiles. She rose quietly from the table ere Gonzaga's song was done, and as quietly she slipped from the room.

It was a fine night, the air heavy with the vernal scent of fertile lands, and the deep cobalt of the heavens a glittering, star-flecked dome in a lighter space of which floated the half-disk of the growing moon. Such a moon, she bethought her, as she had looked at with thoughts of him, the night after their brief meeting at Acquasparta. She had gained that north rampart on which he had announced that duty took him, and yonder she saw a man—the only tenant of the wall—leaning upon the embattled parapet, looking down at the lights of Gian Maria's camp. He was bareheaded, and by the gold coif that gleamed in his hair she knew him. Softly she stole up behind him.

"Do we dream here, Messer Francesco?" she asked him, as she reached his side, and there was laughter running through her words.

He started round at the sound of her voice, then he laughed too, softly and gladly.

"It is a night for dreams, and I was dreaming indeed. But you have scattered them."

"You grieve me," she rallied him. "For assuredly they were pleasant, since, to come here and indulge them, you left—us."

"Aye—they were pleasant," he answered. "And yet, they were fraught with a certain sadness, but idle as is the stuff of dreams. They were yours to dispel, for they were of you."

"Of me?" she questioned, her heart-beats quickening and bringing to her cheeks a flush that she thanked the night for concealing.

"Yes, Madonna—of you and our first meeting in the woods at Acquasparta. Do you recall it?"

"I do, I do," she murmured fondly.

"And do you recall how I then swore myself your knight and ever your champion? Little did we dream how the honour that I sighed for was to be mine."

She made him no answer, her mind harking back to that first meeting on which so often and so fondly she had pondered.

"I was thinking, too," he said presently, "of that man Gian Maria in the plain yonder, and of this shameful siege."

"You—you have no misgivings?" she faltered, for his words had disappointed her a little.

"Misgivings?"

"For being here with me. For being implicated in what they call my rebellion?"

He laughed softly, his eyes upon the silver gleam of waters below.

"My misgivings are all for the time when this siege shall be ended; when you and I shall have gone each our separate way," he answered boldly. He turned to face her now, and his voice rang a little tense. "But for being here to guide this fine resistance and lend you the little aid I can—— No, no, I have no misgiving for that. It is the dearest frolic ever my soldiering led me into. I came to Roccaleone with a message of warning; but underneath, deep down in my heart, I bore the hope that mine should be more than a messenger's part; that mine it might be to remain by you and do such work as I am doing."

"Without you they would have forced me by now to surrender."

"Perhaps they would. But while I am here I do not think they will. I burn for news of Babbiano. If I could but tell what is happening there I might cheer you with the assurance that this siege can last but a few days longer. Gian Maria must get him home or submit to the loss of his throne. And if he loses that your uncle would no longer support so strenuously his suit with you. To you, Madonna, this must be a cheering thought. To me—alas! Why should I hope for it?"

He was looking away now into the night, but his voice quivered with the emotion that was in him. She was silent, and emboldened perhaps by that silence of hers, encouraged by the memory of what he had seen that morning reflected in her eyes:

"Madonna," he cried, "I would it might be mine to cut a road for you through that besieging camp, and bear you away to some blessed place where there are neither courts nor princes. But since this may not be, Madonna mia, I would that this siege might last for ever."

And then—was it the night breeze faintly stirring through his hair that mocked him with the whisper, "So indeed would I?" He turned to her, his hand, brown and nervous, fell upon hers, ivory-white, where it rested on the stone.

"Valentina!" he cried, his voice no louder than a whisper, his eyes ardently seeking her averted ones. And then, as suddenly as it had leapt up, was the fire in his glance extinguished. He withdrew his hand from hers, he sighed, and shifted his gaze to the camp once more. "Forgive, forget, Madonna," he murmured bitterly, "that which in my madness I have presumed."

Silent she stood for a long moment; then she edged nearer to him, and her voice murmured back: "What if I account it no presumption?"

With a gasp he swung round to face her, and they stood very close, glance holding glance, and hers the less timid of the two. They thus remained for a little space. Then shaking his head and speaking with an infinite sadness:

"It were better that you did, Madonna," he made answer.

"Better? But why?"

"Because I am no duke, Madonna."

"And what of that?" she cried, to add with scorn: "Out yonder sits a duke. Oh, sir, how shall I account presumptuous in you the very words that I would hear? What does your rank signify to me? I know you for the truest knight, the noblest gentleman, and the most valiant friend that ever came to the aid of distressed maiden. Do you forget the very principles that have led me to make this resistance? That I am a woman, and ask of life no more than is a woman's due—and no less."

There she stopped; again the blood suffused her cheeks as she bethought her of how fast she talked, and of how bold her words might sound. She turned slightly from him, and leant now upon the parapet, gazing out into the night. And as she stood thus, a very ardent voice it was that whispered in her ear:

"Valentina, by my soul, I love you!" And there that whisper, which

filled her with an ecstasy that was almost painful in its poignancy, ended sharply as if throttled. Again his hand sought hers, which was yielded to him as she would have yielded her whole life at his sweet bidding, and now his voice came less passionately.

"Why delude ourselves with cruel hopes, my Valentina?" he was saying. "There is the future. There is the time when this siege shall be done with, and when, Gian Maria having got him home, you will be free to depart. Whither will you go?"

She looked at him as if she did not understand the question, and her eyes were troubled, although in such light as there was he could scarce see this.

"I will go whither you bid me. Where else have I to go?" she added, with a note of bitterness.

He started. Her answer was so far from what he had expected.

"But your uncle——?"

"What duty do I owe to him? Oh, I have thought of it, and until—until this morning, it seemed that a convent must be my ultimate refuge. I have spent most of my young life at Santa Sofia, and the little that I have seen of the world at my uncle's court scarce invites me to see more of it. The Mother Abbess loved me a little. She would take me back, unless——"

She broke off and looked at him, and before that look of absolute and sweet surrender his senses swam. That she was niece to the Duke of Urbino he remembered no more than that he was Count of Aquila, well-born, but of none too rich estate, and certainly no more a match for her in Guidobaldo's eyes than if he had been the simple knight-errant that he seemed.

He moved closer to her, his hands—as if obeying a bidding greater

than his will, the bidding of that glance of hers, perhaps—took her by the shoulders, whilst his whole soul looked at her from his eyes. Then, with a stifled cry, he caught her to him. For a moment she lay, palpitant, within his arms, her tall, bronze head on a level with his chin, her heart beating against his heart. Stooping suddenly, he kissed her on the lips. She suffered it with an unresistance that invited. But when it was done, she gently put him from her; and he, obedient to her slightest wish, curbed the wild ardour of his mood, and set her free.

"Anima mia!" he cried rapturously. "You are mine now, betide what may. Not Gian Maria nor all the dukes in Christendom shall take you from me."

She set her hand upon his lips to silence him, and he kissed the palm, so that laughing she drew back again. And now from laughter she passed to a great solemnity, and with arm outstretched towards the ducal camp: "Win me a way through those lines," said she, "and bear me away from Urbino—far away where Guidobaldo's power and the vengeance of Gian Maria may not follow us—and you shall have won me for your own. But until then, let there be a truce to—to this, between us. Here is a man's work to be done, and if I am weak as to-night, I may weaken you, and then we should both be undone. It is upon your strength I count, Franceschino mio, my true knight."

He would have answered her. He had much to tell her—who and what he was. But she pointed to the head of the steps, where a man's figure loomed.

"Yonder comes the sentinel," she said. "Leave me now, dear Francesco. Go. It is growing late."

He bowed low before her, obedient ever, like the true knight he was, and took his leave of her, his soul on fire.

Valentina watched his retreating figure until it had vanished round

the angle of the wall. Then with a profound sigh, that was as a prayer of thanksgiving for this great good that had come into her life, she leaned upon the parapet and looked out into the darkness, her cheeks flushed, her heart still beating high. She laughed softly to herself out of the pure happiness of her mood. The camp of Gian Maria became a subject for her scorn. What should his might avail whilst she had such a champion to defend her now and hereafter?

There was an irony in that siege on which her fancy fastened. By coming thus in arms against her Gian Maria sought to win her for his wife; yet all that he had accomplished was to place her in the arms of the one man whom she had learnt to love by virtue of this very siege. The mellow warmth of the night, the ambient perfume of the fields were well-sorted to her mood, and the faint breeze that breathed caressingly upon her cheek seemed to re-echo the melodies her heart was giving forth. In that hour those old grey walls of Roccaleone seemed to enclose for her a very paradise, and the snatch of an old love song stole softly from her parted lips. But like a paradise—alas!—it had its snake that crept up unheard behind her, and was presently hissing in her ear. And its voice was the voice of Romeo Gonzaga.

"It comforts me, Madonna, that there is one, at least, in Roccaleone has the heart to sing."

Startled out of her happy pensiveness by that smooth and now unutterably sinister voice, she turned to face its owner.

She saw the white gleam of his face and something of the anger that smouldered in his eye, and despite herself a thrill of alarm ran through her like a shudder. She looked beyond him to a spot where lately she had seen the sentry. There was no one there nor anywhere upon that wall. They were alone, and Messer Gonzaga looked singularly evil.

For a moment there was a tense silence, broken only by the

trampling waters of the torrent-moat and the hoarse challenge of a sentry's "Chi va là?" in Gian Maria's camp. Then she turned nervously, wondering how much he might have heard of what had passed between herself and Francesco, how much have seen.

"And yet, Gonzaga," she answered him, "I left you singing below when I came away."

"—To wanton it here in the moonlight with that damned swashbuckler, that brigand, that kennel-bred beast of a sbirro!"

"Gonzaga! You would dare!"

"Dare?" he mocked her, beside himself with passion. "Is it you who speak of daring—you, the niece of Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, a lady of the noble and illustrious house of Rovere, who cast yourself into the arms of a low-born vassal such as that, a masnadiero, a bandit, a bravo? And can you yet speak of daring, and take that tone with me, when shame should strike you either dead or dumb?"

"Gonzaga," she answered him, her face as white as his own, but her voice steady and hard with anger, "leave me now—upon the instant, or I will have you flogged—flogged to the bone."

A moment he stared at her like a man dazed. Then he tossed his arms to Heaven, and letting them fall heavily to his sides, he shrugged his shoulders and laughed evilly. But of going he made no shift.

"Call your men," he answered her, in a choking voice. "Do your will on me. Flog me to the bone or to the death—let that be the reward of all that I have done, all that I have risked, all that I have sacrificed to serve you. It were of a piece with your other actions."

Her eyes sought his in the gloom, her bosom heaving wildly in her endeavours to master herself before she spoke.

"Messer Gonzaga," said she at last, "I'll not deny that you served

me faithfully in the matter of my escape from Urbino——"

"Why speak of it?" he sneered. "It was a service of which you but avail yourself until another offered on whom you might bestow your favour and the supreme command of your fortress. Why speak of it?"

"To show you that the service you allude to is now paid," she riposted sternly. "By reproaching me you have taken payment, and by insulting me you have stamped out my gratitude."

"A most convenient logic yours," he mocked. "I am cast aside like an outworn garment, and the garment is accounted paid for because through much hard usage it has come to look a little threadbare."

And now it entered her mind that perhaps there was some justice in what he said. Perhaps she had used him a little hardly.

"Do you think, Gonzaga," she said, and her tone was now a shade more gentle, "that because you have served me you may affront me, and that knight who has served me, also, and——"

"In what can such service as his compare with mine? What has he done that I have not done more?"

"Why, when the men rebelled here——"

"Bah! Cite me not that. Body of God! it is his trade to lead such swine. He is one of themselves. But for the rest, what has such a man as this to lose by his share in your rebellion, compared with such a loss as mine must be?"

"Why, if things go ill, I take it he may lose his life," she answered, in a low voice. "Can you lose more?"

He made a gesture of impatience.

"If things go ill—yes. It may cost him dearly. But if they go well, and

this siege is raised, he has nothing more to fear. Mine is a parlous case. However ends this siege, for me there will be no escape from the vengeance of Gian Maria and Guidobaldo. They know my share in it. They know that your action was helped by me, and that without me you could never have equipped yourself for such resistance. Whatever may betide you and this Ser Franceseo, for me there will be no escape."

She drew a deep breath, then set him the obvious question:

"Did you not consider it—did you not weigh these chances—before you embarked upon this business, before you, yourself, urged me to this step?"

"Aye, did I," he answered sullenly.

"Then, why these complaints now?"

He was singularly, madly frank with her in his reply. He told her that he had done it because he loved her, because she had given him signs that his love was not in vain.

"I gave you signs?" she interrupted him. "Mother in Heaven! Recite these signs that I may know them."

"Were you not ever kind to me?" he demanded. "Did you not ever manifest a liking for my company? Were you not ever pleased that I should sing to you the songs that in your honour I had made? Was it not to me you turned in the hour of your need?"

"See now how poor a thing you are, Gonzaga?" she answered witheringly. "A woman may not smile on you, may not give you a kind word, may not suffer you to sing to her, but you must conclude she is enamoured of you. And if I turned to you in my hour of need, as you remind me, needs that be a sign of my infatuation? Does every cavalier so think when a helpless woman turns to him in her distress?"

But even so," she continued, "how should all that diminish the peril you now talk of? Even were your suit with me to prosper, would that make you any the less Romeo Gonzaga, the butt of the anger of my uncle and Gian Maria? Rather do I think that it should make you more."

But he disillusioned her. He did not scruple, in his angry mood, to lay before her his reasonings that as her husband he would be screened.

She laughed aloud at that.

"And so it is by such sophistries as these that your presumption came to life?"

That stung him. Quivering with the passion that obsessed him, he stepped close up to her.

"Tell me, Madonna—why shall we account presumption in Romeo Gonzaga a suit that in a nameless adventurer we encourage?" he asked, his voice thick and tremulous.

"Have a care," she bade him.

"A care of what?" he flashed back. "Answer me, Monna Valentina. Am I so base a man that by the very thought of love for you I must presume, whilst you can give yourself into the arms of this swashbuckling bravo, and take his kisses? Your reasoning sorts ill with your deeds."

"Craven!" she answered him. "Dog that you are!" And before the blaze of passion in her eyes he recoiled, his courage faltering. She cropped her anger in mid-career, and in a dangerously calm voice she bade him see to it that by morning he was no longer in Roccaleone. "Profit by the night," she counselled him, "and escape the vigilance of Gian Maria as best you can. Here you shall not stay."

At that a great fear took possession of him, putting to flight the last remnant of his anger. Nor fear alone was it, to do him full justice. It was also the realisation that if he would take payment from her for this treatment of him, if he would slake his vengeance, he must stay. One plan had failed him. But his mind was fertile, and he might devise another that might succeed and place Gian Maria in Roccaleone. Thus should he be amply venged. She was turning away, having pronounced his banishment, but he sprang after her, and upon his knees he now besought her piteously to hear him yet awhile.

And she, regretting her already of her harshness, and thinking that perhaps in his jealousy he had been scarce responsible for what he had said, stood still to hear him.

"Not that, not that, Madonna," he wailed, his tone suggesting the imminence of tears. "Do not send me away. If die I must, let me die here at Roccaleone, helping the defence to my last breath. But do not cast me out to fall into the hands of Gian Maria. He will hang me for my share in this business. Do not requite me thus, Madonna. You owe me a little, surely, and if I was mad when I talked to you just now, it was love of you that drove me—love of you and suspicion of that man of whom none of us know anything. Madonna, be pitiful a little. Suffer me to remain."

She looked down at him, her mind swayed between pity and contempt. Then pity won the day in the wayward but ever gentle heart of Valentina. She bade him rise.

"And go, Gonzaga. Get you to bed, and sleep you into a saner frame of mind. We will forget all this that you have said, so that you never speak of it again—nor of this love you say you bear me."

The hypocrite caught the hem of her cloak, and bore it to his lips.

"May God keep your heart ever as pure and noble and forgiving,"

he murmured brokenly. "I know how little I am deserving of your clemency. But I shall repay you, Madonna," he protested—and truly meant it, though not in the sense it seemed.

CHAPTER XXI. THE PENITENT

A week passed peacefully at Roccaleone; so peacefully that it was difficult to conceive that out there in the plain sat Gian Maria with his five-score men besieging them.

This inaction fretted the Count of Aquila, as did the lack of news from Fanfulla; and he wondered vaguely what might be taking place at Babbiano that Gian Maria should be content to sit idly before them, as though he had months at his disposal in which to starve them into yielding. The mystery would have been dispelled had he known that he had Gonzaga to thank for this singular patience of Gian Maria's. For the courtier had found occasion to send another letter-carrying shaft into the Duke's camp, informing him of how and why the last plot had failed, and urging Gian Maria to wait and trust in him to devise a better scheme for delivering the castle into his power. He had promised boldly and confidently enough, and Gian Maria—facts showed—had trusted to that promise of his, and awaited its fulfilment. But tax his mind though he did incessantly, no inspiration came to him, no scheme suggested itself by which he might accomplish his treacherous purpose.

He employed the time cunningly to win back Valentina's favour and confidence. On the morning after his stormy interview with Guidobaldo's niece, he had confessed himself to Fra Domenico, and approached the Sacrament. Every morning thereafter he appeared at Mass, and by the piety and fervour of his devotions became an example to all the others. Now this was not lost on Valentina, who was convent-bred, and in a measure devout. She read in this singular alteration of his ways the undoubtable indication of an altered character. That he had approached the Sacrament on the morning

after his wild words to her, she took to mean that he repented him the viciousness of the animosity he had entertained that he continued so extremely devout thereafter she construed into meaning that his repentance was sincere and persistent.

And so she came to ask herself whether, indeed, he had not been as much sinned against as sinning, and she ended by assuring herself that in a measure the fault was hers. Seeing him so penitent, and concluding from it that he was not likely to transgress again, she readmitted him to her favour, and, little by little, the old friendly state was re-established and was the sounder, perhaps, by virtue of her confidence that after what had passed he would not again misunderstand her.

He did not, nor did he again allow his optimism and ever-ready vanity to cozen him with false hopes. He read her with exact precision, and whilst the reading but served to embitter him the more and render him more steadfast in his vengeful purpose, it, nevertheless, made him smile the more sweetly and fawn the more obsequiously.

And not content with this, he did not limit his sycophancy to Valentina, but sought also by a smiling persistence to ingratiate himself with Francesco. No voice in Roccaleone—not even that of the bully Ercole—was raised more often or more enthusiastically to praise and glorify their Provost. Valentina, observing this, and accepting it as another sign of his contrition for the past and purpose of amendment for the future, grew yet more cordial towards him. He was not lacking in astuteness, this pretty Ser Romeo, nor in knowledge of a woman's heart, and the apprehension of the fact that there is no flattery she prefers to that which has for object the man she loves.

Thus did Gonzaga conquer the confidence and esteem of all during that peaceful week. He seemed a changed man, and all save Peppe

saw in this change a matter for increased trust and friendship towards him. But the astute fool looked on and pondered. Such transformations as these were not effected in a night. He was no believer in any human chrysalis that shall make of the grub of yesterday the butterfly of to-day. And so, in this fawning, smiling, subservient Gonzaga, he saw nothing but an object of mistrust, a fellow to be watched with the utmost vigilance. To this vigilance the hunchback applied himself with a zeal born of his cordial detestation of the courtier. But Gonzaga, aware of the fool's mistrust and watchfulness, contrived for once to elude him, and to get a letter to Gian Maria setting forth the ingenious plan he had hatched.

The notion had come to him that Sunday at Mass. On all sanctified days it was Monna Valentina's way to insist that the entire garrison, with the exception of one single sentinel—and this only at Francesco's very earnest urging—should attend the morning service. Like an inspiration it came to him that such a half-hour as that would be a most opportune season in which to throw open the gates of Roccaleone to the besiegers. The following Wednesday was the feast of Corpus Christi. Then would be his opportunity.

Kneeling there, with head bent in ecstatic devotion, he matured his treacherous plan. The single sentry he could suborn, or else—if bribery failed—poniard. He realised that single-handed he might not lower the cumbrous drawbridge, nor would it be wise, even if possible, for the noise of it might give the alarm. But there was the postern. Gian Maria must construct him a light, portable bridge, and have it in readiness to span the moat and silently pour his soldiers into the castle through that little gate.

And so, the plot matured and every detail clear, he got him to his chamber and penned the letter that was to rejoice the heart of Gian Maria. He chose a favourable moment to despatch it, as he had despatched the former ones, tied about the quarrel of an arbalest,

and he saw Gian Maria's signal—for which the letter had provided—that the plan would be adopted. Humming a gay measure, jubilant at the prospect of seeing himself so amply avenged, Gonzaga passed down and out into the castle gardens to join the ladies in their merry-making over a game of hoodman blind.

Now, however much the Duke of Babbiano may have congratulated himself upon the ally he possessed in Gonzaga, and the cunning scheme the latter had devised for placing him in possession of Roccaleone, there came news to him on the morrow that caused him to rejoice a hundredfold more fervently. His subjects of Babbiano were in a condition approaching open rebellion, resulting from the disquieting rumours that Caesar Borgia was arming at Rome for a descent upon the Duchy, and the continued absence of Gian Maria in such a season, upon a wooing that they deemed ill-timed. A strong party had been formed, and the leaders had nailed upon the Palace gates a proclamation that, unless Gian Maria returned within three days to organise the defence of Babbiano, they would depose him and repair to Aquila to invite his cousin, Francesco del Falco—whose patriotism and military skill were known to all—to assume the crown of Babbiano and protect them.

At the news, and upon reading the proclamation, which Alvari had brought with him, Gian Maria flew into one of those fits of rage that made his name a byword in Babbiano. Presently, however, he cooled. There was Gonzaga yonder, who had promised to admit him to Roccaleone on Wednesday. That left him time to first possess himself of his reluctant bride, and then ride hard to Babbiano, to arrive there before the expiry of the three days' grace his subjects gave him.

He conferred with Guidobaldo, and urged that a priest should be in waiting to wed them so soon as he should have brought her out of the fortress. Upon that detail they were within an ace of quarrelling. Guidobaldo would not at first agree to such hasty nuptials; they were

unfitting the dignity and the station of his niece, and if Gian Maria would wed her he must come to Urbino and let the ceremony be performed by a cardinal. Well was it then for Gian Maria that he mastered his wonted hastiness and curbed the hot, defiant retort that rose to his lips. Had he done so, an enduring rupture between them would probably have ensued; for Guidobaldo was not one to permit himself to be hectorred, and, after all, he amply realised that Gian Maria had more need of him than he of Gian Maria. And this in that moment the Duke of Babbiano realised too, and realising it he set himself to plead where otherwise he might have demanded, to beg as a favour that which otherwise he might have commanded with a threat. And so he won Guidobaldo—although reluctant—to his wishes in the matter, and in his good-nature the Duke of Urbino consented to pocket the dignity that prompted him to see the ceremony performed with princely pomp.

This being settled, Gian Maria blessed Gonzaga who rendered it all possible, and came most opportunely to his aid where without him he should have been forced to resort to cannon and bloodshed.

With Gonzaga the only shadow of doubt that remained to mar the perfect certainty of his success lay in his appreciation of Francesco's daring character and resourceful mind, and now as if the gods were eager to favour him to the very last degree—a strange weapon to combat this was unexpectedly thrust into his hand.

It happened that Alvari was not the only messenger who travelled that day to Roccaleone. There followed him by some hours, the Count of Aquila's servant, Zaccaria, who rode hard and reached the approaches of the castle by sunset. His destination being the fortress itself, he was forced to wait in the woods until night had fallen, and even then his mission was fraught with peril.

It befell that somewhere near the second hour of night, the moon being overcast at the time—for there were threats of a storm in the

sky—the sentinel on the eastern wall heard a sound of splashing in the moat below, accompanied by the stertorous breathing of a swimmer whose mouth is not well above water. He challenged the sound, but receiving no reply he turned to go and give the alarm, and ran into the arms of Gonzaga, who had come up to take the air.

"Illustrious," he exclaimed, "there is someone swimming the moat."

"Eh?" cried Gonzaga, a hundred suspicions of Gian Maria running through his mind. "Treachery?"

"It is what I thought."

Gonzaga took the man by the sleeve of his doublet, and drew him back to the parapet. They peered over, and from out of the blackness they were hailed by a faint "Olá!"

"Who goes there?" demanded Romeo.

"A friend," came the answer softly. "A messenger from Babbiano with letters for the Lord Count of Aquila. Throw me a rope, friends, before I drown in this trough."

"You rave, fool!" answered him Gonzaga. "We have no counts at Roccaleone."

"Surely, sir sentinel," replied the voice, "my master, Messer Francesco del Falco, is here. Throw me a rope, I say."

"Messer Fran——" began Gonzaga. Then he made a noise like a man choking. It was as if a sudden light of revelation had flooded his brain. "Get a rope," he harshly bade the sentry. "In the armoury yard. Despatch, fool!" he added sharply, now fearing interruption.

In a moment the man was back, and the rope was lowered to the visitor below. A few seconds later Zaccaria stood on the ramparts of Roccaleone, the water dripping from his sodden garments, and

gathering in a pool about his feet.

"This way," said Gonzaga, leading the man towards the armoury tower, where a lanthorn was burning. By the light of it he surveyed the newcomer, and bade the sentry close the door and remain within call, without.

Zaccaria looked startled at the order. This was scarcely the reception he had expected after so imperilling his life to reach the castle with his letter.

"Where is my lord?" he inquired, through teeth that chattered from the cold of his immersion, wondering vaguely who this very magnificent gentleman might be.

"Is Messer Francesco del Falco your lord?" asked Romeo.

"He is, sir. I have had the honour to serve him these ten years. I bring him letters from Messer Fanfulla degli Arcipreti. They are very urgent. Will you lead me to him?"

"You are very wet," murmured Gonzaga solicitously. "You will take your death from cold, and the death of a man so brave as to have found a way through Gian Maria's lines were truly deplorable." He stepped to the door. "Olá!" he called to the sentry. "Take this brave fellow up there and find him a change of raiment." He pointed to the upper chamber of the tower, where, indeed, such things were stored.

"But my letters, sir!" cried Zaccaria impatiently. "They are very urgent, and hours have I wasted already in waiting for the night."

"Surely you can wait until you have changed your garments? Your life, I take it, is of more account than the loss of a few moments."

"But my orders from Messer degli Arcipreti were that I must not lose an instant."

"Oh, si, si!" cried Gonzaga, with a show of good-tempered impatience. "Give me the letters, then, and I will take them to the Count while you are stripping those wet clothes."

Zaccaria eyed him a moment in doubt. But he looked so harmless in his finery, and the expression of his comely face was so winning and honest, that the man's hesitancy faded as soon as it sprang up. Removing his cap, he drew from within the crown the letter, which he had placed there to keep dry. This package he now handed to Gonzaga, who, with a final word of instruction to the sentry touching the finding of raiment for the messenger, stepped out to go his errand. But outside the door he paused, and called the sentry to him again.

"Here is a ducat for you," he whispered. "Do my bidding and you shall have more. Detain him in the tower till I return, and on no account let him be seen or heard by anyone."

"Yes, Excellency," the man replied. "But what if the captain comes and finds me absent from my post?"

"I will provide for that. I will tell Messer Fortemani that I have employed you on a special matter, and ask him to replace you. You are dispensed sentry duty for to-night."

The man bowed, and quietly withdrew to attend to his prisoner, for in that light he now regarded Zaccaria.

Gonzaga sought Fortemani in the guard-room below, and did as he had promised the sentry.

"But," snapped Ercole, reddening, "by whose authority have you done this? By what right do you send sentinels on missions of your own? Christo Santo! Is the castle to be invaded while you send my watchmen to fetch your comfitbox or a book of verses?"

"You will remember——" began Romeo, with an air of overwhelming dignity.

"Devil take you and him that sent you!" broke in the bully. "The Messer Provost shall hear of this."

"On no account," cried Gonzaga, now passing from anger to alarm and snatching the skirts of Fortemani's cloak as the captain was in the act of going out to execute his threat. "Ser Ercole be reasonable, I beg of you. Are we to alarm the castle and disturb Monna Valentina over a trumpery affair such as this? Man, they will laugh at you."

"Eh?" There was nothing Ercole relished less than to be laughed at. He pondered a moment, and it occurred to him that perhaps he was making much of nothing. Then:

"You, Aventano," he called, "take your partisan, and patrol the eastern rampart. There, Messer Gonzaga, I have obeyed your wishes; but Messer Francesco shall hear of it when he comes his rounds."

Gonzaga left him. Francesco would not make his rounds for another hour, and by then it would not matter what Fortemani told him. In one way or another he would be able to account for his action.

He crossed the courtyard, and mounted the steps leading to his own chamber. Once there, he closed and barred the door. He kindled a light, and flinging the letter on the table, he sat and contemplated its exterior and the great red seal that gleamed in the yellow light of his taper.

So! This knight-errant, this man whom he had accounted a low-born hind, was none other than the famous Count of Aquila, the well-beloved of the people of Babbiano, the beau-ideal of all military folk from Sicily to the Alps. And he had never suspected it! Dull-witted did he now account himself. Enough descriptions had he heard of that famous condottiero, that mirror of Italian chivalry. He might have

known that there did not live two men of such commanding ways as he had seen instanced at Roccaleone. What was his object there? Was it love of Valentina, or was it——? He paused, as in his mind he made a swift review of the politics of Babbiano. A sudden possibility occurred to him that made his eyes sparkle and his hands tremble with eagerness. Was this but a political scheme to undermine his cousin's throne, to which Gonzaga had heard it rumoured that Francesco del Falco was an aspirant? If it were so, what a vengeance would be his to unmask him! How it must humble Valentina! The letter lay before him. Within it the true facts would be disclosed. What did his friend Fanfulla write him?

He took the letter up and made a close inspection of the seal. Then softly, quietly, slowly he drew his dagger. If his suspicions were unfounded, his dagger heated in the taper should afford him the means to conceal the fact that he had tampered with that missive. He slipped his blade under the seal, and worked it cautiously until it came up and set the letter open. He unfolded it, and as he read his eyes dilated. He seemed to crouch on his chair, and the hand that held the paper shook. He drew the candle nearer, and shading his eyes he read it again, word for word:

"MY DEAR LORD COUNT,—I have delayed writing until the time when the signs I observed should have become more definite, as they have now done, so that I may delay no longer. This, then, goes by the hand of Zaccaria, to tell you that to-day has word been sent Gian Maria giving him three days in which to return to Babbiano, or to abandon all hope of his crown, of which the people will send the offer then to you at Aquila, where you are believed to be. So now, my dear lord, you have the tyrant at your mercy, tossed between Scylla and Charybdis. Yours it is to resolve how you will act; but I rejoice in being the one to send you word that your presence at Roccaleone and your stubborn defence of the fortress has not been vain, and that presently you are to reap the well-earned reward of it. The people have been

stirred to this extreme action by the confusion prevailing here.

"News has reached us that Caesar Borgia is arming, at Rome, a condotta to invade Babbiano, and the people are exasperated at Gian Maria's continued absence in such a season. They are short-sighted in this, for they overlook the results that must attend the alliance with Urbino. May God protect and prosper your Excellency, whose most devoted servant is

"FANFULLA DEGLI AROI PRETI."

CHAPTER XXII. A REVELATION

"Francesco," said Valentina, and the name came from her lips as if it were an endearment, "why that frowning, careworn look?"

They were in the dining-room alone, where the others had left them, and they were still seated at the table at which they had supped. Francesco raised his dark, thoughtful eyes, and as they lighted now on Valentina the thoughtfulness that was in them gave place to tenderness.

"I am fretted by this lack of news," he acknowledged. "I would I knew what is being done in Babbiano. I had thought that ere now Caesar Borgia had stirred Gian Maria's subjects into some manner of action. I would I knew!"

She rose, and coming close to him, she stood with one hand resting upon his shoulder, her eyes smiling down upon his upturned face.

"And shall such a trifle fret you—you who professed a week ago that you would this siege might last for ever?"

"Account me not fickle, anima mia," he answered her, and he kissed the ivory fingers that rested on his shoulder. "For that was before the world changed for me at the magic of your bidding. And so," he repeated, "I would I knew what is toward at Babbiano!"

"But why sigh over a wish so idle?" she exclaimed. "By what means can news reach you here of the happenings of the world without?"

He pondered a moment, seeking words in which to answer her. A score of times during that week had he been on the point of

disclosing himself, of telling her who and what he was. Yet ever had he hesitated, putting off that disclosure until the season should appear more fitting. This he now considered the present. She trusted him, and there was no reason to remain silent longer. Perhaps already he had delayed too long, and so he was about to speak when she started from his side, and crossed hastily to the window, alarmed by the sound of approaching steps. A second later the door opened, and Gonzaga appeared.

A moment he hesitated in the doorway, looking from one to the other, and Francesco, lazily regarding him in his turn, noted that his cheeks were pale and that his eyes glittered like those of a man with the fever. Then he stepped forward, and, leaving the door open behind him, he advanced into the room.

"Monna Valentina, I have something to communicate to you." His voice shook slightly. "Messer—Francesco, will you give us leave?" And his feverish eyes moved to the open door with an eloquence that asked no words.

Francesco rose slowly, endeavouring to repress his surprise and glanced across at Valentina, as if awaiting her confirmation or refusal of this request that he should leave them.

"A communication for me?" she marvelled, a slight frown drawing her brows together. "Of what nature, sir?"

"Of a nature as important as it is private."

She raised her chin, and with a patient smile she seemed to beg of Francesco that he would suffer her to humour this mood of Gonzaga's. In quick obedience Francesco inclined his head.

"I shall be in my chamber until the hour of my rounds, Madonna," he announced, and with that took his departure.

Gonzaga attended him to the door, which he closed after him, and composing his features to an expression of sorrowing indignation, he came back and stood facing Valentina across the table.

"Madonna," he said, "I would to Heaven this communication I have to make to you came from other lips. In the light of what has passed—here at Roccaleone—through my folly—you—you may think my mission charged with vindictiveness."

Perplexity stared at him from her eyes.

"You fill me with alarm, my good Gonzaga," she answered him, though smiling.

"Alas it has fallen to my unfortunate lot to do more than that. I have made the discovery of as foul a piece of treachery here in your fortress as ever traitor hatched."

She looked at him more seriously now. The vehemence of his tone, and the suggestion of sorrow that ran through it and gave it so frank an accent, commanded her attention.

"Treachery!" she echoed, in a low voice, her eyes dilating. "And from whom?"

He hesitated a moment, then waving his hand:

"Will you not sit, Madonna?" he suggested nervously.

Mechanically she seated herself at the table, her eyes ever on his face, alarm spreading in her heart, born of suspense.

"Be seated too," she bade him, "and tell me."

He drew up a chair, sat down opposite to her, and taking a deep breath: "Heard you ever of the Count of Aquila?" he inquired.

"It were odd if I had not. The most valiant knight in Italy, fame dubs

him."

His eyes were intently on her face, and what he saw there satisfied him.

"You know how he stands with the people of Babbiano?"

"I know that he is beloved of them."

"And do you know that he is a pretender to the throne of Babbiano? You will remember that he is cousin to Gian Maria?"

"His relationship to Gian Maria I know. That he pretends to the throne of Babbiano I was not aware. But whither are we straying?"

"We are not straying, Madonna," answered Gonzaga, "we are making a straight line for the very heart and soul of this treachery I spoke of. Would you believe me if I told you that here, in Roccaleone, we have an agent of the Count of Aquila one who in the Count's interest is protracting this siege with the pretended aim of driving Gian Maria off."

"Gonzaga——" she began, more than half guessing the drift of his explanation. But he interrupted her with unusual brusqueness.

"Wait, Madonna," he cried, his eyes upon her face, his hand imperiously raised. "Hear me out in patience. I am not talking idly. Of what I tell you I am armed with proof and witness. Such an agent of—the Count's interests we have among us, and his true object in protracting this siege, and encouraging and aiding you in your resistance, is to outwear the patience of the people of Babbiano with Gian Maria, and drive them in the hour of their approaching peril from Caesar Borgia's armies to bestow the throne on Aquila."

"Where learnt you this foul lie?" she asked him, her cheeks crimson, her eyes on fire.

"Madonna," he said, in a patient voice, "this that you call a lie is already an accomplished fact. I am not laying before you the fruits of idle speculation. I have upon me the most positive proof that such a result as was hoped for has already been reached. Gian Maria has received from his subjects a notification that unless he is in his capital within three days from this, they will invest the Lord of Aquila with the ducal crown."

She rose, her anger well controlled, her voice calm.

"Where is this proof? No, no; I don't need to see it. Whatever it is, what shall it prove to me? That your words, in so far as the politics of Babbiano are concerned, may be true; our resistance of Gian Maria may indeed be losing him his throne and doing good service to the cause of the Count of Aquila; but how shall all this prove that lie of yours, that Messer Francesco—for it is clearly of him you speak—that Messer Francesco should be this agent of the Count's? It is a lie, Gonzaga, for which you shall be punished as you deserve."

She ceased, and stood awaiting his reply, and as she watched him his calm demeanour struck a chill into her heart. He was so confident, so full of assurance; and that, in Gonzaga, she had learnt to know meant a strong bulwark 'twixt himself and danger. He sighed profoundly.

"Madonna, these cruel words of yours do not wound me, since they are no more than I expected. But it will wound me—and sorely—if when you shall have learnt the rest you do not humbly acknowledge how you have wronged me, how grossly you have misjudged me. You think I come to you with evil in my heart, urged by a spirit of vindictiveness against Messer Francesco. Instead, I come to you with nothing but a profound sorrow that mine must be the voice to disillusion you, and a deep indignation against him that has so foully used you to his own ends. Wait, Madonna! In a measure you are right. It was not strictly true to say that this Messer Francesco is the agent of

the Count of Aquila."

"Ah! You are recanting already?"

"Only a little—an insignificant little. He is no agent because——" He hesitated, and glanced swiftly up. Then he sighed, lowered his voice, and with consummately simulated sorrow, he concluded "Because he is, himself, Francesco del Falco. Count of Aquila."

She swayed a moment, and the colour died from her cheeks, leaving them ivory pale. She leaned heavily against the table, and turned over in her mind what she had heard. And then, as suddenly as it had gone, the blood rushed back into her face, mounting to her very temples.

"It's a lie!" she blazed at him; "a lie for which you shall be whipped."

He shrugged his shoulders, and cast Francesco's letter on to the table.

"There, Madonna, is something that will prove all that I have said."

She eyed the paper coldly. Her first impulse was to call Fortemani and carry out her threat of having Gonzaga whipped, refusing so much as to see this thing that he so confidently termed a proof; but it may be that his confidence wrought upon her, touching a chord of feminine curiosity. That he was wrong she never doubted; but that he believed himself right she was also assured, and she wondered what this thing might be that had so convinced him. Still she did not touch it, but asked in an indifferent voice:

"What is it?"

"A letter that was brought hither to-night by a man who swam the moat, and whom I have ordered to be detained in the armoury tower. It is from Fanfulla degli Arcipreti to the Count of Aquila. If your memory will bear you back to a certain day at Acquasparta, you may recall that

Fanfulla was the name of a very gallant cavalier who addressed this Messer Francesco with marked respect."

She took that backward mental glance he bade her, and remembered. Then she remembered, too, how that very evening Francesco had said that he was fretting for news of Babbiano, and that when she had asked how he hoped that news could reach him at Roccaleone, Gonzaga had entered before he answered her. Indeed, he had seemed to hesitate upon that answer. A sudden chill encompassed her at that reflection. Oh, it was impossible, absurd! And yet she took the letter from the table. With knit brows she read it, whilst Gonzaga watched her, scarce able to keep the satisfaction from gleaming in his eyes.

She read it slowly, and as she read her face grew deathly pale. When she had finished she stood silent for a long minute, her eyes upon the signature and her mind harking back to what Gonzaga had said, and drawing comparison between that and such things as had been done and uttered, and nowhere did she find the slightest gleam of that discrepancy which so ardently she sought.

It was as if a hand were crushing the heart in her bosom. This man whom she had trusted, this peerless champion of her cause, to be nothing but a self-seeker, an intriguer, who, to advance his own ends, had made a pawn of her. She thought of how for a moment he had held her in his arms and kissed her, and at that her whole soul revolted against the notion that here was no more than treachery.

"It's all a plot against him!" she cried, her cheeks scarlet again. "It's an infamous thing of your devising, Messer Gonzaga, an odious lie!"

"Madonna, the man that brought the letter is still detained. Confront him with Messer Francesco; or apply the question to him, and learn his master's true name and station. As for the rest, if that letter is insufficient proof for you, I beg that you will look back at facts. Why

should he lie to you? and say that his name was Francesco Franceschi? Why should he have urged you—against all reason—to remain here, when he brought you news that Gian Maria was advancing? Surely had he but sought to serve you he had better accomplished this by placing his own castle of Aquila at your disposal, and leaving here an empty nest for Gian Maria, as I urged."

She sank to a chair, a fever in her mind.

"I tell you, Madonna, there is no mistake. What I have said is true. Another three days would he have held Gian Maria here, whilst if you gave him that letter, it is odds he would slip away in the night of tomorrow, that he might be in Babbiano on the third day to take the throne his cousin treats so lightly. Sainted God!" he cried out. "I think this is the most diabolically treacherous plot that ever mind of man conceived and human heartlessness executed."

"But—but——" she faltered, "all this is presupposing that Messer Francesco is indeed the Count of Aquila. May there—may it not be that this letter was meant for some other destination?"

"Will you confront this messenger with the Count?"

"With the Count?" she inquired dully. "With Messer Francesco, you mean?" She shuddered, and with strange inconsistency: "No," she said, in a choking voice, her lip twisting oddly at the corner. "I do not wish to see his face again."

A light gleamed in Gonzaga's eye, and was extinguished on the instant.

"Best make certain," he suggested, rising. "I have ordered Fortemani to bring Lanciotto here. He will be waiting now, without. Shall I admit them?"

She nodded without speaking, and Gonzaga opened the door, and

called Fortemani. A voice answered him from the gloom of the banqueting-hall.

"Bring Lanciotto here," he commanded.

When Francesco's servant entered, a look of surprise on his face at these mysterious proceedings, it was Valentina who questioned him, and that in a voice as cold as though the issue concerned her no whit.

"Tell me, sirrah," she said, "and as you value your neck, see that you answer me truly—what is your master's name?"

Lanciotto looked from her to Gonzaga, who stood by, a cynical curl on his sensual lips.

"Answer Monna Valentina," the courtier urged him. "State your master's true name and station."

"But, lady," began Lanciotto, bewildered.

"Answer me!" she stormed, her small clenched hands beating the table in harsh impatience. And Lanciotto, seeing no help for it, answered:

"Messer Francesco del Falco, Count of Aquila."

Something that began in a sob and ended in a laugh burst from the lips of Valentina. Ercole's eyes were wide at the news, and he might have gone the length of interposing a question, when Gonzaga curtly bade him go to the armoury tower, and bring thence the soldier and the man Gonzaga had left in his care.

"I will leave no shadow of doubt in your mind, Madonna," he said in explanation.

They waited in silence—for Lanciotto's presence hindered

conversation—until Ercole returned accompanied by the man-at-arms and Zaccaria, who had now changed his raiment. Before they could question the new-comer, such questions as they might have put were answered by the greeting that passed between him and his fellow-servant Lanciotto.

Gonzaga turned to Valentina. She sat very still, her tawny head bowed and in her eyes a look of sore distress. And in that instant a brisk step sounded without. The door was thrust open, and Francesco himself stood upon the threshold, with Peppe's alarmed face showing behind him. Gonzaga instinctively drew back a pace, and his countenance lost some of its colour.

At sight of Francesco, Zaccaria rushed forward and bowed profoundly.

"My lord!" he greeted him.

And if one little thing had been wanting to complete the evidence against the Count, that thing, by an odd mischance, Francesco himself seemed to supply. The strange group in that dining-room claiming his attention, and the portentous air that hung about those present, confirmed the warning Peppe had brought him that something was amiss. He disregarded utterly his servant's greeting, and with eyes of a perplexity that may have worn the look of alarm he sought the face of Valentina.

She rose upon the instant, an angry red colouring her cheeks. His very glance, it seemed, was become an affront unbearable after what had passed—for the memory of his kiss bit like a poisoned fang into her brain. An odd laugh broke from her. She made a gesture towards Francesco.

"Fortemani, you will place the Count of Aquila under arrest," she commanded, in a stern, steady voice, "and as you value your life you

will see that he does not elude you."

The great bully hesitated. His knowledge of Francesco's methods was not encouraging.

"Madonna!" gasped Francesco, his bewilderment increasing.

"Did you hear me, Fortemani," she demanded. "Remove him."

"My lord?" cried Lanciotto, laying hand to his sword his eyes upon his master's, ready to draw and lay about him at a glance of bidding.

"Sh! Let be," answered Franeesco coldly. "Here, Messer Fortemani." And he proffered his dagger, the only weapon that he carried.

Valentina, calling Gonzaga to attend her, made shift to quit the apartment. At that Francesco seemed to awaken to his position.

"Madonna, wait," he cried, and he stepped deliberately before her. "You must hear me. I have surrendered in earnest of my faith and confident that once you have heard me——"

"Captain Fortemani," she cried, almost angrily, "will you restrain your prisoner? I wish to pass."

Ercole, with visible reluctance, laid a hand on Francesco's shoulder; but it was unnecessary. Before her words, the Count recoiled as if he had been struck. He stood clear of her path with a gasp at once of unbelief and angry resignation. An instant his eyes rested on Gonzaga, so fiercely that the faint smile withered on the courtier's lips, and his knees trembled under him as he hastened from the room in Valentina's wake.

CHAPTER XXIII. IN THE ARMOURY TOWER

The rough stones of the inner courtyard shone clean and bright in the morning sun, still wet with the heavy rains that had washed them yesternight.

The fool sat on a rude stool within the porch of the long gallery, and, moodily eyeing that glistening pavement, ruminated. He was angry, which, saving where Fra Domenico was concerned, was a rare thing with good-humoured Peppe. He had sought to reason with Monna Valentina touching the imprisonment in his chamber of Messer Francesco, and she had bidden him confine his attention to his capers with a harshness he had never known in her before. But he had braved her commands, and astonished her with the information that the true identity of this Messer Francesco had been known to him since that day when they had first met him at Acquasparta. He had meant to say more. He had meant to add the announcement of Francesco's banishment from Babbiano and his notorious unwillingness to mount his cousin's throne. He had meant to make her understand that had Francesco been so minded, he had no need to stoop to such an act as this that she imputed to him. But she had cut him short, and with angry words and angrier threats she had driven him from her presence.

And so she was gone to Mass, and the fool had taken shelter in the porch of the gallery, that there he might vent some of his ill-humour—or indeed indulge it—in pondering the obtuseness of woman and the insidiousness of Gonzaga, to whom he never doubted that this miserable state of things was due.

And as he sat there—a grotesque, misshapen figure in gaudy motley—an ungovernable rage possessed him. What was to become of them now? Without the Count of Aquila's stern support the garrison would have forced her to capitulate a week ago. What would betide, now that the restraint of his formidable command was withdrawn?

"She will know her folly when it's too late. It's the way of women," he assured himself. And, loving his mistress as he did, his faithful soul was stricken at the thought. He would wait there until she returned from Mass, and then she should hear him—all should hear him. He would not permit himself to be driven away again so easily. He was intently turning over in his mind what he would say, with what startling, pregnant sentence he would compel attention, when he was startled by the appearance of a figure on the chapel steps. Sudden and quietly as an apparition it came, but it bore the semblance of Romeo Gonzaga.

At sight of him, Peppe instinctively drew back into the shadows of the porch, his eyes discerning the suspicious furtiveness of the courtier's movements, and watching them with a grim eagerness. He saw Romeo look carefully about him, and then descend the steps on tiptoe, evidently so that no echo of his footfalls should reach those within the chapel. Then, never suspecting the presence of Peppe, he sped briskly across the yard and vanished through the archway that led to the outer court. And the fool, assured that some knowledge of the courtier's purpose would not be amiss, set out to follow him.

In his room under the Lion's Tower the Count of Aquila had spent a restless night, exercised by those same fears touching the fate of the castle that had beset the fool, but less readily attributing his confinement to Gonzaga's scheming. Zaccaria's presence had told him that Fanfulla must at last have written, and he could but assume that the letter, falling into Monna Valentina's hands, should have contained something that she construed into treason on his part.

Bitterly he reproached himself now with not having from the very outset been frank with her touching his identity; bitterly he reproached her with not so much as giving a hearing to the man she had professed to love. Had she but told him upon what grounds her suspicions against him had been founded, he was assured that he could have dispelled them at a word, making clear their baselessness and his own honesty of purpose towards her. Most of all was he fretted by the fact that Zaccaria's presence, after a coming so long expected and so long delayed, argued that the news he bore was momentous. From this it might result that Gian Maria should move at any moment and that his action might be of a desperate character.

Now through the ranks of Fortemani's men there had run an inevitable dismay at Francesco's arrest, and a resentment against Valentina who had encompassed it. His hand it was that had held them together, his judgment—of which they had had unequivocal signs—that had given them courage. He was a leader who had shown himself capable of leading, and out of confidence for whom they would have undertaken anything that he bade them. Whom had they now? Fortemani was but one of themselves, placed in command over them by an event purely adventitious. Gonzaga was a fop whose capers they mimicked and whose wits they despised; whilst Valentina, though brave enough and high-spirited, remained a girl of no worldly and less military knowledge, whose orders it might be suicidal to carry out.

Now by none were these opinions more strongly entertained than by Ercole Fortemani himself. Never had he performed anything with greater reluctance than the apprehension of Francesco, and when he thought of what was likely to follow his consternation knew no bounds. He had come to respect and, in his rough way, even to love their masterful Provost, and since learning his true identity, in the hour of arresting him, his admiration had grown to something akin to reverence for the condottiero whose name to the men-at-arms of Italy

was like the name of some patron saint.

To ensure the safe keeping of his captive, he had been ordered by Gonzaga, who now resumed command of Roccaleone, to spend the night in the ante-room of Francesco's chamber. These orders he had exceeded by spending a considerable portion of the night in the Count's very room.

"You have but to speak," the bully had sworn, by way of showing Francesco the true nature of his feelings, "and the castle is yours. At a word from you my men will flock to obey you, and you may do your will at Roccaleone."

"Foul traitor that you are," Francesco had laughed at him. "Do you forget under whom you have taken service? Let be what is, Ercole. But if a favour you would do me, let me see Zaccaria—the man that came to Roccaleone to-night."

This Ercole had done for him. Now Zaccaria was fully aware of the contents of the letter he had carried, having been instructed by Fanfulla against the chance arising of his being compelled, for his safety, to destroy it—an expedient to which he now bitterly repented him that he had not had recourse. From Zaccaria, then, Francesco learnt all that there was to learn, and since the knowledge but confirmed his fears that Gian Maria would delay action no longer, he fell a prey to the most passionate impatience at his own detention.

In the grey hours of the morning he grew calmer, and by the light of a lamp that he had called Ercole to replenish, he sat down to write a letter to Valentina, which he thought should carry conviction of his honesty to her heart. Since she would not hear him, this was the only course. At the end of an hour—his moribund light grown yellow now that the sun was risen—his letter was accomplished, and he summoned Ercole again, to charge him to deliver it at once to Monna Valentina.

"I shall await her return from chapel," answered Ercole. He took the letter and departed. As he emerged into the courtyard he was startled to see the fool dash towards him, gasping for breath, and with excitement in every line of his quaint face.

"Quickly, Ercole!" Peppe enjoined him. "Come with me."

"Devil take you, spawn of Satan—whither?" growled the soldier.

"I will tell you as we go. We have not a moment to spare. There is treachery afoot—— Gonzaga——" he gasped, and ended desperately. "Will you come?"

Fortemani needed no second bidding. The chance of catching pretty Messer Romeo at a treachery was too sweet a lure. Snorting and puffing—for hard drinking had sorely impaired his wind—the great captain hurried the fool along, listening as they went to the gasps in which he brought out his story. It was not much, after all. Peppe had seen Messer Gonzaga repair to the armoury tower. Through an arrow-slit he had watched him take down and examine an arbalest, place it on the table and sit down to write.

"Well?" demanded Ercole. "What else?"

"Naught else. That is all," answered the hunchback.

"Heaven and hell!" roared the swashbuckler, coming to a standstill and glowering down upon his impatient companion. "And you have made me run for this?"

"And is it not enough?" retorted Peppe testily. "Will you come on?"

"Not a foot farther," returned the captain, getting very angry. "Is this a miserable jest? What of the treachery you spoke of?"

"A letter and an arbalest!" panted the maddened Peppe, grimacing horribly at this delay. "God, was there ever such a fool! Does this

mean nothing to that thick, empty thing you call a head? Have you forgotten how Gian Maria's offer of a thousand florins came to Roccaleone? On an arbalest quarrel, stupid! Come on, I say, and afterwards you shall have my motley—the only livery you have a right to wear."

In the shock of enlightenment Ercole forgot to cuff the jester for his insolence, and allowed himself once more to be hurried along, across the outer court and up the steps that led to the battlements.

"You think——" he began.

"I think you had best tread more softly," snapped the fool, under his breath, "and control that thunderous wheeze, if you would surprise Ser Romeo."

Ercole accepted the hint, meek as a lamb, and leaving the fool behind him on the steps, he went softly up, and approached the armoury tower. Peering cautiously through the arrow-slit, and favoured by the fact that Gonzaga's back was towards him, he saw that he was no more than in time.

The courtier was bending down, and by the creaking sound that reached him Ercole guessed his occupation to be the winding of the arbalest string. On the table at his side lay a quarrel swathed in a sheet of paper.

Swiftly and silently Ercole moved round the tower, and the next instant he had pushed open the unfastened door and entered.

A scream of terror greeted him, and a very startled face was turned upon him by Gonzaga, who instantly sprang upright. Then, seeing who it was, the courtier's face reassumed some of its normal composure, but his glance was uneasy and his cheek pale.

"Sant Iddio!" he gasped. "You startled me, Ercole. I did not hear

you coming."

And now something in the bully's face heightened the alarm in Gonzaga. He still made an effort at self-control, as planting himself between Ercole and the table, so as to screen the tell-tale shaft, he asked him what he sought there.

"That letter you have written Gian Maria," was the gruff, uncompromising answer, for Ercole reeked nothing of diplomatic issues.

Gonzaga's mouth jerked itself open, and his upper lip shuddered against his teeth.

"What—— Wha——"

"Give me that letter," Ercole insisted, now advancing upon him, and wearing an air of ferocity that drove back into Gonzaga's throat such resentful words as he bethought him of. Then, like an animal at bay—and even a rat will assert itself then—he swung aloft the heavy arbalest he held, and stood barring Ercole's way.

"Stand back!" he cried; "or by God and His saints, I'll beat your brains out."

There was a guttural laugh from the swashbuckler, and then his arms were round Gonzaga's shapely waist, and the popinjay was lifted from his feet. Viciously he brought down the cross-bow, as he had threatened; but it smote the empty air. The next instant Gonzaga was hurtled, bruised, into a corner of the tower.

In a rage so great that he felt it draining him of his very strength and choking the breath in his body, he made a movement to rise and fling himself again upon his aggressor. But Fortemani was down upon him, and for all his struggles contrived to turn him over on his face, twisting his arms behind him, and making them fast with a belt that lay

at hand.

"Lie still, you scorpion!" growled the ruffler, breathing hard from his exertions. He rose, took the shaft with the letter tied about it, read the superscription—"To the High and Mighty Lord Gian Maria Sforza"—and with a chuckle of mingled relish and scorn, he was gone, locking the door.

Left alone, Gonzaga lay face downward where he had been flung, able to do little more than groan and sweat in the extremity of his despair, whilst he awaited the coming of those who would probably make an end of him. Not even from Valentina could he hope for mercy, so incriminating was the note he had penned. His letter was to enjoin the Duke to hold his men in readiness at the hour of the Angelus next morning, and to wait until Gonzaga should wave a handkerchief from the battlements. At that he was to advance immediately to the postern, which he would find open, and the rest, Gonzaga promised him, would be easy. He would take the whole garrison at their prayers and weaponless.

When Francesco read it a light leapt to his eye and an oath to his lips; but neither glance nor oath were of execration, as Ercole stood expecting. A sudden idea flashed through the Count's mind, so strange and humorous and yet so full of promise of easy accomplishment, that he burst into a laugh.

"Now may God bless this fool for the most opportune of traitors!" he exclaimed, in surprise at which Fortemani's mouth fell open, and the eyes of Peppe grew very round.

"Ercole, my friend, here is a bait to trap that lout my cousin, such as I could never have devised myself."

"You mean——?"

"Take it back to him," cried the Count, holding out the letter with a

hand that trembled in the eagerness of his spirit. "Take it back, and get him by fair means or foul to shoot it as he intended; or if he refuses, why, then, do you seal it up and shoot it yourself. But see that it gets to Gian Maria!"

"May I not know what you intend?" quoth the bewildered Ercole.

"All in good time, my friend. First do my bidding with that letter. Listen! It were best that having read it you agree to join him in his betrayal of Roccaleone, your own fears as to the ultimate fate awaiting you at Gian Maria's hands being aroused. Urge him to promise you money, immunity, what you will, as your reward; but make him believe you sincere, and induce him to shoot his precious bolt. Now go! Lose no time, or they may be returning from chapel, and your opportunity will be lost. Come to me here, afterwards, and I will tell you what is in my mind. We shall have a busy night of it to-night, Ercole, and you must set me free when the others are abed. Now go!"

Ercole went, and Peppe, remaining, plagued the Count with questions which he answered until in the end the fool caught the drift of his scheme, and swore impudently that a greater jester than his Excellency did not live. Then Ercole returned.

"Is it done? Has the letter gone?" cried Francesco. Fortemani nodded.

"We are sworn brothers in this business, he and I. He added a line to his note to say that he had gained my cooperation, and that, therefore, immunity was expected for me too."

"You have done well, Ercole." Francesco applauded him. "Now return me the letter I gave you for Monna Valentina. There is no longer the need for it. But return to me to-night toward the fourth hour, when all are abed, and bring with you my men, Lanciotto and Zaccaria."

CHAPTER XXIV. THE INTERRUPTED MASS

The morning of that Wednesday of Corpus Christi, fateful to all concerned in this chronicle, dawned misty and grey, and the air was chilled by the wind that blew from the sea. The chapel bell tinkled out its summons, and the garrison trooped faithfully to Mass.

Presently came Monna Valentina, followed by her ladies, her pages, and lastly, Peppe, wearing under his thin mask of piety an air of eager anxiety and unrest. Valentina was very pale, and round her eyes there were dark circles that told of sleeplessness, and as she bowed her head in prayer, her ladies observed that tears were falling on the illuminated Mass-book over which she bent. And now came Fra Domenico from the sacristy in the white chasuble that the Church ordains for the Corpus Christi feast, followed by a page in a clerkly gown of black, and the Mass commenced.

There were absent only from the gathering Gonzaga and Fortemani, besides a sentry and the three prisoners. Francesco and his two followers.

Gonzaga had presented himself to Valentina with the plausible tale that, as the events of which Fanfulla's letter had given them knowledge might lead Gian Maria at any moment to desperate measures, it might be well that he should reinforce the single man-at-arms patrolling the walls. Valentina, little recking now whether the castle held or fell, and still less such trifles as Gonzaga's attendance at Mass, had assented without heeding the import of what he said.

And so, his face drawn and his body quivering with the excitement

of what he was about to do, Gonzaga had repaired to the ramparts so soon as he had seen them all safely into chapel. The sentinel was that same clerkly youth Aventano, who had read to the soldiers that letter Gian Maria had sent Gonzaga. This the courtier accepted as a good omen. If a man there was among the soldiery at Roccaleone with whom he deemed that he had an account to settle, that man was Aventano.

The mist was rapidly lightening, and the country grew visible for miles around. In the camp of Gian Maria he observed a coming and going of men that argued an inordinate bustle for so early an hour. They awaited his signal.

He approached the young sentinel, growing more and more nervous as the time for action advanced. He cursed Fortemani, who had selfishly refused to take an active part in the admission of Gian Maria. Here was a task that Fortemani could perform more satisfactorily than he. He had urged this fact on Ercole's attention, but the swashbuckler had grinned and shook his head. To Gonzaga fell the greater reward, and so Gonzaga must do the greater work. It was only fair, the knave had urged; and while Gonzaga was about it, he would watch the chapel door against interruption. And so Gonzaga had been forced to come alone to try conclusions with the sentry.

He gave the young man a nervous but pleasant "Good-morrow," and observed with satisfaction that he wore no body armour. His original intention had been to attempt to suborn him, and render him pliable by bribery; but now that the moment for action was arrived he dared not make the offer. He lacked for words in which to present his proposal, and he was afraid lest the man should resent it, and in a fit of indignation attack him with his partisan. He little imagined that Aventano had been forewarned by Ercole that a bribe would be offered him and that he was to accept it promptly. Ercole had chosen this man because he was intelligent, and had made him understand

enough of what was toward, besides offering a substantial reward if he played his part well, and Aventano waited. But Gonzaga, knowing naught of this, abandoned at the last moment the notion of bribing him—which Ercole had enjoined him, and which he in his turn had promised Ercole was the course he would pursue.

"You seem cold, Excellency," said the young man deferentially, for he had observed that Gonzaga shivered.

"A chill morning, Aventano," returned the gallant, with a grin.

"True; but the sun is breaking through yonder. It will be warmer soon."

"Why, yes," answered the other abstractedly, and still he remained by the sentinel, his hand, under the gay mantle of blue velvet, nervously fingering the hilt of a dagger that he dared not draw. It came to him that moments were passing, and that the thing must be done. Yet Aventano was a sinewy youth, and if the sudden stab he meditated failed him, he would be at the fellow's mercy. At the thought he shivered again, and his face turned grey. He moved away a step, and then inspiration brought him a cruel ruse. He uttered a cry.

"What is that?" he exclaimed, his eyes on the ground.

In an instant Aventano was beside him, for his voice had sounded alarmed—a tone, in his present condition, not difficult to simulate.

"What, Excellency?"

"Down there," cried Gonzaga excitedly. "There from that fissure in the stone. Saw you nothing?" And he pointed to the ground at a spot where two slabs met.

"I saw nothing, Illustrious."

"It was like a flash of yellow light below there. What is under us

here? I'll swear there's treachery at work. Get down on your knees, and try if anything is to be seen."

With a wondering glance at the courtier's white, twitching face, the unfortunate young man went down on all fours to do his bidding. After all—poor fellow!—he was hardly intelligent as Fortemani opined.

"There is nothing, Excellency," he said. "The plaster is cracked. But — Ah!"

In a panic of haste Gonzaga had whipped the dagger from its sheath and sunk it into the middle of Aventano's broad back. The fellow's arms slid out, and with a long-drawn, gurgling sigh he sank down and stretched himself horribly on the stones.

In that instant the clouds parted overhead and the sun came out in a blaze of golden glory. High above Gonzaga's head a lark burst into song.

For a moment the assassin remained standing above the body of his victim with head sunk between the shoulders like a man who expects a blow, his face grey, his teeth chattering, and his mouth twitching hideously. A shudder shook him. It was the first life he had taken, and that carrion at his feet filled him with sickly horror. Not for a kingdom—not to save his vile soul from the eternal damnation that act had earned it—would he have dared stoop to pluck the dagger from the back of the wretch he had murdered. With something like a scream he turned, and fled in a panic from the spot. Panting with horror, yet subconsciously aware of the work he had to do, he paused a moment to wave a kerchief, then dashed down the steps to the postern.

With trembling fingers he unlocked the door and set it wide to Gian Maria's men, who, in answer to his signal, were now hurrying forward with a bridge composed of pine trees, that they had hastily and

roughly put together during the previous day. This, with some efforts and more noise than Gonzaga relished, was thrust across the moat. One of the men crept across, and assisted Gonzaga to make fast his end.

A moment later Gian Maria and Guidobaldo stood in the castle-yard, and after them came almost every man of the five score that Gian Maria had brought to that siege. This was what Francesco had confidently expected, knowing that it was not his cousin's way to run any risks.

The Duke of Babbiau, whose face was disfigured by a bristling hedge of reddish stubble—for in obedience to the vow he had made, he now carried a fortnight's growth of beard on his round face—turned to Gonzaga.

"Is all well?" he asked, in a friendly tone, whilst Guidobaldo contemptuously eyed the popinjay.

Gonzaga assured them that the whole thing had been effected without disturbing the garrison at their prayers. Now that he deemed himself well protected his usual serenity of manner returned.

"You may felicitate yourself, Highness," he ventured to say, with a grin, to Guidobaldo, "that you have reared your niece in devout ways."

"Did you address me?" quoth the Duke of Urbino coldly. "I trust it may not again be necessary."

Before the look of loathing in his handsome face Gonzaga cringed. Gian Maria laughed in his piping treble.

"Have I not served your Highness faithfully?" fawned the gallant.

"So has the meanest scullion in my kitchens, the lowliest groom in my stables—and with more honour to himself," answered the proud Duke. "Yet he does not go the length of jesting with me." His eye

carried a menace so eloquent that Gonzaga drew back, afraid; but Gian Maria clapped him on the shoulder in a friendly manner.

"Be of good heart, Judas," he laughed, his pale face a-grin, "I shall find room for you in Babbiano, and work too, if you do it as well as this. Come; the men are here now. Let us go forward whilst they are at their prayers. But we must not disturb them," he added, more seriously. "I will not be guilty of an impiety. We can lie in wait for them without."

He laughed gaily, for he seemed in a preposterously good humour, and bidding Gonzaga lead the way he followed, with Guidobaldo at his side. They crossed the courtyard, where his men were ranged, armed to the teeth, and at the door of the archway leading to the inner court they paused for Gonzaga to open it.

A moment the gallant stood staring. Then he turned a face of consternation on the Dukes. His knees shook visibly.

"It is locked," he announced, in a husky voice.

"We made too much noise in entering," suggested Guidobaldo, "and they have taken the alarm."

The explanation relieved the growing uneasiness in Gian Maria's mind. He turned with an oath to his men.

"Here, some of you," his sharp voice commanded. "Beat me down this door. By the Host! Do the fools think to keep me out so easily?"

The door was broken down, and they advanced. But only some half-dozen paces, for at the end of that short gallery they found the second door barring their progress. Through this, too, they broke, Gian Maria fiercely blaspheming at the delay. Yet when it was done he was none so eager to lead the way.

In the second courtyard he deemed it extremely probable that they should find Valentina's soldiers awaiting them. So bidding his men pass on, he remained behind with Guidobaldo until he heard word that the inner court was likewise empty.

And now the entire hundred of his followers were assembled there to overpower the twenty that served Monna Valentina; and Guidobaldo—despite Gian Maria's scruples—strode coolly forward to the chapel door.

Within the chapel Mass had started. Fra Domenico at the foot of the altar had pattered through the Confiteor, his deep voice responded to by the soprano of the ministering page. The Kyrie was being uttered when the attention of the congregation was attracted by the sound of steps approaching the chapel door to the accompaniment of an ominous clank of steel. The men rose in a body, fearing treachery, and cursing—despite the sanctity of the place—the circumstance that they were without weapons.

Then the door opened, and down the steps rang the armed heels of the new-comers, so that every eye was turned upon them, including that of Fra Domenico, who had pronounced the last "Christe eleison" in a quavering voice.

A gasp of relief, followed by an angry cry from Valentina, went up when they recognised those that came. First stepped the Count of Aquila in full armour, sword at side and dagger on hip, carrying his head-piece on the crook of his left arm. Behind him towered the bulk of Fortemani, his great face flushed with a strange excitement, a leather hackaton over his steel cuirass, girt, too, with sword and dagger, and carrying his shining morion in his hand. Last came Lanciotto and Zaccaria, both fully equipped and armed at all points.

"Who are you that come thus accoutred into God's House to

interrupt the holy Mass?" cried the bass voice of the friar.

"Patience, good father," answered Francesco calmly, "The occasion is our justification."

"What does this mean, Fortemani?" demanded Valentina imperiously, her eyes angrily set upon her captain, utterly ignoring the Count. "Do you betray me too?"

"It means, Madonna," answered the giant bluntly, "that your lap-dog, Messer Gonzaga, is at this very moment admitting Gian Maria and his forces to Roccaleone, by the postern."

There was a hoarse cry from the men, which Francesco silenced by a wave of his mailed hand.

Valentina looked wildly at Fortemani, and then, as if drawn by a greater will than her own, her eyes were forced to travel to the Count. He instantly advanced, and bowed his head before her.

"Madonna, this is no hour for explanations. Action is needed, and that at once. I was wrong in not disclosing my identity to you before you discovered it by such unfortunate means and with the assistance of the only traitor Roccaleone has harboured, Romeo Gonzaga—who, as Fortemani has just told you, is at this moment admitting my cousin and your uncle to the castle. But that my object was ever other than to serve you, or that I sought, as was represented to you, to turn this siege to my own political profit, that, Madonna, I implore you in your own interests to believe untrue."

She sank on to her knees and with folded hands began to pray to the Mother of Mercy, deeming herself lost, for his tone carried conviction, and he had said that Gian Maria was entering the castle.

"Madonna," he cried, touching her lightly on the shoulder; "let your prayers wait until they can be of thanksgiving. Listen. By the vigilance

of Peppe there, who, good soul that he is, never lost faith in me or deemed me a dastard, we were informed last night—Fortemani and I—of this that Gonzaga was preparing. And we have made our plans and prepared the ground. When Gian Maria's soldiers enter, they will find the outer doors barred and locked, and we shall gain a little time while they break through them. My men, as you will observe, are even now barring the door of the chapel to impose a further obstacle. Now while they are thus engaged we must act. Briefly, then, if you will trust us we will bear you out of this, for we four have worked through the night to some purpose."

She looked at him through a film of tears, her face drawn and startled. Then she put her hands to her brow in a gesture of bewildered helplessness.

"But they will follow us," she complained.

"Not so," he answered, smiling. "For that, too, have we provided. Come, Madonna, time presses."

A long moment she looked at him. Then brushing aside the tears that dimmed her sight, she set a hand on either of his shoulders, and stood so, before them all, gazing up into his calm face.

"How shall I know that what you say is true—that I may trust you?" she asked, but her voice was not the voice of one that demands an overwhelming proof ere she will believe.

"By my honour and my knighthood," he answered, in a ringing voice, "I make oath here, at the foot of God's altar, that my purpose—my only purpose—has been, is, and shall be to serve you, Monna Valentina."

"I believe you," she cried; to sob a moment later:

"Forgive me, Francesco, and may God, too, forgive my lack of faith

in you."

He softly breathed her name in such sweet accents that a happy peace pervaded her, and the bright courage of yore shone in her brown eyes.

"Come, sirs!" he cried now, with a sudden briskness that startled them into feverish obedience. "You, Fra Domenico, cut off your sacerdotals, and gird high your habit. There is climbing for you. Here, a couple of you, move aside that altar-step. My men and I have spent the night in loosening its old hinges."

They raised the slab, and in the gap beneath it was disclosed a flight of steps leading down to the dungeons and cellars of Roccaleone.

Down this they went in haste but in good order, marshalled by Francesco, and when the last had passed down, he and Lanciotto, aided by others below, who had seized a rope that he had lowered them, replaced the slab from underneath, so that no trace should remain of the way by which they had come.

A postern had been unbarred below by Fortemani, who had led the way with a half-dozen of the men; and a huge scaling ladder that lay in readiness in that subterranean gallery was rushed out across the moat, which at this point was a roaring torrent.

Fortemani was the first to descend that sloping bridge, and upon reaching the ground he made fast the lower end.

Next went a dozen men at Francesco's bidding, armed with the pikes that had been left overnight in the gallery. At a word of command they slipped quietly away. Then came the women, and lastly, the remainder of the men.

Of the enemy they caught no glimpse; not so much as a sentry, for

every one of Gian Maria's men had been pressed into the investment of the castle. Thus they emerged from Roccaleone, and made their way down that rough bridge into the pleasant meadows to the south. Already Fortemani and his dozen men had disappeared at the trot, making for the front of the castle, when Francesco stepped last upon the bridge, and closed the postern after him. Then he glided rapidly to the ground, and with the assistance of a dozen ready hands he dragged away the scaling ladder. They carried it some yards from the brink of the torrent, and deposited it in the meadow. With a laugh of purest relish Francesco stepped to Valentina's side.

"It will exercise their minds to discover how we got out," he cried, "and they will be forced to the conclusion that we are angels all, with wings beneath our armour. We have not left them a single ladder or a strand of rope in Roccaleone by which to attempt to follow us, even if they discover how we came. But come, Valentina mia, the comedy is not finished yet. Already Fortemani will have removed the bridge by which they entered and engaged such few men as may have been left behind, and we have the High and Mighty Gian Maria in the tightest trap that was ever fashioned."

CHAPTER XXV. THE CAPITULATION OF ROCCAIONE

In the sunshine of that bright May morning Francesco and his men went merrily to work to possess themselves of the ducal camp, and the first business of the day was to arm those soldiers who had come out unarmed. Of weapons there was no lack, and to these they helped themselves in liberal fashion, whilst here and there a man would pause to don a haubergeon or press a steel cap on his head.

Three sentries only had been left to guard the tents, and of these Fortemani and a couple of his men had made prisoners whilst the others were removing the bridge by which the invaders had entered. And now beneath the open postern by the drawbridge gaped a surging torrent that no man would have the hardihood to attempt to swim.

In that opening, presently, appeared Gian Maria, his face red for once, and behind him a clamouring crowd of men-at-arms who shared their master's rage at the manner in which they had been trapped.

At the rear of the tents Valentina and her ladies awaited the issue of the parley that now seemed toward. The bulk of the men were busy at Gian Maria's cannons, and under Francesco's supervision they were training them upon the drawbridge.

From the castle a mighty shout went up. The men disappeared from the postern to reappear a moment later on the ramparts, and

Francesco laughed deep down in his throat as he perceived the purpose of this. They had bethought them of the guns that were mounted there, and were gone to use them against Valentina's little army. Gun after gun they tried, and a fierce cry of rage burst forth when they realised by what dummies they had been held in check during the past week. This was followed by a silence of some moments, terminated at last by the sound of a bugle.

Answering that summons to a parley, and with a last word of injunction to Fortemani, who was left in charge of the men at the guns, Francesco rode forward on one of Gian Maria's horses, escorted by Lanciotto and Zaccaria similarly mounted, and each armed with a loaded arquebuse.

Under the walls of Roccaleone he drew rein, laughing to himself at this monstrous change of sides. As he halted—helmet on head, but beaver open—a body came hurtling over the battlements and splashed into the foaming waters below. It was the corpse of Aventano, which Gian Maria had peremptorily bidden them to remove from his sight.

"I desire to speak with Monna Valentina della Rovere," cried the furious Duke.

"You may speak with me, Gian Maria," answered Francesco's voice, clear and metallic. "I am her representative, her sometime Provost of Roccaleone."

"Who are you?" quoth the Duke, struck by a familiar note in that mocking voice.

"Francesco del Falco, Count of Aquila."

"By God! You!"

"An age of marvels, is it not?" laughed Francesco.

"Which will you lose, my cousin—a wife or a duchy?"

Rage struck Gian Maria speechless for a moment. Then he turned to Guidobaldo and whispered something; but Guidobaldo, who seemed vastly interested now in this knight below, merely shrugged his shoulders.

"I will lose neither, Messer Francesco," roared the Duke. "Neither, by God!" he screamed. "Neither, do you hear me?"

"I should be deaf else," was the easy answer, "But you are gravely at fault. One or the other you must relinquish, and it is yours to make a choice between them. The game has gone against you, Gian Maria, and you must pay."

"But have I no voice in the bartering of my niece?" asked Guidobaldo, with cold dignity. "Is it for you, Lord Count, to say whether your cousin shall wed her or not?"

"Why, no. He may wed her if he will, but he will be a duke no longer. In fact, he will be an outcast with no title to lay claim to, if indeed the Babbianians will leave him a head at all; whilst I, at least, though not a duke with a tottering throne, am a count with lands, small but securely held, and shall become a duke if Gian Maria refuses to relinquish me your niece. So that if he be disposed to marry her, will you be disposed to let her marry a homeless vagrant or a headless corpse?"

Guidobaldo's face seemed to change, and his eyes looked curiously at the white-faced Duke beside him.

"So you are the other pretender to my niece's hand, Lord Count?" he asked, in his coldest voice.

"I am, Highness," answered Francesco quietly. "The matter stands thus: Unless Gian Maria is in Babbiano by morning, he forfeits his crown, and it passes to me by the voice of the people; but if he will

relinquish his claim to Monna Valentina in my favour, then I shall journey straight to Aquila, and I shall trouble Babbiano no more. If he refuses, and insists upon this wedding, abhorrent to Monna Valentina, why, then, my men shall hold him captive behind those walls until it be too late for him to reach his duchy in time to save the crown. In the meantime I will ride to Babbiano in his stead, and—reluctant though I be to play the duke—I shall accept the throne and silence the people's importunities. He can then endeavour to win your Highness's consent to the union."

For perhaps the first time in his life Guidobaldo was guilty of an act of positive discourtesy. He broke into a laugh—a boisterous, amused laugh that cut into Gian Maria's heart like a knife.

"Why, Lord Count," he said, "I confess that you have us very much in your hands to mould us as you will. Now, you are such a soldier and such a strategist as it would pleasure me to have about my person in Urbino. What says your Highness?" he continued, turning now to the almost speechless Gian Maria. "I have yet another niece with whom we might cement the union of the two duchies; and she might prove more willing. Women, it seems, will insist upon being women. Do you not think that Monna Valentina and this your valiant cousin——"

"Heed him not!" screamed Gian Maria, now in a white heat of passion. "He is a smooth-tongued dog that would argue the very devil out of hell. Make no terms with the hind! I have a hundred men, and ——" He swung suddenly round. "Let down that drawbridge, cowards!" he bawled at them, "and sweep me those animals from my tents."

"Gian Maria, I give you warning," cried Francesco, loudly and firmly. "I have trained your own guns on to that bridge, and at the first attempt to lower it I'll blow it into splinters. You come not out of Roccaleone save at my pleasure and upon my terms, and if you lose your duchy by your obstinacy, it will be your own work; but answer me now, that I may

take my course."

Guidobaldo, too, restrained Gian Maria, and countermanded his order for the lowering of the bridge. And now on his other side Gonzaga crept up to him, and whispered into his ear the suggestion that he should wait until night had fallen.

"Wait until night, fool!" blazed the Duke, turning on him, in a fierce joy at finding one whom he might rend. "If I wait until then, my throne is lost to me. This comes of sorting with traitors. It is your fault, you Judas!" he cried more fiercely still, his face distorted; "but you at least shall pay for what you have done."

Gonzaga saw a sudden flash of steel before his eyes, and a piercing scream broke from him as Gian Maria's dagger buried itself in his breast. Too late Guidobaldo put forward a hand to stay the Duke.

And so, by a strangely avenging justice, the magnificent Gonzaga sank dead on the very spot on which he had so cravenly and dastardly poniarded Aventano.

"Throw me that carrion into the moat," growled Gian Maria, still quivering with rage that had prompted his ferocious act.

He was obeyed, and thus murdered and murderer were united in a common grave.

After the first attempt to restrain Gian Maria, Guidobaldo had looked on in unconcern, deeming the act a very fitting punishment of a man with whose treachery he, at least, had never been in sympathy.

As he saw the body vanish in the torrent below, Gian Maria seemed to realise what he had done. His anger fell from him, and with bent head he piously crossed himself. Then turning to an attendant who stood at his elbow:

"See that a Mass is said for his soul to-morrow," he solemnly bade him.

As if the act had served to pacify him and restore him to his senses, Gian Maria now stepped forward and asked his cousin, in calmer tones than he had hitherto employed, to make clear the terms on which he would permit him to return to Babbiano within the time to which his people limited him.

"They are no more than that you relinquish your claim to Monna Valentina, and that you find consolation—as I think his Highness of Urbino has himself suggested—in the Lord Guidobaldo's younger niece."

Before he could reply Guidobaldo was urging him, in a low voice to accept the terms.

"What else is there for you?" Montefeltro ended pregnantly.

"And this other niece of yours——?" quoth Gian Maria lamely.

"I have already passed my word," answered Guidobaldo.

"And Monna Valentina?" the other almost whined.

"May wed this headstrong condottiero of hers. I'll not withstand them. Come; I am your friend in this. I am even sacrificing Valentina to your interests. For if you persist, he will ruin you. The game is his, my lord. Acknowledge your defeat, as I acknowledge mine, and pay."

"But what is your defeat to mine?" cried Gian Maria, who saw through Guidobaldo's appreciation of the fact that such a nephew-in-law as Francesco del Falco was far from undesirable in the troublous times that threatened.

"It is at least as absolute," returned Guidobaldo, with a shrug. And in this vein the Duke of Urbino continued for some moments, till, in the

end, Gian Maria found himself not only deserted by his ally, but having this ally now combating on his cousin's side and pressing him to accept his cousin's terms, distasteful though they were. Thus urged, Gian Maria lamely acknowledged his defeat and his willingness to pay the forfeit. With that he asked how soon he might be permitted to leave the castle.

"Why, at once, now that I have your word," answered Francesco readily, whereat treachery gleamed from Gian Maria's eye, to be swiftly quenched by Francesco's next words. "But lest your men and mine should come to trouble with one another, you will order yours to come forth without arms or armour, and you will depose your own. His Highness Guidobaldo is the only man in whose favour I can make an exception to this condition. Let it be broken, and I promise you that you will very bitterly regret it. At sight of the first armed man issuing from those gates, I'll give the word to fire on you, and your own guns shall work your destruction."

Thus was the second siege of Roccaleone ended almost as soon as it was begun, and thus did Gian Maria capitulate to the conqueror. The Duke of Babbiano and his men marched out sheepishly and silently, and took their way to Babbiano, no word—not even so much as a glance—passing between Gian Maria and the lady who had been the cause of his discomfiture, and who blithely looked on at his departure.

Guidobaldo and his few attendants lingered after his late ally had gone. Then he bade Francesco lead him to his niece, in which Francesco readily obeyed him.

The Duke embraced her coldly—still that he embraced her at all after what was passed augured well.

"You will come with me to Urbino, Lord Count?" he said suddenly to Francesco. "It were best to celebrate the nuptials there. Everything is

in readiness—for all had been prepared for Gian Maria."

A great joy came into Valentina's eyes; her cheeks flushed and her glance fell; but Francesco scanned the Duke's face with the keen eye of one who is incredulous of so much good fortune.

"Your Highness means me well?" he made bold to ask. Guidobaldo stiffened, and a frown broke the serenity of his lofty brow.

"You have my princely word," he answered solemnly, at which, with bended knee, Francesco stooped to kiss his ducal hand.

And so they departed on the horses that they kept as the spoils of war. They made a goodly show, Guidobaldo riding at their head, with Francesco and Valentina, whilst the rear was brought up by Peppe and Fra Domenico, who, touched by this epidemic of goodwill, were at last fraternising with each other.

And as they rode it chanced that presently Guidobaldo fell behind, so that for a moment Francesco and Valentina found themselves alone a little ahead of the others. She turned to him, a shyness in her brown eyes, a tremble at the corners of her red lips:

"You have not yet said that you forgive me, Francesco," she complained, in a timorous whisper. "Were it not seemly that you did since we are to be wed so soon?"

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THE SEA-HAWK

By Rafael Sabatini

Contents

AUTHOR'S NOTE

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

SIR OLIVER TRESSILIAN

THE HUCKSTER

ROSAMUND

THE FORGE

THE INTERVENER

THE BUCKLER

JASPER LEIGH

TREPANNED

THE SPANIARD

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

SAKR-EL-BAHR

THE CAPTIVE

THE RENEGADE

HOMEWARD BOUND

THE RAID

THE LION OF THE FAITH

THE CONVERT

MARZAK-BEN-ASAD

MOTHER AND SON

COMPETITORS

THE SLAVE-MARKET

THE TRUTH

<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	THE SUBTLETY OF FENZILEH
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	IN THE SIGHT OF ALLAH
<u>CHAPTER XIV.</u>	THE SIGN
<u>CHAPTER XV.</u>	THE VOYAGE
<u>CHAPTER XVI.</u>	THE PANNIER
<u>CHAPTER XVII.</u>	THE DUPE
<u>CHAPTER XVIII.</u>	SHEIK MAT
<u>CHAPTER XIX.</u>	THE MUTINEERS
<u>CHAPTER XX.</u>	THE MESSENGER
<u>CHAPTER XXI.</u>	MORITURUS
<u>CHAPTER XXII.</u>	THE SURRENDER
<u>CHAPTER XXIII.</u>	THE HEATHEN CREED
<u>CHAPTER XXIV.</u>	THE JUDGES
<u>CHAPTER XXV.</u>	THE ADVOCATE
<u>CHAPTER XXVI.</u>	THE JUDGMENT

NOTE

Lord Henry Goade, who had, as we shall see, some personal acquaintance with Sir Oliver Tressilian, tells us quite bluntly that he was ill-favoured. But then his lordship is addicted to harsh judgments and his perceptions are not always normal. He says, for instance, of Anne of Cleves, that she was the "ugliest woman that ever I saw." As far as we can glean from his own voluminous writings it would seem to be extremely doubtful whether he ever saw Anne of Cleves at all, and we suspect him here of being no more than a slavish echo of the common voice, which attributed Cromwell's downfall to the ugliness of this bride he procured for his Bluebeard master. To the common voice from the brush of Holbein, which permits us to form our own opinions and shows us a lady who is certainly very far from deserving his lordship's harsh stricture. Similarly, I like to believe that Lord Henry was wrong in his pronouncement upon Sir Oliver, and I am encouraged in this belief by the pen-portrait which he himself appends to it. "He was," he says, "a tall, powerful fellow of a good shape, if we except that his arms were too long and that his feet and hands were of an uncomely bigness. In face he was swarthy, with black hair and a black forked beard; his nose was big and very high in the bridge, and his eyes sunk deep under beetling eyebrows were very pale-coloured and very cruel and sinister. He had—and this I have ever remarked to be the sign of great virility in a man—a big, deep, rough voice, better suited to, and no doubt oftener employed in, quarter-deck oaths and foulnesses than the worship of his Maker."

Thus my Lord Henry Goade, and you observe how he permits his lingering disapproval of the man to intrude upon his description of him. The truth is that—as there is ample testimony in his prolific writings—is lordship was something of a misanthropist. It was, in fact,

his misanthropy which drove him, as it has driven many another, to authorship. He takes up the pen, not so much that he may carry out his professed object of writing a chronicle of his own time, but to the end that he may vent the bitterness engendered in him by his fall from favour. As a consequence he has little that is good to say of anyone, and rarely mentions one of his contemporaries but to tap the sources of a picturesque invective. After all, it is possible to make excuses for him. He was at once a man of thought and a man of action—a combination as rare as it is usually deplorable. The man of action in him might have gone far had he not been ruined at the outset by the man of thought. A magnificent seaman, he might have become Lord High Admiral of England but for a certain proneness to intrigue. Fortunately for him—since head where nature had placed it—he came betimes under a cloud of suspicion. His career suffered a check; but it was necessary to afford him some compensation since, after all, the suspicions could not be substantiated.

Consequently he was removed from his command and appointed by the Queen's Grace her Lieutenant of Cornwall, a position in which it was judged that he could do little mischief. There, soured by this blighting of his ambitions, and living a life of comparative seclusion, he turned, as so many other men similarly placed have turned, to seek consolation in his pen. He wrote his singularly crabbed, narrow and superficial History of Lord Henry Goade: his own Times—which is a miracle of injunventions, distortions, misrepresentations, and eccentric spelling. In the eighteen enormous folio volumes, which he filled with his minute and gothic characters, he gives his own version of the story of what he terms his downfall, and, having, notwithstanding his prolixity, exhausted this subject in the first five of the eighteen tomes, he proceeds to deal with so much of the history of his own day as came immediately under his notice in his Cornish retirement.

For the purposes of English history his chronicles are entirely negligible, which is the reason why they have been allowed to remain

unpublished and in oblivion. But to the student who attempts to follow the history of that extraordinary man, Sir Oliver Tressilian, they are entirely invaluable. And, since I have made this history my present task, it is fitting that I should here at the outset acknowledge my extreme indebtedness to those chronicles. Without them, indeed, it were impossible to reconstruct the life of that Cornish gentleman who became a renegade and a Barbary Corsair and might have become Basha of Algiers—or Argire, as his lordship terms it—but for certain matters which are to be set forth.

Lord Henry wrote with knowledge and authority, and the tale he has to tell is very complete and full of precious detail. He was, himself, an eyewitness of much that happened; he pursued a personal acquaintance with many of those who were connected with Sir Oliver's affairs that he might amplify his chronicles, and he considered no scrap of gossip that was to be gleaned along the countryside too trivial to be recorded. I suspect him also of having received no little assistance from Jasper Leigh in the matter of those events that happened out of England, which seem to me to constitute by far the most interesting portion of his narrative.

R. S.

PART I. SIR OLIVER TRESSILIAN

CHAPTER I. THE HUCKSTER

Sir Oliver Tressilian sat at his ease in the lofty dining-room of the handsome house of Penarrow, which he owed to the enterprise of his father of lamented and lamentable memory and to the skill and invention of an Italian engineer named Bagnolo who had come to England half a century ago as one of the assistants of the famous Torrigiani.

This house of such a startlingly singular and Italianate grace for so remote a corner of Cornwall deserves, together with the story of its construction, a word in passing.

The Italian Bagnolo who combined with his salient artistic talents a quarrelsome, volcanic humour had the mischance to kill a man in a brawl in a Southwark tavern. As a result he fled the town, nor paused in his headlong flight from the consequences of that murderous deed until he had all but reached the very ends of England. Under what circumstances he became acquainted with Tressilian the elder I do not know. But certain it is that the meeting was a very timely one for both of them. To the fugitive, Ralph Tressilian—who appears to have been inveterately partial to the company of rascals of all denominations—afforded shelter; and Bagnolo repaid the service by offering to rebuild the decaying half-timbered house of Penarrow. Having taken the task in hand he went about it with all the enthusiasm of your true artist, and achieved for his protector a residence that was a marvel of grace in that crude age and outlandish district. There arose under the supervision of the gifted engineer, worthy associate of Messer Torrigiani, a noble two-storied mansion of mellow red brick, flooded with light and sunshine by the enormously tall mullioned windows that rose almost from base to summit of each pilastered

facade. The main doorway was set in a projecting wing and was overhung by a massive balcony, the whole surmounted by a pillared pediment of extraordinary grace, now partly clad in a green mantle of creepers. Above the burnt red tiles of the roof soared massive twisted chimneys in lofty majesty.

But the glory of Penarrow—that is, of the new Penarrow begotten of the fertile brain of Bagnolo—was the garden fashioned out of the tangled wilderness about the old house that had crowned the heights above Penarrow point. To the labours of Bagnolo, Time and Nature had added their own. Bagnolo had cut those handsome esplanades, had built those noble balustrades bordering the three terraces with their fine connecting flights of steps; himself he had planned the fountain, and with his own hands had carved the granite faun presiding over it and the dozen other statues of nymphs and sylvan gods in a marble that gleamed in white brilliance amid the dusky green. But Time and Nature had smoothed the lawns to a velvet surface, had thickened the handsome boxwood hedges, and thrust up those black spear-like poplars that completed the very Italianate appearance of that Cornish demesne.

Sir Oliver took his ease in his dining-room considering all this as it was displayed before him in the mellowing September sunshine, and found it all very good to see, and life very good to live. Now no man has ever been known so to find life without some immediate cause, other than that of his environment, for his optimism. Sir Oliver had several causes. The first of these—although it was one which he may have been far from suspecting—was his equipment of youth, wealth, and good digestion; the second was that he had achieved honour and renown both upon the Spanish Main and in the late harrying of the Invincible Armada—or, more aptly perhaps might it be said, in the harrying of the late Invincible Armada—and that he had received in that the twenty-fifth year of his life the honour of knighthood from the Virgin Queen; the third and last contributor to his pleasant mood—

and I have reserved it for the end as I account this to be the proper place for the most important factor—was Dan Cupid who for once seemed compounded entirely of benignity and who had so contrived matters that Sir Oliver's wooing Of Mistress Rosamund Godolphin ran an entirely smooth and happy course.

So, then, Sir Oliver sat at his ease in his tall, carved chair, his doublet untrussed, his long legs stretched before him, a pensive smile about the firm lips that as yet were darkened by no more than a small black line of moustachios. (Lord Henry's portrait of him was drawn at a much later period.) It was noon, and our gentleman had just dined, as the platters, the broken meats and the half-empty flagon on the board beside him testified. He pulled thoughtfully at a long pipe—for he had acquired this newly imported habit of tobacco-drinking—and dreamed of his mistress, and was properly and gallantly grateful that fortune had used him so handsomely as to enable him to toss a title and some measure of renown into his Rosamund's lap.

By nature Sir Oliver was a shrewd fellow ("cunning as twenty devils," is my Lord Henry's phrase) and he was also a man of some not inconsiderable learning. Yet neither his natural wit nor his acquired endowments appear to have taught him that of all the gods that rule the destinies of mankind there is none more ironic and malicious than that same Dan Cupid in whose honour, as it were, he was now burning the incense of that pipe of his. The ancients knew that innocent-seeming boy for a cruel, impish knave, and they mistrusted him. Sir Oliver either did not know or did not heed that sound piece of ancient wisdom. It was to be borne in upon him by grim experience, and even as his light pensive eyes smiled upon the sunshine that flooded the terrace beyond the long mullioned window, a shadow fell athwart it which he little dreamed to be symbolic of the shadow that was even falling across the sunshine of his life.

After that shadow came the substance—tall and gay of raiment

under a broad black Spanish hat decked with blood-red plumes. Swinging a long beribboned cane the figure passed the windows, stalking deliberately as Fate.

The smile perished on Sir Oliver's lips. His swarthy face grew thoughtful, his black brows contracted until no more than a single deep furrow stood between them. Then slowly the smile came forth again, but no longer that erstwhile gentle pensive smile. It was transformed into a smile of resolve and determination, a smile that tightened his lips even as his brows relaxed, and invested his brooding eyes with a gleam that was mocking, crafty and almost wicked.

Came Nicholas his servant to announce Master Peter Godolphin, and close upon the lackey's heels came Master Godolphin himself, leaning upon his beribboned cane and carrying his broad Spanish hat. He was a tall, slender gentleman, with a shaven, handsome countenance, stamped with an air of haughtiness; like Sir Oliver, he had a high-bridged, intrepid nose, and in age he was the younger by some two or three years. He wore his auburn hair rather longer than was the mode just then, but in his apparel there was no more foppishness than is tolerable in a gentleman of his years.

Sir Oliver rose and bowed from his great height in welcome. But a wave of tobacco-smoke took his graceful visitor in the throat and set him coughing and grimacing.

"I see," he choked, "that ye have acquired that filthy habit."

"I have known filthier," said Sir Oliver composedly.

"I nothing doubt it," rejoined Master Godolphin, thus early giving indications of his humour and the object of his visit.

Sir Oliver checked an answer that must have helped his visitor to his ends, which was no part of the knight's intent.

"Therefore," said he ironically, "I hope you will be patient with my shortcomings. Nick, a chair for Master Godolphin and another cup. I bid you welcome to Penarrow."

A sneer flickered over the younger man's white face. "You pay me a compliment, sir, which I fear me 'tis not mine to return to you."

"Time enough for that when I come to seek it," said Sir Oliver, with easy, if assumed, good humour.

"When you come to seek it?"

"The hospitality of your house," Sir Oliver explained.

"It is on that very matter I am come to talk with you."

"Will you sit?" Sir Oliver invited him, and spread a hand towards the chair which Nicholas had set. In the same gesture he waved the servant away.

Master Godolphin ignored the invitation. "You were," he said, "at Godolphin Court but yesterday, I hear." He paused, and as Sir Oliver offered no denial, he added stiffly: "I am come, sir, to inform you that the honour of your visits is one we shall be happy to forgo."

In the effort he made to preserve his self-control before so direct an affront Sir Oliver paled a little under his tan.

"You will understand, Peter," he replied slowly, "that you have said too much unless you add something more." He paused, considering his visitor a moment. "I do not know whether Rosamund has told you that yesterday she did me the honour to consent to become my wife...."

"She is a child that does not know her mind," broke in the other.

"Do you know of any good reason why she should come to change

it?" asked Sir Oliver, with a slight air of challenge.

Master Godolphin sat down, crossed his legs and placed his hat on his knee.

"I know a dozen," he answered. "But I need not urge them. Sufficient should it be to remind you that Rosamund is but seventeen and that she is under my guardianship and that of Sir John Killigrew. Neither Sir John nor I can sanction this betrothal."

"Good lack!" broke out Sir Oliver. "Who asks your sanction or Sir John's? By God's grace your sister will grow to be a woman soon and mistress of herself. I am in no desperate haste to get me wed, and by nature—as you may be observing—I am a wondrous patient man. I'll even wait," And he pulled at his pipe.

"Waiting cannot avail you in this, Sir Oliver. 'Tis best you should understand. We are resolved, Sir John and I."

"Are you so? God's light. Send Sir John to me to tell me of his resolves and I'll tell him something of mine. Tell him from me, Master Godolphin, that if he will trouble to come as far as Penarrow I'll do by him what the hangman should have done long since. I'll crop his pimpish ears for him, by this hand!"

"Meanwhile," said Master Godolphin whettingly, "will you not essay your rover's prowess upon me?"

"You?" quoth Sir Oliver, and looked him over with good-humoured contempt. "I'm no butcher of fledgelings, my lad. Besides, you are your sister's brother, and 'tis no aim of mine to increase the obstacles already in my path." Then his tone changed. He leaned across the table. "Come, now, Peter. What is at the root of all this matter? Can we not compose such differences as you conceive exist? Out with them. 'Tis no matter for Sir John. He's a curmudgeon who signifies not a finger's snap. But you, 'tis different. You are her brother. Out with

your complaints, then. Let us be frank and friendly."

"Friendly?" The other sneered again. "Our fathers set us an example in that."

"Does it matter what our fathers did? More shame to them if, being neighbours, they could not be friends. Shall we follow so deplorable an example?"

"You'll not impute that the fault lay with my father," cried the other, with a show of ready anger.

"I impute nothing, lad. I cry shame upon them both."

"Swounds!" swore Master Peter. "Do you malign the dead?"

"If I do, I malign them both. But I do not. I no more than condemn a fault that both must acknowledge could they return to life."

"Then, Sir, confine your condemnings to your own father with whom no man of honour could have lived at peace...."

"Softly, softly, good Sir...."

"There's no call to go softly. Ralph Tressilian was a dishonour, a scandal to the countryside. Not a hamlet between here and Truro, or between here and Helston, but swarms with big Tressilian noses like your own, in memory of your debauched parent."

Sir Oliver's eyes grew narrower: he smiled. "I wonder how you came by your own nose?" he wondered.

Master Godolphin got to his feet in a passion, and his chair crashed over behind him. "Sir," he blazed, "you insult my mother's memory!"

Sir Oliver laughed. "I make a little free with it, perhaps, in return for your pleasantries on the score of my father."

Master Godolphin pondered him in speechless anger, then swayed by his passion he leaned across the board, raised his long cane and struck Sir Oliver sharply on the shoulder.

That done, he strode off magnificently towards the door. Half-way thither he paused.

"I shall expect your friends and the length of your sword," said he.

Sir Oliver laughed again. "I don't think I shall trouble to send them," said he.

Master Godolphin wheeled, fully to face him again. "How? You will take a blow?"

Sir Oliver shrugged. "None saw it given," said he.

"But I shall publish it abroad that I have caned you."

"You'll publish yourself a liar if you do; for none will believe you." Then he changed his tone yet again. "Come, Peter, we are behaving unworthily. As for the blow, I confess that I deserved it. A man's mother is more sacred than his father. So we may cry quits on that score. Can we not cry quits on all else? What can it profit us to perpetuate a foolish quarrel that sprang up between our fathers?"

"There is more than that between us," answered Master Godolphin. "I'll not have my sister wed a pirate."

"A pirate? God's light! I am glad there's none to hear you for since her grace has knighted me for my doings upon the seas, your words go very near to treason. Surely, lad, what the Queen approves, Master Peter Godolphin may approve and even your mentor Sir John Killigrew. You've been listening to him. 'Twas he sent you hither."

"I am no man's lackey," answered the other hotly, resenting the

imputation—and resenting it the more because of the truth in it.

"To call me a pirate is to say a foolish thing. Hawkins with whom I sailed has also received the accolade, and who dubs us pirates insults the Queen herself. Apart from that, which, as you see, is a very empty charge, what else have you against me? I am, I hope, as good as any other here in Cornwall; Rosamund honours me with her affection and I am rich and shall be richer still ere the wedding bells are heard."

"Rich with the fruit of thieving upon the seas, rich with the treasures of scuttled ships and the price of slaves captured in Africa and sold to the plantations, rich as the vampire is gluttoned—with the blood of dead men."

"Does Sir John say that?" asked Sir Oliver, in a soft deadly voice.

"I say it."

"I heard you; but I am asking where you learnt that pretty lesson. Is Sir John your preceptor? He is, he is. No need to tell me. I'll deal with him. Meanwhile let me disclose to you the pure and disinterested source of Sir John's rancour. You shall see what an upright and honest gentleman is Sir John, who was your father's friend and has been your guardian."

"I'll not listen to what you say of him."

"Nay, but you shall, in return for having made me listen to what he says of me. Sir John desires to obtain a licence to build at the mouth of the Fal. He hopes to see a town spring up above the haven there under the shadow of his own Manor of Arwenack. He represents himself as nobly disinterested and all concerned for the prosperity of the country, and he neglects to mention that the land is his own and that it is his own prosperity and that of his family which he is concerned to foster. We met in London by a fortunate chance whilst

Sir John was about this business at the Court. Now it happens that I, too, have interests in Truro and Penryn; but, unlike Sir John, I am honest in the matter, and proclaim it. If any growth should take place about Smithick it follows from its more advantageous situation that Truro and Penryn must suffer, and that suits me as little as the other matter would suit Sir John. I told him so, for I can be blunt, and I told the Queen in the form of a counter-petition to Sir John's." He shrugged. "The moment was propitious to me. I was one of the seamen who had helped to conquer the unconquerable Armada of King Philip. I was therefore not to be denied, and Sir John was sent home as empty-handed as he went to Court. D'ye marvel that he hates me? Knowing him for what he is, d'ye marvel that he dubs me pirate and worse? 'Tis natural enough so to misrepresent my doings upon the sea, since it is those doings have afforded me the power to hurt his profit. He has chosen the weapons of calumny for this combat, but those weapons are not mine, as I shall show him this very day. If you do not credit what I say, come with me and be present at the little talk I hope to have with that curmudgeon."

"You forget," said Master Godolphin, "that I, too, have interests in the neighbourhood of Smithick, and that you are hurting those."

"Soho!" crowed Sir Oliver. "Now at last the sun of truth peeps forth from all this cloud of righteous indignation at my bad Tressilian blood and pirate's ways! You, too, are but a trafficker. Now see what a fool I am to have believed you sincere, and to have stood here in talk with you as with an honest man." His voice swelled and his lip curled in a contempt that struck the other like a blow. "I swear I had not wasted breath with you had I known you for so mean and pitiful a fellow."

"These words...." began Master Godolphin, drawing himself up very stiffly.

"Are a deal less than your deserts," cut in the other, and he raised his voice to call—"Nick."

"You shall answer to them," snapped his visitor.

"I am answering now," was the stern answer. "To come here and prate to me of my dead father's dissoluteness and of an ancient quarrel between him and yours, to bleat of my trumped-up course of piracy and my own ways of life as a just cause why I may not wed your sister whilst the real consideration in your mind, the real spur to your hostility is not more than the matter of some few paltry pounds a year that I hinder you from pocketing. A God's name get you gone."

Nick entered at that moment.

"You shall hear from me again, Sir Oliver," said the other, white with anger. "You shall account to me for these words."

"I do not fight with... with hucksters," flashed Sir Oliver.

"D'ye dare call me that?"

"Indeed, 'tis to discredit an honourable class, I confess it. Nick, the door for Master Godolphin."

CHAPTER II. ROSAMUND

Anon, after his visitor had departed, Sir Oliver grew calm again. Then being able in his calm to consider his position, he became angry anew at the very thought of the rage in which he had been, a rage which had so mastered him that he had erected additional obstacles to the already considerable ones that stood between Rosamund and himself. In full blast, his anger swung round and took Sir John Killigrew for its objective. He would settle with him at once. He would so, by Heaven's light!

He bellowed for Nick and his boots.

"Where is Master Lionel? he asked when the boots had been fetched.

"He be just ridden in, Sir Oliver."

"Bid him hither."

Promptly, in answer to that summons, came Sir Oliver's half-brother—a slender lad favouring his mother the dissolute Ralph Tressilian's second wife. He was as unlike Sir Oliver in body as in soul. He was comely in a very gentle, almost womanish way; his complexion was fair and delicate, his hair golden, and his eyes of a deep blue. He had a very charming stripling grace—for he was but in his twenty-first year—and he dressed with all the care of a Court-gallant.

"Has that whelp Godolphin been to visit you?" he asked as he entered.

"Aye," growled Sir Oliver. "He came to tell me some things and to hear some others in return."

"Ha. I passed him just beyond the gates, and he was deaf to my greeting. 'Tis a most cursed insufferable pup."

"Art a judge of men, Lal." Sir Oliver stood up booted. "I am for Arwenack to exchange a compliment or two with Sir John."

His tight-pressed lips and resolute air supplemented his words so well that Lionel clutched his arm.

"You're not... you're not...?"

"I am." And affectionately, as if to soothe the lad's obvious alarm, he patted his brother's shoulder. "Sir John," he explained, "talks too much. 'Tis a fault that wants correcting. I go to teach him the virtue of silence."

"There will be trouble, Oliver."

"So there will—for him. If a man must be saying of me that I am a pirate, a slave-dealer, a murderer, and Heaven knows what else, he must be ready for the consequences. But you are late, Lal. Where have you been?"

"I rode as far as Malpas."

"As far as Malpas?" Sir Oliver's eyes narrowed, as was the trick with him. "I hear it whispered what magnet draws you thither," he said. "Be wary, boy. You go too much to Malpas."

"How?" quoth Lionel a trifle coldly.

"I mean that you are your father's son. Remember it, and strive not to follow in his ways lest they bring you to his own end. I have just been reminded of these predilections of his by good Master Peter. Go not over often to Malpas, I say. No more." But the arm which he flung about his younger brother's shoulders and the warmth of his

embrace made resentment of his warning quite impossible.

When he was gone, Lionel sat him down to dine, with Nick to wait on him. He ate but little, and never addressed the old servant in the course of that brief repast. He was very pensive. In thought he followed his brother on that avenging visit of his to Arwenack. Killigrew was no babe, but man of his hands, a soldier and a seaman. If any harm should come to Oliver...He trembled at the thought; and then almost despite him his mind ran on to calculate the consequences to himself. His fortune would be in a very different case, he reflected. In a sort of horror, he sought to put so detestable a reflection from his mind; but it returned insistently. It would not be denied. It forced him to a consideration of his own circumstances.

All that he had he owed to his brother's bounty. That dissolute father of theirs had died as such men commonly die, leaving behind him heavily encumbered estates and many debts; the very house of Penarrow was mortgaged, and the moneys raised on it had been drunk, or gambled, or spent on one or another of Ralph Tressilian's many lights o' love. Then Oliver had sold some little property near Helston, inherited from his mother; he had sunk the money into a venture upon the Spanish Main. He had fitted out and manned a ship, and had sailed with Hawkins upon one of those ventures, which Sir John Killigrew was perfectly entitled to account pirate raids. He had returned with enough plunder in specie and gems to disencumber the Tressilian patrimony. He had sailed again and returned still wealthier. And meanwhile, Lionel had remained at home taking his ease. He loved his ease. His nature was inherently indolent, and he had the wasteful extravagant tastes that usually go with indolence. He was not born to toil and struggle, and none had sought to correct the shortcomings of his character in that respect. Sometimes he wondered what the future might hold for him should Oliver come to marry. He feared his life might not be as easy as it was at present. But he did not seriously fear. It was not in his nature—it never is in the

natures of such men—to give any excess of consideration to the future. When his thoughts did turn to it in momentary uneasiness, he would abruptly dismiss them with the reflection that when all was said Oliver loved him, and Oliver would never fail to provide adequately for all his wants.

In this undoubtedly he was fully justified. Oliver was more parent than brother to him. When their father had been brought home to die from the wound dealt him by an outraged husband—and a shocking spectacle that sinner's death had been with its hasty terrified repentance—he had entrusted Lionel to his elder brother's care. At the time Oliver was seventeen and Lionel twelve. But Oliver had seemed by so many years older than his age, that the twice-widowed Ralph Tressilian had come to depend upon this steady, resolute, and masterful child of his first marriage. It was into his ear that the dying man had poured the wretched tale of his repentance for the life he had lived and the state in which he was leaving his affairs with such scant provision for his sons. For Oliver he had no fear. It was as if with the prescience that comes to men in his pass he had perceived that Oliver was of those who must prevail, a man born to make the world his oyster. His anxieties were all for Lionel, whom he also judged with that same penetrating insight vouchsafed a man in his last hours. Hence his piteous recommendation of him to Oliver, and Oliver's ready promise to be father, mother, and brother to the youngster.

All this was in Lionel's mind as he sat musing there, and again he struggled with that hideous insistent thought that if things should go ill with his brother at Arwenack, there would be great profit to himself; that these things he now enjoyed upon another's bounty he would then enjoy in his own right. A devil seemed to mock him with the whispered sneer that were Oliver to die his own grief would not be long-lived. Then in revolt against that voice of an egoism so loathsome that in his better moments it inspired even himself with horror, he bethought him of Oliver's unvarying, unwavering affection; he pondered all the loving

care and kindness that through these years past Oliver had ever showered upon him; and he cursed the rottenness of a mind that could even admit such thoughts as those which he had been entertaining. So wrought upon was he by the welter of his emotions, by that fierce strife between his conscience and his egotism, that he came abruptly to his feet, a cry upon his lips.

"Vade retro, Sathanas!"

Old Nicholas, looking up abruptly, saw the lad's face, waxen, his brow bedewed with sweat.

"Master Lionel! Master Lionel!" he cried, his small bright eyes concernedly scanning his young master's face. "What be amiss?"

Lionel mopped his brow. "Sir Oliver has gone to Arwenack upon a punitive business," said he.

"An' what be that, zur?" quoth Nicholas.

"He has gone to punish Sir John for having maligned him."

A grin spread upon the weather-beaten countenance of Nicholas.

"Be that so? Marry, 'twere time. Sir John he be over long i' th' tongue."

Lionel stood amazed at the man's easy confidence and supreme assurance of how his master must acquit himself.

"You... you have no fear, Nicholas...." He did not add of what. But the servant understood, and his grin grew broader still.

"Fear? Lackaday! I bain't afeear'd for Sir Oliver, and doan't ee be afeear'd. Sir Oliver'll be home to sup with a sharp-set appetite—'tis the only difference fighting ever made to he."

The servant was justified of his confidence by the events, though

through a slight error of judgment Sir Oliver did not quite accomplish all that promised and intended. In anger, and when he deemed that he had been affronted, he was—as his chronicler never wearies of insisting, and as you shall judge before the end of this tale is reached—of a tigerish ruthlessness. He rode to Arwenack fully resolved to kill his calumniator. Nothing less would satisfy him. Arrived at that fine embattled castle of the Killigrews which commanded the entrance to the estuary of the Fal, and from whose crenels the country might be surveyed as far as the Lizard, fifteen miles away, he found Peter Godolphin there before him; and because of Peter's presence Sir Oliver was more deliberate and formal in his accusation of Sir John than he had intended. He desired, in accusing Sir John, also to clear himself in the eyes of Rosamund's brother, to make the latter realize how entirely odious were the calumnies which Sir John had permitted himself, and how basely prompted.

Sir John, however, came halfway to meet the quarrel. His rancour against the Pirate of Penarrow—as he had come to dub Sir Oliver—rendered him almost as eager to engage as was his visitor.

They found a secluded corner of the deer-park for their business, and there Sir John—a slim, sallow gentleman of some thirty years of age—made an onslaught with sword and dagger upon Sir Oliver, full worthy of the onslaught he had made earlier with his tongue. But his impetuosity availed him less than nothing. Sir Oliver was come there with a certain purpose, and it was his way that he never failed to carry through a thing to which he set his hand.

In three minutes it was all over and Sir Oliver was carefully wiping his blade, whilst Sir John lay coughing upon the turf tended by white-faced Peter Godolphin and a scared groom who had been bidden thither to make up the necessary tale of witnesses.

Sir Oliver sheathed his weapons and resumed his coat, then came to stand over his fallen foe, considering him critically.

"I think I have silenced him for a little time only," he said. "And I confess that I intended to do better. I hope, however, that the lesson will suffice and that he will lie no more—at least concerning me."

"Do you mock a fallen man?" was Master Godolphin's angry protest.

"God forbid!" said Sir Oliver soberly. "There is no mockery in my heart. There is, believe me, nothing but regret—regret that I should not have done the thing more thoroughly. I will send assistance from the house as I go. Give you good day, Master Peter."

From Arwenack he rode round by Penryn on his homeward way. But he did not go straight home. He paused at the Gates of Godolphin Court, which stood above Trefusis Point commanding the view of Carrick Roads. He turned in under the old gateway and drew up in the courtyard. Leaping to the kidney-stones that paved it, he announced himself a visitor to Mistress Rosamund.

He found her in her bower—a light, turreted chamber on the mansion's eastern side, with windows that looked out upon that lovely sheet of water and the wooded slopes beyond. She was sitting with a book in her lap in the deep of that tall window when he entered, preceded and announced by Sally Pentreath, who, now her tire-woman, had once been her nurse.

She rose with a little exclamation of gladness when he appeared under the lintel—scarce high enough to admit him without stooping—and stood regarding him across the room with brightened eyes and flushing cheeks.

What need is there to describe her? In the blaze of notoriety into which she was anon to be thrust by Sir Oliver Tressilian there was scarce a poet in England who did not sing the grace and loveliness of Rosamund Godolphin, and in all conscience enough of those

fragments have survived. Like her brother she was tawny headed and she was divinely tall, though as yet her figure in its girlishness was almost too slender for her height.

"I had not looked for you so early...." she was beginning, when she observed that his countenance was oddly stern. "Why... what has happened?" she cried, her intuitions clamouring loudly of some mischance.

"Naught to alarm you, sweet; yet something that may vex you." He set an arm about that lissom waist of hers above the swelling farthingale, and gently led her back to her chair, then flung himself upon the window-seat beside her. "You hold Sir John Killigrew in some affection?" he said between statement and inquiry.

"Why, yes. He was our guardian until my brother came of full age."

Sir Oliver made a wry face. "Aye, there's the rub. Well, I've all but killed him."

She drew back into her chair, recoiling before him, and he saw horror leap to her eyes and blench her face. He made haste to explain the causes that had led to this, he told her briefly of the calumnies concerning him that Sir John had put about to vent his spite at having been thwarted in a matter of his coveted licence to build at Smithick.

"That mattered little," he concluded. "I knew these tales concerning me were abroad, and I held them in the same contempt as I hold their utterer. But he went further, Rose: he poisoned your brother's mind against me, and he stirred up in him the slumbering rancour that in my father's time was wont to lie between our houses. To-day Peter came to me with the clear intent to make a quarrel. He affronted me as no man has ever dared."

She cried out at that, her already great alarm redoubled. He smiled.

"Do not suppose that I could harm him. He is your brother, and, so, sacred to me. He came to tell me that no betrothal was possible between us, forbade me ever again to visit Godolphin Court, dubbed me pirate and vampire to my face and reviled my father's memory. I tracked the evil of all this to its source in Killigrew, and rode straight to Arwenack to dam that source of falsehood for all time. I did not accomplish quite so much as I intended. You see, I am frank, my Rose. It may be that Sir John will live; if so I hope that he may profit by this lesson. I have come straight to you," he concluded, "that you may hear the tale from me before another comes to malign me with false stories of this happening."

"You... you mean Peter?" she cried.

"Alas!" he sighed.

She sat very still and white, looking straight before her and not at all at Sir Oliver. At length she spoke.

"I am not skilled in reading men," she said in a sad, small voice. "How should I be, that am but a maid who has led a cloistered life. I was told of you that you were violent and passionate, a man of bitter enmities, easily stirred to hatreds, cruel and ruthless in the persecution of them."

"You, too, have been listening to Sir John," he muttered, and laughed shortly.

"All this was I told," she pursued as if he had not spoken, "and all did I refuse to believe because my heart was given to you. Yet... yet of what have you made proof to-day?"

"Of forbearance," said he shortly.

"Forbearance?" she echoed, and her lips writhed in a smile of weary irony. "Surely you mock me!"

He set himself to explain.

"I have told you what Sir John had done. I have told you that the greater part of it—and matter all that touched my honour—I know Sir John to have done long since. Yet I suffered it in silence and contempt. Was that to show myself easily stirred to ruthlessness? What was it but forbearance? When, however, he carries his petty huckster's rancour so far as to seek to choke for me my source of happiness in life and sends your brother to affront me, I am still so forbearing that I recognize your brother to be no more than a tool and go straight to the hand that wielded him. Because I know of your affection for Sir John I gave him such latitude as no man of honour in England would have given him."

Then seeing that she still avoided his regard, still sat in that frozen attitude of horror at learning that the man she loved had imbrued his hands with the blood of another whom she also loved, his pleading quickened to a warmer note. He flung himself upon his knees beside her chair, and took in his great sinewy hands the slender fingers which she listlessly surrendered. "Rose," he cried, and his deep voice quivered with intercession, "dismiss all that you have heard from out your mind. Consider only this thing that has befallen. Suppose that Lionel my brother came to you, and that, having some measure of power and authority to support him, he swore to you that you should never wed me, swore to prevent this marriage because he deemed you such a woman as could not bear my name with honour to myself; and suppose that to all this he added insult to the memory of your dead father, what answer would you return him? Speak, Rose! Be honest with thyself and me. Deem yourself in my place, and say in honesty if you can still condemn me for what I have done. Say if it differs much from what you would wish to do in such a case as I have named."

Her eyes scanned now his upturned face, every line of which was

pleading to her and calling for impartial judgment. Her face grew troubled, and then almost fierce. She set her hands upon his shoulders, and looked deep into his eyes.

"You swear to me, Noll, that all is as you have told it me—you have added naught, you have altered naught to make the tale more favourable to yourself?"

"You need such oaths from me?" he asked, and she saw sorrow spread upon his countenance.

"If I did I should not love thee, Noll. But in such an hour I need your own assurance. Will you not be generous and bear with me, strengthen me to withstand anything that may be said hereafter?"

"As God's my witness, I have told you true in all," he answered solemnly.

She sank her head to his shoulder. She was weeping softly, overwrought by this climax to all that in silence and in secret she had suffered since he had come a-wooing her.

"Then," she said, "I believe you acted rightly. I believe with you that no man of honour could have acted otherwise. I must believe you, Noll, for did I not, then I could believe in naught and hope for naught. You are as a fire that has seized upon the better part of me and consumed it all to ashes that you may hold it in your heart. I am content so you be true."

"True I shall ever be, sweetheart," he whispered fervently. "Could I be less since you are sent to make me so?"

She looked at him again, and now she was smiling wistfully through her tears.

"And you will bear with Peter?" she implored him.

"He shall have no power to anger me," he answered. "I swear that too. Do you know that but to-day he struck me?"

"Struck you? You did not tell me that!"

"My quarrel was not with him but with the rogue that sent him. I laughed at the blow. Was he not sacred to me?"

"He is good at heart, Noll," she pursued. "In time he will come to love you as you deserve, and you will come to know that he, too, deserves your love."

"He deserves it now for the love he bears to you."

"And you will think ever thus during the little while of waiting that perforce must lie before us?"

"I shall never think otherwise, sweet. Meanwhile I shall avoid him, and that no harm may come should he forbid me Godolphin Court I'll even stay away. In less than a year you will be of full age, and none may hinder you to come and go. What is a year, with such hope as mine to still impatience?"

She stroked his face. "Art very gentle with me ever, Noll," she murmured fondly. "I cannot credit you are ever harsh to any, as they say."

"Heed them not," he answered her. "I may have been something of all that, but you have purified me, Rose. What man that loved you could be aught but gentle." He kissed her, and stood up. "I had best be going now," he said. "I shall walk along the shore towards Trefusis Point to-morrow morning. If you should chance to be similarly disposed...."

She laughed, and rose in her turn. "I shall be there, dear Noll."

"'Twere best so hereafter," he assured her, smiling, and so took his

leave.

She followed him to the stair-head, and watched him as he descended with eyes that took pride in the fine upright carriage of that stalwart, masterful lover.

CHAPTER III. THE FORGE

Sir Oliver's wisdom in being the first to bear Rosamund the story of that day's happenings was established anon when Master Godolphin returned home. He went straight in quest of his sister; and in a frame of mind oppressed by fear and sorrow, for Sir John, by his general sense of discomfiture at the hands of Sir Oliver and by the anger begotten of all this he was harsh in manner and disposed to hector.

"Madam," he announced abruptly, "Sir John is like to die."

The astounding answer she returned him—that is, astounding to him—did not tend to soothe his sorely ruffled spirit.

"I know," she said. "And I believe him to deserve no less. Who deals in calumny should be prepared for the wages of it."

He stared at her in a long, furious silence, then exploded into oaths, and finally inveighed against her unnaturalness and pronounced her bewitched by that foul dog Tressilian.

"It is fortunate for me," she answered him composedly, "that he was here before you to give me the truth of this affair." Then her assumed calm and the anger with which she had met his own all fell away from her. "Oh, Peter, Peter," she cried in anguish, "I hope that Sir John will recover. I am distraught by this event. But be just, I implore you. Sir Oliver has told me how hard-driven he had been."

"He shall be driven harder yet, as God's my life! If you think this deed shall go unpunished...."

She flung herself upon his breast and implored him to carry this quarrel no further. She spoke of her love for Sir Oliver and announced

her firm resolve to marry him in despite of all opposition that could be made, all of which did not tend to soften her brother's humour. Yet because of the love that ever had held these two in closest bonds he went so far in the end as to say that should Sir John recover he would not himself pursue the matter further. But if Sir John should die—as was very likely—honour compelled him to seek vengeance of a deed to which he had himself so very largely contributed.

"I read that man as if he were an open book," the boy announced, with callow boastfulness. "He has the subtlety of Satan, yet he does not delude me. It was at me he struck through Killigrew. Because he desires you, Rosamund, he could not—as he bluntly told me—deal with me however I provoked him, not even though I went the length of striking him. He might have killed me for't; but he knew that to do so would place a barrier 'twixt him and you. Oh! he is calculating as all the fiends of Hell. So, to wipe out the dishonour which I did him, he shifts the blame of it upon Killigrew and goes out to kill him, which he further thinks may act as a warning to me. But if Killigrew dies...." And thus he rambled on, filling her gentle heart with anguish to see this feud increasing between the two men she loved best in all the world. If the outcome of it should be that either were to kill the other, she knew that she could never again look upon the survivor.

She took heart at last in the memory of Sir Oliver's sworn promise that her brother's life should be inviolate to him, betide what might. She trusted him; she depended upon his word and that rare strength of his which rendered possible to him a course that no weaker man would dare pursue. And in this reflection her pride in him increased, and she thanked God for a lover who in all things was a giant among men.

But Sir John Killigrew did not die. He hovered between this world and a better one for some seven days, at the end of which he began to recover. By October he was abroad again, gaunt and pale,

reduced to half the bulk that had been his before, a mere shadow of a man.

One of his first visits was to Godolphin Court. He went to remonstrate with Rosamund upon her betrothal, and he did so at the request of her brother. But his remonstrances were strangely lacking in the force that she had looked for.

The odd fact is that in his near approach to death, and with his earthly interest dwindling, Sir John had looked matters frankly in the face, and had been driven to the conclusion—a conclusion impossible to him in normal health—that he had got no more than he deserved. He realized that he had acted unworthily, if unconscious at the time of the unworthiness of what he did; that the weapons with which he had fought Sir Oliver were not the weapons that become a Gentleman or in which there is credit to be won. He perceived that he had permitted his old enmity for the house of Tressilian, swollen by a sense of injury lately suffered in the matter of the licence to build at Smithick, to warp his judgment and to persuade him that Sir Oliver was all he had dubbed him. He realized that jealousy, too, had taken a hand in the matter. Sir Oliver's exploits upon the seas had brought him wealth, and with this wealth he was building up once more the Tressilian sway in those parts, which Ralph Tressilian had so outrageously diminished, so that he threatened to eclipse the importance of the Killigrews of Arwenack.

Nevertheless, in the hour of reaction he did not go so far as to admit that Sir Oliver Tressilian was a fit mate for Rosamund Godolphin. She and her brother had been placed in his care by their late father, and he had nobly discharged his tutelage until such time as Peter had come to full age. His affection for Rosamund was tender as that of a lover, but tempered by a feeling entirely paternal. He went very near to worshipping her, and when all was said, when he had cleared his mind of all dishonest bias, he still found overmuch to

dislike in Oliver Tressilian, and the notion of his becoming Rosamund's husband was repellent.

First of all there was that bad Tressilian blood—notoriously bad, and never more flagrantly displayed than in the case of the late Ralph Tressilian. It was impossible that Oliver should have escaped the taint of it; nor could Sir John perceive any signs that he had done so. He displayed the traditional Tressilian turbulence. He was passionate and brutal, and the pirate's trade to which he had now set his hand was of all trades the one for which he was by nature best equipped. He was harsh and overbearing, impatient of correction and prone to trample other men's feelings underfoot. Was this, he asked himself in all honesty, a mate for Rosamund? Could he entrust her happiness to the care of such a man? Assuredly he could not.

Therefore, being whole again, he went to remonstrate with her as he accounted it his duty and as Master Peter had besought him. Yet knowing the bias that had been his he was careful to understate rather than to overstate his reasons.

"But, Sir John," she protested, "if every man is to be condemned for the sins of his forbears, but few could escape condemnation, and wherever shall you find me a husband deserving your approval?"

"His father...." began Sir John.

"Tell me not of his father, but of himself," she interrupted.

He frowned impatiently—they were sitting in that bower of hers above the river.

"I was coming to 't," he answered, a thought testily, for these interruptions which made him keep to the point robbed him of his best arguments. "However, suffice it that many of his father's vicious qualities he has inherited, as we see in his ways of life; that he has not inherited others only the future can assure us."

"In other words," she mocked him, yet very seriously, "I am to wait until he dies of old age to make quite sure that he has no such sins as must render him an unfitting husband?"

"No, no," he cried. "Good lack! what a perverseness is thine!"

"The perverseness is your own, Sir John. I am but the mirror of it."

He shifted in his chair and grunted. "Be it so, then," he snapped. "We will deal with the qualities that already he displays." And Sir John enumerated them.

"But this is no more than your judgment of him—no more than what you think him."

"'Tis what all the world thinks him."

"But I shall not marry a man for what others think of him, but for what I think of him myself. And in my view you cruelly malign him. I discover no such qualities in Sir Oliver."

"'Tis that you should be spared such a discovery that I am beseeching you not to wed him."

"Yet unless I wed him I shall never make such a discovery; and until I make it I shall ever continue to love him and to desire to wed him. Is all my life to be spent so?" She laughed outright, and came to stand beside him. She put an arm about his neck as she might have put it about the neck of her father, as she had been in the habit of doing any day in these past ten years—and thereby made him feel himself to have reached an unconscionable age. With her hand she rubbed his brow.

"Why, here are wicked wrinkles of ill-humour," she cried to him. "You are all undone, and by a woman's wit, and you do not like it."

"I am undone by a woman's wilfulness, by a woman's headstrong resolve not to see."

"You have naught to show me, Sir John."

"Naught? Is all that I have said naught?"

"Words are not things; judgments are not facts. You say that he is so, and so and so. But when I ask you upon what facts you judge him, your only answer is that you think him to be what you say he is. Your thoughts may be honest, Sir John, but your logic is contemptible." And she laughed again at his gaping discomfiture. "Come, now, deal like an honest upright judge, and tell me one act of his—one thing that he has ever done and of which you have sure knowledge—that will bear him out to be what you say he is. Now, Sir John!"

He looked up at her impatiently. Then, at last he smiled.

"Rogue!" he cried—and upon a distant day he was to bethink him of those words. "If ever he be brought to judgment I can desire him no better advocate than thou."

Thereupon following up her advantage swiftly, she kissed him. "Nor could I desire him a more honest judge than you."

What was the poor man to do thereafter? What he did. Live up to her pronouncement, and go forthwith to visit Sir Oliver and compose their quarrel.

The acknowledgment of his fault was handsomely made, and Sir Oliver received it in a spirit no less handsome. But when Sir John came to the matter of Mistress Rosamund he was, out of his sense of duty to her, less generous. He announced that since he could not bring himself to look upon Sir Oliver as a suitable husband for her, nothing that he had now said must mislead Sir Oliver into supposing him a consenting party to any such union.

"But that," he added, "is not to say that I oppose it. I disapprove, but I stand aside. Until she is of full age her brother will refuse his sanction. After that, the matter will concern neither him nor myself."

"I hope," said Sir Oliver, "he will take as wise a view. But whatever view he takes will be no matter. For the rest, Sir John, I thank you for your frankness, and I rejoice to know that if I may not count you for my friend, at least I need not reckon you among my enemies."

But if Sir John was thus won round to a neutral attitude, Master Peter's rancour abated nothing; rather it increased each day, and presently there came another matter to feed it, a matter of which Sir Oliver had no suspicion.

He knew that his brother Lionel rode almost daily to Malpas, and he knew the object of those daily rides. He knew of the lady who kept a sort of court there for the rustic bucks of Truro, Penryn, and Helston, and he knew something of the ill-repute that had attached to her in town—a repute, in fact, which had been the cause of her withdrawal into the country. He told his brother some frank and ugly truths, concerning her, by way of warning him, and therein, for the first time, the twain went very near to quarrelling.

After that he mentioned her no more. He knew that in his indolent way Lionel could be headstrong, and he knew human nature well enough to be convinced that interference here would but set up a breach between himself and his brother without in the least achieving its real object. So Oliver shrugged re-signedly, and held his peace.

There he left the affair, nor ever spoke again of Malpas and the siren who presided there. And meanwhile the autumn faded into winter, and with the coming of stormy weather Sir Oliver and Rosamund had fewer opportunities of meeting. To Godolphin Court he would not go since she did not desire it; and himself he deemed it best to remain away since otherwise he must risk a quarrel with its

master, who had forbidden him the place. In those days he saw Peter Godolphin but little, and on the rare occasions when they did meet they passed each other with a very meagre salute.

Sir Oliver was entirely happy, and men noticed how gentler were his accents, how sunnier had become a countenance that they had known for haughty and forbidding. He waited for his coming happiness with the confidence of an immortal in the future. Patience was all the service Fate asked of him, and he gave that service blithely, depending upon the reward that soon now would be his own. Indeed, the year drew near its close; and ere another winter should come round Penarrow House would own a mistress. That to him seemed as inevitable as the season itself. And yet for all his supreme confidence, for all his patience and the happiness he culled from it, there were moments when he seemed oppressed by some elusive sense of overhanging doom, by some subconsciousness of an evil in the womb of Destiny. Did he challenge his oppression, did he seek to translate it into terms of reason, he found nothing upon which his wits could fasten—and he came ever to conclude that it was his very happiness by its excessiveness that was oppressing him, giving him at times that sense of premonitory weight about the heart as if to check its joyous soarings.

One day, a week from Christmas, he had occasion to ride to Helston on some trifling affair. For half a week a blizzard had whirled about the coast, and he had been kept chafing indoors what time layer upon layer of snow was spread upon the countryside. On the fourth day, the storm being spent, the sun came forth, the skies were swept clear of clouds and all the countryside lay robed in a sun-drenched, dazzling whiteness. Sir Oliver called for his horse and rode forth alone through the crisp snow. He turned homeward very early in the afternoon, but when a couple of miles from Helston he found that his horse had cast a shoe. He dismounted, and bridle over arm tramped on through the sunlit vale between the heights of Pendennis

and Arwenack, singing as he went. He came thus to Smithick and the door of the forge. About it stood a group of fishermen and rustics, for, in the absence of any inn just there, this forge was ever a point of congregation. In addition to the rustics and an itinerant merchant with his pack-horses, there were present Sir Andrew Flack, the parson from Penryn, and Master Gregory Baine, one of the Justices from the neighbourhood of Truro. Both were well known to Sir Oliver, and he stood in friendly gossip with them what time he waited for his horse.

It was all very unfortunate, from the casting of that shoe to the meeting with those gentlemen; for as Sir Oliver stood there, down the gentle slope from Arwenack rode Master Peter Godolphin.

It was said afterwards by Sir Andrew and Master Baine that Master Peter appeared to have been carousing, so flushed was his face, so unnatural the brightness of his eye, so thick his speech and so extravagant and foolish what he said. There can be little doubt that it was so. He was addicted to Canary, and so indeed was Sir John Killigrew, and he had been dining with Sir John. He was of those who turn quarrelsome in wine—which is but another way of saying that when the wine was in and the restraint out, his natural humour came uppermost untrammelled. The sight of Sir Oliver standing there gave the lad precisely what he needed to indulge that evil humour of his, and he may have been quickened in his purpose by the presence of those other gentlemen. In his half-fuddled state of mind he may have recalled that once he had struck Sir Oliver and Sir Oliver had laughed and told him that none would believe it.

He drew rein suddenly as he came abreast of the group, so suddenly that he pulled his horse until it almost sat down like a cat; yet he retained his saddle. Then he came through the snow that was all squelched and mudded just about the forge, and leered at Sir Oliver.

"I am from Arwenack," he announced unnecessarily. "We have been talking of you."

"You could have had no better subject of discourse," said Sir Oliver, smiling, for all that his eyes were hard and something scared—though his fears did not concern himself.

"Marry, you are right; you make an engrossing topic—you and your debauched father."

"Sir," replied Sir Oliver, "once already have I deplored your mother's utter want of discretion."

The words were out of him in a flash under the spur of the gross insult flung at him, uttered in the momentary blind rage aroused by that inflamed and taunting face above him. No sooner were they sped than he repented them, the more bitterly because they were greeted by a guffaw from the rustics. He would have given half his fortune in that moment to have recalled them.

Master Godolphin's face had changed as utterly as if he had removed a mask. From flushed that it had been it was livid now and the eyes were blazing, the mouth twitching. Thus a moment he glowered upon his enemy. Then standing in his stirrups he swung aloft his whip.

"You dog!" he cried, in a snarling sob. "You dog!" And his lash came down and cut a long red wheal across Sir Oliver's dark face.

With cries of dismay and anger the others, the parson, the Justice and the rustics got between the pair, for Sir Oliver was looking very wicked, and all the world knew him for a man to be feared.

"Master Godolphin, I cry shame upon you," ex-claimed the parson. "If evil comes of this I shall testify to the grossness of your aggression. Get you gone from here!"

"Go to the devil, sir," said Master Godolphin thickly. "Is my mother's name to be upon the lips of that bastard? By God, man, the matter

rests not here. He shall send his friends to me, or I will horse-whip him every time we meet. You hear, Sir Oliver?"

Sir Oliver made him no reply.

"You hear?" he roared. "There is no Sir John Killigrew this time upon whom you can shift the quarrel. Come you to me and get the punishment of which that whiplash is but an earnest." Then with a thick laugh he drove spurs into his horse's flanks, so furiously that he all but sent the parson and another sprawling.

"Stay but a little while for me," roared Sir Oliver after him. "You'll ride no more, my drunken fool!"

And in a rage he bellowed for his horse, flinging off the parson and Master Baine, who endeavoured to detain and calm him. He vaulted to the saddle when the nag was brought him, and whirled away in furious pursuit.

The parson looked at the Justice and the Justice shrugged, his lips tight-pressed.

"The young fool is drunk," said Sir Andrew, shaking his white head. "He's in no case to meet his Maker."

"Yet he seems very eager," quoth Master Justice Baine. "I doubt I shall hear more of the matter." He turned and looked into the forge where the bellows now stood idle, the smith himself grimy and aproned in leather in the doorway, listening to the rustics account of the happening. Master Baine it seems had a taste for analogies. "Faith," he said, "the place was excellently well chosen. They have forged here to-day a sword which it will need blood to temper."

CHAPTER IV. THE INTERVENER

The parson had notions of riding after Sir Oliver, and begged Master Baine to join him. But the Justice looked down his long nose and opined that no good purpose was to be served; that Tressilians were ever wild and bloody men; and that an angry Tressilian was a thing to be avoided. Sir Andrew, who was far from valorous, thought there might be wisdom in the Justice's words, and remembered that he had troubles enough of his own with a froward wife without taking up the burdens of others. Master Godolphin and Sir Oliver between them, quoth the justice, had got up this storm of theirs. A God's name let them settle it, and if in the settling they should cut each other's throats haply the countryside would be well rid of a brace of turbulent fellows. The pedlar deemed them a couple of madmen, whose ways were beyond the understanding of a sober citizen. The others—the fishermen and the rustics—had not the means to follow even had they had the will.

They dispersed to put abroad the news of that short furious quarrel and to prophesy that blood would be let in the adjusting of it. This prognostication they based entirely upon their knowledge of the short Tressilian way. But it was a matter in which they were entirely wrong. It is true that Sir Oliver went galloping along that road that follows the Penryn river and that he pounded over the bridge in the town of Penryn in Master Godolphin's wake with murder in his heart. Men who saw him riding wildly thus with the red wheal across his white furious face said that he looked a very devil.

He crossed the bridge at Penryn a half-hour after sunset, as dusk

was closing into night, and it may be that the sharp, frosty air had a hand in the cooling of his blood. For as he reached the river's eastern bank he slackened his breakneck pace, even as he slackened the angry galloping of his thoughts. The memory of that oath he had sworn three months ago to Rosamund smote him like a physical blow. It checked his purpose, and, reflecting this, his pace fell to an amble. He shivered to think how near he had gone to wrecking all the happiness that lay ahead of him. What was a boy's whiplash, that his resentment of it; should set all his future life in jeopardy? Even though men should call him a coward for submitting to it and leaving the insult unavenged, what should that matter? Moreover, upon the body of him who did so proclaim him he could brand the lie of a charge so foolish. Sir Oliver raised his eyes to the deep sapphire dome of heaven where an odd star was glittering frostily, and thanked God from a swelling heart that he had not overtaken Peter Godolphin whilst his madness was upon him.

A mile or so below Penryn, he turned up the road that ran down to the ferry there, and took his way home over the shoulder of the hill with a slack rein. It was not his usual way. He was wont ever to go round by Trefusis Point that he might take a glimpse at the walls of the house that harboured Rosamund and a glance at the window of her bower. But to-night he thought the shorter road over the hill would be the safer way. If he went by Godolphin Court he might chance to meet Peter again, and his past anger warned him against courting such a meeting, warned him to avoid it lest evil should betide. Indeed, so imperious was the warning, and such were his fears of himself after what had just passed, that he resolved to leave Penarrow on the next day. Whither he would go he did not then determine. He might repair to London, and he might even go upon another cruise—an idea which he had lately dismissed under Rosamund's earnest intercession. But it was imperative that he should quit the neighbourhood, and place a distance between Peter Godolphin and himself until such time as he might take Rosamund to wife. Eight months or so of exile; but what

matter? Better so than that he should be driven into some deed that would compel him to spend his whole lifetime apart from her. He would write, and she would understand and approve when he told her what had passed that day.

The resolve was firmly implanted in him by the time he reached Penarrow, and he felt himself uplifted by it and by the promise it afforded him that thus his future happiness would be assured.

Himself he stabled his horse; for of the two grooms he kept, one had by his leave set out yesterday to spend Christmas in Devon with his parents, the other had taken a chill and had been ordered to bed that very day by Sir Oliver, who was considerate with those that served him. In the dining-room he found supper spread, and a great log fire blazed in the enormous cowed fire-place, diffusing a pleasant warmth through the vast room and flickering ruddily upon the trophies of weapons that adorned the walls, upon the tapestries and the portraits of dead Tressilians. Hearing his step, old Nicholas entered bearing a great candle-branch which he set upon the table.

"You'm late, Sir Oliver," said the servant, "and Master Lionel bain't home yet neither."

Sir Oliver grunted and scowled as he crunched a log and set it sizzling under his wet heel. He thought of Malpas and cursed Lionel's folly, as, without a word, he loosed his cloak and flung it on an oaken coffer by the wall where already he had cast his hat. Then he sat down, and Nicholas came forward to draw off his boots.

When that was done and the old servant stood up again, Sir Oliver shortly bade him to serve supper.

"Master Lionel cannot be long now," said he. "And give me to drink, Nick. 'Tis what I most require."

"I've brewed ee a posset o' canary sack," announced Nicholas;

"there'm no better supping o' a frosty winter's night, Sir Oliver."

He departed to return presently with a black jack that was steaming fragrantly. He found his master still in the same attitude, staring at the fire, and frowning darkly. Sir Oliver's thoughts were still of his brother and Malpas, and so insistent were they that his own concerns were for the moment quite neglected; he was considering whether it was not his duty, after all, to attempt a word of remonstrance. At length he rose with a sigh and got to table. There he bethought him of his sick groom, and asked Nicholas for news of him. Nicholas reported the fellow to be much as he had been, whereupon Sir Oliver took up a cup and brimmed it with the steaming posset.

"Take him that," he said. "There's no better medicine for such an ailment."

Outside fell a clatter of hooves.

"Here be Master Lionel at last," said the servant.

"No doubt," agreed Sir Oliver. "No need to stay for him. Here is all he needs. Carry that to Tom ere it cools."

It was his object to procure the servant's absence when Lionel should arrive, resolved as he was to greet him with a sound rating for his folly. Reflection had brought him the assurance that this was become his duty in view of his projected absence from Penarrow; and in his brother's interest he was determined not to spare him.

He took a deep draught of the posset, and as he set it down he heard Lionel's step without. Then the door was flung open, and his brother stood on the threshold a moment at gaze.

Sir Oliver looked round with a scowl, the well-considered reproof already on his lips.

"So...." he began, and got no further. The sight that met his eyes

drove the ready words from his lips and mind; instead it was with a sharp gasp of dismay that he came immediately to his feet. "Lionel!"

Lionel lurched in, closed the door, and shot home one of its bolts. Then he leaned against it, facing his brother again. He was deathly pale, with great dark stains under his eyes; his ungloved right hand was pressed to his side, and the fingers of it were all smeared with blood that was still oozing and dripping from between them. Over his yellow doublet on the right side there was a spreading dark stain whose nature did not intrigue Sir Oliver a moment.

"My God!" he cried, and ran to his brother. "What's happened, Lal? Who has done this?"

"Peter Godolphin," came the answer from lips that writhed in a curious smile.

Never a word said Sir Oliver, but he set his teeth and clenched his hands until the nails cut into his palms. Then he put an arm about this lad he loved above all save one in the whole world, and with anguish in his mind he supported him forward to the fire. There Lionel dropped to the chair that Sir Oliver had lately occupied.

"What is your hurt, lad? Has it gone deep?" he asked, in terror almost.

"'Tis naught—a flesh wound; but I have lost a mort of blood. I thought I should have been drained or ever I got me home."

With fearful speed Sir Oliver drew his dagger and ripped away doublet, vest, and shirt, laying bare the lad's white flesh. A moment's examination, and he breathed more freely.

"Art a very babe, Lal," he cried in his relief. "To ride without thought to stanch so simple a wound, and so lose all this blood—bad Tressilian blood though it be." He laughed in the immensity of his

reaction from that momentary terror. "Stay thou there whilst I call Nick to help us dress this scratch."

"No, no!" There was note of sudden fear in the lad's voice, and his hand clutched at his brother's sleeve. "Nick must not know. None must know, or I am undone else."

Sir Oliver stared, bewildered. Lionel smiled again that curious twisted, rather frightened smile.

"I gave better than I took, Noll," said he. "Master Godolphin is as cold by now as the snow on which I left him."

His brother's sudden start and the fixed stare from out of his slowly paling face scared Lionel a little. He observed, almost subconsciously, the dull red wheal that came into prominence as the colour faded out of Sir Oliver's face, yet never thought to ask how it came there. His own affairs possessed him too completely.

"What's this?" quoth Oliver at last, hoarsely.

Lionel dropped his eyes, unable longer to meet a glance that was becoming terrible.

"He would have it," he growled almost sullenly, answering the reproach that was written in every line of his brother's taut body. "I had warned him not to cross my path. But to-night I think some madness had seized upon him. He affronted me, Noll; he said things which it was beyond human power to endure, and...." He shrugged to complete his sentence.

"Well, well," said Oliver in a small voice. "First let us tend this wound of yours."

"Do not call Nick," was the other's swift admonition. "Don't you see, Noll?" he explained in answer to the inquiry of his brother's stare, "don't you see that we fought there almost in the dark and without

witnesses. It..." he swallowed, "it will be called murder, fair fight though it was; and should it be discovered that it was I..." He shivered and his glance grew wild; his lips twitched.

"I see," said Oliver, who understood at last, and he added bitterly: "You fool!"

"I had no choice," protested Lionel. "He came at me with his drawn sword. Indeed, I think he was half-drunk. I warned him of what must happen to the other did either of us fall, but he bade me not concern myself with the fear of any such consequences to himself. He was full of foul words of me and you and all whoever bore our name. He struck me with the flat of his blade and threatened to run me through as I stood unless I drew to defend myself. What choice had I? I did not mean to kill him—as God's my witness, I did not, Noll."

Without a word Oliver turned to a side-table, where stood a metal basin and ewer. He poured water, then came in the same silence to treat his brother's wound. The tale that Lionel told made blame impossible, at least from Oliver. He had but to recall the mood in which he himself had ridden after Peter Godolphin; he had but to remember, that only the consideration of Rosamund—only, indeed, the consideration of his future—had set a curb upon his own bloodthirsty humour.

When he had washed the wound he fetched some table linen from a press and ripped it into strips with his dagger; he threaded out one of these and made a preliminary crisscross of the threads across the lips of the wound—for the blade had gone right through the muscles of the breast, grazing the ribs; these threads would help the formation of a clot. Then with the infinite skill and cunning acquired in the course of his rovings he proceeded to the bandaging.

That done, he opened the window and flung out the blood-tinted water. The cloths with which he had mopped the wound and all other

similar evidences of the treatment he cast upon the fire. He must remove all traces even from the eyes of Nicholas. He had the most implicit trust in the old servant's fidelity. But the matter was too grave to permit of the slightest risk. He realized fully the justice of Lionel's fears that however fair the fight might have been, a thing done thus in secret must be accounted murder by the law.

Bidding Lionel wrap himself in his cloak, Sir Oliver unbarred the door, and went upstairs in quest of a fresh shirt and doublet for his brother. On the landing he met Nicholas descending. He held him a moment in talk of the sick man above, and outwardly at least he was now entirely composed. He dispatched him upstairs again upon a trumped-up errand that must keep him absent for some little time, whilst himself he went to get the things he needed.

He returned below with them, and when he had assisted his brother into fresh garments with as little movement as possible so as not to disturb his dressing of the wound or set it bleeding afresh, he took the blood-stained doublet, vest, and shirt which he had ripped and flung them, too, into the great fire.

When some moments later Nicholas entered the vast room he found the brothers sitting composedly at table. Had he faced Lionel he would have observed little amiss with him beyond the deep pallor of his face. But he did not even do so much. Lionel sat with his back to the door and the servant's advance into the room was checked by Sir Oliver with the assurance that they did not require him. Nicholas withdrew again, and the brothers were once more alone.

Lionel ate very sparingly. He thirsted and would have emptied the measure of posset, but that Sir Oliver restrained him, and refused him anything but water lest he should contract a fever. Such a sparing meal as they made—for neither had much appetite—was made in silence. At last Sir Oliver rose, and with slow, heavy steps, suggestive of his humour, he crossed to the fire-place. He threw fresh logs on the

blaze, and took from the tall mantelshelf his pipe and a leaden jar of tobacco. He filled the pipe pensively, then with the short iron tongs seized a fragment of glowing wood and applied it to the herb.

He returned to the table, and standing over his brother, he broke at last the silence that had now endured some time.

"What," he asked gruffly, "was the cause of your quarrel?"

Lionel started and shrank a little; between finger and thumb he kneaded a fragment of bread, his eyes upon it. "I scarce know," he replied.

"Lal, that is not the truth."

"How?"

"'Tis not the truth. I am not to be put off with such an answer. Yourself you said that you had warned him not to cross your path. What path was in your mind?"

Lionel leaned his elbows on the table and took his head in his hands. Weak from loss of blood, overwrought mentally as well, in a state of revulsion and reaction also from the pursuit which had been the cause of to-night's tragic affair, he had not strength to withhold the confidence his brother asked. On the contrary, it seemed to him that in making such a confidence, he would find a haven and refuge in Sir Oliver.

"'Twas that wanton at Malpas was the cause of all," he complained. And Sir Oliver's eye flashed at the words. "I deemed her quite other; I was a fool, a fool! I"—he choked, and a sob shook him—"I thought she loved me. I would have married her, I would so, by God."

Sir Oliver swore softly under his breath.

"I believed her pure and good, and...." He checked. "After all, who

am I to say even now that she was not? 'Twas no fault of hers. 'Twas he, that foul dog Godolphin, who perverted her. Until he came all was well between us. And then...."

"I see," said Sir Oliver quietly. "I think you have something for which to thank him, if he revealed to you the truth of that strumpet's nature. I would have warned thee, lad. But... Perhaps I have been weak in that."

"It was not so; it was not she...."

"I say it was, and if I say so I am to be believed, Lionel. I'd smirch no woman's reputation without just cause. Be very sure of that."

Lionel stared up at him. "O God!" he cried presently, "I know not what to believe. I am a shuttle-cock flung this way and that way."

"Believe me," said Sir Oliver grimly. "And set all doubts to rest." Then he smiled. "So that was the virtuous Master Peter's secret pastime, eh? The hypocrisy of man! There is no plumbing the endless depths of it!"

He laughed outright, remembering all the things that Master Peter had said of Ralph Tressilian—delivering himself as though he were some chaste and self-denying anchorite. Then on that laugh he caught his breath quite suddenly. "Would she know?" he asked fearfully. "Would that harlot know, would she suspect that 'twas your hand did this?"

"Aye—would she," replied the other. "I told her to-night, when she flouted me and spoke of him, that I went straight to find him and pay the score between us. I was on my way to Godolphin Court when I came upon him in the park."

"Then you lied to me again, Lionel. For you said 'twas he attacked you."

"And so he did." Lionel countered instantly. "He never gave me time to speak, but flung down from his horse and came at me snarling like a cross-grained mongrel. Oh, he was as ready for the fight as I—as eager."

"But the woman at Malpas knows," said Sir Oliver gloomily. "And if she tells...."

"She'll not," cried Lionel. "She dare not for her reputation's sake."

"Indeed, I think you are right," agreed his brother with relief. "She dare not for other reasons, when I come to think of it. Her reputation is already such, and so well detested is she that were it known she had been the cause, however indirect, of this, the countryside would satisfy certain longings that it entertains concerning her. You are sure none saw you either going or returning?"

"None."

Sir Oliver strode the length of the room and back, pulling at his pipe. "All should be well, then, I think," said he at last. "You were best abed. I'll carry you thither."

He took up his stripling brother in his powerful arms and bore him upstairs as though he were a babe.

When he had seen him safely disposed for slumber, he returned below, shut the door in the hall, drew up the great oaken chair to the fire, and sat there far into the night smoking and thinking.

He had said to Lionel that all should be well. All should be well for Lionel. But what of himself with the burden of this secret on his soul? Were the victim another than Rosamund's brother the matter would have plagued him but little. The fact that Godolphin was slain, it must be confessed, was not in itself the source of his oppression. Godolphin had more than deserved his end, and he would have come

by it months ago at Sir Oliver's own hand but for the fact that he was Rosamund's brother, as we know. There was the rub, the bitter, cruel rub. Her own brother had fallen by the hand of his. She loved her brother more than any living being next to himself, just as he loved Lionel above any other but herself. The pain that must be hers he knew; he experienced some of it in anticipation, participating it because it was hers and because all things that were hers he must account in some measure his own.

He rose up at last, cursing that wanton at Malpas who had come to fling this fresh and terrible difficulty where already he had to face so many. He stood leaning upon the overmantel, his foot upon one of the dogs of the fender, and considered what to do. He must bear his burden in silence, that was all. He must keep this secret even from Rosamund. It split his heart to think that he must practise this deceit with her. But naught else was possible short of relinquishing her, and that was far beyond his strength.

The resolve adopted, he took up a taper and went off to bed.

CHAPTER V. THE BUCKLER

It was old Nicholas who brought the news next morning to the brothers as they were breaking their fast.

Lionel should have kept his bed that day, but dared not, lest the fact should arouse suspicion. He had a little fever, the natural result both of his wound and of his loss of blood; he was inclined to welcome rather than deplore it, since it set a flush on cheeks that otherwise must have looked too pale.

So leaning upon his brother's arm he came down to a breakfast of herrings and small ale before the tardy sun of that December morning was well risen.

Nicholas burst in upon them with a white face and shaking limbs. He gasped out his tale of the event in a voice of terror, and both brothers affected to be shocked, dismayed and incredulous. But the worst part of that old man's news, the true cause of his terrible agitation, was yet to be announced.

"And they do zay," he cried with anger quivering through his fear, "they do zay that it were you that killed he, Sir Oliver."

"I?" quoth Sir Oliver, staring, and suddenly like a flood there burst upon his mind a hundred reasons overlooked until this moment, that inevitably must urge the countryside to this conclusion, and to this conclusion only. "Where heard you that foul lie?"

In the tumult of his mind he never heeded what answer was returned by Nicholas. What could it matter where the fellow had heard the thing; by now it would be the accusation on the lips of every man.

There was one course to take and he must take it instantly—as he had taken it once before in like case. He must straight to Rosamund to forestall the tale that others would carry to her. God send he did not come too late already.

He stayed for no more than to get his boots and hat, then to the stables for a horse, and he was away over the short mile that divided Penarrow from Godolphin Court, going by bridle and track meadow straight to his goal. He met none until he fetched up in the courtyard at Godolphin Court. Thence a babble of excited voices had reached him as he approached. But at sight of him there fell a general silence, ominous and staring. A dozen men or more were assembled there, and their eyes considered him first with amazement and curiosity, then with sullen anger.

He leapt down from his saddle, and stood a moment waiting for one of the three Godolphin grooms he had perceived in that assembly to take his reins. Seeing that none stirred—

"How now?" he cried. "Does no one wait here? Hither, sirrah, and hold my horse."

The groom addressed hesitated a moment, then, under the stare of Sir Oliver's hard, commanding eye, he shuffled sullenly forward to do as he was bid. A murmur ran through the group. Sir Oliver flashed a glance upon it, and every tongue trembled into silence.

In that silence he strode up the steps, and entered the rush-strewn hall. As he vanished he heard the hubbub behind him break out anew, fiercer than it had been before. But he nothing heeded it.

He found himself face to face with a servant, who shrank before him, staring as those in the courtyard had stared. His heart sank. It was plain that he came a little late already; that the tale had got there ahead of him.

"Where is your mistress?" said he.

"I...I will tell her you are here, Sir Oliver," the man replied in a voice that faltered; and he passed through a doorway on the right. Sir Oliver stood a moment tapping his boots with his whip, his face pale, a deep line between his brows. Then the man reappeared, closing the door after him.

"Mistress Rosamund bids you depart, sir. She will not see you."

A moment Sir Oliver scanned the servant's face—or appeared to scan it, for it is doubtful if he saw the fellow at all. Then for only answer he strode forward towards the door from which the man had issued. The servant set his back to it, his face resolute.

"Sir Oliver, my mistress will not see you."

"Out of my way!" he muttered in his angry, contemptuous fashion, and as the man persistent in his duty stood his ground, Sir Oliver took him by the breast of his jacket, heaved him aside and went in.

She was standing in mid-apartment, dressed by an odd irony all in bridal white, that yet was not as white as was her face. Her eyes looked like two black stains, solemn and haunting as they fastened up on this intruder who would not be refused. Her lips parted, but she had no word for him. She just stared in a horror that routed all his audacity and checked the masterfulness of his advance. At last he spoke.

"I see that you have heard," said he, "the lie that runs the countryside. That is evil enough. But I see that you have lent an ear to it; and that is worse."

She continued to regard him with a cold look of loathing, this child that but two days ago had lain against his heart gazing up at him in trust and adoration.

"Rosamund!" he cried, and approached her by another step.

"Rosamund! I am here to tell you that it is a lie."

"You had best go," she said, and her voice had in it a quality that made him tremble.

"Go?" he echoed stupidly. "You bid me go? You will not hear me?"

"I consented to hear you more than once; refused to hear others who knew better than I, and was heedless of their warnings. There is no more to be said between us. I pray God that they may take and hang you."

He was white to the lips, and for the first time in his life he knew fear and felt his great limbs trembling under him.

"They may hang me and welcome since you believe this thing. They could not hurt me more than you are doing, nor by hanging me could they deprive me of aught I value, since your faith in me is a thing to be blown upon by the first rumour of the countryside."

He saw the pale lips twist themselves into a dreadful smile. "There is more than rumour, I think," said she. "There is more than all your lies will ever serve to cloak."

"My lies?" he cried. "Rosamund, I swear to you by my honour that I have had no hand in the slaying of Peter. May God rot me where I stand if this be not true!"

"It seems," said a harsh voice behind him, "that you fear God as little as aught else."

He wheeled sharply to confront Sir John Killigrew, who had entered after him.

"So," he said slowly, and his eyes grew hard and bright as agates, "this is your work." And he waved a hand towards Rosamund. It was plain to what he alluded.

"My work?" quoth Sir John. He closed the door, and advanced into the room. "Sir, it seems your audacity, your shamelessness, transcends all bounds. Your...."

"Have done with that," Sir Oliver interrupted him and smote his great fist upon the table. He was suddenly swept by a gust of passion "Leave words to fools, Sir John, and criticisms to those that can defend them better."

"Aye, you talk like a man of blood. You come hectoring it here in the very house of the dead—in the very house upon which you have cast this blight of sorrow and murder...."

"Have done, I say, or murder there will be!"

His voice was a roar, his mien terrific. And bold man though Sir John was, he recoiled. Instantly Sir Oliver had conquered himself again. He swung to Rosamund. "Ah, forgive me!" he pleaded. "I am mad—stark mad with anguish at the thing imputed. I have not loved your brother, it is true. But as I swore to you, so have I done. I have taken blows from him, and smiled; but yesterday in a public place he affronted me, lashed me across the face with his riding-whip, as I still bear the mark. The man who says I were not justified in having killed him for it is a liar and a hypocrite. Yet the thought of you, Rosamund, the thought that he was your brother sufficed to quench the rage in which he left me. And now that by some grim mischance he has met his death, my recompense for all my patience, for all my thought for you is that I am charged with slaying him, and that you believe this charge."

"She has no choice," rasped Killigrew.

"Sir John," he cried, "I pray you do not meddle with her choice. That you believe it, marks you for a fool, and a fool's counsel is a rotten staff to lean upon at any time. Why God o' mercy! assume that I

desired to take satisfaction for the affront he had put upon me; do you know so little of men, and of me of all men, that you suppose I should go about my vengeance in this hole-and-corner fashion to set a hangman's noose about my neck. A fine vengeance that, as God lives! Was it so I dealt with you, Sir John, when you permitted your tongue to wag too freely, as you have yourself confessed? Heaven's light, man; take a proper view; consider was this matter likely. I take it you are a more fearsome antagonist than was ever poor Peter Godolphin, yet when I sought satisfaction of you I sought it boldly and openly, as is my way. When we measured swords in your park at Arwenack we did so before witnesses in proper form, that the survivor might not be troubled with the Justices. You know me well, and what manner of man I am with my weapons. Should I not have done the like by Peter if I had sought his life? Should I not have sought it in the same open fashion, and so killed him at my pleasure and leisure, and without risk or reproach from any?"

Sir John was stricken thoughtful. Here was logic hard and clear as ice; and the knight of Arwenack was no fool. But whilst he stood frowning and perplexed at the end of that long tirade, it was Rosamund who gave Sir Oliver his answer.

"You ran no risk of reproach from any, do you say?"

He turned, and was abashed. He knew the thought that was running in her mind.

"You mean," he said slowly, gently, his accents charged with reproachful incredulity, "that I am so base and false that I could in this fashion do what I dared not for your sake do openly? 'Tis what you mean. Rosamund! I burn with shame for you that you can think such thoughts of one whom... whom you professed to love."

Her coldness fell from her. Under the lash of his bitter, half-scornful accents, her anger mounted, whelming for a moment even her

anguish in her brother's death.

"You false deceiver!" she cried. "There are those who heard you vow his death. Your very words have been reported to me. And from where he lay they found a trail of blood upon the snow that ran to your own door. Will you still lie?"

They saw the colour leave his face. They saw his arms drop limply to his sides, and his eyes dilate with obvious sudden fear.

"A... a trail of blood?" he faltered stupidly.

"Aye, answer that!" cut in Sir John, fetched suddenly from out his doubts by that reminder.

Sir Oliver turned upon Killigrew again. The knight's words restored to him the courage of which Rosamund's had bereft him. With a man he could fight; with a man there was no need to mince his words.

"I cannot answer it," he said, but very firmly, in a tone that brushed aside all implications. "If you say it was so, so it must have been. Yet when all is said, what does it prove? Does it set it beyond doubt that it was I who killed him? Does it justify the woman who loved me to believe me a murderer and something worse?" He paused, and looked at her again, a world of reproach in his glance. She had sunk to a chair, and rocked there, her fingers locking and interlocking, her face a mask of pain unutterable.

"Can you suggest what else it proves, sir?" quoth Sir John, and there was doubt in his voice.

Sir Oliver caught the note of it, and a sob broke from him.

"O God of pity!" he cried out. "There is doubt in your voice, and there is none in hers. You were my enemy once, and have since been in a mistrustful truce with me, yet you can doubt that I did this thing. But she... she who loved me has no room for any doubt!"

"Sir Oliver," she answered him, "the thing you have done has broken quite my heart. Yet knowing all the taunts by which you were brought to such a deed I could have forgiven it, I think, even though I could no longer be your wife; I could have forgiven it, I say, but for the baseness of your present denial."

He looked at her, white-faced an instant, then turned on his heel and made for the door. There he paused.

"Your meaning is quite plain," said he. "It is your wish that I shall take my trial for this deed." He laughed. "Who will accuse me to the Justices? Will you, Sir John?"

"If Mistress Rosamund so desires me," replied the knight.

"Ha! Be it so. But do not think I am the man to suffer myself to be sent to the gallows upon such paltry evidence as satisfies that lady. If any accuser comes to bleat of a trail of blood reaching to my door, and of certain words I spoke yesterday in anger, I will take my trial—but it shall be trial by battle upon the body of my accuser. That is my right, and I will have every ounce of it. Do you doubt how God will pronounce? I call upon him solemnly to pronounce between me and such an one. If I am guilty of this thing may He wither my arm when I enter the lists."

"Myself I will accuse you," came Rosamund's dull voice. "And if you will, you may claim your rights against me and butcher me as you butchered him."

"God forgive you, Rosamund!" said Sir Oliver, and went out.

He returned home with hell in his heart. He knew not what the future might hold in store for him; but such was his resentment against Rosamund that there was no room in his bosom for despair. They should not hang him. He would fight them tooth and claw, and yet

Lionel should not suffer. He would take care of that. And then the thought of Lionel changed his mood a little. How easily could he have shattered their accusation, how easily have brought her to her proud knees imploring pardon of him! By a word he could have done it, yet he feared lest that word must jeopardize his brother.

In the calm, still watches of that night, as he lay sleepless upon his bed and saw things without heat, there crept a change into his mental attitude. He reviewed all the evidence that had led her to her conclusions, and he was forced to confess that she was in some measure justified of them. If she had wronged him, he had wronged her yet more. For years she had listened to all the poisonous things that were said of him by his enemies—and his arrogance had made him not a few. She had disregarded all because she loved him; her relations with her brother had become strained on that account, yet now, all this returned to crush her; repentance played its part in her cruel belief that it was by his hand Peter Godolphin had fallen. It must almost seem to her that in a sense she had been a party to his murder by the headstrong course to which she had kept in loving the man her brother hated.

He saw it now, and was more merciful in judging her. She had been more than human if she had not felt as he now saw that she must feel, and since reactions are to be measured by the mental exaltations from which they spring, so was it but natural that now she must hate him fiercely whom she had loved wellnigh as fiercely.

It was a heavy cross to bear. Yet for Lionel's sake he must bear it with what fortitude he could. Lionel must not be sacrificed to his egoism for a deed that in Lionel he could not account other than justified. He were base indeed did he so much as contemplate such a way of escape as that.

But if he did not contemplate it, Lionel did, and went in terror during those days, a terror that kept him from sleep and so fostered the fever

in him that on the second day after that grim affair he had the look of a ghost, hollow-eyed and gaunt. Sir Oliver remonstrated with him and in such terms as to put heart into him anew. Moreover, there was other news that day to allay his terrors: the Justices, at Truro had been informed of the event and the accusation that was made; but they had refused point-blank to take action in the matter. The reason of it was that one of them was that same Master Anthony Baine who had witnessed the affront offered Sir Oliver. He declared that whatever had happened to Master Godolphin as a consequence was no more than he deserved, no more than he had brought upon himself, and he gave it as his decision that his conscience as a man of honour would not permit him to issue any warrant to the constable.

Sir Oliver received this news from that other witness, the parson, who himself had suffered such rudeness at Godolphin's hands, and who, man of the Gospel and of peace though he was, entirely supported the Justice's decision—or so he declared.

Sir Oliver thanked him, protesting that it was kind in him and in Master Baine to take such a view, but for the rest avowing that he had had no hand in the affair, however much appearances might point to him.

When, however, it came to his knowledge two days later that the whole countryside was in a ferment against Master Baine as a consequence of the attitude he had taken up, Sir Oliver summoned the parson and straightway rode with him to the Justice's house at Truro, there to afford certain evidence which he had withheld from Rosamund and Sir John Killigrew.

"Master Baine," he said, when the three of them were closeted in that gentleman's library, "I have heard of the just and gallant pronouncement you have made, and I am come to thank you and to express my admiration of your courage."

Master Baine bowed gravely. He was a man whom Nature had made grave.

"But since I would not that any evil consequences might attend your action, I am come to lay proof before you that you have acted more rightly even than you think, and that I am not the slayer."

"You are not?" ejaculated Master Baine in amazement.

"Oh, I assure you I use no subterfuge with you, as you shall judge. I have proof to show you, as I say; and I am come to do so now before time might render it impossible. I do not desire it to be made public just yet, Master Baine; but I wish you to draw up some such document as would satisfy the courts at any future time should this matter be taken further, as well it may."

It was a shrewd plea. The proof that was not upon himself was upon Lionel; but time would efface it, and if anon publication were made of what he was now about to show, it would then be too late to look elsewhere.

"I assure you, Sir Oliver, that had you killed him after what happened I could not hold you guilty of having done more than punish a boorish and arrogant offender."

"I know sir. But it was not so. One of the pieces of evidence against me—indeed the chief item—is that from Godolphin's body to my door there was a trail of blood."

The other two grew tensely interested. The parson watched him with unblinking eyes.

"Now it follows logically, I think, inevitably indeed, that the murderer must have been wounded in the encounter. The blood could not possibly have been the victim's, therefore it must have been the slayer's. That the slayer was wounded indeed we know, since there

was blood upon Godolphin's sword. Now, Master Baine, and you, Sir Andrew, shall be witnesses that there is upon my body not so much as a scratch of recent date. I will strip me here as naked as when first I had the mischance to stray into this world, and you shall satisfy yourselves of that. Thereafter I shall beg you, Master Baine, to indite the document I have mentioned." And he removed his doublet as he spoke. "But since I will not give these louts who accuse me so much satisfaction, lest I seem to go in fear of them, I must beg, sirs, that you will keep this matter entirely private until such time as its publication may be rendered necessary by events."

They saw the reasonableness of his proposal, and they consented, still entirely sceptical. But when they had made their examination they were utterly dumbfounded to find all their notions entirely upset. Master Baine, of course, drew up the required document, and signed and sealed it, whilst Sir Andrew added his own signature and seal as witness thereunto.

With this parchment that should be his buckler against any future need, Sir Oliver rode home, uplifted. For once it were safe to do so, that parchment should be spread before the eyes of Sir John Killigrew and Rosamund, and all might yet be well.

CHAPTER VI. JASPER LEIGH

If that Christmas was one of sorrow at Godolphin Court, it was nothing less at Penarrow.

Sir Oliver was moody and silent in those days, given to sit for long hours staring into the heart of the fire and repeating to himself again and again every word of his interview with Rosamund, now in a mood of bitter resentment against her for having so readily believed his guilt, now in a gentler sorrowing humour which made full allowance for the strength of the appearances against him.

His half-brother moved softly about the house now in a sort of self-effacement, never daring to intrude upon Sir Oliver's abstractions. He was well acquainted with their cause. He knew what had happened at Godolphin Court, knew that Rosamund had dismissed Sir Oliver for all time, and his heart smote him to think that he should leave his brother to bear this burden that rightly belonged to his own shoulders.

The thing preyed so much upon his mind that in an expansive moment one evening he gave it tongue.

"Noll," he said, standing beside his brother's chair in the firelit gloom, and resting a hand upon his brother's shoulder, "were it not best to tell the truth?"

Sir Oliver looked up quickly, frowning. "Art mad?" quoth he. "The truth would hang thee, Lal."

"It might not. And in any case you are suffering something worse than hanging. Oh, I have watched you every hour this past week, and I know the pain that abides in you. It is not just." And he insisted—"We

had best tell the truth."

Sir Oliver smiled wistfully. He put out a hand and took his brother's.

"'Tis noble in you to propose it, Lal."

"Not half so noble as it is in you to bear all the suffering for a deed that was my own."

"Bah!" Sir Oliver shrugged impatiently; his glance fell away from Lionel's face and returned to the consideration of the fire. "After all, I can throw off the burden when I will. Such knowledge as that will enhearten a man through any trial."

He had spoken in a harsh, cynical tone, and Lionel had turned cold at his words. He stood a long while in silence there, turning them over in his mind and considering the riddle which they presented him. He thought of asking his brother bluntly for the key to it, for the precise meaning of his disconcerting statement, but courage failed him. He feared lest Sir Oliver should confirm his own dread interpretation of it.

He drew away after a time, and soon after went to bed. For days thereafter the phrase rankled in his mind—"I can throw off the burden when I will." Conviction grew upon him that Sir Oliver meant that he was enheartened by the knowledge that by speaking if he choose he could clear himself. That Sir Oliver would so speak he could not think. Indeed, he was entirely assured that Sir Oliver was very far from intending to throw off his burden. Yet he might come to change his mind. The burden might grow too heavy, his longings for Rosamund too clamorous, his grief at being in her eyes her brother's murderer too overwhelming.

Lionel's soul shuddered to contemplate the consequences to himself. His fears were self-revelatory. He realized how far from sincere had been his proposal that they should tell the truth; he perceived that it had been no more than the emotional outburst of the

moment, a proposal which if accepted he must most bitterly have repented. And then came the reflection that if he were guilty of emotional outbursts that could so outrageously play the traitor to his real desires, were not all men subject to the same? Might not his brother, too, come to fall a prey to one of those moments of mental storm when in a climax of despair he would find his burden altogether too overwhelming and in rebellion cast it from him?

Lionel sought to assure himself that his brother was a man of stern fibres, a man who never lost control of himself. But against this he would argue that what had happened in the past was no guarantee of what might happen in the future; that a limit was set to the endurance of every man be he never so strong, and that it was far from impossible that the limit of Sir Oliver's endurance might be reached in this affair. If that happened in what case should he find himself? The answer to this was a picture beyond his fortitude to contemplate. The danger of his being sent to trial and made to suffer the extreme penalty of the law would be far greater now than if he had spoken at once. The tale he could then have told must have compelled some attention, for he was accounted a man of unsmirched honour and his word must carry some weight. But now none would believe him. They would argue from his silence and from his having suffered his brother to be unjustly accused that he was craven-hearted and dishonourable, and that if he had acted thus it was because he had no good defence to offer for his deed. Not only would he be irrevocably doomed, but he would be doomed with ignominy, he would be scorned by all upright men and become a thing of contempt over whose end not a tear would be shed.

Thus he came to the dread conclusion that in his endeavours to screen himself he had but enmeshed himself the more inextricably. If Oliver but spoke he was lost. And back he came to the question: What assurance had he that Oliver would not speak?

The fear of this from occurring to him occasionally began to haunt him day and night, and for all that the fever had left him and his wound was entirely healed, he remained pale and thin and hollow-eyed. Indeed the secret terror that was in his soul glared out of his eyes at every moment. He grew nervous and would start up at the least sound, and he went now in a perpetual mistrust of Oliver, which became manifest in a curious petulance of which there were outbursts at odd times.

Coming one afternoon into the dining-room, which was ever Sir Oliver's favourite haunt in the mansion of Penarrow, Lionel found his half-brother in that brooding attitude, elbow on knee and chin on palm, staring into the fire. This was so habitual now in Sir Oliver that it had begun to irritate Lionel's tense nerves; it had come to seem to him that in this listlessness was a studied tacit reproach aimed at himself.

"Why do you sit ever thus over the fire like some old crone?" he growled, voicing at last the irritability that so long had been growing in him.

Sir Oliver looked round with mild surprise in his glance. Then from Lionel his eyes travelled to the long windows.

"It rains," he said.

"It was not your wont to be driven to the fireside by rain. But rain or shine 'tis ever the same. You never go abroad."

"To what end?" quoth Sir Oliver, with the same mildness, but a wrinkle of bewilderment coming gradually between his dark brows. "Do you suppose I love to meet lowering glances, to see heads approach one another so that confidential curses of me may be muttered?"

"Ha!" cried Lionel, short and sharp, his sunken eyes blazing suddenly. "It has come to this, then, that having voluntarily done this

thing to shield me you now reproach me with it."

"I?" cried Sir Oliver, aghast.

"Your very words are a reproach. D'ye think I do not read the meaning that lies under them?"

Sir Oliver rose slowly, staring at his brother. He shook his head and smiled.

"Lal, Lal!" he said. "Your wound has left you disordered, boy. With what have I reproached you? What was this hidden meaning of my words? If you will read aright you will see it to be that to go abroad is to involve myself in fresh quarrels, for my mood is become short, and I will not brook sour looks and mutterings. That is all."

He advanced and set his hands upon his brother's shoulders. Holding him so at arm's length he considered him, what time Lionel drooped his head and a slow flush overspread his cheeks. "Dear fool!" he said, and shook him. "What ails you? You are pale and gaunt, and not yourself at all. I have a notion. I'll furnish me a ship and you shall sail with me to my old hunting-grounds. There is life out yonder—life that will restore your vigour and your zest, and perhaps mine as well. How say you, now?"

Lionel looked up, his eye brightening. Then a thought occurred to him; a thought so mean that again the colour flooded into his cheeks, for he was shamed by it. Yet it clung. If he sailed with Oliver, men would say that he was a partner in the guilt attributed to his brother. He knew—from more than one remark addressed him here or there, and left by him uncontradicted—that the belief was abroad on the countryside that a certain hostility was springing up between himself and Sir Oliver on the score of that happening in Godolphin Park. His pale looks and hollow eyes had contributed to the opinion that his brother's sin was weighing heavily upon him. He had ever been

known for a gentle, kindly lad, in all things the very opposite of the turbulent Sir Oliver, and it was assumed that Sir Oliver in his present increasing harshness used his brother ill because the lad would not condone his crime. A deal of sympathy was consequently arising for Lionel and was being testified to him on every hand. Were he to accede to such a proposal as Oliver now made him, assuredly he must jeopardize all that.

He realized to the full the contemptible quality of his thought and hated himself for conceiving it. But he could not shake off its dominion. It was stronger than his will.

His brother observing this hesitation, and misreading it drew him to the fireside and made him sit.

"Listen," he said, as he dropped into the chair opposite. "There is a fine ship standing in the road below, off Smithick. You'll have seen her. Her master is a desperate adventurer named Jasper Leigh, who is to be found any afternoon in the alehouse at Penycumwick. I know him of old, and he and his ship are to be acquired. He is ripe for any venture, from scuttling Spaniards to trading in slaves, and so that the price be high enough we may buy him body and soul. His is a stomach that refuses nothing, so there be money in the venture. So here is ship and master ready found; the rest I will provide—the crew, the munitions, the armament, and by the end of March we shall see the Lizard dropping astern. What do you say, Lal? 'Tis surely better than to sit, moping here in this place of gloom."

"I'll...I'll think of it," said Lionel, but so listlessly that all Sir Oliver's quickening enthusiasm perished again at once and no more was said of the venture.

But Lionel did not altogether reject the notion. If on the one hand he was repelled by it, on the other he was attracted almost despite himself. He went so far as to acquire the habit of riding daily over to

Penycumwick, and there he made the acquaintance of that hardy and scarred adventurer of whom Sir Oliver had spoken, and listened to the marvels the fellow had to tell—many of them too marvellous to be true—of hazards upon distant seas.

But one day in early March Master Jasper Leigh had a tale of another kind for him, news that dispelled from Lionel's mind all interest in the captain's ventures on the Spanish Main. The seaman had followed the departing Lionel to the door of the little inn and stood by his stirrup after he had got to horse.

"A word in your ear, good Master Tressilian," said he. "D'ye know what is being concerted here against our brother?"

"Against my brother?"

"Ay—in the matter of the killing of Master Peter Godolphin last Christmas. Seeing that the Justices would not move of themselves, some folk ha' petitioned the Lieutenant of Cornwall to command them to grant a warrant for Sir Oliver's arrest on a charge o' murder. But the Justices ha' refused to be driven by his lordship, answering that they hold their office direct from the Queen and that in such a matter they are answerable to none but her grace. And now I hear that a petition be gone to London to the Queen herself, begging her to command her Justices to perform their duty or quit their office."

Lionel drew a sharp breath, and with dilating eyes regarded the mariner, but made him no answer.

Jasper laid a long finger against his nose and his eyes grew cunning. "I thought I'd warn you, sir, so as you may bid Sir Oliver look to hisself. 'Tis a fine seaman and fine seamen be none so plentiful."

Lionel drew his purse from his pocket and without so much as looking into its contents dropped it into the seaman's ready hand, with a muttered word of thanks.

He rode home in terror almost. It was come. The blow was about to fall, and his brother would at last be forced to speak. At Penarrow a fresh shock awaited him. He learnt from old Nicholas that Sir Oliver was from home, that he had ridden over to Godolphin Court.

The instant conclusion prompted by Lionel's terror was that already the news had reached Sir Oliver and that he had instantly taken action; for he could not conceive that his brother should go to Godolphin Court upon any other business.

But his fears on that score were very idle. Sir Oliver, unable longer to endure the present state of things, had ridden over to lay before Rosamund that proof with which he had taken care to furnish himself. He could do so at last without any fear of hurting Lionel. His journey, however, had been entirely fruitless. She had refused point-blank to receive him, and for all that with a humility entirely foreign to him he had induced a servant to return to her with a most urgent message yet he had been denied. He returned stricken to Penarrow, there to find his brother awaiting him in a passion of impatience.

"Well?" Lionel greeted him. "What will you do now?"

Sir Oliver looked at him from under brows that scowled darkly in reflection of his thoughts.

"Do now? Of what do you talk?" quoth he.

"Have you not heard?" And Lionel told him the news.

Sir Oliver stared long at him when he had done, then his lips tightened and he smote his brow.

"So!" he cried. "Would that be why she refused to see me? Did she conceive that I went perhaps to plead? Could she think that? Could she?"

He crossed to the fireplace and stirred the logs with his boot angrily. "Oh! 'Twere too unworthy. Yet of a certainty 'tis her doing, this."

"What shall you do?" insisted Lionel, unable to repress the question that was uppermost in his mind; and his voice shook.

"Do?" Sir Oliver looked at him over his shoulder. "Prick this bubble, by heaven! Make an end of it for them, confound them and cover them with shame."

He said it roughly, angrily, and Lionel recoiled, deeming that roughness and anger aimed at himself. He sank into a chair, his knees loosened by his sudden fear. So it seemed that he had had more than cause for his apprehensions. This brother of his who boasted such affection for him was not equal to bearing this matter through. And yet the thing was so unlike Oliver that a doubt still lingered with him.

"You... you will tell them the truth?" he said, in small, quavering voice.

Sir Oliver turned and considered him more attentively.

"A God's name, Lal, what's in thy mind now?" he asked, almost roughly. "Tell them the truth? Why, of course—but only as it concerns myself. You're not supposing that I shall tell them it was you? You'll not be accounting me capable of that?"

"What other way is there?"

Sir Oliver explained the matter. The explanation brought Lionel relief. But this relief was ephemeral. Further reflection presented a new fear to him. It came to him that if Sir Oliver cleared himself, of necessity his own implication must follow. His terrors very swiftly magnified a risk that in itself was so slender as to be entirely

negligible. In his eyes it ceased to be a risk; it became a certain and inevitable danger. If Sir Oliver put forward this proof that the trail of blood had not proceeded from himself, it must, thought Lionel, inevitably be concluded that it was his own. As well might Sir Oliver tell them the whole truth, for surely they could not fail to infer it. Thus he reasoned in his terror, accounting himself lost irrevocably.

Had he but gone with those fears of his to his brother, or had he but been able to abate them sufficiently to allow reason to prevail, he must have been brought to understand how much further they carried him than was at all justified by probability. Oliver would have shown him this, would have told him that with the collapsing of the charge against himself no fresh charge could be levelled against any there, that no scrap of suspicion had ever attached to Lionel, or ever could. But Lionel dared not seek his brother in this matter. In his heart he was ashamed of his fears; in his heart he knew himself for a craven. He realized to the full the hideousness of his selfishness, and yet, as before, he was not strong enough to conquer it. In short, his love of himself was greater than his love of his brother, or of twenty brothers.

The morrow—a blustering day of late March found him again at that alehouse at Penycumwick in the company of Jasper Leigh. A course had occurred to him, as the only course now possible. Last night his brother had muttered something of going to Killigrew with his proofs since Rosamund refused to receive him. Through Killigrew he would reach her, he had said; and he would yet see her on her knees craving his pardon for the wrong she had done him, for the cruelty she had shown him.

Lionel knew that Killigrew was absent from home just then; but he was expected to return by Easter, and to Easter there was but a week. Therefore he had little time in which to act, little time in which to execute the project that had come into his mind. He cursed himself for conceiving it, but held to it with all the strength of a weak nature.

Yet when he came to sit face to face with Jasper Leigh in that little inn-parlour with the scrubbed table of plain deal between them, he lacked the courage to set his proposal forth. They drank sherry sack stiffly laced with brandy by Lionel's suggestion, instead of the more customary mulled ale. Yet not until he had consumed the best part of a pint of it did Lionel feel himself heartened to broaching his loathsome business. Through his head hummed the words his brother had said some time ago when first the name of Jasper Leigh had passed between them—"a desperate adventurer ripe for anything. So the price be high enough you may buy him body and soul." Money enough to buy Jasper Leigh was ready to Lionel's hand; but it was Sir Oliver's money—the money that was placed at Lionel's disposal by his half-brother's open-handed bounty. And this money he was to employ for Oliver's utter ruin! He cursed himself for a filthy, contemptible hound; he cursed the foul fiend that whispered such suggestions into his mind; he knew himself, despised himself and reviled himself until he came to swear to be strong and to go through with whatever might await him sooner than be guilty of such a baseness; the next moment that same resolve would set him shuddering again as he viewed the inevitable consequences that must attend it.

Suddenly the captain set him a question, very softly, that fired the train and blew all his lingering self-resistance into shreds.

"You'll ha' borne my warning to Sir Oliver?" he asked, lowering his voice so as not to be overheard by the vintner who was stirring beyond the thin wooden partition.

Master Lionel nodded, nervously fingering the jewel in his ear, his eyes shifting from their consideration of the seaman's coarse, weather-tanned and hairy countenance.

"I did," he said. "But Sir Oliver is headstrong. He will not stir."

"Will he not?" The captain stroked his bushy red beard and cursed

profusely and horribly after the fashion of the sea. "Od's wounds! He's very like to swing if he bides him here."

"Ay," said Lionel, "if he bides." He felt his mouth turn dry as he spoke; his heart thudded, but its thuds were softened by a slight insensibility which the liquor had produced in him.

He uttered the words in so curious a tone that the sailor's dark eyes peered at him from under his heavy sandy eyebrows. There was alert inquiry in that glance. Master Lionel got up suddenly.

"Let us take a turn outside, captain," said he.

The captain's eyes narrowed. He scented business. There was something plaguily odd about this young gentleman's manner. He tossed off the remains of his sack, slapped down the pot and rose.

"Your servant, Master Tressilian," said he.

Outside our gentleman untethered his horse from the iron ring to which he had attached the bridle; leading his horse he turned seaward and strode down the road that wound along the estuary towards Smithick.

A sharp breeze from the north was whipping the water into white peaks of foam; the sky was of a hard brightness and the sun shone brilliantly. The tide was running out, and the rock in the very neck of the haven was thrusting its black crest above the water. A cable's length this side of it rode the black hull and naked spars of the Swallow—Captain Leigh's ship.

Lionel stepped along in silence, very gloomy and pensive, hesitating even now. And the crafty mariner reading this hesitation, and anxious to conquer it for the sake of such profit as he conceived might lie in the proposal which he scented, paved the way for him at last.

"I think that ye'll have some matter to propose to me." said he slyly. "Out with it, sir, for there never was a man more ready to serve you."

"The fact is," said Lionel, watching the other's face with a sidelong glance, "I am in a difficult position, Master Leigh."

"I've been in a many," laughed the captain, "but never yet in one through which I could not win. Strip forth your own, and haply I can do as much for you as I am wont to do for myself."

"Why, it is this wise," said the other. "My brother will assuredly hang as you have said if he bides him here. He is lost if they bring him to trial. And in that case, faith, I am lost too. It dishonours a man's family to have a member of it hanged. 'Tis a horrible thing to have happen."

"Indeed, indeed!" the sailor agreed encouragingly.

"I would abstract him from this," pursued Lionel, and at the same time cursed the foul fiend that prompted him such specious words to cloak his villainy. "I would abstract him from it, and yet 'tis against my conscience that he should go unpunished for I swear to you, Master Leigh, that I abhor the deed—a cowardly, murderous deed!"

"Ah!" said the captain. And lest that grim ejaculation should check his gentleman he made haste to add—"To be sure! To be sure!"

Master Lionel stopped and faced the other squarely, his shoulders to his horse. They were quite alone in as lonely a spot as any conspirator could desire. Behind him stretched the empty beach, ahead of him the ruddy cliffs that rise gently to the wooded heights of Arwenack.

"I'll be quite plain and open with you, Master Leigh. Peter Godolphin was my friend. Sir Oliver is no more than my half-brother. I would give a deal to the man who would abstract Sir Oliver secretly from the doom that hangs over him, and yet do the thing in such a way

that Sir Oliver should not thereby escape the punishment he deserves."

It was strange, he thought, even as he said it, that he could bring his lips so glibly to utter words that his heart detested.

The captain looked grim. He laid a finger upon Master Lionel's velvet doublet in line with that false heart of his.

"I am your man," said he. "But the risk is great. Yet ye say that ye'd give a deal...."

"Yourself shall name the price," said Lionel quickly, his eyes burning feverishly, his cheeks white.

"Oh I can contrive it, never fear," said the captain. "I know to a nicety what you require. How say you now: if I was to carry him overseas to the plantations where they lack toilers of just such thews as his?" He lowered his voice and spoke with some slight hesitation, fearing that he proposed perhaps more than his prospective employer might desire.

"He might return," was the answer that dispelled all doubts on that score.

"Ah!" said the skipper. "What o' the Barbary rovers, then! They lack slaves and are ever ready to trade, though they be niggardly payers. I never heard of none that returned once they had him safe aboard their galleys. I ha' done some trading with them, bartering human freights for spices and eastern carpets and the like."

Master Lionel breathed hard. "'Tis a horrible fate, is't not?"

The captain stroked his beard. "Yet 'tis the only really safe bestowal, and when all is said 'tis not so horrible as hanging, and certainly less dishonouring to a man's kin. Ye'd be serving Sir Oliver and yourself."

"Tis so, tis so," cried Master Lionel almost fiercely. "And the price?"

The seaman shifted on his short, sturdy legs, and his face grew pensive. "A hundred pound?" he suggested tentatively.

"Done with you for a hundred pounds," was the prompt answer—so prompt that Captain Leigh realized he had driven a fool's bargain which it was incumbent upon him to amend.

"That is, a hundred pound for myself," he corrected slowly. "Then there be the crew to reckon for—to keep their counsel and lend a hand; 'twill mean another hundred at the least."

Master Lionel considered a moment. "It is more than I can lay my hands on at short notice. But, look you, you shall have a hundred and fifty pounds in coin and the balance in jewels. You shall not be the loser in that, I promise you. And when you come again, and bring me word that all is done as you now undertake there shall be the like again."

Upon that the bargain was settled. And when Lionel came to talk of ways and means he found that he had allied himself to a man who understood his business thoroughly. All the assistance that the skipper asked was that Master Lionel should lure his gentleman to some concerted spot conveniently near the waterside. There Leigh would have a boat and his men in readiness, and the rest might very safely be left to him.

In a flash Lionel bethought him of the proper place for this. He swung round, and pointed across the water to Trefusis Point and the grey pile of Godolphin Court all bathed in sunshine now.

"Yonder, at Trefusis Point in the shadow of Godolphin Court at eight to-morrow night, when there will be no moon. I'll see that he is

there. But on your life do not miss him."

"Trust me," said Master Leigh. "And the money?"

"When you have him safely aboard come to me at Penarrow," he replied, which showed that after all he did not trust Master Leigh any further than he was compelled.

The captain was quite satisfied. For should his gentleman fail to disburse he could always return Sir Oliver to shore.

On that they parted. Lionel mounted and rode away, whilst Master Leigh made a trumpet of his hands and hallooed to the ship.

As he stood waiting for the boat that came off to fetch him, a smile slowly overspread the adventurer's rugged face. Had Master Lionel seen it he might have asked himself how far it was safe to drive such bargains with a rogue who kept faith only in so far as it was profitable. And in this matter Master Leigh saw a way to break faith with profit. He had no conscience, but he loved as all rogues love to turn the tables upon a superior rogue. He would play Master Lionel most finely, most poetically false; and he found a deal to chuckle over in the contemplation of it.

CHAPTER VII. TREPANNED

Master Lionel was absent most of the following day from Penarrow upon a pretext of making certain purchases in Truro. It would be half-past seven when he returned; and as he entered he met Sir Oliver in the hall.

"I have a message for you from Godolphin Court," he announced, and saw his brother stiffen and his face change colour. "A boy met me at the gates and bade me tell you that Mistress Rosamund desires a word with you forthwith."

Sir Oliver's heart almost stopped, then went off at a gallop. She asked for him! She had softened perhaps from her yesterday's relentlessness. She would consent at last to see him!

"Be thou blessed for these good tidings!" he answered on a note of high excitement. "I go at once." And on the instant he departed. Such was his eagerness, indeed, that under the hot spur of it he did not even stay to fetch that parchment which was to be his unanswerable advocate. The omission was momentous.

Master Lionel said no word as his brother swept out. He shrank back a little into the shadows. He was white to the lips and felt as he would stifle. As the door closed he moved suddenly. He sprang to follow Sir Oliver. Conscience cried out to him that he could not do this thing. But Fear was swift to answer that outcry. Unless he permitted what was planned to take its course, his life might pay the penalty.

He turned, and lurched into the dining-room upon legs that trembled.

He found the table set for supper as on that other night when he had staggered in with a wound in his side to be cared for and sheltered by Sir Oliver. He did not approach the table; he crossed to the fire, and sat down there holding out his hands to the blaze. He was very cold and could not still his trembling. His very teeth chattered.

Nicholas came in to know if he would sup. He answered unsteadily that despite the lateness of the hour he would await Sir Oliver's return.

"Is Sir Oliver abroad?" quoth the servant in surprise.

"He went out a moment since, I know not whither," replied Lionel. "But since he has not supped he is not like to be long absent."

Upon that he dismissed the servant, and sat huddled there, a prey to mental tortures which were not to be repressed. His mind would turn upon naught but the steadfast, unwavering affection of which Sir Oliver ever had been prodigal towards him. In this very matter of Peter Godolphin's death, what sacrifices had not Sir Oliver made to shield him? From so much love and self-sacrifice in the past he inclined to argue now that not even in extreme peril would his brother betray him. And then that bad streak of fear which made a villain of him reminded him that to argue thus was to argue upon supposition, that it would be perilous to trust such an assumption; that if, after all, Sir Oliver should fail him in the crucial test, then was he lost indeed.

When all is said, a man's final judgment of his fellows must be based upon his knowledge of himself; and Lionel, knowing himself incapable of any such sacrifice for Sir Oliver, could not believe Sir Oliver capable of persisting in such a sacrifice as future events might impose. He reverted to those words Sir Oliver had uttered in that very room two nights ago, and more firmly than ever he concluded that they could have but one meaning.

Then came doubt, and, finally, assurance of another sort,

assurance that this was not so and that he knew it; assurance that he lied to himself, seeking to condone the thing he did. He took his head in his hands and groaned loud. He was a villain, a black-hearted, soulless villain! He reviled himself again. There came a moment when he rose shuddering, resolved even in this eleventh hour to go after his brother and save him from the doom that awaited him out yonder in the night.

But again that resolve was withered by the breath of selfish fear. Lively he resumed his seat, and his thoughts took a fresh turn. They considered now those matters which had engaged them on that day when Sir Oliver had ridden to Arwenack to claim satisfaction of Sir John Killigrew. He realized again that Oliver being removed, what he now enjoyed by his brother's bounty he would enjoy henceforth in his own unquestioned right. The reflection brought him a certain consolation. If he must suffer for his villainy, at least there would be compensations.

The clock over the stables chimed the hour of eight. Master Lionel shrank back in his chair at the sound. The thing would be doing even now. In his mind he saw it all—saw his brother come running in his eagerness to the gates of Godolphin Court, and then dark forms resolve themselves from the surrounding darkness and fall silently upon him. He saw him struggling a moment on the ground, then, bound hand and foot, a gag thrust into his mouth, he beheld him in fancy borne swiftly down the slope to the beach and so to the waiting boat.

Another half-hour sat he there. The thing was done by now, and this assurance seemed to quiet him a little.

Then came Nicholas again to babble of some possible mischance having overtaken his master.

"What mischance should have overtaken him?" growled Lionel, as

if in scorn of the idea.

"I pray none indeed," replied the servant. "But Sir Oliver lacks not for enemies nowadays, and 'tis scarce zafe for he to be abroad after dark."

Master Lionel dismissed the notion contemptuously. For pretence's sake he announced that he would wait no longer, whereupon Nicholas brought in his supper, and left him again to go and linger about the door, looking out into the night and listening for his master's return. He paid a visit to the stables, and knew that Sir Oliver had gone forth afoot.

Meanwhile Master Lionel must make pretence of eating though actual eating must have choked him. He smeared his platter, broke food, and avidly drank a bumper of claret. Then he, too, feigned a growing anxiety and went to join Nicholas. Thus they spent the weary night, watching for the return of one who Master Lionel knew would return no more.

At dawn they roused the servants and sent them to scour the countryside and put the news of Sir Oliver's disappearance abroad. Lionel himself rode out to Arwenack to ask Sir John Killigrew bluntly if he knew aught of this matter.

Sir John showed a startled face, but swore readily enough that he had not so much as seen Sir Oliver for days. He was gentle with Lionel, whom he liked, as everybody liked him. The lad was so mild and kindly in his ways, so vastly different from his arrogant overbearing brother, that his virtues shone the more brightly by that contrast.

"I confess it is natural you should come to me," said Sir John. "But, my word on it, I have no knowledge of him. It is not my way to beset my enemies in the dark."

"Indeed, indeed, Sir John, I had not supposed it in my heart," replied the afflicted Lionel. "Forgive me that I should have come to ask a question so unworthy. Set it down to my distracted state. I have not been the same man these months, I think, since that happening in Godolphin Park. The thing has preyed upon my mind. It is a fearsome burden to know your own brother—though I thank God he is no more than my half-brother—guilty of so foul a deed."

"How?" cried Killigrew, amazed. "You say that? You believed it yourself?"

Master Lionel looked confused, a look which Sir John entirely misunderstood and interpreted entirely in the young man's favour. And it was thus and in that moment that was sown the generous seed of the friendship that was to spring up between these two men, its roots fertilized by Sir John's pity that one so gentle-natured, so honest, and so upright should be cursed with so villainous a brother.

"I see, I see," he said. And he sighed. "You know that we are daily expecting an order from the Queen to her Justices to take the action which hitherto they have refused against your... against Sir Oliver." He frowned thoughtfully. "D'ye think Sir Oliver had news of this?"

At once Master Lionel saw the drift of what was in the other's mind.

"I know it," he replied. "Myself I bore it him. But why do you ask?"

"Does it not help us perhaps to understand and explain Sir Oliver's disappearance? God lack! Surely, knowing that, he were a fool to have tarried here, for he would hang beyond all doubt did he stay for the coming of her grace's messenger."

"My God!" said Lionel, staring. "You... you think he is fled, then?"

Sir John shrugged. "What else is to be thought?"

Lionel hung his head. "What else, indeed?" said he, and took his

leave like a man overwrought, as indeed he was. He had never considered that so obvious a conclusion must follow upon his work so fully to explain the happening and to set at rest any doubt concerning it.

He returned to Penarrow, and bluntly told Nicholas what Sir John suspected and what he feared himself must be the true reason of Sir Oliver's disappearance. The servant, however, was none so easy to convince.

"But do ee believe that he done it?" cried Nicholas. "Do ee believe it, Master Lionel?" There was reproach amounting to horror in the servant's voice.

"God help me, what else can I believe now that he is fled."

Nicholas sidled up to him with tightened lips. He set two gnarled fingers on the young man's arm.

"He'm not fled, Master Lionel," he announced with grim impressiveness. "He'm never a turntail. Sir Oliver he don't fear neither man nor devil, and if so be him had killed Master Godolphin, he'd never ha' denied it. Don't ee believe Sir John Killigrew. Sir John ever hated he."

But in all that countryside the servant was the only one to hold this view. If a doubt had lingered anywhere of Sir Oliver's guilt, that doubt was now dispelled by this flight of his before the approach of the expected orders from the Queen.

Later that day came Captain Leigh to Penarrow inquiring for Sir Oliver.

Nicholas brought word of his presence and his inquiry to Master Lionel, who bade him be admitted.

The thick-set little seaman rolled in on his bowed legs, and leered at his employer when they were alone.

"He's snug and safe aboard," he announced. "The thing were done as clean as peeling an apple, and as quiet."

"Why did you ask for him?" quoth Master Lionel.

"Why?" Jasper leered again. "My business was with him. There was some talk between us of him going a voyage with me. I've heard the gossip over at Smithick. This will fit in with it." He laid that finger of his to his nose. "Trust me to help a sound tale along. 'T were a clumsy business to come here asking for you, sir. Ye'll know now how to account for my visit."

Lionel paid him the price agreed and dismissed him upon receiving the assurance that the Swallow would put to sea upon the next tide.

When it became known that Sir Oliver had been in treaty with Master Leigh for a passage overseas, and that it was but on that account that Master Leigh had tarried in that haven, even Nicholas began to doubt.

Gradually Lionel recovered his tranquillity as the days flowed on. What was done was done, and, in any case, being now beyond recall, there was no profit in repining. He never knew how fortune aided him, as fortune will sometimes aid a villain. The royal pour-suivants arrived some six days later, and Master Baine was the recipient of a curt summons to render himself to London, there to account for his breach of trust in having refused to perform his sworn duty. Had Sir Andrew Flack but survived the chill that had carried him off a month ago, Master Justice Baine would have made short work of the accusation lodged against him. As it was, when he urged the positive knowledge he possessed, and told them how he had made the examination to

which Sir Oliver had voluntarily submitted, his single word carried no slightest conviction. Not for a moment was it supposed that this was aught but the subterfuge of one who had been lax in his duty and who sought to save himself from the consequences of that laxity. And the fact that he cited as his fellow-witness a gentleman now deceased but served to confirm his judges in this opinion. He was deposed from his office and subjected to a heavy fine, and there the matter ended, for the hue-and-cry that was afoot entirely failed to discover any trace of the missing Sir Oliver.

For Master Lionel a new existence set in from that day. Looked upon as one in danger of suffering for his brother's sins, the countryside determined to help him as far as possible to bear his burden. Great stress was laid upon the fact that after all he was no more than Sir Oliver's half-brother; some there were who would have carried their kindness to the lengths of suggesting that perhaps he was not even that, and that it was but natural that Ralph Tressilian's second wife should have repaid her husband in kind for his outrageous infidelities. This movement of sympathy was led by Sir John Killigrew, and it spread in so rapid and marked a manner that very soon Master Lionel was almost persuaded that it was no more than he deserved, and he began to sun himself in the favour of a countryside that hitherto had shown little but hostility for men of the Tressilian blood.

CHAPTER VIII. THE SPANIARD

The Swallow, having passed through a gale in the Bay of Biscay—a gale which she weathered like the surprisingly steady old tub she was—rounded Cape Finisterre and so emerged from tempest into peace, from leaden skies and mountainous seas into a sunny azure calm. It was like a sudden transition from winter into spring, and she ran along now, close hauled to the soft easterly breeze, with a gentle list to port.

It had never been Master Leigh's intent to have got so far as this without coming to an understanding with his prisoner. But the wind had been stronger than his intentions, and he had been compelled to run before it and to head to southward until its fury should abate. Thus it fell out—and all marvellously to Master Lionel's advantage, as you shall see—that the skipper was forced to wait until they stood along the coast of Portugal—but well out to sea, for the coast of Portugal was none too healthy just then to English seamen—before commanding Sir Oliver to be haled into his presence.

In the cramped quarters of the cabin in the poop of the little vessel sat her captain at a greasy table, over which a lamp was swinging faintly to the gentle heave of the ship. He was smoking a foul pipe, whose fumes hung heavily upon the air of that little chamber, and there was a bottle of Nantes at his elbow.

To him, sitting thus in state, was Sir Oliver introduced—his wrists still pinioned behind him. He was haggard and hollow-eyed, and he carried a week's growth of beard on his chin. Also his garments were still in disorder from the struggle he had made when taken, and from the fact that he had been compelled to lie in them ever since.

Since his height was such that it was impossible for him to stand upright in that low-ceilinged cabin, a stool was thrust forward for him by one of the ruffians of Leigh's crew who had haled him from his confinement beneath the hatchway.

He sat down quite listlessly, and stared vacantly at the skipper. Master Leigh was somewhat discomposed by this odd calm when he had looked for angry outbursts. He dismissed the two seamen who fetched Sir Oliver, and when they had departed and closed the cabin door he addressed his captive.

"Sir Oliver," said he, stroking his red beard, "ye've been most foully abused."

The sunshine filtered through one of the horn windows and beat full upon Sir Oliver's expressionless face.

"It was not necessary, you knave, to bring me hither to tell me so much," he answered.

"Quite so," said Master Leigh. "But I have something more to add. Ye'll be thinking that I ha' done you a disservice. There ye wrong me. Through me you are brought to know true friends from secret enemies; henceforward ye'll know which to trust and which to mistrust."

Sir Oliver seemed to rouse himself a little from his passivity, stimulated despite himself by the impudence of this rogue. He stretched a leg and smiled sourly.

"You'll end by telling me that I am in your debt," said he.

"You'll end by saying so yourself," the captain assured him. "D'ye know what I was bidden do with you?"

"Faith, I neither know nor care," was the surprising answer, wearily delivered. "If it is for my entertainment that you propose to tell me, I

beg you'll spare yourself the trouble."

It was not an answer that helped the captain. He pulled at his pipe a moment.

"I was bidden," said he presently, "to carry you to Barbary and sell you there into the service of the Moors. That I might serve you, I made believe to accept this task."

"God's death!" swore Sir Oliver. "You carry make-believe to an odd length."

"The weather has been against me. It were no intention o' mine to ha' come so far south with you. But we've been driven by the gale. That is overpast, and so that ye'll promise to bear no plaint against me, and to make good some of the loss I'll make by going out of my course, and missing a cargo that I wot of, I'll put about and fetch you home again within a week."

Sir Oliver looked at him and smiled grimly. "Now what a rogue are you that can keep faith with none!" he cried. "First you take money to carry me off; and then you bid me pay you to carry me back again."

"Ye wrong me, sir, I vow ye do! I can keep faith when honest men employ me, and ye should know it, Sir Oliver. But who keeps faith with rogues is a fool—and that I am not, as ye should also know. I ha' done this thing that a rogue might be revealed to you and thwarted, as well as that I might make some little profit out of this ship o' mine. I am frank with ye, Sir Oliver. I ha' had some two hundred pounds in money and trinkets from your brother. Give me the like and...."

But now of a sudden Sir Oliver's listlessness was all dispelled. It fell from him like a cloak, and he sat forward, wide awake and with some show of anger even.

"How do you say?" he cried, on a sharp, high note.

The captain stared at him, his pipe neglected. "I say that if so be as ye'll pay me the same sum which your brother paid me to carry you off...."

"My brother?" roared the knight. "Do you say my brother?"

"I said your brother."

"Master Lionel?" the other demanded still.

"What other brothers have you?" quoth Master Leigh.

There fell a pause and Sir Oliver looked straight before him, his head sunken a little between his shoulders. "Let me understand," he said at length. "Do you say that my brother Lionel paid you money to carry me off—in short, that my presence aboard this foul hulk of yours is due to him?"

"Whom else had ye suspected? Or did ye think that I did it for my own personal diversion?"

"Answer me," bellowed Sir Oliver, writhing in his bonds.

"I ha' answered you more than once already. Still, I tell you once again, since ye are slow to understand it, that I was paid a matter of two hundred pound by your brother, Master Lionel Tressilian, to carry you off to Barbary and there sell you for a slave. Is that plain to you?"

"As plain as it is false. You lie, you dog!"

"Softly, softly!" quoth Master Leigh, good-humouredly.

"I say you lie!"

Master Leigh considered him a moment. "Sets the wind so!" said he at length, and without another word he rose and went to a sea-chest ranged against the wooden wall of the cabin. He opened it and took thence a leather bag. From this he produced a handful of jewels.

He thrust them under Sir Oliver's nose. "Haply," said he, "ye'll be acquainted with some of them. They was given me to make up the sum since your brother had not the whole two hundred pound in coin. Take a look at them."

Sir Oliver recognized a ring and a long pear-shaped pearl earring that had been his brother's; he recognized a medallion that he himself had given Lionel two years ago; and so, one by one, he recognized every trinket placed before him.

His head drooped to his breast, and he sat thus awhile like a man stunned. "My God!" he groaned miserably, at last. "Who, then, is left to me! Lionel too! Lionel!" A sob shook the great frame. Two tears slowly trickled down that haggard face and were lost in the stubble of beard upon his chin. "I am accursed!" he said.

Never without such evidence could he have believed this thing. From the moment that he was beset outside the gates of Godolphin Court he had conceived it to be the work of Rosamund, and his listlessness was begotten of the thought that she could have suffered conviction of his guilt and her hatred of him to urge her to such lengths as these. Never for an instant had he doubted the message delivered him by Lionel that it was Mistress Rosamund who summoned him. And just as he believed himself to be going to Godolphin Court in answer to her summons, so did he conclude that the happening there was the real matter to which she had bidden him, a thing done by her contriving, her answer to his attempt on the previous day to gain speech with her, her manner of ensuring that such an impertinence should never be repeated.

This conviction had been gall and wormwood to him; it had drugged his very senses, reducing him to a listless indifference to any fate that might be reserved him. Yet it had not been so bitter a draught as this present revelation. After all, in her case there were some grounds for the hatred that had come to take the place of her

erstwhile love. But in Lionel's what grounds were possible? What motives could exist for such an action as this, other than a monstrous, a loathly egoism which desired perhaps to ensure that the blame for the death of Peter Godolphin should not be shifted from the shoulders that were unjustly bearing it, and the accursed desire to profit by the removal of the man who had been brother, father and all else to him? He shuddered in sheer horror. It was incredible, and yet beyond a doubt it was true. For all the love which he had showered upon Lionel, for all the sacrifices of self which he had made to shield him, this was Lionel's return. Were all the world against him he still must have believed Lionel true to him, and in that belief must have been enheartened a little. And now...His sense of loneliness, of utter destitution overwhelmed him. Then slowly of his sorrow resentment was begotten, and being begotten it grew rapidly until it filled his mind and whelmed in its turn all else. He threw back his great head, and his bloodshot, gleaming eyes fastened upon Captain Leigh, who seated now upon the sea-chest was quietly observing him and waiting patiently until he should recover the wits which this revelation had scattered.

"Master Leigh," said he, "what is your price to carry me home again to England?"

"Why, Sir Oliver," said he, "I think the price I was paid to carry you off would be a fair one. The one would wipe out t'other as it were."

"You shall have twice the sum when you land me on Trefusis Point again," was the instant answer.

The captain's little eyes blinked and his shaggy red eyebrows came together in a frown. Here was too speedy an acquiescence. There must be guile behind it, or he knew naught of the ways of men.

"What mischief are ye brooding?" he sneered.

"Mischief, man? To you?" Sir Oliver laughed hoarsely. "God's light, knave, d'ye think I consider you in this matter, or d'ye think I've room in my mind for such petty resentments together with that other?"

It was the truth. So absolute was the bitter sway of his anger against Lionel that he could give no thought to this rascally seaman's share in the adventure.

"Will ye give me your word for that?"

"My word? Pshaw, man! I have given it already. I swear that you shall be paid the sum I've named the moment you set me ashore again in England. Is that enough for you? Then cut me these bonds, and let us make an end of my present condition."

"Faith, I am glad to deal with so sensible a man! Ye take it in the proper spirit. Ye see that what I ha' done I ha' but done in the way of my calling, that I am but a tool, and that what blame there be belongs to them which hired me to this deed."

"Aye, ye're but a tool—a dirty tool, whetted with gold; no more. 'Tis admitted. Cut me these bonds, a God's name! I'm weary o' being trussed like a capon."

The captain drew his knife, crossed to Sir Oliver's side and slashed his bonds away without further word. Sir Oliver stood up so suddenly that he smote his head against the low ceiling of the cabin, and so sat down again at once. And in that moment from without and above there came a cry which sent the skipper to the cabin door. He flung it open, and so let out the smoke and let in the sunshine. He passed out on to the poop-deck, and Sir Oliver—conceiving himself at liberty to do so—followed him.

In the waist below a little knot of shaggy seamen were crowding to the larboard bulwarks, looking out to sea; on the forecastle there was another similar assembly, all staring intently ahead and towards the

land. They were off Cape Roca at the time, and when Captain Leigh saw by how much they had lessened their distance from shore since last he had conned the ship, he swore ferociously at his mate who had charge of the wheel. Ahead of them away on their larboard bow and in line with the mouth of the Tagus from which she had issued—and where not a doubt but she had been lying in wait for such stray craft as this—came a great tall-masted ship, equipped with top-gallants, running wellnigh before the wind with every foot of canvas spread.

Close-hauled as was the Swallow and with her top-sails and mizzen reefed she was not making more than one knot to the Spaniard's five—for that she was a Spaniard was beyond all doubt judging by the haven whence she issued.

"Luff alee!" bawled the skipper, and he sprang to the wheel, thrusting the mate aside with a blow of his elbow that almost sent him sprawling.

"'Twas yourself set the course," the fellow protested.

"Thou lubberly fool," roared the skipper. "I bade thee keep the same distance from shore. If the land comes jutting out to meet us, are we to keep straight on until we pile her up?" He spun the wheel round in his hands, and turned her down the wind. Then he relinquished the helm to the mate again. "Hold her thus," he commanded, and bellowing orders as he went, he heaved himself down the companion to see them executed. Men sprang to the ratlines to obey him, and went swarming aloft to let out the reefs of the topsails; others ran astern to do the like by the mizzen and soon they had her leaping and plunging through the green water with every sheet unfurled, racing straight out to sea.

From the poop Sir Oliver watched the Spaniard. He saw her veer a point or so to starboard, heading straight to intercept them, and he

observed that although this manœuvre brought her fully a point nearer to the wind than the Swallow, yet, equipped as she was with half as much canvas again as Captain Leigh's piratical craft, she was gaining steadily upon them none the less.

The skipper came back to the poop, and stood there moodily watching that other ship's approach, cursing himself for having sailed into such a trap, and cursing his mate more fervently still.

Sir Oliver meanwhile took stock of so much of the Swallow's armament as was visible and wondered what like were those on the main-deck below. He dropped a question on that score to the captain, dispassionately, as though he were no more than an indifferently interested spectator, and with never a thought to his position aboard.

"Should I be racing her afore the Wind if I as properly equipped?" growled Leigh. "Am I the man to run before a Spaniard? As it is I do no more than lure her well away from land."

Sir Oliver understood, and was silent thereafter. He observed a bo'sun and his mates staggering in the waist under loads of cutlasses and small arms which they stacked in a rack about the mainmast. Then the gunner, a swarthy, massive fellow, stark to the waist with a faded scarf tied turban-wise about his head, leapt up the companion to the brass carronade on the larboard quarter, followed by a couple of his men.

Master Leigh called up the bo'sun, bade him take the wheel, and dispatched the mate forward to the forecastle, where another gun was being prepared for action.

Thereafter followed a spell of racing, the Spaniard ever lessening the distance between them, and the land dropping astern until it was no more than a hazy line above the shimmering sea. Suddenly from

the Spaniard appeared a little cloud of white smoke, and the boom of a gun followed, and after it came a splash a cable's length ahead of the Swallow's bows.

Linstock in hand the brawny gunner on the poop stood ready to answer them when the word should be given. From below came the gunner's mate to report himself ready for action on the main-deck and to receive his orders.

Came another shot from the Spaniard, again across the bows of the Swallow.

"'Tis a clear invitation to heave to," said Sir Oliver.

The skipper snarled in his fiery beard. "She has a longer range than most Spaniards," said he. "But I'll not waste powder yet for all that. We've none to spare."

Scarcely had he spoken when a third shot boomed. There was a splintering crash overhead followed by a sough and a thud as the maintopmast came hurtling to the deck and in its fall stretched a couple of men in death. Battle was joined, it seemed. Yet Captain Leigh did nothing in a hurry.

"Hold there!" he roared to the gunner who swung his linstock at that moment in preparation.

She was losing way as a result of that curtailment of her mainmast, and the Spaniard came on swiftly now. At last the skipper accounted her near enough, and gave the word with an oath. The Swallow fired her first and last shot in that encounter. After the deafening thunder of it and through the cloud of suffocating smoke, Sir Oliver saw the high forecastle of the Spaniard rent open.

Master Leigh was cursing his gunner for having aimed too high. Then he signalled to the mate to fire the culverin of which he had

charge. That second shot was to be the signal for the whole broadside from the main-deck below. But the Spaniard anticipated them. Even as the skipper of the Swallow signalled the whole side of the Spaniard burst into flame and smoke.

The Swallow staggered under the blow, recovered an instant, then listed ominously to larboard.

"Hell!" roared Leigh. "She's bilging!" and Sir Oliver saw the Spaniard standing off again, as if satisfied with what she had done. The mate's gun was never fired, nor was the broadside from below. Indeed that sudden list had set the muzzles pointing to the sea; within three minutes of it they were on a level with the water. The Swallow had received her death-blow, and she was settling down.

Satisfied that she could do no further harm, the Spaniard luffed and hove to, awaiting the obvious result and intent upon picking up what slaves she could to man the galleys of his Catholic Majesty on the Mediterranean.

Thus the fate intended Sir Oliver by Lionel was to be fulfilled; and it was to be shared by Master Leigh himself, which had not been at all in that venal fellow's reckoning.

PART II. SAKR-EL-BAHR

CHAPTER I. THE CAPTIVE

Sakr-el-Bahr, the hawk of the sea, the scourge of the Mediterranean and the terror of Christian Spain, lay prone on the heights of Cape Spartel.

Above him on the crest of the cliff ran the dark green line of the orange groves of Araish—the reputed Garden of the Hesperides of the ancients, where the golden apples grew. A mile or so to eastward were dotted the huts and tents of a Bedouin encampment on the fertile emerald pasture-land that spread away, as far as eye could range, towards Ceuta. Nearer, astride of a grey rock an almost naked goatherd, a lithe brown stripling with a cord of camel-hair about his shaven head, intermittently made melancholy and unmelodious sounds upon a reed pipe. From somewhere in the blue vault of heaven overhead came the joyous trilling of a lark, from below the silken rustling of the tideless sea.

Sakr-el-Bahr lay prone upon a cloak of woven camel-hair amid luxuriating fern and samphire, on the very edge of the shelf of cliff to which he had climbed. On either side of him squatted a negro from the Sus both naked of all save white loin-cloths, their muscular bodies glistening like ebony in the dazzling sunshine of mid-May. They wielded crude fans fashioned from the yellowing leaves of date palms, and their duty was to wave these gently to and fro above their lord's head, to give him air and to drive off the flies.

Sakr-el-Bahr was in the very prime of life, a man of a great length of body, with a deep Herculean torso and limbs that advertised a giant strength. His hawk-nosed face ending in a black forked beard was of a swarthiness accentuated to exaggeration by the snowy white turban

wound about his brow. His eyes, by contrast, were singularly light. He wore over his white shirt a long green tunic of very light silk, woven along its edges with arabesques in gold; a pair of loose calico breeches reached to his knees; his brown muscular calves were naked, and his feet were shod in a pair of Moorish shoes of crimson leather, with up-curling and very pointed toes. He had no weapons other than the heavy-bladed knife with a jewelled hilt that was thrust into his girdle of plaited leather.

A yard or two away on his left lay another supine figure, elbows on the ground, and hands arched above his brow to shade his eyes, gazing out to sea. He, too, was a tall and powerful man, and when he moved there was a glint of armour from the chain mail in which his body was cased, and from the steel casque about which he had swathed his green turban. Beside him lay an enormous curved scimitar in a sheath of brown leather that was heavy with steel ornaments. His face was handsome, and bearded, but swarthier far than his companion's, and the backs of his long fine hands were almost black.

Sakr-el-Bahr paid little heed to him. Lying there he looked down the slope, clad with stunted cork-trees and evergreen oaks; here and there was the golden gleam of broom; yonder over a spur of whitish rock sprawled the green and living scarlet of a cactus. Below him about the caves of Hercules was a space of sea whose clear depths shifted with its slow movement from the deep green of emerald to all the colours of the opal. A little farther off behind a projecting screen of rock that formed a little haven two enormous masted galleys, each of fifty oars, and a smaller galliot of thirty rode gently on the slight heave of the water, the vast yellow oars standing out almost horizontally from the sides of each vessel like the pinions of some gigantic bird. That they lurked there either in concealment or in ambush was very plain. Above them circled a flock of seagulls noisy and insolent.

Sakr-el-Bahr looked out to sea across the straits towards Tarifa and the faint distant European coastline just visible through the limpid summer air. But his glance was not concerned with that hazy horizon; it went no further than a fine white-sailed ship that, close-hauled, was beating up the straits some four miles off. A gentle breeze was blowing from the east, and with every foot of canvas spread to catch it she stood as close to it as was possible. Nearer she came on her larboard tack, and not a doubt but her master would be scanning the hostile African littoral for a sight of those desperate rovers who haunted it and who took toll of every Christian ship that ventured over-near. Sakr-el-Bahr smiled to think how little the presence of his galleys could be suspected, how innocent must look the sun-bathed shore of Africa to the Christian skipper's diligently searching spy-glass. And there from his height, like the hawk they had dubbed him, poised in the cobalt heavens to plumb down upon his prey, he watched the great white ship and waited until she should come within striking distance.

A promontory to eastward made something of a lee that reached out almost a mile from shore. From the watcher's eyrie the line of demarcation was sharply drawn; they could see the point at which the white crests of the wind-whipped wavelets ceased and the water became smoother. Did she but venture as far southward on her present tack, she would be slow to go about again, and that should be their opportunity. And all unconscious of the lurking peril she held steadily to her course, until not half a mile remained between her and that inauspicious lee.

Excitement stirred the mail-clad corsair; he kicked his heels in the air, then swung round to the impassive and watchful Sakr-el-Bahr.

"She will come! She will come!" he cried in the Frankish jargon—the lingua franca of the African littoral.

"Insh' Allah!" was the laconic answer—"If God will."

A tense silence fell between them again as the ship drew nearer so that now with each forward heave of her they caught a glint of the white belly under her black hull. Sakr-el-Bahr shaded his eyes, and concentrated his vision upon the square ensign flying from, her mainmast. He could make out not only the red and yellow quarterings, but the devices of the castle and the lion.

"A Spanish ship, Biskaine," he growled to his companion. "It is very well. The praise to the One!"

"Will she venture in?" wondered the other.

"Be sure she will venture," was the confident answer. "She suspects no danger, and it is not often that our galleys are to be found so far westward. Aye, there she comes in all her Spanish pride."

Even as he spoke she reached that line of demarcation. She crossed it, for there was still a moderate breeze on the leeward side of it, intent no doubt upon making the utmost of that southward run.

"Now!" cried Biskaine—Biskaine-el-Borak was he called from the lightning-like impetuosity in which he was wont to strike. He quivered with impatience, like a leashed hound.

"Not yet," was the calm, restraining answer. "Every inch nearer shore she creeps the more certain is her doom. Time enough to sound the charge when she goes about. Give me to drink, Abiad," he said to one of his negroes, whom in irony he had dubbed "the White."

The slave turned aside, swept away a litter of ferns and produced an amphora of porous red clay; he removed the palm-leaves from the mouth of it and poured water into a cup. Sakr-el-Bahr drank slowly, his eyes never leaving the vessel, whose every ratline was clearly defined by now in the pellucid air. They could see men moving on her decks, and the watchman stationed in the foremast fighting-top. She

was not more than half a mile away when suddenly came the manœuvre to go about.

Sakr-el-Bahr leapt instantly to his great height and waved a long green scarf. From one of the galleys behind the screen of rocks a trumpet rang out in immediate answer to that signal; it was followed by the shrill whistles of the bo'suns, and that again by the splash and creak of oars, as the two larger galleys swept out from their ambush. The long armoured poops were a-swarm with turbaned corsairs, their weapons gleaming in the sunshine; a dozen at least were astride of the crosstree of each mainmast, all armed with bows and arrows, and the ratlines on each side of the galleys were black with men who swarmed there like locusts ready to envelop and smother their prey.

The suddenness of the attack flung the Spaniard into confusion. There was a frantic stir aboard her, trumpet blasts and shootings and wild scurrings of men hither and thither to the posts to which they were ordered by their too reckless captain. In that confusion her manœuvre to go about went all awry, and precious moments were lost during which she stood floundering, with idly flapping sails. In his desperate haste the captain headed her straight to leeward, thinking that by running thus before the wind he stood the best chance of avoiding the trap. But there was not wind enough in that sheltered spot to make the attempt successful. The galleys sped straight on at an angle to the direction in which the Spaniard was moving, their yellow dripping oars flashing furiously, as the bo'suns plied their whips to urge every ounce of sinew in the slaves.

Of all this Sakr-el-Bahr gathered an impression as, followed by Biskaine and the negroes, he swiftly made his way down from that eyrie that had served him so well. He sprang from red oak to cork-tree and from cork-tree to red oak; he leapt from rock to rock, or lowered himself from ledge to ledge, gripping a handful of heath or a projecting stone, but all with the speed and nimbleness of an ape. He

dropped at last to the beach, then sped across it at a run, and went bounding along a black reef until he stood alongside of the galliot which had been left behind by the other Corsair vessels. She awaited him in deep water, the length of her oars from the rock, and as he came alongside, these oars were brought to the horizontal, and held there firmly. He leapt down upon them, his companions following him and using them as a gangway, reached the bulwarks. He threw a leg over the side, and alighted on a decked space between two oars and the two rows of six slaves that were manning each of them.

Biskaine followed him and the negroes came last. They were still astride of the bulwarks when Sakr-el-Bahr gave the word. Up the middle gangway ran a bo'sun and two of his mates cracking their long whips of bullock-hide. Down went the oars, there was a heave, and they shot out in the wake of the other two to join the fight.

Sakr-el-Bahr, scimitar in hand, stood on the prow, a little in advance of the mob of eager babbling corsairs who surrounded him, quivering in their impatience to be let loose upon the Christian foe. Above, along the yardarm and up the ratlines swarmed his bowmen. From the mast-head floated out his standard, of crimson charged with a green crescent.

The naked Christian slaves groaned, strained and sweated under the Moslem lash that drove them to the destruction of their Christian brethren.

Ahead the battle was already joined. The Spaniard had fired one single hasty shot which had gone wide, and now one of the corsair's grappling-irons had seized her on the larboard quarter, a withering hail of arrows was pouring down upon her decks from the Muslim crosstrees; up her sides crowded the eager Moors, ever most eager when it was a question of tackling the Spanish dogs who had driven them from their Andalusian Caliphate. Under her quarter sped the other galley to take her on the starboard side, and even as she went

her archers and stingers hurled death aboard the galleon.

It was a short, sharp fight. The Spaniards in confusion from the beginning, having been taken utterly by surprise, had never been able to order themselves in a proper manner to receive the onslaught. Still, what could be done they did. They made a gallant stand against this pitiless assailant. But the corsairs charged home as gallantly, utterly reckless of life, eager to slay in the name of Allah and His Prophet and scarcely less eager to die if it should please the All-pitiful that their destinies should be here fulfilled. Up they went, and back fell the Castilians, outnumbered by at least ten to one.

When Sakr-el-Bahr's galliot came alongside, that brief encounter was at an end, and one of his corsairs was aloft, hacking from the mainmast the standard of Spain and the wooden crucifix that was nailed below it. A moment later and to a thundering roar of "Al-hamdolliah!" the green crescent floated out upon the breeze.

Sakr-el-Bahr thrust his way through the press in the galleon's waist; his corsairs fell back before him, making way, and as he advanced they roared his name deliriously and waved their scimitars to acclaim him this hawk of the sea, as he was named, this most valiant of all the servants of Islam. True he had taken no actual part in the engagement. It had been too brief and he had arrived too late for that. But his had been the daring to conceive an ambush at so remote a western point, and his the brain that had guided them to this swift sweet victory in the name of Allah the One.

The decks were slippery with blood, and strewn with wounded and dying men, whom already the Muslimeen were heaving overboard—dead and wounded alike when they were Christians, for to what end should they be troubled with maimed slaves?

About the mainmast were huddled the surviving Spaniards, weaponless and broken in courage, a herd of timid, bewildered

sheep.

Sakr-el-Bahr stood forward, his light eyes considering them grimly. They must number close upon a hundred, adventurers in the main who had set out from Cadiz in high hope of finding fortune in the Indies. Their voyage had been a very brief one; their fate they knew—to toil at the oars of the Muslim galleys, or at best, to be taken to Algiers or Tunis and sold there into the slavery of some wealthy Moor.

Sakr-el-Bahr's glance scanned them appraisingly, and rested finally on the captain, who stood slightly in advance, his face livid with rage and grief. He was richly dressed in the Castilian black, and his velvet thimble-shaped hat was heavily plumed and decked by a gold cross.

Sakr-el-Bahr salaamed ceremoniously to him. "Fortuna de guerra, senior capitan," said he in fluent Spanish. "What is your name?"

"I am Don Paulo de Guzman," the man answered, drawing himself erect, and speaking with conscious pride in himself and manifest contempt of his interlocutor.

"So! A gentleman of family! And well-nourished and sturdy, I should judge. In the sôk at Algiers you might fetch two hundred philips. You shall ransom yourself for five hundred."

"Por las Entranas de Dios!" swore Don Paulo who, like all pious Spanish Catholics, favoured the oath anatomical. What else he would have added in his fury is not known, for Sakr-el-Bahr waved him contemptuously away.

"For your profanity and want of courtesy we will make the ransom a thousand philips, then," said he. And to his followers—"Away with him! Let him have courteous entertainment against the coming of his ransom."

He was borne away cursing.

Of the others Sakr-el-Bahr made short work. He offered the privilege of ransoming himself to any who might claim it, and the privilege was claimed by three. The rest he consigned to the care of Biskaine, who acted as his Kayla, or lieutenant. But before doing so he bade the ship's bo'sun stand forward, and demanded to know what slaves there might be on board. There were, he learnt, but a dozen, employed upon menial duties on the ship—three Jews, seven Muslimeen and two heretics—and they had been driven under the hatches when the peril threatened.

By Sakr-el-Bahr's orders these were dragged forth from the blackness into which they had been flung. The Muslimeen upon discovering that they had fallen into the hands of their own people and that their slavery was at an end, broke into cries of delight, and fervent praise of Allah than whom they swore there was no other God. The three Jews, lithe, stalwart young men in black tunics that fell to their knees and black skull-caps upon their curly black locks, smiled ingratiatingly, hoping for the best since they were fallen into the hands of people who were nearer akin to them than Christians and allied to them, at least, by the bond of common enmity to Spain and common suffering at the hands of Spaniards. The two heretics stood in stolid apathy, realizing that with them it was but a case of passing from Charybdis to Scylla, and that they had as little to hope for from heathen as from Christian. One of these was a sturdy bowlegged fellow, whose garments were little better than rags; his weather-beaten face was of the colour of mahogany and his eyes of a dark blue under tufted eyebrows that once had been red—like his hair and beard—but were now thickly intermingled with grey. He was spotted like a leopard on the hands by enormous dark brown freckles.

Of the entire dozen he was the only one that drew the attention of Sakr-el-Bahr. He stood despondently before the corsair, with bowed head and his eyes upon the deck, a weary, dejected, spiritless slave who would as soon die as live. Thus some few moments during which

the stalwart Muslim stood regarding him; then as if drawn by that persistent scrutiny he raised his dull, weary eyes. At once they quickened, the dulness passed out of them; they were bright and keen as of old. He thrust his head forward, staring in his turn; then, in a bewildered way he looked about him at the ocean of swarthy faces under turbans of all colours, and back again at Sakr-el-Bahr.

"God's light!" he said at last, in English, to vent his infinite amazement. Then reverting to the cynical manner that he had ever affected, and effacing all surprise—

"Good day to you, Sir Oliver," said he. "I suppose ye'll give yourself the pleasure of hanging me."

"Allah is great!" said Sakr-el-Bahr impassively.

CHAPTER II. THE RENEGADE

How it came to happen that Sakr-el-Bahr, the Hawk of the Sea, the Muslim rover, the scourge of the Mediterranean, the terror of Christians, and the beloved of Asad-ed-Din, Basha of Algiers, would be one and the same as Sir Oliver Tressilian, the Cornish gentleman of Penarrow, is at long length set forth in the chronicles of Lord Henry Goade. His lordship conveys to us some notion of how utterly overwhelming he found that fact by the tedious minuteness with which he follows step by step this extraordinary metamorphosis. He devotes to it two entire volumes of those eighteen which he has left us. The whole, however, may with advantage be summarized into one short chapter.

Sir Oliver was one of a score of men who were rescued from the sea by the crew of the Spanish vessel that had sunk the *Swallow*; another was Jasper Leigh, the skipper. All of them were carried to Lisbon, and there handed over to the Court of the Holy Office. Since they were heretics all—or nearly all—it was fit and proper that the Brethren of St. Dominic should undertake their conversion in the first place. Sir Oliver came of a family that never had been famed for rigidity in religious matters, and he was certainly not going to burn alive if the adoption of other men's opinions upon an extremely hypothetical future state would suffice to save him from the stake. He accepted Catholic baptism with an almost contemptuous indifference. As for Jasper Leigh, it will be conceived that the elasticity of the skipper's conscience was no less than Sir Oliver's, and he was certainly not the man to be roasted for a trifle of faith.

No doubt there would be great rejoicings in the Holy House over the rescue of these two unfortunate souls from the certain perdition that

had awaited them. It followed that as converts to the Faith they were warmly cherished, and tears of thanksgiving were profusely shed over them by the Hounds of God. So much for their heresy. They were completely purged of it, having done penance in proper form at an Auto held on the Rocio at Lisbon, candle in hand and sanbenito on their shoulders. The Church dismissed them with her blessing and an injunction to persevere in the ways of salvation to which with such meek kindness she had inducted them.

Now this dismissal amounted to a rejection. They were, as a consequence, thrown back upon the secular authorities, and the secular authorities had yet to punish them for their offence upon the seas. No offence could be proved, it is true. But the courts were satisfied that this lack of offence was but the natural result of a lack of opportunity. Conversely, they reasoned, it was not to be doubted that with the opportunity the offence would have been forthcoming. Their assurance of this was based upon the fact that when the Spaniard fired across the bows of the Swallow as an invitation to heave to, she had kept upon her course. Thus, with unanswerable Castilian logic was the evil conscience of her skipper proven. Captain Leigh protested on the other hand that his action had been dictated by his lack of faith in Spaniards and his firm belief that all Spaniards were pirates to be avoided by every honest seaman who was conscious of inferior strength of armaments. It was a plea that won him no favour with his narrow-minded judges.

Sir Oliver fervently urged that he was no member of the crew of the Swallow, that he was a gentleman who found himself aboard her very much against his will, being the victim of a villainous piece of trepanning executed by her venal captain. The court heard his plea with respect, and asked to know his name and rank. He was so very indiscreet as to answer truthfully. The result was extremely educative to Sir Oliver; it showed him how systematically conducted was the keeping of the Spanish archives. The court produced documents

enabling his judges to recite to him most of that portion of his life that had been spent upon the seas, and many an awkward little circumstance which had slipped his memory long since, which he now recalled, and which certainly was not calculated to make his sentence lighter.

Had he not been in the Barbados in such a year, and had he not there captured the galleon Maria de las Dolores? What was that but an act of villainous piracy? Had he not scuttled a Spanish carack four years ago in the bay of Funchal? Had he not been with that pirate Hawkins in the affair at San Juan de Ulloa? And so on. Questions poured upon him and engulfed him.

He almost regretted that he had given himself the trouble to accept conversion and all that it entailed at the hands of the Brethren of St. Dominic. It began to appear to him that he had but wasted time and escaped the clerical fire to be dangled on a secular rope as an offering to the vengeful gods of outraged Spain.

So much, however, was not done. The galleys in the Mediterranean were in urgent need of men at the time, and to this circumstance Sir Oliver, Captain Leigh, and some others of the luckless crew of the Swallow owed their lives, though it is to be doubted whether any of them found the matter one for congratulation. Chained each man to a fellow, ankle to ankle, with but a short length of links between, they formed part of a considerable herd of unfortunates, who were driven across Portugal into Spain and then southward to Cadiz. The last that Sir Oliver saw of Captain Leigh was on the morning on which he set out from the reeking Lisbon gaol. Thereafter throughout that weary march each knew the other to be somewhere in that wretched regiment of galley-slaves; but they never came face to face again.

In Cadiz Sir Oliver spent a month in a vast enclosed space that was open to the sky, but nevertheless of an indescribable foulness, a place of filth, disease, and suffering beyond human conception, the

details of which the curious may seek for himself in my Lord Henry's chronicles. They are too revolting by far to be retailed here.

At the end of that month he was one of those picked out by an officer who was manning a galley that was to convey the Infanta to Naples. He owed this to his vigorous constitution which had successfully withstood the infections of that mephitic place of torments, and to the fine thews which the officer pummelled and felt as though he were acquiring a beast of burden—which, indeed, is precisely what he was doing.

The galley to which our gentleman was dispatched was a vessel of fifty oars, each manned by seven men. They were seated upon a sort of staircase that followed the slope of the oar, running from the gangway in the vessel's middle down to the shallow bulwarks.

The place allotted to Sir Oliver was that next the gangway. Here, stark naked as when he was born, he was chained to the bench, and in those chains, let us say at once, he remained, without a single moment's intermission, for six whole months.

Between himself and the hard timbers of his seat there was naught but a flimsy and dirty sheepskin. From end to end the bench was not more than ten feet in length, whilst the distance separating it from the next one was a bare four feet. In that cramped space of ten feet by four, Sir Oliver and his six oar-mates had their miserable existence, waking and sleeping—for they slept in their chains at the oar without sufficient room in which to lie at stretch.

Anon Sir Oliver became hardened and inured to that unspeakable existence, that living death of the galley-slave. But that first long voyage to Naples was ever to remain the most terrible experience of his life. For spells of six or eight endless hours at a time, and on one occasion for no less than ten hours, did he pull at his oar without a single moment's pause. With one foot on the stretcher, the other on

the bench in front of him, grasping his part of that appallingly heavy fifteen-foot oar, he would bend his back to thrust forward—and upwards so to clear the shoulders of the groaning, sweating slaves in front of him—then he would lift the end so as to bring the blade down to the water, and having gripped he would rise from his seat to throw his full weight into the pull, and so fall back with clank of chain upon the groaning bench to swing forward once more, and so on until his senses reeled, his sight became blurred, his mouth parched and his whole body a living, straining ache. Then would come the sharp fierce cut of the boatswain's whip to revive energies that flagged however little, and sometimes to leave a bleeding stripe upon his naked back.

Thus day in day out, now broiled and blistered by the pitiless southern sun, now chilled by the night dews whilst he took his cramped and unrefreshing rest, indescribably filthy and dishevelled, his hair and beard matted with endless sweat, unwashed save by the rains which in that season were all too rare, choked almost by the stench of his miserable comrades and infested by filthy crawling things begotten of decaying sheepskins and Heaven alone knows what other foulnesses of that floating hell. He was sparingly fed upon weevilled biscuit and vile messes of tallowy rice, and to drink he was given luke-warm water that was often stale, saving that sometimes when the spell of rowing was more than usually protracted the boatswains would thrust lumps of bread sodden in wine into the mouths of the toiling slaves to sustain them.

The scurvy broke out on that voyage, and there were other diseases among the rowers, to say nothing of the festering sores begotten of the friction of the bench which were common to all, and which each must endure as best he could. With the slave whose disease conquered him or who, reaching the limit of his endurance, permitted himself to swoon, the boat-swains had a short way. The diseased were flung overboard; the swooning were dragged out upon the gangway or bridge and flogged there to revive them; if they did not

revive they were flogged on until they were a horrid bleeding pulp, which was then heaved into the sea.

Once or twice when they stood to windward the smell of the slaves being wafted abaft and reaching the fine gilded poop where the Infanta and her attendants travelled, the helmsmen were ordered to put about, and for long weary hours the slaves would hold the galley in position, backing her up gently against the wind so as not to lose way.

The number that died in the first week of that voyage amounted to close upon a quarter of the total. But there were reserves in the prow, and these were drawn upon to fill the empty places. None but the fittest could survive this terrible ordeal.

Of these was Sir Oliver, and of these too was his immediate neighbour at the oar, a stalwart, powerful, impassive, uncomplaining young Moor, who accepted his fate with a stoicism that aroused Sir Oliver's admiration. For days they exchanged no single word together, their religions marking them out, they thought, for enemies despite the fact that they were fellows in misfortune. But one evening when an aged Jew who had collapsed in merciful unconsciousness was dragged out and flogged in the usual manner, Sir Oliver, chancing to behold the scarlet prelate who accompanied the Infanta looking on from the poop-rail with hard unmerciful eyes, was filled with such a passion at all this inhumanity and at the cold pitilessness of that professed servant of the Gentle and Pitiful Saviour, that aloud he cursed all Christians in general and that scarlet Prince of the Church in particular.

He turned to the Moor beside him, and addressing him in Spanish

"Hell," he said, "was surely made for Christians, which may be why they seek to make earth like it."

Fortunately for him the creak and dip of the oars, the clank of chains, and the lashes beating sharply upon the wretched Jew were sufficient to muffle his voice. But the Moor heard him, and his dark eyes gleamed.

"There is a furnace seven times heated awaiting them,) my brother," he replied, with a confidence which seemed to be the source of his present stoicism. "But art thou, then, not a Christian?"

He spoke in that queer language of the North African seaboard, that *lingua franca*, which sounded like some French dialect interspersed with Arabic words. But Sir Oliver made out his meaning almost by intuition. He answered him in Spanish again, since although the Moor did not appear to speak it yet it was plain he understood it.

"I renounce from this hour," he answered in his passion. "I will acknowledge no religion in whose name such things are done. Look me at that scarlet fruit of hell up yonder. See how daintily he sniffs at his pomander lest his saintly nostrils be offended by the exhalations of our misery. Yet are we God's creatures made in God's image like himself. What does he know of God? Religion he knows as he knows good wine, rich food, and soft women. He preaches self-denial as the way to heaven, and by his own tenets is he damned." He growled an obscene oath as he heaved the great oar forward. "A Christian I?" he cried, and laughed for the first time since he had been chained to that bench of agony. "I am done with Christians and Christianity!"

"Verily we are God's, and to Him shall we return," said the Moor.

That was the beginning of a friendship between Sir Oliver and this man, whose name was Yusuf-ben-Moktar. The Muslim conceived that in Sir Oliver he saw one upon whom the grace of Allah had descended, one who was ripe to receive the Prophet's message. Yusuf was devout, and he applied himself to the conversion of his

fellow-slave. Sir Oliver listened to him, however, with indifference. Having discarded one creed he would need a deal of satisfying on the score of another before he adopted it, and it seemed to him that all the glorious things urged by Yusuf in praise of Islam he had heard before in praise of Christianity. But he kept his counsel on that score, and meanwhile his intercourse with the Muslim had the effect of teaching him the lingua franca, so that at the end of six months he found himself speaking it like a Mauretanian with all the Muslim's imagery and with more than the ordinary seasoning of Arabic.

It was towards the end of that six months that the event took place which was to restore Sir Oliver to liberty. In the meanwhile those limbs of his which had ever been vigorous beyond the common wont had acquired an elephantine strength. It was ever thus at the oar. Either you died under the strain, or your thews and sinews grew to be equal to their relentless task. Sir Oliver in those six months was become a man of steel and iron, impervious to fatigue, superhuman almost in his endurance.

They were returning home from a trip to Genoa when one evening as they were standing off Minorca in the Balearic Isles they were surprised by a fleet of four Muslim galleys which came skimming round a promontory to surround and engage them.

Aboard the Spanish vessel there broke a terrible cry of "Asad-ed-Din"—the name of the most redoubtable Muslim corsair since the Italian renegade Ochiali—the Ali Pasha who had been killed at Lepanto. Trumpets blared and drums beat on the poop, and the Spaniards in morion and corselet, armed with calivers and pikes, stood to defend their lives and liberty. The gunners sprang to the culverins. But fire had to be kindled and linstocks ignited, and in the confusion much time was lost—so much that not a single cannon shot was fired before the grappling irons of the first galley clanked upon and gripped the Spaniard's bulwarks. The shock of the impact was

terrific. The armoured prow of the Muslim galley—Asad-ed-Din's own—smote the Spaniard a slanting blow amidships that smashed fifteen of the oars as if they had been so many withered twigs.

There was a shriek from the slaves, followed by such piteous groans as the damned in hell may emit. Fully two score of them had been struck by the shafts of their oars as these were hurled back against them. Some had been killed outright, others lay limp and crushed, some with broken backs, others with shattered limbs and ribs.

Sir Oliver would assuredly have been of these but for the warning, advice, and example of Yusuf, who was well versed in galley-fighting and who foresaw clearly what must happen. He thrust the oar upward and forward as far as it would go, compelling the others at his bench to accompany his movement. Then he slipped down upon his knees, released his hold of the timber, and crouched down until his shoulders were on a level with the bench. He had shouted to Sir Oliver to follow his example, and Sir Oliver without even knowing what the manoeuvre should portend, but gathering its importance from the other's urgency of tone, promptly obeyed. The oar was struck an instant later and ere it snapped off it was flung back, braining one of the slaves at the bench and mortally injuring the others, but passing clean over the heads of Sir Oliver and Yusuf. A moment later the bodies of the oarsmen of the bench immediately in front were flung back atop of them with yells and curses.

When Sir Oliver staggered to his feet he found the battle joined. The Spaniards had fired a volley from their calivers and a dense cloud of smoke hung above the bulwarks; through this surged now the corsairs, led by a tall, lean, elderly man with a flowing white beard and a swarthy eagle face. A crescent of emeralds flashed from his snowy turban; above it rose the peak of a steel cap, and his body was cased in chain mail. He swung a great scimitar, before which Spaniards

went down like wheat to the reaper's sickle. He fought like ten men, and to support him poured a never-ending stream of Muslimeen to the cry of "Din! Din! Allah, Y'Allah!" Back and yet back went the Spaniards before that irresistible onslaught.

Sir Oliver found Yusuf struggling in vain to rid himself of his chain, and went to his assistance. He stooped, seized it in both hands, set his feet against the bench, exerted all his strength, and tore the staple from the wood. Yusuf was free, save, of course, that a length of heavy chain was dangling from his steel anklet. In his turn he did the like service by Sir Oliver, though not quite as speedily, for strong man though he was, either his strength was not equal to the Cornishman's or else the latter's staple had been driven into sounder timber. In the end, however, it yielded, and Sir Oliver too was free. Then he set the foot that was hampered by the chain upon the bench, and with the staple that still hung from the end of it he prised open the link that attached it to his anklet.

That done he took his revenge. Crying "Din!" as loudly as any of the Muslimeen boarders, he flung himself upon the rear of the Spaniards brandishing his chain. In his hands it became a terrific weapon. He used it as a scourge, lashing it to right and left of him, splitting here a head and crushing there a face, until he had hacked a way clean through the Spanish press, which bewildered by this sudden rear attack made but little attempt to retaliate upon the escaped galley-slave. After him, whirling the remaining ten feet of the broken oar, came Yusuf.

Sir Oliver confessed afterwards to knowing very little of what happened in those moments. He came to a full possession of his senses to find the fight at an end, a cloud of turbaned corsairs standing guard over a huddle of Spaniards, others breaking open the cabin and dragging thence the chests that it contained, others again armed with chisels and mallets passing along the benches liberating

the surviving slaves, of whom the great majority were children of Islam.

Sir Oliver found himself face to face with the white-bearded leader of the corsairs, who was leaning upon his scimitar and regarding him with eyes at once amused and amazed. Our gentleman's naked body was splashed from head to foot with blood, and in his right hand he still clutched that yard of iron links with which he had wrought such ghastly execution. Yusuf was standing at the corsair leader's elbow speaking rapidly.

"By Allah, was ever such a lusty fighter seen!" cried the latter. "The strength of the Prophet is within him thus to smite the unbelieving pigs."

Sir Oliver grinned savagely.

"I was returning them some of their whip-lashes—with interest," said he.

And those were the circumstances under which he came to meet the formidable Asad-ed-Din, Basha of Algiers, those the first words that passed between them.

Anon, when aboard Asad's own galley he was being carried to Barbary, he was washed and his head was shaved all but the forelock, by which the Prophet should lift him up to heaven when his earthly destiny should come to be fulfilled. He made no protest. They washed and fed him and gave him ease; and so that they did these things to him they might do what else they pleased. At last arrayed in flowing garments that were strange to him, and with a turban wound about his head, he was conducted to the poop, where Asad sat with Yusuf under an awning, and he came to understand that it was in compliance with the orders of Yusuf that he had been treated as if he were a True-Believer.

Yusuf-ben-Moktar was discovered as a person of great consequence, the nephew of Asad-ed-Din, and a favourite with that Exalted of Allah the Sublime Portal himself, a man whose capture by Christians had been a thing profoundly deplored. Accordingly his delivery from that thralldom was matter for rejoicing. Being delivered, he bethought him of his oar-mate, concerning whom indeed Asad-ed-Din manifested the greatest curiosity, for in all this world there was nothing the old corsair loved so much as a fighter, and in all his days, he vowed, never had he seen the equal of that stalwart galley-slave, never the like of his performance with that murderous chain. Yusuf had informed him that the man was a fruit ripe for the Prophet's plucking, that the grace of Allah was upon him, and in spirit already he must be accounted a good Muslim.

When Sir Oliver, washed, perfumed, and arrayed in white caftan and turban, which gave him the air of being even taller than he was, came into the presence of Asad-ed-Din, it was conveyed to him that if he would enter the ranks of the Faithful of the Prophet's House and devote the strength and courage with which Allah the One had endowed him to the upholding of the true Faith and to the chastening of the enemies of Islam, great honour, wealth and dignity were in store for him.

Of all that proposal, made at prodigious length and with great wealth of Eastern circumlocution, the only phrase that took root in his rather bewildered mind was that which concerned the chastening of the enemies of Islam. The enemies of Islam he conceived, were his own enemies; and he further conceived that they stood in great need of chastening, and that to take a hand in that chastening would be a singularly grateful task. So he considered the proposals made him. He considered, too, that the alternative—in the event of his refusing to make the protestations of Faith required of him—was that he must return to the oar of a galley, of a Muslim galley now. Now that was an occupation of which he had had more than his fill, and since he had

been washed and restored to the normal sensations of a clean human being he found that whatever might be within the scope of his courage he could not envisage returning to the oar. We have seen the ease with which he had abandoned the religion in which he was reared for the Roman faith, and how utterly deluded he had found himself. With the same degree of ease did he now go over to Islam and with much greater profit. Moreover, he embraced the Religion of Mahomet with a measure of fierce conviction that had been entirely lacking from his earlier apostasy.

He had arrived at the conclusion whilst aboard the galley of Spain, as we have seen, that Christianity as practised in his day was a grim mockery of which the world were better rid. It is not to be supposed that his convictions that Christianity was at fault went the length of making him suppose that Islam was right, or that his conversion to the Faith of Mahomet was anything more than superficial. But forced as he was to choose between the rower's bench and the poop-deck, the oar and the scimitar, he boldly and resolutely made the only choice that in his case could lead to liberty and life.

Thus he was received into the ranks of the Faithful whose pavilions wait them in Paradise, set in an orchard of never-failing fruit, among rivers of milk, of wine, and of clarified honey. He became the Kayia or lieutenant to Yusuf on the galley of that corsair's command and seconded him in half a score of engagements with an ability and a conspicuity that made him swiftly famous throughout the ranks of the Mediterranean rovers. Some six months later in a fight off the coast of Sicily with one of the galleys of the Religion—as the vessels of the Knights of Malta were called—Yusuf was mortally wounded in the very moment of the victory. He died an hour later in the arms of Sir Oliver, naming the latter his successor in the command of the galley, and enjoining upon all implicit obedience to him until they should be returned to Algiers and the Basha should make known his further will in the matter.

The Basha's will was to confirm his nephew's dying appointment of a successor, and Sir Oliver found himself in full command of a galley. From that hour he became Oliver-Reis, but very soon his valour and fury earned him the by-name of Sakr-el-Bahr, the Hawk of the Sea. His fame grew rapidly, and it spread across the tideless sea to the very shores of Christendom. Soon he became Asad's lieutenant, the second in command of all the Algerine galleys, which meant in fact that he was the commander-in-chief, for Asad was growing old and took the sea more and more rarely now. Sakr-el-Bahr sallied forth in his name and his stead, and such was his courage, his address, and his good fortune that never did he go forth to return empty-handed.

It was clear to all that the favour of Allah was upon him, that he had been singled out by Allah to be the very glory of Islam. Asad, who had ever esteemed him, grew to love him. An intensely devout man, could he have done less in the case of one for whom the Pitying the Pitiful showed so marked a predilection? It was freely accepted that when the destiny of Asad-ed-Din should come to be fulfilled, Sakr-el-Bahr must succeed him in the Bashalik of Algiers, and that thus Oliver-Reis would follow in the footsteps of Barbarossa, Ochiali, and other Christian renegades who had become corsair-princes of Islam.

In spite of certain hostilities which his rapid advancement begot, and of which we shall hear more presently, once only did his power stand in danger of suffering a check. Coming one morning into the reeking bagnio at Algiers, some six months after he had been raised to his captaincy, he found there a score of countrymen of his own, and he gave orders that their letters should instantly be struck off and their liberty restored them.

Called to account by the Basha for this action he took a high-handed way, since no other was possible. He swore by the beard of the Prophet that if he were to draw the sword of Mahomet and to serve Islam upon the seas, he would serve it in his own way, and one

of his ways was that his own countrymen were to have immunity from the edge of that same sword. Islam, he swore, should not be the loser, since for every Englishman he restored to liberty he would bring two Spaniards, Frenchmen, Greeks, or Italians into bondage.

He prevailed, but only upon condition that since captured slaves were the property of the state, if he desired to abstract them from the state he must first purchase them for himself. Since they would then be his own property he could dispose of them at his good pleasure. Thus did the wise and just Asad resolve the difficulty which had arisen, and Oliver-Reis bowed wisely to that decision.

Thereafter what English slaves were brought to Algiers he purchased, manumitted, and found means to send home again. True, it cost him a fine price yearly, but he was fast amassing such wealth as could easily support this tax.

As you read Lord Henry Goade's chronicles you might come to the conclusion that in the whorl of that new life of his Sir Oliver had entirely forgotten the happenings in his Cornish home and the woman he had loved, who so readily had believed him guilty of the slaying of her brother. You might believe this until you come upon the relation of how he found one day among some English seamen brought captive to Algiers by Biskaine-el-Borak—who was become his own second in command—a young Cornish lad from Helston named Pitt, whose father he had known.

He took this lad home with him to the fine palace which he inhabited near the Bab-el-Oueb, treated him as an honoured guest, and sat through a whole summer night in talk with him, questioning him upon this person and that person, and thus gradually drawing from him all the little history of his native place during the two years that were sped since he had left it. In this we gather an impression of the wistful longings the fierce nostalgia that must have overcome the renegade and his endeavours to allay it by his endless questions. The

Cornish lad had brought him up sharply and agonizingly with that past of his upon which he had closed the door when he became a Muslim and a corsair. The only possible inference is that in those hours of that summer's night repentance stirred in him, and a wild longing to return. Rosamund should reopen for him that door which, hard-driven by misfortune, he had slammed. That she would do so when once she knew the truth he had no faintest doubt. And there was now no reason why he should conceal the truth, why he should continue to shield that dastardly half-brother of his, whom he had come to hate as fiercely as he had erstwhile loved him.

In secret he composed a long letter giving the history of all that had happened to him since his kidnapping, and setting forth the entire truth of that and of the deed that had led to it. His chronicler opines that it was a letter that must have moved a stone to tears. And, moreover, it was not a mere matter of passionate protestations of innocence, or of unsupported accusation of his brother. It told her of the existence of proofs that must dispel all doubt. It told her of that parchment indited by Master Baine and witnessed by the parson, which document was to be delivered to her together with the letter. Further, it bade her seek confirmation of that document's genuineness, did she doubt it, at the hands of Master Baine himself. That done, it besought her to lay the whole matter before the Queen, and thus secure him faculty to return to England and immunity from any consequences of his subsequent regenade act to which his sufferings had driven him. He loaded the young Cornishman with gifts, gave him that letter to deliver in person, and added instructions that should enable him to find the document he was to deliver with it. That precious parchment had been left between the leaves of an old book on falconry in the library at Penarrow, where it would probably be found still undisturbed since his brother would not suspect its presence and was himself no scholar. Pitt was to seek out Nicholas at Penarrow and enlist his aid to obtain possession of that document, if it still existed.

Then Sakr-el-Bahr found means to conduct Pitt to Genoa, and there put him aboard an English vessel.

Three months later he received an answer—a letter from Pitt, which reached him by way of Genoa—which was at peace with the Algerines, and served then as a channel of communication with Christianity. In this letter Pitt informed him that he had done all that Sir Oliver had desired him; that he had found the document by the help of Nicholas, and that in person he had waited upon Mistress Rosamund Godolphin, who dwelt now with Sir John Killigrew at Arwenack, delivering to her the letter and the parchment; but that upon learning on whose behalf he came she had in his presence flung both unopened upon the fire and dismissed him with his tale untold.

Sakr-el-Bahr spent the night under the skies in his fragrant orchard, and his slaves reported in terror that they had heard sobs and weeping. If indeed his heart wept, it was for the last time; thereafter he was more inscrutable, more ruthless, cruel and mocking than men had ever known him, nor from that day did he ever again concern himself to manumit a single English slave. His heart was become a stone.

Thus five years passed, counting from that spring night when he was trepanned by Jasper Leigh, and his fame spread, his name became a terror upon the seas, and fleets put forth from Malta, from Naples, and from Venice to make an end of him and his ruthless piracy. But Allah kept watch over him, and Sakr-el-Bahr never delivered battle but he wrested victory to the scimitars of Islam.

Then in the spring of that fifth year there came to him another letter from the Cornish Pitt, a letter which showed him that gratitude was not as dead in the world as he supposed it, for it was purely out of gratitude that the lad whom he had delivered from thralldom wrote to inform him of certain matters that concerned him. This letter reopened

that old wound; it did more; it dealt him a fresh one. He learnt from it that the writer had been constrained by Sir John Killigrew to give such evidence of Sir Oliver's conversion to Islam as had enabled the courts to pronounce Sir Oliver as one to be presumed dead at law, granting the succession to his half-brother, Master Lionel Tressilian. Pitt professed himself deeply mortified at having been forced unwittingly to make Sir Oliver so evil a return for the benefits received from him, and added that sooner would he have suffered them to hang him than have spoken could he have foreseen the consequences of his testimony.

So far Sir Oliver read unmoved by any feeling other than cold contempt. But there was more to follow. The letter went on to tell him that Mistress Rosamund was newly returned from a two years' sojourn in France to become betrothed to his half-brother Lionel, and that they were to be wed in June. He was further informed that the marriage had been contrived by Sir John Killigrew in his desire to see Rosamund settled and under the protection of a husband, since he himself was proposing to take the seas and was fitting out a fine ship for a voyage to the Indies. The writer added that the marriage was widely approved, and it was deemed to be an excellent measure for both houses, since it would weld into one the two contiguous estates of Penarrow and Godolphin Court.

Oliver-Reis laughed when he had read thus far. The marriage was approved not for itself, it would seem, but because by means of it two stretches of earth were united into one. It was a marriage of two parks, of two estates, of two tracts of arable and forest, and that two human beings were concerned in it was apparently no more than an incidental circumstance.

Then the irony of it all entered his soul and spread it with bitterness. After dismissing him for the supposed murder of her brother, she was to take the actual murderer to her arms. And he, that cur, that false

villain!—out of what depths of hell did he derive the courage to go through with this mummary?—had he no heart, no conscience, no sense of decency, no fear of God?

He tore the letter into fragments and set about effacing the matter from his thoughts. Pitt had meant kindly by him, but had dealt cruelly. In his efforts to seek distraction from the torturing images ever in his mind he took to the sea with three galleys, and thus some two weeks later came face to face with Master Jasper Leigh aboard the Spanish carack which he captured under Cape Spartel.

CHAPTER III. HOMEWARD BOUND

In the cabin of the captured Spaniard, Jasper Leigh found himself that evening face to face with Sakr-el-Bahr, haled thither by the corsair's gigantic Nubians.

Sakr-el-Bahr had not yet pronounced his intentions concerning the piratical little skipper, and Master Leigh, full conscious that he was a villain, feared the worst, and had spent some miserable hours in the fore-castle awaiting a doom which he accounted foregone.

"Our positions have changed, Master Leigh, since last we talked in a ship's cabin," was the renegade's inscrutable greeting.

"Indeed," Master Leigh agreed. "But I hope ye'll remember that on that occasion I was your friend."

"At a price," Sakr-el-Bahr reminded him. "And at a price you may find me your friend to-day."

The rascally skipper's heart leapt with hope.

"Name it, Sir Oliver," he answered eagerly. "And so that it ties within my wretched power I swear I'll never boggle at it. I've had enough of slavery," he ran on in a plaintive whine. "Five years of it, and four of them spent aboard the galleys of Spain, and no day in all of them but that I prayed for death. Did you but know what I ha' suffered."

"Never was suffering more merited, never punishment more fitting, never justice more poetic," said Sakr-el-Bahr in a voice that made the

skipper's blood run cold. "You would have sold me, a man who did you no hurt, indeed a man who once befriended you—you would have sold me into slavery for a matter of two hundred pounds...."

"Nay, nay," cried the other fearfully, "as God's my witness, 'twas never part of my intent. Ye'll never ha' forgot the words I spoke to you, the offer that I made to carry you back home again."

"Ay, at a price, 'tis true," Sakr-el-Bahr repeated. "And it is fortunate for you that you are to-day in a position to pay a price that should postpone your dirty neck's acquaintance with a rope. I need a navigator," he added in explanation, "and what five years ago you would have done for two hundred pounds, you shall do to-day for your life. How say you: will you navigate this ship for me?"

"Sir," cried Jasper Leigh, who could scarce believe that this was all that was required of him, "I'll sail it to hell at your bidding."

"I am not for Spain this voyage," answered Sakr-el-Bahr. "You shall sail me precisely as you would have done five years ago, back to the mouth of the Fal, and set me ashore there. Is that agreed?"

"Ay, and gladly," replied Master Leigh without a second's pause.

"The conditions are that you shall have your life and your liberty," Sakr-el-Bahr explained. "But do not suppose that arrived in England you are to be permitted to depart. You must sail us back again, though once you have done that I shall find a way to send you home if you so desire it, and perhaps there will be some measure of reward for you if you serve me faithfully throughout. Follow the habits of a lifetime by playing me false and there's an end to you. You shall have for constant bodyguard these two lilies of the desert," and he pointed to the colossal Nubians who stood there invisible almost in the shadow but for the flash of teeth and eyeballs. "They shall watch over you, and see that no harm befalls you so long as you are honest with

me, and they shall strangle you at the first sign of treachery. You may go. You have the freedom of the ship, but you are not to leave it here or elsewhere save at my express command."

Jasper Leigh stumbled out counting himself fortunate beyond his expectations or deserts, and the Nubians followed him and hung behind him ever after like some vast twin shadow.

To Sakr-el-Bahr entered now Biskaine with a report of the prize captured. Beyond the prisoners, however, and the actual vessel, which had suffered nothing in the fight, the cargo was of no account. Outward bound as she was it was not to be expected that any treasures would be discovered in her hold. They found great store of armaments and powder and a little money; but naught else that was worthy of the corsairs' attention.

Sakr-el-Bahr briefly issued his surprising orders.

"Thou'lt set the captives aboard one of the galleys, Biskaine, and thyself convey them to Algiers, there to be sold. All else thou'lt leave aboard here, and two hundred picked corsairs to go a voyage with me overseas, men that will act as mariners and fighters."

"Art thou, then, not returning to Algiers, O Sakr-el-Bahr?"

"Not yet. I am for a longer voyage. Convey my service to Asad-ed-Din, whom Allah guard and cherish, and tell him to look for me in some six weeks time."

This sudden resolve of Oliver-Reis created no little excitement aboard the galleys. The corsairs knew nothing of navigation upon the open seas, none of them had ever been beyond the Mediterranean, few of them indeed had ever voyaged as far west as Cape Spartel, and it is doubtful if they would have followed any other leader into the perils of the open Atlantic. But Sakr-el-Bahr, the child of Fortune, the protected of Allah, had never yet led them to aught but victory, and he

had but to call them to heel and they would troop after him whithersoever he should think well to go. So now there was little trouble in finding the two hundred Muslimeen he desired for his fighting crew. Rather was the difficulty to keep the number of those eager for the adventure within the bounds he had indicated.

You are not to suppose that in all this Sir Oliver was acting upon any preconceived plan. Whilst he had lain on the heights watching that fine ship beating up against the wind it had come to him that with such a vessel under him it were a fond adventure to sail to England, to descend upon that Cornish coast abruptly as a thunderbolt, and present the reckoning to his craven dastard of a brother. He had toyed with the fancy, dreamily almost as men build their castles in Spain. Then in the heat of conflict it had entirely escaped his mind, to return in the shape of a resolve when he came to find himself face to face with Jasper Leigh.

The skipper and the ship conjointly provided him with all the means to realize that dream he had dreamt. There was none to oppose his will, no reason not to indulge his cruel fancy. Perhaps, too, he might see Rosamund again, might compel her to hear the truth from him. And there was Sir John Killigrew. He had never been able to determine whether Sir John had been his friend or his foe in the past; but since it was Sir John who had been instrumental in setting up Lionel in Sir Oliver's place—by inducing the courts to presume Sir Oliver's death on the score that being a renegade he must be accounted dead at law—and since it was Sir John who was contriving this wedding between Lionel and Rosamund, why, Sir John, too, should be paid a visit and should be informed of the precise nature of the thing he did.

With the forces at his disposal in those days of his absolute lordship of life and death along the African littoral, to conceive was with Oliver-Reis no more than the prelude to execution. The habit of

swift realization of his every wish had grown with him, and that habit guided now his course.

He made his preparations quickly, and on the morrow the Spanish carack—lately labelled Nuestra Senora de las Llagas, but with that label carefully effaced from her quarter—trimmed her sails and stood out for the open Atlantic, navigated by Captain Jasper Leigh. The three galleys under the command of Biskaine-el-Borak crept slowly eastward and homeward to Algiers, hugging the coast, as was the corsair habit. The wind favoured Oliver so well that within ten days of rounding Cape St. Vincent he had his first glimpse of the Lizard.

CHAPTER IV. THE RAID

In the estuary of the River Fal a splendid ship, on the building of which the most cunning engineers had been employed and no money spared, rode proudly at anchor just off Smithick under the very shadow of the heights crowned by the fine house of Arwenack. She was fitting out for a distant voyage and for days the work of bringing stores and munitions aboard had been in progress, so that there was an unwonted bustle about the little forge and the huddle of cottages that went to make up the fishing village, as if in earnest of the great traffic that in future days was to be seen about that spot. For Sir John Killigrew seemed at last to be on the eve of prevailing and of laying there the foundations of the fine port of his dreams.

To this state of things his friendship with Master Lionel Tressilian had contributed not a little. The opposition made to his project by Sir Oliver—and supported, largely at Sir Oliver's suggestion, by Truro and Helston—had been entirely withdrawn by Lionel; more, indeed Lionel had actually gone so far in the opposite direction as to support Sir John in his representations to Parliament and the Queen. It followed naturally enough that just as Sir Oliver's opposition of that cherished project had been the seed of the hostility between Arwenack and Penarrow, so Lionel's support of it became the root of the staunch friendship that sprang up between himself and Sir John.

What Lionel lacked of his brother's keen intelligence he made up for in cunning. He realized that although at some future time it was possible that Helston and Truro and the Tressilian property there might come to suffer as a consequence of the development of a port so much more advantageously situated, yet that could not be in his own lifetime; and meanwhile he must earn in return Sir John's support

for his suit of Rosamund Godolphin and thus find the Godolphin estates merged with his own. This certain immediate gain was to Master Lionel well worth the other future possible loss.

It must not, however, be supposed that Lionel's courtship had thenceforward run a smooth and easy course. The mistress of Godolphin Court showed him no favour and it was mainly that she might abstract herself from the importunities of his suit that she had sought and obtained Sir John Killigrew's permission to accompany the latter's sister to France when she went there with her husband, who was appointed English ambassador to the Louvre. Sir John's authority as her guardian had come into force with the decease of her brother.

Master Lionel moped awhile in her absence; but cheered by Sir John's assurance that in the end he should prevail, he quitted Cornwall in his turn and went forth to see the world. He spent some time in London about the Court, where, however, he seems to have prospered little, and then he crossed to France to pay his devoirs to the lady of his longings.

His constancy, the humility with which he made his suit, the obvious intensity of his devotion, began at last to wear away that gentlewoman's opposition, as dripping water wears away a stone. Yet she could not bring herself to forget that he was Sir Oliver's brother—the brother of the man she had loved, and the brother of the man who had killed her own brother. Between them stood, then, two things; the ghost of that old love of hers and the blood of Peter Godolphin.

Of this she reminded Sir John on her return to Cornwall after an absence of some two years, urging these matters as reasons why an alliance between herself and Lionel Tressilian must be impossible.

Sir John did not at all agree with her.

"My dear," he said, "there is your future to be thought of. You are now of full age and mistress of your own actions. Yet it is not well for a woman and a gentlewoman to dwell alone. As long as I live, or as long as I remain in England, all will be well. You may continue indefinitely your residence here at Arwenack, and you have been wise, I think, in quitting the loneliness of Godolphin Court. Yet consider that that loneliness may be yours again when I am not here."

"I should prefer that loneliness to the company you would thrust upon me," she answered him.

"Ungracious speech!" he protested. "Is this your gratitude for that lad's burning devotion, for his patience, his gentleness, and all the rest!"

"He is Oliver Tressilian's brother," she replied.

"And has he not suffered enough for that already? Is there to be no end to the price that he must pay for his brother's sins? Besides, consider that when all is said they are not even brothers. They are but half-brothers."

"Yet too closely kin," she said. "If you must have me wed I beg you'll find me another husband."

To this he would answer that expediently considered no husband could be better than the one he had chosen her. He pointed out the contiguity of their two estates, and how fine and advantageous a thing it would be to merge these two into one.

He was persistent, and his persistence was increased when he came to conceive his notion to take the seas again. His conscience would not permit him to heave anchor until he had bestowed her safely in wedlock. Lionel too was persistent, in a quiet, almost self-effacing way that never set a strain upon her patience, and was therefore the more difficult to combat.

In the end she gave way under the pressure of these men's wills, and did so with the best grace she could summon, resolved to drive from her heart and mind the one real obstacle of which, for very shame, she had made no mention to Sir John. The fact is that in spite of all, her love for Sir Oliver was not dead. It was stricken down, it is true, until she herself failed to recognize it for what it really was. But she caught herself thinking of him frequently and wistfully; she found herself comparing him with his brother; and for all that she had bidden Sir John find her some other husband than Lionel, she knew full well that any suitor brought before her must be submitted to that same comparison to his inevitable undoing. All this she accounted evil in herself. It was in vain that she lashed her mind with the reminder that Sir Oliver was Peter's murderer. As time went on she found herself actually making excuses for her sometime lover; she would admit that Peter had driven him to the step, that for her sake Sir Oliver had suffered insult upon insult from Peter, until, being but human, the cup of his endurance had overflowed in the end, and weary of submitting to the other's blows he had risen up in his anger and smitten in his turn.

She would scorn herself for such thoughts as these, yet she could not dismiss them. In act she could be strong—as witness how she had dealt with that letter which Oliver sent her out of Barbary by the hand of Pitt—but her thoughts she could not govern, and her thoughts were full often traitors to her will. There were longings in her heart for Oliver which she could not stifle, and there was ever the hope that he would one day return, although she realized that from such a return she might look for nothing.

When Sir John finally slew the hope of that return he did a wiser thing than he conceived. Never since Oliver's disappearance had they heard any news of him until Pitt came to Arwenack with that letter and his story. They had heard, as had all the world, of the corsair Sakr-el-

Bahr, but they had been far indeed from connecting him with Oliver Tressilian. Now that his identity was established by Pitt's testimony, it was an easy matter to induce the courts to account him dead and to give Lionel the coveted inheritance.

This to Rosamund was a small matter. But a great one was that Sir Oliver was dead at law, and must be so in fact, should he ever again set foot in England. It extinguished finally that curiously hopeless and almost subconscious hope of hers that one day he would return. Thus it helped her perhaps to face and accept the future which Sir John was resolved to thrust upon her.

Her betrothal was made public, and she proved if not an ardently loving, at least a docile and gentle mistress to Lionel. He was content. He could ask no more in reason at the moment, and he was buoyed up by every lover's confidence that given opportunity and time he could find the way to awaken a response. And it must be confessed that already during their betrothal he gave some proof of his reason for his confidence. She had been lonely, and he dispelled her loneliness by his complete surrender of himself to her; his restraint and his cautious, almost insidious creeping along a path which a more clumsy fellow would have taken at a dash made companionship possible between them and very sweet to her. Upon this foundation her affection began gradually to rise, and seeing them together and such excellent friends, Sir John congratulated himself upon his wisdom and went about the fitting out of that fine ship of his—the Silver Heron—for the coming voyage.

Thus they came within a week of the wedding, and Sir John all impatience now. The marriage bells were to be his signal for departure; as they fell silent the Silver Heron should spread her wings.

It was the evening of the first of June; the peal of the curfew had faded on the air and lights were being set in the great dining-room at Arwenack where the company was to sup. It was a small party. Just

Sir John and Rosamund and Lionel, who had lingered on that day, and Lord Henry Goade—our chronicler—the Queen's Lieutenant of Cornwall, together with his lady. They were visiting Sir John and they were to remain yet a week his guests at Arwenack that they might grace the coming nuptials.

Above in the house there was great stir of preparation for the departure of Sir John and his ward, the latter into wedlock, the former into unknown seas. In the turret chamber a dozen sempstresses were at work upon the bridal outfit under the directions of that Sally Pentreath who had been no less assiduous in the preparation of swaddling clothes and the like on the eve of Rosamund's appearance in this world.

At the very hour at which Sir John was leading his company to table Sir Oliver Tressilian was setting foot ashore not a mile away.

He had deemed it wiser not to round Pendennis Point. So in the bay above Swanpool on the western side of that promontory he had dropped anchor as the evening shadows were deepening. He had launched the ship's two boats, and in these he had conveyed some thirty of his men ashore. Twice had the boats returned, until a hundred of his corsairs stood ranged along that foreign beach. The other hundred he left on guard aboard. He took so great a force upon an expedition for which a quarter of the men would have sufficed so as to ensure by overwhelming numbers the avoidance of all unnecessary violence.

Absolutely unobserved he led them up the slope towards Arwenack through the darkness that had now closed in. To tread his native soil once more went near to drawing tears from him. How familiar was the path he followed with such confidence in the night; how well known each bush and stone by which he went with his silent multitude hard upon his heels. Who could have foretold him such a return as this.

Who could have dreamt when he roamed amain in his youth here with dogs and fowling-piece that he would creep one night over these dunes a renegade Muslim leading a horde of infidels to storm the house of Sir John Killigrew of Arwenack?

Such thoughts begot a weakness in him; but he made a quick recovery when his mind swung to all that he had so unjustly suffered, when he considered all that he came thus to avenge.

First to Arwenack to Sir John and Rosamund to compel them to hear the truth at least, and then away to Penarrow for Master Lionel and the reckoning. Such was the project that warmed him, conquered his weakness and spurred him, relentless, onward and upward to the heights and the fortified house that dominated them.

He found the massive iron-studded gates locked, as was to have been expected at that hour. He knocked, and presently the postern gaped, and a lantern was advanced. Instantly that lantern was dashed aside and Sir Oliver had leapt over the sill into the courtyard. With a hand gripping the porter's throat to choke all utterance, Sir Oliver heaved him out to his men, who swiftly gagged him.

That done they poured silently through that black gap of the postern into the spacious gateway. On he led them, at a run almost, towards the tall mullioned windows whence a flood of golden light seemed invitingly to beckon them.

With the servants who met them in the hall they dealt in the same swift silent fashion as they had dealt with the gatekeeper, and such was the speed and caution of their movements that Sir John and his company had no suspicion of their presence until the door of the dining-room crashed open before their eyes.

The sight which they beheld was one that for some moments left them mazed and bewildered. Lord Henry tells us how at first he

imagined that here was some mummary, some surprise prepared for the bridal couple by Sir John's tenants or the folk of Smithick and Penycumwick, and he adds that he was encouraged in this belief by the circumstance that not a single weapon gleamed in all that horde of outlandish intruders.

Although they came full armed against any eventualities, yet by their leader's orders not a blade was bared. What was to do was to be done with their naked hands alone and without bloodshed. Such were the orders of Sakr-el-Bahr, and Sakr-el-Bahr's were not orders to be disregarded.

Himself he stood forward at the head of that legion of brown-skinned men arrayed in all the colours of the rainbow, their heads swathed in turbans of every hue. He considered the company in grim silence, and the company in amazement considered this turbaned giant with the masterful face that was tanned to the colour of mahogany, the black forked beard, and those singularly light eyes glittering like steel under his black brows.

Thus a little while in silence, then with a sudden gasp Lionel Tressilian sank back in his tall chair as if bereft of strength.

The agate eyes flashed upon him smiling, cruelly.

"I see that you, at least, I recognize me," said Sakr-el-Bahr in his deep voice. "I was assured I could depend upon the eyes of brotherly love to pierce the change that time and stress have wrought in me."

Sir John was on his feet, his lean swarthy face flushing darkly, an oath on his lips. Rosamund sat on as if frozen with horror, considering Sir Oliver with dilating eyes, whilst her hands clawed the table before her. They too recognized him now, and realized that here was no mummary. That something sinister was intended Sir John could not for a moment doubt. But of what that something might be he could

form no notion. It was the first time that Barbary rovers were seen in England. That famous raid of theirs upon Baltimore in Ireland did not take place until some thirty years after this date.

"Sir Oliver Tressilian!" Killigrew gasped, and "Sir Oliver Tressilian!" echoed Lord Henry Goade, to add "By God!"

"Not Sir Oliver Tressilian, came the answer, but Sakr-el-Bahr, the scourge of the sea, the terror of Christendom, the desperate corsair your lies, cupidity, and false-heartedness have fashioned out of a sometime Cornish gentleman." He embraced them all in his denunciatory gesture. "Behold me here with my sea-hawks to present a reckoning long overdue."

Writing now of what his own eyes beheld, Lord Henry tells us how Sir John leapt to snatch a weapon from the armoured walls; how Sakr-el-Bahr barked out a single word in Arabic, and how at that word a half-dozen of his supple blackamoors sprang upon the knight like greyhounds upon a hare and bore him writhing to the ground.

Lady Henry screamed; her husband does not appear to have done anything, or else modesty keeps him silent on the score of it. Rosamund, white to the lips, continued to look on, whilst Lionel, overcome, covered his face with his hands in sheer horror. One and all of them expected to see some ghastly deed of blood performed there, coldly and callously as the wringing of a capon's neck. But no such thing took place. The corsairs merely turned Sir John upon his face, dragged his wrists behind him to make them fast, and having performed that duty with a speedy, silent dexterity they abandoned him.

Sakr-el-Bahr watched their performance with those grimly smiling eyes of his. When it was done he spoke again and pointed to Lionel, who leapt up in sudden terror, with a cry that was entirely inarticulate. Lithe brown arms encircled him like a legion of snakes. Powerless,

he was lifted in the air and borne swiftly away. For an instant he found himself held face to face with his turbaned brother. Into that pallid terror-stricken human mask the renegade's eyes stabbed like two daggers. Then deliberately and after the fashion of the Muslim he was become he spat upon it.

"Away!" he growled, and through the press of corsairs that thronged the hall behind him a lane was swiftly opened and Lionel was swallowed up, lost to the view of those within the room.

"What murderous deed do you intend?" cried Sir John indomitably. He had risen and stood grimly dignified in his bonds.

"Will you murder your own brother as you murdered mine?" demanded Rosamund, speaking now for the first time, and rising as she spoke, a faint flush coming to overspread her pallor. She saw him wince; she saw the mocking lustful anger perish in his face, leaving it vacant for a moment. Then it became grim again with a fresh resolve. Her words had altered all the current of his intentions. They fixed in him a dull, fierce rage. They silenced the explanations which he was come to offer, and which he scorned to offer here after that taunt.

"It seems you love that—whelp, that thing that was my brother," he said, sneering. "I wonder will you love him still when you come to be better acquainted with him? Though, faith, naught would surprise me in a woman and her love. Yet I am curious to see—curious to see." He laughed. "I have a mind to gratify myself. I will not separate you—not just yet."

He advanced upon her. "Come thou with me, lady," he commanded, and held out his hand.

And now Lord Henry seems to have been stirred to futile action.

"At that," he writes, "I thrust myself between to shield her. 'Thou dog,' I cried, 'thou shalt be made to suffer!'

"Suffer?" quoth he, and mocked me with his deep laugh. 'I have suffered already. 'Tis for that reason I am here.'

"And thou shalt suffer again, thou pirate out of hell!" I warned him. 'Thou shalt suffer for this outrage as God's my life!'

"Shall I so?" quoth he, very calm and sinister. 'And at whose hands, I pray you?'

"At mine, sir, I roared, being by now stirred to a great fury.

"At thine?" he sneered. 'Thou'lt hunt the hawk of the sea? Thou? Thou plump partridge! Away! Hinder me not!'"

And he adds that again Sir Oliver spoke that short Arabic command, whereupon a dozen blackamoors whirled the Queen's Lieutenant aside and bound him to a chair.

Face to face stood now Sir Oliver with Rosamund—face to face after five long years, and he realized that in every moment of that time the certainty had never departed from him of some such future meeting.

"Come, lady," he bade her sternly.

A moment she looked at him with hate and loathing in the clear depths of her deep blue eyes. Then swiftly as lightning she snatched a knife from the board and drove it at his heart. But his hand moved as swiftly to seize her wrist, and the knife clattered to the ground, its errand unfulfilled.

A shuddering sob escaped her then to express at once her horror of her own attempt and of the man who held her. That horror mounting until it overpowered her, she sank suddenly against him in a swoon.

Instinctively his arms went round her, and a moment he held her

thus, recalling the last occasion on which she had lain against his breast, on an evening five years and more ago under the grey wall of Godolphin Court above the river. What prophet could have told him that when next he so held her the conditions would be these? It was all grotesque and incredible, like the fantastic dream of some sick mind. But it was all true, and she was in his arms again.

He shifted his grip to her waist, heaved her to his mighty shoulder, as though she were a sack of grain, and swung about, his business at Arwenack accomplished—indeed, more of it accomplished than had been his intent, and also something less.

"Away, away!" he cried to his rovers, and away they sped as fleetly and silently as they had come, no man raising now so much as a voice to hinder them.

Through the hall and across the courtyard flowed that human tide; out into the open and along the crest of the hill it surged, then away down the slope towards the beach where their boats awaited them. Sakr-el-Bahr ran as lightly as though the swooning woman he bore were no more than a cloak he had flung across his shoulder. Ahead of him went a half-dozen of his fellows carrying his gagged and pinioned brother.

Once only before they dipped from the heights of Arwenack did Oliver check. He paused to look across the dark shimmering water to the woods that screened the house of Penarrow from his view. It had been part of his purpose to visit it, as we know. But the necessity had now been removed, and he was conscious of a pang of disappointment, of a hunger to look again upon his home. But to shift the current of his thoughts just then came two of his officers—Othmani and Ali, who had been muttering one with the other. As they overtook him, Othmani set now a hand upon his arm, and pointed down towards the twinkling lights of Smithick and Penycumwick.

"My lord," he cried, "there will be lads and maidens there should fetch fat prices in the sôk-el-Abeed."

"No doubt," said Sakr-el-Bahr, scarce heeding him, heeding indeed little in this world but his longings to look upon Penarrow.

"Why, then, my lord, shall I take fifty True-Believers and make a raid upon them? It were an easy task, all unsuspecting as they must be of our presence."

Sakr-el-Bahr came out of his musings. "Othmani," said he, "art a fool, the very father of fools, else wouldst thou have come to know by now that those who once were of my own race, those of the land from which I am sprung, are sacred to me. Here we take no slave but these we have. On, then, in the name of Allah!"

But Othmani was not yet silenced. "And is our perilous voyage across these unknown seas into this far heathen land to be rewarded by no more than just these two captives? Is that a raid worthy of Sakr-el-Bahr?"

"Leave Sakr-el-Bahr to judge," was the curt answer.

"But reflect, my lord: there is another who will judge. How shall our Basha, the glorious Asad-ed-Din, welcome thy return with such poor spoils as these? What questions will he set thee, and what account shalt thou render him for having imperilled the lives of all these True-Believers upon the seas for so little profit?"

"He shall ask me what he pleases, and I shall answer what I please and as Allah prompts me. On, I say!"

And on they went, Sakr-el-Bahr conscious now of little but the warmth of that body upon his shoulder, and knowing not, so tumultuous were his emotions, whether it fired him to love or hate.

They gained the beach; they reached the ship whose very presence

had continued unsuspected. The breeze was fresh and they stood away at once. By sunrise there was no more sign of them than there had been at sunset, there was no more clue to the way they had taken than to the way they had come. It was as if they had dropped from the skies in the night upon that Cornish coast, and but for the mark of their swift, silent passage, but for the absence of Rosamund and Lionel Tressilian, the thing must have been accounted no more than a dream of those few who had witnessed it.

Aboard the carack, Sakr-el-Bahr bestowed Rosamund in the cabin over the quarter, taking the precaution to lock the door that led to the stern-gallery. Lionel he ordered to be dropped into a dark hole under the hatchway, there to lie and meditate upon the retribution that had overtaken him until such time as his brother should have determined upon his fate—for this was a matter upon which the renegade was still undecided.

Himself he lay under the stars that night and thought of many things. One of these things, which plays some part in the story, though it is probable that it played but a slight one in his thoughts, was begotten of the words Othmani had used. What, indeed, would be Asad's welcome of him on his return if he sailed into Algiers with nothing more to show for that long voyage and the imperilling of the lives of two hundred True-Believers than just those two captives whom he intended, moreover, to retain for himself? What capital would not be made out of that circumstance by his enemies in Algiers and by Asad's Sicilian wife who hated him with all the bitterness of a hatred that had its roots in the fertile soil of jealousy?

This may have spurred him in the cool dawn to a very daring and desperate enterprise which Destiny sent his way in the shape of a tall-masted Dutchman homeward bound. He gave chase, for all that he was full conscious that the battle he invited was one of which his corsairs had no experience, and one upon which they must have

hesitated to venture with another leader than himself. But the star of Sakr-el-Bahr was a star that never led to aught but victory, and their belief in him, the very javelin of Allah, overcame any doubts that may have been begotten of finding themselves upon an unfamiliar craft and on a rolling, unfamiliar sea.

This fight is given in great detail by my Lord Henry from the particulars afforded him by Jasper Leigh. But it differs in no great particular from other sea-fights, and it is none of my purpose to surfeit you with such recitals. Enough to say that it was stern and fierce, entailing great loss to both combatants; that cannon played little part in it, for knowing the quality of his men Sakr-el-Bahr made haste to run in and grapple. He prevailed of course as he must ever pre-vail by the very force of his personality and the might of his example. He was the first to leap aboard the Dutchman, clad in mail and whirling his great scimitar, and his men poured after him shouting his name and that of Allah in a breath.

Such was ever his fury in an engagement that it infected and inspired his followers. It did so now, and the shrewd Dutchmen came to perceive that this heathen horde was as a body to which he supplied the brain and soul. They attacked him fiercely in groups, intent at all costs upon cutting him down, convinced almost by instinct that were he felled the victory would easily be theirs. And in the end they succeeded. A Dutch pike broke some links of his mail and dealt him a flesh wound which went unheeded by him in his fury; a Dutch rapier found the breach thus made in his defences, and went through it to stretch him bleeding upon the deck. Yet he staggered up, knowing as full as did they that if he succumbed then all was lost. Armed now with a short axe which he had found under his hand when he went down, he hacked a way to the bulwarks, set his back against the timbers, and hoarse of voice, ghastly of face, spattered with the blood of his wound he urged on his men until the victory was theirs—and this was fortunately soon. And then, as if he had been sustained

by no more than the very force of his will, he sank down in a heap among the dead and wounded huddled against the vessel's bulwarks.

Grief-stricken his corsairs bore him back aboard the carack. Were he to die then was their victory a barren one indeed. They laid him on a couch prepared for him amidships on the main deck, where the vessel's pitching was least discomfiting. A Moorish surgeon came to tend him, and pronounced his hurt a grievous one, but not so grievous as to close the gates of hope.

This pronouncement gave the corsairs all the assurance they required. It could not be that the Gardener could already pluck so fragrant a fruit from Allah's garden. The Pitiful must spare Sakr-el-Bahr to continue the glory of Islam.

Yet they were come to the straits of Gibraltar before his fever abated and he recovered complete consciousness, to learn of the final issue of that hazardous fight into which he had led those children of the Prophet.

The Dutchman, Othmani informed him, was following in their wake, with Ali and some others aboard her, steering ever in the wake of the carack which continued to be navigated by the Nasrani dog, Jasper Leigh. When Sakr-el-Bahr learnt the value of the capture, when he was informed that in addition to a hundred able-bodied men under the hatches, to be sold as slaves in the sôk-el-Abeed, there was a cargo of gold and silver, pearls, amber, spices, and ivory, and such lesser matters as gorgeous silken fabrics, rich beyond anything that had ever been seen upon the seas at any one time, he felt that the blood he had shed had not been wasted.

Let him sail safely into Algiers with these two ships both captured in the name of Allah and his Prophet, one of them an argosy so richly fraught, a floating treasure-house, and he need have little fear of what his enemies and the crafty evil Sicilian woman might have wrought

against him in his absence.

Then he made inquiry touching his two English captives, to be informed that Othmani had taken charge of them, and that he had continued the treatment meted out to them by Sakr-el-Bahr himself when first they were brought aboard.

He was satisfied, and fell into a gentle healing sleep, whilst, on the decks above, his followers rendered thanks to Allah the Pitying the Pitiful, the Master of the Day of Judgment, who Alone is All-Wise, All-Knowing.

CHAPTER V. THE LION OF THE FAITH

Asad-ed-Din, the Lion of the Faith, Basha of Algiers, walked in the evening cool in the orchard of the Kasbah upon the heights above the city, and at his side, stepping daintily, came Fenzileh, his wife, the first lady of his hareem, whom eighteen years ago he had carried off in his mighty arms from that little whitewashed village above the Straits of Messina which his followers had raided.

She had been a lissom maid of sixteen in those far-off days, the child of humble peasant-folk, and she had gone uncomplaining to the arms of her swarthy ravisher. To-day, at thirty-four, she was still beautiful, more beautiful indeed than when first she had fired the passion of Asad-Reis—as he then was, one of the captains of the famous Ali-Basha. There were streaks of red in her heavy black tresses, her skin was of a soft pearliness that seemed translucent, her eyes were large, of a golden-brown, agleam with sombre fires, her lips were full and sensuous. She was tall and of a shape that in Europe would have been accounted perfect, which is to say that she was a thought too slender for Oriental taste; she moved along beside her lord with a sinuous, languorous grace, gently stirring her fan of ostrich plumes. She was unveiled; indeed it was her immodest habit to go naked of face more often than was seemly, which is but the least of the many undesirable infidel ways which had survived her induction into the Faith of Islam—a necessary step before Asad, who was devout to the point of bigotry, would consent to make her his wife. He had found her such a wife as it is certain he could never have procured at home; a woman who, not content to be his toy, the plaything of his idle hour, insinuated herself into affairs, demanded

and obtained his confidences, and exerted over him much the same influence as the wife of a European prince might exert over her consort. In the years during which he had lain under the spell of her ripening beauty he had accepted the situation willingly enough; later, when he would have curtailed her interferences, it was too late; she had taken a firm grip of the reins, and Asad was in no better case than many a European husband—an anomalous and outrageous condition this for a Basha of the Prophet's House. It was also a dangerous one for Fenzileh; for should the burden of her at any time become too heavy for her lord there was a short and easy way by which he could be rid of it. Do not suppose her so foolish as not to have realized this—she realized it fully; but her Sicilian spirit was daring to the point of recklessness; her very dauntlessness which had enabled her to seize a control so unprecedented in a Muslim wife urged her to maintain it in the face of all risks.

Dauntless was she now, as she paced there in the cool of the orchard, under the pink and white petals of the apricots, the flaming scarlet of pomegranate blossoms, and through orange-groves where the golden fruit glowed and amid foliage of sombre green. She was at her eternal work of poisoning the mind of her lord against Sakr-el-Bahr, and in her maternal jealousy she braved the dangers of such an undertaking, fully aware of how dear to the heart of Asad-ed-Din was that absent renegade corsair. It was this very affection of the Basha's for his lieutenant that was the fomenter of her own hate of Sakr-el-Bahr, for it was an affection that transcended Asad's love for his own son and hers, and it led to the common rumour that for Sakr-el-Bahr was reserved the high destiny of succeeding Asad in the Bashalik.

"I tell thee thou'rt abused by him, O source of my life."

"I hear thee," answered Asad sourly. "And were thine own hearing less infirm, woman, thou wouldst have heard me answer thee that thy words weigh for naught with me against his deeds. Words may be but

a mask upon our thoughts; deeds are ever the expression of them. Bear thou that in mind, O Fenzileh."

"Do I not bear in mind thine every word, O fount of wisdom?" she protested, and left him, as she often did, in doubt whether she fawned or sneered. "And it is his deeds I would have speak for him, not indeed my poor words and still less his own."

"Then, by the head of Allah, let those same deeds speak, and be thou silent."

The harsh tone of his reproof and the scowl upon his haughty face, gave her pause for a moment. He turned about.

"Come!" he said. "Soon it will be the hour of prayer." And he paced back towards the yellow huddle of walls of the Kasbah that overtopped the green of that fragrant place.

He was a tall, gaunt man, stooping slightly at the shoulders under the burden of his years; but his eagle face was masterful, and some lingering embers of his youth still glowed in his dark eyes. Thoughtfully, with a jewelled hand, he stroked his long white beard; with the other he leaned upon her soft plump arm, more from habit than for support, for he was full vigorous still.

High in the blue overhead a lark burst suddenly into song, and from the depths of the orchard came a gentle murmur of doves as if returning thanks for the lessening of the great heat now that the sun was sinking rapidly towards the world's edge and the shadows were lengthening.

Came Fenzileh's voice again, more musical than either, yet laden with words of evil, poison wrapped in honey.

"O my dear lord, thou'rt angered with me now. Woe me! that never may I counsel thee for thine own glory as my heart prompts me, but I

must earn thy coldness."

"Abuse not him I love," said the Basha shortly. "I have told thee so full oft already."

She nestled closer to him, and her voice grew softer, more akin to the amorous cooing of the doves. "And do I not love thee, O master of my soul? Is there in all the world a heart more faithful to thee than mine? Is not thy life my life? Have not my days been all devoted to the perfecting of thine happiness? And wilt thou then frown upon me if I fear for thee at the hands of an intruder of yesterday?"

"Fear for me?" he echoed, and laughed jeeringly. "What shouldst thou fear for me from Sakr-el-Bahr?"

"What all believers must ever fear from one who is no true Muslim, from one who makes a mock and travesty of the True Faith that he may gain advancement."

The Basha checked in his stride, and turned upon her angrily.

"May thy tongue rot, thou mother of lies!"

"I am as the dust beneath thy feet, O my sweet lord, yet am I not what thine heedless anger calls me."

"Heedless?" quoth he. "Not heedless but righteous to hear one whom the Prophet guards, who is the very javelin of Islam against the breast of the unbeliever, who carries the scourge of Allah against the infidel Frankish pigs, so maligned by thee! No more, I say! Lest I bid thee make good thy words, and pay the liar's price if thou shouldst fail."

"And should I fear the test?" she countered, nothing daunted. "I tell thee, O father of Marzak, that I should hail it gladly. Why, hear me now. Thou settest store by deeds, not words. Tell me, then, is it the deed of a True-Believer to waste substance upon infidel slaves, to purchase

them that he may set them free?"

Asad moved on in silence. That erstwhile habit of Sakr-el-Bahr's was one not easy to condone. It had occasioned him his moments of uneasiness, and more than once had he taxed his lieutenant with the practice ever to receive the same answer, the answer which he now made to Fenzileh. "For every slave that he so manumitted, he brought a dozen into bondage."

"Perforce, else would he be called to account. 'Twas so much dust he flung into the face of true Muslimeen. Those manumissions prove a lingering fondness for the infidel country whence he springs. Is there room for that in the heart of a true member of the Prophet's immortal House? Hast ever known me languish for the Sicilian shore from which in thy might thou wrested me, or have I ever besought of thee the life of a single Sicilian infidel in all these years that I have lived to serve thee? Such longings are betrayed, I say, by such a practice, and such longings could have no place in one who had uprooted infidelity from his heart. And now this voyage of his beyond the seas—risking a vessel that he captured from the arch-enemy of Islam, which is not his to risk but thine in whose name he captured it; and together with it he imperils the lives of two hundred True-Believers. To what end? To bear him overseas, perchance that he may look again upon the unhallowed land that gave him birth. So Biskaine reported. And what if he should founder on the way?"

"Thou at least wouldst be content, thou fount of malice," growled Asad.

"Call me harsh names, O sun that warms me! Am I not thine to use and abuse at thy sweet pleasure? Pour salt upon the heart thou woundest; since it is thy hand I'll never murmur a complaint. But heed me—heed my words; or since words are of no account with thee, then heed his deeds which I am drawing to thy tardy notice. Heed them, I say, as my love bids me even though thou shouldst give me to be

whipped or slain for my temerity."

"Woman, thy tongue is like the clapper of a bell with the devil swinging from the rope. What else dost thou impute?"

"Naught else, since thou dost but mock me, withdrawing thy love from thy fond slave."

"The praise to Allah, then," said he. "Come, it is the hour of prayer!"

But he praised Allah too soon. Woman-like, though she protested she had done, she had scarce begun as yet.

"There is thy son, O father of Marzak."

"There is, O mother of Marzak."

"And a man's son should be the partner of his soul. Yet is Marzak passed over for this foreign upstart; yet does this Nasrani of yesterday hold the place in thy heart and at thy side that should be Marzak's."

"Could Marzak fill that place," he asked. "Could that beardless boy lead men as Sakr-el-Bahr leads them, or wield the scimitar against the foes of Islam and increase as Sakr-el-Bahr increases the glory of the Prophet's Holy Law upon the earth?"

"If Sakr-el-Bahr does this, he does it by thy favour, O my lord. And so might Marzak, young though he be. Sakr-el-Bahr is but what thou hast made him—no more, no less."

"There art thou wrong, indeed, O mother of error. Sakr-el-Bahr is what Allah hath made him. He is what Allah wills. He shall become what Allah wills. Hast yet to learn that Allah has bound the fate of each man about his neck?"

And then a golden glory suffused the deep sapphire of the sky

heralding the setting of the sun and made an end of that altercation, conducted by her with a daring as singular as the patience that had endured it. He quickened his steps in the direction of the courtyard. That golden glow paled as swiftly as it had spread, and night fell as suddenly as if a curtain had been dropped.

In the purple gloom that followed the white cloisters of the courtyard glowed with a faintly luminous pearliness. Dark forms of slaves stirred as Asad entered from the garden followed by Fenzileh, her head now veiled in a thin blue silken gauze. She flashed across the quadrangle and vanished through one of the archways, even as the distant voice of a Mueddin broke plaintively upon the brooding stillness reciting the Shehad—

"La illaha, illa Allah! Wa Muhammad er Rasool Allah!"

A slave spread a carpet, a second held a great silver bowl, into which a third poured water. The Basha, having washed, turned his face towards Mecca, and testified to the unity of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, King of the Day of judgment, whilst the cry of the Mueddin went echoing over the city from minaret to minaret.

As he rose from his devotions, there came a quick sound of steps without, and a sharp summons. Turkish janissaries of the Basha's guard, invisible almost in their flowing black garments, moved to answer that summons and challenge those who came.

From the dark vaulted entrance of the courtyard leapt a gleam of lanterns containing tiny clay lamps in which burned a wick that was nourished by mutton fat. Asad, waiting to learn who came, halted at the foot of the white glistening steps, whilst from doors and lattices of the palace flooded light to suffuse the courtyard and set the marbles shimmering.

A dozen Nubian javelin-men advanced, then ranged themselves

aside whilst into the light stepped the imposing, gorgeously robed figure of Asad's wazeer, Tsamanni. After him came another figure in mail that clanked faintly and glimmered as he moved.

"Peace and the Prophet's blessings upon thee, O mighty Asad!" was the wazeer's greeting.

"And peace upon thee, Tsamanni," was the answer. "Art the bearer of news?"

"Of great and glorious tidings, O exalted one! Sakr-el-Bahr is returned."

"The praise to Him!" exclaimed the Basha, with uplifted hands; and there was no mistaking the thrill of his voice.

There fell a soft step behind him and a shadow from the doorway. He turned. A graceful stripling in turban and caftan of cloth of gold salaamed to him from the topmast step. And as he came upright and the light of the lanterns fell full upon his face the astonishingly white fairness of it was revealed—a woman's face it might have been, so softly rounded was it in its beardlessness.

Asad smiled wryly in his white beard, guessing that the boy had been sent by his ever-watchful mother to learn who came and what the tidings that they bore.

"Thou hast heard, Marzak?" he said. "Sakr-el-Bahr is returned."

"Victoriously, I hope," the lad lied glibly.

"Victorious beyond aught that was ever known," replied Tsamanni. "He sailed at sunset into the harbour, his company aboard two mighty Frankish ships, which are but the lesser part of the great spoil he brings."

"Allah is great," was the Basha's glad welcome of this answer to

those insidious promptings of his Sicilian wife. "Why does he not come in person with his news?"

"His duty keeps him yet awhile aboard, my lord," replied the wazeer. "But he hath sent his kayia Othmani here to tell the tale of it."

"Thrice welcome be thou, Othmani." He beat his hands together whereat slaves placed cushions for him upon the ground. He sat, and beckoned Marzak to his side. "And now thy tale!"

And Othmani standing forth related how they had voyaged to distant England in the ship that Sakr-el-Bahr had captured, through seas that no corsair yet had ever crossed, and how on their return they had engaged a Dutchman that was their superior in strength and numbers; how none the less Sakr-el-Bahr had wrested victory by the help of Allah, his protector, how he had been dealt a wound that must have slain any but one miraculously preserved for the greater glory of Islam, and of the surpassing wealth of the booty which at dawn tomorrow should be laid at Asad's feet for his division of it.

CHAPTER VI. THE CONVERT

That tale of Othmani's being borne anon to Fenzileh by her son was gall and wormwood to her jealous soul. Evil enough to know that Sakrel-Bahr was returned in spite of the fervent prayers for his foundering which she had addressed both to the God of her forefathers and to the God of her adoption. But that he should have returned in triumph bringing with him heavy spoils that must exalt him further in the affection of Asad and the esteem of the people was bitterness indeed. It left her mute and stricken, bereft even of the power to curse him.

Anon, when her mind recovered from the shock she turned it to the consideration of what at first had seemed a trivial detail in Othmani's tale as reported by Marzak.

"It is most singularly odd that he should have undertaken that long voyage to England to wrest thence just those two captives; that being there he should not have raided in true corsair fashion and packed his ship with slaves. Most singularly odd!"

They were alone behind the green lattices through which filtered the perfumes of the garden and the throbbing of a nightingale's voice laden with the tale of its love for the rose. Fenzileh reclined upon a divan that was spread with silken Turkey carpets, and one of her gold-embroidered slippers had dropped from her henna-stained toes. Her lovely arms were raised to support her head, and she stared up at the lamp of many colours that hung from the fretted ceiling.

Marzak paced the length of the chamber back and forth, and there was silence save for the soft swish of his slippers along the floor.

"Well?" she asked him impatiently at last. "Does it not seem odd to thee?"

"Odd, indeed, O my mother," the youth replied, coming to a halt before her.

"And canst think of naught that was the cause of it?"

"The cause of it?" quoth he, his lovely young face, so closely modelled upon her own, looking blank and vacant.

"Ay, the cause of it," she cried impatiently. "Canst do naught but stare? Am I the mother of a fool? Wilt thou simper and gape and trifle away thy days whilst that dog-descended Frank tramples thee underfoot, using thee but as a stepping-stone to the power that should be thine own? And that be so, Marzak, I would thou hadst been strangled in my womb."

He recoiled before the Italian fury of her, was dully resentful even, suspecting that in such words from a woman were she twenty times his mother, there was something dishonouring to his manhood.

"What can I do?" he cried.

"Dost ask me? Art thou not a man to think and act? I tell thee that misbegotten son of a Christian and a Jew will trample thee in the dust. He is greedy as the locust, wily as the serpent, and ferocious as the panther. By Allah! I would I had never borne a son. Rather might men point at me the finger of scorn and call me mother of the wind than that I should have brought forth a man who knows not how to be a man."

"Show me the way," he cried. "Set me a task; tell me what to do and thou shalt not find me lacking, O my mother. Until then spare me these insults, or I come no more to thee."

At this threat that strange woman heaved herself up from her soft

couch. She ran to him and flung her arms about his neck, set her cheek against his own. Not eighteen years in the Basha's hareem had stifled the European mother in her, the passionate Sicilian woman, fierce as a tiger in her maternal love.

"O my child, my lovely boy," she almost sobbed. "It is my fear for thee that makes me harsh. If I am angry it is but my love that speaks, my rage for thee to see another come usurping the place beside thy father that should be thine. Ah! but we will prevail, sweet son of mine. I shall find a way to return that foreign offal to the dung-heap whence it sprang. Trust me, O Marzak! Sh! Thy father comes. Away! Leave me alone with him."

She was wise in that, for she knew that alone Asad was more easily controlled by her, since the pride was absent which must compel him to turn and rend her did she speak so before others. Marzak vanished behind the screen of fretted sandalwood that masked one doorway even as Asad loomed in the other.

He came forward smiling, his slender brown fingers combing his long beard, his white djellaba trailing behind him along the ground.

"Thou hast heard, not a doubt, O Fenzileh," said he. "Art thou answered enough?"

She sank down again upon her cushions and idly considered herself in a steel mirror set in silver.

"Answered?" she echoed lazily, with infinite scorn and a hint of rippling contemptuous laughter running through the word. "Answered indeed. Sakr-el-Bahr risks the lives of two hundred children of Islam and a ship that being taken was become the property of the State upon a voyage to England that has no object but the capturing of two slaves—two slaves, when had his purpose been sincere, it might have been two hundred."

"Ha! And is that all that thou hast heard?" he asked her mocking in his turn.

"All that signifies," she replied, still mirroring herself. "I heard as a matter of lesser import that on his return, meeting fortuitously a Frankish ship that chanced to be richly laden, he seized it in thy name."

"Fortuitously, sayest thou?"

"What else?" She lowered the mirror, and her bold, insolent eyes met his own quite fearlessly. "Thou'lt not tell me that it was any part of his design when he went forth?"

He frowned; his head sank slowly in thought. Observing the advantage gained she thrust it home. "It was a lucky wind that blew that Dutchman into his path, and luckier still her being so richly fraught that he may dazzle thine eyes with the sight of gold and gems, and so blind thee to the real purpose of his voyage."

"Its real purpose?" he asked dully. "What was its real purpose?" She smiled a smile of infinite knowledge to hide her utter ignorance, her inability to supply even a reason that should wear an air of truth.

"Dost ask me, O perspicuous Asad? Are not thine eyes as sharp, thy wits as keen at least as mine, that what is clear to me should be hidden from thee? Or hath this Sakr-el-Bahr bewitched thee with enchantments of Baby?"

He strode to her and caught her wrist in a cruelly rough grip of his sinewy old hand.

"His purpose, thou jade! Pour out the foulness of thy mind. Speak!"

She sat up, flushed and defiant.

"I will not speak," said she.

"Thou wilt not? Now, by the Head of Allah! dost dare to stand before my face and defy me, thy Lord? I'll have thee whipped, Fenzileh. I have been too tender of thee these many years—so tender that thou hast forgot the rods that await the disobedient wife. Speak then ere thy flesh is bruised or speak thereafter, at thy pleasure."

"I will not," she repeated. "Though I be flung to the hooks, not another word will I say of Sakr-el-Bahr. Shall I unveil the truth to be spurned and scorned and dubbed a liar and the mother of lies?" Then abruptly changing she fell to weeping. "O source of my life!" she cried to him, "how cruelly unjust to me thou art!" She was grovelling now, a thing of supplest grace, her lovely arms entwining his knees. "When my love for thee drives me to utter what I see, I earn but thy anger, which is more than I can endure. I swoon beneath the weight of it."

He flung her off impatiently. "What a weariness is a woman's tongue!" he cried, and stalked out again, convinced from past experiences that did he linger he would be whelmed in a torrent of words.

But her poison was shrewdly administered, and slowly did its work. It abode in his mind to torture him with the doubts that were its very essence. No reason, however well founded, that she might have urged for Sakr-el-Bahr's strange conduct could have been half so insidious as her suggestion that there was a reason. It gave him something vague and intangible to consider. Something that he could not repel since it had no substance he could grapple with. Impatiently he awaited the morning and the coming of Sakr-el-Bahr himself, but he no longer awaited it with the ardent whole-hearted eagerness as of a father awaiting the coming of a beloved son.

Sakr-el-Bahr himself paced the poop deck of the carack and watched the lights perish one by one in the little town that straggled up the hillside before him. The moon came up and bathed it in a white

hard light, throwing sharp inky shadows of rustling date palm and spearlike minaret, and flinging shafts of silver athwart the peaceful bay.

His wound was healed and he was fully himself once more. Two days ago he had come on deck for the first time since the fight with the Dutchman, and he had spent there the greater portion of the time since then. Once only had he visited his captives. He had risen from his couch to repair straight to the cabin in the poop where Rosamund was confined. He had found her pale and very wistful, but with her courage entirely unbroken. The Godolphins were a stiff-necked race, and Rosamund bore in her frail body the spirit of a man. She looked up when he entered, started a little in surprise to see him at last, for it was the first time he stood before her since he had carried her off from Arwenack some four weeks ago. Then she had averted her eyes, and sat there, elbows on the table, as if carved of wood, as if blind to his presence and deaf to his words.

To the expressions of regret—and they were sincere, for already he repented him his unpremeditated act so far as she was concerned—she returned no slightest answer, gave no sign indeed that she heard a word of it. Baffled, he stood gnawing his lip a moment, and gradually, unreasonably perhaps, anger welled up from his heart. He turned and went out again. Next he had visited his brother, to consider in silence a moment the haggard, wild-eyed, unshorn wretch who shrank and cowered before him in the consciousness of guilt. At last he returned to the deck, and there, as I have said, he spent the greater portion of the last three days of that strange voyage, reclining for the most part in the sun and gathering strength from its ardour.

To-night as he paced under the moon a stealthy shadow crept up the companion to call him gently by his English name—

"Sir Oliver!"

He started as if a ghost had suddenly leapt up to greet him. It was Jasper Leigh who hailed him thus.

"Come up," he said. And when the fellow stood before him on the poop—"I have told you already that here is no Sir Oliver. I am Oliver-Reis or Sakr-el-Bahr, as you please, one of the Faithful of the Prophet's House. And now what is your will?"

"Have I not served you faithfully and well?" quoth Captain Leigh.

"Who has denied it?"

"None. But neither has any acknowledged it. When you lay wounded below it had been an easy thing for me to ha' played the traitor. I might ha' sailed these ships into the mouth of Tagus. I might so by God!"

"You'd have been carved in pieces on the spot," said Sakr-el-Bahr.

"I might have hugged the land and run the risk of capture and then claimed my liberation from captivity."

"And found yourself back on the galleys of his Catholic Majesty. But there! I grant that you have dealt loyally by me. You have kept your part of the bond. I shall keep mine, never doubt it."

"I do not. But your part of the bond was to send me home again."

"Well?"

"The hell of it is that I know not where to find a home, I know not where home may be after all these years. If ye send me forth, I shall become a wanderer of no account."

"What else am I to do with you?"

"Faith now I am as full weary of Christians and Christendom as you was yourself when the Muslims took the galley on which you toiled. I

am a man of parts, Sir Ol-Sakr-el-Bahr. No better navigator ever sailed a ship from an English port, and I ha' seen a mort o' fighting and know the art of it upon the sea. Can ye make naught of me here?"

"You would become a renegade like me?" His tone was bitter.

"I ha' been thinking that 'renegade' is a word that depends upon which side you're on. I'd prefer to say that I've a wish to be converted to the faith of Mahound."

"Converted to the faith of piracy and plunder and robbery upon the seas is what you mean," said Sakr-el-Bahr.

"Nay, now. To that I should need no converting, for all that I were afore," Captain Leigh admitted frankly. "I ask but to sail under another flag than the Jolly Roger."

"You'll need to abjure strong drink," said Sakr-el-Bahr.

"There be compensations," said Master Leigh.

Sakr-el-Bahr considered. The rogue's appeal smote a responsive chord in his heart. It would be good to have a man of his own race beside him, even though it were but such a rascal as this.

"Be it as you will," he said at last. "You deserve to be hanged in spite of what promises I made you. But no matter for that. So that you become a Muslim I will take you to serve beside me, one of my own lieutenants to begin with, and so long as you are loyal to me, Jasper, all will be well. But at the first sign of faithlessness, a rope and the yard-arm, my friend, and an airy dance into hell for you."

The rascally skipper stooped in his emotion, caught up Sakr-el-Bahr's hand and bore it to his lips. "It is agreed," he said. "Ye have shown me mercy who have little deserved it from you. Never fear for my loyalty. My life belongs to you, and worthless thing though it may be, ye may do with it as ye please."

Despite himself Sakr-el-Bahr tightened his grip upon the rogue's hand, and Jasper shuffled off and down the companion again, touched to the heart for once in his rough villainous life by a clemency that he knew to be undeserved, but which he swore should be deserved ere all was done.

CHAPTER VII. MARZAK-BEN-ASAD

It took no less than forty camels to convey the cargo of that Dutch argosy from the mole to the Kasbah, and the procession—carefully marshalled by Sakr-el-Bahr, who knew the value of such pageants to impress the mob—was such as never yet had been seen in the narrow streets of Algiers upon the return of any corsair. It was full worthy of the greatest Muslim conqueror that sailed the seas, of one who, not content to keep to the tideless Mediterranean as had hitherto been the rule of his kind, had ventured forth upon the wider ocean.

Ahead marched a hundred of his rovers in their short caftans of every conceivable colour, their waists swathed in gaudy scarves, some of which supported a very arsenal of assorted cutlery; many wore body armour of mail and the gleaming spike of a casque thrust up above their turbans. After them, dejected and in chains, came the five score prisoners taken aboard the Dutchman, urged along by the whips of the corsairs who flanked them. Then marched another regiment of corsairs, and after these the long line of stately, sneering camels, shuffling cumbrously along and led by shouting Saharowis. After them followed yet more corsairs, and then mounted, on a white Arab jennet, his head swathed in a turban of cloth of gold, came Sakr-el-Bahr. In the narrower streets, with their white and yellow washed houses, which presented blank windowless walls broken here and there by no more than a slit to admit light and air, the spectators huddled themselves fearfully into doorways to avoid being crushed to death by the camels, whose burdens bulging on either side entirely filled those narrow ways. But the more open spaces, such as the strand on either side of the mole, the square before the sôk, and the

approaches of Asad's fortress, were thronged with a motley roaring crowd. There were stately Moors in flowing robes cheek by jowl with half-naked blacks from the Sus and the Draa; lean, enduring Arabs in their spotless white djellabas rubbed shoulders with Berbers from the highlands in black camel-hair cloaks; there were Levantine Turks, and Jewish refugees from Spain ostentatiously dressed in European garments, tolerated there because bound to the Moor by ties of common suffering and common exile from that land that once had been their own.

Under the glaring African sun this amazing crowd stood assembled to welcome Sakr-el-Bahr; and welcome him it did, with such vocal thunder that an echo of it from the mole reached the very Kasbah on the hilltop to herald his approach.

By the time, however, that he reached the fortress his procession had dwindled by more than half. At the sôk his forces had divided, and his corsairs, headed by Othmani, had marched the captives away to the bagnio—or banyard, as my Lord Henry calls it—whilst the camels had continued up the hill. Under the great gateway of the Kasbah they padded into the vast courtyard to be ranged along two sides of it by their Saharowi drivers, and there brought clumsily to their knees. After them followed but some two score corsairs as a guard of honour to their leader. They took their stand upon either side of the gateway after profoundly salaaming to Asad-ed-Din. The Basha sat in the shade of an awning enthroned upon a divan, attended by his wazeer Tsamanni and by Marzak, and guarded by a half-dozen janissaries, whose sable garments made an effective background to the green and gold of his jewelled robes. In his white turban glowed an emerald crescent.

The Basha's countenance was dark and brooding as he watched the advent of that line of burdened camels. His thoughts were still labouring with the doubt of Sakr-el-Bahr which Fenzileh's crafty

speech and craftier reticence had planted in them. But at sight of the corsair leader himself his countenance cleared suddenly, his eyes sparkled, and he rose to his feet to welcome him as a father might welcome a son who had been through perils on a service dear to both.

Sakr-el-Bahr entered the courtyard on foot, having dismounted at the gate. Tall and imposing, with his head high and his forked beard thrusting forward, he stalked with great dignity to the foot of the divan followed by Ali and a mahogany-faced fellow, turbaned and red-bearded, in whom it needed more than a glance to recognize the rascally Jasper Leigh, now in all the panoply of your complete renegado.

Sakr-el-Bahr went down upon his knees and prostrated himself solemnly before his prince.

"The blessing of Allah and His peace upon thee, my lord," was his greeting.

And Asad, stooping to lift that splendid figure in his arms, gave him a welcome that caused the spying Fenzileh to clench her teeth behind the fretted lattice that concealed her.

"The praise to Allah and to our Lord Mahomet that thou art returned and in health, my son. Already hath my old heart been gladdened by the news of thy victories in the service of the Faith."

Then followed the display of all those riches wrested from the Dutch, and greatly though Asad's expectations had been fed already by Othmani, the sight now spread before his eyes by far exceeded all those expectations.

In the end all was dismissed to the treasury, and Tsamanni was bidden to go cast up the account of it and mark the share that fell to the portion of those concerned—for in these ventures all were

partners, from the Basha himself, who represented the State down to the meanest corsair who had manned the victorious vessels of the Faith, and each had his share of the booty, greater or less according to his rank, one twentieth of the total falling to Sakr-el-Bahr himself.

In the courtyard were left none but Asad, Marzak and the janissaries, and Sakr-el-Bahr with Ali and Jasper. It was then that Sakr-el-Bahr presented his new officer to the Bashal as one upon whom the grace of Allah had descended, a great fighter and a skilled seaman, who had offered up his talents and his life to the service of Islam, who had been accepted by Sakr-el-Bahr, and stood now before Asad to be confirmed in his office.

Marzak interposed petulantly, to exclaim that already were there too many erstwhile Nasrani dogs in the ranks of the soldiers of the Faith, and that it was unwise to increase their number and presumptuous in Sakr-el-Bahr to take so much upon himself.

Sakr-el-Bahr measured him with an eye in which scorn and surprise were nicely blended.

"Dost say that it is presumptuous to win a convert to the banner of Our Lord Mahomet?" quoth he. "Go read the Most Perspicuous Book and see what is there enjoined as a duty upon every True-Believer. And bethink thee, O son of Asad, that when thou dost in thy little wisdom cast scorn upon those whom Allah has blessed and led from the night wherein they dwelt into the bright noontide of Faith, thou dost cast scorn upon me and upon thine own mother, which is but a little matter, and thou dost blaspheme the Blessed name of Allah, which is to tread the ways that lead unto the Pit."

Angry but defeated and silenced, Marzak fell back a step and stood biting his lip and glowering upon the corsair, what time Asad nodded his head and smiled approval.

"Verily art thou full learned in the True Belief, Sakr-el-Bahr," he said. "Thou art the very father of wisdom as of valour." And thereupon he gave welcome to Master Leigh, whom he hailed to the ranks of the Faithful under the designation of Jasper-Reis.

That done, the renegade and Ali were both dismissed, as were also the janissaries, who, quitting their position behind Asad, went to take their stand on guard at the gateway. Then the Basha beat his hands together, and to the slaves who came in answer to his summons he gave orders to set food, and he bade Sakr-el-Bahr to come sit beside him on the divan.

Water was brought that they might wash. That done, the slaves placed before them a savoury stew of meat and eggs with olives, limes, and spices.

Asad broke bread with a reverently pronounced "Bismillah!" and dipped his fingers into the earthenware bowl, leading the way for Sakr-el-Bahr and Marzak, and as they ate he invited the corsair himself to recite the tale of his adventure.

When he had done so, and again Asad had praised him in high and loving terms, Marzak set him a question.

"Was it to obtain just these two English slaves that thou didst undertake this perilous voyage to that distant land?"

"That was but a part of my design," was the calm reply. "I went to rove the seas in the Prophet's service, as the result of my voyage gives proof."

"Thou didst not know that this Dutch argosy would cross thy path," said Marzak, in the very words his mother had prompted him.

"Did I not?" quoth Sakr-el-Bahr, and he smiled confidently, so confidently that Asad scarce needed to hear the words that so

cunningly gave the lie to the innuendo. "Had I no trust in Allah the All-wise, the All-knowing?

"Well answered, by the Koran!" Asad approved him heartily, the more heartily since it rebutted insinuations which he desired above all to hear rebutted.

But Marzak did not yet own himself defeated. He had been soundly schooled by his guileful Sicilian mother.

"Yet there is something in all this I do not understand," he murmured, with false gentleness.

"All things are possible to Allah!" said Sakr-el-Bahr, in tones of incredulity, as if he suggested—not without a suspicion of irony—that it was incredible there should be anything in all the world that could elude the penetration of Marzak.

The youth bowed to him in acknowledgment. "Tell me, O mighty Sakr-el-Bahr," he begged, "how it came to pass that having reached those distant shores thou wert content to take thence but two poor slaves, since with thy followers and the favour of the All-seeing thou might easily have taken fifty times that number." And he looked ingenuously into the corsair's swarthy, rugged face, whilst Asad frowned thoughtfully, for the thought was one that had occurred to him already.

It became necessary that Sakr-el-Bahr should lie to clear himself. Here no high-sounding phrase of Faith would answer. And explanation was unavoidable, and he was conscious that he could not afford one that did not go a little lame.

"Why, as to that," said he, "these prisoners were wrested from the first house upon which we came, and their capture occasioned some alarm. Moreover, it was night-time when we landed, and I dared not adventure the lives of my followers by taking them further from the ship

and attacking a village which might have risen to cut off our good retreat."

The frown remained stamped upon the brow of Asad, as Marzak slyly observed.

"Yet Othmani," said he, "urged thee to fall upon a slumbering village all unconscious of thy presence, and thou didst refuse."

Asad looked up sharply at that, and Sakr-el-Bahr realized with a tightening about the heart something of the undercurrents at work against him and all the pains that had been taken to glean information that might be used to his undoing.

"Is it so?" demanded Asad, looking from his son to his lieutenant with that lowering look that rendered his face evil and cruel.

Sakr-el-Bahr took a high tone. He met Asad's glance with an eye of challenge.

"And if it were so my lord?" he demanded.

"I asked thee is it so?"

"Ay, but knowing thy wisdom I disbelieved my ears," said Sakr-el-Bahr. "Shall it signify what Othmani may have said? Do I take my orders or am I to be guided by Othmani? If so, best set Othmani in my place, give him the command and the responsibility for the lives of the Faithful who fight beside him." He ended with an indignant snort.

"Thou art over-quick to anger," Asad reproved him, scowling still

"And by the Head of Allah, who will deny my right to it? Am I to conduct such an enterprise as this from which I am returned laden with spoils that might well be the fruits of a year's raiding, to be questioned by a beardless stripling as to why I was not guided by Othmani?"

He heaved himself up and stood towering there in the intensity of a passion that was entirely simulated. He must bluster here, and crush down suspicion with whorling periods and broad, fierce gesture.

"To what should Othmani have guided me?" he demanded scornfully. "Could he have guided me to more than I have this day laid at thy feet? What I have done speaks eloquently with its own voice. What he would have had me do might well have ended in disaster. Had it so ended, would the blame of it have fallen upon Othmani? Nay, by Allah! but upon me. And upon me rests then the credit, and let none dare question it without better cause."

Now these were daring words to address to the tyrant Asad, and still more daring was the tone, the light hard eyes aflash and the sweeping gestures of contempt with which they were delivered. But of his ascendancy over the Basha there was no doubt. And here now was proof of it.

Asad almost cowered before his fury. The scowl faded from his face to be replaced by an expression of dismay.

"Nay, nay, Sakr-el-Bahr, this tone!" he cried.

Sakr-el-Bahr, having slammed the door of conciliation in the face of the Basha, now opened it again. He became instantly submissive.

"Forgive it," he said. "Blame the devotion of thy servant to thee and to the Faith he serves with little reck to life. In this very expedition was I wounded nigh unto death. The livid scar of it is a dumb witness to my zeal. Where are thy scars, Marzak?"

Marzak quailed before the sudden blaze of that question, and Sakr-el-Bahr laughed softly in contempt.

"Sit," Asad bade him. "I have been less than just."

"Thou art the very fount and spring of justice, O my lord, as this thine admission proves," protested the corsair. He sat down again, folding his legs under him. "I will confess to you that being come so near to England in that cruise of mine I determined to land and seize one who some years ago did injure me, and between whom and me there was a score to settle. I exceeded my intentions in that I carried off two prisoners instead of one. These prisoners," he ran on, judging that the moment of reaction in Asad's mind was entirely favourable to the preferment of the request he had to make, "are not in the bagnio with the others. They are still confined aboard the carack I seized."

"And why is this?" quoth Asad, but without suspicion now.

"Because, my lord, I have a boon to ask in some reward for the service I have rendered."

"Ask it, my son."

"Give me leave to keep these captives for myself."

Asad considered him, frowning again slightly. Despite himself, despite his affection for Sakr-el-Bahr, and his desire to soothe him now that rankling poison of Fenzileh's infusing was at work again in his mind.

"My leave thou hast," said he. "But not the law's, and the law runs that no corsair shall subtract so much as the value of an asper from his booty until the division has been made and his own share allotted him," was the grave answer.

"The law?" quoth Sakr-el-Bahr. "But thou art the law, exalted lord."

"Not so, my son. The law is above the Basha, who must himself conform to it so that he be just and worthy of his high office. And the law I have recited thee applies even should the corsair raider be the Basha himself. These slaves of thine must forthwith be sent to the

bagnio to join the others that tomorrow all may be sold in the sôk. See it done, Sakr-el-Bahr."

The corsair would have renewed his pleadings, but that his eye caught the eager white face of Marzak and the gleaming expectant eyes, looking so hopefully for his ruin. He checked, and bowed his head with an assumption of indifference.

"Name thou their price then, and forthwith will I pay it into thy treasury."

But Asad shook his head. "It is not for me to name their price, but for the buyers," he replied. "I might set the price too high, and that were unjust to thee, or too low, and that were unjust to others who would acquire them. Deliver them over to the bagnio."

"It shall be done," said Sakr-el-Bahr, daring to insist no further and dissembling his chagrin.

Very soon thereafter he departed upon that errand, giving orders, however, that Rosamund and Lionel should be kept apart from the other prisoners until the hour of the sale on the morrow when perforce they must take their place with the rest.

Marzak lingered with his father after Oliver had taken his leave, and presently they were joined there in the courtyard by Fenzileh—this woman who had brought, said many, the Frankish ways of Shaitan into Algiers.

CHAPTER VIII. MOTHER AND SON

Early on the morrow—so early that scarce had the Shehad been recited—came Biskaine-el-Borak to the Basha. He had just landed from a galley which had come upon a Spanish fishing boat, aboard of which there was a young Morisco who was being conducted over seas to Algiers. The news of which the fellow was the bearer was of such urgency that for twenty hours without intermission the slaves had toiled at the oars of Biskaine's vessel—the capitana of his fleet—to bring her swiftly home.

The Morisco had a cousin—a New-Christian like himself, and like himself, it would appear, still a Muslim at heart—who was employed in the Spanish treasury at Malaga. This man had knowledge that a galley was fitting out for sea to convey to Naples the gold destined for the pay of the Spanish troops in garrison there. Through parsimony this treasure-galley was to be afforded no escort, but was under orders to hug the coast of Europe, where she should be safe from all piratical surprise. It was judged that she would be ready to put to sea in a week, and the Morisco had set out at once to bring word of it to his Algerine brethren that they might intercept and capture her.

Asad thanked the young Morisco for his news, bade him be housed and cared for, and promised him a handsome share of the plunder should the treasure-galley be captured. That done he sent for Sakr-el-Bahr, whilst Marzak, who had been present at the interview, went with the tale of it to his mother, and beheld her fling into a passion when he added that it was Sakr-el-Bahr had been summoned that he might be entrusted with this fresh expedition, thus proving that all her crafty

innuendoes and insistent warnings had been so much wasted labour.

With Marzak following at her heels, she swept like a fury into the darkened room where Asad took his ease.

"What is this I hear, O my lord?" she cried, in tone and manner more the European shrew than the submissive Eastern slave. "Is Sakr-el-Bahr to go upon this expedition against the treasure-galley of Spain?"

Reclining on his divan he looked her up and down with a languid eye. "Dost know of any better fitted to succeed?" quoth he.

"I know of one whom it is my lord's duty to prefer to that foreign adventurer. One who is entirely faithful and entirely to be trusted. One who does not attempt to retain for himself a portion of the booty garnered in the name of Islam."

"Bah!" said Asad. "Wilt thou talk forever of those two slaves? And who may be this paragon of thine?"

"Marzak," she answered fiercely, flinging out an arm to drag forward her son. "Is he to waste his youth here in softness and idleness? But yesternight that ribald mocked him with his lack of scars. Shall he take scars in the orchard of the Kasbah here? Is he to be content with those that come from the scratch of a bramble, or is he to learn to be a fighter and leader of the Children of the Faith that himself he may follow in the path his father trod?"

"Whether he so follows," said Asad, "is as the Sultan of Istambul, the Sublime Portal, shall decree. We are but his vicegerents here."

"But shall the Grand Sultan appoint him to succeed thee if thou hast not equipped him so to do? I cry shame on thee, O father of Marzak!, for that thou art lacking in due pride in thine own son."

"May Allah give me patience with thee! Have I not said that he is

still over young."

"At his age thyself thou wert upon the seas, serving with the great Ochiali."

"At his age I was, by the favour of Allah, taller and stronger than is he. I cherish him too dearly to let him go forth and perchance be lost to me before his strength is full grown."

"Look at him," she commanded. "He is a man, Asad, and such a son as another might take pride in. Is it not time he girt a scimitar about his waist and trod the poop of one of thy galleys?"

"Indeed, indeed, O my father!" begged Marzak himself.

"What?" barked the old Moor. "And is it so? And wouldst thou go forth then against the Spaniard? What knowledge hast thou that shall equip thee for such a task?"

"What can his knowledge be since his father has never been concerned to school him?" returned Fenzileh. "Dost thou sneer at shortcomings that are the natural fruits of thine own omissions?"

"I will be patient with thee," said Asad, showing every sign of losing patience. "I will ask thee only if in thy judgment he is in case to win a victory for Islam? Answer me straightly now."

"Straightly I answer thee that he is not. And, as straightly, I tell thee that it is full time he were. Thy duty is to let him go upon this expedition that he may learn the trade that lies before him."

Asad considered a moment. Then: "Be it so," he answered slowly. "Shalt set forth, then, with Sakr-el-Bahr, my son."

"With Sakr-el-Bahr?" cried Fenzilch aghast.

"I could find him no better preceptor."

"Shall thy son go forth as the servant of another?"

"As the pupil," Asad amended. "What else?"

"Were I a man, O fountain of my soul," said she, "and had I a son, none but myself should be his preceptor. I should so mould and fashion him that he should be another me. That, O my dear lord, is thy duty to Marzak. Entrust not his training to another and to one whom despite thy love for him I cannot trust. Go forth thyself upon this expedition with Marzak here for thy kayia."

Asad frowned. "I grow too old," he said. "I have not been upon the seas these two years past. Who can say that I may not have lost the art of victory. No, no." He shook his head, and his face grew overcast and softened by wistfulness. "Sakr-el-Bahr commands this time, and if Marzak goes, he goes with him."

"My lord...." she began, then checked. A Nubian had entered to announce that Sakr-el-Bahr was come and was awaiting the orders of his lord in the courtyard. Asad rose instantly and for all that Fenzileh, greatly daring as ever, would still have detained him, he shook her off impatiently, and went out.

She watched his departure with anger in those dark lovely eyes of hers, an anger that went near to filming them in tears, and after he had passed out into the glaring sunshine beyond the door, a silence dwelt in the cool darkened chamber—a silence disturbed only by distant trills of silvery laughter from the lesser women of the Basha's house. The sound jarred her taut nerves. She moved with an oath and beat her hands together. To answer her came a negress, lithe and muscular as a wrestler and naked to the waist; the slave ring in her ear was of massive gold.

"Bid them make an end of that screeching," she snapped to vent some of her fierce petulance. "Tell them I will have the rods to them if

they again disturb me."

The negress went out, and silence followed, for those other lesser ladies of the Basha's harem were more obedient to the commands of Fenzileh than to those of the Basha himself.

Then she drew her son to the fretted lattice commanding the courtyard, a screen from behind which they could see and hear all that passed out yonder. Asad was speaking, informing Sakr-el-Bahr of what he had learnt, and what there was to do.

"How soon canst thou put to sea again?" he ended

"As soon as the service of Allah and thyself require," was the prompt answer.

"It is well, my son." Asad laid a hand, affectionately upon the corsair's shoulder, entirely conquered by this readiness. "Best set out at sunrise to-morrow. Thou'lt need so long to make thee ready for the sea."

"Then by thy leave I go forthwith to give orders to prepare," replied Sakr-el-Bahr, for all that he was a little troubled in his mind by this need to depart again so soon.

"What galleys shalt thou take?"

"To capture one galley of Spain? My own galeasse, no more; she will be full equal to such an enterprise, and I shall be the better able, then, to lurk and take cover—a thing which might well prove impossible with a fleet."

"Ay—thou art wise in thy daring," Asad approved him. "May Allah prosper thee upon the voyage."

"Have I thy leave to go?"

"A moment yet. There is my son Marzak. He is approaching manhood, and it is time he entered the service of Allah and the State. It is my desire that he sail as thy lieutenant on this voyage, and that thou be his preceptor even as I was thine of old."

Now here was something that pleased Sakr-el-Bahr as little as it pleased Marzak. Knowing the bitter enmity borne him by the son of Fenzileh he had every cause to fear trouble if this project of Asad's were realized.

"As I was thine of old!" he answered with crafty wistfulness. "Wilt thou not put to sea with us to-morrow, O Asad? There is none like thee in all Islam, and what a joy were it not to stand beside thee on the prow as of old when we grapple with the Spaniard."

Asad considered him. "Dost thou, too, urge this?" quoth he.

"Have others urged it?" The man's sharp wits, rendered still sharper by his sufferings, were cutting deeply and swiftly into this matter. "They did well, but none could have urged it more fervently than I, for none knows so well as I the joy of battle against the infidel under thy command and the glory of prevailing in thy sight. Come, then, my lord, upon this enterprise, and be thyself thine own son's preceptor since 'tis the highest honour thou canst bestow upon him."

Thoughtfully Asad stroked his long white beard, his eagle eyes growing narrow. "Thou temptest me, by Allah!"

"Let me do more...."

"Nay, more thou canst not. I am old and worn, and I am needed here. Shall an old lion hunt a young gazelle? Peace, peace! The sun has set upon my fighting day. Let the brood of fighters I have raised up keep that which my arm conquered and maintain my name and the glory of the Faith upon the seas." He leaned upon Sakr-el-Bahr's shoulder and sighed, his eyes wistfully dreamy. "It were a fond

adventure in good truth. But no...I am resolved. Go thou and take Marzak with thee, and bring him safely home again."

"I should not return myself else," was the answer. "But my trust is in the All-knowing."

Upon that he departed, dissembling his profound vexation both at the voyage and the company, and went to bid Othmani make ready his great galeasse, equipping it with carronades, three hundred slaves to row it, and three hundred fighting men.

Asad-el-Din returned to that darkened room in the Kasbah overlooking the courtyard, where Fenzileh and Marzak still lingered. He went to tell them that in compliance with the desires of both Marzak should go forth to prove himself upon this expedition.

But where he had left impatience he found thinly veiled wrath

"O sun that warms me," Fenzileh greeted him, and from long experience he knew that the more endearing were her epithets the more vicious was her mood, "do then my counsels weigh as naught with thee, are they but as the dust upon thy shoes?"

"Less," said Asad, provoked out of his habitual indulgence of her licences of speech.

"That is the truth, indeed!" she cried, bowing her head, whilst behind her the handsome face of her son was overcast.

"It is," Asad agreed. "At dawn, Marzak, thou settest forth upon the galeasse of Sakr-el-Bahr to take the seas under his tutelage and to emulate the skill and valour that have rendered him the stoutest bulwark of Islam, the very javelin of Allah."

But Marzak felt that in this matter his mother was to be supported, whilst his detestation of this adventurer who threatened to usurp the place that should rightly be his own spurred him to mad lengths of

daring.

"When I take the seas with that dog-descended Nasrani," he answered hoarsely, "he shall be where rightly he belongs—at the rowers' bench."

"How?" It was a bellow of rage. Upon the word Asad swung to confront his son, and his face, suddenly inflamed, was so cruel and evil in its expression that it terrified that intriguing pair. "By the beard of the Prophet! what words are these to me?" He advanced upon Marzak until Fenzileh in sudden terror stepped between and faced him, like a lioness springing to defend her cub. But the Basha, enraged now by this want of submission in his son, enraged both against that son and the mother who he knew had prompted him, caught her in his sinewy old hands, and flung her furiously aside, so that she stumbled and fell in a panting heap amid the cushions of her divan.

"The curse of Allah upon thee!" he screamed, and Marzak recoiled before him. "Has this presumptuous hellcat who bore thee taught thee to stand before my face, to tell me what thou wilt and wilt not do? By the Koran! too long have I endured her evil foreign ways, and now it seems she has taught thee how to tread them after her and how to beard thy very father! To-morrow thou'lt take the sea with Sakr-el-Bahr, I have said it. Another word and thou'lt go aboard his galleasse even as thou saidst should be the case with him—at the rowers' bench, to learn submission under the slave master's whip."

Terrified, Marzak stood numb and silent, scarcely daring to draw breath. Never in all his life had he seen his father in a rage so royal. Yet it seemed to inspire no fear in Fenzileh, that congenital shrew whose tongue not even the threat of rods or hooks could silence.

"I shall pray Allah to restore sight to thy soul, O father of Marzak," she panted, "to teach thee to discriminate between those that love

thee and the self-seekers that abuse thy trust."

"How!" he roared at her. "Art not yet done?"

"Nor ever shall be until I am lain dumb in death for having counselled thee out of my great love, O light of these poor eyes of mine."

"Maintain this tone," he said, with concentrated anger, "and that will soon befall."

"I care not so that the sleek mask be plucked from the face of that dog-descended Sakr-el-Bahr. May Allah break his bones! What of those slaves of his—those two from England, O Asad? I am told that one is a woman, tall and of that white beauty which is the gift of Eblis to these Northerners. What is his purpose with her—that he would not show her in the suk as the law prescribes, but comes slinking here to beg thee set aside the law for him? Ha! I talk in vain. I have shown thee graver things to prove his vile disloyalty, and yet thou'lt fawn upon him whilst thy fangs are bared to thine own son."

He advanced upon her, stooped, caught her by the wrist, and heaved her up.

His face showed grey under its deep tan. His aspect terrified her at last and made an end of her reckless forward courage.

He raised his voice to call.

"Ya anta! Ayoub!"

She gasped, livid in her turn with sudden terror. "My lord, my lord!" she whimpered. "Stream of my life, be not angry! What wilt thou do?"

He smiled evilly. "Do?" he growled. "What I should have done ten years ago and more. We'll have the rods to thee." And again he called, more insistently—"Ayoub!"

"My lord, my lord!" she gasped in shuddering horror now that at last she found him set upon the thing to which so often she had dared him. "Pity! Pity!" She grovelled and embraced his knees. "In the name of the Pitying the Pitiful be merciful upon the excesses to which my love for thee may have driven this poor tongue of mine. O my sweet lord! O father of Marzak!"

Her distress, her beauty, and perhaps, more than either, her unusual humility and submission may have moved him. For even as at that moment Ayoub—the sleek and portly eunuch, who was her wazeer and chamberlain—loomed in the inner doorway, salaaming, he vanished again upon the instant, dismissed by a peremptory wave of the Basha's hand.

Asad looked down upon her, sneering. "That attitude becomes thee best," he said. "Continue it in future." Contemptuously he shook himself free of her grasp, turned and stalked majestically out, wearing his anger like a royal mantle, and leaving behind him two terror-shaken beings, who felt as if they had looked over the very edge of death.

There was a long silence between them. Then at long length Fenzileh rose and crossed to the meshra-biyah—the latticed window-box. She opened it and took from one of its shelves an earthenware jar, placed there so as to receive the slightest breeze. From it she poured water into a little cup and drank greedily. That she could perform this menial service for herself when a mere clapping of hands would have brought slaves to minister to her need betrayed something of her disordered state of mind.

She slammed the inner lattice and turned to Marzak. "And now?" quoth she.

"Now?" said the lad.

"Ay, what now? What are we to do? Are we to lie crushed under his rage until we are ruined indeed? He is bewitched. That jackal has enchanted him, so that he must deem well done all that is done by him. Allah guide us here, Marzak, or thou'lt be trampled into dust by Sakr-el-Bahr."

Marzak hung his head; slowly he moved to the divan and flung himself down upon its pillows; there he lay prone, his hands cupping his chin, his heels in the air.

"What can I do?" he asked at last.

"That is what I most desire to know. Something must be done, and soon. May his bones rot! If he lives thou art destroyed."

"Ay," said Marzak, with sudden vigour and significance. "If he lives!" And he sat up. "Whilst we plan and plot, and our plans and plots come to naught save to provoke the anger of my father, we might be better employed in taking the shorter way."

She stood in the middle of the chamber, pondering him with gloomy eyes "I too have thought of that," said she. "I could hire me men to do the thing for a handful of gold. But the risk of it...."

"Where would be the risk once he is dead?"

"He might pull us down with him, and then what would our profit be in his death? Thy father would avenge him terribly."

"If it were craftily done we should not be discovered."

"Not be discovered?" she echoed, and laughed without mirth. "How young and blind thou art, O Marzak! We should be the first to be suspected. I have made no secret of my hate of him, and the people do not love me. They would urge thy father to do justice even were he himself averse to it, which I will not credit would be the case. This Sakr-el-Bahr—may Allah wither him!—is a god in their eyes. Bethink

thee of the welcome given him! What Basha returning in triumph was ever greeted by the like? These victories that fortune has vouchsafed him have made them account him divinely favoured and protected. I tell thee, Marzak, that did thy father die to-morrow Sakr-el-Bahr would be proclaimed Basha of Algiers in his stead, and woe betide us then. And Asad-el-Din grows old. True, he does not go forth to fight. He clings to life and may last long. But if he should not, and if Sakr-el-Bahr should still walk the earth when thy father's destiny is fulfilled, I dare not think what then will be thy fate and mine."

"May his grave be defiled!" growled Matzak.

"His grave?" said she. "The difficulty is to dig it for him without hurt to ourselves. Shaitan protects the dog."

"May he make his bed in hell!" said Marzak.

"To curse him will not help us. Up, Marzak, and consider how the thing is to be done."

Marzak came to his feet, nimble and supple as a greyhound. "Listen now," he said. "Since I must go this voyage with him, perchance upon the seas on some dark night opportunity may serve me."

"Wait! Let me consider it. Allah guide me to find some way!" She beat her hands together and bade the slave girl who answered her to summon her wazeer Ayoub, and bid a litter be prepared for her. "We'll to the sôk, O Marzak, and see these slaves of his. Who knows but that something may be done by means of them! Guile will serve us better than mere strength against that misbegotten son of shame."

"May his house be destroyed!" said Marzak.

CHAPTER IX. COMPETITORS

The open space before the gates of the sôk-el-Abeed was thronged with a motley, jostling, noisy crowd that at every moment was being swelled by the human streams pouring to mingle in it from the debauching labyrinth of narrow, unpaved streets.

There were brown-skinned Berbers in black goat-hair cloaks that were made in one piece with a cowl and decorated by a lozenge of red or orange colour on the back, their shaven heads encased in skull-caps or simply bound in a cord of plaited camel-hair; there were black Saharowi who went almost naked, and stately Arabs who seemed overmuffled in their flowing robes of white with the cowls overshadowing their swarthy, finely featured faces; there were dignified and prosperous-looking Moors in brightly coloured selhams astride of sleek mules that were richly caparisoned; and there were Tagareenes, the banished Moors of Andalusia, most of whom followed the trade of slave-dealers; there were native Jews in sombre black djellabas, and Christian-Jews—so-called because bred in Christian countries, whose garments they still wore; there were Levantine Turks, splendid of dress and arrogant of demeanour, and there were humble Cololies, Kabyles and Biscaries. Here a water-seller, laden with his goatskin vessel, tinkled his little bell; there an orange-hawker, balancing a basket of the golden fruit upon his ragged turban, bawled his wares. There were men on foot and men on mules, men on donkeys and men on slim Arab horses, an ever-shifting medley of colours, all jostling, laughing, cursing in the ardent African sunshine under the blue sky where pigeons circled. In the shadow of the yellow tapia wall squatted a line of whining beggars and cripples soliciting alms; near the gates a little space had been cleared and an audience had gathered in a ring about a Meddah—a

beggar-troubadour—who, to the accompaniment of gimbri and gaitah from two acolytes, chanted a doleful ballad in a thin, nasal voice.

Those of the crowd who were patrons of the market held steadily amain, and, leaving their mounts outside, passed through the gates through which there was no admittance for mere idlers and mean folk. Within the vast quadrangular space of bare, dry ground, enclosed by dust-coloured walls, there was more space. The sale of slaves had not yet begun and was not due to begin for another hour, and meanwhile a little trading was being done by those merchants who had obtained the coveted right to set up their booths against the walls; they were vendors of wool, of fruit, of spices, and one or two traded in jewels and trinkets for the adornment of the Faithful.

A well was sunk in the middle of the ground, a considerable octagon with a low parapet in three steps. Upon the nethermost of these sat an aged, bearded Jew in a black djellaba, his head swathed in a coloured kerchief. Upon his knees reposed a broad, shallow black box, divided into compartments, each filled with lesser gems and rare stones, which he was offering for sale; about him stood a little group of young Moors and one or two Turkish officers, with several of whom the old Israelite was haggling at once.

The whole of the northern wall was occupied by a long penthouse, its contents completely masked by curtains of camel-hair; from behind it proceeded a subdued murmur of human voices. These were the pens in which were confined the slaves to be offered for sale that day. Before the curtains, on guard, stood some dozen corsairs with attendant negro slaves.

Beyond and above the wall glistened the white dome of a zowia, flanked by a spear-like minaret and the tall heads of a few date palms whose long leaves hung motionless in the hot air.

Suddenly in the crowd beyond the gates there was a commotion.

From one of the streets six colossal Nubians advanced with shouts of

"Oak! Oak! Warda! Way! Make way!"

They were armed with great staves, grasped in their two hands, and with these they broke a path through that motley press, hurling men to right and left and earning a shower of curses in return.

"Balâk! Make way! Way for the Lord Asad-ed-Din, the exalted of Allah! Way!"

The crowd, pressing back, went down upon its knees and grovelled as Asad-ed-Din on a milk-white mule rode forward, escorted by Tsamanni his wazeer and a cloud of black-robed janissaries with flashing scimitars.

The curses that had greeted the violence of his negroes were suddenly silenced; instead, blessings as fervent filled the air.

"May Allah increase thy might! May Allah lengthen thy days! The blessings of our Lord Mahomet upon thee! Allah send thee more victories!" were the benedictions that showered upon him on every hand. He returned them as became a man who was supremely pious and devout.

"The peace of Allah upon the Faithful of the Prophet's House," he would murmur in response from time to time, until at last he had reached the gates. There he bade Tsamanni fling a purse to the crouching beggars—for is it not written in the Most Perspicuous Book that of alms ye shall bestow what ye can spare, for such as are saved from their own greed shall prosper, and whatever ye give in alms, as seeking the face of Allah shall be doubled unto you?

Submissive to the laws as the meanest of his subjects, Asad dismounted and passed on foot into the sôk. He came to a halt by the

well, and, facing the curtained penthouse, he blessed the kneeling crowd and commanded all to rise.

He beckoned Sakr-el-Bahr's officer Ali—who was in charge of the slaves of the corsair's latest raid and announced his will to inspect the captives. At a sign from Ali, the negroes flung aside the camel-hair curtains and let the fierce sunlight beat in upon those pent-up wretches; they were not only the captives taken by Sakr-el-Bahr, but some others who were the result of one or two lesser raids by Biskaine.

Asad beheld a huddle of men and women—though the proportion of women was very small—of all ages, races, and conditions; there were pale fair-haired men from France or the North, olive-skinned Italians and swarthy Spaniards, negroes and half-castes; there were old men, young men and mere children, some handsomely dressed, some almost naked, others hung with rags. In the hopeless dejection of their countenances alone was there any uniformity. But it was not a dejection that could awaken pity in the pious heart of Asad. They were unbelievers who would never look upon the face of God's Prophet, accursed and unworthy of any tenderness from man. For a moment his glance was held by a lovely black-haired Spanish girl, who sat with her locked hands held fast between her knees, in an attitude of intense despair and suffering—the glory of her eyes increased and magnified by the dark brown stains of sleeplessness surrounding them. Leaning on Tsamanni's arm, he stood considering her for a little while; then his glance travelled on. Suddenly he tightened his grasp of Tsamanni's arm and a quick interest leapt into his sallow face.

On the uppermost tier of the pen that he was facing sat a very glory of womanhood, such a woman as he had heard tell existed but the like of which he had never yet beheld. She was tall and graceful as a cypress-tree; her skin was white as milk, her eyes two darkest sapphires, her head of a coppery golden that seemed to glow like

metal as the sunlight caught it. She was dressed in a close gown of white, the bodice cut low and revealing the immaculate loveliness of her neck.

Asad-ed-Din turned to Ali. "What pearl is this that hath been cast upon this dung-heap?" he asked.

"She is the woman our lord Sakr-el-Bahr carried off from England." Slowly the Basha's eyes returned to consider her, and insensible though she had deemed herself by now, he saw her cheeks slowly reddening under the cold insult of his steady, insistent glance. The glow heightened her beauty, effacing the weariness which the face had worn.

"Bring her forth," said the Basha shortly.

She was seized by two of the negroes, and to avoid being roughly handled by them she came at once, bracing herself to bear with dignity whatever might await her. A golden-haired young man beside her, his face haggard and stubbled with a beard of some growth, looked up in alarm as she was taken from his side. Then, with a groan, he made as if to clutch her, but a rod fell upon his raised arms and beat them down.

Asad was thoughtful. It was Fenzileh who had bidden him come look at the infidel maid whom Sakr-el-Bahr had risked so much to snatch from England, suggesting that in her he would behold some proof of the bad faith which she was forever urging against the corsair leader. He beheld the woman, but he discovered about her no such signs as Fenzileh had suggested he must find, nor indeed did he look for any. Out of curiosity had he obeyed her prompting. But that and all else were forgotten now in the contemplation of this noble ensample of Northern womanhood, statuesque almost in her terrible restraint.

He put forth a hand to touch her arm, and she drew it back as if his

fingers were of fire.

He sighed. "How inscrutable are the ways of Allah, that He should suffer so luscious a fruit to hang from the foul tree of infidelity!"

Tsamanni watching him craftily, a master-sycophant profoundly learned in the art of playing upon his master's moods, made answer:

"Even so perchance that a Faithful of the Prophet's House may pluck it. Verily all things are possible to the One!"

"Yet is it not set down in the Book to be Read that the daughters of the infidel are not for True-Believers?" And again he sighed.

But Tsamanni knowing full well how the Basha would like to be answered, trimmed his reply to that desire.

"Allah is great, and what hath befallen once may well befall again, my lord."

Asad's kindling eyes flashed a glance at his wazeer.

"Thou meanest Fenzileh. But then, by the mercy of Allah, I was rendered the instrument of her enlightenment."

"It may well be written that thou shalt be the same again, my lord," murmured the insidious Tsamanni. There was more stirring in his mind than the mere desire to play the courtier now. 'Twixt Fenzileh and himself there had long been a feud begotten of the jealousy which each inspired in the other where Asad was concerned. Were Fenzileh removed the wazeer's influence must grow and spread to his own profit. It was a thing of which he had often dreamed, but a dream he feared that was never like to be realized, for Asad was ageing, and the fires that had burned so fiercely in his earlier years seemed now to have consumed in him all thought of women. Yet here was one as by a miracle, of a beauty so amazing and so diverse from any that ever yet had feasted the Basha's sight, that plainly she had acted as a

charm upon his senses.

"She is white as the snows upon the Atlas, luscious as the dates of Tafilalt," he murmured fondly, his gleaming eyes considering her what time she stood immovable before him. Suddenly he looked about him, and wheeled upon Tsamanni, his manner swiftly becoming charged with anger.

"Her face has been bared to a thousand eyes and more," he cried.

"Even that has been so before," replied Tsamanni.

And then quite suddenly at their elbow a voice that was naturally soft and musical of accent but now rendered harsh, cut in to ask:

"What woman may this be?"

Startled, both the Basha and his wazeer swung round. Fenzileh, becomingly veiled and hooded, stood before them, escorted by Marzak. A little behind them were the eunuchs and the litter in which, unperceived by Asad, she had been borne thither. Beside the litter stood her wazeer Ayoub-el-Samin.

Asad scowled down upon her, for he had not yet recovered from the resentment she and Marzak had provoked in him. Moreover, that in private she should be lacking in the respect which was his due was evil enough, though he had tolerated it. But that she should make so bold as to thrust in and question him in this peremptory fashion before all the world was more than his dignity could suffer. Never yet had she dared so much nor would she have dared it now but that her sudden anxiety had effaced all caution from her mind. She had seen the look with which Asad had been considering that lovely slave, and not only jealousy but positive fear awoke in her. Her hold upon Asad was growing tenuous. To snap it utterly no more was necessary than that he who of late years had scarce bestowed a thought or glance upon a woman should be taken with the fancy to bring some new recruit to his

hareem.

Hence her desperate, reckless courage to stand thus before him now, for although her face was veiled there was hardy arrogance in every line of her figure. Of his scowl she took no slightest heed.

"If this be the slave fetched by Sakr-el-Bahr from England, then rumour has lied to me," she said. "I vow it was scarce worth so long a voyage and the endangering so many valuable Muslim lives to fetch this yellow-faced, long-shanked daughter of perdition into Barbary."

Asad's surprise beat down his anger. He was not subtle.

"Yellow-faced? Long-shanked?" quoth he. Then reading Fenzileh at last, he displayed a slow, crooked smile. "Already have I observed thee to grow hard of hearing, and now thy sight is failing too, it seems. Assuredly thou art growing old." And he looked her over with such an eye of displeasure that she recoiled.

He stepped close up to her. "Too long already hast thou queened it in my hareem with thine infidel, Frankish ways," he muttered, so that none but those immediately about overheard his angry words. "Thou art become a very scandal in the eyes of the Faithful," he added very grimly. "It were well, perhaps, that we amended that."

Abruptly then he turned away, and by a gesture he ordered Ali to return the slave to her place among the others. Leaning on the arm of Tsamanni he took some steps towards the entrance, then halted, and turned again to Fenzileh:

"To thy litter," he bade her peremptorily, rebuking her thus before all, "and get thee to the house as becomes a seemly Muslim woman. Nor ever again let thyself be seen roving the public places afoot."

She obeyed him instantly, without a murmur; and he himself lingered at the gates with Tsamanni until her litter had passed out,

escorted by Ayoub and Marzak walking each on one side of it and neither daring to meet the angry eye of the Basha.

Asad looked sourly after that litter, a sneer on his heavy lips.

"As her beauty wanes so her presumption waxes," he growled. "She is growing old, Tsamanni—old and lean and shrewish, and no fit mate for a Member of the Prophet's House. It were perhaps a pleasing thing in the sight of Allah that we replaced her." And then, referring obviously to that other one, his eye turning towards the penthouse the curtains of which were drawn again, he changed his tone.

"Didst thou mark, O Tsamanni, with what a grace she moved?—lithely and nobly as a young gazelle. Verily, so much beauty was never created by the All-Wise to be cast into the Pit."

"May it not have been sent to comfort some True-Believer?" wondered the subtle wazeer. "To Allah all things are possible."

"Why else, indeed?" said Asad. "It was written; and even as none may obtain what is not written, so none may avoid what is. I am resolved. Stay thou here, Tsamanni. Remain for the outcry and purchase her. She shall be taught the True Faith. She shall be saved from the furnace." The command had come, the thing that Tsamanni had so ardently desired.

He licked his lips. "And the price, my lord?" he asked, in a small voice.

"Price?" quoth Asad. "Have I not bid thee purchase her? Bring her to me, though her price be a thousand philips."

"A thousand philips!" echoed Tsamanni amazed. "Allah is great!"

But already Asad had left his side and passed out under the arched gateway, where the grovelling anew at the sight of him.

It was a fine thing for Asad to bid him remain for the sale. But the dalal would part with no slave until the money was forthcoming, and Tsamanni had no considerable sum upon his person. Therefore in the wake of his master he set out forthwith to the Kasbah. It wanted still an hour before the sale would be held and he had time and to spare in which to go and return.

It happened, however, that Tsamanni was malicious, and that the hatred of Fenzileh which so long he had consumed in silence and dissembled under fawning smiles and profound salaams included also her servants. There was none in all the world of whom he entertained a greater contempt than her sleek and greasy eunuch Ayoub-el-Samin of the majestic, rolling gait and fat, supercilious lips.

It was written, too, that in the courtyard of the Kasbah he should stumble upon Ayoub, who indeed had by his mistress's commands been set to watch for the wazeer. The fat fellow rolled forward, his hands supporting his paunch, his little eyes agleam.

"Allah increase thy health, Tsamanni," was his courteous greeting. "Thou bearest news?"

"News? What news?" quoth Tsamanni. "In truth none that will gladden thy mistress."

"Merciful Allah! What now? Doth it concern that Frankish slave-girl?"

Tsamanni smiled, a thing that angered Ayoub, who felt that the ground he trod was becoming insecure; it followed that if his mistress fell from influence he fell with her, and became as the dust upon Tsamanni's slippers.

"By the Koran thou tremblest, Ayoub!" Tsamanni mocked him. "Thy soft fat is all a-quivering; and well it may, for thy days are numbered, O

father of nothing."

"Dost deride me, dog?" came the other's voice, shrill now with anger.

"Callest me dog? Thou?" Deliberately Tsamanni spat upon his shadow. "Go tell thy mistress that I am bidden by my lord to buy the Frankish girl. Tell her that my lord will take her to wife, even as he took Fenzileh, that he may lead her into the True Belief and cheat Shaitan of so fair a jewel. Add that I am bidden to buy her though she cost my lord a thousand philips. Bear her that message, O father of wind, and may Allah increase thy paunch!" And he was gone, lithe, active, and mocking.

"May thy sons perish and thy daughters become harlots," roared the eunuch, maddened at once by this evil news and the insult with which it was accompanied.

But Tsamanni only laughed, as he answered him over his shoulder

"May thy sons be sultans all, Ayoub!"

Quivering still with a rage that entirely obliterated his alarm at what he had learnt, Ayoub rolled into the presence of his mistress with that evil message.

She listened to him in a dumb white fury. Then she fell to reviling her lord and the slave-girl in a breath, and called upon Allah to break their bones and blacken their faces and rot their flesh with all the fervour of one born and bred in the True Faith. When she recovered from that burst of fury it was to sit brooding awhile. At length she sprang up and bade Ayoub see that none lurked to listen about the doorways.

"We must act, Ayoub, and act swiftly, or I am destroyed and with me will be destroyed Marzak, who alone could not stand against his

father's face. Sakr-el-Bahr will trample us into the dust." She checked on a sudden thought. "By Allah it may have been a part of his design to have brought hither that white-faced wench. But we must thwart him and we must thwart Asad, or thou art ruined too, Ayoub."

"Thwart him?" quoth her wazeer, gaping at the swift energy of mind and body with which this woman was endowed, the like of which he had never seen in any woman yet. "Thwart him?" he repeated.

"First, Ayoub, to place this Frankish girl beyond his reach."

"That is well thought—but how?"

"How? Can thy wit suggest no way? Hast thou wits at all in that fat head of thine? Thou shalt outbid Tsamanni, or, better still, set someone else to do it for thee, and so buy the girl for me. Then we'll contrive that she shall vanish quietly and quickly before Asad can discover a trace of her."

His face blanched, and the wattles about his jaws were shaking. "And... and the cost? Hast thou counted the cost, O Fenzileh? What will happen when Asad gains knowledge of this thing?"

"He shall gain no knowledge of it," she answered him. "Or if he does, the girl being gone beyond recall, he shall submit him to what was written. Trust me to know how to bring him to it."

"Lady, lady!" he cried, and wrung his bunches of fat fingers. "I dare not engage in this!"

"Engage in what? If I bid thee go buy this girl, and give thee the money thou'lt require, what else concerns thee, dog? What else is to be done, a man shall do. Come now, thou shalt have the money, all I have, which is a matter of some fifteen hundred philips, and what is not laid out upon this purchase thou shalt retain for thyself."

He considered an instant, and conceived that she was right. None

could blame him for executing the commands she gave him. And there would be profit in it, clearly—ay, and it would be sweet to outbid that dog Tsamanni and send him empty-handed home to face the wrath of his frustrated master. He spread his hands and salaamed in token of complete acquiescence.

CHAPTER X. THE SLAVE-MARKET

At the sôk-el-Abeed it was the hour of the outcry, announced by a blast of trumpets and the thudding of tom-toms. The traders that until then had been licensed to ply within the enclosure now put up the shutters of their little booths. The Hebrew pedlar of gems closed his box and effaced himself, leaving the steps about the well clear for the most prominent patrons of the market. These hastened to assemble there, surrounding it and facing outwards, whilst the rest of the crowd was ranged against the southern and western walls of the enclosure.

Came negro water-carriers in white turbans with aspersers made of palmetto leaves to sprinkle the ground and lay the dust against the tramp of slaves and buyers. The trumpets ceased for an instant, then wound a fresh imperious blast and fell permanently silent. The crowd about the gates fell back to right and left, and very slowly and stately three tall dalals, dressed from head to foot in white and with immaculate turbans wound about their heads, advanced into the open space. They came to a halt at the western end of the long wall, the chief dalal standing slightly in advance of the other two.

The chattering of voices sank upon their advent, it became a hissing whisper, then a faint drone like that of bees, and then utter silence. In the solemn and grave demeanour of the dalals there was something almost sacerdotal, so that when that silence fell upon the crowd the affair took on the aspect of a sacrament.

The chief dalal stood forward a moment as if in an abstraction with downcast eyes; then with hands outstretched to catch a blessing he

raised his voice and began to pray in a monotonous chant:

"In the name of Allah the Pitying the Pitiful Who created man from clots of blood! All that is in the Heavens and in the Earth praiseth Allah, Who is the Mighty, the Wise! His the kingdom of the Heavens and of the Earth. He maketh alive and killeth, and He hath power over all things. He is the first and the last, the seen and the unseen, and He knoweth all things."

"Ameen," intoned the crowd.

"The praise to Him who sent us Mahomet His Prophet to give the world the True Belief, and curses upon Shaitan the stoned who wages war upon Allah and His children."

"Ameen."

"The blessings of Allah and our Lord Mahomet upon this market and upon all who may buy and sell herein, and may Allah increase their wealth and grant them length of days in which to praise Him."

"Ameen," replied the crowd, as with a stir and rustle the close ranks relaxed from the tense attitude of prayer, and each man sought elbow-room.

The dalal beat his hands together, whereupon the curtains were drawn aside and the huddled slaves displayed—some three hundred in all, occupying three several pens.

In the front rank of the middle pen—the one containing Rosamund and Lionel—stood a couple of stalwart young Nubians, sleek and muscular, who looked on with completest indifference, no whit appalled by the fate which had haled them thither. They caught the eye of the dalal, and although the usual course was for a buyer to indicate a slave he was prepared to purchase, yet to the end that good beginning should be promptly made, the dalal himself pointed

out that stalwart pair to the corsairs who stood on guard. In compliance the two negroes were brought forth.

"Here is a noble twain," the dalal announced, "strong of muscle and long of limb, as all may see, whom it were a shameful thing to separate. Who needs such a pair for strong labour let him say what he will give." He set out on a slow circuit of the well, the corsairs urging the two slaves to follow him that all buyers might see and inspect them.

In the foremost ranks of the crowd near the gate stood Ali, sent thither by Othmani to purchase a score of stout fellows required to make up the contingent of the galeasse of Sakr-el-Bahr. He had been strictly enjoined to buy naught but the stoutest stuff the market could afford—with one exception. Aboard that galeasse they wanted no weaklings who would trouble the boatswain with their swoonings. Ali announced his business forthwith.

"I need such tall fellows for the oars of Sakr-el-Bahr," said he with loud importance, thus drawing upon himself the eyes of the assembly, and sunning himself in the admiring looks bestowed upon one of the officers of Oliver-Reis, one of the rovers who were the pride of Islam and a sword-edge to the infidel.

"They were born to toil nobly at the oar, O Ali-Reis," replied the dalal in all solemnity. "What wilt thou give for them?"

"Two hundred philips for the twain."

The dalal paced solemnly on, the slaves following in his wake.

"Two hundred philips am I offered for a pair of the lustiest slaves that by the favour of Allah were ever brought into this market. Who will say fifty philips more?"

A portly Moor in a flowing blue selham rose from his seat on the

step of the well as the dalal came abreast of him, and the slaves scenting here a buyer, and preferring any service to that of the galleys with which they were threatened, came each in turn to kiss his hands and fawn upon him, for all the world like dogs.

Calm and dignified he ran his hands over them feeling their muscles, and then forced back their lips and examined their teeth and mouths.

"Two hundred and twenty for the twain," he said, and the dalal passed on with his wares, announcing the increased price he had been offered.

Thus he completed the circuit and came to stand once more before Ali.

"Two hundred and twenty is now the price, O Ali! By the Koran, they are worth three hundred at the least. Wilt say three hundred?"

"Two hundred and thirty," was the answer.

Back to the Moor went the dalal. "Two hundred and thirty I am now offered, O Hamet. Thou wilt give another twenty?"

"Not I, by Allah!" said Hamet, and resumed his seat. "Let him have them."

"Another ten philips?" pleaded the dalal.

"Not another asper."

"They are thine, then, O Ali, for two hundred and thirty. Give thanks to Allah for so good a bargain."

The Nubians were surrendered to Ali's followers, whilst the dalal's two assistants advanced to settle accounts with the corsair.

"Wait wait," said he, "is not the name of Sakr-el-Bahr good

warranty?"

"The inviolable law is that the purchase money be paid ere a slave leaves the market, O valiant Ali."

"It shall be observed," was the impatient answer, "and I will so pay before they leave. But I want others yet, and we will make one account an it please thee. That fellow yonder now. I have orders to buy him for my captain." And he indicated Lionel, who stood at Rosamund's side, the very incarnation of woefulness and debility.

Contemptuous surprise flickered an instant in the eyes of the dalal. But this he made haste to dissemble.

"Bring forth that yellow-haired infidel," he commanded.

The corsairs laid hands on Lionel. He made a vain attempt to struggle, but it was observed that the woman leaned over to him and said something quickly, whereupon his struggles ceased and he suffered himself to be dragged limply forth into the full view of all the market.

"Dost want him for the oar, Ali?" cried Ayoub-el-Samin across the quadrangle, a jest this that evoked a general laugh.

"What else?" quoth Ali. "He should be cheap at least."

"Cheap?" quoth the dalal in an affectation of surprise. "Nay, now. 'Tis a comely fellow and a young one. What wilt thou give, now? a hundred philips?"

"A hundred philips!" cried Ali derisively. "A hundred philips for that skinful of bones! Ma'sh'-Allah! Five philips is my price, O dalal."

Again laughter crackled through the mob. But the dalal stiffened with increasing dignity. Some of that laughter seemed to touch himself, and he was not a person to be made the butt of mirth.

"'Tis a jest, my master," said he, with a forgiving yet contemptuous wave. "Behold how sound he is." He signed to one of the corsairs, and Lionel's doublet was slit from neck to girdle and wrenched away from his body, leaving him naked to the waist, and displaying better proportions than might have been expected. In a passion at that indignity Lionel writhed in the grip of his guards, until one of the corsairs struck him a light blow with a whip in earnest of what to expect if he continued to be troublesome. "Consider him now," said the dalal, pointing to that white torso. "And behold how sound he is. See how excellent are his teeth." He seized Lionel's head and forced the jaws apart.

"Ay," said Ali, "but consider me those lean shanks and that woman's arm."

"'Tis a fault the oar will mend," the dalal insisted.

"You filthy blackamoors!" burst from Lionel in a sob of rage.

"He is muttering curses in his infidel tongue," said Ali. "His temper is none too good, you see. I have said five philips. I'll say no more."

With a shrug the dalal began his circuit of the well, the corsairs thrusting Lionel after him. Here one rose to handle him, there another, but none seemed disposed to purchase.

"Five philips is the foolish price offered me for this fine young Frank," cried the dalal. "Will no True-Believer pay ten for such a slave? Wilt not thou, O Ayoub? Thou, Hamet—ten philips?"

But one after another those to whom he was offered shook their heads. The haggardness of Lionel's face was too unprepossessing. They had seen slaves with that look before, and experience told them that no good was ever to be done with such fellows. Moreover, though shapely, his muscles were too slight, his flesh looked too soft and tender. Of what use a slave who must be hardened and nourished into

strength, and who might very well die in the process? Even at five philips he would be dear. So the disgusted dalal came back to Ali.

"He is thine, then, for five philips—Allah pardon thy avarice."

Ali grinned, and his men seized upon Lionel and bore him off into the background to join the two negroes previously purchased.

And then, before Ali could bid for another of the slaves he desired to acquire, a tall, elderly Jew, dressed in black doublet and hose like a Castilian gentleman, with a ruffle at his neck, a plumed bonnet on his grey locks, and a serviceable dagger hanging from his girdle of hammered gold, had claimed the attention of the dalal.

In the pen that held the captives of the lesser raids conducted by Biskaine sat an Andalusian girl of perhaps some twenty years, of a beauty entirely Spanish.

Her face was of the warm pallor of ivory, her massed hair of an ebony black, her eyebrows were finely pencilled, and her eyes of deepest and softest brown. She was dressed in the becoming garb of the Castilian peasant, the folded kerchief of red and yellow above her bodice leaving bare the glories of her neck. She was very pale, and her eyes were wild in their look, but this detracted nothing from her beauty.

She had attracted the jew's notice, and it is not impossible that there may have stirred in him a desire to avenge upon her some of the cruel wrongs, some of the rackings, burning, confiscations, and banishment suffered by the men of his race at the hands of the men of hers. He may have bethought him of invaded ghettos, of Jewish maidens ravished, and Jewish children butchered in the name of the God those Spanish Christians worshipped, for there was something almost of contemptuous fierceness in his dark eyes and in the hand he flung out to indicate her.

"Yonder is a Castilian wench for whom I will give fifty Philips, O dalal," he announced. The dalal made a sign, whereupon the corsairs dragged her struggling forth.

"So much loveliness may not be bought for fifty Philips, O Ibrahim," said he. "Yusuf here will pay sixty at least." And he stood expectantly before a resplendent Moor.

The Moor, however, shook his head.

"Allah knows I have three wives who would destroy her loveliness within the hour and so leave me the loser."

The dalal moved on, the girl following him but contesting every step of the way with those who impelled her forward, and reviling them too in hot Castilian. She drove her nails into the arms of one and spat fiercely into the face of another of her corsair guards. Rosamund's weary eyes quickened to horror as she watched her—a horror prompted as much by the fate awaiting that poor child as by the undignified fury of the futile battle she waged against it. But it happened that her behaviour impressed a Levantine Turk quite differently. He rose, a short squat figure, from his seat on the steps of the well.

"Sixty Philips will I pay for the joy of taming that wild cat," said he.

But Ibrahim was not to be outbidden. He offered seventy, the Turk countered with a bid of eighty, and Ibrahim again raised the price to ninety, and there fell a pause.

The dalal spurred on the Turk. "Wilt thou be beaten then, and by an Israelite? Shall this lovely maid be given to a perverter of the Scriptures, to an inheritor of the fire, to one of a race that would not bestow on their fellow-men so much as the speck out of a date-stone? It were a shame upon a True-Believer."

Urged thus the Turk offered another five Philips, but with obvious reluctance. The Jew, however, entirely unabashed by a tirade against him, the like of which he heard a score of times a day in the course of trading, pulled forth a heavy purse from his girdle.

"Here are one hundred Philips," he announced. "'Tis overmuch. But I offer it."

Ere the dalal's pious and seductive tongue could urge him further the Turk sat down again with a gesture of finality.

"I give him joy of her," said he.

"She is thine, then, O Ibrahim, for one hundred philips."

The Israelite relinquished the purse to the dalal's white-robed assistants and advanced to receive the girl. The corsairs thrust her forward against him, still vainly battling, and his arms closed about her for a moment.

"Thou has cost me dear, thou daughter of Spain," said he. "But I am content. Come." And he made shift to lead her away. Suddenly, however, fierce as a tiger-cat she writhed her arms upwards and clawed at his face. With a scream of pain he relaxed his hold of her and in that moment, quick as lightning she plucked the dagger that hung from his girdle so temptingly within her reach.

"Valga me Dios!" she cried, and ere a hand could be raised to prevent her she had buried the blade in her lovely breast and sank in a laughing, coughing, heap at his feet. A final convulsive heave and she lay there quite still, whilst Ibrahim glared down at her with eyes of dismay, and over all the market there hung a hush of sudden awe.

Rosamund had risen in her place, and a faint colour came to warm her pallor, a faint light kindled in her eyes. God had shown her the way through this poor Spanish girl, and assuredly God would give her the

means to take it when her own turn came. She felt herself suddenly uplifted and enheartened. Death was a sharp, swift severing, an easy door of escape from the horror that threatened her, and God in His mercy, she knew, would justify self-murder under such circumstances as were her own and that poor dead Andalusian maid's.

At length Ibrahim roused himself from his momentary stupor. He stepped deliberately across the body, his face inflamed, and stood to beard the impassive dalal.

"She is dead!" he bleated. "I am defrauded. Give me back my gold!"

"Are we to give back the price of every slave that dies?" the dalal questioned him.

"But she was not yet delivered to me," raved the Jew. "My hands had not touched her. Give me back my gold."

"Thou liest, son of a dog," was the answer, dispassionately delivered. "She was thine already. I had so pronounced her. Bear her hence, since she belongs to thee."

The Jew, his face empurpling, seemed to fight for breath

"How?" he choked. "Am I to lose a hundred philips?"

"What is written is written," replied the serene dalal.

Ibrahim was frothing at the lips, his eyes were blood-injected. "But it was never written that...."

"Peace," said the dalal. "Had it not been written it could not have come to pass. It is the will of Allah! Who dares rebel against it?"

The crowd began to murmur.

"I want my hundred philips," the Jew insisted, whereupon the

murmur swelled into a sudden roar.

"Thou hearest?" said the dalal. "Allah pardon thee, thou art disturbing the peace of this market. Away, ere ill betide thee."

"Hence! hence!" roared the crowd, and some advanced threateningly upon the luckless Ibrahim. "Away, thou perverter of Holy Writ! thou filth! thou dog! Away!"

Such was the uproar, such the menace of angry countenances and clenched fists shaken in his very face, that Ibrahim quailed and forgot his loss in fear.

"I go, I go," he said, and turned hastily to depart.

But the dalal summoned him back. "Take hence thy property," said he, and pointed to the body. And so Ibrahim was forced to suffer the further mockery of summoning his slaves to bear away the lifeless body for which he had paid in lively potent gold.

Yet by the gates he paused again. "I will appeal me to the Basha," he threatened. "Asad-ed-Din is just, and he will have my money restored to me."

"So he will," said the dalal, "when thou canst restore the dead to life," and he turned to the portly Ayoub, who was plucking at his sleeve. He bent his head to catch the muttered words of Fenzileh's wazeer. Then, in obedience to them, he ordered Rosamund to be brought forward.

She offered no least resistance, advancing in a singularly lifeless way, like a sleep-walker or one who had been drugged. In the heat and glare of the open market she stood by the dalal's side at the head of the well, whilst he dilated upon her physical merits in that lingua franca which he used since it was current coin among all the assorted races represented there—a language which the knowledge of French

that her residence in France had taught her she was to her increasing horror and shame able to understand.

The first to make an offer for her was that same portly Moor who had sought to purchase the two Nubeans. He rose to scrutinize her closely, and must have been satisfied, for the price he offered was a good one, and he offered it with contemptuous assurance that he would not be outbidden.

"One hundred philips for the milk-faced girl."

"'Tis not enough. Consider me the moon-bright loveliness of her face," said the dalal as he moved on. "Chigil yields us fair women, but no woman of Chigil was ever half so fair."

"One hundred and fifty," said the Levantine Turk with a snap.

"Not yet enough. Behold the stately height which Allah hath vouchsafed her. See the noble carriage of her head, the lustre of her eye! By Allah, she is worthy to grace the Sultan's own hareem."

He said no more than the buyers recognized to be true, and excitement stirred faintly through their usually impassive ranks. A Tagareen Moor named Yusuf offered at once two hundred.

But still the dalal continued to sing her praises. He held up one of her arms for inspection, and she submitted with lowered eyes, and no sign of resentment beyond the slow flush that spread across her face and vanished again.

"Behold me these limbs, smooth as Arabian silks and whiter than ivory. Look at those lips like pomegranate blossoms. The price is now two hundred philips. What wilt thou give, O Hamet?"

Hamet showed himself angry that his original bid should so speedily have been doubled. "By the Koran, I have purchased three sturdy girls from the Sus for less."

"Wouldst thou compare a squat-faced girl from the Sus with this narcissus-eyed glory of womanhood?" scoffed the dalal.

"Two hundred and ten, then," was Hamet's sulky grunt.

The watchful Tsamanni considered that the time had come to buy her for his lord as he had been bidden.

"Three hundred," he said curtly, to make an end of matters, and—

"Four hundred," instantly piped a shrill voice behind him.

He spun round in his amazement and met the leering face of Ayoub. A murmur ran through the ranks of the buyers, the people craned their necks to catch a glimpse of this open-handed purchaser.

Yusuf the Tagareen rose up in a passion. He announced angrily that never again should the dust of the sôk of Algiers defile his slippers, that never again would he come there to purchase slaves.

"By the Well of Zem-Zem," he swore, "all men are bewitched in this market. Four hundred philips for a Frankish girl! May Allah increase your wealth, for verily you'll need it." And in his supreme disgust he stalked to the gates, and elbowed his way through the crowd, and so vanished from the sôk.

Yet ere he was out of earshot her price had risen further. Whilst Tsamanni was recovering from his surprise at the competitor that had suddenly appeared before him, the dalal had lured an increased offer from the Turk.

"'Tis a madness," the latter deplored. "But she pleaseth me, and should it seem good to Allah the Merciful to lead her into the True Faith she may yet become the light of my hareem. Four hundred and twenty philips, then, O dalal, and Allah pardon me my prodigality."

Yet scarcely was his little speech concluded than Tsamanni with laconic eloquence rapped out: "Five hundred."

"Y'Allah!" cried the Turk, raising his hands to heaven, and "Y'Allah!" echoed the crowd.

"Five hundred and fifty," shrilled Ayoub's voice above the general din.

"Six hundred," replied Tsamanni, still unmoved.

And now such was the general hubbub provoked by these unprecedented prices that the dalal was forced to raise his voice and cry for silence.

When this was restored Ayoub at once raised the price to seven hundred.

"Eight hundred," snapped Tsamanni, showing at last a little heat.

"Nine hundred," replied Ayoub.

Tsamanni swung round upon him again, white now with fury.

"Is this a jest, O father of wind?" he cried, and excited laughter by the taunt implicit in that appellation.

"And thou'rt the jester," replied Ayoub with forced calm, "thou'lt find the jest a costly one."

With a shrug Tsamanni turned again to the dalal. "A thousand philips," said he shortly.

"Silence there!" cried the dalal again. "Silence, and praise Allah who sends good prices."

"One thousand and one hundred," said Ayoub the irrepressible

And now Tsamanni not only found himself outbidden, but he had reached the outrageous limit appointed by Asad. He lacked authority to go further, dared not do so without first consulting the Basha. Yet if he left the sôk for that purpose Ayoub would meanwhile secure the girl. He found himself between sword and wall. On the one hand did he permit himself to be outbidden his master might visit upon him his disappointment. On the other, did he continue beyond the limit so idly mentioned as being far beyond all possibility, it might fare no less ill with him.

He turned to the crowd, waving his arms in furious gesticulation. "By the beard of the Prophet, this bladder of wind and grease makes sport of us. He has no intent to buy. What man ever heard of the half of such a price for a slave girl?"

Ayoub's answer was eloquent; he produced a fat bag and flung it on the ground, where it fell with a mellow chink. "There is my sponsor," he made answer, grinning in the very best of humours, savouring to the full his enemy's rage and discomfiture, and savouring it at no cost to himself. "Shall I count out one thousand and one hundred philips, O dalal."

"If the wazeer Tsamanni is content."

"Dost thou know for whom I buy?" roared Tsamanni. "For the Basha himself, Asad-ed-Din, the exalted of Allah," He advanced upon Ayoub with hands upheld. "What shalt thou say to him, O dog, when he calls thee to account for daring to outbid him."

But Ayoub remained unruffled before all this fury. He spread his fat hands, his eyes twinkling, his great lips pursed. "How should I know, since Allah has not made me all-knowing? Thou shouldst have said so earlier. 'Tis thus I shall answer the Basha should he question me, and the Basha is just."

"I would not be thee, Ayoub—not for the throne of Istambul."

"Nor I thee, Tsamanni; for thou art jaundiced with rage."

And so they stood glaring each at the other until the dalal called them back to the business that was to do.

"The price is now one thousand and one hundred philips. Wilt thou suffer defeat, O wazeer?"

"Since Allah wills. I have no authority to go further."

"Then at one thousand and one hundred philips, Ayoub, she is...."

But the sale was not yet to be completed. From the dense and eager throng about the gates rang a crisp voice—

"One thousand and two hundred philips for the Frankish girl."

The dalal, who had conceived that the limits of madness had been already reached, stood gaping now in fresh amazement. The mob crowed and cheered and roared between enthusiasm and derision, and even Tsamanni brightened to see another champion enter the lists who perhaps would avenge him upon Ayoub. The crowd parted quickly to right and left, and through it into the open strode Sakr-el-Bahr. They recognized him instantly, and his name was shouted in acclamation by that idolizing multitude.

That Barbary name of his conveyed no information to Rosamund, and her back being turned to the entrance she did not see him. But she had recognized his voice, and she had shuddered at the sound. She could make nothing of the bidding, nor what the purpose that surely underlay it to account for the extraordinary excitement of the traders. Vaguely had she been wondering what dastardly purpose Oliver might intend to serve, but now that she heard his voice that wonder ceased and understanding took its place. He had hung there somewhere in the crowd waiting until all competitors but one should

have been outbidden, and now he stepped forth to buy her for his own—his slave! She closed her eyes a moment and prayed God that he might not prevail in his intent. Any fate but that; she would rob him even of the satisfaction of driving her to sheathe a poniard in her heart as that poor Andalusian girl had done. A wave almost of unconsciousness passed over her in the intensity of her horror. For a moment the ground seemed to rock and heave under her feet.

Then the dizziness passed, and she was herself again. She heard the crowd thundering "Ma'sh'Allah!" and "Sakr-el-Bahr!" and the dalal clamouring sternly for silence. When this was at last restored she heard his exclamation—

"The glory to Allah who sends eager buyers! What sayest thou, O wazeer Ayoub?"

"Ay!" sneered Tsamanni, "what now?"

"One thousand and three hundred," said Ayoub with a quaver of uneasy defiance.

"Another hundred, O dalal," came from Sakr-el-Bahr in a quiet voice.

"One thousand and five hundred," screamed Ayoub, thus reaching not only the limit imposed by his mistress, but the very limit of the resources at her immediate disposal. Gone, too, with that bid was all hope of profit to himself.

But Sakr-el-Bahr, impassive as Fate, and without so much as deigning to bestow a look upon the quivering eunuch, said again—

"Another hundred, O dalal."

"One thousand and six hundred philips!" cried the dalal, more in amazement than to announce the figure reached. Then controlling his

emotions and he bowed his head in reverence and made confession of his faith. "All things are possible if Allah wills them. The praise to Him who sends wealthy buyers."

He turned to the crestfallen Ayoub, so crestfallen that in the contemplation of him Tsamanni was fast gathering consolation for his own discomfiture, vicariously tasting the sweets of vengeance. "What say you now, O perspicuous wazeer?"

"I say," choked Ayoub, "that since by the favour of Shaitan he hath so much wealth he must prevail."

But the insulting words were scarcely uttered than Sakr-el-Bahr's great hand had taken the wazeer by the nape of his fat neck, a growl of anger running through the assembly to approve him.

"By the favour of Shaitan, sayest thou, thou sex-less dog?" he growled, and tightened his grip so that the wazeer squirmed and twisted in an agony of pain. Down was his head thrust, and still down, until his fat body gave way and he lay supine and writhing in the dust of the sôk. "Shall I strangle thee, thou father of filth, or shall I fling thy soft flesh to the hooks to teach thee what is a man's due from thee?" And as he spoke he rubbed the too daring fellow's face roughly on the ground.

"Mercy!" squealed the wazeer. "Mercy, O mighty Sakr-el-Bahr, as thou lookest for mercy!"

"Unsay thy words, thou offal. Pronounce thyself a liar and a dog."

"I do unsay them. I have foully lied. Thy wealth is the reward sent thee by Allah for thy glorious victories over the unbelieving."

"Put out thine offending tongue," said Sakr-el-Bahr, "and cleanse it in the dust. Put it forth, I say."

Ayoub obeyed him in fearful alacrity, whereupon Sakr-el-Bahr

released his hold and allowed the unfortunate fellow to rise at last, half-choked with dirt, livid of face, and quaking like a jelly, an object of ridicule and cruel mockery to all assembled.

"Now get thee hence, ere my sea-hawks lay their talons on thee. Go!"

Ayoub departed in all haste to the increasing jeers of the multitude and the taunts of Tsamanni, whilst Sakr-el-Bahr turned him once more to the dalal.

"At one thousand and six hundred philips this slave is thine, O Sakr-el-Bahr, thou glory of Islam. May Allah increase thy victories!"

"Pay him, Ali," said the corsair shortly, and he advanced to receive his purchase.

Face to face stood he now with Rosamund, for the first time since that day before the encounter with the Dutch argosy when he had sought her in the cabin of the carack.

One swift glance she bestowed on him, then, her senses reeling with horror at her circumstance she shrank back, her face of a deathly pallor. In his treatment of Ayoub she had just witnessed the lengths of brutality of which he was capable, and she was not to know that this brutality had been a deliberate piece of mummery calculated to strike terror into her.

Pondering her now he smiled a tight-lipped cruel smile that only served to increase her terror.

"Come," he said in English.

She cowered back against the dalal as if for protection. Sakr-el-Bahr reached forward, caught her by the wrists, and almost tossed her to his Nubians, Abiad and Zal-Zer, who were attending him.

"Cover her face," he bade them. "Bear her to my house. Away!"

CHAPTER XI. THE TRUTH

The sun was dipping swiftly to the world's rim when Sakr-el-Bahr with his Nubians and his little retinue of corsairs came to the gates of that white house of his on its little eminence outside the Bab-el-Oueb and beyond the walls of the city.

When Rosamund and Lionel, brought in the wake of the corsair, found themselves in the spacious courtyard beyond the dark and narrow entrance, the blue of the sky contained but the paling embers of the dying day, and suddenly, sharply upon the evening stillness, came a mueddin's voice calling the faithful unto prayer.

Slaves fetched water from the fountain that played in the middle of the quadrangle and tossed aloft a slender silvery spear of water to break into a myriad gems and so shower down into the broad marble basin. Sakr-el-Bahr washed, as did his followers, and then he went down upon the praying-mat that had been set for him, whilst his corsairs detached their cloaks and spread them upon the ground to serve them in like stead.

The Nubians turned the two slaves about, lest their glances should defile the orisons of the faithful, and left them so facing the wall and the green gate that led into the garden whence were wafted on the cooling air the perfumes of jessamine and lavender. Through the laths of the gate they might have caught a glimpse of the riot of colour there, and they might have seen the slaves arrested by the Persian waterwheel at which they had been toiling and chanting until the call to prayer had come to strike them into statues.

Sakr-el-Bahr rose from his devotions, uttered a sharp word of command, and entered the house. The Nubians followed him, urging

their captives before them up the narrow stairs, and so brought them out upon the terrace on the roof, that space which in Eastern houses is devoted to the women, but which no woman's foot had ever trodden since this house had been tenanted by Sakr-el-Bahr the wifeless.

This terrace, which was surrounded by a parapet some four feet high, commanded a view of the city straggling up the hillside to eastward, from the harbour and of the island at the end of the mole which had been so laboriously built by the labour of Christian slaves from the stones of the ruined fortress—the Peñon, which Kheyr-ed-Din Barbarossa had wrested from the Spaniards. The deepening shroud of evening was now upon all, transmuting white and yellow walls alike to a pearly greyness. To westward stretched the fragrant gardens of the house, where the doves were murmuring fondly among the mulberries and lotus trees. Beyond it a valley wound its way between the shallow hills, and from a pool fringed with sedges and bullrushes above which a great stork was majestically sailing came the harsh croak of frogs.

An awning supported upon two gigantic spears hung out from the southern wall of the terrace which rose to twice the height of that forming the parapet on its other three sides. Under this was a divan and silken cushions, and near it a small Moorish table of ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold. Over the opposite parapet, where a lattice had been set, rioted a trailing rose-tree charged with blood-red blossoms, though now their colours were merged into the all-encompassing greyness.

Here Lionel and Rosamund looked at each other in the dim light, their faces gleaming ghostly each to each, whilst the Nubians stood like twin statues by the door that opened from the stair-head.

The man groaned, and clasped his hands before him. The doublet which had been torn from him in the sôk had since been restored and temporarily repaired by a strand of palmetto cord. But he was woefully

bedraggled. Yet his thoughts, if his first words are to be taken as an indication of them were for Rosamund's condition rather than his own.

"O God, that you should be subjected to this!" he cried. "That you should have suffered what you have suffered! The humiliation of it, the barbarous cruelty! Oh!" He covered his haggard face with his hands.

She touched him gently on the arm.

"What I have suffered is but a little thing," she said, and her voice was wonderfully steady and soothing. Have I not said that these Godolphins were brave folk? Even their women were held to have something of the male spirit in their breasts; and to this none can doubt that Rosamund now bore witness. "Do not pity me, Lionel, for my sufferings are at an end or very nearly." She smiled strangely, the smile of exaltation that you may see upon the martyr's face in the hour of doom.

"How?" quoth he, in faint surprise.

"How?" she echoed. "Is there not always a way to thrust aside life's burden when it grows too heavy—heavier than God would have us bear?"

His only answer was a groan. Indeed, he had done little but groan in all the hours they had spent together since they were brought ashore from the carack; and had the season permitted her so much reflection, she might have considered that she had found him singularly wanting during those hours of stress when a man of worth would have made some effort, however desperate, to enhearten her rather than repine upon his own plight.

Slaves entered bearing four enormous flaming torches which they set in iron sconces protruding from the wall of the house. Thence they shed a lurid ruddy glow upon the terrace. The slaves departed again, and presently, in the black gap of the doorway between the Nubians,

a third figure appeared unheralded. It was Sakr-el-Bahr.

He stood a moment at gaze, his attitude haughty, his face expressionless; then slowly he advanced. He was dressed in a short white caftan that descended to his knees, and was caught about his waist in a shimmering girdle of gold that quivered like fire in the glow of the torches as he moved. His arms from the elbow and his legs from the knee were bare, and his feet were shod with gold-embroidered red Turkish slippers. He wore a white turban decked by a plume of osprey attached by a jewelled clasp.

He signed to the Nubians and they vanished silently, leaving him alone with his captives.

He bowed to Rosamund. "This, mistress," he said, "is to be your domain henceforth which is to treat you more as wife than slave. For it is to Muslim wives that the housetops in Barbary are allotted. I hope you like it."

Lionel staring at him out of a white face, his conscience bidding him fear the very worst, his imagination painting a thousand horrid fates for him and turning him sick with dread, shrank back before his half-brother, who scarce appeared to notice him just then.

But Rosamund confronted him, drawn to the full of her splendid height, and if her face was pale, yet it was as composed and calm as his own; if her bosom rose and fell to betray her agitations yet her glance was contemptuous and defiant, her voice calm and steady, when she answered him with the question—"What is your intent with me?"

"My intent?" said he, with a little twisted smile. Yet for all that he believed he hated her and sought to hurt, to humble and to crush her, he could not stifle his admiration of her spirit's gallantry in such an hour as this.

From behind the hills peeped the edge of the moon—a sickle of burnished copper.

"My intent is not for you to question," he replied. "There was a time, Rosamund, when in all the world you had no slave more utter than was I. Yourself in your heartlessness, and in your lack of faith, you broke the golden fetters of that servitude. You'll find it less easy to break the shackles I now impose upon you."

She smiled her scorn and quiet confidence. He stepped close to her. "You are my slave, do you understand?—bought in the market-place as I might buy me a mule, a goat, or a camel—and belonging to me body and soul. You are my property, my thing, my chattel, to use or abuse, to cherish or break as suits my whim, without a will that is not my will, holding your very life at my good pleasure."

She recoiled a step before the dull hatred that throbbed in his words, before the evil mockery of his swarthy bearded face.

"You beast!" she gasped.

"So now you understand the bondage into which you are come in exchange for the bondage which in your own wantonness you dissolved."

"May God forgive you," she panted.

"I thank you for that prayer," said he. "May He forgive you no less."

And then from the background came an inarticulate sound, a strangled, snarling sob from Lionel.

Sakr-el-Bahr turned slowly. He eyed the fellow a moment in silence, then he laughed.

"Ha! My sometime brother. A pretty fellow, as God lives is it not? Consider him Rosamund. Behold how gallantly misfortune is borne by

this pillar of manhood upon which you would lean, by this stalwart husband of your choice. Look at him! Look at this dear brother of mine."

Under the lash of that mocking tongue Lionel's mood was stung to anger where before it had held naught but fear.

"You are no brother of mine," he retorted fiercely. "Your mother was a wanton who betrayed my father."

Sakr-el-Bahr quivered a moment as if he had been struck. Yet he controlled himself.

"Let me hear my mother's name but once again on thy foul tongue, and I'll have it ripped out by the roots. Her memory, I thank God, is far above the insults of such a crawling thing as you. None the less, take care not to speak of the only woman whose name I reverence."

And then turning at bay, as even the rat will do, Lionel sprang upon him, with clawing hands outstretched to reach his throat. But Sakr-el-Bahr caught him in a grip that bent him howling to his knees.

"You find me strong, eh?" he gibed. "Is it matter for wonder? Consider that for six endless months I toiled at the oar of a galley, and you'll understand what it was that turned my body into iron and robbed me of a soul."

He flung him off, and sent him crashing into the rosebush and the lattice over which it rambled.

"Do you realize the horror of the rower's bench? to sit day in day out, night in night out, chained naked to the oar, amid the reek and stench of your fellows in misfortune, unkempt, unwashed save by the rain, broiled and roasted by the sun, festering with sores, lashed and cut and scarred by the boatswain's whip as you faint under the ceaseless, endless, cruel toil?"

"Do you realize it?" From a tone of suppressed fury his voice rose suddenly to a roar. "You shall. For that horror which was mine by your contriving shall now be yours until you die."

He paused; but Lionel made no attempt to avail himself of this. His courage all gone out of him again, as suddenly as it had flickered up, he cowered where he had been flung.

"Before you go there is something else," Sakr-el-Bahr resumed, "something for which I have had you brought hither to-night.

"Not content with having delivered me to all this, not content with having branded me a murderer, destroyed my good name, filched my possessions and driven me into the very path of hell, you must further set about usurping my place in the false heart of this woman I once loved."

"I hope," he went on reflectively, "that in your own poor way you love her, too, Lionel. Thus to the torment that awaits your body shall be added torment for your treacherous soul—such torture of mind as only the damned may know. To that end have I brought you hither. That you may realize something of what is in store for this woman at my hands; that you may take the thought of it with you to be to your mind worse than the boatswain's lash to your pampered body."

"You devil!" snarled Lionel. "Oh, you fiend out of hell!"

"If you will manufacture devils, little toad of a brother, do not upbraid them for being devils when next you meet them."

"Give him no heed, Lionel!" said Rosamund. "I shall prove him as much a boaster as he has proved himself a villain. Never think that he will be able to work his evil will."

"'Tis you are the boaster there," said Sakr-el-Bahr. "And for the rest, I am what you and he, between you, have made me."

"Did we make you liar and coward?—for that is what you are indeed," she answered.

"Coward?" he echoed, in genuine surprise. "'Twill be some lie that he has told you with the others. In what, pray, was I ever a coward?"

"In what? In this that you do now; in this taunting and torturing of two helpless beings in our power."

"I speak not of what I am," he replied, "for I have told you that I am what you have made me. I speak of what I was. I speak of the past."

She looked at him and she seemed to measure him with her unwavering glance.

"You speak of the past?" she echoed, her voice low. "You speak of the past and to me? You dare?"

"It is that we might speak of it together that I have fetched you all the way from England; that at last I may tell you things I was a fool to have kept from you five years ago; that we may resume a conversation which you interrupted when you dismissed me."

"I did you a monstrous injury, no doubt," she answered him, with bitter irony. "I was surely wanting in consideration. It would have become me better to have smiled and fawned upon my brother's murderer."

"I swore to you, then, that I was not his murderer," he reminded her in a voice that shook.

"And I answered you that you lied."

"Ay, and on that you dismissed me—the word of the man whom you professed to love, the word of the man to whom you had given your trust weighing for naught with you."

"When I gave you my trust," she retorted, "I did so in ignorance of your true self, in a headstrong wilful ignorance that would not be guided by what all the world said of you and your wild ways. For that blind wilfulness I have been punished, as perhaps I deserved to be."

"Lies—all lies!" he stormed. "Those ways of mine—and God knows they were none so wild, when all is said—I abandoned when I came to love you. No lover since the world began was ever so cleansed, so purified, so sanctified by love as was I."

"Spare me this at least!" she cried on a note of loathing

"Spare you?" he echoed. "What shall I spare you?"

"The shame of it all; the shame that is ever mine in the reflection that for a season I believed I loved you."

He smiled. "If you can still feel shame, it shall overwhelm you ere I have done. For you shall hear me out. Here there are none to interrupt us, none to thwart my sovereign will. Reflect then, and remember. Remember what a pride you took in the change you had wrought in me. Your vanity welcomed that flattery, that tribute to the power of your beauty. Yet, all in a moment, upon the paltriest grounds, you believed me the murderer of your brother."

"The paltriest grounds?" she cried, protesting almost despite herself

"So paltry that the justices at Truro would not move against me."

"Because," she cut in, "they accounted that you had been sufficiently provoked. Because you had not sworn to them as you swore to me that no provocation should ever drive you to raise your hand against my brother. Because they did not realize how false and how forsworn you were."

He considered her a moment. Then he took a turn on the terrace.

Lionel crouching ever by the rose-tree was almost entirely forgotten by him now.

"God give me patience with you!" he said at length. "I need it. For I desire you to understand many things this night. I mean you to see how just is my resentment; how just the punishment that is to overtake you for what you have made of my life and perhaps of my hereafter. Justice Baine and another who is dead, knew me for innocent."

"They knew you for innocent?" There was scornful amazement in her tone. "Were they not witnesses of the quarrel betwixt you and Peter and of your oath that you would kill him?"

"That was an oath sworn in the heat of anger. Afterwards I bethought me that he was your brother."

"Afterwards?" said she. "After you had murdered him?"

"I say again," Oliver replied calmly, "that I did not do this thing."

"And I say again that you lie."

He considered her for a long moment; then he laughed. "Have you ever," he asked, "known a man to lie without some purpose? Men lie for the sake of profit, they lie out of cowardice or malice, or else because they are vain and vulgar boasters. I know of no other causes that will drive a man to falsehood, save that—ah, yes!—" (and he flashed a sidelong glance at Lionel)—"save that sometimes a man will lie to shield another, out of self-sacrifice. There you have all the spurs that urge a man to falsehood. Can any of these be urging me to-night? Reflect! Ask yourself what purpose I could serve by lying to you now. Consider further that I have come to loathe you for your unfaith; that I desire naught so much as to punish you for that and for all its bitter consequences to me that I have brought you hither to exact payment from you to the uttermost farthing. What end then can I serve by falsehood?"

"All this being so, what end could you serve by truth?" she countered.

"To make you realize to the full the injustice that you did. To make you understand the wrongs for which you are called to pay. To prevent you from conceiving yourself a martyr; to make you perceive in all its deadly bitterness that what now comes to you is the inevitable fruit of your own faithlessness."

"Sir Oliver, do you think me a fool?" she asked him.

"Madam, I do—and worse," he answered.

"Ay, that is clear," she agreed scornfully, "since even now you waste breath in attempting to persuade me against my reason. But words will not blot out facts. And though you talk from now till the day of judgment no word of yours can efface those bloodstains in the snow that formed a trail from that poor murdered body to your own door; no word of yours can extinguish the memory of the hatred between him and you, and of your own threat to kill him; nor can it stifle the recollection of the public voice demanding your punishment. You dare to take such a tone as you are taking with me? You dare here under Heaven to stand and lie to me that you may give false gloze to the villainy of your present deed—for that is the purpose of your falsehood, since you asked me what purpose there could be for it. What had you to set against all that, to convince me that your hands were clean, to induce me to keep the troth which—God forgive me!—I had plighted to you?"

"My word," he answered her in a ringing voice.

"Your lie," she amended.

"Do not suppose," said he, "that I could not support my word by proofs if called upon to do so."

"Proofs?" She stared at him, wide-eyed a moment. Then her lip curled. "And that no doubt was the reason of your flight when you heard that the Queen's pursuivants were coming in response to the public voice to call you to account."

He stood at gaze a moment, utterly dumbfounded. "My flight?" he said. "What fable's that?"

"You will tell me next that you did not flee. That that is another false charge against you?"

"So," he said slowly, "it was believed I fled!"

And then light burst upon him, to dazzle and stun him. It was so inevitably what must have been believed, and yet it had never crossed his mind. O the damnable simplicity of it! At another time his disappearance must have provoked comment and investigation, perhaps. But, happening when it did, the answer to it came promptly and convincingly and no man troubled to question further. Thus was Lionel's task made doubly easy, thus was his own guilt made doubly sure in the eyes of all. His head sank upon his breast. What had he done? Could he still blame Rosamund for having been convinced by so overwhelming a piece of evidence? Could he still blame her if she had burnt unopened the letter which he had sent her by the hand of Pitt? What else indeed could any suppose, but that he had fled? And that being so, clearly such a flight must brand him irrefutably for the murderer he was alleged to be. How could he blame her if she had ultimately been convinced by the only reasonable assumption possible?

A sudden sense of the wrong he had done rose now like a tide about him.

"My God!" he groaned, like a man in pain. "My God!"

He looked at her, and then averted his glance again, unable now to

endure the haggard, strained yet fearless gaze of those brave eyes of hers.

"What else, indeed, could you believe?" he muttered brokenly, thus giving some utterance to what was passing through his mind.

"Naught else but the whole vile truth," she answered fiercely, and thereby stung him anew, whipped him out of his sudden weakening back to his mood of resentment and vindictiveness.

She had shown herself, he thought in that moment of reviving anger, too ready to believe what told against him.

"The truth?" he echoed, and eyed her boldly now. "Do you know the truth when you see it? We shall discover. For by God's light you shall have the truth laid stark before you now, and you shall find it hideous beyond all your hideous imaginings."

There was something so compelling now in his tone and manner that it drove her to realize that some revelation was impending. She was conscious of a faint excitement, a reflection perhaps of the wild excitement that was astir in him.

"Your brother," he began, "met his death at the hands of a false weakling whom I loved, towards whom I had a sacred duty. Straight from the deed he fled to me for shelter. A wound he had taken in the struggle left that trail of blood to mark the way he had come." He paused, and his tone became gentler, it assumed the level note of one who reasons impassively. "Was it not an odd thing, now, that none should ever have paused to seek with certainty whence that blood proceeded, and to consider that I bore no wound in those days? Master Baine knew it, for I submitted my body to his examination, and a document was drawn up and duly attested which should have sent the Queen's pursuivants back to London with drooping tails had I been at Penarrow to receive them."

Faintly through her mind stirred the memory that Master Baine had urged the existence of some such document, that in fact he had gone so far as to have made oath of this very circumstance now urged by Sir Oliver; and she remembered that the matter had been brushed aside as an invention of the justice's to answer the charge of laxity in the performance of his duty, particularly as the only co-witness he could cite was Sir Andrew Flack, the parson, since deceased. Sir Oliver's voice drew her attention from that memory.

"But let that be," he was saying. "Let us come back to the story itself. I gave the craven weakling shelter. Thereby I drew down suspicion upon myself, and since I could not clear myself save by denouncing him, I kept silent. That suspicion drew to certainty when the woman to whom I was betrothed, recking nothing of my oaths, freely believing the very worst of me, made an end of our betrothal and thereby branded me a murderer and a liar in the eyes of all. Indignation swelled against me. The Queen's pursuivants were on their way to do what the justices of Truro refused to do.

"So far I have given you facts. Now I give you surmise—my own conclusions—but surmise that strikes, as you shall judge, the very bull's-eye of truth. That dastard to whom I had given sanctuary, to whom I had served as a cloak, measured my nature by his own and feared that I must prove unequal to the fresh burden to be cast upon me. He feared lest under the strain of it I should speak out, advance my proofs, and so destroy him. There was the matter of that wound, and there was something still more unanswerable he feared I might have urged. There was a certain woman—a wanton up at Malpas—who could have been made to speak, who could have revealed a rivalry concerning her betwixt the slayer and your brother. For the affair in which Peter Godolphin met his death was a pitifully, shamefully sordid one at bottom."

For the first time she interrupted him, fiercely. "Do you malign the

dead?"

"Patience, mistress," he commanded. "I malign none. I speak the truth of a dead man that the truth may be known of two living ones. Hear me out, then! I have waited long and survived a deal that I might tell you this

"That craven, then, conceived that I might become a danger to him; so he decided to remove me. He contrived to have me kidnapped one night and put aboard a vessel to be carried to Barbary and sold there as a slave. That is the truth of my disappearance. And the slayer, whom I had befriended and sheltered at my own bitter cost, profited yet further by my removal. God knows whether the prospect of such profit was a further temptation to him. In time he came to succeed me in my possessions, and at last to succeed me even in the affections of the faithless woman who once had been my affianced wife."

At last she started from the frozen patience in which she had listened hitherto. "Do you say that... that Lionel...?" she was beginning in a voice choked by indignation.

And then Lionel spoke at last, straightening himself into a stiffly upright attitude.

"He lies!" he cried. "He lies, Rosamund! Do not heed him."

"I do not," she answered, turning away.

A wave of colour suffused the swarthy face of Sakr-el-Bahr. A moment his eyes followed her as she moved away a step or two, then they turned their blazing light of anger upon Lionel. He strode silently across to him, his mien so menacing that Lionel shrank back in fresh terror.

Sakr-el-Bahr caught his brother's wrist in a grip that was as that of

a steel manacle. "We'll have the truth this night if we have to tear it from you with red-hot pincers," he said between his teeth.

He dragged him forward to the middle of the terrace and held him there before Rosamund, forcing him down upon his knees into a cowering attitude by the violence of that grip upon his wrist.

"Do you know aught of the ingenuity of Moorish torture?" he asked him. "You may have heard of the rack and the wheel and the thumbscrew at home. They are instruments of voluptuous delight compared with the contrivances of Barbary to loosen stubborn tongues."

White and tense, her hands clenched, Rosamund seemed to stiffen before him.

"You coward! You cur! You craven renegade dog!" she branded him.

Oliver released his brother's wrist and beat his hands together. Without heeding Rosamund he looked down upon Lionel, who cowered shuddering at his feet.

"What do you say to a match between your fingers? Or do you think a pair of bracelets of living fire would answer better, to begin with?"

A squat, sandy-bearded, turbaned fellow, rolling slightly in his gait, came—as had been prearranged—to answer the corsair's summons.

With the toe of his slipper Sakr-el-Bahr stirred his brother.

"Look up, dog," he bade him. "Consider me that man, and see if you know him again. Look at him, I say!" And Lionel looked, yet since clearly he did so without recognition his brother explained: "His name among Christians was Jasper Leigh. He was the skipper you bribed to carry me into Barbary. He was taken in his own toils when his ship was sunk by Spaniards. Later he fell into my power, and because I

forebore from hanging him he is to-day my faithful follower. I should bid him tell you what he knows," he continued, turning to Rosamund, "if I thought you would believe his tale. But since I am assured you would not, I will take other means." He swung round to Jasper again. "Bid Ali heat me a pair of steel manacles in a brazier and hold them in readiness against my need of them." And he waved his hand.

Jasper bowed and vanished.

"The bracelets shall coax confession from your own lips, my brother."

"I have naught to confess," protested Lionel. "You may force lies from me with your ruffianly tortures."

Oliver smiled. "Not a doubt but that lies will flow from you more readily than truth. But we shall have truth, too, in the end, never doubt it." He was mocking, and there was a subtle purpose underlying his mockery. "And you shall tell a full story," he continued, "in all its details, so that Mistress Rosamund's last doubt shall vanish. You shall tell her how you lay in wait for him that evening in Godolphin Park; how you took him unawares, and...."

"That is false!" cried Lionel in a passion of sincerity that brought him to his feet.

It was false, indeed, and Oliver knew it, and deliberately had recourse to falsehood, using it as a fulcrum upon which to lever out the truth. He was cunning as all the fiends, and never perhaps did he better manifest his cunning.

"False?" he cried with scorn. "Come, now, be reasonable. The truth, ere torture sucks it out of you. Reflect that I know all—exactly as you told it me. How was it, now? Lurking behind a bush you sprang upon him unawares and ran him through before he could so much as lay a hand to his sword, and so...."

"The lie of that is proven by the very facts themselves," was the furious interruption. A subtle judge of tones might have realized that here was truth indeed, angry indignant truth that compelled conviction. "His sword lay beside him when they found him."

But Oliver was loftily disdainful. "Do I not know? Yourself you drew it after you had slain him."

The taunt performed its deadly work. For just one instant Lionel was carried off his feet by the luxury of his genuine indignation, and in that one instant he was lost.

"As God's my witness, that is false!" he cried wildly. "And you know it. I fought him fair...."

He checked on a long, shuddering, indrawn breath that was horrible to hear.

Then silence followed, all three remaining motionless as statues: Rosamund white and tense, Oliver grim and sardonic, Lionel limp, and overwhelmed by the consciousness of how he had been lured into self-betrayal.

At last it was Rosamund who spoke, and her voice shook and shifted from key to key despite her strained attempt to keep it level.

"What... what did you say, Lionel?" she asked. Oliver laughed softly. "He was about to add proof of his statement, I think," he jeered. "He was about to mention the wound he took in that fight, which left those tracks in the snow, thus to prove that I lied—as indeed I did—when I said that he took Peter unawares."

"Lionel!" she cried. She advanced a step and made as if to hold out her arms to him, then let them fall again beside her. He stood stricken, answering nothing. "Lionel!" she cried again, her voice growing suddenly shrill. "Is this true?"

"Did you not hear him say it?" quoth Oliver.

She stood swaying a moment, looking at Lionel, her white face distorted into a mask of unutterable pain. Oliver stepped towards her, ready to support her, fearing that she was about to fall. But with an imperious hand she checked his advance, and by a supreme effort controlled her weakness. Yet her knees shook under her, refusing their office. She sank down upon the divan and covered her face with her hands.

"God pity me!" she moaned, and sat huddled there, shaken with sobs.

Lionel started at that heart-broken cry. Cowering, he approached her, and Oliver, grim and sardonic, stood back, a spectator of the scene he had precipitated. He knew that given rope Lionel would enmesh himself still further. There must be explanations that would damn him utterly. Oliver was well content to look on.

"Rosamund!" came Lionel's piteous cry. "Rose! Have mercy! Listen ere you judge me. Listen lest you misjudge me!"

"Ay, listen to him," Oliver flung in, with his soft hateful laugh. "Listen to him. I doubt he'll be vastly entertaining."

That sneer was a spur to the wretched Lionel. "Rosamund, all that he has told you of it is false. I...I...It was done in self-defence. It is a lie that I took him unawares." His words came wildly now. "We had quarrelled about... about... a certain matter, and as the devil would have it we met that evening in Godolphin Park, he and I. He taunted me; he struck me, and finally he drew upon me and forced me to draw that I might defend my life. That is the truth. I swear to you here on my knees in the sight of Heaven! And...."

"Enough, sir! Enough!" she broke in, controlling herself to check

these protests that but heightened her disgust.

"Nay, hear me yet, I implore you; that knowing all you may be merciful in your judgment."

"Merciful?" she cried, and almost seemed to laugh

"It was an accident that I slew him," Lionel raved on. "I never meant it. I never meant to do more than ward and preserve my life. But when swords are crossed more may happen than a man intends. I take God to witness that his death was an accident resulting from his own fury."

She had checked her sobs, and she considered him now with eyes that were hard and terrible.

"Was it also an accident that you left me and all the world in the belief that the deed was your brother's?" she asked him.

He covered his face, as if unable to endure her glance. "Did you but know how I loved you—even in those days, in secret—you would perhaps pity me a little," he whimpered.

"Pity?" She leaned forward and seemed to spit the word at him. "'Sdeath, man! Do you sue for pity—you?"

"Yet you must pity me did you know the greatness of the temptation to which I succumbed."

"I know the greatness of your infamy, of your falseness, of your cowardice, of your baseness. Oh!"

He stretched out suppliant hands to her; there were tears now in his eyes. "Of your charity, Rosamund...." he was beginning, when at last Oliver intervened:

"I think you are wearying the lady," he said, and stirred him with his

foot. "Relate to us instead some more of your astounding accidents. They are more diverting. Elucidate the accident, by which you had me kidnapped to be sold into slavery. Tell us of the accident by which you succeeded to my property. Expound to the full the accidental circumstances of which throughout you have been the unfortunate victim. Come, man, ply your wits. 'Twill make a pretty tale."

And then came Jasper to announce that Ali waited with the brazier and the heated manacles.

"They are no longer needed," said Oliver. "Take this slave hence with you. Bid Ali to take charge of him, and at dawn to see him chained to one of the oars of my galeasse. Away with him."

Lionel rose to his feet, his face ashen. "Wait! Ah, wait! Rosamund!" he cried.

Oliver caught him by the nape of his neck, spun him round, and flung him into the arms of Jasper. "Take him away!" he growled, and Jasper took the wretch by the shoulders and urged him out, leaving Rosamund and Oliver alone with the truth under the stars of Barbary.

CHAPTER XII. THE SUBTLETY OF FENZILEH

Oliver considered the woman for a long moment as she sat half-crouching on the divan, her hands locked, her face set and stony, her eyes lowered. He sighed gently and turned away. He paced to the parapet and looked out upon the city bathed in the white glare of the full risen moon. There arose thence a hum of sound, dominated, however, by the throbbing song of a nightingale somewhere in his garden and the croaking of the frogs by the pool in the valley.

Now that truth had been dragged from its well, and tossed, as it were, into Rosamund's lap, he felt none of the fierce exultation which he had conceived that such an hour as this must bring him. Rather, indeed, was he saddened and oppressed. To poison the unholy cup of joy which he had imagined himself draining with such thirsty zest there was that discovery of a measure of justification for her attitude towards him in her conviction that his disappearance was explained by flight.

He was weighed down by a sense that he had put himself entirely in the wrong; that in his vengeance he had overreached himself; and he found the fruits of it, which had seemed so desirably luscious, turning to ashes in his mouth.

Long he stood there, the silence between them entirely unbroken. Then at length he stirred, turned from the parapet, and paced slowly back until he came to stand beside the divan, looking down upon her from his great height.

"At last you have heard the truth," he said. And as she made no

answer he continued: "I am thankful it was surprised out of him before the torture was applied, else you might have concluded that pain was wringing a false confession from him." He paused, but still she did not speak; indeed, she made no sign that she had heard him. "That," he concluded, "was the man whom you preferred to me. Faith, you did not flatter me, as perhaps you may have learnt."

At last she was moved from her silence, and her voice came dull and hard. "I have learnt how little there is to choose between you," she said. "It was to have been expected. I might have known two brothers could not have been so dissimilar in nature. Oh, I am learning a deal, and swiftly!"

It was a speech that angered him, that cast out entirely the softer mood that had been growing in him.

"You are learning?" he echoed. "What are you learning?"

"Knowledge of the ways of men."

His teeth gleamed in his wry smile. "I hope the knowledge will bring you as much bitterness as the knowledge of women—of one woman—has brought me. To have believed me what you believed me—me whom you conceived yourself to love!" He felt, perhaps the need to repeat it that he might keep the grounds of his grievance well before his mind.

"If I have a mercy to beg of you it is that you will not shame me with the reminder."

"Of your faithlessness?" he asked. "Of your disloyal readiness to believe the worst evil of me?"

"Of my ever having believed that I loved you. That is the thought that shames me, as nothing else in life could shame me, as not even the slave-market and all the insult to which you have submitted me could

shame me. You taunt me with my readiness to believe evil of you...."

"I do more than taunt you with it," he broke in, his anger mounting under the pitiless lash of her scorn. "I lay to your charge the wasted years of my life, all the evil that has followed out of it, all that I have suffered, all that I have lost, all that I am become."

She looked up at him coldly, astonishingly mistress of herself. "You lay all this to my charge?" she asked him.

"I do." He was very vehement. "Had you not used me as you did, had you not lent a ready ear to lies, that whelp my brother would never have gone to such lengths, nor should I ever have afforded him the opportunity."

She shifted on the cushions of the divan and turned her shoulder to him.

"All this is very idle," she said coldly. Yet perhaps because she felt that she had need to justify herself she continued: "If, after all, I was so ready to believe evil of you, it is that my instincts must have warned me of the evil that was ever in you. You have proved to me to-night that it was not you who murdered Peter; but to attain that proof you have done a deed that is even fouler and more shameful, a deed that reveals to the full the blackness of your heart. Have you not proved yourself a monster of vengeance and impiety?" She rose and faced him again in her sudden passion. "Are you not—you that were born a Cornish Christian gentleman—become a heathen and a robber, a renegade and a pirate? Have you not sacrificed your very God to your vengeful lust?"

He met her glance fully, never quailing before her denunciation, and when she had ended on that note of question he counter-questioned her.

"And your instincts had forewarned you of all this? God's life,

woman! can you invent no better tale than that?" He turned aside as two slaves entered bearing an earthenware vessel. "Here comes your supper. I hope your appetite is keener than your logic."

They set the vessel, from which a savoury smell proceeded, upon the little Moorish table by the divan. On the ground beside it they placed a broad dish of baked earth in which there were a couple of loaves and a red, short-necked amphora of water with a drinking-cup placed over the mouth of it to act as a stopper.

They salaamed profoundly and padded softly out again.

"Sup," he bade her shortly.

"I want no supper," she replied, her manner sullen.

His cold eye played over her. "Henceforth, girl, you will consider not what you want, but what I bid you do. I bid you eat; about it, therefore."

"I will not."

"Will not?" he echoed slowly. "Is that a speech from slave to master? Eat, I say."

"I cannot! I cannot!" she protested.

"A slave may not live who cannot do her master's bidding."

"Then kill me," she answered fiercely, leaping up to confront and dare him. "Kill me. You are used to killing, and for that at least I should be grateful."

"I will kill you if I please," he said in level icy tones. "But not to please you. You don't yet understand. You are my slave, my thing, my property, and I will not suffer you to be damaged save at my own good pleasure. Therefore, eat, or my Nubians shall whip you to quicken appetite."

For a moment she stood defiant before him, white and resolute. Then quite suddenly, as if her will was being bent and crumpled under the insistent pressure of his own, she drooped and sank down again to the divan. Slowly, reluctantly she drew the dish nearer. Watching her, he laughed quite silently.

She paused, appearing to seek for something. Failing to find it she looked up at him again, between scorn and intercession.

"Am I to tear the meat with my fingers?" she demanded.

His eyes gleamed with understanding, or at least with suspicion. But he answered her quite calmly—"It is against the Prophet's law to defile meat or bread by the contact of a knife. You must use the hands that God has given you."

"Do you mock me with the Prophet and his laws? What are the Prophet's laws to me? If eat I must, at least I will not eat like a heathen dog, but in Christian fashion."

To indulge her, as it seemed, he slowly drew the richly hilted dagger from his girdle. "Let that serve you, then," he said; and carelessly he tossed it down beside her.

With a quick indrawn breath she pounced upon it. "At last," she said, "you give me something for which I can be grateful to you." And on the words she laid the point of it against her breast.

Like lightning he had dropped to one knee, and his hand had closed about her wrist with such a grip that all her arm felt limp and powerless. He was smiling into her eyes, his swarthy face close to her own.

"Did you indeed suppose I trusted you? Did you really think me deceived by your sudden pretence of yielding? When will you learn that I am not a fool? I did it but to test your spirit."

"Then now you know its temper," she replied. "You know my intention."

"Forewarned, forearmed," said he.

She looked at him, with something that would have been mockery but for the contempt that coloured it too deeply. "Is it so difficult a thing," she asked, "to snap the thread of life? Are there no ways of dying save by the knife? You boast yourself my master; that I am your slave; that, having bought me in the market-place, I belong to you body and soul. How idle is that boast. My body you may bind and confine; but my soul.... Be very sure that you shall be cheated of your bargain. You boast yourself lord of life and death. A lie! Death is all that you can command."

Quick steps came pattering up the stairs, and before he could answer her, before he had thought of words in which to do so, Ali confronted him with the astounding announcement that there was a woman below asking urgently to speak with him.

"A woman?" he questioned, frowning. "A Nasrani woman, do you mean?"

"No, my lord. A Muslim," was the still more surprising information.

"A Muslim woman, here? Impossible!"

But even as he spoke a dark figure glided like a shadow across the threshold on to the terrace. She was in black from head to foot, including the veil that shrouded her, a veil of the proportions of a mantle, serving to dissemble her very shape.

Ali swung upon her in a rage. "Did I not bid thee wait below, thou daughter of shame?" he stormed. "She has followed me up, my lord, to thrust herself in here upon you. Shall I drive her forth?"

"Let her be," said Sakr-el-Bahr. And he waved Ali away. "Leave

us!"

Something about that black immovable figure arrested his attention and fired his suspicions. Unaccountably almost it brought to his mind the thought of Ayoub-el-Sarnin and the bidding there had been for Rosamund in the sôk.

He stood waiting for his visitor to speak and disclose herself. She on her side continued immovable until Ali's footsteps had faded in the distance. Then, with a boldness entirely characteristic, with the recklessness that betrayed her European origin, intolerant of the Muslim restraint imposed upon her sex, she did what no True-believing woman would have done. She tossed back that long black veil and disclosed the pale countenance and languorous eyes of Fenzileh.

For all that it was no more than he had expected, yet upon beholding her—her countenance thus bared to his regard—he recoiled a step.

"Fenzileh!" he cried. "What madness is this?"

Having announced herself in that dramatic fashion she composedly readjusted her veil so that her countenance should once more be decently concealed.

"To come here, to my house, and thus!" he protested. "Should this reach the ears of thy lord, how will it fare with thee and with me? Away, woman, and at once!" he bade her.

"No need to fear his knowing of this unless, thyself, thou tell him," she answered. "To thee I need no excuse if thou'lt but remember that like thyself I was not born a Muslim."

"But Algiers is not thy native Sicily, and whatever thou wast born it were well to remember what thou art become."

He went on at length to tell her of the precise degree of her folly, but she cut in, stemming his protestation in full flow.

"These are idle words that but delay me."

"To thy purpose then, in Allah's name, that thus thou mayest depart the sooner."

She came to it straight enough on that uncompromising summons. She pointed to Rosamund. "It concerns that slave," said she. "I sent my wazeer to the sôk to-day with orders to purchase her for me."

"So I had supposed," he said.

"But it seems that she caught thy fancy, and the fool suffered himself to be outbidden."

"Well?"

"Thou'lt relinquish her to me at the price she cost thee?" A faint note of anxiety trembled in her voice.

"I am anguished to deny thee, O Fenzileh. She is not for sale."

"Ah, wait," she cried. "The price paid was high—many times higher than I have ever heard tell was given for a slave, however lovely. Yet I covet her. 'Tis a whim of mine, and I cannot suffer to be thwarted in my whims. To gratify this one I will pay three thousand philips."

He looked at her and wondered what devilries might be stirring in her mind, what evil purpose she desired to serve.

"Thou'lt pay three thousand philips?" he said slowly. Then bluntly asked her: "Why?"

"To gratify a whim, to please a fancy."

"What is the nature of this costly whim?" he insisted.

"The desire to possess her for my own," she answered evasively.

"And this desire to possess her, whence is it sprung?" he returned, as patient as he was relentless.

"You ask too many questions," she exclaimed with a flash of anger.

He shrugged and smiled. "You answer too few."

She set her arms akimbo and faced him squarely. Faintly through her veil he caught the gleam of her eyes, and he cursed the advantage she had in that her face was covered from his reading.

"In a word, Oliver-Reis," said she, "wilt sell her for three thousand philips?"

"In a word—no," he answered her.

"Thou'lt not? Not for three thousand philips?" Her voice was charged with surprise, and he wondered was it real or assumed.

"Not for thirty thousand," answered he. "She is mine, and I'll not relinquish her. So since I have proclaimed my mind, and since to tarry here is fraught with peril for us both, I beg thee to depart."

There fell a little pause, and neither of them noticed the alert interest stamped upon the white face of Rosamund. Neither of them suspected her knowledge of French which enabled her to follow most of what was said in the lingua franca they employed.

Fenzileh drew close to him. "Thou'lt not relinquish her, eh?" she asked, and he was sure she sneered. "Be not so confident. Thou'lt be forced to it, my friend—if not to me, why then, to Asad. He is coming for her, himself, in person."

"Asad?" he cried, startled now.

"Asad-ed-Din," she answered and upon that resumed her pleading. "Come, then! It were surely better to make a good bargain with me than a bad one with the Basha."

He shook his head and planted his feet squarely. "I intend to make no bargain with either of you. This slave is not for sale."

"Shalt thou dare resist Asad? I tell thee he will take her whether she be for sale or not."

"I see," he said, his eyes narrowing. "And the fear of this, then, is the source of thy whim to acquire her for thyself. Thou art not subtle, O Fenzileh. The consciousness that thine own charms are fading sets thee trembling lest so much loveliness should entirely cast thee from thy lord's regard, eh?"

If he could not see her face, and study there the effect of that thrust of his, at least he observed the quiver that ran through her muffled figure, he caught the note of anger that throbbed in her reply—"And if that were so, what is't to thee?"

"It may be much or little," he replied thoughtfully.

"Indeed, it should be much," she answered quickly, breathlessly. "Have I not ever been thy friend? Have I not ever urged thy valour on my lord's notice and wrought like a true friend for thine advancement, Sakr-el-Bahr?"

He laughed outright. "Hast thou so?" quoth he.

"Laugh as thou wilt, but it is true," she insisted. "Lose me and thy most valuable ally is lost—one who has the ear and favour of her lord. For look, Sakr-el-Bahr, it is what would befall if another came to fill my place, another who might poison Asad's mind with lies against thee—for surely she cannot love thee, this Frankish girl whom thou hast torn from her home!"

"Be not concerned for that," he answered lightly, his wits striving in vain to plumb the depths and discover the nature of her purpose. "This slave of mine shall never usurp thy place beside Asad."

"O fool, Asad will take her whether she be for sale or not."

He looked down upon her, head on one side and arms akimbo. "If he can take her from me, the more easily can he take her from thee. No doubt thou hast considered that, and in some dark Sicilian way considered too how to provide against it. But the cost—hast thou counted that? What will Asad say to thee when he learns how thou hast thwarted him?"

"What do I care for that?" she cried in sudden fury, her gestures becoming a little wild. "She will be at the bottom of the harbour by then with a stone about her neck. He may have me whipped. No doubt he will. But 'twill end there. He will require me to console him for his loss, and so all will be well again."

At last he had drawn her, pumped her dry, as he imagined. Indeed, indeed, he thought, he had been right to say she was not subtle. He had been a fool to have permitted himself to be intrigued by so shallow, so obvious a purpose. He shrugged and turned away from her.

"Depart in peace, O Fenzileh," he said. "I yield her to none—be his name Asad or Shaitan."

His tone was final, and her answer seemed to accept at last his determination. Yet she was very quick with that answer; so quick that he might have suspected it to be preconceived.

"Then it is surely thine intent to wed her." No voice could have been more innocent and guileless than was hers now. "If so," she went on, "it were best done quickly, for marriage is the only barrier Asad will not overthrow. He is devout, and out of his deep reverence for the

Prophet's law he would be sure to respect such a bond as that. But be very sure that he will respect nothing short of it."

Yet notwithstanding her innocence and assumed simplicity—because of it, perhaps—he read her as if she had been an open book; it no longer mattered that her face was veiled.

"And thy purpose would be equally well served, eh?" he questioned her, sly in his turn.

"Equally," she admitted.

"Say 'better,' Fenzileh," he rejoined. "I said thou art not subtle. By the Koran, I lied. Thou art subtle as the serpent. Yet I see whither thou art gliding. Were I to be guided by thine advice a twofold purpose would be served. First, I should place her beyond Asad's reach, and second, I should be embroiled with him for having done so. What could more completely satisfy thy wishes?"

"Thou dost me wrong," she protested. "I have ever been thy friend. I would that...." She broke off suddenly to listen. The stillness of the night was broken by cries from the direction of the Bab-el-Oueb. She ran swiftly to the parapet whence the gate was to be seen and leaned far out.

"Look, look!" she cried, and there was a tremor of fear in her voice. "It is he—Asad-ed-Din."

Sakr-el-Bahr crossed to her side and in a glare of torches saw a body of men coming forth from the black archway of the gate.

"It almost seems as if, departing from thy usual custom, thou hast spoken truth, O Fenzileh."

She faced him, and he suspected the venomous glance darted at him through her veil. Yet her voice when she spoke was cold. "In a moment thou'lt have no single doubt of it. But what of me?" The

question was added in a quickening tone. "He must not find me here. He would kill me, I think."

"I am sure he would," Sakr-el-Bahr agreed. "Yet muffled thus, who should recognize thee? Away, then, ere he comes. Take cover in the courtyard until he shall have passed. Didst thou come alone?"

"Should I trust anyone with the knowledge that I had visited thee?" she asked, and he admired the strong Sicilian spirit in her that not all these years in the Basha's hareem had sufficed to extinguish.

She moved quickly to the door, to pause again on the threshold.

"Thou'lt not relinquish her? Thou'lt not."

"Be at ease," he answered her, on so resolved a note that she departed satisfied.

CHAPTER XIII. IN THE SIGHT OF ALLAH

Sakr-el-Bahr stood lost in thought after she had gone. Again he weighed her every word and considered precisely how he should meet Asad, and how refuse him, if the Basha's were indeed such an errand as Fenzileh had heralded.

Thus in silence he remained waiting for Ali or another to summon him to the presence of the Basha. Instead, however, when Ali entered it was actually to announce Asad-ed-Din, who followed immediately upon his heels, having insisted in his impatience upon being conducted straight to the presence of Sakr-el-Bahr.

"The peace of the Prophet upon thee, my son, was the Basha's greeting.

"And upon thee, my lord." Sakr-el-Bahr salaamed. "My house is honoured." With a gesture he dismissed Ali.

"I come to thee a suppliant," said Asad, advancing.

"A suppliant, thou? No need, my lord. I have no will that is not the echo of thine own."

The Basha's questing eyes went beyond him and glowed as they rested upon Rosamund.

"I come in haste," he said, "like any callow lover, guided by my every instinct to the presence of her I seek—this Frankish pearl, this pen-faced captive of thy latest raid. I was away from the Kasbah when that pig Tsamanni returned thither from the sôk; but when at last I

learned that he had failed to purchase her as I commanded, I could have wept for very grief. I feared at first that some merchant from the Sus might have bought her and departed; but when I heard—blessed be Allah!—that thou wert the buyer, I was comforted again. For thou'lt yield her up to me, my son."

He spoke with such confidence that Oliver had a difficulty in choosing the words that were to disillusion him. Therefore he stood in hesitancy a moment.

"I will make good thy loss," Asad ran on. "Thou shalt have the sixteen hundred philips paid and another five hundred to console thee. Say that will content thee; for I boil with impatience."

Sakr-el-Bahr smiled grimly. "It is an impatience well known to me, my lord, where she is concerned," he answered slowly. "I boiled with it myself for five interminable years. To make an end of it I went a distant perilous voyage to England in a captured Frankish vessel. Thou didst not know, O Asad, else thou wouldst...."

"Bah!" broke in the Basha. "Thou'rt a huckster born. There is none like thee, Sakr-el-Bahr, in any game of wits. Well, well, name thine own price, strike thine own profit out of my impatience and let us have done."

"My lord," he said quietly, "it is not the profit that is in question. She is not for sale."

Asad blinked at him, speechless, and slowly a faint colour crept into his sallow cheeks.

"Not... not for sale?" he echoed, faltering in his amazement.

"Not if thou offered me thy Bashalik as the price of her," was the solemn answer. Then more warmly, in a voice that held a note of intercession—"Ask anything else that is mine," he continued, "and

gladly will I lay it at thy feet in earnest of my loyalty and love for thee."

"But I want nothing else." Asad's tone was impatient, petulant almost. "I want this slave."

"Then," replied Oliver, "I cast myself upon thy mercy and beseech thee to turn thine eyes elsewhere."

Asad scowled upon him. "Dost thou deny me?" he demanded, throwing back his head.

"Alas!" said Sakr-el-Bahr.

There fell a pause. Darker and darker grew the countenance of Asad, fiercer glowed the eyes he bent upon his lieutenant. "I see," he said at last, with a calm so oddly at variance with his looks as to be sinister. "I see. It seems that there is more truth in Fenzileh than I suspected. So!" He considered the corsair a moment with his sunken smouldering eyes.

Then he addressed him in a tone that vibrated with his suppressed anger. "Bethink thee, Sakr-el-Bahr, of what thou art, of what I have made thee. Bethink thee of all the bounty these hands have lavished on thee. Thou art my own lieutenant, and mayest one day be more. In Algiers there is none above thee save myself. Art, then, so thankless as to deny me the first thing I ask of thee? Truly is it written 'Ungrateful is Man.'"

"Didst thou know," began Sakr-el-Bahr, "all that is involved for me in this...."

"I neither know nor care," Asad cut in. "Whatever it may be, it should be as naught when set against my will." Then he discarded anger for cajolery. He set a hand upon Sakr-el-Bahr's stalwart shoulder. "Come, my son. I will deal generously with thee out of my love, and I will put thy refusal from my mind."

"Be generous, my lord, to the point of forgetting that ever thou didst ask me for her."

"Dost still refuse?" The voice, honeyed an instant ago, rang harsh again. "Take care how far thou strain my patience. Even as I have raised thee from the dirt, so at a word can I cast thee down again. Even as I broke the shackles that chained thee to the rowers' bench, so can I rivet them on thee anew."

"All this canst thou do," Sakr-el-Bahr agreed. "And since, knowing it, I still hold to what is doubly mine—by right of capture and of purchase—thou mayest conceive how mighty are my reasons. Be merciful, then, Asad...."

"Must I take her by force in spite of thee?" roared the Basha.

Sakr-el-Bahr stiffened. He threw back his head and looked the Basha squarely in the eyes.

"Whilst I live, not even that mayest thou do," he answered.

"Disloyal, mutinous dog! Wilt thou resist me—me?"

"It is my prayer that thou'lt not be so ungenerous and unjust as to compel thy servant to a course so hateful."

Asad sneered. "Is that thy last word?" he demanded.

"Save only that in all things else I am thy slave, O Asad."

A moment the Basha stood regarding him, his glance baleful. Then deliberately, as one who has taken his resolve, he strode to the door. On the threshold he paused and turned again. "Wait!" he said, and on that threatening word departed.

Sakr-el-Bahr remained a moment where he had stood during the interview, then with a shrug he turned. He met Rosamund's eyes fixed

intently upon him, and invested with a look he could not read. He found himself unable to meet it, and he turned away. It was inevitable that in such a moment the earlier stab of remorse should be repeated. He had overreached himself indeed. Despair settled down upon him, a full consciousness of the horrible thing he had done, which seemed now so irrevocable. In his silent anguish he almost conceived that he had mistaken his feelings for Rosamund; that far from hating her as he had supposed, his love for her had not yet been slain, else surely he should not be tortured now by the thought of her becoming Asad's prey. If he hated her, indeed, as he had supposed, he would have surrendered her and gloated.

He wondered was his present frame of mind purely the result of his discovery that the appearances against him had been stronger far than he imagined, so strong as to justify her conviction that he was her brother's slayer.

And then her voice, crisp and steady, cut into his torture of consideration.

"Why did you deny him?"

He swung round again to face her, amazed, horror-stricken.

"You understood?" he gasped.

"I understood enough," said she. "This lingua franca is none so different from French." And again she asked—"Why did you deny him?"

He paced across to her side and stood looking down at her.

"Do you ask why?"

"Indeed," she said bitterly, "there is scarce the need perhaps. And yet can it be that your lust of vengeance is so insatiable that sooner than willingly forgo an ounce of it you will lose your head?"

His face became grim again. "Of course," he sneered, "it would be so that you'd interpret me."

"Nay. If I have asked it is because I doubt."

"Do you realize what it can mean to become the prey of Asad-ed-Din?"

She shuddered, and her glance fell from his, yet her voice was composed when she answered him—"Is it so very much worse than becoming the prey of Oliver-Reis or Sakr-el-Bahr, or whatever they may call you?"

"If you say that it is all one to you there's an end to my opposing him," he answered coldly. "You may go to him. If I resisted him—like a fool, perhaps—it was for no sake of vengeance upon you. It was because the thought of it fills me with horror."

"Then it should fill you with horror of yourself no less," said she.

His answer startled her.

"Perhaps it does," he said, scarcely above a murmur. "Perhaps it does."

She flashed him an upward glance and looked as if she would have spoken. But he went on, suddenly passionate, without giving her time to interrupt him. "O God! It needed this to show me the vileness of the thing I have done. Asad has no such motives as had I. I wanted you that I might punish you. But he...O God!" he groaned, and for a moment put his face to his hands.

She rose slowly, a strange agitation stirring in her, her bosom galloping. But in his overwrought condition he failed to observe it. And then like a ray of hope to illumine his despair came the counsel that Fenzileh had given him, the barrier which she had said that Asad,

being a devout Muslim, would never dare to violate.

"There is a way," he cried. "There is the way suggested by Fenzileh at the promptings of her malice." An instant he hesitated, his eyes averted. Then he made his plunge. "You must marry me."

It was almost as if he had struck her. She recoiled. Instantly suspicion awoke in her; swiftly it drew to a conviction that he had but sought to trick her by a pretended penitence.

"Marry you!" she echoed.

"Ay," he insisted. And he set himself to explain to her how if she were his wife she must be sacred and inviolable to all good Muslimeen, that none could set a finger upon her without doing outrage to the Prophet's holy law, and that, whoever might be so disposed, Asad was not of those, since Asad was perfervidly devout. "Thus only," he ended, "can I place you beyond his reach."

But she was still scornfully reluctant.

"It is too desperate a remedy even for so desperate an ill," said she, and thus drove him into a frenzy of impatience with her.

"You must, I say," he insisted, almost angrily. "You must—or else consent to be borne this very night to Asad's hareem—and not even as his wife, but as his slave. Oh, you must trust me for your own sake! You must!"

"Trust you!" she cried, and almost laughed in the intensity of her scorn. "Trust you! How can I trust one who is a renegade and worse?"

He controlled himself that he might reason with her, that by cold logic he might conquer her consent.

"You are very unmerciful," he said. "In judging me you leave out of all account the suffering through which I have gone and what yourself

contributed to it. Knowing now how falsely I was accused and what other bitter wrongs I suffered, consider that I was one to whom the man and the woman I most loved in all this world had proven false. I had lost faith in man and in God, and if I became a Muslim, a renegade, and a corsair, it was because there was no other gate by which I could escape the unutterable toil of the oar to which I had been chained." He looked at her sadly. "Can you find no excuse for me in all that?"

It moved her a little, for if she maintained a hostile attitude, at least she put aside her scorn.

"No wrongs," she told him, almost with sorrow in her voice, "could justify you in outraging chivalry, in dishonouring your manhood, in abusing your strength to persecute a woman. Whatever the causes that may have led to it, you have fallen too low, sir, to make it possible that I should trust you."

He bowed his head under the rebuke which already he had uttered in his own heart. It was just and most deserved, and since he recognized its justice he found it impossible to resent it.

"I know," he said. "But I am not asking you to trust me to my profit, but to your own. It is for your sake alone that I implore you to do this." Upon a sudden inspiration he drew the heavy dagger from his girdle and proffered it, hilt foremost. "If you need an earnest of my good faith," he said, "take this knife with which to-night you attempted to stab yourself. At the first sign that I am false to my trust, use it as you will—upon me or upon yourself."

She pondered him in some surprise. Then slowly she put out her hand to take the weapon, as he bade her.

"Are you not afraid," she asked him, "that I shall use it now, and so make an end?"

"I am trusting you," he said, "that in return you may trust me. Further, I am arming you against the worst. For if it comes to choice between death and Asad, I shall approve your choice of death. But let me add that it were foolish to choose death whilst yet there is a chance of life."

"What chance?" she asked, with a faint return of her old scorn. "The chance of life with you?"

"No," he answered firmly. "If you will trust me, I swear that I will seek to undo the evil I have done. Listen. At dawn my galeasse sets out upon a raid. I will convey you secretly aboard and find a way to land you in some Christian country—Italy or France—whence you may make your way home again."

"But meanwhile," she reminded him, "I shall have become your wife."

He smiled wistfully. "Do you still fear a trap? Can naught convince you of my sincerity? A Muslim marriage is not binding upon a Christian, and I shall account it no marriage. It will be no more than a pretence to shelter you until we are away."

"How can I trust your word in that?"

"How?" He paused, baffled; but only for a moment. "You have the dagger," he answered pregnantly.

She stood considering, her eyes upon the weapon's lividly gleaming blade. "And this marriage?" she asked. "How is it to take place?"

He explained to her then that by the Muslim law all that was required was a declaration made before a kadi, or his superior, and in the presence of witnesses. He was still at his explanation when from below there came a sound of voices, the tramp of feet, and the flash of torches.

"Here is Asad returning in force," he cried, and his voice trembled. "Do you consent?"

"But the kadi?" she inquired, and by the question he knew that she was won to his way of saving her.

"I said the kadi or his superior. Asad himself shall be our priest, his followers our witnesses."

"And if he refuses? He will refuse!" she cried, clasping her hands before her in her excitement.

"I shall not ask him. I shall take him by surprise."

"It... it must anger him. He may avenge himself for what he must deem a trick."

"Ay," he answered, wild-eyed. "I have thought of that, too. But it is a risk we must run. If we do not prevail, then—"

"I have the dagger," she cried fearlessly.

"And for me there will be the rope or the sword," he answered. "Be calm! They come!"

But the steps that pattered up the stairs were Ali's. He flung upon the terrace in alarm.

"My lord, my lord! Asad-ed-Din is here in force. He has an armed following with him!"

"There is naught to fear," said Sakr-el-Bahr, with every show of calm. "All will be well."

Asad swept up the stairs and out upon that terrace to confront his rebellious lieutenant. After him came a dozen black-robed janissaries with scimitars along which the light of the torches rippled in little runnels as of blood.

The Basha came to a halt before Sakr-el-Bahr, his arms majestically folded, his head thrown back, so that his long white beard jutted forward.

"I am returned," he said, "to employ force where gentleness will not avail. Yet I pray that Allah may have lighted thee to a wiser frame of mind."

"He has, indeed, my lord," replied Sakr-el-Bahr.

"The praise to Him!" exclaimed Asad in a voice that rang with joy. "The girl, then!" And he held out a hand.

Sakr-el-Bahr stepped back to her and took her hand in his as if to lead her forward. Then he spoke the fateful words.

"In Allah's Holy Name and in His All-seeing eyes, before thee, Asad-ed-Din, and in the presence of these witnesses, I take this woman to be my wife by the merciful law of the Prophet of Allah the All-wise, the All-pitying."

The words were out and the thing was done before Asad had realized the corsair's intent. A gasp of dismay escaped him; then his visage grew inflamed, his eyes blazed.

But Sakr-el-Bahr, cool and undaunted before that royal anger, took the scarf that lay about Rosamund's shoulders, and raising it, flung it over her head, so that her face was covered by it.

"May Allah rot off the hand of him who in contempt of our Lord Mahomet's holy law may dare to unveil that face, and may Allah bless this union and cast into the pit of Gehenna any who shall attempt to dissolve a bond that is tied in His All-seeing eyes."

It was formidable. Too formidable for Asad-ed-Din. Behind him his janissaries like hounds in leash stood eagerly awaiting his command.

But none came. He stood there breathing heavily, swaying a little, and turning from red to pale in the battle that was being fought within him between rage and vexation on the one hand and his profound piety on the other. And as he yet hesitated perhaps Sakr-el-Bahr assisted his piety to gain the day.

"Now you will understand why I would not yield her, O mighty Asad," he said. "Thyself hast thou oft and rightly reproached me with my celibacy, reminding me that it is not pleasing in the sight of Allah, that it is unworthy a good Muslim. At last it hath pleased the Prophet to send me such a maid as I could take to wife."

Asad bowed his head. "What is written is written," he said in the voice of one who admonished himself. Then he raised his arms aloft. "Allah is All-knowing," he declared. "His will be done!"

"Ameen," said Sakr-el-Bahr very solemnly and with a great surge of thankful prayer to his own long-forgotten God.

The Basha stayed yet a moment, as if he would have spoken. Then abruptly he turned and waved a hand to his janissaries. "Away!" was all he said to them, and stalked out in their wake.

CHAPTER XIV. THE SIGN

From behind her lattice, still breathless from the haste she had made, and with her whelp Marzak at her side, Fenzileh had witnessed that first angry return of the Basha from the house of Sakr-el-Bahr.

She had heard him bawling for Abdul Mohktar, the leader of his janissaries, and she had seen the hasty mustering of a score of these soldiers in the courtyard, where the ruddy light of torches mingled with the white light of the full moon. She had seen them go hurrying away with Asad himself at their head, and she had not known whether to weep or to laugh, whether to fear or to rejoice.

"It is done," Marzak had cried exultantly. "The dog hath withstood him and so destroyed himself. There will be an end to Sakr-el-Bahr this night." And he had added: "The praise to Allah!"

But from Fenzileh came no response to his prayer of thanksgiving. True, Sakr-el-Bahr must be destroyed, and by a sword that she herself had forged. Yet was it not inevitable that the stroke which laid him low must wound her on its repercussion? That was the question to which now she sought an answer. For all her eagerness to speed the corsair to his doom, she had paused sufficiently to weigh the consequences to herself; she had not overlooked the circumstance that an inevitable result of this must be Asad's appropriation of that Frankish slave-girl. But at the time it had seemed to her that even this price was worth paying to remove Sakr-el-Bahr definitely and finally from her son's path—which shows that, after all, Fenzileh the mother was capable of some self-sacrifice. She comforted herself now with the reflection that the influence, whose waning she feared might be occasioned by the introduction of a rival into Asad's hareem, would

no longer be so vitally necessary to herself and Marzak once Sakr-el-Bahr were removed. The rest mattered none so much to her. Yet it mattered something, and the present state of things left her uneasy, her mind a cockpit of emotions. Her grasp could not encompass all her desires at once, it seemed; and whilst she could gloat over the gratification of one, she must bewail the frustration of another. Yet in the main she felt that she should account herself the gainer.

In this state of mind she had waited, scarce heeding the savagely joyous and entirely selfish babblings of her cub, who cared little what might betide his mother as the price of the removal of that hated rival from his path. For him, at least, there was nothing but profit in the business, no cause for anything but satisfaction; and that satisfaction he voiced with a fine contempt for his mother's feelings.

Anon they witnessed Asad's return. They saw the janissaries come swinging into the courtyard and range themselves there whilst the Basha made his appearance, walking slowly, with steps that dragged a little, his head sunk upon his breast, his hands behind him. They waited to see slaves following him, leading or carrying the girl he had gone to fetch. But they waited in vain, intrigued and uneasy.

They heard the harsh voice in which Asad dismissed his followers, and the clang of the closing gate; and they saw him pacing there alone in the moonlight, ever in that attitude of dejection.

What had happened? Had he killed them both? Had the girl resisted him to such an extent that he had lost all patience and in one of those rages begotten of such resistance made an end of her?

Thus did Fenzileh question herself, and since she could not doubt but that Sakr-el-Bahr was slain, she concluded that the rest must be as she conjectured. Yet, the suspense torturing her, she summoned Ayoub and sent him to glean from Abdul Mohktar the tale of what had passed. In his own hatred of Sakr-el-Bahr, Ayoub went willingly

enough and hoping for the worst. He returned disappointed, with a tale that sowed dismay in Fenzileh and Marzak.

Fenzileh, however, made a swift recovery. After all, it was the best that could have happened. It should not be difficult to transmute that obvious dejection of Asad's into resentment, and to fan this into a rage that must end by consuming Sakr-el-Bahr. And so the thing could be accomplished without jeopardy to her own place at Asad's side. For it was inconceivable that he should now take Rosamund to his hareem. Already the fact that she had been paraded with naked face among the Faithful must in itself have been a difficult obstacle to his pride. But it was utterly impossible that he could so subject his self-respect to his desire as to take to himself a woman who had been the wife of his servant.

Fenzileh saw her way very clearly. It was through Asad's devoutness—as she herself had advised, though scarcely expecting such rich results as these—that he had been thwarted by Sakr-el-Bahr. That same devoutness must further be played upon now to do the rest.

Taking up a flimsy silken veil, she went out to him where he now sat on the divan under the awning, alone there in the tepid-scented summer night. She crept to his side with the soft, graceful, questing movements of a cat, and sat there a moment unheeded almost—such was his abstraction—her head resting lightly against his shoulder.

"Lord of my soul," she murmured presently, "thou art sorrowing." Her voice was in itself a soft and soothing caress.

He started, and she caught the gleam of his eyes turned suddenly upon her.

"Who told thee so?" he asked suspiciously.

"My heart," she answered, her voice melodious as a viol. "Can

sorrow burden thine and mine go light?" she wooed him. "Is happiness possible to me when thou art downcast? In there I felt thy melancholy, and thy need of me, and I am come to share thy burden, or to bear it all for thee." Her arms were raised, and her fingers interlocked themselves upon his shoulder.

He looked down at her, and his expression softened. He needed comfort, and never was she more welcome to him.

Gradually and with infinite skill she drew from him the story of what had happened. When she had gathered it, she loosed her indignation.

"The dog!" she cried. "The faithless, ungrateful hound! Yet have I warned thee against him, O light of my poor eyes, and thou hast scorned me for the warnings uttered by my love. Now at last thou knowest him, and he shall trouble thee no longer. Thou'lt cast him off, reduce him again to the dust from which thy bounty raised him."

But Asad did not respond. He sat there in a gloomy abstraction, staring straight before him. At last he sighed wearily. He was just, and he had a conscience, as odd a thing as it was awkward in a corsair Basha.

"In what hath befallen," he answered moodily, "there is naught to justify me in casting aside the stoutest soldier of Islam. My duty to Allah will not suffer it."

"Yet his duty to thee suffered him to thwart thee, O my lord," she reminded him very softly.

"In my desires—ay!" he answered, and for a moment his voice quivered with passion. Then he repressed it, and continued more calmly—"Shall my self-seeking overwhelm my duty to the Faith? Shall the matter of a slave-girl urge me to sacrifice the bravest soldier of Islam, the stoutest champion of the Prophet's law? Shall I bring down

upon my head the vengeance of the One by destroying a man who is a scourge of scorpions unto the infidel—and all this that I may gratify my personal anger against him, that I may avenge the thwarting of a petty desire?"

"Dost thou still say, O my life, that Sakr-el-Bahr is the stoutest champion of the Prophet's law?" she asked him softly, yet on a note of amazement.

"It is not I that say it, but his deeds," he answered sullenly.

"I know of one deed no True-Believer could have wrought. If proof were needed of his infidelity he hath now afforded it in taking to himself a Nasrani wife. Is it not written in the Book to be Read: 'Marry not idolatresses'? Is not that the Prophet's law, and hath he not broken it, offending at once against Allah and against thee, O fountain of my soul?"

Asad frowned. Here was truth indeed, something that he had entirely overlooked. Yet justice compelled him still to defend Sakr-el-Bahr, or else perhaps he but reasoned to prove to himself that the case against the corsair was indeed complete.

"He may have sinned in thoughtlessness," he suggested.

At that she cried out in admiration of him. "What a fount of mercy and forbearance art thou, O father of Marzak! Thou'rt right as in all things. It was no doubt in thoughtlessness that he offended, but would such thoughtlessness be possible in a True-Believer—in one worthy to be dubbed by thee the champion of the Prophet's Holy Law?"

It was a shrewd thrust, that pierced the armour of conscience in which he sought to empanoply himself. He sat very thoughtful, scowling darkly at the inky shadow of the wall which the moon was casting. Suddenly he rose.

"By Allah, thou art right!" he cried. "So that he thwarted me and kept that Frankish woman for himself, he cared not how he sinned against the law."

She glided to her knees and coiled her arms about his waist, looking up at him. "Still art thou ever merciful, ever sparing in adverse judgment. Is that all his fault, O Asad?"

"All?" he questioned, looking down at her. "What more is there?"

"I would there were no more. Yet more there is, to which thy angelic mercy blinds thee. He did worse. Not merely was he reckless of how he sinned against the law, he turned the law to his own base uses and so defiled it."

"How?" he asked quickly, eagerly almost.

"He employed it as a bulwark behind which to shelter himself and her. Knowing that thou who art the Lion and defender of the Faith wouldst bend obediently to what is written in the Book, he married her to place her beyond thy reach."

"The praise to Him who is All-wise and lent me strength to do naught unworthy!" he cried in a great voice, glorifying himself. "I might have slain him to dissolve the impious bond, yet I obeyed what is written."

"Thy forbearance hath given joy to the angels," she answered him, "and yet a man was found so base as to trade upon it and upon thy piety, O Asad!"

He shook off her clasp, and strode away from her a prey to agitation. He paced to and fro in the moonlight there, and she, well-content, reclined upon the cushions of the divan, a thing of infinite grace, her gleaming eyes discreetly veiled from him—waiting until her poison should have done its work.

She saw him halt, and fling up his arms, as if apostrophizing Heaven, as if asking a question of the stars that twinkled in the wide-flung nimbus of the moon.

Then at last he paced slowly back to her. He was still undecided. There was truth in what she had said; yet he knew and weighed her hatred of Sakr-el-Bahr, knew how it must urge her to put the worst construction upon any act of his, knew her jealousy for Marzak, and so he mistrusted her arguments and mistrusted himself. Also there was his own love of Sakr-el-Bahr that would insist upon a place in the balance of his judgment. His mind was in turmoil.

"Enough," he said almost roughly. "I pray that Allah may send me counsel in the night." And upon that he stalked past her, up the steps, and so into the house.

She followed him. All night she lay at his feet to be ready at the first peep of dawn to buttress a purpose that she feared was still weak, and whilst he slept fitfully, she slept not at all, but lay wide-eyed and watchful.

At the first note of the mueddin's voice, he leapt from his couch obedient to its summons, and scarce had the last note of it died upon the winds of dawn than he was afoot, beating his hands together to summon slaves and issuing his orders, from which she gathered that he was for the harbour there and then.

"May Allah have inspired thee, O my lord!" she cried. And asked him: "What is thy resolve?"

"I go to seek a sign," he answered her, and upon that departed, leaving her in a frame of mind that was far from easy.

She summoned Marzak, and bade him accompany his father, breathed swift instructions of what he should do and how do it.

"Thy fate has been placed in thine own hands," she admonished him. "See that thou grip it firmly now."

In the courtyard Marzak found his father in the act of mounting a white mule that had been brought him.

He was attended by his wazeer Tsamanni, Biskaine, and some other of his captains. Marzak begged leave to go with him. It was carelessly granted, and they set out, Marzak walking by his father's stirrup, a little in advance of the others. For a while there was silence between father and son, then the latter spoke.

"It is my prayer, O my father, that thou art resolved to depose the faithless Sakr-el-Bahr from the command of this expedition."

Asad considered his son with a sombre eye. "Even now the galeasse should be setting out if the argosy is to be intercepted," he said. "If Sakr-el-Bahr does not command, who shall, in Heaven's name?"

"Try me, O my father," cried Marzak.

Asad smiled with grim wistfulness. "Art weary of life, O my son, that thou wouldst go to thy death and take the galeasse to destruction?"

"Thou art less than just, O my father," Marzak protested.

"Yet more than kind, O my son," replied Asad, and they went on in silence thereafter, until they came to the mole.

The splendid galeasse was moored alongside, and all about her there was great bustle of preparation for departure. Porters moved up and down the gangway that connected her with the shore, carrying bales of provisions, barrels of water, kegs of gunpowder, and other necessities for the voyage, and even as Asad and his followers reached the head of that gangway, four negroes were staggering down it under the load of a huge palmetto bale that was slung from

staves yoked to their shoulders.

On the poop stood Sakr-el-Bahr with Othmani, Ali, Jasper-Reis, and some other officers. Up and down the gangway paced Larocque and Vigitello, two renegade boatswains, one French and the other Italian, who had sailed with him on every voyage for the past two years. Larocque was superintending the loading of the vessel, bawling his orders for the bestowal of provisions here, of water yonder, and of powder about the mainmast. Vigitello was making a final inspection of the slaves at the oars.

As the palmetto pannier was brought aboard, Larocque shouted to the negroes to set it down by the mainmast. But here Sakr-el-Bahr interfered, bidding them, instead, to bring it up to the stern and place it in the poop-house.

Asad had dismounted, and stood with Marzak at his side at the head of the gangway when the youth finally begged his father himself to take command of this expedition, allowing him to come as his lieutenant and so learn the ways of the sea.

Asad looked at him curiously, but answered nothing. He went aboard, Marzak and the others following him. It was at this moment that Sakr-el-Bahr first became aware of the Basha's presence, and he came instantly forward to do the honours of his galley. If there was a sudden uneasiness in his heart his face was calm and his glance as arrogant and steady as ever.

"May the peace of Allah overshadow thee and thy house, O mighty Asad," was his greeting. "We are on the point of casting off, and I shall sail the more securely for thy blessing."

Asad considered him with eyes of wonder. So much effrontery, so much ease after their last scene together seemed to the Basha a thing incredible, unless, indeed, it were accompanied by a

conscience entirely at peace.

"It has been proposed to me that I shall do more than bless this expedition—that I shall command it," he answered, watching Sakr-el-Bahr closely. He observed the sudden flicker of the corsair's eyes, the only outward sign of his inward dismay.

"Command it?" echoed Sakr-el-Bahr. "'Twas proposed to thee?" And he laughed lightly as if to dismiss that suggestion.

That laugh was a tactical error. It spurred Asad. He advanced slowly along the vessel's waist-deck to the mainmast—for she was rigged with main and foremasts. There he halted again to look into the face of Sakr-el-Bahr who stepped along beside him.

"Why didst thou laugh?" he questioned shortly.

"Why? At the folly of such a proposal," said Sakr-el-Bahr in haste, too much in haste to seek a diplomatic answer.

Darker grew the Basha's frown. "Folly?" quoth he. "Wherein lies the folly?"

Sakr-el-Bahr made haste to cover his mistake. "In the suggestion that such poor quarry as waits us should be worthy thine endeavour, should warrant the Lion of the Faith to unsheathe his mighty claws. Thou," he continued with ringing scorn, "thou the inspirer of a hundred glorious fights in which whole fleets have been engaged, to take the seas upon so trivial an errand—one galeasse to swoop upon a single galley of Spain! It were unworthy thy great name, beneath the dignity of thy valour!" and by a gesture he contemptuously dismissed the subject.

But Asad continued to ponder him with cold eyes, his face inscrutable. "Why, here's a change since yesterday!" he said.

"A change, my lord?"

"But yesterday in the market-place thyself didst urge me to join this expedition and to command it," Asad reminded him, speaking with deliberate emphasis. "Thyself invoked the memory of the days that are gone, when, scimitar in hand, we charged side by side aboard the infidel, and thou didst beseech me to engage again beside thee. And now...." He spread his hands, anger gathered in his eyes. "Whence this change?" he demanded sternly.

Sakr-el-Bahr hesitated, caught in his own toils. He looked away from Asad a moment; he had a glimpse of the handsome flushed face of Marzak at his father's elbow, of Biskaine, Tsamanni, and the others all staring at him in amazement, and even of some grimy sunburned faces from the rowers' bench on his left that were looking on with dull curiosity.

He smiled, seeming outwardly to remain entirely unruffled. "Why... it is that I have come to perceive thy reasons for refusing. For the rest, it is as I say, the quarry is not worthy of the hunter."

Marzak uttered a soft sneering laugh, as if the true reason of the corsair's attitude were quite clear to him. He fancied too, and he was right in this, that Sakr-el-Bahr's odd attitude had accomplished what persuasions addressed to Asad-ed-Din might to the end have failed to accomplish—had afforded him the sign he was come to seek. For it was in that moment that Asad determined to take command himself.

"It almost seems," he said slowly, smiling, "as if thou didst not want me. If so, it is unfortunate; for I have long neglected my duty to my son, and I am resolved at last to repair that error. We accompany thee upon this expedition, Sakr-el-Bahr. Myself I will command it, and Marzak shall be my apprentice in the ways of the sea."

Sakr-el-Bahr said not another word in protest against that

proclaimed resolve. He salaamed, and when he spoke there was almost a note of gladness in his voice.

"The praise to Allah, then, since thou'rt determined. It is not for me to urge further the unworthiness of the quarry since I am the gainer by thy resolve."

CHAPTER XV. THE VOYAGE

His resolve being taken, Asad drew Tsamanni aside and spent some moments in talk with him, giving him certain instructions for the conduct of affairs ashore during his absence. That done, and the wazeer dismissed, the Basha himself gave the order to cast off, an order which there was no reason to delay, since all was now in readiness.

The gangway was drawn ashore, the boatswains whistle sounded, and the steersmen leapt to their niches in the stern, grasping the shafts of the great steering-oars. A second blast rang out, and down the gangway-deck came Vigitello and two of his mates, all three armed with long whips of bullock-hide, shouting to the slaves to make ready. And then, on the note of a third blast of Larocque's whistle, the fifty-four poised oars dipped to the water, two hundred and fifty bodies bent as one, and when they heaved themselves upright again the great galeasse shot forward and so set out upon her adventurous voyage. From her mainmast the red flag with its green crescent was unfurled to the breeze, and from the crowded mole, and the beach where a long line of spectators had gathered, there burst a great cry of valediction.

That breeze blowing stiffly from the desert was Lionel's friend that day. Without it his career at the oar might have been short indeed. He was chained, like the rest, stark naked, save for a loincloth, in the place nearest the gangway on the first starboard bench abaft the narrow waist-deck, and ere the galeasse had made the short distance between the mole and the island at the end of it, the boatswain's whip had coiled itself about his white shoulders to urge him to better exertion than he was putting forth. He had screamed

under the cruel cut, but none had heeded him. Lest the punishment should be repeated, he had thrown all his weight into the next strokes of the oar, until by the time the Peñon was reached the sweat was running down his body and his heart was thudding against his ribs. It was not possible that it could have lasted, and his main agony lay in that he realized it, and saw himself face to face with horrors inconceivable that must await the exhaustion of his strength. He was not naturally robust, and he had led a soft and pampered life that was very far from equipping him for such a test as this.

But as they reached the Peñon and felt the full vigour of that warm breeze, Sakr-el-Bahr, who by Asad's command remained in charge of the navigation, ordered the unfurling of the enormous lateen sails on main and foremasts. They ballooned out, swelling to the wind, and the galeasse surged forward at a speed that was more than doubled. The order to cease rowing followed, and the slaves were left to return thanks to Heaven for their respite, and to rest in their chains until such time as their sinews should be required again.

The vessel's vast prow, which ended in a steel ram and was armed with a culverin on either quarter, was crowded with lounging corsairs, who took their ease there until the time to engage should be upon them. They leaned on the high bulwarks or squatted in groups, talking, laughing, some of them tailoring and repairing garments, others burnishing their weapons or their armour, and one swarthy youth there was who thrummed a gimri and sang a melancholy Shilha love-song to the delight of a score or so of bloodthirsty ruffians squatting about him in a ring of variegated colour.

The gorgeous poop was fitted with a spacious cabin, to which admission was gained by two archways curtained with stout silken tapestries upon whose deep red ground the crescent was wrought in brilliant green. Above the cabin stood the three cressets or stern-lamps, great structures of gilded iron surmounted each by the orb and

crescent. As if to continue the cabin forward and increase its size, a green awning was erected from it to shade almost half the poop-deck. Here cushions were thrown, and upon these squatted now Asad-ed-Din with Marzak, whilst Biskaine and some three or four other officers who had escorted him aboard and whom he had retained beside him for that voyage, were lounging upon the gilded balustrade at the poop's forward end, immediately above the rowers' benches.

Sakr-el-Bahr alone, a solitary figure, resplendent in caftan and turban that were of cloth of silver, leaned upon the bulwarks of the larboard quarter of the poop-deck, and looked moodily back upon the receding city of Algiers which by now was no more than an agglomeration of white cubes piled up the hillside in the morning sunshine.

Asad watched him silently awhile from under his beetling brows, then summoned him. He came at once, and stood respectfully before his prince.

Asad considered him a moment solemnly, whilst a furtive malicious smile played over the beautiful countenance of his son.

"Think not, Sakr-el-Bahr," he said at length, "that I bear thee resentment for what befell last night or that that happening is the sole cause of my present determination. I had a duty—a long-neglected duty—to Marzak, which at last I have undertaken to perform." He seemed to excuse himself almost, and Marzak misliked both words and tone. Why, he wondered, must this fierce old man, who had made his name a terror throughout Christendom, be ever so soft and yielding where that stalwart and arrogant infidel was concerned?

Sakr-el-Bahr bowed solemnly. "My lord," he said, "it is not for me to question thy resolves or the thoughts that may have led to them. It suffices me to know thy wishes; they are my law."

"Are they so?" said Asad tartly. "Thy deeds will scarce bear out thy protestations." He sighed. "Sorely was I wounded yesternight when thy marriage thwarted me and placed that Frankish maid beyond my reach. Yet I respect this marriage of thine, as all Muslims must—for all that in itself it was unlawful. But there!" he ended with a shrug. "We sail together once again to crush the Spaniard. Let no ill-will on either side o'er-cloud the splendour of our task."

"Ameen to that, my lord," said Sakr-el-Bahr devoutly. "I almost feared...."

"No more!" the Basha interrupted him. "Thou wert never a man to fear anything, which is why I have loved thee as a son."

But it suited Marzak not at all that the matter should be thus dismissed, that it should conclude upon a note of weakening from his father, upon what indeed amounted to a speech of reconciliation. Before Sakr-el-Bahr could make answer he had cut in to set him a question laden with wicked intent.

"How will thy bride beguile the season of thine absence, O Sakr-el-Bahr?"

"I have lived too little with women to be able to give thee an answer," said the corsair.

Marzak winced before a reply that seemed to reflect upon himself. But he returned to the attack.

"I compassionate thee that art the slave of duty, driven so soon to abandon the delight of her soft arms. Where hast thou bestowed her, O captain?"

"Where should a Muslim bestow his wife but according to the biddings of the Prophet—in the house?"

Marzak sneered. "Verily, I marvel at thy fortitude in quitting her so soon!"

But Asad caught the sneer, and stared at his son. "What cause is there to marvel in that a true Muslim should sacrifice his inclinations to the service of the Faith?" His tone was a rebuke; but it left Marzak undismayed. The youth sprawled gracefully upon his cushions, one leg tucked under him.

"Place no excess of faith in appearances, O my father!" he said.

"No more!" growled the Basha. "Peace to thy tongue, Marzak, and may Allah the All-knowing smile upon our expedition, lending strength to our arms to smite the infidel to whom the fragrance of the garden is forbidden."

To this again Sakr-el-Bahr replied "Ameen," but an uneasiness abode in his heart summoned thither by the questions Marzak had set him. Were they idle words calculated to do no more than plague him, and to keep fresh in Asad's mind the memory of Rosamund, or were they based upon some actual knowledge?

His fears were to be quickened soon on that same score. He was leaning that afternoon upon the rail, idly observing the doling out of the rations to the slaves, when Marzak came to join him.

For some moments he stood silently beside Sakr-el-Bahr watching Vigitello and his men as they passed from bench to bench serving out biscuits and dried dates to the rowers—but sparingly, for oars move sluggishly when stomachs are too well nourished—and giving each to drink a cup of vinegar and water in which floated a few drops of added oil.

Then he pointed to a large palmetto bale that stood on the waist-deck near the mainmast about which the powder barrels were stacked.

"That pannier," he said, "seems to me oddly in the way yonder. Were it not better to bestow it in the hold, where it will cease to be an encumbrance in case of action?"

Sakr-el-Bahr experienced a slight tightening at the heart. He knew that Marzak had heard him command that bale to be borne into the poop-cabin, and that anon he had ordered it to be fetched thence when Asad had announced his intention of sailing with him. He realized that this in itself might be a suspicious circumstance; or, rather, knowing what the bale contained, he was too ready to fear suspicion. Nevertheless he turned to Marzak with a smile of some disdain.

"I understood, Marzak, that thou art sailing with us as apprentice."

"What then?" quoth Marzak.

"Why merely that it might become thee better to be content to observe and learn. Thou'lt soon be telling me how grapnels should be slung, and how an action should be fought." Then he pointed ahead to what seemed to be no more than a low cloud-bank towards which they were rapidly skimming before that friendly wind. "Yonder," he said, "are the Balearics. We are making good speed."

Although he said it without any object other than that of turning the conversation, yet the fact itself was sufficiently remarkable to be worth a comment. Whether rowed by her two hundred and fifty slaves, or sailed under her enormous spread of canvas, there was no swifter vessel upon the Mediterranean than the galeasse of Sakr-el-Bahr. Onward she leapt now with bellying tateens, her well-greased keel slipping through the wind-whipped water at a rate which perhaps could not have been bettered by any ship that sailed.

"If this wind holds we shall be under the Point of Aguila before sunset, which will be something to boast of hereafter," he promised.

Marzak, however, seemed but indifferently interested; his eyes continued awhile to stray towards that palmetto bale by the mainmast. At length, without another word to Sakr-el-Bahr, he made his way abaft, and flung himself down under the awning, beside his father. Asad sat there in a moody abstraction, already regretting that he should have lent an ear to Fenzileh to the extent of coming upon this voyage, and assured by now that at least there was no cause to mistrust Sakr-el-Bahr. Marsak came to revive that drooping mistrust. But the moment was ill-chosen, and at the first words he uttered on the subject, he was growled into silence by his sire.

"Thou dost but voice thine own malice," Asad rebuked him. "And I am proven a fool in that I have permitted the malice of others to urge me in this matter. No more, I say."

Thereupon Marzak fell silent and sulking, his eyes ever following Sakr-el-Bahr, who had descended the three steps from the poop to the gangway and was pacing slowly down between the rowers' benches.

The corsair was supremely ill at ease, as a man must be who has something to conceal, and who begins to fear that he may have been betrayed. Yet who was there could have betrayed him? But three men aboard that vessel knew his secret—Ali, his lieutenant, Jasper, and the Italian Vigitello. And Sakr-el-Bahr would have staked all his possessions that neither Ali nor Vigitello would have betrayed him, whilst he was fairly confident that in his own interests Jasper also must have kept faith. Yet Marzak's allusion to that palmetto bale had filled him with an uneasiness that sent him now in quest of his Italian boatswain whom he trusted above all others.

"Vigitello," said he, "is it possible that I have been betrayed to the Basha?"

Vigitello looked up sharply at the question, then smiled with

confidence. They were standing alone by the bulwarks on the waist-deck.

"Touching what we carry yonder?" quoth he, his glance shifting to the bale. "Impossible. If Asad had knowledge he would have betrayed it before we left Algiers, or else he would never have sailed without a stouter bodyguard of his own.

"What need of bodyguard for him?" returned Sakr-el-Bahr. "If it should come to grips between us—as well it may if what I suspect be true—there is no doubt as to the side upon which the corsairs would range themselves."

"Is there not?" quoth Vigitello, a smile upon his swarthy face. "Be not so sure. These men have most of them followed thee into a score of fights. To them thou art the Basha, their natural leader."

"Maybe. But their allegiance belongs to Asad-ed-Din, the exalted of Allah. Did it come to a choice between us, their faith would urge them to stand beside him in spite of any past bonds that may have existed between them and me."

"Yet there were some who murmured when thou wert superseded in the command of this expedition," Vigitello informed him. "I doubt not that many would be influenced by their faith, but many would stand by thee against the Grand Sultan himself. And do not forget," he added, instinctively lowering his voice, "that many of us are renegadoes like myself and thee, who would never know a moment's doubt if it came to a choice of sides. But I hope," he ended in another tone, "there is no such danger here."

"And so do I, in all faith," replied Sakr-el-Bahr, with fervour. "Yet I am uneasy, and I must know where I stand if the worst takes place. Go thou amongst the men, Vigitello, and probe their real feelings, gauge their humour and endeavour to ascertain upon what numbers I

may count if I have to declare war upon Asad or if he declares it upon me. Be cautious."

Vigittello closed one of his black eyes portentously. "Depend upon it," he said, "I'll bring you word anon."

On that they parted, Vigittello to make his way to the prow and there engage in his investigations, Sakr-el-Bahr slowly to retrace his steps to the poop. But at the first bench abaft the gangway he paused, and looked down at the dejected, white-fleshed slave who sat shackled there. He smiled cruelly, his own anxieties forgotten in the savour of vengeance.

"So you have tasted the whip already," he said in English. "But that is nothing to what is yet to come. You are in luck that there is a wind to-day. It will not always be so. Soon shall you learn what it was that I endured by your contriving."

Lionel looked up at him with haggard, blood-injected eyes. He wanted to curse his brother, yet was he too overwhelmed by the sense of the fitness of this punishment.

"For myself I care nothing," he replied.

"But you will, sweet brother," was the answer. "You will care for yourself most damnably and pity yourself most poignantly. I speak from experience. 'Tis odds you will not live, and that is my chief regret. I would you had my thews to keep you alive in this floating hell."

"I tell you I care nothing for myself," Lionel insisted. "What have you done with Rosamund?"

"Will it surprise you to learn that I have played the gentleman and married her?" Oliver mocked him.

"Married her?" his brother gasped, blenching at the very thought. "You hound!"

"Why abuse me? Could I have done more?" And with a laugh he sauntered on, leaving Lionel to writhe there with the torment of his half-knowledge.

An hour later, when the cloudy outline of the Balearic Isles had acquired density and colour, Sakr-el-Bahr and Vigitello met again on the waist-deck, and they exchanged some few words in passing.

"It is difficult to say exactly," the boatswain murmured, "but from what I gather I think the odds would be very evenly balanced, and it were rash in thee to precipitate a quarrel."

"I am not like to do so," replied Sakr-el-Bahr. "I should not be like to do so in any case. I but desired to know how I stand in case a quarrel should be forced upon me." And he passed on.

Yet his uneasiness was no whit allayed; his difficulties were very far from solved. He had undertaken to carry Rosamund to France or Italy; he had pledged her his word to land her upon one or the other shore, and should he fail, she might even come to conclude that such had never been his real intention. Yet how was he to succeed, now, since Asad was aboard the galeasse? Must he be constrained to carry her back to Algiers as secretly as he had brought her thence, and to keep her there until another opportunity of setting her ashore upon a Christian country should present itself? That was clearly impracticable and fraught with too much risk of detection. Indeed, the risk of detection was very imminent now. At any moment her presence in that panner might be betrayed. He could think of no way in which to redeem his pledged word. He could but wait and hope, trusting to his luck and to some opportunity which it was impossible to foresee.

And so for a long hour and more he paced there moodily to and fro, his hands clasped behind him, his turbaned head bowed in thought, his heart very heavy within him. He was taken in the toils of the evil

web which he had spun; and it seemed very clear to him now that nothing short of his life itself would be demanded as the price of it. That, however, was the least part of his concern. All things had miscarried with him and his life was wrecked. If at the price of it he could ensure safety to Rosamund, that price he would gladly pay. But his dismay and uneasiness all sprang from his inability to discover a way of achieving that most desired of objects even at such a sacrifice. And so he paced on alone and very lonely, waiting and praying for a miracle.

CHAPTER XVI. THE PANNIER

He was still pacing there when an hour or so before sunset—some fifteen hours after setting out—they stood before the entrance of a long bottle-necked cove under the shadow of the cliffs of Aquila Point on the southern coast of the Island of Formentera. He was rendered aware of this and roused from his abstraction by the voice of Asad calling to him from the poop and commanding him to make the cove.

Already the wind was failing them, and it became necessary to take to the oars, as must in any case have happened once they were through the coves narrow neck in the becalmed lagoon beyond. So Sakr-el-Bahr, in his turn, lifted up his voice, and in answer to his shout came Vigitello and Larocque.

A blast of Vigitello's whistle brought his own men to heel, and they passed rapidly along the benches ordering the rowers to make ready, whilst Jasper and a half-dozen Muslim sailors set about furling the sails that already were beginning to flap in the shifting and intermittent gusts of the expiring wind. Sakr-el-Bahr gave the word to row, and Vigitello blew a second and longer blast. The oars dipped, the slaves strained and the galeasse ploughed forward, time being kept by a boatswain's mate who squatted on the waist-deck and beat a tomtom rhythmically. Sakr-el-Bahr, standing on the poop-deck, shouted his orders to the steersmen in their niches on either side of the stern, and skilfully the vessel was manoeuvred through the narrow passage into the calm lagoon whose depths were crystal clear. Here before coming to rest, Sakr-el-Bahr followed the invariable corsair practice of going about, so as to be ready to leave his moorings and make for the open again at a moment's notice.

She came at last alongside the rocky buttresses of a gentle slope that was utterly deserted by all save a few wild goats browsing near the summit. There were clumps of broom, thick with golden flower, about the base of the hill. Higher, a few gnarled and aged olive trees reared their grey heads from which the rays of the westering sun struck a glint as of silver.

Larocque and a couple of sailors went over the bulwarks on the larboard quarter, dropped lightly to the horizontal shafts of the oars, which were rigidly poised, and walking out upon them gained the rocks and proceeded to make fast the vessel by ropes fore and aft.

Sakr-el-Bahr's next task was to set a watch, and he appointed Larocque, sending him to take his station on the summit of the head whence a wide range of view was to be commanded.

Pacing the poop with Marzak the Basha grew reminiscent of former days when roving the seas as a simple corsair he had used this cove both for purposes of ambush and concealment. There were, he said, few harbours in all the Mediterranean so admirably suited to the corsairs' purpose as this; it was a haven of refuge in case of peril, and an unrivalled lurking-place in which to lie in wait for the prey. He remembered once having lain there with the formidable Dragut-Reis, a fleet of six galleys, their presence entirely unsuspected by the Genoese admiral, Doria, who had passed majestically along with three caravels and seven galleys.

Marzak, pacing beside his father, listened but half-heartedly to these reminiscences. His mind was all upon Sakr-el-Bahr, and his suspicions of that palmetto bale were quickened by the manner in which for the last two hours he had seen the corsair hovering thoughtfully in its neighbourhood.

He broke in suddenly upon his father's memories with an expression of what was in his mind.

"The thanks to Allah," he said, "that it is thou who command this expedition, else might this coves advantages have been neglected."

"Not so," said Asad. "Sakr-el-Bahr knows them as well as I do. He has used this vantage point afore-time. It was himself who suggested that this would be the very place in which to await this Spanish craft."

"Yet had he sailed alone I doubt if the Spanish argosy had concerned him greatly. There are other matters on his mind, O my father. Observe him yonder, all lost in thought. How many hours of this voyage has he spent thus. He is as a man trapped and desperate. There is some fear rankling in him. Observe him, I say."

"Allah pardon thee," said his father, shaking his old head and sighing over so much impetuosity of judgment. "Must thy imagination be for ever feeding on thy malice? Yet I blame not thee, but thy Sicilian mother, who has fostered this hostility in thee. Did she not hoodwink me into making this unnecessary voyage?"

"I see thou hast forgot last night and the Frankish slave-girl," said his son.

"Nay, then thou seest wrong. I have not forgot it. But neither have I forgot that since Allah hath exalted me to be Basha of Algiers, He looks to me to deal in justice. Come, Marzak, set an end to all this. Perhaps to-morrow thou shalt see him in battle, and after such a sight as that never again wilt thou dare say evil of him. Come, make thy peace with him, and let me see better relations betwixt you hereafter."

And raising his voice he called Sakr-el-Bahr, who immediately turned and came up the gangway. Marzak stood by in a sulky mood, with no notion of doing his father's will by holding out an olive branch to the man who was like to cheat him of his birthright ere all was done. Yet was it he who greeted Sakr-el-Bahr when the corsair set foot upon the poop.

"Does the thought of the coming fight perturb thee, dog of war?" he asked.

"Am I perturbed, pup of peace?" was the crisp answer.

"It seems so. Thine aloofness, thine abstractions...."

"Are signs of perturbation, dost suppose?"

"Of what else?"

Sakr-el-Bahr laughed. "Thou'lt tell me next that I am afraid. Yet I should counsel thee to wait until thou hast smelt blood and powder, and learnt precisely what fear is."

The slight altercation drew the attention of Asad's officers who were idling there. Biskaine and some three others lounged forward to stand behind the Basha, looking, on in some amusement, which was shared by him.

"Indeed, indeed," said Asad, laying a hand upon Marzak's shoulder, "his counsel is sound enough. Wait, boy, until thou hast gone beside him aboard the infidel, ere thou judge him easily perturbed."

Petulantly Marzak shook off that gnarled old hand. "Dost thou, O my father, join with him in taunting me upon my lack of knowledge. My youth is a sufficient answer. But at least," he added, prompted by a wicked notion suddenly conceived, "at least you cannot taunt me with lack of address with weapons."

"Give him room," said Sakr-el-Bahr, with ironical good-humour, "and he will show us prodigies."

Marzak looked at him with narrowing, gleaming eyes. "Give me a cross-bow," he retorted, "and I'll show thee how to shoot," was his amazing boast.

"Thou'lt show him?" roared Asad. "Thou'lt show him!" And his laugh rang loud and hearty. "Go smear the sun's face with clay, boy."

"Reserve thy judgment, O my father," begged Marzak, with frosty dignity.

"Boy, thou'rt mad! Why, Sakr-el-Bahr's quarrel will check a swallow in its flight."

"That is his boast, belike," replied Marzak.

"And what may thine be?" quoth Sakr-el-Bahr. "To hit the Island of Formentera at this distance?"

"Dost dare to sneer at me?" cried Marzak, ruffling.

"What daring would that ask?" wondered Sakr-el-Bahr.

"By Allah, thou shalt learn."

"In all humility I await the lesson."

"And thou shalt have it," was the answer viciously delivered. Marzak strode to the rail. "Ho there! Vigitello! A cross-bow for me, and another for Sakr-el-Bahr."

Vigitello sprang to obey him, whilst Asad shook his head and laughed again.

"An it were not against the Prophet's law to make a wager...." he was beginning, when Marzak interrupted him.

"Already should I have proposed one."

"So that," said Sakr-el-Bahr, "thy purse would come to match thine head for emptiness."

Marzak looked at him and sneered. Then he snatched from

Vigittello's hands one of the cross-bows that he bore and set a shaft to it. And then at last Sakr-el-Bahr was to learn the malice that was at the root of all this odd pretence.

"Look now," said the youth, "there is on that palmetto bale a speck of pitch scarce larger than the pupil of my eye. Thou'lt need to strain thy sight to see it. Observe how my shaft will find it. Canst thou better such a shot?"

His eyes, upon Sakr-el-Bahr's face, watching it closely, observed the pallor by which it was suddenly overspread. But the corsair's recovery was almost as swift. He laughed, seeming so entirely careless that Marzak began to doubt whether he had paled indeed or whether his own imagination had led him to suppose it.

"Ay, thou'lt choose invisible marks, and wherever the arrow enters thou'lt say 'twas there! An old trick, O Marzak. Go cozen women with it."

"Then," said Marzak, "we will take instead the slender cord that binds the bale." And he levelled his bow. But Sakr-el-Bahr's hand closed upon his arm in an easy yet paralyzing grip.

"Wait," he said. "Thou'lt choose another mark for several reasons. For one, I'll not have thy shaft blundering through my oarsmen and haply killing one of them. Most of them are slaves specially chosen for their brawn, and I cannot spare any. Another reason is that the mark is a foolish one. The distance is not more than ten paces. A childish test, which, maybe, is the reason why thou hast chosen it."

Marzak lowered his bow and Sakr-el-Bahr released his arm. They looked at each other, the corsair supremely master of himself and smiling easily, no faintest trace of the terror that was in his soul showing upon his swarthy bearded countenance or in his hard pale eyes.

He pointed up the hillside to the nearest olive tree, a hundred paces distant. "Yonder," he said, "is a man's mark. Put me a shaft through the long branch of that first olive."

Asad and his officers voiced approval.

"A man's mark, indeed," said the Basha, "so that he be a marksman."

But Marzak shrugged his shoulders with make-believe contempt. "I knew he would refuse the mark I set," said he. "As for the olive-branch, it is so large a butt that a child could not miss it at this distance."

"If a child could not, then thou shouldst not," said Sakr-el-Bahr, who had so placed himself that his body was now between Marzak and the palmetto bale. "Let us see thee hit it, O Marzak." And as he spoke he raised his cross-bow, and scarcely seeming to take aim, he loosed his shaft. It flashed away to be checked, quivering, in the branch he had indicated.

A chorus of applause and admiration greeted the shot, and drew the attention of all the crew to what was toward.

Marzak tightened his lips, realizing how completely he had been outwitted. Willy-nilly he must now shoot at that mark. The choice had been taken out of his hands by Sakr-el-Bahr. He never doubted that he must cover himself with ridicule in the performance, and that there he would be constrained to abandon this pretended match.

"By the Koran," said Biskaine, "thou'lt need all thy skill to equal such a shot, Marzak."

"'Twas not the mark I chose," replied Marzak sullenly.

"Thou wert the challenger, O Marzak," his father reminded him. "Therefore the choice of mark was his. He chose a man's mark, and

by the beard of Mohammed, he showed us a man's shot."

Marzak would have flung the bow from him in that moment, abandoning the method he had chosen to investigate the contents of that suspicious palmetto bale; but he realized that such a course must now cover him with scorn. Slowly he levelled his bow at that distant mark.

"Have a care of the sentinel on the hill-top," Sakr-el-Bahr admonished him, provoking a titter.

Angrily the youth drew the bow. The cord hummed, and the shaft sped to bury itself in the hill's flank a dozen yards from the mark.

Since he was the son of the Basha none dared to laugh outright save his father and Sakr-el-Bahr. But there was no suppressing a titter to express the mockery to which the proven braggart must ever be exposed.

Asad looked at him, smiling almost sadly. "See now," he said, "what comes of boasting thyself against Sakr-el-Bahr."

"My will was crossed in the matter of a mark," was the bitter answer. "You angered me and made my aim untrue."

Sakr-el-Bahr strode away to the starboard bulwarks, deeming the matter at an end. Marzak observed him.

"Yet at that small mark," he said, "I challenge him again." As he spoke he fitted a second shaft to his bow. "Behold!" he cried, and took aim.

But swift as thought, Sakr-el-Bahr—heedless now of all consequences—levelled at Marzak the bow which he still held.

"Hold!" he roared. "Loose thy shaft at that bale, and I loose this at thy throat. I never miss!" he added grimly.

There was a startled movement in the ranks of those who stood behind Marzak. In speechless amazement they stared at Sakr-el-Bahr, as he stood there, white-faced, his eyes aflash, his bow drawn taut and ready to launch that death-laden quarrel as he threatened.

Slowly then, smiling with unutterable malice, Marzak lowered his bow. He was satisfied. His true aim was reached. He had drawn his enemy into self-betrayal.

Asad's was the voice that shattered that hush of consternation.

"Kellamullah!" he bellowed. "What is this? Art thou mad, too, O Sakr-el-Bahr?"

"Ay, mad indeed," said Marzak; "mad with fear." And he stepped quickly aside so that the body of Biskaine should shield him from any sudden consequences of his next words. "Ask him what he keeps in that pannier, O my father."

"Ay, what, in Allah's name?" demanded the Basha, advancing towards his captain.

Sakr-el-Bahr lowered his bow, master of himself again. His composure was beyond all belief.

"I carry in it goods of price, which I'll not see riddled to please a pert boy," he said.

"Goods of price?" echoed Asad, with a snort. "They'll need to be of price indeed that are valued above the life of my son. Let us see these goods of price." And to the men upon the waist-deck he shouted, "Open me that pannier."

Sakr-el-Bahr sprang forward, and laid a hand upon the Basha's arm.

"Stay, my lord!" he entreated almost fiercely. "Consider that this

pannier is my own. That its contents are my property; that none has a right to...."

"Wouldst babble of rights to me, who am thy lord?" blazed the Basha, now in a towering passion. "Open me that pannier, I say."

They were quick to his bidding. The ropes were slashed away, and the front of the pannier fell open on its palmetto hinges. There was a half-repressed chorus of amazement from the men. Sakr-el-Bahr stood frozen in horror of what must follow.

"What is it? What have you found?" demanded Asad.

In silence the men swung the bale about, and disclosed to the eyes of those upon the poop-deck the face and form of Rosamund Godolphin. Then Sakr-el-Bahr, rousing himself from his trance of horror, reckless of all but her, flung down the gangway to assist her from the pannier, and thrusting aside those who stood about her, took his stand at her side.

CHAPTER XVII. THE DUPE

For a little while Asad stood at gaze, speechless in his incredulity. Then to revive the anger that for a moment had been whelmed in astonishment came the reflection that he had been duped by Sakr-el-Bahr, duped by the man he trusted most. He had snarled at Fenzileh and scorned Marzak when they had jointly warned him against his lieutenant; if at times he had been in danger of heeding them, yet sooner or later he had concluded that they but spoke to vent their malice. And yet it was proven now that they had been right in their estimate of this traitor, whilst he himself had been a poor, blind dupe, needing Marzak's wit to tear the bandage from his eyes.

Slowly he went down the gangway, followed by Marzak, Biskaine, and the others. At the point where it joined the waist-deck he paused, and his dark old eyes smouldered under his beetling brows.

"So," he snarled. "These are thy goods of price. Thou lying dog, what was thine aim in this?"

Defiantly Sakr-el-Bahr answered him: "She is my wife. It is my right to take her with me where I go." He turned to her, and bade her veil her face, and she immediately obeyed him with fingers that shook a little in her agitation.

"None questions thy right to that," said Asad. "But being resolved to take her with thee, why not take her openly? Why was she not housed in the poop-house, as becomes the wife of Sakr-el-Bahr? Why smuggle her aboard in a pannier, and keep her there in secret?"

"And why," added Marzak, "didst thou lie to me when I questioned thee upon her whereabouts?—telling me she was left behind in thy

house in Algiers?"

"All this I did," replied Sakr-el-Bahr, with a lofty—almost a disdainful—dignity, "because I feared lest I should be prevented from bearing her away with me," and his bold glance, beating full upon Asad, drew a wave of colour into the gaunt old cheeks.

"What could have caused that fear?" he asked. "Shall I tell thee? Because no man sailing upon such a voyage as this would have desired the company of his new-wedded wife. Because no man would take a wife with him upon a raid in which there is peril of life and peril of capture."

"Allah has watched over me his servant in the past," said Sakr-el-Bahr, "and I put my trust in Him."

It was a specious answer. Such words—laying stress upon the victories Allah sent him—had afore-time served to disarm his enemies. But they served not now. Instead, they did but fan the flames of Asad's wrath.

"Blaspheme not," he croaked, and his tall form quivered with rage, his sallow old face grew vulturine. "She was brought thus aboard in secret out of fear that were her presence known thy true purpose too must stand revealed."

"And whatever that true purpose may have been," put in Marzak, "it was not the task entrusted thee of raiding the Spanish treasure-galley."

"'Tis what I mean, my son," Asad agreed. Then with a commanding gesture: "Wilt thou tell me without further lies what thy purpose was?" he asked.

"How?" said Sakr-el-Bahr, and he smiled never so faintly. "Hast thou not said that this purpose was revealed by what I did? Rather,

then, I think is it for me to ask thee for some such information. I do assure thee, my lord, that it was no part of my intention to neglect the task entrusted me. But just because I feared lest knowledge of her presence might lead my enemies to suppose what thou art now supposing, and perhaps persuade thee to forget all that I have done for the glory of Islam, I determined to bring her secretly aboard.

"My real aim, since you must know it, was to land her somewhere on the coast of France, whence she might return to her own land, and her own people. That done, I should have set about intercepting the Spanish galley, and never fear but that by Allah's favour I should have succeeded."

"By the horns of Shaitan," swore Marzak, thrusting himself forward, "he is the very father and mother of lies. Wilt thou explain this desire to be rid of a wife thou hadst but wed?" he demanded.

"Ay," growled Asad. "Canst answer that?"

"Thou shalt hear the truth," said Sakr-el-Bahr.

"The praise to Allah!" mocked Marzak.

"But I warn you," the corsair continued, "that to you it will seem less easy to believe by much than any falsehood I could invent. Years ago in England where I was born I loved this woman and should have taken her to wife. But there were men and circumstances that defamed me to her so that she would not wed me, and I went forth with hatred of her in my heart. Last night the love of her which I believed to be dead and turned to loathing, proved to be still a living force. Loving her, I came to see that I had used her unworthily, and I was urged by a desire above all others to undo the evil I had done."

On that he paused, and after an instant's silence Asad laughed angrily and contemptuously. "Since when has man expressed his love for a woman by putting her from him?" he asked in a voice of scorn

that showed the precise value he set upon such a statement.

"I warned thee it would seem incredible," said Sakr-el-Bahr.

"Is it not plain, O my father, that this marriage of his was no more than a pretence?" cried Marzak.

"As plain as the light of day," replied Asad. "Thy marriage with that woman made an impious mock of the True Faith. It was no marriage. It was a blasphemous pretence, thine only aim to thwart me, abusing my regard for the Prophet's Holy Law, and to set her beyond my reach." He turned to Vigitello, who stood a little behind Sakr-el-Bahr. "Bid thy men put me this traitor into irons," he said.

"Heaven hath guided thee to a wise decision, O my father!" cried Marzak, his voice jubilant. But his was the only jubilant note that was sounded, his the only voice that was raised.

"The decision is more like to guide you both to Heaven," replied Sakr-el-Bahr, undaunted. On the instant he had resolved upon his course. "Stay!" he said, raising his hand to Vigitello, who, indeed had shown no sign of stirring. He stepped close up to Asad, and what he said did not go beyond those who stood immediately about the Basha and Rosamund, who strained her ears that she might lose no word of it.

"Do not think, Asad," he said, "that I will submit me like a camel to its burden. Consider thy position well. If I but raise my voice to call my sea-hawks to me, only Allah can tell how many will be left to obey thee. Darest thou put this matter to the test?" he asked, his countenance grave and solemn, but entirely fearless, as of a man in whom there is no doubt of the issue as it concerns himself.

Asad's eyes glittered dully, his colour faded to a deathly ashen hue. "Thou infamous traitor...." he began in a thick voice, his body quivering with anger.

"Ah no," Sakr-el-Bahr interrupted him. "Were I a traitor it is what I should have done already, knowing as I do that in any division of our forces, numbers will be heavily on my side. Let then my silence prove my unswerving loyalty, Asad. Let it weigh with thee in considering my conduct, nor permit thyself to be swayed by Marzak there, who recks nothing so that he vents his petty hatred of me."

"Do not heed him, O my father!" cried Marzak. "It cannot be that...."

"Peace!" growled Asad, somewhat stricken on a sudden.

And there was peace whilst the Basha stood moodily combing his white beard, his glittering eyes sweeping from Oliver to Rosamund and back again. He was weighing what Sakr-el-Bahr had said. He more than feared that it might be no more than true, and he realized that if he were to provoke a mutiny here he would be putting all to the test, setting all upon a throw in which the dice might well be cogged against him.

If Sakr-el-Bahr prevailed, he would prevail not merely aboard this galley, but throughout Algiers, and Asad would be cast down never to rise again. On the other hand, if he bared his scimitar and called upon the faithful to support him, it might chance that recognizing in him the exalted of Allah to whom their loyalty was due, they would rally to him. He even thought it might be probable. Yet the stake he put upon the board was too vast. The game appalled him, whom nothing yet had appalled, and it scarce needed a muttered caution from Biskaine to determine him to hold his hand.

He looked at Sakr-el-Bahr again, his glance now sullen. "I will consider thy words," he announced in a voice that was unsteady. "I will not be unjust, nor steer my course by appearances alone. Allah forbid!"

CHAPTER XVIII. SHEIK MAT

Under the inquisitive gaping stare of all about them stood Rosamund and Sakr-el-Bahr regarding each other in silence for a little spell after the Basha's departure. The very galley-slaves, stirred from their habitual lethargy by happenings so curious and unusual, craned their sinewy necks to peer at them with a flicker of interest in their dull, weary eyes.

Sakr-el-Bahr's feelings as he considered Rosamunds's white face in the fading light were most oddly conflicting. Dismay at what had befallen and some anxious dread of what must follow were leavened by a certain measure of relief.

He realized that in no case could her concealment have continued long. Eleven mortal hours had she spent in the cramped and almost suffocating space of that pannier, in which he had intended to do no more than carry her aboard. The uneasiness which had been occasioned him by the impossibility to deliver her from that close confinement when Asad had announced his resolve to accompany them upon that voyage, had steadily been increasing as hour succeeded hour, and still he found no way to release her from a situation in which sooner or later, when the limits of her endurance were reached, her presence must be betrayed. This release which he could not have contrived had been contrived for him by the suspicions and malice of Marzak. That was the one grain of consolation in the present peril—to himself who mattered nothing and to her, who mattered all. Adversity had taught him to prize benefits however slight and to confront perils however overwhelming. So he hugged the present slender benefit, and resolutely braced himself to deal with the situation as he found it, taking the fullest advantage of the hesitancy

which his words had sown in the heart of the Basha. He hugged, too, the thought that as things had fallen out, from being oppressor and oppressed, Rosamund and he were become fellows in misfortune, sharing now a common peril. He found it a sweet thought to dwell on. Therefore was it that he faintly smiled as he looked into Rosamund's white, strained face.

That smile evoked from her the question that had been burdening her mind.

"What now? What now?" she asked huskily, and held out appealing hands to him.

"Now," said he coolly, "let us be thankful that you are delivered from quarters destructive both to comfort and to dignity. Let me lead you to those I had prepared for you, which you would have occupied long since but for the ill-timed coming of Asad. Come." And he waved an inviting hand towards the gangway leading to the poop.

She shrank back at that, for there on the poop sat Asad under his awning with Marzak, Biskaine, and his other officers in attendance.

"Come," he repeated, "there is naught to fear so that you keep a bold countenance. For the moment it is Sheik Mat—check to the king."

"Naught to fear?" she echoed, staring.

"For the moment, naught," he answered firmly. "Against what the future may hold, we must determine. Be sure that fear will not assist our judgment."

She stiffened as if he had charged her unjustly.

"I do not fear," she assured him, and if her face continued white, her eyes grew steady, her voice was resolute.

"Then come," he repeated, and she obeyed him instantly now as if to prove the absence of all fear.

Side by side they passed up the gangway and mounted the steps of the companion to the poop, their approach watched by the group that was in possession of it with glances at once of astonishment and resentment.

Asad's dark, smouldering eyes were all for the girl. They followed her every movement as she approached and never for a moment left her to turn upon her companion.

Outwardly she bore herself with a proud dignity and an unfaltering composure under that greedy scrutiny; but inwardly she shrank and writhed in a shame and humiliation that she could hardly define. In some measure Oliver shared her feelings, but blent with anger; and urged by them he so placed himself at last that he stood between her and the Basha's regard to screen her from it as he would have screened her from a lethal weapon. Upon the poop he paused, and salaamed to Asad.

"Permit, exalted lord," said he, "that my wife may occupy the quarters I had prepared for her before I knew that thou wouldst honour this enterprise with thy presence."

Curtly, contemptuously, Asad waved a consenting hand without vouchsafing to reply in words. Sakr-el-Bahr bowed again, stepped forward, and put aside the heavy red curtain upon which the crescent was wrought in green. From within the cabin the golden light of a lamp came out to merge into the blue-gray twilight, and to set a shimmering radiance about the white-robed figure of Rosamund.

Thus for a moment Asad's fierce, devouring eyes observed her, then she passed within. Sakr-el-Bahr followed, and the screening curtain swung back into its place.

The small interior was furnished by a divan spread with silken carpets, a low Moorish table in coloured wood mosaics bearing the newly lighted lamp, and a tiny brazier in which aromatic gums were burning and spreading a sweetly pungent perfume for the fumigation of all True-Believers.

Out of the shadows in the farther corners rose silently Sakr-el-Bahr's two Nubian slaves, Abiad and Zal-Zer, to salaam low before him. But for their turbans and loincloths in spotless white their dusky bodies must have remained invisible, shadowy among the shadows.

The captain issued an order briefly, and from a hanging cupboard the slaves took meat and drink and set it upon the low table—a bowl of chicken cooked in rice and olives and prunes, a dish of bread, a melon, and a clay amphora of water. Then at another word from him, each took a naked scimitar and they passed out to place themselves on guard beyond the curtain. This was not an act in which there was menace or defiance, nor could Asad so interpret it. The acknowledged presence of Sakr-el-Bahir's wife in that poop-house, rendered the place the equivalent of his hareem, and a man defends his hareem as he defends his honour; it is a spot sacred to himself which none may violate, and it is fitting that he take proper precaution against any impious attempt to do so.

Rosamund sank down upon the divan, and sat there with bowed head, her hands folded in her lap. Sakr-el-Bahr stood by in silence for a long moment contemplating her.

"Eat," he bade her at last. "You will need strength and courage, and neither is possible to a fasting body."

She shook her head. Despite her long fast, food was repellent. Anxiety was thrusting her heart up into her throat to choke her.

"I cannot eat," she answered him. "To what end? Strength and

courage cannot avail me now."

"Never believe that," he said. "I have undertaken to deliver you alive from the perils into which I have brought you, and I shall keep my word."

So resolute was his tone that she looked up at him, and found his bearing equally resolute and confident.

"Surely," she cried, "all chance of escape is lost to me."

"Never count it lost whilst I am living," he replied. She considered him a moment, and there was the faintest smile on her lips.

"Do you think that you will live long now?" she asked him.

"Just as long as God pleases," he replied quite coolly. "What is written is written. So that I live long enough to deliver you, then... why, then, faith I shall have lived long enough."

Her head sank. She clasped and unclasped the hands in her lap. She shivered slightly.

"I think we are both doomed," she said in a dull voice. "For if you die, I have your dagger still, remember. I shall not survive you."

He took a sudden step forward, his eyes gleaming, a faint flush glowing through the tan of his cheeks. Then he checked. Fool! How could he so have misread her meaning even for a moment? Were not its exact limits abundantly plain, even without the words which she added a moment later?

"God will forgive me if I am driven to it—if I choose the easier way of honour; for honour, sir," she added, clearly for his benefit, "is ever the easier way, believe me."

"I know," he replied contritely. "I would to God I had followed it."

He paused there, as if hoping that his expression of penitence might evoke some answer from her, might spur her to vouchsafe him some word of forgiveness. Seeing that she continued, mute and absorbed, he sighed heavily, and turned to other matters.

"Here you will find all that you can require," he said. "Should you lack aught you have but to beat your hands together, one or the other of my slaves will come to you. If you address them in French they will understand you. I would I could have brought a woman to minister to you, but that was impossible, as you'll perceive." He stepped to the entrance.

"You are leaving me?" she questioned him in sudden alarm.

"Naturally. But be sure that I shall be very near at hand. And meanwhile be no less sure that you have no cause for immediate fear. At least, matters are no worse than when you were in the pannier. Indeed, much better, for some measure of ease and comfort is now possible to you. So be of good heart; eat and rest. God guard you! I shall return soon after sunrise."

Outside on the poop-deck he found Asad alone now with Marzak under the awning. Night had fallen, the great crescent lanterns on the stern rail were alight and cast a lurid glow along the vessel's length, picking out the shadowy forms and gleaming faintly on the naked backs of the slaves in their serried ranks along the benches, many of them bowed already in attitudes of uneasy slumber. Another lantern swung from the mainmast, and yet another from the poop-rail for the Basha's convenience. Overhead the clustering stars glittered in a cloudless sky of deepest purple. The wind had fallen entirely, and the world was wrapped in stillness broken only by the faint rustling break of waves upon the beach at the cove's end.

Sakr-el-Bahr crossed to Asad's side, and begged for a word alone with him.

"I am alone," said the Basha curtly.

"Marzak is nothing, then," said Sakr-el-Bahr. "I have long suspected it."

Marzak showed his teeth and growled inarticulately, whilst the Basha, taken aback by the ease reflected in the captain's careless mocking words, could but quote a line of the Koran with which Fenzileh of late had often nauseated him.

"A man's son is the partner of his soul. I have no secrets from Marzak. Speak, then, before him, or else be silent and depart."

"He may be the partner of thy soul, Asad," replied the corsair with his bold mockery, "but I give thanks to Allah he is not the partner of mine. And what I have to say in some sense concerns my soul."

"I thank thee," cut in Marzak, "for the justice of thy words. To be the partner of thy soul were to be an infidel unbelieving dog."

"Thy tongue, O Marzak, is like thine archery," said Sakr-el-Bahr.

"Ay—in that it pierces treachery," was the swift retort.

"Nay—in that it aims at what it cannot hit. Now, Allah, pardon me! Shall I grow angry at such words as thine? Hath not the One proven full oft that he who calls me infidel dog is a liar predestined to the Pit? Are such victories as mine over the fleets of the unbelievers vouchsafed by Allah to an infidel? Foolish blasphemer, teach thy tongue better ways lest the All-wise strike thee dumb."

"Peace!" growled Asad. "Thine arrogance is out of season."

"Haply so," said Sakr-el-Bahr, with a laugh. "And my good sense, too, it seems. Since thou wilt retain beside thee this partner of thy soul, I must speak before him. Have I thy leave to sit?"

Lest such leave should be denied him he dropped forthwith to the vacant place beside Asad and tucked his legs under him.

"Lord," he said, "there is a rift dividing us who should be united for the glory of Islam."

"It is of thy making, Sakr-el-Bahr," was the sullen answer, "and it is for thee to mend it."

"To that end do I desire thine ear. The cause of this rift is yonder." And he jerked his thumb backward over his shoulder towards the poop-house. "If we remove that cause, of a surety the rift itself will vanish, and all will be well again between us."

He knew that never could all be well again between him and Asad. He knew that by virtue of his act of defiance he was irrevocably doomed, that Asad having feared him once, having dreaded his power to stand successfully against his face and overbear his will, would see to it that he never dreaded it again. He knew that if he returned to Algiers there would be a speedy end to him. His only chance of safety lay, indeed, in stirring up mutiny upon the spot and striking swiftly, venturing all upon that desperate throw. And he knew that this was precisely what Asad had cause to fear. Out of this assurance had he conceived his present plan, deeming that if he offered to heal the breach, Asad might pretend to consent so as to weather his present danger, making doubly sure of his vengeance by waiting until they should be home again.

Asad's gleaming eyes considered him in silence for a moment.

"How remove that cause?" he asked. "Wilt thou atone for the mockery of thy marriage, pronounce her divorced and relinquish her?"

"That were not to remove her," replied Sakr-el-Bahr. "Consider well, Asad, what is thy duty to the Faith. Consider that upon our unity depends the glory of Islam. Were it not sinful, then, to suffer the

intrusion of aught that may mar such unity? Nay, nay, what I propose is that I should be permitted—assisted even—to bear out the project I had formed, as already I have frankly made confession. Let us put to sea again at dawn—or this very night if thou wilt—make for the coast of France, and there set her ashore that she may go back to her own people and we be rid of her disturbing presence. Then we will return—there is time and to spare—and here or elsewhere lurk in wait for this Spanish argosy, seize the booty and sail home in amity to Algiers, this incident, this little cloud in the splendour of our comradeship, behind us and forgotten as though it had never been. Wilt thou, Asad—for the glory of the Prophet's Law?"

The bait was cunningly presented, so cunningly that not for a moment did Asad or even the malicious Marzak suspect it to be just a bait and no more. It was his own life, become a menace to Asad, that Sakr-el-Bahr was offering him in exchange for the life and liberty of that Frankish slave-girl, but offering it as if unconscious that he did so.

Asad considered, temptation gripping, him. Prudence urged him to accept, so that affecting to heal the dangerous breach that now existed he might carry Sakr-el-Bahr back to Algiers, there, beyond the aid of any friendly mutineers, to have him strangled. It was the course to adopt in such a situation, the wise and sober course by which to ensure the overthrow of one who from an obedient and submissive lieutenant had suddenly shown that it was possible for him to become a serious and dangerous rival.

Sakr-el-Bahr watched the Basha's averted, gleaming eyes under their furrowed, thoughtful brows, he saw Marzak's face white, tense and eager in his anxiety that his father should consent. And since his father continued silent, Marzak, unable longer to contain himself, broke into speech.

"He is wise, O my father!" was his crafty appeal. "The glory of Islam above all else! Let him have his way in this, and let the infidel woman

go. Thus shall all be well between us and Sakr-el-Bahr!" He laid such a stress upon these words that it was obvious he desired them to convey a second meaning.

Asad heard and understood that Marzak, too, perceived what was here to do; tighter upon him became temptation's grip; but tighter, too, became the grip of a temptation of another sort. Before his fierce eyes there arose a vision of a tall stately maiden with softly rounded bosom, a vision so white and lovely that it enslaved him. And so he found himself torn two ways at once. On the one hand, if he relinquished the woman, he could make sure of his vengeance upon Sakr-el-Bahr, could make sure of removing that rebel from his path. On the other hand, if he determined to hold fast to his desires and to be ruled by them, he must be prepared to risk a mutiny aboard the galeasse, prepared for battle and perhaps for defeat. It was a stake such as no sane Basha would have consented to set upon the board. But since his eyes had again rested upon Rosamund, Asad was no longer sane. His thwarted desires of yesterday were the despots of his wits.

He leaned forward now, looking deep into the eyes of Sakr-el-Bahr.

"Since for thyself thou dost not want her, why dost thou thwart me?" he asked, and his voice trembled with suppressed passion. "So long as I deemed thee honest in taking her to wife I respected that bond as became a good Muslim; but since 'tis manifest that it was no more than a pretence, a mockery to serve some purpose hostile to myself, a desecration of the Prophet's Holy Law, I, before whom this blasphemous marriage was performed, do pronounce it to be no marriage. There is no need for thee to divorce her. She is no longer thine. She is for any Muslim who can take her."

Sakr-el-Bahr laughed unpleasantly. "Such a Muslim," he announced, "will be nearer my sword than the Paradise of Mahomet." And on the words he stood up, as if in token of his readiness.

Asad rose with him in a bound of a vigour such as might scarce have been looked for in a man of his years.

"Dost threaten?" he cried, his eyes aflash.

"Threaten?" sneered Sakr-el-Bahr. "I prophesy." And on that he turned, and stalked away down the gangway to the vessel's waist. There was no purpose in his going other than his perceiving that here argument were worse than useless, and that the wiser course were to withdraw at once, avoiding it and allowing his veiled threat to work upon the Basha's mind.

Quivering with rage Asad watched his departure. On the point of commanding him to return, he checked, fearing lest in his present mood Sakr-el-Bahr should flout his authority and under the eyes of all refuse him the obedience due. He knew that it is not good to command where we are not sure of being obeyed or of being able to enforce obedience, that an authority once successfully flouted is in itself half-shattered.

Whilst still he hesitated, Marzak, who had also risen, caught him by the arm and poured into his ear hot, urgent arguments enjoining him to yield to Sakr-el-Bahr's demand.

"It is the sure way," he cried insistently. "Shall all be jeopardized for the sake of that whey-faced daughter of perdition? In the name of Shaitan, let us be rid of her; set her ashore as he demands, as the price of peace between us and him, and in the security of that peace let him be strangled when we come again to our moorings in Algiers. It is the sure way—the sure way!"

Asad turned at last to look into that handsome eager face. For a moment he was at a loss; then he had recourse to sophistry. "Am I a coward that I should refuse all ways but sure ones?" he demanded in a withering tone. "Or art thou a coward who can counsel none other?"

"My anxiety is all for thee, O my father," Marzak defended himself indignantly. "I doubt if it be safe to sleep, lest he should stir up mutiny in the night."

"Have no fear," replied Asad. "Myself I have set the watch, and the officers are all trustworthy. Biskaine is even now in the fore-castle taking the feeling of the men. Soon we shall know precisely where we stand."

"In thy place I would make sure. I would set a term to this danger of mutiny. I would accede to his demands concerning the woman, and settle after-wards with himself."

"Abandon that Frankish pearl?" quoth Asad. Slowly he shook his head. "Nay, nay! She is a garden that shall yield me roses. Together we shall yet taste the sweet sherbet of Kansar, and she shall thank me for having led her into Paradise. Abandon that rosy-limbed loveliness!" He laughed softly on a note of exaltation, whilst in the gloom Marzak frowned, thinking of Fenzileh.

"She is an infidel," his son sternly reminded him, "so forbidden thee by the Prophet. Wilt thou be as blind to that as to thine own peril?" Then his voice gathering vehemence and scorn as he proceeded: "She has gone naked of face through the streets of Algiers; she has been gaped at by the rabble in the sôk; this loveliness of hers has been deflowered by the greedy gaze of Jew and Moor and Turk; galley-slaves and negroes have feasted their eyes upon her unveiled beauty; one of thy captains hath owned her his wife." He laughed. "By Allah, I do not know thee, O my father! Is this the woman thou wouldst take for thine own? This the woman for whose possession thou wouldst jeopardize thy life and perhaps the very Bashalik itself!"

Asad clenched his hands until the nails bit into his flesh. Every word his son had uttered had been as a lash to his soul. The truth of it was not to be contested. He was humiliated and shamed. Yet was he not

conquered of his madness, nor diverted from his course. Before he could make answer, the tall martial figure of Biskaine came up the companion.

"Well?" the Basha greeted him eagerly, thankful for this chance to turn the subject.

Biskaine was downcast. His news was to be read in his countenance. "The task appointed me was difficult," said he. "I have done my best. Yet I could scarce go about it in such a fashion as to draw definite conclusions. But this I know, my lord, that he will be reckless indeed if he dares to take up arms against thee and challenge thine authority. So much at least I am permitted to conclude."

"No more than that?" asked Asad. "And if I were to take up arms against him, and to seek to settle this matter out of hand?"

Biskaine paused a moment ere replying. "I cannot think but that Allah would vouchsafe thee victory," he said. But his words did not delude the Basha. He recognized them to be no more than those which respect for him dictated to his officer. "Yet," continued Biskaine, "I should judge thee reckless too, my lord, as reckless as I should judge him in the like circumstances."

"I see," said Asad. "The matter stands so balanced that neither of us dare put it to the test."

"Thou hast said it."

"Then is thy course plain to thee!" cried Marzak, eager to renew his arguments. "Accept his terms, and...."

But Asad broke in impatiently. "Every thing in its own hour and each hour is written. I will consider what to do."

Below on the waist-deck Sakr-el-Bahr was pacing with Vigitello,

and Vigitello's words to him were of a tenor identical almost with those of Biskaine to the Basha.

"I scarce can judge," said the Italian renegade. "But I do think that it were not wise for either thou or Asad to take the first step against the other."

"Are matters, then, so equal between us?"

"Numbers, I fear," replied Vigitello, "would be in favour of Asad. No truly devout Muslim will stand against the Basha, the representative of the Sublime Portal, to whom loyalty is a question of religion. Yet they are accustomed to obey thee, to leap at thy command, and so Asad himself were rash to put it to the test."

"Ay—a sound argument," said Sakr-el-Bahr. "It is as I had thought."

Upon that he quitted Vigitello, and slowly, thoughtfully, returned to the poop-deck. It was his hope—his only hope now—that Asad might accept the proposal he had made him. As the price of it he was fully prepared for the sacrifice of his own life, which it must entail. But, it was not for him to approach Asad again; to do so would be to argue doubt and anxiety and so to court refusal. He must possess his soul in what patience he could. If Asad persisted in his refusal undeterred by any fear of mutiny, then Sakr-el-Bahr knew not what course remained him to accomplish Rosamund's deliverance. Proceed to stir up mutiny he dared not. It was too desperate a throw. In his own view it offered him no slightest chance of success, and did it fail, then indeed all would be lost, himself destroyed, and Rosamund at the mercy of Asad. He was as one walking along a sword-edge. His only chance of present immunity for himself and Rosamund lay in the confidence that Asad would dare no more than himself to take the initiative in aggression. But that was only for the present, and at any moment Asad might give the word to put about and steer for Barbary again; in no case could that be delayed beyond the plundering of the Spanish

argosy. He nourished the faint hope that in that coming fight—if indeed the Spaniards did show fight—some chance might perhaps present itself, some unexpected way out of the present situation.

He spent the night under the stars, stretched across the threshold of the curtained entrance to the poop-house, making thus a barrier of his body whilst he slept, and himself watched over in his turn by his faithful Nubians who remained on guard. He awakened when the first violet tints of dawn were in the east, and quietly dismissing the weary slaves to their rest, he kept watch alone thereafter. Under the awning on the starboard quarter slept the Basha and his son, and near them Biskaine was snoring.

CHAPTER XIX. THE MUTINEERS

Later that morning, some time after the galeasse had awakened to life and such languid movement as might be looked for in a waiting crew, Sakr-el-Bahr went to visit Rosamund.

He found her brightened and refreshed by sleep, and he brought her reassuring messages that all was well, encouraging her with hopes which himself he was very far from entertaining. If her reception of him was not expressedly friendly, neither was it unfriendly. She listened to the hopes he expressed of yet effecting her safe deliverance, and whilst she had no thanks to offer him for the efforts he was to exert on her behalf—accepting them as her absolute due, as the inadequate liquidation of the debt that lay between them—yet there was now none of that aloofness amounting almost to scorn which hitherto had marked her bearing towards him.

He came again some hours later, in the afternoon, by when his Nubians were once more at their post. He had no news to bring her beyond the fact that their sentinel on the heights reported a sail to westward, beating up towards the island before the very gentle breeze that was blowing. But the argosy they awaited was not yet in sight, and he confessed that certain proposals which he had made to Asad for landing her in France had been rejected. Still she need have no fear, he added promptly, seeing the sudden alarm that quickened in her eyes. A way would present itself. He was watching, and would miss no chance.

"And if no chance should offer?" she asked him.

"Why then I will make one," he answered, lightly almost. "I have been making them all my life, and it would be odd if I should have lost the trick of it on my life's most important occasion."

This mention of his life led to a question from her.

"How did you contrive the chance that has made you what you are? I mean," she added quickly, as if fearing that the purport of that question might be misunderstood, "that has enabled you to become a corsair captain."

"'Tis a long story that," he said. "I should weary you in the telling of it."

"No," she replied, and shook her head, her clear eyes solemnly meeting his clouded glance. "You would not weary me. Chances may be few in which to learn it."

"And you would learn it?" quoth he, and added, "That you may judge me?"

"Perhaps," she said, and her eyes fell.

With bowed head he paced the length of the small chamber, and back again. His desire was to do her will in this, which is natural enough—for if it is true that who knows all must perforce forgive all, never could it have been truer than in the case of Sir Oliver Tressilian.

So he told his tale. Pacing there he related it at length, from the days when he had toiled at an oar on one of the galleys of Spain down to that hour in which aboard the Spanish vessel taken under Cape Spartel he had determined upon that voyage to England to present his reckoning to his brother. He told his story simply and without too great a wealth of detail, yet he omitted nothing of all that had gone to place him where he stood. And she, listening, was so profoundly moved that at one moment her eyes glistened with tears

which she sought vainly to repress. Yet he, pacing there, absorbed, with head bowed and eyes that never once strayed in her direction, saw none of this.

"And so," he said, when at last that odd narrative had reached its end, "you know what the forces were that drove me. Another stronger than myself might have resisted and preferred to suffer death. But I was not strong enough. Or perhaps it is that stronger than myself was my desire to punish, to vent the bitter hatred into which my erstwhile love for Lionel was turned."

"And for me, too—as you have told me," she added.

"Not so," he corrected her. "I hated you for your unfaith, and most of all for your having burnt unread the letter that I sent you by the hand of Pitt. In doing that you contributed to the wrongs I was enduring, you destroyed my one chance of establishing my innocence and seeking rehabilitation, you doomed me for life to the ways which I was treading. But I did not then know what ample cause you had to believe me what I seemed. I did not know that it was believed I had fled. Therefore I forgive you freely a deed for which at one time I confess that I hated you, and which spurred me to bear you off when I found you under my hand that night at Arwenack when I went for Lionel."

"You mean that it was no part of your intent to have done so?" she asked him.

"To carry you off together with him?" he asked. "I swear to God I had not premeditated that. Indeed, it was done because not premeditated, for had I considered it, I do think I should have been proof against any such temptation. It assailed me suddenly when I beheld you there with Lionel, and I succumbed to it. Knowing what I now know I am punished enough, I think."

"I think I can understand," she murmured gently, as if to comfort him,

for quick pain had trembled in his voice.

He tossed back his turbaned head. "To understand is something," said he. "It is half-way at least to forgiveness. But ere forgiveness can be accepted the evil done must be atoned for to the full."

"If possible," said she.

"It must be made possible," he answered her with heat, and on that he checked abruptly, arrested by a sound of shouting from without.

He recognized the voice of Larocque, who at dawn had returned to his sentinel's post on the summit of the headland, relieving the man who had replaced him there during the night.

"My lord! My lord!" was the cry, in a voice shaken by excitement, and succeeded by a shouting chorus from the crew.

Sakr-el-Bahr turned swiftly to the entrance, whisked aside the curtain, and stepped out upon the poop. Larocque was in the very act of clambering over the bulwarks amidships, towards the waist-deck where Asad awaited him in company with Marzak and the trusty Biskaine. The prow, on which the corsairs had lounged at ease since yesterday, was now a seething mob of inquisitive babbling men, crowding to the rail and even down the gangway in their eagerness to learn what news it was that brought the sentinel aboard in such excited haste.

From where he stood Sakr-el-Bahr heard Larocque's loud announcement.

"The ship I sighted at dawn, my lord!"

"Well?" barked Asad.

"She is here—in the bay beneath that headland. She has just dropped anchor."

"No need for alarm in that," replied the Basha at once. "Since she has anchored there it is plain that she has no suspicion of our presence. What manner of ship is she?"

"A tall galleon of twenty guns, flying the flag of England.

"Of England!" cried Asad in surprise. "She'll need be a stout vessel to hazard herself in Spanish waters."

Sakr-el-Bahr advanced to the rail.

"Does she display no further device?" he asked.

Larocque turned at the question. "Ay," he answered, "a narrow blue pennant on her mizzen is charged with a white bird—a stork, I think."

"A stork?" echoed Sakr-el-Bahr thoughtfully. He could call to mind no such English blazon, nor did it seem to him that it could possibly be English. He caught the sound of a quickly indrawn breath behind him. He turned to find Rosamund standing in the entrance, not more than half concealed by the curtain. Her face showed white and eager, her eyes were wide.

"What is't?" he asked her shortly.

"A stork, he thinks," she said, as though that were answer enough.

"I' faith an unlikely bird," he commented. "The fellow is mistook."

"Yet not by much, Sir Oliver."

"How? Not by much?" Intrigued by something in her tone and glance, he stepped quickly up to her, whilst below the chatter of voices increased.

"That which he takes to be a stork is a heron—a white heron, and white is argent in heraldry, is't not?"

"It is. What then?"

"D'ye not see? That ship will be the Silver Heron."

He looked at her. "'S life!" said he, "I reck little whether it be the silver heron or the golden grasshopper. What odds?"

"It is Sir John's ship—Sir John Killigrew's," she explained. "She was all but ready to sail when... when you came to Arwenack. He was for the Indies. Instead—don't you see?—out of love for me he will have come after me upon a forlorn hope of overtaking you ere you could make Barbary."

"God's light!" said Sakr-el-Bahr, and fell to musing. Then he raised his head and laughed. "Faith, he's some days late for that!"

But the jest evoked no response from her. She continued to stare at him with those eager yet timid eyes.

"And yet," he continued, "he comes opportunely enough. If the breeze that has fetched him is faint, yet surely it blows from Heaven."

"Were it...?" she paused, faltering a moment.

Then, "Were it possible to communicate with him?" she asked, yet with hesitation.

"Possible—ay," he answered. "Though we must needs devise the means, and that will prove none so easy."

"And you would do it?" she inquired, an undercurrent of wonder in her question, some recollection of it in her face.

"Why, readily," he answered, "since no other way presents itself. No doubt 'twill cost some lives," he added, "but then...." And he shrugged to complete the sentence.

"Ah, no, no! Not at that price!" she protested. And how was he to

know that all the price she was thinking of was his own life, which she conceived would be forfeited if the assistance of the Silver Heron were invoked?

Before he could return her any answer his attention was diverted. A sullen threatening note had crept into the babble of the crew, and suddenly one or two voices were raised to demand insistently that Asad should put to sea at once and remove his vessel from a neighbourhood become so dangerous. Now, the fault of this was Marzak's. His was the voice that first had uttered that timid suggestion, and the infection of his panic had spread instantly through the corsair ranks.

Asad, drawn to the full of his gaunt height, turned upon them the eyes that had quelled greater clamours, and raised the voice which in its day had hurled a hundred men straight into the jaws of death without a protest.

"Silence!" he commanded. "I am your lord and need no counsellors save Allah. When I consider the time come, I will give the word to row, but not before. Back to your quarters, then, and peace!"

He disdained to argue with them, to show them what sound reasons there were for remaining in this secret cove and against putting forth into the open. Enough for them that such should be his will. Not for them to question his wisdom and his decisions.

But Asad-ed-Din had lain overlong in Algiers whilst his fleets under Sakr-el-Bahr and Biskaine had scoured the inland sea. The men were no longer accustomed to the goad of his voice, their confidence in his judgment was not built upon the sound basis of past experience. Never yet had he led into battle the men of this crew and brought them forth again in triumph and enriched by spoil.

So now they set their own judgment against his. To them it seemed

a recklessness—as, indeed, Marzak had suggested—to linger here, and his mere announcement of his purpose was far from sufficient to dispel their doubts.

The murmurs swelled, not to be overborne by his fierce presence and scowling brow, and suddenly one of the renegades—secretly prompted by the wily Vigitello—raised a shout for the captain whom they knew and trusted.

"Sakr-el-Bahr! Sakr-el-Bahr! Thou'lt not leave us penned in this cove to perish like rats!"

It was as a spark to a train of powder. A score of voices instantly took up the cry; hands were flung out towards Sakr-el-Bahr, where he stood above them and in full view of all, leaning impassive and stern upon the poop-rail, whilst his agile mind weighed the opportunity thus thrust upon him, and considered what profit was to be extracted from it.

Asad fell back a pace in his profound mortification. His face was livid, his eyes blared furiously, his hand flew to the jewelled hilt of his scimitar, yet forbore from drawing the blade. Instead he let loose upon Marzak the venom kindled in his soul by this evidence of how shrunken was his authority.

"Thou fool!" he snarled. "Look on thy craven's work. See what a devil thou hast raised with thy woman's counsels. Thou to command a galley! Thou to become a fighter upon the seas! I would that Allah had stricken me dead ere I begat me such a son as thou!"

Marzak recoiled before the fury of words that he feared might be followed by yet worse. He dared make no answer, offer no excuse; in that moment he scarcely dared breathe.

Meanwhile Rosamund in her eagerness had advanced until she stood at Sakr-el-Bahr's elbow.

"God is helping us!" she said in a voice of fervent gratitude. "This is your opportunity. The men will obey you."

He looked at her, and smiled faintly upon her eagerness. "Ay, mistress, they will obey me," he said. But in the few moments that were sped he had taken his resolve. Whilst undoubtedly Asad was right, and the wise course was to lie close in this sheltering cove where the odds of their going unperceived were very heavily in their favour, yet the men's judgment was not altogether at fault. If they were to put to sea, they might by steering an easterly course pass similarly unperceived, and even should the splash of their oars reach the galleon beyond the headland, yet by the time she had weighed anchor and started in pursuit they would be well away straining every ounce of muscle at the oars, whilst the breeze—a heavy factor in his considerations—was become so feeble that they could laugh at pursuit by a vessel that depended upon wind alone. The only danger, then, was the danger of the galleon's cannon, and that danger was none so great as from experience Sakr-el-Bahr well knew.

Thus was he reluctantly forced to the conclusion that in the main the wiser policy was to support Asad, and since he was full confident of the obedience of the men he consoled himself with the reflection that a moral victory might be in store for him out of which some surer profit might presently be made.

In answer, then, to those who still called upon him, he leapt down the companion and strode along the gangway to the waist-deck to take his stand at the Basha's side. Asad watched his approach with angry misgivings; it was with him a foregone conclusion that things being as they were Sakr-el-Bahr would be ranged against him to obtain complete control of these mutineers and to cull the fullest advantage from the situation. Softly and slowly he unsheathed his scimitar, and Sakr-el-Bahr seeing this out of the corner of his eye, yet affected not to see, but stood forward to address the men.

"How now?" he thundered wrathfully. "What shall this mean? Are ye all deaf that ye have not heard the commands of your Basha, the exalted of Allah, that ye dare raise your mutinous voices and say what is your will?"

Sudden and utter silence followed that exhortation. Asad listened in relieved amazement; Rosamund caught her breath in sheer dismay.

What could he mean, then? Had he but fooled and duped her? Were his intentions towards her the very opposite to his protestations? She leant upon the poop-rail straining to catch every syllable of that speech of his in the lingua franca, hoping almost that her indifferent knowledge of it had led her into error on the score of what he had said.

She saw him turn with a gesture of angry command upon Larocque, who stood there by the bulwarks, waiting.

"Back to thy post up yonder, and keep watch upon that vessel's movements, reporting them to us. We stir not hence until such be our lord Asad's good pleasure. Away with thee!"

Larocque without a murmur threw a leg over the bulwarks and dropped to the oars, whence he clambered ashore as he had been bidden. And not a single voice was raised in protest.

Sakr-el-Bahr's dark glance swept the ranks of the corsairs crowding the forecastle.

"Because this pet of the hareem," he said, immensely daring, indicating Marzak by a contemptuous gesture, "bleats of danger into the ears of men, are ye all to grow timid and foolish as a herd of sheep? By Allah! What are ye? Are ye the fearless sea-hawks that have flown with me, and struck where the talons of my grappling-hooks were flung, or are ye but scavenging crows?"

He was answered by an old rover whom fear had rendered greatly daring.

"We are trapped here as Dragut was trapped at Jerba."

"Thou liest," he answered. "Dragut was not trapped, for Dragut found a way out. And against Dragut there was the whole navy of Genoa, whilst against us there is but one single galleon. By the Koran, if she shows fight, have we no teeth? Will it be the first galleon whose decks we have overrun? But if ye prefer a coward's counsel, ye sons of shame, consider that once we take the open sea our discovery will be assured, and Larocque hath told you that she carries twenty guns. I tell you that if we are to be attacked by her, best be attacked at close quarters, and I tell you that if we lie close and snug in here it is long odds that we shall never be attacked at all. That she has no inkling of our presence is proven, since she has cast anchor round the headland. And consider that if we fly from a danger that doth not exist, and in our flight are so fortunate as not to render real that danger and to court it, we abandon a rich argosy that shall bring profit to us all."

"But I waste my breath in argument," he ended abruptly. "You have heard the commands of your lord, Asad-ed-Din, and that should be argument enough. No more of this, then."

Without so much as waiting to see them disperse from the rail and return to their lounging attitudes about the forecastle, he turned to Asad.

"It might have been well to hang the dog who spoke of Dragut and Jerba," he said. "But it was never in my nature to be harsh with those who follow me." And that was all.

Asad from amazement had passed quickly to admiration and a sort of contrition, into which presently there crept a poisonous tinge of jealousy to see Sakr-el-Bahr prevail where he himself alone must

utterly have failed. This jealousy spread all-pervadingly, like an oil stain. If he had come to bear ill-will to Sakr-el-Bahr before, that ill-will was turned of a sudden into positive hatred for one in whom he now beheld a usurper of the power and control that should reside in the Basha alone. Assuredly there was no room for both of them in the Bashalik of Algiers.

Therefore the words of commendation which had been rising to his lips froze there now that Sakr-el-Bahr and he stood face to face. In silence he considered his lieutenant through narrowing evil eyes, whose message none but a fool could have misunderstood.

Sakr-el-Bahr was not a fool, and he did not misunderstand it for a moment. He felt a tightening at the heart, and ill-will sprang to life within him responding to the call of that ill-will. Almost he repented him that he had not availed himself of that moment of weakness and mutiny on the part of the crew to attempt the entire superseding of the Basha.

The conciliatory words he had in mind to speak he now suppressed. To that venomous glance he opposed his ever ready mockery. He turned to Biskaine.

"Withdraw," he curtly bade him, "and take that stout sea-warrior with thee." And he indicated Marzak.

Biskaine turned to the Basha. "Is it thy wish, my lord?" he asked.

Asad nodded in silence, and motioned him away together with the cowed Marzak.

"My lord," said Sakr-el-Bahr, when they were alone, "yesterday I made thee a proposal for the healing of this breach between us, and it was refused. But now had I been the traitor and mutineer thou hast dubbed me I could have taken full advantage of the humour of my corsairs. Had I done that it need no longer have been mine to

propose or to sue. Instead it would have been mine to dictate. Since I have given thee such crowning proof of my loyalty, it is my hope and trust that I may be restored to the place I had lost in thy confidence, and that this being so thou wilt accede now to that proposal of mine concerning the Frankish woman yonder."

It was unfortunate perhaps that she should have been standing there unveiled upon the poop within the range of Asad's glance; for the sight of her it may have been that overcame his momentary hesitation and stifled the caution which prompted him to accede. He considered her a moment, and a faint colour kindled in his cheeks which anger had made livid.

"It is not for thee, Sakr-el-Bahr," he answered at length, "to make me proposals. To dare it, proves thee far removed indeed from the loyalty thy lips profess. Thou knowest my will concerning her. Once hast thou thwarted and defied me, misusing to that end the Prophet's Holy Law. Continue a barrier in my path and it shall be at thy peril." His voice was raised and it shook with anger.

"Not so loud," said Sakr-el-Bahr, his eyes gleaming with a response of anger. "For should my men overhear these threats of thine I will not answer for what may follow. I oppose thee at my peril sayest thou. Be it so, then." He smiled grimly. "It is war between us, Asad, since thou hast chosen it. Remember hereafter when the consequences come to overwhelm thee that the choice was thine."

"Thou mutinous, treacherous son of a dog!" blazed Asad.

Sakr-el-Bahr turned on his heel. "Pursue the path of an old man's folly," he said over his shoulder, "and see whither it will lead thee."

Upon that he strode away up the gangway to the poop, leaving the Basha alone with his anger and some slight fear evoked by that last bold menace. But notwithstanding that he menaced boldly the heart of

Sakr-el-Bahr was surcharged with anxiety. He had conceived a plan; but between the conception and its execution he realized that much ill might lie.

"Mistress," he addressed Rosamund as he stepped upon the poop. "You are not wise to show yourself so openly."

To his amazement she met him with a hostile glance.

"Not wise?" said she, her countenance scornful. "You mean that I may see more than was intended for me. What game do you play here, sir, that you tell me one thing and show me by your actions that you desire another?"

He did not need to ask her what she meant. At once he perceived how she had misread the scene she had witnessed.

"I'll but remind you," he said very gravely, "that once before you did me a wrong by over-hasty judgment, as has been proven to you."

It overthrew some of her confidence. "But then...." she began.

"I do but ask you to save your judgment for the end. If I live I shall deliver you. Meanwhile I beg that you will keep your cabin. It does not help me that you be seen."

She looked at him, a prayer for explanation trembling on her lips. But before the calm command of his tone and glance she slowly lowered her head and withdrew beyond the curtain.

CHAPTER XX. THE MESSENGER

For the rest of the day she kept the cabin, chafing with anxiety to know what was toward and the more racked by it because Sakr-el-Bahr refrained through all those hours from coming to her. At last towards evening, unable longer to contain herself, she went forth again, and as it chanced she did so at an untimely moment.

The sun had set, and the evening prayer was being recited aboard the galeasse, her crew all prostrate. Perceiving this, she drew back again instinctively, and remained screened by the curtain until the prayer was ended. Then putting it aside, but without stepping past the Nubians who were on guard, she saw that on her left Asad-ed-Din, with Marzak, Biskaine, and one or two other officers, was again occupying the divan under the awning. Her eyes sought Sakr-el-Bahr, and presently they beheld him coming up the gangway with his long, swinging stride, in the wake of the boat-swain's mates who were doling out the meagre evening meal to the slaves.

Suddenly he halted by Lionel, who occupied a seat at the head of his oar immediately next to the gangway. He addressed him harshly in the lingua franca, which Lionel did not understand, and his words rang clearly and were heard—as he intended that they should be—by all upon the poop.

"Well, dog? How does galley-slave fare suit thy tender stomach?"

Lionel looked up at him.

"What are you saying?" he asked in English.

Sakr-el-Bahr bent over him, and his face as all could see was evil and mocking. No doubt he spoke to him in English also, but no more than a murmur reached the straining ears of Rosamund, though from his countenance she had no doubt of the purport of his words. And yet she was far indeed from a correct surmise. The mockery in his countenance was but a mask.

"Take no heed of my looks," he was saying. "I desire them up yonder to think that I abuse you. Look as a man would who were being abused. Cringe or snarl, but listen. Do you remember once when as lads we swam together from Penarrow to Trefusis Point?"

"What do you mean?" quoth Lionel, and the natural sullenness of his mien was all that Sakr-el-Bahr could have desired.

"I am wondering whether you could still swim as far. If so you might find a more appetizing supper awaiting you at the end—aboard Sir John Killigrew's ship. You had not heard? The Silver Heron is at anchor in the bay beyond that headland. If I afford you the means, could you swim to her do you think?"

Lionel stared at him in profoundest amazement. "Do you mock me?" he asked at length.

"Why should I mock you on such a matter?"

"Is it not to mock me to suggest a way for my deliverance?"

Sakr-el-Bahr laughed, and he mocked now in earnest. He set his left foot upon the rowers' stretcher, and leaned forward and down his elbow upon his raised knee so that his face was close to Lionel's.

"For your deliverance?" said he. "God's life! Lionel, your mind was ever one that could take in naught but your own self. 'Tis that has made a villain of you. Your deliverance! God's wounds! Is there none but yourself whose deliverance I might desire? Look you, now I want

you to swim to Sir John's ship and bear him word of the presence here of this galleon and that Rosamund is aboard it. 'Tis for her that I am concerned, and so little for you that should you chance to be drowned in the attempt my only regret will be that the message was not delivered. Will you undertake that swim? It is your one sole chance short of death itself of escaping from the rower's bench. Will you go?"

"But how?" demanded Lionel, still mistrusting him.

"Will you go?" his brother insisted.

"Afford me the means and I will," was the answer.

"Very well." Sakr-el-Bahr leaned nearer still. "Naturally it will be supposed by all who are watching us that I am goading you to desperation. Act, then, your part. Up, and attempt to strike me. Then when I return the blow—and I shall strike heavily that no make-believe may be suspected—collapse on your oar pretending to swoon. Leave the rest to me. Now," he added sharply, and on the word rose with a final laugh of derision as if to take his departure.

But Lionel was quick to follow the instructions. He leapt up in his bonds, and reaching out as far as they would permit him, he struck Sakr-el-Bahr heavily upon the face. On his side, too, there was to be no make-believe apparent. That done he sank down with a clank of shackles to the bench again, whilst every one of his fellow-slaves that faced his way looked on with fearful eyes.

Sakr-el-Bahr was seen to reel under the blow, and instantly there was a commotion on board. Biskaine leapt to his feet with a half-cry of astonishment; even Asad's eyes kindled with interest at so unusual a sight as that of a galley-slave attacking a corsair. Then with a snarl of anger, the snarl of an enraged beast almost, Sakr-el-Bahr's great arm was swung aloft and his fist descended like a hammer upon Lionel's head.

Lionel sank forward under the blow, his senses swimming. Sakr-el-Bahr's arm swung up a second time.

"Thou dog!" he roared, and then checked, perceiving that Lionel appeared to have swooned.

He turned and bellowed for Vigitello and his mates in a voice that was hoarse with passion. Vigitello came at a run, a couple of his men at his heels.

"Unshackle me this carrion, and heave it overboard," was the harsh order. "Let that serve as an example to the others. Let them learn thus the price of mutiny in their lousy ranks. To it, I say."

Away sped a man for hammer and chisel. He returned with them at once. Four sharp metallic blows rang out, and Lionel was dragged forth from his place to the gangway-deck. Here he revived, and screamed for mercy as though he were to be drowned in earnest.

Biskaine chuckled under the awning, Asad looked on approvingly, Rosamund drew back, shuddering, choking, and near to fainting from sheer horror.

She saw Lionel borne struggling in the arms of the boatswain's men to the starboard quarter, and flung over the side with no more compunction or care than had he been so much rubbish. She heard the final scream of terror with which he vanished, the splash of his fall, and then in the ensuing silence the laugh of Sakr-el-Bahr.

For a spell she stood there with horror and loathing of that renegade corsair in her soul. Her mind was bewildered and confused. She sought to restore order in it, that she might consider this fresh deed of his, this act of wanton brutality and fratricide. And all that she could gather was the firm conviction that hitherto he had cheated her; he had lied when he swore that his aim was to effect her deliverance. It was not in such a nature to know a gentle mood of penitence for a

wrong done. What might be his purpose she could not yet perceive, but that it was an evil one she never doubted, for no purpose of his could be aught but evil. So overwrought was she now that she forgot all Lionel's sins, and found her heart filled with compassion for him hurled in that brutal fashion to his death.

And then, quite suddenly a shout rang out from the forecastle.

"He is swimming!"

Sakr-el-Bahr had been prepared for the chance of this.

"Where? Where?" he cried, and sprang to the bulwarks.

"Yonder!" A man was pointing. Others had joined him and were peering through the gathering gloom at the moving object that was Lionel's head and the faintly visible swirl of water about it which indicated that he swam.

"Out to sea!" cried Sakr-el-Bahr. "He'll not swim far in any case. But we will shorten his road for him." He snatched a cross-bow from the rack about the mainmast, fitted a shaft to it and took aim.

On the point of loosing the bolt he paused.

"Marzak!" he called. "Here, thou prince of marksmen, is a butt for thee!"

From the poop-deck whence with his father he too was watching the swimmer's head, which at every moment became more faint in the failing light, Marzak looked with cold disdain upon his challenger, making no reply. A titter ran through the crew.

"Come now," cried Sakr-el-Bahr. "Take up thy bow!"

"If thou delay much longer," put in Asad, "he will be beyond thine aim. Already he is scarcely visible."

"The more difficult a butt, then," answered Sakr-el-Bahr, who was but delaying to gain time. "The keener test. A hundred philips, Marzak, that thou'lt not hit me that head in three shots, and that I'll sink him at the first! Wilt take the wager?"

"The unbeliever is for ever peeping forth from thee," was Marzak's dignified reply. "Games of chance are forbidden by the Prophet."

"Make haste, man!" cried Asad. "Already I can scarce discern him. Loose thy quarrel."

"Pooh," was the disdainful answer. "A fair mark still for such an eye as mine. I never miss—not even in the dark."

"Vain boaster," said Marzak.

"Am I so?" Sakr-el-Bahr loosed his shaft at last into the gloom, and peered after it following its flight, which was wide of the direction of the swimmer's head. "A hit!" he cried brazenly. "He's gone!"

"I think I see him still," said one.

"Thine eyes deceive thee in this light. No man was ever known to swim with an arrow through his brain."

"Ay," put in Jasper, who stood behind Sakr-el-Bahr. "He has vanished."

"Tis too dark to see," said Vigitello.

And then Asad turned from the vessel's side. "Well, well—shot or drowned, he's gone," he said, and there the matter ended.

Sakr-el-Bahr replaced the cross-bow in the rack, and came slowly up to the poop.

In the gloom he found himself confronted by Rosamund's white face between the two dusky countenances of his Nubians. She drew back

before him as he approached, and he, intent upon imparting his news to her, followed her within the poop-house, and bade Abiad bring lights.

When these had been kindled they faced each other, and he perceived her profound agitation and guessed the cause of it. Suddenly she broke into speech.

"You beast! You devil!" she panted. "God will punish you! I shall spend my every breath in praying Him to punish you as you deserve. You murderer! You hound! And I like a poor simpleton was heeding your false words. I was believing you sincere in your repentance of the wrong you have done me. But now you have shown me...."

"How have I hurt you in what I have done to Lionel?" he cut in, a little amazed by so much vehemence.

"Hurt me!" she cried, and on the words grew cold and calm again with very scorn. "I thank God it is beyond your power to hurt me. And I thank you for correcting my foolish misconception of you, my belief in your pitiful pretence that it was your aim to save me. I would not accept salvation at your murderer's hands. Though, indeed, I shall not be put to it. Rather," she pursued, a little wildly now in her deep mortification, "are you like to sacrifice me to your own vile ends, whatever they may be. But I shall thwart you, Heaven helping me. Be sure I shall not want courage for that." And with a shuddering moan she covered her face, and stood swaying there before him.

He looked on with a faint, bitter smile, understanding her mood just as he understood her dark threat of thwarting him.

"I came," he said quietly, "to bring you the assurance that he has got safely away, and to tell you upon what manner of errand I have sent him."

Something compelling in his voice, the easy assurance with which

he spoke, drew her to stare at him again.

"I mean Lionel, of course," he said, in answer to her questioning glance. "That scene between us—the blow and the swoon and the rest of it—was all make-believe. So afterwards the shooting. My challenge to Marzak was a ruse to gain time—to avoid shooting until Lionel's head should have become so dimly visible in the dusk that none could say whether it was still there or not. My shaft went wide of him, as I intended. He is swimming round the head with my message to Sir John Killigrew. He was a strong swimmer in the old days, and should easily reach his goal. That is what I came to tell you."

For a long spell she continued to stare at him in silence.

"You are speaking the truth?" she asked at last, in a small voice.

He shrugged. "You will have a difficulty in perceiving the object I might serve by falsehood."

She sat down suddenly upon the divan; it was almost as if she collapsed bereft of strength; and as suddenly she fell to weeping softly.

"And... and I believed that you... that you...."

"Just so," he grimly interrupted. "You always did believe the best of me."

And on that he turned and went out abruptly.

CHAPTER XXI. MORITURUS

He departed from her presence with bitterness in his heart, leaving a profound contrition in her own. The sense of this her last injustice to him so overwhelmed her that it became the gauge by which she measured that other earlier wrong he had suffered at her hands. Perhaps her overwrought mind falsified the perspective, exaggerating it until it seemed to her that all the suffering and evil with which this chronicle has been concerned were the direct fruits of her own sin of unfaith.

Since all sincere contrition must of necessity bring forth an ardent desire to atone, so was it now with her. Had he but refrained from departing so abruptly he might have had her on her knees to him suing for pardon for all the wrongs which her thoughts had done him, proclaiming her own utter unworthiness and baseness. But since his righteous resentment had driven him from her presence she could but sit and brood upon it all, considering the words in which to frame her plea for forgiveness when next he should return.

But the hours sped, and there was no sign of him. And then, almost with a shock of dread came the thought that ere long perhaps Sir John Killigrew's ship would be upon them. In her distraught state of mind she had scarcely pondered that contingency. Now that it occurred to her all her concern was for the result of it to Sir Oliver. Would there be fighting, and would he perhaps perish in that conflict at the hands either of the English or of the corsairs whom for her sake he had betrayed, perhaps without ever hearing her confession of penitence, without speaking those words of forgiveness of which her soul stood in such thirsty need?

It would be towards midnight when unable longer to bear the suspense of it, she rose and softly made her way to the entrance. Very quietly she lifted the curtain, and in the act of stepping forth almost stumbled over a body that lay across the threshold. She drew back with a startled gasp; then stooped to look, and by the faint rays of the lanterns on mainmast and poop-rail she recognized Sir Oliver, and saw that he slept. She never heeded the two Nubians immovable as statues who kept guard. She continued to bend over him, and then gradually and very softly sank down on her knees beside him. There were tears in her eyes—tears wrung from her by a tender emotion of wonder and gratitude at so much fidelity. She did not know that he had slept thus last night. But it was enough for her to find him here now. It moved her oddly, profoundly, that this man whom she had ever mistrusted and misjudged should even when he slept make of his body a barrier for her greater security and protection.

A sob escaped her, and at the sound, so lightly and vigilantly did he take his rest, he came instantly if silently to a sitting attitude; and so they looked into each other's eyes, his swarthy, bearded hawk face on a level with her white gleaming countenance.

"What is it?" he whispered.

She drew back instantly, taken with sudden panic at that question. Then recovering, and seeking womanlike to evade and dissemble the thing she was come to do, now that the chance of doing it was afforded her—"Do you think," she faltered, "that Lionel will have reached Sir John's ship?"

He flashed a glance in the direction of the divan under the awning where the Basha slept. There all was still. Besides, the question had been asked in English. He rose and held out a hand to help her to her feet. Then he signed to her to reenter the poop-house, and followed her within.

"Anxiety keeps you wakeful?" he said, half-question, half-assertion.

"Indeed," she replied.

"There is scarce the need," he assured her. "Sir John will not be like to stir until dead of night, that he may make sure of taking us unawares. I have little doubt that Lionel would reach him. It is none so long a swim. Indeed, once outside the cove he could take to the land until he was abreast of the ship. Never doubt he will have done his errand."

She sat down, her glance avoiding his; but the light falling on her face showed him the traces there of recent tears.

"There will be fighting when Sir John arrives?" she asked him presently.

"Like enough. But what can it avail? We shall be caught—as was said to-day—in just such a trap as that in which Andrea Doria caught Dragut at Jerba, saving that whilst the wily Dragut found a way out for his galleys, here none is possible. Courage, then, for the hour of your deliverance is surely at hand."

He paused, and then in a softer voice, humbly almost, "It is my prayer," he added, "that hereafter in a happy future these last few weeks shall come to seem no more than an evil dream to you."

To that prayer she offered no response. She sat bemused, her brow wrinkled.

"I would it might be done without fighting," she said presently, and sighed wearily.

"You need have no fear," he assured her. "I shall take all precautions for you. You shall remain here until all is over and the entrance will be guarded by a few whom I can trust."

"You mistake me," she replied, and looked up at him suddenly. "Do you suppose my fears are for myself?" She paused again, and then abruptly asked him, "What will befall you?"

"I thank you for the thought," he replied gravely. "No doubt I shall meet with my deserts. Let it but come swiftly when it comes."

"Ah, no, no!" she cried. "Not that!" And rose in her sudden agitation.

"What else remains?" he asked, and smiled. "What better fate could anyone desire me?"

"You shall live to return to England," she surprised him by exclaiming. "The truth must prevail, and justice be done you."

He looked at her with so fierce and searching a gaze that she averted her eyes. Then he laughed shortly.

"There's but one form of justice I can look for in England," said he. "It is a justice administered in hemp. Believe me, mistress, I am grown too notorious for mercy. Best end it here to-night. Besides," he added, and his mockery fell from him, his tone became gloomy, "bethink you of my present act of treachery to these men of mine, who, whatever they may be, have followed me into a score of perils and but to-day have shown their love and loyalty to me to be greater than their devotion to the Basha himself. I shall have delivered them to the sword. Could I survive with honour? They may be but poor heathens to you and yours, but to me they are my sea-hawks, my warriors, my faithful gallant followers, and I were a dog indeed did I survive the death to which I have doomed them."

As she listened and gathered from his words the apprehension of a thing that had hitherto escaped her, her eyes grew wide in sudden horror.

"Is that to be the cost of my deliverance?" she asked him fearfully.

"I trust not," he replied. "I have something in mind that will perhaps avoid it."

"And save your own life as well?" she asked him quickly.

"Why waste a thought upon so poor a thing? My life was forfeit already. If I go back to Algiers they will assuredly hang me. Asad will see to it, and not all my sea-hawks could save me from my fate."

She sank down again upon the divan, and sat there rocking her arms in a gesture of hopeless distress.

"I see," she said. "I see. I am bringing this fate upon you. When you sent Lionel upon that errand you voluntarily offered up your life to restore me to my own people. You had no right to do this without first consulting me. You had no right to suppose I would be a party to such a thing. I will not accept the sacrifice. I will not, Sir Oliver."

"Indeed, you have no choice, thank God!" he answered her. "But you are astray in your conclusions. It is I alone who have brought this fate upon myself. It is the very proper fruit of my insensate deed. It recoils upon me as all evil must upon him that does it." He shrugged his shoulders as if to dismiss the matter. Then in a changed voice, a voice singularly timid, soft, and gentle, "it were perhaps too much to ask," said he, "that you should forgive me all the suffering I have brought you?"

"I think," she answered him, "that it is for me to beg forgiveness of you."

"Of me?"

"For my unfaith, which has been the source of all. For my readiness to believe evil of you five years ago, for having burnt unread your letter and the proof of your innocence that accompanied it."

He smiled upon her very kindly. "I think you said your instinct guided you. Even though I had not done the thing imputed to me, your instinct knew me for evil; and your instinct was right, for evil I am—I must be. These are your own words. But do not think that I mock you with them. I have come to recognize their truth."

She stretched out her hands to him. "If... if I were to say that I have come to realize the falsehood of all that?"

"I should understand it to be the charity which your pitiful heart extends to one in my extremity. Your instinct was not at fault."

"It was! It was!"

But he was not to be driven out of his conviction. He shook his head, his countenance gloomy. "No man who was not evil could have done by you what I have done, however deep the provocation. I perceive it clearly now—as men in their last hour perceive hidden things."

"Oh, why are you so set on death?" she cried upon a despairing note.

"I am not," he answered with a swift resumption of his more habitual manner. "'Tis death that is so set on me. But at least I meet it without fear or regret. I face it as we must all face the inevitable—the gifts from the hands of destiny. And I am heart-ened—gladdened almost—by your sweet forgive-ness."

She rose suddenly, and came to him. She caught his arm, and standing very close to him, looked up now into his face.

"We have need to forgive each other, you and I, Oliver," she said. "And since forgiveness effaces all, let... let all that has stood between us these last five years be now effaced."

He caught his breath as he looked down into her white, straining face

"Is it impossible for us to go back five years? Is it impossible for us to go back to where we stood in those old days at Godolphin Court?"

The light that had suddenly been kindled in his face faded slowly leaving it grey and drawn. His eyes grew clouded with sorrow and despair.

"Who has erred must abide by his error—and so must the generations that come after him. There is no going back ever. The gates of the past are tight-barred against us."

"Then let us leave them so. Let us turn our backs upon that past, you and I, and let us set out afresh together, and so make amends to each other for what our folly has lost to us in those years."

He set his hands upon her shoulders, and held her so at arm's length from him considering her with very tender eyes.

"Sweet lady!" he murmured, and sighed heavily. "God! How happy might we not have been but for that evil chance...." He checked abruptly. His hands fell from her shoulders to his sides, he half-turned away, brusque now in tone and manner. "I grow maudlin. Your sweet pity has so softened me that I had almost spoke of love; and what have I to do with that? Love belongs to life; love is life; whilst I... *Moriturus te salutat!*"

"Ah, no, no!" She was clinging to him again with shaking hands, her eyes wild.

"It is too late," he answered her. "There is no bridge can span the pit I have dug myself. I must go down into it as cheerfully as God will let me."

"Then," she cried in sudden exaltation, "I will go down with you. At

the last, at least, we shall be together."

"Now here is midsummer frenzy!" he protested, yet there was a tenderness in the very impatience of his accents. He stroked the golden head that lay against his shoulder. "How shall that help me?" he asked her. "Would you embitter my last hour—rob death of all its glory? Nay, Rosamund, you can serve me better far by living. Return to England, and publish there the truth of what you have learnt. Be yours the task of clearing my honour of this stain upon it, proclaiming the truth of what drove me to the infamy of becoming a renegade and a corsair." He started from her. "Hark! What's that?"

From without had come a sudden cry, "Afoot! To arms! To arms! Holâ! Balâk! Balâk!"

"It is the hour," he said, and turning from her suddenly sprang to the entrance and plucked aside the curtain.

CHAPTER XXII. THE SURRENDER

Up the gangway between the lines of slumbering slaves came a quick patter of feet. Ali, who since sunset had been replacing Larocque on the heights, sprang suddenly upon the poop still shouting.

"Captain! Captain! My lord! Afoot! Up! or we are taken!"

Throughout the vessel's length came the rustle and stir of waking men. A voice clamoured somewhere on the forecastle. Then the flap of the awning was suddenly whisked aside and Asad himself appeared with Marzak at his elbow.

From the starboard side as suddenly came Biskaine and Othmani, and from the waist Vigitello, Jasper—that latest renegade—and a group of alarmed corsairs.

"What now?" quoth the Basha.

Ali delivered his message breathlessly. "The galleon has weighed anchor. She is moving out of the bay."

Asad clutched his beard, and scowled. "Now what may that portend? Can knowledge of our presence have reached them?"

"Why else should she move from her anchorage thus in the dead of night?" said Biskaine.

"Why else, indeed?" returned Asad, and then he swung upon Oliver standing there in the entrance of the poop-house. "What sayest thou,

Sakr-el-Bahr?" he appealed to him

Sakr-el-Bahr stepped forward, shrugging. "What is there to say? What is there to do?" he asked. "We can but wait. If our presence is known to them we are finely trapped, and there's an end to all of us this night."

His voice was cool as ice, contemptuous almost, and whilst it struck anxiety into more than one it awoke terror in Marzak.

"May thy bones rot, thou ill-omened prophet!" he screamed, and would have added more but that Sakr-el-Bahr silenced him.

"What is written is written!" said he in a voice of thunder and reproof.

"Indeed, indeed," Asad agreed, grasping at the fatalist's consolation. "If we are ripe for the gardeners hand, the gardener will pluck us."

Less fatalistic and more practical was the counsel of Biskaine.

"It were well to act upon the assumption that we are indeed discovered, and make for the open sea while yet there may be time."

"But that were to make certain what is still doubtful," broke in Marzak, fearful ever. "It were to run to meet the danger."

"Not so!" cried Asad in a loud, confident voice. "The praise to Allah who sent us this calm night. There is scarce a breath of wind. We can row ten leagues while they are sailing one."

A murmur of quick approval sped through the ranks of officers and men.

"Let us but win safely from this cove and they will never overtake us," announced Biskaine.

"But their guns may," Sakr-el-Bahr quietly reminded them to damp their confidence. His own alert mind had already foreseen this one chance of escaping from the trap, but he had hoped that it would not be quite so obvious to the others.

"That risk we must take," replied Asad. "We must trust to the night. To linger here is to await certain destruction." He swung briskly about to issue his orders. "Ali, summon the steersmen. Hasten! Vigitello, set your whips about the slaves, and rouse them." Then as the shrill whistle of the boatswain rang out and the whips of his mates went hissing and cracking about the shoulders of the already half-awakened slaves, to mingle with all the rest of the stir and bustle aboard the galeasse, the Basha turned once more to Biskaine. "Up thou to the prow," he commanded, "and marshal the men. Bid them stand to their arms lest it should come to boarding. Go!" Biskaine salaamed and sprang down the companion. Above the rumbling din and scurrying toil of preparation rang Asad's voice.

"Crossbowmen, aloft! Gunners to the carronades! Kindle your linstocks! Put out all lights!"

An instant later the cressets on the poop-rail were extinguished, as was the lantern swinging from the rail, and even the lamp in the poop-house which was invaded by one of the Basha's officers for that purpose. The lantern hanging from the mast alone was spared against emergencies; but it was taken down, placed upon the deck, and muffled.

Thus was the galeasse plunged into a darkness that for some moments was black and impenetrable as velvet. Then slowly, as the eyes became accustomed to it, this gloom was gradually relieved. Once more men and objects began to take shape in the faint, steely radiance of the summer night.

After the excitement of that first stir the corsairs went about their

tasks with amazing calm and silence. None thought now of reproaching the Basha or Sakr-el-Bahr with having delayed until the moment of peril to take the course which all of them had demanded should be taken when first they had heard of the neighbourhood of that hostile ship. In lines three deep they stood ranged along the ample fighting platform of the prow; in the foremost line were the archers, behind them stood the swordsmen, their weapons gleaming lividly in the darkness. They crowded to the bulwarks of the waist-deck and swarmed upon the rat-lines of the mainmast. On the poop three gunners stood to each of the two small cannon, their faces showing faintly ruddy in the glow of the ignited match.

Asad stood at the head of the companion, issuing his sharp brief commands, and Sakr-el-Bahr, behind him, leaning against the timbers of the poop-house with Rosamund at his side, observed that the Basha had studiously avoided entrusting any of this work of preparation to himself.

The steersmen climbed to their niches, and the huge steering oars creaked as they were swung out. Came a short word of command from Asad and a stir ran through the ranks of the slaves, as they threw forward their weight to bring the oars to the level. Thus a moment, then a second word, the premonitory crack of a whip in the darkness of the gangway, and the tomtom began to beat the time. The slaves heaved, and with a creak and splash of oars the great galleasse skimmed forward towards the mouth of the cove.

Up and down the gangway ran the boatswain's mates, cutting fiercely with their whips to urge the slaves to the very utmost effort. The vessel gathered speed. The looming headland slipped by. The mouth of the cove appeared to widen as they approached it. Beyond spread the dark steely mirror of the dead-calm sea.

Rosamund could scarcely breathe in the intensity of her suspense. She set a hand upon the arm of Sakr-el-Bahr.

"Shall we elude them, after all?" she asked in a trembling whisper.

"I pray that we may not," he answered, muttering. "But this is the handiwork I feared. Look!" he added sharply, and pointed.

They had shot clear to the headland. They were out of the cove, and suddenly they had a view of the dark bulk of the galleon, studded with a score of points of light, riding a cable's length away on their larboard quarter.

"Faster!" cried the voice of Asad. "Row for your lives, you infidel swine! Lay me your whips upon these hides of theirs! Bend me these dogs to their oars, and they'll never overtake us now."

Whips sang and thudded below them in the waist, to be answered by more than one groan from the tormented panting slaves, who already were spending every ounce of strength in this cruel effort to elude their own chance of salvation and release. Faster beat the tomtom marking the desperate time, and faster in response to it came the creak and dip of oars and the panting, stertorous breathing of the rowers.

"Lay on! Lay on!" cried Asad, inexorable. Let them burst their lungs—they were but infidel lungs!—so that for an hour they but maintained the present pace.

"We are drawing away!" cried Marzak in jubilation. "The praise to Allah!"

And so indeed they were. Visibly the lights of the galleon were receding. With every inch of canvas spread yet she appeared to be standing still, so faint was the breeze that stirred. And whilst she crawled, the galeasse raced as never yet she had raced since Sakr-el-Bahr had commanded her, for Sakr-el-Bahr had never yet turned tail upon the foe in whatever strength he found him.

Suddenly over the water from the galleon came a loud hail. Asad laughed, and in the darkness shook his fist at them, cursing them in the name of Allah and his Prophet. And then, in answer to that curse of his, the galleon's side belched fire; the calm of the night was broken by a roar of thunder, and something smote the water ahead of the Muslim vessel with a resounding thudding splash.

In fear Rosamund drew closer to Sakr-el-Bahr. But Asad laughed again.

"No need to fear their marksmanship," he cried. "They cannot see us. Their own lights dazzle them. On! On!"

"He is right," said Sakr-el-Bahr. "But the truth is that they will not fire to sink us because they know you to be aboard."

She looked out to sea again, and beheld those friendly lights falling farther and farther astern.

"We are drawing steadily away," she groaned. "They will never overtake us now."

So feared Sakr-el-Bahr. He more than feared it. He knew that save for some miraculous rising of the wind it must be as she said. And then out of his despair leapt inspiration—a desperate inspiration, true child of that despair of which it was begotten.

"There is a chance," he said to her. "But it is as a throw of the dice with life and death for stakes."

"Then seize it," she bade him instantly. "For though it should go against us we shall not be losers."

"You are prepared for anything?" he asked her.

"Have I not said that I will go down with you this night? Ah, don't waste time in words!"

"Be it so, then," he replied gravely, and moved away a step, then checked. "You had best come with me," he said.

Obediently she complied and followed him, and some there were who stared as these two passed down the gangway, yet none attempted to hinder her movements. Enough and to spare was there already to engage the thoughts of all aboard that vessel.

He thrust a way for her, past the boatswain's mates who stood over the slaves ferociously plying tongues and whips, and so brought her to the waist. Here he took up the lantern which had been muffled, and as its light once more streamed forth, Asad shouted an order for its extinction. But Sakr-el-Bahr took no least heed of that command. He stepped to the mainmast, about which the powder kegs had been stacked. One of these had been broached against its being needed by the gunners on the poop. The unfastened lid rested loosely atop of it. That lid Sakr-el-Bahr knocked over; then he pulled one of the horn sides out of the lantern, and held the now half-naked flame immediately above the powder.

A cry of alarm went up from some who had watched him. But above that cry rang his sharp command:

"Cease rowing!"

The tomtom fell instantly silent, but the slaves took yet another stroke.

"Cease rowing!" he commanded again. "Asad!" he called. "Bid them pause, or I'll blow you all straight into the arms of Shaitan." And he lowered the lantern until it rested on the very rim of the powder keg.

At once the rowing ceased. Slaves, corsairs, officers, and Asad himself stood paralyzed, all at gaze upon that grim figure illumined by the lantern, threatening them with doom. It may have crossed the minds of some to throw themselves forthwith upon him; but to arrest

them was the dread lest any movement towards him should precipitate the explosion that must blow them all into the next world.

At last Asad addressed him, his voice half-choked with rage.

"May Allah strike thee dead! Art thou djinn-possessed?"

Marzak, standing at his father's side, set a quarrel to the bow which he had snatched up. "Why do you all stand and stare?" he cried. "Cut him down, one of you!" And even as he spoke he raised his bow. But his father checked him, perceiving what must be the inevitable result.

"If any man takes a step towards me, the lantern goes straight into the gunpowder," said Sakr-el-Bahr serenely. "And if you shoot me as you intend, Mar-zak, or if any other shoots, the same will happen of itself. Be warned unless you thirst for the Paradise of the Prophet."

"Sakr-el-Bahr!" cried Asad, and from its erstwhile anger his voice had now changed to a note of intercession. He stretched out his arms appealingly to the captain whose doom he had already pronounced in his heart and mind. "Sakr-el-Bahr, I conjure thee by the bread and salt we have eaten together, return to thy senses, my son."

"I am in my sense," was the answer, "and being so I have no mind for the fate reserved me in Algiers—by the memory of that same bread and salt. I have no mind to go back with thee to be hanged or sent to toil at an oar again."

"And if I swear to thee that naught of this shall come to pass?"

"Thou'lt be forsworn. I would not trust thee now, Asad. For thou art proven a fool, and in all my life I never found good in a fool and never trusted one—save once, and he betrayed me. Yesterday I pleaded with thee, showing thee the wise course, and affording thee thine opportunity. At a slight sacrifice thou mightest have had me and hanged me at thy leisure. 'Twas my own life I offered thee, and for all

that thou knewest it, yet thou knewest not that I knew." He laughed. "See now what manner of fool art thou? Thy greed hath wrought thy ruin. Thy hands were opened to grasp more than they could hold. See now the consequence. It comes yonder in that slowly but surely approaching galleon."

Every word of it sank into the brain of Asad thus tardily to enlighten him. He wrung his hands in his blended fury and despair. The crew stood in appalled silence, daring to make no movement that might precipitate their end.

"Name thine own price," cried the Basha at length, "and I swear to thee by the beard of the Prophet it shall be paid thee."

"I named it yesterday, but it was refused. I offered thee my liberty and my life if that were needed to gain the liberty of another."

Had he looked behind him he might have seen the sudden lighting of Rosamund's eyes, the sudden clutch at her bosom, which would have announced to him that his utterances were none so cryptic but that she had understood them.

"I will make thee rich and honoured, Sakr-el-Bahr," Asad continued urgently. "Thou shalt be as mine own son. The Bashalik itself shall be thine when I lay it down, and all men shall do thee honour in the meanwhile as to myself."

"I am not to be bought, O mighty Asad. I never was. Already wert thou set upon my death. Thou canst command it now, but only upon the condition that thou share the cup with me. What is written is written. We have sunk some tall ships together in our day, Asad. We'll sink together in our turn to-night if that be thy desire."

"May thou burn for evermore in hell, thou black-hearted traitor!" Asad cursed him, his anger bursting all the bonds he had imposed upon it.

And then, of a sudden, upon that admission of defeat from their Basha, there arose a great clamour from the crew. Sakr-el-Bahr's sea-hawks called upon him, reminding him of their fidelity and love, and asking could he repay it now by dooming them all thus to destruction.

"Have faith in me!" he answered them. "I have never led you into aught but victory. Be sure that I shall not lead you now into defeat—on this the last occasion that we stand together."

"But the galleon is upon us!" cried Vigitello. And so, indeed, it was, creeping up slowly under that faint breeze, her tall bulk loomed now above them, her prow ploughing slowly forward at an acute angle to the prow of the galeasse. Another moment and she was alongside, and with a swing and clank and a yell of victory from the English seamen lining her bulwarks her grappling irons swung down to seize the corsair ship at prow and stern and waist. Scarce had they fastened, than a torrent of men in breast-plates and morions poured over her side, to alight upon the prow of the galeasse, and not even the fear of the lantern held above the powder barrel could now restrain the corsairs from giving these hardy boarders the reception they reserved for all infidels. In an instant the fighting platform on the prow was become a raging, seething hell of battle luridly illumined by the ruddy glow from the lights aboard the Silver Heron. Foremost among those who had leapt down had been Lionel and Sir John Killigrew. Foremost among those to receive them had been Jasper Leigh, who had passed his sword through Lionel's body even as Lionel's feet came to rest upon the deck, and before the battle was joined.

A dozen others went down on either side before Sakr-el-Bahr's ringing voice could quell the fighting, before his command to them to hear him was obeyed.

"Hold there!" he had bellowed to his sea-hawks, using the lingua

franca. "Back, and leave this to me. I will rid you of these foes." Then in English he had summoned his countrymen also to desist. "Sir John Killigrew!" he called in a loud voice. "Hold your hand until you have heard me! Call your men back and let none others come aboard! Hold until you have heard me, I say, then wreak your will."

Sir John, perceiving him by the mainmast with Rosamund at his side, and leaping at the most inevitable conclusion that he meant to threaten her life, perhaps to destroy her if they continued their advance, flung himself before his men, to check them.

Thus almost as suddenly as it had been joined the combat paused

"What have you to say, you renegade dog?" Sir John demanded.

"This, Sir John, that unless you order your men back aboard your ship, and make oath to desist from this encounter, I'll take you straight down to hell with us at once. I'll heave this lantern into the powder here, and we sink and you come down with us held by your own grappling hooks. Obey me and you shall have all that you have come to seek aboard this vessel. Mistress Rosamund shall be delivered up to you."

Sir John glowered upon him a moment from the poop, considering. Then—

"Though not prepared to make terms with you," he announced, "yet I will accept the conditions you impose, but only provided that I have all indeed that I am come to seek. There is aboard this galley an infamous renegade hound whom I am bound by my knightly oath to take and hang. He, too, must be delivered up to me. His name was Oliver Tressilian."

Instantly, unhesitatingly, came the answer—"Him, too, will I surrender to you upon your sworn oath that you will then depart and do here no further hurt."

Rosamund caught her breath, and clutched Sakr-el-Bahr's arm, the arm that held the lantern.

"Have a care, mistress," he bade her sharply, "or you will destroy us all."

"Better that!" she answered him.

And then Sir John pledged him his word that upon his own surrender and that of Rosamund he would withdraw nor offer hurt to any there.

Sakr-el-Bahr turned to his waiting corsairs, and briefly told them what the terms he had made.

He called upon Asad to pledge his word that these terms would be respected, and no blood shed on his behalf, and Asad answered him, voicing the anger of all against him for his betrayal.

"Since he wants thee that he may hang thee, he may have thee and so spare us the trouble, for 'tis no less than thy treachery deserves from us."

"Thus, then, I surrender," he announced to Sir John, and flung the lantern overboard.

One voice only was raised in his defence, and that voice was Rosamund's. But even that voice failed, conquered by weary nature. This last blow following upon all that lately she had endured bereft her of all strength. Half swooning she collapsed against Sakr-el-Bahr even as Sir John and a handful of his followers leapt down to deliver her and make fast their prisoner.

The corsairs stood looking on in silence; the loyalty to their great captain, which would have made them spend their last drop of blood in his defence, was quenched by his own act of treachery which had

brought the English ship upon them. Yet when they saw him pinioned and hoisted to the deck of the Silver Heron, there was a sudden momentary reaction in their ranks. Scimitars were waved aloft, and cries of menace burst forth. If he had betrayed them, yet he had so contrived that they should not suffer by that betrayal. And that was worthy of the Sakr-el-Bahr they knew and loved; so worthy that their love and loyalty leapt full-armed again upon the instant.

But the voice of Asad called upon them to bear in mind what in their name he had promised, and since the voice of Asad alone might not have sufficed to quell that sudden spark of revolt, there came down to them the voice of Sakr-el-Bahr himself issuing his last command.

"Remember and respect the terms I have made for you! Mektub! May Allah guard and prosper you!"

A wail was his reply, and with that wail ringing in his ears to assure him that he did not pass unloved, he was hurried below to prepare him for his end.

The ropes of the grapnels were cut, and slowly the galleon passed away into the night, leaving the galley to replace what slaves had been maimed in the encounter and to head back for Algiers, abandoning the expedition against the argosy of Spain.

Under the awning upon the poop Asad now sat like a man who has awakened from an evil dream. He covered his head and wept for one who had been as a son to him, and whom through his madness he had lost. He cursed all women, and he cursed destiny; but the bitterest curse of all was for himself.

In the pale dawn they flung the dead overboard and washed the decks, nor did they notice that a man was missing in token that the English captain, or else his followers, had not kept strictly to the letter of the bond.

They returned in mourning to Algiers—mourning not for the Spanish argosy which had been allowed to go her ways unmolested, but for the stoutest captain that ever bared his scimitar in the service of Islam. The story of how he came to be delivered up was never clearly told; none dared clearly tell it, for none who had participated in the deed but took shame in it thereafter, however clear it might be that Sakr-el-Bahr had brought it all upon himself. But, at least, it was understood that he had not fallen in battle, and hence it was assumed that he was still alive. Upon that presumption there was built up a sort of legend that he would one day come back; and redeemed captives returning a half-century later related how in Algiers to that day the coming of Sakr-el-Bahr was still confidently expected and looked for by all true Muslimeen.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE HEATHEN CREED

Sakr-el-Bahr was shut up in a black hole in the forecastle of the Silver Heron to await the dawn and to spend the time in making his soul. No words had passed between him and Sir John since his surrender. With wrists pinioned behind him, he had been hoisted aboard the English ship, and in the waist of her he had stood for a moment face to face with an old acquaintance—our chronicler, Lord Henry Goade. I imagine the florid countenance of the Queen's Lieutenant wearing a preternaturally grave expression, his eyes forbidding as they rested upon the renegade. I know—from Lord Henry's own pen—that no word had passed between them during those brief moments before Sakr-el-Bahr was hurried away by his guards to be flung into those dark, cramped quarters reeking of tar and bilge.

For a long hour he lay where he had fallen, believing himself alone; and time and place would no doubt conduce to philosophical reflection upon his condition. I like to think that he found that when all was considered, he had little with which to reproach himself. If he had done evil he had made ample amends. It can scarcely be pretended that he had betrayed those loyal Muslimeen followers of his, or, if it is, at least it must be added that he himself had paid the price of that betrayal. Rosamund was safe, Lionel would meet the justice due to him, and as for himself, being as good as dead already, he was worth little thought. He must have derived some measure of content from the reflection that he was spending his life to the very best advantage. Ruined it had been long since. True, but for his ill-starred expedition of vengeance he might long have continued to wage war as a corsair.

might even have risen to the proud Muslim eminence of the Bashalik of Algiers and become a feudatory prince of the Grand Turk. But for one who was born a Christian gentleman that would have been an unworthy way to have ended his days. The present was the better course.

A faint rustle in the impenetrable blackness of his prison turned the current of his thoughts. A rat, he thought, and drew himself to a sitting attitude, and beat his slippered heels upon the ground to drive away the loathly creature. Instead, a voice challenged him out of the gloom.

"Who's there?"

It startled him for a moment, in his complete assurance that he had been alone.

"Who's there?" the voice repeated, querulously to add: "What black hell be this? Where am I?"

And now he recognized the voice for Jasper Leigh's, and marvelled how that latest of his recruits to the ranks of Mohammed should be sharing this prison with him.

"Faith," said he, "you're in the forecastle of the Silver Heron; though how you come here is more than I can answer."

"Who are ye?" the voice asked.

"I have been known in Barbary as Sakr-el-Bahr."

"Sir Oliver!"

"I suppose that is what they will call me now. It is as well perhaps that I am to be buried at sea, else it might plague these Christian gentlemen what legend to inscribe upon my headstone. But you—how come you hither? My bargain with Sir John was that none should be molested, and I cannot think Sir John would be forsworn."

"As to that I know nothing, since I did not even know where I was bestowed until ye informed me. I was knocked senseless in the fight, after I had put my bilbo through your comely brother. That is the sum of my knowledge."

Sir Oliver caught his breath. "What do you say? You killed Lionel?"

"I believe so," was the cool answer. "At least I sent a couple of feet of steel through him—'twas in the press of the fight when first the English dropped aboard the galley; Master Lionel was in the van—the last place in which I should have looked to see him."

There fell a long silence. At length Sir Oliver spoke in a small voice.

"Not a doubt but you gave him no more than he was seeking. You are right, Master Leigh; the van was the last place in which to look for him, unless he came deliberately to seek steel that he might escape a rope. Best so, no doubt. Best so! God rest him!"

"Do you believe in God?" asked the sinful skipper on an anxious note.

"No doubt they took you because of that," Sir Oliver pursued, as if communing with himself. "Being in ignorance perhaps of his deserts, deeming him a saint and martyr, they resolved to avenge him upon you, and dragged you hither for that purpose." He sighed. "Well, well, Master Leigh, I make no doubt that knowing yourself for a rascal you have all your life been preparing your neck for a noose; so this will come as no surprise to you."

The skipper stirred uneasily, and groaned. "Lord, how my head aches!" he complained.

"They've a sure remedy for that," Sir Oliver comforted him. "And you'll swing in better company than you deserve, for I am to be hanged in the morn-ing too. You've earned it as fully as have I, Master

Leigh. Yet I am sorry for you—sorry you should suffer where I had not so intended."

Master Leigh sucked in a shuddering breath, and was silent for a while.

Then he repeated an earlier question.

"Do you believe in God, Sir Oliver?"

"There is no God but God, and Mohammed is his Prophet," was the answer, and from his tone Master Leigh could not be sure that he did not mock.

"That's a heathen creed," said he in fear and loathing.

"Nay, now; it's a creed by which men live. They perform as they preach, which is more than can be said of any Christians I have ever met."

"How can you talk so upon the eve of death?" cried Leigh in protest.

"Faith," said Sir Oliver, "it's considered the season of truth above all others."

"Then ye don't believe in God?"

"On the contrary, I do."

"But not in the real God?" the skipper insisted.

"There can be no God but the real God—it matters little what men call Him."

"Then if ye believe, are ye not afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Of hell, damnation, and eternal fire," roared the skipper, voicing his own belated terrors.

"I have but fulfilled the destiny which in His Omniscience He marked out for me," replied Sir Oliver. "My life hath been as He designed it, since naught may exist or happen save by His Will. Shall I then fear damnation for having been as God fashioned me?"

"'Tis the heathen Muslim creed!" Master Leigh protested.

"'Tis a comforting one," said Sir Oliver, "and it should comfort such a sinner as thou."

But Master Leigh refused to be comforted. "Oh!" he groaned miserably. "I would that I did not believe in God!"

"Your disbelief could no more abolish Him than can your fear create Him," replied Sir Oliver. "But your mood being what it is, were it not best you prayed?"

"Will not you pray with me?" quoth that rascal in his sudden fear of the hereafter.

"I shall do better," said Sir Oliver at last. "I shall pray for you—to Sir John Killigrew, that your life be spared."

"Sure he'll never heed you!" said Master Leigh with a catch in his breath.

"He shall. His honour is concerned in it. The terms of my surrender were that none else aboard the galley should suffer any hurt."

"But I killed Master Lionel."

"True—but that was in the scrimmage that preceded my making terms. Sir John pledged me his word, and Sir John will keep to it when I have made it clear to him that honour demands it."

A great burden was lifted from the skipper's mind—that great shadow of the fear of death that had overhung him. With it, it is greatly to be feared that his desperate penitence also departed. At least he talked no more of damnation, nor took any further thought for Sir Oliver's opinions and beliefs concerning the hereafter. He may rightly have supposed that Sir Oliver's creed was Sir Oliver's affair, and that should it happen to be wrong he was scarcely himself a qualified person to correct it. As for himself, the making of his soul could wait until another day, when the necessity for it should be more imminent.

Upon that he lay down and attempted to compose himself to sleep, though the pain in his head proved a difficulty. Finding slumber impossible after a while he would have talked again; but by that time his companion's regular breathing warned him that Sir Oliver had fallen asleep during the silence.

Now this surprised and shocked the skipper. He was utterly at a loss to understand how one who had lived Sir Oliver's life, been a renegade and a heathen, should be able to sleep tranquilly in the knowledge that at dawn he was to hang. His belated Christian zeal prompted him to rouse the sleeper and to urge him to spend the little time that yet remained him in making his peace with God. Humane compassion on the other hand suggested to him that he had best leave him in the peace of that oblivion. Considering matters he was profoundly touched to reflect that in such a season Sir Oliver could have found room in his mind to think of him and his fate and to undertake to contrive that he should be saved from the rope. He was the more touched when he bethought him of the extent to which he had himself been responsible for all that happened to Sir Oliver. Out of the consideration of heroism, a certain heroism came to be begotten in him, and he fell to pondering how in his turn he might perhaps serve Sir Oliver by a frank confession of all that he knew of the influences that had gone to make Sir Oliver what he was. This resolve uplifted him, and oddly enough it uplifted him all the more

when he reflected that perhaps he would be jeopardizing his own neck by the confession upon which he had determined.

So through that endless night he sat, nursing his aching head, and enheartened by the first purpose he had ever conceived of a truly good and altruistic deed. Yet fate it seemed was bent upon frustrating that purpose of his. For when at dawn they came to hale Sir Oliver to his doom, they paid no heed to Jasper Leigh's demands that he, too, should be taken before Sir John.

"Thee bean't included in our orders," said a seaman shortly.

"Maybe not," retorted Master Leigh, "because Sir John little knows what it is in my power to tell him. Take me before him, I say, that he may hear from me the truth of certain matters ere it be too late."

"Be still," the seaman bade him, and struck him heavily across the face, so that he reeled and collapsed into a corner. "Thee turn will come soon. Just now our business be with this other heathen."

"Naught that you can say would avail," Sir Oliver assured him quietly. "But I thank you for the thought that marks you for my friend. My hands are bound, Jasper. Were it otherwise I would beg leave to clasp your own. Fare you well!"

Sir Oliver was led out into the golden sunlight which almost blinded him after his long confinement in that dark hole. They were, he gathered, to conduct him to the cabin where a short mockery of a trial was to be held. But in the waist their progress was arrested by an officer, who bade them wait.

Sir Oliver sat down upon a coil of rope, his guard about him, an object of curious inspection to the rude seamen. They thronged the forecastle and the hatchways to stare at this formidable corsair who once had been a Cornish gentleman and who had become a renegade Muslim and a terror to Christianity.

Truth to tell, the sometime Cornish gentleman was difficult to discern in him as he sat there still wearing the caftan of cloth of silver over his white tunic and a turban of the same material swathed about his steel headpiece that ended in a spike. Idly he swung his brown sinewy legs, naked from knee to ankle, with the inscrutable calm of the fatalist upon his swarthy hawk face with its light agate eyes and black forked beard; and those callous seamen who had assembled there to jeer and mock him were stricken silent by the intrepidity and stoicism of his bearing in the face of death.

If the delay chafed him, he gave no outward sign of it. If his hard, light eyes glanced hither and thither it was upon no idle quest. He was seeking Rosamund, hoping for a last sight of her before they launched him upon his last dread voyage.

But Rosamund was not to be seen. She was in the cabin at the time. She had been there for this hour past, and it was to her that the present delay was due.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE JUDGES

In the absence of any woman into whose care they might entrust her, Lord Henry, Sir John, and Master Tobias, the ship's surgeon, had amongst them tended Rosamund as best they could when numbed and half-dazed she was brought aboard the Silver Heron.

Master Tobias had applied such rude restoratives as he commanded, and having made her as comfortable as possible upon a couch in the spacious cabin astern, he had suggested that she should be allowed the rest of which she appeared so sorely to stand in need. He had ushered out the commander and the Queen's Lieutenant, and himself had gone below to a still more urgent case that was demanding his attention—that of Lionel Tressilian, who had been brought limp and unconscious from the galeasse together with some four other wounded members of the Silver Heron's crew.

At dawn Sir John had come below, seeking news of his wounded friend. He found the surgeon kneeling over Lionel.

As he entered, Master Tobias turned aside, rinsed his hands in a metal basin placed upon the floor, and rose wiping them on a napkin.

"I can do no more, Sir John," he muttered in a desponding voice. "He is sped."

"Dead, d'ye mean?" cried Sir John, a catch in his voice.

The surgeon tossed aside the napkin, and slowly drew down the upturned sleeves of his black doublet. "All but dead," he answered. "The wonder is that any spark of life should still linger in a body with that hole in it. He is bleeding inwardly, and his pulse is steadily

weakening. It must continue so until imperceptibly he passes away. You may count him dead already, Sir John." He paused. "A merciful, painless end," he added, and sighed perfunctorily, his pale shaven face decently grave, for all that such scenes as these were commonplaces in his life. "Of the other four," he continued, "Blair is dead; the other three should all recover."

But Sir John gave little heed to the matter of those others. His grief and dismay at this quenching of all hope for his friend precluded any other consideration at the moment.

"And he will not even recover consciousness?" he asked insisting, although already he had been answered.

"As I have said, you may count him dead already, Sir John. My skill can do nothing for him."

Sir John's head drooped, his countenance drawn and grave. "Nor can my justice," he added gloomily. "Though it avenge him, it cannot give me back my friend." He looked at the surgeon. "Vengeance, sir, is the hollowest of all the mockeries that go to make up life."

"Your task, Sir John," replied the surgeon, "is one of justice, not vengeance."

"A quibble, when all is said." He stepped to Lionel's side, and looked down at the pale handsome face over which the dark shadows of death were already creeping. "If he would but speak in the interests of this justice that is to do! If we might but have the evidence of his own words, lest I should ever be asked to justify the hanging of Oliver Tressilian."

"Surely, sir," the surgeon ventured, "there can be no such question ever. Mistress Rosamund's word alone should suffice, if indeed so much as that even were required."

"Ay! His offenses against God and man are too notorious to leave grounds upon which any should ever question my right to deal with him out of hand."

There was a tap at the door and Sir John's own body servant entered with the announcement that Mistress Rosamund was asking urgently to see him.

"She will be impatient for news of him," Sir John concluded, and he groaned. "My God! How am I to tell her? To crush her in the very hour of her deliverance with such news as this! Was ever irony so cruel?" He turned, and stepped heavily to the door. There he paused. "You will remain by him to the end?" he bade the surgeon interrogatively.

Master Tobias bowed. "Of course, Sir John." And he added, "'Twill not be long."

Sir John looked across at Lionel again—a glance of valediction. "God rest him!" he said hoarsely, and passed out.

In the waist he paused a moment, turned to a knot of lounging seamen, and bade them throw a halter over the yard-arm, and hale the renegade Oliver Tressilian from his prison. Then with slow heavy step and heavier heart he went up the companion to the vessel's castellated poop.

The sun, new risen in a faint golden haze, shone over a sea faintly rippled by the fresh clean winds of dawn to which their every stitch of canvas was now spread. Away on the larboard quarter, a faint cloudy outline, was the coast of Spain.

Sir John's long sallow face was preternaturally grave when he entered the cabin, where Rosamund awaited him. He bowed to her with a grave courtesy, doffing his hat and casting it upon a chair. The last five years had brought some strands of white into his thick black hair, and at the temples in particular it showed very grey, giving him

an appearance of age to which the deep lines in his brow contributed.

He advanced towards her, as she rose to receive him. "Rosamund, my dear!" he said gently, and took both her hands. He looked with eyes of sorrow and concern into her white, agitated face.

"Are you sufficiently rested, child?"

"Rested?" she echoed on a note of wonder that he should suppose it.

"Poor lamb, poor lamb!" he murmured, as a mother might have done, and drew her towards him, stroking that gleaming auburn head. "We'll speed us back to England with every stitch of canvas spread. Take heart then, and...."

But she broke in impetuously, drawing away from him as she spoke, and his heart sank with foreboding of the thing she was about to inquire.

"I overheard a sailor just now saying to another that it is your intent to hang Sir Oliver Tressilian out of hand—this morning."

He misunderstood her utterly. "Be comforted," he said. "My justice shall be swift; my vengeance sure. The yard-arm is charged already with the rope on which he shall leap to his eternal punishment."

She caught her breath, and set a hand upon her bosom as if to repress its sudden tumult.

"And upon what grounds," she asked him with an air of challenge, squarely facing him, "do you intend to do this thing?"

"Upon what grounds?" he faltered. He stared and frowned, bewildered by her question and its tone. "Upon what grounds?" he repeated, foolishly almost in the intensity of his amazement. Then he considered her more closely, and the wildness of her eyes bore to

him slowly an explanation of words that at first had seemed beyond explaining.

"I see!" he said in a voice of infinite pity; for the conviction to which he had leapt was that her poor wits were all astray after the horrors through which she had lately travelled. "You must rest," he said gently, "and give no thought to such matters as these. Leave them to me, and be very sure that I shall avenge you as is due."

"Sir John, you mistake me, I think. I do not desire that you avenge me. I have asked you upon what grounds you intend to do this thing, and you have not answered me."

In increasing amazement he continued to stare. He had been wrong, then. She was quite sane and mistress of her wits. And yet instead of the fond inquiries concerning Lionel which he had been dreading came this amazing questioning of his grounds to hang his prisoner.

"Need I state to you—of all living folk—the offences which that dastard has committed?" he asked, expressing thus the very question that he was setting himself.

"You need to tell me," she answered, "by what right you constitute yourself his judge and executioner; by what right you send him to his death in this peremptory fashion, without trial." Her manner was as stern as if she were invested with all the authority of a judge.

"But you," he faltered in his ever-growing bewilderment, "you, Rosamund, against whom he has offended so grievously, surely you should be the last to ask me such a question! Why, it is my intention to proceed with him as is the manner of the sea with all knaves taken as Oliver Tressilian was taken. If your mood be merciful towards him—which as God lives, I can scarce conceive—consider that this is the greatest mercy he can look for."

"You speak of mercy and vengeance in a breath, Sir John." She was growing calm, her agitation was quieting and a grim sternness was replacing it.

He made a gesture of impatience. "What good purpose could it serve to take him to England?" he demanded. "There he must stand his trial, and the issue is foregone. It were unnecessarily to torture him."

"The issue may be none so foregone as you suppose," she replied. "And that trial is his right."

Sir John took a turn in the cabin, his wits all confused. It was preposterous that he should stand and argue upon such a matter with Rosamund of all people, and yet she was compelling him to it against his every inclination, against common sense itself.

"If he so urges it, we'll not deny him," he said at last, deeming it best to humour her. "We'll take him back to England if he demands it, and let him stand his trial there. But Oliver Tressilian must realize too well what is in store for him to make any such demand." He passed before her, and held out his hands in entreaty. "Come, Rosamund, my dear! You are distraught, you...."

"I am indeed distraught, Sir John," she answered, and took the hands that he extended. "Oh, have pity!" she cried with a sudden change to utter intercession. "I implore you to have pity!"

"What pity can I show you, child? You have but to name...."

"'Tis not pity for me, but pity for him that I am beseeching of you."

"For him?" he cried, frowning again.

"For Oliver Tressilian."

He dropped her hands and stood away. "God's light!" he swore.

"You sue for pity for Oliver Tressilian, for that renegade, that incarnate devil? Oh, you are mad!" he stormed. "Mad!" and he flung away from her, whirling his arms.

"I love him," she said simply.

That answer smote him instantly still. Under the shock of it he just stood and stared at her again, his jaw fallen.

"You love him!" he said at last below his breath. "You love him! You love a man who is a pirate, a renegade, the abductor of yourself and of Lionel, the man who murdered your brother!"

"He did not." She was fierce in her denial of it. "I have learnt the truth of that matter."

"From his lips, I suppose?" said Sir John, and he was unable to repress a sneer. "And you believed him?"

"Had I not believed him I should not have married him."

"Married him?" Sudden horror came now to temper his bewilderment. Was there to be no end to these astounding revelations? Had they reached the climax yet, he wondered, or was there still more to come? "You married that infamous villain?" he asked, and his voice was expressionless.

"I did—in Algiers on the night we landed there." He stood gaping at her whilst a man might count to a dozen, and then abruptly he exploded. "It is enough!" he roared, shaking a clenched fist at the low ceiling of the cabin. "It is enough, as God's my Witness. If there were no other reason to hang him, that would be reason and to spare. You may look to me to make an end of this infamous marriage within the hour."

"Ah, if you will but listen to me!" she pleaded.

"Listen to you?" He paused by the door to which he had stepped in his fury, intent upon giving the word that there and then should make an end, and summoning Oliver Tressilian before him, announce his fate to him and see it executed on the spot. "Listen to you?" he repeated, scorn and anger blending in his voice. "I have heard more than enough already!"

It was the Killigrew way, Lord Henry Goade assures us, pausing here at long length for one of those digressions into the history of families whose members chance to impinge upon his chronicle. "They were," he says, "ever an impetuous, short-reasoning folk, honest and upright enough so far as their judgment carried them, but hampered by a lack of penetration in that judgment."

Sir John, as much in his earlier commerce with the Tressilians as in this pregnant hour, certainly appears to justify his lordship of that criticism. There were a score of questions a man of perspicuity would not have asked, not one of which appears to have occurred to the knight of Arwenack. If anything arrested him upon the cabin's threshold, delayed him in the execution of the thing he had resolved upon, no doubt it was sheer curiosity as to what further extravagances Rosamund might yet have it in her mind to utter.

"This man has suffered," she told him, and was not put off by the hard laugh with which he mocked that statement. "God alone knows what he has suffered in body and in soul for sins which he never committed. Much of that suffering came to him through me. I know to-day that he did not murder Peter. I know that but for a disloyal act of mine he would be in a position incontestably to prove it without the aid of any man. I know that he was carried off, kidnapped before ever he could clear himself of the accusation, and that as a consequence no life remained him but the life of a renegade which he chose. Mine was the chief fault. And I must make amends. Spare him to me! If you love me...."

But he had heard enough. His sallow face was flushed to a flaming purple.

"Not another word!" he blazed at her. "It is because I do love you—love and pity you from my heart—that I will not listen. It seems I must save you not only from that knave, but from yourself. I were false to my duty by you, false to your dead father and murdered brother else. Anon, you shall thank me, Rosamund." And again he turned to depart.

"Thank you?" she cried in a ringing voice. "I shall curse you. All my life I shall loathe and hate you, holding you in horror for a murderer if you do this thing. You fool! Can you not see? You fool!"

He recoiled. Being a man of position and importance, quick, fearless, and vindictive of temperament—and also, it would seem, extremely fortunate—it had never happened to him in all his life to be so uncompromisingly and frankly judged. She was by no means the first to account him a fool, but she was certainly the first to call him one to his face; and whilst to the general it might have proved her extreme sanity, to him it was no more than the culminating proof of her mental distemper.

"Pish!" he said, between anger and pity, "you are mad, stark mad! Your mind's unhinged, your vision's all distorted. This fiend incarnate is become a poor victim of the evil of others; and I am become a murderer in your sight—a murderer and a fool. God's Life! Bah! Anon when you are rested, when you are restored, I pray that things may once again assume their proper aspect."

He turned, all aquiver still with indignation, and was barely in time to avoid being struck by the door which opened suddenly from without.

Lord Henry Goade, dressed—as he tells us—entirely in black, and with his gold chain of office—an ominous sign could they have read it—upon his broad chest, stood in the doorway, silhouetted sharply

against the flood of morning sunlight at his back. His benign face would, no doubt, be extremely grave to match the suit he had put on, but its expression will have lightened somewhat when his glance fell upon Rosamund standing there by the table's edge.

"I was overjoyed," he writes, "to find her so far recovered, and seeming so much herself again, and I expressed my satisfaction."

"She were better abed," snapped Sir John, two hectic spots burning still in his sallow cheeks. "She is distempered, quite."

"Sir John is mistaken, my lord," was her calm assurance, "I am very far from suffering as he conceives."

"I rejoice therein, my dear," said his lordship, and I imagine his questing eyes speeding from one to the other of them, and marking the evidences of Sir John's temper, wondering what could have passed. "It happens," he added sombrely, "that we may require your testimony in this grave matter that is toward." He turned to Sir John. "I have bidden them bring up the prisoner for sentence. Is the ordeal too much for you, Rosamund?"

"Indeed, no, my lord," she replied readily. "I welcome it." And threw back her head as one who braces herself for a trial of endurance.

"No, no," cut in Sir John, protesting fiercely. "Do not heed her, Harry. She...."

"Considering," she interrupted, "that the chief count against the prisoner must concern his... his dealings with myself, surely the matter is one upon which I should be heard."

"Surely, indeed," Lord Henry agreed, a little bewildered, he confesses, "always provided you are certain it will not overtax your endurance and distress you overmuch. We could perhaps dispense with your testimony."

"In that, my lord, I assure you that you are mistaken," she answered. "You cannot dispense with it."

"Be it so, then," said Sir John grimly, and he strode back to the table, prepared to take his place there.

Lord Henry's twinkling blue eyes were still considering Rosamund somewhat searchingly, his fingers tugging thoughtfully at his short tuft of ashen-coloured beard. Then he turned to the door. "Come in, gentlemen," he said, "and bid them bring up the prisoner."

Steps clanked upon the deck, and three of Sir John's officers made their appearance to complete the court that was to sit in judgment upon the renegade corsair, a judgment whose issue was foregone.

CHAPTER XXV. THE ADVOCATE

Chairs were set at the long brown table of massive oak, and the officers sat down, facing the open door and the blaze of sunshine on the poop-deck, their backs to the other door and the horn windows which opened upon the stern-gallery. The middle place was assumed by Lord Henry Goade by virtue of his office of Queen's Lieutenant, and the reason for his chain of office became now apparent. He was to preside over this summary court. On his right sat Sir John Killigrew, and beyond him an officer named Youldon. The other two, whose names have not survived, occupied his lordship's left.

A chair had been set for Rosamund at the table's extreme right and across the head of it, so as to detach her from the judicial bench. She sat there now, her elbows on the polished board, her face resting in her half-clenched hands, her eyes scrutinizing the five gentlemen who formed this court.

Steps rang on the companion, and a shadow fell athwart the sunlight beyond the open door. From the vessel's waist came a murmur of voices and a laugh. Then Sir Oliver appeared in the doorway guarded by two fighting seamen in corselet and morion with drawn swords.

He paused an instant in the doorway, and his eyelids flickered as if he had received a shock when his glance alighted upon Rosamund. Then under the suasion of his guards he entered, and stood forward, his wrists still pinioned behind him, slightly in advance of the two soldiers.

He nodded perfunctorily to the court, his face entirely calm.

"A fine morning, sirs," said he.

The five considered him in silence, but Lord Henry's glance, as it rested upon the corsair's Muslim garb, was eloquent of the scorn which he tells us filled his heart.

"You are no doubt aware, sir," said Sir John after a long pause, "of the purpose for which you have been brought hither."

"Scarcely," said the prisoner. "But I have no doubt whatever of the purpose for which I shall presently be taken hence. However," he continued, cool and critical, "I can guess from your judicial attitudes the superfluous mockery that you intend. If it will afford you entertainment, faith, I do not grudge indulging you. I would observe only that it might be considerate in you to spare Mistress Rosamund the pain and weariness of the business that is before you."

"Mistress Rosamund herself desired to be present," said Sir John, scowling.

"Perhaps," said Sir Oliver, "she does not realize...."

"I have made it abundantly plain to her," Sir John interrupted, almost vindictively.

The prisoner looked at her as if in surprise, his brows knit. Then with a shrug he turned to his judges again.

"In that case," said he, "there's no more to be said. But before you proceed, there is another matter upon which I desire an understanding.

"The terms of my surrender were that all others should be permitted to go free. You will remember, Sir John, that you pledged me your knightly word for that. Yet I find aboard here one who was lately with

me upon my galeasse—a sometime English seaman, named Jasper Leigh, whom you hold a prisoner."

"He killed Master Lionel Tressilian," said Sir John coldly

"That may be, Sir John. But the blow was delivered before I made my terms with you, and you cannot violate these terms without hurt to your honour."

"D'ye talk of honour, sir?" said Lord Henry.

"Of Sir John's honour, my lord," said the prisoner, with mock humility.

"You are here, sir, to take your trial," Sir John reminded him.

"So I had supposed. It is a privilege for which you agreed to pay a certain price, and now it seems you have been guilty of filching something back. It seems so, I say. For I cannot think but that the arrest was inadvertently effected, and that it will suffice that I draw your attention to the matter of Master Leigh's detention."

Sir John considered the table. It was beyond question that he was in honour bound to enlarge Master Leigh, whatever the fellow might have done; and, indeed, his arrest had been made without Sir John's knowledge until after the event.

"What am I to do with him?" he growled sullenly.

"That is for yourself to decide, Sir John. But I can tell you what you may not do with him. You may not keep him a prisoner, or carry him to England or injure him in any way. Since his arrest was a pure error, as I gather, you must repair that error as best you can. I am satisfied that you will do so, and need say no more. Your servant, sirs," he added to intimate that he was now entirely at their disposal, and he stood waiting.

There was a slight pause, and then Lord Henry, his face inscrutable, his glance hostile and cold, addressed the prisoner.

"We have had you brought hither to afford you an opportunity of urging any reasons why we should not hang you out of hand, as is our right."

Sir Oliver looked at him in almost amused surprise. "Faith!" he said at length. "It was never my habit to waste breath."

"I doubt you do not rightly apprehend me, sir," returned his lordship, and his voice was soft and silken as became his judicial position. "Should you demand a formal trial, we will convey you to England that you may have it."

"But lest you should build unduly upon that," cut in Sir John fiercely, "let me warn you that as the offences for which you are to suffer were chiefly committed within Lord Henry Goade's own jurisdiction, your trial will take place in Cornwall, where Lord Henry has the honour to be Her Majesty's Lieutenant and dispenser of justice."

"Her Majesty is to be congratulated," said Sir Oliver elaborately.

"It is for you to choose, sir," Sir John ran on, "whether you will be hanged on sea or land."

"My only possible objection would be to being hanged in the air. But you're not likely to heed that," was the flippant answer.

Lord Henry leaned forward again. "Let me beg you, sir, in your own interests to be serious," he admonished the prisoner.

"I confess the occasion, my lord. For if you are to sit in judgment upon my piracy, I could not desire a more experienced judge of the matter on sea or land than Sir John Killigrew."

"I am glad to deserve your approval," Sir John replied tartly.

Piracy," he added, "is but the least of the counts against you."

Sir Oliver's brows went up, and he stared at the row of solemn faces.

"As God's my life, then, your other counts must needs be sound—or else, if there be any justice in your methods, you are like to be disappointed of your hopes of seeing me swing. Proceed, sirs, to the other counts. I vow you become more interesting than I could have hoped."

"Can you deny the piracy?" quoth Lord Henry.

"Deny it? No. But I deny your jurisdiction in the matter, or that of any English court, since I have committed no piracy in English waters."

Lord Henry admits that the answer silenced and bewildered him, being utterly unexpected. Yet what the prisoner urged was a truth so obvious that it was difficult to apprehend how his lordship had come to overlook it. I rather fear that despite his judicial office, jurisprudence was not a strong point with his lordship. But Sir John, less perspicuous or less scrupulous in the matter, had his retort ready.

"Did you not come to Arwenack and forcibly carry off thence...."

"Nay, now, nay, now," the corsair interrupted, good-humouredly. "Go back to school, Sir John, to learn that abduction is not piracy."

"Call it abduction, if you will," Sir John admitted.

"Not if I will, Sir John. We'll call it what it is, if you please."

"You are trifling, sir. But we shall mend that presently," and Sir John banged the table with his fist, his face flushing slightly in anger. (Lord Henry very properly deplores this show of heat at such a time.) "You cannot pretend to be ignorant," Sir John continued, "that abduction is punishable by death under the law of England." He turned to his

fellow-judges. "We will then, sirs, with your concurrence, say no more of the piracy."

"Faith," said Lord Henry in his gentle tones, "in justice we cannot." And he shrugged the matter aside. "The prisoner is right in what he claims. We have no jurisdiction in that matter, seeing that he committed no piracy in English waters, nor—so far as our knowledge goes—against any vessel sailing under the English flag."

Rosamund stirred. Slowly she took her elbows from the table, and folded her arms resting them upon the edge of it. Thus leaning forward she listened now with an odd brightness in her eye, a slight flush in her cheeks reflecting some odd excitement called into life by Lord Henry's admission—an admission which sensibly whittled down the charges against the prisoner.

Sir Oliver, watching her almost furtively, noted this and marvelled, even as he marvelled at her general composure. It was in vain that he sought to guess what might be her attitude of mind towards himself now that she was safe again among friends and protectors.

But Sir John, intent only upon the business ahead, plunged angrily on.

"Be it so," he admitted impatiently. "We will deal with him upon the counts of abduction and murder. Have you anything to say?"

"Nothing that would be like to weigh with you," replied Sir Oliver. And then with a sudden change from his slightly derisive manner to one that was charged with passion: "Let us make an end of this comedy," he cried, "of this pretence of judicial proceedings. Hang me, and have done, or set me to walk the plank. Play the pirate, for that is a trade you understand. But a' God's name don't disgrace the Queen's commission by playing the judge."

Sir John leapt to his feet, his face aflame. "Now, by Heaven, you

insolent knave...."

But Lord Henry checked him, placing a restraining hand upon his sleeve, and forcing him gently back into his seat. Himself he now addressed the prisoner.

"Sir, your words are unworthy one who, whatever his crimes, has earned the repute of being a sturdy, valiant fighter. Your deeds are so notorious—particularly that which caused you to flee from England and take to roving, and that of your reappearance at Arwenack and the abduction of which you were then guilty—that your sentence in an English court is a matter foregone beyond all possible doubt. Nevertheless, it shall be yours, as I have said, for the asking.

"Yet," he added, and his voice was lowered and very earnest, "were I your friend, Sir Oliver, I would advise you that you rather choose to be dealt with in the summary fashion of the sea."

"Sirs," replied Sir Oliver, "your right to hang me I have not disputed, nor do I. I have no more to say."

"But I have."

Thus Rosamund at last, startling the court with her crisp, sharp utterance. All turned to look at her as she rose, and stood tall and compelling at the table's end.

"Rosamund!" cried Sir John, and rose in his turn. "Let me implore you...."

She waved him peremptorily, almost contemptuously, into silence.

"Since in this matter of the abduction with which Sir Oliver is charged," she said, "I am the person said to have been abducted, it were perhaps well that before going further in this matter you should hear what I may hereafter have to say in an English court."

Sir John shrugged, and sat down again. She would have her way, he realized; just as he knew that its only result could be to waste their time and protract the agony of the doomed man.

Lord Henry turned to her, his manner full of deference. "Since the prisoner has not denied the charge, and since wisely he refrains from demanding to be taken to trial, we need not harass you, Mistress Rosamund. Nor will you be called upon to say anything in an English court."

"There you are at fault, my lord," she answered, her voice very level. "I shall be called upon to say something when I impeach you all for murder upon the high seas, as impeach you I shall if you persist in your intent."

"Rosamund!" cried Oliver in his sudden amazement—and it was a cry of joy and exultation.

She looked at him, and smiled—a smile full of courage and friendliness and something more, a smile for which he considered that his impending hanging was but a little price to pay. Then she turned again to that court, into which her words had flung a sudden consternation.

"Since he disdains to deny the accusation, I must deny it for him," she informed them. "He did not abduct me, sirs, as is alleged. I love Oliver Tressilian. I am of full age and mistress of my actions, and I went willingly with him to Algiers where I became his wife."

Had she flung a bomb amongst them she could hardly have made a greater disorder of their wits. They sat back, and stared at her with blank faces, muttering incoherencies.

"His... his wife?" babbled Lord Henry. "You became his...."

And then Sir John cut in fiercely. "A lie! A lie to save that foul

villain's neck!"

Rosamund leaned towards him, and her smile was almost a sneer. "Your wits were ever sluggish, Sir John," she said. "Else you would not need reminding that I could have no object in lying to save him if he had done me the wrong that is imputed to him." Then she looked at the others. "I think, sirs, that in this matter my word will outweigh Sir John's or any man's in any court of justice."

"Faith, that's true enough!" ejaculated the bewildered Lord Henry. "A moment, Killigrew!" And again he stilled the impetuous Sir John. He looked at Sir Oliver, who in truth was very far from being the least bewildered in that company. "What do you say to that, sir?" he asked.

"To that?" echoed the almost speechless corsair. "What is there left to say?" he evaded.

"'Tis all false," cried Sir John again. "We were witnesses of the event—you and I, Harry—and we saw...."

"You saw," Rosamund interrupted. "But you did not know what had been concerted."

For a moment that silenced them again. They were as men who stand upon crumbling ground, whose every effort to win to a safer footing but occasioned a fresh slide of soil. Then Sir John sneered, and made his riposte.

"No doubt she will be prepared to swear that her betrothed, Master Lionel Tressilian, accompanied her willingly upon that elopement."

"No," she answered. "As for Lionel Tressilian he was carried off that he might expiate his sins—sins which he had fathered upon his brother there, sins which are the subject of your other count against him."

"Now what can you mean by that?" asked his lordship.

"That the story that Sir Oliver killed my brother is a calumny; that the murderer was Lionel Tressilian, who, to avoid detection and to complete his work, caused Sir Oliver to be kidnapped that he might be sold into slavery."

"This is too much!" roared Sir John. "She is trifling with us, she makes white black and black white. She has been bewitched by that crafty rogue, by Moorish arts that..."

"Wait!" said Lord Henry, raising his hand. "Give me leave." He confronted her very seriously. "This... this is a grave statement, mistress. Have you any proof—anything that you conceive to be a proof—of what you are saying?"

But Sir John was not to be repressed. "'Tis but the lying tale this villain told her. He has bewitched her, I say. 'Tis plain as the sunlight yonder."

Sir Oliver laughed outright at that. His mood was growing exultant, buoyant, and joyous, and this was the first expression of it. "Bewitched her? You're determined never to lack for a charge. First 'twas piracy, then abduction and murder, and now 'tis witchcraft!"

"Oh, a moment, pray!" cried Lord Henry, and he confesses to some heat at this point. "Do you seriously tell us, Mistress Rosamund, that it was Lionel Tressilian who murdered Peter Godolphin?"

"Seriously?" she echoed, and her lips were twisted in a little smile of scorn. "I not merely tell it you, I swear it here in the sight of God. It was Lionel who murdered my brother and it was Lionel who put it about that the deed was Sir Oliver's. It was said that Sir Oliver had run away from the consequences of something discovered against him, and I to my shame believed the public voice. But I have since discovered the truth..."

"The truth, do you say, mistress?" cried the impetuous Sir John in a voice of passionate contempt. "The truth...."

Again his Lordship was forced to intervene.

"Have patience, man," he admonished the knight. "The truth will prevail in the end, never fear, Killigrew."

"Meanwhile we are wasting time," grumbled Sir John, and on that fell moodily silent.

"Are we further to understand you to say, mistress," Lord Henry resumed, "that the prisoner's disappearance from Penarrow was due not to flight, as was supposed, but to his having been trepanned by order of his brother?"

"That is the truth as I stand here in the sight of Heaven," she replied in a voice that rang with sincerity and carried conviction to more than one of the officers seated at that table. "By that act the murderer sought not only to save himself from exposure, but to complete his work by succeeding to the Tressilian estates. Sir Oliver was to have been sold into slavery to the Moors of Barbary. Instead the vessel upon which he sailed was captured by Spaniards, and he was sent to the galleys by the Inquisition. When his galley was captured by Muslim corsairs he took the only way of escape that offered. He became a corsair and a leader of corsairs, and then...."

"What else he did we know," Lord Henry interrupted. "And I assure you it would all weigh very lightly with us or with any court if what else you say is true."

"It is true. I swear it, my lord," she repeated.

"Ay," he answered, nodding gravely. "But can you prove it?"

"What better proof can I offer you than that I love him, and have married him?"

"Bah!" said Sir John.

"That, mistress," said Lord Henry, his manner extremely gentle, "is proof that yourself you believe this amazing story. But it is not proof that the story itself is true. You had it, I suppose," he continued smoothly, "from Oliver Tressilian himself?"

"That is so; but in Lionel's own presence, and Lionel himself confirmed it—admitting its truth."

"You dare say that?" cried Sir John, and stared at her in incredulous anger. "My God! You dare say that?"

"I dare and do," she answered him, giving him back look for look.

Lord Henry sat back in his chair, and tugged gently at his ashen tuft of beard, his florid face overcast and thoughtful. There was something here he did not understand at all. "Mistress Rosamund," he said quietly, "let me exhort you to consider the gravity of your words. You are virtually accusing one who is no longer able to defend himself; if your story is established, infamy will rest for ever upon the memory of Lionel Tressilian. Let me ask you again, and let me entreat you to answer scrupulously. Did Lionel Tressilian admit the truth of this thing with which you say that the prisoner charged him?"

"Once more I solemnly swear that what I have spoken is true; that Lionel Tressilian did in my presence, when charged by Sir Oliver with the murder of my brother and the kidnapping of himself, admit those charges. Can I make it any plainer, sirs?"

Lord Henry spread his hands. "After that, Killigrew, I do not think we can go further in this matter. Sir Oliver must go with us to England, and there take his trial."

But there was one present—that officer named Youldon—whose

wits, it seems, were of keener temper.

"By your leave, my lord," he now interposed, and he turned to question the witness. "What was the occasion on which Sir Oliver forced this admission from his brother?"

Truthfully she answered. "At his house in Algiers on the night he...." She checked suddenly, perceiving then the trap that had been set for her. And the others perceived it also. Sir John leapt into the breach which Youldon had so shrewdly made in her defences.

"Continue, pray," he bade her. "On the night he...."

"On the night we arrived there," she answered desperately, the colour now receding slowly from her face.

"And that, of course," said Sir John slowly, mockingly almost, "was the first occasion on which you heard this explanation of Sir Oliver's conduct?"

"It was," she faltered—perforce.

"So that," insisted Sir John, determined to leave her no loophole whatsoever, "so that until that night you had naturally continued to believe Sir Oliver to be the murderer of your brother?"

She hung her head in silence, realizing that the truth could not prevail here since she had hampered it with a falsehood, which was now being dragged into the light.

"Answer me!" Sir John commanded.

"There is no need to answer," said Lord Henry slowly, in a voice of pain, his eyes lowered to the table. "There can, of course, be but one answer. Mistress Rosamund has told us that he did not abduct her forcibly; that she went with him of her own free will and married him; and she has urged that circumstance as a proof of her conviction of

his innocence. Yet now it becomes plain that at the time she left England with him she still believed him to be her brother's slayer. Yet she asks us to believe that he did not abduct her." He spread his hands again and pursed his lips in a sort of grieved contempt.

"Let us make an end, a' God's name!" said Sir John, rising.

"Ah, wait!" she cried. "I swear that all that I have told you is true—all but the matter of the abduction. I admit that, but I condoned it in view of what I have since learnt."

"She admits it!" mocked Sir John.

But she went on without heeding him. "Knowing what he has suffered through the evil of others, I gladly own him my husband, hoping to make some amends to him for the part I had in his wrongs. You must believe me, sirs. But if you will not, I ask you is his action of yesterday to count for naught? Are you not to remember that but for him you would have had no knowledge of my whereabouts?"

They stared at her in fresh surprise.

"To what do you refer now, mistress? What action of his is responsible for this?"

"Do you need to ask? Are you so set on murdering him that you affect ignorance? Surely you know that it was he dispatched Lionel to inform you of my whereabouts?"

Lord Henry tells us that at this he smote the table with his open palm, displaying an anger he could no longer curb. "This is too much!" he cried. "Hitherto I have believed you sincere but misguided and mistaken. But so deliberate a falsehood transcends all bounds. What has come to you, girl? Why, Lionel himself told us the circumstances of his escape from the galeasse. Himself he told us how that villain had him flogged and then flung him into the sea for dead."

"Ah!" said Sir Oliver between his teeth. "I recognize Lionel there! He would be false to the end, of course. I should have thought of that."

Rosamund at bay, in a burst of regal anger leaned forward to face Lord Henry and the others. "He lied, the base, treacherous dog!" she cried.

"Madam," Sir John rebuked her, "you are speaking of one who is all but dead."

"And more than damned," added Sir Oliver. "Sirs," he cried, "you prove naught but your own stupidity when you accuse this gentle lady of falsehood."

"We have heard enough, sir," Lord Henry interrupted.

"Have you so, by God!" he roared, stung suddenly to anger. "You shall hear yet a little more. The truth will prevail, you have said yourself; and prevail the truth shall since this sweet lady so desires it."

He was flushed, and his light eyes played over them like points of steel, and like points of steel they carried a certain measure of compulsion. He had stood before them half-mocking and indifferent, resigned to hang and desiring the thing might be over and ended as speedily as possible. But all that was before he suspected that life could still have anything to offer him, whilst he conceived that Rosamund was definitely lost to him. True, he had the memory of a certain tenderness she had shown him yesternight aboard the galley, but he had deemed that tenderness to be no more than such as the situation itself begot. Almost he had deemed the same to be here the case until he had witnessed her fierceness and despair in fighting for his life, until he had heard and gauged the sincerity of her avowal that she loved him and desired to make some amends to him for all that he had suffered in the past. That had spurred him, and had a further spur been needed, it was afforded him when they branded her words

with falsehood, mocked her to her face with what they supposed to be her lies. Anger had taken him at that to stiffen his resolve to make a stand against them and use the one weapon that remained him—that a merciful chance, a just God had placed within his power almost despite himself.

"I little knew, sirs," he said, "that Sir John was guided by the hand of destiny itself when last night, in violation of the terms of my surrender, he took a prisoner from my galeasse. That man is, as I have said, a sometime English seaman, named Jasper Leigh. He fell into my hands some months ago, and took the same road to escape from thralldom that I took myself under the like circumstances. I was merciful in that I permitted him to do so, for he is the very skipper who was suborned by Lionel to kidnap me and carry me into Barbary. With me he fell into the hands of the Spaniards. Have him brought hither, and question him."

In silence they all looked at him, but on more than one face he saw the reflection of amazement at his impudence, as they conceived it.

It was Lord Henry who spoke at last. "Surely, sir, this is most oddly, most suspiciously apt," he said, and there could be no doubt that he was faintly sneering. "The very man to be here aboard, and taken prisoner thus, almost by chance...."

"Not quite by chance, though very nearly. He conceives that he has a grudge against Lionel, for it was through Lionel that misfortune overtook him. Last night when Lionel so rashly leapt aboard the galley, Jasper Leigh saw his opportunity to settle an old score and took it. It was as a consequence of that that he was arrested."

"Even so, the chance is still miraculous."

"Miracles, my lord, must happen sometimes if the truth is to prevail," Sir Oliver replied with a tinge of his earlier mockery. "Fetch

him hither, and question him. He knows naught of what has passed here. It were a madness to suppose him primed for a situation which none could have foreseen. Fetch him hither, then."

Steps sounded outside but went unheeded at the moment.

"Surely," said Sir John, "we have been trifled with by liars long enough!"

The door was flung open, and the lean black figure of the surgeon made its appearance.

"Sir John!" he called urgently, breaking without ceremony into the proceedings, and never heeding Lord Henry's scowl. "Master Tressilian has recovered consciousness. He is asking for you and for his brother. Quick, sirs! He is sinking fast."

CHAPTER XXVI. THE JUDGMENT

To that cabin below the whole company repaired in all speed in the surgeon's wake, Sir Oliver coming last between his guards. They assembled about the couch where Lionel lay, leaden-hued of face, his breathing laboured, his eyes dull and glazing.

Sir John ran to him, went down upon one knee to put loving arms about that chilling clay, and very gently raised him in them, and held him so resting against his breast.

"Lionel!" he cried in stricken accents. And then as if thoughts of vengeance were to soothe and comfort his sinking friend's last moments, he added: "We have the villain fast."

Very slowly and with obvious effort Lionel turned his head to the right, and his dull eyes went beyond Sir John and made quest in the ranks of those that stood about him.

"Oliver?" he said in a hoarse whisper. "Where is Oliver?"

"There is not the need to distress you...." Sir John was beginning, when Lionel interrupted him.

"Wait!" he commanded in a louder tone. "Is Oliver safe?"

"I am here," said Sir Oliver's deep voice, and those who stood between him and his brother drew aside that they might cease from screening him.

Lionel looked at him for a long moment in silence, sitting up a little.

Then he sank back again slowly against Sir John's breast.

"God has been merciful to me a sinner," he said, "since He accords me the means to make amends, tardily though it be."

Then he struggled up again, and held out his arms to Sir Oliver, and his voice came in a great pleading cry. "Noll! My brother! Forgive!"

Oliver advanced, none hindering until, with his hands still pinioned behind him he stood towering there above his brother, so tall that his turban brushed the low ceiling of the cabin. His countenance was stern and grim.

"What is it that you ask me to forgive?" he asked. Lionel struggled to answer, and sank back again into Sir John's arms, fighting for breath; there was a trace of blood-stained foam about his lips.

"Speak! Oh, speak, in God's name!" Rosamund exhorted him from the other side, and her voice was wrung with agony.

He looked at her, and smiled faintly. "Never fear," he whispered, "I shall speak. God has spared me to that end. Take your arms from me, Killigrew. I am the... the vilest of men. It... it was I who killed Peter Godolphin."

"My God!" groaned Sir John, whilst Lord Henry drew a sharp breath of dismay and realization.

"Ah, but that is not my sin," Lionel continued. "There was no sin in that. We fought, and in self-defence I slew him—fighting fair. My sin came afterwards. When suspicion fell on Oliver, I nourished it... Oliver knew the deed was mine, and kept silent that he might screen me. I feared the truth might become known for all that... and... and I was jealous of him, and... and I had him kidnapped to be sold...."

His fading voice trailed away into silence. A cough shook him, and the faint crimson foam on his lips was increased. But he rallied again,

and lay there panting, his fingers plucking at the coverlet.

"Tell them," said Rosamund, who in her desperate fight for Sir Oliver's life kept her mind cool and steady and directed towards essentials, "tell them the name of the man you hired to kidnap him."

"Jasper Leigh, the skipper of the Swallow," he answered whereupon she flashed upon Lord Henry a look that contained a gleam of triumph for all that her face was ashen and her lips trembled.

Then she turned again to the dying man, relentlessly almost in her determination to extract all vital truth from him ere he fell silent.

"Tell them," she bade him, "under what circumstances Sir Oliver sent you last night to the Silver Heron."

"Nay, there is no need to harass him," Lord Henry interposed. "He has said enough already. May God forgive us our blindness, Killigrew!"

Sir John bowed his head in silence over Lionel.

"Is it you, Sir John?" whispered the dying man. "What? Still there? Ha!" he seemed to laugh faintly, then checked. "I am going...." he muttered, and again his voice grew stronger, obeying the last flicker of his shrinking will. "Noll! I am going! I...I have made reparation... all that I could. Give me... give me thy hand!" Gropingly he put forth his right.

"I should have given it you ere this but that my wrists are bound," cried Oliver in a sudden frenzy. And then exerting that colossal strength of his, he suddenly snapped the cords that pinioned him as if they had been thread. He caught his brother's extended hand, and dropped upon his knees beside him. "Lionel...Boy!" he cried. It was as if all that had befallen in the last five years had been wiped out of existence. His fierce relentless hatred of his half-brother, his burning

sense of wrong, his parching thirst for vengeance, became on the instant all dead, buried, and forgotten. More, it was as if they had never been. Lionel in that moment was again the weak, comely, beloved brother whom he had cherished and screened and guarded, and for whom when the hour arrived he had sacrificed his good name, and the woman he loved, and placed his life itself in jeopardy.

"Lionel, boy!" was all that for a moment he could say. Then: "Poor lad! Poor lad!" he added. "Temptation was too strong for thee." And reaching forth he took the other white hand that lay beyond the couch, and so held both tight-clasped within his own.

From one of the ports a ray of sunshine was creeping upwards towards the dying man's face. But the radiance that now overspread it was from an inward source. Feebly he returned the clasp of his brother's hands.

"Oliver, Oliver!" he whispered. "There is none like thee! I ever knew thee as noble as I was base. Have I said enough to make you safe? Say that he will be safe now," he appealed to the others, "that no...."

"He will be safe," said Lord Henry stoutly. "My word on't."

"It is well. The past is past. The future is in your hands, Oliver. God's blessing on't." He seemed to collapse, to rally yet again. He smiled pensively, his mind already wandering. "That was a long swim last night—the longest I ever swam. From Penarrow to Trefusis—a fine long swim. But you were with me, Noll. Had my strength given out...I could have depended on you. I am still chill from it, for it was cold... cold... ugh!" He shuddered, and lay still.

Gently Sir John lowered him to his couch. Beyond it Rosamund fell upon her knees and covered her face, whilst by Sir John's side Oliver continued to kneel, clasping in his own his brother's chilling hands.

There ensued a long spell of silence. Then with a heavy sigh Sir

Oliver folded Lionel's hands across his breast, and slowly, heavily rose to his feet.

The others seemed to take this for a signal. It was as if they had but waited mute and still out of deference to Oliver. Lord Henry moved softly round to Rosamund and touched her lightly upon the shoulder. She rose and went out in the wake of the others, Lord Henry following her, and none remaining but the surgeon.

Outside in the sunshine they checked. Sir John stood with bent head and hunched shoulders, his eyes upon the white deck. Timidly almost—a thing never seen before in this bold man—he looked at Sir Oliver.

"He was my friend," he said sorrowfully, and as if to excuse and explain himself, "and... and I was misled through love of him."

"He was my brother," replied Sir Oliver solemnly. "God rest him!"

Sir John, resolved, drew himself up into an attitude preparatory to receiving with dignity a rebuff should it be administered him.

"Can you find it in your generosity, sir, to forgive me?" he asked, and his air was almost one of challenge.

Silently Sir Oliver held out his hand. Sir John fell upon it almost in eagerness.

"We are like to be neighbours again," he said, "and I give you my word I shall strive to be a more neighbourly one than in the past."

"Then, sirs," said Sir Oliver, looking from Sir John to Lord Henry, "I am to understand that I am no longer a prisoner."

"You need not hesitate to return with us to England, Sir Oliver," replied his lordship. "The Queen shall hear your story, and we have Jasper Leigh to confirm it if need be, and I will go warranty for your

complete reinstatement. Count me your friend, Sir Oliver, I beg." And he, too, held out his hand. Then turning to the others: "Come, sirs," he said, "we have duties elsewhere, I think."

They tramped away, leaving Oliver and Rosamund alone. The twain looked long each at the other. There was so much to say, so much to ask, so much to explain, that neither knew with what words to begin. Then Rosamund suddenly came up to him, holding out her hands. "Oh, my dear!" she said, and that, after all, summed up a deal.

One or two over-inquisitive seamen, lounging on the forecandle and peeping through the shrouds, were disgusted to see the lady of Godolphin Court in the arms of a beturbaned bare-legged follower of Mahound.

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THE SHAME OF MOTLEY

**Being the Memoir of Certain
Transactions
in the Life of Lazzaro Biancomonte,
of Biancomonte,
sometime Fool of the Court of
Pesaro.**

By Rafael Sabatini

Contents

<u>PART I.</u>	FLOWER OF THE QUINCE
<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	THE CARDINAL OF VALENCIA
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	THE LIVERIES OF SANTAFIOR
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	MADONNA PAOLA
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	THE COZENING OF RAMIRO
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	MADONNA'S INGRATITUDE
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	FOOL'S LUCK
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	THE SUMMONS FROM ROME
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	"MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN"
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	THE FOOL-AT-ARMS
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	THE FALL OF PESARO

<u>PART II.</u>	THE OGRE OF CESENA
<u>CHAPTER XI.</u>	MADONNA'S SUMMONS
<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	THE GOVERNOR OF CESENA
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	POISON
<u>CHAPTER XIV.</u>	REQUIESCAT!
<u>CHAPTER XV.</u>	AN ILL ENCOUNTER
<u>CHAPTER XVI.</u>	IN THE CITADEL OF CESENA
<u>CHAPTER XVII.</u>	THE SENESCHAL
<u>CHAPTER XVIII.</u>	THE LETTER
<u>CHAPTER XIX.</u>	DOOMED
<u>CHAPTER XX.</u>	THE SUNSET

CHAPTER XXI. AVE CAESAR!

PART I. FLOWER OF THE QUINCE

CHAPTER I. THE CARDINAL OF VALENCIA

For three days I had been cooling my heels about the Vatican, vexed by suspense. It fretted me that I should have been so lightly dealt with after I had discharged the mission that had brought me all the way from Pesaro, and I wondered how long it might be ere his Most Illustrious Excellency the Cardinal of Valencia might see fit to offer me the honourable employment with which Madonna Lucrezia had promised me that he would reward the service I had rendered the House of Borgia by my journey.

Three days were sped, yet nought had happened to signify that things would shape the course by me so ardently desired; that the means would be afforded me of mending my miserable ways, and repairing the wreck my life had suffered on the shoals of Fate. True, I had been housed and fed, and the comforts of indolence had been mine; but, for the rest, I was still clothed in the livery of folly which I had worn on my arrival, and, wherever I might roam, there followed ever at my heels a crowd of underlings, seeking to have their tedium lightened by jests and capers, and voting me—when their hopes proved barren—the sorriest Fool that had ever worn the motley.

On that third day I speak of, my patience tried to its last strand, I had beaten a lacquey with my hands, and fled from the cursed gibes his fellows aimed at me, out into the misty gardens and the chill January air, whose sting I could, perhaps, the better disregard by virtue of the heat of indignation that consumed me. Was it ever to be so with me? Could nothing lift the curse of folly from me, that I must ever be a Fool, and worse, the sport of other fools?

It was there on one of the terraces crowning the splendid heights above immortal Rome that Messer Gianluca found me. He greeted me courteously; I answered with a snarl, deeming him come to pursue the plaguing from which I had fled.

"His Most Illustrious Excellency the Cardinal of Valencia is asking for you, Messer Boccadoro," he announced. And so despairing had been my mood of ever hearing such a summons that, for a moment, I accounted it some fresh jest of theirs. But the gravity of his fat countenance reassured me.

"Let us go, then," I answered with alacrity, and so confident was I that the interview to which he bade me was the first step along the road to better fortune, that I permitted myself a momentary return to the Fool's estate from which I thought myself on the point of being forever freed.

"I shall use the interview to induce his Excellency to submit a tenth beatitude to the approval of our Holy Father: Blessed are the bearers of good tidings. Come on, Messer the seneschal."

I led the way, in my impatience forgetful of his great paunch and little legs, so that he was sorely tried to keep pace with me. Yet who would not have been in haste, urged by such a spur as had I? Here, then, was the end of my shameful travesty. To-morrow a soldier's harness should replace the motley of a jester; the name by which I should be known again to men would be that of Lazzaro Biancomonte, and no longer Boccadoro—the Fool of the golden mouth.

Thus much had Madonna Lucrezia's promises led me to expect, and it was with a soul full of joyous expectation that I entered the great man's closet.

He received me in a manner calculated to set me at my ease, and

yet there was about him a something that overawed me. Cesare Borgia, Cardinal of Valencia, was then in his twenty-third year, for all that there hung about him the semblance of a greater age, just as his cardinalial robes lent him the appearance of a height far above the middle stature that was his own. His face was pale and framed in a silky auburn beard; his nose was aquiline and strong; his eyes the keenest that I have ever seen; his forehead lofty and intelligent. He seemed pervaded by an air of feverish restlessness, something surpassing the *vivida vis animi*, something that marked him to discerning eyes for a man of incessant action of body and of mind.

"My sister tells me," he said in greeting, "that you are willing to take service under me, Messer Biancomonte."

"Such was the hope that guided me to Rome, Most Excellent," I answered him.

Surprise flashed into his eyes, and was gone as quickly as it had come. His thin lips parted in a smile, whose meaning was inscrutable.

"As some reward for the safe delivery of the letter you brought me from her?" he questioned mildly.

"Precisely, Illustrious," I answered in all frankness.

His open hand smote the table of wood-mosaics at which he sat.

"Praised be Heaven!" he cried. "You seem to promise that I shall have in you a follower who deals in truth."

"Could your Excellency, to whom my real name is known, expect ought else of one who bears it—however unworthily?"

There was amusement in his glance.

"Can you still swagger it, after having worn that livery for three years?" he asked, and his lean forefinger pointed at my hideous

motley of red and black and yellow.

I flushed and hung my head, and—as if to mock that very expression of my shame—the bells on my cap gave forth a silvery tinkle at the movement.

"Excellency, spare me," I murmured. "Did you know all my miserable story you would be merciful. Did you know with what joy I turned my back on the Court of Pesaro—"

"Aye," he broke in mockingly, "when Giovanni Sforza threatened to have you hanged for the overboldness of your tongue. Not until then did it occur to you to turn from the shameful life in which the best years of your manhood were being wasted. There! Just now I commended your truthfulness; but the truth that dwells in you is no more, it seems, than the truth we may look for in the mouth of Folly. At heart, I fear, you are a hypocrite, Messer Biancomonte; the worst form of hypocrite—a hypocrite to your own self."

"Did your Excellency know all!" I cried.

"I know enough," he answered, with stern sorrow; "enough to make me marvel that the son of Ettore Biancomonte of Biancomonte should play the Fool to Costanzo Sforza, Lord of Pesaro. Oh you will tell me that you went there for revenge, to seek to right the wrong his father did your father."

"It was, it was!" I cried, with heated vehemence. "Be flames everlasting the dwelling of my soul if any other motive drove me to this shameful trade."

There was a pause. His beautiful eyes flamed with a sudden light as they rested on me. Then the lids drooped demurely, and he drew a deep breath. But when he spoke there was scorn in his voice.

"And, no doubt, it was that same motive kept you there, at peace

for three whole years, in slothful ease, the motleyed Fool, jesting and capering for his enemy's delectation—you, a man with the knightly memory of your foully-wronged parent to cry hourly shame upon you. No doubt you lacked the opportunity to bring the tyrant to account. Or was it that you were content to let him make a mock of you so long as he housed and fed you and clothed you in your garish livery of shame?

"Spare me, Excellency," I cried again. "Of your charity let my past be done with. When he drove me forth with threats of hanging, from which your gracious sister saved me, I turned my steps to Rome at her bidding to—"

"To find honourable employment at my hands," he interrupted quietly. Then suddenly rising, and speaking in a voice of thunder—"And what, then, of your revenge?" he cried.

"It has been frustrated," I answered lamely. "Sufficient do I account the ruin that already I have wrought in my life by the pursuit of that phantom. I was trained to arms, my lord. Let me discard for good these tawdry rags, and strap a soldier's harness to my back."

"How came you to journey hither thus?" he asked, suddenly turning the subject.

"It was Madonna Lucrezia's wish. She held that my errand would be safer so, for a Fool may travel unmolested."

He nodded that he understood, and paced the chamber with bowed head. For a spell there was silence, broken only by the soft fall of his slippered feet and the swish of his silken purple. At last he paused before me and looked up into my face—for I was a good head taller than he was. His fingers combed his auburn beard, and his beautiful eyes were full on mine.

"That was a wise precaution of my sister's," he approved. "I will

take a lesson from her in the matter. I have employment for you, Messer Biancomonte."

I bowed my head in token of my gratitude.

"You shall find me diligent and faithful, my lord," I promised him.

"I know it," he sniffed, "else should I not employ you."

He turned from me, and stepped back to his table. He took up a package, fingered it a moment, then dropped it again, and shot me one of his quiet glances.

"That is my answer to Madonna Lucrezia's letter," he said slowly, his voice as smooth as silk, "and I desire that you shall carry it to Pesaro for me, and deliver it safely and secretly into her hands."

I could do no more than stare at him. It seemed as if my mind were stricken numb.

"Well?" he asked at last; and in his voice there was now a suggestion of steel beneath the silk. "Do you hesitate?"

"And if I do," I answered, suddenly finding my voice, "I do no more than might a bolder man. How can I, who am banned by punishment of death, contrive to penetrate again into the Court of Pesaro and reach the Lady Lucrezia?"

"That is a matter that I shall leave to the shrewd wit which all Italy says is the heritage of Boccadoro, the Prince of Fools. Does the task daunt you?" His glance and voice were alike harsh.

In very truth it did, and I told him so, but in the terms which the shrewd wit he said was mine dictated.

"I hesitate, my lord, indeed; but more because I fear the frustration of your own ends—whatever they may be—than because I dread to

earn a broken neck by again adventuring into Pesaro. Would not some other messenger—unknown at the Court of Giovanni Sforza—be in better case to acquit himself of such a task?

"Yes, if I had one I could trust," he answered frankly.

"I will be open with you, Biancomonte. There are such grave matters at issue, there are such secrets confided to that paper, that I would not for a kingdom, not for our Holy Father's triple crown, that they should fall into alien hands."

He approached me again, and his slender hand, upon which the sacred amethyst was glowing, fell lightly on my shoulder. He lowered his voice "You are the man, the one man in Italy, whose interests are bound up with mine in this; therefore are you the one man to whom I can entrust that package."

"I?" I gasped in amazement—as well I might, for what interests had Boccadoro, the Fool, in common with Cesare Borgia, Cardinal of Valencia?

"You," he answered vehemently, "you, Lazzaro Biancomonte of Biancomonte, whose father Costanzo of Pesaro stripped of his domains. The matters in those papers mean the ruin of the Lord of Pesaro. We are all but ripe to strike at him from Rome and when we strike he shall be so disfigured by the blow that all Italy shall hold its sides to laugh at the sorry figure he will cut. I would not say so much to any other living man but you and if I tell it you it is because I need your aid."

"The lion and mouse," I murmured.

"Why yes, if you will."

"And this man is the husband of your sister!" I exclaimed, almost involuntarily.

"Does that imply a doubt of what I have said?" he flashed, his head thrown back, his brows drawn suddenly together.

"No, no," I hastened to assure him. He smiled softly.

"Maddonna Lucrezia knows all—or nearly all. Of what else she may need to learn, that letter will inform her. It is the last thread, the last knot needed, before we can complete the net in which we are to hold that tyrant? Now, will you bear the letter?"

Would I bear it? Dear God! To achieve the end in view I would have spent my remaining days in motley, making sport for grooms and kitchen wenches. Some such answer did I make him, and he smiled his satisfaction.

"You shall journey as you are," he bade me. "I am guided by my sister, assured that the coat of a Fool is stouter protection than the best hauberk ever tempered. When you have done your errand come you back to me, and you shall have employment better suited to one who bears the name of Biancomonte."

"You may depend upon me in this, my lord," I promised gravely. "I shall not fail you."

"It is well" said he; and those wondrous eyes of his rested again upon my face. "How soon can you set out?"

"At once, my lord. Does not the by-word say that a fool makes little preparation for a journey?"

He nodded, and moved to a coffer, a beautiful piece of Venetian work in ultramarine and gold. From this he took a heavy bag.

"There," said he, "you will find the best of all travelling companions." I thanked him, and set the bag on the crook of my left arm, and by its weight I knew how true he was to the notorious splendour of his race.

"And this," said he, "is a talisman that may serve to help you out of any evil plight, and open many a door that you may find locked." And he handed me a signet ring on which was graven the steer that is the emblem of the House of Borgia.

He raised aloft the hand on which was glistening the sacred amethyst—two fingers crooked and two erect. Wondering what this should mean, I stared inquiry.

"Kneel," he bade me. And realising what he would be about, I sank on to my knees whilst he murmured the Apostolic benediction over my bowed head. The rushes of the floor were the only witnesses of the smile that crept to my lips at this sudden assumption of his churchly office by that most worldly prince.

CHAPTER II. THE LIVERIES OF SANTAFIOR

Such preparations as I had to make were soon complete.

Although it was agreed that I was to travel in the motley, yet, in my lately-born shame of that apparel, I decided that I would conceal it as best might be, revealing it only should the need arise. Moreover, it was incumbent that I should afford myself more protection against the inclement January night than that of my foliated cape, my crested cap and silken hose. So, a black cloak, heavy and ample, a broad-brimmed hat, and a pair of riding boots of untanned leather were my further equipment. In the lining of one of those boots I concealed the Lord Cesare's package; his money—some twenty ducats—I carried in a belt about my waist, and his ring I set boldly on my finger.

Few moments did it need me to make ready, yet fewer, it seems, would the Borgia impatience have had me employ; for scarce was I booted when someone knocked at my door. I opened, and there entered a very mountain of a man, whose corselet flashed back the yellow light of my tapers, as might have done a mirror, and whose harsh voice barked out to ask if I was ready.

I had had some former acquaintance with this fellow, having first met him during the previous year, on the occasion of the Court of Pesaro's sojourn at Rome. His name was Ramiro del' Orca, and throughout the Papal army it stood synonymous for masterfulness and grim brutality. He was, as I have said, an enormous man, of prodigious bodily strength, heavy, yet of good proportions. Of his face one gathered the impression of a blazing furnace. His cheeks and

nose were of a vivid red, and still more fiery was the hair, now hidden 'neath his morion, and the beard that tapered to a dagger's point. His very eyes kept tune with the red harmony of his ferocious countenance, for the whites were ever bloodshot as a drunkard's—which, with no want of truth, men said he was.

"Come," grunted that fiery, self-sufficient vassal, "be stirring, sir Fool. I have orders to see you to the gates. There is a horse ready saddled for you. It is the Lord Cardinal's parting gift. Resolve me now, which will be the greater ass—the one that rides, or the one that is ridden?"

"O monstrous riddle!" I exclaimed, as I took up my cloak and hat. "Who am I that I should solve it?"

"It baffles you, sir Fool?" quoth he.

"In very truth it does." I ruefully wagged my head so that my bells set up a jangle. "For the rider is a man and the ridden a horse. But," I pursued, in that back-biting strain, which is the very essence of the jester's wit, "were you to make a trio of us, including Messer Ramiro del' Orca, Captain in the army of his Holiness, no doubt would then afflict me. I should never hesitate which of the three to pronounce the ass."

"What shall that mean?" he asked, with darkening brows.

"That its meaning proves obscure to you confirms the verdict I was hinting at," I taunted him. "For asses are notoriously of dull perceptions." Then stepping forward briskly: "Come, sir," I sharply urged him, "whilst we engage upon this pretty play of wit, his Excellency's business waits, which is an ill thing. Where is this horse you spoke of?"

He showed me his strong, white teeth in a very evil smile.

"Were it not for that same business—" he began.

"You would do fine things, I am assured," I interrupted him.

"Would I not?" he snarled. "By the Host! I should be wringing your pert neck, or laying bare your bones with a thong of bullock-hide, you ill conditioned Fool!"

I looked at him with pleasant, smiling eyes.

"You confirm the opinion that is popularly held of you," said I.

"What may that be?" quoth he, his eyes very evil. "In Rome, I'm told, they call you hangman."

He growled in his throat like an angered cur, and his hands were jerked to the level of his breast, the fingers bending talon-wise.

"Body of God!" he muttered fiercely, "I'll teach one fool, at least—"

"Let us cease these pleasantries, I entreat you," I laughed. "Saints defend me! If your mood incline to raillery you'll find your match in some lad of the stables. As for me, I have not the time, had I the will, to engage you further. Let me remind you that I would be gone."

The reminder was well-timed. He bethought him of the journey I must go, on which he was charged to see me safely started.

"Come on, then," he growled, in a white heat of passion that was only curbed by the consideration of that slender, pale young cardinal, his master.

Still, some of his rage he vented in roughly taking me by the collar of my doublet, and dragging the almost headlong from the room, and so a-down a flight of steps out into the courtyard. Meet treatment for a Fool—a treatment to which time might have inured me; for had I not for three years already been exposed to rough usage of this kind at

the hands of every man above the rank of groom? And had I once rebelled in act as I did in soul, and used the strength wherewith God endowed me to punish my ill-users, a whip would have reminded me into what sorry slavery had I sold myself when I put on the motley.

It had been snowing for the past hour, and the ground was white in the courtyard when we descended.

At our appearance there was a movement of serving-men and a fall of hoofs, muffled by the snow. Some held torches that cast a ruddy glare upon the all-encompassing whiteness, and a groom was leading forward the horse that was destined to bear me. I donned my broad-brimmed hat, and wrapped my cloak about me. Some murmurs of farewell caught my ears, from those minions with whom I had herded during my three days at the Vatican. Then Messer del' Orca thrust me forward.

"Mount, Fool, and be off," he rasped.

I mounted, and turned to him. He was a surly dog; if ever surly dog wore human shape, and the shape was the only human thing about Captain Ramiro.

"Brother, farewell," I simpered.

"No brother of yours, Fool," snarled he.

"True—my cousin only. The fool of art is no brother to the fool of nature."

"A whip!" he roared to his grooms. "Fetch me a whip."

I left him calling for it, as I urged my nag across the snow and over the narrow drawbridge. Beyond, I stayed a moment to look over my shoulder. They stood gazing after me, a group of some half-dozen men, looking black against the whiteness of the ground. Behind them rose the brown walls of the rocca illumined by the flare of torches,

from which the smell of rosin reached my nostrils as I paused. I waved my hat to them in token of farewell, and digging my spurless heels into the flanks of my horse, I ambled down through the biting wind and drifting snow, into the town.

The streets were deserted and dark, save for the ray that here fell from a window, and there stole through the chink of a door to glow upon the snow in earnest of the snug warmth within. Silence reigned, broken only by the moan of the wind under the eaves, for although it was no more than approaching the second hour of night, yet who but the wight whom necessity compelled would be abroad in such weather?

All night I rode despite that weather's foulness—a foulness that might have given pause to one whose haste to bear a letter was less attuned to his own supreme desires.

Betimes next morning I paused at a small locanda on the road to Magliano, and there I broke my fast and took some rest. My horse had suffered by the journey more than had I, and I would have taken a fresh one at Magliano, but there was none to be had—so they told me—this side of Narni, wherefore I was forced to set out once more upon that poor jaded beast that had carried me all night.

It was high noon when I came, at last, to Narni, the last league of the journey accomplished at a walk, for my nag could go no faster. Here I paused to dine, but here, again, they told me that no horses might be had. And so, leading by the bridle the animal I dared no longer ride, lest I should kill it outright, I entered the territory of Urbino on foot, and trudged wearily amain through the snow that was some inches deep by now. In this miserable fashion I covered the seven leagues, or so, to Spoleto, where I arrived exhausted as night was falling.

There, at the Osteria del Sole, I supped and lay. I found a company of gentlemen in the common-room, who upon espying my motley—

when I had thrown off my sodden cloak and hat—pressed me, willy-nilly, into amusing them. And so I spent the night at my Fool's trade, giving them drolleries from the works of Boccacci and Sacchetti—the horn-books of all jesters.

I obtained a fresh horse next morning, and I set out betimes, intending to travel with a better speed. The snow was thick and soft at first, but as I approached the hills it grew more crisp. Overhead the sky was of an unbroken blue, and for all that the air was sharp there was warmth in the sunshine. All day I rode hard, and never rested until towards nightfall I found myself on the spurs of the Apennines in the neighborhood of Gualdo, the better half of my journey well-accomplished. The weather had changed again at sunset. It was snowing anew, and the north wind was howling like a choir of the damned.

Before me gleamed the lights of a little wayside tavern, and since it might suit me better to lie there than to journey on to Gualdo, I drew rein before that humble door, and got down from my wearied horse. Despite the early hour the door was already barred, for the bedding of travellers formed no part of the traffic of so lowly a house as this nameless, wayside wine-shop. Theirs was a trade that ended with the daylight. Nevertheless I was assured they could be made to find me a rag of straw to lie on, and so I knocked boldly with my whip.

The taverner who opened for me, and stood a moment surveying me by the light of the torch he held aloft, was a slim, mild-mannered man, not over-clean. Behind him surged the figure of his wife; just such a woman as you might look to find the mate of such a man: broad and tall of frame and most scurvily cross-grained of face. It may well be that had he bidden me welcome, she had driven me back into the night; but since he made some demur when I asked for lodging, and protested that in his house was but accommodation too rude to offer my magnificence, the woman thrust him aside, and loudly bade

me enter.

I obeyed her readily, hat on head and cloak about me, lest my interests should suffer were my trade disclosed. I bade the man see to my horse, and then escorted by the woman, I made my way to the single room above, which, in obedience to my demand, she made haste to set at my convenience.

It was an evil-smelling, squalid hole; a bed of wattles in a corner, and in the centre a greasy table with a three-legged stool and a crazy chair beside it. The floor was black with age and filth, and broken everywhere by rat-holes. She set her noisome, smoking oil lamp on the table, and with some apology for the rudeness of the chamber she asked in tones almost defiant if my excellency would be content.

"Perforce," said I ungraciously, perceiving surliness to be the key to the respect of such a creature; "a king might thank Heaven for a kennel on such a night as this."

She bent her back in a clumsy bow, and with a growing humility wondered had I supped. I had not, but sooner would I have starved than have been poisoned by such foulnesses as they might have set before me. So I answered her that all I needed was a cup of wine.

When she had brought me that, and, at last, I was alone, I closed the door. It had no lock, nor any sort of fastening, so I set the three-legged stool against it that it might give me warning of intrusion. Next I threw off my cloak and hat and boots, and all dressed as I was I flung myself upon my miserable couch. But jaded though I might be, it was not yet my intent to sleep. Now that the half of my journey was accomplished, I found myself beset by doubts which had not before assailed me, touching the manner in which this mission of mine was to be accomplished. It would prove no easy thing for me to penetrate unnoticed into the town of Pesaro, much less into the Sforza Court, where for three years I had pursued my Fool's trade. There was

scarce a man, a woman or a child in the entire domains of Giovanni Sforza to whom Boccadoro, the Fool, was not known; and many a villano, who had never noticed the features of the Lord of Pesaro, could have told you the very colour of his jester's eyes; which, after all, is no strange thing, for—sad reflection!—in a world in which Wisdom may be overlooked, Folly goes never disregarded.

The garments I wore might be well enough to journey in; but if I would gain the presence of Lucrezia Borgia I must see that I arrived in others. And then my thoughts wandered into speculation. What might be this momentous letter that I carried? What was this secret traffic 'twixt Cesare Borgia and his sister? Since Cesare had said that it meant the ruin of Giovanni Sforza—a ruin so utter, so complete and humiliating that it must provoke the scornful mirth of all Italy—the knowledge of it must soon be mine. Meanwhile I was an agent of that ruin. Dear God! how that reflection warmed me! What joy I took in the thought that, though he knew it not, nor could come to know it, I Lazzaro Biancomonte, whom he had abused and whose spirit he had broken—was become a tool to expedite the work of abasement and destruction that was ripening for him. And realizing all this, that letter I vowed to Heaven I would carry, suffering no obstacle to daunt me, suffering nothing to turn me from my path.

And then another voice seemed to arise within me, to cry out impatiently: "Yes, yes; but how?"

I rose, and approaching the table, I took up the jug of wine and poured myself a draught. I drank it off, and cast the dregs at an inquisitive rat that had thrust its head above the boards. Then I quenched the light, and flung myself once more upon my bed, in the hope that darkness would prove a stimulant to thought and bring me to the solution I was seeking. It brought me sleep instead. Unconsciously I sank to it, my riddle all unsolved.

I did not wake until the pale sun of that January morning was

drawing the pattern of my lattice on the ceiling. The stormy night had been succeeded by a calm and sunlit day. And by its light the place wore a more loathsome look than it had done last night, so that at the very sight of it I leapt from my couch and grew eager to be gone. I set a ducat on the table, and going to the door I called my hostess. The stairs creaked presently 'neath her portentous weight, and, panting slightly, she stood before me.

At sight of me, for I was without my cloak, and my motley was revealed in the cold, morning light, she cried out in amazement first, and then in rage—deeming me one of those parasites who tramp the world in the garb of folly, seeking here a dinner, there a bed, in exchange for some scurvy tumbling or some witless jests.

"Ossa di Cristo!" was her cry. "Have I housed a Fool?"

"If I am the first you have housed, your tumbling ruin of a tavern has been a singularly choice resort. Woman—"

"Would you 'woman' me?" she stormed.

"Why, no," said I politely. "I was at fault. I'll keep the title for your husband—God help him!"

She smiled grimly.

"And are these," she asked, with a ferocious sarcasm, "the jests with which you pay the score?"

"Jests?" quoth I. "Score? Pish! More eyes, less tongue would more befit a hostess who has never housed a fool." And with a splendid gesture I pointed to the ducat gleaming on the table. At sight of the gold her eyes grew big with greed.

"My master—" she began, and coming forward took the piece in her hand, to assure herself that she was not the dupe of magic. "A fool with gold!" she marvelled.

"Is a shame to his calling," I acknowledged. Then—"Get me a needle and a length of thread," said I. She scuttled off to do my bidding, like nothing so much as one of the rats that tenanted her unclean sty. She was back in a moment, all servility, and wondering whether there was a rent about me she might make bold to stitch. What a key to courtesy is gold, my masters! I drove her out, and eager to conciliate me, she went at once.

With my own hands I effected in my doublet the slight repair of which it stood in need. Then I donned my hat, and, cloak on shoulder, made my way below, calling for my horse as I descended.

I scorned the wine they proffered me ere I departed. That last night's draught had quenched my thirst for ever of such grape-juice as it was theirs to tender. I urged the taverner to hasten with my horse, and stood waiting in the squalid common-room, my mind divided 'twixt impatience to resume the road to Pesaro and fresh speculations upon the means I was to adopt to enter it and yet save my neck—for this was now become an obsessing problem.

As I stood waiting, there broke upon my ears the sound of an approaching cavalcade: the noise of voices and the soft fall of hoofs upon the thick snow carpet. The company halted at the door, and a loud, gruff voice was raised to cry:

"Locandiere! Afoot, sluggard!"

I stepped to the door, with very natural curiosity, a company of four mounted men escorting a mule-litter, the curtains of which were drawn so that nothing might be seen of him or her that rode within. Grooms were those four, as all the world might see at the first glance, and the livery they wore was that of the noble House of Santafor—the holy white flower of the quince being embroidered on the breast of their gabardines.

They bore upon them such signs of hard and hasty travelling that it was soon guessed they had spent the night in the saddle. Their horses were in a foam of sweat; and the men themselves were splashed with mud from foot to cap.

Even as I was going forward to regard them the taverner appeared, leading my horse by the bridle. Now at an inn the traveller that arrives is ever of more importance than he that departs. At sight of those horsemen, the taverner forgot my impatience, for he paused to bow in welcome to the one that seemed the leader.

"Most Magnificent," said he to that liveried hind, "command me."

"We need a guide," the fellow answered with an ill grace.

"A guide, Illustrious?" quoth the host. "A guide?"

"I said a guide, fool," answered him the groom. "Heard you never of such animals? We need a man who knows the hills, to lead us by the shortest road to Cagli."

The taverner shook his grey head stupidly. He bowed again until I fancied I could hear the creak of his old joints.

"Here be no guides, Magnificent," he deplored. "Perhaps at Gualdo—"

"Animal," was the retort—for true courtesy commend me to a lacquey!—"it is not our wish to pursue the road as far as Gualdo, else had we not stopped at this kennel of yours."

I scarce know what it can have been that moved me to act as I then did, for, in the truth, the manner of that rascal of a groom was little prepossessing, and his master, I doubted, could be little better than he left the fellow to hector it thus over that wretched tavern oaf. But I stepped forward.

"Did you say that you were journeying to Cagli?" questioned I.

He eyed me sourly, suspicion writ athwart his round, ill-favoured face, But my motley was hidden from his sight. My cloak, my hat and boots allowed naught of my true condition to appear, and might as well have covered a lordling as a jester. Yet his inveterate surliness the rascal could not wholly conquer.

"What may be the purpose of your question?" he growled.

"To serve your master, whoever he may be," I answered him serenely, "although it is a service I do not press upon him. I, too, am journeying to Cagli, and like yourselves, I am in haste and go the shorter way across the hills, with which I am well acquainted. If it so please you to follow me your need of a guide may thus be satisfied."

It was the tone to take if I would be respected. Had I proposed that we should journey in company I should not have earned me the half of the deference which was accorded to my haughtily granted leave that they might follow me if they so chose.

With marked submission did he give me thanks in his master's name.

I mounted and set out, and at my heels came now the litter and its escort. Thus did we quit the plain and breast the slopes, where the snow grew deeper and firmer underfoot as we advanced. And as I went, still plaguing my mind to devise a means by which I might penetrate to the Court of Pesaro, little did I dream that the matter was being solved for me—the solution having begun with my offer to guide that company across the hills.

CHAPTER III. MADONNA PAOLA

We gained the heights in the forenoon, and there we dismounted and paused awhile to breathe our horses ere we took the path that was to lead us down to Cagli. The air was sharp and cold, for all that overhead was spread a cloudless, cobalt dome of sky, and the sun poured down its light upon the wide expanse of snow-clad earth, of a whiteness so dazzling as to be hurtful to the sight.

Hitherto I had ridden stolidly ahead, as unheeding of that following company as if I had been unconscious of its existence. But now that we paused, their fat, white-faced leader, whose name was Giacopo, approached me and sought to draw me into conversation. I yielded readily enough, for I scented a mystery about that closely-curtained litter, and mysteries are ever provoking to such a mind as mine. For all that it might profit me naught to learn who rode there, and why with all this haste, yet these were matters, I confess, on which my curiosity was aroused.

"Are you journeying beyond Cagli?" I asked him presently, in an idle tone.

He cocked his head, and eyed me aslant, the suspicion in his eyes confirming the existence of the mystery I scented.

"Yes," he answered, after a pause. "We hope to reach Urbino before night. And you? Are you journeying far?"

"That far, at least," I answered him, emulating the caution he had shown.

And then, ere more might pass between us, the leather curtains of the litter were sharply drawn aside. At the sound I turned my head, and so far was the vision different from that which—for no reason that I can give—I had expected, that I was stricken with surprise and wonder. A lady—a very child, indeed—had leapt nimbly to the ground ere any of those grooms could offer her assistance.

She was, I thought, the most beautiful woman that I had ever seen, and to one who had read the famous work of Messer Firenzuola on feminine beauty it might seem, at first, that here stood the incarnation of that writer's catalogue of womanly perfections. She was of a good shape and stature, despite her tender years; her face was oval, delicately featured and of an ivory pallor. Her eyes—blue as the heavens overhead—were not of the colour most approved by Firenzuola, nor was her hair of the golden brown which that arbiter commends. Had Firenzuola seen her, it may well be that he had altered or modified his views. She was sumptuously arrayed in a loose-sleeved camorra of grey velvet that was heavy with costly furs; above the lenza of fine linen on her head gleamed the gold thread of a jewelled net, and at her waist a girdle of surpassing richness, all set with gems, glowed like a thing of fire in the bright sunshine.

She took a deep breath of the sharp, invigorating air, then looked about her, and espying me in conversation with Giacopo she approached us across the gleaming snow.

"Is this," she inquired, and her sweet, melodious voice was a perfect match to the graceful charm of her whole presence, "the traveller who so kindly consented to fill for us the office of a guide?"

Giacopo answered briefly that I was that man.

"I am in your debt, sir," she protested, with an odd earnestness. "You do not know how great a service you have rendered me. But if at any time Paola Sforza di Santafor may be able to discharge this

obligation, you shall find me very willing."

White-faced, black-browed Giacompo scowled at this proclamation of her identity.

I made her a low bow, and answered coldly, brusquely almost, for I hated the very name of Sforza, and every living thing that bore it.

"Madonna, you overrate my service. It so chanced that I was travelling this way."

She looked more closely at me, as if she would have sought the reason of my churlish tone, and I was strangely thankful that she could not see the motley worn by the muffled stranger who confronted her. No doubt she accounted me a clown, whose nature inclined to surliness, and so she turned away, telling Giacompo that as soon as the horses were breathed they might push on.

"We must rest them yet awhile, Madonna," answered he, "if they are to carry us as far as Cagli. Heaven send that we may obtain fresh cattle there, else is all lost."

Her frown proclaimed how much his words displeased her.

"You forget that if there are no horses for us, neither are there any for those others." And she waved her hand towards the valley below and the road by which we had come. From this and from what was said I gathered that they were a party of fugitives with pursuers at their heels.

"They have a warrant which we have not," was Giacompo's answer, gloomily delivered, "and they will seize cattle where they can find it."

With a little gesture of impatience, more at his fears than at the peril that aroused them, she moved away towards her litter.

"Your horse would be better for the loan of your cloak, sir stranger,"

said Giacomo to me.

I knew him to be right, but shrugged my shoulders.

"Better the horse should die of cold than I," I answered gruffly, and turning from him I set myself to pace the snow and stir the blood that was chilling in my veins.

There was a beauty in the white, sunlit landscape spread before me that compelled my glance. To some it might compare but ill with the luxuriant splendour that is of the vernal season; but to me there was a wondrously impressive charm about that solemn, silent, virginal expanse of snow, expressionless as the Sphinx, and imposing and majestic by virtue of that very lack of expression. From Fabriano, at our feet, was spread to the east, the broad plain that lies twixt the Esino and the Masone, as far as Mount Comero, which, in the distance, lifted its round shoulder from the haze of sea. To the west the country lay under the same winding-sheet of snow as far as eye might range, to the towers of distant Perugia, to the Lake Trasimeno—a silver sheen that broke the white monotony—to Etruscan Cortona, perched like an eyrie on its mountain top, and to the line of Tuscan hills, like heavy, low-lying clouds upon the blue horizon.

Lost was I in the contemplation of that scene when a cry, succeeded by a volley of horrid blasphemy, drew my attention of a sudden to my companions. They stood grouped together, and their eyes were on the road by which we had scaled those heights. Their first expression of loud astonishment had been succeeded by an utter silence. I stepped forward to command a better view of what they contemplated, and in the plain below, midway between Narni and the slopes, a mile or so behind us, I caught a glitter as of a hundred mirrors in the sunshine. A company of some dozen men-at-arms it was, riding briskly along the tracks we had left behind us in the snow. Could these be the pursuers?

Even as I formed the question in my mind, the lady's silvery voice, behind me, put it into words. She had drawn aside the curtains of her litter and she was leaning out, her eyes upon those dancing points of brilliance.

"Madonna," cried one of her grooms, in a quaver of alarm, "they are Borgia soldiers."

"Your fear is father to that opinion," she answered scornfully. "How can you descry it at this distance?"

Now, either God had given that knave an eagle's sight, or else, as she suggested, fear spurred his imagination and begot his certainty of what he thought he saw.

"The leader's bannerol bears the device of a red bull," he answered promptly.

I thought she paled a little, and her brows contracted.

"In God's name, let us get forward, then!" cried Giacopo. "Orsu! To horse, knaves!"

No second bidding did they need. In the twinkling of an eye they were in the saddle, and one of them had caught the bridle of the leading mule of the litter. Giacopo called to me to lead the way with him, with no more ceremony than if I had been one of themselves. But I made no ado. A chase is an interesting business, whatever your point of view, and if a greater safety lies with the hunter, there is a keener excitement with the hunted.

Down that steep and slippery hillside we blundered, making for Cagli at a pace in which there lay a myriad-fold more danger than could menace us from any party of pursuers. But fear was spur and whip to the unreasoning minds of those poltroons, and so from the danger behind us we fled, and courted a more deadly and certain

peril in the fleeing. At first I sought to remonstrate with Giacopo; but he was deaf to the wisdom that I spoke. He turned upon me a face which terror had rendered whiter than its natural habit, white as the egg of a duck, with a hint of blue or green behind it. I had, besides, an ugly impression of teeth and eyeballs.

"Death is behind us, sir," he snarled. "Let us get on."

"Death is more assuredly before you," I answered grimly. "If you will court it, go your way. As for me, I am over-young to break my neck and be left on the mountain-side to fatten crows. I shall follow at my leisure."

"Gesul!" he cried, through chattering teeth. "Are you a coward, then?"

The taunt would have angered me had his condition been other than it was; but coming from one so possessed of the devil of terror, it did no more than provoke my mirth.

"Come on, then, valiant runagate," I laughed at him.

And on we went, our horses now plunging, now sliding down yard upon yard of moving snow, snorting and trembling, more reasoning far than these rational animals that bestrode them. Twice did it chance that a man was flung from his saddle, yet I know not what prayers Madonna may have been uttering in her litter, to obtain for us the miracle of reaching the plain with never so much as a broken bone.

Thus far had we come, but no farther, it seemed, was it possible to go. The horses, which by dint of slipping and sliding had encompassed the descent at a good pace, were so winded that we could get no more than an amble out of them, saving mine, which was tolerably fresh.

At this a new terror assailed the timorous Giacompo. His head was ever turned to look behind—unfailing index of a frightened spirit; his eyes were ever on the crest of the hills, expecting at every moment to behold the flash of the pursuers' steel. The end soon followed. He drew rein and called a halt, sullenly sitting his horse like a man deprived of wit—which is to pay him the compliment of supposing that he ever had wit to be deprived of.

Instantly the curtain-rings rasped, and Madonna Paola's head appeared, her voice inquiring the reason of this fresh delay.

Sullenly Giacompo moved his horse nearer, and sullenly he answered her.

"Madonna, our horses are done. It is useless to go farther."

"Useless?" she cried, and I had an instance of how sharply could ring the voice that I had heard so gentle. "Of what do you talk, you knave? Ride on at once."

"It is vain to ride on," he answered obdurately, insolence rising in his voice. "Another half-league—another league at most, and we are taken."

"Cagli is less than a league distant," she reminded him. "Once there, we can obtain fresh horses. You will not fail me now, Giacompo!"

"There will be delays, perforce, at Cagli," he reminded her, "and, meanwhile, there are these to guide the Borgia sbirri." And he pointed to the tracks we were leaving in the snow.

She turned from him, and addressed herself to the other three.

"You will stand by me, my friends," she cried. "Giacopo, here, is a coward; but you are better men." They stirred, and one of them was momentarily moved into a faint semblance of valour.

"We will go with you, Madonna," he exclaimed. "Let Giacopo remain behind, if so he will."

But Giacopo was a very ill-conditioned rogue; neither true himself, nor tolerant, it seemed, of truth in others.

"You will be hanged for your pains when you are caught!" he exclaimed, "as caught you will be, and within the hour. If you would save your necks, stay here and make surrender."

His speech was not without effect upon them, beholding which, Madonna leapt from the litter, the better to confront them. The corners of her sensitive little mouth were quivering now with the emotion that possessed her, and on her eyes there was a film of tears.

"You cowards!" she blazed at them, "you hinds, that lack the spirit even to run! Were I asking you to stand and fight in defence of me, you could not show yourselves more palsied. I was a fool," she sobbed, stamping her foot so that the snow squelched under it. "I was a fool to entrust myself to you."

"Madonna," answered one of them, "if flight could still avail us, you should not find us stubborn. But it were useless. I tell you again, Madonna, that when I espied them from the hill-top yonder, they were but a half-league behind. Soon we shall have them over the mountain, and we shall be seen."

"Fool!" she cried, "a half-league behind, you say; and you forget that we were on the summit, and they had yet to scale it. If you but press on we shall treble that distance, at least, ere they begin the descent. Besides, Giacopo," she added, turning again to the leader, "you may be at fault; you may be scared by a shadow; you may be wrong in accounting them our pursuers."

The man shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, and grunted.

"Arnaldo, there, made no mistake. He told us what he saw."

"Now Heaven help a poor, deserted maid, who set her trust in curs!" she exclaimed, between grief and anger.

I had been no better than those hinds of hers had I remained unmoved. I have said that I hated the very name of Sforza; but what had this tender child to do with my wrongs that she should be brought within the compass of that hatred? I had inferred that her pursuers were of the House of Borgia, and in a flash it came to me that were I so inclined I might prove, by virtue of the ring I carried, the one man in Italy to serve her in this extremity. And to be of service to her, her winsome beauty had already inflamed me. For there was I know not what about this child that seemed to take me in its toils, and so wrought upon me that there and then I would have risked my life in her good service. Oh, you may laugh who read. Indeed, deep down in my heart I laughed myself, I think, at the heroics to which I was yielding—I, the Fool, most base of lacqueys—over a damsel of the noble House of Santaflor. It was shame of my motley, maybe, that caused me to draw my cloak more tightly about me as I urged forward my horse, until I had come into their midst.

"Lady," said I bluntly and without preamble, "can I assist you? I have inferred your case from what I have overheard."

All eyes were on me, gaping with surprise—hers no less than her grooms'.

"What can you do alone, sir?" she asked, her gentle glance upraised to mine.

"If, as I gather, your pursuers are servants of the House of Borgia, I may do something."

"They are," she answered, without hesitation, some eagerness, even, investing her tones.

It may seem an odd thing that this lady should so readily have taken a stranger into her confidence. Yet reflect upon the parlous condition in which she found herself. Deserted by her dispirited grooms, her enemies hot upon her heels, she was in no case to trifle with assistance, or to despise an offer of services, however frail it might seem. With both hands she clutched at the slender hope I brought her in the hour of her despair.

"Sir," she cried, "if indeed it lies in your power to help me, you could not find it in your heart to be sparing of that power did you but know the details of my sorry circumstance."

"That power, Madonna, it may be that I have," said I, and at those words of mine her servants seemed to honour me with a greater interest. They leaned forward on their horses and eyed me with eyes grown of a sudden hopeful. "And," I continued, "if you will have utter faith in me, I see a way to render doubly certain your escape."

She looked up into my face, and what she saw there may have reassured her that I promised no more than I could accomplish. For the rest she had to choose between trusting me and suffering capture.

"Sir," said she, "I do not know you, nor why you should interest yourself in the concerns of a desolated woman. But, Heaven knows, I am in no case to stand pondering the aid you offer, nor, indeed, do I doubt the good faith that moves you. Let me hear, sir, how you would propose to serve me."

"Whence are you?" I inquired.

"From Rome," she informed me without hesitation, "to seek at my cousin's Court of Pesaro shelter from a persecution to which the Borgia family is submitting me."

At her cousin's Court of Pesaro! An odd coincidence, this—and

while I was pondering it, it flashed into my mind that by helping her I might assist myself. Had aught been needed to strengthen my purpose to serve her, I had it now.

"Yet," said I, surprise investing my voice, "at Pesaro there is Madonna Lucrezia of that same House of Borgia."

She smiled away the doubt my words implied.

"Madonna Lucrezia is my friend," said she; "as sweet and gentle a friend as ever woman had, and she will stand by me even against her own family."

Since she was satisfied of that, I waived the point, and returned to what was of more immediate interest.

"And you fled," said I, "with these?" And I indicated her attendants. "Not content to leave the clearest of tracks behind you in the snow, you have had yourself attended by four grooms in the livery of Santafior. So that by asking a few questions any that were so inclined might follow you with ease."

She opened wide her eyes at that. Oftentimes have I observed that it needs a fool to teach some elementary wisdom to the wise ones of this world. I leapt from my saddle and stood in the road beside her, the bridle on my arm.

"Listen now, Madonna. If you would make good your escape it first imports that you should rid yourself of this valiant escort. Separate from it for a little while. Take you my horse—it is a very gentle beast, and it will carry you with safety—and ride on, alone, to Cagli."

"Alone?" quoth she, in some surprise.

"Why, yes," I answered gruffly. "What of that? At the Inn of 'The Full Moon' ask for the hostess, and tell her that you are to await an escort there, begging her, meanwhile, to place you under her protection. She

is a worthy soul, or else I do not know one, and she will befriend you readily. But see to it that you tell her nothing of your affairs."

"And then?" she inquired eagerly.

"Then, wait you there until to-night, or even until to-morrow morning, for these knaves to rejoin you to the end that you may resume your journey."

"But we—" began Giacompo. Scenting his protest, I cut him short.

"You four," said I, "shall escort me—for I shall replace Madonna in the litter—you shall escort me towards Fabriano. Thus shall we draw the pursuit upon ourselves, and assure your lady a clear road of escape."

They swore most roundly and with great circumstance of oaths that they would lend themselves to no such madness, and it took me some moments to persuade them that I was possessed of a talisman that should keep us all from harm.

"Were it otherwise, dolts, do you think I should be eager to go with you? Would any chance wayfarer so wantonly imperil his neck for the sake of a lady with whom he can scarce be called acquainted?"

It was an argument that had weight with them, as indeed, it must have had with the dullest. I flashed my ring before their eyes.

"This escutcheon," said I, "is the shield that shall stand between us and danger from any of the house that bears these arms."

Thus I convinced and wrought upon them until they were ready to obey me—the more ready since any alternative was really to be preferred to their present situation. In danger they already stood from those that followed as they well knew; and now it seemed to them that by obeying one who was armed with such credentials, it might be

theirs to escape that danger. But even as I was convincing them, by the same arguments was I sowing doubts in the lady's subtler mind.

"You are attached to that house?" quoth she, in accents of mistrust. She wanted to say more. I saw it in her eyes that she was wondering was there treachery underlying an action so singularly disinterested as to justify suspicion.

"Madonna," said I, "if you would save yourself I implore that you will trust me. Very soon your pursuers will be appearing on those heights, and then your chance of flight will be lost to you. I will ask you but this: Did I propose to betray you into their hands, could I have done better than to have left you with your grooms?"

Her face lighted. A sunny smile broke on me from her heavenly eyes.

"I should have thought of that," said she. And what more she would have added I put off by urging her to mount.

Sitting the man's saddle as best she might—well enough, indeed, to fill us all with surprise and admiration—she took her leave of me with pretty words of thanks, which again I interrupted.

"You have but to follow the road," said I, "and it will bring you straight to Cagli. The distance is a short league, and you should come there safely. Farewell, Madonna!"

"May I not know," she asked at parting, "the name of him that has so generously befriended me?"

I hesitated a second. Then—"They call me Boccadoro," answered I.

"If your mouth be as truly golden as your heart, then are you well-named," said she. Then, gathering her mantle about her, and waving me farewell, she rode off without so much as a glance at the cowardly

hinds who had failed her in the hour of her need.

A moment I stood watching her as she cantered away in the sunshine; then stepping to the litter, I vaulted in.

"Now, rogues," said I to the escort, "strike me that road to Fabriano."

"I know you not, sir," protested Giacopo. "But this I know—that if you intend us treachery you shall have my knife in your gullet for your pains."

"Fool!" I scorned him, "since when has it been worth the while of any man to betray such creatures as are you? Plague me no more! Be moving, else I leave you to your coward's fate."

It was the tone best understood by hinds of their lily-livered quality. It quelled their faint spark of mutiny, and a moment later one of those knaves had caught the bridle of the leading mule and the litter moved forward, whilst Giacopo and the others came on behind at as brisk a pace as their weary horses would yield. In this guise we took the road south, in the direction opposite to that travelled by the lady. As we rode, I summoned Giacopo to my side.

"Take your daggers," I bade him, "and rip me that blazon from your coats. See that you leave no sign about you to proclaim you of the House of Santafior, or all is lost. It is a precaution you would have taken earlier if God had given you the wit of a grasshopper."

He nodded that he understood my order, and scowled his disapproval of my comment on his wit. For the rest, they did my bidding there and then.

Having satisfied myself that no betraying sign remained about them, I drew the curtains of my litter, and reclining there I gave myself up to pondering the manner in which I should greet the Borgia sbirri

when they overtook me. From that I passed on to the contemplation of the position in which I found myself, and the thing that I had done. And the proportions of the jest that I was perpetrating afforded me no little amusement. It was a burla not unworthy the peerless gifts of Boccadoro, and a fitting one on which to close his wild career of folly. For had I not vowed that Boccadoro I would be no more once the errand on which I travelled was accomplished? By Cesare Borgia's grace I looked to—

A sudden jolt brought me back to the immediate present, and the realisation that in the last few moments we had increased our pace. I put out my head.

"Giacopo!" I shouted. He was at my side in an instant. "Why are we galloping?"

"They are behind," he answered, and fear was again overspreading his fat face. "We caught a glimpse of them as we mounted the last hill."

"You caught a glimpse of whom?" quoth I.

"Why, of the Borgia soldiers."

"Animal," I answered him, "what have we to do with them? They may have mistaken us for some party of which they are in pursuit. But since we are not that party, let your jaded beasts travel at a more reasonable speed. We do not wish to have the air of fugitives."

He understood me, and I was obeyed. For a half-hour we rode at a more gentle pace. That was about the time they took to come up with us, still a league or so from Fabriano. We heard their cantering hoofs crushing the snow, and then a loud imperious voice shouting to us a command to stay. Instantly we brought up in unconcerned obedience, and they thundered alongside with cries of triumph at having run their prey to earth.

I cast aside my hat, and thrust my motleyed head through the curtains with a jangle of bells, to inquire into the reason of this halt. Whom my appearance astounded the more—whether the lacqueys of Santafor, or the Borgia men-at-arms that now encircled us—I cannot guess. But in the crowd of faces that confronted me there was not one but wore a look of deep amazement.

CHAPTER IV. THE COZENING OF RAMIRO

The cavalcade that had overtaken us proved to number some twenty men-at-arms, whose leader was no less a person than Ramiro del' Orca—that same mountain of a man who had attended my departure from the Vatican three nights ago. From the circumstance that so important a personage should have been charged with the pursuit of the Lady of Santafior, I inferred that great issues were at stake.

He was clad in mail and leather, and from his lance fluttered the bannerol bearing the Borgia arms, which had announced his quality to Madonna's servants.

At sight of me his bloodshot eyes grew round with wonder, and for a little season a deathly calm preceded the thunder of his voice.

"Sainted Host!" he roared at last. "What trickery may this be?" And sidling his horse nearer he tore aside the curtains of my litter.

Out of faces pale as death the craven grooms looked on, to behold me reclining there, my cloak flung down across my legs to hide my boots, and my motley garb of red and black and yellow all revealed. I believe their astonishment by far surpassed the Captain's own.

"You are choicely met, Ser Ramiro," I greeted him. Then, seeing that he only stared, and made no shift to speak: "Maybe," quoth I, "you'll explain why you detain me. I am in haste."

"Explain?" he thundered. "Sangue di Cristo! The burden of

explaining lies with you. What make you here?"

"Why," answered I, in tones of deep astonishment, "I am about the business of the Lord Cardinal of Valencia, our master."

"Dawvero?" he jeered. He stretched out a mighty paw, and took me by the collar of my doublet. "Now, bethink you how you answer me, or there will be a fool the less in the world."

"Indeed, the world might spare more."

He scowled at my pleasantry. To him, apparently, the situation afforded no scope for philosophical reflections.

"Where is the girl?" he asked abruptly.

"Girl?" quoth I. "What girl? Am I a mother-abbess, that you should set me such a question?"

Two dark lines showed between his brows. His voice quivered with passion.

"I ask you again—where is the girl?"

I laughed like one who is a little wearied by the entertainment provided for him.

"Here be no girls, Messer del' Orca," I answered him in the same tone. "Nor can I think what this babble of girls portends."

My seeming innocence, and the assurance with which I maintained the expression of it, whispered a doubt into his mind. He released me, and turned upon his men, a baffled look in his eyes.

"Was not this the party?" he inquired ferociously. "Have you misled me, beasts?"

"It seemed the party, Illustrious," answered one of them.

"Do you dare tell me that 'it seemed'?" he roared, seeking to father upon them the blunder he was beginning to fear that he had made. "But—What is the livery of these knaves?"

"They wear none," someone answered him, and at that answer he seemed to turn limp and lose his fierce assurance.

Then he bridled afresh.

"Yet the party, I'll swear, is this!" he insisted; and turning once more to me: "Explain, animal!" he bade me in terrifying tones. "Explain, or, by the Host! be you ignorant or not, I'll have you hanged."

I accounted it high time to take another tone with him. Hanging was a discomfort I was never less minded to suffer.

"Draw nearer, fool," said I contemptuously, and at the epithet, so greatly did my audacity amaze him, he mildly did my bidding.

"I know not what doubts are battling in your thick head, sir captain," I pursued. "But this I know—that if you persist in hindering me, or commit the egregious folly of offering me violence, you will answer for it, hereafter, to the Lord Cardinal of Valencia.

"I am going upon a secret mission"—and here I sank my voice to a whisper for his ears alone—"in the service of the house that hires you, as for yourself you might easily have inferred. Behold." And I revealed my ring. "Detain me longer at your peril."

He must have had some notion of the fact that I was journeying in Cesare Borgia's service, and this coupled with the sight of that talisman effected in his manner a swift and wholesome change. Had I, arrayed in the panoply of Mother Church, defied the devil, my victory could not have been more complete.

He looked about him like a man whose wits have been scattered

suddenly to the four winds of Heaven.

"But this litter," he mumbled, riveting his dazed eyes upon me, "and these four knaves—?"

"Tell me," I questioned, with sudden earnestness, "are you in quest of just such a party?"

"Aye that I am," he answered sharply, intelligence returning to his glance, inquiry burning in it.

"And would the men, peradventure, be wearing the livery of the House of Santaflor?"

His quick assent came almost choked in a company of oaths.

"Why then, if that be your quarry, you are but wasting time. Such a party passed us at the gallop about an hour ago. It would be an hour, would it not, Giacomo?"

"I should say an hour," answered the lacquey dully.

"In what direction?" came Ramiro's frenzied question. He doubted me no longer.

"In the direction of Fabriano I should say," I answered. "Although it may well be that they were making for Sinigaglia. The road branches farther on."

He waited for no more. Without word of thanks for the priceless information I had given him, he wheeled his horse, and shouted a hoarse command to his followers. A moment later and they were cantering past us, the snow flying beneath their hoofs; within five minutes the last of them had vanished round an angle of the road, and the only indication of the halt they had made was the broad path of dirty brown where their horses had crushed the snow.

I have been an actor in few more entertaining comedies than the cozening of Ser Ramiro, and a witness of nothing that afforded me at once so much relief and relish as his abrupt departure. I sank back on the cushions of my litter, and gave myself over to a burst of full-souled laughter which was interrupted ere it was half done by Giacopo, who had dismounted and approached me.

"You have fooled us finely," said he, with venom.

I quenched my laughter to regard him. Of what did he babble? Was he, and were his fellows, too, so ungrateful as to bear a grudge against the man who had saved them?

"You have fooled us finely," he insisted in a louder voice.

"That, knave, is my trade," said I. "But it rather seems to me that it was Messer Ramiro del' Orca whom I fooled."

"Aye," he answered querulously. "But what when he discerns how you have played upon him? What when he discovers the trick by which you have thrown him off the scent? What when he returns?"

"Spare me," I begged, "I am but indifferently skilful at conjecture."

"Nay, but you shall answer me," he cried, livid with a passion that my bantering tone had quickened.

"Can it be that you are indeed curious to know what will befall when he returns?" I questioned meekly.

"I am," he snorted, with an angry twist of the lips.

"It should be easy to gratify the morbid spirit of curiosity that actuates you. Remain here, and await his return. Thus shall you learn."

"That will not I," he vowed.

"Nor I, nor I, nor I!" chorused his followers.

"Then, why plague me with unprofitable questions? What concern is it of ours how Messer del' Orca shall vent his wrath when he is disillusioned. Your duty now is to rejoin your mistress. Ride hard for Cagli. Seek her at the sign of 'The Full Moon,' and then away for Pesaro. If you are brisk you will gain the shelter of the Lord Giovanni Sforza's fortress long before Messer del' Orca again picks up the scent, if, indeed, he ever does so."

Giacopo laughed derisively till his fat body shook with the scornful mirth of him.

"By my faith, I'm done with the business," he cried, and the other three expressed a very hearty agreement with that attitude.

"How done with it?" I asked.

"I shall make my way back across the hills and so retrace my steps to Rome. I'll risk my head no more for any lady or any Fool."

"If you should ever chance to risk it for yourself," said I, with unmeasured scorn, "you'll risk it for the greatest fool and the cowardliest rogue that ever shamed the name of man. And your mistress? Is she to wait at Cagli until doomsday? If anywhere within the bulk of that elephant's body there lurks the heart of a rabbit, you'll get you to horse and ride to the help of that poor lady."

They resented my tone, and showed their resentment plainly. Messer Giacopo went the length of raising his hand to me. But I am a man of amazing strength—amazing inasmuch as being slender of shape I do not have the air of it. Leaping suddenly from the litter, I caught that miserable vassal by the breast of his doublet, shook him once or twice, then tossed him headlong into a drift of snow by the roadside.

At that they bared their knives and made shift to attack me. But I

flung myself on to one of the mules of the litter, and showing them the stout Pistoja dagger that I carried, I presented with it a bold and truculent front, no whit intimidated by their numbers. Four to one though they were, they thought better of it. A moment they stood off, consulting among themselves; then Giacompo mounted, and with some mocking counsel as to how I should dispose of the litter and the mules, they made off, no doubt, to find their way back to Rome. Giacompo, as I was afterwards to discover, was Madonna Paola's purse-bearer, so that they would not lack for means.

Awhile I stayed there, cursing them for the white-livered cravens that they were, and thinking of that poor child who had ridden on to Cagli, and who would await them in vain. There, on the mule, I sat in the noontide sunlight, and pondered this, so absorbed in her affairs as to have grown forgetful of my own. At last I resolved to ride on to Cagli alone, and inform her that her men were fled.

There was no time to lose, for as that rogue Giacompo had said, Ramiro del' Orca might discover at any moment how he had been tricked, and return hot-foot to find me and extort the truth from me by such means as I had no stomach for enduring.

First, then, it was of moment thoroughly to efface our tracks, leaving no sign that might guide Meser Ramiro to repair the error into which I had tricked him. Slowly, says the proverb, one journeys far and safely. Slowly, then, did I consider! The escort was, no doubt, on its way back to Rome, and if I could but rid myself of that cumbrous litter, Ser Ramiro would find himself mightily hard put to it to again pick up the trail. I remembered a ravine a little way behind, and I rode my mule back to that as fast as it would travel with the litter and the other mule attached to it. Arrived there, I unharnessed the beasts on the very edge of that shallow precipice. Then exerting all my strength, I contrived to roll the litter over. Down that steep incline it went, over and over, gathering more snow to itself at every revolution, and

sinking at last into the drift at the bottom. There were signs enough to show its presence, but those signs would hardly be read by any but the sharpest eyes, or by such as might be looking for it in precisely such a position. I must trust to luck that it escaped the notice of Messer Ramiro. But even if he did discover it, I did not think that it would tell him overmuch.

That done I resumed my hat and cloak—which I had retained—mounted once more, and urging the other mule along, I proceeded thus as fast as might be for a half-league or so in the direction of Cagli. That distance covered, again I halted. There was not a soul in sight. I stripped one of the mules of all its harness, which I buried in the snow, behind a hedge, then I drove the beast loose into a field. The peasant-owner of that land might conclude upon the morrow that it had rained asses in the night.

And now I was able to travel at a brisker pace, and in an hour or so I had passed the point where the road diverged, and I caught a glimpse of the four grooms, already high up in the hills which they were crossing. Whether they saw me or not I do not know, but with a last curse at their cowardice I put them from my mind, and cantered briskly on towards Cagli. It was a short league farther, and in little more than half an hour, my mule half-dead, I halted at the door of "The Full Moon."

Flinging my reins to the ostler, I strode into the inn, swaddled in my cloak, and called for the hostess. The place was empty, as indeed all Cagli had seemed when I rode up. She came forward—a woman with a brown, full face, and large kindly eyes—and I asked her whether a lady had arrived there in safety that morning. At first she seemed mistrustful, but when I had assured her that I was in that lady's service, she frankly owned that Madonna was safe in her own room. Thither I allowed her to lead me, at once eager and reluctant. Eager with my own eyes to assure myself of her perfect safety; reluctant that, since a

man may not penetrate to a lady's chamber hat on head, by uncovering I must disclose my shameful trade. Yet there was nothing for it but a bold face, and as I mounted the stairs in the woman's wake, I told myself that I was doubly a fool to be tormented by qualms of such a nature.

Hat in hand I followed the hostess into Madonna's room. The lady rose from the window-seat to greet me, her face pale and her gentle eyes wearing an anxious look. At sight of my head crowned with the crested, horned hood of folly, a frown of bewilderment drew her brows together, and she looked more closely to see whether I was indeed the man who had befriended her that morning in her extremity. In the eyes of the hostess I caught a gleam of recognition. She knew me for the merry loon who had entertained her guests one night a fortnight since, when on my way from Pesaro to Rome. But before she could give expression to this discovery of hers, the lady spoke.

"Leave us awhile, my woman," she commanded. But I stayed the hostess as she was withdrawing.

"This lady," said I, "will need an escort of three or four stout knaves upon a journey that she is going. She will be setting out as soon as may be."

"But what of my grooms?" cried the lady.

"Madonna," I informed her, "they have deserted you. That is the reason of my presence here. You shall hear the story of it presently. Meanwhile, we must arrange to replace them." And I turned again to the hostess.

She was standing in thought, a doubtful expression on her face. But as I looked at her she shook her head.

"There is no such escort to be found to-day in Cagli," she made answer. "The town is all but empty, and every lusty man is either gone

on the pilgrimage to the Holy House of Loretto, or else is at Pesaro for the Feast of the Epiphany."

It was in vain that I protested that a couple of knaves might surely be found. She answered me that such as were in Cagli were there because they would not be elsewhere.

The lady's face grew clouded as she listened, for from my insistence she shrewdly inferred that it imported to be gone.

"There is your ostler," quoth I at last. "He will do for one."

"He is the only man I have. My husband and my sons are gone to Pesaro."

"Yet spare us this one, and you shall be well paid his services."

But no bribe could tempt her to give way, and no doubt she was well-advised, for she contended that there was work to be done such as was beyond her years and strength, and that if she sent her ostler off, as well might she close her inn—a thing that was impossible.

Here, then, was an obstacle with which I had not reckoned. It was impossible to send the lady off alone, to travel a distance of some ten leagues, and the most of it by night—for if she would make sure of escaping, she must journey now without pause until she came to Pesaro.

And then, in a flash, it occurred to me that here lay the means, ready to my hand, by avail of which I might boldly re-enter Pesaro despite my banishment, and discharge my errand to Lucrezia Borgia. For, surely, considering the mission on which ostensibly I should be returning—as the saviour and protector of his kinswoman—Giovanni Sforza could not enforce that ban against me. Next I bethought me of the other aspect that the business wore. In fooling Ramiro I had thwarted the Borgia ends; in rescuing Madonna Paola I had perhaps

set at naught the Cardinal of Valencia's aims. If so, what then? It would seem that because the lady's eyes were mild and sweet, and because her beauty had so deeply wrought upon me, I had indeed fooled away my chance of salvation from the life and trade that were grown hateful to me. For back to Rome and Cesare Borgia I should dare go no more. Clearly I had burned my boats, and I had done it almost unthinkingly, acting upon the good impulse to befriend this lady, and never reckoning the cost down to its total. For all that the thing I had done, and what I might yet do, should offer me the means I needed to enter Pesaro without danger to my neck, I did not see that I was to derive great profit in the end—unless my profit lay in knowing that I had advanced the ruin of Giovanni Sforza by delivering my letter to Lucrezia. That at any rate was enough incentive clearly to define for me the line that I should take through this tangle into which the ever-jesting Fates had thrust me.

I was still at my thoughts, still pondering this most perplexing situation, the hostess standing silent by the door, when suddenly Madonna Paola spoke.

"Sir," said she, in faltering accents, "I—I have not the right to ask you, and I stand already so deeply in your debt. Not a doubt of it, but it will have inconvenienced you to have journeyed thus far to inform me of the flight of my grooms. Yet if you could—" She paused, timid of proceeding, and her glance fell.

The hostess was all ears, struck by the respectful manner in which this very evidently noble lady addressed a Fool. I opened the door for her.

"You may leave us now," said I. "I will come to you presently."

When she was gone I turned once more to the lady, my course resolved upon. My hate had conquered my last doubt. What first imported was that I should get to Pesaro and to Madonna Lucrezia.

"You were about to ask me," said I, "that I should accompany you to Pesaro."

"I hesitated, sir," she murmured. I bowed respectfully.

"There was not the need, Madonna," I assured her. "I am at your service."

"But, Messer Boccadoro, I have no claim upon you."

"Surely," said I, "the claim that every distressed lady has upon a man of heart. Let us say no more. It were best not to delay in setting out, although I can scarcely think that there is any imminent danger from Ramiro del' Orca now."

"Who is he?" she inquired.

"I told her, whereupon—"

"Did they come up with you?" she asked. "What passed between you?"

Succinctly I related what had chanced, and how I had sent Ramiro on a fool's errand, adding the particulars of the flight of her grooms, and of how I had rid myself of the litter and the second mule. She heard me, her eyes sparkling, and at times she clapped her hands with a glee that was almost childish, vowing that this was splendid, that was brave. I allayed what little fears remained her by pointing out how effectively we had effaced our tracks, and how vainly now Messer del' Orca might beat the country in quest of a lady in a litter, escorted by four grooms.

And now she beset me with fresh thanks and fresh expressions of wonder at my generous readiness to befriend her—a wonder all devoid of suspicion touching the single-mindedness of my purpose. But I reminded her that we had little leisure to stand talking, and left

her to make her preparations for the journey, whilst I went below to see that my mule and her horse were saddled. I made bold to pay the reckoning, and when presently she spoke of it, with flaming cheeks, and would have pledged me a jewel, I bade her look upon it as a loan which anon she might repay me when I had brought her safely to her kinsman's Court at Pesaro.

Thus, at last, we left Cagli, and took the road north, riding side by side and talking pleasantly the while, ever concerning the matter of her flight and of her hopes of shelter at Pesaro, which, being nearest to her heart, found readiest expression. I went wrapped in my cloak once more, my head-dress hidden 'neath my broad-brimmed hat, so that the few wayfarers we chanced on need not marvel to see a lady in such friendly intercourse with a Fool. And so dull was I that day as not to marvel, myself, at such a state of things.

The sun was declining, a red ball of fire, towards the mountains on our left, casting a blood-red glow upon the snow that everywhere encompassed us, as we cantered briskly on towards Fossombrone.

In that hour I fell to pondering, and I even caught myself hoping that Messer Ramiro del' Orca might not chance upon the discovery of how egregiously I had fooled him. He was dull-witted and slow at inference, and upon that I built the hope that he might fail to associate me with Madonna Paola's elusion of his pursuit. Thus the chance might yet be mine of returning to Rome and the honourable employment Cesare Borgia had promised me. If only that were so to fall out, I might yet contrive to mend the wreckage of my life. I was returned, it seems, to the ways of early youth, when we build our hopes of future greatness upon untenable foundations!

Great hopes and great ambitions rose within my breast that January evening, fired by the gentle child that rode beside me. Fate had sent me to her aid that day, and I seemed to have acquired, by virtue of that circumstance, a certain right in her. Had Fate no other

favours for me in her lap! I bethought me of the very House of Sforza, to which I had been so shamefully attached, and of its humble source in that peasant, Giacomuzzo Attendolo, surnamed Sforza for his abnormal strength of body, who rose to great and princely heights.

Assuredly I had the advantage of such an one, and were the chance but given me—

I went no further. Down in my heart I laughed to scorn my own wild musings. Cesare Borgia would come to know—he must, whether Ramiro told him, or whether he inferred it for himself from the account Ramiro must give him of our meeting—how I had thwarted him in one thing, whilst I had served him in another. Fate was against me. I had fallen too low to ever rise again, and no dreams indulged in a sunset hour, and inspired, perhaps, by a child who was beautiful as one of the saints of God, would ever come to be realised by poor Boccadoro.

Night was falling as we clattered through the slippery streets of Fossombrone.

CHAPTER V. MADONNA'S INGRATITUDE

We stayed in Fossombrone little more than a half-hour, and having made a hasty supper we resumed our way, giving out that we wished to reach Fano ere we slept. And so by the first hour of night Fossombrone was a league or so behind us, and we were advancing briskly towards the sea. Overhead a moon rode at the full in a clear sky, and its light was reflected by the snow, so that we were not discomforted by any darkness. We fell, presently, into a gentler pace, for, after all, there could be no advantage in reaching Pesaro before morning, and as we rode we talked, and I made bold to ask her the cause of her flight from Rome.

She told me then that she was Madonna Paola Sforza di Santaflor, and that Pope Alexander, in his nepotism and his desire to make rich and powerful alliances for his family, had settled upon her as the wife for his nephew, Ignacio Borgia. He had been emboldened to this step by the fact that her only protector was her brother, Filippo di Santaflor, whom they had sought to coerce. It was her brother, who, seeing himself in a dangerous and unenviable position, had secretly suggested flight to her, urging her to repair to her kinsman Giovanni Sforza at Pesaro. Her flight, however, must have been speedily discovered and the Borgias, who saw in that act a defiance of their supreme authority, had ordered her pursuit.

But for me, she concluded, that pursuits must have resulted in her capture, and once they had her back in Rome, willing or unwilling, they would have driven her into the alliance by means of which they sought to bring her fortune into their own house. This drew her into fresh

protestations of the undying gratitude she entertained towards me, protestations which I would have stemmed, but that she persisted in them.

"It is a good and noble thing that you have done," said she, "and I think that Heaven must have directed you to my aid, for it is scarce likely that in all Italy I should have found another man who would have done so much."

"Why, what, after all, is this much that I have done?" I cried. "It is no less than my manhood bade me do; no less than any other would have done seeing you so beset."

"Nay, that is more than I can ever think," she answered. "Who for the sake of an unknown would have suffered such inconveniences as have you? Who would have returned as you have returned to advise me of the defection of my grooms? Who, when other escort failed, would have gone the length of journeying all this way to render a service that is beyond repayment? And, above all, who for the sake of an unknown maid would have submitted to this travesty of yours?"

"Travesty?" quoth I, so struck by that as to interrupt her at last. "What travesty, Madonna?"

"Why, this garb of motley that you donned the better to fool my pursuers and that you still wear in my poor service."

I turned in the saddle to stare at her, and in the moonlight I clearly saw her eyes meet mine. So! that was the reason of her kindness and of the easy familiarity of her speech with me! She deemed me some knight-errant who caracoled through Italy in quest of imperilled maidens needing aid. Of a certainty she had gathered her knowledge of the world from the works of Messer Bojardo, or perhaps from the "Amadis of Gaul" of Messer Bernardo Tasso. And, no doubt, she thought that suits of motley grew on bushes by the roadside, whence

those who had a fancy for disguise might cull them.

Well, well, it were better she should know the truth at once, and choose such a demeanour as she considered fitting towards a Fool. I had no stomach for the courtesies that were meant for such a man as I was not.

"Madonna, you are in error," I informed her, speaking slowly. "This garb is no travesty. It is my usual raiment."

There was a pause and I saw the slackening of her reins. No doubt, had we been afoot she would have halted, the better to confront me.

"How?" she asked, and a new note, imperious and chill, was sounding already in her voice. "You would not have me understand that you are by trade a Fool?"

"Allowing that I am not a fool by birth, under what other circumstances, think you, I should be likely to wear the garments of a Fool?"

"But this morning," she protested, after a brief pause, "when first I met you, you were not so arrayed."

"I was arrayed even as I am now, in a cloak and hat and boots that hid my motley from such undiscerning eyes as were yours and your grooms'—all taken up with your own fears as you then were."

There was in the tail of that a sting, as I meant there should be, for the sudden haughtiness of her tone was cutting into me. Was I less worthy of thanks because I was a Fool? Had I on that account done less to serve and save her? Or was it that the action which, in a spurred and armoured knight, had been accounted noble was deemed unworthy of thanks in a crested, motleyed jester? It seemed, indeed, that some such reasoning she followed, for after that we spoke no more until we were approaching Fano.

A many times before had I felt the shame of my ignoble trade, but never so acutely as at that moment. It had seared my soul when Giovanni Sforza had told my story to his Court, ere he had driven me from Pesaro with threats of hanging, and it had burned even deeper when later, Madonna Lucrezia, upon entrusting me with her letter to her brother, had upbraided me with the supineness that so long had held me in that vile bondage. But deepest of all went now the burning iron of that disgrace. For my companion's silence seemed to argue that had she known my quality she would have scorned the aid of which she had availed herself to such good purpose. If any doubt of this had mercifully remained me, her next words would have served to have resolved it. It was when the lights of Fano gleamed ahead; we were coming to a cross-roads, and I urged the turning to the left.

"But Fano is in front," she remonstrated coldly.

"This way we can avoid the town and gain the Pesaro road beyond it," answered I, my tone as cool as hers.

"Yet may it not be that at Fano I might find an escort?"

I could have cried out at her cruelty, for in her words I could but read my dismissal from her service. There had been no more talk of an escort other than that which I afforded, and with which at first she had been well content.

I sat my mule in silence for a moment. She had been very justly served had I been the vassal that she deemed me, and had I borne myself in that character without consideration of her sex, her station or her years. She had been very justly served had I wheeled about and left her there to make her way to Fano, and thence to Pesaro, as best she might. She was without money, as I knew, and she would have found in Fano such a reception as would have brought the bitter tears of late repentance to her pretty eyes.

But I was soft-hearted, and, so, I reasoned with her; yet in a manner that was to leave her no doubt of the true nature of her situation, and the need to use me with a little courtesy for the sake of what I might yet do, if she lacked the grace to treat me with gratitude for the sake of that which I had done already.

"Madonna," said I. "It were wiser to choose the by-road and forego the escort, since we have dispensed with it so far. There are many reasons why a lady should not seek to enter Fano at this hour of night."

"I know of none," she interrupted me.

"That may well be. Nevertheless they exist."

"This night-riding in so lonely a fashion is little to my taste," she told me sullenly. "I am for Fano."

She had the mercy to spare me the actual words, yet her tone told me as plainly as if she had uttered them that I could go with her or not, as I should choose. In silence, very sore at heart, I turned my mule's head once more towards the lights of the town.

"Since you are resolved, so be it," was all my answer; and we proceeded.

No word did we exchange until we had entered the main street, when she curtly asked me which was the best inn.

"The Golden Fish," said I, as curtly, and to "The Golden Fish" we went.

Arrived there, Madonna Paola took affairs into her own hands. She dismounted, leaving the reins with a groom, and entering the common-room she proclaimed her needs to those that occupied it by loudly calling upon the landlord to find her an escort of three or four knaves to accompany her at once to Pesaro, where they should be

well rewarded by the Lord Giovanni, her cousin.

I had followed her in, and I ground my teeth at such an egregious piece of folly. Her hood was thrown back, displaying the lenza of fine linen on her sable hair, and over this a net of purest gold all set with jewels. Her camorra, too, was open, and in her girdle there were gems for all to see. There were but a half-dozen men in the room. Two of these had a venerable air—they may have been traders journeying to Milan—whilst a third, who sat apart, was a slender, effeminate-looking youth. The remaining three were fellows of rough aspect, and when one of them—a black-browed ruffian—raised his eyes and fastened them upon the riches that Madonna Paola with such indifference displayed, I knew what was to follow.

He rose upon the instant, and stepping forward, he made her a low bow.

"Illustrious lady," said he, "if these two friends of mine and I find favour with you, here is an escort ready found. We are stout fellows, and very faithful."

Faithful to their cut-throat trade, I made no doubt he meant.

His fellows now rose also, and she looked them over, giving herself the airs of having spent her virgin life in judging men by their appearance. It was in vain I tugged her cloak, in vain I murmured the word "wait" under cover of my hand. She there and then engaged them, and bade them make ready to set out at once. One more attempt I made to induce her to alter her resolve.

"Madonna," said I, "it is an unwise thing to go a-journeying by night with three unknown men, and of such villainous appearance. To me they seem no better than bandits."

We were standing apart from the others, and she was sipping a cup of spiced wine that the host had mulled for her. She looked at me

with a tolerant smile.

"They are poor men," said she. "Would you have them robed in velvet?"

"My quarrel is with their looks, Madonna, not their garments," I answered patiently. She laughed lightly, carelessly; even, I thought, a trifle scornfully.

"You are very fanciful," said she, then added—"but if so be that you are afraid to trust yourself in their company, why then, sir, I need bring you no farther out of the road that you were following when first we met."

Did the child think that some jealousy actuated me, and prompted me to inspire her with mistrust of my supplanters? She angered me. Yet now, more than ever was I resolved to journey with her. Leave her at the mercy of those ruffians, whom in her ignorance she was mad enough to trust, I could not—not even had she whipped me. She was so young, so frail and slight, that none but a craven could have found it in his heart to have deserted her just then.

"If it please you Madonna," I answered smoothly, "I will make bold to travel on with you."

It may be that my even accents stung her; perhaps she read in them some measure of reproof of the ingratitude that lay in her altered bearing towards me. Her eyes met mine across the table, and seemed to harden as she looked. Her answer came in a vastly altered tone.

"Why, if you are bent that way, I shall be glad to have you avail yourself of my escort, Boccadoro."

I had suffered the scorn now of her speech, now of her silence, for some hours, but never was I so near to turning on her as at that

moment; never so near to consigning her to the fate to which her headstrong folly was compelling her. That she should take that tone with me!

The violence of the sudden choler I suppressed turned me pale under her steady glance. So that, seeing it, her own cheeks flamed crimson, and her eyes fell, as if in token that she realised the meanness of her bearing. To some natures there can be nothing more odious than such a realisation, and of those, I think, was she; for she stamped her foot in a sudden pet, and curtly asked the host why there was such delay with the horses.

"They are at the door, Madonna," he protested, bowing as he spoke. "And your escort is already waiting in the saddle."

She turned and strode abruptly towards the threshold. Over her shoulder she called to me:

"If you come with us, Boccadoro, you had best be brisk."

"I follow, Madonna," said I, with a grim relish, "so soon as I have paid the reckoning."

She halted and half turned, and I thought I saw a slight droop at the corners of her mouth.

"You are keeping count of what I owe you?" she muttered.

"Aye, Madonna," I answered, more grimly still, "I am keeping count." And I thought that my wits were vastly at fault if that account were not to be greatly swelled ere Pesaro was reached. Haply, indeed, my own life might go to swell it. I almost took a relish in that thought. Perhaps then, when I was stiff and cold—done to death in her service—this handsome, ungrateful child would come to see how much discomfort I had suffered for her sake.

My thoughts still ran in that channel as we rode out of Pesaro, for I

misliked the way in which those knaves disposed themselves about us. In front went Madonna Paola; and immediately behind her, so that their horses' heads were on a level with her saddle-bow, one on each side, went two of those ruffians. The third, whom I had heard them call Stefano, and who was the one who had made her the offer of their services, ambled at my side, a few paces in the rear, and sought to draw me into conversation, haply by way of throwing me off my guard.

Mistrust is a fine thing at times. "Forewarned is forearmed," says the proverb, and of all forewarnings there is none we are more likely to heed than our own mistrust; for whereas we may leave unheeded the warnings of a friend, we seldom leave unheeded the warnings of our spirit.

And so, while my amiable and garrulous Ser Stefano engaged me in pleasant conversation—addressing me ever as Messer the Fool, since he knew me not by name—I wrapped my cloak about me, and under cover of it kept my fingers on the hilt of my stout Pistoja dagger, ready to draw and use it at the first sign of mischief. For that sign I was all eyes, and had I been Argus himself I could have kept no better watch. Meanwhile I plied my tongue and maintained as merry a conversation with Ser Stefano as you could wish to hear, for he seemed a ready-witted knave of a most humorous turn of fancy—God rest his rascally soul! And so it came to pass that I did by him the very thing he sought to do by me; I lulled him into a careless confidence.

At last the sign I had been waiting for was given. I saw it as plainly as if it had been meant for me; I believe I saw it before the man for whom it was intended, and but for my fears concerning Madonna Paola, I could have laughed outright at their clumsy assurance. The man who rode on Madonna's right turned in his saddle and put up his hand as if to beckon Stefano. I was regaling him with one of the choicest of Messer Sacchetti's paradoxes, gurgling, myself, at the humour of the thing I told. I paid no heed to the sign. I continued to

expound my quip, as though we had the night before us in which to make its elusive humour clear. But out of the tail of my eye I watched my good friend Stefano, and I saw his right hand steal round to the region of his back where I knew his dagger to be slung. Yet was I patient. There should be no blundering through an excessive precipitancy. I talked on until I saw that my suspicions were amply realised. I caught the cold gleam of steel in the hand that he brought back as stealthily as he had carried it to his poniard. Sant' Iddio! What a coward he was for all his bulk, to go so slyly about the business of stabbing a poor, helpless, defenceless Fool.

"But Sacchetti makes his point clear," I babbled on, most blandly; "almost as clear, as comprehensive and as penetrating as should be to you the point of this." And with a swift movement I swung half-round in my saddle, and sank my dagger to the hilt in his side even as he was in the act of raising his.

He made no sound beyond the faintest gurgle—the first vowel of a suddenly choked word of wonder and surprise. He rocked a second in his saddle, then crashed over, and lay with arms flung wide, like a huge black crucifix, upon the white ground. At the same moment a piercing scream broke from Madonna Paola.

I tremble still to think what might have been her fate had not those ruffians who had laid hands on her fallen into the sorry error of holding their single adversary too lightly. They heard the thud of the gallant Stefano's fall, and they never doubted that mine was the body that had gone down. They heard the rapid hoof-beats of my approach, yet, they never turned their heads to ascertain whether they might not be mistaken in their firm conviction that it was Messer Stefano who was joining them.

I kissed my blade for luck, and drove it straight and full into the back of the fellow on Madonna Paola's right. He cried out, essayed to turn in his saddle that he might deal with this unlooked-for assailant, then,

overcome, he lurched forward on to the withers of his horse and thence rolled over, and was dragged away at the gallop, his foot caught in a stirrup, by the suddenly startled brute he rode.

So far things had gone with an amazing and delightful ease. If only the last of them had had the amiability to be intimidated by my prowess and to have taken to his heels, I might have issued from that contest with the unscathed glory of a very Mars. But from his throat there came, in answer to his comrade's cry, a roar of rage. He fell back from Madonna, and wheeled his horse to come at me, drawing his sword as he advanced.

"Ride on, Madonna," I shouted. "I will rejoin you presently."

The fellow laughed, a mighty ugly and discomposing laugh, which may or may not have shaken her faith in my promise to rejoin her. It certainly went near to shaking mine. However, she displayed a presence of mind full worthy of the haughtiness and ingratitude of which she had showed herself capable. She urged her mule forward, and, so, left him a clear road to attack me. I made a mistake then that went mighty near to costing me my life. I paused to twist my cloak about my left arm intending to use it as a buckler. Had I but risked the arm itself, all unprotected, in that task, it may well be that it had served me better. As it was, my preparations were far from complete when already he was upon me, with the result that the waving slack of my cloak was in my way to hamper and retard the movements of my arm.

His sword leapt at me, a murderous blue-white flash of moonlit steel. I put up my half-swaddled arm to divert the thrust, holding my dagger ready in my right, and gripping my mule with all the strength of my two knees. I caught the blade, it is true, and turned aside the stroke intended for my heart. But the slack of the cloak clung to the neck of my mule, so that I could not carry my arm far enough to send his point clear of my body. It took me in the shoulder, stinging me, first icy cold then burning hot, as it went tearing its way through. For just a

second was I daunted, more at knowing myself touched than by the actual pain. Then I flung my whole body forward to reach him at the close quarters to which he had come, and I buried my dagger in his breast, high up at the base of his dirty throat.

The force of the blow carried me forward, even as it bore him backward; and so, with his sword-blade in my shoulder, and my dagger where I had planted it, we hurtled over together and lay a second amidst what seemed a forest of equine legs. Then something smote me across the head, and I was knocked senseless.

Conceive me, if you can, a sorrier, or more useless thing. A senseless Fool!

CHAPTER VI. FOOL'S LUCK

My return to consciousness seemed to afford me such sensations as a diver may experience as he rises up and up through the depth of water he has plumbed—or as a disembodied soul may know in its gentle ascent towards Heaven. Indeed the latter parallel may be more apt. For through the mist that suffused my senses there penetrated from overhead a voice that seemed to invoke every saint in the calendar on the behalf of some poor mortal. A very litany of intercession was it, not quite, it would appear, devoid of self-seeking.

"Sainted Virgin, restore him! Good St. Paul, who wert done to death with a sword, let him not perish, else am I lost indeed!" came the voice.

I took a deep breath, and opened my eyes, whereat the voice cried out gladly that its intercessions had been heard, and I knew that it was on my behalf that the saints of Heaven had been disturbed in their beatific peace. My head was pillowed in a woman's lap, and it took me a moment or two to realise that that lap was Madonna Paula's, as was hers the voice that had reached my awakening senses, the voice that now welcomed me back to life in terms that were very different from the last that I could remember her having used towards me.

"Thank God, Messer Boccadoro!" she exclaimed, as she bent over me.

Her face was black with shadow, but in her voice I caught a hint of tears, and I wondered whether they were shed on my behalf or on her own.

"I do!" I answered fervently. "Have you any notion of what hour it

is?"

"None," she sighed. "You have been so long unconscious that I was losing hope of ever hearing your voice again."

I became aware of a dull ache on the right side of my head. I put up my hand, and withdrew it moist. She saw the action.

"One of the horses must have struck you with its hoof after you fell," she explained. "But I was more concerned for your other wound. I withdrew the sword with my own hands."

That other wound she spoke of was now making itself felt as well. It was a gnawing, stinging pain in the region of my left shoulder, which seemed to turn me numb to the waist on that side of my body, and render powerless my arm. I questioned her touching my three adversaries, and she silently pointed to three black masses that lay some little distance from us in the snow.

"Not all dead?" I cried.

"I do not know," she answered, with a sob. "I have not dared go near them. They frighten me. Mother of Heaven, what a night of horror it has been! Oh, that I had taken your advice, Messer Boccacoloro!" she exclaimed in a passion of self-reproach.

I laughed, seeking to soften her distress.

"To me it seems, that whether you would or not, you have been compelled to take it, after all. Those fellows lie there harmless enough, and I am still—as I urged that I should be—your only escort."

"A nobler protector never woman had," she assured me, and I felt a hot pearl of moisture fall upon my brow.

"You were wise, at least, to journey with a Fool," I answered her. "For fools are proverbially lucky folk, and to-night has proven me of all

fools the luckiest. But, Madonna," I suggested, in a different tone, "should we not be better advised to attempt to resume, this interesting journey of ours? We do not seem to lack horses?"

A couple of nags were standing by the road-side, together with our mules, and I was afterwards to learn that she, herself, it was had tethered them.

"It must be yet some three leagues to Pesaro," I added, "and if we journey slowly, as I fear me that we must, we should arrive there soon after daybreak."

"Do you think that you can stand?" she asked, a hopeful ring in her voice.

"I might essay it," answered I, and I would have done so, there and then, but that she detained me.

"First let me see to this hurt in your head," said she. "I have been bathing it with snow while you were unconscious."

She gathered a fresh handful as she spoke, and, very tenderly she wiped away the blood. Then from her own head she took the fine linen lanza that she wore, and made a bandage—a bandage sweet with the faint fragrance of marsh-mallow—and bound it about my battered skull. When that was done she turned her attention to my shoulder. This was a more difficult matter, and all that we could do was to attempt to stanch the blood, which already had drenched my doublet on that side. To this end she passed a long scarf under my arm, and wound it several times about my shoulder.

At last her gentle ministrations ended, I sought to rise. A dizziness assailed me scarce was I on my feet, and it is odds I had fallen back, but that she caught and steadied me.

"Mother in Heaven! You are too weak to ride," she exclaimed. "You

must not attempt it."

"Nay, but I will," I answered, with more stoutness of tone than I felt of body, and notwithstanding that my knees were loosening under my weight. "It is a faintness that will pass."

If ever man willed himself to conquer weakness, that did I then, and with some measure of success—or else it was that my faintness passed of itself. I drew away from her support, and straightening myself, I crossed to where the animals were tethered, staggering at first, but presently with a surer foot. She followed me, watching my steps with as much apprehension as a mother may feel when her first-born makes his earliest attempts at walking, and as ready to spring to my aid did I show signs of stumbling. But I kept up, and presently my senses seemed to clear, and I stepped out more surely.

Awhile we stood discussing which of the animals we should take. It was my suggestion that we should ride the horses but she wisely contended that the mules would prove the more convenient if the slower. I agreed with her, and then, ere we set out, I went to see to my late opponents. One of them—Ser Stefano—was cold and stiff; the other two still lived, and from the nature of their wounds seemed likely to survive, if only they were not frozen to death before some good Samaritan came upon them.

I knelt a moment to offer up a prayer for the repose of the soul of him that was dead, and I bound up the wounds of the living as best I could, to save them greater loss of blood. Indeed, had it lain in my power, I would have done more for them. But in what case was I to render further aid? After all, they had brought their fate upon themselves, and I doubt not they were paying a score that they had heaped up heavily in the past.

I went back to the mules, and, despite my remonstrances, Madonna Paola insisted upon aiding me to mount, urging me to have a care of

my wound, and to make no violent movement that should set it bleeding again. Then she mounted too, nimble as any boy that ever robbed an orchard, and we set out once more. And now it was a very contrite and humbled lady that rode with me, and one that was at no pains to dissemble her contrition, but, rather, could speak of nothing else.

It moved me strangely to have her suing pardon from me, as though I had been her equal instead of the sometime jester of the Court of Pesaro, dismissed for an excessive pertness towards one with whom his master curried favour.

And presently, as was perhaps but natural after all that she had witnessed, she fell to questioning me as to how it came to pass that one of such wit, resource and courage should follow the mean calling to which I had owned. In answer I told her without reservation the full story of my shame. It was a thing that I had ever most zealously kept hidden, as already I have shown.

To be a Fool was evil enough in all truth; but to let men know that under my motley was buried the identity of a man patrician-born was something infinitely worse. For, however vile the trade of a Fool may be, it is not half so vile for a low-born clod who is too indolent or too sickly to do honest work as for one who has accepted it out of a half-cowardice and persevered in it through very sloth.

Yet on that night and after all that had chanced, no matter how my cheeks might burn in the gloom as I rode beside her, I was glad for once to tell that ignominious story, glad that she should know what weight of circumstance had driven me to wear my hideous livery.

But since my story dealt oddly with that Lord of Pesaro, the kinsman whose shelter she was now upon her way to seek, I must first assure myself that the candour to which I was disposed would not offend.

"Does it happen, Madonna," I inquired, "that you are well acquainted with the Lord of Pesaro?"

"Nay; I have never seen him," answered she. "When he was at Rome, a year ago in the service of the Pope, I was at my studies in the convent. His father was my father's cousin, so that my kinship is none so near. Why do you ask?"

"Because my story deals with him, Madonna, and it is no pretty tale. Not such a narrative as I should choose wherewith to entertain you. Still, since you have asked for it, you shall hear it.

"It was in the year that Giovanni Sforza, Lord of Pesaro, celebrated his nuptials with the Lady Lucrezia Borgia—three years ago, therefore—that one morning there rode into the courtyard of his castle of Pesaro a tall and lean young man on a tall and lean old horse. He was garbed and harnessed after a fashion that proclaimed him half-knight, half-peasant, and caused the castle lacqueys to eye him with amusement and greet him with derision. Lacqueys are great arbiters of fashion.

"In a loud, imperious voice this cockerel called for Giovanni, Lord of Pesaro, whereupon, resenting the insolence of his manner, the men-at-arms would have driven him out without more ado. But it chanced that from one of the windows of his stronghold the tyrant espied his odd visitor. He was in a mood that craved amusement, and marvelling what madman might be this, he made his way below and bade them stand back and let me speak—for I, Madonna, was that lean young man.

"'Are you,' quoth I, 'the Lord of Pesaro?'

"He answered me courteously that he was, whereupon I did my errand to him. I flung my gauntlet of buffalo-hide at his feet in gage of battle.

"Your father," said I, 'Costanzo of Pesaro, was a foul brigand, who robbed my father of his castle and lands of Biancomonte, leaving him to a needy and poverty-stricken old age. I am here to avenge upon your father's son my father's wrongs; I am here to redeem my castle and my lands. If so be that you are a true knight, you will take up the challenge that I fling you, and you will do battle with me, on horse or foot, and with whatsoever arms you shall decree, God defending him that has justice on his side.'

"Knowing the world as I know it now, Madonna," I interpolated, "I realise the folly of that act of mine. But in those days my views belonged to a long departed age of chivalry, of which I had learnt from such books as came my way at Biancomonte, and which I believed was the life of to-day in the world of men. It was a thing which some tyrants would have had me broken on the wheel. But Giovanni Sforza never so much as manifested anger. There was a complacent smile on his white face and his fingers toyed carelessly with his beard.

"I waited patiently, very haughty of mien and very fierce at heart, and when the amusement began to fade from his eyes, I begged that he would deliver me his answer.

"My answer,' quoth he, 'is that you get you back to the place from whence you came, and render thanks to God on your knees every morning of the life I am sparing you that Giovanni Sforza is more entertained than affronted by your frenzy.'

"At his words I went crimson from chin to brow.

"Do you disdain me?" I questioned, choking with rage. He turned, with a shrug and a laugh, and bade one of his men to give this cavalier his glove, and conduct him from the castle. Several that had stood at hand made shift to obey him, whereat I fell into such a blind, unreasoning fury that incontinently I drew my sword, and laid about me. They were many, I was but one; and they were not long in

overpowering me and dragging me from my horse.

"They bound me fast, and Giovanni bade them let me have a priest, then get me hanged without delay. Had he done that, the world being as it is, perhaps none could blame him. But he elected to spare my life, yet on such terms as I could never have accepted had it not been for the consideration of my poor widowed mother, whom I had left in the hills of Biancomonte whilst I went forth to seek my fortune—such was the tale I had told her. I was her sole support, her only hope in life; and my death must have been her own, if not from grief, why, then from very want. The thought of that poor old woman crushed my spirit as I sat in durance waiting for my end, and when the priest came, whom they had sent to shrive me, he found me weeping, which he took to argue a contrite heart. He bore the tale of it to Giovanni, and the Lord of Pesaro came to visit me in consequence, and found me sorely changed from my furious mood of some hours earlier.

"I was a very coward, I own; but it was for my mother's sake. If I feared death, it was because I bethought me of what it must mean to her."

"At sight of Giovanni I cast myself at his feet, and with tears in my eyes and in heartrending tones, bespeaking a humility as great as had been my erstwhile arrogance, I begged my life of him. I told him the truth—that for myself I was not afraid to die, but that I had a mother in the hills who was dependent on me, and who must starve if I were thus cut off.

"He watched me with his moody eyes, a saturnine smile about his lips. Then of a sudden he shook with a silent mirth, whose evil, malicious depth I was far indeed from suspecting. He asked me would I take solemn oath that if he spared my life I would never again raise my hand against him. That oath I took with a greediness born of my fear of the death that was impending.

"'You have been wise,' said he,' and you shall have your life on one condition—that you devote it to my service.'

"'Even that will I do,' I answered readily. He turned to an attendant, and ordered him to go fetch a suit of motley. No word passed between us until that man returned with those garish garments. Then Giovanni smiled on me in his mocking, infernal way.

"'Not that,' I cried, guessing his purpose.

"'Aye, that,' he answered me; 'that or the hangman's noose. A man who could devise so monstrous a jest as was your challenge to the Tyrant of Pesaro should be a merry fellow if he would. I need such a one. There are two Fools at my Court, but they are mere tumblers, deformed vermin that excite as much disgust as mirth. I need a sprightlier man, a man of some learning and more drollery; such a man, in short, as you would seem to be.'

"I recoiled in horror and disgust. Was this his clemency—this sparing of my life that he might submit it to an eternal shame? For a moment my mother was forgotten. I thought only of myself, and I grew resolved to hang.

"'When you spoke of service,' said I 'I thought of service of an honourable sort.'

"'The service that I offer you is honourable,' he said, with cold amusement. 'Indeed, remembering that your life was forfeit, you should account yourself most fortunate. You shall be well housed and well fed, you shall wear silk and lie in fine linen, on condition that you are merry. If you prove dull our castellan shall have you whipped—for such a one as you could not be dull save out of sullenness, of which we shall seek to cure you if you show signs of it.'

"'I will not do it,' I cried, 'it were too base.'

"'My friend,' he answered me, 'the choice is yours. You shall have an hour in which to resolve what you will do. When they open this door for you at sunset, come forth clad as you are, and you shall hang. If you prefer to live, then don me that robe and cap of motley, and, on condition that you are merry, life is yours.'"

I paused a moment. Our horses were moving slowly, for the tale engrossed us both, me in the telling, her in the hearing. Presently—

"I need not harass you with the reflections that were mine during that hour, Madonna. Rather let me ask you: how should a man so placed make choice to be full worthy of the office proffered him?"

There was a moment's silence while she pondered.

"Why," she answered me, at last, "a fool I take it would have chosen death: the wise man life, since it must hold the hope of better days."

"And since it asked a man of wit to play the fool to such a tune as the Lord Giovanni piped, that wise young man chose life and folly. But was that choice indeed so wise? The story ends not there. That young men whose early life had been one of hardships found himself, indeed, well-housed and fed as the Lord Giovanni had promised him, and so he fell into a slothful spirit, and was content to play the Fool for bed and board.

"There were times when conscience knocked loudly at my heart, and I was tortured with shame to see myself in the garb of Fools, the sport of all, from prince to scullion. But in the three years that I had dwelt at Pesaro my identity had been forgotten by the few who had ever been aware of it. Moreover, a court is a place of changes, and in three years there had been such comings and goings at the Court of Giovanni Sforza, that not more than one or two remained of those that had inhabited it when first I entered on my existence there. Thus had my position grown steadily more bearable. I was just a jester and no

more, and so, in a measure—though I blush to say it—I grew content. I gathered consolation from the fact that there were not any who now remembered the story of my coming to Pesaro, or who knew of the cowardliness I had been guilty of when I consented to mask myself in the motley and assume the name of Boccadoro. I counted on the Lord Giovanni's generosity to let things continue thus, and, meanwhile, I provided for my mother out of the vails that were earned me by my shame. But there came a day when Giovanni in evil wantonness of spirit chose to make merry at the Fool's expense.

"To be held up to scorn and ridicule is a part of the trade of such as I, and had it been just Boccadoro whom Giovanni had exposed to the derision of his Court, haply I had been his jester still. But such sport as that would have satisfied but ill the deep-seated malice of his soul. The man whom his cruel mockery crucified for their entertainment was Lazzaro Biancomonte, whom he revealed to them, relating in his own fashion the tale I have told you.

"At that I rebelled, and I said such things to him in that hour, before all his Court, as a man may not say to a prince and live. Passion surged up in him, and he ordered his castellan to flog me to the bone—in short, to slay me with a whip.

"From that punishment I was saved by the intercessions of Madonna Lucrezia. But I was driven out of Pesaro that very night, and so it happens that I am a wanderer now."

At that I left it. I had no mind to tell her what motives had impelled Lucrezia Borgia to rescue me, nor on what errand I had gone to Rome and was from Rome returning.

She had heard me in silence, and now that I had done, she heaved a sigh, for which gentle expression of pity out of my heart I thanked her. We were silent, thereafter, for a little while. At length she turned her head to regard me in the light of the now declining moon.

"Messer Biancomonte," said she, and the sound of the old name, falling from her lips, thrilled me with a joy unspeakable, and seemed already to reinvest me in my old estate, "Messer Biancomonte, you have done me in these four-and-twenty hours such service as never did knight of old for any lady—and you did it, too, out of the most disinterested and noble of motives, proving thereby how truly knightly is that heart of yours, which, for my sake, has all but beat its last tonight. You must journey on to Pesaro with me despite this banishment of which you have told me. I will be surety that no harm shall come to you. I could not do less, and I shall hope to do far more. Such influence as I may prove to have with my cousin of Pesaro shall be exerted all on your behalf, my friend; and if in the nature of Giovanni Sforza there be a tithe of the gratitude with which you have inspired me, you shall, at least, have justice, and Biancomonte shall be yours again."

I was silent for a spell, so touched was I by the kindness she manifested me—so touched, indeed, and so unused to it that I forgot how amply I had earned it, and how rudely she had used me ere that was done.

"Alas!" I sighed. "God knows I am no longer fit to sit in the house of the Biancomonte. I am come too low, Madonna."

"That Lazzaro, after whom you are named," she answered, "had come yet lower. But he lived again, and resumed his former station. Take your courage from that."

"He lived not at the mercy of Giovanni of Pesaro," said I.

There was a fresh pause at that. Then—"At least," she urged me, "you'll come to Pesaro with me?"

"Why yes," said I. "I could not let you go alone." And in my heart I felt a pang of shame, and called myself a cur for making use of her as I

was doing to reach the Court of Giovanni Sforza.

"You need fear no consequences," she promised me. "I can be surety for that at least."

In the east a brighter, yellower light than the moon's began to show. It was the dawn, from which I gathered that it must be approaching the thirteenth hour. Pesaro could not be more than a couple of leagues farther, and, presently, when we had gained the summit of the slight hill we were ascending, we beheld in the distance a blurred mass looming on the edge of the glittering sea. A silver ribbon that uncoiled itself from the western hills disappeared behind it. That silvery streak was the River Foglia; that heap of buildings against the landscape's virgin white, the town of Pesaro.

Madonna pointed to it with a sudden cry of gladness. "See Messer Biancomonte, how near we are. Courage, my friend; a little farther, and yonder we have rest and comfort for you."

She had need, in truth, to cry me "Courage!" for I was weakening fast once more. It may have been the much that I had talked, or the infernal jolting of my mule, but I was losing blood again, and as we were on the point of riding forward my senses swam, so that I cried out; and but for her prompt assistance I might have rolled headlong from my saddle.

As it was, she caught me about the waist as any mother might have done her son. "What ails you?" she inquired, her newly-aroused anxiety contrasting sharply with her joyous cry of a moment earlier. "Are you faint, my friend?" It needed no confession on my part. My condition was all too plain as I leaned against her frail body for support.

"It is my wound," I gasped. Then I set my teeth in anguish. So near the haven, and to fail now! It could not be; it must not be. I summoned

all my resolution, all my fortitude; but in vain. Nature demanded payment for the abuses she had suffered.

"If we proceed thus," she ventured fearfully, "you leaning against me, and going at a slow pace—no faster than a walk—think you, you can bear it? Try, good Messer 'Biancomonte."

"I will try, Madonna," I replied. "Perhaps thus, and if I am silent, we may yet reach Pesaro together. If not—if my strength gives out—the town is yonder and the day is coming. You will find your way without me."

"I will not leave you, sir," she vowed; and it was good to hear her.

"Indeed, I hope you may not know the need," I answered wearily. And thus we started on once more.

Sant' Iddio! What agonies I suffered ere the sun rose up out of the sea to flood us with his winter glory! What agonies were mine during those two hours or so of that last stage of our eventful journey! "I must bear up until we are at the gates of Pesaro," I kept murmuring to myself, and, as if my spirit were inclined to become the servant of my will and hold my battered flesh alive until we got that far, Pesaro's gates I had the joy of entering ere I was constrained to give way.

Dimly I remember—for very dim were my perceptions growing—that as we crossed the bridge and passed beneath the archway of the Porta Romana, the officer turned out to see who came. At sight of me he gaped a moment in astonishment.

"Boccadoro?" he exclaimed, at last. "So soon returned?"

"Like Perseus from the rescue of Andromeda," answered I, in a feeble voice, "saving that Perseus was less bloody than am I. Behold the Madonna Paola Sforza di Santafior, the noble cousin of our High and Mighty Lord."

And then as if my task being done, I were free to set my weary brain to rest, my senses grew confused, the officer's voice became a hum that gradually waxed fainter as I sank into what seemed the most luxurious and delicious sleep that ever mortal knew.

Two days later, when I was conscious once more, I learned what excitement those words of mine had sown, with what honours Madonna Paola was escorted to the Castle, and how the citizens of Pesaro turned out upon hearing the news which ran like fire before us. And Madonna, it seems, had loudly proclaimed how gallantly I had served her, for as they bore me along in a cloak carried by four men-at-arms, the cry that was heard in the streets of Pesaro that morning was "Boccadoro!" They had loved me, had those good citizens of Pesaro, and the news of my departure had cast a gloom upon the town. To have their hero return in a manner so truly heroic provoked that brave display of their affection, and I deeply doubt if ever in the days of greatest loyalty the name of Sforza was as loudly cried in Pesaro as, they tell me, was the name of Sforza's Fool that day.

CHAPTER VII. THE SUMMONS FROM ROME

If Madonna Paola did not achieve quite all that she had promised me so readily, yet she achieved more than from my acquaintance with the nature of Giovanni Sforza—and my knowledge of the deep malice he entertained for me—I should have dared to hope.

The Tyrant of Pesaro, as I was soon to learn, was greatly taken with this fair cousin of his, whom that morning he had beheld for the first time. And being taken with her, it may be that Giovanni listened the more readily to her intercessions on my poor behalf. Since it was she who begged this thing, he could not wholly refuse. But since he was Giovanni Sforza, he could not wholly grant. He promised her that my life, at least, should be secure, and that not only would he pardon me, but that he would have his own physician see to it that I was made sound again. For the time, that was enough, he thought. First let them bring me back to life. When that was achieved, it would be early enough to consider what course this life should take thereafter.

And she, knowing him not and finding him so kind and gracious, trusted that he would perform that which he tricked her into believing that he promised.

For some ten days I lay abed, feverish at first and later very weak from the great loss of blood I had sustained. But after the second day, when my fever had abated, I had some visitors, among whom was Madonna Paola, who bore me the news that her intercessions for me with the Lord of Pesaro were likely to bear fruit, and that I might look for my reinstatement. Yet, if I permitted myself to hope as she bade

me; I did so none too fully.

My situation, bearing in mind how at once I had served and thwarted the ends of Cesare Borgia, was perplexing.

Another visitor I had was Messer Magistri—the pompous seneschal of Pesaro—who, after his own fashion, seemed to have a liking for me, and a certain pity. Here was my chance of discharging the true errand on which I was returned.

"I owe thanks," said I, "to many circumstances for the sparing of my life; but above all people and all things do I owe thanks to our gracious Lady Lucrezia. Do you think, Messer Magistri, that she would consent to see me and permit me again to express the gratitude that fills my heart?"

Mosser Magistri thought that he could promise this, and consented to bear my message to her. Within the hour she was at my bedside and divining that, haply, I had news to give her of the letter I had born her brother, she dismissed Magistri who was in attendance.

Once we were alone her first words were of kindly concern for my condition, delivered in that sweet, musical voice that was by no means the least charm of a princess to whom Nature had been prodigal of gifts. For without going to that length of exaggerated praise which some have bestowed—for her own ear, and with an eye to profit—upon Madonna Lucrezia, yet were I less than truthful if I sought to belittle her ample claims to beauty. Some six years later than the time of which I write she was met on the occasion of her entry into Ferrara by a certain clown dressed in the scanty guise of the shepherd Paris, who proffered her the apple of beauty with the mean-souled flattery that since beholding her he had been forced to alter his old-time judgment in favour of Venus.

He lied, like the brazen, self-seeking adulator that he was, and for

which he should have been soundly whipped. Her nose was a shade too long, her chin a shade too short to admit, even remotely, of such comparisons. Still, that she had a certain gracious beauty, as I have said, it is not mine to deny. There was an almost childish freshness in her face, an almost childish innocence in her fine gray eyes, and, above all, a golden and resplendent hair as brought to mind the tresses of God's angels.

That fair child—for no more than a child was she—drew a chair to my bedside.

There she sate herself, whilst I thanked her for her concern on my behalf, and answered that I was doing well enough, and should be abroad again in a day or two.

"Brave lad," she murmured, patting my hand, which lay upon the coverlet, as though she had been my sister and I anything but a Fool, "count me ever your friend hereafter, for what you have done for Madonna Paola. For although it was my own family you thwarted, yet you did so to serve one who is more to me than any family, more than any sister could be."

"What I did, Madonna," I answered, "I did with the better heart since it opened out a way that was barred me, solved me a riddle which my Lord, your Illustrious brother, set me—one that otherwise might well have overtaxed my wits."

"Ah?" Her gray eyes fell on me in a swift and searching glance, a glance that revealed to the full their matchless beauty. Care seemed of a sudden to have aged her face. The question of her eyes needed no translation into words.

"The Lord Cardinal of Valencia entrusted me with a letter for you, in answer to your own," I informed her, and from underneath my pillow I drew the package, which during Magistri's absence I had abstracted

from my boot that I might have it in readiness when she came.

She sighed as she took it, and a wistful smile invested the corners of her mouth.

"I had hoped he would have found better employment for you," she said.

"His Excellency promised that he would more fitly employ me in the future did I discharge this errand with secrecy and despatch. But by aiding Madonna Paola I have burned my boats against returning to claim the redemption of that promise; though had it not been for Madonna Paola and what I did, I scarce know how I should have penetrated here to you."

She broke the seal, and rising crossed to the window, where she stood reading the letter, her back toward me. Presently I heard a stifled sob. The letter was crushed in her hand. Then moments passed ere she confronted me once more. But her manner as all changed; she was agitated and preoccupied, and for all that she forced herself to talk of me and my affairs, her mind was clearly elsewhere. At last she left me, nor did I see her again during the time I was confined to my bed.

On the eleventh day I rose, and the weather being mild and spring-like, I was permitted by my grave-faced doctor to take the air a little on the terrace that overlooks the sea. I found no garments but some suits of motley, and so, in despite of my repugnance now to reassume that garb, I had no choice but to array myself in one of these. I selected the least garish one—a suit of black and yellow stripes, with hose that was half black, half yellow, too; and so, leaning upon the crutch they had left me, I crept forth into the sunlight, the very ghost of the man that I had been a fortnight ago.

I found a stone seat in a sheltered corner looking southward

towards Ancona, and there I rested me and breathed the strong invigorating air of the Adriatic. The snows were gone, and between me and the wall some twenty paces off—there was a stretch of soft, green turf.

I had brought with me a book that Madonna Lucrezia had sent me while I was yet abed. It was a manuscript collection of Spanish odes, with the proverbs of one Domenico Lopez—all very proper nourishment for a jester's mind. The odes seemed to possess a certain quaintness, and among the proverbs there were many that were new to me in framing and in substance. Moreover, I was glad of this means of improving my acquaintance with the tongue of Spain, and I was soon absorbed. So absorbed, indeed, as never to hear the footsteps of the Lord Giovanni, when presently he approached me unattended, nor to guess at his presence until his shadow fell athwart my page. I raised my eyes, and seeing who it was I made shift to get on my feet; but he commanded me to remain seated, commenting sympathetically upon my weak condition.

He asked me what I read, and when I had told him, a thin smile fluttered across his white face.

"You choose your reading with rare judgment," said he. "Read on, and prime your mind with fresh humour, prepare yourself with new conceits for our amusement against the time when health shall be more fully restored you."

It was in such words as these that he intimated to me that I was pardoned, and reinstated—as the Fool of the Court of Pesaro. That was to be the sum of his clemency. We were precisely where we had been. Once before had he granted me my life on condition that I should amuse him; he did no more than repeat that mercy now. I stared at him in wonder, open-mouthed, whereit he laughed.

"You are agreeably surprised, my Boccadoro?" said he, his fingers

straying to his beard as was his custom. "My clemency is no more than you deserve in return for the service you have rendered to the House of Sforza." And he patted my head as though I had been one of his dogs that had borne itself bravely in the chase.

I answered nothing. I sat there as if I had been a part of the stone from which my seat was hewn, for I lacked the strength to rise and strangle him as he deserved—moreover, I was bound by an oath, which it would have damned my soul to break, never to raise my hand against him.

And then, before he could say more, two ladies issued from the doorway on my right. They were Madonna Lucrezia and Madonna Paola. Upon espying me they hastened forward with expressions of pleased surprise at seeing me risen and out, and when I would have got to my feet they stayed me as Giovanni had done. Madonna Paola's words seemed addressed to heaven rather than to me, for they were words of thanksgiving for this recovery of my strength.

"I have no thanks," she ended warmly, "that can match the deeds by which you earned them, Messer Biancomonte."

My eyes drifting to Giovanni's face surprised its sudden darkening.

"Madonna Paola," said he, in an icy voice, "you have uttered a name that must not be heard within my walls of Pesaro, if you would prove yourself the friend of Boccadoro. To remind me of his true identity is to remind me of that which counts not in his favour."

She turned to regard him, a mild surprise in her blue eyes.

"But, my lord, you promised—" she began.

"I promised," he interposed, with an easy smile and manner never so deprecatory, "that I would pardon him, grant him his life and restore him to my favour."

"But did you not say that if he survived and was restored to strength you would then determine the course his life should take?"

Still smiling, he produced his comfit-box, and raised the lid.

"That is a thing he seems to have determined for himself," he answered smoothly—he could be smooth as a cat upon occasion—could this bastard of Costanzo Sforza. "I came upon him here, arrayed as you behold him, and reading a book of Spanish quips. Is it not clear that he has chosen?"

Between thumb and forefinger he balanced a sugar-crusted comfit of coriander seed steeped in marjoram vinegar, and having put his question he bore the sweet-meat to his mouth. The ladies looked at him, and from him to me. Then Madonna Paola spoke, and there seemed a reproachful wonder in her voice.

"Is this indeed your choice?" she asked me.

"It is the choice that was forced on me," said I, in heat. "They left me no garment save these of folly. That I was reading this book it pleases my lord to interpret into a further sign of my intentions."

She turned to him again, and to the appeal she made was joined that of Madonna Lucrezia. He grew serious and put up his hand in a gesture of rare loftiness.

"I am more clement than you think," said he, "in having done so much. For the rest, the restoration that you ask for him is one involving political issues you little dream of. What is this?"

He had turned abruptly. A servant was approaching, leading a mud-splashed courier, whom he announced as having just arrived.

"Whence are you?" Giovanni questioned him.

"From the Holy See," answered the courier, bowing, "with letters for

the High and Mighty Lord Giovanni Sforza, Tyrant of Pesaro, and his noble spouse, Madonna Lucrezia Borgia."

He proffered his letters as he spoke, and Giovanni, whose brow had grown overcast, took them with a hand that seemed reluctant. Then bidding the servant see to the courier's refreshment, he dismissed them both.

A moment he stood, balancing the parchments as if from their weight he would infer the gravity of their contents; and the affairs of Boccadoro were, there and then, forgotten by us all. For the thought that rose uppermost in our minds—saving always that of Madonna Lucrezia—was that these communications concerned the sheltering of Madonna Paola, and were a command for her immediate return to Rome. At last Giovanni handed his wife the letter intended for her, and, in silence, broke the seal of his own.

He unfolded it with a grim smile, but scarce had he begun to read when his expression softened into one of terror, and his face grew ashen. Next it flared crimson, the veins on his brow stood out like ropes, and his eyes flashed furiously upon Madonna Lucrezia. She was reading, her bosom rising and falling in token of the excitement that possessed her.

"Madonna," he cried in an awful voice, "I have here a command from the Holy See to repair at once to Rome, to answer certain charges that are preferred against me relating to my marriage. Madonna, know you aught of this?"

"I know, sir," she answered steadily, "that I, too, have here a letter calling me to Rome. But there is no reason given for the summons."

Intuitively it flashed across my mind that whatever the matter might be, Madonna Lucrezia had full knowledge of it through the letter I had brought her from her brother.

"Can you conjecture, Madonna, what are these charges to which my letter vaguely alludes?" Giovanni was inquiring.

"Your pardon, but the subject is scarcely of a nature to permit discussion in the castle courtyard. Its character is intimate."

He looked at her very searchingly, but for all that he was a man of almost twice her years, her wits were more than a match for his, and his scrutiny can have told him nothing. She preserved a calm, unruffled front.

"In five minutes, Madonna," said he, very sternly, "I shall be honoured if you will receive me in your closet."

She inclined her head, murmuring an unhesitating assent. Satisfied, he bowed to her and to Madonna Paola—who had been looking on with eyes that wonder had set wide open—and turning on his heel he strode briskly away. As he passed into the castle, Madonna Lucrezia heaved a sigh and rose.

"My poor Boccadoro," she cried, "I fear me your affairs must wait a while. But think of me always as your friend, and believe that if I can prevail upon my brother to overlook the ill-turn you did him when you entered the service of this child"—and she pointed to Madonna Paola—"I shall send for you from Rome, for in Pesaro I fear you have little to hope for. But let this be a secret between us."

From those words of hers I inferred, as perhaps she meant I should, that once she left Pesaro to obey her father's summons, our little northern state was to know her no more. Once again, only, did I see her, on the occasion of her departure, some four days later, and then but for a moment. Back to Pesaro she came no more, as you shall learn anon; but behind her she left a sweet and fragrant memory, which still endures though many years are sped and much calumny has been heaped upon her name.

I might pause here to make some attempt at refuting the base falsehoods that had been bruited by that time-serving vassal Guicciardini, and others of his kidney, whom the upstart Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere—sometime pedlar—in his jealous fury at seeing the coveted pontificate pass into the family of Borgia, bought and hired to do his loathsome work of calumny and besmirch the fame of as sweet a lady as Italy has known. But this poor chronicle of mine is rather concerned with the history of Madonna Paola di Santafior, and it were a divergence well-nigh unpardonable to set my pen at present to that other task. Moreover, there is scarce the need. If any there be who doubt me, or if future generations should fall into the error of lending credence to the lies of that villain Guicciardini, of that arch-villain Giuliano della Rovere, or of other smaller fry who have lent their helot's pens to weave mendacious records of her life, dubbing her murderess, adulteress, and Heaven knows what besides—I will but refer them to the archives of Ferrara, whose Duchess she became at the age of one-and-twenty, and where she reigned for eighteen years. There shall it be found recorded that she was an exemplary, God-fearing woman; a faithful and honoured wife; a wise, devoted mother; and a princess, beloved and esteemed by her people for her piety, her charity and her wisdom. If such records as are there to be read by earnest seekers after truth be not sufficient to convince, and to reveal those others whom I have named in the light of their true baseness, then were it idle for me to set up in these pages a passing refutation of the falsehoods which it has grieved me so often to hear repeated.

It was two days later that the Lord Giovanni set out for Rome, obedient to the command he had received. But before his departure—on the eve of it, to be precise—there arrived at Pesaro a very wonderful and handsome gentleman. This was the brother of Madonna Paola, the High and Mighty Lord Filippo di Santafior. He had had a hint in Rome that his connivance at his sister's defiant escape was suspected at the Vatican, and he had wisely determined

that his health would thrive better in a northern climate for a while.

A very splendid creature was this Lord Filippo, all shimmering velvet, gleaming jewels, costly furs and glittering gold. His face was effeminate, though finely featured, and resembled, in much, his sister's. He rode a cream-coloured horse, which seemed to have been steeped in musk, so strongly was it scented. But of all his affectations the one with which I as taken most was to see one of his grooms approach him when he dismounted, to dust his wondrous clothes down to his shoes, which he wore in the splayed fashion set by the late King of France who was blessed with twelve toes on each of his deformed feet.

The Lord Giovanni, himself not lacking in effeminacy, was greatly taken by the wondrous raiment, the studied lisp and the hundred affectations of this peerless gallant. Had he not been overburdened at the time by the Papal business that impended, he might there and then have cemented the intimacy which was later to spring up between them. As it was, he made him very welcome, and placed at his and his sister's disposal the beautiful palace that his father had begun, and he, himself, had completed, which was known as the Palazza Sforza. On the morrow Giovanni left Pesaro with but a small retinue, in which I was thankful not to be included.

Two days later Madonna Lucrezia followed her husband, the fact that they journeyed not together, seeming to wear an ominous significance. Her eyes had a swollen look, such as attends much weeping, which afterwards I took as proof that she knew for what purpose she was going, and was moved to bitter grief at the act to which her ambitious family was constraining her.

After their departure things moved sluggishly at Pesaro. The nobles of the Lord Giovanni's Court repaired to their several houses in the neighboring country, and save for the officers of the household the place became deserted.

Madonna Paola remained at the Sforza Palace, and I saw her only once during the two mouths that followed, and then it was about the streets, and she had little more than a greeting for me as she passed. At her side rode her brother, a splendid blaze of finery, falcon on wrist.

My days were spent in reading and reflection, for there was naught else to do. I might have gone my ways, had I so wished it, but something kept me there at Pesaro, curious to see the events with which the time was growing big.

We grew sadly stagnant during Lent, and what with the uneventful course of things, and the lean fare proscribed by Mother Church, it was a very dispirited Boccadoro that wandered aimlessly whither his dulling fancy took him. But in Holy Week, at last, we received an abrupt stir which set a whirlpool of excitement in the Dead Sea of our lives. It was the sudden reappearance of the Lord Giovanni.

He came alone, dust-stained and haggard, on a horse that dropped dead from exhaustion the moment Pesaro was reached, and in his pallid cheek and hollow eye we read the tale of some great fear and some disaster.

That night we heard the story of how he had performed the feat of riding all the way from Rome in four-and-twenty hours, fleeing for his life from the peril of assassination, of which Madonna Lucrezia had warned him.

He went off to his Castle of Gradara, where he shut himself up with the trouble we could but guess at, and so in Pesaro, that brief excitement spent, we stagnated once again.

I seemed an anomaly in so gloomy a place, and more than once did I think of departing and seeking out my poor old mother in her mountain home, contenting myself hereafter with labouring like any

honest villano born to the soil. But there ever seemed to be a voice that bade me stay and wait, and the voice bore a suggestion of Madonna Paola. But why dissemble here? Why cast out hints of voices heard, supernatural in their flavour? The voice, I doubt not, was just my own inclination, which bade me hope that once again it might be mine to serve that lady.

An eventful year in the history of the families of Sforza and Borgia was that year of grace 1497.

Spring came, and ere it had quite grown to summer we had news of the assassination of the Duke of Gandia, and the tale that he was done to death by his elder brother, Cesare Borgia; a tale which seemed to lack for reasonable substantiation, and which, despite the many voices that make bold to noise it broadcast, may or may not be true.

In that same month of June messages passed between Rome and Pesaro, and gradually the burden of the messages leaked out in rumours that Pope Alexander and his family were pressing the Lord Giovanni to consent to a divorce. At last he left Pesaro again; this time to journey to Milan and seek counsel with his powerful cousin, Lodovico, whom they called "The Moor." When he returned he was more sulky and downcast than ever, and at Gradara he lived in an isolation that had been worthy of a hermit.

And thus that miserable year wore itself out, and, at last, in December, we heard that the divorce was announced, and that Lucrezia Borgia was the Tyrant of Pesaro's wife no more. The news of it and the reasons that were put forward as having led to it were roared across Italy in a great, derisive burst of laughter, of which the Lord Giovanni was the unfortunate and contemptible butt.

CHAPTER VIII. "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN"

And now, lest I grow tedious and weary you with this narrative of mine, it may be well that I but touch with a fugitive pen upon the events of the next three years of the history of Pesaro.

Early in 1498 the Lord Giovanni showed himself once more abroad, and he seemed again the same weak, cruel, pleasure-loving tyrant he had been before shame overtook him and drove him for a season into hiding. Madonna Paola and her brother, Filippo di Santaflor, remained in Pesaro, where they now appeared to have taken up their permanent abode. Madonna Paola—following her inclinations—withdrew to the Convent of Santa Caterina, there to pursue in peace the studies for which she had a taste, whilst her splendid, profligate brother became the ornament—the arbiter elegantiarum—of our court.

Thus were they left undisturbed; for in the cauldron of Borgia politics a stew was simmering that demanded all that family's attention, and of whose import we guessed something when we heard that Cesare Borgia had flung aside his cardinalial robes to put on armour and give freer rein to the boundless ambition that consumed him.

With me life moved as if that winter excursion and adventure had never been. Even the memory of it must have faded into a haze that scarce left discernible any semblance of reality, for I was once again Boccadoro, the golden-mouthed Fool, whose sayings were echoed by every jester throughout Italy. My shame that for a brief season had

run up in arms seemed to be laid to rest once more, and I was content with the burden that was mine. Money I had in plenty, for when I pleased him the Lord Giovanni's vails were often handsome, and much of my earnings went to my poor mother, who would sooner have died starving than have bought herself bread with those ducats could she have guessed at what manner of trade Lazzaro Biancomonte had earned them.

The Lord Giovanni was a frequent visitor at the Convent of Santa Caterina, whither he went, ever attended by Filippo di Santafor, to pay his duty to his fair cousin. In the summer of 1500, she being then come to the age of eighteen, and as divinely beautiful a lady as you could find in Italy, she allowed herself to be persuaded by her brother—who, I make no doubt had been, in his turn, persuaded by the Lord of Pesaro—to leave her convent and her studies, and to take up her life at the Sforza Palace, where Filippo held by now a sort of petty court of his own.

And now it fell out that the Lord Giovanni was oftener at the Palace than at the Castle, and during that summer Pesaro was given over to such merrymaking as it had never known before. There was endless lute-thrumming and recitation of verses by a score of parasite poets whom the Lord Giovanni encouraged, posing now as a patron of letters; there were balls and masques and comedies beyond number, and we were as gay as though Italy held no Cesare Borgia, Duke of Valentino, who was sweeping northward with his all-conquering flood of mercenaries.

But one there was who, though the very centre of all these merry doings, the very one in whose honour and for whose delectation they were set afoot, seemed listless and dispirited in that boisterous crowd. This was Madonna Paola, to whom, rumour had it, that her kinsman, the Lord Giovanni, was paying a most ardent suit.

I saw her daily now, and often would she choose me for her sole

companion; often, sitting apart with me, would she unburden her heart and tell me much that I am assured she would have told no other. A strange thing may it have seemed, this confidence between the Fool and the noble Lady of Santafior—my Holy Flower of the Quince, as in my thoughts I grew to name her. Perhaps it may have been because she found me ever ready to be sober at her bidding, when she needed sober company as those other fools—the greater fools since they accounted themselves wise—could not afford her.

That winter adventure betwixt Cagli and Pesaro was a link that bound us together, and caused her to see under my motley and my masking smile the true Lazzaro Biancomonte whom for a little season she had known. And when we were alone it had become her wont to call me Lazzaro, leaving that other name that they had given me for use when others were at hand. Yet never did she refer to my condition, or wound me by seeking to spur me to the ambition to become myself again. Haply she was content that I should be as I was, since had I sought to become different it must have entailed my quitting Pesaro, and this poor lady was so bereft of friends that she could not afford to lose even the sympathy of the despised jester.

It was in those days that I first came to love her with as pure a flame as ever burned within the heart of man, for the very hopelessness of it preserved its holy whiteness. What could I do, if I would love her, but love her as the dog may love his mistress? More was surely not for me—and to seek more were surely a madness that must earn me less. And so, I was content to let things be, and keep my heart in check, thanking God for the mercy of her company at times, and for the precious confidences she made me, and praying Heaven—for of my love was I grown devout—that her life might run a smooth and happy course, and ready, in the furtherance of such an object, to lay down my own should the need arise. Indeed there were times when it seemed to me that it was a good thing to be a Fool to know a love of so rare a purity as that—such a love as I might never have known had

I been of her station, and in such case as to have hoped to win her some day for my own.

One evening of late August, when the vines were heavy with ripe fruit, and the scent of roses was permeating the tepid air, she drew me from the throng of courtiers that made merry in the Palace, and led me out into the noble gardens to seek counsel with me, she said, upon a matter of gravest moment. There, under the sky of deepest blue, crimsoning to saffron where the sun had set, we paced awhile in silence, my own senses held in thrall by the beauty of the eventide, the ambient perfumes of the air and the strains of music that faintly reached us from the Palace. Madonna's head was bent, and her eyes were set upon the ground and burdened, so my furtive glance assured me, with a gentle sorrow. At length she spoke, and at the words she uttered my heart seemed for a moment to stand still.

"Lazzaro," said she, "they would have me marry."

For a little spell there was a silence, my wits seeming to have grown too numbed to attempt to seek an answer. I might be content, indeed, to love her from a distance, as the cloistered monk may love and worship some particular saint in Heaven; yet it seems that I was not proof against jealousy for all the abstract quality of my worship.

"Lazzaro," she repeated presently, "did you hear me? They would have me marry."

"I have heard some such talk," I answered, rousing myself at last; "and they say that it is the Lord Giovanni who would prove worthy of your hand."

"They say rightly, then," she acknowledged. "The Lord Giovanni it is."

Again there was a silence, and again it was she who broke it.

"Well, Lazzaro?" she asked. "Have you naught to say?"

"What would you have me say, Madonna? If this wedding accords with your own wishes, then am I glad."

"Lazzaro, Lazzaro! you know that it does not."

"How should I know it, Madonna?"

"Because your wits are shrewd, and because you know me. Think you this petty tyrant is such a man as I should find it in my heart to conceive affection for? Grateful to him am I for the shelter he has afforded us here; but my love—that is a thing I keep, or fain would keep, for some very different man. When I love, I think it will be a valorous knight, a gentleman of lofty mind, of noble virtues and ready address."

"An excellent principle on which to go in quest of a husband, Madonna mia. But where in this degenerate world do you look to find him?"

"Are there, then, no such men?"

"In the pages of Bojardo and those other poets whom you have read too earnestly there may be."

"Nay, there speaks your cynicism," she chided me. "But even if my ideals be too lofty, would you have me descend from the height of such a pinnacle to the level of the Lord Giovanni—a weak-spirited craven, as witnesses the manner in which he permitted the Borgias to mishandle him; a cruel and unjust tyrant, as witnesses his dealing with you, to seek no further instances; a weak, ignorant, pleasure-loving fool, devoid of wit and barren of ambition? Such is the man they would have me wed. Do not tell me, Lazzaro, that it were difficult to find a better one than this."

"I do not mean to tell you that. After all, though it be my trade to jest,

it is not my way to deal in falsehood. I think, Madonna, that if we were to have you write for us such an appreciation of the High and Mighty Giovanni Sforza, you would leave a very faithful portrait for the enlightenment of posterity."

"Lazzaro, do not jest!" she cried. "It is your help I need. That is the reason why I am come to you with the tale of what they seek to force me into doing."

"To force you?" I cried. "Would they dare so much?"

"Aye, if I resist them further."

"Why, then," I answered, with a ready laugh, "do not resist them further."

"Lazzaro!" she cried, her accents telling of a spirit wounded by what she accounted a flippancy.

"Mistake me not," I hastened to elucidate. "It is lest they should employ force and compel you at once to enter into this union that I counsel you to offer no resistance. Beg for a little time, vaguely suggesting that you are not indisposed to the Lord Giovanni's suit."

"That were deceit," she protested.

"A trusty weapon with which to combat tyranny," said I.

"Well? And then?" she questioned. "Such a state of things cannot endure for ever. It must end some day."

I shook my head, and I smiled down upon her a smile that was very full of confidence.

"That day will never dawn, unless the Lord Giovanni's impatience transcends all bounds."

She looked at me, a puzzled glance in her eyes, a bewildered

expression knitting her fine brows.

"I do not take your meaning, my friend," she complained.

"Then mark the enucleation. I will expound this meaning of mine through the medium of a parable. In Babylon of old, there dwelt a king whose name was Belshazzar, who, having fallen into habits of voluptuousness and luxury, was so enslaved by them as to feast and make merry whilst a certain Darius, King of the Medes, was marching in arms against his capital. At a feast one night the fingers of a man's hand were seen to write upon the wall, and the words they wrote were a belated warning: 'Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.'"

She looked at me, her eyes round with inquiry, and a faint smile of uncertainty on her lips.

"Let me confess that your elucidation helps me but little."

"Ponder it, Madonna," I urged her. "Substitute Giovanni Sforza for Belshazzar, Cesare Borgia for King Darius, and you have the key to my parable."

"But is it indeed so? Does danger threaten Pesaro from that quarter?"

"Aye, does it," I answered, almost impatiently. "The tide of war is surging up, and presently will whelm us utterly. Yet here sits the Lord Giovanni making merry with balls and masques and burle and banquets, wholly unprepared, wholly unconscious of his peril. There may be no hand to write a warning on his walls—or else, as in the case of Babylon, the hand will write when it is too late to avert the evil—yet there are not wanting other signs for those that have the wit to read them; nor is a wondrous penetration needed."

"And you think then—" she began.

"I think that if you are obdurate with him, he and your brother may

hurry you by force into this union. But if you temporise with half-promises, with suggestions that before Christmas you may grow reconciled to his wishes, he will be patient."

"But what if Christmas comes and finds us still in this position?"

"It will need a miracle for that; or, at least, the death of Cesare Borgia—an unlikely event, for they say he uses great precautions. Saving the miracle, and providing Cesare lives, I will give the Lord Giovanni's reign in Pesaro at most two months."

We had halted now, and were confronting each other in the descending gloom.

"Lazzaro, dear friend," she cried, almost with gaiety, "I was wise to take counsel with you. You have planted in my heart a very vigorous growth of hope."

We turned soon after, and started to retrace our steps, for she might be ill-advised to remain absent overlong.

I left her on the terrace in a very different spirit from that in which she had come to me, bearing with me her promise that she would act as I had advised her. No doubt I had taken a load from her gentle soul, and oddly enough I had taken, too, a load from mine.

Things fell out as I said they would in far as Giovanni Sforza and Filippo were concerned. Madonna's seeming amenability to their wishes stayed their insistence, and they could but respect her wishes to let the betrothal be delayed yet a little while. And during the weeks that followed, it was I scarce know whether more pitiable or more amusing to see the efforts that Giovanni made to win her ardently desired affection.

Love has sharp eyes at times, and a dullard under the influence of the baby god will turn shrewd and exert rare wiles in the conduct of his

wooling. Giovanni, by some intuition usually foreign to his dull nature, seemed to divine what manner of man would be Madonna Paola's ideal, and strove to pass himself off as possessed of the attributes of that ideal, with an ardour that was pitifully comical. He became an actor by the side of whom those comedians that played impromptus for his delectation were the merest bunglers with the art. He gathered that Madonna Paola loved the poets and their stately diction, and so, to please her better, he became a poet for the season.

"Poeta nascitur" the proverb runs, and that proverb's truth was doubtless forced home upon the Lord Giovanni at an early stage of his excursions into the flowery meads of prosody. Fortunately he lacked the supreme vanity that is the attribute of most poetasters, and he was able to see that such things as after hours of midnight-labour he contrived to pen, would evoke nothing but her amusement—unless, indeed, it were her scorn—and render him the laughing-stock of all his Court.

So, in the wisdom of despair, he came to me, and with a gentleness that in the past he had rarely manifested for me, he asked me was I skilled in writing verse. There were not wanting others to whom he might have gone, for there was no lack of rhymsters about his Court; but perhaps he thought he could be more certain of my silence than of theirs.

I answered him that were the subject to my taste, I might succeed in throwing off some passable lines upon it. He pressed gold upon me, and bade me there and then set about fashioning an ode to Madonna Paola, and to forget, when they were done, under pain of a whipping to the bone, that I had written them.

I obeyed him with a right good-will. For what subject of all subjects possible was there that made so powerful an appeal to my inclinations? Within an hour he had the ode—not perhaps such a poem as might stand comparison with the verses of Messer Petrarca,

yet a very passable effusion, chaste of conceit and palpitating with sincerity and adoration. It was in that that I addressed her as the "Holy Flower of the Quince," which was the symbol of the House of Santafior.

So great an impression made that ode that on the morrow the Lord Giovanni came to me with a second bribe and a second threat of torture. I gave him a sonnet of Petrarchian manner which went near to outshining the merits of the ode. And now, these requests of the Lord Giovanni's assumed an almost daily regularity, until it came to seem that did affairs continue in this manner for yet a little while, I should have earned me enough to have repurchased Biancomonte, and, so, ended my troubles. And good was the value that I gave him for his gold. How good, he never knew; for how was he, the clod, to guess that this despised jester of his Court was pouring out his very soul into the lines he wrote to the tyrant's orders?

It is scant wonder that, at last, Madonna Paola who had begun by smiling, was touched and moved by the ardent worship that sighed from those perfervid verses. So touched, indeed, was she as to believe the Lord Giovanni's love to be the pure and holy thing those lines presented it, and to conclude that his love had wrought in him a wondrous and ennobling transformation. That so she thought I have the best of all reasons to affirm, for I had it from her very lips one day.

"Lazzaro," she sighed, "it is occurring to me that I have done the Lord Giovanni an injustice. I have misgauged his character. I held him to be a shallow, unlettered clown, devoid of any finer feelings. Yet his verses have a merit that is far above the common note of these writings, and they breathe such fine and lofty sentiments as could never spring from any but a fine and lofty soul."

How I came to keep my tongue from wagging out the truth I scarcely know. It may be that I was frightened of the punishment that might overtake me did I betray my master; but I rather think that it was the

fear of betraying myself, and so being flung into the outer darkness where there was no such radiant presence as Madonna Paola's. For had I told her it was I had penned those poems that were the marvel of the Court, she must of necessity have guessed my secret, for to such quick wits as hers it must have been plain at once that they were no vapourings of artistry, but the hot expressions of a burning truth. It was in that—in their supreme sincerity—that their chief virtue lay.

Thus weeks wore on. The vintage season came and went; the roses faded in the gardens of the Palazzo Sforza, and the trees put on their autumn garb of gold. October was upon us, and with it came, at last, the fear that long ago should have spurred us into activity. And now that it came it did not come to stimulate, but to palsy. Terror-stricken at the conquering advance of Valentino—which was the name they now gave Cesare Borgia; a name derived from his Duchy of Valentinois—Giovanni Sforza abruptly ceased his revelling, and made a hurried appeal for help to Francesco Gonzaga, Lord of Mantua—his brother-in-law, through the Lord of Pesaro's first marriage. The Mantuan Marquis sent him a hundred mercenaries under the command of an Albanian named Giacomo. As well might he have sent him a hundred figs wherewith to pelt the army of Valentino!

Disaster swooped down swiftly upon the Lord of Pesaro. His very people, seeing in what case they were, and how unprepared was their tyrant to defend them, wisely resolved that they would run no risks of fire and pillage by aiding to oppose the irresistible force that was being hurled against us.

It was on the second Sunday in October that the storm burst over the Lord Giovanni's head. He was on the point of leaving the Castle to attend Mass at San Domenico, and in his company were Filippo Sforza of Santafior and Madonna Paola, besides courtiers and attendants, amounting in all to perhaps a score of gallant cavaliers

and ladies. The cavalcade was drawn up in the quadrangle, and Giovanni was on the point of mounting, when, of a sudden, a rumbling noise, as of distant thunder, but too continuous for that, arrested him, his foot already in the stirrup.

"What is that?" he asked, an ashen pallor overspreading his effeminate face, as, doubtless, the thought of the enemy came uppermost in his mind.

Men looked at one another with fear in their eyes and some of the ladies raised their voices in querulous beseeching for reassurance. They had their answer even as they asked. The Albanian Giacomo, who was now virtually the provost of the Castle, appeared suddenly at the gates with half a score of men. He raised a warning hand, which compelled the Lord Giovanni to pause; then he rasped out a brisk command to his followers. The winches creaked, and the drawbridge swung up even as with a clank and rattle of chains the portcullis fell.

That done, he came forward to impart the ominous news which one of his riders had brought him at the gallop from the Porta Romana.

A party of some fifty men, commanded by one of Cesare's captains, had ridden on in advance of the main army to call upon Pesaro to yield to the forces of the Church. And the people, without hesitation, had butchered the guard and thrown wide the gates, inviting the enemy to enter the town and seize the Castle. And to the end that this might be the better achieved, a hundred or so had traitorously taken up arms, and were pressing forward to support the little company that came, with such contemptuous daring, to storm our fortress and prepare the way for Valentino.

It was a pretty situation this for the Lord Giovanni, and here were fine opportunities for some brave acting under the eyes of his adored Madonna Paola. How would he bear himself now? I wondered.

He promised mighty well once the first shock of the news was overcome.

"By God and His saints!" he roared, "though it may be all that it is given me to do, I'll strike a blow to punish these dastards who have betrayed me, and to crush the presumption of this captain who attacks us with fifty men. It is a contempt which he shall bitterly repent him."

Then he thundered to Giacomo to marshal his men, and he called upon those of his courtiers who were knights to put on their armour that they might support him. Lastly he bade a page go help him to arm, that he might lead his little force in person.

I saw Madonna Paola's eyes gleam with a sudden light of admiration, and I guessed that in the matter of Giovanni's valour her opinions were undergoing the same change as the verses had caused them to undergo in the matter of his intellect.

Myself, I was amazed. For here was a Lord Giovanni I seemed never to have known, and I was eager to behold the sequel to so fine a prologue.

CHAPTER IX. THE FOOL-AT-ARMS

That valorous bearing that the Lord Giovanni showed whilst, with Madonna Paola's glance upon him, his fear of seeming afraid was greater than his actual fear of our assailants, he cast aside like a mantle once he was within the walls of his Castle, and under the eyes of none save the page and myself, for I followed idly at a respectful distance.

He stood irresolute and livid of countenance, his eagerness to arm and to lead his mercenaries and his knights all departed out of him. It was that curiosity of mine to see the sequel to his stout words that had led me to follow him, and what I saw was, after all, no more than I might have looked for—the proof that his big talk of sallying forth to battle was but so much acting. Yet it must have been acting of such a quality as to have deceived even his very self.

Now, however, by the main steps, he halted in the cool gloom of the gallery, and I saw that fear had caught his heart in an icy grip and was squeezing it empty. In his irresolution he turned about, and his gloomy eye fell upon me loitering in the porch. At that he turned to the page who followed in obedience to his command.

"Begone!" he growled at the lad, "I will have Boccadoro, there, to help me arm." And with a poor attempt at mirth—"The act is a madness," he muttered, "and so it is fitting that folly should put on my armour for it. Come with me, you," he bade me, and I, obediently, gladly, went forward and up the wide stone staircase after him, leaving the page to speculate as he listed on the matter of his abrupt

dismissal.

I read the Lord Giovanni's motives, as clearly as if they had been written for me by his own hand. The opinion in which I might hold him was to him a matter of so small account that he little cared that I should be the witness of the weakness which he feared was about to overcome him—nay, which had overcome him already. Was I not the one man in Pesaro who already knew his true nature, as revealed by that matter of the verses which I had written, and of which he had assumed the authorship? He had no shame before me, for I already knew the very worst of him, and he was confident that I would not talk lest he should destroy me at my first word. And yet, there was more than that in his motive for choosing me to go with him in that hour, as I was to learn once we were closeted in his chamber.

"Boccadoro," he cried, "can you not find me some way out of this?" Under his beard I saw the quiver of his lips as he put the question.

"Out of this?" I echoed, scarce understanding him at first.

"Aye, man—out of this Castle, out of Pesaro. Bestir those wits of yours. Is there no way in which it might be done, no disguise under which I might escape?"

"Escape?" quoth I, looking at him, and endeavouring to keep from my eyes the contempt that was in my heart. Dear God! Had revenge been all I sought of him, how I might have gloated over his miserable downfall!

"Do not stand there staring with those hollow eyes," he cried, anger and fear blending horridly in his voice and rendering shrill its pitch. "Find me a way. Come, knave, find me a way, or I'll have you broken on the wheel. Set your wits to save that long, lean body from destruction. Think, I bid you."

He was moving restlessly as he spoke, swayed by the agitation of

terror that possessed him like a devil. I looked at him now without dissembling my scorn. Even in such an hour as this the habit of hectoring cruelty remained him.

"What shall it avail me to think?" I asked him in a voice that was as cold and steady as his was hot and quavering. "Were you a bird I might suggest flight across the sea to you. But you are a man, a very human, a very mortal man, although your father made you Lord of Pesaro."

Even as I was speaking, the thunder of the besiegers reached our ears—such a dull roar it was as that of a stormy sea in winter time. Maddened by his terror he stood over me now, his eyes flashing wildly in his white face.

"Another word in such a tone," he rasped, his fingers on his dagger, "and I'll make an end of you. I need your help, animal!"

I shook my head, my glance meeting his without fear. I was of twice his strength, we were alone, and the hour was one that levelled ranks. Had he made the least attempt to carry out his threat, had he but drawn an inch of the steel he fingered, I think I should have slain him with my hands without fear or thought of consequences.

"I have no help for you such as you need," I answered him. "I am but the Fool of Pesaro. Whoever looked to a Fool for miracles?"

"But here is death," he almost moaned.

"Lord of Pesaro," I reminded him, "your mercenaries are under arms by your command, and your knights are joining them. They wait for the fulfilment of your promise to lead them out against the enemy. Shall you fail them in such an hour as this?"

He sank, limp as an empty scabbard, to a chair.

"I dare not go. It is death," he answered miserably.

"And what but death is it to remain here?" I asked, torturing him with more zest than ever he had experienced over the agonies of some poor victim on the rack. "In bearing yourself gallantly there lies a slender chance for you. Your people seeing you in arms and ready to defend them may yet be moved to a return of loyalty."

"A fig for their loyalty," was his peevish, craven answer. "What shall it avail me when I'm slain!"

God! was there ever such a coward as this, such a weak-souled, water-hearted dastard?

"But you may not be slain," I urged him. And then I sounded a fresh note. "Bethink you of Madonna Paola and of the brave things you promised her."

He flushed a little, then paled again, then sat very still. Shame had touched him at last, yet its grip was not enough to make a man of him. A moment he remained irresolute, whilst that shame fought a hard battle with his fears.

But those fears proved stronger in the end, and his shame was overthrown by them.

"I dare not," he gasped, his slender, delicate hands clutching at the arms of his chair. "Heaven knows I am not skilled in the use of arms."

"It asks no skill," I assured him. "Put on your armour, take a sword and lay about you. The most ignorant scullion in your kitchens could perform it given that he had the spirit."

He moistened his lips with his tongue, and his eyes looked dead as a snake's. Suddenly he rose and took a step towards the armour that was piled about a great leathern chair. Then he paused and turned to me once more.

"Help me to put it on," he said in a voice that he strove to render steady. Yet scarcely had I reached the pile and taken up the breast-plate, when he recoiled again from the task. He broke into a torrent of blasphemy.

"I will not sacrifice myself," he almost screamed. "Jesus! not I. I will find a way out of this. I will live to return with an army and regain my throne."

"A most wise purpose. But, meanwhile, your men are waiting for you; Madonna Paola di Santaflor is waiting for you, and—hark!—the bellowing crowd is waiting for you."

"They wait in vain," he snarled. "Who cares for them? The Lord of Pesaro am I."

"Care you, then, nothing for them? Will you have your name written in history as that of a coward who would not lift his sword to strike one blow for honour's sake ere he was driven out like a beast by the mere sound of voices?"

That touched him. His vanity rose in arms.

"Take up that corselet," he commanded hoarsely. I did his bidding, and, without a word, he raised his arms that I might fit it to his breast. Yet in the instant that I turned me to pick up the back-piece, a crash resounded through the chamber. He had hurled the breastplate to the ground in a fresh access of terror-rage. He strode towards me, his eyes glittering like a madman's.

"Go you!" he cried, and with outstretched arms he pointed wildly across the courtyard. "You are very ready with your counsels. Let me behold your deeds, Do you put on the armour and go out to fight those animals."

He raved, he ranted, he scarce knew what he said or did, and yet

the words he uttered sank deep into my heart, and a sudden, wild ambition swelled my bosom.

"Lord of Pesaro," I cried, in a voice so compelling that it sobered him, "if I do this thing what shall be my reward?"

He stared at me stupidly for a moment. Then he laughed in a silly crackling fashion.

"Eh?" he queried. "Gesu!" And he passed a hand over his damp brow, and threw back the hair that cumbered it. "What is the thing that you would do, Fool?"

"Why, the thing you bade me," I answered firmly. "Put on your armour, and shut down the visor so that all shall think it is the Lord Giovanni, Tyrant of Pesaro, who rides. If I do this thing, and put to rout the rabble and the fifty men that Cesare Borgia has sent, what shall be my reward?"

He watched me with twitching lips, his glare fixed upon me and a faint colour kindling in his face. He saw how easy the thing might be. Perhaps he recalled that he had heard that I was skilled in arms—having spent my youth in the exercise of them, against the time when I might fling the challenge that had brought me to my Fool's estate. Maybe he recalled how I had borne myself against long odds on that adventure with Madonna Paola, years ago. Just such a vanity as had spurred him to have me write him verses that he might pretend were of his own making, moved him now to grasp at my proposal. They would all think that Giovanni's armour contained Giovanni himself. None would ever suspect Boccadoro the Fool within that shell of steel. His honour would be vindicated, and he would not lose the esteem of Madonna Paola. Indeed, if I returned covered with glory, that glory would be his; and if he elected to fly thereafter, he might do so without hurt to his fair name, for he would have amply proved his mettle and his courage.

In some such fashion I doubt not that the High and Mighty Giovanni Sforza reasoned during the seconds that we stood, face to face and eye to eye, in that room, the cries of the impatient ones below almost drowned in the roar of the multitude beyond.

At last he put out his hands to seize mine, and drawing me to the light he scanned my face, Heaven alone knowing what it was he sought there.

"If you do this," said he, "Biancomonte shall be yours again, if it remains in my power to bestow it upon you now or at any future time. I swear it by my honour."

"Swear it by your fear of Hell or by your hope of Heaven and the compact is made," I answered, and so palsied was he and so fallen in spirit that he showed no resentment at the scorn of his honour my words implied, but there and then took the oath I that demanded.

"And now," I urged, "help me to put on this armour of yours."

Hurriedly I cast off my jester's doublet and my head-dress with its jangling bells, and with a wild exultation, a joy so fierce as almost to bring tears to my eyes, I held my arms aloft whilst that poor craven strapped about my body the back and breast plates of his corselet. I, the Fool, stood there as arrogant as any knight, whilst with his noble hands the Lord of Pesaro, kneeling, made secure the greaves upon my legs, the sollerets with golden spurs, the cuissarts and the genouilleres. Then he rose up, and with hands that trembled in his eagerness, he put on my brassarts and shoulder-plates, whilst I, myself, drew on my gauntlets. Next he adjusted the gorget, and handed me, last of all, the helm, a splendid head-piece of black and gold, surmounted by the Sforza lion.

I took it from him and passed it over my head. Then ere I snapped down the visor and hid the face of Boccadoro, I bade him, unless he

would render futile all this masquerade, to lock the door of his closet, and lie there concealed till my return. At that a sudden doubt assailed him.

"And what," quoth he, "if you do not return?"

In the fever that had possessed me this was a thing that had not entered into my calculations, nor should it now. I laughed, and from the hollow of my helmet not a doubt but the sound must have seemed charged with mockery. I pointed to the cap and doublet I had shed.

"Why, then, Illustrious, it will but remain for you to complete the change."

"Dog!" he cried; "beast, do you deride me?"

My answer was to point out towards the yard.

"They are clamouring," said I. "They wax impatient. I had better go before they come for you." As I spoke I selected a heavy mace for only weapon, and swinging it to my shoulder I stepped to the door. On the threshold he would have stayed me, purged by his fear of what might befall him did I not return. But I heeded him not.

"Fare you well, my Lord of Pesaro," said I. "See that none penetrates to your closet. Make fast the door."

"Stay!" he called after me. "Do you hear me? Stay!"

"Others will hear you if you commit this folly," I called back to him. "Get you to cover." And so I left him.

Below, in the courtyard, my coming was hailed by a great, enthusiastic clamour. They had all but abandoned hope of seeing the Lord Giovanni, so long had he been about his arming. As they brought forward my charger, I sought with my eyes Madonna Paola. I beheld her by her brother—who, it seemed, was not going with us—in

the front rank of the spectators. Her cheeks were tinged with a slight flush of excitement, and her eyes glowed at the brave sight of armed men.

I mounted, and as I rode past her to take my place at the head of that company, I lowered my mace and bowed. She detained me a moment, setting her hand upon the glossy neck of my black charger.

"My Lord," she said, in a low voice, intended for my ear alone, "this is a brave and gallant thing you do, and however slight may be your hope of prevailing, yet your honour will be safe-guarded by this act, and men will remember you with respect should it come to pass that a usurper shall possess anon your throne. Bear you that in mind to lend you a glad courage. I shall pray for you, my Lord, till you return."

I bowed, answering never a word lest my voice should betray me; and musing on the matter of the strange roads that lead to a woman's heart, I passed on, to gain the van.

Two months ago, knowing Giovanni as he was, he had been detestable to her, and she contemplated with loathing the danger in which she stood of being allied to him by marriage. Since then he had made good use of a poor jester's mental gifts to incline her by the fervour of some verses to a kindlier frame of mind, and now, making good use of that same jester's courage, he completed her subjection by the display of it. She was prepared to wed the Lord Giovanni with a glad heart and a proud willingness whensoever he should desire it.

But Giacomo was beside me now, and in the quadrangle a silence reigned, all waiting for my command. From without there came such a din as seemed to argue that all hell was at the Castle gates. There were shouts of defiance and screams of abuse, whilst a constant rain of stones beat against the raised drawbridge.

They thought, no doubt, that Giovanni and his followers were at their

prayers, cowering with terror. No notion had they of the armed force, some six score strong, that waited to pour down upon them. I briskly issued my command, and four men detached themselves and let down the bridge. It fell with a crash, and ere those without had well grasped the situation we had hurled ourselves across and into them with the force of a wedge, flinging them to right and to left as we crashed through with hideous slaughter. The bridge swung up again when the last of Giacomo's mercenaries was across, and we were shut out, in the midst of that fierce human maelstrom.

For some five minutes there raged such a brief, hot fight as will be remembered as long as Pesaro stands. No longer than that did it take for the crowd of citizens to realise that war was not their trade, and that they had better leave the fighting to Cesare Borgia's men; and so they fell away and left us a clear road to come at the men-at-arms. But already some forty of our saddles were empty, and the fight, though brief, had proved exhausting to many of us.

Before us, like an array of mirrors in the October sun, shone the serried ranks of the steel-cased Borgia soldiers, their lances in rest, waiting to receive us. Their leader, a gigantic man whose head was armed by no more than a pot of burnished steel, from which escaped the long red ringlets of his hair, was that same Ramiro del' Orca who had commanded the party pursuing Madonna Paola three years ago. He was, since, become the most redoubtable of Cesare's captains, and his name was, perhaps, the best hated in Italy for the grim stories that were connected with it.

As we rode on he backed to join the foremost rank of his soldiers, and his voice—a voice that Stentor might have envied—trumpeted a laugh at sight of us.

"Gesu!" he roared, so that I heard him above the thunder of our hoofs. "What has come to Giovanni Sforza. Has he, perchance, become a man since Madonna Lucrezia divorced him? I will bear her

the news of it, my good Giovanni—my living thunderbolt of Jove!"

His men echoed his boisterous mood, infected by it, and this, I argued, boded ill for the courage of those that followed me. Another moment and we had swept into them, and many there were who laughed no more, or went to laugh with those in Hell.

For myself I singled out the blustering Ramiro, and I let him know it by a swinging blow of my mace upon his morion. It was a most finely-tempered piece of steel, for my stroke made no impression on it, though Ramiro winced and raised his stout sword to return the compliment.

"Body of God!" he croaked, "you become a very god of war, Giovanni. To me, then, my lusty Mars! We'll make a fight of it that poets shall sing of over winter fires. Look to yourself!"

His sword caught me a cunning, well-aimed blow on the side of my helm, and thence, glanced to my shoulder. But for the quality of Giovanni's head-piece of a truth there had been an end to the warring of a Fool. I smote him back, a mighty blow upon his epauliere that shore the steel plate from his shoulder, and left him a vulnerable spot. At that he swore ferociously, and his bloodshot eyes grew wicked as the fiend's. A second time he essayed that side-long blow upon my helm, and with such force and ready address that he burst the fastening of my visor on the left, so that it swung down and left my beaver open.

With a cry of triumph he closed with me, and shortened his sword to stab me in the face. And then a second cry escaped him, for the countenance he beheld was not the countenance he had looked to see. Instead of the fair skin, the handsome features and the bearded mouth of the Lord Giovanni, he beheld a shaven face, a hooked nose and a complexion swarthy as the devil's.

"I know you, rogue," he roared. "By the Host! your valour seemed too fierce for Giovanni Sforza. You are Bocca—"

Exerting all the strength that I had been gradually collecting, I hurled him back with a force that almost drove him from the saddle, and rising in my stirrups I rained blow after blow upon his morion ere he could recover.

"Dog!" I muttered softly, "your knowledge shall be the death of you."

He drew away from me at last, and during the moments that I spent in readjusting my visor he sallied, and charged me again. His blustering was gone and his face grown pale, for such blows as mine could not have been without effect. Not a doubt of it but he was taken with amazement to find such fighting qualities in a Fool—an amazement that must have eclipsed even that of finding Boccadoro in the armour of Giovanni Sforza.

Again he swung his sword in that favourite stroke of his; but this time I caught the edge upon my mace, and ere he could recover I aimed a blow straight at his face. He lowered his head, like a bull on the point of charging, and so my blow descended again upon his morion, but with a force that rolled him, senseless, from the saddle.

Before I could take a breathing space I was beset by, at least, a dozen of his followers who had stood at hand during the encounter, never doubting that victory must be ultimately with their invincible captain. They drove me back foot by foot, fighting lustily, and performing—it was said afterwards by the anxious ones that watched us from the Castle, among whom was Madonna Paola—such deeds of strength and prowess as never romancer sang of in his wildest flight of fancy.

My men had suffered sorely, but the brave Giacomo still held them together, fired by the example that I set him, until in the end the day

was ours. Discouraged by the disabling of their captain, so soon as they had gathered him up our opponents thought of nothing but retreat; and retreat they did, hotly pursued by us, and never allowed to pause or slacken rein until we had hurled them out of the town of Pesaro, to get them back to Cesare Borgia with the tale of their ignominious discomfiture.

CHAPTER X. THE FALL OF PESARO

As we rode back through the town of Pesaro, some fifty men of the six score that had sallied from the Castle a half-hour ago, we found the streets well-nigh deserted, the rebellious citizens having fled back to the shelter of their homes, like rats to their burrows in time of peril.

As we advanced through the shambles that we had left about the Castle gates, it occurred to me that within the courtyard a crowd would be waiting to receive and welcome me, and it became necessary to devise some means of avoiding this reception. I beckoned Giacomo to my side.

"Let it be given out that I will speak to no man until I have rendered thanks to Heaven for this signal victory," I muttered to the unsuspecting Albanian. "Do you clear a way for me so soon as we are within."

He obeyed me so well that when the bridge had been let down, he preceded me with a couple of his men and gently but firmly pressed back those that would have approached—among the first of whom were Madonna Paola and her brother.

"Way!" he shouted. "Make way for the High and Mighty Lord of Pesaro!"

Thus I passed through, my half-shattered visor sufficiently closed still to conceal my face, and in this manner I gained the door of the eastern wing and dismounted. Two or three attendants sprang forward, ready to go with me that they might assist me to disarm. But I

waved them imperiously back, and mounted the stairs alone. Alone I crossed the ante-chamber, and tapped at the door of the Lord Giovanni's closet. Instantly it opened, for he had watched my return and been awaiting me. Hastily he drew me in and closed the door.

He was flushed with excitement and trembling like a leaf. Yet at the sight that I presented he lost some of his high colour, and recoiled to stare at my armour, battered, dented, and splashed with browning stains, which loudly proclaimed the fray through which I had been.

He fell to praising my valour, to speaking of the great service I had rendered him, and of the gratitude that he would ever entertain for me, all in terms of a fawning, cloying sweetness that disgusted me more than ever his cruelties had done. I took off my helmet whilst he spoke, and let it fall with a crash. The face I revealed to him was livid with fatigue, and blackened with the dust that had caked upon my sweat. He came forward again and helped hastily to strip off my harness, and when that was done he fetched a great silver basin and a ewer of embossed gold from which he poured me fragrant rose-water that I might wash. Macerated sweet herbs he found me, lupin meal and glasswort, the better that I might cleanse myself; and when, at last, I was refreshed by my ablutions, he poured me a goblet of a full-bodied golden wine that seemed to infuse fresh life into my veins. And all the time he spoke of the prowess I had shown, and lamented that all these years he should have had me at his Court and never guessed my worth.

At length I turned to resume my clothes. And since it must excite comment and perhaps arouse suspicion were I to appear in any but my jester's garish livery, I once more assumed my foliated cape, my cap and bells.

"Wear it yet for a little while," he said, "and thus complete the service you have done me. Presently you may doff it for all time, and resume your true estate. Biancomonte, as I promised you, shall be

yours again. The Lord of Pesaro does not betray his word."

I smiled grimly at the pride of his utterance.

"It is an easy thing," said I, "freely to give that which is no longer ours."

He coloured with the anger that was ever ready.

"What shall that mean?" he asked.

"Why, that in a few days you will have Cesare Borgia here, and you will be Lord of Pesaro no more. I have saved your honour for you. More than that it were idle to attempt."

"Think not that I shall submit," he cried. "I shall find in Italy the help I need to return and drive the usurper out. You must have faith in that, yourself, else had you never bargained with me as you have done for the return of your Estates."

To that I answered nothing, but urged him to go below and show himself; and the better that he might bear himself among his courtiers, I detailed to him the most salient features of that fight.

He went, not without a certain uneasiness which, however, was soon dispelled by the thunder of acclamation with which he was received; not only by his courtiers, but by the soldiers who had fought in that hot skirmish, and who believed that it was he had led them.

Meanwhile I sat above, in the closet he had vacated, and thence I watched him, with such mingling feelings in my heart as baffle now my halting pen. Scorn there was in my mood and a hot contempt of him that he could stand there and accept their acclamation with an air of humility that I am persuaded was assumed: a certain envious anger was there, too, to think that such a weak-kneed, lily-livered craven should receive the plaudits of the deeds that I, his buffoon, had performed for him. Those acclamations were not for him, although

those who acclaimed him thought so. They were for the man who had routed Ramiro del' Orca and his followers, and that man assuredly was I. Yet there I crouched above, behind the velvet curtains where none might see me, whilst he stood smiling and toying with his brown beard and listening to the fine words of praise that, I could imagine, were falling from the lips of Madonna Paola, who had drawn near and was speaking to him.

There is in my nature a certain love of effectiveness, a certain taste for theatrical parade and the contriving of odd situations. This bent of mine was whispering to me then to throw wide the window, and, stemming their noisy plaudits, announce to them the truth of what had passed. Yet what if I had done so? They would have accounted it but a new jest of Boccadoro, the Fool, and one so ill-conceived that they might urge the Lord Giovanni to have him whipped for it.

Aye, it would have been a folly, a futile act that would have earned me unbelief, contempt and anger. And yet there was a moment when jealousy urged me almost headlong to that rashness. For in Madonna Paola's eyes there was a new expression as they rested on the face of Giovanni Sforza—an expression that told me she had come to love this man whom a little while ago she had despised.

God! was there ever such an irony? Was there ever such a paradox? She loved him, and yet it was not him she loved. The man she loved was the man who had shown the qualities of his mind in the verses with which the Court was ringing; the man who had that morning given proof of his high mettle and knightly prowess by the deeds of arms he had performed. I was that man—not he at whom so adoringly she looked. And so—I argued, in my warped way and with the philosophy worthy of a Fool—it was I whom she loved, and Giovanni was but the symbol that stood for me. He represented the songs and the deeds that were mine.

But if I did not throw wide that window and proclaim the fact to ears

that would have been deaf to the truth of them, what think you that I did? I took a subtler vengeance. I repaired to my own chamber, procured me pen and ink, and, there, with a heart that was brimming over with gall, I penned an epic modelled upon the stately lines of Virgil, wherein I sang the prowess of the Lord Giovanni Sforza, describing that morning's mighty feat of arms, and detailing each particular of the combat 'twixt Giovanni and Ramiro del' Orca.

It was a brave thing when it was done; a finer and worthier poetical achievement than any that I had yet encompassed, and that night, after they had supped, as merrily as though Duke Valentino had never been heard of, and whilst they were still sitting at their wine, I got me a lute and stole down to the banqueting hall.

I announced myself by leaping on a table and loudly twanging the strings of my instrument. There was a hush, succeeded by a burst of acclamation. They were in a high good-humour, and the Fool with a new song was the very thing they craved.

When silence was restored I began, and whilst my fingers moved sluggishly across the strings, striking here and there a chord, I recited the epic I had penned. My voice swelled with a feverish enthusiasm whose colossal irony none there save one could guess. He, at first surprised, grew angry presently, as I could see by the cloud that had settled on his brow. Yet he restrained himself, and the rest of the company were too enthralled by the breathless quality of my poem to bestow their glances on any countenance save mine.

Madonna Paola sat upon the Lord of Pesaro's right, and her blue eyes were round and her lips parted with enthusiasm as I proceeded. And when presently I came to that point in the fight betwixt Giovanni and Ramiro del' Orca, when Ramiro, having broken down the Lord Giovanni's visor, was on the point of driving his sword into his adversary's face, I saw her shrink in a repetition of the morning's alarm, and her bosom heaved more swiftly, as though the issue of that

combat hung now upon my lines and she were made anxious again for the life of the man whom she had learnt to love.

I finished on a slow and stately rhythm, my voice rising and falling softly, after the manner of a Gregorian chant, as I dwelt on the piety that had succeeded the Lord of Pesaro's brave exploits, and how upon his return from the stricken field he had repaired straight to his closet, his battered and bloody harness on his back, that he might kneel ere he disarmed and render thanks to God for the victory vouchsafed him.

On that "Te Deum" I finished softly, and as my voice ceased and the vibration of my last chord melted away, a thunder of applause was my reward.

Men leapt from their chairs in their enthusiasm, and crowded round the table on which I was perched, whilst, when presently I sprang down, one noble woman kissed me on the lips before them all, saying that my mouth was indeed a mouth of gold.

Madonna Paola was leaning towards the Lord Giovanni, her eyes shining with excitement and filmed with tears as they proudly met his glance, and I knew that my song had but served to endear him the more to her by causing her to realise more keenly the brave qualities of the adventure that I sang. The sight of it almost turned me faint, and I would have eluded them and got away as I had come but that they lifted me up and bore me so to the table at which the Lord Giovanni sat. He smiled, but his face was very pale. Could it be that I had touched him? Could it be that I had driven the iron into his soul, and that he could not bear to confront me, knowing what a dastard I must deem him?

The splendid Filippo of Santafior had risen to his feet, and was waving a white, bejewelled hand in an imperious demand for silence. When at last it came he spoke, his voice silvery and his accents

mincing.

"Lord of Pesaro; I demand a boon. He who for years has suffered the ignominy of the motley is at last revealed to us as a poet of such magnitude of soul and richness of expression that he would not suffer by comparison with the great Bojardo or the greater Virgil. Let him be stripped for ever of that hideous garb he wears, and let him be treated, hereafter, with the dignity his high gifts deserve. Thus shall the day come when Pesaro will take honour in calling him her son."

Loud and long was the applause that succeeded his words, and when at last it had died down, the Lord Giovanni proved equal to the occasion, like the consummate actor that he was.

"I would," said he, "that these high gifts, of which to-night he has afforded proof, could have been employed upon a worthier subject. I fear me that since you have heard his epic you will be prone to overestimate the deed of which it tells the story. I would, too, my friends," he continued, with a sigh, "that it were still mine to offer him such encouragement as he deserves. But I am sorely afraid that my days in Pesaro are numbered, that my sands are all but run—at least, for a little while. The conqueror is at our gates, and it would be vain to set against the overwhelming force of his numbers the handful of valiant knights and brave soldiers that to-day opposed and scattered his forerunners. It is my intention to withdraw, now that my honour is safe by what has passed, and that none will dare to say that it was through fear that I fled. Yet my absence, I trust, may be but brief. I go to collect the necessary resources, for I have powerful friends in this Italy whose interests touching the Duca Valentino go hand in hand with mine, and who will, thus, be the readier to lend me assistance. Once I have this, I shall return and then—woe to the vanquished!"

The tide of enthusiasm that had been rising as he spoke, now overflowed. Swords leapt from their scabbards—mere toy weapons were they, meant more for ornament than offence, yet were they the

earnest of the stouter arms those gentlemen were ready to wield when the time came. He quieted their clamours with a dignified wave of the hand.

"When that day comes I shall see to it that Boccadoro has his deserts. Meanwhile let the suggestion of my illustrious cousin be acted upon, and let this gifted poet be arrayed in a manner that shall sort better with the nobility of his mind that to-night he has revealed to us."

Thus was it that I came, at last, to shed the motley and move among men garbed as themselves. And with my outward trappings I cast off, too, the name of Boccadoro, and I insisted upon being known again as Lazzaro Biancomonte.

But in so far as the Court of Pesaro was concerned, this new life upon which I was embarked was of little moment, for on the Tuesday that followed that first Sunday in October of such momentous memory, the Lord Giovanni's Court passed out of being.

It came about with his flight to Bologna, accompanied by the Albanian captain and his men, as well as by several of the knights who had joined in Sunday's fray. Ardently, as I came afterwards to learn, did he urge Madonna Paola and her brother to go with them, and I believe that the lady would have done his will in this had not the Lord Filippo opposed the step. He was no warrior himself, he swore—for it was a thing he made open boast of, affecting to despise all who followed the coarse trade of arms—and, as for his sister, it was not fitting that she should go with a fugitive party made up of a handful of knights and some fifty rough mercenaries, and be exposed to the hardships and perils that must be theirs. Not even when he was reminded that the advancing conqueror was Cesare Borgia did it affect him, for despite his shallow, mincing ways, and his paraded scorn of war and warriors, the Lord Filippo was stout enough at heart. He did not fear the Borgia, he answered serenely, and if he came, he

would offer him such hospitality as lay within his power.

He came at last, did the mighty Cesare, although between his coming and Giovanni's flight a full fortnight sped. As for myself, I spent the time at the Sforza Palace, whither the Lord Filippo had carried me as his guest, he being greatly taken with me and determined to become my patron. We had news of Giovanni, first from Bologna and later from Ravenna, whither he was fled. At first he talked of returning to Pesaro with three hundred men he hoped to have from the Marquis of Mantua. But probably this was no more than another piece of that big talk of his, meant to impress the sorrowing and repining Madonna Paola, who suffered more for him, maybe, than he suffered himself.

She would talk with me for hours together of the Lord Giovanni, of his mental gifts, and of his splendid courage and military address, and for all that my gorge rose with jealousy and with the force of this injustice to myself, I held my peace. Indeed, indeed, it was better so. For all that I was no longer Boccadoro the Fool, yet as Lazzaro Biancomonte, the poet, I was not so much better that I could indulge any mad aspirations of my own such as might have led me to betray the dastard who had arrayed his craven self in the peacock feathers of my achievements.

In the course of the confidence with which the Lord Filippo honoured me I made bold, on the eve of Cesare's arrival, to suggest to him that he should remove his sister from the Palace and send her to the Convent of Santa Caterina whilst the Borgia abode in the town, lest the sight of her should remind Cesare of the old-time marriage plans which his family had centred round this lady, and lead to their revival. Filippo heard me kindly, and thanked me freely for the solicitude which my counsel argued. For the rest, however, it was a counsel that he frankly admitted he saw no need to follow.

"In the three years that are sped since the Holy Father entertained such plans for the temporal advancement of his nephew Ignacio, the

fortunes of the House of Borgia have so swollen that what was then a desirable match for one of its members is now scarcely worthy of their attention. I do not think," he concluded, "that we have the least reason to fear a renewal of that suit."

It may be that I am by nature suspicious and quick to see ignoble motives in men's actions, but it occurred to me then that the Lord Filippo would not be so greatly put about if indeed the Borgias were to reopen negotiations for the bestowing of Madonna Paola's hand upon the Pope's nephew Ignacio. That swelling of the Borgia fortunes which in the three years had taken place and which, he contended, would render them more ambitious than to seek alliance with the House of Santaflor, rendered them, nevertheless, in his eyes a more desirable family to be allied with than in the days when he had counselled his sister's flight from Rome. And so, I thought, despite what stood between her and the Lord Giovanni, Filippo would know no scruple now in urging her into an alliance with the House of Borgia should they manifest a willingness to have that old affair reopened.

On the 29th of that same month of October, Cesare arrived in Pesaro. His entry was a triumphant procession, and the orderliness that prevailed among the two thousand men-at-arms that he brought with him was a thing that spoke eloquently for the wondrous discipline enforced by this great condottiero.

The Lord Filippo was among those that met him, and like the time-server that he was, he placed the Sforza Palace at his disposal.

The Duca Valentino came with his retinue and the gentlemen of his household, among whom was ever conspicuous by his great size and red ugliness the Captain Ramiro del' Orca, who now seemed to act in many ways as Cesare's factotum. This captain, for reasons which it is unnecessary to detail, I most sedulously avoided.

On the evening of his arrival Cesare supped in private with Filippo

and the members of Filippo's household—that is to say, with Madonna Paola and two of her ladies, and three gentlemen attached to the person of the Lord Filippo. Cesare's only attendants were two cavaliers of his retinue, Bartolomeo da Capranica, his Field-Marshal, and Dorio Savelli, a nobleman of Rome.

Cesare Borgia, this man whose name had so terrible a sound in the ears of Italy's little princelings, this man whose power and whose great gifts of mind had made him the subject of such bitter envy and fear, until he was the best-hated gentleman in Italy—and, therefore, the most calumniated—was little changed from that Cardinal of Valencia, in whose service I had been for a brief season. The pallor of his face was accentuated by the ill-health in which he found himself just then, and the air of feverish restlessness that had always pervaded him was grown more marked in the years that were sped, as was, after all, but natural, considering the nature of the work that had claimed him since he had deposed his priestly vestments. He was splendidly arrayed, and he bore himself with an imperial dignity, a dignity, nevertheless, tempered with graciousness and charm, and as I regarded him then, it was borne in upon me that no fitter name could his godfathers have bestowed on him than that of Cesare.

The Lord Filippo exerted all his powers worthily to entertain his noble and illustrious guest, and by his extreme, almost servile affability it not only would seem that he had forgotten the favour and shelter he had received at the hands of the Lord Giovanni, but it confirmed my suspicions of his willingness to advance his own fortunes by breaking with the fallen tyrant in so far as his sister was concerned.

Short of actually making the proposal itself, it would seem that Filippo did all in his power to urge his sister upon the attention of Cesare. But Duke Valentino's mind at that time was too full of the concerns of conquest and administration to find room for a matter to

him so trifling as the enriching of his cousin Ignacio by a wealthy alliance. To this alone, I thought, was it due that Madonna Paola escaped the persecution that might then have been hers.

On the morrow Cesare moved on to Rimini, leaving his administrators behind him to set right the affairs of Pesaro, and ensure its proper governing, in his name, hereafter.

And now that, for the present, my hopes of ever seeing my own wrongs redressed and my estates returned to me were too slender to justify my remaining longer in Pesaro, I craved of the Lord Filippo permission to withdraw, telling him frankly that my tardily aroused duty called me to my widowed mother, whom for some six years I had not seen. He threw no difficulty in the way of my going; and I was free to depart. And now came the hidden pain of my leave-taking of Madonna Paola. She seemed to grieve at my departure.

"Lazzaro," she cried, when I had told her of my intention, "do you, too, desert me? And I have ever held you my best of friends."

I told her of the mother and of the duty that I owed her, whereupon she remonstrated no more, nor sought to do other than urge me to go to her. And then I spoke of Madonna's kindness to me, and of the friendship with which she had honoured one so lowly, and in the end I swore, with my hand on my heart and my soul on my lips, that if ever she had work for me, she would not need to call me twice.

"This ring, Madonna," said I, "was given me by the Lord Cesare Borgia, and was to have proved a talisman to open wide for me the door to fortune. It did better service than that, Madonna. It was the talisman that saved you from your pursuers that day at Cagli, three years ago."

"You remind me, Lazzaro," she cried, "of how much you have sacrificed in my service. Yours must be a very noble nature that will do

so much to serve a helpless lady without any hope of guerdon."

"Nay, nay," I answered lightly, "you must not make so much of it. It would never have sorted with my inclinations to have turned man-at-arms. This ring, Madonna, that once has served you, I beg that you will keep, for it may serve you again."

"I could not, Lazzaro! I could not!" she exclaimed, recoiling, yet without any show of deeming presumptuous my words or of being offended by them.

"If you would make me the reward that you say I have earned, you will do this for me. It will make me happier, Madonna. Take it"—I thrust it into her unwilling hand—"and if ever you should need me send it back to me. That ring and the name of the place where you abide by the lips of the messenger you choose, and with a glad heart, as fast as horse can bear me, shall I ride to serve you once again."

"In such a spirit, yes," said she. "I take it willingly, to treasure it as a buckler against danger, since by means of it I can bring you to my aid in time of peril."

"Madonna, do not overestimate my powers," I besought her. "I would have you see in me no more than I am. But it sometimes happens that the mouse may aid the lion."

"And when I need the lion to aid the mouse, my good Lazzaro, I will send for you."

There were tears in her voice, and her eyes were very bright.

"Addio, Lazzaro," she murmured brokenly. "May God and His saints protect you. I will pray for you, and I shall hope to see you again some day, my friend."

"Addio, Madonna!" was all that I could trust myself to say ere I fled from her presence that she might not see my deep emotion, nor hear

the sobs that were threatening to betray the anguish that was ravaging my soul.

PART II. THE OGRE OF CESENA

CHAPTER XI. MADONNA'S SUMMONS

However great the part that my mother—sainted woman that she was—may have played in my life, she nowise enters into the affairs of this chronicle, so that it would be an irrelevance and an impertinence to introduce her into these pages. Of the joy with which she welcomed me to the little home near Biancomonte, in which the earnings of Boccadoro the Fool had placed her, it could interest you but little to read in detail, nor could it interest you to know of the gentle patience with which she cheered and humoured me during the period that I sojourned there, tilling the little plot she owned, reaping and garnering like any born villano. With a woman's quick intuition she guessed perhaps the canker that was eating at my heart, and with a mother's blessed charity she sought to soothe and mitigate my pain.

It was during this period of my existence that the poetic gifts I had discovered myself possessed of whilst at Pesaro, burst into full bloom; and not a little relief did I find in the penning of those love-songs—the true expression of what was in my heart—which have since been given to the world under the title of *Le Rime di Boccadoro*. And what time I tended my mother's land by day, and wrote by night of the feverish, despairing love that was consuming me, I waited for the call that, sooner or later, I knew must come. What prophetic instinct it was had rooted that certainty in my heart I do not pretend to say. Perhaps my hope was of such a strength that it assumed the form of certainty to solace the period of my hermitage. But that some day Madonna Paola's messenger would arrive bringing me the Borgia ring, I was as confident as that some day I must die.

Two years went by, and we were in the Autumn of 1502, yet my faith knew no abating, my confidence was strong as ever. And, at last, that confidence was justified. One night of early October, as I sat at supper with my mother after the labours of the day, a sound of hoofs disturbed the peace of the silent night. It drew rapidly nearer, and long before the knock fell upon our door, I knew that it was the messenger from my lady.

My mother looked at me across the board, an expression of alarm overspreading her old face. "Who," her eyes seemed to ask me, "was this horseman that rode so late?"

My hound rose from the hearth with a growl, and stood bristling, his eyes upon the door. White-haired old Silvio, the last remaining retainer of the House of Biancomonte, came forth from the kitchen, with inquiry and fear blending on his wrinkled, weather-beaten countenance.

And I, seeing all these signs of alarm, yet knowing what awaited me on the threshold, rose with a laugh, and in a bound had crossed the intervening space. I flung wide the door, and from the gloom without a man's voice greeted me with a question.

"Is this the house of Messer Lazzaro Biancomonte?"

"I am that Lazzaro Biancomonte," answered I. "What may your pleasure be?"

The stranger advanced until he came within the light. He was plainly dressed, and wore a jerkin of leather and long boots. From his air I judged him a servant or a courier. He doffed his hat respectfully, and held out his right hand in which something was gleaming yellow. It was the Borgia ring.

"Pesaro," was all he said.

I took the ring and thanked him, then bade him enter and refresh himself ere he returned, and I called old Silvio to bring wine.

"I am not returning," the man informed me. "I am a courier riding to Parma, whom Madonna charged with that message to you in passing."

Nevertheless he consented to rest him awhile and sip the wine we set before him, and what time he did so I engaged him in talk, and led him to tell me what he knew of the trend of things at Pesaro, and what news there was of the Lord Giovanni. He had little enough to tell. Pesaro was flourishing and prospering under the Borgia dominion. Of the Lord Giovanni there was little news, saving that he was living under the protection of the Gonzagas in Mantua, and that so long as he was content to abide there the Borgias seemed disposed to give him peace.

Next I made him tell me what he knew of Filippo di Santaflor and Madonna Paola. On this subject he was better informed. Madonna Paola was well and still lived with her brother at the Palace of Pesaro. The Lord Filippo was high in favour with the Borgias, and Cesare lately had been frequently his guest at Pesaro, whilst once, for a few days, the Lord Ignacio de Borgia had accompanied his illustrious cousin.

I flushed and paled at that piece of news, and the reason of her summons no longer asked conjecture. It was an easy thing for me, knowing what I knew, to fill in the details which the courier omitted in ignorance from the story.

The Lord Filippo, seeking his own advancement, had so urged his sister upon the notice of the Borgia family—perhaps even approached Cesare—in such a manner that it was again become a question of wedding her to Ignacio, who had, meanwhile, remained unmarried. I could read that opportunist's motives as easily as if he

had written them down for my instruction. Giovanni Sforza he accounted lost beyond redemption, and I could imagine how he had plied his wits to aid his sister to forget him, or else to remember him no longer with affection. Whether he had succeeded or not I could not say until I had seen her; but meanwhile, deeming ripe the soil of her heart for the new attachment that should redound so much to his own credit—now that the House of Borgia had risen to such splendid heights—he was driving her into this alliance with Ignacio.

Faithful to the very letter of the promise I had made her, I set out that same night, after embracing my poor, tearful mother, and promising to return as soon as might be. All night I rode, my soul now tortured with anxiety, now exalted at the supreme joy of seeing Madonna, which was so soon to be mine. I was at the gates of Pesaro before matins, and within the Palazzo Sforza ere its inmates had broken their fast.

The Lord Filippo welcomed me with a certain effusion, chiding me for my long absence and the ingratitude it had seemed to indicate, and never dreaming by what summons I was brought back.

"You are well-returned," he told me in conclusion. "We shall need you soon, to write an epithalamium."

"You are to be wed, Magnificent?" quoth I at last, at which he laughed consumedly.

"Nay, we shall need the song for my sister's nuptials. She is to wed the Lord Ignacio Borgia, before Christmas."

"A lofty theme," I answered with humility, "and one that may well demand resources nobler than those of my poor pen."

"Then get you to work at once upon it. I will have your chamber prepared."

He sent for his seneschal, a person—like most Of the servants at the Palace—strange to me, and he gave orders that I should be sumptuously lodged. He was grown more splendid than ever in the prosperity that seemed to surround him here at Pesaro, in this Palace that had undergone such changes and been so enriched during the past two years as to go near defying recognition.

When the seneschal had shown me to the quarters he had set apart for me, I made bold to make inquiries concerning Madonna Paola.

"She is in the garden, Illustrious," answered the seneschal, deeming me, no doubt, a great lord, from the respect which Filippo had indicated should be shown me. "Madonna has the wisdom to seek the little sunshine the year still holds. Winter will be soon upon us."

I agreed with the old man, and dismissed him. So soon as he was gone, I quitted my chamber, and all dust staineded as I was I made my way down to the garden. A turn in one of the boxwood-bordered alleys brought me suddenly face to face with Madonna Paola.

A moment we stood looking at each other, my heart swelling within me until I thought that it must burst. Then I advanced a step and sank on one knee before her.

"You sent for me, Madonna. I am here." There was a pause, and when presently I looked up into her blessed face I saw a smile of infinite sorrow on her lips, blending oddly with the gladness that shone from her sweet eyes.

"You faithful one," she murmured at last. "Dear Lazzaro, I did not look for you so soon."

"Within an hour of your messenger's arrival I was in the saddle, nor did I pause until I had reached the gates of Pesaro. I am here to serve you to the utmost of my power, Madonna, and the only doubt that

assails me is that my power may be all too small for the service that you need."

"Is its nature known to you?" she asked in wonder. Then, ere I had answered, she bade me rise, and with her own hand assisted me.

"I have guessed it," answered I, "guided by such scraps of information as from your messenger I gleaned. It concerns, unless I err, the Lord Ignacio Borgia."

"Your wits have lost nothing of their quickness," she said, with a sad smile, "and I doubt me you know all."

"The only thing I did not know your brother has just told me—that you are to be wed before Christmas. He has ordered me to write your epithalamium."

She drew into step beside me, and we slowly paced the alley side by side, and, as we went, withered leaves overhead, and withered leaves to make a carpet for our feet, she told me in her own way more or less what I have set down, even to her brother's self-seeking share in the transaction that she dubbed hideous and abhorrent.

She was little changed, this winsome lady in the time that was sped. She was in her twenty-first year, but in reality she seemed to me no older than she had been on that day when first I saw her arguing with her grooms upon the road to Cagli. And from this I reassured myself that she had not been fretted overmuch by the absence of the Lord Giovanni.

Presently she spoke of him and of her plighted word which her brother and those supple gentlemen of the House of Borgia were inducing her to dishonour.

"Once before, in a case almost identical, when all seemed lost, you came—as if Heaven directed—to my rescue. This it is that gives me

confidence in such aid as you might lend me now."

"Alas! Madonna," I sighed, "but the times are sorely changed and the situations with them. What is there now that I can do?"

"What you did then. Take me beyond their reach."

"Ah! But whither?"

"Whither but to the Lord Giovanni? Is it not to him that my troth is plighted?"

I shook my head in sorrow, a thrust of jealousy cutting me the while.

"That may not be," said I. "It were not seemly, unless the Lord Giovanni were here himself to take you hence."

"Then I will write to the Lord Giovanni," she cried. "I will write, and you shall bear my letter."

"What think you will the Lord Giovanni do?" I burst out, with a scorn that must have puzzled her. "Think you his safety does not give him care enough in the hiding-place to which he has crept, that he should draw upon himself the vengeance of the Borgias?"

She stared at me in ineffable surprise. "But the Lord Giovanni is brave and valiant," she cried, and down in my heart I laughed in bitter mockery.

"Do you love the Lord Giovanni, Madonna?" I asked bluntly.

My question seemed to awaken fresh astonishment. It may well be that it awakened, too, reflection. She was silent for a little space. Then

"I honour and respect him for a noble, chivalrous and gifted gentleman," she answered me, and her answer made me singularly content, spreading a balm upon the wounds my soul had taken. But to

her fresh intercessions that I should carry a letter to him, I shook my head again. My mood was stubborn.

"Believe me, Madonna, it were not only unwise, but futile."

She protested.

"I swear it would be," I insisted, with a convincing force that left her staring at me and wondering whence I derived so much assurance. "We must wait. From now till Christmas we have more than two months. In two months much may befall. As a last resource we may consider communication with the Lord Giovanni. But it is a forlorn hope, Madonna, and so we will leave it until all else has failed us."

She brightened at my promise that at least if other measures proved unavailing, we should adopt that course, and her brightening flattered me, for it bore witness to the supreme confidence she had in me.

"Lazzaro," said she, "I know you will not fail me. I trust you more than any living man; more, I think, than even the Lord Giovanni, whom, if God pleases, I shall some day wed."

"Thanks, Madonna mia," I answered, gratefully indeed. "It is a trust that I shall ever strive to justify. Meanwhile have faith and hope, and wait."

Once before, when, to escape the schemes of her brother who would have wed her to the Lord Giovanni, she had appealed to me, the counsel I had given her had been much the same as that which I gave her now. At the irony of it I could have laughed had any other been in question but Madonna Paola—this tender White Flower of the Quince that was like to be rudely wilted by the ruthless hands of scheming men.

CHAPTER XII. THE GOVERNOR OF CESENA

That night I would have supped in my own quarters but that Filippo sent for me and bade me join him and swell the little court he kept. At times I believe he almost thought that he was the true Lord of Pesaro—an opinion that may have been shared by not a few of the citizens themselves. Certainly he kept a greater state and was better housed than the duke of Valentinois' governor.

It was a jovial company of perhaps a dozen nobles and ladies that met about his board, and Filippo bade his servants lay for me beside him. As we ate he questioned me touching the occupation that I had found during my absence from Pesaro. I used the greatest frankness with him, and answered that my life had been partly a peasants, partly a poet's.

"Tell me what you wrote," he bade me his eyes resting on my face with a new look of interest, for his love of letters was one of the few things about him that was not affected.

"A few novelle, dealing with court-life; but chiefly verses," answered I.

"And with these verses—what have you done?"

"I have them by me, Illustrious," I answered. He smiled, seemingly well pleased.

"You must read them to us," he cried. "If they rival that epic of yours, which I have never forgotten, they should be worth hearing."

And presently, supper being done, I went at his bidding to my chamber for my precious manuscripts, and, returning, I entertained the company with the reading of a portion of what I had written. They heard me with an attention that might have rendered me vain had my ambition really lain in being accounted a great writer; and when I paused, now and again, there was a murmur of applause, and many a pat on the shoulder from Filippo whenever a line, a phrase or a stanza took his fancy.

I was perhaps too absorbed to pay any great attention to the impression my verses were producing, but presently, in one of my pauses, the Lord Filippo startled me with words that awoke me to a sense of my imprudence.

"Do you know, Lazzaro, of what your lines remind me in an extraordinary measure?"

"Of what, Excellency?" I asked politely, raising my eyes from my manuscript. They chanced to meet the glance of Madonna Paola. It was riveted upon me, and its expression was one I could not understand.

"Of the love-songs of the Lord Giovanni Sforza," answered he. "They resemble those poems infinitely more than they resemble the epic you wrote two years ago."

I stammered something about the similarity being merely one of subject. But he shook his head at that, and took good note of my confusion.

"No," said he, "the resemblance goes deeper. There is the same facile beauty of the rhymes the same freshness of the rhythm—remotely resembling that of Petrarca, yet very different. Conceits similar to those that were the beauty spots of the Lord Giovanni's verses are ubiquitous in yours, and above all there is the same fervent

earnestness, the same burning tone of sincerity that rendered his strambotti so worthy of admiration."

"It may be," I answered him, my confusion growing under the steady gaze of Madonna Paola, "it may be that having heard the verses of the Lord Giovanni, I may, unconsciously, have modelled my own lines upon those that made so deep an impression on me."

He looked at me gravely for a moment.

"That might be an explanation," he answered deliberately, "but frankly, if I were asked, I should give a very different one."

"And that would be?" came, sharp and compelling, the voice of Madonna.

He turned to her, shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "Why, since you ask me," he said, "I should hazard the opinion that Lazzaro, here, was of considerable assistance to the Lord Giovanni in the penning of those verses with which he delighted us all—and you, Madonna, I believe, particularly."

Madonna Paola crimsoned, and her eyes fell. The others looked at us with inquiring glances—at her, at Filippo and at me. With a fresh laugh Filippo turned to me.

"Confess now, am I not right?" he asked good-humouredly.

"Magnificent," I murmured in tones of protest, "ask yourself the question. Was it a likely thing that the Lord Giovanni would enlist the services of his jester in such a task?"

"Give me a straightforward answer," he insisted. "Am I right or wrong?"

"I am giving you more than a straightforward answer, my lord," I still evaded him, and more boldly now. "I am setting you on the high-road

to solve the matter for yourself by an appeal to your own good sense and reason. Was it in the least likely, I repeat, that the Lord Giovanni would seek the services of his Fool to aid him write the verses in honour of the lady of his heart?"

With a burst of mocking laughter, Filippo smote the table a blow of his clenched hand.

"Your prevarications answer me," he cried. "You will not say that I am wrong."

"But I do say that you are wrong!" I exclaimed, suddenly inspired. "I did not assist the Lord Giovanni with his verses. I swear it."

His laughter faded; and his eyes surveyed me with a sudden solemnity.

"Then why did you evade my question?" he demanded shrewdly. And then his countenance changed as swiftly again. It was illumined by the light of sudden understanding. "I have it," he cried. "The answer is plain. You did not assist the Lord Giovanni to write them. Why? Because you wrote them yourself, and you gave them to him that he might pass them off as his own."

It was a merciful thing for me that the whole company fell into a burst of laughter and applauded Filippo's quick discernment, which they never doubted. All talked at once, and a hundred proofs were advanced in support of Filippo's opinion. The Lord Giovanni's celebrated dullness of mind, amounting almost to stupidity, was cited, and they reminded one another of the profound astonishment with which they had listened to the compositions that had suddenly burst from him.

Filippo turned to his sister, on whose pale face I saw it written that she was as convinced as any there, and my feelings were those of a dastard who has broken faith with the man who trusted him.

"Do you appreciate now, Madonna," he murmured, "the deceits and wiles by which that craven crept like a snake into your esteem?"

I guessed at once that by that thrust he sought to incline her more to the union he had in view for her.

"At least he was no craven," answered she. "His burning desire to please me may have betrayed him into this foolish duplicity. But he still must live in my memory as a brave and gallant gentleman; or have you forgotten, Filippo, that noble combat with the forces of Ramiro del' Orca?"

To such a question Filippo had no answer, and presently his mood sobered a little. For myself, I was glad when the time came to withdraw from that company that twitted and pestered me and played upon my sense of shame at the imprudence I had committed.

Now that I look back, I can scarce conceive why it should have so wrought upon me; for, in truth, the little love I bore the Lord Giovanni might rather have led me to rejoice that his imposture should be laid bare to the eyes of all the world. I think that really there was an element of fear in my feelings—fear that, upon reflection, Madonna Paola might ask herself how came that burning sincerity into the love-songs written in her honour which it was now disclosed that I had penned. The answer she might find to such a question was one that might arouse her pride and so outrage it as to lead her to cast me out of her friendship and never again suffer me to approach her.

Such a conclusion, however, she fortunately did not arrive at. Haply she accounted the fervour of those lines assumed, for when on the morrow she met me, she did no more than gently chide me for the deceit that I had had a hand in practising upon her. She accepted my explanation that my share in that affair had been wrung from me with threats of torture, and putting it from her mind she returned to the matter of the approaching alliance she sought to elude, renewing her

prayers that I should aid her.

"I have," she told me then, "one other friend who might assist us, and who has the power perhaps if he but has the will. He is the Governor of Cesena, and for all that he holds service under Cesare Borgia, yet he seems much devoted to me, and I do not doubt that to further my interests he would even consent to pit his wits against those of the family he serves."

"In which case, Madonna," answered I, spurred to it, perhaps, by an insensate pang of jealousy at the thought that there should be another beside myself to have her confidence, "he would be a traitor. And it is ever an ill thing to trust a traitor. Who once betrays may betray again."

That she manifested no resentment, but, on the contrary, readily agreed with me, showed me how idle had been that jealousy of mine, and made me ashamed of it.

"Why yes," she mused, "it is the very thought that had occurred to me, and caused me to spurn the aid he proffered when last he was here."

"Ah!" I cried. "What aid was that?"

"You must know, Lazzaro," said she, "that he comes often to Pesaro from Cesena, being a man in whom the Duke places great trust, and on whom he has bestowed considerable powers. He never fails to lie at the Palace when he comes, and he seems to—to have conceived a regard for me. He is a man of twice my years," she added hurriedly, "and haply looks upon me as he might upon a daughter."

I sniffed the air. I had heard of such men.

"A week ago, when last he came, I was cast down and grieved by the affair of this marriage, which Filippo had that day disclosed to me.

The Governor of Cesena, observing my sadness, sought my confidence with a kindliness of which you would scarce believe him capable; for he is a fierce and blustering man of war. In the fulness of my heart there was nothing that seemed so desirable as a friendly ear into which I might pour the tale of my affliction. He heard me gravely, and when I had done he placed himself at my disposal, assuring me that if I would but trust myself to him, he would defeat the ends of the House of Borgia. Not until then did I seem to bethink me that he was the servant of that house, and his readiness to betray the hand that paid him sowed mistrust and a certain loathing of him in my mind. I let him see it, perhaps, which was unwise, and, may be, even ungrateful. He seemed deeply wounded, and the subject was abandoned. But I have since thought that perhaps I acted with a rashness that was—"

"With a rashness that was eminently justifiable," I interrupted her. "You could not have been better advised than to have mistrusted such a man."

But touching this same Governor of Cesena, there was a fine surprise in store for me. At dusk some two days later there was a sudden commotion in the courtyard of the Palace, and when I inquired of a groom into its cause, I was informed that his Excellency the Governor of Cesena had arrived.

Curious to see this man whose willingness to betray the house he served, where Madonna was concerned, was by no means difficult to probe, I descended to the banqueting-hall at supper time.

They were not yet at table when I entered, and a group was gathered in the centre of the room about a huge man, at sight of whose red head and crimson, brutal face I would have turned and sought again the refuge of my own quarters but that his wolf's eye had already fastened on me.

"Body of God!" he swore, and that was all. But his eyes were on me

in a marvellous stare, as were now—impelled by that oath of his—the eyes of all the company. We looked at each other for a moment, then a great laugh burst from him, shaking his vast bulk and wrinkling his hideous face. He thrust the intervening men aside as if they had been a growth of sedges he would penetrate, and he advanced towards me; the Lord Filippo and his sister looking on with all the rest in interested surprise.

In front of me he halted, and setting his hands on his hips he regarded me with a brutal mirth.

"What may your trade be now?" he asked at last contemptuously.

I had taken rapid stock of him in the seconds that were sped, and from the surpassing richness of his apparel, his gold-broidered doublet and crimson, fur-edged surcoat, I knew that Messer Ramiro del' Orca was grown to the high estate of Governor of Cesena.

"A new trade even as yours," I answered him.

"Nay, that is no answer," he cried, overlooking my offensiveness. "Do you still follow the trade of arms?"

"I think," Filippo interposed, "that our Excellency is in some error. This gentleman is Lazzaro Biancomonte, a poet of whom Italy will one day be proud, despite the fact that for a time he acted as the Lord Giovanni Sforza's Fool."

Ramiro looked at his interlocutor, as the mastiff may look at the lap dog. He grunted, and blew out his cheeks.

"There is yet another part he played," said he, "as I have good cause to remember—for he is the only man that can boast of having unhorsed Ramiro del' Orca. He was for a brief season the Lord Giovanni Sforza himself."

"How?" asked the profoundly amazed Filippo, whilst all present

pressed closer to miss nothing of the disclosure that seemed to impend. Myself, I groaned. There was naught that I could say to stem the tide of revelation that was coming.

"Do you then keep this paladin here arrayed like a clerk?" quoth Ramiro in his sardonic way. "And can it be that the secret of his feat of arms has been guarded so well that you are still in ignorance of it?"

Filippo's wits worked swiftly, and swiftly they pieced together the hints that Ramiro had let fall.

"You will tell us," said he, "that the fight in the streets of Pesaro, in which your Excellency's party suffered defeat, was led by Biancomonte in the armour of Giovanni Sforza?"

Ramiro looked at him with that displeasure with which the jester visits the man who by anticipation robs his story of its points.

"It was known to you?" growled he.

"Not so. I have but learnt it from you. But it nowise astonishes me."

And he looked at his sister, whose eyes devoured me, as if they would read in my soul whether this thing were indeed true. Under her eyes I dropped my glance like a man ashamed at hearing a disgraceful act of his paraded.

"Had it indeed been the Lord Giovanni, he had been dead that day," laughed Ramiro grimly. "Indeed it was nothing but my astonishment at sight of the face I was about to stab, after having broken the fastenings of his visor that stayed my hand for long enough to give him the advantage. But I bear you no grudge for that," he ended, turning on me with a ferocious smile, "nor yet for that other trick by which—as Boccadoro the Fool—you bested me. I am not a sweet man when thwarted, yet I can admire wit and respect courage. But see to it," he ended, with a sudden and most unreasonable

ferocity, his visage empurpling if possible still more, "see to it that you pit neither that courage nor that wit against me again. I have heard the story of how you came to be Fool of the Court of Pesaro. Cesena is a dull place, and we might enliven it by the presence of a jester of such nimble wits as yours."

He turned without awaiting my reply, and strode away to take his place at table, whilst I walked slowly to my accustomed seat, and took little part in the conversation that ensued, which, as you may imagine, had me and that exploit of mine for scope.

Anon an elephantine trumpeting of laughter seemed to set the air quivering. Ramiro was lying back in his chair a prey to such a passion of mirth that it swelled the veins of his throat and brow until I thought that they must burst—and, from my soul, I hoped they would. Adown his rugged cheeks two tears were slowly trickling. The Lord Filippo, as presently transpired, had been telling him of the epic I had written in praise of the Lord Giovanni's prowess. Naught would now satisfy that ogre but he must have the epic read, and Filippo, who had retained a copy of it, went in quest of it, and himself read it aloud for the delight of all assembled and the torture of myself who saw in Madonna Paola's eyes that she accounted the deception I had practised on her a thing beyond pardon.

Filippo had a taste for letters, as I think I have made clear, and he read those lines with the same fire and fervour that I, myself, had breathed into them two years ago. But instead of the rapt and breathless attention with which my reading had been attended, the present company listened with a smile, whilst ever and anon a short laugh or a quiet chuckle would mark how well they understood to-night the subtle ironies which had originally escaped them.

I crept away, sick at heart, while they were still making sport over my work, cursing the Lord Giovanni, who had forced me to these things, and my own mad mood that had permitted me in an evil hour

to be so forced. Yet my grief and bitterness were little things that night compared with what Madonna was to make them on the morrow.

She sent for me betimes, and I went in fear and trembling of her wrath and scorn. How shall I speak of that interview? How shall I describe the immeasurable contempt with which she visited me, and which I felt was perhaps no more than I deserved.

"Messer Biancomonte," said she coldly, "I have ever accounted you my friend, and disinterested the motives that inspired a heart seemingly noble to do service to a forlorn and helpless lady. It seems that I was wrong. That the indulging of a warped and malignant spirit was the inspiration you had to appear to befriend me."

"Madonna, you are over-cruel," I cried out, wounded to the very soul of me.

"Am I so?" she asked, with a cold smile upon her ivory face. "Is it not rather you who were cruel? Was it a fine thing to do to trick a lady into giving her affection to a man for gifts which he did not possess? You know in what manner of regard I held the Lord Giovanni Sforza so long as I saw him with the eyes of reason and in the light of truth. And you, who were my one professed friend, the one man who spoke so loudly of dying in my service, you falsified my vision, you masked him—either at his own and at my brother's bidding, or else out of the malignancy of your nature—in a garb that should render him agreeable in my eyes. Do you realise what you have done? Does not your conscience tell you? You have contrived that I have plighted my troth to a man such as I believed the Lord Giovanni to be. Mother of Mercy!" she ended, with a scorn ineffable; "when I dwell upon it now, it almost seems that it was to you I gave my heart, for yours were the deeds that earned my regard—not his."

Such was the very argument that I had hugged to my starving soul, at the time the things she spoke of had befallen, and it had consoled

me as naught in life could have consoled me. Yet now that she employed it with such a scornful emphasis as to make me realise how far beneath her I really was, how immeasurably beyond my reach was she, it was as much consolation to me as confession without absolution may be to the perishing sinner. I answered nothing. I could not trust myself to speak. Besides, what was there that I could say?

"I summoned you back to Pesaro," she continued pitilessly, "trusting in your fine words and deeming honest the offer of services you made me. Now that I know you, you are free to depart from Pesaro when you will."

Despite my shame, I dared, at last, to raise my eyes. But her face was averted, and she saw nothing of the entreaty, nothing of the grief that might have told her how false were her conclusions. One thing alone there was might have explained my actions, might have revealed them in a new light; but that one thing I could not speak of.

I turned in silence, and in silence I quitted the room; for that, I thought, was, after all, the wisest answer I could make.

CHAPTER XIII. POISON

Despite Madonna Paola's dismissal, I remained in Pesaro. Indeed had I attempted to leave, it is probable that the Lord Filippo would have deterred me, for I was much grown in his esteem since the disclosures that had earned me the disfavour of Madonna. But I had no thought of going. I hoped against hope that anon she might melt to a kinder mood, or else that by yet aiding her, despite herself, to elude the Borgia alliance, I might earn her forgiveness for those matters in which she held that I had so gravely sinned against her.

The epithalamium, meanwhile, was forgotten utterly and I spent my days in conceiving wild plans to save her from the Lord Ignacio, only to abandon them when in more sober moments their impracticable quality was borne in upon me.

In this fashion some six weeks went by, and during the time she never once addressed me. We saw much during those days of the Governor of Cesena. Indeed his time seemed mainly spent in coming and going 'twixt Cesena and Pesaro, and it needed no keen penetration to discern the attraction that brought him. He was ever all attention to Madonna, and there were times when I feared that perhaps she had been drawn into accepting the aid that once before he had proffered. But these fears were short-lived, for, as time sped, Madonna's aversion to the man grew plain for all to see. Yet he persisted until the very eve, almost, of her betrothal to Ignacio.

One evening in early December I chanced, through the purest accident, to overhear her sharp repulsion of the suit that he had evidently been pressing.

"Madonna," I heard him answer, with a snarl, "I may yet prove to you

that you have been unwise so to use Ramiro del' Orca."

"If you so much as venture to address me again upon the subject," she returned in the very chilliest accents, "I will lay this matter of your odious suit before your master Cesare Borgia."

They must have caught the sound of my footsteps in the gallery in which they stood, and Ramiro moved away, his purple face pale for once, and his eyes malevolent as Satan's.

I reflected with pleasure that perhaps we had now seen the last of him, and that before that threat of Madonna's he would see fit to ride home to Cesena and remain there. But I was wrong. With incredible effrontery and daring he lingered. The morrow was a Sunday, and, on the Tuesday or Wednesday following, Cesare Borgia and his cousin Ignacio were expected. Filippo was in the best of moods, and paid more heed to the Governor of Cesena's presence at Pesaro than he did to mine. It may be that he imagined Ramiro del' Orca to be acting under Cesare's instructions.

That Sunday night we supped together, and we were all tolerably gay, the topic of our talk being the coming of the bridegroom. Madonna's was the only downcast face at the board. She was pale and worn, and there were dark circles round her eyes that did much to mar the beauty of her angel face, and inspired me with a deep and sorrowing pity.

Ramiro announced his intention of leaving Pesaro on the morrow, and ere he went he begged leave to pledge the beautiful Lady of Santafior, who was so soon to become the bride of the valiant and mighty Ignacio Borgia. It was a toast that was eagerly received, so eager and uproariously that even that poor lady herself was forced to smile, for all that I saw it in her eyes that her heart was on the point of breaking.

I remember how, when we had drunk, she raised her goblet—a beautiful chaste cup of solid gold—and drank, herself, in acknowledgment; and I remember, too, how, chancing to move my head, I caught a most singular, ill-omened smile upon the coarse lips of Messer Ramiro.

At the time I thought of it no more, but in the morning when the horrible news that spread through the Palace gained my ears, that smile of Ramiro del' Orca recurred to me at once.

It was from the seneschal of the Palace that I first heard that tragic news. I had but risen, and I was descending from my quarters, when I came upon him, his old face white as death, a palsy in his limbs.

"Have you heard the news, Ser Lazzaro?" he cried in a quavering voice.

"The news of what?" I asked, struck by the horror in his face.

"Madonna Paola is dead," he told me, with a sob.

I stared at him in speechless consternation, and for a moment I seemed forlorn of sense and understanding.

"Dead?" I remember whispering. "What is it you say?" And I leaned forward towards him, peering into his face. "What is it you say?"

"Well may you doubt your ears," he groaned. "But, Vergine Santissima! it is the truth. Madonna Paola, that sweet angel of God, lies cold and stiff. They found her so this morning."

"God of Heaven!" I cried out, and leaving him abruptly I dashed down the steps.

Scarce knowing what I did, acting upon an impulsive instinct that was as irresistible as it was unreasoning, I made for the apartments of Madonna Paola. In the antechamber I found a crowd assembled,

and on every face was pallid consternation written. Of my own countenance I had a glimpse in a mirror as I passed; it was ashen, and my hollow eyes were wild as a madman's.

Someone caught me by the arm. I turned. It was the Lord Filippo, pale as the rest, his affectations all fallen from him, and the man himself revealed by the hand of an overwhelming sorrow. With him was a grave, white-bearded gentleman, whose sober robe proclaimed the physician.

"This is a black and monstrous affair, my friend," he murmured.

"Is it true, is it really true, my lord?" I cried in such a voice that all eyes were turned upon me.

"Your grief is a welcome homage to my own," he said. "Alas, Dio Santo! it is most hideously true. She lies there cold and white as marble, I have just seen her. Come hither, Lazzaro." He drew me aside, away from the crowd and out of that antechamber, into a closet that had been Madonna's oratory. With us came the physician.

"This worthy doctor tells me that he suspects she has been poisoned, Lazzaro."

"Poisoned?" I echoed. "Body of God! but by whom? We all loved her. There was not in Pesaro a man worthy of the name but would have laid down his life in her service. Who was there, then, to poison that dear saint?"

It was then that the memory of Ramiro del' Orca, and the look that in his eyes I had surprised whilst Madonna drank, flashed back into my mind.

"Where is the Governor of Cesena?" I cried suddenly. Filippo looked at me with quick surprise.

"He departed betimes this morning for his castle. Why do you

ask?"

I told him why I asked; I told him what I knew of Ramiro's attentions to Madonna, of the rejection they had suffered, and of the vengeance he had seemed to threaten. Filippo heard me patiently, but when I had done he shook his head.

"Why, all being as you say, should he work so wanton a destruction?" he asked stupidly, as if jealousy were not cause enough to drive an evil man to destroy that which he may not possess. "Nay, nay, your wits are disordered. You remember that he looked at Madonna whilst she drank, and you construe that into a proof that he had poisoned the cup she drank from. But then it is probable that we all looked at her in that same moment."

"But not with such eyes as his," I insisted.

"Could he have administered the poison with his own hands?" asked the doctor gravely.

"No," said I, "that were a difficult matter. But he might have bribed a servant to drop a powder in her wine."

"Why then," said he, "it should be an easy thing to find the servant. Do you chance to remember who served the wine?"

"I remember," answered Filippo readily.

"Let the man be questioned; let him be racked if necessary. Thus shall you probably arrive at a true knowledge; thus discover under whose directions he was working."

It was the only thing to do, and Filippo sent me about it there and then, telling me the servant in question was a Venetian of the name of Zabatello. If confirmation had been needed that this fellow had been the tool of the poisoner—there was no reason to suppose that he

would have done the thing to have served any ends of his own—that confirmation I had upon discovering that Zabatello was fled from Pesaro, leaving no trace behind him.

Men were sent out by the Lord Filippo in every direction to endeavour to find the rogue and bring him back. Whether they caught him or not seemed, after all a little thing to me. She was dead; that was the one all-absorbing, all-effacing fact that took possession of my mind, blotting out all minor matters that might be concerned with it. Even the now assured fact that she had been poisoned was a thing that found little room in my consideration on that day of my burning grief.

She was dead, dead, dead! The hideous phrase boomed again and again through my distracted mind. Compared with that overwhelming catastrophe, what signified to me the how or why or when she had died. She was dead, and the world was empty.

For hours I sat on the rocks, alone by the sea, on that stormy day of December, and I indulged my grief where no prying eyes could witness it, amid the solitude of wild and angry Nature. And the moan and thud with which the great waves hurled themselves against the base of the black rock on which I was perched afforded but a feeble echo of the storm that raged and beat within my desolated soul.

She was dead, dead, dead! The waves seemed to shout it as they leapt up and spattered me with brine; the wind now moaned it piteously, now shrieked it fiercely as it scudded by, wrapping its invisible coils about me, and seeming intent on tearing me from my resting-place.

Towards evening, at last, I rose, and skirting the Castle, I entered the town, dishevelled and bedraggled, yet caring nothing what spectacle I might afford. And presently a grim procession overtook me, and at sight of the black, cowed and visored figures that

advanced in the lurid light of their wax torches, I fell on my knees there in the street, and so remained, my knees deep in the mud, my head bowed, until her sainted body had been borne past. None heeded me. They bore her to San Domenico, and thither I followed presently, and in the shadow of one of the pillars of the aisle I crouched whilst the monks chanted their funereal psalms.

The singing ended, the friars departed, and presently those of the Court and the sight-seers from the streets began to leave the church. In an hour I was alone—alone with the beloved dead, and there, on my knees, I stayed, and whether I prayed or blasphemed during that horrid hour, my memory will not let me say.

It may have been towards the third hour of night when at last I staggered up—stiff and cramped from my long kneeling on the cold stone. Slowly, in a half-dazed condition, I move down the aisle and gained the door of the church. I essayed to open it. It resisted my efforts, and then I realised that it was locked for the night.

The appreciation of my position afforded me not the slightest dismay. On the contrary, I think my feelings were rather of relief. I had not known whither I should repair—so distraught was my mood—and now chance had settled the matter for me by decreeing that I should remain.

I turned and slowly I paced back until I stood beside the great black catafalque, at each corner of which a tall wax taper was burning. My footsteps rang with a hollow sound through the vast, gloomy spaces of that cold, empty church; my very breathing seemed to find an echo in it. But these were not things to occupy my mind in such a season, no more than was the icy cold by which I was half-numbed—yet of which I seemed to remain unconscious in the absorbing anguish that possessed me.

Near the foot of the bier there was a bench, and there I sat me

down, and resting my elbows on my knees I took my dishevelled head between my frozen hands. My thoughts were all of her whose poor murdered clay was there encased above me. I reviewed, I think, each scene of my life where it had touched on hers; I evoked every word she had addressed to me since first I had met her on the road to Cagli.

And anon my mood changed, and, from cold and frozen that it had been by grief, it grew ablaze with the fire of anger and the lust to wreak vengeance upon him that had brought her to this condition. Let Filippo fear to move without proofs, let him doubt such proofs as I had set before him and deem them overslender to warrant action. Such scruples should not serve to restrain me. I was no lukewarm brother. Here in Pesaro I would remain until her poor body was delivered to the earth, and then I would set out upon a last emprise. Messer Ramiro del' Orca should account to me for this vile deed.

There in the House of Peace I sat gnawing my hands and maturing my bloody plans whilst the night wore on. Later a still more frenzied mood obsessed me—a burning desire to look again upon the sweet face of her I had loved, the sainted visage of Madonna Paola. What was there to deter me? Who was there to gainsay me?

I stood up and uttered that challenge aloud in my madness. My voice echoed mournfully up the aisles, and the sound of the echo chilled me, yet my purpose gathered strength.

I advanced, and after a moment's pause, with the silver-broidered hem of the pall in my hands, I suddenly swept off that mantle of black cloth, setting up such a gust of wind as all but quenched the tapers. I caught up the bench on which I had been sitting, and, dragging it forward, I mounted it and stood now with my breast on a level with the coffin-lid. I laid hands on it and found it unfastened. Without thought or care of how I went about the thing, I raised it and let it crash over to the ground. It fell on the stone flags with a noise like that of thunder,

which boomed and reverberated along the gloomy vault above.

A figure, all in purest white, lay there under my eyes, the face covered by a veil. With deepest reverence, and a prayer to her sainted soul to forgive the desecration of my loving hands, I tremblingly drew that veil aside. How beautiful she was in the calm peace of death! She lay there like one gently sleeping, the faintest smile upon her lips, and as I looked it seemed hard to believe that she was truly dead. Why, her lips had lost nothing of their colour; they were as rosy red—or nearly so—as ever I had seen them in life. How could this be? The lips of the dead are wont to put on a livid hue. I stared a moment, my reverence and grief almost effaced by the intensity of my wonder. This face, so ivory pale, wore not the ashen aspect of one that would never wake again. There was a warmth about that pallor. And then I caught my nether lip in my teeth until it bled, and it is a miracle that I did not scream, seeing how overwrought was my condition.

For it had seemed to me that the draperies on her bosom had slightly moved, a gentle, almost imperceptible heave as if she breathed. I looked, and there it came again.

God! into what madness was I come that my eyes could so deceive me? It was the draught that stirred the air about the church and blew great shrouds of wax adown the taper's yellow sides. I manned myself to a more sober mood, and looked again.

And now my doubts were all dispelled. I knew that I had mastered any errant fancy, and that my eyes were grown wise and discriminating, and I knew, too, that she lived. Her bosom slowly rose and fell; the colour of her lips, the hue of her cheeks confirmed the assurance that she breathed. The poison had failed in its work.

I paused a second yet to ponder. That morning her appearance had been such that the physician had been deceived by it, and had

pronounced her cold. Yet now there were these signs of life. What could it portend but that the effects of the poison were passing off and that she was recovering?

In the wild madness of joy that sent the blood drumming and beating through my brain, my first impulse was to run for help. Then I bethought me of the closed doors, and I realised that no matter how I shouted none would hear me. I must succour her myself as best I could, and meanwhile she must be protected from the chill air of that December night in that church that was colder than the tomb. I had my cloak, a heavy, serviceable garment; and if more were needed, there was the pall which I had removed, and which lay in a heap about the legs of my bench.

I leaned forward, and passing my hand under her head, I gently raised it. Then slipping it downwards, I thrust my arm after it until I had her round the waist in a firm grip. Thus I raised her from the coffin, and the warmth of her body on my arm, the ready, supple bending of her limbs, were so many added proofs that she was not dead.

Gently and reverently I lifted her in my arms, an intoxication of holy joy pervading me, and the prayers falling faster from my lips than ever they had done since as a lad I had recited them at my mother's knee. A moment I laid her on the bench, whilst I divested myself of my cloak. Then suddenly I paused, and stood listening, holding my breath.

Steps were advancing towards the door.

My first impulse was to rush forward and call to those who came, shouting my news and imploring their help. Then a sudden, an almost instinctive suspicion caught and chilled me. Who was it came at such an hour? What could any man seek in the Church of San Domenico at dead of night? Was the church indeed their goal, or were they but passers-by?

That last question went not long unanswered. The steps came nearer, whilst I stood appalled, my skin roughening like a dog's. They halted at the door. Something heavy hurtled against it.

A voice, the voice of Ramiro del' Orca—I knew it upon the instant—reached my ears which concentration had rendered superacute.

"It is locked, Baldassare. Get out those tools of yours and force it."

My wits were working now at fever-pace. It may be that I am swift of thought beyond the ordinary man, or it may be that what then came to me was either a flash of inspiration or the conclusion to which I leapt by instinct. But in that moment the whole plot of Madonna's poisoning was revealed to me. Poisoned she had been—aye, but by some drug that did but produce for a little while the outward appearance of death so truly simulated as to deceive the most experienced of doctors. I had heard of such poisons, and here, in very truth, was one of them at work. His vengeance on her for her indifference to his suit was not so clumsy and primitive as that of simply slaying her. He had, by his infernal artifice, intended, secretly, to bear her off. To-morrow when men found a broken church-door and a violated bier, they would set the sacrilege down to some wizard who had need of the body for his dark practices of magic.

I cursed myself in that hour that I had not earlier been moved to peer into her coffin whilst yet there might have been time to have saved her. Now? The sweat stood out in beads upon my brow. At that door there were, to judge by the sound of footsteps and of voices, some three or four men besides Messer Ramiro. For only weapon I had my dagger. What could I do with that to defend her? Ramiro's plan would suffer no frustration through my discovery; when to-morrow the sacrilege was discovered the cold body of Lazzaro Biancomonte lying beside the desecrated bier would be but an item in the work of profanation they would find—an item that nowise would modify the conclusion to which I anticipated they would come.

CHAPTER XIV. REQUIESCAT!

A strange and mysterious thing is the working of terror on the human mind. Some it renders incapable of thought or action, paralysing their limbs and stagnating the blood in their veins; such creatures die in anticipating death. Others under the stress of that grim passion have their wits preternaturally sharpened. The instinct of self-preservation assumes command of all their senses, and urges them to swift and feverish action.

I thank God with a full heart that to this latter class do I belong. After one gelid moment, spent with eyes and mouth agape, my hands fallen limp beside me and my hair bristling with affright, I became myself again and never calmer than in that dread moment. I went to work with superhuman swiftness. My cheeks may have been livid, my very lips bloodless; but my hands were steady and my wits under full control.

Concealment—concealment for myself and her—was the thing that now imported; and no sooner was the thought conceived than the means were devised. Slender means were they, yet Heaven knows I was in no case to be exacting, and since they were the best the place afforded I must trust to them without demurring, and pray God that Messer Ramiro might lack the wit to search. And with that fresh hope it came to me that I must find a way so to dispose as to make him believe that to search would be a futile waste of energy.

The odds against me lay in the little time at my disposal. Yet a little time there was. The door was stout, and Messer Ramiro might take no violent means of bursting it, lest the noise should arouse the street—and I well could guess how little he would relish having lights to shine upon this deed of night of his.

With what tools his sbirro was at work I could not say; but surely they must be such as would leave me a few moments. Already the fellow had begun. I could make out a soft crunching sound, as of steel biting into wood. To act, then!

With movements swift as a cat's, and as silent, I went to work. Like a ghost I glided round the coffin to the other side, where the lid was lying. I took it up, and when for a moment I had deposited Madonna Paola on the ground, I mounted the bench and gently but quickly set back that lid as it had been. Next, I gathered up the cumbrous pall, and mounting the bench once more I spread it across the coffin. This way and that I pulled it, straightening it into the shape that it had worn when first I had entered, and casting its folds into regular lines that would lend it the appearance of having remained undisturbed.

And what time I toiled, the half of my mind intent upon my task, the other half was as intent upon the progress of the worker at the door.

At last it was done. I set the bench where first it had been, at the foot of the catafalque, and gathering up Madonna in my arms, as though her weight had been an infant's, I bore her swiftly out of the circle of light of those four tapers into the black, impenetrable gloom beyond. On I sped towards the high-altar, flying now as men fly in evil dreams, with the sensation of an enemy upon them and their progress a mere standing-still.

Thus I gained the chancel, hurtling against the railing as I passed, and pausing for an instant, wondering whether those without could have heard the noise which in my clumsiness I had made. But the grinding sound continued uninterrupted, and I breathed more freely. I mounted the altar-steps, the distant light behind me still feebly guiding me; I ran round to the right, and heaved a great sigh of relief to find my hopes verified, and that the altar of San Domenico was as the altar of other churches I had known. It stood a pace or so from the wall, and behind it there was just such narrow hiding-room as I had looked to

find.

I paused at the mouth of that black opening, and even as I paused, something hard that gave out a metallic sound fell at the far end of the church. Instinct told me it was the lock which those miscreants had cut from the door. I waited for no more, but like a beast scudding to cover I plunged into that black space.

Madonna, wrapped in my cloak as she was, I set down upon the ground, and then I crept forward on hands and knees and thrust out my head, trusting to the darkness to envelop me.

I waited thus for some seconds, my heart beating now against my ribs as if it would hurl itself out of my bosom, my head and face on fire with the fever of reaction that succeeded my late cold pallor.

From where I watched it was impossible to see the door hidden in the black gloom. Away in the centre of the church, an island of light in that vast sea of blackness, stood the catafalque with its four wax torches. Something creaked, and almost immediately I saw the flames of those tapers bend towards me, beaten over by the gust that smote them from the door. Thus I surmised that Ramiro and his men had entered. The soft fall of their feet; for they were treading lightly now, succeeded, and at last they came into view, shadowy at first, then sharply outlined as they approached the light.

A moment they stood in half-whispered conversation, their voices a mere boom of sound in which no word was to be distinguished. Then I saw Ramiro suddenly step forward—I knew him by his great height—and drag away, even as I had done, the pall that hid the coffin. Next he seized the bench and gave a brisk order to his men in a less cautious voice, so that I caught his words.

"Spread a cloak," said he, and, in obedience, the four that were with him took a cloak among them, each holding one of its corners. It

was thus that he meant to bear her with him.

He mounted now the bench, and I could imagine with what elation of mind he put out his hands to remove the coffin-lid. As well as if his soul had been transformed into a book conceived for my amusement did I surmise the exultant mood that then possessed him. He had tricked Filippo; he had out-witted us all—Madonna herself, included—and he was leaving no trace behind him that should warrant any so much as to dare to think that this vile deed was the work of Messer Ramiro del' Orca, Governor of Cessna.

But Fate, that arch-humourist, that jester of the gods, delights in mighty contrasts, and has a trick of exalting us by false hopes and hollow lures on the very eve of working our discomfiture. From the soul that but a moment back had been aglow with evil satisfaction there burst a sudden blasphemous cry of rage that disregarded utterly the sanctity of that consecrated place.

"By the Death of Christ! the coffin is empty!"

It was the roar of a beast enraged, and it was succeeded by a heavy crash as he let fall the coffin-lid; a second later a still louder sound awoke the night-echoes of that silent place. In a burst of maniacal frenzy he had caught the coffin itself a buffet of his mighty fist, and hurled it from its trestles.

Then he leapt down from the bench, and flung all caution to the winds in the excitement that possessed him.

"It is a trick of that smooth-faced knave Filippo," he cried. "They have laid a trap for us, animals, and you never informed yourselves."

I could imagine the foam about the corners of his mouth, the swelling veins in his brow, and the mad bulging of his hideous eyes, for terror spoke in his words, and the Governor of Cesena, overbearing bully though he was, could on occasion, too, become a

coward.

"Out of this!" he growled at them. "See that your swords hang ready. Away!"

One of them murmured something that I could not catch. Mother in Heaven! if it should be a suggestion of what actually had taken place a suggestion that the church should be searched ere they abandoned it? But Ramiro's answer speedily relieved my fears.

"I'll take no risks," he barked. "Come! Let us go separately. I first, and do you follow me and get clear of Pesaro as best you can." His voice grew lower, and from what else he said I but caught the words, "Cesena" and "to-morrow night," from which I gathered that he was appointing that as their next meeting-place.

Ramiro went, and scarce had the echoes of his footsteps died away ere the others followed in a rush, fearful of being caught in some trap that was here laid for them, and but restrained from flying on the instant by their still greater fear of that harsh master, Ramiro.

Thanking Heaven for this miraculous deliverance, and for the wit it had lent me so to prepare a scene that should thoroughly mislead those ravishers, I turned me now to Madonna Paola. Her breathing was grown more heavy and more regular, so that in all respects she was as one sleeping healthily. Soon I hoped that she might awaken, for to seek to bear her thence and to the Palace in my arms would have been a madness. And now it occurred to me that I should have restoratives at hand against the time of her regaining consciousness. Inspiration suggested to me the wine that should be stored in the sacristy for altar purposes. It was unconsecrated, and there could be no sacrilege in using it.

I crept round to the front of the altar. At the angle a candle-branch protruded, standing no higher than my head. It held some three or four

tapers, and was so placed to enable the priest to read his missal at early Mass on dark winter mornings. I plucked one of the candles from its socket, and hastening down the church, I lighted it from one of the burning tapers of the bier. Screening it with my hand, I retraced my steps and regained the chancel. Then turning to the left, I made for a door that I knew should give access to the sacristy. It yielded to my touch, and I passed down a short stone-flagged passage, and entered the spacious chamber beyond. An oak settle was placed against one wall, and above it hung an enormous, rudely-carved crucifix. Facing it against the other wall loomed a huge piece of furniture, half-cupboard, half-buffet. On a bench in a corner stood a basin and ewer of metal, whilst a few vestments hanging beside these completed the furniture of this austere and white-washed chamber. Setting my candle on the buffet, I opened one of the drawers. It was full of garments of different kinds, among which I noticed several monks' habits. I rummaged to the bottom only to find some odd pairs of sandals.

Disappointed, I closed the drawer and tried another, with no better fortune. Here were under-vestments of fine linen, newly washed and fragrant with rosemary. I abandoned the drawer and gave my attention to the cupboard above. It was locked, but the key was there. It opened, and my candle reflected a blaze on gold and silver vessels, consecrated chalices; a dazzling monstra, and several richly-carved ciboria of solid gold, set with precious stones. But in a corner I espied a dark-brown, gourd-shaped object. It was a skin of wine, and, with a half-suppressed cry of joy, I seized it. In that instant a piercing scream rang through the stillness of the church, and startled me so that I stood there for some seconds, frozen in horror, a hundred wild conjectures leaping to my mind.

Had Ramiro remained hidden, and was he returned? Did the scream mean that Madonna Paola had been awakened by his rough hands?

A second time it came, and now it seemed to break the hideous spell that its first utterance had cast over me. Dropping the leather bottle, I sped back, down the stone passage to the door that abutted on the chancel.

There, by the high-altar, I saw a form that seemed at first luminous and ghostly, but in which presently I recognised Madonna Paola, the dim rays of the distant tapers finding out the white robe with which her limbs were hung. She was alone, and I knew then that it was but the very natural fear consequent upon awakening in such a place that had provoked the cry I had heard.

"Madonna," I called, advancing swiftly towards her. "Madonna Paola!" There was a gasp, a moment's stillness, then—

"Lazzaro?" She cried, questioningly. "What has happened? Why am I here?"

I was beside her now, and found her trembling like an aspen.

"Something horrible has happened, Madonna," I answered. "But it is over now, and the evil is averted."

"But how came I here?"

"That you shall learn." I stooped to gather up the cloak which had slipped from her shoulders as she advanced. "Do you wrap this about you," I urged her, and with my own hands I assisted to enfold her in that mantle. "Are you faint, Madonna?" I asked.

"I scarce know," she answered in a frightened voice. "There is a black horror upon me. Tell me," she implored again, "what does it mean?"

I drew her away now, promising to satisfy her in the fullest manner once she were out of these forbidding surroundings. I led her to the

sacristy and seating her upon the settle I produced that wine-skin once again.

At first she babbled like a child of not being thirsty; but I was insistent.

"It is no matter of quenching thirst, Madonna," I told her. "The wine will warm and revive you. Come Madonna mia, drink."

She obeyed me now, and having got the first gulp down her throat she drank a lusty draught that was not long in bringing a healthier colour to replace the ashen pallor of her cheeks.

"I am so cold, Lazzaro," she complained.

I turned to the drawer in which I had espied the rough monks' habits, and pulling one out I held it for her to don. She sat there now, in that garment of coarse black cloth, the cowl flung back upon her shoulder, the fairest postulate that ever entered upon a novitiate.

"You are good to me, Lazzaro," she murmured plaintively, "and I have used you very ill." She paused a second, passing her hand across her brow. Then—"What is the hour?" she asked.

It was a question that I left unheeded. I bade her brace herself and have courage for the tale I was to tell. I assured her that the horror of it was all passed and that she had naught to fear. So soon as her natural curiosity should be satisfied it should be hers to return to her brother at the Palace.

"But how came I thence?" she cried. "I must have lain in a swoon, for I remember nothing." And then her swift mind, leaping to a reasonable conclusion; and assisted, perhaps, by the memory of the shattered catafalque which she had seen—"Did they account me dead, Lazzaro?" she asked of a sudden, her eyes dilating with a curious affright as they were turned upon my own.

"Yes, Madonna," answered I, "you were accounted dead." And, with that, I told her the entire story of what had befallen, saving only that I left my own part unmentioned, nor sought to explain my opportune presence in the church. When I spoke of the coming of Ramiro and his knaves she shuddered and closed her eyes in very awe. At length, when I had done, she opened them again, and again she turned them full upon me. Their brightness seemed to increase a moment, and then I saw that she was quietly weeping.

"And you were there to save me, Lazzaro?" she murmured brokenly. "Lazzaro mio, it seems that you are ever at hand when I have need of you. You are indeed my one true friend—the one true friend that never fails me."

"Are you feeling stronger, Madonna?" I asked abruptly, roughly almost.

"Yes, I am stronger." She stood up as if to test her strength. "Indeed little ails me saving the horror of this thing. The thought of it seems to turn me sick and dizzy."

"Sit then and rest," said I. "Presently, when you are more recovered, we will set out."

"Whither shall we go?" she asked.

"Why, to the Palace, to your brother."

"Why, yes," she answered, as though it were the last suggestion that she had been expecting, "And to-morrow—it will be to-morrow, will it not?—comes the Lord Ignacio to claim his bride. He will owe you no mean thanks, Lazzaro."

There was a pause. I paced the chamber, a hundred thoughts crowding my mind, but overriding them all the conjecture of how far it might be from matins, and how soon we might be discovered by the

monks. Presently she spoke again.

"Lazzaro," she inquired very gently, "what was it brought you to the church?"

"I came with the others, Madonna, to the burial service," answered I, and fearing such questions as might follow—questions that I had been dreading ever since I had brought her to the sacristy—"If you are recovered we had best be going," I told her gruffly.

"Nay, I am not yet enough recovered," answered she. "And before we go, there are some points in this strange adventure that I would have you make clear to me. Meanwhile, we are very well here. If the good fathers come upon us, what shall it signify?"

I groaned inwardly, and I grew, I think, more afraid than when Ramiro and his men had broken into the church an hour ago.

"What kept you here after all were gone?"

"I remained to pray, Madonna," I answered brusquely. "Is aught else to be done in a church?"

"To pray for me, Lazzaro?" she asked.

"Assuredly, Madonna."

"Faithful heart," she murmured. "And I had used you so cruelly for the deception you practised. But you merited my cruelty, did you not, Lazzaro? Say that you did, else must I perish of remorse."

"Perhaps I deserved it, Madonna. But perhaps not so much as you bestowed, had you but understood my motives," I said unguardedly.

"If I had understood your motives?" she mused. "Aye, there is much I do not understand. Even in this night's transactions there are not wanting things that remain mysterious despite the explanations you

have supplied me. Tell me, Lazzaro, what was it led you to suppose that I still lived?

"I did not suppose it," I blundered like a fool, never seeing whither her question led.

"You did not?" she cried, in deep surprise; and now, when it was too late, I understood. "What was it, then, induced you to lift the coffin-lid?"

"You ask me more than I can tell you," I answered, almost roughly. "Do you thank God, Madonna, that it was so, and never plague your mind to learn the 'why' of it."

She looked at me with eyes that were singularly luminous.

"But I must know," she insisted. "Have I not the right? Tell me now: Was it that you wished to see my face again before they gave me over to the grave?"

"Perhaps it was that, Madonna," I answered in confusion, avoiding her glance. Then—"Shall we be going?" I suggested fiercely. But she never heeded that suggestion.

She spoke as if she had not heard, and the words she uttered seemed to turn me into stone.

"Did you love me then so much, dear Lazzaro?"

I swung round to face her now, and I know that my face was white—whiter than hers had been when I had beheld her in her coffin. My eyes seemed to burn in their sockets as they met hers. A madness overtook me and whelmed my better judgment. I had undergone so much that day through grief, and that night through a hundred emotions, that I was no longer fully master of myself. Her words robbed me, I think, of my last lingering shred of reason.

"Love you, Madonna?" I echoed in a voice that was as unlike my own as was the mood that then possessed me. "You are the air I breathe, the sun that lights my miserable world. You are dearer to me than honour, sweeter than life. You are the guardian angel of my existence, the saint to whom I have turned morning and evening in my prayers for grace. Do I love you, Madonna—?"

And there I paused. The thought of what I did and what the consequences must be rushed suddenly upon me. I shivered as a man shivers in awaking. I dropped on my knees before her, bowing my head and flinging wide my arms.

"Forgive, Madonna," I cried entreatingly. "Forgive and forget. Never again will I offend."

"Neither forgive nor forget will I," came her voice, charged with an ineffable sweetness, and her hands descended on my bowed head, as if she would bless and soothe me. "I am conscious of no offence that craves forgiveness, and what you have said I would not forget if I could. Whence springs this fear of yours, dear Lazzaro? Am I more than woman, or you less than man that you should tremble for the confession that in a wild moment I have dragged from you? For that wild moment I shall be thankful to my life's end; for your words have been the sweetest ever my poor ears listened to. Once I thought that I loved the Lord Giovanni Sforza. But it was you I loved; for the deeds that earned him my affection were deeds of yours and not of his. Once I told you so in scorn. Yet since then I have come soberly to ponder it. I account you, Lazzaro, the noblest friend, the bravest gentleman and the truest lover that the world has known. Need it surprise you, then, that I love you and that mine would be a happy life if I might spend it in growing worthy of this noble love of yours?"

There was a knot in my throat and tears in my eyes—a matter at which I take no shame. Air seemed to fail me for a moment, and I almost thought that I should swoon, so overcome was I. Transport the

blackest soul from among the damned of Hell, wash it white of its sins and seat it on one of the glorious thrones of Heaven, then ponder its emotions, and you may learn something of what I felt. At last, when I had mastered the exquisite torture of my joy—

"Madonna mia," I cried, "bethink you of what you say. You are the noble lady of Santafor, and I—"

"No more of this," she interrupted me. "You are Lazzaro Biancomonte, of patrician birth, no matter to what odd shifts a cruel fortune may have driven you. Will you take me?"

She had my face between her palms, and she forced my glance to meet her own saintly eyes.

"Will you take me, Lazzaro?" she repeated.

"Holy Flower of the Quince!" was all that I could murmur, whereat she gently smiled. "Santo Fior di Cotogno!"

And then a great sadness overwhelmed me. A tide that neaped the frail bark of happiness high and dry upon the shores of black despair.

"To-morrow Madonna, comes the Lord Ignacio Borgia," I groaned.

"I know, I know," said she. "But I have thought of that. Paula Sforza di Santafor is dead. Requiescat! We must dispose that they will let her rest in peace."

CHAPTER XV. AN ILL ENCOUNTER

Speechless I stared at her a moment, so taken was I with the immensity of the thing that she suggested. Fear, amazement, and joy jostled one another for the possession of my mind.

"Why do you look so, Lazzaro?" she exclaimed at last. "What is it daunts you?"

"How is the thing possible?" quoth I.

"What difficulty does it present?" she questioned back. "The Governor of Cesena has rendered very possible what I propose. We may look on him to-morrow as our best friend."

"But Ramiro knows," I reminded her.

"True, but do you think that he will dare to tell the world what he knows? He might be asked to say how he comes by his knowledge, and that should prove a difficult question to answer. Tell me, Lazzaro," she continued, "if he had succeeded in carrying me away, what think you would have been said in Pesaro to-morrow when the coffin was found empty?"

"They would assume that your body had been stolen by some wizard or some daring student of anatomy."

"Ah! And if we were quietly to quit the church and be clear of Pesaro before morning, would not the same be said?"

"Probably," answered I.

"Then why hesitate? Is it that you do not love me enough, Lazzaro?"

I smiled, and my eyes must have told her more than any protestation could. Then I sighed. "I hesitate, Madonna, because I would not have you do now what you might come, hereafter, bitterly to repent. I would not let you be misled by the impulse of a moment into an act whose consequences must endure as long as life itself."

"Is that the reasoning of a lover?" she asked me, very quietly. "Is this cold argument, this weighing of issues, consistent with the stormy passion you professed so lately?"

"It is," I answered stoutly. "It is because I love you more than I love myself that I would have you reflect ere you adventure your life upon such a broken raft as mine. You are Paola Sforza di Santafor, and I —"

"Enough of that," she interrupted me, rising. She swept towards me, and before I knew it her hands were on my shoulders, her face upturned, and her blue eyes on mine, depriving me of all will and all resistance.

"Lazzaro," said she, and there was an intensity almost fierce in her low tones, "moments are flying and you stand here reasoning with me, and bidding me weigh what is already weighed for all time. Will you wait until escape is rendered impossible, until we are discovered, before you will decide to save me, and to grasp with both hands this happiness of ours that is not twice offered in a lifetime?"

She was so close to me that I could almost feel the beating of her heart. Some subtle perfume reaching me and combining with the dominion that her eyes seemed to have established over me completed my subjugation. I was as warm wax in her hands. Forgotten were all considerations of rank and station. We were just a man and a woman whose fates were linked irrevocably by love. I

stooped suddenly, under the sway of an impulse, I could not resist, and kissed her upturned face, turning almost dizzy in the act. Then I broke from her clasp, and bracing myself for the task to which we stood committed by that kiss—

"Paola," said I, "we must devise the means to get away. I will bear you to my mother's home near Biancomonte, that you may dwell there at least until we are wed. But the thing that exercises my mind is how to make our unobserved escape from Pesaro."

"I have thought of it already," she informed me quietly.

"You have thought of it?" I cried. "And of what have you thought?"

For answer she stepped back a pace, and drew the cowl of the monk's habit over her head until her features were lost in the shadows of it. She stood before me now, a diminutive Dominican brother. Her meaning was clear to me at once. With a cry of gladness I turned to the drawer whence I had taken the habit in which she was arrayed, and selecting another one I hastily donned it above the garments that I wore.

No sooner was it done than I caught her by the arm.

"Come, Madonna," I bade her in an urgent voice. At the first step she stumbled. The habit was so long that it cumbered her feet. But that was a difficulty soon conquered. With my dagger I cut a piece from the skirt of it, enough to leave her freedom of movement; and, that accomplished, we set out.

We crossed the church swiftly and silently, and a moment I left her in the porch whilst I surveyed the street. All was quiet. Pesaro still slept, and it must have wanted some two hours or more to the dawn.

A fine rain was falling as we sallied out, and there was a sting in the December wind which made us draw our cowls the tighter about our

face. Abandoning the main street, I led her down some narrow alleys, deserted like all the rest of the city, and not so much as a stray cat abroad in that foul weather. It was very dark, and a hundred times we stumbled, whilst in some places I almost carried her bodily to avoid the filth of the quarter we were traversing. At length we gained the space in front of the gates that open on to the northern road, known as Porta Venezia, and I would have blundered on and roused the guard to let us out, using the Borgia ring once more—that talisman whose power had grown during these years, so that it would now open me almost any door in Italy. But Paola stayed me. Wisely she counselled that we should do nothing that might draw too much attention upon ourselves, and she urged me to wait until the dawn, when the guard would be astir and the gates opened.

So we fled to the shelter of a porch, and there we waited, huddling ourselves out of the reach of the icy rain. We talked little during the time we spent there. For my own part I had overmuch food for thought, and a very natural anxiety racked me. Soon the monks would be descending to the church, and they would discover the havoc there, and spread the alarm.

Who could say but that they might even discover the abstraction of the two habits from the sacristy, and the hue and cry for two men in the sackcloth of Dominicans would be afoot—for they would infer that two men so disguised had made off with the body of Madonna Paola. The thought stirred me like a goad. I stood up. The night was growing thinner, and, suddenly, even as I rose, a light gleamed from one of the Windows of the guard-house.

"God be thanked for that fellow's early rising," I cried out. "Come, Madonna, let us be moving."

And I added my newly-conceived reasons for quitting the place without further delay.

Cursing us for being so early abroad—a curse to which I responded with a sonorous "Pax Domini sit tecum" the still somnolent sentinel opened the post and let us pass. I was glad in the end that we had waited and thus avoided the necessity of showing my ring, for should inquiries be made concerning two monks, that ring of mine might have betrayed the identity of one of them. I gave thanks to Heaven that I knew the country well. A quarter of a league or so from Pesaro we quitted the high-road and took to the by-paths with which I was well acquainted.

Day came, grey and forbidding at first, but presently the rain ceased and the sun flashed out a thousand diamonds from the drenched hedge-rows.

We plodded on; and at length, towards noon, when we had gained the neighbourhood of the village of Cattolica, we halted at the hut of a peasant on a small campagna. I had divested myself of my monk's habit, and cut away the cowl from Madonna's. She had thereafter fashioned it by means that were mysterious to my dull man's mind into a more feminine-looking garb.

Thus we now presented ourselves to the old man who was the sole tenant of that lonely and squalid house. A ducat opened his door as wide as it would go, and gave us free access to every cranny of his dwelling. Food he procured us—rough black bread, some pieces of roasted goat, and some goat's milk—and on this we regaled ourselves as though it had been a ducal banquet, for hunger had set us in the mood to account anything delicious. And when we had eaten we fell to talking, the old man having left us to go about such peasant duties as claimed his attention, and our talk concerned ourselves, our future first, and later on our past. I remember that Madonna returned to the matter of the deception that I had practised, seeking to learn what reasons had impelled me, and I answered her in all truth.

"Madonna mia, I think it must have been to win your love. When

Giovanni Sforza bade me, with many a threat, to write those verses, I undertook the task with ready gladness, for in its performance I was to pour out the tale of the passion that was consuming my poor heart. It occurred to me that if those verses were worthy, you might come to love their author for their beauty, and so I strove to render them beautiful. It was the same spirit urged me to don the Lord Giovanni's armour and fight in that splendid if futile skirmish. Even as you had come to love the author for his verses, so might you come to love the warrior for his valour. That you should account the one and the other the work of Giovanni Sforza was to me a little thing, since I was well content to think that you but loved him because you accounted his the things that I had performed. Therefore was I the one you truly loved, although you did not know it. Could you but conceive what consolation that reflection was to me, you would deal lightly with me for my deceit."

"I can conceive it," she answered, very gently, her eyes downcast: "and now that I know the motives that impelled you, I almost love you for that deceit itself, for it seems to me that it holds some quality well worthy of devotion."

Such was our talk, all of a nature to help us to a better understanding of each other, and all seeming to endear us more and more by showing us how close the past had already drawn us.

Later I rose and announced my intention of adventuring into Cattolica, there to procure her garments more seemly than those she wore, in which she might journey on and come into the presence of my mother. Also, there was in Cattolica a man I knew, of whom I hoped for the loan of enough money to enable me to purchase mules, to the end that we might journey in more dignity and comfort. It was then about the twentieth hour, and I hoped to return by nightfall. I took my leave of Madonna, enjoining her to rest and to seek sleep whilst I was absent; and with that I set out.

Catolica was no more than a half-league distant, and I looked to reach it in a half-hour or so. I fell into thought as I trudged along, and I was building plans for the sunlit future that was to be ours. I was a man transformed that day, and I could have sung in spite of the chill December wind that buffeted me, so full of joy and gladness was my heart.

At Biancomonte I was likely to spend my days as little better than a peasant, but surely a peasant's estate with such a companion as was to be mine was preferable to an emperor's throne without her.

The bleak landscape seemed to me invested with a beauty that at no other time I should have noticed. God was good. I swore a thousand times, the world was a good world—so good that Heaven could scarce be better.

I had come, perhaps, the better half of the distance I had to travel, and I was giving full rein to my joyous fancy, when suddenly I espied ahead a company of horsemen. They were approaching me at a brisk pace, but I took no thought of them, accounting myself secure from any molestation. If it so happened that it was a search party from Pesaro, seeking two men disguised as monks who had ravished the coffin of Madonna Paola di Santafior, what should they want of Lazzaro Biancomonte? And so, in my confidence, I advanced even as they trotted quickly towards me.

Not until they were within a matter of a hundred paces did I raise my eyes to take their measure; and then I halted on my step, smitten of a sudden by an unreasoning and unreasonable fear, to see at their head the bulky form of the Governor of Cesena. He saw me, too, and, what was worse, he recognised me on the instant, for he clapped spurs to his horse and came at me as if he would ride me down. Within three paces of me he drew up his steed. Whether the memory of the other two occasions on which I had thwarted him arose now in his mind and made him wonder had not some fatality brought me

across his path again to send awry his pretty schemes concerning Madonna Paula, I cannot say for certain; yet some suspicion of it occurred to me and filled me with apprehension.

"Body of Bacchus!" he roared. "Is it truly you, Boccadoro?"

"They call me Biancomonte now, Magnificent," I answered him. But my tone was respectful, for it could profit me nothing to incense him.

"A fig for what they call you," he snapped contemptuously. "Whence are you?"

"From Pesaro," I answered truthfully.

"From Pesaro? But you are travelling towards it."

"True. I was making for Cattolica, but I missed my way in seeking to shorten it. I am now returning by the high-road."

The explanation satisfied him on that point, and being satisfied, he asked me when I had left Pesaro. A moment I hesitated.

"Late last night," said I at last. He looked, at me, my foolish hesitation having perhaps unslipped a suspicion that was straining at its leash.

"In that case," said he, "you can scarcely have heard the strange story that is being told there?"

I looked at him, as if puzzled, for a second. "If you mean the story of Madonna Paoia's end, I heard it yesterday."

"Why, what story was that?" quoth he in some surprise, his beetling brows coming together in one broad line of fur.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Men said that she had been poisoned."

"Oh, that," he cried indifferently. "But men say to-day that her body

was stolen from the Church of San Domenico where it lay. An odd happening, is it not?" And his eyes covered me in a fierce scrutiny that again suggested to me those suspicions of his that I might be the man who had anticipated him. I was soon to learn that he had more grounds than at first I thought for those same suspicions.

"Odd, indeed," I answered calmly, for all that I felt my pulses quickening with apprehension. "But is it true?" I added.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Rumour's habit is to lie," he answered. "Yet for such a lie as that, so monstrous an imagination would be needed that, rather, am I inclined to account it truth. There are no more poets in Pesaro since you left. But at what hour was it that you quitted the city?"

To hesitate again were to betray myself; it were to suggest that I was seeking an answer that should sort well with the rest of my story. Besides, what could the hour signify?

"It would be about the first hour of night," I said. He looked at me with increasing strangeness.

"You must indeed have wandered from your road to have got no farther than this in all that time. Perhaps you were hampered by some heavy burden?" He leered evilly, and I turned cold.

"I was burdened with nothing heavier than this body of mine and a rather uneasy conscience."

"Where, then, have you tarried?"

At this I thought it time to rebel. Were I too meekly to submit to this examination, my very meekness might afford him fresh grounds for doubts.

"Once have I told you," I answered wearily, "that I lost my way. And, however much it may flatter me to have your Excellency evincing such

an interest in my concerns, I am at a loss to find a reason for it."

He leered prodigiously once more, and his eyebrows shot up to the level of his cap.

"I will tell you, brute beast," he answered me. "I question you because I suspect that you are hiding something from me."

"What should I hide from your Excellency?"

He dared not enlighten me on that point, for should his suspicions prove unfounded he would have uselessly betrayed himself.

"If you are honest, why do you lie?"

"I?" I ejaculated. "In what have I lied?"

"In that you have told me that you left Pesaro at the first hour of night. At the third hour you were still in the Church of San Domenico, whither you followed Madonna Paola's bier."

It was my turn to knit my brows. "Was I indeed?" quoth I. "Why, yes, it may well be. But what of that? Is the hour in which I quitted Pesaro a matter of such moment as to be worth lying over? If I said that I left about the first hour, it is because I was under the impression that it was so. But I was so distraught by grief at Madonna's death that I may have been careless in my account of time."

"More lies," he blazed with sudden passion. "It may have been the third hour, you say. Fool, the gates of Pesaro close at the second hour of night. Where are your wits?"

Outwardly calm, but inwardly in a panic—more for Madonna's sake than for my own—I promptly held out the hand on which I wore the Borgia ring. In a flash of inspiration did that counter suggest itself to me.

"There is a key that will open any gate in Romagna at any hour."

He looked at the ring, and of what passed in his mind I can but offer a surmise. He may have remembered that once before I had fooled him with the help of that gold circlet; or he may have thought that I was secretly in the service of the Borgias, and that, acting in their interests, I had carried off Madonna Paola. Be that as it may, the sight of the ring threw him into a fury. He turned on his horse.

"Lucagnolo!" he called, and a man of officer's rank detached himself from the score of men-at-arms and rode forward. "Let six men escort me home to Cesena. Take you the remainder and beat up the country for three leagues about this spot. Do not leave a house outside Cattolica unsearched. You know what we are seeking?"

The man inclined his head.

"If it is within the circle you have appointed, we will find it," he answered confidently.

"Set about it," was the surly command, and Ramiro turned again to me. "You have gone a little pale, good Messer Boccadoro," he sneered. "We shall soon learn whether you have sought to fool me. Woe betide you, should it be so. We bear a name for swift justice at Cesena."

"So be it then," I answered as calmly as I might. "Meanwhile, perhaps you will now suffer me to go my ways."

"The readier since your way must lie with ours."

"Not so, Magnificent, I am for Cattolica."

"Not so, animal," he mimicked me with elephantine grace, "you are for Cesena, and you had best go with a good will. Our manner of constraining men is reputed rude." He turned again. "Ercole, take you this man behind you. Assist him, Stefano."

And so it was done, and a few minutes later I was riding, strapped to the steel-clad Ercole, away from Paola at every stride. Thus at every stride the anguish that possessed me increased, as the fear that they must find her rose ever higher.

CHAPTER XVI. IN THE CITADEL OF CESENA

I will not harass you at any further length with the feelings that were mine as we sped northward towards Cesena. If you are a person of some imagination and not destitute of human sympathy you will be able to surmise them; if you are not—why then, my tale is not for you, and it is more than probable that you will have wearied of it and flung it aside long before you reach this page.

We rode so hard that by sunset Cesena was in sight, and ere night had fallen we were within the walls of the citadel. It was when we had dismounted and I stood in the courtyard between Ercole and another of the soldiers that Ramiro again addressed me.

"Animal," said he, "they tell me that I bear a name for harsh measures and rough ways. You shall be a witness hereafter of how deeply I am maligned. For instead of putting you to the question and loosening your lying tongue with the rack, I am content to keep you a prisoner until my men return with that which I suspect you to be hiding from me. But if I then discover that you have sought to fool me, you shall flutter from Ramiro del' Orca's flagstaff."

He pointed up to the tower of the Castle, from which a beam protruded, laden at that moment with a ghastly burden just discernible in the thickening gloom. He named it well when he called it his "flagstaff," and the miserable banner of carrion that hung from it was a fitting pennon for the ruthless Governor of Cesena. Worthy was he to have worn the silver hauberk of Werner von Urslingen with its motto, "The enemy of God, of pity and of mercy."

Forbidding, black-browed men caught me with rough hands and dragged me off to a dank, unlighted prison, as empty of furniture as it was full of noisome smells. And there they left me to my ugly thoughts and my deeply despondent mood what time the Governor of Cesena supped with his officers in the hall of the Castle.

Ramiro drank deep that night as was his habit, and being overladen with wine it entered his mind that in one of his dungeons lay Lazzaro Biancomonte, who, at one time, had been known as Boccadoro, the merriest Fool in Italy. In his drunkenness he grew merry, and when Ramiro del' Orca grew merry men crossed themselves and betook them to their prayers. He would fain be amused, and to serve that end he summoned one of his sbirri and bade the fellow drag Boccadoro from his dungeon and fetch him into his presence.

When they came for me I turned cold with fear that Madonna was already taken, and, by contrast with such a fear as that, the reflection that he might carry out his threat to hang me from that black beam of his, faded into insignificant proportions.

They ushered me into a great hall, not ill-furnished, the floor strewn plentifully with rushes, and warmed by an enormous fire of blazing oak. By the door stood two pikemen in armour, like a pair of statues: in the centre of the floor was a heavy oaken board, laden now with flagons and beakers, at which sat Ramiro with a pair of gossips so villainous to look at, that the sight of them reminded me of the adage "God makes a man and then accompanies him."

The Governor made a hideous noise at sight of me, which I was constrained to accept as an expression of horrid glee.

"Boccadoro," said he, "do you recall that when last I had the honour of being entertained by your pert tongue, I promised you that did you ever cross my path again I would raise you to the dignity of Fool of my

Court of Cesena?"

Into what magniloquence does vanity betray us! His Court of Cesena! As well might you describe a pig-sty as a bower of roses.

But his words, despite the unsavoury thing of which they seemed to hold a promise, fell sweetly on my ear, inasmuch as for the time they relieved my fears touching Madonna. It was not to advise me of her capture that he had had me haled into his odious presence. I gathered courage.

"Have you not fools enough already at Cesena?" I asked him.

A moment he looked as if he were inclining to anger. Then he burst into a coarse laugh, and turned to one of his gossips.

"Did I not tell you, Lampugnani, that his wit was quick and penetrating? Hear him, rogue. Already has he discerned your quality." He laughed consumedly at his own jest, and turning to me he pointed to a crimson bundle on a chair beside me. "Take those garments," he roughly bade me. "Go dress yourself in them, then come you back and entertain us."

Without answering him, and already anticipating the nature of the clothes he bade me don, I lifted one of the garments from the heap. It was a foliated jester's cap, with a bell hanging from every point, which gave out a tinkling sound as I picked it up. I let it fall again as though it had scorched me, the memory of what stood between Madonna Paola and me rising like a warning spectre in my mind. I would not again defile myself by the garb of folly; not again would I incur the shame of playing the Fool for the amusement of others.

"May it please your Excellency to excuse me," I answered in a firm tone. "I have made a vow never again to put on motley."

He eyed me sardonically for a moment, as if enjoying in

anticipation the pleasure of compelling me against my will. He sat back in his chair and threw one heavily-booted leg across the other.

"In the Citadel of Cesena," said he, "we fear neither God nor Devil, and vows are as water to us—things we cannot stomach. It does not please me to excuse you."

I may have paled a little before the sinister smile with which he accompanied his words, but I stood my ground boldly.

"It is not," said I, "a question of what a vow may be to you and yours, but of what a vow is to me. It is a thing I cannot break."

"Sangue di Cristo!" he snarled, "we will break it for you, then—that or your bones. Resolve yourself, beast, the motley or the rack—or yet, if you prefer it, there is the cord yonder." And he pointed to the far end of the chamber where some ropes were hanging from a pulley, the implements of the ghastly torture of the cord. Of such a nature was this monster that he made a torture-chamber of his dining-hall.

"Let the rogue make acquaintance with it," laughed Lampugnani, showing a mouthful of yellow teeth behind the black beard that bushed his lips. "I'll swear his dancing would afford us more amusement than his quips. Swing him up, Illustrious."

But the Illustrious seemed to ponder the matter.

"You shall have five minutes in which to decide," he informed me presently. "They say that I am cruel. Behold how patient is my clemency. Five minutes shall you have where many another would hang you out of hand for bearding him as you have done me."

"You may begin at once," said I. "neither five minutes nor five years will alter my determination."

His brow grew black with anger. "We shall see," was all he said.

There was a silence now in which we waited, a storm of thoughts battling in my mind. Presently Ramiro caught up one of the flagons and applied it to his cup. It proved empty, and in a gust of passion he hurled it against the wall where it burst into a thousand pieces. Clearly he was very angry, and it taxed my wits to account for the little measure of patience he was showing me.

"Beppo!" he called. A page lounging by the buffet sprang to attention. He was a slender, rather delicate lad, fair of hair and blue of eyes, not more than twelve years of age. An elderly man who stood beside him—one Mariani, the seneschal of Cesena—stepped forward also, solicitude in his glance.

"Bring me wine," bawled the ogre. "Must I tell you what I need? If you do not put those eyes of yours to better service, I'll have them plucked from your empty head. Bestir, animal."

The old man caught up a beaker from the buffet and handed it to the boy.

"Here, my son," said he. "Hasten to his Excellency."

The lad took the beaker from his father's hands, and trembling in his fear of Ramiro's anger, he sprang forward to serve him. In his haste the poor youth slipped in some grease that had clung to the rushes. In seeking to recover himself he tripped over the feet of one of the halberdiers that guarded me, and measured his length upon the floor at Ramiro's feet, flooding the Governor's legs with the wine he carried.

How shall I tell you of the horror that was the sequel?

For just one instant Ramiro looked down at the sprawling lad, his eyes glowing like a madman's. Then suddenly he rose, stooped, and set one hand to the boy's belt, the other to the collar of his jerkin. Feeling himself lifted, and knowing whose were the dread hands that

held him, poor Beppo uttered a single scream of terror. Then Ramiro swung him round with an ease that displayed the man's prodigious strength. For just a second he seemed to hesitate how to dispose of the human bundle that he held. Then, as if suddenly taking his resolve, that devil hurled the lad across the little intervening space, straight into the heart of the blazing fire.

Beppo hurtled against the logs with a sickening crash, and a thousand sparks leapt up and vanished in the cavern of the chimney. Ramiro wheeled sharply about, and snatching the pike from the hands of one of my guards, he pinned down the poor body of the boy to make sure of his victim's entire destruction.

Away by the buffet old Mariani looked on with a face as grey as ashes, his eyes protruding in horror at the thing they witnessed. One glimpse I had of him, and I scarce know which was the sight that sickened me more, the father's anguish or the twitching limbs of the burning child. Two legs and two arms protruded from the blaze and writhed and wriggled horribly what time the flames peeled the garments from them and licked the flesh from the bones. At length they fell still and sank down into the white heat of the logs, a hideous, pungent odour spreading through the chamber. From the old man by the buffet, who had stood spellbound during this ghastly scene, there broke at last an anguished cry.

"Mercy, my lord, mercy!"

The Governor of Cesena straightened himself from his task, pulled the pike from the flames, and restored it to the man-at-arms. Then turning to Mariani:

"Fetch me wine," he bade him curtly, as he seated himself once more upon the chair from which he had risen to perform that deed of ghastly ruthlessness.

A torch spluttered suddenly in its sconce, and the fierce hissing of the fire—like some monster licking its chops over a bloody meal—were the only sounds that disturbed the stillness that ensued.

Every man there, including Ramiro's table companions, was white to the lips; for accustomed though they might be to horrors in that brigand's nest, this was a horror that surpassed anything they had ever witnessed. The silence irked Messer Ramiro. He looked round from under his shaggy brows, and he spluttered out an oath.

"Will you bring me this wine, pig?" he growled at the almost senseless Mariani, and in his air and voice there was a promise of such terrific things that the old man put aside his horror to make room for his fears, and mechanically seizing another flagon he hurried forward to minister to the wants of his fearful lord.

Ramiro eyed him with cynical amusement.

"Your hand shakes, Mariani," he derided him. "Are you cold? Go warm yourself," he added, with a brutal laugh and a jerk of his thumb towards the fire.

My eyes have looked upon some gruesome sights, and I have heard such tales of ruthless cruelty as you would deem almost passing possibility. I have read of the awful doings of the Lord Bernabo Visconti at Milan in the olden time, but I believe that compared with this monster of Cesena that same Bernabo was no worse than a sucking dove. How it befell that men permitted him to live, how it was that none bethought him to put poison in his wine or a knife in his back, is something that I shall never wholly understand. Could it be that these robbers of whom he made a hedge for his protection were no better than himself, or was it that the man's terrific brutality was on such a scale that it filled them with an almost supernatural awe of him? To men better versed than am I in the mysterious ways of human nature do I leave the answering of these

questions.

The ogre turned his bloodshot eyes upon me, as with his hand he caressed his tawny beard. He seemed to have cooled a little now, and to have regained some mastery of his drunken self. Old Mariani tottered back to his buffet, and stood leaning against it, his eyes wandering, with the look of a man demented, to the fire that had devoured his child. There, indeed, if he escaped the madness with which the poignancy of his grief was threatening him, was a tool that might turn its edge against this inhuman monster, this devil, this bloody carnifex of a Governor.

"Chance," said Ramiro, "has designed that you should see something of how we deal with clumsy knaves at Cesena, Boccadoro. To disobedient ones I can assure you that we are not half so merciful. There is no such short shrift for them. You have had more than the time I promised you for reflection. The garments await you yonder. Let us know—"

The door opened suddenly, and a servant entered.

"A courier from the Lord Vitellozzo Vitelli, Tyrant of Città di Castello," he announced, unwittingly breaking in upon Ramiro's words, "with urgent messages for the high and Mighty Governor of Cesena."

On the instant Ramiro rose, the expression of his face changing from cynical amusement to sober concern, the task upon which he was engaged forgotten.

"Admit him instantly," he commanded. And whilst he waited he paced the chamber in long strides, his chin thrust slightly forward, suggestive of deep thought. And during that pause, I, too, was thinking. Not indeed of him, nor vainly speculating upon such matters as might be involved in the message, the announcement of which

seemed so deeply to engage his mind, but chiefly of my own and Madonna Paola's concerns.

It was not fear of what I had seen that now sent my thoughts into a new channel and inspired me with the wisdom of obeying Ramiro del Orca's behest that I should don the hateful motley and play the Fool for his diversion. It was not that I feared death; it was that I feared what the consequences of my death might be to Paola di Santafor.

However desperate a position may seem, unlooked-for loopholes often present themselves, and so long as we live and have sound limbs to aid us to seize such opportunities as may offer, it is a weak thing utterly to abandon hope.

Was it, then, not better to submit to the shame of the motley once again for a little time, when by so doing I might perhaps live to work my own salvation, and Madonna's should she suffer capture, rather than stubbornly to invite him to put me to death out of a feeling of false pride?

The very resolve seemed to lend me strength and to revive the hope that lay moribund in my breast. And then, scarce was it taken, when the door again opened, and a man, who was splashed from head to foot with mud, in earnest of how hard he had ridden, was ushered in.

He advanced to Meser Ramiro, bowed and presented a package. Ramiro broke the seal, and standing with his back to the fire, immediately in the light shed by one of the wax torches, he read the letter. Then his eyes wandered to the man who had brought it, and to me it seemed that they dwelt particularly upon the hat the courier was holding in his hand.

"Take this good fellow to the kitchen," he bade the servant that had introduced him, "let him be fed and rested." Then, turning to the man,

himself, "I shall require you to set out at daybreak with my answer," he said; and so, with a wave of the hand, he dismissed him. As the messenger departed Ramiro returned to the table, filled himself a cup of wine and drank.

"What says the Lord Vitelli?" Lampugnani ventured to ask him.

"If he knew you," answered Ramiro, with a scowl, "he would counsel me to strangle some of the over-inquisitive rascals that surround me."

"Over-inquisitive?" echoed Lampugnani boldly. "Body of God! It were enough to wake the curiosity of an ecstatic hermit to have a mud-splashed courier from Citta di Castello at Cesena three times within one little week."

Ramiro looked at him, and by his glance it was plain to see that the words had jarred his temper. Whatever it was that Vitelli wrote to Ramiro, this gentleman was not minded to divulge it.

"If you have supped, Lampugnani," said the Governor slowly, his eyes upon his offending officer, "perhaps you will find some duty to perform ere you seek your bed."

Lampugnani turned crimson, and for a moment seemed to hesitate. Then he rose. He was a man of choleric aspect, and that he served under Ramiro del' Orca was as much a danger to the Governor as to himself. He had not the air of one whom it was wise to threaten in however veiled a manner.

"Shall I fetch you this fellow's hat ere I sleep?" he inquired, with contemptuous insolence.

Not a word did Ramiro answer him, but his glance fastened upon Lampugnani with an expression before which that impudent ruffian lowered his own bold eyes. Thus for a moment; then with an awkward laugh to cover the intimidation that he felt, Lampugnani walked heavily

from the room and banged the door after him.

There was about it all a strangeness that set my wits to work in a mighty busy fashion. That work suffered interruption by the harsh voice of Ramiro.

"Are you resolved, Boccadoro?" he growled at me. "Have you decided for the motley or the cord?"

Instantly I fell into the part I was to play.

"Did I choose the latter," said I, with an assumption of sudden airiness and such a grimace as was part and parcel of my old-time trade, "then were I truly worthy of the former, for I should have proved myself, indeed, a fool. Yet if I choose the former, I pray that you'll not follow the same course of reasoning, and hold me worthy of the latter."

When he had understood its subtleties; for his wits were of a quality that would have disgraced a calf, he roared at the conceit, and seemingly thrown into a better humour by the promise of more such entertainment, he bade my guards release me, and urged me to assume the motley without more delay.

What time I was obeying him my mind was returning to that matter of Lampugnani's words, and it is not difficult to understand how I should arrive at the only possible conclusion they suggested. The hats of the other messengers from Vitelli, that the officer had mentioned, had been brought to Ramiro. The reason for this that at once arose in my mind was that within the messenger's hat there was a second and more secret communication for the Governor.

This secrecy and Ramiro's display of anger at seeing a hint of it betrayed by Lampugnani struck me, not unnaturally, as suspicious. What were these hidden communications that passed between Vitellozzo Vitelli and the Governor of Cesena? It was a matter of

which I could not pretend to offer a solution, but, nevertheless, it was one, I thought, that promised to repay investigation.

Ramiro grew impatient, and my reflections suffered interruption by his rough command that I should hasten. One of the men-at-arms helped me to truss my points, and when that was done I stepped forward—Boccadoro the Fool once more.

CHAPTER XVII. THE SENESCHAL

For an hour or so that night I played the Fool for Messer Ramiro's entertainment in a manner which did high justice to the fame that at Pesaro I had earned for the name of Boccadoro.

Beginning with quip and jest and paradox, aimed now at him, now at the officer who had remained to keep him company in his cups, now at the servants who ministered to him, now at the guards standing at attention, I passed on later to play the part of narrator, and I delighted his foul and prurient mind with the story of Andreuccio da Perugia and another of the more licentious tales of Messer Giovanni Boccacci. I crimson now with shame at the manner in which I set myself to pander to his mood that with my wit I might defend my life and limbs, and preserve them for the service of my Holy Flower of the Quince in the hour of her need.

One man alone of all those present did I spare my banter. This was the old seneschal, Miriani. He stood at his post by the buffet, and ever and anon he would come forward to replenish Messer Ramiro's cup in obedience to the monsters imperious orders.

What fortitude was it, I wondered, that kept the old man outwardly so calm? His face was as the face of one who is dead, its features set and rigid, its colour ashen. But his step was tolerably firm, and his hand seemed to have lost the trembling that had assailed it under the first shock of the horror he had witnessed.

As I watched him furtively I thought that were I Ramiro I should beware of him. That frozen calm argued to me some terrible labour of

the mind beneath that livid mask. But the Governor of Cesena appeared insensible, or else he was contemptuous of danger from that quarter. It may even have delighted his outrageous nature to behold a man whose son he had done to death with such brutality continue obedient and submissive to his will, for it may have flattered his vanity by the concession that bearing seemed to make to his grim power.

An hour went by, my second tale was done, and I was now entrancing Messer Ramiro with some impromptu verses upon the divorce of Giovanni Sforza, a theme set me by himself, when I was interrupted by the arrival of a soldier, who entered unannounced.

I paled and turned cold at the cry with which Ramiro rose to greet him, and the words he dropped, which told me that here was one of the riders of the party that, under Lucagnolo, had been ordered to search the country about Cattolica. Had they found Madonna?

"Messer Lucagnolo," the fellow announced, "has sent me to report to you the failure of his search to the west and north of Cattolica. He has beaten the country thoroughly for three leagues of the town on those two sides, as you desired him, but unfortunately without result. He is now spreading his search to the south, and not a house is being left unvisited. By morning he hopes to report again to your Excellency."

A wild wave of joy swept through my soul. They had ransacked the country west and north of Cattolica without result. Why then, assuredly, they had missed the peasant's hut that sheltered her, and where she waited yet for my return. Their search to the south I knew would prove equally futile. I could have fallen on my knees in a prayer of thanksgiving had my surroundings been other than they were.

Ramiro's eye wandered round to me and settled on me in a lowering glance. By his face it was plain that the message

disappointed him.

"I wonder," said he, "whether we could make you talk?" And from me his eyes roamed on to the instrument of torture at the end of that long chamber. I grew sick with fear, for if he were to do this thing, and maim me by it, how should I avail myself or her hereafter?

"Excellency," I cried, "since you met me you have hinted at something that I am hiding from you, at something touching which I could give you information did I choose. What it may be passes all thought of mine. But this I do assure you: no torture could make me tell you what I do not know, nor is any torture needed to extract from me such information as I may be possessed of. I do but beg that you wilt frankly question me upon this matter, whatever it may be, and your Excellency shall be answered to the best of my knowledge."

He looked at me as if taken aback a little by my assurance and the seemingly transparent candour of my speech, and in his face I saw that he believed me. A moment he hesitated yet; then—

"I am seeking knowledge concerning Madonna Paolo di Santafor," he said presently, resuming, as he spoke, his seat at table. "As I told you, the body, which was believed to be dead, was stolen in the night from San Domenico. Know you aught of this?"

It may be an ignoble thing to lie, but with what other weapon was I to fight this brigand? Surely if an exception can be made to the rule, and a lie become a meritorious thing, such an occasion as this would surely justify such an exception.

"I know nothing," I answered boldly, unhesitatingly, and even with a ring of truth and sincerity that was calculated to convince, "nor can I even believe this rumour. It is a wild story. That the body has been stolen may be true enough. Such things occur; though he was a bold man who laid hands upon the body of a person of such importance.

But that she lives—Gesu! that is an old wife's tale. I had, myself, the word of the Lord Filippo's physician that she was dead."

"Nevertheless, this old wife's tale, as you dub it, is one of which I have had confirmation. Lend me your wits, Boccadoro, and you shall not regret it. Exercise them now, and conjecture me who could have abstracted the body from the church. In seeking this information I am acting in the interests of the noble House of Borgia which I serve and to which she was to have been allied, as you well know."

I could have laughed to see how the apparent sincerity of my denial had convinced him to such an extent that he even sought my help to discover the true thief, and to account for his interest in the matter he lied to me of his service to the House of Borgia.

"I will gladly lend you these wits," said I, "to disprove to you the rumour of which you say that you have confirmation. Let us accept the statement that the body has been stolen. That much, no doubt, is true, for even rumours require some slight foundation. But who in all this world could say that when the body was taken it was not dead? Clearly but one man—he that administered the poison. And, I ask your Excellency, would he be likely to tell the world what he had done?"

He might have answered me: "I am that man." But he did not. Instead, he hung his head, as if pondering the words of wisdom I had uttered—words meant to convince him of my own innocence in the matter; and this they achieved, at least in part. He flashed me a look of sudden suspicion, it is true; but it faded almost as soon as it shone from his brooding eye.

"Maybe I am a fool that I do not string you up and test the truth of what you say," he grumbled. "But I incline to believe you, and you are a merry rogue. You shall remain and have peace and comfort so long as you amuse me. But tremble if I discover that you have sought to

deceive me. You shall have the cord first and other things after, and your death shall be the thing you'll pray for long before it takes you from my vengeance. If you know aught, speak now and you shall find me merciful. Your life and liberty shall be the recompense of your honesty towards me."

"I repeat, Excellency," I answered, without changing colour, "that all that I know have I already told you."

He was convinced, I think, for the time being.

"Get you gone, then," he bade me. "I have other business to deal with ere I sleep. Mariani, see that Boccadoro is well lodged."

The old man bowed, and lifting a torch from its socket, he silently motioned me to go with him. I made Messer Ramiro a profound obeisance, and withdrew in the wake of the seneschal.

He led me up a flight of stairs that rose from the hall and along a gallery that ran half round it, then plunging down a corridor he halted presently, and, opening a door, ushered me into a tolerably furnished room.

A servant followed hanging the clothes that I had worn when I arrived.

The old man lingered a moment after the servant had withdrawn, and his hollow eyes rested on me for a second. I thought that he was on the point of saying something, and I waited returning his glance with one that quailed before the anguish of his own. I feared to speak, to offer an expression of the sympathy that filled my heart; for in that strange place I could not tell how far a man was to be trusted—even a man so wronged as this one. On his own part it may be that a like doubt beset him concerning me, for in the end he departed as he had come, no word having passed his ashen lips.

Left alone, I surveyed my surroundings by the light of the taper he had left in the iron sconce on the wall. The single window overlooked the courtyard, so that even had I been disposed and able to cut through the iron that barred it, I should but succeed in falling into the hands of the guards who abounded in that nest of infamy.

So that, for the night at least, the notion of flight must be abandoned. What the morrow would bring forth we must wait and see. Perhaps some way of escape would offer itself. Then my thoughts returned to Paola, and I was tortured by surmises as to her fate, and chiefly as to how she could have eluded the search that must have been made for her in the hut where I had left her. Had the peasant befriended her, I wondered; and what did she think of my protracted absence? I sat on the edge of the bed and gave rein to my conjectures. The noises in the castle had all ceased, and still I sat on, unconscious of time, my taper burning low.

It may have been midnight when I was startled by the sound of a stealthy step in the corridor near my door. A heavy footfall I should have left unheeded, but this soft tread aroused me on the instant, and I sat listening.

It halted at my door, and was succeeded by a soft, scratching sound. Noiselessly I rose, and with ready hands I waited, prepared, in the instinct of self-preservation, to fall upon the intruder, however futile the act might be. But the door did not open as I expected. Instead, the scratching sound continued, growing slightly louder. Then it occurred to me, at last, that whoever came might be a friend craving admittance, and proceeding stealthily that others in the castle might not overhear him.

Swiftly I crossed to the door, and opened. On the threshold a dark figure straightened itself from a stooping posture, and the light of the taper behind me fell on a face of a pallor that seemed to glisten in its intensity. It was the face of Mariani, the seneschal of the Castle of

Cessna.

One glance we exchanged, and intuitively I seemed to apprehend the motive of this midnight visit. He came either to bring me aid or to seek mine, with vengeance for his guerdon. I stood aside, and silently he entered my room and closed the door.

"Quench your taper," he bade me in a husky whisper.

Without hesitation I obeyed him, a strange excitement thrilling me. For a second we stood in the dark, then another light gleamed as he plucked away the cloak that masked a lanthorn which he had brought with him. He set the lanthorn on the floor, and held the cloak in his hand, ready at a moment's notice to conceal the light in its folds. Then pulling me down beside him on the bed, where he had perched himself:

"My friend," said he, "it may be that I bring you assistance."

"Speak, then," I bade him. "You shall not find me slow to act if there is the need or the way."

"So I had surmised," he said. "Are you not that same Boccadoro, Fool of the Court of Pesaro, who donned the Lord Giovanni's armour and rode out to do battle in his stead?"

I answered him that I was that man.

"I have heard the tale," said he. "Indeed, all Italy has heard it, and knows you for a man of steel, as strong and audacious as you are cunning and resourceful. I know against what desperate odds you fought that day, and how you overcame this terrible Ramiro. This it is that leads me to hope that in the service of your own ends you may become the instrument of my vengeance."

"Unfold your project, man," I muttered, fiercely almost, in my burning eagerness. "Let me hear what you would have me do."

He did not answer me until a sob had shaken his old frame.

"That boy," he muttered brokenly, "that golden-haired angel sent me for the consolation of my decaying years, that lad whom Ramiro destroyed so foully and wantonly, was my son. Futile though the attempt had proved, I had certainly set my hands at the tyrants neck, but that I founded hopes on you of a surer and more terrible revenge. That thought has manned me and upheld me when anguish was near to slaying me outright. To see the boy burn so under my very eyes! God of mercy and pity! That I should have lived so long!"

"Your child burned but a moment, suffered but an instant; for the deed, Ramiro will burn in Hell through countless generations, through interminable ages."

It was a paltry consolation, perhaps, but it was the best that then occurred to me.

"Meanwhile," I begged him, "do you tell me what you would have me do."

I urged him to it that he might, thereby, suffer his mind to rest a moment from pondering that ghastly thing that he had witnessed, that scene that would live before his eyes until they closed in their last sleep.

"You heard Lampugnani quip Ramiro with the fact that three messengers have ridden desperately within the week from Citta di Castello to Cesena, and you heard, perhaps, his obscure reference to the hat?"

"I heard both, and both I weighed," said I. The old man looked at me as if surprised.

"And what," he asked, "was the conclusion you arrived at?"

"Why, simply this: that whilst the messenger bore some letter from Vitelli to Ramiro that should serve to lull the suspicions of any who, wondering at so much traffic between these two, should be moved to take a peep into those missives, the true letter with which the courier rides is concealed within the lining of his hat—probably unknown even to himself."

He stared at me as though I had been a wizard.

"Messer Boccadoro—" he began.

"My name," I corrected him, "is Biancomonte—Lazzaro Biancomonte."

"Whatever be your name," he returned, "of the quality of your wits there can be no question. You have guessed for yourself the half of what I was come to tell you. Has your shrewdness borne you any further? Have you concluded aught concerning the nature of those letters?"

"I have concluded that it might repay some trouble to discover what is contained in letters that are sent with so much secrecy. I can conceive nothing that might lie between the Lord of Citta di Castello and this ruffian of Cesena, and yet—treason lurks often where least it is expected, and treason makes stranger bed-fellows than misfortune."

"Lampugnani was no fool, and yet a great fool," the old man murmured. He surmised what you have surmised. With each of the messengers Ramiro has dealt in the same manner. He has sent each to be fed and refreshed whilst waiting to return with the answer he was penning. For their refreshment he has ordered a very full, stout wine—not drugged, for that they might discover upon awaking; but a wine that of itself would do the work of setting them to sleep very soundly. Then, when all slept, and only he remained at table, like the

drunkard that he is, it has been his habit to descend himself to the kitchen and possess himself of the messenger's hat. With this he has returned to the hall, opened the lining and withdrawn a letter.

"Then, as I suppose, he has penned his answer, thrust it into the lining, where the other one had been, and secured it, as it was before, with his own hands. He has returned the hat to the place from whence he took it, and when the courier awakens in the morning there is another letter put into his hand, and he is bidden to bear it to Vitelli."

He paused a moment; then continued: "Lampugnani must have suspected something and watched Ramiro to make sure that his suspicions were well founded. In that he was wise, but he was a fool to allow Ramiro to see what lie he had discovered. Already he has paid the penalty. He is lying with a dagger in his throat, for an hour ago Ramiro stabbed him while he slept."

I shuddered. What a place of blood was this! Could it be that Cesare Borgia had no knowledge of what things were being performed by his Governor of Cesena?

"Poor Lampugnani!" I sighed. "God rest his soul."

"I doubt but he is in Hell," answered Mariani, without emotion. "He was as great a villain as his master, and he has gone to answer for his villainy even as this ugly monster of a Ramiro shall. But let Lampugnani be. I am not come to talk of him."

"Returning from his bloody act, Ramiro ordered me to bed. I went, and as I passed Lampugnani's room I saw the door standing wide. It was thus that I learnt what had befallen. I remembered his words concerning the hat and I remembered old suspicions of my own aroused by the thought of the potent wine which Ramiro had ordered me to see given to the couriers. I sped back to the gallery that overlooks the hall. Ramiro was absent, and I surmised at once that he

was gone to the kitchen. Then was it that I thought of you and of what service you might render if things were indeed as I now more than suspected. Like an inspiration it came to me how I might prepare your way. I ran down to the hall, sweating in my terror that he should return ere I had performed the task I went on. From the buffet I drew a flagon of that same stout wine that Ramiro used upon his messengers. I ripped away the seal and crimson cord by which it is distinguished, and placing it on the table I removed the flagon I had set for him before I had first departed.

"Then I fled back to the gallery, and from the shadows I watched for his return. Soon he came, bearing a hat in his hand; and from that hat he took a letter, all as you have surmised. He read it, and I saw his face lighten with a fierce excitement. Then he helped himself freely to wine, and drank thirstily, for all that he was overladen with it. One of the qualities of this wine is that in quenching thirst it produces yet a greater. Ramiro drank again, then sat with the letter before him in the light of the single taper I had left burning. Presently he grew sleepy. He shook himself and drank again. Then again he sat conning his epistle, and thus I left him and came hither in quest of you."

There followed a pause.

"Well?" I asked at length. "What is it you would have me do? Stab him as he sleeps?"

He shook his head. "That were too sweet and sudden a death for him. If it had been no more than a matter of that, my old arms would have lent me strength enough. But think you it would repay me for having seen my boy pinned by that monster's pike to the burning logs?"

"What is it, then, you ask of me?"

"If that letter were indeed the treasonable document we account it;

if its treason should be aimed at Cesare Borgia—it could scarce be aimed at another—would it not be a sweet thing to obtain possession of it?"

"Aye, but when he wakes to-morrow and finds it gone—what then? You know this Governor of Cesena well enough to be assured that he would ransack the castle, torture, rack, burn and flay us all until the missive were forthcoming."

"That," he groaned, "is what deterred me. If I had the means of getting the letter sent to Cesare Borgia, or of escaping with it myself from Cesena, I should not have hesitated. Cesare Borgia is lying at Faenza, and I could ride there in a day. But it would be impossible for me to leave the place before morning. I have duties to perform in the town, and I might get away whilst I am about them, but before then the letter will have been missed, and no one will be allowed to leave the citadel."

"Why then," said I, "the only hope lies in abstracting that letter in such a manner that he shall not suspect the loss; and that seems a very desperate hope."

We sat in silence for some moments, during which I thought intently to little purpose.

"Does he sleep yet, think you?" I asked presently.

"Assuredly he must."

"And if I were to go to the gallery, is there any fear that I should be discovered by others?"

"None. All at Cesena are asleep by now."

"Then," said I, rising, "let us take a look at him. Who knows what may suggest itself? Come." I moved towards the door, and he took up his lanthorn and followed me, enjoining me to tread lightly.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE LETTER

On tiptoe I crept down that corridor to the gallery above the banqueting-hall, secure from sight in the enveloping darkness, and intent upon allowing no sound to betray my presence, lest Ramiro should have awakened. Behind me, treading as lightly, came Messer Mariani.

Thus we gained the gallery. I leaned against the stout oaken balustrade, and looked down into the black pit of the hall, broken in the centre by the circle of light from the two tapers that burnt upon the table. The other torches had all been quenched.

At the table sat Messer Ramiro, his head fallen forward and sideways upon his right arm which was outstretched and limp along the board. Before him lay a paper which I inferred to be the letter whose possession might mean so much.

I could hear the old man breathing heavily beside me as I leaned there in the dark, and sought to devise a means by which that paper might be obtained. No doubt it would be the easiest thing in the world to snatch it away without disturbing him. But there was always to be considered that when he waked and missed the letter we should have to reckon with his measures to regain possession of it.

It became necessary, therefore, to go about it in a manner that should leave him unsuspecting of the theft. A little while I pondered this, deeming the thing desperate at first. Then an idea came to me on a sudden, and turning to Mariani I asked him could he find me a sheet of paper of about the size of that letter held by Ramiro. He answered me that he could, and bade me wait there until he should return.

I waited, watching the sleeper below, my excitement waxing with every second of the delay. Ramiro was snoring now—a loud, sonorous snore that rang like a trumpet-blast through that vast empty hall.

At last Mariani returned, bringing the sheet of paper I had asked for, and he was full of questions of what I intended. But neither the place nor the time was one in which to stand unfolding plans. Every moment wasted increased the uncertainty of the success of my design. Someone might come, or Ramiro might awaken despite the potency of the wine he had been given—for on so well-seasoned a toper the most potent of wines could have but a transient effect.

So I left Mariani, and moved swiftly and silently to the head of the staircase.

I had gone down two steps, when, in the dark, I missed the third, the bells in my cap jangling at the shock. I brought my teeth together and stood breathless in apprehension, fearing that the noise might awaken him, and cursing myself for a careless fool to have forgotten those infernal bells. Above me I heard a warning hiss from old Mariani, which, if anything, increased my dread. But Ramiro snored on, and I was reassured.

A moment I stood debating whether I should go on, or first return to divest myself of that cap of mine. In the end I decided to pursue the latter course. The need for swift and sudden movement might come ere I was done with this adventure, and those bells might easily be the undoing of me. So back I went to the surprise and infinite dismay of Mariani until I had whispered in his ear the reason. We retreated together to the corridor, and there, with his help, I removed my jangling headgear, which I left him to restore to my chamber.

Whilst he went upon that errand I returned once more on mine, and

this time I gained the foot of the stairs without mishap, and stood in the hall. Ramiro's back was towards me. On my right stood the tall buffet from which the boy had fetched him wine that evening; this I marked out as the cover to which I must fly in case of need.

A second I stood hesitating, still considering my course; then I went softly forward, my feet making no sound in the rushes of the floor. I had covered half the distance, and, growing bolder, I was advancing more swiftly and with less caution, when suddenly my knee came in contact with a three-legged stool that had been carelessly left where none would have suspected it. The blow may have hurt afterwards, indeed, I was conscious of a soreness at the knee; but at the moment I had no thought or care for physical pain. The bench went over with a crash, and for all that the rushes may have deadened in part the sound of its fall, to my nervous ear it boomed like the report of a cannon through the stillness of the place.

I turned cold as ice, and the sweat of fear sprang out to moisten me from head to foot. Instantly I dropped on all fours, lest Ramiro, awaking suddenly, should turn; and I waited for the least sign that should render advisable my seeking the cover of the buffet. In the gallery above I could picture old Mariani clenching his teeth at the noise, his knees knocking together, and his face white with horror; for Ramiro's snoring had abruptly ceased. It came to an end with a choking catch of the breath, and I looked to see him raise his head and start up to ascertain what it was that had aroused him. But he never stirred, and for all that he no longer snored, his breathing continued heavy and regular, so that I was cheered by the assurance that I had but disturbed his slumber, not dispelled it.

Yet, since I had disturbed and lightened it, a greater precaution was now necessary, and I waited there for some ten minutes maybe, a period that must have proved a very eternity to the old man upstairs. At last I had the reward of hearing the snoring recommence; lightly at

first, but soon with all its former fullness.

I rose and proceeded now with a caution that must guard me from any more unlooked-for obstacles. Moreover, as I approached, the darkness was dispelled more and more at every stride in the direction of the light. At last I reached the table, and stood silent as a spectre at Ramiro's side, looking down upon the features of the sleeping man.

His face was flushed, and his tawny hair tumbled about his damp brow; his lips quivered as he breathed. For a moment, as I stood gazing on him, there was murder in my mind. His dagger hung temptingly in his girdle. To have drawn it and rid the world of this monster might have been a worthy deed, acceptable in the eyes of Heaven. But how should it profit me? Rather must it prove my destruction at the hands of his followers, and to be destroyed just then, with Paola depending upon me, and life full of promise once I regained my liberty, was something I had no mind to risk.

My eyes wandered to the letter lying on the table. If this were of the nature we suspected, it should prove a safer tool for his destruction.

To read it as it lay was an easy matter, and it came to me then that ere I decided upon my course it might be well that I should do so. If by chance it were innocent of treason, why, then, I might resort to the risk of that other and more desperate weapon—his own dagger.

At the foot of the short flight of steps that led from the hall to the courtyard I could hear the slow pacing of the sentry placed there by Ramiro. But unless he were summoned, it was extremely unlikely that the fellow would leave his post, so that, I concluded, I had little to fear from that quarter. I drew back and taking up a position behind Ramiro's chair—a position more favourable to escape in the untoward event of his awaking—I craned forward to read the letter over his shoulder. I thanked God in that hour for two things: that my

sight was keen, and that Vitellozzo Vitelli wrote a large, bold hand.

Scarcely breathing, and distracted the while by the mad racing of my pulses, I read; and this, as nearly as I can remember, is what the letter contained:

"ILLUSTRIOUS RAMIRO—Your answer to my last letter reached me safely, and it rejoiced me to learn that you had found a man for our undertaking. See that you have him in readiness, for the hour of action is at hand. Cesare goes south on the second or third day of the New Year, and he has announced to me his intention of passing through Cesena on his way, there to investigate certain charges of maladministration which have been preferred against you. These concern, in particular, certain misappropriation of grain and stores, and an excessive severity of rule, of which complaints have reached him. From this you will gather that out of a spirit of self-defence, if not to earn the reward which we have bound ourselves to pay you, it is expedient that you should not fail us. The occasion of the Duke's visit to Cesena will be, of all, the most propitious for our purpose. Have your arbalister posed, and may God strengthen his arm and render true his aim to the end that Italy may be rid of a tyrant. I commend myself to your Excellency, and I shall anxiously await your news.

"VITELLOZZO VITELLI."

Here indeed were my hopes realised. A plot there was, and it aimed at nothing less than the Duca Valentino's life. Let that letter be borne to Cesare Borgia at Faenza, and I would warrant that within a dozen hours of his receipt of it he would so dispose that all who had suffered by the cruel tyranny of Ramiro del' Orca would be avenged, and those who were still suffering would be relieved. In this letter lay my own freedom and the salvation of Madonna Paula, and this letter it behoved me at once to become possessed. It was a safer far alternative than that dagger of his.

A moment I stood pondering the matter for the last time, then stepping sideways and forward, so that I was again beside him, I put out my hand and swiftly whipped the letter from the table. Then standing very still, to prevent the slightest rustle, I remained a second or two observing him. He snored on, undisturbed by my light-fingered action.

I drew away a pace or two, as lightly as I might, and folding the letter I thrust it into my girdle. Then from my open doublet I drew the sheet that Mariani had supplied me, and, advancing again, I placed it on the table in a position almost identical with that which the original had occupied, saving that it was removed a half-finger's breadth from his hand, for I feared to allow it actually to touch him lest it should arouse him.

Holding my breath, for now was I come to the most desperate part of my undertaking, I caught up one of the tapers and set fire to a corner of the sheet. That done, I left the candle lying on its side against the paper, so as to convey the impression to him, when presently he awakened, that it had fallen from it sconce. Then, without waiting for more, I backed swiftly away, watching the progress of the flames as they devoured the paper and presently reached his hand and scorched it.

At that I dropped again on all fours, and having gained the corner of the buffet, I crouched there, even as with a sudden scream of pain he woke and sprang upright, shaking his blistered hand. As a matter of instinct he looked about to see what it was had hurt him. Then his eyes fell upon the charred paper on the table, and the fallen candle, which was still burning across one end of it, and even to the dull wits of Ramiro del' Orca the only possible conclusion was suggested. He stared at it a moment, then swept that flimsy sheet of ashes from the table with an oath, and sank back once more into his great leathern chair.

"Body of God!" he swore aloud, "it is well that I had read it a dozen times. Better that it should have been burnt than that someone should have read it whilst I slept."

The idea of such a possibility seemed to rouse him to fresh action, for seizing the fallen candle and replacing it in its socket, he rose once more, and holding it high above his head he looked about the hall.

The light it shed may have been feeble, and the shadows about my buffet thick; but, as I have said, my doublet was open, and some ray of that weak candlelight must have found out the white shirt that was showing at my breast, for with a sudden cry he pushed back his chair and took a step towards me, no doubt intent upon investigating that white something that he saw gleaming there.

I waited for no more. I had no fancy to be caught in that corner, utterly at his mercy. I stood up suddenly.

"Magnificent, it is I," I announced, with a calm and boundless effrontery.

The boldness of it may have staggered him a little, for he paused, although his eyes were glowing horribly with the frenzy that possessed him, the half of which was drunkenness, the other fear and wrath lest I should have seen his treacherous communication from Vitelli.

"What make you here?" he questioned threateningly.

"I thirsted, Excellency," I answered glibly. "I thirsted, and I bethought me of this buffet where you keep your wine."

He continued to eye me, some six paces off, his half-drunken wits no doubt weighing the plausibility of my answer. At last—

"If that be all, what cause had you to hide?" he asked me shrewdly.

"One of your candles fell over and awakened you," said I. "I feared you might resent my presence, and so I hid."

"You came not near the table?" he inquired. "You saw nothing of the paper that I held? Nay, by the Host! I'll take no risks. You were born 'neath an unlucky star, fool; for be your reason for your presence here no more than you assert, you have come in a season that must be fatal to you."

He set the candle on the table, then carrying his hand to his girdle he withdrew it sharply, and I caught the gleam of a dagger.

In that instant I thought of Mariani waiting above, and like a flash it came to me that if I could outpace this drunken brigand, and, gaining the gallery well ahead of him, transfer that letter to the old man's hands, I should not die in vain. Cesare Borgia would avenge me, and Madonna Paola, at least, would be safe from this villain. If Mariani could reach Valentino at Faenza, I would answer for it that within four-and-twenty hours Messer Ramiro del' Orca would be the banner on that ghastly beam that he facetiously dubbed his flagstaff; and he would be the blackest, dirtiest banner that ever yet had fluttered there.

The thought conceived in the twinkling of an eye, I acted upon without a second's hesitation. Ere Ramiro had taken his first step towards me, I had sprung to the stairs and I was leaping up them with the frantic speed of one upon whose heels death is treading closely.

A singular, fierce joy was blent with my measure of fear; a joy at the thought that even now, in this extremity, I was outwitting him, for never a doubt had he that the burnt paper he had found on the table was all that was left of Vitelli's letter. His fears were that I might have read it, but never a suspicion crossed his mind of such a trick as I had played upon him.

So I sped on, the gigantic Ramiro blundering after me, panting and

blaspheming, for although powerful, his bulk and the wine he had taken left him no nimbleness. The distance between us widened, and if only Mariani would have the presence of mind to wait for me at the mouth of the passage, all would be as I could wish it before his dagger found my heart.

I was assuring myself of this when in the dark I stumbled, and striking my legs against a stair I hurtled forward. I recovered almost immediately, but, in my frenzy of haste to make up for the instant lost, I stumbled a second time ere I was well upon my feet.

With a roar Ramiro must have hurled himself forward, for I felt my ankle caught in a grip from which there was no escaping, and I was roughly and brutally dragged back and down those stairs; now my head, now my breast beating against the steps as I descended them one by one.

But even in that hour the letter was my first thought, and I found a way to thrust it farther under my girdle so that it should not be seen.

At last I reached the hall, half-stunned, and with all the misery of defeat and the certainty of the futility of my death to further torture my last moments. Over me stood Ramiro, his dagger upheld, ready to strike.

"Dog!" he taunted me, "your sands are run."

"Mercy, Magnificent," I gasped. "I have done nothing to deserve your poniard."

He laughed brutally, delaying his stroke that he might prolong my agony for his drunken entertainment.

"Address your prayers to Heaven," he mocked me, "and let them concern your soul."

And then, like a flash of inspiration came the words that should

delay his hand.

"Spare me," I cried "for I am in mortal sin."

Impious, abandoned villain, though he was, he said too much when he boasted that he feared neither God nor Devil. He was prone to forget his God, and the lessons that as a babe he had learnt at his mother's knee—for I take it that even Ramiro del' Orca had once been a babe—but deep down in his soul there had remained the fear of Hell and an almost instinctive obedience to the laws of Mother Church. He could perform such ruthless cruelties as that of hurling a page into the fire to punish his clumsiness; he could rack and stab and hang men with the least shadow of compunction or twinge of conscience, but to slay a man who professed himself to be in mortal sin was a deed too appalling even for this ruthless butcher.

He hesitated a second, then he lowered his hand, his face telling me clearly how deeply he grudged me the respite which, yet, he dared not do other than accord me.

"Where shall I find me a priest?" he grumbled. "Think you the Citadel of Cesena is a monastery? I will wait while you make an act of contrition for your sins. It is all the shrift I can afford you. And get it done, for it is time I was abed. You shall have five minutes in which to clear your soul."

By this it seemed to me—as it may well seem to you—that matters were but little mended, and instead of employing the respite he accorded me in the pious collecting of thoughts which he enjoined, I sat up—very sore from my descent of the stairs—and employed those precious moments in putting forward arguments to turn him from, his murderous purpose.

"I have lived too ungodly a life," I protested, "to be able to squeeze into Paradise through so narrow a gate. As you would hope for your

own ultimate salvation, Excellency, I do beseech you not to imperil mine."

This disposed him, at least, to listen to me, and proceeded to assure him of the harmless nature of my visit to the hall in quest of wine to quench my thirst. I was running the grave risk of dying with lies on my lips, but I was too desperate to give the matter thought just then. His mood seemed to relent; the delay, perhaps, had calmed his first access of passion, and he was grown more reasonable. But when Ramiro cooled he was, perhaps, more malignant than ever, for it meant a return to natural condition, and Ramiro's natural condition was one of cruelty unsurpassed.

"It may be as you say," he answered me at last, sheathing his dagger, "and at least you have my word that I will not slay you without first assuring myself that you have lied. For to-night you shall remain in durance. To-morrow we will apply the question to you."

The hope that had been reviving in my breast fell dead once more, and I turned cold at that threat. And yet, between now and to-morrow, much might betide, and I had cause for thankfulness, perhaps, for this respite. Thus I sought to cheer myself. But I fear I failed. To-morrow he would torture me, not so much to ascertain whether I had spoken truly, but because to his diseased mind it afforded diversion to witness a man's anguish. No doubt it was that had urged him now to spare my life and accord me this merciless piece of mercy.

In a loud voice he called the sentry who was pacing below; and in a moment the man appeared in answer to that summons.

"You will take this knave to the chamber set apart for him up there, and you will leave him secure under lock and bar, bringing me the key of his door."

The fellow informed himself which was the chamber, then turning to

me he curtly bade me go with him. Thus was I haled back to my room, with the promise of horrors on the morrow, but with the night before me in which to scheme and pray for some miracle that might yet save me. But the days of miracles were long past. I lay on my bed and deplored with many a sigh that bitter fact. And if aught had been wanting to increase the weight of fear and anguish on my already over-burdened mind, and to aid in what almost seemed an infernal plot to utterly distract me, I had it in fresh, wild conjectures touching Madonna Paola. Where indeed could she be that Ramiro's men had failed to find her for all that they had scoured that part of the country in which I had left her to wait for my return? What if, by now, worse had befallen her than the capture with which Ramiro's lieutenant was charged?

With such doubts as these to haunt me, fretted as I was by my utter inability to take a step in her service, I lay. There for an hour or so in such agony of mind as is begotten only of suspense. In my girdle still reposed the treasonable letter from Vitelli to Ramiro, a mighty weapon with which to accomplish the butcher's overthrow. But how was I to wield it imprisoned here?

I wondered why Mariani had not returned, only to remember that the soldier who had locked me in had carried the key of my prison-chamber to Ramiro.

Suddenly the stillness was disturbed by a faint tap at my door. My instincts and my reason told me it must be Mariani at last. In an instant I had leapt from the bed and whispered through the keyhole:

"Who is there?"

"It is I—Mariani—the seneschal," came the old man's voice, very softly, but nevertheless distinctly. "They have taken the key."

I groaned, then in a gust of passion I fell to cursing Ramiro for that

precaution.

"You have the letter?" came Mariani's voice again.

"Aye, I have it still," I answered.

"Have you seen what it contains?"

"A plot to assassinate the Duke—no less. Enough to get this bloody Ramiro broken on the wheel."

I was answered by a sound that was as a gasp of malicious joy. Then the old man's voice added:

"Can you pass it under the door? There is a sufficient gap."

I felt, and found that he was right; I could pass the half of my hand underneath. I took the letter and thrust it through. His hands fastened on it instantly, almost snatching it from my fingers before they were ready to release it.

"Have courage," he bade me. "Listen. I shall endeavour to leave Cesena in the morning, and I shall ride straight for Faenza. If I find the Duke there when I arrive, he should be here within some twelve or fourteen hours of my departure. Fence with Ramiro, temporise if you can till then, and all will be well with you."

"I will do what I can," I answered him. "But if he slays me in the meantime, at least I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that he will not be long in following me."

"May God shield you," he said fervently.

"May God speed you," I answered him, with a still greater fervour.

That night, as you may well conceive, I slept but little, and that little ill. The morning, instead of relieving the fears that in the darkness had been with me, seemed to increase them. For now was the time for

Mariani to act, and I was fearful as to how he might succeed. I was full of doubts lest some obstacle should have arisen to prevent his departure from Cesena, and I spent my morning in wearisome speculation.

I took an almost childish satisfaction in the thought that since, being a prisoner, I could no longer count myself the Fool of the Court of Cesena, I was free to strip the motley and assume the more sober garments in which I had been taken, and which—as you may recall—had been placed in my chamber on the previous evening. It was the very plainest raiment. For doublet I wore a buff brigandine, quilted and dagger-proof, and caught at the waist by a girdle of hammered steel; my wine-coloured hose was stout and serviceable, as were my long boots of untanned leather. Yet prouder was I of this sober apparel than ever king of his ermine.

It may have been an hour or so past noon when, at last, my solitude was invaded by a soldier who came to order me into the presence of the Governor. I had been sitting at the window, leaning against the bars and looking out at the desolate white landscape, for there had been a heavy fall of snow in the night, which reminded me—as snow ever did—of my first meeting with Madonna Paola.

I rose upon the instant, and my fears rose with me. But I kept a bold front as I went down into the hall, where Ramiro and the blackguards of his Court were sitting, with three or four men-at-arms at attention by the door. Close to the pulleys appertaining to the torture of the cord stood two leather-clad ruffians—Ramiro's executioners.

At the head of the board, which was still strewn with fragments of food—for they had but dined—sat Ramiro del' Orca. With him were half a dozen of his officers, whose villainous appearance pronounced them worthy of their brutal leader. The air was heavy with the pungent odour of viands. I looked round for Mariani, and I took some comfort from the fact that he was absent. Might heaven please that he was

even then on his way to Faenza.

Ramiro watched my advance with a smile in which mockery was blent with satisfaction, for all that of the resumption of my proper raiment he seemed to take no heed. No doubt he had dined well, and he was now disposing himself to be amused.

"Messer Bocadaro," said he, when I had come to a standstill, "there was last night a matter that was not cleared up between us and concerning which I expressed an intention of questioning you to-day. I should proceed to do so at once, were it not that there is yet another matter on which I am, if possible, still more desirous you should tell us all you know. Once already have you evaded my questions with answers which at the time I half believed. Even now I do not say that I utterly disbelieve them, but I wish to assure myself that you told the truth; for if you lied, why then we may still be assisted by such information the cord shall squeeze from you. I am referring to the mysterious disappearance of Madonna Paola di Santafior—a disappearance of which you have assured me that you knew nothing, being even in ignorance of the fact that the lady was not really dead. I had confidently expected that the party searching for Madonna Paola would have succeeded ere this in finding her. But this morning my hopes suffered disappointment. My men have returned empty-handed once more."

"For which mercy may Heaven be praised!" I burst out.

He scowled at me; then he laughed evilly.

"My men have returned—all save three. Captain Lucagnolo with two of his followers, has undertaken to go beyond the area I appointed for the search, and to proceed to the village of Cattolica. While he is pursuing his inquiries there, I have resolved to pursue my own here. I now call upon you, Boccadoro, to tell us what you know of Madonna Paola's whereabouts."

"I know nothing," I answered stoutly. "I am prepared to take oath that I know nothing of her whereabouts."

"Tell me, then, at least," said he, "where you bestowed her."

I shook my head, pressing my lips tight.

"Do you think that I would tell you if I had the knowledge?" was the scornful question with which I answered him. "You may pursue your inquiries as you will and where you will, but I pray God they may all prove as futile as must those that you would pursue here and upon my own person."

This was how I fenced with him, this was the manner in which I followed Mariani's sound advice that I should temporise! Oh! I know that my words were the words of a fool, yet no fear that Ramiro would inspire me could have restrained them.

There was a murmur at the table, and his fellows turned their eyes on Ramiro to see how he would receive this bearding. He smiled quietly, and raising his hand he made a sign to the executioners.

Rude hands seized me from behind, and the doublet was torn from my back by fingers that never paused to untruss my points.

They turned me about, and hurried me along until I stood under the pulleys of the torture, and one of the men held me securely whilst the other passed the cords about my wrists. Then both the executioners stepped back, to be ready to hoist me at the Governor's signal.

He delayed it, much as an epicure delays the consumption of a delectable morsel, heightening by suspense the keen desire of his palate. He watched me closely, and had my lips quivered or my eyelids fluttered, he would have hailed with joy such signs of weakness. But I take pride in truthfully writing that I stood bold and impassively before him, and if I was pale I thank Heaven that pallor

was the habit of my countenance, so that from that he could gather no satisfaction. And standing there, I gave him back look for look, and waited.

"For the last time, Boccadoro," he said slowly, attempting by words to shake a demeanour that was proof against the impending facts of the cord, "I ask you to remember what must be the consequences of this stubbornness. If not at the first hoist, why then at the second or the third, the torture will compel you to disclose what you may know. Would you not be better advised to speak at once, while your limbs are soundly planted in their sockets, rather than let yourself be maimed, perhaps for life, ere you will do so?"

There was a stir of hoofs without. They thundered on the planks of the drawbridge and clattered on the stones of the courtyard. The thought of Cesare Borgia rose to my mind. But never did drowning man clutch at a more illusory straw. Cold reason quenched my hope at once. If the greatest imaginable success attended Mariani's journey, the Duke could not reach Cesena before midnight, and to that it wanted some ten hours at least. Moreover, the company that came was small to judge by the sound—a half-dozen horses at the most.

But Ramiro's attention had been diverted from me by the noise. Half-turning in his chair, he called to one of the men-at-arms to ascertain who came. Before the fellow could do his bidding, the door was thrust open and Lucagnolo appeared on the threshold, jaded and worn with hard riding.

A certain excitement arose in me at sight of him, despite my confidence that he must be returning empty-handed.

Ramiro rose, pushed back his chair and advanced towards the new-comer.

"Well?" he demanded. "What news?"

"Excellency, the girl is here."

That answer seemed to turn me into stone, so great was the shock of this sudden shattering of the confidence that had sustained me.

"My search in the country failing," pursued the captain, as he came forward, "I made bold to exceed your orders by pushing my inquiries as far as the village of Cattolica. There I found her after some little labour."

Surely I dreamt. Surely, I told myself, this was not possible. There was some mistake. Lucagnolo had brought some wench whom he believed to be Madonna Paola.

But even as I was assuring myself of this, the door opened again, and between two men-at-arms, white as death, her garments stained with mud and all but reduced to rags, and her eyes wild with a great fear, came my beloved Paola.

With a sound that was as a grunt of satisfaction, Ramiro strode forward to meet her. But her eyes travelled past him and rested upon me, standing there between the leather-clad executioners with the cords of the torture pinioning my wrists, and I saw the anguish deepen in their blue depths.

CHAPTER XIX. DOOMED

Across the length of that hall our eyes met—hers and mine—and held each other's glances. To me the room and all within it formed an indistinct and misty picture, from out of which there clearly gleamed my Paola's sweet, white face.

All at the table had risen with Ramiro, and now, copying their leader, they bared their heads in outward token of such respect as certainly would have been felt by any men less abandoned than were they before so much saintly beauty and distress.

Lucagnolo had stepped aside, and Ramiro was now bowing low and ceremoniously before Madonna. His face I could not see, since his back was towards me, but his tones, as they floated across the hall to where I stood, came laden with subservience.

"Madonna, I give praise and thanks to Heaven for this," said he. "I was afflicted by the gravest misgivings for your safety, and I am more than thankful to behold you safe and sound."

There was a hypocritical flavour of courtliness about his words, and a mincing of his tones that suggested the efforts of a bull-calf to imitate the warbling of a thristle.

Madonna paid him no heed; indeed, she appeared not to have heard him, for her eyes continued to look past him and at me. At last her lips parted, and although she scarcely seemed to raise her voice above a whisper, the word uttered reached my ears across the stillness of the great room, and the word was "Lazzaro!"

At mention of my name, and at the tone in which it was uttered—a

tone that betrayed same measure of what was in her heart—Ramiro wheeled sharply in my direction, his brows wrinkling. A certain craftiness he had, for all that I ever accounted him the dullest-witted clod that ever rose to his degree of honour. He must have realised how expedient it was that in all he did he should present himself to Madonna in a favourite light.

"Release him," he bade the executioners that held me, and in an instant I was set free. The order given, he turned again to Madonna.

"You have been torturing him," she cried, and her words were hard and fierce, her eyes blazing. "You shall repent it, Ser Ramiro. The Lord Cesare Borgia shall hear of it."

Her anger betrayed her more and more, and however hidden it may have been to her, to me it was exceeding clear that she was encompassing my destruction. Ramiro laughed easily.

"Madonna, you are at fault. We have not been torturing him, though I confess that we were on the point of putting him to the question. But your timely arrival has saved his limbs, for the question we were asking him concerned your whereabouts!"

I would have shouted to her to be wary how she answered him, for some premonition how he was about to trick her entered my mind. But realising the futility of such a course, I held my peace and waited agonisedly.

"You had tortured him in vain then," she answered scornfully. "For Lazzaro Biancomonte would never have betrayed me. Nor could he have betrayed me if he would, for after your men had searched the hut in which I was hidden, I walked to Cattolica thinking foolishly that I should be safer there."

Lackaday! She had told him the very thing he had sought to know. Yet to make doubly sure he pursued the scent a little farther.

"Indeed it seems to me that had I tortured him I had given him no more than he deserved for having abandoned you in that hut. Madonna, I tremble to think of the harm that might have come to you through that knave's desertion." And he scowled across at me, much as the Pharisee might have scowled upon the publican.

"He is no knave," she answered, and I could have groaned to hear her working my undoing, though not by so much as a sign might I inspire her with caution, for that sign must have been seen by others. "Nor did he abandon me. He left me only to go in quest of the necessities for our journey. If harm has come to me the blame of it must not rest on him."

"Of what harm do you speak, Madonna?" he cried, in a voice laden with concern.

"Of what harm," she echoed, eyeing him with a scorn that would have slain him had he any manhood left. "Of what harm? Mother of Mercy, defend me! Do you ask the question? What greater harm could have come to me than to have fallen into the hands of Ramiro del' Orca and his brigands?"

He stood looking at her, and I doubt not that his face was a very picture of simulated consternation.

"Surely, Madonna, you do not understand that we are your friends, that you can so abuse us. But you will be faint, Madonna," he cried, with a fresh and deep solicitude. "A cup of wine." And he waved his hand towards the table.

"It would poison me, I think," she answered coldly.

"You are cruel, and—alas!—mistrustful," said he. "Can you guess nothing of the anxiety that has been mine these two days, of the fears that have haunted me as I thought of you and your wanderings?"

Her lip curled, and her face took on some slight vestige of colour. Her spirit was a thing for which I might then have come to love her had it not been that already I loved her to distraction.

"Yes," said she, "I can guess something of your dismay when you found your schemes frustrated; when you found that you had come too late to San Domenico."

"Will you not forgive me that shift to which my adoration drove me?" he implored, in a honeyed voice—and a more fearful thing than Ramiro the butcher was Ramiro the lover.

At that scarcely covert avowal of his passion she recoiled a step as she might before a thing unclean. The little colour faded from her cheek, the scorn departed from her lip, and a sickly, deadly fear overspread her lovely face. God! that I should stand there and witness this insult to the woman I adored and worshipped with a fervour that the Church seeks to instil into us for those about the throne of Heaven. It might not be. A blind access of fury took me. Of the consequences I thought nothing. Reason left me utterly, and the slight hope that might lie in temporising was disregarded.

Before those about me could guess my purpose, or those others, too engrossed in the scene at the far end of the hall, could intervene, I had sprung from between the executioners and dashed across the space that separated me from the Governor of Cesena. One well-aimed blow, and there should be an end to Messer Ramiro. That was the only thought that found room in my disordered mind.

One or two there were who cried out as I sped past them, swift as the hound when it speeds after the fleeing hare. But I was upon Ramiro ere any could have sufficiently mastered his surprise to interfere.

By the nape of his great neck I caught him from behind, and setting

my knee at his spine I wrenched him backward, and so flung him over on the floor. Down I went with him, my hand reaching for the dagger at his jewelled girdle, and I had found and drawn it in that swift action of mine ere he had bethought him of his hands. Up it flashed and down. I sank it through the crimson velvet of his rich doublets straight at the spot where his heart should be—if he were so human as to have a heart. The next instant I turned cold and sick. My desperate effort had been all for nothing. In my hand I was left with the bronze hilt of his great poniard; the blade had broken off against the mesh of steel the coward wore beneath his finery.

There was a rush of feet about us, a piercing scream from Madonna Paola, and it was to her that I owed my life in that grim moment. A dozen blades were naked and would have transfixed me as I lay, but that she covered my body with her own and bade them strike at me through her.

A moment later and the powerful hands of the Governor of Cesena were at my throat. I was lifted and tossed aside, as though I had been a hound and he the bull I had beset. And as he swung me over and crushed me to the ground, he knelt above me and grinned horribly into my purpling face.

A second we stayed so, and I thought indeed that my hour was come, when suddenly I felt the blood in my head released once more. He had taken his hands from my throat. He seized me now by the collar and dragged me rudely to my feet.

"Take this knave and lock him in his chamber," he bade a couple of his bravi. "I may have need of him ere he dies."

"Messer Ramiro," came the interceding voice of Madonna Paola, "what he did, he did for me. You will not let him die for it?"

There was a pause during which he looked at her, whilst the men

were roughly dragging me across the hall.

"Who knows, Madonna?" he said, with a bow and an infernal smile. "If you were to beg his life, it might even come to pass that I might spare it."

He did not wait for her answer, but stepping after me he called to the men that led me. In obedience they halted, and he came forward. We were now at the foot of the staircase.

"Boccadoro," said he, planting himself before me, and eyeing me with eyes that were very full of malice, "you will recall the punishment I promised you if I came to discover it was you had thwarted me in Pesaro. It is the second time you have fooled Ramiro del' Orca. There does not live the man who can boast that he did it thrice, nor will I risk it that you be that man. Make your peace with Heaven, for at sunset—in an hour's time—you hang. There is one little thing that might save you even yet, and if you find life sweet, you would do well to pray that that little thing may come to pass."

I answered him nothing, but I bowed my head in token that I had heard and he signed to the men to proceed with me, whilst turning on his heel he stepped down the hall again to where Madonna Paola, overcome with weakness, had sunk upon a stool.

As I was leaving the gallery I had a last glimpse of her, sitting there with drawn face and haggard eyes that followed me as I passed from her sight, whilst Ramiro del' Orca stood beside her murmuring words that did not reach me. His so-called courtiers and his men-at-arms were trooping out of the room, no doubt in obedience to his dismissal.

CHAPTER XX. THE SUNSET

I have heard tell of the calm that comes upon brave men when hope is dead and their doom has been pronounced. Uncertainty may have tortured and made cowards of them; but once that uncertainty is dissolved and suspense is at an end, resignation enters their soul, and, possessing it, gives to their bearing a noble and dignified peace. By the mercy of Heaven they are made, maybe, to see how poor and evanescent a thing is life; and they come to realise that since to die is a necessity there is no avoiding, as well might it betide to-day as ten years hence.

Such a mood, however, came not to soothe that last hour of mine, and yet I account myself no coward. It was an hour of such torture and anguish as never before I had experienced—much though I had undergone—and the source of all my suffering lay in the fact that Madonna Paola was in the hands of the ogre of Cesena. Had it not been for that most untoward circumstance I almost believe that while I waited for the sun to set on that December afternoon, my mood had not only been calm but even in some measure joyous, for it must have comforted my last moments to reflect that for all that Messer Ramiro was about to hang me, yet had I sown the seeds of his own destruction ere he had brought me to this pass.

I did, indeed, reflect upon it, and it may even be that, in spite of all, I culled some grain of comfort from the reflection. But let that be. My narrative would drag wearily were I to digress that I might tell you at length the ugly course of my thoughts whilst the sands of my last hour were running swiftly out. For, after all, my concern and yours is with the story of Lazzaro Biancomonte, sometime known as Boccadoro the Fool, and not with his philosophies—philosophies so unprofitable that

it can benefit no man that I should set them down.

My windows faced west, and so I was able to watch the fall of the sun, and measure by its shortening distance from the horizon the ebbing of my poor life. At last the nether rim of that round, fiery orb was on the point of touching the line of distant hills, and it was casting a crimson glow along the white, snow-sheeted landscape that was singularly suggestive of a tide of blood—a very fitting tide to flow and ebb about the walls of the Castle of Cesena.

One little thing there was might save me, Ramiro had said. But I had shut the thought out of my mind to keep me from utter distraction. The only little thing in which I held that my salvation could lie would be in the miraculous arrival of Cesare Borgia, and of that not the faintest hope existed. If the greatest luck attended Mariani's errand and the greatest speed were made by the Duke once he received the letter, he could not reach Cesena in less than another eight hours. And another eight minutes, to reckon by the swift sinking of the sun would see the time appointed for my hanging. I thought of Joshua in that grim hour, and in a mood that approached the whimsical I envied him his gift. If I could have stayed the setting of the sun, and held it where it was till midnight, all might yet be well if Mariani had been diligent and Cesare swift.

The key grating in the lock put an end to my vague musings, and reminded me of the fact that I had neglected to employ that last hour as would have become a good son of Mother Church. For an instant I believe that my heart turned me to thoughts of God, and sent up a prayer for mercy for my poor sinful soul. Then the door swung wide. Two halberdiers and a carnifex in his odious leathern apron stood before me. Clearly Ramiro sought to be exact, and to have me hanging the instant the sun should vanish.

"It is time," said one of the soldiers, whilst the executioner, stepping into my chamber, pinioned my wrists behind me, and retaining hold of

the cord bade me march. He followed, holding that slender cord, and so, like a beast to the shambles, went I.

Once more they led me into the hall, where the shadows were lengthening in dark contrast to the splashes of sunlight that lingered on the floor, and whose blood-red hue was deepened by the gules of the windows through which it was filtered.

Ramiro was waiting for me, and six of his officers were in attendance. But, for once, there were no men-at-arms at hand. On a chair, the one usually occupied by Ramiro, himself, sat Madonna Paola, still in her torn and bedraggled raiment, her face white, her eyes wild as they had been when first she had been haled into Ramiro's presence, some two hours ago, and her features so rigidly composed that it told the tale of the awful self-control she must be exerting—a self-control that might end with a sudden snap that would plunge her into madness.

A wild rage possessed me at sight of her. Let Ramiro be ruthless and cruel where men were concerned; that was a thing for which forgiveness might be found him. But that he should submit a lady, delicately nurtured as was Madonna, to such horrors as she had undergone since she had awakened from his sleeping-potion in the Church of San Domenico, was something for which no Hell could punish him condignly.

Ramiro met me with a countenance through the assumed gravity of which I could espy his wicked, infernal mockery peeping forth.

"I deplore your end, Lazzaro Biancomonte," said he slowly, "for you are a brave man, and brave men are rare. You were worthy of better things, but you chose to cross swords with Ramiro del' Orca, and you have got your death-blow. May God have mercy on your soul."

"I am praying," said I, "for just so much mercy as you shall have

justice. If my prayer is heard, I should be well-content."

He changed countenance a little. So, too, I thought, did Madonna Paola. My firmness may have yielded her some grain of comfort. Ramiro set his hands on his hips, and eyed me squarely.

"You are a dauntless rogue," he confessed.

I laughed for answer, and in that moment it entered my mind that I might yet enjoy some measure of revenge in this life. More than that, I might benefit Madonna. For were the seed I was about to sow to take root in the craven heart of Ramiro del' Orca, it would so fully occupy his mind that he would have little time to bestow on Paola in the few hours that were left him. But before I could bethink me of words, he was speaking again.

"I held out to you a slender hope," said he. "I told you that there was one little thing might save you. That hope has borne no fruit; the little thing, I spoke of has not come to pass. It rested with Madonna Paola, here. She had it in her hands to effect your salvation, but she has refused. Your blood rests on her head."

She shuddered at the words, and a low moan escaped her. She covered her face with her hands. A moment I stood looking at her; then I shifted my glance to Ramiro.

"Will it please you, Illustrious, to allow me a few moments' conversation with Madonna Paola di Santafor?"

I invested my tones with a weight of meaning that did not escape him. His face suddenly lightened; whilst one of his officers—a fellow very fitly named Lupone—laughed outright.

"Your hero seems none so heroic after all," he said derisively to the Governor. "The imminence of death makes him amenable."

Ramiro scowled on him for answer. Then, turning to me—"Do you

think you could bend her stubbornness?" quoth he.

"I might attempt it," answered I.

His eyes flashed with evil hope; his lips parted in a smile. He shot a glance at Madonna, who had withdrawn her hands from her face and was regarding me now with a strange expression of horror and incredulity—marvelling, no doubt, to find me such a craven as I must have seemed.

Ramiro looked at the diminishing sunlight on the floor.

"In some five minutes the sun will have completely set," said he. "Those five minutes you shall have to seek to enlist Madonna's aid on your behalf. If you succeed—and she may tell you on what terms you are to have your life—you shall depart from Cesena to-night a free man."

He paused a moment, and his eyes, lighted by an odious smile, rested once more on Madonna Paula. Then he bade all withdraw, and went with them into an adjoining chamber, fondly nurturing the hopes that were begotten of his belief that Lazzaro Biancomonte was a villain.

When we were alone, she and I, I stood a moment where they had left me, my hands pinioned behind me, and the cord which the executioner had held trailing the ground like a lambent tail. Then I went slowly forward until I stood close before her. Her eyes were on my face, still with that same look of unbelief.

"Madonna mia," said I, "do not for an instant think that it is my purpose to ask of you any sacrifice that might save my worthless life. Rather was my purpose in seeking these few moments with you, to strengthen and encourage you by such news as it is mine to bring."

She looked now as if she scarcely understood.

"If I will wed him to-night, he has promised that you shall go free," she said in a whisper. "He says that he can bring a priest from the neighbourhood at a moment's notice."

"Do not heed him," I cried sternly.

"I do not heed him," said she, more composedly. "If he seeks to force me, I shall find a way of setting myself free. Dear Mother of Heaven! death were a sweet and restful thing after all that I have suffered in these days."

Then she fell suddenly to weeping.

"Think me not an utter coward, Lazzaro. Willingly would I do this thing to save so noble a life as yours, did I not think that you must hate me for it. I was stout and firm in my refusal, confident that you would have had me so. Was I not right, my poor, poor Lazzaro?"

"Madonna, you were right," I answered firmly and calmly.

"And you are to die, amor mio," she murmured passionately. "You are to die when the promise of happiness seemed held out to us. And yet, were you to live at the price at which life is offered you, would your life be endurable? Tell me the truth, Lazzaro; swear it to me. For if life is the dearer thing to you, why then, you shall have your life."

"Need you ask me, Paola?" questioned I. "Does not your heart tell you how much easier is death than would be such life as I must lead hereafter, even if we could trust Ramiro, which we cannot. Be brave, Madonna, and help me to be brave and to bear thyself with a becoming fortitude. Now listen to what I have to tell you. Ramiro del' Orca is a traitor who is plotting the death of his overlord. Proofs of it are by now in the hands of Cesare Borgia, and in some seven or eight hours the Duke himself should be here to put this monster to the question touching these matters. I will say a word in his ear ere I depart that will fill his mind with a very wholesome fear, and you will

find that during the few hours left him he will have little leisure to think of you and afflict you with his odious wooing. Be strong, then, for a little while, for Cesare is coming to set you free."

She looked at me now with eyes that were wide open. Suddenly—

"Could we not gain time?" she cried, and in her eagerness she rose and set her hands upon my shoulders. "Could I not pretend to acquiesce to his wishes, and so delay your end?"

"I have thought of it," I answered gloomily, "but the thought has brought me no hope. Ramiro is not to be trusted. He might tell you that he sets me free, but he dare not do so; he fears that I may have knowledge of his dealings with Vitelli, and assuredly he would break faith with us. Again the coming of the Duke might be delayed. Alas!" I ended in despair, "there is nothing to be done but to let things run their course."

There was even more in my mind than I expressed. My mistrust of Ramiro went further than I had explained, and concerning Madonna more closely than it did me.

"Nay, Lazzaro mine," she still protested, "I will attempt it. It is, at least, well worth the risk.

"You forget," said I, "that even when Cesare comes we cannot say how he will bear himself towards you. You were to have been betrothed to his cousin, Ignacio. It is a matter upon which he may insist."

She looked at me for a moment with anguish in her eyes that turned my misery into torture.

"Lazzaro," she moaned, "was ever woman so beset! I think that Heaven must have laid some curse upon me."

Her face was close to mine. I stooped forward and kissed her on

her brow.

"May God have you in His keeping, Madonna mia," I murmured. "The sun is gone."

"Lazzaro!" It was the cry of a breaking heart. Her arms went round my neck, and in a passion of grief her kisses burned on my lips.

Then the door of the anteroom opened—and I thanked God for the mercy of that interruption. I whispered a word to her, and in obedience she sprang back, and sank limp and broken on the chair once again.

Ramiro entered, his men behind him, his face alit with eagerness. There and then I swamped his hopes.

"The sun is gone, Magnificent," said I. "You had best get me hanged."

His brow darkened, for there was a note of mockery and triumph in my voice.

"You have fooled me, animal," he cried. His jaw set, and his eyes continued to regard me with an evil glow. Then he laughed terribly, shrugged his shoulders, and spoke again. "After all, it shall avail you little." He turned to the carnifex. "Federigo, do your work," said he, whereupon the fellow stepped behind me, and the halberdiers ranged themselves one on either side of me again.

"A word ere I go, Messer del' Orca," I demanded insolently.

He looked at me sharply, wondering, maybe, at the fresh tone I took.

"Say it and begone," he sullenly permitted me.

I paused a moment to choose fitting words for that portentous death-song of mine. At length—

"You boasted to me a little while ago," said I, smiling grimly, "that the man did not live who had thrice fooled you. That man does live, for that man am I."

"Bah!" he returned contemptuously, thinking, no doubt, that I referred to my interview with Madonna Paola. "You may take what pride you will from such a thought. You are upon the threshold of death."

"True, but the thought is one that affords me more comfort and joy than pride. As much comfort and joy as you shall take horror when I tell you in what manner I have fooled you." I paused to heighten the sensation of my words.

"To such good purpose have I used my wits that ere another sun shall rise and set you will have followed me along the black road that I am now treading—the road whose bourne is the gallows. Bethink you of the charred paper that last night you brushed from this table when you awoke to find a candle fallen on the treacherous letter Vitellozzo Vitelli sent you in the lining of a hat."

His jaw fell, his face flamed redder than ever for a second, then it went grey as ashes.

"Of what do you prate, fool?" he questioned huskily, seeking to bluster it before the startled glances of his officers.

"I speak," said I, "of that charred paper. It was I who laid the candle across it; but it was a virgin sheet I burned. Vitelli's letter I had first abstracted."

"You lie!" he almost screamed.

"To prove that I do not, I will tell you what it contained. It held proof that bribed by the Tyrant of Citta di Castello you had undertaken to pose an arbalister to slay the Duke on the occasion of his coming

visit to Cesena."

He glared at me a moment in furious amazement. Then he turned to his officers.

"Do not heed him," he bade them. "The dog lies to sow doubts in your minds ere he goes out to hang. It is a puerile revenge."

I laughed with amused confidence. There was one among them had heard Lampugnani's words touching the messenger's hat—words that had cost the fellow his life. But my concern was little with the effect my words might produce upon his followers.

"By to-morrow you will know whether I have lied or not. Nay, before then shall you know it, for by midnight Cesare Borgia should be at Cesena. Vitellozzo Vitelli's letter is in his hands by now."

At that Ramiro burst into a laugh. So convinced was he of the impossibility of my having got the letter to the Duke, even if what I had said of its abstraction were true, that he gathered assurance from what seemed to him so monstrous an exaggeration.

"By your own words are you confounded," said he. "Out of your own mouth have you proven your lies. Assuming that all you say were true, how could you, who since last night have been a prisoner, have got a messenger to bear anything from you to Cesare Borgia?"

I looked at him with a contemptuous amusement that daunted him.

"Where is Mariani?" I asked quietly. "Where is the father of the lad you so brutally and wantonly slew yesternight? Seek him throughout Cesena, and when you find him not, perhaps you will realise that one who had seen his own son suffer such an outrageous and cruel death at your brigand's hands would be a willing and ready instrument in an act that should avenge him."

Vergine santa! What a consternation was his. He must have

missed Mariani early in the day, for he took no measure, asked no questions that might confirm or refute the thing I announced. His face grew livid, and his knees loosened. He sank on to a chair and mopped the cold sweat from his brow with his great brown hand. No thought had he now for the eyes of his officers or their opinions. Fear, icy and horrid, such fear as in his time he had inspired in a thousand hearts was now possessed of him. Sweet indeed was the flavour of my vengeance.

His officers instinctively drew away from him before the guilt so clearly written on his face, and their eyes were full of doubt as to how they should proceed and of some fear—for it must have been passing through their minds that they stood, themselves, in danger of being involved with him in the Duke's punishment of his disloyalty.

This was more than had ever entered into my calculations or found room in my hopes. By a brisk appeal to them, it almost seemed that I might work my salvation in this eleventh hour.

Madonna watched the scene with eyes that suggested to me that the same hope had arisen in her own mind. My halberdiers and the carnifex alone stood stolidly indifferent. Ramiro was to them the man that hired them; with his intriguing they had no concern.

For a moment or two there was a silence, and Ramiro sat staring before him, his white face glistening with the sweat of fear. A very coward at heart was this overbearing ogre of Cesena, who for years had been the terror and scourge of the countryside. At last he mastered his emotion and sprang to his feet.

"You have had the laugh of me," he snarled, fury now ringing in his voice. "But ere you die you may regret it that you mocked me."

He turned to the executioner.

"Strip him," he commanded fiercely. "He shall not hang as I

intended—at least not before we have torn every bone of his body from its socket. To the cord with him!" And he pointed to the torture at the end of the hall.

The executioner made shift to obey him when suddenly Madonna Paola leapt to her feet, her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright with a new excitement.

"Is there none here," he cried, appealing to Ramiro's officers, "that will draw his sword in the service of his overlord, the Duca Valentino? There stands a traitor, and there one who has proven his loyalty to Cesare Borgia. The Duke is likely to demand a heavy price for the life of that faithful one to whose warning he owes his escape of assassination. Will none of you side now with the right that anon you may stand well with Cesare Borgia when he comes? Or, by idly allowing this traitor to have his way, will you participate in the punishment that must be his?"

It was the very spur they needed. And scarce was that final question of hers flung at those knaves, when the answer came from one of them. It was that same sturdy Lupone.

"I, for one, am for the Duke," said he, and his sword leapt from its scabbard. "I draw my iron for Valentino. Let every loyal man do likewise and seize this traitor." And with his sword he pointed at Ramiro.

In an instant three others bared their weapons and ranged themselves beside him. The remaining two—of whom was Lucagnolo—folded their hands, manifesting by that impassivity that they were minded to take neither one side nor the other.

The carnifex paused in his labours of undressing me, and the affair promised to grow interesting. But Ramiro did not stand his ground. Fury swelling his veins and crimsoning his huge face, he sprang to the

door and bellowed to his guards. Six men trooped in almost at once, and reinforced by the halberdiers that had been guarding me, they made short work of the resistance of those four officers. In as little time as it takes me to record it, they were disarmed and ranged against the wall behind those guards and others that had come to their support—to be dealt with by Ramiro after he had dealt with me.

His fear of Cesare's coming was put by for the moment in his fierce lust to be avenged upon me who had betrayed him and the officers who had turned against him. Madonna sank back once more in her despair. The little spark that she had so bravely fanned to life had been quenched almost as soon as it had shown itself.

"Now, Federigo," said Ramiro grimly, "I am waiting."

The executioner resumed his work, and in an instant I stood stripped of my brigandine. As the fellow led me, unresisting, to the torture—for what resistance could have availed me now?—I tried to pray for strength to endure what was to come. I was done with life; for some portion of an hour I must go through the cruellest of agonies; and then, when it pleased God in His mercy that I should swoon, it would be to wake no more in this world. For they would bear out my unconscious body, and hang it by the neck from that black beam they called Ramiro del' Orca's flagstaff.

I cast a last glance at Madonna. She had fallen on her knees, and with folded hands was praying intently, none heeding her.

Federigo halted me beneath the pulleys, and his horrid hands grew busy adjusting the ropes to my wrists.

And then, when the last ray of hope had faded, but before the executioner had completed his hideous task, a trumpet-blast, winding a challenge to the gates of the Castle of Cesena, suddenly rang out upon the evening air, and startled us all by its sudden and imperious

note.

CHAPTER XXI. AVE CAESAR!

For just an instant I allowed myself to be tortured by the hope that a miracle had happened, and here was Cesare Borgia come a good eight hours before it was possible for Mariani to have fetched him from Faenza. The same doubt may have crossed Ramiro's mind, for he changed colour and sprang to the door to bawl an order forbidding his men to lower the bridge.

But he was too late. Before he was answered by his followers, we heard the creaking of the hinges and the rattle of the running chains, ending in a thud that told us the drawbridge had dropped across the moat. Then came the loud continuous thunder of many hoofs upon its timbers. Paralysed by fear Ramiro stood where he had halted, turning his eyes wildly in this direction and in that, but never moving one way or the other.

It must be Cesare, I swore to myself. Who else could ride to Cessna with such numbers? But then, if it was Cesare, it could not be that he had seen Mariani, for he could not have ridden from Faenza. Madonna had risen too, and with a white face and straining eyes she was looking towards the door.

And then our doubts were at last ended. There was a jangle of spurs and the fall of feet, and through the open door stepped a straight, martial figure in a doublet of deep crimson velvet, trimmed with costly lynx furs and slashed with satin in the sleeves and shoulder-puffs; jewels gleamed in the massive chain across his breast and at the marroquin girdle that carried his bronze-hilted sword; his hose was of red silk, and his great black boots were armed with golden spurs. But to crown all this very regal splendour

was the beautiful, pale, cold face of Cesare Borgia, from out of which two black eyes flashed and played like sword-points on the company.

Behind him surged a press of mercenaries, in steel, their weapons naked in their hands, so that no doubt was left of the character of this visit.

Collecting himself, and bethinking him that after all, he had best dissemble a good countenance; Ramiro advanced respectfully to meet his overlord. But ere he had taken three steps the Duke stayed him.

"Stand where you are, traitor," was the imperious command. "I'll trust you no nearer to my person." And to emphasise his words he raised his gloved left hand, which had been resting on his sword-hilt, and in which I now observed that he held a paper.

Whether Ramiro recognised it, or whether it was that the mere sight of a paper reminded him of the letter which on my testimony should be in Cesare's keeping, or whether again the word "traitor" with which Cesare branded him drove the iron deeper into his soul, I cannot say; but to this I can testify: that he turned a livid green, and stood there before his formidable master in an attitude so stricken as to have aroused pity for any man less a villain than was he.

And now Cesare's eye, travelling round, alighted on Madonna Paola, standing back in the shadows to which she had instinctively withdrawn at his coming. At sight of her he recoiled a pace, deeming, no doubt, that it was an apparition stood before him. Then he looked again, and being a man whose mind was above puerile superstitions, he assured himself that by what miracle the thing was wrought, the figure before him was the living body of Madonna Paola Sforza di Santafior. He swept the velvet cap with its jewelled plume from off his auburn locks, and bowed low before her.

"In God's name, Madonna, how are you come to life again, and how do I find you here of all places?"

She made no ado about enlightening him.

"That villain," said she, and her finger pointed straight and firmly at Ramiro, "put a sleeping-potion in my wine on the last night he dined with us at Pesaro, and when all thought me dead he came to the Church of San Domenico with his men to carry off my sleeping body. He would have succeeded in his fell design but that Lazzaro Biancomonte there, whom you have stayed him in the act of torturing to death, was beforehand and saved me from his clutches for a time. This morning at Cattolica his searching sbirri discovered me and brought me hither, where I have been for the past three hours, and where, but for your Excellency's timely arrival, I shudder to think of the indignities I might have suffered."

"I thank you, Madonna, for this clear succinctness," answered Cesare coldly, as was his habit. They say he was a passionate man, and such indeed I do believe him to have been; but even in the hottest frenzy of rage, outwardly he was ever the same—icily cold and tranquil. And this, no doubt, was the thing that made him terrible.

"Presently, Madonna," he pursued, "I shall ask you to tell me how it chanced that, having saved you, Messer Biancomonte did not bear you to your brother's house. But first I have business with my Governor of Cesena—a score which is rendered, if possible, heavier than it already stood by this thing that you have told me."

"My lord," cried out Ramiro, finding his tongue at last, "Madonna has misinformed you. I know nothing of who administered the sleeping-potion. Certainly it was not I. I heard a rumour that her body had been stolen, and—"

"Silence!" Cesare commanded sternly. "Did I question you, dog?"

His beautiful, terrible eyes fastened upon Ramiro in a glance that defied the man to answer him. Cowed, like a hound at sight of the whip, Ramiro whimpered into silence.

Cesare waved his hand in his direction, half-turning to the men-at-arms behind him.

"Take and disarm him," was his passionless command. And while they were doing his bidding, he turned to me and ordered the executioner beside me to unbind my hands and set me at liberty.

"I owe you a heavy debt, Messer Biancomonte," he said, without any warmth, even now that his voice was laden with a message of gratitude. "It shall be discharged. It is thanks to your daring and resource that the seneschal Mariani was able to bring me this letter, this piece of culminating proof against Ramiro del' Orca. It is fortunate for you that Mariani was not put to it to ride to Faenza to find me, or else I am afraid we had not reached Cesena in time to save your life. I met him some leagues this side of Faenza, as I was on my way to Sinigaglia."

He turned abruptly to Ramiro.

"In this letter which Vitelli wrote you," said he, "it is suggested that there are others in the conspiracy. Tell me now, who are those others? See that you answer me with truth, for I shall compel proofs from you of such accusations as you may make."

Ramiro looked at him with eyes rendered dull by agony. He moistened his lips with his tongue, and turning his head towards his men—

"Wine," he gasped, from very force of habit. "A cup of wine!"

"Let it be supplied him," said Cesare coldly, and we all stood waiting while a servant filled him a cup. Ramiro gulped the wine

avidly, never pausing until the goblet was empty.

"Now," said Cesare, who had been watching him, "will it please you to answer my question?"

"My lord," said Ramiro, revived and strengthened in spirit by the draught, "I must ask your Excellency to be a little plainer with me. To what conspiracy is it that you refer? I know of none. What is this letter which you say Vitelli wrote me? I take it you refer to the Lord of Citta di Castello. But I can recall no letters passing between us. My acquaintance with him is of the slightest."

Cesare looked at him a second.

"Approach," he curtly bade him, and Ramiro came forward, one of the Borgia halberdiers on either side of him, each holding him by an arm. The Duke thrust the letter under his eyes. "Have you never seen that before?"

Ramiro looked at it a moment, and his attempt at dissembling bewilderment was a ludicrous thing to witness.

"Never," he said brazenly at last.

Cesare folded the letter and slipped it into the breast of his doublet. From his girdle he took a second paper. He turned from Ramiro.

"Don Miguel," he called.

From behind his men-at-arms a tall man, all dressed in black, stood forward. It was Cesare's Spanish captain, one whose name was as well known and as well-dreaded in Italy as Cesare's own. The Duke held out to him the paper that he had produced.

"You heard the question that I asked Messer del' Orca?" he inquired.

"I heard, illustrious," answered Miguel, with a bow.

"See that you obtain me an answer to it, as well as an account of the other matters that I have noted on this list—concerning the misappropriation of stores, the retention of taxes illicitly levied, and the wanton cruelty towards my good citizens of Cesena. Put him to the question without delay, and record me his replies. The implements are yonder."

And with the same calm indifference which characterised his every word and action Cesare pointed to the torture, and turned to Madonna Paola, as though he gave the matter of Ramiro del' Orca and his misdeeds not another thought.

"Mercy, my lord," rang now the voice of Ramiro, laden with horrid fear. "I will speak."

"Then do so—to Don Miguel. He will question you in my name." Again he turned to Madonna. "Madonna Paola, may I conduct you hence? Things may perhaps occur which it is not seemly your gentle eyes should witness. Messer Biancomonte, attend us."

Now, in spite of all that Ramiro had made me suffer, I should have been loath to have remained and witnessed his examination. That they would torture him was now inevitable. His chance of answering freely was gone. Even if he returned meek replies to Don Miguel's questions, that gentleman would, no doubt, still submit him to the cord by way of assuring himself that such replies were true ones.

Gladly, then, did I turn to follow the Duke and Madonna Paola into the adjoining chamber to which Cesare led the way, even as Don Miguel's voice was raised to command his men to clear the hall, to the end that he might conduct his examination in private.

The three of us stood in the anteroom. A servant had lighted the tapers and closed the doors, and the Duke turned to me.

"First, Messer Biancomonte, to discharge my debt. You are, if I am not misinformed, the lord by right of birth of certain lands that bear your name, which suffered sequestration during the reign of the late Costanzo, Tyrant of Pesaro, whose son Giovanni upheld that confiscation. Am I right?"

"Your Excellency is very well informed. The Lord of Pesaro did make me tardy restitution—so tardy, indeed, that the lands which he restored to me had already virtually passed from his possession."

Cesare smiled.

"In recompense for the service you have rendered me this day," said he, and my heart thrilled at the words and at the thought of the joy which I was about to bear to my old mother, "I reinvest you in your lands of Biancomonte for so long as you are content to recognise in me your overlord, and to be loyal, true and faithful to my rule."

I bowed, murmuring something of the joy I felt and the devotion I should entertain.

"Then that is done with. You shall have the deed from my hand by morning. And now, Madonna, will you grant me some explanation of your conduct in leaving Pesaro in this man's company, instead of repairing to your brother's house, when you awakened from the effects of the potion Ramiro gave you, or must I seek the explanation from Messer Biancomonte?"

Her eyes fell before the scrutiny of his, and when they were raised again it was to meet my glance, and if Cesare could not, for himself, read the message of those eyes, why then, his penetration was by no means what the world accounted it.

"My lord," I cried, "let me explain. I love Madonna Paola. It was love of her that led me to the church and kept me there that night. It was

love of her and the overwhelming passion of my grief at her so sudden death that led me, in a madness, to desire once more to look upon her face ere they delivered it to earth's keeping. Thus was it that I came to discover that she lived; thus was it that I anticipated Ramiro del' Orca. He came upon us almost before I had raised her from the coffin, yet love lent me strength and craft to delude him. We hid awhile in the sacristy, and it was there, after Madonna had revived, that the pent-up passion of years burst the bond with which reason had bidden me restrain it."

"By the Host!" cried Cesare, his brows drawn down in a frown. "You are a bold man to tell me this. And you, Madonna," he cried, turning suddenly to her, "what have you to say?"

"Only, my lord, that I have suffered more I think in these past few days than has ever fallen to the life-time's share of another woman. I think, my lord, that I have suffered enough to have earned me a little peace and a little happiness for the remainder of my days. All my life have men plagued me with marriages that were hateful to me, and this has culminated in the brutal act of Ramiro del' Orca. Do you not think that I have endured enough?"

He stared at her for a moment.

"Then you love this fellow?" he gasped. "You, Madonna Paola Sforza di Santaflor, one of the noblest ladies in all Italy, confess to love this lordling of a few barren acres?"

"I loved him, Illustrious, when he was less, much less, than that. I loved him when he was little better than the Fool of the Court of Pesaro, and not even the shame of the motley that disgraced him could stay the impulse of my affections."

He laughed curiously.

"By my faith," said he, "I have gone through life complaining of the

want of frankness in the men and women I have met. But you two seem to deal in it liberally enough to satisfy the most ardent seeker after truth. I would that Pontius Pilate could have known you." Then he grew sterner. "But what account of this evening's adventure am I to bear to my cousin Ignacio?"

She hung her head in silence, whilst my own spirit trembled. Then suddenly I spoke.

"My lord," said I, "if you take her back to Pesaro, you may keep the deed of Biancomonte. For unless Madonna Paola goes thither with me, your gift is a barren one, your reward of no account or value to me."

"I would not have it so," said he, his head on one side and his fingers toying with his auburn beard. "You saved my life, and you must be rewarded fittingly."

"Then, Illustrious, in payment for my preservation of your life, do you render happy mine, and we shall thus be quits."

"My lord," cried Paola, putting forth her hands in supplication, "if you have ever loved, befriend us now."

A shadow darkened his face for an instant, then it was gone, and his expression was as inscrutable as ever. Yet he took her hands in his and looked down into her eyes.

"They say that I am hard, bloodthirsty and unfeeling," he said in tones that were almost of complaint. "But I am not proof against so much appeal. Ignacio must find him a bride in Spain; and if he is wise and would taste the sweets of life, he will see to it that he finds him a willing one."

"As for you two, Cesare Borgia shalt stand your friend. He owes you no less. I will be godfather to your nuptials. Thus shall the blame

and consequences rest on me. Paola Sforza di Santafor is dead, men think. We will leave them thinking it. Filippo must know the truth. But you can trust me to make your brother take a reasonable view of what has come to pass. After all, there may be a disparity in your ranks. But it is purely adventitious, for noble though you may be, Madonna Paola, you are wedding one who seems no less noble at heart, whatever the parts he may have played in life." He smiled inscrutably, as he added: "I have in mind that you once sought service with me Messer Biancomonte, and if a martial life allures you still, I'll make you lord of something better far than Biancomonte."

I thanked him, and Madonna joined me in that expression of gratitude—an expression that fell very short of all that was in our hearts. But touching that offer of his that I should follow his fortunes, I begged him not to insist.

"The possession of Biancomonte has from my cradle been the goal of all my hopes. It is patrimony enough for me, and there, with Madonna Paola, I'll take a long farewell of ambition, which is but the seed of discontent."

"Why, as you will," he sighed. And then, before more could be said, there came from the adjoining room a piercing scream.

Cesare raised his head, and his lips parted in the faintest vestige of a smile.

"They are exacting the truth from the Governor of Cesena," said he. "I think, Madonna, that we had better move a little farther off. Ramiro's voice makes indifferent music for a lady's ear."

She was white as death at the horrid noise and all the things of which it may have reminded her, and so we passed from the antechamber and sought the more distant places of the castle.

Here let me pause. We were married on the morrow which was

Christmas eve, and in the grey dawn of the Christmas morning we set out for Biancomonte with the escort which Cesare Borgia placed at our disposal.

As we rode out from the Citadel of Cesena, we saw the last of Ramiro del' Orca. Beyond the gates, in the centre of the public square, a block stood planted in the snow. On the side nearer the castle there was a dark mass over which a rich mantle had been thrown; it was of purple colour, and in the uncertain light it was not easy to tell where the cloak ended, and the stain that embrued the snow began. On the other side of the block a decapitated head stood mounted on an upright pike, and the sightless eyes of Ramiro del' Orca looked from his grinning face upon the town of Cesena, which he had so wantonly misruled.

Madonna shuddered and turned her head aside as we rode past that dread emblem of the Borgia justice.

To efface from her mind the memory of such a thing on such a day, I talked to her, as we cantered out into the country, of the life to come, of the mother that waited to welcome us, and of the glad tidings with which we were to rejoice her on that Christmas day.

There is no moral to my story. I may not end with one of those graceful admonitions beloved of Messer Boccacci to whom in my jester's days I owed so much. Not mine is it to say with him "Wherefore, gentle ladies"—or "noble sirs—beware of this, avoid that other thing."

Mine is a plain tale, written in the belief that some account of those old happenings that befell me may offer you some measure of entertainment, and written, too, in the support of certain truths which my contemporaries have been shamefully inclined and simoniacally induced to suppress. Many chroniclers set forth how the Lord Vitellozzo Vitelli and his associates were barbarously strangled by

Cesare's orders at Sinigaglia, and wilfully—for I cannot believe that it results from ignorance—are they silent touching the reason, leaving you to imagine that it was done in obedience to a ruthlessness of character beyond parallel, so that you may come to consider Cesare Borgia as black as they were paid to paint him.

To confute them do I set down these facts of which my knowledge cannot be called in question, and also that you may know the true story of Paola di Santaflor—and more particularly that part of it which lies beyond the death she did not die.

The sun of that Christmas day was setting as we drew near to Biancomonte and the humble dwelling of my old mother. We fell into talk of her once more. Suddenly Paola turned in her saddle to confront me.

"Tell me, Lord of Biancomonte, will she love me a little, think you?" she asked, to plague me.

"Who would not love you, Lady of Biancomonte?" counter-questioned I.

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THE STROLLING SAINT

**Being the Confessions of the High
& Mighty Agostino D'Anguissola
Tyrant of Mondolfo & Lord of
Carmina, in the State of Piacenza**

By Raphael Sabatini

Contents

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

THE OBLATE

NOMEN ET OMEN

GINO FALCONE

THE PIETISTIC THRALL

LUISINA

REBELLION

FRA GERVASIO

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

GIULIANA

THE HOUSE OF ASTORRE FIFANTI.

HUMANITIES

PREUX-CHEVALIER

MY LORD GAMBARA CLEARS THE GROUND

PABULUM ACHERONTIS

THE IRON GIRDLE

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WILDERNESS

THE HOME-COMING

THE CAPTAIN OF JUSTICE

GAMBARA'S INTERESTS

THE ANCHORITE OF MONTE ORSARO

THE RENUNCIATION

HYPNEROTOMACHIA

CHAPTER VII.	INTRUDERS
CHAPTER VIII.	THE VISION
CHAPTER IX.	THE ICONOCLAST

[BOOK IV.](#) THE WORLD

CHAPTER I.	PAGLIANO
CHAPTER II.	THE GOVERNOR OF MILAN
CHAPTER III.	PIER LUIGI FARNESE
CHAPTER IV.	MADONNA BIANCA
CHAPTER V.	THE WARNING
CHAPTER VI.	THE TALONS OF THE HOLY OFFICE
CHAPTER VII.	THE PAPAL BULL
CHAPTER VIII.	THE THIRD DEGREE
CHAPTER IX.	THE RETURN
CHAPTER X.	THE NUPTIALS OF BIANCA
CHAPTER XI.	THE PENANCE
CHAPTER XII.	BLOOD
CHAPTER XIII.	THE OVERTHROW
CHAPTER XIV.	THE CITATION
CHAPTER XV.	THE WILL OF HEAVEN

BOOK I. THE OBLATE

CHAPTER I. NOMEN ET OMEN

In seeking other than in myself—as men will—the causes of my tribulations, I have often inclined to lay the blame of much of the ill that befell me, and the ill that in my sinful life I did to others, upon those who held my mother at the baptismal font and concerted that she should bear the name of Monica.

There are in life many things which, in themselves, seeming to the vulgar and the heedless to be trivial and without consequence, may yet be causes pregnant of terrible effects, mainsprings of Destiny itself. Amid such portentous trifles I would number the names so heedlessly bestowed upon us.

It surprises me that in none of the philosophic writings of the learned scholars of antiquity can I find that this matter of names has been touched upon, much less given the importance of which I account it to be deserving.

Possibly it is because no one of them ever suffered, as I have suffered, from the consequences of a name. Had it but been so, they might in their weighty and impressive manner have set down a lesson on the subject, and so relieved me—who am all-conscious of my shortcomings in this direction—from the necessity of repairing that omission out of my own experience.

Let it then, even at this late hour, be considered what a subtle influence for good or ill, what a very mould of character may lie within a name.

To the dull clod of earth, perhaps, or, again, to the truly strong-minded nature that is beyond such influences, it can matter little that

he be called Alexander or Achilles; and once there was a man named Judas who fell so far short of the noble associations of that name that he has changed for all time the very sound and meaning of it.

But to him who has been endowed with imagination—that greatest boon and greatest affliction of mankind—or whose nature is such as to crave for models, the name he bears may become a thing portentous by the images it conjures up of some mighty dead who bore it erstwhile and whose life inspires to emulation.

Whatever may be accounted the general value of this premiss, at least as it concerns my mother I shall hope to prove it apt.

They named her Monica. Why the name was chosen I have never learnt; but I do not conceive that there was any reason for the choice other than the taste of her parents in the matter of sounds. It is a pleasing enough name, euphoniously considered, and beyond that—as is so commonly the case—no considerations were taken into account.

To her, however, at once imaginative and of a feeble and dependent spirit, the name was fateful. St. Monica was made the special object of her devotions in girlhood, and remained so later when she became a wife. The Life of St. Monica was the most soiled and fingered portion of an old manuscript collection of the life histories of a score or so of saints that was one of her dearest possessions. To render herself worthy of the name she bore, to model her life upon that of the sainted woman who had sorrowed and rejoiced so much in her famous offspring, became the obsession of my mother's soul. And but that St. Monica had wed and borne a son, I do not believe that my mother would ever have adventured herself within the bonds of wedlock.

How often in the stressful, stormy hours of my most unhappy youth did I not wish that she had preferred the virginal life of the cloister, and

thus spared me the heavy burden of an existence which her unholy and mistaken saintliness went so near to laying waste!

I like to think that in the days when my father wooed her, she forgot for a spell in the strong arms of that fierce ghibelline the pattern upon which it had become her wont to weave her life; so that in all that drab, sackcloth tissue there was embroidered at least one warm and brilliant little wedge of colour; so that in all that desert waste, in all that parched aridity of her existence, there was at least one little patch of garden-land, fragrant, fruitful, and cool.

I like to think it, for at best such a spell must have been brief indeed; and for that I pity her—I, who once blamed her so very bitterly. Before ever I was born it must have ceased; whilst still she bore me she put from her lips the cup that holds the warm and potent wine of life, and turned her once more to her fasting, her contemplations, and her prayers.

That was in the year in which the battle of Pavia was fought and won by the Emperor. My father, who had raised a condotta to lend a hand in the expulsion of the French, was left for dead upon that glorious field. Afterwards he was found still living, but upon the very edge and border of Eternity; and when the news of it was borne to my mother I have little doubt but that she imagined it to be a visitation—a punishment upon her for having strayed for that brief season of her adolescence from the narrow flinty path that she had erst claimed to tread in the footsteps of Holy Monica.

How much the love of my father may still have swayed her I do not know. But to me it seems that in what next she did there was more of duty, more of penitence, more of reparation for the sin of having been a woman as God made her, than of love. Indeed, I almost know this to be so. In delicate health as she was, she bade her people prepare a litter for her, and so she had herself carried into Piacenza, to the Church of St. Augustine. There, having confessed and received the

Sacrament, upon her knees before a minor altar consecrated to St. Monica, she made solemn vow that if my father's life was spared she would devote the unborn child she carried to the service of God and Holy Church.

Two months thereafter word was brought her that my father, his recovery by now well-nigh complete, was making his way home.

On the morrow was I born—a votive offering, an oblate, ere yet I had drawn the breath of life.

It has oft diverted me to conjecture what would have chanced had I been born a girl—since that could have afforded her no proper parallel. In the circumstance that I was a boy, I have no faintest doubt but that she saw a Sign, for she was given to seeing signs in the slightest and most natural happenings. It was as it should be; it was as it had been with the Sainted Monica in whose ways she strove, poor thing, to walk. Monica had borne a son, and he had been named Augustine. It was very well. My name, too, should be Augustine, that I might walk in the ways of that other Augustine, that great theologian whose mother's name was Monica.

And even as the influence of her name had been my mother's guide, so was the influence of my name to exert its sway upon me. It was made to do so. Ere I could read for myself, the life of that great saint—with such castrations as my tender years demanded—was told me and repeated until I knew by heart its every incident and act. Anon his writings were my school-books. His *De Civitate Dei* and *De Vita Beata* were the paps at which I suckled my earliest mental nourishment.

And even to-day, after all the tragedy and sin and turbulence of my life, that was intended to have been so different, it is from his *Confessions* that I have gathered inspiration to set down my own—although betwixt the two you may discern little indeed that is

comparable.

I was prenatally made a votive offering for the preservation of my father's life, for his restoration to my mother safe and sound. That restoration she had, as you have seen; and yet, had she been other than she was, she must have accounted herself cheated of her bargain in the end. For betwixt my father and my mother I became from my earliest years a subject of contentions that drove them far asunder and set them almost in enmity the one against the other.

I was his only son, heir to the noble lordships of Mondolfo and Carmina. Was it likely, then, that he should sacrifice me willingly to the seclusion of the cloister, whilst our lordship passed into the hands of our renegade, guelphic cousin, Cosimo d'Anguissola of Codogno?

I can picture his outbursts at the very thought of it; I can hear him reasoning, upbraiding, storming. But he was as an ocean of energy hurling himself against the impassive rock of my mother's pietistic obstinacy. She had vowed me to the service of Holy Church, and she would suffer tribulation and death so that her vow should be fulfilled. And hers was a manner against which that strong man, my father, never could prevail. She would stand before him white-faced and mute, never presuming to return an answer to his pleading or to enter into argument.

"I have vowed," she would say, just once; and thereafter, avoiding his fiery glance, she would bow her head meekly, fold her hands, the very incarnation of long-suffering and martyrdom.

Anon, as the storm of his anger crashed about her, two glistening lines would appear upon her pallid face, and her tears—horrid, silent weeping that brought no trace of emotion to her countenance—showered down. At that he would fling out of her presence and away, cursing the day in which he had mated with a fool.

His hatred of these moods of hers, of the vow she had made which bade fair to deprive him of his son, drove him ere long to hatred of the cause of it all. A ghibelline by inheritance, he was not long in becoming an utter infidel, at war with Rome and the Pontifical sway. Nor was he one to content himself with passive enmity. He must be up and doing, seeking the destruction of the thing he hated. And so it befell that upon the death of Pope Clement (the second Medici Pontiff), profiting by the weak condition from which the papal army had not yet recovered since the Emperor's invasion and the sack of Rome, my father raised an army and attempted to shatter the ancient yoke which Julius II had imposed upon Parma and Piacenza when he took them from the State of Milan.

A little lad of seven was I at the time, and well do I remember the martial stir and bustle there was about our citadel of Mondolfo, the armed multitudes that thronged the fortress that was our home, or drilled and manoeuvred upon the green plains beyond the river.

I was all wonder-stricken and fascinated by the sight. My blood was quickened by the brazen notes of their trumpets, and to balance a pike in my hands was to procure me the oddest and most exquisite thrills that I had known. But my mother, perceiving with alarm the delight afforded me by such warlike matters, withdrew me so that I might see as little as possible of it all.

And there followed scenes between her and my father of which hazy impressions linger in my memory. No longer was she a mute statue, enduring with fearful stoicism his harsh upbraidings. She was turned into a suppliant, now fierce, now lachrymose; by her prayers, by her prophecies of the evil that must attend his ungodly aims, she strove with all her poor, feeble might to turn him from the path of revolt to which he had set his foot.

And he would listen now in silence, his face grim and sardonic; and when from very weariness the flow of her inspired oratory began to

falter, he would deliver ever the same answer.

"It is you who have driven me to this; and this is no more than a beginning. You have made a vow—an outrageous votive offering of something that is not yours to bestow. That vow you cannot break, you say. Be it so. But I must seek a remedy elsewhere. To save my son from the Church to which you would doom him, I will, ere I have done, tear down the Church and make an end of it in Italy."

And at that she would shrivel up before him with a little moan of horror, taking her poor white face in her hands.

"Blasphemer!" she would cry in mingled terror and aversion, and upon that word—the "Amen" to all their conferences in those last days they spent together—she would turn, and dragging me with her, all stunned and bewildered by something beyond my understanding, she would hurry me to the chapel of the citadel, and there, before the high altar, prostrate herself and spend long hours in awful sobbing intercessions.

And so the gulf between them widened until the day of his departure.

I was not present at their parting. What farewells may have been spoken between them, what premonitions may have troubled one or the other that they were destined never to meet again, I do not know.

I remember being rudely awakened one dark morning early in the year, and lifted from my bed by arms to whose clasp I never failed to thrill. Close to mine was pressed a hot, dark, shaven hawk-face; a pair of great eyes, humid with tears, considered me passionately. Then a ringing voice—that commanding voice that was my father's—spoke to Falcone, the man-at-arms who attended him and who ever acted as his equerry.

"Shall we take him with us to the wars, Falcone?"

My little arms went round his neck and tightened there convulsively until the steel rim of his gorget bit into them.

"Take me!" I sobbed. "Take me!"

He laughed for answer, with something of exultation in his voice. He swung me to his shoulder, and held me poised there, looking up at me. And then he laughed again.

"Dost hear the whelp?" he cried to Falcone. "Still with his milk-teeth in his head, and already does he yelp for battle!"

Then he looked up at me again, and swore one of his great oaths.

"I can trust you, son of mine," he laughed. "They'll never make a shaveling of you. When your thews are grown it will not be on thuribles they'll spend their strength, or I'm a liar else. Be patient yet awhile, and we shall ride together, never doubt it."

With that he pulled me down again to kiss me, and he clasped me to his breast so that the studs of his armour remained stamped upon my tender flesh after he had departed.

The next instant he was gone, and I lay weeping, a very lonely little child.

But in the revolt that he led he had not reckoned upon the might and vigour of the new Farnese Pontiff. He had conceived, perhaps, that one pope must be as supine as another, and that Paul III would prove no more redoubtable than Clement VIII. To his bitter cost did he discover his mistake. Beyond the Po he was surprised by the Pontifical army under Ferrante Orsini, and there his force was cut to pieces.

My father himself escaped and with him some other gentlemen of Piacenza, notably one of the scions of the great house of Pallavicini,

who took a wound in the leg which left him lame for life, so that ever after he was known as Pallavicini il Zopo.

They were all under the pope's ban, outlaws with a price upon the head of each, hunted and harried from State to State by the papal emissaries, so that my father never more dared set foot in Mondolfo, or, indeed, within the State of Piacenza, which had been rudely punished for the insubordination it had permitted to be reared upon its soil.

And Mondolfo went near to suffering confiscation. Assuredly it would have suffered it but for the influence exerted on my mother's and my own behalf by her brother, the powerful Cardinal of San Paulo in Carcere, seconded by that guelphic cousin of my father's, Cosimo d'Anguissola, who, after me, was heir to Mondolfo, and had, therefore, good reason not to see it confiscated to the Holy See.

Thus it fell out that we were left in peace and not made to suffer from my father's rebellion. For that, he himself should suffer when taken. But taken he never was. From time to time we had news of him. Now he was in Venice, now in Milan, now in Naples; but never long in any place for his safety's sake. And then one night, six years later, a scarred and grizzled veteran, coming none knew whence, dropped from exhaustion in the courtyard of our citadel, whither he had struggled. Some went to minister to him, and amongst these there was a groom who recognized him.

"It is Messer Falcone!" he cried, and ran to bear the news to my mother, with whom I was at table at the time. With us, too, was Fra Gervasio, our chaplain.

It was grim news that old Falcone brought us. He had never quitted my father in those six weary years of wandering until now that my father was beyond the need of his or any other's service.

There had been a rising and a bloody battle at Perugia, Falcone informed us. An attempt had been made to overthrow the rule there of Pier Luigi Farnese, Duke of Castro, the pope's own abominable son. For some months my father had been enjoying the shelter of the Perugians, and he had repaid their hospitality by joining them and bearing arms with them in the ill-starred blow they struck for liberty. They had been crushed in the encounter by the troops of Pier Luigi, and my father had been among the slain.

And well was it for him that he came by so fine and merciful an end, thought I, when I had heard the tale of horrors that had been undergone by the unfortunates who had fallen into the hands of Farnese.

My mother heard him to the end without any sign of emotion. She sat there, cold and impassive as a thing of marble, what time Fra Gervasio—who was my father's foster-brother, as you shall presently learn more fully—sank his head upon his arm and wept like a child to hear the piteous tale of it. And whether from force of example, whether from the memories that came to me so poignantly in that moment of a fine strong man with a brown, shaven face and a jovial, mighty voice, who had promised me that one day we should ride together, I fell a-weeping too.

When the tale was done, my mother coldly gave orders that Falcone be cared for, and went to pray, taking me with her.

Oftentimes since have I wondered what was the tenour of her prayers that night. Were they for the rest of the great turbulent soul that was gone forth in sin, in arms against the Holy Church, excommunicate and foredoomed to Hell? Or were they of thanksgiving that at last she was completely mistress of my destinies, her mind at rest, since no longer need she fear opposition to her wishes concerning me? I do not know, nor will I do her the possible injustice that I should were I to guess.

CHAPTER II. GINO FALCONE

When I think of my mother now I do not see her as she appeared in any of the scenes that already I have set down. There is one picture of her that is burnt as with an acid upon my memory, a picture which the mere mention of her name, the mere thought of her, never fails to evoke like a ghost before me. I see her always as she appeared one evening when she came suddenly and without warning upon Falcone and me in the armoury of the citadel.

I see her again, a tall, slight, graceful woman, her oval face of the translucent pallor of wax, framed in a nun-like coif, over which was thrown a long black veil that fell to her waist and there joined the black unrelieved draperies that she always wore. This sable garb was no mere mourning for my father. His death had made as little change in her apparel as in her general life. It had been ever thus as far as my memory can travel; always had her raiment been the same, those trailing funereal draperies. Again I see them, and that pallid face with its sunken eyes, around which there were great brown patches that seemed to intensify the depth at which they were set and the sombre lustre of them on the rare occasions when she raised them; those slim, wax-like hands, with a chaplet of beads entwined about the left wrist and hanging thence to a silver crucifix at the end.

She moved almost silently, as a ghost; and where she passed she seemed to leave a trail of sorrow and sadness in her wake, just as a worldly woman leaves a trail of perfume.

Thus looked she when she came upon us there that evening, and thus will she live for ever in my memory, for that was the first time that I knew rebellion against the yoke she was imposing upon me; the first

time that our wills clashed, hers and mine; and as a consequence, maybe, was it the first time that I considered her with purpose and defined her to myself.

The thing befell some three months after the coming of Falcone to Mondolfo.

That the old man-at-arms should have exerted a strong attraction upon my young mind, you will readily understand. His intimate connection with that dimly remembered father, who stood secretly in my imagination in the position that my mother would have had St. Augustine occupy, drew me to his equerry like metal to a lodestone.

And this attraction was reciprocal. Of his own accord old Falcone sought me out, lingering in my neighbourhood at first like a dog that looks for a kindly word. He had not long to wait. Daily we had our meetings and our talks and daily did these grow in length; and they were stolen hours of which I said no word to my mother, nor did others for a season, so that all was well.

Our talks were naturally of my father, and it was through Falcone that I came to know something of the greatness of that noble-souled, valiant gentleman, whom the old servant painted for me as one who combined with the courage of the lion the wiliness of the fox.

He discoursed of their feats of arms together, he described charges of horse that set my nerves a-tingle as in fancy I heard the blare of trumpets and the deafening thunder of hooves upon the turf. Of escalades, of surprises, of breaches stormed, of camisades and ambushes, of dark treacheries and great heroisms did he descant to fire my youthful fancy, to fill me first with delight, and then with frenzy when I came to think that in all these things my life must have no part, that for me another road was set—a grey, gloomy road at the end of which was dangled a reward which did not greatly interest me.

And then one day from fighting as an endeavour, as a pitting of force against force and astuteness against astuteness, he came to talk of fighting as an art.

It was from old Falcone that first I heard of Marozzo, that miracle-worker in weapons, that master at whose academy in Bologna the craft of swordsmanship was to be acquired, so that from fighting with his irons as a beast with its claws, by sheer brute strength and brute instinct, man might by practised skill and knowledge gain advantages against which mere strength must spend itself in vain.

What he told me amazed me beyond anything that I had ever heard, even from himself, and what he told me he illustrated, flinging himself into the poises taught by Marozzo that I might appreciate the marvellous science of the thing.

Thus was it that for the first time I made the acquaintance—an acquaintance held by few men in those days—of those marvellous guards of Marozzo's devising; Falcone showed me the difference between the mandritto and the roverso, the false edge and the true, the stramazzone and the tondo; and he left me spellbound by that marvellous guard appropriately called by Marozzo the iron girdle—a low guard on the level of the waist, which on the very parry gives an opening for the point, so that in one movement you may ward and strike.

At last, when I questioned him, he admitted that during their wanderings, my father, with that recklessness that alternated curiously with his caution, had ventured into the city of Bologna notwithstanding that it was a Papal fief, for the sole purpose of studying with Marozzo that Falcone himself had daily accompanied him, witnessed the lessons, and afterwards practised with my father, so that he had come to learn most of the secrets that Marozzo taught.

One day, at last, very timidly, like one who, whilst overconscious of

his utter unworthiness, ventures to crave a boon which he knows himself without the right to expect, I asked Falcone would he show me something of Marozzo's art with real weapons.

I had feared a rebuff. I had thought that even old Falcone might laugh at one predestined to the study of theology, desiring to enter into the mysteries of sword-craft. But my fears were far indeed from having a foundation. There was no laughter in the equerry's grey eyes, whilst the smile upon his lips was a smile of gladness, of eagerness, almost of thankfulness to see me so set.

And so it came to pass that daily thereafter did we practise for an hour or so in the armoury with sword and buckler, and with every lesson my proficiency with the iron grew in a manner that Falcone termed prodigious, swearing that I was born to the sword, that the knack of it was in the very blood of me.

It may be that affection for me caused him to overrate the progress that I made and the aptitude I showed; it may even be that what he said was no more than the good-natured flattery of one who loved me and would have me take pleasure in myself. And yet when I look back at the lad I was, I incline to think that he spoke no more than sober truth.

I have alluded to the curious, almost inexplicable delight it afforded me to feel in my hands the balance of a pike for the first time. Fain would I tell you something of all that I felt when first my fingers closed about a sword-hilt, the forefinger passed over the quillons in the new manner, as Falcone showed me. But it defies all power of words. The sweet seduction of its balance, the white gleaming beauty of the blade, were things that thrilled me with something akin to the thrill of the first kiss of passion. It was not quite the same, I know; yet I can think of nothing else in life that is worthy of being compared with it.

I was at the time a lad in my thirteenth year, but I was well-grown

and strong beyond my age, despite the fact that my mother had restrained me from all those exercises of horsemanship, of arms, and of wrestling by which boys of my years attain development. I stood almost as tall then as Falcone himself—who was accounted of a good height—and if my reach fell something short of his, I made up for this by the youthful quickness of my movements; so that soon—unless out of good nature he refrained from exerting his full vigour—I found myself Falcone's match.

Fra Gervasio, who was then my tutor, and with whom my mornings were spent in perfecting my Latin and giving me the rudiments of Greek, soon had his suspicions of where the hour of the siesta was spent by me with old Falcone. But the good, saintly man held his peace, a matter which at that time intrigued me. Others there were, however, who thought well to bear the tale of our doings to my mother, and thus it happened that she came upon us that day in the armoury, each of us in shirt and breeches at sword-and-target play.

We fell apart upon her entrance, each with a guilty feeling, like children caught in a forbidden orchard, for all that Falcone held himself proudly erect, his grizzled head thrown back, his eyes cold and hard.

A long while it seemed ere she spoke, and once or twice I shot her a furtive comprehensive glance, and saw her as I shall ever see her to my dying day.

Her eyes were upon me. I do not believe that she gave Falcone a single thought at first. It was at me only that she looked, and with such a sorrow in her glance to see me so vigorous and lusty, as surely could not have been fetched there by the sight of my corpse itself. Her lips moved awhile in silence; and whether she was at her everlasting prayers, or whether she was endeavouring to speak but could not for emotion, I do not know. At last her voice came, laden with a chill reproach.

"Agostino!" she said, and waited as if for some answer from me.

It was in that instant that rebellion stirred in me. Her coming had turned me cold, for all that my body was overheated from the exercise and I was sweating furiously. Now, at the sound of her voice, something of the injustice that oppressed me, something of the unreasoning bigotry that chained and fettered me, stood clear before my mental vision for the first time. It warmed me again with the warmth of sullen indignation. I returned her no answer beyond a curtly respectful invitation that she should speak her mind, couched—as had been her reproof—in a single word of address.

"Madonna?" I challenged, and emulating something of old Falcone's attitude, I drew myself erect, flung back my head, and brought my eyes to the level of her own by an effort of will such as I had never yet exerted.

It was, I think, the bravest thing I ever did. I felt, in doing it, as one feels who has nerved himself to enter fire. And when the thing was done, the ease of it surprised me. There followed no catastrophe such as I expected. Before my glance, grown suddenly so very bold, her own eyes drooped and fell away as was her habit. She spoke thereafter without looking at me, in that cold, emotionless voice that was peculiar to her always, the voice of one in whom the founts of all that is sweet and tolerant and tender in life are for ever frozen.

"What are you doing with weapons, Agostino?" she asked me.

"As you see, madam mother, I am at practice," I answered, and out of the corner of my eye I caught the grim approving twitch of old Falcone's lips.

"At practice?" she echoed, dully as one who does not understand. Then very slowly she shook her sorrowful head. "Men practise what they must one day perform, Agostino. To your books, then, and leave

swords for bloody men, nor ever let me see you again with weapons in your hands if you respect me."

"Had you not come hither, madam mother, you had been spared the sight to-day," I answered with some lingering spark of my rebellious fire still smouldering.

"It was God's will that I should come to set a term to such vanities before they take too strong a hold upon you," answered she. "Lay down those weapons."

Had she been angry, I think I could have withstood her. Anger in her at such a time must have been as steel upon the flint of my own nature. But against that incarnation of sorrow and sadness, my purpose, my strength of character were turned to water. By similar means had she ever prevailed with my poor father. And I had, too, the habit of obedience which is not so lightly broken as I had at first accounted possible.

Sullenly then I set down my sword upon a bench that stood against the wall, and my target with it. As I turned aside to do so, her gloomy eyes were poised for an instant upon Falcone, who stood grim and silent. Then they were lowered again ere she began to address him.

"You have done very ill, Falcone," said she. "You have abused my trust in you, and you have sought to pervert my son and to lead him into ways of evil."

He started under that reproof like a fiery stallion under the spur. His face flushed scarlet. The habit of obedience may have been strong in Falcone too; but it was obedience to men; with women he had never had much to do, old warrior though he was. Moreover, in this he felt that an affront had been put upon the memory of Giovanni d'Anguissola, who was my father and who went nigh to being Falcone's god. And this his answer plainly showed.

"The ways into which I lead your son, Madonna," said he in a low voice that boomed up and echoed in the groined ceiling overhead, "are the ways that were trod by my lord his father. And who says that the ways of Giovanni d'Anguissola were evil ways lies foully, be he man or woman, patrician or villein, pope or devil." And upon that he paused magnificently, his eyes aflash.

She shuddered under his rough speech. Then answered without looking up, and with no trace of anger in her voice:

"You are restored to health and strength by now, Messer Falcone. The seneschal shall have orders to pay you ten gold ducats in discharge of all that may be still your due from us. See that by night you have left Mondolfo."

And then, without changing her deadly inflection, or even making a noticeable pause, "Come, Agostino," she commanded.

But I did not move. Her words had fixed me there with horror. I heard from Falcone a sound that was between a growl and a sob. I dared not look at him, but the eye of my fancy saw him standing rigid, pale, and self-contained.

What would he do, what would he say? Oh, she had done a cruel, a bitterly cruel wrong. This poor old warrior, all scarred and patched from wounds that he had taken in my father's service, to be turned away in his old age, as we should not have turned away a dog! It was a monstrous thing. Mondolfo was his home. The Anguissola were his family, and their honour was his honour, since as a villein he had no honour of his own. To cast him out thus!

All this flashed through my anguished mind in one brief throb of time, as I waited, marvelling what he would do, what say, in answer to that dismissal.

He would not plead, or else I did not know him; and I was sure of

that, without knowing what else there was that must make it impossible for old Falcone to stoop to ask a favour of my mother.

Awhile he just stood there, his wits overthrown by sheer surprise. And then, when at last he moved, the thing he did was the last thing that I had looked for. Not to her did he turn; not to her, but to me, and he dropped on one knee before me.

"My lord!" he cried, and before he added another word I knew already what else he was about to say. For never yet had I been so addressed in my lordship of Mondolfo. To all there I was just the Madonnino. But to Falcone, in that supreme hour of his need, I was become his lord.

"My lord," he said, then. "Is it your wish that I should go?"

I drew back, still wrought upon by my surprise; and then my mother's voice came cold and acid.

"The Madonnino's wish is not concerned in this, Mester Falcone. It is I who order your departure."

Falcone did not answer her; he affected not to hear her, and continued to address himself to me.

"You are the master here, my lord," he urged. "You are the law in Mondolfo. You carry life and death in your right hand, and against your will no man or woman in your lordship can prevail."

He spoke the truth, a mighty truth which had stood like a mountain before me all these months, yet which I had not seen.

"I shall go or remain as you decree, my lord," he added; and then, almost in a snarl of defiance, "I obey none other," he concluded, "nor pope nor devil."

"Agostino, I am waiting for you," came my mother's voice from the

doorway.

Something had me by the throat. It was Temptation, and old Falcone was the tempter. More than that was he—though how much more I did not dream, nor with what authority he acted there. He was the Mentor who showed me the road to freedom and to manhood; he showed me how at a blow I might shiver the chains that held me, and shake them from me like the cobwebs that they were. He tested me, too; tried my courage and my will; and to my undoing was it that he found me wanting in that hour. My regrets for him went near to giving me the resolution that I lacked. Yet even these fell short.

I would to God I had given heed to him. I would to God I had flung back my head and told my mother—as he prompted me—that I was lord of Mondolfo, and that Falcone must remain since I so willed it.

I strove to do so out of my love for him rather than out of any such fine spirit as he sought to inspire in me. Had I succeeded I had established my dominion, I had become arbiter of my fate; and how much of misery, of anguish, and of sin might I not thereafter have been spared!

The hour was crucial, though I knew it not. I stood at a parting of ways; yet for lack of courage I hesitated to take the road to which so invitingly he beckoned me.

And then, before I could make any answer such as I desired, such as I strove to make, my mother spoke again, and by her tone, which had grown faltering and tearful—as was her wont in the old days when she ruled my father—she riveted anew the fetters I was endeavouring with all the strength of my poor young soul to snap.

"Tell him, Agostino, that your will is as your mother's. Tell him so and come. I am waiting for you."

I stifled a groan, and let my arms fall limply to my sides. I was a

weaking and contemptible. I realized it. And yet to-day when I look back I see how vast a strength I should have needed. I was but thirteen and of a spirit that had been cowed by her, and was held under her thrall.

"I... I am sorry, Falcone," I faltered, and there were tears in my eyes.

I shrugged again—shrugged in token of my despair and grief and impotence—and I moved down the long room towards the door where my mother waited.

I did not dare to bestow another look upon that poor broken old warrior, that faithful, lifelong servant, turned thus cruelly upon the world by a woman whom bigotry had sapped of all human feelings and a boy who was a coward masquerading under a great name.

I heard his gasping sob, and the sound smote upon my heart and hurt me as if it had been iron. I had failed him. He must suffer more in the knowledge of my unworthiness to be called the son of that master whom he had worshipped than in the destitution that might await him.

I reached the door.

"My lord! My lord!" he cried after me despairingly. On the very threshold I stood arrested by that heartbroken cry of his. I half turned.

"Falcone..." I began.

And then my mother's white hand fell upon my wrist.

"Come, my son," she said, once more impassive.

Nervelessly I obeyed her, and as I passed out I heard Falcone's voice crying:

"My lord, my lord! God help me, and God help you!" An hour later he had left the citadel, and on the stones of the courtyard lay ten

golden ducats which he had scattered there, and which not one of the greedy grooms or serving-men could take courage to pick up, so fearful a curse had old Falcone laid upon that money when he cast it from him.

CHAPTER III. THE PIETISTIC THRALL

That evening my mother talked to me at longer length than I remember her ever to have done before.

It may be that she feared lest Gino Falcone should have aroused in me notions which it was best to lull back at once into slumber. It may be that she, too, had felt something of the crucial quality of that moment in the armoury, just as she must have perceived my first hesitation to obey her slightest word, whence came her resolve to check this mutiny ere it should spread and become too big for her.

We sat in the room that was called her private dining-room, but which, in fact, was all things to her save the chamber in which she slept.

The fine apartments through which I had strayed as a little lad in my father's day, the handsome lofty chambers, with their frescoed ceilings, their walls hung with costly tapestries, many of which had come from the looms of Flanders, their floors of wood mosaics, and their great carved movables, had been shut up these many years.

For my mother's claustral needs sufficient was provided by the alcove in which she slept, the private chapel of the citadel in which she would spend long hours, and this private dining-room where we now sat. Into the spacious gardens of the castle she would seldom wander, into our town of Mondolfo never. Not since my father's departure upon his ill-starred rebellion had she set foot across the drawbridge.

"Tell me whom you go with, and I will tell you what you are," says the proverb. "Show me your dwelling, and I shall see your character," say I.

And surely never was there a chamber so permeated by the nature of its tenant as that private dining-room of my mother's.

It was a narrow room in the shape of a small parallelogram, with the windows set high up near the timbered, whitewashed ceiling, so that it was impossible either to look in or to look out, as is sometimes the case with the windows of a chapel.

On the white space of wall that faced the door hung a great wooden Crucifix, very rudely carved by one who either knew nothing of anatomy, or else—as is more probable—was utterly unable to set down his knowledge upon timber. The crudely tinted figure would be perhaps half the natural size of a man; and it was the most repulsive and hideous representation of the Tragedy of Golgotha that I have ever seen. It filled one with a horror which was far indeed removed from the pious horror which that Symbol is intended to arouse in every true believer. It emphasized all the ghastly ugliness of death upon that most barbarous of gallows, without any suggestion of the beauty and immensity of the Divine Martyrdom of Him Who in the likeness of the sinful flesh was Alone without sin.

And to me the ghastliest and most pitiful thing of all was an artifice which its maker had introduced for the purpose of conveying some suggestion of the supernatural to that mangled, malformed, less than human representation. Into the place of the wound made by the spear of Longinus, he had introduced a strip of crystal which caught the light at certain angles—more particularly when there were lighted tapers in the room—so that in reflecting this it seemed to shed forth luminous rays.

An odd thing was that my mother—who looked upon that Crucifix

with eyes that were very different from mine—would be at pains in the evening when lights were fetched to set a taper at such an angle as was best calculated to produce the effect upon which the sculptor had counted. What satisfaction it can have been to her to see reflected from that glazed wound the light which she herself had provided for the purpose, I am lost to think. And yet I am assured that she would contemplate that shining effluence in a sort of ecstatic awe, accounting it something very near akin to miracle.

Under this Crucifix hung a little alabaster font of holy-water, into the back of which was stuck a withered, yellow branch of palm, which was renewed on each Palm Sunday. Before it was set a praying-stool of plain oak, without any cushion to mitigate its harshness to the knees.

In the corner of the room stood a tall, spare, square cupboard, capacious but very plain, in which the necessities of the table were disposed. In the opposite corner there was another smaller cupboard with a sort of writing-pulpit beneath. Here my mother kept the accounts of her household, her books of recipes, her homely medicines and the heavy devotional tomes and lesser volumes—mostly manuscript—out of which she nourished her poor starving soul.

Amongst these was the Treatise of the Mental Sufferings of Christ—the book of the Blessed Battista of Varano, Princess of Camerino, who founded the convent of Poor Clares in that city—a book whose almost blasphemous presumption fired the train of my earliest misgivings.

Another was The Spiritual Combat, that queer yet able book of the cleric Scupoli—described as the "aureo libro," dedicated "Al Supremo Capitano e Gloriosissimo Trionfatore, Gesu Cristo, Figliuolo di Maria," and this dedication in the form of a letter to Our Saviour, signed, "Your most humble servant, purchased with Your Blood." 1

1 This work, which achieved a great vogue and of which several editions were issued down to 1750, was first printed in 1589. Clearly, however, MS. copies were in existence earlier, and it is to one of these that Agostino here refers.

Down the middle of the chamber ran a long square-ended table of oak, very plain like all the rest of the room's scant furnishings. At the head of this table was an arm-chair for my mother, of bare wood without any cushion to relieve its hardness, whilst on either side of the board stood a few lesser chairs for those who habitually dined there. These were, besides myself, Fra Gervasio, my tutor; Messer Giorgio, the castellan, a bald-headed old man long since past the fighting age and who in times of stress would have been as useful for purposes of defending Mondolfo as Lorenza, my mother's elderly woman, who sat below him at the board; he was toothless, bowed, and decrepit, but he was very devout—as he had need to be, seeing that he was half dead already—and this counted with my mother above any other virtue.²

2 Virtù is the word used by Agostino, and it is susceptible to a wider translation than that which the English language affords, comprising as it does a sense of courage and address at arms. Indeed, it is not clear that Agostino is not playing here upon the double meaning of the word.

The last of the four who habitually sat with us was Giojoso, the seneschal, a lantern-jawed fellow with black, beetling brows, about whom the only joyous thing was his misnomer of a name.

Of the table that we kept, beyond noting that the fare was ever of a lenten kind and that the wine was watered, I will but mention that my mother did not observe the barrier of the salt. There was no sitting above it or below at our board, as, from time immemorial, is the universal custom in feudal homes. That her having abolished it was an

act of humility on her part there can be little doubt, although this was a subject upon which she never expressed herself in my hearing.

The walls of that room were whitewashed and bare.

The floor was of stone overlain by a carpet of rushes that was changed no oftener than once a week.

From what I have told you, you may picture something of the chill gloom of the place, something of the pietism which hung upon the very air of that apartment in which so much of my early youth was spent. And it had, too, an odour that is peculiarly full of character, the smell which is never absent from a sacristy and rarely from conventual chambers; a smell difficult to define, faint and yet tenuously pungent, and like no other smell in all the world that I have ever known. It is a musty odour, an odour of staleness which perhaps an open window and the fresh air of heaven might relieve but could not dissipate; and to this is wed, but so subtly that it would be impossible to say which is predominant, the slight, sickly aroma of wax.

We supped there that night in silence at about the hour that poor Gino Falcone would be taking his departure. Silence was habitual with us at meal-times, eating being performed—like everything else in that drab household—as a sort of devotional act. Occasionally the silence would be relieved by readings aloud from some pious work, undertaken at my mother's bidding by one or another of the amanuenses.

But on the night in question there was just silence, broken chiefly by the toothless slobber of the castellan over the soft meats that were especially prepared for him. And there was something of grimness in that silence; for none—and Fra Gervasio less than any—approved the unchristian thing that out of excess of Christianity my mother had done in driving old Falcone forth.

Myself, I could not eat at all. My misery choked me. The thought of that old servitor whom I had loved being sent a wanderer and destitute, and all through my own weakness, all because I had failed him in his need, just as I had failed myself, was anguish to me. My lip would quiver at the thought, and it was with difficulty that I repressed my tears.

At last that hideous repast came to an end in prayers of thanksgiving whose immoderate length was out of all proportion to the fare provided.

The castellan shuffled forth upon the arm of the seneschal; Lorenza followed at a sign from my mother, and we three—Gervasio, my mother, and I—were left alone.

And here let me say a word of Fra Gervasio. He was, as I have already written, my father's foster-brother. That is to say, he was the child of a sturdy peasant-woman of the Val di Taro, from whose lusty, healthy breast my father had suckled the first of that fine strength that had been his own.

He was older than my father by a month or so, and as often happens in such cases, he was brought to Mondolfo to be first my father's playmate, and later, no doubt, to have followed him as a man-at-arms. But a chill that he took in his tenth year as a result of a long winter immersion in the icy waters of the Taro laid him at the point of death, and left him thereafter of a rather weak and sickly nature. But he was quick and intelligent, and was admitted to learn his letters with my father, whence it ensued that he developed a taste for study. Seeing that by his health he was debarred from the hardy open life of a soldier, his scholarly aptitude was encouraged, and it was decided that he should follow a clerical career.

He had entered the order of St. Francis; but after some years at the Convent of Aguilona, his health having been indifferent and the

conventional rules too rigorous for his condition, he was given licence to become the chaplain of Mondolfo. Here he had received the kindest treatment at the hands of my father, who entertained for his sometime playmate a very real affection.

He was a tall, gaunt man with a sweet, kindly face, reflecting his sweet, kindly nature; he had deep-set, dark eyes, very gentle in their gaze, a tender mouth that was a little drawn by lines of suffering and an upright wrinkle, deep as a gash, between his brows at the root of his long, slender nose.

He it was that night who broke the silence that endured even after the others had departed. He spoke at first as if communing with himself, like a man who thinks aloud; and between his thumb and his long forefinger, I remember that he kneaded a crumb of bread upon which his eyes were intent.

"Gino Falcone is an old man, and he was my lord's best-loved servant. He would have died for my lord, and joyfully; and now he is turned adrift, to die to no purpose. Ah, well." He heaved a deep sigh and fell silent, whilst I—the pent-up anguish in me suddenly released to hear my thoughts thus expressed—fell soundlessly to weeping.

"Do you reprove me, Fra Gervasio?" quoth my mother, quite emotionless.

The monk pushed back his stool and rose ere he replied. "I must," he said, "or I am unworthy of the scapulary I wear. I must reprove this unchristian act, or else am I no true servant of my Master."

She crossed herself with her thumb-nail upon the brow and upon the lips, to repress all evil thoughts and evil words—an unfailing sign that she was stirred to anger and sought to combat the sin of it. Then she spoke, meekly enough, in the same cold, level voice.

"I think it is you who are at fault," she told him, "when you call

unchristian an act which was necessary to secure this child to Christ."

He smiled a sad little smile. "Yet even so, it were well you should proceed with caution and with authority; and in this you have none."

It was her turn to smile, the palest, ghostliest of smiles, and even for so much she must have been oddly moved. "I think I have," said she and quoted, "'If thy right hand offend thee, hack it off.'"

I saw a hot flush mount to the friar's prominent cheek-bones. Indeed, he was a very human man under his conventual robe, with swift stirrings of passion which the long habit of repression had not yet succeeded in extinguishing. He cast his eyes to the ceiling in such a glance of despair as left me thoughtful. It was as an invocation to Heaven to look down upon the obstinate, ignorant folly of this woman who accounted herself wise and who so garbled the Divine teaching as to blaspheme with complacency.

I know that now; at the time I was not quite so clear-sighted as to read the full message of that glance.

Her audacity was as the audacity of fools. Where wisdom, full-fledged, might have halted, trembling, she swept resolutely onward. Before her stood this friar, this teacher and interpreter, this man of holy life who was accounted profoundly learned in the Divinities; and he told her that she had done an evil thing. Yet out of the tiny pittance of her knowledge and her little intellectual sight—which was no better than a blindness—must she confidently tell him that he was at fault.

Argument was impossible between him and her. Thus much I saw, and I feared an explosion of the wrath of which I perceived in him the signs. But he quelled it. Yet his voice rumbled thunderously upon his next words.

"It matters something that Gino Falcone should not starve," he said.

"It matters more that my son should not be damned," she answered him, and with that answer left him weapon-less, for against the armour of a crassness so dense and one-ideaed there are no weapons that can prevail.

"Listen," she said, and her eyes, raised for a moment, comprehended both of us in their glance. "There is something that it were best I tell you, that once for all you may fathom the depth of my purpose for Agostino here. My lord his father was a man of blood and strife..."

"And so were many whose names stand to-day upon the roll of saints and are its glory," answered the friar with quick asperity.

"But they did not raise their arms against the Holy Church and against Christ's Own most holy Vicar, as did he," she reminded him sorrowfully. "The sword is an ill thing save when it is wielded in a holy cause. In my lord's hands, wielded in the unholyest of all causes, it became a thing accursed. But God's anger overtook him and laid him low at Perugia in all the strength and vigour that had made him arrogant as Lucifer. It was perhaps well for all of us that it so befell."

"Madonna!" cried Gervasio in stern horror.

But she went on quite heedless of him. "Best of all was it for me, since I was spared the harshest duty that can be imposed upon a woman and a wife. It was necessary that he should expiate the evil he had wrought; moreover, his life was become a menace to my child's salvation. It was his wish to make of Agostino such another as himself, to lead his only son adown the path of Hell. It was my duty to my God and to my son to shield this boy. And to accomplish that I would have delivered up his father to the papal emissaries who sought him."

"Ah, never that!" the friar protested. "You could never have done

that!"

"Could I not? I tell you it was as good as done. I tell you that the thing was planned. I took counsel with my confessor, and he showed me my plain duty."

She paused a moment, whilst we stared, Fra Gervasio white-faced and with mouth that gaped in sheer horror.

"For years had he eluded the long arm of the pope's justice," she resumed. "And during those years he had never ceased to plot and plan the overthrow of the Pontifical dominion. He was blinded by his arrogance to think that he could stand against the hosts of Heaven. His stubbornness in sin had made him mad. Quem Deus vult perdere..." And she waved one of her emaciated hands, leaving the quotation unfinished. "Heaven showed me the way, chose me for its instrument. I sent him word, offering him shelter here at Mondolfo where none would look to find him, assuming it to be the last place to which he would adventure. He was to have come when death took him on the field of Perugia."

There was something here that I did not understand at all. And in like case, it seemed, was Fra Gervasio, for he passed a hand over his brow, as if to clear thence some veils that clogged his understanding.

"He was to have come?" he echoed. "To shelter?" he asked.

"Nay," said she quietly, "to death. The papal emissaries had knowledge of it and would have been here to await him."

"You would have betrayed him?" Fra Gervasio's voice was hoarse, his eyes were burning sombrely.

"I would have saved my son," said she, with quiet satisfaction, in a tone that revealed how incontestably right she conceived herself to

be.

He stood there, and he seemed taller and more gaunt than usual, for he had drawn himself erect to the full of his great height—and he was a man who usually went bowed. His hands were clenched and the knuckles showed blue-white like marble. His face was very pale and in his temple a little pulse was throbbing visibly. He swayed slightly upon his feet, and the sight of him frightened me a little. He seemed so full of terrible potentialities.

When I think of vengeance, I picture to myself Fra Gervasio as I beheld him in that hour. Nothing that he could have done would have surprised me. Had he fallen upon my mother then, and torn her limb from limb, it would have been no more than from the sight of him I might have expected.

I have said that nothing that he could have done would have surprised me. Rather should I have said that nothing would have surprised me save the thing he did.

Whilst a man might have counted ten stood he so—she seeing nothing of the strange transfiguration that had come over him, for her eyes were downcast as ever. Then quite slowly, his hands unclenched, his arms fell limply to his sides, his head sank forward upon his breast, and his figure bowed itself lower than was usual. Quite suddenly, quite softly, almost as a man who swoons, he sank down again into the chair from which he had risen.

He set his elbows on the table, and took his head in his hands. A groan escaped him. She heard it, and looked at him in her furtive way.

"You are moved by this knowledge, Fra Gervasio," she said and sighed. "I have told you this—and you, Agostino—that you may know how deep, how ineradicable is my purpose. You were a votive

offering, Agostino; you were vowed to the service of God that your father's life might be spared, years ago, ere you were born. From the very edge of death was your father brought back to life and strength. He would have used that life and that strength to cheat God of the price of His boon to me."

"And if," Fra Gervasio questioned almost fiercely, "Agostino in the end should have no vocation, should have no call to such a life?"

She looked at him very wistfully, almost pityingly. "How should that be?" she asked. "He was offered to God. And that God accepted the gift, He showed when He gave Giovanni back to life. How, then, could it come to pass that Agostino should have no call? Would God reject that which He had accepted?"

Fra Gervasio rose again. "You go too deep for me, Madonna," he said bitterly. "It is not for me to speak of my gifts save reverently and in profound and humble gratitude for that grace by which God bestowed them upon me. But I am accounted something of a casuist. I am a doctor of theology and of canon law, and but for the weak state of my health I should be sitting to-day in the chair of canon law at the University of Pavia. And yet, Madonna, the things you tell me with such assurance make a mock of everything I have ever learnt."

Even I, lad as I was, perceived the bitter irony in which he spoke. Not so she. I vow she flushed under what she accounted his praise of her wisdom and divine revelation; for vanity is the last human weakness to be discarded. Then she seemed to recollect herself. She bowed her head very reverently.

"It is God's grace that reveals to me the truth," she said.

He fell back a step in his amazement at having been so thoroughly misunderstood. Then he drew away from the table. He looked at her as he would speak, but checked on the thought. He turned, and so,

without another word, departed, and left us sitting there together.

It was then that we had our talk; or, rather, that she talked, whilst I sat listening. And presently as I listened, I came gradually once more under the spell of which I had more than once that day been on the point of casting off the yoke.

For, after all, you are to discern in what I have written here, between what were my feelings at the time and what are my criticisms of to-day in the light of the riper knowledge to which I have come. The handling of a sword had thrilled me strangely, as I have shown. Yet was I ready to believe that such a thrill was but a lure of Satan's, as my mother assured me. In deeper matters she might harbour error, as Fra Gervasio's irony had shown me that he believed. But we went that night into no great depths.

She spent an hour or so in vague discourse upon the joys of Paradise, in showing me the folly of jeopardizing them for the sake of the fleeting vanities of this ephemeral world. She dealt at length upon the love of God for us, and the love which we should bear to Him, and she read to me passages from the book of the Blessed Varano and from Scupoli to add point to her teachings upon the beauty and nobility of a life that is devoted to God's service—the only service of this world in which nobility can exist.

And then she added little stories of martyrs who had suffered for the faith, of the tortures to which they had been subjected, and of the happiness they had felt in actual suffering, of the joy that their very torments had brought them, borne up as they were by their faith and the strength of their love of God.

There was in all this nothing that was new to me, nothing that I did not freely accept and implicitly believe without pausing to judge or criticize. And yet, it was shrewd of her to have plied me then as she did; for thereby, beyond doubt, she checked me upon the point of self-

questioning to which that day's happenings were urging me, and she brought me once more obediently to heel and caused me to fix my eyes more firmly than ever beyond the things of this world and upon the glories of the next which I was to make my goal and aim.

Thus came I back within the toils from which I had been for a moment tempted to escape; and what is more, my imagination fired to some touch of ecstasy by those tales of sainted martyrs, I returned willingly to the pietistic thrall, to be held in it more firmly than ever yet before.

We parted as we always parted, and when I had kissed her cold hand I went my way to bed. And if I knelt that night to pray that God might watch over poor errant Falcone, it was to the end that Falcone might be brought to see the sin and error of his ways and win to the grace of a happy death when his hour came.

CHAPTER IV. LUISINA

Of the four years that followed little mention need be made in these pages, save for one incident whose importance is derived entirely from that which subsequently befell, for at the time it had no meaning for me. Yet since later it was to have much, it is fitting that it should be recorded here.

It happened that a month or so after old Falcone had left us there wandered one noontide into the outer courtyard of the castle two pilgrim fathers, on their way—as they announced—from Milan to visit the Holy House at Loreto.

It was my mother's custom to receive all pilgrim wayfarers and beggars in this courtyard at noontide twice in each week to bestow upon them food and alms. Rarely was she, herself, present at that alms-giving; more rarely still was I. It was Fra Gervasio who discharged the office of almoner on the Countess of Mondolfo's behalf. Occasionally the whines and snarls of the motley crowd that gathered there—for they were not infrequently quarrelsome—reached us in the maschio tower where we had our apartments. But on the day of which I speak I chanced to stand in the pillared gallery above the courtyard, watching the heaving, surging human mass below, for the concourse was greater than usual.

Cripples there were of every sort, and all in rags; some with twisted, withered limbs, others with mere stumps where limbs had been lopped off, others again—and there were many of these—with hideous running sores, some of which no doubt would be counterfeit—as I now know—and contrived with poultices of salt for the purpose of exciting charity in the piteous. All were dishevelled, unkempt,

ragged, dirty, and, doubtless, verminous. Most were greedy and wolfish as they thrust one another aside to reach Fra Gervasio, as if they feared that the supply of alms and food should be exhausted ere their turn arrived. Amongst them there was commonly a small sprinkling of mendicant friars, some of these, perhaps, just the hypocrite rogues that I have since discovered many of them to be though at the time all who wore the scapulary were holy men in my innocent eyes. They were mostly, or so they pretended, bent upon pilgrimages to distant parts, living upon such alms as they could gather on their way.

On the steps of the chapel Fra Gervasio would stand—gaunt and impassive—with his posse of attendant grooms behind him. One of the latter, standing nearest to our almoner, held a great sack of broken bread; another presented a wooden, trough-like platter filled with slices of meat, and a third dispensed out of horn cups a poor, thin, and rather sour, but very wholesome wine, which he drew from the skins that were his charge.

From one to the other were the beggars passed on by Fra Gervasio, and lastly came they back to him, to receive from his hands a piece of money—a grosso, of which he held the bag himself.

On the day of which I write, as I stood there gazing down upon that mass of misery, marvelling perhaps a little upon the inequality of fortune, and wondering vaguely what God could be about to inflict so much suffering upon certain of His creatures, to cause one to be born into purple and another into rags, my eyes were drawn by the insistent stare of two monks who stood at the back of the crowd with their shoulders to the wall.

They were both tall men, and they stood with their cowls over their tonsures, in the conventual attitude, their hands tucked away into the ample sleeves of their brown habits. One of this twain was broader than his companion and very erect of carriage, such as was unusual

in a monk. His mouth and the half of his face were covered by a thick brown beard, and athwart his countenance, from under the left eye across his nose and cheek, ran a great livid scar to lose itself in the beard towards the right jaw. His deep-set eyes regarded me so intently that I coloured uncomfortably under their gaze; for accustomed as I was to seclusion, I was easily abashed. I turned away and went slowly along the gallery to the end; and yet I had a feeling that those eyes were following me, and, indeed, casting a swift glance over my shoulder ere I went indoors, I saw that this was so.

That evening at supper I chanced to mention the matter to Fra Gervasio.

"There was a big bearded capuchin in the yard at alms-time to-day—" I was beginning, when the friar's knife clattered from his hand, and he looked at me with eyes of positive fear out of a face from which the last drop of blood had abruptly receded. I checked my inquiry at the sight of him thus suddenly disordered, whilst my mother, who, as usual, observed nothing, made a foolish comment.

"The little brothers are never absent, Agostino."

"This brother was a big brother," said I.

"It is not seemly to make jest of holy men," she reproved me in her chilling voice.

"I had no thought to jest," I answered soberly. "I should never have remarked this friar but that he gazed upon me with so great an intentness—so great that I was unable to bear it."

It was her turn to betray emotion. She looked at me full and long—for once—and very searchingly. She, too, had grown paler than was her habit.

"Agostino, what do you tell me?" quoth she, and her voice quivered.

Now here was a deal of pother about a capuchin who had stared at the Madonnino of Anguissola! The matter was out of all proportion to the stir it made, and I conveyed in my next words some notion of that opinion.

But she stared wistfully. "Never think it, Agostino," she besought me. "You know not what it may import." And then she turned to Fra Gervasio. "Who was this mendicant?" she asked.

He had by now recovered from his erstwhile confusion. But he was still pale, and I observed that his hand trembled.

"He must have been one of the two little brothers of St. Francis on their way, they said, from Milan to Loreto on a pilgrimage."

"Not those you told me are resting here until to-morrow?"

From his face I saw that he would have denied it had it lain within his power to utter a deliberate falsehood.

"They are the same," he answered in a low voice.

She rose. "I must see this friar," she announced, and never in all my life had I beheld in her such a display of emotion.

"In the morning, then," said Fra Gervasio. "It is after sunset," he explained. "They have retired, and their rule..." He left the sentence unfinished, but he had said enough to be understood by her.

She sank back to her chair, folded her hands in her lap and fell into meditation. The faintest of flushes crept into her wax-like cheeks.

"If it should be a sign!" she murmured raptly, and then she turned again to Fra Gervasio. "You heard Agostino say that he could not bear this friar's gaze. You remember, brother, how a pilgrim appeared near San Rufino to the nurse of Saint Francis, and took from her arms the child that he might bless it ere once more he

vanished? If this should be a sign such as that!"

She clasped her hands together fervently. "I must see this friar ere he departs again," she said to the staring, dumbfounded Fra Gervasio.

At last, then, I understood her emotion. All her life she had prayed for a sign of grace for herself or for me, and she believed that here at last was something that might well be discovered upon inquiry to be an answer to her prayer. This capuchin who had stared at me from the courtyard became at once to her mind—so ill-balanced upon such matters—a supernatural visitant, harbinger, as it were, of my future saintly glory.

But though she rose betimes upon the morrow, to see the holy man ere he fared forth again, she was not early enough. In the courtyard whither she descended to make her way to the outhouse where the two were lodged, she met Fra Gervasio, who was astir before her.

"The friar?" she cried anxiously, filled already with forebodings. "The holy man?"

Gervasio stood before her, pale and trembling. "You are too late, Madonna. Already he is gone."

She observed his agitation now, and beheld in it a reflection of her own, springing from the selfsame causes. "Oh, it was a sign indeed!" she exclaimed. "And you have come to realize it, too, I see." Next, in a burst of gratitude that was almost pitiful upon such slight foundation, "Oh, blessed Agostino!" she cried out.

Then the momentary exaltation fell from that woman of sorrows. "This but makes my burden heavier, my responsibility greater," she wailed. "God help me bear it!"

Thus passed that incident so trifling in itself and so misunderstood

by her. But it was never forgotten, and from time to time she would allude to it as the sign which had been vouchsafed me and for which great should be my thankfulness and my joy.

Save for that, in the four years that followed, time flowed an uneventful course within the four walls of the big citadel—for beyond those four walls I was never once permitted to set foot; and although from time to time I heard rumours of doings in the town itself, of the affairs of the State whereof I was by right of birth the tyrant, and of the greater business of the big world beyond, yet so trained and schooled was I that I had no great desire for a nearer acquaintance with that world.

A certain curiosity did at times beset me, spurred not so much by the little that I heard as by things that I read in such histories as my studies demanded I should read. For even the lives of saints, and Holy Writ itself, afford their student glimpses of the world. But this curiosity I came to look upon as a lure of the flesh, and to resist. Blessed are they who are out of all contact with the world, since to them salvation comes more easily; so I believed implicitly, as I was taught by my mother and by Fra Gervasio at my mother's bidding.

And as the years passed under such influences as had been at work upon me from the cradle, influences which had known no check save that brief one afforded by Gino Falcone, I became perforce devout and pious from very inclination.

Joyous transports were afforded me by the study of the life of that Saint Luigi of the noble Mantuan House of Gonzaga—in whom I saw an ideal to be emulated, since he seemed to me to be much in my own case and of my own estate—who had counted the illusory greatness of this world well lost so that he might win the bliss of Paradise. Similarly did I take delight in the Life, written by Tommaso da Celano, of that blessed son of Pietro Bernardone, the merchant of Assisi, that Francis who became the Troubadour of the Lord and

sang so sweetly the praises of His Creation. My heart would swell within me and I would weep hot and very bitter tears over the narrative of the early and sinful part of his life, as we may weep to see a beloved brother beset by deadly perils. And greater, hence, was the joy, the exultation, and finally the sweet peace and comfort that I gathered from the tale of his conversion, of his wondrous works, and of the Three Companions.

In these pages—so lively was my young imagination and so wrought upon by what I read—I suffered with him again his agonies of hope, I thrilled with some of the joy of his stupendous ecstasies, and I almost envied him the signal mark of Heavenly grace that had imprinted the stigmata upon his living body.

All that concerned him, too, I read: his *Little Flowers*, his *Testament*, *The Mirror of Perfection*; but my greatest delight was derived from his *Song of the Creatures*, which I learnt by heart.

Oftentimes since have I wondered and sought to determine whether it was the piety of those lauds that charmed me spiritually, or an appeal to my senses made by the beauty of the lines and the imagery which the Assisian used in his writings.

Similarly I am at a loss to determine whether the pleasure I took in reading of the joyous, perfumed life of that other stigmatized saint, the blessed Catherine of Siena, was not a sensuous pleasure rather than the soul-ecstasy I supposed it at the time.

And as I wept over the early sins of St. Francis, so too did I weep over the rhapsodical *Confessions* of St. Augustine, that mighty theologian after whom I had been named, and whose works—after those concerning St. Francis—exerted a great influence upon me in those early days.

Thus did I grow in grace until Fra Gervasio, who watched me

narrowly and anxiously, seemed more at ease, setting aside the doubts that earlier had tormented him lest I should be forced upon a life for which I had no vocation. He grew more tender and loving towards me, as if something of pity lurked within the strong affection in which he held me.

And, meanwhile, as I grew in grace of spirit, so too did I grow in grace of body, waxing tall and very strong, which would have been nowise surprising but that those nurtured as was I are seldom lusty. The mind feeding overmuch upon the growing body is apt to sap its strength and vigour, besides which there was the circumstance that I continued throughout those years a life almost of confinement, deprived of all the exercises by which youth is brought to its fine flower of strength.

As I was approaching my eighteenth year there befell another incident, which, trivial in itself, yet has its place in my development and so should have its place within these confessions. Nor did I judge it trivial at the time—nor were trivial the things that followed out of it—trivial though it may seem to me to-day as I look back upon it through all the murk of later life.

Giojoso, the seneschal, of whom I have spoken, had a son, a great raw-boned lad whom he would have trained as an amanuensis, but who was one of Nature's dunces out of which there is nothing useful to be made. He was strong-limbed, however, and he was given odd menial duties to perform about the castle. But these he shirked where possible, as he had shirked his lessons in earlier days.

Now it happened that I was walking one spring morning—it was in May of that year '44 of which I am now writing—on the upper of the three spacious terraces that formed the castle garden. It was but an indifferently tended place, and yet perhaps the more agreeable on that account, since Nature had been allowed to have her prodigal, luxuriant way. It is true that the great boxwood hedges needed

trimming, and that weeds were sprouting between the stones of the flights of steps that led from terrace to terrace; but the place was gay and fragrant with wild blossoms, and the great trees afforded generous shade, and the long rank grass beneath them made a pleasant couch to lie on during the heat of the day in summer. The lowest terrace of all was in better case. It was a well-planted and well-tended orchard, where I got many a colic in my earlier days from a gluttony of figs and peaches whose complete ripening I was too impatient to await.

I walked there, then, one morning quite early on the upper terrace immediately under the castle wall, and alternately I read from the *De Civitate Dei* which I had brought with me, alternately mused upon the matter of my reading. Suddenly I was disturbed by a sound of voices just below me.

The boxwood hedge, being twice my height and fully two feet thick, entirely screened the speakers from my sight.

There were two voices, and one of these, angry and threatening, I recognized for that of Rinolfo—Messer Giojoso's graceless son; the other, a fresh young feminine voice, was entirely unknown to me; indeed it was the first girl's voice I could recall having heard in all my eighteen years, and the sound was as pleasantly strange as it was strangely pleasant.

I stood quite still, to listen to its expostulations.

"You are a cruel fellow, Ser Rinolfo, and Madonna the Countess shall be told of this."

There followed a crackling of twigs and a rush of heavy feet.

"You shall have something else of which to tell Madonna's beatitude," threatened the harsh voice of Rinolfo.

That and his advances were answered by a frightened screech, a screech that moved rapidly to the right as it was emitted. There came more snapping of twigs, a light scurrying sound followed by a heavier one, and lastly a panting of breath and a soft pattering of running feet upon the steps that led up to the terrace where I walked.

I moved forward rapidly to the opening in the hedge where these steps debouched, and no sooner had I appeared there than a soft, lithe body hurtled against me so suddenly that my arms mechanically went round it, my right hand still holding the *De Civitate Dei*, forefinger enclosed within its pages to mark the place.

Two moist dark eyes looked up appealingly into mine out of a frightened but very winsome, sun-tinted face.

"O Madonnino!" she panted. "Protect me! Save me!"

Below us, checked midway in his furious ascent, halted Rinolfo, his big face red with anger, scowling up at me in sudden doubt and resentment.

The situation was not only extraordinary in itself, but singularly disturbing to me. Who the girl was, or whence she came, I had no thought or notion as I surveyed her. She would be of about my own age, or perhaps a little younger, and from her garb it was plain that she belonged to the peasant class. She wore a spotless bodice of white linen, which but indifferently concealed the ripening swell of her young breast. Her petticoat, of dark red homespun, stopped short above her bare brown ankles, and her little feet were naked. Her brown hair, long and abundant, was still fastened at the nape of her slim neck, but fell loose beyond that, having been disturbed, no doubt, in her scuffle with Rinolfo. Her little mouth was deeply red and it held strong young teeth that were as white as milk.

I have since wondered whether she was as beautiful as I deemed

her in that moment. For it must be remembered that mine was the case of the son of Filippo Balducci—related by Messer Boccaccio in the merry tales of his Decamerone 1—who had come to years of adolescence without ever having beheld womanhood, so that the first sight of it in the streets of Florence affected him so oddly that he vexed his sire with foolish questions and still more foolish prayers.

1 In the Introduction to the Fourth Day.

So was it now with me. In all my eighteen years I had by my mother's careful contriving never set eyes upon a woman of an age inferior to her own. And—consider me foolish if you will but so it is—I do not think that it had occurred to me that they existed, or else, if they did, that in youth they differed materially from what in age I found them. Thus I had come to look upon women as just feeble, timid creatures, over-prone to gossip, tears, and lamentations, and good for very little that I could perceive.

I had been unable to understand for what reason it was that San Luigi of Gonzaga had from years of discretion never allowed his eyes to rest upon a woman; nor could I see wherein lay the special merit attributed to this. And certain passages in the Confessions of St. Augustine and in the early life of St. Francis of Assisi bewildered me and left me puzzled.

But now, quite suddenly, it was as if revelation had come to me. It was as if the Book of Life had at last been opened for me, and at a glance I had read one of its dazzling pages. So that whether this brown peasant girl was beautiful or not, beautiful she seemed to me with the radiant beauty that is attributed to the angels of Paradise. Nor did I doubt that she would be as holy, for to see in beauty a mark of divine favour is not peculiar only to the ancient Greeks.

And because of the appeal of this beauty—real or supposed—I was very ready with my protection, since I felt that protection must

carry with it certain rights of ownership which must be very sweet and were certainly desired.

Holding her, therefore, within the shelter of my arms, where in her heedless innocence she had flung herself, and by very instinct stroking with one hand her little brown head to soothe her fears, I became truculent for the first time in my new-found manhood, and boldly challenged her pursuer.

"What is this, Rinolfo?" I demanded. "Why do you plague her?"

"She broke up my snares," he answered sullenly, "and let the birds go free."

"What snares? What birds?" quoth I.

"He is a cruel beast," she shrilled. "And he will lie to you, Madonnino."

"If he does I'll break the bones of his body," I promised in a tone entirely new to me. And then to him—"The truth now, poltroon!" I admonished him.

At last I got the story out of them: how Rinolfo had scattered grain in a little clearing in the garden, and all about it had set twigs that were heavily smeared with viscum; that he set this trap almost daily, and daily took a great number of birds whose necks he wrung and had them cooked for him with rice by his silly mother; that it was a sin in any case to take little birds by such cowardly means, but that since amongst these birds there were larks and thrushes and plump blackbirds and other sweet musicians of the air, whose innocent lives were spent in singing the praises of God, his sin became a hideous sacrilege.

Finally I learnt that coming that morning upon half a score of poor fluttering terrified birds held fast in Rinolfo's viscous snares, the little

girl had given them their liberty and had set about breaking up the springs. At this occupation he had caught her, and there is no doubt that he would have taken a rude vengeance but for the sanctuary which she had found in me.

And when I had heard, behold me for the first time indulging the prerogative that was mine by right of birth, and dispensing justice at Mondolfo like the lord of life and death that I was there.

"You, Rinolfo," I said, "will set no more snares here at Mondolfo, nor will you ever again enter these gardens under pain of my displeasure and its consequences. And as for this child, if you dare to molest her for what has happened now, or if you venture so much as to lay a finger upon her at any time and I have word of it, I shall deal with you as with a felon. Now go."

He went straight to his father, the seneschal, with a lying tale of my having threatened him with violence and forbidden him ever to enter the garden again because he had caught me there with Luisina—as the child was called—in my arms. And Messer Giojoso, full of parental indignation at this gross treatment of his child, and outraged chastity at the notion of a young man of churchly aims, as were mine, being in perverse dalliance with that peasant-wench, repaired straight to my mother with the story of it, which I doubt not lost nothing by its repetition.

Meanwhile I abode there with Luisina. I was in no haste to let her go. Her presence pleased me in some subtle, quite indefinable manner; and my sense of beauty, which, always strong, had hitherto lain dormant within me, was awake at last and was finding nourishment in the graces of her.

I sat down upon the topmost of the terrace steps, and made her sit beside me. This she did after some demur about the honour of it and her own unworthiness, objections which I brushed peremptorily aside.

So we sat there on that May morning, quite close together, for which there was, after all, no need, seeing that the steps were of a noble width. At our feet spread the garden away down the flight of terraces to end in the castle's grey, buttressed wall. But from where we sat we could look beyond this, our glance meeting the landscape a mile or so away with the waters of the Taro glittering in the sunshine and the Apennines, all hazy, for an ultimate background.

I took her hand, which she relinquished to me quite freely and frankly with an innocence as great as my own; and I asked her who she was and how she came to Mondolfo. It was then that I learnt that her name was Luisina, that she was the daughter of one of the women employed in the castle kitchen, who had brought her to help there a week ago from Borgo Taro, where she had been living with an aunt.

To-day the notion of the Tyrant of Mondolfo sitting—almost *coram populo*—on the steps of the garden of his castle, clasping the hand of the daughter of one of his scullions, is grotesque and humiliating. At the time the thought never presented itself to me at all, and had it done so it would have troubled me no whit. She was my first glimpse of fresh young maidenhood, and I was filled with pleasant interest and desirous of more acquaintance with this phenomenon. Beyond that I did not go.

I told her frankly that she was very beautiful. Whereupon she looked at me with suddenly startled eyes that were full of fearful questionings, and made to draw her hand from mine. Unable to understand her fears, and seeking to reassure her, to convince her that in me she had a friend, one who would ever protect her from the brutalities of all the Rinolfos in the world, I put an arm about her shoulders and drew her closer to me, gently and protectingly.

She suffered it very stonily, like a poor fascinated thing that is robbed by fear of its power to resist the evil that it feels enfolding it.

"O Madonnino!" she whispered fearfully, and sighed. "Nay, you must not. It... it is not good."

"Not good?" quoth I, and it was just so that that fool of a son of Balducci's must have protested in the story when he was told by his father that it was not good to look on women. "Nay, now, but it is good to me."

"And they say you are to be a priest," she added, which seemed to me a very foolish and inconsequent thing to add.

"Well, then? And what of that?" I asked.

She looked at me again with those timid eyes of hers. "You should be at your studies," said she.

"I am," said I, and smiled. "I am studying a new subject."

"Madonnino, it is not a subject whose study makes good priests," she announced, and puzzled me again by the foolish inconsequence of her words.

Already, indeed, she began to disappoint me. Saving my mother—whom I did not presume to judge at all, and who seemed a being altogether apart from what little humanity I had known until then—I had found that foolishness was as natural to women as its bleat to a sheep or its cackle to a goose; and in this opinion I had been warmly confirmed by Fra Gervasio. Now here in Luisina I had imagined at first that I had discovered a phase of womanhood unsuspected and exceptional. She was driving me to conclude, however, that I had been mistaken, and that here was just a pretty husk containing a very trivial spirit, whose companionship must prove a dull affair when custom should have staled the first impression of her fresh young beauty.

It is plain now that I did her an injustice, for there was about her

words none of the inconsequence I imagined. The fault was in myself and in the profound ignorance of the ways of men and women which went hand in hand with my deep but ineffectual learning in the ways of saints.

Our entertainment, however, was not destined to go further. For at the moment in which I puzzled over her words and sought to attach to them some intelligent meaning, there broke from behind us a scream that flung us apart, as startled as if we had been conscious indeed of guilt.

We looked round to find that it had been uttered by my mother. Not ten yards away she stood, a tall black figure against the grey background of the lichened wall, with Giojoso in attendance and Rinolfo slinking behind his father, leering.

CHAPTER V. REBELLION

The sight of my mother startled me more than I can say. It filled me with a positive dread of things indefinable. Never before had I seen her coldly placid countenance so strangely disordered, and her unwonted aspect it must have been that wrought so potently upon me.

No longer was she the sorrowful spectre, white-faced, with downcast eyes and level, almost inanimate, tones. Her cheeks were flushed unnaturally, her lips were quivering, and angry fires were smouldering in her deep-set eyes.

Swiftly she came down to us, seeming almost to glide over the ground. Not me she addressed, but poor Luisina; and her voice was hoarse with an awful anger.

"Who are you, wench?" quoth she. "What make you here in Mondolfo?"

Luisina had risen and stood swaying there, very white and with averted eyes, her hands clasping and unclasping. Her lips moved; but she was too terrified to answer. It was Giojoso who stepped forward to inform my mother of the girl's name and condition. And upon learning it her anger seemed to increase.

"A kitchen-wench!" she cried. "O horror!"

And quite suddenly, as if by inspiration, scarce knowing what I said or that I spoke at all, I answered her out of the store of the theological learning with which she had had me stuffed.

"We are all equals in the sight of God, madam mother."

She flashed me a glance of anger, of pious anger than which none can be more terrible.

"Blasphemer!" she denounced me. "What has God to do with this?"

She waited for no answer, rightly judging, perhaps, that I had none to offer.

"And as for that wanton," she commanded, turning fiercely to Giojoso, "let her be whipped hence and out of the town of Mondolfo. Set the grooms to it."

But upon that command of hers I leapt of a sudden to my feet, a tightening about my heart, and beset by a certain breathlessness that turned me pale.

Here again, it seemed, was to be repeated—though with methods a thousand times more barbarous and harsh—the wrong that was done years ago in the case of poor Gino Falcone. And the reason for it in this instance was not even dimly apparent to me. Falcone I had loved; indeed, in my eighteen years of life he was the only human being who had knocked for admission upon the portals of my heart. Him they had driven forth. And now, here was a child—the fairest creature of God's that until that hour I had beheld, whose companionship seemed to me a thing sweet and desirable, and whom I felt that I might love as I had loved Falcone. Her too they would drive forth, and with a brutality and cruelty that revolted me.

Later I was to perceive the reasons better, and much food for reflection was I to derive from realizing that there are no spirits so vengeful, so fierce, so utterly intolerant, ungovernable, and feral as the spirits of the devout when they conceive themselves justified to anger.

All the sweet teaching of Charity and brotherly love and patience is jettisoned, and by the most amazing paradox that Christianity has

ever known, Catholic burns heretic, and heretic butchers Catholic, all for the love of Christ; and each glories devoutly in the deed, never heeding the blasphemy of his belief that thus he obeys the sweet and gentle mandates of the God Incarnate.

Thus, then, my mother now, commanding that hideous deed with a mind at peace in pharisaic self-righteousness.

But not again would I stand by as I had stood by in the case of Falcone, and let her cruel, pietistic will be done. I had grown since then, and I had ripened more than I was aware. It remained for this moment to reveal to me the extent. Besides, the subtle influence of sex—all unconscious of it as I was—stirred me now to prove my new-found manhood.

"Stay!" I said to Giojoso, and in uttering the command I grew very cold and steady, and my breathing resumed the normal.

He checked in the act of turning away to do my mother's hideous bidding.

"You will give Madonna's order to the grooms, Ser Giojoso, as you have been bidden. But you will add from me that if there is one amongst them dares to obey it and to lay be it so much as a finger upon Luisina, him will I kill with these two hands."

Never was consternation more profound than that which I flung amongst them by those words. Giojoso fell to trembling; behind him, Rinolfo, the cause of all this garboil, stared with round big eyes; whilst my mother, all a-quiver, clutched at her bosom and looked at me fearfully, but spoke no word.

I smiled upon them, towering there, conscious and glad of my height for the first time in my life.

"Well?" I demanded of Giojoso. "For what do you wait? About it,

sir, and do as my mother has commanded you."

He turned to her, all bent and grovelling, arms outstretched in ludicrous bewilderment, every line of him beseeching guidance along this path so suddenly grown thorny.

"Ma—madonna!" he stammered.

She swallowed hard, and spoke at last.

"Do you defy my will, Agostino?"

"On the contrary, madam mother, I am enforcing it. Your will shall be done; your order shall be given. I insist upon it. But it shall lie with the discretion of the grooms whether they obey you. Am I to blame if they turn cowards?"

O, I had found myself at last, and I was making a furious, joyous use of the discovery.

"That... that were to make a mock of me and my authority," she protested. She was still rather helpless, rather breathless and confused, like one who has suddenly been hurled into cold water.

"If you fear that, madam, perhaps you had better countermand your order."

"Is the girl to remain in Mondolfo against my wishes? Are you so... so lost to shame?" A returning note of warmth in her accents warned me that she was collecting herself to deal with the situation.

"Nay," said I, and I looked at Luisina, who stood there so pale and tearful. "I think that for her own sake, poor maid, it were better that she went, since you desire it. But she shall not be whipped hence like a stray dog."

"Come, child," I said to her, as gently as I could. "Go pack, and quit

this home of misery. And be easy. For if any man in Mondolfo attempts to hasten your going, he shall reckon with me."

I laid a hand for an instant in kindness and friendliness upon her shoulder. "Poor little Luisina," said I, sighing. But she shrank and trembled under my touch. "Pity me a little, for they will not permit me any friends, and who is friendless is indeed pitiful."

And then, whether the phrase touched her, so that her simple little nature was roused and she shook off what self-control she had ever learnt, or whether she felt secure enough in my protection to dare proclaim her mind before them all, she caught my hand, and, stooping, kissed it.

"O Madonnino!" she faltered, and her tears showered upon that hand of mine. "God reward you your sweet thought for me. I shall pray for you, Madonnino."

"Do, Luisina," said I. "I begin to think I need it."

"Indeed, indeed!" said my mother very sombrely. And as she spoke, Luisina, as if her fears were reawakened, turned suddenly and went quickly along the terrace, past Rinolfo, who in that moment smiled viciously, and round the angle of the wall.

"What... what are my orders, Madonna?" quoth the wretched seneschal, reminding her that all had not yet been resolved.

She lowered her eyes to the ground, and folded her hands. She was by now quite composed again, her habitual sorrowful self.

"Let be," she said. "Let the wench depart. So that she goes we may count ourselves fortunate."

"Fortunate, I think, is she," said I. "Fortunate to return to the world beyond all this—the world of life and love that God made and that St. Francis praises. I do not think he would have praised Mondolfo, for I

greatly doubt that God had a hand in making it as it is to-day. It is too... too arid."

O, my mood was finely rebellious that May morning.

"Are you mad, Agostino?" gasped my mother.

"I think that I am growing sane," said I very sadly. She flashed me one of her rare glances, and I saw her lips tighten.

"We must talk," she said. "That girl..." And then she checked. "Come with me," she bade me.

But in that moment I remembered something, and I turned aside to look for my friend Rinolfo. He was moving stealthily away, following the road Luisina had taken. The conviction that he went to plague and jeer at her, to exult over her expulsion from Mondolfo, kindled my anger all anew.

"Stay! You there! Rinolfo!" I called.

He halted in his strides, and looked over his shoulder, impudently.

I had never yet been paid by any the deference that was my due. Indeed, I think that among the grooms and serving-men at Mondolfo I must have been held in a certain measure of contempt, as one who would never come to more manhood than that of the cassock.

"Come here," I bade him, and as he appeared to hesitate I had to repeat the order more peremptorily. At last he turned and came.

"What now, Agostino?" cried my mother, setting a pale hand upon my sleeve

But I was all intent upon that lout, who stood there before me shifting uneasily upon his feet, his air mutinous and sullen. Over his shoulder I had a glimpse of his father's yellow face, wide-eyed with

alarm.

"I think you smiled just now," said I.

"Heh! By Bacchus!" said he impudently, as who would say: "How could I help smiling?"

"Will you tell me why you smiled?" I asked him.

"Heh! By Bacchus!" said he again, and shrugged to give his insolence a barb.

"Will you answer me?" I roared, and under my display of anger he looked truculent, and thus exhausted the last remnant of my patience.

"Agostino!" came my mothers voice in remonstrance, and such is the power of habit that for a moment it controlled me and subdued my violence.

Nevertheless I went on, "You smiled to see your spite succeed. You smiled to see that poor child driven hence by your contriving; you smiled to see your broken snares avenged. And you were following after her no doubt to tell her all this and to smile again. This is all so, it is not?"

"Heh! By Bacchus!" said he for the third time, and at that my patience gave out utterly. Ere any could stop me I had seized him by throat and belt and shaken him savagely.

"Will you answer me like a fool?" I cried. "Must you be taught sense and a proper respect of me?"

"Agostino! Agostino!" wailed my mother. "Help, Ser Giojoso! Do you not see that he is mad!"

I do not believe that it was in my mind to do the fellow any grievous hurt. But he was so ill-advised in that moment as to attempt to defend

himself. He rashly struck at one of the arms that held him, and by the act drove me into a fury ungovernable.

"You dog!" I snarled at him from between clenched teeth. "Would you raise your hand to me? Am I your lord, or am I dirt of your own kind? Go learn submission." And I flung him almost headlong down the flight of steps.

There were twelve of them and all of stone with edges still sharp enough though blunted here and there by time. The fool had never suspected in me the awful strength which until that hour I had never suspected in myself. Else, perhaps, there had been fewer insolent shrugs, fewer foolish answers, and, last of all, no attempt to defy me physically.

He screamed as I flung him; my mother screamed; and Giojoso screamed.

After that there was a panic-stricken silence whilst he went thudding and bumping to the bottom of the flight. I did not greatly care if I killed him. But he was fortunate enough to get no worse hurt than a broken leg, which should keep him out of mischief for a season and teach him respect for me for all time.

His father scuttled down the steps to the assistance of that precious son, who lay moaning where he had fallen, the angle at which the half of one of his legs stood to the rest of it, plainly announcing the nature of his punishment.

My mother swept me indoors, loading me with reproaches as we went. She dispatched some to help Giojoso, others she sent in urgent quest of Fra Gervasio, me she hurried along to her private dining-room. I went very obediently, and even a little fearfully now that my passion had fallen from me.

There, in that cheerless room, which not even the splashes of

sunlight falling from the high-placed windows upon the whitewashed wall could help to gladden, I stood a little sullenly what time she first upbraided me and then wept bitterly, sitting in her high-backed chair at the table's head.

At last Gervasio came, anxious and flurried, for already he had heard some rumour of what had chanced. His keen eyes went from me to my mother and then back again to me.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"What has not happened?" wailed my mother. "Agostino is possessed."

He knit his brows. "Possessed?" quoth he.

"Ay, possessed—possessed of devils. He has been violent. He has broken poor Rinolfo's leg."

"Ah!" said Gervasio, and turned to me frowning with full tutorial sternness. "And what have you to say, Agostino?"

"Why, that I am sorry," answered I, rebellious once more. "I had hoped to break his dirty neck."

"You hear him!" cried my mother. "It is the end of the world, Gervasio. The boy is possessed, I say."

"What was the cause of your quarrel?" quoth the friar, his manner still more stern.

"Quarrel?" quoth I, throwing back my head and snorting audibly. "I do not quarrel with Rinolfos. I chastise them when they are insolent or displease me. This one did both."

He halted before me, erect and very stern—indeed almost threatening. And I began to grow afraid; for, after all, I had a kindness

for Gervasio, and I would not willingly engage in a quarrel with him. Yet here I was determined to carry through this thing as I had begun it.

It was my mother who saved the situation.

"Alas!" she moaned, "there is wicked blood in him. He has the abominable pride that was the ruin and downfall of his father."

Now that was not the way to make an ally of Fra Gervasio. It did the very opposite. It set him instantly on my side, in antagonism to the abuser of my father's memory, a memory which he, poor man, still secretly revered.

The sternness fell away from him. He looked at her and sighed. Then, with bowed head, and hands clasped behind him, he moved away from me a little.

"Do not let us judge rashly," he said. "Perhaps Agostino received some provocation. Let us hear..."

"O, you shall hear," she promised tearfully, exultant to prove him wrong. "You shall hear a yet worse abomination that was the cause of it."

And out she poured the story that Rinolfo and his father had run to tell her—of how I had shown the fellow violence in the first instance because he had surprised me with Luisina in my arms.

The friar's face grew dark and grave as he listened. But ere she had quite done, unable longer to contain myself, I interrupted.

"In that he lied like the muckworm that he is," I exclaimed. "And it increases my regrets that I did not break his neck as I intended."

"He lied?" quoth she, her eyes wide open in amazement—not at the fact, but at the audacity of what she conceived my falsehood.

"It is not impossible," said Fra Gervasio. "What is your story, Agostino?"

I told it—how the child out of a very gentle and Christian pity had released the poor birds that were taken in Rinolfo's limed twigs, and how in a fury he had made to beat her, so that she had fled to me for shelter and protection; and how, thereupon, I had bidden him begone out of that garden, and never set foot in it again.

"And now," I ended, "you know all the violence that I showed him, and the reason for it. If you say that I did wrong, I warn you that I shall not believe you."

"Indeed..." began the friar with a faint smile of friendliness. But my mother interrupted him, betwixt sorrow and anger.

"He lies, Gervasio. He lies shamelessly. O, into what a morass of sin has he not fallen, and every moment he goes deeper! Have I not said that he is possessed? We shall need the exorcist."

"We shall indeed, madam mother, to clear your mind of foolishness," I answered hotly, for it stung me to the soul to be branded thus a liar, to have my word discredited by that of a lout such as Rinolfo.

She rose a sombre pillar of indignation. "Agostino, I am your mother," she reminded me.

"Let us thank God that for that, at least, you cannot blame me," answered I, utterly reckless now.

The answer crushed her back into her chair. She looked appealingly at Fra Gervasio, who stood glum and frowning. "Is he... is he perchance bewitched?" she asked the friar, quite seriously. "Do you think that any spells might have."

He interrupted her with a wave of the hand and an impatient snort

"We are at cross purposes here," he said. "Agostino does not lie. For that I will answer."

"But, Fra Gervasio, I tell you that I saw them—that I saw them with these two eyes—sitting together on the terrace steps, and he had his arm about her. Yet he denies it shamelessly to my face."

"Said I ever a word of that?" I appealed me to the friar. "Why, that was after Rinolfo left us. My tale never got so far. It is quite true. I did sit beside her. The child was troubled. I comforted her. Where was the harm?"

"The harm?" quoth he. "And you had your arm about her—and you to be a priest one day?"

"And why not, pray?" quoth I. "Is this some new sin that you have discovered—or that you have kept hidden from me until now? To console the afflicted is an ordination of Mother Church; to love our fellow-creatures an ordination of our Blessed Lord Himself. I was performing both. Am I to be abused for that?"

He looked at me very searchingly, seeking in my countenance—as I now know—some trace of irony or guile. Finding none, he turned to my mother. He was very solemn.

"Madonna," he said quietly, "I think that Agostino is nearer to being a saint than either you or I will ever get."

She looked at him, first in surprise, then very sadly. Slowly she shook her head. "Unhappily for him there is another arbiter of saintship, Who sees deeper than do you, Gervasio."

He bowed his head. "Better not to look deep enough than to do as you seem in danger of doing, Madonna, and by looking too deep imagine things which do not exist."

"Ah, you will defend him against reason even," she complained. "His anger exists. His thirst to kill—to stamp himself with the brand of Cain—exists. He confesses that himself. His insubordination to me you have seen for yourself; and that again is sin, for it is ordained that we shall honour our parents.

"O!" she moaned. "My authority is all gone. He is beyond my control. He has shaken off the reins by which I sought to guide him."

"You had done well to have taken my advice a year ago, Madonna. Even now it is not too late. Let him go to Pavia, to the Sapienza, to study his humanities."

"Out into the world!" she cried in horror. "O, no, no! I have sheltered him here so carefully!"

"Yet you cannot shelter him for ever," said he. "He must go out into the world some day."

"He need not," she faltered. "If the call were strong enough within him, a convent..." She left her sentence unfinished, and looked at me.

"Go, Agostino," she bade me. "Fra Gervasio and I must talk."

I went reluctantly, since in the matter of their talk none could have had a greater interest than I, seeing that my fate stood in the balance of it. But I went, none the less, and her last words to me as I was departing were an injunction that I should spend the time until I should take up my studies for the day with Fra Gervasio in seeking forgiveness for the morning's sins and grace to do better in the future.

CHAPTER VI. FRA GERVASIO

I did not again see my mother that day, nor did she sup with us that evening. I was told by Fra Gervasio that on my account was she in retreat, praying for light and guidance in the thing that must be determined concerning me.

I withdrew early to my little bedroom overlooking the gardens, a room that had more the air of a monastic cell than a bedchamber fitting the estate of the Lord of Mondolfo. The walls were whitewashed, and besides the crucifix that hung over my bed, their only decoration was a crude painting of St. Augustine disputing with the little boy on the seashore.

For bed I had a plain hard pallet, and the room contained, in addition, a wooden chair, a stool upon which was set a steel basin with its ewer for my ablutions, and a cupboard for the few sombre black garments I possessed—for the amiable vanity of raiment usual in young men of my years had never yet assailed me; I had none to emulate in that respect.

I got me to bed, blew out my taper, and composed myself to sleep. But sleep was playing truant from me. Long I lay there surveying the events of that day—the day in which I had embarked upon the discovery of myself; the most stirring day that I had yet lived; the day in which, although I scarcely realized it, if at all, I had at once tasted love and battle, the strongest meats that are in the dish of life.

For some hours, I think, had I lain there, reflecting and putting together pieces of the riddle of existence, when my door was softly opened, and I started up in bed to behold Fra Gervasio bearing a taper which he sheltered with one hand, so that the light of it was

thrown upwards into his pale, gaunt face.

Seeing me astir he came forward and closed the door.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Sh!" he admonished me, a finger to his lips. He advanced to my side, set down the taper on the chair, and seated himself upon the edge of my bed.

"Lie down again, my son," he bade me. "I have something to say to you."

He paused a moment, whilst I settled down again and drew the coverlet to my chin not without a certain premonition of important things to come.

"Madonna has decided," he informed me then. "She fears that having once resisted her authority, you are now utterly beyond her control; and that to keep you here would be bad for yourself and for her. Therefore she has resolved that to-morrow you leave Mondolfo."

A faint excitement began to stir in me. To leave Mondolfo—to go out into that world of which I had read so much; to mingle with my fellow-man, with youths of my own age, perhaps with maidens like Luisina, to see cities and the ways of cities; here indeed was matter for excitement. Yet it was an excitement not altogether pleasurable; for with my very natural curiosity, and with my eagerness to have it gratified, were blended certain fears imbibed from the only quality of reading that had been mine.

The world was an evil place in which temptations seethed, and through which it was difficult to come unscathed. Therefore, I feared the world and the adventuring beyond the shelter of the walls of the castle of Mondolfo; and yet I desired to judge for myself the evil of which I read, the evil which in moments of doubt I even permitted

myself to question.

My reasoning followed the syllogism that God being good and God having created the world, it was not possible that the creation should be evil. It was well enough to say that the devil was loose in it. But that was not to say that the devil had created it; and it would be necessary to prove this ere it could be established that it was evil in itself—as many theologians appeared to seek to show—and a place to be avoided.

Such was the question that very frequently arose in my mind, ultimately to be dismissed as a lure of Satan's to imperil my poor soul. It battled for existence now amid my fears; and it gained some little ascendancy.

"And whither am I to go?" I asked. "To Pavia, or to the University of Bologna?"

"Had my advice been heeded," said he, "one or the other would have been your goal. But your mother took counsel with Messer Arcolano."

He shrugged, and there was contempt in the lines of his mouth. He distrusted Arcolano, the regular cleric who was my mother's confessor and spiritual adviser, exerting over her a very considerable influence. She, herself, had admitted that it was this Arcolano who had induced her to that horrid traffic in my father's life and liberty which she was mercifully spared from putting into effect.

"Messer Arcolano," he resumed after a pause, "has a good friend in Piacenza, a pedagogue, a doctor of civil and canon law, a man who, he says, is very learned and very pious, named Astorre Fifanti. I have heard of this Fifanti, and I do not at all agree with Messer Arcolano. I have said so. But your mother..." He broke off. "It is decided that you go to him at once, to take up your study of the

humanities under his tutelage, and that you abide with him until you are of an age for ordination, which your mother hopes will be very soon. Indeed, it is her wish that you should enter the subdiaconate in the autumn, and your novitiate next year, to fit you for the habit of St. Augustine."

He fell silent, adding no comment of any sort, as if he waited to hear what of my own accord I might have to urge. But my mind was incapable of travelling beyond the fact that I was to go out into the world to-morrow.

The circumstance that I should become a monk was no departure from the idea to which I had been trained, although explicitly no more than my mere priesthood had been spoken of. So I lay there without thinking of any words in which to answer him.

Gervasio considered me steadily, and sighed a little. "Agostino," he said presently, "you are upon the eve of taking a great step, a step whose import you may never fully have considered. I have been your tutor, and your rearing has been my charge. That charge I have faithfully carried out as was ordained me, but not as I would have carried it out had I been free to follow my heart and my conscience in the matter.

"The idea of your ultimate priesthood has been so fostered in your mind that you may well have come to believe that to be a priest is your own inherent desire. I would have you consider it well now that the time approaches for a step which is irrevocable."

His words and his manner startled me alike.

"How?" I cried. "Do you say that it might be better if I did not seek ordination? What better can the world offer than the priesthood? Have you not, yourself, taught me that it is man's noblest calling?"

"To be a good priest, fulfilling all the teachings of the Master,

becoming in your turn His mouthpiece, living a life of self-abnegation, of self-sacrifice and purity," he answered slowly, "that is the noblest thing a man can be. But to be a bad priest—there are other ways of being damned less hurtful to the Church."

"To be a bad priest?" quoth I. "Is it possible to be a bad priest?"

"It is not only possible, my son, but in these days it is very frequent. Many men, Agostino, enter the Church out of motives of self-seeking. Through such as these Rome has come to be spoken of as the Necropolis of the Living. Others, Agostino—and these are men most worthy of pity—enter the Church because they are driven to it in youth by ill-advised parents. I would not have you one of these, my son."

I stared at him, my amazement ever growing. "Do you... do you think I am in danger of it?" I asked.

"That is a question you must answer for yourself. No man can know what is in another's heart. I have trained you as I was bidden train you. I have seen you devout, increasing in piety, and yet..." He paused, and looked at me again. "It may be that this is no more than the fruit of your training; it may be that your piety and devotion are purely intellectual. It is very often so. Men know the precepts of religion as a lawyer knows the law. It no more follows out of that that they are religious—though they conceive that it does—than it follows that a lawyer is law-abiding. It is in the acts of their lives that we must seek their real natures, and no single act of your life, Agostino, has yet given sign that the call is in your heart.

"To-day, for instance, at what is almost your first contact with the world, you indulge your human feelings to commit a violence; that you did not kill is as much an accident as that you broke Rinolfo's leg. I do not say that you did a very sinful thing. In a worldly youth of your years the provocation you received would have more than justified your action. But not in one who aims at a life of humility and self-

forgetfulness such as the priesthood imposes."

"And yet," said I, "I heard you tell my mother below stairs that I was nearer sainthood than either of you."

He smiled sadly, and shook his head. "They were rash words, Agostino. I mistook ignorance for purity—a common error. I have pondered it since, and my reflection brings me to utter what in this household amounts to treason."

"I do not understand," I confessed.

"My duty to your mother I have discharged more faithfully perhaps than I had the right to do. My duty to my God I am discharging now, although to you I may rather appear as an *advocatus diaboli*. This duty is to warn you; to bid you consider well the step you are to take.

"Listen, Agostino. I am speaking to you out of the bitter experience of a very cruel life. I would not have you tread the path I have trodden. It seldom leads to happiness in this world or the next; it seldom leads anywhere but straight to Hell."

He paused, and I looked into his haggard face in utter stupefaction to hear such words from the lips of one whom I had ever looked upon as goodness incarnate.

"Had I not known that some day I must speak to you as I am speaking now, I had long since abandoned a task which I did not consider good. But I feared to leave you. I feared that if I were removed my place might be taken by some time-server who to earn a livelihood would tutor you as your mother would have you tutored, and thrust you forth without warning upon the life to which you have been vowed.

"Once, years ago, I was on the point of resisting your mother." He passed a hand wearily across his brow. "It was on the night that Gino

Falcone left us, driven forth by her because she accounted it her duty. Do you remember, Agostino?"

"O, I remember!" I answered.

"That night," he pursued, "I was angered—righteously angered to see so wicked and unchristian an act performed in blasphemous self-righteousness. I was on the point of denouncing the deed as it deserved, of denouncing your mother for it to her face. And then I remembered you. I remembered the love I had borne your father, and my duty to him, to see that no such wrong was done you in the end as that which I feared. I reflected that if I spoke the words that were burning my tongue for utterance, I should go as Gino Falcone had gone.

"Not that the going mattered. I could better save my soul elsewhere than here in this atmosphere of Christianity misunderstood; and there are always convents of my order to afford me shelter. But your being abandoned mattered; and I felt that if I went, abandoned you would be to the influences that drove and moulded you without consideration for your nature and your inborn inclinations. Therefore I remained, and left Falcone's cause unchampioned. Later I was to learn that he had found a friend, and that he was... that he was being cared for."

"By whom?" quoth I, more interested perhaps in this than in anything that he had yet said.

"By one who was your father's friend," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "a soldier of fortune by name of Galeotto—a leader of free lances who goes by the name of Il Gran Galeotto. But let that be. I want to tell you of myself, that you may judge with what authority I speak.

"I was destined," Agostino, for a soldier's life in the following of my valiant foster-brother, your father. Had I preserved the strength of my

early youth, undoubtedly a soldier's harness would be strapped here to-day in the place of this scapulary. But it happened that an illness left me sickly and ailing, and unfitted me utterly for such a life. Similarly it unfitted me for the labour of the fields, so that I threatened to become a useless burden upon my parents, who were peasant-folk. To avoid this they determined to make a monk of me; they offered me to God because they found me unfitted for the service of man; and, poor, simple, self-deluded folk, they accounted that in doing so they did a good and pious thing.

"I showed aptitude in learning; I became interested in the things I studied; I was absorbed by them in fact, and never gave a thought to the future; I submitted without question to the wishes of my parents, and before I awakened to a sense of what was done and what I was, myself, I was in orders."

He sank his voice impressively as he concluded—"For ten years thereafter, Agostino, I wore a hair-shirt day and night, and for girdle a knotted length of whip-cord in which were embedded thorns that stung and chafed me and tore my body. For ten years, then, I never knew bodily ease or proper rest at night. Only thus could I bring into subjection my rebellious flesh, and save myself from the way of ordinary men which to me must have been a path of sacrilege and sin. I was devout. Had I not been devout and strong in my devotion I could never have endured what I was forced to endure as the alternative to damnation, because without consideration for my nature I had been ordained a priest.

"Consider this, Agostino; consider it well. I would not have you go that way, nor feel the need to drive yourself from temptation by such a spur. Because I know—I say it in all humility, Agostino, I hope, and thanking God for the exceptional grace He vouchsafed me to support me—that for one priest without vocation who can quench temptation by such agonizing means, a hundred perish, which is bad; and by the

scandal of their example they drive many from the Church and set a weapon in the hands of her enemies, which is a still heavier reckoning to meet hereafter."

A spell of silence followed. I was strangely moved by his tale, strangely impressed by the warning that I perceived in it. And yet my confidence, I think, was all unshaken.

And when presently he rose, took up his taper, and stood by my bedside to ask me once again did I believe myself to be called, I showed my confidence in my answer.

"It is my hope and prayer that I am called, indeed," I said. "The life that will best prepare me for the world to come is the life I would follow."

He looked at me long and sadly. "You must do as your heart bids you," he sighed. "And when you have seen the world, your heart will have learnt to speak to you more plainly." And upon that he left me.

Next day I set out.

My leave-takings were brief. My mother shed some tears and many prayers over me at parting. Not that she was moved to any grief at losing me. That were a grief I should respect and the memory of which I should treasure as a sacred thing. Her tears were tears of dread lest, surrounded by perils in the world, I should succumb and thus falsify her vows.

She, herself, confessed it in the valedictory words she addressed to me. Words that left the conviction clear upon my mind that the fulfilment of her vow was the only thing concerning me that mattered. To the price that later might be paid for it I cannot think that she ever gave a single thought.

Tears there were too in the eyes of Fra Gervasio. My mother had

suffered me to do no more than kiss her hand—as was my custom. But the friar took me to his bosom, and held me tight a moment in his long arms.

"Remember!" he murmured huskily and impressively. And then, putting me from him, "God help and guide you, my son," were his last words.

I went down the steps into the courtyard where most of the servants were gathered to see their lord's departure, whilst Messer Arcolano, who was to go with me, paused to assure my mother of the care that he would have of me, and to receive her final commands concerning me.

Four men, mounted and armed, stood waiting to escort us, and with them were three mules, one for Arcolano, one for myself, and the third already laden with my baggage.

A servant held my stirrup, and I swung myself up into the saddle, with which I was but indifferently acquainted. Then Arcolano mounted too, puffing over the effort, for he was a corpulent, rubicund man with the fattest hands I have ever seen.

I touched my mule with the whip, and the beast began to move. Arcolano ambled beside me; and behind us, abreast, came the men-at-arms. Thus we rode down towards the gateway, and as we went the servants murmured their valedictory words.

"A safe journey, Madonnino!"

"A good return, Madonnino!"

I smiled back at them, and in the eyes of more than one I detected a look of commiseration.

Once I turned, when the end of the quadrangle was reached, and I waved my cap to my mother and Fra Gervasio, who stood upon the

steps where I had left them. The friar responded by waving back to me. But my mother made no sign. Likely enough her eyes were upon the ground again already

Her unresponsiveness almost angered me. I felt that a man had the right to some slight display of tenderness from the woman who had borne him. Her frigidity wounded me. It wounded me the more in comparison with the affectionate clasp of old Gervasio's arms. With a knot in my throat I passed from the sunlight of the courtyard into the gloom of the gateway, and out again beyond, upon the drawbridge. Our hooves thudded briskly upon the timbers, and then with a sharper note upon the cobbles beyond.

I was outside the walls of the castle for the first time. Before me the long, rudely paved street of the borgo sloped away to the marketplace of the town of Mondolfo. Beyond that lay the world, itself—all at my feet, as I imagined.

The knot in my throat was dissolved. My pulses quickened with anticipation. I dug my heels into the mule's belly and pushed on, the portly cleric at my side.

And thus I left my home and the gloomy, sorrowful influence of my most dolorous mother.

BOOK II. GIULIANA

CHAPTER I. THE HOUSE OF ASTORRE FIFANTI.

Let me not follow in too close detail the incidents of that journey lest I be in danger of becoming tedious. In themselves they contained laughable matter enough, but in the mere relation they may seem dull.

Down the borgo, ahead of us, ran the rumour that here was the *Madonnino* of Mondolfo, and the excitement that the announcement caused was something at which I did not know whether to be flattered or offended.

The houses gave up their inhabitants, and all stood at gaze as we passed, to behold for the first time this lord of theirs of whom they had heard Heaven knows what stories—for where there are elements of mystery human invention can be very active.

At first so many eyes confused me; so that I kept my own steadily upon the glossy neck of my mule. Very soon, however, growing accustomed to being stared at, I lost some of my shyness, and now it was that I became a trouble to Messer Arcolano. For as I looked about me there were a hundred things to hold my attention and to call for inquiry and nearer inspection.

We had come by this into the market-place, and it chanced that it was a market-day and that the square was thronged with peasants from the Val di Taro who had come to sell their produce and to buy their necessities.

I was for halting at each booth and inspecting the wares, and each time that I made as if to do so, the obsequious peasantry fell away

before me, making way invitingly. But Messer Arcolano urged me along, saying that we had far to go, and that in Piacenza there were better shops and that I should have more time to view them.

Then it was the fountain with its surmounting statues that caught my eye—Durfreno's arresting, vigorous group of the Laocoon—and I must draw rein and cry out in my amazement at so wonderful a piece of work, plaguing Arcolano with a score of questions concerning the identity of the main figure and how he came beset by so monstrous a reptile, and whether he had succeeded in the end in his attempt to strangle it.

Arcolano, out of patience by now, answered me shortly that the reptile was the sculptor's pious symbolization of sin, which St. Hercules was overcoming.

I am by no means sure that such was not indeed his own conception of the matter, and that there did not exist in his mind some confusion as to whether the pagan demigod had a place in the Calendar or not. For he was an uncultured, plebeian fellow, and what my mother should have found in him to induce her to prefer him for her confessor and spiritual counsellor to the learned Fra Gervasio is one more of the many mysteries which an attempt to understand her must ever present to me.

Then there were the young peasant girls who thronged about and stood in groups, blushing furiously under my glance, which Arcolano vainly bade me lower. A score of times did it seem to me that one of these brown-legged, lithe, comely creatures was my little Luisina; and more than once I was on the point of addressing one or another, to discover my mistake and be admonished for my astounding frivolousness by Messer Arcolano.

And when once or twice I returned the friendly laughter of these girls, whilst the grinning serving-men behind me would nudge one

another and wink to see me—as they thought—so very far off the road to priesthood to which I was vowed, hot anathema poured from the fat cleric's lips, and he urged me roughly to go faster.

His tortures ended at last when we came into the open country. We rode in silence for a mile or two, I being full of thought of all that I had seen, and infected a little by the fever of life through which I had just passed. At last, I remember that I turned to Arcolano, who was riding with the ears of his mule in line with my saddle-bow, and asked him to point out to me where my dominions ended.

The meek question provoked an astonishingly churlish answer. I was shortly bidden to give my mind to other than worldly things; and with that he began a homily, which lasted for many a weary mile, upon the vanities of the world and the glories of Paradise—a homily of the very tritest, upon subjects whereupon I, myself, could have dilated to better purpose than could His Ignorance.

The distance from Mondolfo to Piacenza is a good eight leagues, and though we had set out very early, it was past noon before we caught our first glimpse of the city by the Po, lying low as it does in the vast Aemilian plain, and Arcolano set himself to name to me this church and that whose spires stood out against the cobalt background of the sky.

An hour or so after our first glimpse of the city, our weary beasts brought us up to the Gate of San Lazzaro. But we did not enter, as I had hoped. Messer Arcolano had had enough of me and my questions at Mondolfo, and he was not minded to expose himself to worse behaviour on my part in the more interesting thoroughfares of this great city.

So we passed it by, and rode under the very walls by way of an avenue of flowering chestnuts, round to the northern side, until we emerged suddenly upon the sands of Po, and I had my first view at

close quarters of that mighty river flowing gently about the islands, all thick with willows, that seemed to float upon its gleaming waters.

Fishermen were at work in a boat out in mid-stream, heaving their nets to the sound of the oddest cantilena, and I was all for pausing there to watch their operations. But Arcolano urged me onward with that impatience of his which took no account of my very natural curiosity. Presently I drew rein again with exclamations of delight and surprise to see the wonderful bridge of boats that spanned the river a little higher up.

But we had reached our destination. Arcolano called a halt at the gates of a villa that stood a little way back from the road on slightly rising ground near the Fodesta Gate. He bade one of the grooms get down and open, and presently we ambled up a short avenue between tall banks of laurel, to the steps of the villa itself.

It was a house of fair proportions, though to me at the time, accustomed to the vast spaces of Mondolfo, it seemed the merest hut. It was painted white, and it had green Venetian shutters which gave it a cool and pleasant air; and through one of the open windows floated a sound of merry voices, in which a woman's laugh was predominant.

The double doors stood open and through these there emerged a moment after our halting a tall, thin man whose restless eyes surveyed us swiftly, whose thin-lipped mouth smiled a greeting to Messer Arcolano in the pause he made before hurrying down the steps with a slip-slop of ill-fitting shoes.

This was Messer Astorre Fifanti, the pedant under whom I was to study, and with whom I was to take up my residence for some months to come.

Seeing in him one who was to be set in authority over me, I

surveyed him with the profoundest interest, and from that instant I disliked him.

He was, as I have said, a tall, thin man; and he had long hands that were very big and bony in the knuckles. Indeed they looked like monstrous skeleton hands with a glove of skin stretched over them. He was quite bald, save for a curly grizzled fringe that surrounded the back of his head, on a level with his enormous ears, and his forehead ran up to the summit of his egg-shaped head. His nose was pendulous and his eyes were closely set, with too crafty a look for honesty. He wore no beard, and his leathery cheeks were blue from the razor. His age may have been fifty; his air was mean and sycophantic. Finally he was dressed in a black gaberdine that descended to his knees, and he ended in a pair of the leanest shanks and largest feet conceivable.

To greet us he fawned and washed his bony hands in the air.

"You have made a safe journey, then," he purred. "Benedicamus Dominum!"

"Deo gratias!" rumbled the fat priest, as he heaved his rotundity from the saddle with the assistance of one of the grooms.

They shook hands, and Fifanti turned to survey me for the second time.

"And this is my noble charge!" said he. "Salve! Be welcome to my house, Messer Agostino."

I got to earth, accepted his proffered hand, and thanked him.

Meanwhile the grooms were unpacking my baggage, and from the house came hurrying an elderly servant to receive it and convey it within doors.

I stood there a little awkwardly, shifting from leg to leg, what time

Doctor Fifanti pressed Arcolano to come within and rest; he spoke, too, of some Vesuvian wine that had been sent him from the South and upon which he desired the priest's rare judgment.

Arcolano hesitated, and his gluttonous mouth quivered and twitched. But he excused himself in the end. He must on. He had business to discharge in the town, and he must return at once and render an account of our safe journey to the Countess at Mondolfo. If he tarried now it would grow late ere he reached Mondolfo, and late travelling pleased him not at all. As it was his bones would be weary and his flesh tender from so much riding; but he would offer it up to Heaven for his sins.

And when the too-amiable Fifanti had protested how little there could be the need in the case of one so saintly as Messer Arcolano, the priest made his farewells. He gave me his blessing and enjoined upon me obedience to one who stood to me in loco parentis, heaved himself back on to his mule, and departed with the grooms at his heels.

Then Doctor Fifanti set a bony hand upon my shoulder, and opined that after my journey I must be in need of refreshment; and with that he led me within doors, assuring me that in his house the needs of the body were as closely cared for as the needs of the mind.

"For an empty belly," he ended with his odious, sycophantic geniality, "makes an empty heart and an empty head."

We passed through a hall that was prettily paved in mosaics, into a chamber of good proportions, which seemed gay to me after the gloom by which I had been surrounded.

The ceiling was painted blue and flecked with golden stars, whilst the walls were hung with deep blue tapestries on which was figured in grey and brownish red a scene which, I was subsequently to learn,

represented the metamorphosis of Actaeon. At the moment I did not look too closely. The figures of Diana in her bath with her plump attendant nymphs caused me quickly to withdraw my bashful eyes.

A good-sized table stood in the middle of the floor, bearing, upon a broad strip of embroidered white napery, sparkling crystal and silver, vessels of wine and platters of early fruits. About it sat a very noble company of some half-dozen men and two very resplendent women. One of these was slight and little, very dark and vivacious with eyes full of a malicious humour. The other, of very noble proportions, of a fine, willowy height, with coiled ropes of hair of a colour such as I had never dreamed could be found upon human being. It was ruddy and glowed like metal. Her face and neck—and of the latter there was a very considerable display—were of the warm pale tint of old ivory. She had large, low-lidded eyes, which lent her face a languid air. Her brow was low and broad, and her lips of a most startling red against the pallor of the rest.

She rose instantly upon my entrance, and came towards me with a slow smile, holding out her hand, and murmuring words of most courteous welcome.

"This, Ser Agostino," said Fifanti, "is my wife."

Had he announced her to be his daughter it would have been more credible on the score of their respective years, though equally incredible on the score of their respective personalities.

I gaped foolishly in my amazement, a little dazzled, too, by the effulgence of her eyes, which were now raised to the level of my own. I lowered my glance abashed, and answered her as courteously as I could. Then she led me to the table, and presented me to the company, naming each to me.

The first was a slim and very dainty young gentleman in a scarlet

walking-suit, over which he wore along scarlet mantle. A gold cross was suspended from his neck by a massive chain of gold. He was delicately featured, with a little pointed beard, tiny mustachios, and long, fair hair that fell in waves about his effeminate face. He had the whitest of hands, very delicately veined in blue, and it was—as I soon observed—his habit to carry them raised, so that the blood might not flow into them to coarsen their beauty. Attached to his left wrist by a fine chain was a gold pomander-ball of the size of a small apple, very beautifully chiselled. Upon one of his fingers he wore the enormous sapphire ring of his rank.

That he was a prince of the Church I saw for myself; but I was far from being prepared for the revelation of his true eminence—never dreaming that a man of the humble position of Doctor Fifanti would entertain a guest so exalted.

He was no less a person than the Lord Egidio Oberto Gambara, Cardinal of Brescia, Governor of Piacenza and Papal Legate to Cisalpine Gaul.

The revelation of the identity of this elegant, effeminate, perfumed personage was a shock to me; for it was not thus by much that I had pictured the representative of our Holy Father the Pope.

He smiled upon me amiably and something wearily, the satiate smile of the man of the world, and he languidly held out to me the hand bearing his ring. I knelt to kiss it, overawed by his ecclesiastical rank, however little awed by the man within it.

As I rose again he looked up at me considering my inches.

"Why," said he, "here is a fine soldier lost to glory." And as he spoke, he half turned to a young man who sat beside him, a man at whom I was eager to take a fuller look, for his face was most strangely familiar to me.

He was tall and graceful, very beautifully dressed in purple and gold, and his blue-black hair was held in a net or coif of finest gold thread. His garments clung as tightly and smoothly as if he had been kneaded into them—as, indeed, he had. But it was his face that held my eyes. It was a sun-tanned, shaven hawk-face with black level brows, black eyes, and a strong jaw, handsome save for something displeasing in the lines of the mouth, something sardonic, proud, and contemptuous.

The Cardinal addressed him. "You breed fine fellows in your family, Cosimo," were the words with which he startled me, and then I knew where I had seen that face before. In my mirror.

He was as like me—save that he was blacker and not so tall—as if he had been own brother to me instead of merely cousin as I knew at once he was. For he must be that guelphic Anguissola renegade who served the Pope and was high in favour with Farnese, and Captain of Justice in Piacenza. In age he may have been some seven or eight years older than myself.

I stared at him now with interest, and I found attractions in him, the chief of which was his likeness to my father. So must my father have looked when he was this fellow's age. He returned my glance with a smile that did not improve his countenance, so contemptuously languid was it, so very supercilious.

"You may stare, cousin," said he, "for I think I do you the honour to be something like you."

"You will find him," lisped the Cardinal to me, "the most self-complacent dog in Italy. When he sees in you a likeness to himself he flatters himself grossly, which, as you know him better, you will discover to be his inveterate habit. He is his own most assiduous courtier." And my Lord Gambara sank back into his chair, languishing, the pomander to his nostrils.

All laughed, and Messer Cosimo with them, still considering me.

But Messer Fifanti's wife had yet to make me known to three others who sat there, beside the little sloe-eyed lady. This last was a cousin of her own—Donna Leocadia degli Allogati, whom I saw now for the first and last time.

The three remaining men of the company are of little interest save one, whose name was to be well known—nay, was well known already, though not to one who had lived in such seclusion as mine.

This was that fine poet Annibale Caro, whom I have heard judged to be all but the equal of the great Petrarca himself. A man who had less the air of a poet it would not be easy to conceive. He was of middle height and of a habit of body inclining to portliness, and his age may have been forty. His face was bearded, ruddy, and small-featured, and there was about him an air of smug prosperity; he was dressed with care, but he had none of the splendour of the Cardinal or my cousin. Let me add that he was secretary to the Duke Pier Luigi Farnese, and that he was here in Piacenza on a mission to the Governor in which his master's interests were concerned.

The other two who completed that company are of no account, and indeed their names escape me, though I seem to remember that one was named Pacini and that he was said to be a philosopher of considerable parts.

Bidden to table by Messer Fifanti, I took the chair he offered me beside his lady, and presently came the old servant whom already I had seen, bearing meat for me. I was hungry, and I fell to with zest, what time a pleasant ripple of talk ran round the board. Facing me sat my cousin, and I never observed until my hunger was become less clamorous with what an insistence he regarded me. At last, however, our eyes met across the board. He smiled that crooked, somewhat unpleasant smile of his.

"And so, Ser Agostino, they are to make a priest of you?" said he.

"God pleasing," I answered soberly, and perhaps shortly.

"And if his brains at all resemble his body," lisped the Cardinal-legate, "you may live to see an Anguissola Pope, my Cosimo."

My stare must have betrayed my amazement at such words. "Not so, magnificent," I made answer. "I am destined for the life monastic."

"Monastic!" quoth he, in a sort of horror, and looking as if a bad smell had suddenly been thrust under his nose. He shrugged and pouted and had fresh recourse to his pomander. "O, well! Friars have become popes before to-day."

"I am to enter the hermit order of St. Augustine," I again corrected.

"Ah!" said Caro, in his big, full voice. "He aspires not to Rome but to Heaven, my lord."

"Then what the devil does he in your house, Fifanti?" quoth the Cardinal. "Are you to teach him sanctity?"

And the table shook with laughter at a jest I did not understand any more than I understood my Lord Cardinal.

Messer Fifanti, sitting at the table-head, shot me a glance of anxious inquiry; he smiled foolishly, and washed his hands in the air again, his mind fumbling for an answer that should turn aside that barbed jest. But he was forestalled by my cousin Cosimo.

"The teaching might come more aptly from Monna Giuliana," said he, and smiled very boldly across at Fifanti's lady who sat beside me, whilst a frown grew upon the prodigious brow of the pedant.

"Indeed, indeed," the Cardinal murmured, considering her through half-closed eyes, "there is no man but may enter Paradise at her

bidding." And he sighed furiously, whilst she chid him for his boldness; and for all that much of what they said was in a language that might have been unknown to me, yet was I lost in amazement to see a prelate made so free with. She turned to me, and the glory of her eyes fell about my soul like an effulgence.

"Do not heed them, Ser Agostino. They are profane and wicked men," she said, "and if you aspire to holiness, the less you see of them the better will it be for you."

I did not doubt it, yet I dared not make so bold as to confess it, and I wondered why they should laugh to hear her earnest censure of them.

"It is a thorny path, this path of holiness," said the Cardinal sighing.

"Your excellency has been told so, we assume," quoth Caro, who had a very bitter tongue for one who looked so well-nourished and contented.

"I might have found it so for myself but that my lot has been cast among sinners," answered the Cardinal, comprehending the company in his glance and gesture. "As it is, I do what I can to mend their lot."

"Now here is gallantry of a different sort!" cried the little Leocadia with a giggle.

"O, as to that," quoth Cosimo, showing his fine teeth in a smile, "there is a proverb as to the gallantry of priests. It is like the love of women, which again is like water in a basket—as soon in as out." And his eyes hung upon Giuliana.

"When you are the basket, sir captain, shall anyone blame the women?" she countered with her lazy insolence.

"Body of God!" cried the Cardinal, and laughed wholeheartedly, whilst my cousin scowled. "There you have the truth, Cosimo, and the

truth is better than proverbs."

"It is unlucky to speak of the dead at table," put in Caro.

"And who spoke of the dead, Messer Annibale?" quoth Leocadia.

"Did not my Lord Cardinal mention Truth?" answered the brutal poet.

"You are a derider—a gross sinner," said the Cardinal languidly. "Stick to your verses, man, and leave Truth alone."

"Agreed—if your excellency will stick to Truth and quit writing verses. I offer the compact in the interest of humanity, which will be the gainer."

The company shook with laughter at this direct and offensive hit. But my Lord Gambara seemed nowise incensed. Indeed, I was beginning to conclude that the man had a sweetness and tolerance of nature that bordered on the saintly.

He sipped his wine thoughtfully, and held it up to the light so that the deep ruby of it sparkled in the Venetian crystal.

"You remind me that I have written a new song," said he.

"Then have I sinned indeed," groaned Caro.

But Gambara, disregarding the interruption, his glass still raised, his mild eyes upon the wine, began to recite:

"Bacchus saepe visitans
Mulierum genus
Facit eas subditas
Tibi, O tu Venus!"

Without completely understanding it, yet scandalized beyond measure at as much as I understood, to hear such sentiments upon

his priestly lips, I stared at him in candid horror.

But he got no farther. Caro smote the table with his fist.

"When wrote you that, my lord?" he cried.

"When?" quoth the Cardinal, frowning at the interruption. "Why, yestereve."

"Ha!" It was something between a bark and a laugh from Messer Caro. "In that case, my lord, memory usurped the place of invention. That song was sung at Pavia when I was a student—which is more years ago than I care to think of."

The Cardinal smiled upon him, unabashed. "And what then, pray? Can we avoid these things? Why, the very Virgil whom you plagiarize so freely was himself a plagiarist."

Now this, as you may well conceive, provoked a discussion about the board, in which all joined, not excepting Fifanti's lady and Donna Leocadia.

I listened in some amazement and deep interest to matters that were entirely strange to me, to the arguing of mysteries which seemed to me—even from what I heard of them—to be strangely attractive.

Anon Fifanti joined in the discussion, and I observed how as soon as he began to speak they all fell silent, all listened to him as to a master, what time he delivered himself of his opinions and criticisms of this Virgil, with a force, a lucidity and an eloquence that revealed his learning even to one so ignorant as myself.

He was listened to with deference by all, if we except perhaps my Lord Gambara, who had no respect for anything and who preferred to whisper to Leocadia under cover of his hand, ogling her what time she simpered. Once or twice Monna Giuliana flashed him an

unfriendly glance, and this I accounted natural, deeming that she resented this lack of attention to the erudite dissertation of her husband.

But as for the others, they were attentive, as I have said, and even Messer Caro, who at the time—as I gathered then—was engaged upon a translation of Virgil into Tuscan, and who, therefore, might be accounted something of an authority, held his peace and listened what time the doctor reasoned and discoursed.

Fifanti's mean, sycophantic air fell away from him as by magic. Warmed by his subject and his enthusiasm he seemed suddenly ennobled, and I found him less antipathic; indeed, I began to see something admirable in the man, some of that divine quality that only deep culture and learning can impart.

I conceived that now, at last, I held the explanation of how it came to pass that so distinguished a company frequented his house and gathered on such familiar terms about his board.

And I began to be less amazed at the circumstance that he should possess for wife so beautiful and superb a creature as Madonna Giuliana. I thought that I obtained glimpses of the charm which that elderly man might be able to exert upon a fine and cultured young nature with aspirations for things above the commonplace.

CHAPTER II. HUMANITIES

As the days passed and swelled into weeks, and these, in their turn, accumulated into months, I grew rapidly learned in worldly matters at Doctor Fifanti's house.

The curriculum I now pursued was so vastly different from that which my mother had bidden Fra Gervasio to set me, and my acquaintance with the profane writers advanced so swiftly once it was engaged upon, that I acquired knowledge as a weed grows.

Fifanti flung into strange passions when he discovered the extent of my ignorance and the amazing circumstance that whilst Fra Gervasio had made of me a fluent Latin scholar, he had kept me in utter ignorance of the classic writers, and almost in as great an ignorance of history itself. This the pedant set himself at once to redress, and amongst the earliest works he gave me as preparation were Latin translations of Thucydides and Herodotus which I devoured—especially the glowing pages of the latter—at a speed that alarmed my tutor.

But mere studiousness was not my spur, as he imagined. I was enthralled by the novelty of the matters that I read, so different from all those with which I had been allowed to become acquainted hitherto.

There followed Tacitus, and after him Cicero and Livy, which latter two I found less arresting; then came Lucretius, and his *De Rerum Naturae* proved a succulent dish to my inquisitive appetite.

But the cream and glory of the ancient writers I had yet to taste. My first acquaintance with the poets came from the translation of Virgil upon which Messer Caro was at the time engaged. He had definitely

taken up his residence in Piacenza, whither it was said that Farnese, his master, who was to be made our Duke, would shortly come. And in the interval of labouring for Farnese, as Caro was doing, he would toil at his translation, and from time to time he would bring sheaves of his manuscript to the doctor's house, to read what he had accomplished.

He came, I remember, one languid afternoon in August, when I had been with Messer Fifanti for close upon three months, during which time my mind had gradually, yet swiftly, been opening out like a bud under the sunlight of much new learning. We sat in the fine garden behind the house, on the lawn, in the shade of mulberry trees laden with yellow translucent fruit, by a pond that was all afloat with water-lilies.

There was a crescent-shaped seat of hewn marble, over which Messer Gambara, who was with us, had thrown his scarlet cardinal's cloak, the day being oppressively hot. He was as usual in plain, walking clothes, and save for the ring on his finger and the cross on his breast, you had never conceived him an ecclesiastic. He sat near his cloak, upon the marble seat, and beside him sat Monna Giuliana, who was all in white save for the gold girdle at her waist.

Caro, himself, stood to read, his bulky manuscript in his hands. Against the sundial, facing the poet, leaned the tall figure of Messer Fifanti, his bald head uncovered and shining humidly, his eyes ever and anon stealing a look at his splendid wife where she sat so demurely at the prelate's side.

Myself, I lay on the grass near the pond, my hand trailing in the cool water, and at first I was not greatly interested. The heat of the day and the circumstance that we had dined, when played upon by the poet's booming and somewhat monotonous voice, had a lulling effect from which I was in danger of falling asleep. But anon, as the narrative warmed and quickened, the danger was well overpast. I was very

wide-awake, my pulses throbbing, my imagination all on fire. I sat up and listened with an enthralled attention, unconscious of everything and everybody, unconscious even of the very voice of the reader, intent only upon the amazing, tragic matter that he read.

For it happened that this was the Fourth Book of the Aeneid, and the most lamentable, heartrending story of Dido's love for Aeneas, of his desertion of her, of her grief and death upon the funeral pyre.

It held me spellbound. It was more real than anything that I had ever read or heard; and the fate of Dido moved me as if I had known and loved her; so that long ere Messer Caro came to an end I was weeping freely in a most exquisite misery.

Thereafter I was as one who has tasted strong wine and finds his thirst fired by it. Within a week I had read the Aeneid through, and was reading it a second time. Then came the Comedies of Terence, the Metamorphoses of Ovid, Martial, and the Satires of Juvenal. And with those my transformation was complete. No longer could I find satisfaction in the writings of the fathers of the church, or in contemplating the lives of the saints, after the pageantries which the eyes of my soul had looked upon in the profane authors.

What instructions my mother supposed Fifanti to have received concerning me from Arcolano, I cannot think. But certain it is that she could never have dreamed under what influences I was so soon to come, no more than she could conceive what havoc they played with all that hitherto I had learnt and with the resolutions that I had formed—and that she had formed for me—concerning the future.

All this reading perturbed me very oddly, as one is perturbed who having long dwelt in darkness is suddenly brought into the sunlight and dazzled by it, so that, grown conscious of his sight, he is more effectively blinded than he was before. For the process that should have been a gradual one from tender years was carried through in

what amounted to little more than a few weeks.

My Lord Gambara took an odd interest in me. He was something of a philosopher in his trivial way; something of a student of his fellow-man; and he looked upon me as an odd human growth that was being subjected to an unusual experiment. I think he took a certain delight in helping that experiment forward; and certain it is that he had more to do with the debauching of my mind than any other, or than any reading that I did.

It was not that he told me more than elsewhere I could have learnt; it was the cynical manner in which he conveyed his information. He had a way of telling me of monstrous things as if they were purely normal and natural to a properly focussed eye, and as if any monstrousness they might present to me were due to some distortion imparted to them solely by the imperfection of my intellectual vision.

Thus it was from him that I learnt certain unsuspected things concerning Pier Luigi Farnese, who, it was said, was coming to be our Duke, and on whose behalf the Emperor was being importuned to invest him in the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza.

One day as we walked together in the garden—my Lord Gambara and I—I asked him plainly what was Messer Farnese's claim.

"His claim?" quoth he, checking, to give me a long, cool stare. He laughed shortly and resumed his pacing, I keeping step with him. "Why, is he not the Pope's son, and is not that claim enough?"

"The Pope's son!" I exclaimed. "But how is it possible that the Holy Father should have a son?"

"How is it possible?" he echoed mockingly. "Why, I will tell you, sir. When our present Holy Father went as Cardinal-legate to the Mark of Ancona, he met there a certain lady whose name was Lola, who pleased him, and who was pleased with him. Alessandro Farnese

was a handsome man, Ser Agostino. She bore him three children, of whom one is dead, another is Madonna Costanza, who is wed to Sforza of Santafiora, and the third—who really happens to have been the first-born—is Messer Pier Luigi, present Duke of Castro and future Duke of Piacenza."

It was some time ere I could speak.

"But his vows, then?" I exclaimed at last.

"Ah! His vows!" said the Cardinal-legate. "True, there were his vows. I had forgotten that. No doubt he did the same." And he smiled sardonically, sniffing at his pomander-ball.

From that beginning in a fresh branch of knowledge much followed quickly. Under my questionings, Messer Gambara very readily made me acquainted through his unsparing eyes with that cesspool that was known as the Roman Curia. And my horror, my disillusionment increased at every word he said.

I learnt from him that Pope Paul III was no exception to the rule, no such scandal as I had imagined; that his own elevation to the purple was due in origin to the favour which his sister, the beautiful Giulia, had found in the eyes of the Borgia Pope, some fifty years ago. Through him I came to know the Sacred College as it really was; not the very home and fount of Christianity, as I had deemed it, controlled and guided by men of a sublime saintliness of ways, but a gathering of ambitious worldlings, who had become so brazen in their greed of temporal power that they did not even trouble to cloak the sin and evil in which they lived; men in whom the spirit that had actuated those saints the study of whose lives had been my early delight, lived no more than it might live in the bosom of a harlot.

I said so to him one day in a wild, furious access of boldness, in one of those passionate outbursts that are begotten of illusions

blighted.

He heard me through quite calmly, without the least trace of anger, smiling ever his quiet mocking smile, and plucking at his little, auburn beard.

"You are wrong, I think," he said. "Say that the Church has fallen a prey to self-seekers who have entered it under the cloak of the priesthood. What then? In their hands the Church has been enriched. She has gained power, which she must retain. And that is to the Church's good."

"And what of the scandal of it?" I stormed.

"O, as to that—why, boy, have you never read Boccaccio?"

"Never," said I.

"Read him, then," he urged me. "He will teach you much that you need to know. And read in particular the story of Abraam, the Jew, who upon visiting Rome was so scandalized by the licence and luxury of the clergy that he straightway had himself baptized and became a Christian, accounting that a religion that could survive such wiles of Satan to destroy it must indeed be the true religion, divinely inspired." He laughed his little cynical laugh to see my confusion increased by that bitter paradox.

It is little wonder that I was all bewildered, that I was like some poor mariner upon unknown waters, without stars or compass.

Thus that summer ebbed slowly, and the time of my projected minor ordination approached. Messer Gambara's visits to Fifanti's grew more and more frequent, until they became a daily occurrence; and now my cousin Cosimo came oftener too. But it was their custom to come in the forenoon, when I was at work with Fifanti. And often I observed the doctor to be oddly preoccupied, and to spend much

time in creeping to the window that was all wreathed in clematis, and in peeping through that purple-decked green curtain into the garden where his excellency and Cosimo walked with Monna Giuliana.

When both visitors were there his anxiety seemed less. But if only one were present he would give himself no peace. And once when Messer Gambara and she went together within doors, he abruptly interrupted my studies, saying that it was enough for that day; and he went below to join them.

Half a year earlier I should have had no solution for his strange behaviour. But I had learnt enough of the world by now to perceive what maggot was stirring in that egg-shaped head. Yet I blushed for him, and for his foul and unworthy suspicions. As soon would I have suspected the painted Madonna from the brush of Raffaele Santi that I had seen over the high altar of the Church of San Sisto, as suspect the beautiful and noble-souled Giuliana of giving that old pedant cause for his uneasiness. Still, I conceived that this was the penalty that such a withered growth of humanity must pay for having presumed to marry a young wife.

We were much together in those days, Monna Giuliana and I. Our intimacy had grown over a little incident that it were well I should mention.

A young painter, Gianantonio Regillo, better known to the world as Il Pordenone, had come to Piacenza that summer to decorate the Church of Santa Maria della Campagna. He came furnished with letters to the Governor, and Gambara had brought him to Fifanti's villa. From Monna Giuliana the young painter heard the curious story of my having been vowed prenatally to the cloister by my mother, learnt her name and mine, and the hope that was entertained that I should walk in the ways of St. Augustine after whom I had been christened.

It happened that he was about to paint a picture of St. Augustine, as a fresco for the chapel of the Magi of the church I have named. And having seen me and heard that story of mine, he conceived the curious notion of using me as the model for the figure of the saint. I consented, and daily for a week he came to us in the afternoons to paint; and all the time Monna Giuliana would be with us, deeply interested in his work.

That picture he eventually transferred to his fresco, and there—O bitter irony!—you may see me to this day, as the saint in whose ways it was desired that I should follow.

Monna Giuliana and I would linger together in talk after the painter had gone; and this would be at about the time that I had my first lessons of Curial life from my Lord Gambara. You will remember that he mentioned Boccaccio to me, and I chanced to ask her was there in the library a copy of that author's tales.

"Has that wicked priest bidden you to read them?" she inquired, 'twixt seriousness and mockery, her dark eyes upon me in one of those glances that never left me easy.

I told her what had passed; and with a sigh and a comment that I would get an indigestion from so much mental nourishment as I was consuming, she led me to the little library to find the book.

Messer Fifanti's was a very choice collection of works, and every one in manuscript; for the doctor was something of an idealist, and greatly averse to the printing-press and the wide dissemination of books to which it led. Out of his opposition to the machine grew a dislike to its productions, which he denounced as vulgar; and not even their comparative cheapness and the fact that, when all was said, he was a man of limited means, would induce him to harbour a single volume that was so produced.

Along the shelves she sought, and finally drew down four heavy tomes. Turning the pages of the first, she found there, with a readiness that argued a good acquaintance with the work, the story of Abraam the Jew, which I desired to read as it had been set down. She bade me read it aloud, which I did, she seated in the window, listening to me.

At first I read with some constraint and shyness, but presently warming to my task and growing interested, I became animated and vivacious in my manner, so that when I ceased I saw her sitting there, her hands clasped about one knee, her eyes upon my face, her lips parted a little, the very picture of interest.

And with that it happened that we established a custom, and very often, almost daily, after dinner, we would repair together to the library, and I—who hitherto had no acquaintance with any save Latin works—began to make and soon to widen my knowledge of our Tuscan writers. We varied our reading. We dipped into our poets. Dante we read, and Petrarca, and both we loved, though better than the works of either—and this for the sake of the swift movement and action that is in his narrative, though his melodies, I realized, were not so pure—the Orlando of Ariosto.

Sometimes we would be joined by Fifanti himself; but he never stayed very long. He had an old-fashioned contempt for writings in what he called the "dialettale," and he loved the solemn injuvenations of the Latin tongue. Soon, as he listened, he would begin to yawn, and presently grunt and rise and depart, flinging a contemptuous word at the matter of my reading, and telling me at times that I might find more profitable amusement.

But I persisted in it, guided ever by Fifanti's lady. And whatever we read by way of divergence, ever and anon we would come back to the stilted, lucid, vivid pages of Boccaccio.

One day I chanced upon the tragical story of "Isabetta and the Pot of Basil," and whilst I read I was conscious that she had moved from where she had been sitting and had come to stand behind my chair. And when I reached the point at which the heart-broken Isabetta takes the head of her murdered lover to her room, a tear fell suddenly upon my hand.

I stopped, and looked up at Giuliana. She smiled at me through unshed tears that magnified her matchless eyes.

"I will read no more," I said. "It is too sad."

"Ah, no!" she begged. "Read on, Agostino! I love its sadness."

So I read on to the story's cruel end, and when it was done I sat quite still, myself a little moved by the tragedy of it, whilst Giuliana continued to lean against my chair. I was moved, too, in another way; curiously and unaccountably; and I could scarcely have defined what it was that moved me.

I sought to break the spell of it, and turned the pages. "Let me read something else," said I. "Something more gay, to dispel the sadness of this."

But her hand fell suddenly upon mine, enclasping and holding it. "Ah, no!" she begged me gently. "Give me the book. Let us read no more to-day."

I was trembling under her touch—trembling, my every nerve a-quiver and my breath shortened—and suddenly there flashed through my mind a line of Dante's in the story of Paolo and Francesca:

"Quel giorno piu non vi leggemmo avanti."

Giuliana's words: "Let us read no more to-day"—had seemed an echo of that line, and the echo made me of a sudden conscious of an

unsuspected parallel. All at once our position seemed to me strangely similar to that of the ill-starred lovers of Rimini.

But the next moment I was sane again. She had withdrawn her hand, and had taken the volume to restore it to its shelf.

Ah, no! At Rimini there had been two fools. Here there was but one. Let me make an end of him by persuading him of his folly.

Yet Giuliana did nothing to assist me in that task. She returned from the book-shelf, and in passing lightly swept her fingers over my hair.

"Come, Agostino; let us walk in the garden," said she.

We went, my mood now overpast. I was as sober and self-contained as was my habit. And soon thereafter came my Lord Gambara—a rare thing to happen in the afternoon.

Awhile the three of us were together in the garden, talking of trivial matters. Then she fell to wrangling with him concerning something that Caro had written and of which she had the manuscript. In the end she begged me would I go seek the writing in her chamber. I went, and hunted where she had bidden me and elsewhere, and spent a good ten minutes vainly in the task. Chagrined that I could not discover the thing, I went into the library, thinking that it might be there.

Doctor Fifanti was writing busily at the table when I intruded. He looked up, thrusting his horn-rimmed spectacles high upon his peaked forehead.

"What the devil!" quoth he very testily. "I thought you were in the garden with Madonna Giuliana."

"My Lord Gambara is there," said I.

He crimsoned and banged the table with his bony hand. "Do I not know that?" he roared, though I could see no reason for all this heat.

"And why are you not with them?"

You are not to suppose that I was still the meek, sheepish lad who had come to Piacenza three months ago. I had not been learning my world and discovering Man to no purpose all this while.

"It has yet to be explained to me," said I, "under what obligation I am to be anywhere but where I please. That firstly. Secondly—but of infinitely lesser moment—Monna Giuliana has sent me for the manuscript of Messer Caro's *Gigli d'Oro*."

I know not whether it was my cool, firm tones that quieted him. But quiet he became.

"I... I was vexed by your interruption," he said lamely, to explain his late choler. "Here is the thing. I found it here when I came. Messer Caro might discover better employment for his leisure. But there, there"—he seemed in sudden haste again. "Take it to her in God's name. She will be impatient." I thought he sneered. "O, she will praise your diligence," he added, and this time I was sure that he sneered.

I took it, thanked him, and left the room intrigued. And when I rejoined them, and handed her the manuscript, the odd thing was that the subject of their discourse having meanwhile shifted, it no longer interested her, and she never once opened the pages she had been in such haste to have me procure.

This, too, was puzzling, even to one who was beginning to know his world

But I was not done with riddles. For presently out came Fifanti himself, looking, if possible, yellower and more sour and lean than usual. He was arrayed in his long, rusty gown, and there were the usual shabby slippers on his long, lean feet. He was ever a man of most indifferent personal habits.

"Ah, Astorre," his wife greeted him. "My Lord Cardinal brings you good tidings."

"Does he so?" quoth Fifanti, sourly as I thought; and he looked at the legate as though his excellency were the very reverse of a happy harbinger.

"You will rejoice, I think, doctor," said the smiling prelate, "to hear that I have letters from my Lord Pier Luigi appointing you one of the ducal secretaries. And this, I doubt not, will be followed, on his coming hither, by an appointment to his council. Meanwhile, the stipend is three hundred ducats, and the work is light."

There followed a long and baffling silence, during which the doctor grew first red, then pale, then red again, and Messer Gambara stood with his scarlet cloak sweeping about his shapely limbs, sniffing his pomander and smiling almost insolently into the other's face; and some of the insolence of his look, I thought, was reflected upon the pale, placid countenance of Giuliana.

At last, Fifanti spoke, his little eyes narrowing.

"It is too much for my poor deserts," he said curtly.

"You are too humble," said the prelate. "Your loyalty to the House of Farnese, and the hospitality which I, its deputy, have received..."

"Hospitality!" barked Fifanti, and looked very oddly at Giuliana; so oddly that a faint colour began to creep into her cheeks. "You would pay for that?" he questioned, half mockingly. "Oh, but for that a stipend of three hundred ducats is too little."

And all the time his eyes were upon his wife, and I saw her stiffen as if she had been struck.

But the Cardinal laughed outright. "Come now, you use me with an amiable frankness," he said. "The stipend shall be doubled when you

join the council."

"Doubled?" he said. "Six hundred...?" He checked. The sum was vast. I saw greed creep into his little eyes. What had troubled him hitherto, I could not fathom even yet. He washed his bony hands in the air, and looked at his wife again. "It... it is a fair price, no doubt, my lord," said he, his tone contemptuous.

"The Duke shall be informed of the value of your learning," lisped the Cardinal.

Fifanti knit his brows. "The value of my learning?" he echoed, as if slowly puzzled. "My learning? Oh! Is that in question?"

"Why else should we give you the appointment?" smiled the Cardinal, with a smile that was full of significance.

"It is what the town will be asking, no doubt," said Messer Fifanti. "I hope you will be able to satisfy its curiosity, my lord."

And on that he turned, and stalked off again, very white and trembling, as I could perceive.

My Lord Gambara laughed carelessly again, and over the pale face of Monna Giuliana there stole a slow smile, the memory of which was to be hateful to me soon, but which at the moment went to increase my already profound mystification.

CHAPTER III. PREUX-CHEVALIER

In the days that followed I found Messer Fifanti in queerer moods than ever. Ever impatient, he would be easily moved to anger now, and not a day passed but he stormed at me over the Greek with which, under his guidance, I was wrestling.

And with Giuliana his manner was the oddest thing conceivable; at times he was mocking as an ape, at times his manner had in it a suggestion of the serpent; more rarely he was his usual, vulturine self. He watched her curiously, ever between anger and derision, to all of which she presented a calm front and a patience almost saintly. He was as a man with some mighty burden on his mind, undecided whether he shall bear it or cast it off.

Her patience moved me most oddly to pity; and pity for so beautiful a creature is Satan's most subtle snare, especially when you consider what a power her beauty had to move me as I had already discovered to my erstwhile terror. She confided in me a little in those days, but ever with a most saintly resignation. She had been sold into wedlock, she admitted, with a man who might have been her father, and she confessed to finding her lot a cruel one; but confessed it with the air of one who intends none the less to bear her cross with fortitude.

And then, one day, I did a very foolish thing. We had been reading together, she and I, as was become our custom. She had fetched me a volume of the lascivious verse of Panormitano, and we sat side by side on the marble seat in the garden what time I read to her, her shoulder touching mine, the fragrance of her all about me.

She wore, I remember, a clinging gown of russet silk, which did rare justice to the splendid beauty of her, and her heavy ruddy hair was confined in a golden net that was set with gems—a gift from my Lord Gambara. Concerning this same gift words had passed but yesterday between Giuliana and her husband; and I deemed the doctor's anger to be the fruit of a base and unworthy mind.

I read, curiously enthralled—though whether by the beauty of the lines or the beauty of the woman there beside me I could not then have told you.

Presently she checked me. "Leave now Panormitano," she said. "Here is something else upon which you shall give me your judgment." And she set before me a sheet upon which there was a sonnet writ in her own hand, which was as beautiful as any copyist's that I have ever seen.

I read the poem. It was the tenderest and saddest little cry from a heart that ached and starved for an ideal love; and good as the manner seemed, the matter itself it was that chiefly moved me. At my admission of its moving quality her white hand closed over mine as it had done that day in the library when we had read of "Isabetta and the Pot of Basil." Her hand was warm, but not warm enough to burn me as it did.

"Ah, thanks, Agostino," she murmured. "Your praise is sweet to me. The verses are my own."

I was dumbfounded at this fresh and more intimate glimpse of her. The beauty of her body was there for all to see and worship; but here was my first glimpse of the rare beauties of her mind. In what words I should have answered her I do not know, for at that moment we suffered an interruption.

Sudden and harsh as the crackling of a twig came from behind us

the voice of Messer Fifanti. "What do you read?"

We started apart, and turned.

Either he, of set purpose, had crept up behind us so softly that we should not suspect his approach, or else so engrossed were we that our ears had been deafened for the time. He stood there now in his untidy gown of black, and there was a leer of mockery on his long, white face. Slowly he put a lean arm between us, and took the sheet in his bony claw.

He peered at it very closely, being without glasses, and screwed his eyes up until they all but disappeared.

Thus he stood, and slowly read, whilst I looked on a trifle uneasy, and Giuliana's face wore an odd look of fear, her bosom heaving unsteadily in its russet sheath.

He sniffed contemptuously when he had read, and looked at me.

"Have I not bidden you leave the vulgarities of dialect to the vulgar?" quoth he. "Is there not enough written for you in Latin, that you must be wasting your time and perverting your senses with such poor illiterate gibberish as this? And what is it that you have there?" He took the book. "Panormitano!" he roared. "Now, there's a fitting author for a saint in embryo! There's a fine preparation for the cloister!"

He turned to Giuliana. He put forward his hand and touched her bare shoulder with his hideous forefinger. She cringed under the touch as if it were barbed.

"There is not the need that you should render yourself his preceptress," he said, with his deadly smile.

"I do not," she replied indignantly. "Agostino has a taste for letters, and..."

"Tcha! Tcha!" he interrupted, tapping her shoulder sharply. "I had no thought for letters. There is my Lord Gambara, and there is Messer Cosimo d'Anguissola, and there is Messer Caro. There is even Pordenone, the painter." His lips writhed over their names. "You have friends enough, I think. Leave, then, Ser Agostino here. Do not dispute him with God to whom he has been vowed."

She rose in a fine anger, and stood quivering there, magnificently tall, and Juno, I imagined, must have looked to the poets as she looked then to me.

"This is too much!" she cried.

"It is, madam," he snapped. "I agree with you." She considered him with eyes that held a loathing and contempt unutterable. Then she looked at me, and shrugged her shoulders as who would say: "You see how I am used!" Lastly she turned, and took her way across the lawn towards the house.

There was a little silence between us after she had gone. I was on fire with indignation, and yet I could think of no words in which I might express it, realizing how utterly I lacked the right to be angry with a husband for the manner in which he chose to treat his wife.

At last, pondering me very gravely, he spoke.

"It were best you read no more with Madonna Giuliana," he said slowly. "Her tastes are not the tastes that become a man who is about to enter holy orders." He closed the book, which hitherto he had held open; closed it with an angry snap, and held it out to me.

"Restore it to its shelf," he bade me.

I took it, and quite submissively I went to do his bidding. But to gain the library I had to pass the door of Giuliana's room. It stood open,

and Giuliana herself in the doorway. We looked at each other, and seeing her so sorrowful, with tears in her great dark eyes, I stepped forward to speak, to utter something of the deep sympathy that stirred me.

She stretched forth a hand to me. I took it and held it tight, looking up into her eyes.

"Dear Agostino!" she murmured in gratitude for my sympathy; and I, distraught, inflamed by tone and look, answered by uttering her name for the first time.

"Giuliana!"

Having uttered it I dared not look at her. But I stooped to kiss the hand which she had left in mine. And having kissed it I started upright and made to advance again; but she snatched her hand from my clasp and waved me away, at once so imperiously and beseechingly that I turned and went to shut myself in the library with my bewilderment.

For full two days thereafter, for no reason that I could clearly give, I avoided her, and save at table and in her husband's presence we were never once together.

The repasts were sullen things at which there was little said, Madonna sitting in a frozen dignity, and the doctor, a silent man at all times, being now utterly and forbiddingly mute.

But once my Lord Gambara supped with us, and he was light and trivial as ever, an incarnation of frivolity and questionable jests, apparently entirely unconscious of Fifanti's chill reserve and frequent sneers. Indeed, I greatly marvelled that a man of my Lord Gambara's eminence and Governor of Piacenza should so very amiably endure the boorishness of that pedant.

Explanation was about to be afforded me.

On the third day, as we were dining, Giuliana announced that she was going afoot into the town, and solicited my escort. It was an honour that never before had been offered me. I reddened violently, but accepted it, and soon thereafter we set out, just she and I together.

We went by way of the Fodesta Gate, and passed the old Castle of Sant' Antonio, then in ruins—for Gambara was demolishing it and employing the material to construct a barrack for the Pontifical troops that garrisoned Piacenza. And presently we came upon the works of this new building, and stepped out into mid-street to avoid the scaffoldings, and so pursued our way into the city's main square—the Piazza del Commune, overshadowed by the red-and-white bulk of the Communal Palace. This was a noble building, rather in the Saracenic manner, borrowing a very warlike air from the pointed battlements that crowned it.

Near the Duomo we came upon a great concourse of people who were staring up at the iron cage attached to the square tower of the belfry near its summit. In this cage there was what appeared at first to be a heap of rags, but which presently resolved itself into a human shape, crouching in that narrow, cruel space, exposed there to the pitiless beating of the sun, and suffering Heaven alone can say what agonies. The murmuring crowd looked up in mingled fear and sympathy.

He had been there since last night, a peasant girl informed us, and he had been confined there by order of my Lord the Cardinal-legate for the odious sin of sacrilege.

"What!" I cried out, in such a tone of astonished indignation that Monna Giuliana seized my arm and pressed it to enjoin prudence.

It was not until she had made her purchases in a shop under the Duomo and we were returning home that I touched upon the matter. She chid me for the lack of caution that might have led me into some unpardonable indiscretions but for her warning.

"But the very thought of such a man as my Lord Gambara torturing a poor wretch for sacrilege!" I cried. "It is grotesque; it is ludicrous; it is infamous!"

"Not so loud," she laughed. "You are being stared at." And then she delivered herself of an amazing piece of casuistry. "If a man being a sinner himself, shall on that account refrain from punishing sin in others, then is he twice a sinner."

"It was my Lord Gambara taught you that," said I, and involuntarily I sneered.

She considered me with a very searching look.

"Now, what precisely do you mean, Agostino?"

"Why, that it is by just such sophistries that the Cardinal-legate seeks to cloak the disorders of his life. 'Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor?' is his philosophy. If he would engage the most sacrilegious fellow in Piacenza, let him engage himself."

"You do not love him?" said she.

"O—as to that—as a man he is well enough. But as an ecclesiastic...O, but there!" I broke off shortly, and laughed. "The devil take Messer Gambara!"

She smiled. "It is greatly to be feared that he will."

But my Lord Gambara was not so lightly to be dismissed that afternoon. As we were passing the Porta Fodesta, a little group of country-folk that had gathered there fell away before us, all eyes upon

the dazzling beauty of Giuliana—as, indeed, had been the case ever since we had come into the town, so that I had been singularly and sweetly proud of being her escort. I had been conscious of the envious glances that many a tall fellow had sent after me, though, after all, theirs was but as the jealousy of Phoebus for Adonis.

Wherever we had passed and eyes had followed us, men and women had fallen to whispering and pointing after us. And so did they now, here at the Fodesta Gate, but with this difference, that, at last, I overheard for once what was said, for there was one who did not whisper.

"There goes the leman of my Lord Gambara," quoth a gruff, sneering voice, "the light of love of the saintly legate who is starving Domenico to death in a cage for the sin of sacrilege."

Not a doubt but that he would have added more, but that at that moment a woman's shrill voice drowned his utterance. "Silence, Giuffrè!" she admonished him fearfully. "Silence, on your life!"

I had halted in my stride, suddenly cold from head to foot, as on that day when I had flung Rinolfo from top to bottom of the terrace steps at Mondolfo. It happened that I wore a sword for the first time in my life—a matter from which I gathered great satisfaction—having been adjudged worthy of the honour by virtue that I was to be Madonna's escort. To the hilt I now set hand impetuously, and would have turned to strike that foul slanderer dead, but that Giuliana restrained me, a wild alarm in her eyes.

"Come!" she panted in a whisper. "Come away!"

So imperious was the command that it conveyed to my mind some notion of the folly I should commit did I not obey it. I saw at once that did I make an ensample of this scurrilous scandalmonger I should thereby render her the talk of that vile town. So I went on, but very

white and stiff, and breathing somewhat hard; for pent-up passion is an evil thing to house.

Thus came we out of the town and to the shady banks of the gleaming Po. And then, at last, when we were quite alone, and within two hundred yards of Fifanti's house, I broke at last the silence.

I had been thinking very busily, and the peasant's words had illumined for me a score of little obscure matters, had explained to me the queer behaviour and the odd speeches of Fifanti himself since that evening in the garden when the Cardinal-legate had announced to him his appointment as ducal secretary. I checked now in my stride, and turned to face her.

"Was it true?" I asked, rendered brutally direct by a queer pain I felt as a result of my thinking.

She looked up into my face so sadly and wistfully that my suspicions fell from me upon the instant, and I reddened from shame at having harboured them.

"Agostino!" she cried, such a poor little cry of pain that I set my teeth hard and bowed my head in self-contempt.

Then I looked at her again.

"Yet the foul suspicion of that lout is shared by your husband himself," said I.

"The foul suspicion—yes," she answered, her eyes downcast, her cheeks faintly tinted. And then, quite suddenly, she moved forward. "Come," she bade me. "You are being foolish."

"I shall be mad," said I, "ere I have done with this." And I fell into step again beside her. "If I could not avenge you there, I can avenge you here." And I pointed to the house. "I can smite this rumour at its foulest point."

Her hand fell on my arm. "What would you do?" she cried.

"Bid your husband retract and sue to you for pardon, or else tear out his lying throat," I answered, for I was in a great rage by now.

She stiffened suddenly. "You go too fast, Messer Agostino," said she. "And you are over-eager to enter into that which does not concern you. I do not know that I have given you the right to demand of my husband reason of the manner in which he deals with me. It is a thing that touches only my husband and myself."

I was abashed; I was humiliated; I was nigh to tears. I choked it all down, and I strode on beside her, my rage smouldering within me. But it was flaring up again by the time we reached the house with no more words spoken between us. She went to her room without another glance at me, and I repaired straight in quest of Fifanti.

I found him in the library. He had locked himself in, as was his frequent habit when at his studies, but he opened to my knock. I stalked in, unbuckled my sword, and set it in a corner. Then I turned to him.

"You are doing your wife a shameful wrong, sir doctor," said I, with all the directness of youth and indiscretion.

He stared at me as if I had struck him—as he might have stared, rather, at a child who had struck him, undecided whether to strike back for the child's good, or to be amused and smile.

"Ah!" he said at last. "She has been talking to you?" And he clasped his hands behind him and stood before me, his head thrust forward, his legs wide apart, his long gown, which was open, clinging to his ankles.

"No," said I. "I have been thinking."

"In that case nothing will surprise me," he said in his sour, contemptuous manner. "And so you have concluded...?"

"That you are harbouring an infamous suspicion."

"Your assurance that it is infamous would offend me did it not comfort me," he sneered. "And what, pray, is this suspicion?"

"You suspect that... that—O God! I can't utter the thing."

"Take courage," he mocked me. And he thrust his head farther forward. He looked singularly like a vulture in that moment.

"You suspect that Messer Gambara... that Messer Gambara and Madonna... that..." I clenched my hands together, and looked into his leering face. "You understand me well enough," I cried, almost angrily.

He looked at me seriously now, a cold glitter in his small eyes.

"I wonder do you understand yourself?" he asked. "I think not. I think not. Since God has made you a fool, it but remains for man to make you a priest, and thus complete God's work."

"You cannot move me by your taunts," I said. "You have a foul mind, Messer Fifanti."

He approached me slowly, his untidily shod feet slip-slopping on the wooden floor.

"Because," said he, "I suspect that Messer Gambara... that Messer Gambara and Madonna... that... You understand me," he mocked me, with a mimicry of my own confusion. "And what affair may it be of yours whom I suspect or of what I suspect them where my own are concerned?"

"It is my affair, as it is the affair of every man who would be accounted gentle, to defend the honour of a pure and saintly lady from

the foul aspersions of slander."

"Knight-errantry, by the Host!" quoth he, and his brows shot up on his steep brow. Then they came down again to scowl. "No doubt, my preux-chevalier, you will have definite knowledge of the groundlessness of these same slanders," he said, moving backwards, away from me, towards the door; and as he moved now his feet made no sound, though I did not yet notice this nor, indeed, his movement at all.

"Knowledge?" I roared at him. "What knowledge can you need beyond what is afforded by her face? Look in it, Messer Fifanti, if you would see innocence and purity and chastity! Look in it!"

"Very well," said he. "Let us look in it."

And quite suddenly he pulled the door open to disclose Giuliana standing there, erect but in a listening attitude.

"Look in it!" he mocked me, and waved one of his bony hands towards that perfect countenance.

There was shame and confusion in her face, and some anger. But she turned without a word, and went quickly down the passage, followed by his evil, cackling laugh.

Then he looked at me quite solemnly. "I think," said he, "you had best get to your studies. You will find more than enough to engage you there. Leave my affairs to me, boy."

There was almost a menace in his voice, and after what had happened it was impossible to pursue the matter.

Sheepishly, overwhelmed with confusion, I went out—a knight-errant with a shorn crest.

CHAPTER IV. MY LORD GAMBARA CLEARS THE GROUND

I had angered her! Worse; I had exposed her to humiliation at the hands of that unworthy animal who soiled her in thought with the slime of his suspicions. Through me she had been put to the shameful need of listening at a door, and had been subjected to the ignominy of being so discovered. Through me she had been mocked and derided!

It was all anguish to me. For her there was no shame, no humiliation, no pain I would not suffer, and take joy in the suffering so that it be for her. But to have submitted that sweet, angelic woman to suffering—to have incurred her just anger! Woe me!

I came to the table that evening full of uneasiness, very unhappy, feeling it an effort to bring myself into her presence and endure be it her regard or her neglect. To my relief she sent word that she was not well and would keep her chamber; and Fifanti smiled oddly as he stroked his blue chin and gave me a sidelong glance. We ate in silence, and when the meal was done, I departed, still without a word to my preceptor, and went to shut myself up again in my room.

I slept ill that night, and very early next morning I was astir. I went down into the garden somewhere about the hour of sunrise, through the wet grass that was all scintillant with dew. On the marble bench by the pond, where the water-lilies were now rotting, I flung myself down, and there was I found a half-hour later by Giuliana herself.

She stole up gently behind me, and all absorbed and moody as I was, I had no knowledge of her presence until her crisp boyish voice startled me out of my musings.

"Of what do we brood here so early, sir saint?" quoth she.

I turned to meet her laughing eyes. "You... you can forgive me?" faltered foolishly.

She pouted tenderly. "Should I not forgive one who has acted foolishly out of love for me?"

"It was, it was..." I cried; and there stopped, all confused, feeling myself growing red under her lazy glance.

"I know it was," she answered. She set her elbows on the seat's tall back until I could feel her sweet breath upon my brow. "And should I bear you a resentment, then? My poor Agostino, have I no heart to feel? Am I but a cold, reasoning intelligence like that thing my husband? O God! To have been mated to that withered pedant! To have been sacrificed, to have been sold into such bondage! Me miserable!"

"Giuliana!" I murmured soothingly, yet agonized myself.

"Could none have foretold me that you must come some day?"

"Hush!" I implored her. "What are you saying?"

But though I begged her to be silent, my soul was avid for more such words from her—from her, the most perfect and beautiful of women.

"Why should I not?" said she. "Is truth ever to be stifled? Ever?"

I was mad, I know—quite mad. Her words had made me so. And when, to ask me that insistent question, she brought her face still

nearer, I flung down the reins of my unreason and let it ride amain upon its desperate, reckless course. In short, I too leaned forward, I leaned forward, and I kissed her full upon those scarlet, parted lips.

I kissed her, and fell back with a cry that was of anguish almost—so poignantly had the sweet, fierce pain of that kiss run through my every fibre. And as I cried out, so too did she, stepping back, her hands suddenly to her face. But the next moment she was peering up at the windows of the house—those inscrutable eyes that looked upon our deed; that looked and of which it was impossible to discern how much they might have seen.

"If he should have seen us!" was her cry; and it moved me unpleasantly that such should have been the first thought my kiss inspired in her. "If he should have seen us! Gesu! I have enough to bear already!"

"I care not," said I. "Let him see. I am not Messer Gambara. No man shall put an insult upon you on my account, and live."

I was become the very ranting, roaring, fire-breathing type of lover who will slaughter a whole world to do pleasure to his mistress or to spare her pain—I—I—I, Agostino d'Anguissola—who was to be ordained next month and walk in the ways of St. Augustine!

Laugh as you read—for very pity, laugh!

"Nay, nay," she reassured herself. "He will be still abed. He was snoring when I left." And she dismissed her fears, and looked at me again, and returned to the matter of that kiss.

"What have you done to me, Agostino?"

I dropped my glance before her languid eyes. "What I have done to no other woman yet," I answered, a certain gloom creeping over the exultation that still thrilled me. "O Giuliana, what have you done to me?"

You have bewitched me; You have made me mad!" And I set my elbows on my knees and took my head in my hands, and sat there, overwhelmed now by the full consciousness of the irrevocable thing that I had done, a thing that must brand my soul for ever, so it seemed.

To have kissed a maid would have been ill enough for one whose aims were mine. But to kiss a wife, to become a cicisbeo! The thing assumed in my mind proportions foolishly, extravagantly beyond its evil reality.

"You are cruel, Agostino," she whispered behind me. She had come to lean again upon the back of the bench. "Am I alone to blame? Can the iron withstand the lodestone? Can the rain help falling upon the earth? Can the stream flow other than downhill?" She sighed. "Woe me! It is I who should be angered that you have made free of my lips. And yet I am here, wooing you to forgive me for the sin that is your own."

I cried out at that and turned to her again, and I was very white, I know.

"You tempted me!" was my coward's cry.

"So said Adam once. Yet God thought otherwise, for Adam was as fully punished as was Eve." She smiled wistfully into my eyes, and my senses reeled again. And then old Busio, the servant, came suddenly forth from the house upon some domestic errand to Giuliana, and thus was that situation mercifully brought to an end.

For the rest of the day I lived upon the memory of that morning, reciting to myself each word that she had uttered, conjuring up in memory the vision of her every look. And my absent-mindedness was visible to Fifanti when I came to my studies with him later. He grew more peevish with me than was habitual, dubbed me dunce and

wooden-head, and commended the wisdom of those who had determined upon a claustral life for me, admitting that I knew enough Latin to enable me to celebrate as well as another without too clear a knowledge of the meaning of what I pattered. All of which was grossly untrue, for, as none knew better than himself, the fluency of my Latin was above the common wont of students. When I told him so, he delivered himself of his opinion upon the common wont of students with all the sourness of his crabbed nature.

"I'll write an ode for you upon any subject that you may set me," I challenged him.

"Then write one upon impudence," said he. "It is a subject you should understand." And upon that he got up and flung out of the room in a pet before I could think of an answer.

Left alone, I began an ode which should prove to him his lack of justice. But I got no further than two lines of it. Then for a spell I sat biting my quill, my mind and the eyes of my soul full of Giuliana.

Presently I began to write again. It was not an ode, but a prayer, oddly profane—and it was in Italian, in the "dialettale" that provoked Fifi's sneers. How it ran I have forgotten these many years. But I recall that in it I likened myself to a sailor navigating shoals and besought the pharos of Giuliana's eyes to bring me safely through, besought her to anoint me with her glance and so hearten me to brave the dangers of that procellous sea.

I read it first with satisfaction, then with dismay as I realized to the full its amorous meaning. Lastly I tore it up and went below to dine.

We were still at table when my Lord Gambaro arrived. He came on horseback attended by two grooms whom he left to await him. He was all in black velvet, I remember, even to his thigh-boots which were laced up the sides with gold, and on his breast gleamed a fine

medallion of diamonds. Of the prelate there was about him, as usual, nothing but the scarlet cloak and the sapphire ring.

Fifanti rose and set a chair for him, smiling a crooked smile that held more hostility than welcome. None the less did his excellency pay Madonna Giuliana a thousand compliments as he took his seat, supremely calm and easy in his manner. I watched him closely, and I watched Giuliana, a queer fresh uneasiness pervading me.

The talk was trivial and chiefly concerned with the progress of the barracks the legate was building and the fine new road from the middle of the city to the Church of Santa Chiara, which he intended should be called the Via Gambara, but which, despite his intentions, is known to-day as the Stradone Farnese.

Presently my cousin arrived, full-armed and very martial by contrast with the velvety Cardinal. He frowned to see Messer Gambara, then effaced the frown and smiled as, one by one, he greeted us. Last of all he turned to me.

"And how fares his saintliness?" quoth he.

"Indeed, none too saintly," said I, speaking my thoughts aloud.

He laughed. "Why, then, the sooner we are in orders, the sooner shall we be on the road to mending that. Is it not so, Messer Fifanti?"

"His ordination will profit you, I nothing doubt," said Fifanti, with his habitual discourtesy and acidity. "So you do well to urge it."

The answer put my cousin entirely out of countenance a moment. It was a blunt way of reminding me that in this Cosimo I saw one who followed after me in the heirship to Mondolfo, and in whose interests it was that I should don the conventual scapulary.

I looked at Cosimo's haughty face and cruel mouth, and conjectured in that hour whether I should have found him so very civil

and pleasant a cousin had things been other than they were.

O, a very serpent was Messer Fifanti; and I have since wondered whether of intent he sought to sow in my heart hatred of my guelphic cousin, that he might make of me a tool for his own service—as you shall come to understand.

Meanwhile, Cosimo, having recovered, waved aside the imputation, and smiled easily.

"Nay, there you wrong me. The Anguissola lose more than I shall gain by Agostino's renunciation of the world. And I am sorry for it. You believe me, cousin?"

I answered his courteous speech as it deserved, in very courteous terms. This set a pleasanter humour upon all. Yet some restraint abode. Each sat, it seemed, as a man upon his guard. My cousin watched Gambara's every look whenever the latter turned to speak to Giuliana; the Cardinal-legate did the like by him; and Messer Fifanti watched them both.

And, meantime, Giuliana sat there, listening now to one, now to the other, her lazy smile parting those scarlet lips—those lips that I had kissed that morning—I, whom no one thought of watching!

And soon came Messer Annibale Caro, with lines from the last pages of his translation oozing from him. And when presently Giuliana smote her hands together in ecstatic pleasure at one of those same lines and bade him repeat it to her, he swore roundly by all the gods that are mentioned in Virgil that he would dedicate the work to her upon its completion.

At this the surliness became general once more and my Lord Gambara ventured the opinion—and there was a note of promise, almost of threat, in his sleek tones—that the Duke would shortly be needing Messer Caro's presence in Parma; whereupon Messer Caro

cursed the Duke roundly and with all a poet's volubility of invective.

They stayed late, each intent, no doubt, upon outstaying the others. But since none would give way they were forced in the end to depart together.

And whilst Messer Fifanti, as became a host, was seeing them to their horses, I was left alone with Giuliana.

"Why do you suffer those men?" I asked her bluntly. Her delicate brows were raised in surprise. "Why, what now? They are very pleasant gentlemen, Agostino."

"Too pleasant," said I, and rising I crossed to the window whence I could watch them getting to horse, all save Caro, who had come afoot. "Too pleasant by much. That prelate out of Hell, now..."

"Sh!" she hissed at me, smiling, her hand raised. "Should he hear you, he might send you to the cage for sacrilege. O Agostino!" she cried, and the smiles all vanished from her face. "Will you grow cruel and suspicious, too?"

I was disarmed. I realized my meanness and unworthiness.

"Have patience with me," I implored her. "I... I am not myself to-day." I sighed ponderously, and fell silent as I watched them ride away. Yet I hated them all; and most of all I hated the dainty, perfumed, golden-headed Cardinal-legate.

He came again upon the morrow, and we learnt from the news of which he was the bearer that he had carried out his threat concerning Messer Caro. The poet was on his way to Parma, to Duke Pier Luigi, dispatched thither on a mission of importance by the Cardinal. He spoke, too, of sending my cousin to Perugia, where a strong hand was needed, as the town showed signs of mutiny against the authority of the Holy See.

When he had departed, Messer Fifanti permitted himself one of his bitter insinuations.

"He desires a clear field," he said, smiling his cold smile upon Giuliana. "It but remains for him to discover that his Duke has need of me as well."

He spoke of it as a possible contingency, but sarcastically, as men speak of things too remote to be seriously considered. He was to remember his words two days later when the very thing came to pass.

We were at breakfast when the blow fell.

There came a clatter of hooves under our windows, which stood open to the tepid September morning, and soon there was old Busio ushering in an officer of the Pontificals with a parchment tied in scarlet silk and sealed with the arms of Piacenza.

Messer Fifanti took the package and weighed it in his hand, frowning. Perhaps already some foreboding of the nature of its contents was in his mind. Meanwhile, Giuliana poured wine for the officer, and Busio bore him the cup upon a salver.

Fifanti ripped away silk and seals, and set himself to read. I can see him now, standing near the window to which he had moved to gain a better light, the parchment under his very nose, his short-sighted eyes screwed up as he acquainted himself with the letter's contents. Then I saw him turn a sickly leaden hue. He stared at the officer a moment and then at Giuliana. But I do not think that he saw either of them. His look was the blank look of one whose thoughts are very distant.

He thrust his hands behind him, and with head forward, in that curious attitude so reminiscent of a bird of prey, he stepped slowly back to his place at the table-head. Slowly his cheeks resumed their normal tint.

"Very well, sir," he said, addressing the officer. "Inform his excellency that I shall obey the summons of the Duke's magnificence without delay."

The officer bowed to Giuliana, took his leave, and went, old Busio escorting him.

"A summons from the Duke?" cried Giuliana, and then the storm broke

"Ay," he answered, grimly quiet, "a summons from the Duke." And he tossed it across the table to her.

I saw that fateful document float an instant in the air, and then, thrown out of poise by the blob of wax, swoop slanting to her lap.

"It will come no doubt as a surprise to you," he growled; and upon that his hard-held passion burst all bonds that he could impose upon it. His great bony fist crashed down upon the board and swept a precious Venetian beaker to the ground, where it burst into a thousand atoms, spreading red wine like a bloodstain upon the floor.

"Said I not that this rascal Cardinal would make a clear field for himself? Said I not so?" He laughed shrill and fiercely. "He would send your husband packing as he has sent his other rivals. O, there is a stipend waiting—a stipend of three hundred ducats yearly that shall be made into six hundred presently, and all for my complaisance, all that I may be a joyous and content cornuto!"

He strode to the window cursing horribly, whilst Giuliana sat white of face with lips compressed and heaving bosom, her eyes upon her plate.

"My Lord Cardinal and his Duke may take themselves together to Hell ere I obey the summons that the one has sent me at the desire of the other. Here I stay to guard what is my own."

"You are a fool," said Giuliana at length, "and a knave, too, for you insult me without cause."

"Without cause? O, without cause, eh? By the Host! Yet you would not have me stay?"

"I would not have you gaoled, which is what will happen if you disobey the Duke's magnificence," said she.

"Gaoled?" quoth he, of a sudden trembling in the increasing intensity of his passion. "Caged, perhaps—to die of hunger and thirst and exposure, like that poor wretch Domenico who perished yesterday, at last, because he dared to speak the truth. Gesu!" he groaned. "O, miserable me!" And he sank into a chair.

But the next instant he was up again, and his long arms were waving fiercely. "By the Eyes of God! They shall have cause to cage me. If I am to be horned like a bull, I'll use those same horns. I'll gore their vitals. O madam, since of your wantonness you inclined to harlotry, you should have wedded another than Astorre Fifanti."

It was too much. I leapt to my feet.

"Messer Fifanti," I blazed at him. "I'll not remain to hear such words addressed to this sweet lady."

"Ah, yes," he snarled, wheeling suddenly upon me as if he would strike me. "I had forgot the champion, the preux-chevalier, the saint in embryo! You will not remain to hear the truth, sir, eh?" And he strode, mouthing, to the door, and flung it wide so that it crashed against the wall. "This is your remedy. Get you hence! Go! What passes here concerns you not. Go!" he roared like a mad beast, his rage a thing terrific.

I looked at him and from him to Giuliana, and my eyes most clearly invited her to tell me how she would have me act.

"Indeed, you had best go, Agostino," she answered sadly. "I shall bear his insults easier if there be no witness. Yes, go."

"Since it is your wish, Madonna," I bowed to her, and very erect, very defiant of mien, I went slowly past the livid Fifanti, and so out. I heard the door slammed after me, and in the little hall I came upon Busio, who was wringing his hand and looking very white. He ran to me.

"He will murder her, Messer Agostino," moaned the old man. "He can be a devil in his anger."

"He is a devil always, in anger and out of it," said I. "He needs an exorcist. It is a task that I should relish. I'd beat the devils out of him, Busio, and she would let me. Meanwhile, stay we here, and if she needs our help, it shall be hers."

I dropped on to the carved settle that stood there, old Busio standing at my elbow, more tranquil now that there was help at hand for Madonna in case of need. And through the door came the sound of his storming, and presently the crash of more broken glassware, as once more he thumped the table. For well-high half an hour his fury lasted, and it was seldom that her voice was interposed. Once we heard her laugh, cold and cutting as a sword's edge, and I shivered at the sound, for it was not good to hear.

At last the door was opened and he came forth. His face was inflamed, his eyes wild and blood-injected. He paused for a moment on the threshold, but I do not think that he noticed us at first. He looked back at her over his shoulder, still sitting at table, the outline of her white-gowned body sharply defined against the deep blue tapestry of the wall behind her.

"You are warned," said he. "Do you heed the warning!" And he came forward.

Perceiving me at last where I sat, he bared his broken teeth in a snarling smile. But it was to Busio that he spoke. "Have my mule saddled for me in an hour," he said, and passed on and up the stairs to make his preparations. It seemed, therefore, that she had conquered his suspicions.

I went in to offer her comfort, for she was weeping and all shaken by that cruel encounter. But she waved me away.

"Not now, Agostino. Not now," she implored me. "Leave me to myself, my friend."

I had not been her friend had I not obeyed her without question.

CHAPTER V. PABULUM ACHERONTIS

It was late that afternoon when Astorre Fifanti set out. He addressed a few brief words to me, informing me that he should return within four days, betide what might, setting me tasks upon which I was meanwhile to work, and bidding me keep the house and be circumspect during his absence.

From the window of my room I saw the doctor get astride his mule. He was girt with a big sword, but he still wore his long, absurd and shabby gown and his loose, ill-fitting shoes, so that it was very likely that the stirrup-leathers would engage his thoughts ere he had ridden far.

I saw him dig his heels into the beast's sides and go ambling down the little avenue and out at the gate. In the road he drew rein, and stood in talk some moments with a lad who idled there, a lad whom he was wont to employ upon odd tasks about the garden and elsewhere.

This, Madonna also saw, for she was watching his departure from the window of a room below. That she attached more importance to that little circumstance than did I, I was to learn much later.

At last he pushed on, and I watched him as he dwindled down the long grey road that wound along the river-side until in the end he was lost to view—for all time, I hoped; and well had it been for me had my idle hope been realized.

I supped alone that night with no other company than Busio's, who

ministered to my needs.

Madonna sent word that she would keep her chamber. When I had supped and after night had fallen I went upstairs to the library, and, shutting myself in, I attempted to read, lighted by the three beaks of the tall brass lamp that stood upon the table. Being plagued by moths, I drew the curtains close across the open window, and settled down to wrestle with the opening lines of the [Title in Greek] of Aeschylus.

But my thoughts wandered from the doings of the son of Iapetus, until at last I flung down the book and sat back in my chair all lost in thought, in doubt, and in conjecture. I became seriously introspective. I made an examination not only of conscience, but of heart and mind, and I found that I had gone woefully astray from the path that had been prepared for me. Very late I sat there and sought to determine upon what I should do.

Suddenly, like a manna to my starving soul, came the memory of the last talk I had with Fra Gervasio and the solemn warning he had given me. That memory inspired me rightly. To-morrow—despite Messer Fifanti's orders—I would take horse and ride to Mondolfo, there to confess myself to Fra Gervasio and to be guided by his counsel. My mother's vows concerning me I saw in their true light. They were not binding upon me; indeed, I should be doing a hideous wrong were I to follow them against my inclinations. I must not damn my soul for anything that my mother had vowed or ever I was born, however much she might account that it would be no more than filial piety so to do.

I was easier in mind after my resolve was taken, and I allowed that mind of mine to stray thereafter as it listed. It took to thoughts of Giuliana—Giuliana for whom I ached in every nerve, although I still sought to conceal from myself the true cause of my suffering. Better a thousand times had I envisaged that sinful fact and wrestled with it boldly. Thus should I have had a chance of conquering myself and

winning clear of all the horror that lay before me.

That I was weak and irresolute at such a time, when I most needed strength, I still think to-day—when I can take a calm survey of all—was the fault of the outrageous rearing that was mine. At Mondolfo they had so nurtured me and so sheltered me from the stinging blasts of the world that I was grown into a very ripe and succulent fruit for the Devil's mouth. The things to whose temptation usage would have rendered me in some degree immune were irresistible to one who had been tutored as had I.

Let youth know wickedness, lest when wickedness seeks a man out in his riper years he shall be fooled and conquered by the beauteous garb in which the Devil has the cunning to array it.

And yet to pretend that I was entirely innocent of where I stood and in what perils were to play the hypocrite. Largely I knew; just as I knew that lacking strength to resist, I must seek safety in flight. And to-morrow I would go. That point was settled, and the page, meanwhile, turned down. And for to-night I delivered myself up to the savouring of this hunger that was upon me.

And then, towards the third hour of night, as I still sat there, the door was very gently opened, and I beheld Giuliana standing before me. She detached from the black background of the passage, and the light of my three-beaked lamp set her ruddy hair aglow so that it seemed there was a luminous nimbus all about her head. For a moment this gave colour to my fancy that I beheld a vision evoked by the too great intentness of my thoughts. The pale face seemed so transparent, the white robe was almost diaphanous, and the great dark eyes looked so sad and wistful. Only in the vivid scarlet of her lips was there life and blood.

I stared at her. "Giuliana!" I murmured.

"Why do you sit so late?" she asked me, and closed the door as she spoke.

"I have been thinking, Giuliana," I answered wearily, and I passed a hand over my brow to find it moist and clammy. "To-morrow I go hence."

She started round and her eyes grew distended, her hand clutched her breast. "You go hence?" she cried, a note as of fear in her deep voice. "Hence? Whither?"

"Back to Mondolfo, to tell my mother that her dream is at an end."

She came slowly towards me. "And... and then?" she asked.

"And then? I do not know. What God wills. But the scapulary is not for me. I am unworthy. I have no call. This I now know. And sooner than be such a priest as Messer Gambarà—of whom there are too many in the Church to-day—I will find some other way of serving God."

"Since... since when have you thought thus?"

"Since this morning, when I kissed you," I answered fiercely.

She sank into a chair beyond the table and stretched a hand across it to me, inviting the clasp of mine. "But if this is so, why leave us?"

"Because I am afraid," I answered. "Because... O God! Giuliana, do you not see?" And I sank my head into my hands.

Steps shuffled along the corridor. I looked up sharply. She set a finger to her lips. There fell a knock, and old Busio stood before us.

"Madonna," he announced, "my Lord the Cardinal-legate is below and asks for you."

I started up as if I had been stung. So! At this hour! Then Messer

Fifanti's suspicions did not entirely lack for grounds.

Giuliana flashed me a glance ere she made answer.

"You will tell my Lord Gambara that I have retired for the night and that... But stay!" She caught up a quill and dipped it in the ink-horn, drew paper to herself, and swiftly wrote three lines; then dusted it with sand, and proffered that brief epistle to the servant.

"Give this to my lord."

Busio took the note, bowed, and departed.

After the door had closed a silence followed, in which I paced the room in long strides, aflame now with the all-consuming fire of jealousy. I do believe that Satan had set all the legions of hell to achieve my overthrow that night. Naught more had been needed to undo me than this spur of jealousy. It brought me now to her side. I stood over her, looking down at her between tenderness and fierceness, she returning my glance with such a look as may haunt the eyes of sacrificial victims.

"Why dared he come?" I asked.

"Perhaps... perhaps some affair connected with Astorre..." she faltered.

I sneered. "That would be natural seeing that he has sent Astorre to Parma."

"If there was aught else, I am no party to it," she assured me.

How could I do other than believe her? How could I gauge the turpitude of that beauty's mind—I, all unversed in the wiles that Satan teaches women? How could I have guessed that when she saw Fifanti speak to that lad at the gate that afternoon she had feared that he had set a spy upon the house, and that fearing this she had bidden

the Cardinal begone? I knew it later. But not then.

"Will you swear that it is as you say?" I asked her, white with passion.

As I have said, I was standing over her and very close. Her answer now was suddenly to rise. Like a snake came she gliding upwards into my arms until she lay against my breast, her face upturned, her eyes languidly veiled, her lips a-pout.

"Can you do me so great a wrong, thinking you love me, knowing that I love you?" she asked me.

For an instant we swayed together in that sweetly hideous embrace. I was as a man sapped of all strength by some portentous struggle. I trembled from head to foot. I cried out once—a despairing prayer for help, I think it was—and then I seemed to plunge headlong down through an immensity of space until my lips found hers. The ecstasy, the living fire, the anguish, and the torture of it have left their indelible scars upon my memory. Even as I write the cruelly sweet poignancy of that moment is with me again—though very hateful now.

Thus I, blindly and recklessly, under the sway and thrall of that terrific and overpowering temptation. And then there leapt in my mind a glimmer of returning consciousness: a glimmer that grew rapidly to be a blazing light in which I saw revealed the hideousness of the thing I did. I tore myself away from her in that second of revulsion and hurled her from me, fiercely and violently, so that, staggering to the seat from which she had risen, she fell into it rather than sat down.

And whilst, breathless with parted lips and galloping bosom, she observed me, something near akin to terror in her eyes, I stamped about that room and raved and heaped abuse and recriminations upon myself, ending by going down upon my knees to her, imploring her forgiveness for the thing I had done—believing like a fatuous fool

that it was all my doing—and imploring her still more passionately to leave me and to go.

She set a trembling hand upon my head; she took my chin in the other, and raised my face until she could look into it.

"If it be your will—if it will bring you peace and happiness, I will leave you now and never see you more. But are you not deluded, my Agostino?"

And then, as if her self-control gave way, she fell to weeping.

"And what of me if you go? What of me wedded to that monster, to that cruel and inhuman pedant who tortures and insults me as you have seen?"

"Beloved, will another wrong cure the wrong of that?" I pleaded. "O, if you love me, go—go, leave me. It is too late—too late!"

I drew away from her touch, and crossed the room to fling myself upon the window-seat. For a space we sat apart thus, panting like wrestlers who have flung away from each other. At length—"Listen, Giuliana," I said more calmly. "Were I to heed you, were I to obey my own desires, I should bid you come away with me from this to-morrow."

"If you but would!" she sighed. "You would be taking me out of hell."

"Into another worse," I countered swiftly. "I should do you such a wrong as naught could ever right again."

She looked at me for a spell in silence. Her back was to the light and her face in shadow, so that I could not read what passed there. Then, very slowly, like one utterly weary, she got to her feet.

"I will do your will, beloved; but I do it not for the wrong that I should suffer—for that I should count no wrong—but for the wrong that I

should be doing you."

She paused as if for an answer. I had none for her. I raised my arms, then let them fall again, and bowed my head. I heard the gentle rustle of her robe, and I looked up to see her staggering towards the door, her arms in front of her like one who is blind. She reached it, pulled it open, and from the threshold gave me one last ineffable look of her great eyes, heavy now with tears. Then the door closed again, and I was alone.

From my heart there rose a great surge of thankfulness. I fell upon my knees and prayed. For an hour at least I must have knelt there, seeking grace and strength; and comforted at last, my calm restored, I rose, and went to the window. I drew back the curtains, and leaned out to breathe the physical calm of that tepid September night.

And presently out of the gloom a great grey shape came winging towards the window, the heavy pinions moving ponderously with their uncanny sigh. It was an owl attracted by the light. Before that bird of evil omen, that harbinger of death, I drew back and crossed myself. I had a sight of its sphinx-like face and round, impassive eyes ere it circled to melt again into the darkness, startled by any sudden movement. I closed the window and left the room.

Very softly I crept down the passage towards my chamber, leaving the light burning in the library, for it was not my habit to extinguish it, and I gave no thought to the lateness of the hour.

Midway down the passage I halted. I was level with Giuliana's door, and from under it there came a slender blade of light. But it was not this that checked me. She was singing, Such a pitiful little heartbroken song it was:

"Amor mi muojo; mi muojo amore mio!"

ran its last line.

I leaned against the wall, and a sob broke from me. Then, in an instant, the passage was flooded with light, and in the open doorway Giuliana stood all white before me, her arms held out.

CHAPTER VI. THE IRON GIRDLE

From the distance, drawing rapidly nearer and ringing sharply in the stillness of the night, came the clatter of a mule's hooves.

But, though heard, it was scarcely heard consciously, and it certainly went unheeded until it was beneath the window and ceasing at the door.

Giuliana's fingers locked themselves upon my arm in a grip of fear.

"Who comes?" she asked, below her breath, fearfully. I sprang from the bed and crouched, listening, by the window, and so lost precious time.

Out of the darkness Giuliana's voice spoke again, hoarsely now and trembling.

"It will be Astorre," she said, with conviction. "At this hour it can be none else. I suspected when I saw him talking to that boy at the gate this afternoon that he was setting a spy upon me, to warn him wherever he was lurking, did the need arise."

"But how should the boy know...?" I began, when she interrupted me almost impatiently.

"The boy saw Messer Gambarara ride up. He waited for no more, but went at once to warn Astorre. He has been long in coming," she added in the tone of one who is still searching for the exact explanation of the thing that is happening. And then, suddenly and very urgently, "Go, go—go quickly!" she bade me.

As in the dark I was groping my way towards the door she spoke again:

"Why does he not knock? For what does he wait?" Immediately, from the stairs, came a terrific answer to her question—the unmistakable, slip-slopping footstep of the doctor.

I halted, and for an instant stood powerless to move. How he had entered I could not guess, nor did I ever discover. Sufficient was the awful fact that he was in.

I was ice-cold from head to foot. Then I was all on fire and groping forward once more whilst those footsteps, sinister and menacing as the very steps of Doom, came higher and nearer.

At last I found the door and wrenched it open. I stayed to close it after me, and already at the end of the passage beat the reflection of the light Fifanti carried. A second I stood there hesitating which way to turn. My first thought was to gain my own chamber. But to attempt it were assuredly to run into his arms. So I turned, and went as swiftly and stealthily as possible towards the library.

I was all but in when he turned the corner of the passage, and so caught sight of me before I had closed the door.

I stood in the library, where the lamp still burned, sweating, panting, and trembling. For even as he had had a glimpse of me, so had I had a glimpse of him, and the sight was terrifying to one in my situation.

I had seen, his tall, gaunt figure bending forward in his eager, angry haste. In one hand he carried a lanthorn; a naked sword in the other. His face was malign and ghastly, and his bald, egg-like head shone yellow. The fleeting glimpse he had of me drew from him a sound between a roar and a snarl, and with quickened feet he came slip-slopping down the passage.

I had meant, I think, to play the fox: to seat myself at the table, a book before me, and feigning slumber, present the appearance of one who had been overcome by weariness at his labours. But now all thought of that was at an end. I had been seen, and that I fled was all too apparent. So that in every way I was betrayed.

The thing I did, I did upon instinct rather than reason; and this again was not well done. I slammed the door, and turned the key, placing at least that poor barrier between myself and the man I had so deeply wronged, the man whom I had given the right to slay me. A second later the door shook as if a hurricane had smitten it. He had seized the handle, and he was pulling at it frenziedly with a maniacal strength.

"Open!" he thundered, and fell to snarling and whimpering horribly. "Open!"

Then, quite abruptly he became oddly calm. It was as if his rage grew coldly purposeful; and the next words he uttered acted upon me as a dagger-prod, and reawakened my mind from its momentary stupefaction.

"Do you think these poor laths can save you from my vengeance, my Lord Gambara?" quoth he, with a chuckle horrible to hear.

My Lord Gambara! He mistook me for the Legate! In an instant I saw the reason of this. It was as Giuliana had conceived. The boy had run to warn him wherever he was—at Roncaglia, perhaps, a league away upon the road to Parma. And the boy's news was that my Lord the Governor had gone to Fifanti's house. The boy had never waited to see the Legate come forth again; but had obeyed his instructions to the letter, and it was Gambara whom Fifanti came to take red-handed and to kill as he had the right to do.

When he had espied my flying shape, the length of the corridor had lain between us, Fifanti was short-sighted, and since it was Gambara

whom he expected to find, Gambarà at once he concluded it to be who fled before him.

There was no villainy for which I was not ripe that night, it seemed. For no sooner did I perceive this error than I set myself to scheme how I might profit by it. Let Gambarà by all means suffer in my place if the thing could be contrived. If not in fact, at least in intent, the Cardinal-legate had certainly sinned. If he was not in my place now, it was through the too great good fortune that attended him. Besides, Gambarà would be in better case to protect himself from the consequences and from Fifanti's anger.

Thus cravenly I reasoned; and reasoning thus, I reached the window. If I could climb down to the garden, and then perhaps up again to my own chamber, I might get me to bed, what time Fifanti still hammered at that door. Meanwhile his voice came rasping through those slender timbers, as he mocked the Lord Cardinal he supposed me.

"You would not be warned, my lord, and yet I warned you enough. You would plant horns upon my head. Well, well! Do not complain if you are gored by them."

Then he laughed hideously. "This poor Astorre Fifanti is blind and a fool. He is to be sent packing on a journey to the Duke, devised to suit my Lord Cardinal's convenience. But you should have bethought you that suspicious husbands have a trick of pretending to depart whilst they remain."

Next his voice swelled up again in passion, and again the door was shaken.

"Will you open, then, or must I break down the door! There is no barrier in the world shall keep me from you, there is no power can save you. I have the right to kill you by every law of God and man.

"Shall I forgo that right?" He laughed snarlingly.

"Three hundred ducats yearly to recompense the hospitality I have given you—and six hundred later upon the coming of the Duke!" he mocked. "That was the price, my lord, of my hospitality—which was to include my wife's harlotry. Three hundred ducats! Ha! ha! Three hundred thousand million years in Hell! That is the price, my lord—the price that you shall pay, for I present the reckoning and enforce it. You shall be shriven in iron—you and your wanton after you.

"Shall I be caged for having shed a prelate's sacred blood? for having sent a prelate's soul to Hell with all its filth of sin upon it? Shall I? Speak, magnificent; out of the fullness of your theological knowledge inform me."

I had listened in a sort of fascination to that tirade of venomous mockery. But now I stirred, and pulled the casement open. I peered down into the darkness and hesitated. The wall was creeper-clad to the window's height; but I feared the frail tendrils of the clematis would never bear me. I hesitated. Then I resolved to jump. It was but little more than some twelve feet to the ground, and that was nothing to daunt an active lad of my own build, with the soft turf to land upon below. It should have been done without hesitation; for that moment's hesitation was my ruin.

Fifanti had heard the opening of the casement, and fearing that, after all, his prey might yet escape him, he suddenly charged the door like an infuriated bull, and borrowing from his rage a strength far greater than his usual he burst away the fastenings of that crazy door.

Into the room hurtled the doctor, to check and stand there blinking at me, too much surprised for a moment to grasp the situation.

When, at last, he understood, the returning flow of rage was overwhelming.

"You!" he gasped, and then his voice mounting—"You dog!" he screamed. "So it was you! You!"

He crouched and his little eyes, all blood-injected, peered at me with horrid malice. He grew cold again as he mastered his surprise. "You!" he repeated. "Blind fool that I have been! You! The walker in the ways of St. Augustine—in his early ways, I think. You saint in embryo, you postulant for holy orders! You shall be ordained this night—with this!" And he raised his sword so that little yellow runnels of light sped down the livid blade.

"I will ordain you into Hell, you hound!" And thereupon he leapt at me.

I sprang away from the window, urged by fear of him into a very sudden activity. As I crossed the room I had a glimpse of the white figure of Giuliana in the gloom of the passage, watching.

He came after me, snarling. I seized a stool and hurled it at him. He avoided it nimbly, and it went crashing through the half of the casement that was still closed.

And as he avoided it, grown suddenly cunning, he turned back towards the door to bar my exit should I attempt to lead him round the table.

We stood at gaze, the length of the little low-ceilinged chamber between us, both of us breathing hard.

Then I looked round for something with which to defend myself; for it was plain that he meant to have my life. By a great ill-chance it happened that the sword which I had worn upon that day when I went as Giuliana's escort into Piacenza was still standing in the very corner where I had set it down. Instinctively I sprang for it, and Fifanti, never suspecting my quest until he saw me with a naked iron in my hand, did nothing to prevent my reaching it.

Seeing me armed, he laughed. "Ho, ho! The saint-at-arms!" he mocked. "You'll be as skilled with weapons as with holiness!" And he advanced upon me in long stealthy strides. The width of the table was between us, and he smote at me across it. I parried, and cut back at him, for being armed now, I no more feared him than I should have feared a child. Little he knew of the swordcraft I had learnt from old Falcone, a thing which once learnt is never forgotten though lack of exercise may make us slow.

He cut at me again, and narrowly missed the lamp in his stroke. And now, I can most solemnly make oath that in the thing that followed there was no intent. It was over and done before I was conscious of the happening. I had acted purely upon instinct as men will in performing what they have been taught.

To ward his blow, I came almost unconsciously into that guard of Marozzo's which is known as the iron girdle. I parried and on the stroke I lunged, and so, taking the poor wretch entirely unawares, I sank the half of my iron into his vitals ere he or I had any thought that the thing was possible.

I saw his little eyes grow very wide, and the whole expression of his face become one of intense astonishment.

He moved his lips as if to speak, and then the sword clattered from his one hand, the lanthorn from his other; he sank forward quietly, still looking at me with the same surprised glance, and so came further on to my rigidly held blade, until his breast brought up against the quillons. For a moment he remained supported thus, by just that rigid arm of mine and the table against which his weight was leaning. Then I withdrew the blade, and in the same movement flung the weapon from me. Before the sword had rattled to the floor, his body had sunk down into a heap beyond the table, so that I could see no more than the yellow, egg-like top of his bald head.

Awhile I stood watching it, filled with an extraordinary curiosity and a queer awe. Very slowly was it that I began to realize the thing I had done. It might be that I had killed Fifanti. It might be. And slowly, gradually I grew cold with the thought and the apprehension of its horrid meaning.

Then from the passage came a stifled scream, and Giuliana staggered forward, one hand holding flimsy draperies to her heaving bosom, the other at her mouth, which had grown hideously loose and uncontrolled. Her glowing copper hair, all unbound, fell about her shoulders like a mantle.

Behind her with ashen face and trembling limbs came old Busio. He was groaning and ringing his hands. Thus I saw the pair of them creep forward to approach Fifanti, who had made no sound since my sword had gone through him.

But Fifanti was no longer there to heed them—the faithful servant and the unfaithful wife. All that remained, huddled there at the foot of the table, was a heap of bleeding flesh and shabby garments.

It was Giuliana who gave me the information. With a courage that was almost stupendous she looked down into his face, then up into mine, which I doubt not was as livid.

"You have killed him," she whispered. "He is dead."

He was dead and I had killed him! My lips moved.

"He would have killed me," I answered in a strangled voice, and knew that what I said was a sort of lie to cloak the foulness of my deed.

Old Busio uttered a long, croaking wail, and went down on his knees beside the master he had served so long—the master who would never more need servant in this world.

It was upon the wings of that pitiful cry that the full understanding of the thing I had done was borne in upon my soul. I bowed my head, and took my face in my hands. I saw myself in that moment for what I was. I accounted myself wholly and irrevocably damned, Be God never so clement, surely here was something for which even His illimitable clemency could find no pardon.

I had come to Fifanti's house as a student of humanities and divinities; all that I had learnt there had been devilries culminating in this hour's work. And all through no fault of that poor, mean, ugly pedant, who indeed had been my victim—whom I had robbed of honour and of life.

Never man felt self-horror as I felt it then, self-loathing and self-contempt. And then, whilst the burden of it all, the horror of it all was full upon me, a soft hand touched my shoulder, and a soft, quivering voice murmured urgently in my ear:

"Agostino, we must go; we must go."

I plucked away my hands, and showed her a countenance before which she shrank in fear.

"We?" I snarled at her. "We?" I repeated still more fiercely, and drove her back before me as if I had done her a bodily hurt.

O, I should have imagined—had I had time in which to imagine anything—that already I had descended to the very bottom of the pit of infamy. But it seems that one more downward step remained me; and that step I took. Not by act, nor yet by speech, but just by thought.

For without the manliness to take the whole blame of this great crime upon myself, I must in my soul and mind fling the burden of it upon her. Like Adam of old, I blamed the woman, and charged her in my thoughts with having tempted me. Charging her thus, I loathed her as the cause of all this sin that had engulfed me; loathed her in that

moment as a thing unclean and hideous; loathed her with a completeness of loathing such as I had never experienced before for any fellow-creature.

Instead of beholding in her one whom I had dragged with me into my pit of sin and whom it was incumbent upon my manhood thenceforth to shelter and protect from the consequences of my own iniquity, I attributed to her the blame of all that had befallen.

To-day I know that in so doing I did no more than justice. But it was not justly done. I had then no such knowledge as I have to-day by which to correct my judgment. The worst I had the right to think of her in that hour was that her guilt was something less than mine. In thinking otherwise was it that I took that last step to the very bottom of the hell that I had myself created for myself that night.

The rest was as nothing by comparison. I have said that it was not by act or speech that I added to the sum of my iniquities; and yet it was by both. First, in that fiercely echoed "We?" that I hurled at her to strike her from me; then in my precipitate flight alone.

How I stumbled from that room I scarcely know. The events of the time that followed immediately upon Fifanti's death are all blurred as the impressions of a sick man's dream.

I dimly remember that as she backed away from me until her shoulders touched the wall, that as she stood so, all white and lovely as any snare that Satan ever devised for man's ruin, staring at me with mutely pleading eyes, I staggered forward, avoiding the sight of that dreadful huddle on the floor, over which Busio was weeping foolishly.

As I stepped a sudden moisture struck my stockinged feet. Its nature I knew by instinct upon the instant, and filled by it with a sudden unreasoning terror, I dashed with a loud cry from the room.

Along the passage and down the dark stairs I plunged until I reached the door of the house. It stood open and I went heedlessly forth. From overhead I heard Giuliana calling me in a voice that held a note of despair. But I never checked in my headlong career.

Fifanti's mule, I have since reflected, was tethered near the steps. I saw the beast, but it conveyed no meaning to my mind, which I think was numbed. I sped past it and on, through the gate, round the road by the Po, under the walls of the city, and so away into the open country.

Without cap, without doublet, without shoes, just in my trunks and shirt and hose, as I was, I ran, heading by instinct for home as heads the animal that has been overtaken by danger whilst abroad. Never since Phidippides, the Athenian courier, do I believe that any man had run as desperately and doggedly as I ran that night.

By dawn, having in some three hours put twenty miles or so between myself and Piacenza, I staggered exhausted and with cut and bleeding feet through the open door of a peasant's house.

The family, sat at breakfast in the stone-flagged room into which I stumbled. I halted under their astonished eyes.

"I am the Lord of Mondolfo," I panted hoarsely, "and I need a beast to carry me home."

The head of that considerable family, a grizzled, suntanned peasant, rose from his seat and pondered my condition with a glance that was laden with mistrust.

"The Lord of Mondolfo—you, thus?" quoth he. "Now, by Bacchus, I am the Pope of Rome!"

But his wife, more tender-hearted, saw in my disorder cause for pity rather than irony.

"Poor lad!" she murmured, as I staggered and fell into a chair, unable longer to retain my feet. She rose immediately, and came hurrying towards me with a basin of goat's milk. The draught refreshed my body as her gentle words of comfort soothed my troubled soul. Seated there, her stout arm about my shoulders, my head pillowed upon her ample, motherly breast, I was very near to tears, loosened in my overwrought state by the sweet touch of sympathy, for which may God reward her.

I rested in that place awhile. Three hours I slept upon a litter of straw in an outhouse; whereupon, strengthened by my repose, I renewed my claim to be the Lord of Mondolfo and my demand for a horse to carry me to my fortress.

Still doubting me too much to trust me alone with any beast of his, the peasant nevertheless fetched out a couple of mules and set out with me for Mondolfo.

BOOK III. THE WILDERNESS

CHAPTER I. THE HOME-COMING

It was still early morning when we came into the town of Mondolfo, my peasant escort and I.

The day being Sunday there was little stir in the town at such an hour, and it presented a very different appearance from that which it had worn when last I had seen it. But the difference lay not only in the absence of bustle and the few folk abroad now as compared with that market-day on which, departing, I had ridden through it. I viewed the place to-day with eyes that were able to draw comparisons, and after the wide streets and imposing buildings of Piacenza, I found my little township mean and rustic.

We passed the Duomo, consecrated to Our Lady of Mondolfo. Its portals stood wide, and in the opening swung a heavy crimson curtain, embroidered with a huge golden cross which was bellying outward like an enormous gonfalon. On the steps a few crippled beggars whined, and a few faithful took their way to early Mass.

On, up the steep, ill-paved street we climbed to the mighty grey citadel looming on the hill's crest, like a gigantic guardian brooding over the city of his trust. We crossed the drawbridge unchallenged, passed under the tunnel of the gateway, and so came into the vast, untenanted bailey of the fortress.

I looked about me, beat my hands together, and raised my voice to shout

"Ola! Ola!"

In answer to my call the door of the guardhouse opened presently, and a man looked out. He frowned at first; then his brows went up and his mouth fell open.

"It is the Madonnino!" he shouted over his shoulder, and hurried forward to take my reins, uttering words of respectful welcome, which seemed to relieve the fears of my peasant, who had never quite believed me what I proclaimed myself.

There was a stir in the guardhouse, and two or three men of the absurd garrison my mother kept there shuffled in the doorway, whilst a burly fellow in leather with a sword girt on him thrust his way through and hurried forward, limping slightly. In the dark, lowering face I recognized my old friend Rinolfo, and I marvelled to see him thus accoutred.

He halted before me, and gave me a stiff and unfriendly salute; then he bade the man-at-arms to hold my stirrup.

"What is your authority here, Rinolfo?" I asked him shortly.

I am the castellan," he informed me.

"The castellan? But what of Messer Giorgio?"

"He died a month ago."

"And who gave you this authority?"

"Madonna the Countess, in some recompense for the hurt you did me," he replied, thrusting forward his lame leg.

His tone was surly and hostile; but it provoked no resentment in me now. I deserved his unfriendliness. I had crippled him. At the moment I forgot the provocation I had received—forgot that since he had raised his hand to his lord, it would have been no great harshness to have hanged him. I saw in him but another instance of my wickedness,

another sufferer at my hands; and I hung my head under the rebuke implicit in his surly tone and glance.

"I had not thought, Rinolfo, to do you an abiding hurt," said I, and here checked, bethinking me that I lied; for had I not expressed regret that I had not broken his neck?

I got down slowly and painfully, for my limbs were stiff and my feet very sore. He smiled darkly at my words and my sudden faltering; but I affected not to see.

"Where is Madonna?" I asked.

"She will have returned by now from chapel," he answered.

I turned to the man-at-arms. "You will announce me," I bade him. "And you, Rinolfo, see to these beasts and to this good fellow here. Let him have wine and food and what he needs. I will see him again ere he sets forth."

Rinolfo muttered that all should be done as I ordered, and I signed to the man-at-arms to lead the way.

We went up the steps and into the cool of the great hall. There the soldier, whose every feeling had been outraged no doubt by Rinolfo's attitude towards his lord, ventured to express his sympathy and indignation.

"Rinolfo is a black beast, Madonnino," he muttered.

"We are all black beasts, Eugenio," I answered heavily, and so startled him by words and tone that he ventured upon no further speech, but led me straight to my mother's private dining-room, opened the door and calmly announced me.

"Madonna, here is my Lord Agostino."

I heard the gasp she uttered before I caught sight of her. She was seated at the table's head in her great wooden chair, and Fra Gervasio was pacing the rush-strewn floor in talk with her, his hands behind his back, his head thrust forward.

At the announcement he straightened suddenly and wheeled round to face me, inquiry in his glance. My mother, too, half rose, and remained so, staring at me, her amazement at seeing me increased by the strange appearance I presented.

Eugenio closed the door and departed, leaving me standing there, just within it; and for a moment no word was spoken.

The cheerless, familiar room, looking more cheerless than it had done of old, with its high-set windows and ghastly Crucifix, affected me in a singular manner. In this room I had known a sort of peace—the peace that is peculiarly childhood's own, whatever the troubles that may haunt it. I came into it now with hell in my soul, sin-blackened before God and man, a fugitive in quest of sanctuary.

A knot rose in my throat and paralysed awhile my speech. Then with a sudden sob, I sprang forward and hobbled to her upon my wounded feet. I flung myself down upon my knees, buried my head in her lap, and all that I could cry was:

"Mother! Mother!"

Whether perceiving my disorder, my distraught and suffering condition, what remained of the woman in her was moved to pity; whether my cry acting like a rod of Moses upon that rock of her heart which excess of piety had long since sterilized, touched into fresh life the springs that had long since been dry, and reminded her of the actual bond between us, her tone was more kindly and gentle than I had ever known it.

"Agostino, my child! Why are you here?" And her wax-like fingers

very gently touched my head. "Why are you here—and thus? What has happened to you?"

"Me miserable!" I groaned.

"What is it?" she pressed me, an increasing anxiety in her voice.

At last I found courage to tell her sufficient to prepare her mind.

"Mother, I am a sinner," I faltered miserably.

I felt her recoiling from me as from the touch of something unclean and contagious, her mind conceiving already by some subtle premonition some shadow of the thing that I had done. And then Gervasio spoke, and his voice was soothing as oil upon troubled waters.

"Sinners are we all, Agostino. But repentance purges sin. Do not abandon yourself to despair, my son."

But the mother who bore me took no such charitable and Christian view.

"What is it? Wretched boy, what have you done?" And the cold repugnance in her voice froze anew the courage I was forming.

"O God help me! God help me!" I groaned miserably.

Gervasio, seeing my condition, with that quick and saintly sympathy that was his, came softly towards me and set a hand upon my shoulder.

"Dear Agostino," he murmured, "would you find it easier to tell me first? Will you confess to me, my son? Will you let me lift this burden from your soul?"

Still on my knees I turned and looked up into that pale, kindly face. I caught his thin hand, and kissed it ere he could snatch it away. "If

there were more priests like you" I cried, "there would be fewer sinners like me."

A shadow crossed his face; he smiled very wanly, a smile that was like a gleam of pale sunshine from an over-clouded sky, and he spoke in gentle, soothing words of the Divine Mercy.

I staggered to my bruised feet. "I will confess to you, Fra Gervasio," I said, "and afterwards we will tell my mother."

She looked as she would make demur. But Fra Gervasio checked any such intent.

"It is best so, Madonna," he said gravely. "His most urgent need is the consolation that the Church alone can give."

He took me by the arm very gently, and led me forth. We went to his modest chamber, with its waxed floor, the hard, narrow pallet upon which he slept, the blue and gold image of the Virgin, and the little writing-pulpit upon which lay open a manuscript he was illuminating, for he was very skilled in that art which already was falling into desuetude.

At this pulpit, by the window, he took his seat, and signed to me to kneel. I recited the Confiteor. Thereafter, with my face buried in my hands, my soul writhing in an agony of penitence and shame, I poured out the hideous tale of the evil I had wrought.

Rarely did he speak while I was at that recitation. Save when I halted or hesitated he would interject a word of pity and of comfort that fell like a blessed balsam upon my spiritual wounds and gave me strength to pursue my awful story.

When I had done and he knew me to the full for the murderer and adulterer that I was, there fell a long pause, during which I waited as a felon awaits sentence. But it did not come. Instead, he set himself to

examine more closely the thing I had told him. He probed it with a question here and a question there, and all of a shrewdness that revealed the extent of his knowledge of humanity, and the infinite compassion and gentleness that must be the inevitable fruits of such sad knowledge.

He caused me to go back to the very day of my arrival at Fifanti's, and thence, step by step, he led me again over the road that in the past four months I had trodden, until he had traced the evil to its very source, and could see the tiny spring that had formed the brook which, gathering volume as it went, had swollen at last into a raging torrent that had laid waste its narrow confines.

"Who that knows all that goes to the making of a sin shall dare to condemn a sinner?" he cried at last, so that I looked up at him, startled, and penetrated by a ray of hope and comfort. He returned my glance with one of infinite pity.

"It is the woman here upon whom must fall the greater blame," said he.

But at that I cried out in hot remonstrance, adding that I had yet another vileness to confess—for it was now that for the first time I realized it. And I related to him how last night I had repudiated her, cast her off and fled, leaving her to bear the punishment alone.

Of my conduct in that he withheld his criticism. "The sin is hers," he repeated. "She was a wife, and the adultery is hers. More, she was the seducer. It was she who debauched your mind with lascivious readings, and tore away the foundations of virtue from your soul. If in the cataclysm that followed she was crushed and smothered, it is no more than she had incurred."

I still protested that this view was all too lenient to me, that it sprang of his love for me, that it was not just. Thereupon he began to make

clear to me many things that may have been clear to you worldly ones who have read my scrupulous and exact confessions, but which at the time were still all wrapped in obscurity for me.

It was as if he held up a mirror—an intelligent and informing mirror—in which my deeds were reflected by the light of his own deep knowledge. He showed me the gradual seduction to which I had been subjected; he showed me Giuliana as she really was, as she must be from what I had told him; he reminded me that she was older by ten years than I, and greatly skilled in men and worldliness; that where I had gone blindly, never seeing what was the inevitable goal and end of the road I trod, she had consciously been leading me thither, knowing full well what the end must be, and desiring it.

As for the murder of Fifanti, the thing was grievous; but it had been done in the heat of combat, and he could not think that I had meant the poor man's death. And Fifanti himself was not entirely without blame. Largely had he contributed to the tragedy. There had been evil in his heart. A good man would have withdrawn his wife from surroundings which he knew to be perilous and foul, not used her as a decoy to enable him to trap and slay his enemy.

And the greatest blame of all he attached to that Messer Arcolano who had recommended Fifanti to my mother as a tutor for me, knowing full well—as he must have known—what manner of house the doctor kept and what manner of wanton was Giuliana. Arcolano had sought to serve Fifanti's interests in pretending to serve mine and my mother's; and my mother should be enlightened that at last she might know that evil man for what he really was.

"But all this," he concluded, "does not mean, Agostino, that you are to regard yourself as other than a great sinner. You have sinned monstrously, even when all these extenuations are considered."

"I know, I know!" I groaned.

"But beyond forgiveness no man has ever sinned, nor have you now. So that your repentance is deep and real, and when by some penance that I shall impose you shall have cleansed yourself of all this mire that clings to your poor soul, you shall have absolution from me."

"Impose your penance," I cried eagerly. "There is none I will not undertake, to purchase pardon and some little peace of mind."

"I will consider it," he answered gravely. "And now let us seek your mother. She must be told, for a great deal hangs upon this, Agostino. The career to which you were destined is no longer for you, my son."

My spirit quailed under those last words; and yet I felt an immense relief at the same time, as if some overwhelming burden had been lifted from me.

"I am indeed unworthy," I said.

"It is not your unworthiness that I am considering, my son, but your nature. The world calls you over-strongly. It is not for nothing that you are the child of Giovanni d'Anguissola. His blood runs thick in your veins, and it is very human blood. For such as you there is no hope in the cloister. Your mother must be made to realize it, and she must abandon her dreams concerning you. It will wound her very sorely. But better that than..." He shrugged and rose. "Come, Agostino."

And I rose, too, immensely comforted and soothed already, for all that I was yet very far from ease or peace of mind. Outside his room he set a hand upon my arm.

"Wait," he said, "we have ministered in some degree to your poor spirit. Let us take thought for the body, too. You need garments and other things. Come with me."

He led me up to my own little chamber, took fresh raiment for me

from a press, called Lorenza and bade her bring bread and wine, vinegar and warm water.

In a very weak dilution of the latter he bade me bathe my lacerated feet, and then he found fine strips of linen in which to bind them ere I drew fresh hose and shoes. And meanwhile munching my bread and salt and taking great draughts of the pure if somewhat sour wine, my mental peace was increased by the refreshment of my body.

At last I stood up more myself than I had been in these last twelve awful hours—for it was just noon, and into twelve hours had been packed the events that well might have filled a lifetime.

He put an arm about my shoulder, fondly as a father might have done, and so led me below again and into my mother's presence.

We found her kneeling before the Crucifix, telling her beads; and we stood waiting a few moments in silence until with a sigh and a rustle of her stiff black dress she rose gently and turned to face us.

My heart thudded violently in that moment, as I looked into that pale face of sorrow. Then Fra Gervasio began to speak very gently and softly.

"Your son, Madonna, has been lured into sin by a wanton woman," he began, and there she interrupted him with a sudden and very piteous cry.

"Not that! Ah, not that!" she exclaimed, putting out hands gropingly before her.

"That and more, Madonna," he answered gravely. "Be brave to hear the rest. It is a very piteous story. But the founts of Divine Mercy are inexhaustible, and Agostino shall drink therefrom when by penitence he shall have cleansed his lips."

Very erect she stood there, silent and ghostly, her face looking

diaphanous by contrast with the black draperies that enshrouded her, whilst her eyes were great pools of sorrow. Poor, poor mother! It is the last recollection I have of her; for after that day we never met again, and I would give ten years to purgatory if I might recall the last words that passed between us.

As briefly as possible and ever thrusting into the foreground the immensity of the snare that had been spread for me and the temptation that had enmeshed me, Gervasio told her the story of my sin.

She heard him through in that immovable attitude, one hand pressed to her heart, her poor pale lips moving now and again, but no sound coming from them, her face a white mask of pain and horror.

When he had done, so wrought upon was I by the sorrow of that countenance that I went forward again to fling myself upon my knees before her.

"Mother, forgive!" I pleaded. And getting no answer I put up my hands to take hers. "Mother!" I cried, and the tears were streaming down my face.

But she recoiled before me.

"Are you my child?" she asked in a voice of horror. "Are you the thing that has grown out of that little child I vowed to chastity and to God? Then has my sin overtaken me—the sin of bearing a son to Giovanni d'Anguissola, that enemy of God!"

"Ah, mother, mother!" I cried again, thinking perhaps by that all-powerful word to move her yet to pity and to gentleness.

"Madonna," cried Gervasio, "be merciful if you would look for mercy."

"He has falsified my vows," she answered stonily. "He was my votive offering for the life of his impious father. I am punished for the unworthiness of my offering and the unworthiness of the cause in which I offered it. Accursed is the fruit of my womb!" She moaned, and sank her head upon her breast.

"I will atone!" I cried, overwhelmed to see her so distraught.

She wrung her pale hands.

"Atone!" she cried, and her voice trembled. "Go then, and atone. But never let me see you more; never let me be reminded of the sinner to whom I have given life. Go! Begone!" And she raised a hand in tragical dismissal.

I shrank back, and came slowly to my feet. And then Gervasio spoke, and his voice boomed and thundered with righteous indignation.

"Madonna, this is inhuman!" he denounced. "Shall you dare to hope for mercy being yourself unmerciful?"

"I shall pray for strength to forgive him; but the sight of him might tempt me back with the memory of the thing that he has done," she answered, and she had returned to that cold and terrible reserve of hers.

And then things that Fra Gervasio had repressed for years welled up in a mighty flood. "He is your son, and he is as you have made him."

"As I have made him?" quoth she, and her glance challenged the friar.

"By what right did you make of him a votive offering? By what right did you seek to consecrate a child unborn to a claustral life without thought of his character, without reck of the desires that should be

his? By what right did you make yourself the arbiter of the future of a man unborn?"

"By what right?" quoth she. "Are you a priest, and do you ask me by what right I vowed him to the service of God?"

"And is there, think you, no way of serving God but in the sterility of the cloister?" he demanded. "Why, since no man is born to damnation, and since by your reasoning the world must mean damnation, then all men should be encloistered, and soon, thus, there would be an end to man. You are too arrogant, Madonna, when you presume to judge what pleases God. Beware lest you fall into the sin of the Pharisee, for often have I seen you stand in danger of it."

She swayed as if her strength were failing her, and again her pale lips moved.

"Enough, Fra Gervasio! I will go," I cried.

"Nay, it is not yet enough," he answered, and strode down the room until he stood between her and me. "He is what you have made him," he repeated in denunciation. "Had you studied his nature and his inclinations, had you left them free to develop along the way that God intended, you would have seen whether or not the cloister called him; and then would have been the time to have taken a resolve. But you thought to change his nature by repressing it; and you never saw that if he was not such as you would have him be, then most surely would you doom him to damnation by making an evil priest of him.

"In your Pharisaic arrogance, Madonna, you sought to superimpose your will to God's will concerning him—you confounded God's will with your own. And so his sins recoil upon you as much as upon any. Therefore, Madonna, do I bid you beware. Take a humbler view if you would be acceptable in the Divine sight. Learn to forgive, for I say to you to-day that you stand as greatly in need of forgiveness for the

thing that Agostino has done, as does Agostino himself."

He paused at last, and stood trembling before her, his eyes aflame, his high cheek-bones faintly tinted. And she measured him very calmly and coldly with her sombre eyes.

"Are you a priest?" she asked with steady scorn. "Are you indeed a priest?" And then her invective was loosened, and her voice shrilled and mounted as her anger swayed her. "What a snake have I harboured here!" she cried. "Blasphemer! You show me clearly whence came the impiety and ungodliness of Giovanni d'Anguissola. It had the same source as your own. It was suckled at your mother's breast."

A sob shook him. "My mother is dead, Madonna!" he rebuked her.

"She is more blessed, then, than I; since she has not lived to see what a power for sin she has brought forth. Go, pitiful friar. Go, both of you. You are very choicely mated. Begone from Mondolfo, and never let me see either of you more."

She staggered to her great chair and sank into it, whilst we stood there, mute, regarding her. For myself, it was with difficulty that I repressed the burning things that rose to my lips. Had I given free rein to my tongue, I had made of it a whip of scorpions. And my anger sprang not from the things she said to me, but from what she said to that saintly man who held out a hand to help me out of the morass of sin in which I was being sunk. That he, that sweet and charitable follower of his Master, should be abused by her, should be dubbed blasphemer and have the cherished memory of his mother defiled by her pietistic utterances, was something that inflamed me horribly.

But he set a hand upon my shoulder.

"Come, Agostino," he said very gently. He was calm once more. "We will go, as we are bidden, you and I."

And then, out of the sweetness of his nature, he forged all unwittingly the very iron that should penetrate most surely into her soul.

"Forgive her, my son. Forgive her as you need forgiveness. She does not understand the thing she does. Come, we will pray for her, that God in His infinite mercy may teach her humility and true knowledge of Him."

I saw her start as if she had been stung.

"Blasphemer, begone!" she cried again; and her voice was hoarse with suppressed anger.

And then the door was suddenly flung open, and Rinolfo clanked in, very martial and important, his hand thrusting up his sword behind him.

"Madonna," he announced, "the Captain of Justice from Piacenza is here."

CHAPTER II. THE CAPTAIN OF JUSTICE

There was a moment's silence after Rinolfo had flung that announcement.

"The Captain of Justice?" quoth my mother at length, her voice startled. "What does he seek?"

"The person of my Lord Agostino d'Anguissola," said Rinolfo steadily.

She sighed very heavily. "A felon's end!" she murmured, and turned to me. "If thus you may expiate your sins," she said, speaking more gently, "let the will of Heaven be done. Admit the captain, Ser Rinolfo."

He bowed, and turned sharply to depart.

"Stay!" I cried, and rooted him there by the imperative note of my command.

Fra Gervasio was more than right when he said that mine was not a nature for the cloister. In that moment I might have realized it to the full by the readiness with which the thought of battle occurred to me, and more by the anticipatory glow that warmed me at the very thought of it. I was the very son of Giovanni d'Anguissola.

"What force attends the captain?" I inquired.

"He has six mounted men with him," replied Rinolfo. "In that case," I answered, "you will bid him begone in my name."

"And if he should not go?" was Rinolfo's impudent question.

"You will tell him that I will drive him hence—him and his braves. We keep a garrison of a score of men at least—sufficient to compel him to depart."

"He will return again with more," said Rinolfo.

"Does that concern you?" I snapped. "Let him return with what he pleases. To-day I enrol more forces from the countryside, take up the bridge and mount our cannon. This is my lair and fortress, and I'll defend it and myself as becomes my name and blood. For I am the lord and master here, and the Lord of Mondolfo is not to be dragged away thus at the heels of a Captain of Justice. You have my orders, obey them. About it, sir."

Circumstances had shown me the way that I must take, and the folly of going forth a fugitive outcast at my mother's bidding. I was Lord of Mondolfo, as I had said, and they should know and feel it from this hour—all of them, not excepting my mother.

But I reckoned without the hatred Rinolfo bore me. Instead of the prompt obedience that I had looked for, he had turned again to my mother.

"Is it your wish, Madonna?" he inquired.

"It is my wish that counts, you knave," I thundered and advanced upon him.

But he fronted me intrepidly. "I hold my office from my Lady the Countess. I obey none other here."

"Body of God! Do you defy me?" I cried. "Am I Lord of Mondolfo, or am I a lackey in my own house? You'd best obey me ere I break you, Ser Rinolfo. We shall see whether the men will take my orders," I

added confidently.

The faintest smile illumined his dark face. "The men will not stir a finger at the bidding of any but Madonna the Countess and myself," he answered hardily.

It was by an effort that I refrained from striking him. And then my mother spoke again.

"It is as Ser Rinolfo says," she informed me. "So cease this futile resistance, sir son, and accept the expiation that is offered you."

I looked at her, she avoiding my glance.

"Madonna, I cannot think that it is so," said I. "These men have known me since I was a little lad. Many of them have followed the fortunes of my father. They'll never turn their backs upon his son in the hour of his need. They are not all so inhuman as my mother."

"You mistake, sir," said Rinolfo. "Of the men you knew but one or two remain. Most of our present force has been enrolled by me in the past month."

This was defeat, utter and pitiful. His tone was too confident, he was too sure of his ground to leave me a doubt as to what would befall if I made appeal to his knavish followers. My arms fell to my sides, and I looked at Gervasio. His face was haggard, and his eyes were very full of sorrow as they rested on me.

"It is true, Agostino," he said.

And as he spoke, Rinolfo limped out of the room to fetch the Captain of Justice, as my mother had bidden him; and his lips smiled cruelly.

"Madam mother," I said bitterly, "you do a monstrous thing. You usurp the power that is mine, and you deliver me—me, your son—to

the gallows. I hope that, hereafter, when you come to realize to the full your deed, you will be able to give your conscience peace."

"My first duty is to God," she answered; and to that pitiable answer there was nothing to be rejoined.

So I turned my shoulder to her and stood waiting, Fra Gervasio beside me, clenching his hands in his impotence and mute despair. And then an approaching clank of mail heralded the coming of the captain.

Rinolfo held the door, and Cosimo d'Anguissola entered with a firm, proud tread, two of his men, following at his heels.

He wore a buff-coat, under which no doubt there would be a shirt of mail; his gorget and wristlets were of polished steel, and his headgear was a steel cap under a cover of peach-coloured velvet. Thigh-boots encased his legs; sword and dagger hung in the silver carriages at his belt; his handsome, aquiline face was very solemn.

He bowed profoundly to my mother, who rose to respond, and then he flashed me one swift glance of his piercing eyes.

"I deplore my business here," he announced shortly. "No doubt it will be known to you already." And he looked at me again, allowing his eyes to linger on my face.

"I am ready, sir," I said.

"Then we had best be going, for I understand that none could be less welcome here than I. Yet in this, Madonna, let me assure you that there is nothing personal to myself. I am the slave of my office. I do but perform it."

"So much protesting where no doubt has been expressed," said Fra Gervasio, "in itself casts a doubt upon your good faith. Are you not Cosimo d'Anguissola—my lord's cousin and heir?"

"I am," said he, "yet that has no part in this, sir friar."

"Then let it have part. Let it have the part it should have. Will you bear one of your own name and blood to the gallows? What will men say of that when they perceive your profit in the deed?"

Cosimo looked him boldly between the eyes, his hawk-face very white.

"Sir priest, I know not by what right you address me so. But you do me wrong. I am the Podesta of Piacenza bound by an oath that it would dishonour me to break; and break it I must or else fulfil my duty here. Enough!" he added, in his haughty, peremptory fashion. "Ser Agostino, I await your pleasure."

"I will appeal to Rome," cried Fra Gervasio, now beside himself with grief.

Cosimo smiled darkly, pityingly. "It is to be feared that Rome will turn a deaf ear to appeals on behalf of the son of Giovanni d'Anguissola."

And with that he motioned me to precede him. Silently I pressed Fra Gervasio's hand, and on that departed without so much as another look at my mother, who sat there a silent witness of a scene which she approved.

The men-at-arms fell into step, one on either side of me, and so we passed out into the courtyard, where Cosimo's other men were waiting, and where was gathered the entire family of the castle—a gaping, rather frightened little crowd.

They brought forth a mule for me, and I mounted. Then suddenly there was Fra Gervasio at my side again.

"I, too, am going hence," he said. "Be of good courage, Agostino."

There is no effort I will not make on your behalf." In a broken voice he added his farewells ere he stood back at the captain's peremptory bidding. The little troop closed round me, and thus, within a couple of hours of my coming, I departed again from Mondolfo, surrendered to the hangman by the pious hands of my mother, who on her knees, no doubt, would be thanking God for having afforded her the grace to act in so righteous a manner.

Once only did my cousin address me, and that was soon after we had left the town behind us. He motioned the men away, and rode to my side. Then he looked at me with mocking, hating eyes.

"You had done better to have continued in your saint's trade than have become so very magnificent a sinner," said he.

I did not answer him, and he rode on beside me in silence some little way.

"Ah, well," he sighed at last. "Your course has been a brief one, but very eventful. And who would have suspected so very fierce a wolf under so sheepish an outside? Body of God! You fooled us all, you and that white-faced trull."

He said it through his teeth with such a concentration of rage in his tones that it was easy to guess where the sore rankled.

I looked at him gravely. "Does it become you, sir, do you think, to gird at one who is your prisoner?"

"And did you not gird at me when it was your turn?" he flashed back fiercely. "Did not you and she laugh together over that poor, fond fool Cosimo whose money she took so very freely, and yet who seems to have been the only one excluded from her favours?"

"You lie, you dog!" I blazed at him, so fiercely that the men turned in their saddles. He paled, and half raised the gauntleted hand in which

he carried his whip. But he controlled himself, and barked an order to his followers:

"Ride on, there!"

When they had drawn off a little, and we were alone again, "I do not lie, sir," he said. "It is a practice which I leave to shavelings of all degrees."

"If you say that she took aught from you, then you lie," I repeated.

He considered me steadily. "Fool!" he said at last. "Whence else came her jewels and fine clothes? From Fifanti, do you think—that impecunious pedant? Or perhaps you imagine that it was from Gambarà? In time that grasping prelate might have made the Duke pay. But pay, himself? By the Blood of God! he was never known to pay for anything.

"Or, yet again, do you suppose her finery was afforded her by Caro?—Messer Annibale Caro—who is so much in debt that he is never like to return to Piacenza, unless some dolt of a patron rewards him for his poetaster's labours.

"No, no, my shaveling. It was I who paid—I who was the fool. God! I more than suspected the others. But you. You saint... You!"

He flung up his head, and laughed bitterly and unpleasantly. "Ah, well!" he ended, "You are to pay, though in different kind. It is in the family, you see." And abruptly raising his voice he shouted to the men to wait.

Thereafter he rode ahead, alone and gloomy, whilst no less alone and gloomy rode I amid my guards. The thing he had revealed to me had torn away a veil from my silly eyes. It had made me understand a hundred little matters that hitherto had been puzzling me. And I saw how utterly and fatuously blind I had been to things which even Fra

Gervasio had apprehended from just the relation he had drawn from me.

It was as we were entering Piacenza by the Gate of San Lazzaro that I again drew my cousin to my side.

"Sir Captain!" I called to him, for I could not bring myself to address him as cousin now. He came, inquiry in his eyes.

"Where is she now?" I asked.

He stared at me a moment, as if my effrontery astonished him. Then he shrugged and sneered. "I would I knew for certain," was his fierce answer. "I would I knew. Then should I have the pair of you." And I saw it in his face how unforgivingly he hated me out of his savage jealousy. "My Lord Gambara might tell you. I scarcely doubt it. Were I but certain, what a reckoning should I not present! He may be Governor of Piacenza, but were he Governor of Hell he should not escape me." And with that he rode ahead again, and left me.

The rumour of our coming sped through the streets ahead of us, and out of the houses poured the townsfolk to watch our passage and to point me out one to another with many whisperings and solemn head-waggings. And the farther we advanced, the greater was the concourse, until by the time we reached the square before the Communal Palace we found there what amounted to a mob awaiting us.

My guards closed round me as if to protect me from that crowd. But I was strangely without fear, and presently I was to see how little cause there was for any, and to realize that the action of my guards was sprung from a very different motive.

The people stood silent, and on every upturned face of which I caught a glimpse I saw something that was akin to pity. Presently, however, as we drew nearer to the Palace, a murmur began to rise. It

swelled and grew fierce. Suddenly a cry rose vehement and clear.

"Rescue! Rescue!"

"He is the Lord of Mondolfo," shouted one tall fellow, "and the Cardinal-legate makes a cat's-paw of him! He is to suffer for Messer Gambara's villainy!"

Again he was answered by the cry—"Rescue! Rescue!" whilst some added an angry—"Death to the Legate!"

Whilst I was deeply marvelling at all this, Cosimo looked at me over his shoulder, and though his lips were steady, his eyes seemed to smile, charged with a message of derision—and something more, something that I could not read. Then I heard his hard, metallic voice.

"Back there, you curs! To your kennels! Out of the way, or we ride you down."

He had drawn his sword, and his white hawk-face was so cruel and determined that they fell away before him and their cries died down.

We passed into the courtyard of the Communal Palace, and the great studded gates were slammed in the faces of the mob, and barred.

I got down from my mule, and was conducted at Cosimo's bidding to one of the dungeons under the Palace, where I was left with the announcement that I must present myself to-morrow before the Tribunal of the Ruota.

I flung myself down upon the dried rushes that had been heaped in a corner to do duty for a bed, and I abandoned myself to my bitter thoughts. In particular I pondered the meaning of the crowd's strange attitude. Nor was it a riddle difficult to resolve. It was evident that believing Gambara, as they did, to be Giuliana's lover, and informed perhaps—invention swelling rumour as it will—that the Cardinal-

legate had ridden late last night to Fifanti's house, it had been put about that the foul murder done there was Messer Gambara's work.

Thus was the Legate reaping the harvest of all the hatred he had sown, of all the tyranny and extortion of his iron rule in Piacenza. And willing to believe any evil of the man they hated, they not only laid Fifanti's death at his door, but they went to further lengths and accounted that I was the cat's-paw; that I was to be sacrificed to save the Legate's face and reputation. They remembered perhaps the ill-odour in which we Anguissola of Mondolfo had been at Rome, for the ghibelline leanings that ever had been ours and for the rebellion of my father against the Pontifical sway; and their conclusions gathered a sort of confirmation from that circumstance.

Long upon the very edge of mutiny and revolt against Gambara's injustice, it had needed but what seemed a crowning one such as this to quicken their hatred into expression.

It was all very clear and obvious, and it seemed to me that to-morrow's trial should be very interesting. I had but to deny; I had but to make myself the mouthpiece of the rumour that was abroad, and Heaven alone could foretell what the consequences might be.

Then I smiled bitterly to myself. Deny? O, no! That was a last vileness I could not perpetrate. The Ruota should hear the truth, and Gambara should be left to shelter Giuliana, who—Cosimo was assured—had fled to him in her need as to a natural protector.

It was a bitter thought. The intensity of that bitterness made me realize with alarm how it still was with me. And pondering this, I fell asleep, utterly worn out in body and in mind by the awful turmoil of that day.

CHAPTER III. GAMBARA'S INTERESTS

I awakened to find a man standing beside me. He was muffled in a black cloak and carried a lanthorn. Behind him the door gaped as he had left it.

Instantly I sat up, conscious of my circumstance and surroundings, and at my movement this visitor spoke.

"You sleep very soundly for a man in your case." said he, and the voice was that of my Lord Gambara, its tone quite coldly critical.

He set down the lanthorn on a stool, whence it shed a wheel of yellow light intersected with black beams. His cloak fell apart, and I saw that he was dressed for riding, very plainly, in sombre garments, and that he was armed.

He stood slightly to one side that the light might fall upon my face, leaving his own in shadow; thus he considered me for some moments in silence. At last, very slowly, very bitterly, shaking his head as he spoke.

"You fool, you clumsy fool!" he said.

Having drawn, as you have seen, my own conclusions from the attitude of the mob, I was in little doubt as to the precise bearing of his words.

I answered him sincerely. "If folly were all my guilt," said I, "it would be well."

He sniffed impatiently. "Still sanctimonious!" he sneered. "Tcha! Up now, and play the man, at least. You have shed your robe of sanctity, Messer Agostino; have done with pretence!"

"I do not pretend," I answered him. "And as for playing the man, I shall accept what punishment the law may have for me with fortitude at least. If I can but expiate..."

"Expiate a fig!" he snapped, interrupting me. "Why do you suppose that I am here?"

"I wait to learn."

"I am here because through your folly you have undone us all. What need," he cried, the anger of expostulation quivering in his voice, "what need was there to kill that oaf Fifanti?"

"He would have killed me," said I. "I slew him in self-defence."

"Ha! And do you hope to save your neck with such a plea?"

"Nay. I have no thought of urging it. I but tell it you."

"There is not the need to tell me anything," he answered, his anger very plain. "I am very well informed of all. Rather, let me tell you something. Do you realize, sir, that you have made it impossible for me to abide another day in Piacenza?"

"I am sorry..." I began lamely.

"Present your regrets to Satan," he snapped. "Me they avail nothing. I am put to the necessity of abandoning my governorship and fleeing by night like a hunted thief. And I have you to thank for it. You see me on the point of departure. My horses wait above. So you may add my ruin to the other fine things you accomplished yesternight. For a saint you are over-busy, sir." And he turned away and strode the length of my cell and back, so that, at last, I had a glimpse of his face,

which was drawn and scowling. Gone now was the last vestige of his habitual silkiness; the pomander-ball hung neglected, and his delicate fingers tugged viciously at his little pointed beard, his great sapphire ring flashing sombrely.

"Look you, Ser Agostino, I could kill you and take joy in it. I could, by God!"

His eyes upon me, he drew from his breast a folded paper. "Instead, I bring you liberty. I open your doors for you, and bid you escape. Here, man, take this paper. Present it to the officer at the Fodesta Gate. He will let you pass. And then away with you, out of the territory of Piacenza."

For an instant my heart-beats seemed suspended by astonishment. I swung my legs round, and half rose, excitedly. Then I sank back again. My mind was made up. I was tired of the world; sick of life the first draught of which had turned so bitter in my throat. If by my death I might expiate my sins and win pardon by my submission and humility, it was all I could desire. I should be glad to be released from all the misery and sorrow into which I had been born.

I told him so in some few words. "You mean me well, my lord," I ended, "and I thank you. But..."

"By God and the Saints!" he blazed, "I do not mean you well at all. I mean you anything but well. Have I not said that I could kill you with satisfaction? Whatever be the sins of Egidio Gambara, he is no hypocrite, and he lets his enemies see his face unmasked."

"But, then," I cried, amazed, "why do you offer me my freedom?"

"Because this cursed populace is in such a temper that if you are brought to trial I know not what may happen. As likely as not we shall have an insurrection, open revolt against the Pontifical authority, and red war in the streets. And this is not the time for it.

"The Holy Father requires the submission of these people. We are upon the eve of Duke Pier Luigi's coming to occupy his new States, and it imports that he should be well received, that he should be given a loving welcome by his subjects. If, instead, they meet him with revolt and defiance, the reasons will be sought, and the blame of the affair will recoil upon me. Your cousin Cosimo will see to that. He is a very subtle gentleman, this cousin of yours, and he has a way of working to his own profit. So now you understand. I have no mind to be crushed in this business. Enough have I suffered already through you, enough am I suffering in resigning my governorship. So there is but one way out. There must be no trial to-morrow. It must be known that you have escaped. Thus they will be quieted, and the matter will blow over. So now, Ser Agostino, we understand each other. You must go."

"And whither am I to go?" I cried, remembering my mother and that Mondolfo—the only place of safety—was closed to me by her cruelly pious hands.

"Whither?" he echoed. "What do I care? To Hell—anywhere, so that you get out of this."

"I'd sooner hang," said I quite seriously.

"You'd hang and welcome, for all the love I bear you," he answered, his impatience growing. "But if you hang blood will be shed, innocent lives will be lost, and I myself may come to suffer."

"For you, sir, I care nothing," I answered him, taking his own tone, and returning him the same brutal frankness that he used with me. "That you deserve to suffer I do not doubt. But since other blood than yours might be shed as you say, since innocent lives might be lost... Give me the paper."

He was frowning upon me, and smiling viperishly at the same time. "I like your frankness better than your piety," said he. "So now we

understand each other, and know that neither is in the other's debt. Hereafter beware of Egidio Gambarà. I give you this last loyal warning. See that you do not come into my way again."

I rose and looked at him—looked down from my greater height. I knew well the source of this last, parting show of hatred. Like Cosimo's it sprang from jealousy. And a growth more potential of evil does not exist.

He bore my glance a moment, then turned and took up the lanthorn. "Come," he said, and obediently I followed him up the winding stone staircase, and so to the very gates of the Palace.

We met no one. What had become of the guards, I cannot think; but I am satisfied that Gambarà himself had removed them. He opened the wicket for me, and as I stepped out he gave me the paper and whistled softly. Almost at once I heard a sound of muffled hooves under the colonnade, and presently loomed the figures of a man and a mule; both dim and ghostly in the pearly light of dawn—for that was the hour.

Gambarà followed me out, and pulled the wicket after him.

"That beast is for you," he said curtly. "It will the better enable you to get away."

As curtly I acknowledged the gift, and mounted whilst the groom held the stirrup for me.

O! it was the oddest of transactions! My Lord Gambarà with death in his heart very reluctantly giving me a life I did not want.

I dug my heels into the mule's sides and started across the silent, empty square, then plunged into a narrow street where the gloom was almost as of midnight, and so pushed on.

I came out into the open space before the Porta Fodesta, and so to

the gate itself. From one of the windows of the gatehouse, a light shone yellow, and, presently, in answer to my call, out came an officer followed by two men, one of whom carried a lanthorn swinging from his pike. He held this light aloft, whilst the officer surveyed me.

"What now?" he challenged. "None passes out to-night."

For answer I thrust the paper under his nose. "Orders from my Lord Gambara," said I.

But he never looked at it. "None passes out to-night," he repeated imperturbably. "So run my orders."

"Orders from whom?" quoth I, surprised by his tone and manner.

"From the Captain of Justice, if you must know. So you may get you back whence you came, and wait till daylight."

"Ah, but stay," I said. "I do not think you can have heard me. I carry orders from my Lord the Governor. The Captain of Justice cannot overbear these." And I shook the paper insistently.

"My orders are that none is to pass—not even the Governor himself," he answered firmly.

It was very daring of Cosimo, and I saw his aim. He was, as Gambara had said, a very subtle gentleman. He, too, had set his finger upon the pulse of the populace, and perceived what might be expected of it. He was athirst for vengeance, as he had shown me, and determined that neither I nor Gambara should escape. First, I must be tried, condemned, and hanged, and then he trusted, no doubt, that Gambara would be torn in pieces; and it was quite possible that Messer Cosimo himself would secretly find means to fan the mob's indignation against the Legate into fierce activity. And it seemed that the game was in his hands, for this officer's resoluteness showed how implicitly my cousin was obeyed.

Of that same resoluteness of the lieutenant's I was to have a yet more signal proof. For presently, whilst still I stood there vainly remonstrating, down the street behind me rode Gambara himself on a tall horse, followed by a mule-litter and an escort of half a score of armed grooms.

He uttered an exclamation when he saw me still there, the gate shut and the officer in talk with me. He spurred quickly forward.

"How is this?" he demanded haughtily and angrily. "This man rides upon the business of the State. Why this delay to open for him?"

"My orders," said the lieutenant, civilly but firmly, "are that none passes out to-night."

"Do you know me?" demanded Gambara.

"Yes, my lord."

"And you dare talk to me of your orders? There are no orders here in Piacenza but my orders. Set me wide the wicket of that gate. I myself must pass."

"My lord, I dare not."

"You are insubordinate," said the Legate, of a sudden very cold.

He had no need to ask whose orders were these. At once he saw the trammel spread for him. But if Messer Cosimo was subtle, so, too, was Messer Gambara. By not so much as a word did he set his authority in question with the officer.

"You are insubordinate," was all he answered him, and then to the two men-at-arms behind the lieutenant—"Ho, there!" he called. "Bring out the guard. I am Egidio Gambara, your Governor."

So calm and firm and full of assurance was his tone, so

unquestionable his right to command them, that the men sprang instantly to obey him.

"What would you do, my lord?" quoth the officer, and he seemed daunted.

"Buffoon," said Gambara between his teeth. "You shall see."

Six men came hurrying from the gatehouse, and the Cardinal called to them.

"Let the corporal stand forth," he said.

A man advanced a pace from the rank they had hastily formed and saluted.

"Place me your officer under arrest," said the Legate coldly, advancing no reason for the order. "Let him be locked in the gatehouse until my return; and do you, sir corporal, take command here meanwhile."

The startled fellow saluted again, and advanced upon his officer. The lieutenant looked up with sudden uneasiness in his eyes. He had gone too far. He had not reckoned upon being dealt with in this summary fashion. He had been bold so long as he conceived himself no more than Cosimo's mouthpiece, obeying orders for the issuing of which Cosimo must answer. Instead, it seemed, the Governor intended that he should answer for them himself. Whatever he now dared, he knew—as Gambara knew—that his men would never dare to disobey the Governor, who was the supreme authority there under the Pope.

"My lord," he exclaimed, "I had my orders from the Captain of Justice."

"And dare you to say that your orders included my messengers and my own self?" thundered the dainty prelate.

"Explicitly, my lord," answered the lieutenant.

"It shall be dealt with on my return, and if what you say is proved true, the Captain of Justice shall suffer with yourself for this treason—for that is the offence. Take him away, and someone open me that gate."

There was an end to disobedience, and a moment or two later we stood outside the town, on the bank of the river, which gurgled and flowed away smoothly and mistily in the growing light, between the rows of stalwart poplars that stood like sentinels to guard it.

"And now begone," said Gambarà curtly to me, and wheeling my mule I rode for the bridge of boats, crossed it, and set myself to breast the slopes beyond.

Midway up I checked and looked back across the wide water. The light had grown quite strong by now, and in the east there was a faint pink flush to herald the approaching sun. Away beyond the river, moving southward, I could just make out the Legate's little cavalcade. And then, for the first time, a question leapt in my mind concerning the litter whose leathern curtains had remained so closely drawn. Whom did it contain? Could it be Giuliana? Had Cosimo spoken the truth when he said that she had gone to Gambarà for shelter?

A little while ago I had sighed for death and exulted in the chance of expiation and of purging myself of the foulness of sin. And now, at the sudden thought that occurred to me, I felt a prey to an insensate jealousy touching the woman whom I had lately loathed as the cause of my downfall. O, the inconstancy of the human heart, and the eternal battles in such poor natures as mine between the knowledge of right and the desire for wrong!

It was in vain that I sought to turn my thoughts to other things; in vain that I cast them back upon my recent condition and my recent

resolves; in vain that I remembered the penitence of yestermorn, the confession at Fra Gervasio's knee, and the strong resolve to do penance and make amends by the purity of all my after-life. Vain was it all.

I turned my mule about, and still wrestling with my conscience, choking it, I rode down the hill again, and back across the bridge, and then away to the south, to follow Messer Gambara and set an end to doubt.

I must know. I must! It was no matter that conscience told me that here was no affair of mine; that Giuliana belonged to the past from which I was divorced, the past for which I must atone and seek forgiveness. I must know. And so I rode along the dusty highway in pursuit of Messer Gambara, who was proceeding, I imagined, to join the Duke at Parma.

I had no difficulty in following them. A question here, and a question there, accompanied by a description of the party, was all that was necessary to keep me on their track. And ever, it seemed to me from the answers that I got, was I lessening the distance that separated us.

I was weak for want of food, for the last time that I had eaten was yesterday at noon, at Mondolfo; and then but little. Yet all I had this day were some bunches of grapes that I stole in passing from a vineyard and ate as I trotted on along that eternal Via Aemilia.

It was towards noon, at last, that a taverner at Castel Guelfo informed me that my party had passed through the town but half an hour ahead of me. At the news I urged my already weary beast along, for unless I made good haste now it might well happen that Parma should swallow up Gambara and his party ere I overtook them. And then, some ten minutes later, I caught a flutter of garments half a mile or so ahead of me, amid the elms. I quitted the road and entered the woodland. A little way I still rode; then, dismounting, I tethered my

mule, and went forward cautiously on foot.

I found them in a little sunken dell by a tiny rivulet. Lying on my belly in the long grass above, I looked down upon them with a black hatred of jealousy in my heart.

They were reclining there, in that cool, fragrant spot in the shadow of a great beech-tree. A cloth had been spread upon the ground, and upon this were platters of roast meats, white bread and fruits, and a flagon of wine, a second flagon standing in the brook to cool.

My Lord Gambara was talking and she was regarding him with eyes that were half veiled, a slow, insolent smile upon her matchless face. Presently at something that he said she laughed outright, a laugh so tuneful and light-hearted that I thought I must be dreaming all this. It was the gay, frank, innocent laughter of a child; and I never heard in all my life a sound that caused me so much horror. He leaned across to her, and stroked her velvet cheek with his delicate hand, whilst she suffered it in that lazy fashion that was so peculiarly her own.

I stayed for no more. I wriggled back a little way to where a clump of hazel permitted me to rise without being seen. Thence I fled the spot. And as I went, my heart seemed as it must burst, and my lips could frame but one word which I kept hurling out of me like an imprecation, and that word was "Trull!"

Two nights ago had happened enough to stamp her soul for ever with sorrow and despair. Yet she could sit there, laughing and feasting and trulling it lightly with the Legate!

The little that remained me of my illusions was shivered in that hour. There was, I swore, no good in all the world; for even where goodness sought to find a way, it grew distorted, as in my mother's case. And yet through all her pietism surely she had been right! There was no

peace, no happiness save in the cloister. And at last the full bitterness of penitence and regret overtook me when I reflected that by my own act I had rendered myself for ever unworthy of the cloister's benign shelter.

CHAPTER IV. THE ANCHORITE OF MONTE ORSARO

I went blindly through the tangle of undergrowth, stumbling at every step and scarce noticing that I stumbled; and in this fashion I came presently back to my mule.

I mounted and rode amain, not by the way that I had come, but westward; not by road, but by bridle-paths, through meadow-land and forest, up hill and down, like a man entranced, not knowing whither I went nor caring.

Besides, whither was I to go? Like my father before me I was an outcast, a fugitive outlaw. But this troubled me not yet. My mind, my wounded, tortured mind was all upon the past. It was of Giuliana that I thought as I rode in the noontide warmth of that September day. And never can human brain have held a sorer conflict of reflection than was mine.

No shadow now remained of the humour that had possessed me in the hour in which I had repudiated her after the murder of Fifanti. I had heard Fra Gervasio deliver judgment upon her, and I had doubted his justice, felt that he used her mercilessly. My own sight had now confirmed to me the truth of what he had said; but in doing so—in allowing me to see her in another man's possession—a very rage of jealousy had been stirred in me and a greater rage of longing.

This longing followed upon my first bitter denunciation of her; and it followed soon. It is in our natures, as I then experienced, never more to desire a thing than when we see it lost to us. Bitterly now did I reproach myself for not having borne her off with me two nights ago

when I had fled Fifanti's house, when she herself had urged that course upon me. I despised myself, out of my present want, for my repudiation of her—a hundred times more bitterly than I had despised myself when I imagined that I had done a vileness by that repudiation.

Never until now, did it seem to me, had I known how deeply I loved her, how deeply the roots of our passion had burrowed down into my heart, and fastened there to be eradicated only with life itself. So thought I then; and thinking so I cried her name aloud, called to her through the scented pine-woods, thus voicing my longing and my despair.

And swift on the heels of this would come another mood. There would come the consciousness of the sin of it all, the imperative need to cleanse myself of this, to efface her memory from my soul which could not hold it without sinning anew in fierce desire. I strove to do so with all my poor weak might. I denounced her to myself again for a soulless harlot; blamed her for all the ill that had befallen me; accounted her the very hand that had wielded me, a senseless instrument, to slay her importunate husband.

And then I perceived that this was as pitiful a ruse of self-deception as that of the fox in the fable unable to reach the luscious grapes above him. For as well might a starving man seek to compel by an effort of his will the hunger to cease from gnawing at his vitals.

Thus were desire and conscience locked in conflict, and each held the ascendancy alternately what time I pushed onward aimlessly until I came to the broad bed of a river.

A grey waste of sun-parched boulders spread away to the stream, which was diminished by the long drought. Beyond the narrow sheen of water, stretched another rocky space, and then came the green of meadows and a brown city upon the rising ground.

The city was Fornovo, and the diminished river was the Taro, the ancient boundary between the Gaulish and Ligurian folk. I stood upon the historic spot where Charles VIII had cut his way through the allies to win back to France after the occupation of Naples. But the grotesque little king who had been dust for a quarter of a century troubled my thoughts not at all just then. The Taro brought me memories not of battle, but of home. To reach Mondolfo I had but to follow the river up the valley towards that long ridge of the Apennines arrayed before me, with the tall bulks of Mount Giso and Mount Orsaro, their snow-caps sparkling in the flood of sunshine that poured down upon them. Two hours, or perhaps three at most, along the track of that cool, glittering water, and the grey citadel of Mondolfo would come into view.

It was this very reflection that brought me now to consider my condition; to ask myself whither I should turn. Money I had none—not so much as a single copper grosso. To sell I had nothing but the clothes I stood in—black, clerkly garments that I had got yesterday at Mondolfo. Not so much as a weapon had I that I might have bartered for a few coins. There was the mule; that should yield a ducat or two. But when this was spent, what then? To go a suppliant to that pious icicle my mother were worse than useless.

Whither was I to turn—I, Lord of Mondolfo and Carmina, one of the wealthiest and most puissant tyrants of this Val di Taro? It provoked me almost to laughter, of a fierce and bitter sort. Perhaps some peasant of the contado would take pity on his lord and give him shelter and nourishment in exchange for such labour as his lord might turn his stout limbs to upon that peasant's land, which was my own.

I might perhaps essay it. Certainly it was the only thing that was left me. For against my mother and to support my rights I might not invoke a law which had placed me under a ban, a law that would deal me out its rigours did I reveal myself.

Then I had thoughts of seeking sanctuary in some monastery, of offering myself as a lay-brother, to do menial work, and in this way perhaps I might find peace, and, in a lesser degree than was originally intended, the comforts of the religion to which I had been so grossly unfaithful. The thought grew and developed into a resolve. It brought me some comfort. It became a desire.

I pushed on, following the river along ground that grew swiftly steeper, conscious that perforce my journey must end soon, for my mule was showing signs of weariness.

Some three miles farther, having by then penetrated the green rampart of the foothills, I came upon the little village of Pojetta. It is a village composed of a single street throwing out as its branches a few narrow alleys, possessing a dingy church and a dingier tavern; this last had for only sign a bunch of withered rosemary that hung above its grimy doors.

I drew rein there as utterly weary as my mule, hungry and thirsty and weak. I got down and invited the suspicious scrutiny of the lantern-jawed taverner, who, for all that my appearance was humble enough in such garments as I wore, must have accounted me none the less of too fine an air for such a house as his.

"Care for my beast," I bade him. "I shall stay here an hour or two."

He nodded surlily, and led the mule away, whilst I entered the tavern's single room. Coming into it from the sunlight I could scarcely see anything at first, so dark did the place seem. What light there was came through the open door; for the chamber's single window had long since been rendered opaque by a screen of accumulated dust and cobwebs. It was a roomy place, low-ceilinged with blackened rafters running parallel across its dirty yellow wash.

The floor was strewn with foul rushes that must have lain unchanged

for months, slippery with grease and littered with bones that had been flung there by the polite guests the place was wont to entertain. And it stank most vilely of rancid oil and burnt meats and other things indefinable in all but their acrid, nauseating, unclean pungency.

A fire was burning low at the room's far end, and over this a girl was stooping, tending something in a stew-pot. She looked round at my advent, and revealed herself for a tall, black-haired, sloe-eyed wench, comely in a rude, brown way, and strong, to judge by the muscular arms which were bared to the elbow.

Interest quickened her face at sight of so unusual a patron. She slouched forward, wiping her hands upon her hips as she came, and pulled out a stool for me at the long trestle-table that ran down the middle of the floor.

Grouped about the upper end of this table sat four men of the peasant type, sun-tanned, bearded, and rudely garbed in loose jerkins and cross gartered leg cloths.

A silence had fallen upon them as I entered, and they too were now inspecting me with a frank interest which in their simple way they made no attempt to conceal.

I sank wearily to the stool, paying little heed to them, and in answer to the girl's invitation to command her, I begged for meat and bread and wine. Whilst she was preparing these, one of the men addressed me civilly; and I answered him as civilly but absently, for I had enough of other matters to engage my thoughts. Then another of them questioned me in a friendly tone as to whence I came. Instinctively I concealed the truth, answering vaguely that I was from Castel Guelfo—which was the neighbourhood in which I had overtaken my Lord Gambara and Giuliana.

"And what do they say at Castel Guelfo of the things that are

happening in Piacenza?" asked another.

"In Piacenza?" quoth I. "Why, what is happening in Piacenza?"

Eagerly, with an ardour to show themselves intimate with the affairs of towns, as is the way of rustics, they related to me what already I had gathered to be the vulgar version of Fifanti's death. Each spoke in turn, cutting in the moment another paused to breathe, and sometimes they spoke together, each anxious to have the extent of his information revealed and appreciated.

And their tale, of course, was that Gambarà, being the lover of Fifanti's wife, had dispatched the doctor on a trumped-up mission, and had gone to visit her by night. But that the suspicious Fifanti lying near by in wait, and having seen the Cardinal enter, followed him soon after and attacked him, whereupon the Lord Gambarà had slain him. And then that wily, fiendish prelate had sought to impose the blame upon the young Lord of Mondolfo, who was a student in the pedant's house, and he had caused the young man's arrest. But this the Piacentini would not endure. They had risen, and threatened the Governor's life; and he was fled to Rome or Parma, whilst the authorities to avoid a scandal had connived at the escape of Messer d'Anguissola, who was also gone, no man knew whither.

The news had travelled speedily into that mountain fastness, it seemed. But it had been garbled at its source. The Piacentini conceived that they held some evidence of what they believed—the evidence of the lad whom Fifanti had left to spy and who had borne him the tale that the Cardinal was within. This evidence they accounted well-confirmed by the Legate's flight.

Thus is history written. Not a doubt but that some industrious scribe in Piacenza with a grudge against Gambarà, would set down what was the talk of the town; and hereafter, it is not to be doubted, the murder of Astorre Fifanti for the vilest of all motives will be added to

the many crimes of Egidio Gambarà, that posterity may execrate his name even beyond its already rich enough deserts.

I heard them in silence and but little moved, yet with a question now and then to probe how far this silly story went in detail. And whilst they were still heaping abuse upon the Legate—of whom they spoke as Jews may speak of pork—came the lantern-jawed host with a dish of broiled goat, some bread, and a jug of wine. This he set before me, then joined them in their vituperation of Messer Gambarà.

I ate ravenously, and for all that I do not doubt the meat was tough and burnt, yet at the time those pieces of broiled goat upon that dirty table seemed the sweetest food that ever had been set before me.

Finding that I was but indifferently communicative and had little news to give them, the peasants fell to gossiping among themselves, and they were presently joined by the girl, whose name, it seemed, was Giovannozza. She came to startle them with the rumour of a fresh miracle attributed to the hermit of Monte Orsaro.

I looked up with more interest than I had hitherto shown in anything that had been said, and I inquired who might be this anchorite.

"Sainted Virgin!" cried the girl, setting her hands upon her generous hips, and turning her bold sloe-eyes upon me in a stare of incredulity. "Whence are you, sir, that you seem to know nothing of the world? You had not heard the news of Piacenza, which must be known to everyone by now; and you have never heard of the anchorite of Monte Orsaro!" She appealed by a gesture to Heaven against the Stygian darkness of my mind.

"He is a very holy man," said one of the peasants.

"And he dwells alone in a hut midway up the mountain," added a second.

"In a hut which he built for himself with his own hands," a third explained.

"And he lives on nuts and herbs and such scraps of food as are left him by the charitable," put in the fourth, to show himself as full of knowledge as his fellows.

But now it was Giovannozza who took up the story, firmly and resolutely; and being a woman she easily kept her tongue going and overbore the peasants so that they had no further share in the tale until it was entirely told. From her I learnt that the anchorite, one Fra Sebastiano, possessed a miraculous image of the blessed martyr St. Sebastian, whose wounds miraculously bled during Passion Week, and that there were no ills in the world that this blood would not cure, provided that those to whom it was applied were clean of mortal sin and imbued with the spirit of grace and faith.

No pious wayfarer going over the Pass of Cisa into Tuscany but would turn aside to kiss the image and ask a blessing at the hands of the anchorite; and yearly in the season of the miraculous manifestation, great pilgrimages were made to the hermitage by folk from the Valleys of the Taro and Bagnanza, and even from beyond the Apennines. So that Fra Sebastiano gathered great store of alms, part of which he redistributed amongst the poor, part of which he was saving to build a bridge over the Bagnanza torrent, in crossing which so many poor folk had lost their lives.

I listened intently to the tale of wonders that followed, and now the peasants joined in again, each with a story of some marvellous cure of which he had direct knowledge. And many and amazing were the details they gave me of the saint—for they spoke of him as a saint already—so that no doubt lingered in my mind of the holiness of this anchorite.

Giovannozza related how a goatherd coming one night over the

pass had heard from the neighbourhood of the hut the sounds of singing, and the music was the strangest and sweetest ever sounded on earth, so that it threw the poor fellow into a strange ecstasy, and it was beyond doubt that what he had heard was an angel choir. And then one of the peasants, the tallest and blackest of the four, swore with a great oath that one night when he himself had been in the hills he had seen the hermit's hut all aglow with heavenly light against the black mass of the mountain.

All this left me presently very thoughtful, filled with wonder and amazement. Then their talk shifted again, and it was of the vintage they discoursed, the fine yield of grapes about Fontana Fredda, and the heavy crop of oil that there would be that year. And then with the hum of their voices gradually receding, it ceased altogether for me, and I was asleep with my head pillowed upon my arms.

It would be an hour later when I awakened, a little stiff and cramped from the uncomfortable position in which I had rested. The peasants had departed and the surly-faced host was standing at my side.

"You should be resuming your journey," said he, seeing me awake. "It wants but a couple of hours to sunset, and if you are going over the pass it were well not to let the night overtake you."

"My journey?" said I aloud, and looked askance at him.

Whither, in Heaven's name, was I journeying?

Then I bethought me of my earlier resolve to seek shelter in some convent, and his mention of the pass caused me to think now that it would be wiser to cross the mountains into Tuscany. There I should be beyond the reach of the talons of the Farnese law, which might close upon me again at any time so long as I was upon Pontifical territory.

I rose heavily, and suddenly bethought me of my utter lack of money. It dismayed me for a moment. Then I remembered the mule,

and determined that I must go afoot.

"I have a mule to sell," said I, "the beast in your stables."

He scratched his ear, reflecting no doubt upon the drift of my announcement. "Yes?" he said dubiously. "And to what market are you taking it?"

"I am offering it to you," said I.

"To me?" he cried, and instantly suspicion entered his crafty eye and darkened his brow. "Where got you the mule?" he asked, and snapped his lips together.

The girl entering at that moment stood at gaze, listening.

"Where did I get it?" I echoed. "What is that to you?"

He smiled unpleasantly. "It is this to me: that if the bargelli were to come up here and discover a stolen mule in my stables, it would be an ill thing for me."

I flushed angrily. "Do you imply that I stole the mule?" said I, so fiercely that he changed his air.

"Nay now, nay now," he soothed me. "And, after all, it happens that I do not want a mule. I have one mule already, and I am a poor man, and..."

"A fig for your whines," said I. "Here is the case. I have no money—not a grosso. So the mule must pay for my dinner. Name your price, and let us have done."

"Ha!" he fumed at me. "I am to buy your stolen beast, am I? I am to be frightened by your violence into buying it? Be off, you rogue, or I'll raise the village and make short work of you. Be off, I say!"

He backed away as he spoke, towards the fireplace, and from the

corner took a stout oaken staff. He was a villain, a thieving rogue. That much was plain. And it was no less plain that I must submit, and leave my beast to him, or else perhaps suffer a worse alternative.

Had those four honest peasants still been there, he would not have dared to have so borne himself. But as it was, without witnesses to say how the thing had truly happened, if he raised the village against me how should they believe a man who confessed that he had eaten a dinner for which he could not pay? It must go very ill with me.

If I tried conclusions with him, I could break him in two notwithstanding his staff. But there would remain the girl to give the alarm, and when to dishonesty I should have added violence, my case would be that of any common bandit.

"Very well," I said. "You are a dirty, thieving rascal, and a vile one to take advantage of one in my position. I shall return for the mule another day. Meanwhile consider it in pledge for what I owe you. But see that you are ready for the reckoning when I present it."

With that, I swung on my heel, strode past the big-eyed girl, out of that foul kennel into God's sweet air, followed by the ordures of speech which that knave flung after me.

I turned up the street, setting my face towards the mountains, and trudged amain.

Soon I was out of the village and ascending the steep road towards the Pass of Cisa that leads over the Apennines to Pontremoli. This way had Hannibal come when he penetrated into Etruria some two thousand years ago. I quitted the road and took to bridle-paths under the shoulder of the mighty Mount Prinzerà. Thus I pushed on and upward through grey-green of olive and deep enamelled green of fig-trees, and came at last into a narrow gorge between two great mountains, a place of ferns and moisture where all was shadow and

the air felt chill.

Above me the mountains towered to the blue heavens, their flanks of a green that was in places turned to golden, where Autumn's fingers had already touched those heights, in places gashed with grey and purple wounds, where the bare rock thrust through.

I went on aimlessly, and came presently upon a little fir thicket, through which I pushed towards a sound of tumbling waters. I stood at last upon the rocks above a torrent that went thundering down the mighty gorge which it had cloven itself between the hills. Thence I looked down a long, wavering valley over which the rays of the evening sun were slanting, and hazily in the distance I could see the russet city of Fornovo which I had earlier passed that day. This torrent was the Bagnanza, and it effectively barred all passage. So I went up, along its bed, scrambling over lichened rocks or sinking my feet into carpets of soft, yielding moss.

At length, grown weary and uncertain of my way, I sank down to rest and think. And my thoughts were chiefly of that hermit somewhere above me in these hills, and of the blessedness of such a life, remote from the world that man had made so evil. And then, with thinking of the world, came thoughts of Giuliana. Two nights ago I had held her in my arms. Two nights ago! And already it seemed a century remote—as remote as all the rest of that life of which it seemed a part. For there had been a break in my existence with the murder of Fifanti, and in the past two days I had done more living and I had aged more than in all the eighteen years before.

Thinking of Giuliana, I evoked her image, the glowing, ruddy copper of her hair, the dark mystery of her eyes, so heavy-lidded and languorous in their smile. My spirit conjured her to stand before me all white and seductive as I had known her, and my longings were again upon me like a searing torture.

I fought them hard. I sought to shut that image out. But it abode to mock me. And then faintly from the valley, borne upon the breeze that came sighing through the fir-trees, rose the tinkle of an Angelus bell.

I fell upon my knees and prayed to the Mother of Purity for strength, and thus I came once more to peace. That done I crept under the shelter of a projecting rock, wrapped my cloak tightly about me, and lay down upon the hard ground to rest, for I was very weary.

Lying there I watched the colour fading from the sky. I saw the purple lights in the east turn to an orange that paled into faintest yellow, and this again into turquoise. The shadows crept up those heights. A star came out overhead, then another, then a score of stars to sparkle silvery in the blue-black heavens.

I turned on my side, and closed my eyes, seeking to sleep; and then quite suddenly I heard a sound of unutterable sweetness—a melody so faint and subtle that it had none of the form and rhythm of earthly music. I sat up, my breath almost arrested, and listened more intently. I could still hear it, but very faint and distant. It was as a sound of silver bells, and yet it was not quite that. I remembered the stories I had heard that day in the tavern at Pojetta, and the talk of the mystic melodies by which travellers had been drawn to the anchorite's abode. I noted the direction of the sound, and I determined to be guided by it, and to cast myself at the feet of that holy man, to implore of him who could heal bodies the miracle of my soul's healing and my mind's purging from its torment.

I pushed on, then, through the luminous night, keeping as much as possible to the open, for under trees lesser obstacles were not to be discerned. The melody grew louder as I advanced, ever following the Bagnanza towards its source; and the stream, too, being much less turbulent now, did not overbear that other sound.

It was a melody on long humming notes, chiefly, it seemed to me,

upon two notes with the occasional interjection of a third and fourth, and, at long and rare intervals, of a fifth. It was harmonious beyond all description, just as it was weird and unearthly; but now that I heard it more distinctly it had much more the sound of bells—very sweet and silvery.

And then, quite suddenly, I was startled by a human cry—a piteous, wailing cry that told of helplessness and pain. I went forward more quickly in the direction whence it came, rounded a stout hazel coppice, and stood suddenly before a rude hut of pine logs built against the side of the rock. Through a small unglazed window came a feeble shaft of light.

I halted there, breathless and a little afraid. This must be the dwelling of the anchorite. I stood upon holy ground.

And then the cry was repeated. It proceeded from the hut. I advanced to the window, took courage and peered in. By the light of a little brass oil lamp with a single wick I could faintly make out the interior.

The rock itself formed the far wall of it, and in this a niche was carved—a deep, capacious niche in the shadows of which I could faintly discern a figure some two feet in height, which I doubted not would be the miraculous image of St. Sebastian. In front of this was a rude wooden pulpit set very low, and upon it a great book with iron clasps and a yellow, grinning skull.

All this I beheld at a single glance. There was no other furniture in that little place, neither chair nor table; and the brass lamp was set upon the floor, near a heaped-up bed of rushes and dried leaves upon which I beheld the anchorite himself. He was lying upon his back, and seemed a vigorous, able-bodied man of a good length.

He wore a loose brown habit roughly tied about his middle by a

piece of rope from which was suspended an enormous string of beads. His beard and hair were black, but his face was livid as a corpse's, and as I looked at him he emitted a fresh groan, and writhed as if in mortal suffering.

"O my God! My God!" I heard him crying. "Am I to die alone? Mercy! I repent me!" And he writhed moaning, and rolled over on his side so that he faced me, and I saw that his livid countenance was glistening with sweat.

I stepped aside and lifted the latch of the rude door.

"Are you suffering, father?" I asked, almost fearfully. At the sound of my voice, he suddenly sat up, and there was a great fear in his eyes. Then he fell back again with a cry.

"I thank Thee, my God! I thank Thee!"

I entered, and crossing to his side, I went down on my knees beside him.

Without giving me time to speak, he clutched my arm with one of his clammy hands, and raised himself painfully upon his elbow, his eyes burning with the fever that was in him.

"A priest!" he gasped. "Get me a priest! Oh, if you would be saved from the flames of everlasting Hell, get me a priest to shrive me. I am dying, and I would not go hence with the burden of all this sin upon my soul."

I could feel the heat of his hand through the sleeve of my coat. His condition was plain. A raging fever was burning out his life.

"Be comforted," I said. "I will go at once." And I rose, whilst he poured forth his blessings upon me.

At the door I checked to ask what was the nearest place.

"Casi," he said hoarsely. "To your right, you will see the path down the hill-side. You cannot miss it. In half an hour you should be there. And return at once, for I have not long. I feel it."

With a last word of reassurance and comfort I closed the door, and plunged away into the darkness.

CHAPTER V. THE RENUNCIATION

I found the path the hermit spoke of, and followed its sinuous downhill course, now running when the ground was open, now moving more cautiously, yet always swiftly, when it led me through places darkened by trees.

At the end of a half-hour I espied below me the twinkling lights of a village on the hill-side, and a few minutes later I was among the houses of Casi. To find the priest in his little cottage by the church was an easy matter; to tell him my errand and to induce him to come with me, to tend the holy man who lay dying alone in the mountain, was as easy. To return, however, was the most difficult part of the undertaking; for the upward path was steep, and the priest was old and needed such assistance as my own very weary limbs could scarcely render him. We had the advantage of a lanthorn which he insisted upon bringing, and we made as good progress as could be expected. But it was best part of two hours after my setting out before we stood once more upon the little platform where the hermit had his hut.

We found the place in utter darkness. Through lack of oil his little lamp had burned itself out; and when we entered, the man on the bed of wattles lay singing a lewd tavern-song, which, coming from such holy lips, filled me with horror and amazement.

But the old priest, with that vast and doleful experience of death-beds which belongs to men of his class, was quick to perceive the cause of this. The fever was flickering up before life's final extinction,

and the poor moribund was delirious and knew not what he said.

For an hour we watched beside him, waiting. The priest was confident that there would be a return of consciousness and a spell of lucidity before the end.

Through that lugubrious hour I squatted there, watching the awful process of human dissolution for the first time.

Save in the case of Fifanti I had never yet seen death; nor could it be said that I had really seen it then. With the pedant, death had been a sudden sharp severing of the thread of life, and I had been conscious that he was dead without any appreciation of death itself, blinded in part by my own exalted condition at the time.

But in this death of Fra Sebastiano I was heated by no participation. I was an unwilling and detached spectator, brought there by force of circumstance; and my mind received from the spectacle an impression not easily to be effaced, an impression which may have been answerable in part for that which followed.

Towards dawn at last the sick man's babblings—and they were mostly as profane and lewd as his occasional bursts of song—were quieted. The unseeing glitter of his eyes that had ever and anon been turned upon us was changed to a dull and heavy consciousness, and he struggled to rise, but his limbs refused their office.

The priest leaned over him with a whispered word of comfort, then turned and signed to me to leave the hut. I rose, and went towards the door. But I had scarcely reached it when there was a hoarse cry behind me followed by a gasping sob from the priest. I started round to see the hermit lying on his back, his face rigid, his mouth open and idiotic, his eyes more leaden than they had been a moment since.

"What is it?" I cried, despite myself.

"He has gone, my son," answered the old priest sorrowfully. "But he was contrite, and he had lived a saint." And drawing from his breast a little silver box, he proceeded to perform the last rites upon the body from which the soul was already fled.

I came slowly back and knelt beside him, and long we remained there in silent prayer for the repose of that blessed spirit. And whilst we prayed the wind rose outside, and a storm grew in the bosom of the night that had been so fair and tranquil. The lightning flashed and illumined the interior of that hut with a vividness as of broad daylight, throwing into livid relief the arrow-pierced St. Sebastian in the niche and the ghastly, grinning skull upon the hermit's pulpit.

The thunder crashed and crackled, and the echoes of its artillery went booming and rolling round the hills, whilst the rain fell in a terrific lashing downpour. Some of it finding a weakness in the roof, trickled and dripped and formed a puddle in the middle of the hut.

For upwards of an hour the storm raged, and all the while we remained upon our knees beside the dead anchorite. Then the thunder receded and gradually died away in the distance; the rain ceased; and the dawn crept pale as a moon-stone adown the valley.

We went out to breathe the freshened air just as the first touches of the sun quickened to an opal splendour the pallor of that daybreak. All the earth was steaming, and the Bagnanza, suddenly swollen, went thundering down the gorge.

At sunrise we dug a grave just below the platform with a spade which I found in the hut. There we buried the hermit, and over the spot I made a great cross with the largest stones that I could find. The priest would have given him burial in the hut itself; but I suggested that perhaps there might be some other who would be willing to take the hermit's place, and consecrate his life to carrying on the man's pious work of guarding that shrine and collecting alms for the poor and for

the building of the bridge.

My tone caused the priest to look at me with sharp, kindly eyes.

"Have you such thoughts for yourself, perchance?" he asked me.

"Unless you should adjudge me too unworthy for the office," I answered humbly.

"But you are very young, my son," he said, and laid a kindly hand upon my shoulder. "Have you suffered, then, so sorely at the hands of the world that you should wish to renounce it and to take up this lonely life?"

"I was intended for the priesthood, father," I replied. "I aspired to holy orders. But through the sins of the flesh I have rendered myself unworthy. Here, perhaps, I can expiate and cleanse my heart of all the foulness it gathered in the world."

He left me an hour or so later, to make his way back to Casi, having heard enough of my past and having judged sufficiently of my attitude of mind to approve me in my determination to do penance and seek peace in that isolation. Before going he bade me seek him out at Casi at any time should any doubts assail me, or should I find that the burden I had taken up was too heavy for my shoulders.

I watched him go down the winding, mountain path, watched the bent old figure in his long black gaberdine, until a turn in the path and a clump of chestnuts hid him from my sight.

Then I first tasted the loneliness to which on that fair morning I had vowed myself. The desolation of it touched me and awoke self-pity in my heart, to extinguish utterly the faint flame of ecstasy that had warmed me when first I thought of taking the dead anchorite's place.

I was not yet twenty, I was lord of great possessions, and of life I had tasted no more than one poisonous, reckless draught; yet I was

done with the world—driven out of it by penitence. It was just; but it was bitter. And then I felt again that touch of ecstasy to reflect that it was the bitterness of the resolve that made it worthy, that through its very harshness was it that this path should lead to grace.

Later on I busied myself with an inspection of the hut, and my first attentions were for the miraculous image. I looked upon it with awe, and I knelt to it in prayer for forgiveness for the unworthiness I brought to the service of the shrine.

The image itself was very crude of workmanship and singularly ghastly. It reminded me poignantly of the Crucifix that had hung upon the whitewashed wall of my mother's private dining-room and had been so repellent to my young eyes.

From two arrow wounds in the breast descended two brown streaks, relics of the last miraculous manifestation. The face of the young Roman centurion who had suffered martyrdom for his conversion to Christianity was smiling very sweetly and looking upwards, and in that part of his work the sculptor had been very happy. But the rest of the carving was gruesome and the anatomy was gross and bad, the figure being so disproportionately broad as to convey the impression of a stunted dwarf.

The big book standing upon the pulpit of plain deal proved, as I had expected, to be a missal; and it became my custom to recite from it each morning thereafter the office for the day.

In a rude cupboard I found a jar of baked earth that was half full of oil, and another larger jar containing some cakes of maize bread and a handful of chestnuts. There was also a brown bundle which resolved itself into a monkish habit within which was rolled a hair-shirt.

I took pleasure in this discovery, and I set myself at once to strip off my secular garments and to don this coarse brown habit, which, by

reason of my great height, descended but midway down my calves. For lack of sandals I went barefoot, and having made a bundle of the clothes I had removed I thrust them into the cupboard in the place of those which I had taken thence.

Thus did I, who had been vowed to the anchorite order of St. Augustine, enter upon my life as an unordained anchorite. I dragged out the wattles upon which my blessed predecessor had breathed his last, and having swept the place clean with a bundle of hazel-switches which I cut for the purpose, I went to gather fresh boughs and rushes by the swollen torrent, and with these I made myself a bed.

My existence became not only one of loneliness, but of grim privation. People rarely came my way, save for a few faithful women from Casi or Fiori who solicited my prayers in return for the oil and maize-cakes which they left me, and sometimes whole days would pass without the sight of a single human being. These maize-cakes formed my chief nourishment, together with a store of nuts from the hazel coppice that grew before my door and some chestnuts which I went further afield to gather in the woods. Occasionally, as a gift, there would be a jar of olives, which was the greatest delicacy that I savoured in those days. No flesh-food or fish did I ever taste, so that I grew very lean and often suffered hunger.

My days were spent partly in prayer and partly in meditation, and I pondered much upon what I could remember of the Confessions of St. Augustine, deriving great consolation from the thought that if that great father of the Church had been able to win to grace out of so much sin as had befouled his youth, I had no reason to despair. And as yet I had received no absolution for the mortal offences I had committed at Piacenza. I had confessed to Fra Gervasio, and he had bidden me do penance first, but the penance had never been imposed. I was imposing it now. All my life should I impose it thus.

Yet, ere it was consummated I might come to die; and the thought

appalled me, for I must not die in sin.

So I resolved that when I should have spent a year in that fastness I would send word to the priest at Casi by some of those who visited my hermitage, and desire him to come to me that I might seek absolution at his hands.

CHAPTER VI.

HYPNEROTOMACHIA

At first I seemed to make good progress in my quest after grace, and a certain solatium of peace descended upon me, beneficent as the dew of a summer night upon the parched and thirsty earth. But anon this changed and I would catch the thoughts that should have been bent upon pious meditation glancing backward with regretful longings at that life out of which I had departed.

I would start up in a pious rage and cast out such thoughts by more strenuous prayer and still more strenuous fasting. But as my body grew accustomed to the discomforts to which it was subjected, my mind assumed a rebellious freedom that clogged the work of purification upon which I strove to engage it. My stomach out of its very emptiness conjured up evil visions to torment me in the night, and with these I vainly wrestled until I remembered the measures which Fra Gervasio told me that he had taken in like case. I had then the happy inspiration to have recourse to the hair-shirt, which hitherto I had dreaded.

It would be towards the end of October, as the days were growing colder, that I first put on that armour against the shafts of Satan. It galled me horribly and fretted my tender flesh at almost every movement; but so at least, at the expense of the body, I won back to some peace of mind, and the flesh, being quelled and subdued, no longer interposed its evil humours to the purity I desired for my meditations.

For upwards of a month, then, the mild torture of the goat's-hair

cilice did the office I required of it. But towards December, my skin having grown tough and callous from the perpetual irritation, and inured to the fretting of the sharp hair, my mind once more began to wander mutinously. To check it again I put off the cilice, and with it all other undergarments, retaining no more clothing than just the rough brown monkish habit. Thus I exposed myself to the rigours of the weather, for it had grown very cold in those heights where I dwelt, and the snows were creeping nearer adown the mountain-side.

I had seen the green of the valley turn to gold and then to flaming brown. I had seen the fire perish out of those autumnal tints, and with the falling of the leaves, a slow, grey, bald decrepitude covering the world. And to this had now succeeded chill wintry gales that howled and whistled through the logs of my wretched hut, whilst the western wind coming down over the frozen zone above cut into me like a knife's edge.

And famished as I was I felt this coldness the more, and daily I grew leaner until there was little left of my erstwhile lusty vigour, and I was reduced to a parcel of bones held together in a bag of skin, so that it almost seemed that I must rattle as I walked.

I suffered, and yet I was glad to suffer, and took a joy in my pain, thanking God for the grace of permitting me to endure it, since the greater the discomforts of my body, the more numbed became the pain of my mind, the more removed from me were the lures of longing with which Satan still did battle for my soul. In pain itself I seemed to find the nepenthes that others seek from pain; in suffering was my Lethean draught that brought the only oblivion that I craved.

I think that in those months my reason wandered a little under all this strain; and I think to-day that the long ecstasies into which I fell were largely the result of a feverishness that burned in me as a consequence of a chill that I had taken.

I would spend long hours upon my knees in prayer and meditation. And remembering how others in such case as mine had known the great boon and blessing of heavenly visions, I prayed and hoped for some such sign of grace, confident in its power to sustain me thereafter against all possible temptation.

And then, one night, as the year was touching its end, it seemed to me that my prayer was answered. I do not think that my vision was a dream; leastways, I do not think that I was asleep when it visited me. I was on my knees at the time, beside my bed of wattles, and it was very late at night. Suddenly the far end of my hut grew palely lucent, as if a phosphorescent vapour were rising from the ground; it waved and rolled as it ascended in billows of incandescence, and then out of the heart of it there gradually grew a figure all in white over which there was a cloak of deepest blue all flecked with golden stars, and in the folded hands a sheaf of silver lilies.

I knew no fear. My pulses throbbed and my heart beat ponderously but rapturously as I watched the vision growing more and more distinct until I could make out the pale face of ineffable sweetness and the veiled eyes.

It was the Blessed Madonna, as Messer Pordenone had painted her in the Church of Santa Chiara at Piacenza; the dress, the lilies, the sweet pale visage, all were known to me, even the billowing cloud upon which one little naked foot was resting.

I cried out in longing and in rapture, and I held out my arms to that sweet vision. But even as I did so its aspect gradually changed. Under the upper part of the blue mantle, which formed a veil, was spread a mass of ruddy, gleaming hair; the snowy pallor of the face was warmed to the tint of ivory, and the lips deepened to scarlet and writhed in a voluptuous smile; the dark eyes glowed languidly; the lilies faded away, and the pale hands were held out to me.

"Giuliana!" I cried, and my pure and piously joyous ecstasy was changed upon the instant to fierce, carnal longings.

"Giuliana!" I held out my arms, and slowly she floated towards me, over the rough earthen floor of my cell.

A frenzy of craving seized me. I was impatient to lock my arms once more about that fair sleek body. I sought to rise, to go to meet her slow approach, to lessen by a second this agony of waiting. But my limbs were powerless. I was as if cast in lead, whilst more and more slowly she approached me, so languorously mocking.

And then revulsion took me, suddenly and without any cause or warning. I put my hands to my face to shut out a vision whose true significance I realized as in a flash.

"Retro me, Sathanas!" I thundered. "Jesus! Maria!"

I rose at last numbed and stiff. I looked again. The vision had departed. I was alone in my cell, and the rain was falling steadily outside. I groaned despairingly. Then I swayed, reeled sideways and lost all consciousness.

When I awoke it was broad day, and the pale wintry sun shone silvery from a winter sky. I was very weak and very cold, and when I attempted to rise all things swam round me, and the floor of my cell appeared to heave like the deck of a ship upon a rolling sea.

For days thereafter I was as a man entranced, alternately frozen with cold and burning with fever; and but that a shepherd who had turned aside to ask the hermit's blessing discovered me in that condition, and remained, out of his charity, for some three days to tend me, it is more than likely I should have died.

He nourished me with the milk of goats, a luxury upon which my strength grew swiftly, and even after he had quitted my hut he still

came daily for a week to visit me, and daily he insisted that I should consume the milk he brought me, overruling my protests that my need being overpast there was no longer the necessity to pamper me.

Thereafter I knew a season of peace.

It was, I then reasoned, as if the Devil having tried me with a masterstroke of temptation, and having suffered defeat, had abandoned the contest. Yet I was careful not to harbour that thought unduly, nor glory in my power, lest such presumption should lead to worse. I thanked Heaven for the strength it had lent me, and implored a continuance of its protection for a vessel so weak.

And now the hill-side and valley began to put on the raiment of a new year. February, like a benignant nymph, tripped down by meadow and stream, and touched the slumbering earth with gentler breezes. And soon, where she had passed, the crocus reared its yellow head, anemones, scarlet, blue and purple, tossed from her lap, sang the glories of spring in their tender harmonies of hue, coy violet and sweet-smelling nardosmia waved their incense on her altars, and the hellebore sprouted by the streams.

Then as birch and beech and oak and chestnut put forth a garb of tender pallid green, March advanced and Easter came on apace.

But the approach of Easter filled me with a staggering dread. It was in Passion Week that the miracle of the image that I guarded was wont to manifest itself. What if through my unworthiness it should fail? The fear appalled me, and I redoubled my prayers. There was need; for spring which touched the earth so benignly had not passed me by. And at moments certain longings for the world would stir in me again, and again would come those agonizing thoughts of Giuliana which I had conceived were for ever laid to rest, so that I sought refuge once more in the hair-shirt; and when this had once more lost its efficacy, I took long whip-like branches of tender eglantine to fashion a scourge

with which I flagellated my naked body so that the thorns tore my flesh and set my rebellious blood to flow.

One evening, at last, as I sat outside my hut, gazing over the rolling emerald uplands, I had my reward. I almost fainted when first I realized it in the extremity of my joy and thankfulness. Very faintly, just as I had heard it that night when first I came to the hermitage, I heard now the mystic, bell-like music that had guided my footsteps thither. Never since that night had the sound of it reached me, though often I had listened for it.

It came now wafted down to me, it seemed, upon the evening breeze, a sound of angelic chimes infinitely ravishing to my senses, and stirring my heart to such an ecstasy of faith and happiness as I had never yet known since my coming thither.

It was a sign—a sign of pardon, a sign of grace. It could be naught else. I fell upon my knees and rendered my deep and joyous thanks.

And in all the week that followed that unearthly silver music was with me, infinitely soothing and solacing. I could wander afield, yet it never left me, unless I chanced to go so near the tumbling waters of the Bagnanza that their thunder drowned that other blessed sound. I took courage and confidence. Passion Week drew nigh; but it no longer had any terrors for me. I was adjudged worthy of the guardianship of the shrine. Yet I prayed, and made St. Sebastian the special object of my devotions, that he should not fail me.

April came, as I learnt of the stray visitors who, of their charity, brought me the alms of bread, and the second day of it was the first of Holy Week.

CHAPTER VII. INTRUDERS

It was on Holy Thursday that the image usually began to bleed, and it would continue so to do until the dawn of Easter Sunday.

Each day now, as the time drew nearer, I watched the image closely, and on the Wednesday I watched it with a dread anxiety I could not repress, for as yet there was no faintest sign. The brown streaks that marked the course of the last bleeding continued dry. All that night I prayed intently, in a torture of doubt, yet soothed a little by the gentle music that was never absent now.

With the first glint of dawn I heard steps outside the hut; but I did not stir. By sunrise there was a murmur of voices like the muttering of a sea upon its shore. I rose and peered more closely at the saint. He was just wood, inanimate and insensible, and there was still no sign. Outside, I knew, a crowd of pilgrims was already gathered. They were waiting, poor souls. But what was their waiting compared with mine?

Another hour I knelt there, still beseeching Heaven to take mercy upon me. But Heaven remained unresponsive and the wounds of the image continued dry.

I rose, at last, in a sort of despair, and going to the door of the hut, I flung it wide.

The platform was filled with a great crowd of peasantry, and an overflow poured down the sides of it and surged up the hill on the right and the left. At sight of me, so gaunt and worn, my eyes wild with despair and feverish from sleeplessness, a tangled growth of beard upon my hollow cheeks, they uttered as with one voice a great cry of awe. The multitude swayed and rippled, and then with a curious

sound as that of a great wind, all went down upon their knees before me—all save the array of cripples huddled in the foreground, brought thither, poor wretches, in the hope of a miraculous healing.

As I was looking round upon that assembly, my eyes were caught by a flash and glitter on the road above us leading to the Cisa Pass. A little troop of men-at-arms was descending that way. A score of them there would be, and from their lance-heads fluttered scarlet bannerols bearing a white device which at that distance I could not make out.

The troop had halted, and one upon a great black horse, a man whose armour shone like the sun itself, was pointing down with his mail-clad hand. Then they began to move again, and the brightness of their armour, the fluttering pennons on their lances, stirred me strangely in that fleeting moment, ere I turned again to the faithful who knelt there waiting for my words. Dolefully, with hanging head and downcast eyes, I made the dread announcement.

"My children, there is yet no miracle."

A deathly stillness followed the words. Then came an uproar, a clamour, a wailing. One bold mountaineer thrust forward to the foremost ranks, though without rising from his knees.

"Father," he cried, "how can that be? The saint has never failed to bleed by dawn on Holy Thursday, these five years past."

"Alas!" I groaned, "I do not know. I but tell you what is. All night have I held vigil. But all has been vain. I will go pray again, and do you, too, pray."

I dared not tell them of my growing suspicion and fear that the fault was in myself; that here was a sign of Heaven's displeasure at the impurity of the guardian of that holy place.

"But the music!" cried one of the cripples raucously. "I hear the blessed music!"

I halted, and the crowd fell very still to listen. We all heard it pealing softly, soothingly, as from the womb of the mountain, and a great cry went up once more from that vast assembly, a hopeful cry that where one miracle was happening another must happen, that where the angelic choirs were singing all must be well.

And then with a thunder of hooves and clank of metal the troop that I had seen came over the pasture-lands, heading straight for my hermitage, having turned aside from the road. At the foot of the hillock upon which my hut was perched they halted at a word from their leader.

I stood at gaze, and most of the people too craned their necks to see what unusual pilgrim was this who came to the shrine of St. Sebastian.

The leader swung himself unaided from the saddle, full-armed as he was; then going to a litter in the rear, he assisted a woman to alight from it.

All this I watched, and I observed too that the device upon the bannerols was the head of a white horse. By that device I knew them. They were of the house of Cavalcanti—a house that had, as I had heard, been in alliance and great friendship with my father. But that their coming hither should have anything to do with me or with that friendship I was assured was impossible. Not a single soul could know of my whereabouts or the identity of the present hermit of Monte Orsaro.

The pair advanced, leaving the troop below to await their return, and as they came I considered them, as did, too, the multitude.

The man was of middle height, very broad and active, with long

arms, to one of which the little lady clung for help up the steep path. He had a proud, stern aquiline face that was shaven, so that the straight lines of his strong mouth and powerful length of jaw looked as if chiselled out of stone. It was only at closer quarters that I observed how the general hardness of that countenance was softened by the kindliness of his deep brown eyes. In age I judged him to be forty, though in reality he was nearer fifty.

The little lady at his side was the daintiest maid that I had ever seen. The skin, white as a water-lily, was very gently flushed upon her cheeks; the face was delicately oval; the little mouth, the tenderest in all the world; the forehead low and broad, and the slightly slanting eyes—when she raised the lashes that hung over them like long shadows—were of the deep blue of sapphires. Her dark brown hair was coiled in a jewelled net of thread of gold, and on her white neck a chain of emeralds sparkled sombrely. Her close-fitting robe and her mantle were of the hue of bronze, and the light shifted along the silken fabric as she moved, so that it gleamed like metal. About her waist there was a girdle of hammered gold, and pearls were sewn upon the back of her brown velvet gloves.

One glance of her deep blue eyes she gave me as she approached; then she lowered them instantly, and so weak—so full of worldly vanities was I still that in that moment I took shame at the thought that she should see me thus, in this rough hermit's habit, my face a tangle of unshorn beard, my hair long and unkempt. And the shame of it dyed my gaunt cheeks. And then I turned pale again, for it seemed to me that out of nowhere a voice had asked me:

"Do you still marvel that the image will not bleed?"

So sharp and clear did those words arise from the lips of Conscience that it seemed to me as if they had been uttered aloud, and I looked almost in alarm to see if any other had overheard them.

The cavalier was standing before me, and his brows were knit, a deep amazement in his eyes. Thus awhile in utter silence. Then quite suddenly, his voice a ringing challenge:

"What is your name?" he said.

"My name?" quoth I, astonished by such a question, and remarking now the intentness and surprise of his own glance. "It is Sebastian," I answered, and truthfully, for that was the name of my adoption, the name I had taken when I entered upon my hermitage.

"Sebastian of what and where?" quoth he.

He stood before me, his back to the peasant crowd, ignoring them as completely as if they had no existence, supremely master of himself. And meanwhile, the little lady on his arm stole furtive upward glances at me.

"Sebastian of nowhere," I answered. "Sebastian the hermit, the guardian of this shrine. If you are come to..."

"What was your name in the world?" he interrupted impatiently, and all the time his eyes were devouring my gaunt face.

"The name of a sinner," answered I. "I have stripped it off and cast it from me."

An expression of impatience rippled across the white face

"But the name of your father?" he insisted.

"I have none," answered I. "I have no kin or ties of any sort. I am Sebastian the hermit."

His lips smacked testily. "Were you baptized Sebastian?" he inquired.

"No," I answered him. "I took the name when I became the guardian

of this shrine."

"And when was that?"

"In September of last year, when the holy man who was here before me died."

I saw a sudden light leap to his eyes and a faint smile to his lips. He leaned towards me. "Heard you ever of the name of Anguissola?" he inquired, and watched me closely, his face within a foot of mine.

But I did not betray myself, for the question no longer took me by surprise. I was accounted to be very like my father, and that a member of the house of Cavalcanti, with which Giovanni d'Anguissola had been so intimate, should detect the likeness was not unnatural. I was convinced, moreover, that he had been guided thither by merest curiosity at the sight of that crowd of pilgrims.

"Sir," I said, "I know not your intentions; but in all humility let me say that I am not here to answer questions of worldly import. The world has done with me, and I with the world. So that unless you are come hither out of piety for this shrine, I beg that you will depart with God and molest me no further. You come at a singularly inauspicious time, when I need all my strength to forget the world and my sinful past, that through me the will of Heaven may be done here."

I saw the maid's tender eyes raised to my face with a look of great compassion and sweetness whilst I spoke. I observed the pressure which she put on his arm. Whether he gave way to that, or whether it was the sad firmness of my tone that prevailed upon him I cannot say. But he nodded shortly.

"Well, well!" he said, and with a final searching look, he turned, the little lady with him, and went clanking off through the lane which the crowd opened out for him.

That they resented his presence, since it was not due to motives of piety, they very plainly signified. They feared that the intrusion at such a time of a personality so worldly must raise fresh difficulties against the performance of the expected miracle.

Nor were matters improved when at the crowd's edge he halted and questioned one of them as to the meaning of this pilgrimage. I did not hear the peasant's answer; but I saw the white, haughty face suddenly thrown up, and I caught his next question:

"When did it last bleed?"

Again an inaudible reply, and again his ringing voice—"That would be before this young hermit came? And to-day it will not bleed, you say?"

He flashed me a last keen glance of his eyes, which had grown narrow and seemed laden with mockery. The little lady whispered something to him, in answer to which he laughed contemptuously.

"Fool's mummery," he snapped, and drew her on, she going, it seemed to me, reluctantly.

But the crowd had heard him and the insult offered to the shrine. A deep-throated bay rose up in menace, and some leapt to their feet as if they would attack him.

He checked, and wheeled at the sound. "How now?" he cried, his voice a trumpet-call, his eyes flashing terribly upon them; and as dogs crouch to heel at the angry bidding of their master, the multitude grew silent and afraid under the eyes of that single steel-clad man.

He laughed a deep-throated laugh, and strode down the hill with his little lady on his arm.

But when he had mounted and was riding off, the crowd, recovering courage from his remoteness, hurled its curses after him and shrilly

branded him, "Derider!" and "Blasphemer!"

He rode contemptuously amain, however, looking back but once, and then to laugh at them.

Soon he had dipped out of sight, and of his company nothing was visible but the fluttering red pennons with the device of the white horse-head. Gradually these also sank and vanished, and once more I was alone with the crowd of pilgrims.

Enjoining prayer upon them again, I turned and re-entered the hut.

CHAPTER VIII. THE VISION

Pray as we might, night came and still the image gave no sign. The crowd melted away, with promises to return at dawn—promises that sounded almost like a menace in my ears.

I was alone once more, alone with my thoughts and these made sport of me. It was not only upon the unresponsiveness of St. Sebastian that my mind now dwelt, nor yet upon the horrid dread that this unresponsiveness might be a sign of Heaven's displeasure, an indication that as a custodian of that shrine I was unacceptable through the mire of sin that still clung to me. Rather, my thoughts went straying down the mountain-side in the wake of that gallant company, that stern-faced man and that gentle-eyed little lady who had hung upon his arm. Before the eyes of my mind there flashed again the brilliance of their arms, in my ears rang the thunder of their chargers' hooves, whilst the image of the girl in her shimmering, bronze-hued robe remained insistently.

Theirs the life that should have been mine! She such a companion as should have shared my life and borne me children of my own. And I would burn with shame again in memory, as I had burnt in actual fact, to think that she should have beheld me in so unkempt and bedraggled a condition.

How must I compare in her eyes with the gay courtiers who would daily hover in her presence and hang upon her gentle speech? What thought of me could I hope should ever abide with her, as the image of her abode with me? Or, if she thought of me at all, she must think of me just as a poor hermit, a man who had donned the anchorite's sackcloth and turned his back upon a world that for him was empty.

It is very easy for you worldly ones who read, to conjecture what had befallen me. I was enamoured. In a meeting of eyes had the thing come to me. And you will say that it is little marvel, considering the seclusion of all my life and particularly that of the past few months, that the first sweet maid I beheld should have wrought such havoc, and conquered my heart by the mere flicker of her lashes.

Yet so much I cannot grant your shrewdness.

That meeting was predestined. It was written that she should come and tear the foolish bandage from my eyes, allowing me to see for myself that, as Fra Gervasio had opined, my vocation was neither for hermitage nor cloister; that what called me was the world; and that in the world must I find salvation since I was needed for the world's work.

And none but she could have done that. Of this I am persuaded, as you shall be when you have read on.

The yearnings with which she filled my soul were very different from those inspired by the memory of Giuliana. That other sinful longing, she entirely effaced at last, thereby achieving something that had been impossible to prayers and fasting, to scourge and cilice. I longed for her almost beatifically, as those whose natures are truly saintly long for the presence of the blessed ones of Heaven. By the sight of her I was purified and sanctified, washed clean of all that murk of sinful desire in which I had lain despite myself; for my desire of her was the blessed, noble desire to serve, to guard, to cherish.

Pure was she as the pale narcissus by the streams, and serving her what could I be but pure?

And then, quite suddenly, upon the heels of such thoughts came the reaction. Horror and revulsion were upon me. This was but a fresh snare of Satan's baiting to lure me to destruction. Where the memory of Giuliana had failed to move me to aught but penance and

increasing rigours, the foul fiend sought to engage me with a seeming purity to my ultimate destruction. Thus had Anthony, the Egyptian monk, been tempted; and under one guise or another it was ever the same Circean lure.

I would make an end. I swore it in a mighty frenzy of repentance, in a very lust to do battle with Satan and with my own flesh and a phrenetic joy to engage in the awful combat.

I stripped off my ragged habit, and standing naked I took up my scourge of eglantine and beat myself until the blood flowed freely. But that was not enough. All naked as I was, I went forth into the blue night, and ran to a pool of the Bagnanza, going of intent through thickets of bramble and briar-rose that gripped and tore my flesh and lacerated me so that at times I screamed aloud in pain, to laugh ecstatically the next moment and joyfully taunt Satan with his defeat.

Thus I tore on, my very body ragged and bleeding from head to foot, and thus I came to the pool in the torrent's course. Into this I plunged, and stood with the icy waters almost to my neck, to purge the unholy fevers out of me. The snows above were melting at the time, and the pool was little more than liquid ice. The chill of it struck through me to the very marrow, and I felt my flesh creep and contract until it seemed like the rough hide of some fabled monster, and my wounds stung as if fire were being poured into them.

Thus awhile; then all feeling passed, and a complete insensibility to the cold of the water or the fire of the wounds succeeded. All was numbed, and every nerve asleep. At last I had conquered. I laughed aloud, and in a great voice of triumph I shouted so that the shout went echoing round the hills in the stillness of the night:

"Satan, thou art defeated!"

And upon that I crawled up the mossy bank, the water gliding from

my long limbs. I attempted to stand. But the earth rocked under my feet; the blueness of the night deepened into black, and consciousness was extinguished like a candle that is blown out.

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She appeared above me in a great effulgence that emanated from herself as if she were grown luminous. Her robe was of cloth of silver and of a dazzling sheen, and it hung closely to her lissom, virginal form, defining every line and curve of it; and by the chaste beauty of her I was moved to purest ecstasy of awe and worship.

The pale, oval face was infinitely sweet, the slanting eyes of heavenly blue were infinitely tender, the brown hair was plaited into two long tresses that hung forward upon either breast and were entwined with threads of gold and shimmering jewels. On the pale brow a brilliant glowed with pure white fires, and her hands were held out to me in welcome.

Her lips parted to breathe my name.

"Agostino d'Anguissola!" There were whole tomes of tender meaning in those syllables, so that hearing her utter them I seemed to learn all that was in her heart.

And then her shining whiteness suggested to me the name that must be hers.

"Bianca!" I cried, and in my turn held out my arms and made as if to advance towards her. But I was held back in icy, clinging bonds, whose relentlessness drew from me a groan of misery.

"Agostino, I am waiting for you at Pagliano," she said, and it did not occur to me to wonder where might be this Pagliano of which I could not remember ever to have heard. "Come to me soon."

"I may not come," I answered miserably. "I am an anchorite, the guardian of a shrine; and my life that has been full of sin must be given henceforth to expiation. It is the will of Heaven."

She smiled all undismayed, smiled confidently and tenderly.

"Presumptuous!" she gently chid me. "What know you of the will of Heaven? The will of Heaven is inscrutable. If you have sinned in the world, in the world must you atone by deeds that shall serve the world—God's world. In your hermitage you are become barren soil that will yield naught to yourself or any. Come then from the wilderness. Come soon! I am waiting!"

And on that the splendid vision faded, and utter darkness once more encompassed me, a darkness through which still boomed repeatedly the fading echo of the words:

"Come soon! I am waiting!"

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I lay upon my bed of wattles in the hut, and through the little unglazed windows the sun was pouring, but the dripping eaves told of rain that had lately ceased.

Over me was bending a kindly faced old man in whom I recognized the good priest of Casi.

I lay quite still for a long while, just gazing up at him. Soon my memory got to work of its own accord, and I bethought me of the pilgrims who must by now have come and who must be impatiently awaiting news.

How came I to have slept so long? Vaguely I remembered my last night's penance, and then came a black gulf in my memory, a gap I could not bridge. But uppermost leapt the anxieties concerning the

image of St. Sebastian.

I struggled up to discover that I was very weak; so weak that I was glad to sink back again.

"Does it bleed? Does it bleed yet?" I asked, and my voice was so small and feeble that the sound of it startled me.

The old priest shook his head, and his eyes were very full of compassion.

"Poor youth, poor youth!" he sighed.

Without all was silent; there was no such rustle of a multitude as I listened for. And then I observed in my cell a little shepherd-lad who had been wont to come that way for my blessing upon occasions. He was half naked, as lithe as a snake and almost as brown. What did he there? And then someone else stirred—an elderly peasant-woman with a wrinkled kindly face and soft dark eyes, whom I did not know at all.

Somehow, as my mind grew clearer, last night seemed ages remote. I looked at the priest again.

"Father," I murmured, "what has happened?"

His answer amazed me. He started violently. Looked more closely, and suddenly cried out:

"He knows me! He knows me! Deo gratias!" And he fell upon his knees

Now here it seemed to me was a sort of madness. "Why should I not know you?" quoth I.

The old woman peered at me. "Ay, blessed be Heaven! He is awake at last, and himself again." She turned to the lad, who was

staring at me, grinning. "Go tell them, Beppo! Haste!"

"Tell them?" I cried. "The pilgrims? Ah, no, no—not unless the miracle has come to pass!"

"There are no pilgrims here, my son," said the priest.

"Not?" I cried, and cold horror descended upon me. "But they should have come. This is Holy Friday, father."

"Nay, my son, Holy Friday was a fortnight ago."

I stared askance at him, in utter silence. Then I smiled half tolerantly. "But father, yesterday they were all here. Yesterday was..."

"Your yesterday, my son, is sped these fifteen days," he answered. "All that long while, since the night you wrestled with the Devil, you have lain exhausted by that awful combat, lying there betwixt life and death. All that time we have watched by you, Leocadia here and I and the lad Beppo."

Now here was news that left me speechless for some little while. My amazement and slow understanding were spurred on by a sight of my hands lying on the rude coverlet which had been flung over me. Emaciated they had been for some months now. But at present they were as white as snow and almost as translucent in their extraordinary frailty. I became increasingly conscious, too, of the great weakness of my body and the great lassitude that filled me.

"Have I had the fever?" I asked him presently.

"Ay, my son. And who would not? Blessed Virgin! who would not after what you underwent?"

And now he poured into my astonished ears the amazing story that had overrun the country-side. It would seem that my cry in the night, my exultant cry to Satan that I had defeated him, had been overheard

by a goatherd who guarded his flock in the hills. In the stillness he distinctly heard the words that I had uttered, and he came trembling down, drawn by a sort of pious curiosity to the spot whence it had seemed to him that the cry had proceeded.

And there by a pool of the Bagnanza he had found me lying prone, my white body glistening like marble and almost as cold. Recognizing in me the anchorite of Monte Orsaro, he had taken me up in his strong arms and had carried me back to my hut. There he had set about reviving me by friction and by forcing between my teeth some of the grape-spirit that he carried in a gourd.

Finding that I lived, but that he could not arouse me and that my icy coldness was succeeded by the fire of fever, he had covered me with my habit and his own cloak, and had gone down to Casi to fetch the priest and relate his story.

This story was no less than that the hermit of Monte Orsaro had been fighting with the devil, who had dragged him naked from his hut and had sought to hurl him into the torrent; but that on the very edge of the river the anchorite had found strength, by the grace of God, to overthrow the tormentor and to render him powerless; and in proof of it there was my body all covered with Satan's claw-marks by which I had been torn most cruelly.

The priest had come at once, bringing with him such restoratives as he needed, and it is a thousand mercies that he did not bring a leech, or else I might have been bled of the last drops remaining in my shrunken veins.

And meanwhile the goatherd's story had gone abroad. By morning it was on the lips of all the country-side, so that explanations were not lacking to account for St. Sebastian's refusal to perform the usual miracle, and no miracle was expected—nor had the image yielded any.

The priest was mistaken. A miracle there had been. But for what had chanced, the multitude must have come again confidently expecting the bleeding of the image which had never failed in five years, and had the image not bled it must have fared ill with the guardian of the shrine. In punishment for his sacrilegious ministry which must be held responsible for the absence of the miracle they so eagerly awaited, well might the crowd have torn me limb from limb.

Next the old man went on to tell me how three days ago there had come to the hermitage a little troop of men-at-arms, led by a tall, bearded man whose device was a sable band upon an argent field, and accompanied by a friar of the order of St. Francis, a tall, gaunt fellow who had wept at sight of me.

"That would be Fra Gervasio!" I exclaimed. "How came he to discover me?"

"Yes—Fra Gervasio is his name," replied the priest.

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"I think he is here."

In that moment I caught the sound of approaching steps. The door opened, and before me stood the tall figure of my best friend, his eyes all eagerness, his pale face flushed with joyous excitement.

I smiled my welcome.

"Agostino! Agostino!" he cried, and ran to kneel beside me and take my hand in his. "O, blessed be God!" he murmured.

In the doorway stood now another man, who had followed him—one whose face I had seen somewhere yet could not at first remember where. He was very tall, so that he was forced to stoop to avoid the lintel of the low door—as tall as Gervasio or myself—and the tanned

face was bearded by a heavy brown beard in which a few strands of grey were showing. Across his face there ran the hideous livid scar of a blow that must have crushed the bridge of his nose. It began just under the left eye, and crossed the face downwards until it was lost in the beard on the right side almost in line with the mouth. Yet, notwithstanding that disfigurement, he still possessed a certain beauty, and the deep-set, clear, grey-blue eyes were the eyes of a brave and kindly man.

He wore a leather jerkin and great thigh-boots of grey leather, and from his girdle of hammered steel hung a dagger and the empty carriages of a sword. His cropped black head was bare, and in his hand he carried a cap of black velvet.

We looked at each other awhile, and his eyes were sad and wistful, laden with pity, as I thought, for my condition. Then he moved forward with a creak of leather and jingle of spurs that made pleasant music.

He set a hand upon the shoulder of the kneeling Gervasio.

"He will live now, Gervasio?" he asked.

"O, he will live," answered the friar with an almost fierce satisfaction in his positive assurance. "He will live and in a week we can move him hence. Meanwhile he must be nourished." He rose. "My good Leocadia, have you the broth? Come, then, let us build up this strength of his. There is haste, good soul; great haste!" She bustled at his bidding, and soon outside the door there was a crackling of twigs to announce the lighting of a fire. And then Gervasio made known to me the stranger.

"This is Galeotto," he said. "He was your father's friend, and would be yours."

"Sir," said I, "I could not desire otherwise with any who was my father's friend. You are not, perchance, the Gran Galeotto?" I inquired,

remembering the sable device on argent of which the priest had told me.

"I am that same," he answered, and I looked with interest upon one whose name had been ringing through Italy these last few years. And then, I suddenly realized why his face was familiar to me. This was the man who in a monkish robe had stared so insistently at me that day at Mondolfo five years ago.

He was a sort of outlaw, a remnant of the days of chivalry and free-lances, whose sword was at the disposal of any purchaser. He rode at the head of a last fragment of the famous company that Giovanni de' Medici had raised and captained until his death. The sable band which they adopted in mourning for that warrior, earned for their founder the posthumous title of Giovanni delle Bande Nere.

He was called Il Gran Galeotto (as another was called Il Gran Diavolo) in play upon the name he bore and the life he followed. He had been in bad odour with the Pope for his sometime association with my father, and he was not well-viewed in the Pontifical domains until, as I was soon to learn, he had patched up a sort of peace with Pier Luigi Farnese, who thought that the day might come when he should need the support of Galeotto's free-lances.

"I was," he said, "your father's closest friend. I took this at Perugia, where he fell," he added, and pointed to his terrific scar. Then he laughed. "I wear it gladly in memory of him."

He turned to Gervasio, smiling. "I hope that Giovanni d'Anguissola's son will hold me in some affection for his father's sake, when he shall come to know me better."

"Sir," I said, "from my heart I thank you for that pious, kindly wish; and I would that I might fully correspond to it. But Agostino d'Anguissola, who has been so near to death in the body, is, indeed,

dead to the world already. Here you see but a poor hermit named Sebastian, who is the guardian of this shrine."

Gervasio rose suddenly. "This shrine..." he began in a fierce voice, his face inflamed as with sudden wrath. And there he stopped short. The priest was staring at him, and through the open door came Leocadia with a bowl of steaming broth. "We'll talk of this again," he said, and there was a sort of thunder rumbling in the promise.

CHAPTER IX. THE ICONOCLAST

It was a week later before we returned to the subject.

Meanwhile, the good priest of Casi and Leocadia had departed, bearing with them a princely reward from the silent, kindly eyed Galeotto.

To tend me there remained only the boy Beppo; and after my long six months of lenten fare there followed now a period of feasting that began to trouble me as my strength returned. When, finally, on the seventh day, I was able to stand, and, by leaning on Gervasio's arm, to reach the door of the hut and to look out upon the sweet spring landscape and the green tents that Galeotto's followers had pitched for themselves in the dell below my platform, I vowed that I would make an end of broths and capons' breasts and trout and white bread and red wine and all such succulences.

But when I spoke so to Gervasio, he grew very grave.

"There has been enough of this, Agostino," said he. "You have gone near your death; and had you died, you had died a suicide and had been damned—deserving it for your folly if for naught else."

I looked at him with surprise and reproach. "How, Fra Gervasio?" I said.

"How?" he answered. "Do you conceive that I am to be fooled by tales of fights with Satan in the night and the marks of the fiend's claws upon your body? Is this your sense of piety, to add to the other

foul impostures of this place by allowing such a story to run the breadth of the country-side?"

"Foul impostures?" I echoed, aghast. "Fra Gervasio, your words are sacrilege."

"Sacrilege?" he cried, and laughed bitterly. "Sacrilege? And what of that?" And he flung out a stern, rigid, accusing arm at the image of St. Sebastian in its niche.

"You think because it did not bleed..." I began.

"It did not bleed," he cut in, "because you are not a knave. That is the only reason. This man who was here before you was an impious rogue. He was no priest. He was a follower of Simon Mage, trafficking in holy things, battenning upon the superstition of poor humble folk. A black villain who is dead—dead and damned, for he was not allowed time when the end took him to confess his ghastly sin of sacrilege and the money that he had extorted by his simonies."

"My God! Fra Gervasio, what do you say? How dare you say so much?"

"Where is the money that he took to build his precious bridge?" he asked me sharply. "Did you find any when you came hither? No. I'll take oath that you did not. A little longer, and this brigand had grown rich and had vanished in the night—carried off by the Devil, or borne away to realms of bliss by the angels, the poor rustics would have said."

Amazed at his vehemence, I sank to a tree-bole that stood near the door to do the office of a stool.

"But he gave alms!" I cried, my senses all bewildered.

"Dust in the eyes of fools. No more than that. That image—" his scorn became tremendous—"is an impious fraud, Agostino."

Could the monstrous thing that he suggested be possible? Could any man be so lost to all sense of God as to perpetrate such a deed as that without fear that the lightnings of Heaven would blast him?

I asked the question. Gervasio smiled.

"Your notions of God are heathen notions," he said more quietly. "You confound Him with Jupiter the Thunderer. But He does not use His lightnings as did the father of Olympus. And yet—reflect! Consider the manner in which that brigand met his death."

"But... but..." I stammered. And then, quite suddenly, I stopped short, and listened. "Hark, Fra Gervasio! Do you not hear it?"

"Hear it? Hear what?"

"The music—the angelic melodies! And you can say that this place is a foul imposture; this holy image an impious fraud! And you a priest! Listen! It is a sign to warn you against stubborn unbelief."

He listened, with frowning brows, a moment; then he smiled.

"Angelic melodies!" he echoed with gentlest scorn. "By what snares does the Devil delude men, using even suggested holiness for his purpose! That, boy—that is no more than the dripping of water into little wells of different depths, producing different notes. It is in there, in some cave in the mountain where the Bagnanza springs from the earth."

I listened, half disillusioned by his explanation, yet fearing that my senses were too slavishly obeying his suggestion. "The proof of that? The proof!" I cried.

"The proof is that you have never heard it after heavy rain, or while the river was swollen."

That answer shattered my last illusion. I looked back upon the time I had spent there, upon the despair that had beset me when the music ceased, upon the joy that had been mine when again I heard it, accepting it always as a sign of grace. And it was as he said. Not my unworthiness, but the rain, had ever silenced it. In memory I ran over the occasions, and so clearly did I perceive the truth of this, that I marvelled the coincidence should not earlier have discovered it to me.

Moreover, now that my illusions concerning it were gone, the sound was clearly no more than he had said. I recognized its nature. It might have intrigued a sane man for a day or a night. But it could never longer have deceived any but one whose mind was become fevered with fanatic ecstasy.

Then I looked again at the image in the niche, and the pendulum of my faith was suddenly checked in its counter-swing. About that image there could be no delusions. The whole country-side had witnessed the miracle of the bleeding, and it had wrought cures, wondrous cures, among the faithful. They could not all have been deceived. Besides, from the wounds in the breast there were still the brown signs of the last manifestation.

But when I had given some utterance to these thoughts Gervasio for only answer stooped and picked up a wood-man's axe that stood against the wall. With this he went straight towards the image.

"Fra Gervasio!" I cried, leaping to my feet, a premonition of what he was about turning me cold with horror. "Stay!" I almost screamed.

But too late. My answer was a crashing blow. The next instant, as I sank back to my seat and covered my face, the two halves of the image fell at my feet, flung there by the friar.

"Look!" he bade me in a roar.

Fearfully I looked. I saw. And yet I could not believe.

He came quickly back, and picked up the two halves. "The oracle of Delphi was not more impudently worked," he said. "Observe this sponge, these plates of metal that close down upon it and exert the pressure necessary to send the liquid with which it is laden oozing forth." As he spoke he tore out the fiendish mechanism. "And see now how ingeniously it was made to work—by pressure upon this arrow in the flank."

There was a burst of laughter from the door. I looked up, startled, to find Galeotto standing at my elbow. So engrossed had I been that I had never heard his soft approach over the turf.

"Body of Bacchus!" said he. "Here is Gervasio become an image breaker to some purpose. What now of your miraculous saint, Agostino?"

My answer was first a groan over my shattered illusion, and then a deep-throated curse at the folly that had made a mock of me.

The friar set a hand upon my shoulder. "You see, Agostino, that your excursions into holy things do not promise well. Away with you, boy! Off with this hypocrite robe, and get you out into the world to do useful work for God and man. Had your heart truly called you to the priesthood, I had been the first to have guided your steps thither. But your mind upon such matters has been warped, and your views are all false; you confound mysticism with true religion, and mouldering in a hermitage with the service of God. How can you serve God here? Is not the world God's world that you must shun it as if the Devil had fashioned it? Go, I say—and I say it with the authority of the orders that I bear—go and serve man, and thus shall you best serve God. All else are but snares to such a nature as yours."

I looked at him helplessly, and from him to Galeotto who stood

there, his black brows knit; watching me with intentness as if great issues hung upon my answer. And Gervasio's words touched in my mind some chord of memory. They were words that I had heard before—or something very like them, something whose import was the same.

Then I groaned miserably and took my head in my hands. "Whither am I to go?" I cried. "What place is there in all the world for me? I am an outcast. My very home is held against me. Whither, then, shall I go?"

"If that is all that troubles you," said Galeotto, his tone unctuously humorous, "why we will ride to Pagliano."

I leapt at the word—literally leapt to my feet, and stared at him with blazing eyes.

"Why, what ails him now?" quoth he.

Well might he ask. That name—Pagliano—had stirred my memory so violently, that of a sudden as in a flash I had seen again the strange vision that visited my delirium; I had seen again the inviting eyes, the beckoning hands, and heard again the gentle voice saying, "Come to Pagliano! Come soon!"

And now I knew, too, where I had heard words urging my return to the world that were of the same import as those which Gervasio used.

What magic was there here? What wizardry was at play? I knew—for they had told me—that it had been that cavalier who had visited me, that man whose name was Ettore de' Cavalcanti, who had borne news to them of one who was strangely like what Giovanni d'Anguissola had been. But Pagliano had never yet been mentioned.

"Where is Pagliano?" I asked.

"In Lombardy—in the Milanese," replied Galeotto.

"It is the home of Cavalcanti."

"You are faint, Agostino," cried Gervasio, with a sudden solicitude, and put an arm about my shoulders as I staggered.

"No, no," said I. "It is nothing. Tell me—" And I paused almost afraid to put the question, lest the answer should dash my sudden hope. For it seemed to me that in this place of false miracles, one true miracle at least had been wrought; if it should be proved so indeed, then would I accept it as a sign that my salvation lay indeed in the world. If not...

"Tell me," I began again; "this Cavalcanti has a daughter. She was with him upon that day when he came here. What is her name?"

Galeotto looked at me out of narrowing eyes.

"Why, what has that to do with anything?" quoth Gervasio.

"More than you think. Answer me, then. What is her name?"

"Her name is Bianca," said Galeotto.

Something within me seemed to give way, so that I fell to laughing foolishly as women laugh who are on the verge of tears. By an effort I regained my self-control.

"It is very well," I said. "I will ride with you to Pagliano."

Both stared at me in utter amazement at the suddenness of my consent following upon information that, in their minds, could have no possible bearing upon the matter at issue.

"Is he quite sane, do you think?" cried Galeotto gruffly.

"I think he has just become so," said Fra Gervasio after a pause.

"God give me patience, then," grumbled the soldier, and left me puzzled by the words.

BOOK IV. THE WORLD

CHAPTER I. PAGLIANO

The lilac was in bloom when we came to the grey walls of Pagliano in that May of '45, and its scent, arousing the memory of my return to the world, has ever since been to me symbolical of the world itself.

Mine was no half-hearted, backward-glancing return. Having determined upon the step, I took it resolutely and completely at a single stride. Since Galeotto placed his resources at my disposal, to be repaid him later when I should have entered upon the enjoyment of my heritage of Mondolfo, I did not scruple to draw upon them for my needs.

I accepted the fine linen and noble raiment that he offered, and I took pleasure in the brave appearance that I made in them, my face shorn now of its beard and my hair trimmed to a proper length. Similarly I accepted weapons, money, and a horse; and thus equipped, looking for the first time in my life like a patrician of my own lofty station, I rode forth from Monte Orsaro with Galeotto and Gervasio, attended by the former's troop of twenty lances.

And from the moment of our setting out there came upon me a curious peace, a happiness and a great sense of expectancy. No longer was I oppressed by the fear of proving unworthy of the life which I had chosen—as had been the case when that life had been monastic.

Galeotto was in high spirits to see me so blithe, and he surveyed with pride the figure that I made, vowing that I should prove a worthy son of my father ere all was done.

The first act of my new life was performed as we were passing

through the village of Pojetta.

I called a halt before the doors of that mean hostelry, over which hung what no doubt would still be the same withered bunch of rosemary that had been there in autumn when last I went that way.

To the sloe-eyed, deep-bosomed girl who lounged against the door-post to see so fine a company ride by, I gave an order to fetch the taverner. He came with a slouch, a bent back, and humble, timid eyes—a very different attitude from that which he had last adopted towards me.

"Where is my mule, you rogue?" quoth I.

He looked at me askance. "Your mule, magnificent? said he.

"You have forgotten me, I think—forgotten the lad in rusty black who rode this way last autumn and whom you robbed."

At the words he turned a sickly yellow, and fell to trembling and babbling protestations and excuses.

"Have done," I broke in. "You would not buy the mule then. You shall buy it now, and pay for it with interest."

"What is this, Agostino?" quoth Galeotto at my elbow. "An act of justice, sir," I answered shortly, whereupon he questioned me no further, but looked on with a grim smile. Then to the taverner, "Your manners to-day are not quite the same as on the last occasion when we met. I spare you the gallows that you may live to profit by the lesson of your present near escape. And now, rogue, ten ducats for that mule." And I held out my hand.

"Ten ducats!" he cried, and gathering courage perhaps since he was not to hang. "It is twice the value of the beast," he protested.

"I know," I said. "It will be five ducats for the mule, and five for your

life. I am merciful to rate the latter as cheaply as it deserves. Come, thief, the ten ducats without more ado, or I'll burn your nest of infamy and hang you above the ruins."

He cowered and shrivelled. Then he scuttled within doors to fetch the money, whilst Galeotto laughed deep in his throat.

"You are well-advised," said I, when the rogue returned and handed me the ducats. "I told you I should come back to present my reckoning. Be warned by this."

As we rode on Galeotto laughed again. "Body of Satan! There is a thoroughness about you, Agustino. As a hermit you did not spare yourself; and now as a tyrant you do not seem likely to spare others."

"It is the Anguissola way," said Gervasio quietly.

"You mistake," said I. "I conceive myself in the world for some good purpose, and the act you have witnessed is a part of it. It was not a revengeful deed. Vengeance would have taken a harsher course. It was justice, and justice is righteous."

"Particularly a justice that puts ten ducats in your pocket," laughed Galeotto.

"There, again, you mistake me," said I. "My aim is that thieves be mulcted to the end that the poor shall profit." And I drew rein again.

A little crowd had gathered about us, mostly of very ragged, half-clad people, for this village of Pojetta was a very poverty-stricken place. Into that little crowd I flung the ten ducats—with the consequence that on the instant it became a seething, howling, snarling, quarrelling mass. In the twinkling of an eye a couple of heads were cracked and blood was flowing, so that to quell the riot my charity had provoked, I was forced to spur my horse forward and bid them with threats disperse.

"And I think now," said Galeotto when it was done, "that you are just as reckless in the manner of doing charity. For the future, Agostino, you would do well to appoint an almoner."

I bit my lip in vexation; but soon I smiled again. Were such little things to fret me? Did we not ride to Pagliano and to Bianca de' Cavalcanti? At the very thought my pulses would quicken, and a sweetness of anticipation would invade my soul, to be clouded at moments by an indefinable dread.

And thus we came to Pagliano in that month of May, when the lilac was in bloom, as I have said, and after Fra Gervasio had left us, to return to his convent at Piacenza.

We were received in the courtyard of that mighty fortress by that sturdy, hawk-faced man who had recognized me in the hermitage on Monte Orsaro. But he was no longer in armour. He wore a surcoat of yellow velvet, and his eyes were very kindly and affectionate when they rested on Galeotto and from Galeotto passed on to take survey of me.

"So this is our hermit!" quoth he, a note of some surprise in his crisp tones. "Somewhat changed!"

"By a change that goes deeper than his pretty doublet," said Galeotto.

We dismounted, and grooms, in the Cavalcanti livery of scarlet with the horse-head in white upon their breasts, led away our horses. The seneschal acted as quarter-master to our lances, whilst Cavalcanti himself led us up the great stone staircase with its carved balustrade of marble, from which rose a file of pillars to support the groined ceiling. This last was frescoed in dull red with the white horse-head at intervals. On our right, on every third step, stood orange-trees in tubs, all flowering and shedding the most fragrant perfume.

Thus we ascended to a spacious gallery, and through a succession of magnificent rooms we came to the noble apartments that had been made ready for us.

A couple of pages came to tend me, bringing perfumed water and macerated herbs for my ablutions. These performed, they helped me into fresh garments that awaited me—black hose of finest silk and velvet trunks of the same sable hue, and for my body a fine close-fitting doublet of cloth of gold, caught at the waist by a jewelled girdle from which hung a dagger that was the merest toy.

When I was ready they went before me, to lead the way to what they called the private dining-room, where supper awaited us. At the very mention of a private dining-room I had a vision of whitewashed walls and high-set windows and a floor strewn with rushes. Instead we came into the most beautiful chamber that I had ever seen. From floor to ceiling it was hung with arras of purple brocade alternating with cloth of gold; thus on three sides. On the fourth there was an opening for the embayed window which glowed like a gigantic sapphire in the deepening twilight.

The floor was spread with a carpet of the ruddy purple of porphyry, very soft and silent to the feet. From the frescoed ceiling, where a joyous Phoebus drove a team of spirited white stallions, hung a chain that was carved in the semblance of interlocked Titans to support a great candelabrum, each branch of which was in the image of a Titan holding a stout candle of scented wax. It was all in gilded bronze and the workmanship—as I was presently to learn—of that great artist and rogue Benvenuto Cellini. From this candelabrum there fell upon the board a soft golden radiance that struck bright gleams from crystals and plate of gold and silver.

By a buffet laden with meats stood the master of the household in black velvet, his chain of office richly carved, his badge a horse's head in silver, and he was flanked on either hand by a nimble-looking

page.

Of all this my first glance gathered but the most fleeting of impressions. For my eyes were instantly arrested by her who stood between Cavalcanti and Galeotto, awaiting my arrival. And, miracle of miracles, she was arrayed exactly as I had seen her in my vision.

Her supple maiden body was sheathed in a gown of cloth of silver; her brown hair was dressed into two plaits interlaced with gold threads and set with tiny gems, and these plaits hung one on either breast. Upon the low, white brow a single jewel gleamed—a brilliant of the very whitest fire.

Her long blue eyes were raised to look at me as I entered, and their glance grew startled when it encountered mine, the delicate colour faded gradually from her cheeks, and her eyes fell at last as she moved forward to bid me welcome to Pagliano in her own name.

They must have perceived her emotion as they perceived mine. But they gave no sign. We got to the round table—myself upon Cavalcanti's left, Galeotto in the place of honour, and Bianca facing her father so that I was on her right.

The seneschal bestirred himself, and the silken ministering pages fluttered round us. My Lord of Pagliano was one who kept a table as luxurious as all else in his splendid palace. First came a broth of veal in silver basins, then a stew of cocks' combs and capons' breasts, then the ham of a roasted boar, the flesh very lusciously saturated with the flavour of rosemary; and there was venison that was as soft as velvet, and other things that I no longer call to mind. And to drink there was a fragrant, well-sunned wine of Lombardy that had been cooled in snow.

Galeotto ate enormously, Cavalcanti daintily, I but little, and Bianca nothing. Her presence had set up such emotions in me that I had no

thought for food. But I drank deeply, and so came presently to a spurious ease which enabled me to take my share in the talk that was toward, though when all is said it was but a slight share, since Cavalcanti and Galeotto discoursed of matters wherein my knowledge was not sufficient to enable me to bear a conspicuous part.

More than once I was on the point of addressing Bianca herself, but always courage failed me. I had ever in mind the memory she must have of me as she had last seen me, to increase the painful diffidence which her presence itself imposed upon me. Nor did I hear her voice more than once or twice when she demurely answered such questions as her father set her. And though once or twice I found her stealing a look at me, she would instantly avert her eyes when our glances crossed.

Thus was our first meeting, and for a little time it was to be our last, because I lacked the courage to seek her out. She had her own apartments at Pagliano with her own maids of honour, like a princess; and the castle garden was entirely her domain into which even her father seldom intruded. He gave me the freedom of it; but it was a freedom of which I never took advantage in the week that we abode there. Several times was I on the point of doing so. But I was ever restrained by my unconquerable diffidence.

And there was something else to impose restraint upon me. Hitherto the memory of Giuliana had come to haunt me in my hermitage, by arousing in me yearnings which I had to combat with fasting and prayer, with scourge and dice. Now the memory of her haunted me again; but in a vastly different way. It haunted me with the reminder of all the sin in which through her I had steeped myself; and just as the memory of that sin had made me in purer moments deem myself unworthy to be the guardian of the shrine on Monte Orsaro, so now did it cause me to deem myself all unworthy to enter the garden

that enshrined Madonna Bianca de' Cavalcanti.

Before the purity that shone from her I recoiled in an awe whose nature was as the feelings of a religion. I felt that to seek her presence would be almost to defile her. And so I abstained, my mind very full of her the while, for all that the time was beguiled for me in daily exercise with horse and arms under the guidance of Galeotto.

I was not so tutored merely for the sake of repairing a grave omission in my education. It had a definite scope, as Galeotto frankly told me, informing me that the time approached in which to avenge my father and strike a blow for my own rights.

And then at the end of a week a man rode into the courtyard of Pagliano one day, and flung down from his horse shouting to be led to Messer Galeotto. There was something about this courier's mien and person that awoke a poignant memory. I was walking in the gallery when the clatter of his advent drew my attention, and his voice sent a strange thrill through me.

One glance I gave to make quite sure, and then I leapt down the broad steps four at a time, and a moment later, to the amazement of all present, I had caught the dusty rider in my arms, and I was kissing the wrinkled, scarred, and leathery old cheeks.

"Falcone!" I cried. "Falcone, do you not know me?"

He was startled by the violence of my passionate onslaught. Indeed, he was almost borne to the ground by it, for his old legs were stiff now from riding.

And then—how he stared! What oaths he swore!

"Madonnino!" he babbled. "Madonnino!" And he shook himself free of my embrace, and stood back that he might view me. "Body of Satan! But you are finely grown, and how like to what your father was

when he was no older than are you! And they have not made a shaveling of you, after all. Now blessed be God for that!" Then he stopped short, and his eyes went past me, and he seemed to hesitate.

I turned, and there, leaning on the balustrade of the staircase, looking on with smiling eyes stood Galeotto with Messer Cavalcanti at his elbow.

I heard Galeotto's words to the Lord of Pagliano. "His heart is sound—which is a miracle. That woman, it seems, could not quite dehumanize him." And he came down heavily, to ask Falcone what news he bore.

The old equerry drew a letter from under his leathern jacket.

"From Ferrante?" quoth the Lord of Pagliano eagerly, peering over Galeotto's shoulder.

"Ay," said Galeotto, and he broke the seal. He stood to read, with knitted brows. "It is well," he said, at last, and passed the sheet to Cavalcanti. "Farnese is in Piacenza already, and the Pope will sway the College to give his bastard the ducal crown. It is time we stirred."

He turned to Falcone, whilst Cavalcanti read the letter. "Take food and rest, good Gino. For to-morrow you ride again with me. And so shall you, Agostino."

"I ride again?" I echoed, my heart sinking and some of my dismay showing upon my face. "Whither?"

"To right the wrongs of Mondolfo," he answered shortly, and turned away.

CHAPTER II. THE GOVERNOR OF MILAN

We rode again upon the morrow as he had said, and with us went Falcone and the same goodly company of twenty lances that had escorted me from Monte Orsaro. But I took little thought for them or pride in such an escort now. My heart was leaden. I had not seen Bianca again ere I departed, and Heaven knew when we should return to Pagliano. Thus at least was I answered by Galeotto when I made bold to ask the question.

Two days we rode, going by easy stages, and came at last upon that wondrously fair and imposing city of Milan, in the very heart of the vast plain of Lombardy with the distant Alps for background and northern rampart.

Our destination was the castle; and in a splendid ante-chamber, packed with rustling, silken courtiers and clanking captains in steel, a sprinkling of prelates and handsome, insolent-eyed women, more than one of whom reminded me of Giuliana, and every one of whom I disparaged by comparing her with Bianca, Galeotto and I stood waiting.

To many there he seemed known, and several came to greet him and some to whisper in his ear. At last a pert boy in a satin suit that was striped in the Imperial livery of black and yellow, pushed his way through the throng.

"Messer Galeotto," his shrill voice announced, "his excellency awaits you."

Galeotto took my arm, and drew me forward with him. Thus we went through a lane that opened out before us in that courtly throng, and came to a curtained door. An usher raised the curtain for us at a sign from the page, who, opening, announced us to the personage within.

We stood in a small closet, whose tall, slender windows overlooked the courtyard, and from the table, on which there was a wealth of parchments, rose a very courtly gentleman to receive us out of a gilded chair, the arms of which were curiously carved into the shape of serpents' heads.

He was a well-nourished, florid man of middle height, with a resolute mouth, high cheek-bones, and crafty, prominent eyes that reminded me vaguely of the eyes of the taverner of Pojetta. He was splendidly dressed in a long gown of crimson damask edged with lynx fur, and the fingers of his fat hands and one of his thumbs were burdened with jewels.

This was Ferrante Gonzaga, Prince of Molfetta, Duke of Ariano, the Emperor's Lieutenant and Governor of the State of Milan.

The smile with which he had been ready to greet Galeotto froze slightly at sight of me. But before he could voice the question obviously in his mind my companion had presented me.

"Here, my lord, is one upon whom I trust that we may count when the time comes. This is Agostino d'Anguissola, of Mondolfo and Carmina."

Surprise overspread Gonzaga's face. He seemed about to speak, and checked, and his eyes were very searchingly bent upon Galeotto's face, which remained inscrutable as stone. Then the Governor looked at me, and from me back again at Galeotto. At last he smiled, whilst I bowed before him, but very vaguely conscious of

what might impend.

"The time," he said, "seems to be none too distant. The Duke of Castro—this Pier Luigi Farnese—is so confident of ultimate success that already he has taken up his residence in Piacenza, and already, I am informed, is being spoken of as Duke of Parma and Piacenza."

"He has cause," said Galeotto. "Who is to withstand his election since the Emperor, like Pilate, has washed his hands of the affair?"

A smile overspread Gonzaga's crafty face. "Do not assume too much concerning the Emperor's wishes in the matter. His answer to the Pope was that if Parma and Piacenza are Imperial fiefs—integral parts of the State of Milan—it would ill become the Emperor to alienate them from an empire which he holds merely in trust; whereas if they can be shown rightly to belong to the Holy See, why then the matter concerns him not, and the Holy See may settle it."

Galeotto shrugged and his face grew dark. "It amounts to an assent," he said.

"Not so," purred Gonzaga, seating himself once more. "It amounts to nothing. It is a Sibylline answer which nowise prejudices what he may do in future. We still hope," he added, "that the Sacred College may refuse the investiture. Pier Luigi Farnese is not in good odour in the Curia."

"The Sacred College cannot withstand the Pope's desires. He has bribed it with the undertaking to restore Nepi and Camerino to the States of the Church in exchange for Parma and Piacenza, which are to form a State for his son. How long, my lord, do you think the College will resist him?"

"The Spanish Cardinals all have the Emperor's desires at heart."

"The Spanish Cardinals may oppose the measure until they choke

themselves with their vehemence," was the ready answer. "There are enough of the Pope's creatures to carry the election, and if there were not it would be his to create more until there should be sufficient for his purpose. It is an old subterfuge."

"Well, then," said Gonzaga, smiling, "since you are so assured, it is for you and the nobles of Piacenza to be up and doing. The Emperor depends upon you; and you may depend upon him."

Galeotto looked at the Governor out of his scarred face, and his eyes were very grave.

"I had hoped otherwise," he said. "That is why I have been slow to move. That is why I have waited, why I have even committed the treachery of permitting Pier Luigi to suppose me ready at need to engage in his service."

"Ah, there you play a dangerous game," said Gonzaga frankly.

"I'll play a more dangerous still ere I have done," he answered stoutly. "Neither Pope nor Devil shall dismay me. I have great wrongs to right, as none knows better than your excellency, and if my life should go in the course of it, why"—he shrugged and sneered—"it is all that is left me; and life is a little thing when a man has lost all else."

"I know, I know," said the sly Governor, wagging his big head, "else I had not warned you. For we need you, Messer Galeotto."

"Ay, you need me; you'll make a tool of me—you and your Emperor. You'll use me as a cat's-paw to pull down this inconvenient duke."

Gonzaga rose, frowning. "You go a little far, Messer Galeotto," he said.

"I go no farther than you urge me," answered the other.

"But patience, patience!" the Lieutenant soothed him, growing

sleek again in tone and manner. "Consider now the position. What the Emperor has answered the Pope is no more than the bare and precise truth. It is not clear whether the States of Parma and Piacenza belong to the Empire or the Holy See. But let the people rise and show themselves ill-governed, let them revolt against Farnese once he has been created their duke and when thus the State shall have been alienated from the Holy See, and then you may count upon the Emperor to step in as your liberator and to buttress up your revolt."

"Do you promise us so much?" asked Galeotto.

"Explicitly," was the ready answer, "upon my most sacred honour. Send me word that you are in arms, that the first blow has been struck, and I shall be with you with all the force that I can raise in the Emperor's name."

"Your excellency has warrant for this?" demanded Galeotto.

"Should I promise it else? About it, sir. You may work with confidence."

"With confidence, yes," replied Galeotto gloomily, "but with no great hope. The Pontifical government has ground the spirit out of half the nobles of the Val di Taro. They have suffered so much and so repeatedly—in property, in liberty, in life itself—that they are grown rabbit-hearted, and would sooner cling to the little liberty that is still theirs than strike a blow to gain what belongs to them by every right. Oh, I know them of old! What man can do, I shall do; but..." He shrugged, and shook his head sorrowfully.

"Can you count on none?" asked Gonzaga, very serious, stroking his smooth, fat chin.

"I can count upon one," answered Galeotto. "The Lord of Pagliano; he is ghibelline to the very marrow, and he belongs to me. At my bidding there is nothing he will not do. There is an old debt between

us, and he is a noble soul who will not leave his debts unpaid. Upon him I can count; and he is rich and powerful. But then, he is not really a Piacentino himself. He holds his fief direct from the Emperor. Pagliano is part of the State of Milan, and Cavalcanti is no subject of Farnese. His case, therefore, is exceptional and he has less than the usual cause for timidity. But the others..." Again he shrugged. "What man can do to stir them, that will I do. You shall hear from me soon again, my lord."

Gonzaga looked at me. "Did you not say that here was another?"

Galeotto smiled sadly. "Ay—just one arm and one sword. That is all. Unless this emprise succeeds he is never like to rule in Mondolfo. He may be counted upon; but he brings no lances with him."

"I see," said Gonzaga, his lip between thumb and forefinger. "But his name..."

"That and his wrongs shall be used, depend upon it, my lord—the wrongs which are his by inheritance."

I said no word. A certain resentment filled me to hear myself so disposed of without being consulted; and yet it was tempered by a certain trust in Galeotto, a faith that he would lead me into nothing unworthy.

Gonzaga conducted us to the door of the closet. "I shall look to hear from you, Ser Galeotto," he said. "And if at first the nobles of the Val di Taro are not to be moved, perhaps after they have had a taste of Messer Pier Luigi's ways they will gather courage out of despair. I think we may be hopeful if patient. Meanwhile, my master the Emperor shall be informed."

Another moment and we were out of that florid, crafty, well-nourished presence. The curtains had dropped behind us, and we were thrusting our way through the press in the ante-chamber,

Galeotto muttering to himself things which as we gained the open air I gathered to be curses directed against the Emperor and his Milanese Lieutenant.

In the inn of the sign of the Sun, by the gigantic Duomo of Visconti's building, he opened the gates to his anger and let it freely forth.

"It is a world of cravens," he said, "a world of slothful, self-seeking, supine cowards, Agostino. In the Emperor, at least, I conceived that we should have found a man who would not be averse to acting boldly where his interests must be served. More I had not expected of him; but that, at least. And even in that he fails me. Oh, this Charles V!" he cried. "This prince upon whose dominions the sun never sets! Fortune has bestowed upon him all the favours in her gift, yet for himself he can do nothing.

"He is crafty, cruel, irresolute, and mistrustful of all. He is without greatness of any sort, and he is all but Emperor of the World! Others must do his work for him; others must compass the conquests which he is to enjoy.

"Ah, well!" he ended, with a sneer, "perhaps as the world views these things there is a certain greatness in that—the greatness of the fox."

Naturally there was much in this upon which I needed explanation, and I made bold to intrude upon his anger to crave it. And it was then that I learnt the true position of affairs.

Between France and the Empire, the State of Milan had been in contention until quite lately, when Henri II had abandoned it to Charles V. And in the State of Milan were the States of Parma and Piacenza, which Pope Julius II had wrested from it and incorporated in the domain of the Church. The act, however, was unlawful, and although these States had ever since been under Pontifical rule, it was to Milan

that they belonged, though Milan never yet had had the power to enforce her rights. She had that power at last, now that the Emperor's rule there was a thing determined, and it was in this moment that papal nepotism was to make a further alienation of them by constituting them into a duchy for the Farnese bastard, Pier Luigi, who was already Duke of Castro.

Under papal rule the nobles—more particularly the ghibellines—and the lesser tyrants of the Val di Taro had suffered rudely, plundered by Pontifical brigandage, enduring confiscations and extortions until they were reduced to a miserable condition. It was against the beginnings of this that my father had raised his standard, to be crushed thorough the supineness of his peers, who would not support him to save themselves from being consumed in the capacious maw of Rome.

But what they had suffered hitherto would be as nothing to what they must suffer if the Pope now had his way and if Pier Luigi Farnese were to become their duke—an independent prince. He would break the nobles utterly, to remain undisputed master of the territory. That was a conclusion foregone. And yet our princelings saw the evil approaching them, and cowered irresolute to await and suffer it.

They had depended, perhaps, upon the Emperor, who, it was known, did not favour the investiture, nor would confirm it. It was remembered that Ottavio Farnese—Pier Luigi's son—was married to Margaret of Austria, the Emperor's daughter, and that if a Farnese dominion there was to be in Parma and Piacenza, the Emperor would prefer that it should be that of his own son-in-law, who would hold the duchy as a fief of the Empire. Further was it known that Ottavio was intriguing with Pope and Emperor to gain the investiture in his own father's stead.

"The unnatural son!" I exclaimed upon learning that.

Galeotto looked at me, and smiled darkly, stroking his great beard.

"Say, rather, the unnatural father," he replied. "More honour to Ottavio Farnese in that he has chosen to forget that he is Pier Luigi's son. It is not a parentage in which any man—be he the most abandoned—could take pride."

"How so?" quoth I.

"You have, indeed, lived out of the world if you know nothing of Pier Luigi Farnese. I should have imagined that some echo of his turpitudes must have penetrated even to a hermitage—that they would be written upon the very face of Nature, which he outrages at every step of his infamous life. He is a monster, a sort of antichrist; the most ruthless, bloody, vicious man that ever drew the breath of life. Indeed, there are not wanting those who call him a warlock, a dealer in black magic who has sold his soul to the Devil. Though, for that matter, they say the same of the Pope his father, and I doubt not that his magic is just the magic of a wickedness that is scarcely human.

"There is a fellow named Paolo Giovio, Bishop of Nocera, a charlatan and a wretched dabbler in necromancy and something of an alchemist, who has lately written the life of another Pope's son—Cesare Borgia, who lived nigh upon half a century ago, and who did more than any man to consolidate the States of the Church, though his true aim, like Pier Luigi's, was to found a State for himself. I am given to think that for his model of a Pope's bastard this Giovio has taken the wretched Farnese rogue, and attributed to the son of Alexander VI the vices and infamies of this son of Paul III.

"Even to attempt to draw a parallel is to insult the memory of the Borgia; for he, at least, was a great captain and a great ruler, and he knew how to endear to himself the fold that he governed; so that when I was a lad—thirty years ago—there were still those in the Romagna

who awaited the Borgias' return, and prayed for it as earnestly as pray the faithful for the second coming of the Messiah, refusing to believe that he was dead. But this Pier Luigi!" He thrust out a lip contemptuously. "He is no better than a thief, a murderer, a defiler, a bestial, lecherous dog!"

And with that he began to relate some of the deeds of this man, and his life, it seemed, was written in blood and filth—a tale of murders and rapes and worse. And when as a climax he told me of the horrible, inhuman outrage done to Cosimo Gheri, the young Bishop of Fano, I begged him to cease, for my horror turned me almost physically sick.¹

1 The incident to which Agostino here alludes is fully set forth by Benedetto Varchi at the end of Book XVI of his *Storia Fiorentina*.

"That bishop was a holy man, of very saintly life," Galeotto insisted, "and the deed permitted the German Lutherans to say that here was a new form of martyrdom for saints invented by the Pope's son. And his father pardoned him the deed, and others as bad, by a secret bull, absolving him from all pains and penalties that he might have incurred through youthful frailty or human incontinence!"

It was the relation of those horrors, I think, which, stirring my indignation, spurred me even more than the thought of redressing the wrongs which the Pontifical or Farnesian government would permit my mother to do me.

I held out my hand to Galeotto. "To the utmost of my little might," said I, "you may depend upon me in this good cause in which you have engaged."

"There speaks the son of the house of Anguissola," said he, a light of affection in his steel-coloured eyes. "And there are your father's wrongs to right as well as the wrongs of humanity, remember. By this

Pier Luigi was he crushed; whilst those who bore arms with him at Perugia and were taken alive..." He paused and turned livid, great beads of perspiration standing upon his brow. "I cannot," he faltered, "I cannot even now, after all these years, bear to think upon those horrors perpetrated by that monster."

I was strangely moved at the sight of emotion in one who seemed emotionless as iron.

"I left the hermitage," said I, "in the hope that I might the better be able to serve God in the world. I think you are showing me the way, Ser Galeotto."

CHAPTER III. PIER LUIGI FARNESE

We left Milan that same day, and there followed for some months a season of wandering through Lombardy, going from castle to castle, from tyranny to tyranny, just the three of us—Galeotto and myself with Falcone for our equerry and attendant.

Surely something of the fanatic's temperament there must have been in me; for now that I had embraced a cause, I served it with all the fanaticism with which on Monte Orsaro I sought to be worthy of the course I had taken then.

I was become as an apostle, preaching a crusade or holy war against the Devil's lieutenant on earth, Messer Pier Luigi Farnese, sometime Duke of Castro, now Duke of Parma and Piacenza—for the investiture duly followed in the August of that year, and soon his iron hand began to be felt throughout the State of which the Pope had constituted him a prince.

And to the zest that was begotten of pure righteousness, Galeotto cunningly added yet another and more worldly spur. We were riding one day in late September of that year from Cortemaggiore, where we had spent a month in seeking to stir the Pallavicini to some spirit of resistance, and we were making our way towards Romagnese, the stronghold of that great Lombard family of dal Verme.

As we were ambling by a forest path, Galeotto abruptly turned to me, Falcone at the time being some little way in advance of us, and startled me by his words.

"Cavalcanti's daughter seemed to move you strangely, Agostino," he said, and watched me turn pale under his keen glance.

In my confusion—more or less at random—"What should Cavalcanti's daughter be to me?" I asked.

"Why, what you will, I think," he answered, taking my question literally. "Cavalcanti would consider the Lord of Mondolfo and Carmina a suitable mate for his daughter, however he might hesitate to marry her to the landless Agostino d'Anguissola. He loved your father better than any man that ever lived, and such an alliance was mutually desired."

"Do you think I need this added spur?" quoth I.

"Nay, I know that you do not. But it is well to know what reward may wait upon our labour. It makes that labour lighter and increases courage."

I hung my head, without answering him, and we rode silently amain.

He had touched me where the flesh was raw and tender. Bianca de' Cavalcanti! It was a name I uttered like a prayer, like a holy invocation. Just so had I been in a measure content to carry that name and the memory of her sweet face. To consider her as the possible Lady of Mondolfo when I should once more have come into my own, was to consider things that filled me almost with despair.

Again I experienced such hesitations as had kept me from ever seeking her at Pagliano, though I had been given the freedom of her garden. Giuliana had left her brand upon me. And though Bianca had by now achieved for me what neither prayers nor fasting could accomplish, and had exorcized the unholy visions of Giuliana from my mind, yet when I came to consider Bianca as a possible companion—as something more or something less than a saint enthroned in the heaven created by my worship of her—there rose between us ever

that barrier of murder and adultery, a barrier which not even in imagination did I dare to overstep.

I strove to put such thoughts from my mind that I might leave it free to do the work to which I had now vowed myself.

All through that winter we pursued our mission. With the dal Verme we had but indifferent success, for they accounted themselves safe, being, like Cavalcanti, feudatories of the Emperor himself, and nowise included in the territories of Parma and Piacenza. From Romagnese we made our way to the stronghold of the Anguissola of Albarola, my cousins, who gave me a very friendly welcome, and who, though with us in spirit and particularly urged by their hatred of our guelphic cousin Cosimo who was now Pier Luigi's favourite, yet hesitated as the others had done. And we met with little better success with Sforza of Santaflora, to whose castle we next repaired, or yet with the Landi, the Scotti, or Confalonieri. Everywhere the same spirit of awe was abroad, and the same pusillanimity, content to hug the little that remained rather than rear its head to demand that which by right belonged.

So that when the spring came round again, and our mission done, our crusade preached to hearts that would not be inflamed, we turned our steps once more towards Pagliano, we were utterly dispirited men—although, for myself, my despondency was tempered a little by the thought that I was to see Bianca once more.

Yet before I come to speak of her again, let me have done with these historical matters in so far as they touched ourselves.

We had left the nobles unresponsive, as you have seen. But soon the prognostications of the crafty Gonzaga were realized. Soon Farnese, through his excessive tyranny, stung them out of their apathy. The first to feel his iron hand were the Pallavicini, whom he stripped of their lands of Cortemaggiore, taking as hostages

Girolamo Pallavicini's wife and mother. Next he hurled his troops against the dal Verme, forcing Romagnese to capitulate, and then seeking similarly to reduce their other fief of Bobbio. Thence upon his all-conquering way, he marched upon Castel San Giovanni, whence he sought to oust the Sforza, and at the same time he committed the mistake of attempting to drive the Gonzaga out of Soragna.

This last rashness brought down upon his head the direct personal resentment of Ferrante Gonzaga. With the Imperial troops at his heels the Governor of Milan not only intervened to save Soragna for his family, but forced Pier Luigi to disgorge Bobbio and Romagnese, restoring them to the dal Verme, and compelled him to raise the siege of San Giovanni upon which he was at the time engaged—claiming that both these noble houses were feudatories of the Empire.

Intimidated by that rude lesson, Pier Luigi was forced to draw in his steely claws. To console himself, he turned his attention to the Val di Taro, and issued an edict commanding all nobles there to disarm, disband their troops, quit their fortresses, and go to reside in the principal cities of their districts. Those who resisted or demurred, he crushed at once with exile and confiscation; and even those who meekly did his will, he stripped of all privileges as feudal lords.

Even my mother, we heard, was forced to dismiss her trivial garrison, having been ordered to close the Citadel of Mondolfo, and take up her residence in our palace in the city itself. But she went further than she was bidden—she took the veil in the Convent of Santa Chiara, and so retired from the world.

The State began to ferment in secret at so much and such harsh tyranny. Farnese was acting in Piacenza as Tarquin of old had acted in his garden, slicing the tallest poppies from their stems. And soon to swell his treasury, which not even his plunder, brigandage, and extortionate confiscations could fill sufficiently to satisfy his greed, he

set himself to look into the past lives of the nobles, and to promulgate laws that were retroactive, so that he was enabled to levy fresh fines and perpetrate fresh sequestrations in punishment of deeds that had been done long years ago.

Amongst these, we heard that he had Giovanni d'Anguissola decapitated in effigy for his rebellion against the authority of the Holy See, and that my tyrannies of Mondolfo and Carmina were confiscated from me because of my offence in being Giovanni d'Anguissola's son. And presently we heard that Mondolfo had been conferred by Farnese upon his good and loyal servant and captain, the Lord Cosimo d'Anguissola, subject to a tax of a thousand ducats yearly!

Galeotto ground his teeth and swore horribly when the news was brought us from Piacenza, whilst I felt my heart sink and the last hope of Bianca—the hope secretly entertained almost against hope itself—withering in my soul.

But soon came consolation. Pier Luigi had gone too far. Even rats when cornered will turn at bay and bare their teeth for combat. So now the nobles of the Valnure and the Val di Taro.

The Scotti, the Pallavicini, the Landi, and the Anguissola of Albarola, came one after the other in secret to Pagliano to interview the gloomy Galeotto. And at one gathering that was secretly held in a chamber of the castle, he lashed them with his furious scorn.

"You are come now," he jeered at them, "now that you are maimed; now that you have been bled of half your strength; now that most of your teeth are drawn. Had you but had the spirit and good sense to rise six months ago when I summoned you so to do, the struggle had been brief and the victory certain. Now the fight will be all fraught with risk, dangerous to engage, and uncertain of issue."

But it was they—these men who themselves had been so pusillanimous at first—who now urged him to take the lead, swearing to follow him to the death, to save for their children what little was still left them.

"In that spirit I will not lead you a step," he answered them. "If we raise our standard, we fight for all our ancient rights, for all our privileges, and for the restoration of all that has been confiscated; in short, for the expulsion of the Farnese from these lands. If that is your spirit, then I will consider what is to be done—for, believe me, open warfare will no longer avail us here. What we have to do must be done by guile. You have waited too long to resolve yourselves. And whilst you have grown weak, Farnese has been growing strong. He has fawned upon and flattered the populace; he has set the people against the nobles; he has pretended that in crushing the nobles he was serving the people, and they—poor fools!—have so far believed him that they will run to his banner in any struggle that may ensue."

He dismissed them at last with the promise that they should hear from him, and on the morrow, attended by Falcone only, he rode forth again from Pagliano, to seek out the dal Verme and the Sforza of Santafiora and endeavour to engage their interest against the man who had outraged them.

And that was early in August of the year '46.

I remained at Pagliano by Galeotto's request. He would have no need of me upon his mission. But he might desire me to seek out some of the others of the Val di Taro with such messages as he should send me.

And in all this time I had seen but little of Monna Bianca. We met under her father's eye in that gold-and-purple dining-room; and there I would devoutly, though surreptitiously, feast my eyes upon the exquisite beauty of her. But I seldom spoke to her, and then it was

upon the most trivial matters; whilst although the summer was now full fragrantly unfolded, yet I never dared to intrude into that garden of hers to which I had been bidden, ever restrained by the overwhelming memory of the past.

So poignant was this memory that at times I caught myself wondering whether, after all, I had not been mistaken in lending an ear so readily to the arguments of Fra Gervasio, whether Fra Gervasio himself had not been mistaken in assuming that my place was in the world, and whether I had not done best to have carried out my original intention of seeking refuge in some monastery in the lowly position of a lay brother.

Meanwhile the Lord of Pagliano used me in the most affectionate and fatherly manner. But not even this sufficed to encourage me where his daughter was concerned, and I seemed to observe also that Bianca herself, if she did not actually avoid my society, was certainly at no pains to seek it.

What the end would have been but for the terrible intervention there was in our affairs, I have often surmised without result.

It happened that one day, about a week after Galeotto had left us there rode up to the gates of Pagliano a very magnificent company, and there was great braying of horns, stamping of horses and rattle of arms.

My Lord Pier Luigi Farnese had been on a visit to his city of Parma, and on his return journey had thought well to turn aside into the lands of ultra-Po, and pay a visit to the Lord of Pagliano, whom he did not love, yet whom, perhaps, it may have been his intention to conciliate, since hurt him he could not.

Sufficiently severe had been the lesson he had received for meddling with Imperial fiefs; and he must have been mad had he

thought of provoking further the resentment of the Emperor. To Farnese, Charles V was a sleeping dog it was as well to leave sleeping.

He rode, then, upon his friendly visit into the Castle of Pagliano, attended by a vast retinue of courtiers and ladies, pages, lackeys, and a score of men-at-arms. A messenger had ridden on in advance to warn Cavalcanti of the honour that the Duke proposed to do him, and Cavalcanti, relishing the honour no whit, yet submitting out of discreetness, stood to receive his excellency at the foot of the marble staircase with Bianca on one side and myself upon the other.

Under the archway they rode, Farnese at the head of the cavalcade. He bestrode a splendid white palfrey, whose mane and tail were henna-dyed, whose crimson velvet trappings trailed almost to the ground. He was dressed in white velvet, even to his thigh-boots, which were laced with gold and armed with heavy gold spurs. A scarlet plume was clasped by a great diamond in his velvet cap, and on his right wrist was perched a hooded falcon.

He was a tall and gracefully shaped man of something over forty years of age, black-haired and olive-skinned, wearing a small pointed beard that added length to his face. His nose was aquiline, and he had fine eyes, but under them there were heavy brown shadows, and as he came nearer it was seen that his countenance was marred by an unpleasant eruption of sores.

After him came his gentlemen, a round dozen of them, with half that number of splendid ladies, all a very dazzling company. Behind these, in blazing liveries, there was a cloud of pages upon mules, and lackeys leading sumpter-beasts; and then to afford them an effective background, a grey, steel phalanx of men-at-arms.

I describe his entrance as it appeared at a glance, for I did not study it or absorb any of its details. My horrified gaze was held by a

figure that rode on his right hand, a queenly woman with a beautiful pale countenance and a lazy, insolent smile.

It was Giuliana.

How she came there I did not at the moment trouble to reflect. She was there. That was the hideous fact that made me doubt the sight of my own eyes, made me conceive almost that I was at my disordered visions again, the fruit of too much brooding. I felt as if all the blood were being exhausted from my heart, as if my limbs would refuse their office, and I leaned for support against the terminal of the balustrade by which I stood.

She saw me. And after the first slight start of astonishment, her lazy smile grew broader and more insolent. I was but indifferently conscious of the hustle about me, of the fact that Cavalcanti himself was holding the Duke's stirrup, whilst the latter got slowly to the ground and relinquished his falcon to a groom who wore a perch suspended from his neck, bearing three other hooded birds. Similarly I was no more than conscious of being forced to face the Duke by words that Cavalcanti was uttering. He was presenting me.

"This, my lord, is Agostino d'Anguissola."

I saw, as through a haze, the swarthy, pustuled visage frown down upon me. I heard a voice which was at once harsh and effeminate and quite detestable, saying in unfriendly tones:

"The son of Giovanni d'Anguissola of Mondolfo, eh?"

"The same, my lord," said Cavalcanti, adding generously—"Giovanni d'Anguissola was my friend."

"It is a friendship that does you little credit, sir," was the harsh answer. "It is not well to befriend the enemies of God."

Was it possible that I had heard aright? Had this human foulness

dared to speak of God?

"That is a matter upon which I will not dispute with a guest," said Cavalcanti with an urbanity of tone belied by the anger that flashed from his brown eyes.

At the time I thought him greatly daring, little dreaming that, forewarned of the Duke's coming, his measures were taken, and that one blast from the silver whistle that hung upon his breast would have produced a tide of men-at-arms that would have engulfed and overwhelmed Messer Pier Luigi and his suite.

Farnese dismissed the matter with a casual laugh. And then a lazy, drawling voice—a voice that once had been sweetest music to my ears, but now was loathsome as the croaking of Stygian frogs—addressed me.

"Why, here is a great change, sir saint! We had heard you had turned anchorite; and behold you in cloth of gold, shining as you would out-dazzle Phoebus."

I stood palely before her, striving to keep the loathing from my face, and I was conscious that Bianca had suddenly turned and was regarding us with eyes of grave concern.

"I like you better for the change," pursued Giuliana. "And I vow that you have grown at least another inch. Have you no word for me, Agostino?"

I was forced to answer her. "I trust that all is well with you, Madonna," I said.

Her lazy smile grew broader, displaying the dazzling whiteness of her strong teeth. "Why, all is very well with me," said she, and her sidelong glance at the Duke, half mocking, half kindly with an odious kindliness, seemed to give added explanations.

That he should have dared bring here this woman whom no doubt he had wrested from his creature Gambarà—here into the shrine of my pure and saintly Bianca—was something for which I could have killed him then, for which I hated him far more bitterly than for any of those dark turpitudes that I had heard associated with his odious name.

And meanwhile there he stood, that Pope's bastard, leaning over my Bianca, speaking to her, and in his eyes the glow of a dark and unholy fire what time they fed upon her beauty as the slug feeds upon the lily. He seemed to have no thought for any other, nor for the circumstance that he kept us all standing there.

"You must come to our Court at Piacenza, Madonna," I heard him murmuring. "We knew not that so fair a flower was blossoming unseen in this garden of Pagliano. It is not well that such a jewel should be hidden in this grey casket. You were made to queen it in a court, Madonna; and at Piacenza you shall be hailed and honoured as its queen." And so he rambled on with his rough and trivial flattery, his foully pimpled face within a foot of hers, and she shrinking before him, very white and mute and frightened. Her father looked on with darkling brows, and Giuliana began to gnaw her lip and look less lazy, whilst in the courtly background there was a respectful murmuring babble, supplying a sycophantic chorus to the Duke's detestable adulation.

It was Cavalcanti, at last, who came to his daughter's rescue by a peremptory offer to escort the Duke and his retinue within.

CHAPTER IV. MADONNA BIANCA

Pier Luigi's original intent had been to spend no more than a night at Pagliano. But when the morrow came, he showed no sign of departing, nor upon the next day, nor yet upon the next.

A week passed, and still he lingered, seeming to settle more and more in the stronghold of the Cavalcanti, leaving the business of his Duchy to his secretary Filarete and to his council, at the head of which, as I learnt, was my old friend Annibale Caro.

And meanwhile, Cavalcanti, using great discreetness, suffered the Duke's presence, and gave him and his suite most noble entertainment.

His position was perilous and precarious in the extreme, and it needed all his strength of character to hold in curb the resentment that boiled within him to see himself thus preyed upon; and that was not the worst. The worst was Pier Luigi's ceaseless attentions to Bianca, the attentions of the satyr for the nymph, a matter in which I think Cavalcanti suffered little less than did I.

He hoped for the best, content to wait until cause for action should be forced upon him. And meanwhile that courtly throng took its ease at Pagliano. The garden that hitherto had been Bianca's own sacred domain, the garden into which I had never yet dared set foot, was overrun now by the Duke's gay suite—a cloud of poisonous butterflies. There in the green, shaded alleys they disported themselves; in the lemon-grove, in the perfumed rose-garden, by hedges of box and screens of purple clematis they fluttered.

Bianca sought to keep her chamber in those days, and kept it for as long on each day as was possible to her. But the Duke, hobbling on the terrace—for as a consequence of his journey on horseback he had developed a slight lameness, being all rotten with disease—would grow irritable at her absence, and insistent upon her presence, hinting that her retreat was a discourtesy; so that she was forced to come forth again, and suffer his ponderous attentions and gross flatteries.

And three days later there came another to Pagliano, bidden thither by the Duke, and this other was none else than my cousin Cosimo, who now called himself Lord of Mondolfo, having been invested in that tyranny, as I have said.

On the morning after his arrival we met upon the terrace.

"My saintly cousin!" was his derisive greeting. "And yet another change in you—out of sackcloth into velvet! The calendar shall know you as St. Weathercock, I think—or, perhaps, St. Mountebank."

What followed was equally bitter and sardonic on his part, fiercely and openly hostile on mine. At my hostility he had smiled cruelly.

"Be content with what is, my strolling saint," he said, in the tone of one who gives a warning, "unless you would be back in your hermitage, or within the walls of some cloister, or even worse. Already have you found it a troublesome matter to busy yourself with the affairs of the world. You were destined for sanctity." He came closer, and grew very fierce. "Do not put it upon me to make a saint of you by sending you to Heaven."

"It might end in your own dispatch to Hell," said I. "Shall we essay it?"

"Body of God!" he snarled, laughter still lingering on his white face.

"Is this the mood of your holiness at present? What a bloodthirsty brave are you become! Consider, pray, sir, that if you trouble me I have no need to do my own office of hangman. There is sufficient against you to make the Tribunal of the Ruota very busy; there is—can you have forgotten it?—that little affair at the house of Messer Fifanti."

I dropped my glance, browbeaten for an instant. Then I looked at him again, and smiled.

"You are but a poor coward, Messer Cosimo," said I, "to use a shadow as a screen. You know that nothing can be proved against me unless Giuliana speaks, and that she dare not for her own sake. There are witnesses who will swear that Gambara went to Fifanti's house that night. There is not one to swear that Gambara did not kill Fifanti ere he came forth again; and it is the popular belief, for his traffic with Giuliana is well-known, as it is well-known that she fled with him after the murder—which, in itself, is evidence of a sort. Your Duke has too great a respect for the feelings of the populace," I sneered, "to venture to outrage them in such a matter. Besides," I ended, "it is impossible to incriminate me without incriminating Giuliana and, Messer Pier Luigi seems, I should say, unwilling to relinquish the lady to the brutalities of a tribunal."

"You are greatly daring," said he, and he was pale now, for in that last mention of Giuliana, it seemed that I had touched him where he was still sensitive.

"Daring?" I rejoined. "It is more than I can say for you, Ser Cosimo. Yours is the coward's fault of caution."

I thought to spur him. If this failed, I was prepared to strike him, for my temper was beyond control. That he, standing towards me as he did, should dare to mock me, was more than I could brook. But at that moment there spoke a harsh voice just behind me.

"How, sir? What words are these?"

There, very magnificent in his suit of ivory velvet, stood the Duke. He was leaning heavily upon his cane, and his face was more blotched than ever, the sunken eyes more sunken.

"Are you seeking to quarrel with the Lord of Mondolfo?" quoth he and I saw by his smile that he used my cousin's title as a taunt.

Behind him was Cavalcanti with Bianca leaning upon his arm just as I had seen her that day when she came with him to Monte Orsaro, save that now there was a look as of fear in the blue depths of her eyes. A little on one side there was a group composed of three of the Duke's gentlemen with Giuliana and another of the ladies, and Giuliana was watching us with half-veiled eyes.

"My lord," I answered, very stiff and erect, and giving him back look for look, something perhaps of the loathing with which he inspired me imprinted on my face, "my lord, you give yourself idle alarms. Ser Cosimo is too cautious to embroil himself."

He limped toward me; leaning heavily upon his stick, and it pleased me that of a good height though he was, he was forced to look up into my face.

"There is too much bad Anguissola blood in you," he said. "Be careful lest out of our solicitude for you, we should find it well to let our leech attend you."

I laughed, looking into his blotched face, considering his lame leg and all the evil humours in him.

"By my faith, I think it is your excellency needs the attentions of a leech," said I, and flung all present into consternation by that answer.

I saw his face turn livid, and I saw the hand shake upon the golden head of his cane. He was very sensitive upon the score of his foul

infirmities. His eyes grew baleful as he controlled himself. Then he smiled, displaying a ruin of blackened teeth.

"You had best take care," he said. "It were a pity to cripple such fine limbs as yours. But there is a certain matter upon which the Holy Office might desire to set you some questions. Best be careful, sir, and avoid disagreements with my captains."

He turned away. He had had the last word, and had left me cold with apprehension, yet warmed by the consciousness that in the brief encounter it was he who had taken the deeper wound.

He bowed before Bianca. "Oh, pardon me," he said. "I did not dream you stood so near. Else no such harsh sounds should have offended your fair ears. As for Messer d'Anguissola..." He shrugged as who would say, "Have pity on such a boor!"

But her answer, crisp and sudden as come words that are spoken on impulse or inspiration, dashed his confidence.

"Nothing that he said offended me," she told him boldly, almost scornfully.

He flashed me a glance that was full of venom, and I saw Cosimo smile, whilst Cavalcanti started slightly at such boldness from his meek child. But the Duke was sufficiently master of himself to bow again.

"Then am I less aggrieved," said he, and changed the subject. "Shall we to the bowling lawn?" And his invitation was direct to Bianca, whilst his eyes passed over her father. Without waiting for their answer, his question, indeed, amounting to a command, he turned sharply to my cousin. "Your arm, Cosimo," said he, and leaning heavily upon his captain he went down the broad granite steps, followed by the little knot of courtiers, and, lastly, by Bianca and her father.

As for me, I turned and went indoors, and there was little of the saint left in me in that hour. All was turmoil in my soul, turmoil and hatred and anger. Anon to soothe me came the memory of those sweet words that Bianca had spoken in my defence, and those words emboldened me at last to seek her but as I had never yet dared in all the time that I had spent at Pagliano.

I found her that evening, by chance, in the gallery over the courtyard. She was pacing slowly, having fled thither to avoid that hateful throng of courtiers. Seeing me she smiled timidly, and her smile gave me what little further encouragement I needed. I approached, and very earnestly rendered her my thanks for having championed my cause and supported me with the express sign of her approval.

She lowered her eyes; her bosom quickened slightly, and the colour ebbed and flowed in her cheeks.

"You should not thank me," said she. "What I did was done for justice's sake."

"I have been presumptuous," I answered humbly, "in conceiving that it might have been for the sake of me."

"But it was that also," she answered quickly, fearing perhaps that she had pained me. "It offended me that the Duke should attempt to browbeat you. I took pride in you to see you bear yourself so well and return thrust for thrust."

"I think your presence must have heartened me," said I. "No pain could be so cruel as to seem base or craven in your eyes."

Again the tell-tale colour showed upon her lovely cheek. She began to pace slowly down the gallery, and I beside her. Presently she spoke again.

"And yet," she said, "I would have you cautious. Do not wantonly

affront the Duke, for he is very powerful."

"I have little left to lose," said I.

"You have your life," said she.

"A life which I have so much misused that it must ever cry out to me in reproach."

She gave me a little fluttering, timid glance, and looked away again. Thus we came in silence to the gallery's end, where a marble seat was placed, with gay cushions of painted and gilded leather. She sank to it with a little sigh, and I leaned on the balustrade beside her and slightly over her. And now I grew strangely bold.

"Set me some penance," I cried, "that shall make me worthy."

Again came that little fluttering, frightened glance.

"A penance?" quoth she. "I do not understand."

"All my life," I explained, "has been a vain striving after something that eluded me. Once I deemed myself devout; and because I had sinned and rendered myself unworthy, you found me a hermit on Monte Orsaro, seeking by penance to restore myself to the estate from which I had succumbed. That shrine was proved a blasphemy; and so the penance I had done, the signs I believed I had received, were turned to mockery. It was not there that I should save myself. One night I was told so in a vision."

She gave an audible gasp, and looked at me so fearfully that I fell silent, staring back at her.

"You knew!" I cried.

Long did her blue, slanting eyes meet my glance without wavering, as never yet they had met it. She seemed to hesitate, and at the

same time openly to consider me.

"I know now," she breathed.

"What do you know?" My voice was tense with excitement.

"What was your vision?" she rejoined.

"Have I not told you? There appeared to me one who called me back to the world; who assured me that there I should best serve God; who filled me with the conviction that she needed me. She addressed me by name, and spoke of a place of which I had never heard until that hour, but which to-day I know."

"And you? And you?" she asked. "What answer did you make?"

"I called her by name, although until that hour I did not know it."

She bowed her head. Emotion set her all a-tremble.

"It is what I have so often wondered," she confessed, scarce above a whisper. "And it is true—as true as it is strange!"

"True?" I echoed. "It was the only true miracle in that place of false ones, and it was so clear a call of destiny that it decided me to return to the world which I had abandoned. And yet I have since wondered why. Here there seems to be no place for me any more than there was yonder. I am devout again with a worldly devotion now, yet with a devotion that must be Heaven-inspired, so pure and sweet it is. It has shut out from me all the foulness of that past; and yet I am unworthy. And that is why I cry to you to set me some penance ere I can make my prayer."

She could not understand me, nor did she. We were not as ordinary lovers. We were not as man and maid who, meeting and being drawn each to the other, fence and trifle in a pretty game of dalliance until the maid opines that the appearances are safe, and that, her resistance

having been of a seemly length, she may now make the ardently desired surrender with all war's honours. Nothing of that was in our wooing, a wooing which seemed to us, now that we spoke of it, to have been done when we had scarcely met, done in the vision that I had of her, and the vision that she had of me.

With averted eyes she set me now a question.

"Madonna Giuliana used you with a certain freedom on her arrival, and I have since heard your name coupled with her own by the Duke's ladies. But I have asked no questions of them. I know how false can be the tongues of courtly folk. I ask it now of you. What is or was this Madonna Giuliana to you?"

"She was," I answered bitterly, "and God pity me that I must say it to you—she was to me what Circe was to the followers of Ulysses."

She made a little moan, and I saw her clasp her hands in her lap; and the sound and sight filled me with sorrow and despair. She must know. Better that the knowledge should stand between us as a barrier which both could see than that it should remain visible only to the eyes of my own soul, to daunt me.

"O Bianca! Forgive me!" I cried. "I did not know! I did not know! I was a poor fool reared in seclusion and ripened thus for the first temptation that should touch me. That is what on Monte Orsaro I sought to expiate, that I might be worthy of the shrine I guarded then. That is what I would expiate now that I might be worthy of the shrine whose guardian I would become, the shrine at which I worship now."

I was bending very low above her little brown head, in which the threads of the gold coif-net gleamed in the fading light.

"If I had but had my vision sooner," I murmured, "how easy it would have been! Can you find mercy for me in your gentle heart? Can you forgive me, Bianca?"

"O Agostino," she answered very sadly, and the sound of my name from her lips, coming so naturally and easily, thrilled me like the sound of the mystic music of Monte Orsaro. "What shall I answer you? I cannot now. Give me leisure to think. My mind is all benumbed. You have hurt me so!"

"Me miserable!" I cried.

"I had believed you one who erred through excess of holiness."

"Whereas I am one who attempted holiness through excess of error."

"I had believed you so, so...O Agostino!" It was a little wail of pain.

"Set me a penance," I implored her.

"What penance can I set you? Will any penance restore to me my shattered faith?"

I groaned miserably and covered my face with my hands. It seemed that I was indeed come to the end of all my hopes; that the world was become as much a mockery to me as had been the hermitage; that the one was to end for me upon the discovery of a fraud, as had the other ended—with the difference that in this case the fraud was in myself.

It seemed, indeed, that our first communion must be our last. Ever since she had seen me step into that gold-and-purple dining-room at Pagliano, the incarnation of her vision, as she was the incarnation of mine, Bianca must have waited confidently for this hour, knowing that it was foreordained to come. Bitterness and disillusion were all that it had brought her.

And then, ere more could be said, a thin, flute-like voice hissed down the vaulted gallery:

"Madonna Bianca! To hide your beauty from our hungry eyes. To quench the light by which we guide our footsteps. To banish from us the happiness and joy of your presence! Unkind, unkind!"

It was the Duke. In his white velvet suit he looked almost ghostly in the deepening twilight. He hobbled towards us, his stick tapping the black-and-white squares of the marble floor. He halted before her, and she put aside her emotion, donned a worldly mask, and rose to meet him.

Then he looked at me, and his brooding eyes seemed to scan my face.

"Why! It is Ser Agostino, Lord of Nothing," he sneered, and down the gallery rang the laugh of my cousin Cosimo, and there came, too, a ripple of other voices.

Whether to save me from friction with those steely gentlemen who aimed at grinding me to powder, whether from other motives, Bianca set her finger-tips upon the Duke's white sleeve and moved away with him.

I leaned against the balustrade all numb, watching them depart. I saw Cosimo come upon her other side and lean over her as he moved, so slim and graceful, beside her own slight, graceful figure. Then I sank to the cushions of the seat she had vacated, and stayed there with my misery until the night had closed about the place, and the white marble pillars looked ghostly and unreal.

CHAPTER V. THE WARNING

I prayed that evening more fervently than I had prayed since quitting Monte Orsaro. It was as if all the influences of my youth, which lately had been shaken off in the stir of intrigue and of rides that had seemed the prelude to battle, were closing round me again.

Even as a woman had lured me once from the ways to which I seemed predestined, only to drive me back once more the more frenziedly, so now it almost seemed as if again a woman should have lured me to the world but to drive me from it again and more resolutely than ever. For I was anew upon the edge of a resolve to have done with all human interests and to seek the peace and seclusion of the cloister.

And then I bethought me of Gervasio. I would go to him for guidance, as I had done aforetime. I would ride on the morrow to seek him out in the convent near Piacenza to which he had withdrawn.

I was disturbed at last by the coming of a page to my chamber with the announcement that my lord was already at supper.

I had thoughts of excusing myself, but in the end I went.

The repast was spread, as usual, in the banqueting-hall of the castle; and about the splendid table was Pier Luigi's company, amounting to nigh upon a score in all. The Duke himself sat on Monna Bianca's right, whilst on her left was Cosimo.

Heeding little whether I was observed or not, I sank to a vacant place, midway down the board, between one of the Duke's pretty young gentlemen and one of the ladies of that curious train—a bold-

eyed Roman woman, whose name, I remember, was Valeria Cesarini, but who matters nothing in these pages. Almost facing me sat Giuliana, but I was hardly conscious of her, or conscious, indeed, of any save Monna Bianca.

Once or twice Bianca's glance met mine, but it fell away again upon the instant. She was very pale, and there were wistful lines about her lips; yet her mood was singular. Her eyes had an unnatural sparkle, and ever and anon she would smile at what was said to her in half-whispers, now by the Duke, now by Cosimo, whilst once or twice she laughed outright. Gone was the usual chill reserve with which she hedged herself about to distance the hateful advances of Pier Luigi. There were moments now when she seemed almost flattered by his vile ogling and adulatory speeches, as if she had been one of those brazen ladies of his Court.

It wounded me sorely. I could not understand it, lacking the wit to see that this queer mood sprang from the blow I had dealt her, and was the outward manifestation of her own pain at the shattering of the illusions she had harboured concerning myself.

And so I sat there moodily, gnawing my lip and scowling darkly upon Pier Luigi and upon my cousin, who was as assiduous in his attentions as his master, and who seemed to be receiving an even greater proportion of her favours. One little thing there was to hearten me. Looking at the Lord of Pagliano, who sat at the table's head, I observed that his glance was dark as it kept watch upon his daughter—that chaste white lily that seemed of a sudden to have assumed such wanton airs.

It was a matter that stirred me to battle, and forgotten again were my resolves to seek Gervasio, forgotten all notion of abandoning the world for the second time. Here was work to be done. Bianca was to be guarded. Perhaps it was in this that she would come to have need of me.

Once Cosimo caught my gloomy looks, and he leaned over to speak to the Duke, who glanced my way with languid, sneering eyes. He had a score to settle with me for the discomfiture he had that morning suffered at my hands thanks to Bianca's collaboration. He was a clumsy fool, when all is said, and confident now of her support—from the sudden and extreme friendliness of her mood—he ventured to let loose a shaft at me in a tone that all the table might overhear.

"That cousin of yours wears a very conventual hang-dog look," said he to Cosimo. And then to the lady on my right—"Forgive, Valeria," he begged, "the scurvy chance that should have sat a shaveling next to you." Lastly he turned to me to complete this gross work of offensiveness.

"When do you look, sir, to enter the life monastic for which Heaven has so clearly designed you?"

There were some sycophants who tittered at his stupid pleasantry; then the table fell silent to hear what answer I should make, and a frown sat like a thundercloud upon the brow of Cavalcanti.

I toyed with my goblet, momentarily tempted to fling its contents in his pustuled face, and risk the consequences. But I bethought me of something else that would make a deadlier missile.

"Alas!" I sighed. "I have abandoned the notion—constrained to it."

He took my bait. "Constrained?" quoth he. "Now what fool did so constrain you?"

"No fool, but circumstance," I answered. "It has occurred to me," I explained, and I boldly held his glance with my own, "that as a simple monk my life would be fraught with perils, seeing that in these times even a bishop is not safe."

Saving Bianca (who in her sweet innocence did not so much as dream of the existence of such vileness as that to which I was referring and by which a saintly man had met his death) I do not imagine that there was a single person present who did not understand to what foul crime I alluded.

The silence that followed my words was as oppressive as the silence which in Nature preludes thunder.

A vivid flame of scarlet had overspread the Duke's countenance. It receded, leaving his cheeks a greenish white, even to the mottling pimples. Abashed, his smouldering eyes fell away before my bold, defiant glance. The fingers of his trembling hand tightened about the slender stem of his Venetian goblet, so that it snapped, and there was a gush of crimson wine upon the snowy napery. His lips were drawn back—like a dog's in the act of snarling—and showed the black stumps of his broken teeth. But he made no sound, uttered no word. It was Cosimo who spoke, half rising as he did so.

"This insolence, my lord Duke, must be punished; this insult wiped out. Suffer me..."

But Pier Luigi reached forward across Bianca, set a hand upon my cousin's sleeve, and pressed him back into his seat silencing him.

"Let be," he said. And looked up the board at Cavalcanti. "It is for my Lord of Pagliano to say if a guest shall be thus affronted at his board."

Cavalcanti's face was set and rigid. "You place a heavy burden on my shoulders," said he, "when your excellency, my guest, appeals to me against another guest of mine—against one who is all but friendless and the son of my own best friend."

"And my worst enemy," cried Pier Luigi hotly.

"That is your excellency's own concern, not mine," said Cavalcanti coldly. "But since you appeal to me I will say that Messer d'Anguissola's words were ill-judged in such a season. Yet in justice I must add that it is not the way of youth to weigh its words too carefully; and you gave him provocation. When a man—be he never so high—permits himself to taunt another, he would do well to see that he is not himself vulnerable to taunts."

Farnese rose with a horrible oath, and every one of his gentlemen with him.

"My lord," he said, "this is to take sides against me; to endorse the affront."

"Then you mistake my intention," rejoined Cavalcanti, with an icy dignity. "You appeal to me for judgment. And between guests I must hold the scales dead-level, with no thought for the rank of either. Of your chivalry, my lord Duke, you must perceive that I could not do else."

It was the simplest way in which he could have told Farnese that he cared nothing for the rank of either, and of reminding his excellency that Pagliano, being an Imperial fief, was not a place where the Duke of Parma might ruffle it unchecked.

Messer Pier Luigi hesitated, entirely out of countenance. Then his eyes turned to Bianca, and his expression softened.

"What says Madonna Bianca?" he inquired, his manner reassuming some measure of its courtliness. "Is her judgment as unmercifully level?"

She looked up, startled, and laughed a little excitedly, touched by the tenseness of a situation which she did not understand.

"What say I?" quoth she. "Why, that here is a deal of pother about

some foolish words."

"And there," cried Pier Luigi, "spoke, I think, not only beauty but wisdom—Minerva's utterances from the lips of Diana!"

In glad relief the company echoed his forced laugh, and all sat down again, the incident at an end, and my contempt of the Duke increased to see him permit such a matter to be so lightly ended.

But that night, when I had retired to my chamber, I was visited by Cavalcanti. He was very grave.

"Agostino," he said, "let me implore you to be circumspect, to keep a curb upon your bitter tongue. Be patient, boy, as I am—and I have more to endure."

"I marvel, sir, that you endure it," answered I, for my mood was petulant.

"You will marvel less when you are come to my years—if, indeed, you come to them. For if you pursue this course, and strike back when such men as Pier Luigi tap you, you will not be likely to see old age. Body of Satan! I would that Galeotto were here! If aught should happen to you..." He checked, and set a hand upon my shoulder.

"For your father's sake I love you, Agostino, and I speak as one who loves you."

"I know, I know!" I cried, seizing his hand in a sudden penitence. "I am an ingrate and a fool. And you upheld me nobly at table. Sir, I swear that I will not submit you to so much concern again."

He patted my shoulder in a very friendly fashion, and his kindly eyes smiled upon me. "If you but promise that—for your own sake, Agostino—we need say no more. God send this papal by-blow takes his departure soon, for he is as unwelcome here as he is unbidden."

"The foul toad!" said I. "To see him daily, hourly bending over Monna Bianca, whispering and ogling—ugh!"

"It offends you, eh? And for that I love you! There. Be circumspect and patient, and all will be well. Put your faith in Galeotto, and endure insults which you may depend upon him to avenge when the hour strikes."

Upon that he left me, and he left me with a certain comfort. And in the days that followed, I acted upon his injunction, though, truth to tell, there was little provocation to do otherwise. The Duke ignored me, and all the gentlemen of his following did the like, including Cosimo. And meanwhile they revelled at Pagliano and made free with the hospitality to which they had not been bidden.

Thus sped another week in which I had not the courage again to approach Bianca after what had passed between us at our single interview. Nor for that matter was I afforded the opportunity. The Duke and Cosimo were ever at her side, and yet it almost seemed as if the Duke had given place to his captain, for Cosimo's was the greater assiduity now.

The days were spent at bowls or pallone within the castle, or upon hawking-parties or hunting-parties when presently the Duke's health was sufficiently improved to enable him to sit his horse; and at night there was feasting which Cavalcanti must provide, and on some evenings we danced, though that was a diversion in which I took no part, having neither the will nor the art.

One night as I sat in the gallery above the great hall, watching them footing it upon the mosaic floor below, Giuliana's deep, slow voice behind me stirred me out of my musings. She had espied me up there and had come to join me, although hitherto I had most sedulously avoided her, neither addressing her nor giving her the opportunity to address me since the first brazen speech on her arrival.

"That white-faced lily, Madonna Bianca de' Cavalcanti, seems to have caught the Duke in her net of innocence," said she.

I started round as if I had been stung, and at sight of my empurpling face she slowly smiled, the same hateful smile that I had seen upon her face that day in the garden when Gambarà had bargained for her with Fifanti.

"You are greatly daring," said I.

"To take in vain the name of her white innocence?" she answered, smiling superciliously. And then she grew more serious. "Look, Agostino, we were friends once. I would be your friend now."

"It is a friendship, Madonna, best not given expression."

"Ha! We are very scrupulous—are we not?—since we have abandoned the ways of holiness, and returned to this world of wickedness, and raised our eyes to the pale purity of the daughter of Cavalcanti!" She spoke sneeringly.

"What is that to you?" I asked.

"Nothing," she answered frankly. "But that another may have raised his eyes to her is something. I am honest with you. If this child is aught to you, and you would not lose her, you would do well to guard her more closely than you are wont. A word in season. That is all my message."

"Stay!" I begged her now, for already she was gliding away through the shadows of the gallery.

She laughed over her shoulder at me—the very incarnation of effrontery and insolence.

"Have I moved you into sensibility?" quoth she. "Will you condescend to questions with one whom you despise?—as, indeed,"

she added with a stinging scorn, "you have every right to do."

"Tell me more precisely what you mean," I begged her, for her words had moved me fearfully.

"Gesu!" she exclaimed. "Can I be more precise? Must I add counsels? Why, then, I counsel that a change of air might benefit Madonna Bianca's health, and that if my Lord of Pagliano is wise, he will send her into retreat in some convent until the Duke's visit here is at an end. And I can promise you that in that case it will be the sooner ended. Now, I think that even a saint should understand me."

With that last gibe she moved resolutely on and left me.

Of the gibe I took little heed. What imported was her warning. And I did not doubt that she had good cause to warn me. I remembered with a shudder her old-time habit of listening at doors. It was very probable that in like manner had she now gathered information that entitled her to give me such advice.

It was incredible. And yet I knew that it was true, and I cursed my blindness and Cavalcanti's. What precisely Farnese's designs might be I could not conceive. It was hard to think that he should dare so much as Giuliana more than hinted. It may be that, after all, there was no more than just the danger of it, and that her own base interests urged her to do what she could to avert it.

In any case, her advice was sound; and perhaps, as she said, the removal of Bianca quietly might be the means of helping Pier Luigi's unwelcome visit to an end.

Indeed, it was so. It was Bianca who held him at Pagliano, as the blindest idiot should have perceived.

That very night I would seek out Cavalcanti ere I retired to sleep.

CHAPTER VI. THE TALONS OF THE HOLY OFFICE

Acting upon my resolve, I went to wait for Cavalcanti in the little anteroom that communicated with his bedroom. My patience was tried, for he was singularly late in coming; fully an hour passed after all the sounds had died down in the castle and it was known that all had retired, and still there was no sign of him.

I asked one of the pages who lounged there waiting for their master, did he think my lord would be in the library, and the boy was conjecturing upon this unusual tardiness of Cavalcanti's in seeking his bed, when the door opened, and at last he appeared.

When he found me awaiting him, a certain eagerness seemed to light his face; a second's glance showed me that he was in the grip of some unusual agitation. He was pale, with a dull flush under the eyes, and the hand with which he waved away the pages shook, as did his voice when he bade them depart, saying that he desired to be alone with me awhile.

When the two slim lads had gone, he let himself fall wearily into a tall, carved chair that was placed near an ebony table with silver feet in the middle of the room.

But instead of unburdening himself as I fully expected, he looked at me, and—

"What is it, Agostino?" he inquired.

"I have thought," I answered after a moment's hesitation, "of a

means by which this unwelcome visit of Farnese's might be brought to an end."

And with that I told him as delicately as was possible that I believed Madonna Bianca to be the lodestone that held him there, and that were she removed from his detestable attentions, Pagliano would cease to amuse him and he would go his ways.

There was no outburst such as I had almost looked for at the mere suggestion contained in my faltering words. He looked at me gravely and sadly out of that stern face of his.

"I would you had given me this advice two weeks ago," he said. "But who was to have guessed that this pope's bastard would have so prolonged his visit? For the rest, however, you are mistaken, Agostino. It is not he who has dared to raise his eyes as you suppose to Bianca. Were such the case, I should have killed him with my hands were he twenty times the Duke of Parma. No, no. My Bianca is being honourably wooed by your cousin Cosimo."

I looked at him, amazed. It could not be. I remembered Giuliana's words. Giuliana did not love me, and were it as he supposed she would have seen no cause to intervene. Rather might she have taken a malicious pleasure in witnessing my own discomfiture, in seeing the sweet maid to whom I had raised my eyes, snatched away from me by my cousin who already usurped so much that was my own.

"O, you must be mistaken," I cried.

"Mistaken?" he echoed. He shook his head, smiling bitterly. "There is no possibility of mistake. I am just come from an interview with the Duke and his fine captain. Together they sought me out to ask my daughter's hand for Cosimo d'Anguissola."

"And you?" I cried, for this thrust aside my every doubt.

"And I declined the honour," he answered sternly, rising in his agitation. "I declined it in such terms as to leave them no doubt upon the irrevocable quality of my determination; and then this pestilential Duke had the effrontery to employ smiling menaces, to remind me that he had the power to compel folk to bend the knee to his will, to remind me that behind him he had the might of the Pontiff and even of the Holy Office. And when I defied him with the answer that I was a feudatory of the Emperor, he suggested that the Emperor himself must bow before the Court of the Inquisition."

"My God!" I cried in liveliest fear.

"An idle threat!" he answered contemptuously, and set himself to stride the room, his hands clasped behind his broad back.

"What have I to do with the Holy Office?" he snorted. "But they had worse indignities for me, Agostino. They mocked me with a reminder that Giovanni d'Anguissola had been my firmest friend. They told me they knew it to have been my intention that my daughter should become the Lady of Mondolfo, and to cement the friendship by making one State of Pagliano, Mondolfo and Carmina. And they added that by wedding her to Cosimo d'Anguissola was the way to execute that plan, for Cosimo, Lord of Mondolfo already, should receive Carmina as a wedding-gift from the Duke."

"Was such indeed your intention?" I asked scarce above a whisper, overawed as men are when they perceive precisely what their folly and wickedness have cost them.

He halted before me, and set one hand of his upon my shoulder, looking up into my face. "It has been my fondest dream, Agostino," he said.

I groaned. "It is a dream that never can be realized now," said I miserably.

"Never, indeed, if Cosimo d'Anguissola continues to be Lord of Mondolfo," he answered, his keen, friendly eyes considering me.

I reddened and paled under his glance.

"Nor otherwise," said I. "For Monna Bianca holds me in the contempt which I deserve. Better a thousand times that I should have remained out of this world to which you caused me to return—unless, indeed, my present torment is the expiation that is required of me unless, indeed, I was but brought back that I might pay with suffering for all the evil that I have wrought."

He smiled a little. "Is it so with you? Why, then, you afflict yourself too soon, boy. You are over-hasty to judge. I am her father, and my little Bianca is a book in which I have studied deeply. I read her better than do you, Agostino. But we will talk of this again."

He turned away to resume his pacing in the very moment in which he had fired me with such exalted hopes. "Meanwhile, there is this Farnese dog with his parcel of minions and harlots making a sty of my house. He threatens to remain until I come to what he terms a reasonable mind—until I consent to do his will and allow my daughter to marry his henchman; and he parted from me enjoining me to give the matter thought, and impudently assuring me that in Cosimo d'Anguissola—in that guelfic jackal—I had a husband worthy of Bianca de' Cavalcanti."

He spoke it between his teeth, his eyes kindling angrily again.

"The remedy, my lord, is to send Bianca hence," I said. "Let her seek shelter in a convent until Messer Pier Luigi shall have taken his departure. And if she is no longer here, Cosimo will have little inclination to linger."

He flung back his head, and there was defiance in every line of his clear-cut face. "Never!" he snapped. "The thing could have been done

two weeks ago, when they first came. It would have seemed that the step was determined before his coming, and that in my independence I would not alter my plans. But to do it now were to show fear of him; and that is not my way.

"Go, Agostino. Let me have the night to think. I know not how to act. But we will talk again to-morrow."

It was best so; best leave it to the night to bring counsel, for we were face to face with grave issues which might need determining sword in hand.

That I slept little will be readily conceived. I plagued my mind with this matter of Cosimo's suit, thinking that I saw the ultimate intent—to bring Pagliano under the ducal sway by rendering master of it one who was devoted to Farnese.

And then, too, I would think of that other thing that Cavalcanti had said: that I had been hasty in my judgment of his daughter's mind. My hopes rose and tortured me with the suspense they held. Then came to me the awful thought that here there might be a measure of retribution, and that it might be intended as my punishment that Cosimo, whom I had unconsciously bested in my sinful passion, should best me now in this pure and holy love.

I was astir betimes, and out in the gardens before any, hoping, I think, that Bianca, too, might seek the early morning peace of that place, and that so we might have speech.

Instead, it was Giuliana who came to me. I had been pacing the terrace some ten minutes, inhaling the matutinal fragrance, drawing my hands through the cool dew that glistened upon the boxwood hedges, when I saw her issue from the loggia that opened to the gardens.

Upon her coming I turned to go within, and I would have passed her

without a word, but that she put forth a hand to detain me.

"I was seeking you, Agostino," she said in greeting.

"Having found me, Madonna, you will give me leave to go," said I.

But she was resolutely barring my way. A slow smile parted her scarlet lips and broke over that ivory countenance that once I had deemed so lovely and now I loathed.

"I mind me another occasion in a garden betimes one morning when you were in no such haste to shun me."

I crimsoned under her insolent regard. "Have you the courage to remember?" I exclaimed.

"Half the art of life is to harbour happy memories," said she.

"Happy?" quoth I.

"Do you deny that we were happy on that morning?—it would be just about this time of year, two years ago. And what a change in you since then! Heigho! And yet men say that woman is inconstant!"

"I did not know you then," I answered harshly.

"And do you know me now? Has womanhood no mysteries for you since you gathered wisdom in the wilderness?"

I looked at her with detestation in my eyes. The effrontery, the ease and insolence of her bearing, all confirmed my conviction of her utter shamelessness and heartlessness.

"The day after... after your husband died," I said, "I saw you in a dell near Castel Guelfo with my Lord Gambara. In that hour I knew you."

She bit her lip, then smiled again. "What would you?" answered she. "Through your folly and crime I was become an outcast. I went in

danger of my life. You had basely deserted me. My Lord Gambarà, more generous, offered me shelter and protection. I was not born for martyrdom and dungeons," she added, and sighed with smiling plaintiveness. "Are you, of all men, the one to blame me?"

"I have not the right, I know," I answered. "Nor do I blame you more than I blame myself. But since I blame myself most bitterly—since I despise and hate myself for what is past, you may judge what my feelings are for you. And judging them, I think it were well you gave me leave to go."

"I came to speak of other than ourselves, Ser Agostino," she answered, all unmoved still by my scorn, or leastways showing nothing of what emotions might be hers. "It is of that simpering daughter of my Lord of Pagliano."

"There is nothing I could less desire to hear you talk upon," said I.

"It is so very like a man to scorn the thing I could tell him after he has already heard it from me."

"The thing you told me was false," said I. "It was begotten of fear to see your own base interests thwarted. It is proven so by the circumstance that the Duke has sought the hand of Madonna Bianca for Cosimo d'Anguissola."

"For Cosimo?" she cried, and I never saw her so serious and thoughtful. "For Cosimo? You are sure of this?" The urgency of her tone was such that it held me there and compelled my answer.

"I have it from my lord himself."

She knit her brows, her eyes upon the ground; then slowly she raised them, and looked at me again, the same unusual seriousness and alertness in every line of her face.

"Why, by what dark ways does he burrow to his ends?" she mused.

And then her eyes grew lively, her expression cunning and vengeful. "I see it!" she exclaimed. "O, it is as clear as crystal. This is the Roman manner of using complaisant husbands."

"Madonna!" I rebuked her angrily—angry to think that anyone should conceive that Bianca could be so abused.

"Gesu!" she returned with a shrug. "The thing is plain enough if you will but look at it. Here his excellency dares nothing, lest he should provoke the resentment of that uncompromising Lord of Pagliano. But once she is safely away—as Cosimo's wife..."

"Stop!" I cried, putting out a hand as if I would cover her mouth. Then collecting myself. "Do you suggest that Cosimo could lend himself to so infamous a compact?"

"Lend himself? That pander? You do not know your cousin. If you have any interest in this Madonna Bianca you will get her hence without delay, and see that Pier Luigi has no knowledge of the convent to which she is consigned. He enjoys the privileges of a papal offspring, and there is no sanctuary he will respect. So let the thing be done speedily and in secret."

I looked at her between doubt and horror.

"Why should you mistrust me?" she asked, answering my look. "I have been frank with you. It is not you nor that white-faced ninny I would serve. You may both go hang for me, though I loved you once, Agostino." And the sudden tenderness of tone and smile were infinitely mocking. "No, no, beloved, if I meddle in this at all, it is because my own interests are in peril."

I shuddered at the cold, matter-of-fact tone in which she alluded to such interests as those which she could have in Pier Luigi.

"Ay, shrink and cringe, sir saint," she sneered. "Having cast me off and taken up holiness, you have the right, of course." And with that she moved past me, and down the terrace-steps without ever turning her head to look at me again. And that was the last I ever saw of her, as you shall find, though little was it to have been supposed so then.

I stood hesitating, half minded to go after her and question her more closely as to what she knew and what she did no more than surmise. But then I reflected that it mattered little. What really mattered was that her good advice should be acted upon without delay.

I went towards the house and in the loggia came face to face with Cosimo.

"Still pursuing the old love," he greeted me, smiling and jerking his head in the direction of Giuliana. "We ever return to it in the end, they say; yet you had best have a care. It is not well to cross my Lord Pier Luigi in such matters; he can be a very jealous tyrant."

I wondered was there some double meaning in the words. I made shift to pass on, leaving his taunt unanswered, when suddenly he stepped up to me and tapped my shoulder.

"One other thing, sweet cousin. You little deserve a warning at my hands. Yet you shall have it. Make haste to shake the dust of Pagliano from your feet. An evil is hanging over you here."

I looked into his wickedly handsome face, and smiled coldly.

"It is a warning which in my turn I will give to you, you jackal," said I, and watched the expression of his countenance grow set and frozen, the colour recede from it.

"What do you mean?" he growled, touched to suspicion of my knowledge by the term I had employed. "What things has that trull dared to..."

I cut in. "I mean, sir, to warn you. Do not drive me to do more."

We were quite alone. Behind us stretched the long, empty room, before us the empty gardens. He was without weapons as was I. But my manner was so fierce that he recoiled before me, in positive fear of my hands, I think.

I swung on my heel and pursued my way.

I went above to seek Cavalcanti, and found him newly risen. Wrapped in a gown of miniver, he received me with the news that having given the matter thought, he had determined to sacrifice his pride and remove Bianca not later than the morrow, as soon as he could arrange it. And to arrange it he would ride forth at once.

I offered to go with him, and that offer he accepted, whereafter I lounged in his antechamber waiting until he should be dressed, and considering whether to impart to him the further information I had that morning gleaned. In the end I decided not to do so, unable to bring myself to tell him that so much turpitude might possibly be plotting against Bianca. It was a statement that soiled her, so it seemed to me. Indeed I could scarcely bear to think of it.

Presently he came forth full-dressed, booted, and armed, and we went along the corridor and out upon the gallery. As side by side we were descending the steps, we caught sight of a singular group in the courtyard.

Six mounted men in black were drawn up there, and a little in the foreground a seventh, in a corselet of blackened steel and with a steel cap upon his head, stood by his horse in conversation with Farnese. In attendance upon the Duke were Cosimo and some three of his gentlemen.

We halted upon the steps, and I felt Cavalcanti's hand suddenly tighten upon my arm.

"What is it?" I asked innocently, entirely unalarmed. "These are familiars of the Holy Office," he answered me, his tone very grave. In that moment the Duke, turning, espied us. He came towards the staircase to meet us, and his face, too, was very solemn.

We went down, I filled by a strange uneasiness, which I am sure was entirely shared by Cavalcanti.

"Evil tidings, my Lord of Pagliano," said Farnese. "The Holy Office has sent to arrest the person of Agostino d'Anguissola, for whom it has been seeking for over a year."

"For me?" I cried, stepping forward ahead of Cavalcanti. "What has the Holy Office to do with me?"

The leading familiar advanced. "If you are Agostino d'Anguissola, there is a charge of sacrilege against you, for which you are required to answer before the courts of the Holy Office in Rome."

"Sacrilege?" I echoed, entirely bewildered—for my first thought had been that here might be something concerning the death of Fifanti, and that the dread tribunal of the Inquisition dealing with the matter secretly, there would be no disclosures to be feared by those who had evoked its power.

The thought was, after all, a foolish one; for the death of Fifanti was a matter that concerned the Ruota and the open courts, and those, as I well knew, did not dare to move against me, on Messer Gambara's account.

"Of what sacrilege can I be guilty?" I asked.

"The tribunal will inform you," replied the familiar—a tall, sallow, elderly man.

"The tribunal will need, then, to await some other opportunity," said

Cavalcanti suddenly. "Messer d'Anguissola is my guest; and my guests are not so rudely plucked forth from Pagliano."

The Duke drew away, and leaned upon the arm of Cosimo, watching. Behind me in the gallery I heard a rustle of feminine gowns; but I did not turn to look. My eyes were upon the stern sable figure of the familiar.

"You will not be so ill-advised, my lord," he was saying, "as to compel us to use force."

"You will not, I trust, be so ill-advised as to attempt it," laughed Cavalcanti, tossing his great head. "I have five score men-at-arms within these walls, Messer Black-clothes."

The familiar bowed. "That being so, the force for to-day is yours, as you say. But I would solemnly warn you not to employ it contumaciously against the officers of the Holy Office, nor to hinder them in the duty which they are here to perform, lest you render yourself the object of their just resentment."

Cavalcanti took a step forward, his face purple with anger that this tipstaff ruffian should take such a tone with him. But in that instant I seized his arm.

"It is a trap!" I muttered in his ear. "Beware!"

I was no more than in time. I had surprised upon Farnese's mottled face a sly smile—the smile of the cat which sees the mouse come venturing from its lair. And I saw the smile perish—to confirm my suspicions—when at my whispered words Cavalcanti checked in his rashness.

Still holding him by the arm, I turned to the familiar.

"I shall surrender to you in a moment, sir," said I. "Meanwhile, and you, gentlemen—give us leave apart." And I drew the bewildered

Cavalcanti aside and down the courtyard under the colonnade of the gallery.

"My lord, be wise for Bianca's sake," I implored him. "I am assured that here is nothing but a trap baited for you. Do not gorge their bait as your valour urges you. Defeat them, my lord, by circumspection. Do you not see that if you resist the Holy Office, they can issue a ban against you, and that against such a ban not even the Emperor can defend you? Indeed, if they told him that his feudatory, the Lord of Pagliano, had been guilty of contumaciously thwarting the ends of the Holy Inquisition, that bigot Charles V would be the first to deliver you over to the ghastly practices of that tribunal. It should not need, my lord, that I should tell you this."

"My God!" he groaned in utter misery. "But you, Agostino?"

"There is nothing against me," I answered impatiently. "What sacrilege have I ever committed? The thing is a trumped-up business, conceived with a foul purpose by Messer Pier Luigi there. Courage, then, and self-restraint; and thus we shall foil their aims. Come, my lord, I will ride to Rome with them. And do not doubt that I shall return very soon."

He looked at me with eyes that were full of trouble, indecision in every line of a face that was wont to look so resolute. He knew himself between the sword and the wall.

"I would that Galeotto were here!" cried that man usually so self-reliant. "What will he say to me when he comes? You were a sacred charge, boy."

"Say to him that I will be returning shortly—which must be true. Come, then. You may serve me this way. The other way you will but have to endure ultimate arrest, and so leave Bianca at their mercy, which is precisely what they seek."

He braced himself at the thought of Bianca. We turned, and in silence we paced back, quite leisurely as if entirely at our ease, for all that Cavalcanti's face had grown very haggard.

"I yield me, sir," I said to the familiar.

"A wise decision," sneered the Duke.

"I trust you'll find it so, my lord," I answered, sneering too.

They led forward a horse for me, and when I had embraced Cavalcanti, I mounted and my funereal escort closed about me. We rode across the courtyard under the startled eyes of the folk of Pagliano, for the familiars of the Holy Office were dread and fearful objects even to the stoutest-hearted man. As we neared the gateway a shrill cry rang out on the morning air:

"Agostino!"

Fear and tenderness and pain were all blent in that cry.

I swung round in the saddle to behold the white form of Bianca, standing in the gallery with parted lips and startled eyes that were gazing after me, her arms outheld. And then, even as I looked, she crumpled and sank with a little moan into the arms of the ladies who were with her.

I looked at Pier Luigi and from the depths of my heart I cursed him, and I prayed that the day might not be far distant when he should be made to pay for all the sins of his recreant life.

And then, as we rode out into the open country, my thoughts were turned to tenderer matters, and it came to me that when all was done, that cry of Bianca's made it worth while to have been seized by the talons of the Holy Office.

CHAPTER VII. THE PAPAL BULL

And now, that you may understand to the full the thing that happened, it is necessary that I should relate it here in its proper sequence, although that must entail my own withdrawal for a time from pages upon which too long I have intruded my own doings and thoughts and feelings.

I set it down as it was told to me later by those who bore their share in it, and particularly by Falcone, who, as you shall learn, came to be a witness of all, and retailed to me the affair with the greatest detail of what this one said and how that one looked.

I reached Rome on the fourth day after my setting out with my grim escort, and on that same day, at much the same hour as that in which the door of my dungeon in Sant' Angelo closed upon me, Galeotto rode into the courtyard of Pagliano on his return from his treasonable journey.

He was attended only by Falcone, and it so chanced that his arrival was witnessed by Farnese, who with various members of his suite was lounging in the gallery at the time.

Surprise was mutual at the encounter; for Galeotto had known nothing of the Duke's sojourn at Pagliano, believing him to be still at Parma, whilst the Duke as little suspected that of the five score men-at-arms garrisoned in Pagliano, three score lances were of Galeotto's free company.

But at sight of this condottiero, whose true aims he was far from

suspecting, and whose services he was eager to enlist, the Duke heaved himself up from his seat and went down the staircase shouting greetings to the soldier, and playfully calling him Galeotto in its double sense, and craving to know where he had been hiding himself this while.

The condottiero swung down from his saddle unaided—a thing which he could do even when full-armed—and stood before Farnese, a grim, dust-stained figure, with a curious smile twisting his scarred face.

"Why," said he, in answer, "I have been upon business that concerns your magnificence somewhat closely."

And with Falcone at his heels he advanced, the horses relinquished to the grooms who had hastened forward.

"Upon business that concerns me?" quoth the Duke, intrigued.

"Why, yes," said Galeotto, who stood now face to face with Farnese at the foot of the steps up which the Duke's attendants were straggling. "I have been recruiting forces, and since one of these days your magnificence is to give me occupation, you will see that the matter concerns you."

Above leaned Cavalcanti, his face grey and haggard, without the heart to relish the wicked humour of Galeotto that could make jests for his own entertainment. True there was also Falcone to overhear, appreciate, and grin under cover of his great brown hand.

"Does this mean that you are come to your senses on the score of a stipend, Ser Galeotto?" quoth the Duke.

"I am not a trader out of the Giudecca to haggle over my wares," replied the burly condottiero. "But I nothing doubt that your magnificence and I will come to an understanding at the last."

"Five thousand ducats yearly is my offer," said Farnese, "provided that you bring three hundred lances."

"Ah, well!" said Galeotto softly, "you may come to regret one of these days, highness, that you did not think well to pay me the price I ask."

"Regret?" quoth the Duke, with a frown of displeasure at so much frankness.

"When you see me engaged in the service of some other," Galeotto explained. "You need a condottiero, my lord; and you may come to need one even more than you do now."

"I have the Lord of Mondolfo," said the Duke.

Galeotto stared at him with round eyes. "The Lord of Mondolfo?" quoth he, intentionally uncomprehending.

"You have not heard? Why, here he stands." And he waved a jewelled hand towards Cosimo, a handsome figure in green and blue, standing nearest to Farnese.

Galeotto looked at this Anguissola, and his brow grew very black.

"So," he said slowly, "you are the Lord of Mondolfo, eh? I think you are very brave."

"I trust my valour will not be lacking when the proof of it is needed," answered Cosimo haughtily, feeling the other's unfriendly mood and responding to it.

"It cannot," said Galeotto, "since you have the courage to assume that title, for the lordship of Mondolfo is an unlucky one to bear, Ser Cosimo. Giovanni d'Anguissola was unhappy in all things, and his was a truly miserable end. His father before him was poisoned by his best friend, and as for the last who legitimately bore that title—why,

none can say that the poor lad was fortunate."

"The last who legitimately bore that title?" cried Cosimo, very ruffled. "I think, sir, it is your aim to affront me."

"And what is more," continued the condottiero, as if Cosimo had not spoken, "not only are the lords of Mondolfo unlucky in themselves but they are a source of ill luck to those they serve. Giovanni's father had but taken service with Cesare Borgia when the latter's ruin came at the hands of Pope Julius II. What Giovanni's own friendship cost his friends none knows better than your highness. So that, when all is said, I think you had better look about you for another condottiero, magnificent."

The magnificent stood gnawing his beard and brooding darkly, for he was a grossly superstitious fellow who studied omens and dabbled in horoscopes, divinations, and the like. And he was struck by the thing that Galeotto said. He looked at Cosimo darkly. But Cosimo laughed.

"Who believes such old wives' tales? Not I, for one."

"The more fool you!" snapped the Duke.

"Indeed, indeed," Galeotto applauded. "A disbelief in omens can but spring from an ignorance of such matters. You should study them, Messer Cosimo. I have done so, and I tell you that the lordship of Mondolfo is unlucky to all dark-complexioned men. And when such a man has a mole under the left ear as you have—in itself a sign of death by hanging—it is well to avoid all risks."

"Now that is very strange!" muttered the Duke, much struck by this whittling down of Cosimo's chances, whilst Cosimo shrugged impatiently and smiled contemptuously. "You seem to be greatly versed in these matters, Ser Galeotto," added Farnese.

"He who would succeed in whatever he may undertake should qualify to read all signs," said Galeotto sententiously. "I have sought this knowledge."

"Do you see aught in me that you can read?" inquired the Duke in all seriousness.

Galeotto considered him a moment without any trace in his eyes of the wicked mockery that filled his soul. "Why," he answered slowly, "not in your own person, magnificent—leastways, not upon so brief a glance. But since you ask me, I have lately been considering the new coinage of your highness."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the Duke, all eagerness, whilst several of his followers came crowding nearer—for all the world is interested in omens. "What do you read there?"

"Your fate, I think."

"My fate?"

"Have you a coin upon you?"

Farnese produced a gold ducat, fire-new from the mint. The condottiero took it and placed his finger upon the four letters P L A C—the abbreviation of "Placentia" in the inscription.

"P—L—A—C," he spelled. "That contains your fate, magnificent, and you may read it for yourself." And he returned the coin to the Duke, who stared at the letters foolishly and then at this reader of omens.

"But what is the meaning of PLAC?" he asked, and he had paled a little with excitement.

"I have a feeling that it is a sign. I cannot say more. I can but point it out to you, my lord, and leave the deciphering of it to yourself, who are

more skilled than most men in such matters. Have I your excellency's leave to go doff this dusty garb?" he concluded.

"Ay, go, sir," answered the Duke abstractedly, puzzling now with knitted brows over the coin that bore his image.

"Come, Falcone," said Galeotto, and with his equerry at his heels he set his foot on the first step.

Cosimo leaned forward, a sneer on his white hawk-face, "I trust, Ser Galeotto, that you are a better condottiero than a charlatan."

"And you, sir," said Galeotto, smiling his sweetest in return, "are, I trust, a better charlatan than a condottiero."

He went up the stairs, the gaudy throng making way before him, and he came at last to the top, where stood the Lord of Pagliano awaiting him, a great trouble in his eyes. They clasped hands in silence, and Cavalcanti went in person to lead his guest to his apartments.

"You have not a happy air," said Galeotto as they went. "And, Body of God! it is no matter for marvel considering the company you keep. How long has the Farnese beast been here?"

"His visit is now in its third week," said Cavalcanti, answering mechanically.

Galeotto swore in sheer surprise. "By the Host! And what keeps him?"

Cavalcanti shrugged and let his arms fall to his sides. To Galeotto this proud, stern baron seemed most oddly dispirited.

"I see that we must talk," he said. "Things are speeding well and swiftly now," he added, dropping his voice. "But more of that presently. I have much to tell you."

When they had reached the chamber that was Galeotto's, and the doors were closed and Falcone was unbuckling his master's spurs—"Now for my news," said the condottiero. "But first, to spare me repetitions, let us have Agostino here. Where is he?"

The look on Cavalcanti's face caused Galeotto to throw up his head like a spirited animal that scents danger.

"Where is he?" he repeated, and old Falcone's fingers fell idle upon the buckle on which they were engaged.

Cavalcanti's answer was a groan. He flung his long arms to the ceiling, as if invoking Heaven's aid; then he let them fall again heavily, all strength gone out of them.

Galeotto stood an instant looking at him and turning very white. Suddenly he stepped forward, leaving Falcone upon his knees.

"What is this?" he said, his voice a rumble of thunder. "Where is the boy? I say."

The Lord of Pagliano could not meet the gaze of those steel coloured eyes.

"O God!" he groaned. "How shall I tell you?"

"Is he dead?" asked Galeotto, his voice hard.

"No, no—not dead. But... But..." The plight of one usually so strong, so full of mastery and arrogance, was pitiful.

"But what?" demanded the condottiero. "Gesu! Am I a woman, or a man without sorrows, that you need to stand hesitating? Whatever it may be, speak, then, and tell me."

"He is in the clutches of the Holy Office," answered Cavalcanti miserably.

Galeotto looked at him, his pallor increasing. Then he sat down suddenly, and, elbows on knees, he took his head in his hands and spoke no word for a spell, during which time Falcone, still kneeling, looked from one to the other in an agony of apprehension and impatience to hear more.

Neither noticed the presence of the equerry; nor would it have mattered if they had, for he was trusty as steel, and they had no secrets from him.

At last, having gained some measure of self-control, Galeotto begged to know what had happened, and Cavalcanti related the event.

"What could I do? What could I do?" he cried when he had finished.

"You let them take him?" said Galeotto, like a man who repeats the thing he has been told, because he cannot credit it. "You let them take him?"

"What alternative had I?" groaned Cavalcanti, his face ashen and seared with pain.

"There is that between us, Ettore, that... that will not let me credit this, even though you tell it me."

And now the wretched Lord of Pagliano began to use the very arguments that I had used to him. He spoke of Cosimo's suit of his daughter, and how the Duke sought to constrain him to consent to the alliance. He urged that in this matter of the Holy Office was a trap set for him to place him in Farnese's power.

"A trap?" roared the condottiero, leaping up. "What trap? Where is this trap? You had five score men-at-arms under your orders here—three score of them my own men, each one of whom would have laid down his life for me, and you allowed the boy to be taken hence by six

rascals from the Holy Office, intimidated by a paltry score of troopers that rode with this filthy Duke!"

"Nay, nay—not that," the other protested. "Had I dared to raise a finger I should have brought myself within the reach of the Inquisition without benefiting Agostino. That was the trap, as Agostino himself perceived. It was he himself who urged me not to intervene, but to let them take him hence, since there was no possible charge which the Holy Office could prefer against him."

"No charge!" cried Galeotto, with a withering scorn. "Did villainy ever want for invention? And this trap? Body of God, Ettore, am I to account you a fool after all these years? What trap was there that could be sprung upon you as things stood? Why, man, the game was in your hands entirely. Here was this Farnese in your power. What better hostage than that could you have held? You had but to whistle your war-dogs to heel and seize his person, demanding of the Pope his father a plenary absolution and indemnity for yourself and for Agostino from any prosecutions of the Holy Office ere you surrendered him. And had they attempted to employ force against you, you could have held them in check by threatening to hang the Duke unless the parchments you demanded were signed and delivered to you. My God, Ettore! Must I tell you this?"

Cavalcanti sank to a seat and took his head in his hands.

"You are right," he said. "I deserve all your reproaches. I have been a fool. Worse—I have wanted for courage." And then, suddenly, he reared his head again, and his glance kindled. "But it is not yet too late," he cried, and started up. "It is still time!"

"Time!" sneered Galeotto. "Why, the boy is in their hands. It is hostage for hostage now, a very different matter. He is lost—irretrievably lost!" he ended, groaning. "We can but avenge him. To save him is beyond our power."

"No," said Cavalcanti. "It is not. I am a dolt, a dotard; and I have been the cause of it. Then I shall pay the price."

"What price?" quoth the condottiero, pondering the other with an eye that held no faintest gleam of hope.

"Within an hour you shall have in your hands the necessary papers to set Agostino at liberty; and you shall carry them yourself to Rome. It is the amend I owe you. It shall be made."

"But how is it possible?"

"It is possible, and it shall be done. And when it is done you may count upon me to the last breath to help you to pull down this pestilential Duke in ruin."

He strode to the door, his step firm once more and his face set, though it was very grey. "I will leave you now. But you may count upon the fulfilment of my promise."

He went out, leaving Galeotto and Falcone alone, and the condottiero flung himself into a chair and sat there moodily, deep in thought, still in his dusty garments and with no thought for changing them. Falcone stood by the window, looking out upon the gardens and not daring to intrude upon his master's mood.

Thus Cavalcanti found them a hour later when he returned. He brought a parchment, to which was appended a great seal bearing the Pontifical arms. He thrust it into Galeotto's hand.

"There," he said, "is the discharge of the debt which through my weakness and folly I have incurred."

Galeotto looked at the parchment, then at Cavalcanti, and then at the parchment once more. It was a papal bull of plenary pardon and indemnity to me.

"How came you by this?" he asked, astonished.

"Is not Farnese the Pope's son?" quoth Cavalcanti scornfully.

"But upon what terms was it conceded? If it involves your honour, your life, or your liberty, here's to make an end of it." And he held it across in his hands as if to tear it, looking up at the Lord of Pagliano.

"It involves none of these," the latter answered steadily. "You had best set out at once. The Holy Office can be swift to act."

CHAPTER VIII. THE THIRD DEGREE

I was haled from my dungeon by my gaoler accompanied by two figures that looked immensely tall in their black monkish gowns, their heads and faces covered by vizored cowls in which two holes were cut for their eyes. Seen by the ruddy glare of the torch which the gaoler carried to that subterranean place of darkness, those black, silent figures, their very hands tucked away into the wide-mouthed sleeves of their habits, looked spectral and lurid—horrific messengers of death.

By chill, dark passages of stone, through which our steps reverberated, they brought me to a pillared, vaulted underground chamber, lighted by torches in iron brackets on the walls.

On a dais stood an oaken writing-table bearing two massive wax tapers and a Crucifix. At this table sat a portly, swarthy-visaged man in the black robes of the order of St. Dominic. Immediately below and flanking him on either hand sat two mute cowed figures to do the office of amanuenses.

Away on the right, where the shadows were but faintly penetrated by the rays of the torches, stood an engine of wood somewhat of the size and appearance of the framework of a couch, but with stout straps of leather to pinion the patient, and enormous wooden screws upon which the frame could be made to lengthen or contract. From the ceiling grey ropes dangled from pulleys, like the tentacles of some dread monster of cruelty.

One glance into that gloomy part of the chamber was enough for

me.

Repressing a shudder, I faced the inquisitor, and thereafter kept my eyes upon him to avoid the sight of those other horrors. And he was horror enough for any man in my circumstances to envisage.

He was very fat, with a shaven, swarthy face and the dewlap of an ox. In that round fleshliness his eyes were sunken like two black buttons, malicious through their very want of expression. His mouth was loose-lipped and gluttonous and cruel.

When he spoke, the deep rumbling quality of his voice was increased by the echoes of that vaulted place.

"What is your name?" he said.

"I am Agostino d'Anguissola, Lord of Mondolfo and..."

"Pass over your titles," he boomed. "The Holy Office takes no account of worldly rank. What is your age?"

"I am in my twenty-first year."

"Benedicamus Dominum," he commented, though I could not grasp the appositeness of the comment. "You stand accused, Agostino d'Anguissola, of sacrilege and of defiling holy things. What have you to say? Do you confess your guilt?"

"I am so far from confessing it," I answered, "that I have yet to learn what is the nature of the sacrilege with which I am charged. I am conscious of no such sin. Far from it, indeed..."

"You shall be informed," he interrupted, imposing silence upon me by a wave of his fat hand; and heaving his vast bulk sideways—"Read him the indictment," he bade one of the amanuenses.

From the depths of a vizored cowl came a thin, shrill voice:

"The Holy Office has knowledge that Agostino d'Anguissola did for a space of some six months, during the winter of the year of Our Blessed Lord 1544, and the spring of the year of Our Blessed Lord 1545, pursue a fraudulent and sacrilegious traffic, adulterating, for moneys which he extorted from the poor and the faithful, things which are holy, and adapting them to his own base purposes. It is charged against him that in a hermitage on Monte Orsaro he did claim for an image of St. Sebastian that it was miraculous, that it had power to heal suffering and that miraculously it bled from its wounds each year during Passion Week, whence it resulted that pilgrimages were made to this false shrine and great store of alms was collected by the said Agostino d'Anguissola, which moneys he appropriated to his own purposes. It is further known that ultimately he fled the place, fearing discovery, and that after his flight the image was discovered broken and the cunning engine by which this diabolical sacrilege was perpetrated was revealed."

Throughout the reading, the fleshy eyes of the inquisitor had been steadily, inscrutably regarding me. He passed a hand over his pendulous chin, as the thin voice faded into silence.

"You have heard," said he.

"I have heard a tangle of falsehood," answered I. "Never was truth more untruly told than this."

The beady eyes vanished behind narrowing creases of fat; and yet I knew that they were still regarding me. Presently they appeared again.

"Do you deny that the image contained this hideous engine of fraud?"

"I do not," I answered.

"Set it down," he eagerly bade one of the amanuenses. "He

confesses thus much." And then to me—"Do you deny that you occupied that hermitage during the season named?"

"I do not."

"Set it down," he said again. "What, then, remains?" he asked me.

"It remains that I knew nothing of the fraud. The trickster was a pretended monk who dwelt there before me and at whose death I was present. I took his place thereafter, implicitly believing in the miraculous image, refusing, when its fraud was ultimately suggested to me, to credit that any man could have dared so vile and sacrilegious a thing. In the end, when it was broken and its fraud discovered, I quitted that ghastly shrine of Satan's in horror and disgust."

There was no emotion on the huge, yellow face. "That is the obvious defence," he said slowly. "But it does not explain the appropriation of the moneys."

"I appropriated none," I cried angrily. "That is the foulest lie of all."

"Do you deny that alms were made?"

"Certainly they were made; though to what extent I am unaware. A vessel of baked earth stood at the door to receive the offerings of the faithful. It had been my predecessor's practice to distribute a part of these alms among the poor; a part, it was said, he kept to build a bridge over the Bagnanza torrent, which was greatly needed."

"Well, well?" quoth he. "And when you left you took with you the moneys that had been collected?"

"I did not," I answered. "I gave the matter no thought. When I left I took nothing with me—not so much as the habit I had worn in that hermitage."

There was a pause. Then he spoke slowly. "Such is not the evidence before the Holy Office."

"What evidence?" I cried, breaking in upon his speech. "Where is my accuser? Set me face to face with him."

Slowly he shook his huge head with its absurd fringe of greasy locks about the tonsured scalp—that symbol of the Crown of Thorns.

"You must surely know that such is not the way of the Holy Office. In its wisdom this tribunal holds that to produce delators would be to subject them perhaps to molestation, and thus dry up the springs of knowledge and information which it now enjoys. So that your request is idle as idle as is the attempt at defence that you have made, the falsehoods with which you have sought to clog the wheels of justice."

"Falsehood, sir monk?" quoth I, so fiercely that one of my attendants set a restraining hand upon my arm.

The beady eyes vanished and reappeared, and they considered me impassively.

"Your sin, Agostino d'Anguissola," said he in his booming, level voice, "is the most hideous that the wickedness of man could conceive or diabolical greed put into execution. It is the sin that more than any other closes the door to mercy. It is the offence of Simon Mage, and it is to be expiated only through the gates of death. You shall return hence to your cell, and when the door closes upon you, it closes upon you for all time in life, nor shall you ever see your fellow-man again. There hunger and thirst shall be your executioners, slowly to deprive you of a life of which you have not known how to make better use. Without light or food or drink shall you remain there until you die. This is the punishment for such sacrilege as yours."

I could not believe it. I stood before him what time he mouthed out those horrible and emotionless words. He paused a moment, and

again came that broad gesture of his that stroked mouth and chin. Then he resumed:

"So much for your body. There remains your soul. In its infinite mercy, the Holy Office desires that your expiation be fulfilled in this life, and that you may be rescued from the fires of everlasting Hell. Therefore it urges you to cleanse yourself by a full and contrite avowal ere you go hence. Confess, then, my son, and save your soul."

"Confess?" I echoed. "Confess to a falsehood? I have told you the truth of this matter. I tell you that in all the world there is none less prone to sacrilege than I that I am by nature and rearing devout and faithful. These are lies which have been uttered to my hurt. In dooming me you doom an innocent man. Be it so. I do not know that I have found the world so delectable a place as to quit it with any great regret. My blood be upon your own heads and upon this iniquitous and monstrous tribunal. But spare yourselves at least the greater offence of asking my confession of a falsehood."

The little eyes had vanished. The face grew very evil, stirred at last into animosity by my denunciation of that court. Then the inscrutable mask slipped once more over that odious countenance.

He took up a little mallet, and struck a gong that stood beside him.

I heard a creaking of hinges, and saw an opening in the wall to my right, where I had perceived no door. Two men came forth—brawny, muscular, bearded men in coarse, black hose and leathern waistcoats cut deep at the neck and leaving their great arms entirely naked. The foremost carried a thong of leather in his hands.

"The hoist," said the inquisitor shortly.

The men advanced towards me and came to replace the familiars between whom I had been standing. Each seized an arm, and they held me so. I made no resistance.

"Will you confess?" the inquisitor demanded. "There is still time to save yourself from torture."

But already the torture had commenced, for the very threat of it is known as the first degree. I was in despair. Death I could suffer. But under torments I feared that my strength might fail. I felt my flesh creeping and tightening upon my body, which had grown very cold with the awful chill of fear; my hair seemed to bristle and stiffen until I thought that I could feel each separate thread of it.

"I swear to you that I have spoken the truth," I cried desperately. "I swear it by the sacred image of Our Redeemer standing there before you."

"Shall we believe the oath of an unbeliever attainted of sacrilege?" he grumbled, and he almost seemed to sneer.

"Believe or not," I answered. "But believe this—that one day you shall stand face to face with a Judge Whom there is no deceiving, to answer for the abomination that you make of justice in His Holy Name. Let loose against me your worst cruelties, then; they shall be as caresses to the torments that will be loosed against you when your turn for Judgment comes."

"To the hoist with him," he commanded, stretching an arm towards the grey tentacle-like ropes. "We must soften his heart and break the diabolical pride that makes him persevere in blasphemy."

They led me aside into that place of torments, and one of them drew down the ropes from the pulley overhead, until the ends fell on a level with my wrists. And this was torture of the second degree—to see its imminence.

"Will you confess?" boomed the inquisitor's voice. I made him no answer.

"Strip and attach him," he commanded.

The executioners laid hold of me, and in the twinkling of an eye I stood naked to the waist. I caught my lips in my teeth as the ropes were being adjusted to my wrists, and as thus I suffered torture of the third degree.

"Will you confess?" came again the question.

And scarcely had it been put—for the last time, as I well knew—than the door was flung open, and a young man in black sprang into the chamber, and ran to thrust a parchment before the inquisitor.

The inquisitor made a sign to the executioners to await his pleasure.

I stood with throbbing pulses, and waited, instinctively warned that this concerned me. The inquisitor took the parchment, considered its seals and then the writing upon it.

That done he set it down and turned to face us.

"Release him," he bade the executioners, whereat I felt as I would faint in the intensity of this reaction.

When they had done his bidding, the Dominican beckoned me forward. I went, still marvelling.

"See," he said, "how inscrutable are the Divine ways, and how truth must in the end prevail. Your innocence is established, after all, since the Holy Father himself has seen cause to intervene to save you. You are at liberty. You are free to depart and to go wheresoever you will. This bull concerns you." And he held it out to me.

My mind moved through these happenings as a man moves through a dense fog, faltering and hesitating at every step. I took the parchment and considered it. Satisfied as to its nature, however

mystified as to how the Pope had come to intervene, I folded the document and thrust it into my belt.

Then the familiars of the Holy Office assisted me to resume my garments; and all was done now in utter silence, and for my own part in the same mental and dream-like confusion.

At length the inquisitor waved a huge hand doorwards. "Ite!" he said, and added, whilst his raised hand seemed to perform a benedictory gesture—"Pax Domini sit tecum."

"Et cum spiritu tuo," I replied mechanically, as, turning, I stumbled out of that dread place in the wake of the messenger who had brought the bull, and who went ahead to guide me.

CHAPTER IX. THE RETURN

Above in the blessed sunlight, which hurt my eyes—for I had not seen it for a full week—I found Galeotto awaiting me in a bare room; and scarcely was I aware of his presence than his great arms went round me and enclasped me so fervently that his corselet almost hurt my breast, and brought back as in a flash a poignant memory of another man fully as tall, who had held me to him one night many years ago, and whose armour, too, had hurt me in that embrace.

Then he held me at arms' length and considered me, and his steely eyes were blurred and moist. He muttered something to the familiar, linked his arm through mine and drew me away, down passages, through doors, and so at last into the busy Roman street.

We went in silence by ways that were well known to him but in which I should assuredly have lost myself, and so we came at last to a fair tavern—the Osteria del Sole—near the Tower of Nona.

His horse was stalled here, and a servant led the way above-stairs to the room that he had hired.

How wrong had I not been, I reflected, to announce before the Inquisition that I should have no regrets in leaving this world. How ungrateful was that speech, considering this faithful one who loved me for my father's sake! And was there not Bianca, who, surely—if her last cry, wrung from her by anguish, contained the truth—must love me for my own?

How sweet the revulsion that now came upon me as I sank into a chair by the window, and gave myself up to the enjoyment of that truly happy moment in which the grey shadow of death had been lifted

from me.

Servants bustled in, to spread the board with the choice meats that Galeotto had ordered, and great baskets of luscious fruits and flagons of red Puglia wine; and soon we seated ourselves to the feast.

But ere I began to eat, I asked Galeotto how this miracle had been wrought; what magic powers he wielded that even the Holy Office must open its doors at his bidding. With a glance at the servants who attended us, he bade me eat, saying that we should talk anon. And as my reaction had brought a sharp hunger in its train, I fell to with the best will in all the world, and from broth to figs there were few words between us.

At last, our goblets charged and the servants with-drawn, I repeated my inquiry.

"The magic is not mine," said Galeotto. "It is Cavalcanti's. It was he who obtained this bull."

And with that he set himself briefly to relate the matters that already are contained here concerning that transaction, but the minuter details of which I was later to extract from Falcone. And as he proceeded with his narrative I felt myself growing cold again with apprehension, just as I had grown cold that morning in the hands of the executioners. Until at last, seeing me dead-white, Galeotto checked to inquire what ailed me.

"What—what was the price that Cavalcanti paid for this?" I inquired in answer.

"I could not glean it, nor did I stay to insist, for there was haste. He assured me that the thing had been accomplished without hurt to his honour, life, or liberty; and with that I was content, and spurred for Rome."

"And you have never since thought what the price was that Cavalcanti might have paid?"

He looked at me with troubled eyes. "I confess that in this matter the satisfaction of coming to your salvation has made me selfish. I have had thoughts for nothing else."

I groaned, and flung out my arms across the table. "He has paid such a price," I said, "that a thousand times sooner would I that you had left me where I was."

He leaned forward, frowning darkly. "What do you mean?" he cried.

And then I told him what I feared; told him how Farnese had sued for Bianca's hand for Cosimo; how proudly and finally Cavalcanti had refused; how the Duke had insisted that he would remain at Pagliano until my lord changed his mind; how I had learned from Giuliana the horrible motive that urged the Duke to press for that marriage.

Lastly—"And that is the price he consented to pay," I cried wildly. "His daughter—that sweet virgin—was the price! And at this hour, maybe, the price is paid and that detestable bargain consummated. O, Galeotto! Galeotto! Why was I not left to rot in that dungeon of the Inquisition—since I could have died happily, knowing naught of this?"

"By the Blood of God, boy! Do you imply that I had knowledge? Do you suggest that I would have bought any life at such a price?"

"No, no!" I answered. "I know that you did not—that you could not..." And then I leaped to my feet. "And we sit talking here, whilst this... whilst this... O God!" I sobbed. "We may yet be in time. To horse, then! Let us away!"

He, too, came to his feet. "Ay, you are right. It but remains to remedy the evil. Come, then. Anger shall mend my spent strength. It can be done in three days. We will ride as none ever rode yet since

the world began."

And we did—so desperately that by the morning of the third day, which was a Sunday, we were in Forli (having crossed the Apennines at Arcangelo) and by that same evening in Bologna. We had not slept and we had scarcely rested since leaving Rome. We were almost dead from weariness.

Since such was my own case, what must have been Galeotto's? He was of iron, it is true. But consider that he had ridden this way at as desperate a pace already, to save me from the clutches of the Inquisition; and that, scarce rested, he was riding north again. Consider this, and you will not marvel that his weariness conquered him at last.

At the inn at Bologna where we dismounted, we found old Falcone awaiting us. He had set out with his master to ride to Rome. But being himself saddle-worn at the time, he had been unable to proceed farther than this, and here Galeotto in his fierce impatience had left him, pursuing his way alone.

Here, then, we found the equerry again, consumed by anxiety. He leapt forward to greet me, addressing me by the old title of Madonnino which I loved to hear from him, however much that title might otherwise arouse harsh and gloomy memories.

Here at Bologna Galeotto announced that he would be forced to rest, and we slept for three hours—until night had closed in. We were shaken out of our slumbers by the host as he had been ordered; but even then I lay entranced, my limbs refusing their office, until the memory of what was at issue acted like a spur upon me, and caused me to fling my weariness aside as if it had been a cloak.

Galeotto, however, was in a deplorable case. He could not move a limb. He was exhausted—utterly and hopelessly exhausted with

fatigue and want of sleep. Falcone and I pulled him to his feet between us; but he collapsed again, unable to stand.

"I am spent," he muttered. "Give me twelve hours—twelve hours' sleep, Agostino, and I'll ride with you to the Devil."

I groaned and cursed in one. "Twelve hours!" I cried. "And she... I can't wait, Galeotto. I must ride on alone."

He lay on his back and stared up at me, and his eyes had a glassy stare. Then he roused himself by an effort, and raised himself upon his elbow.

"That is it, boy—ride on alone. Take Falcone. Listen, there are three score men of mine at Pagliano who will follow you to Hell at a word that Falcone shall speak to them from me. About it, then, and save her. But wait, boy! Do no violence to Farnese, if you can help it."

"But if I can't?" I asked.

"If you can't—no matter. But endeavour not to offer him any hurt! Leave that to me—anon when all is ripe for it. To-day it would be premature, and... and we... we should be... crushed by the..." His speech trailed off into incoherent mutterings; his eyelids dropped, and he was fast asleep again.

Ten minutes later we were riding north again, and all that night we rode, along the endless Aemilian Way, pausing for no more than a draught of wine from time to time, and munching a loaf as we rode. We crossed the Po, and kept steadily on, taking fresh horses when we could, until towards sunset a turn in the road brought Pagliano into our view—grey and lichened on the crest of its smooth emerald hill.

The dusk was falling and lights began to gleam from some of the castle windows when we brought up in the shadow of the gateway.

A man-at-arms lounged out of the guardhouse to inquire our

business.

"Is Madonna Bianca wed yet?" was the breathless greeting I gave him.

He peered at me, and then at Falcone, and he swore in some surprise.

"Well, returned my lord! Madonna Bianca? The nuptials were celebrated to-day. The bride has gone."

"Gone?" I roared. "Gone whither, man?"

"Why, to Piacenza—to my Lord Cosimo's palace there. They set out some three hours since."

"Where is your lord?" I asked him, flinging myself from the saddle.

"Within doors, most noble."

How I found him, or by what ways I went to do so, are things that are effaced completely from my memory. But I know that I came upon him in the library. He was sitting hunched in a great chair, his face ashen, his eyes fevered. At sight of me—the cause, however innocent, of all this evil—his brows grew dark, and his eyes angry. If he had reproaches for me, I gave him no time to utter them, but hurled him mine.

"What have you done, sir?" I demanded. "By what right did you do this thing? By what right did you make a sacrifice of that sweet dove? Did you conceive me so vile as to think that I should ever owe you gratitude—that I should ever do aught but abhor the deed, abhor all who had a hand in it, abhor the very life itself purchased for me at such a cost?"

He cowered before my furious wrath; for I must have seemed terrific as I stood thundering there, my face wild, my eyes bloodshot,

half mad from pain and rage and sleeplessness.

"And do you know what you have done?" I went on. "Do you know to what you have sold her? Must I tell you?"

And I told him, in a dozen brutal words that brought him to his feet, the lion in him roused at last, his eyes ablaze.

"We must after them," I urged. "We must wrest her from these beasts, and make a widow of her for the purpose. Galeotto's lances are below and they will follow me. You may bring what more you please. Come, sir—to horse!"

He sprang forward with no answer beyond a muttered prayer that we might come in time.

"We must," I answered fiercely, and ran madly from the room, along the gallery and down the stairs, shouting and raging like a maniac, Cavalcanti following me.

Within ten minutes, Galeotto's three score men and another score of those who garrisoned Pagliano for Cavalcanti were in the saddle and galloping hell-for-leather to Piacenza. Ahead on fresh horses went Falcone and I, the Lord of Pagliano spurring beside me and pestering me with questions as to the source of my knowledge.

Our great fear was lest we should find the gates of Piacenza closed on our arrival. But we covered the ten miles in something under an hour, and the head of our little column was already through the Fodesta Gate when the first hour of night rang out from the Duomo, giving the signal for the closing of the gates.

The officer in charge turned out to view so numerous a company, and challenged us to stand. But I flung him the answer that we were the Black Bands of Ser Galeotto and that we rode by order of the Duke, with which perforce he had to be content; for we did not stay for

more and were too numerous to be detained by such meagre force as he commanded.

Up the dark street we swept—the same street down which I had last ridden on that night when Gambara had opened the gates of the prison for me—and so we came to the square and to Cosimo's palace.

All was in darkness, and the great doors were closed. A strange appearance this for a house to which a bride had so newly come.

I dismounted as lightly as if I had not ridden lately more than just the ten miles from Pagliano. Indeed, I had become unconscious of all fatigue, entirely oblivious of the fact that for three nights now I had not slept—save for the three hours at Bologna.

I knocked briskly on the iron-studded gates. We stood there waiting, Cavalcanti and Falcone afoot with me, the men on horseback still, a silent phalanx.

I issued an order to Falcone. "Ten of them to secure our egress, the rest to remain here and allow none to leave the house."

The equerry stepped back to convey the command in his turn to the men, and the ten he summoned slipped instantly from their saddles and ranged themselves in the shadow of the wall.

I knocked again, more imperatively, and at last the postern in the door was opened by an elderly serving-man.

"What's this?" he asked, and thrust a lanthorn into my face.

"We seek Messer Cosimo d'Anguissola," I answered. He looked beyond me at the troop that lined the street, and his face became troubled. "Why, what is amiss?" quoth he.

"Fool, I shall tell that to your master. Conduct me to him. The matter

presses."

"Nay, then—but have you not heard? My lord was wed to-day. You would not have my lord disturbed at such a time?" He seemed to leer.

I put my foot into his stomach, and bore him backward, flinging him full length upon the ground. He went over and rolled away into a corner, where he lay bellowing.

"Silence him!" I bade the men who followed us in. "Then, half of you remain here to guard the stairs; the rest attend us."

The house was vast, and it remained silent, so that it did not seem that the clown's scream when he went over had been heard by any.

Up the broad staircase we sped, guided by the light of the lanthorn, which Falcone had picked up—for the place was ominously in darkness. Cavalcanti kept pace with me, panting with rage and anxiety.

At the head of the stairs we came upon a man whom I recognized for one of the Duke's gentlemen-in-waiting. He had been attracted, no doubt, by the sound of our approach; but at sight of us he turned to escape. Cavalcanti reached forward in time to take him by the ankle, so that he came down heavily upon his face.

In an instant I was sitting upon him, my dagger at his throat.

"A sound," said I, "and you shall finish it in Hell!" Eyes bulging with fear stared at me out of his white face. He was an effeminate cur, of the sort that the Duke was wont to keep about him, and at once I saw that we should have no trouble with him.

"Where is Cosimo?" I asked him shortly. "Come, man, conduct us to the room that holds him if you would buy your dirty life."

"He is not here," wailed the fellow.

"You lie, you hound," said Cavalcanti, and turning to me—"Finish him, Agostino," he bade me.

The man under me writhed, filled now by the terror that Cavalcanti had so cunningly known how to inspire in him. "I swear to God that he is not here," he answered, and but that fear had robbed him of his voice, he would have screamed it. "Gesu! I swear it—it is true!"

I looked up at Cavalcanti, baffled, and sick with sudden dismay. I saw Cavalcanti's eye, which had grown dull, kindle anew. He stooped over the prostrate man.

"Is the bride here—is my daughter in this house?"

The fellow whimpered and did not answer until my dagger's edge was at his throat again. Then he suddenly screeched—"Yes!"

In an instant I had dragged him to his feet again, his pretty clothes and daintily curled hair all crumpled, so that he looked the most pitiful thing in all the world.

"Lead us to her chamber," I bade him.

And he obeyed as men obey when the fear of death is upon them.

CHAPTER X. THE NUPTIALS OF BIANCA

An awful thought was in my mind as we went, evoked by the presence in such a place of one of the Duke's gentlemen; an awful question rose again and again to my lips, and yet I could not bring myself to utter it.

So we went on in utter silence now, my hand upon his shoulder, clutching velvet doublet and flesh and bone beneath it, my dagger bare in my other hand.

We crossed an antechamber whose heavy carpet muffled our footsteps, and we halted before tapestry curtains that masked a door, Here, curbing my fierce impatience, I paused. I signed to the five attendant soldiers to come no farther; then I consigned the courtier who had guided us to the care of Falcone, and I restrained Cavalcanti, who was shaking from head to foot.

I raised the heavy, muffling curtain, and standing there an instant by the door, I heard my Bianca's voice, and her words seemed to freeze the very marrow in my bones.

"O, my lord," she was imploring in a choking voice, "O, my lord, have pity on me!"

"Sweet," came the answer, "it is I who beseech pity at your hands. Do you not see how I suffer? Do you not see how fiercely love of you is torturing me—how I burn—that you can so cruelly deny me?"

It was Farnese's voice. Cosimo, that dastard, had indeed carried

out the horrible compact of which Giuliana had warned me, carried it out in a more horrible and inhuman manner than even she had suggested or suspected.

Cavalcanti would have hurled himself against the door but that I set a hand upon his arm to restrain him, and a finger of my other hand—the one that held the dagger—to my lips.

Softly I tried the latch. I was amazed to find the door yield. And yet, where was the need to lock it? What interruption could he have feared in a house that evidently had been delivered over to him by the bridegroom, a house that was in the hands of his own people?

Very quietly I thrust the door open, and we stood there upon the threshold—Cavalcanti and I—father and lover of that sweet maid who was the prey of this foul Duke. We stood whilst a man might count a dozen, silent witnesses of that loathsome scene.

The bridal chamber was all hung in golden arras, save the great carved bed which was draped in dead-white velvet and ivory damask—symbolizing the purity of the sweet victim to be offered up upon that sacrificial altar.

And to that dread sacrifice she had come—for my sake, as I was to learn—with the fearful willingness of Iphigenia. For that sacrifice she had been prepared; but not for this horror that was thrust upon her now.

She crouched upon a tall-backed praying-stool, her gown not more white than her face, her little hands convulsively clasped to make her prayer to that monster who stood over her, his mottled face all flushed, his eyes glowing as they considered her helplessness and terror with horrible, pitiless greed.

Thus we observed them, ourselves unperceived for some moments, for the praying-stool on which she crouched was placed to

the left, by the cowed fire-place, in which a fire of scented wood was crackling, the scene lighted by two golden candlebranches that stood upon the table near the curtained window.

"O, my lord!" she cried in her despair, "of your mercy leave me, and no man shall ever know that you sought me thus. I will be silent, my lord. O, if you have no pity for me, have, at least, pity for yourself. Do not cover yourself with the infamy of such a deed—a deed that will make you hateful to all men."

"Gladly at such a price would I purchase your love, my Bianca! What pains could daunt me? Ah, you are mine, you are mine!"

As the hawk that has been long poised closes its wings and drops at last upon its prey, so swooped he of a sudden down upon her, caught and dragged her up from the praying-stool to crush her to him.

She screamed in that embrace, and sought to battle, swinging round so that her back was fully towards us, and Farnese, swinging round also in that struggle, faced us and beheld us.

It was as if a mask had been abruptly plucked from his face, so sudden and stupendous was its alteration. From flushed that it had been it grew livid and sickly; the unholy fires were spent in his eyes, and they grew dull and dead as a snake's; his jaw was loosened, and the sensual mouth looked unutterably foolish.

For a moment I think I smiled upon him, and then Cavalcanti and I sprang forward, both together. As we moved, his arms loosened their hold, and Bianca would have fallen but that I caught her.

Her terror still upon her, she glanced upwards to see what fresh enemy was this, and then, at sight of my face, as my arms closed about her, and held her safe—

"Agostino!" she cried, and closed her eyes to lie panting on my

breast.

The Duke, fleeing like a scared rat before the anger of Cavalcanti, scuttled down the room to a small door in the wall that held the fireplace. He tore it open and sprang through, Cavalcanti following recklessly.

There was a snarl and a cry, and the Lord of Pagliano staggered back, clutching one hand to his breast, and through his fingers came an ooze of blood. Falcone ran to him. But Cavalcanti swore like a man possessed.

"It is nothing!" he snapped. "By the horns of Satan! it is nothing. A flesh wound, and like a fool I gave back before it. After him! In there! Kill! Kill!"

Out came Falcone's sword with a swish, and into the dark closet beyond went the equerry with a roar, Cavalcanti after him.

It seemed that scarce had Farnese got within that closet than, flattening himself against the wall, he had struck at Cavalcanti as the latter followed, thus driving him back and gaining all the respite he needed. For now they found the closet empty. There was a door beyond, that opened to a corridor, and this was locked. Not a doubt but that Farnese had gone that way. They broke that door down. I heard them at it what time I comforted Bianca, and soothed her, stroking her head, her cheek, and murmuring fondly to her until presently she was weeping softly.

Thus Cavalcanti and Falcone found us presently when they returned. Farnese had escaped with one of his gentlemen who had reached him in time to warn him that the street was full of soldiers and the palace itself invaded. Thereupon the Duke had dropped from one of the windows to the garden, his gentleman with him, and Cavalcanti had been no more than in time to see them disappearing through the

garden gate.

The Lord of Pagliano's buff-coat was covered with blood where Pier Luigi had stabbed him. But he would give the matter no thought. He was like a tiger now. He dashed out into the antechamber, and I heard him bellowing orders. Someone screamed horribly, and then followed a fierce din as if the very place were coming down about our ears.

"What is it?" cried Bianca, quivering in my arms. "Are... are they fighting?"

"I do not think so, sweet," I answered her. "We are in great strength. Have no fear."

And then Falcone came in again.

"The Lord of Pagliano is raging like a madman," he said. "We had best be getting away or we shall have a brush with the Captain of Justice."

Supporting Bianca, I led her from that chamber.

"Where are we going?" she asked me.

"Home to Pagliano," I answered her, and with that answer comforted that sorely tried maid.

We found the antechamber in wreckage. The great chandelier had been dragged from the ceiling, pictures were slashed and cut to ribbons, the arras had been torn from the walls and the costly furniture was reduced to fire-wood; the double-windows opening to the balcony stood wide, and not a pane of glass left whole, the fragments lying all about the place.

Thus, it seemed, childish almost, had Cavalcanti vented his terrible rage, and I could well conceive what would have befallen any

of the Duke's people upon whom in that hour he had chanced. I did not know then that the poor pimp who had acted as our guide was hanging from the balcony dead, nor that his had been the horrible scream I had heard.

On the stairs we met the raging Cavalcanti reascending, the stump of his shivered sword in his hand.

"Hasten!" he cried. "I was coming for you. Let us begone!"

Below, just within the main doors we found a pile of furniture set on a heap of straw.

"What is this?" I asked.

"You shall see," he roared. "Get to horse."

I hesitated a moment, then obeyed him, and took Bianca on the withers in front of me, my arm about her to support her.

Then he called to one of the men-at-arms who stood by with a flaring torch. He snatched the brand from his hand, and stabbed the straw with it in a dozen places, from each of which there leapt at once a tongue of flame. When, at last, he flung the torch into the heart of the pile, it was all a roaring, hissing, crackling blaze.

He stood back and laughed. "If there are any more of his brothel-mates in the house, they can escape as he did. They will be more fortunate than that one." And he pointed up to the limp figure hanging from the balcony, so that I now learnt what already I have told you.

With my hand I screened Bianca's eyes. "Do not look," I bade her.

I shuddered at the sight of that limply hanging body. And yet I reflected that it was just. Any man who could have lent his aid to the foul crime that was attempted there that night deserved this fate and worse.

Cavalcanti got to horse, and we rode down the street, bringing folk to their windows in alarm. Behind us the flames began to lick out from the ground floor of Cosimo's palace.

We reached the Porta Fodesta, and peremptorily bade the guard to open for us. He answered, as became his duty, with the very words that had been addressed to me at that place on a night two years ago:

"None passes out to-night."

In an instant a group of our men surrounded him, others made a living barrier before the guard-house, whilst two or three dismounted, drew the bolts, and dragged the great gates open.

We rode on, crossing the river, and heading straight for Pagliano.

For a while it was the sweetest ride that ever I rode, with my Bianca nestling against my breast, and responding faintly to all the foolishness that poured from me in that ambrosial hour.

And then it seemed to me that we rode not by night but in the blazing light of day, along a dusty road, flanking an arid, sun-drenched stretch of the Campagna; and despite the aridity there must be water somewhere, for I heard it thundering as the Bagnanza had thundered after rain, and yet I knew that could not be the Bagnanza, for the Bagnanza was nowhere in the neighbourhood of Rome.

Suddenly a great voice, and I knew it for the voice of Bianca, called me by name.

"Agostino!"

The vision was dissipated. It was night again and we were riding for Pagliano through the fertile lands of ultra-Po; and there was Bianca clutching at my breast and uttering my name in accents of

fear, whilst the company about me was halting.

"What is it?" cried Cavalcanti. "Are you hurt?" I understood. I had been dozing in the saddle, and I must have rolled out of it but that Bianca awakened me with her cry. I said so.

"Body of Satan!" he swore. "To doze at such a time!"

"I have scarce been out of the saddle for three days and three nights—this is the fourth," I informed him. "I have had but three hours' sleep since we left Rome. I am done," I admitted. "You, sir, had best take your daughter. She is no longer safe with me."

It was so. The fierce tension which had banished sleep from me whilst these things were doing, being now relaxed, left me exhausted as Galeotto had been at Bologna. And Galeotto had urged me to halt and rest there! He had begged for twelve hours! I could now thank Heaven from a full heart for having given me the strength and resolution to ride on, for those twelve hours would have made all the difference between Heaven and Hell.

Cavalcanti himself would not take her, confessing to some weakness. For all that he insisted that his wound was not serious, yet he had lost much blood through having neglected in his rage to stanch it. So it was to Falcone that fell the charge of that sweet burden.

The last thing I remember was Cavalcanti's laugh, as, from the high ground we had mounted, he stopped to survey a ruddy glare above the city of Piacenza, where, in a vomit of sparks, Cosimo's fine palace was being consumed.

Then we rode down into the valley again; and as we went the thud of hooves grew more and more distant, and I slept in the saddle as I rode, a man-at-arms on either side of me, so that I remember no more of the doings of that strenuous night.

CHAPTER XI. THE PENANCE

I awakened in the chamber that had been mine at Pagliano before my arrest by order of the Holy Office, and I was told upon awakening that I had slept a night and a day and that it was eventide once more.

I rose, bathed, and put on a robe of furs, and then Galeotto came to visit me.

He had arrived at dawn, and he too had slept for some ten hours since his arrival, yet despite of it his air was haggard, his glance overcast and heavy.

I greeted him joyously, conscious that we had done well. But he remained gloomy and unresponsive.

"There is ill news," he said at last. "Cavalcanti is in a raging fever, and he is sapped of strength, his body almost drained of blood. I even fear that he is poisoned, that Farnese's dagger was laden with some venom."

"O, surely... it will be well with him!" I faltered. He shook his head sombrely, his brows furrowed.

"He must have been stark mad last night. To have raged as he did with such a wound upon him, and to have ridden ten miles afterwards! O, it was midsummer frenzy that sustained him. Here in the courtyard he reeled unconscious from the saddle; they found him drenched with blood from head to foot; and he has been unconscious ever since. I am afraid..." He shrugged despondently.

"Do you mean that... that he may die?" I asked scarce above a whisper.

"It will be a miracle if he does not. And that is one more crime to the score of Pier Luigi." He said it in a tone of indescribable passion, shaking his clenched fist at the ceiling.

The miracle did not come to pass. Two days later, in the presence of Galeotto, Bianca, Fra Gervasio, who had been summoned from his Piacenza convent to shrive the unfortunate baron, and myself, Ettore Cavalcanti sank quietly to rest.

Whether he was dealt an envenomed wound, as Galeotto swore, or whether he died as a result of the awful draining of his veins, I do not know.

At the end he had a moment of lucidity.

"You will guard my Bianca, Agostino," he said to me, and I swore it fervently, as he bade me, whilst upon her knees beyond the bed, clasping one of his hands that had grown white as marble, Bianca was sobbing brokenheartedly.

Then the dying man turned his head to Galeotto. "You will see justice done upon that monster ere you die," he said. "It is God's holy work."

And then his mind became clouded again by the mists of approaching dissolution, and he sank into a sleep, from which he never awakened.

We buried him on the morrow in the Chapel of Pagliano, and on the next day Galeotto drew up a memorial wherein he set forth all the circumstances of the affair in which that gallant gentleman had met his end. It was a terrible indictment of Pier Luigi Farnese. Of this memorial he prepared two copies, and to these—as witnesses of all the facts therein related—Bianca, Falcone, and I appended our signatures, and Fra Gervasio added his own. One of these copies

Galeotto dispatched to the Pope, the other to Ferrante Gonzaga in Milan, with a request that it should be submitted to the Emperor.

When the memorial was signed, he rose, and taking Bianca's hand in his own, he swore by his every hope of salvation that ere another year was sped her father should be avenged together with all the other of Pier Luigi's victims.

That same day he set out again upon his conspirator's work, whose aim was not only the life of Pier Luigi, but the entire shattering of the Pontifical sway in Parma and Piacenza. Some days later he sent me another score of lances—for he kept his forces scattered about the country whilst gradually he increased their numbers.

Thereafter we waited for events at Pagliano, the drawbridge raised, and none entering save after due challenge.

We expected an attack which never came; for Pier Luigi did not dare to lead an army against an Imperial fief upon such hopeless grounds as were his own. Possibly, too, Galeotto's memorial may have caused the Pope to impose restraint upon his dissolute son.

Cosimo d'Anguissola, however, had the effrontery to send a messenger a week later to Pagliano, to demand the surrender of his wife, saying that she was his by God's law and man's, and threatening to enforce his rights by an appeal to the Vatican.

That we sent the messenger empty-handed away, it is scarce necessary to chronicle. I was in command at Pagliano, holding it in Bianca's name, as Bianca's lieutenant and castellan, and I made oath that I would never lower the bridge to admit an enemy.

But Cosimo's message aroused in us a memory that had lain dormant these days. She was no longer for my wooing. She was the wife of another.

It came to us almost as a flash of lightning in the night; and it startled us by all that it revealed.

"The fault of it is all mine," said she, as we sat that evening in the gold-and-purple dining-room where we had supped.

It was with those words that she broke the silence that had endured throughout the repast, until the departure of the pages and the seneschal who had ministered to us precisely as in the days when Cavalcanti had been alive.

"Ah, not that, sweet!" I implored her, reaching a hand to her across the table.

"But it is true, my dear," she answered, covering my hand with her own. "If I had shown you more mercy when so contritely you confessed your sin, mercy would have been shown to me. I should have known from the sign I had that we were destined for each other; that nothing that you had done could alter that. I did know it, and yet..." She halted there, her lip tremulous.

"And yet you did the only thing that you could do when your sweet purity was outraged by the knowledge of what I really had been."

"But you were so no more," she said with a something of pleading in her voice.

"It was you—the blessed sight of you that cleansed me," I cried. "When love for you awoke in me, I knew love for the first time, for that other thing which I deemed love had none of love's holiness. Your image drove out all the sin from my soul. The peace which half a year of penance, of fasting and flagellation could not bring me, was brought me by my love for you when it awoke. It was as a purifying fire that turned to ashes all the evil of desires that my heart had held."

Her hand pressed mine. She was weeping softly.

"I was an outcast," I continued. "I was a mariner without compass, far from the sight of land, striving to find my way by the light of sentiments implanted in me from early youth. I sought salvation desperately—sought it in a hermitage, as I would have sought it in a cloister but that I had come to regard myself as unworthy of the cloistered life. I found it at last, in you, in the blessed contemplation of you. It was you who taught me the lesson that the world is God's world and that God is in the world as much as in the cloister. Such was the burden of your message that night when you appeared to me on Monte Orsaro."

"O, Agostino!" she cried, "and all this being so can you refrain from blaming me for what has come to pass? If I had but had faith in you—the faith in the sign which we both received—I should have known all this; known that if you had sinned you had been tempted and that you had atoned."

"I think the atonement lies here and now, in this," I answered very gravely. "She was the wife of another who dragged me down. You are the wife of another who have lifted me up. She through sin was attainable. That you can never, never be, else should I have done with life in earnest. But do not blame yourself, sweet saint. You did as your pure spirit bade you; soon all would have been well but that already Messer Pier Luigi had seen you."

She shuddered.

"You know, dear that if I submitted to wed your cousin, it was to save you—that such was the price imposed?"

"Dear saint!" I cried.

"I but mention it that upon such a score you may have no doubt of my motives."

"How could I doubt?" I protested.

I rose, and moved down the room towards the window, behind which the night gleamed deepest blue. I looked out upon the gardens from which the black shadows of stark poplars thrust upward against the sky, and I thought out this thing. Then I turned to her, having as I imagined found the only and rather obvious solution.

"There is but one thing to do, Bianca."

"And that?" her eyes were very anxious, and looked perhaps even more so in consequence of the pallor of her face and the lines of pain that had come into it in these weeks of such sore trial.

"I must remove the barrier that stands between us. I must seek out Cosimo and kill him."

I said it without anger, without heat of any sort: a calm, cold statement of a step that it was necessary to take. It was a just measure, the only measure that could mend an unjust situation. And so, I think, she too viewed it. For she did not start, or cry out in horror, or manifest the slightest surprise at my proposal. But she shook her head, and smiled very wistfully.

"What a folly would not that be!" she said. "How would it amend what is? You would be taken, and justice would be done upon you summarily. Would that make it any easier or any better for me? I should be alone in the world and entirely undefended."

"Ah, but you go too fast," I cried. "By justice I could not suffer, I need but to state the case, the motive of my quarrel, the iniquitous wrong that was attempted against you, the odious traffic of this marriage, and all men would applaud my act. None would dare do me a hurt."

"You are too generous in your faith in man," she said. "Who would believe your claims?"

"The courts," I said.

"The courts of a State in which Pier Luigi governs?"

"But I have witnesses of the facts."

"Those witnesses would never be allowed to testify. Your protests would be smothered. And how would your case really look?" she cried. "The world would conceive that the lover of Bianca de Cavalcanti had killed her husband that he might take her for his own. What could you hope for, against such a charge as that? Men might even remember that other affair of Fifanti's and even the populace, which may be said to have saved you erstwhile, might veer round and change from the opinion which it has ever held. They would say that one who has done such a thing once may do it twice; that..."

"O, for pity's sake, stop! Have mercy!" I cried, flinging out my arms towards her. And mercifully she ceased, perceiving that she had said enough.

I turned to the window again, and pressed my brow against the cool glass. She was right. That acute mind of hers had pierced straight to the very core of this matter. To do the thing that had been in my mind would be not only to destroy myself, but to defile her; for upon her would recoil a portion of the odium that must be flung at me. And—as she said—what then must be her position? They would even have a case upon which to drag her from these walls of Pagliano. She would be a victim of the civil courts; she might, at Pier Luigi's instigation, be proceeded against as my accomplice in what would be accounted a dastardly murder for the basest of motives.

I turned to her again.

"You are right," I said. "I see that you are right. Just as I was right when I said that my atonement lies here and now. The penance for which I have cried out so long is imposed at last. It is as just as it is cruelly apt."

I came slowly back to the table, and stood facing her across it. She looking up at me with very piteous eyes.

"Bianca, I must go hence," I said. "That, too, is clear."

Her lips parted; her eyes dilated; her face, if anything, grew paler.

"O, no, no!" she cried piteously.

"It must be," I said. "How can I remain? Cosimo may appeal for justice against me, claiming that I hold his wife in duress—and justice will be done."

"But can you not resist? Pagliano is strong and well-manned. The Black Bands are very faithful men, and they will stand by you to the end."

"And the world?" I cried. "What will the world say of you? It is you yourself have made me see it. Shall your name be dragged in the foul mire of scandal? The wife of Cosimo d'Anguissola a runagate with her husband's cousin? Shall the world say that?"

She moaned, and covered her face with her hands. Then she controlled herself again, and looked at me almost fiercely.

"Do you care so much for what men say?"

"I am thinking of you."

"Then think of me to better purpose, my Agostino. Consider that we are confronted by two evils, and that the choice of the lesser is forced upon us. If you go, I am all unprotected, and... and... the harm is done already."

Long I looked at her with such a yearning to take her in my arms and comfort her! And I had the knowledge that if I remained, daily must I experience this yearning which must daily grow crueller and

more fierce from the very restraint I must impose upon it. And then that rearing of mine, all drenched in sanctity misunderstood, came to my help, and made me see in this an added burden to my penance, a burden which I must accept if I would win to ultimate grace.

And so I consented to remain, and I parted from her with no more than a kiss bestowed upon her finger-tips, and went to pray for patience and strength to bear my heavy cross and so win to my ultimate reward, be it in this world or the next.

In the morning came news by a messenger from Galeotto—news of one more foul crime that the Duke had committed on that awful night when we had rescued Bianca from his evil claws. The unfortunate Giuliana had been found dead in her bed upon the following morning, and the popular voice said that the Duke had strangled her.

Of that rumour I subsequently had confirmation. It would appear that maddened with rage at the loss of his prey, that ravening wolf had looked about to discover who might have betrayed his purpose and procured that intervention. He bethought him of Giuliana. Had not Cosimo seen her in intimate talk with me on the morning of my arrest, and would he not have reported it to his master?

So to the handsome mansion in which he housed her, and to which at all hours he had access, the Duke went instantly. He must have taxed her with it; and knowing her nature, I can imagine that she not only admitted that his thwarting was due to her, but admitted it mockingly, exultingly, jeering as only a jealous woman can jeer, until in his rage he seized her by the throat.

How bitterly must she not have repented that she had not kept a better guard upon her tongue, during those moments of her agony, brief in themselves, yet horribly long to her, until her poor wanton spirit went forth from the weak clay that she had loved too well.

When I heard of the end of that unfortunate, all my bitterness against her went out of me, and in my heart I set myself to find excuses for her. Witty and cultured in much; in much else she had been as stupid as the dumb beast. She was irreligious as were many because what she saw of religion did not inspire respect in her, and whilst one of her lovers had been a prince of the Church another had been the son of the Pope. She was by nature sensuous, and her sensuousness stifled in her all perception of right or wrong.

I like to think that her death was brought about as the result of a good deed—so easily might it have been the consequence of an evil one. And I trust that that deed—good in itself, whatever the sources from which it may have sprung—may have counted in her favour and weighed in the balance against the sins that were largely of her nature.

I bethought me of Fra Gervasio's words to me: "Who that knows all that goes to the making of a sin shall ever dare to blame a sinner?" He had applied those words to my own case where Giuliana was concerned. But do they not apply equally to Giuliana? Do they not apply to every sinner, when all is said?

CHAPTER XII. BLOOD

The words that passed between Bianca and me that evening in the dining-room express all that can be said of our attitude to each other during the months that followed. Daily we met, and the things which our lips no longer dared to utter, our eyes expressed.

Days passed and grew to weeks, and these accumulated into months. The autumn faded from gold to grey, and the winter came and laid the earth to sleep, and then followed spring to awaken it once more.

None troubled us at Pagliano, and we began with some justice to consider ourselves secure. Galeotto's memorial, not a doubt, had stirred up matters; and Pier Luigi would be under orders from his father not to add one more scandal to the many of his life by venturing to disturb Madonna Bianca in her stronghold at Pagliano.

From time to time we were visited by Galeotto. It was well for him that fatigue had overwhelmed him that day at Bologna, and so hindered him from taking a hand with us in the doings of that hideous night, else he might no longer have freedom to roam the State unchallenged as he did.

He told us of the new citadel the Duke was building in Piacenza, and how for the purpose he was pulling down houses relentlessly to obtain material and to clear himself a space, and how, further, he was widening and strengthening the walls of the city.

"But I doubt," he said one morning in that spring, "if he will live to see the work completed. For we are resolved at last. There is no need for an armed rising. Five score of my lances will be all that is

necessary. We are planning a surprise, and Ferrante Gonzaga is to be at hand to support us with Imperial troops and to receive the State as the Emperor's vicegerent when the hour strikes. It will strike soon," he added, "and this, too, shall be paid for with the rest." And he touched the black mourning gown that Bianca wore.

He rode away again that day, and he went north for a last interview with the Emperor's Lieutenant, but promising to return before the blow was struck to give me the opportunity to bear my share in it.

Spring turned to summer, and we waited, wandering in the gardens together; reading together, playing at bowls or tennis, though the latter game was not considered one for women, and sometimes exercising the men-at-arms in the great inner bailey where they lodged. Twice we rode out ahawking, accompanied by a strong escort, and returned without mishap, though I would not consent to a third excursion, lest a rumour having gone abroad, our enemies should lie in wait to trap us. I grew strangely fearful of losing her who did not and who never might belong to me.

And all this time my penance, as I regarded it, grew daily heavier to bear. Long since I had ceased so much as to kiss her finger-tips. But to kiss the very air she breathed was fraught with danger to my peace of mind. And then one evening, as we paced the garden together, I had a moment's madness, a moment in which my yearnings would no longer be repressed. Without warning I swung about, caught her in my arms, and crushed her to me.

I saw the sudden flicker of her eyelids, the one swift upward glance of her blue eyes, and I beheld in them a yearning akin to my own, but also a something of fear that gave me pause.

I put her from me. I knelt and kissed the hem of her mourning gown.

"Forgive me, sweet." I besought her very humbly.

"My poor Agostino," was all she answered me, what time her fingers fluttered gently over my sable hair.

Thereafter I shunned her for a whole week, and was never in her company save at meals under the eyes of our attendants.

At last, one day in the early part of September, on the very anniversary of her father's death—the eighth of that month it was, and a Thursday—came Galeotto with a considerable company of men-at-arms; and that night he was gay and blithe as I had never seen him in these twelve months past.

When we were alone, the cause of it, which already I suspected, at last transpired.

"It is the hour," he said very pregnantly. "His sands are swiftly running out. To-morrow, Agostino, you ride with me to Piacenza. Falcone shall remain here to captain the men in case any attempt should be made upon Pagliano, which is not likely."

And now he told us of the gay doings there had been in Piacenza for the occasion of the visit of the Duke's son Ottavio—that same son-in-law of the Emperor whom the latter befriended, yet not to the extent of giving him the duchy in his father's place when that father should have gone to answer for his sins.

Daily there had been jousts and tournaments and all manner of gaieties, for which the Piacentini had been sweated until they could sweat no more. Having fawned upon the people that they might help him to crush the barons, Farnese was now crushing the people whose service he no longer needed. Extortion had reduced them to poverty and despair and their very houses were being pulled down to supply material for the new citadel, the Duke recking little who might thus be left without a roof over his head.

"He has gone mad," said Galeotto, and laughed. "Pier Luigi could

not more effectively have played his part so as to serve our ends. The nobles he alienated long ago, and now the very populace is incensed against him and weary of his rapine. It is so bad with him that of late he has remained shut in the citadel, and seldom ventures abroad, so as to avoid the sight of the starving faces of the poor and the general ruin that he is making of that fair city. He has given out that he is ill. A little blood-letting will cure all his ills for ever."

Upon the morrow Galeotto picked thirty of his men, and gave them their orders. They were to depose their black liveries, and clad as countryfolk, but armed as countryfolk would be for a long journey, they were severally to repair afoot to Piacenza, and assemble there upon the morning of Saturday at the time and place he indicated. They went, and that afternoon we followed.

"You will come back to me, Agostino?" Bianca said to me at parting.

"I will come back," I answered, and bowing I left her, my heart very heavy.

But as we rode the prospect of the thing to do warmed me a little, and I shook off my melancholy. Optimism coloured the world for me all of the rosy hue of promise.

We slept in Piacenza that night, in a big house in the street that leads to the Church of San Lazzaro, and there was a company of perhaps a dozen assembled there, the principals being the brothers Pallavicini of Cortemaggiore, who had been among the first to feel the iron hand of Pier Luigi; there were also present Agostino Landi, and the head of the house of Confalonieri.

We sat after supper about a long table of smooth brown oak, which reflected as in a pool the beakers and flagons with which it was charged, when suddenly Galeotto span a coin upon the middle of it. It

fell flat presently, showing the ducal arms and the inscription of which the abbreviation PLAC was a part.

Galeotto set his finger to it. "A year ago I warned him," said he, "that his fate was written there in that shortened word. To-morrow I shall read the riddle for him."

I did not understand the allusion and said so.

"Why," he explained, not only to me but to others whose brows had also been knit, "first 'Plac' stands for Placentia where he will meet his doom; and then it contains the initials of the four chief movers in this undertaking—Pallavicini, Landi, Anguissola, and Confalonieri."

"You force the omen to come true when you give me a leader's rank in this affair," said I.

He smiled but did not answer, and returned the coin to his pocket.

And now the happening that is to be related is to be found elsewhere, for it is a matter of which many men have written in different ways, according to their feelings or to the hand that hired them to the writing.

Soon after dawn Galeotto quitted us, each of us instructed how to act.

Later in the morning, as I was on my way to the castle, where we were to assemble at noon, I saw Galeotto riding through the streets at the Duke's side. He had been beyond the gates with Pier Luigi on an inspection of the new fortress that was building. It appeared that once more there was talk between the Duke and Galeotto of the latter's taking service under him, and Galeotto made use of this circumstance to forward his plans. He was, I think, the most self-contained and patient man that it would have been possible to find for such an undertaking.

In addition to the condottiero, a couple of gentlemen on horseback attended the Duke, and half a score of his Swiss lanzknechte in gleaming corselets and steel morions, shouldering their formidable pikes, went afoot to hedge his excellency.

The people fell back before that little company; the citizens doffed their caps with the respect that is begotten of fear, but their air was sullen and in the main they were silent, though here and there some knave, with the craven adulation of those born to serve at all costs, raised a feeble shout of "Duca!"

The Duke moved slowly at little more than a walking pace, for he was all crippled again by the disease that ravaged him, and his face, handsome in itself, was now repulsive to behold; it was a livid background for the fiery pustules that mottled it, and under the sunken eyes there were great brown stains of suffering.

I flattened myself against a wall in the shadow of a doorway lest he should see me, for my height made me an easy mark in that crowd. But he looked neither to right nor to left as he rode. Indeed, it was said that he could no longer bear to meet the glances of the people he had so grossly abused and outraged with deeds that are elsewhere abundantly related, and with which I need not turn your stomachs here.

When they had gone by, I followed slowly in their wake towards the castle. As I turned out of the fine road that Gambarà had built, I was joined by the brothers Pallavicini, a pair of resolute, grizzled gentlemen, the elder of whom, as you will remember, was slightly lame. With an odd sense of fitness they had dressed themselves in black. They were accompanied by half a dozen of Galeotto's men, but these bore no device by which they could be identified. We exchanged greetings, and stepped out together across the open space of the Piazza della Citadella towards the fortress.

We crossed the drawbridge, and entered unchallenged by the guard. People were wont to come and go, and to approach the Duke it was necessary to pass the guard in the ante-chamber above, whose business it was to question all comers.

Moreover the only guard set consisted of a couple of Swiss who lounged in the gateway, the garrison being all at dinner, a circumstance upon which Galeotto had calculated in appointing noon as the hour for the striking of the blow.

We crossed the quadrangle, and passing under a second archway came into the inner bailey as we had been bidden. Here we were met by Confalonieri, who also had half a dozen men with him. He greeted us, and issued his orders sharply.

"You, Ser Agostino, are to come with us, whilst you others are to remain here until Messer Landi arrives with the remainder of our forces. He should have a score of men with him, and they will cut down the guard when they enter. The moment that is done let a pistol-shot be discharged as the signal to us above, and proceed immediately to take up the bridge and overpower the Swiss who should still be at table. Landi has his orders and knows how to act."

The Pallavicini briefly spoke their assents, and Confalonieri, taking me by the arm, led me quickly above-stairs, his half-dozen men following close upon our heels. Upon none was there any sign of armour. But every man wore a shirt of mail under his doublet or jerkin.

We entered the ante-chamber—a fine, lofty apartment, richly hung and richly furnished. It was empty of courtiers, for all were gone to dine with the captain of the guard, who had been married upon that very morning and was giving a banquet in honour of the event, as Galeotto had informed himself when he appointed the day.

Over by a window sat four of the Swiss—the entire guard—about a

table playing at dice, their lances deposited in an angle of the wall.

Watching their game—for which he had lingered after accompanying the Duke thus far—stood the tall, broad-shouldered figure of Galeotto. He turned as we entered, and gave us an indifferent glance as if we were of no interest to him, then returned his attention to the dicers.

One or two of the Swiss looked up at us casually. The dice rattled merrily, and there came from the players little splutters of laughter and deep guttural, German oaths.

At the room's far end, by the curtains that masked the door of the chamber where Farnese sat at dinner, stood an usher in black velvet, staff in hand, who took no more interest in us than did the Swiss.

We sauntered over to the dicers' table, and in placing ourselves the better to watch their game, we so contrived that we entirely hemmed them into the embrasure, whilst Confalonieri himself stood with his back to the pikes, an effective barrier between the men and their weapons.

We remained thus for some moments whilst the game went on, and we laughed with the winners and swore with the losers, as if our hearts were entirely in the dicing and we had not another thought in the world.

Suddenly a pistol-shot crackled below, and startled the Swiss, who looked at one another. One burly fellow whom they named Hubli held the dice-box poised for a throw that was never made.

Across the courtyard below men were running with drawn swords, shouting as they ran, and hurled themselves through the doorway leading to the quarters where the Swiss were at table. This the guards saw through the open window, and they stared, muttering German oaths to express their deep bewilderment.

And then there came a creak of winches and a grinding of chains to inform us that the bridge was being taken up. At last those four lanzknechte looked at us.

"Beim blute Gottes!" swore Hubli. "Was giebt es?"

Our set faces, showing no faintest trace of surprise, quickened their alarm, and this became flavoured by suspicion when they perceived at last how closely we pressed about them.

"Continue your game," said Confalonieri quietly, "it will be best for you."

The great blonde fellow Hubli flung down the dice-box and heaved himself up truculently to face the speaker who stood between him and the lances. Instantly Confalonieri stabbed him, and he sank back into his chair with a cry, intensest surprise in his blue eyes, so sudden and unlooked-for had the action been.

Galeotto had already left the group about the table, and with a blow of his great hand he felled the usher who sought to bar his passage to the Duke's chamber. He tore down the curtains, and he was wrapping and entangling the fellow in the folds of them when I came to his aid followed by Confalonieri, whose six men remained to hold the three sound and the one wounded Swiss in check.

And now from below there rose such a din of steel on steel, of shouts and screams and curses, that it behoved us to make haste.

Bidding us follow him, Galeotto flung open the door. At table sat Farnese with two of his gentlemen, one of whom was the Marquis Sforza-Fogliani, the other a doctor of canon law named Copallati.

Alarm was already written on their faces. At sight of Galeotto—"Ah! You are still here!" cried Farnese. "What is taking place below? Have the Swiss fallen to fighting among themselves?"

Galeotto returned no answer, but advanced slowly into the room; and now Farnese's eyes went past him and fastened upon me, and I saw them suddenly dilate; beyond me they went and met the cold glance of Confalonieri, that other gentleman he had so grievously wronged and whom he had stripped of the last rag of his possessions and his rights. The sun coming through the window caught the steel that Confalonieri still carried in his hands; its glint drew the eyes of the Duke, and he must have seen that the baron's sleeve was bloody.

He rose, leaning heavily upon the table.

"What does this mean?" he demanded in a quavering voice, and his face had turned grey with apprehension.

"It means," Galeotto answered him, firmly and coldly, "that your rule in Piacenza is at an end, that the Pontifical sway is broken in these States, and that beyond the Po Ferrante Gonzaga waits with an army to take possession here in the Emperor's name. Finally, my Lord Duke, it means that the Devil's patience is to be rewarded, and that he is at last to have you who have so faithfully served him upon earth."

Farnese made a gurgling sound and put a jewelled hand to his throat as if he choked. He was all in green velvet, and every button of his doublet was a brilliant of price; and that gay raiment by its incongruity seemed to heighten the tragedy of the moment.

Of his gentlemen the doctor sat frozen with terror in his high-backed seat, clutching the arms of it so that his knuckles showed white as marble. In like case were the two attendant servants, who hung motionless by the buffet. But Sforza-Fogliani, a man of some spirit for all his effeminate appearance, leapt to his feet and set a hand to his weapons.

Instantly Confalonieri's sword flashed from its sheath. He had passed his dagger into his left hand.

"On your life, my Lord Marquis, do not meddle here," he warned him in a voice that was like a trumpet-call.

And before that ferocious aspect and those naked weapons Sforza-Fogliani stood checked and intimidated.

I too had drawn my poniard, determined that Farnese should fall to my steel in settlement of the score that lay between us. He saw the act, and if possible his fears were increased, for he knew that the wrongs he had done me were personal matters between us for which it was not likely I should prove forgiving.

"Mercy!" he gasped, and held out supplicating hands to Galeotto.

"Mercy?" I echoed, and laughed fiercely. "What mercy would you have shown me against whom you set the Holy Office, but that you could sell my life at a price that was merciless? What mercy would you have shown to the daughter of Cavalcanti when she lay in your foul power? What mercy did you show her father who died by your hand? What mercy did you show the unfortunate Giuliana whom you strangled in her bed? What mercy did you ever show to any that you dare ask now for mercy?"

He looked at me with dazed eyes, and from me to Galeotto. He shuddered and turned a greenish hue. His knees were loosened by terror, and he sank back into the chair from which he had risen.

"At least... at least," he gasped, "let me have a priest to shrive me. Do not... do not let me die with all my sins upon me!"

In that moment there came from the ante-chamber the sound of swiftly moving feet, and the clash of steel mingling with cries. The sound heartened him. He conceived that someone came to his assistance. He raised his voice in a desperate screech:

"To me! To me! Help!"

As he shouted I sprang towards him, to find my passage suddenly barred by Galeotto's arm. He shot it out, and my breast came against it as against a rod of iron. It threw me out of balance, and ere I had recovered it had thrust me back again.

"Back there!" said Galeotto's brazen voice. "This affair is mine. Mine are the older wrongs and the greater."

With that he stepped behind the Duke's chair, and Farnese in a fresh spurt of panic came to his feet. Galeotto locked an arm about his neck and pulled his head back. Into his ear he muttered words that I could not overhear, but it was matter that stilled Farnese's last struggle. Only the Duke's eyes moved, rolling in his head as he sought to look upon the face of the man who spoke to him. And in that moment Galeotto wrenched his victim's head still farther back, laying entirely bare the long brown throat, across which he swiftly drew his dagger.

Copallati screamed and covered his face with his hands; Sforza-Fogliani, white to the lips, looked on like a man entranced.

There was a screech from Farnese that ended in a gurgle, and suddenly the blood spurted from his neck as from a fountain. Galeotto let him go. He dropped to his chair and fell forward against the table, drenching it in blood. Thence he went over sideways and toppled to the floor, where he lay twitching, a huddle of arms and legs, the head lolling sideways, the eyes vitreous, and blood, blood, blood all about him.

CHAPTER XIII. THE OVERTHROW

The sight turned me almost physically sick.

I faced about, and sprang from the room out into the ante-chamber, where a battle was in progress. Some three or four of the Duke's gentlemen and a couple of Swiss had come to attempt a rescue. They had compelled Galeotto's six men to draw and defend themselves, the odds being suddenly all against them. Into that medley I went with drawn sword, hacking and cutting madly, giving knocks and taking them, glad of the excitement of it; glad of anything that would shut out from my mind the horror of the scene I had witnessed.

Presently Confalonieri came out to take a hand, leaving Galeotto on guard within, and in a few minutes we had made an end of that resistance—the last splutter of resistance within those walls.

Beyond some cuts and scratches that some of us had taken, not a man of ours was missing, whilst of the Duke's followers not a single one remained alive in that ante-chamber. The place was a shambles. Hangings that had been clutched had been torn from the walls; a great mirror was cracked from top to bottom; tables were upset and wrecked; chairs were splintered; and hardly a pane of glass remained in any of the windows. And everywhere there was blood, everywhere dead men.

Up the stairs came trooping now our assembled forces led by Landi and the Pallavicini. Below all was quiet. The Swiss garrison taken by surprise at table, as was planned, had been disarmed and

all were safe and impotent under lock and bolt. The guards at the gate had been cut down, and we were entirely masters of the place.

Sforza-Fogliani, Copallati, and the two servants were fetched from the Duke's chamber and taken away to be locked up in another room until the business should be ended. For after all, it was but begun.

In the town the alarm-bell was ringing from the tower of the Communal Palace, and at the sound I saw Galeotto's eyes kindling. He took command, none disputing it him, and under his orders men went briskly to turn the cannon of the fortress upon the square, that an attack might be repulsed if it were attempted. And three salvoes were fired, to notify Ferrante Gonzaga where he waited that the castle was in the hands of the conspirators and Pier Luigi slain.

Meanwhile we had returned with Galeotto to the room where the Duke had died, and where his body still lay, huddled as it had fallen. The windows of this chamber were set in the outer wall of the fortress, immediately above the gates and commanding a view of the square. We were six—Confalonieri, Landi, the two Pallavicini, Galeotto, and myself, besides a slight fellow named Malvicini, who had been an officer of light-horse in the Duke's service, but who had taken a hand in betraying him.

In the square there was by now a seething, excited mob through which a little army of perhaps a thousand men of the town militia with their captain, da Terni, riding at their head, was forcing its way. And they were shouting "Duca!" and crying out that the castle had been seized by Spaniards—by which they meant the Emperor's troops.

Galeotto dragged a chair to the window, and standing upon it, showed himself to the people.

"Disperse!" he shouted to them. "To your homes! The Duke is dead!"

But his voice could not surmount that raging din, above which continued to ring the cry of "Duca! Duca!"

"Let me show them their Duca," said a voice. It was Malvicini's.

He had torn down a curtain-rope, and had attached an end of it to one of the dead man's legs. Thus he dragged the body forward towards the window. The other end of the rope he now knotted very firmly to a mullion. Then he took the body up in his arms, whilst Galeotto stood aside to make way for him, and staggering under his ghastly burden, Malvicini reached the window, and heaved it over the sill.

It fell the length of the rope and there was arrested with a jerk to hang head downwards, spread-eagle against the brown wall; and the diamond buttons in his green velvet doublet sparkled merrily in the sunshine.

At that sight a great silence swept across the multitude, and availing himself of this, Galeotto again addressed those Piacentini.

"To your homes," he cried to them, "and arm yourselves to defend the State from your enemies if the need should arise. There hangs the Duke—dead. He has been slain to liberate our country from unjust oppression."

Still, it seemed, they did not hear him; for though to us they appeared to be almost silent, yet there was a rustle and stir amongst them, which must have deafened each to what was being announced.

They renewed their cries of "Duca!" of "Spaniards!" and "To arms!"

"A curse on your 'Spaniards!'" cried Malvicini. "Here! Take your Duke. Look at him, and understand." And he slashed the rope across, so that the body plunged down into the castle ditch.

A few of the foremost of the crowd ran forward and scrambled

down into the ditch to view the body, and from them the rumour of the truth ran like a ripple over water through that mob, so that in the twinkling of an eye there was no man in that vast concourse—and all Piacenza seemed by now to be packed into the square—but knew that Pier Luigi Farnese was dead.

A sudden hush fell. There were no more cries of "Duca!" They stood silent, and not a doubt but that in the breasts of the majority surged a great relief. Even the militia ceased to advance. If the Duke was dead there was nothing left to do.

Again Galeotto spoke to them, and this time his words were caught by those in the ditch immediately below us, and from them they were passed on, and suddenly a great cry went up—a shout of relief, a paean of joy. If Farnese was dead, and well dead, they could, at last, express the thing that was in their hearts.

And now at the far end of the square a glint of armour appeared; a troop of horse emerged, and began slowly to press forward through the crowd, driving it back on either side, but very gently. They came three abreast, and there were six score of them, and from their lance-heads fluttered bannerols showing a sable bar on an argent field. They were Galeotto's free company, headed by one of his lieutenants. Beyond the Po they too had been awaiting the salvo of artillery that should be their signal to advance.

When their identity was understood, and when the crowd had perceived that they rode to support the holders of the castle, they were greeted with lusty cheers, in which presently even the militia joined, for these last were Piacentini and no Swiss hireling soldiers of the Duke's.

The drawbridge was let down, and the company thundered over it to draw up in the courtyard under the eyes of Galeotto. He issued his orders once more to his companions. Then calling for horses for

himself and for me, and bidding a score of lances to detach themselves to ride with us, we quitted the fortress.

We pressed through the clamant multitude until we had reached the middle of the square. Here Galeotto drew rein and, raising his hand for silence, informed the people once more that the Duke had been done to death by the nobles of Piacenza, thus to avenge alike their own and the people's wrongs, and to free them from unjust oppression and tyranny.

They cheered him when he had done, and the cry now was "Piacenza! Piacenza!"

When they had fallen silent again—"I would have you remember," he cried, "that Pier Luigi was the Pontiff's son, and that the Pontiff will make haste to avenge his death and to re-establish here in Piacenza the Farnese sway. So that all that we have done this day may go for naught unless we take our measures."

The silence deepened.

"But you have been served by men who have the interest of the State at heart; and more has been done to serve you than the mere slaying of Pier Luigi Farnese. Our plans are made, and we but wait to know is it your will that the State should incorporate itself as of old with that of Milan, and place itself under the protection of the Emperor, who will appoint you fellow-countrymen for rulers, and will govern you wisely and justly, abolishing extortion and oppression?"

A thunder of assent was his answer. "Cesare! Cesare!" was now the cry, and caps were tossed into the air.

"Then go arm yourselves and repair to the Commune, and there make known your will to the Anziani and councillors, and see that it is given effect by them. The Emperor's Lieutenant is at your gates. I ride to surrender to him the city in your name, and before nightfall he will

be here to protect you from any onslaught of the Pontificals."

With that he pushed on, the mob streaming along with us, intent upon going there and then to do the thing that Galeotto advised. And by now they had discovered Galeotto's name, and they were shouting it in acclamation of him, and at the sound he smiled, though his eyes seemed very wistful.

He leaned over to me, and gripped my hand where it lay on the saddle-bow clutching the reins.

"Thus is Giovanni d'Anguissola at last avenged!" he said to me in a deep voice that thrilled me.

"I would that he were here to know," I answered.

And again Galeotto's eyes grew wistful as they looked at me.

We won out of the town at last, and when we came to the high ground beyond the river, we saw in the plain below phalanx upon phalanx of a great army. It was Ferrante Gonzaga's Imperial force.

Galeotto pointed to it. "That is my goal," he said. "You had best ride on to Pagliano with these lances. You may need them there. I had hoped that Cosimo would have been found in the castle with Pier Luigi. His absence makes me uneasy. Away with you, then. You shall have news of me within three days."

We embraced, on horseback as we were. Then he wheeled his charger and went down the steep ground, riding hard for Ferrante's army, whilst we pursued our way, and came some two hours later without mishap to Pagliano.

I found Bianca awaiting me in the gallery above the courtyard, drawn thither by the sounds of our approach.

"Dear Agostino, I have been so fearful for you," was her greeting

when I had leapt up the staircase to take her hand.

I led her to the marble seat she had occupied on that night, two years ago, when first we had spoken of our visions. Briefly I gave her the news of what had befallen in Piacenza.

When I had done, she sighed and looked at me.

"It brings us no nearer to each other," she said.

"Nay, now—this much nearer, at least, that the Imperial decree will return me the lordships of Mondolfo and Carmina, dispossessing the usurper. Thus I shall have something to offer you, my Bianca."

She smiled at me very sadly, almost reproachfully.

"Foolish," said she. "What matter the possessions that it may be yours to cast into my lap? Is that what we wait for, Agostino? Is there not Pagliano for you? Would not that, at need, be lordship enough?"

"The meanest cottage of the countryside were lordship enough so that you shared it," I answered passionately, as many in like case have answered before and since.

"You see, then, that you are wrong to attach importance to so slight a thing as this Imperial decree where you and I are concerned. Can an Imperial decree annul my marriage?"

"For that a papal bull would be necessary."

"And how is a papal bull to be obtained?"

"It is not for us," I admitted miserably.

"I have been wicked," she said, her eyes upon the ground, a faint colour stirring in her cheeks. "I have prayed that the usurper might be dispossessed of his rights in me. I have prayed that when the attack was made and revolt was carried into the Citadel of Piacenza,

Cosimo d'Anguissola might stand at his usual post beside the Duke and might fall with him. Surely justice demanded it!" she cried out. "God's justice, as well as man's. His act in marrying me was a defilement of one of the holiest of sacraments, and for that he should surely be punished and struck down!"

I went upon my knees to her. "Dear love!" I cried. "See, I have you daily in my sight. Let me not be ungrateful for so much."

She took my face in her hands and looked into my eyes, saying no word. Then she leaned forward, and very gently touched my forehead with her lips.

"God pity us a little, Agostino," she murmured, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"The fault is mine—all mine!" I denounced myself. "We are being visited with my sins. When I can take you for my own—if that blessed day should ever dawn—I shall know that I have attained to pardon, that I am cleansed and worthy of you at last."

She rose and I escorted her within; then went to my own chamber to bathe and rest.

CHAPTER XIV. THE CITATION

We were breaking our fast upon the following morning when Falcone sent word to me by one of the pages that a considerable force was advancing towards us from the south.

I rose, somewhat uneasy. Yet I reflected that it was possible that, news of the revolt in Piacenza having reached Parma, this was an army of Pontificals moving thence upon the rebellious city. But in that case, what should they be doing this side of Po?

An hour later, from the battlements where we paced side by side—Bianca and I—we were able to estimate this force and we fixed its strength at five score lances. Soon we could make out the device upon their bannerols—a boar's head azure upon an argent field—my own device, that of the Anguissola of Mondolfo; and instantly I knew them for Cosimo's men.

On the lower parapet six culverins had been dragged into position under the supervision of Falcone—who was still with us at Pagliano. These pieces stood loaded and manned by the soldiers to whom I had assigned the office of engineers.

Thus we waited until the little army came to a halt about a quarter of a mile away, and a trumpeter with a flag of truce rode forward accompanied by a knight armed cap-a-pie, his beaver down.

The herald wound a challenge; and it was answered from the postern by a man-at-arms, whereupon the herald delivered his message.

"In the name of our Holy Father and Lord, Paul III, we summon

Agostino d'Anguissola here to confer with the High and Mighty Cosimo d'Anguissola, Tyrant of Mondolfo and Carmina."

Three minutes later, to their infinite surprise, the bridge thudded down to span the ditch, and I walked out upon it with Bianca at my side.

"Will the Lord Cosimo come within to deliver his message?" I demanded.

The Lord Cosimo would not, fearing a trap.

"Will he meet us here upon the bridge, divesting himself first of his weapons? Myself I am unarmed."

The herald conveyed the words to Cosimo, who hesitated still. Indeed, he had wheeled his horse when the bridge fell, ready to gallop off at the first sign of a sortie.

I laughed. "You are a paltry coward, Cosimo, when all is said," I shouted. "Do you not see that had I planned to take you, I need resort to no subterfuge? I have," I added—though untruthfully—"twice your number of lances under arms, and by now I could have flung them across the bridge and taken you under the very eyes of your own men. You were rash to venture so far. But if you will not venture farther, at least send me your herald."

At that he got down from his horse, delivered up sword and dagger to his single attendant, received from the man a parchment, and came towards us, opening his vizor as he advanced. Midway upon the bridge we met. His lips curled in a smile of scorn.

"Greetings, my strolling saint," he said. "Through all your vagaries you are at least consistent in that you ever engage your neighbour's wife to bear you company in your wanderings."

I went hot and cold, red and white by turns. With difficulty I controlled

myself under that taunt—the cruellest he could have flung at me in Bianca's hearing.

"Your business here?" I snarled.

He held out the parchment, his eyes watching me intently, so that they never once strayed to Bianca.

"Read, St. Mountebank," he bade me.

I took the paper, but before I lowered my eyes to it, I gave him warning.

"If on your part you attempt the slightest treachery," I said, "you shall be repaid in kind. My men are at the winches, and they have my orders that at the first treacherous movement on your part they are to take up the bridge. You will see that you could not reach the end of it in time to save yourself."

It was his turn to change colour under the shadow of his beaver. "Have you trapped me?" he asked between his teeth.

"If you had anything of the Anguissola besides the name," I answered, "you would know me incapable of such a thing. It is because I know that of the Anguissola you have nothing but the name, that you are a craven, a dastard and a dog, that I have taken my precautions."

"Is it your conception of valour to insult a man whom you hold as if bound hand and foot against striking you as you deserve?"

I smiled sweetly into that white, scowling face.

"Throw down your gauntlet upon this bridge, Cosimo, if you deem yourself affronted, if you think that I have lied; and most joyfully will I take it up and give you the trial by battle of your seeking."

For an instant I almost thought that he would take me at my word, as most fervently I hoped. But he restrained himself.

"Read!" he bade me again, with a fierce gesture. And accounting him well warned by now, I read with confidence.

It was a papal brief ordering me under pain of excommunication and death to make surrender to Cosimo d'Anguissola of the Castle of Pagliano which I traitorously held, and of the person of his wife, Madonna Bianca.

"This document is not exact," said I. "I do not hold this castle traitorously. It is an Imperial fief, and I hold it in the Emperor's name."

He smiled. "Persist if you are weary of life," he said. "Surrender now, and you are free to depart and go wheresoever you list. Continue in your offence, and the consequences shall daunt you ere all is done. This Imperial fief belongs to me, and it is for me, who am Lord of Pagliano by virtue of my marriage and the late lord's death, to hold it for the Emperor.

"And you are not to doubt that when this brief is laid before the Emperor's Lieutenant at Milan, he will move instantly against you to cast you out and to invest me in those rights which are mine by God's law and man's alike."

My answer may, at first, have seemed hardly to the point. I held out the brief to him.

"To seek the Emperor's Lieutenant you need not go as far as Milan. You will find him in Piacenza."

He looked at me, as if he did not understand. "How?" he asked.

I explained. "While you have been cooling your heels in the ante-chambers of the Vatican to obtain this endorsement of your infamy, the world hereabouts has moved a little. Yesterday Ferrante Gonzaga

took possession of Piacenza in the Emperor's name. To-day the Council will be swearing fealty to Caesar upon his Lieutenant's hands."

He stared at me for a long moment, speechless in his utter amazement. Then he swallowed hard.

"And the Duke?" he asked.

"The Duke has been in Hell these four-and-twenty hours."

"Dead?" he questioned, his voice hushed.

"Dead," said I.

He leaned against the rail of the bridge, his arms fallen limply to his sides, one hand crushing the Pontifical parchment. Then he braced himself again. He had reviewed the situation, and did not see that it hurt his position, when all was said.

"Even so," he urged, "what can you hope for? The Emperor himself must bow before this, and do me justice." And he smacked the document. "I demand my wife, and my demand is backed by Pontifical authority. You are mad if you think that Charles V can fail to support it."

"It is possible that Charles V may take a different view of the memorial setting forth the circumstances of your marriage, from that which the Holy Father appears to have taken. I counsel you to seek the Imperial Lieutenant at Piacenza without delay. Here you waste time."

His lips closed with a snap. Then, at last, his eyes wandered to Bianca, who stood just beside and slightly behind me.

"Let me appeal to you, Monna Bianca..." he began.

But at that I got between them "Are you so dead to shame," I roared, "that you dare address her, you pimp, you jackal, you eater of dirt? Be off, or I will have this drawbridge raised and deal with you here and now, in despite of Pope and Emperor and all the other powers you can invoke. Away with you, then!"

"You shall pay!" he snarled, "By God, you shall pay!"

And on that he went off, in some fear lest I should put my threat into execution.

But Bianca was in a panic. "He will do as he says." she cried as soon as we had re-entered the courtyard. "The Emperor cannot deny him justice. He must, he must! O, Agostino, it is the end. And see to what a pass I have brought you!"

I comforted her. I spoke brave words. I swore to hold that castle as long as one stone of it stood upon another. But deep down in my heart there was naught but presages of evil.

On the following day, which was Sunday, we had peace. But towards noon on Monday the blow fell. An Imperial herald from Piacenza rode out to Pagliano with a small escort.

We were in the garden when word was brought us, and I bade the herald be admitted. Then I looked at Bianca. She was trembling and had turned very white.

We spoke no word whilst they brought the messenger—a brisk fellow in his black-and-yellow Austrian livery. He delivered me a sealed letter. It proved to be a summons from Ferrante Gonzaga to appear upon the morrow before the Imperial Court which would sit in the Communal Palace of Piacenza to deliver judgment upon an indictment laid against me by Cosimo d'Anguissola.

I looked at the herald, hesitation in my mind and glance. He held out

a second letter.

"This, my lord, I was asked by favour to deliver to you also."

I took it, and considered the superscription:

"These to the Most Noble Agostino d'Anguissola, at Pagliano.

Quickly.

Quickly.

Quickly."

The hand was Galeotto's. I tore it open. It contained but two lines:

"Upon your life do not fail to obey the Imperial summons. Send Falcone to me here at once." And it was signed—"GALEOTTO."

"It is well," I said to the herald, "I will not fail to attend."

I bade the seneschal who stood in attendance to give the messenger refreshment ere he left, and upon that dismissed him.

When we were alone I turned to Bianca. "Galeotto bids me go," I said. "There is surely hope."

She took the note, and passing a hand over her eyes, as if to clear away some mist that obscured her vision, she read it. Then she considered the curt summons that gave no clue, and lastly looked at me.

"It is the end," I said. "One way or the other, it is the end. But for Galeotto's letter, I think I should have refused to obey, and made myself an outlaw indeed. As it is—there is surely hope!"

"O, Agostino, surely, surely!" she cried. "Have we not suffered enough? Have we not paid enough already for the happiness that should be ours? To-morrow I shall go with you to Piacenza."

"No, no," I implored her.

"Could I remain here?" she pleaded. "Could I sit here and wait? Could you be so cruel as to doom me to such a torture of suspense?"

"But if... if the worst befalls?"

"It cannot," she answered. "I believe in God."

CHAPTER XV. THE WILL OF HEAVEN

In the Chamber of Justice of the Communal Palace sat that day not the Assessors of the Ruota, but the Councillors in their damask robes—the Council of Ten of the City of Piacenza. And to preside over them sat not their Prior, but Ferrante Gonzaga himself, in a gown of scarlet velvet edged with miniver.

They sat at a long table draped in red at the room's end, Gonzaga slightly above them on a raised dais, under a canopy. Behind him hung a golden shield upon which was figured, between two upright columns each surmounted by a crown, the double-headed black eagle of Austria; a scroll intertwining the pillars was charged with the motto "PLUS ULTRA."

At the back of the court stood the curious who had come to see the show, held in bounds by a steel line of Spanish halberdiers. But the concourse was slight, for the folk of Piacenza still had weightier matters to concern them than the trial of a wife-stealer.

I had ridden in with an escort of twenty lances. But I left these in the square when I entered the palace and formally made surrender to the officer who met me. This officer led me at once into the Chamber of Justice, two men-at-arms opening a lane for me through the people with the butts of their pikes, so that I came into the open space before my judges, and bowed profoundly to Gonzaga.

Coldly he returned the salutation, his prominent eyes regarding me from out of that florid, crafty countenance.

On my left, but high up the room and immediately at right angles to the judges' tables, sat Galeotto, full-armed. He was flanked on the one side by Fra Gervasio, who greeted me with a melancholy smile, and on the other by Falcone, who sat rigid.

Opposite to this group on the judges' other hand stood Cosimo. He was flushed, and his eyes gleamed as they measured me with haughty triumph. From me they passed to Bianca, who followed after me with her women, pale, but intrepid and self-contained, her face the whiter by contrast with the mourning-gown which she still wore for her father, and which it might well come to pass that she should continue hereafter to wear for me.

I did not look at her again as she passed on and up towards Galeotto, who had risen to receive her. He came some few steps to meet her, and escorted her to a seat next to his own, so that Falcone moved down to another vacant stool. Her women found place behind her.

An usher set a chair for me, and I, too, sat down, immediately facing the Emperor's Lieutenant. Then another usher in a loud voice summoned Cosimo to appear and state his grievance.

He advanced a step or two, when Gonzaga raised his hand, to sign to him to remain where he was so that all could see him whilst he spoke.

Forthwith, quickly, fluently, and lucidly, as if he had got the thing by heart, Cosimo recited his accusation: How he had married Bianca de' Cavalcanti by her father's consent in her father's own Castle of Pagliano; how that same night his palace in Piacenza had been violently invested by myself and others abetting me, and how we had carried off his bride and burnt his palace to the ground; how I had since held her from him, shut up in the Castle of Pagliano, which was his fief in his quality as her husband; and how similarly I had unlawfully

held Pagliano against him to his hurt.

Finally he reminded the Court that he had appealed to the Pope, who had issued a brief commanding me, under pain of excommunication and death, to make surrender; that I had flouted the Pontifical authority, and that it was only upon his appeal to Caesar and upon the Imperial mandate that I had surrendered. Wherefore he begged the Court to uphold the Holy Father's authority, and forthwith to pronounce me excommunicate and my life forfeit, restoring to him his wife Bianca and his domain of Pagliano, which he would hold as the Emperor's liege and loyal servitor.

Having spoken thus, he bowed to the Court, stepped back, and sat down.

The Ten looked at Gonzaga. Gonzaga looked at me.

"Have you anything to say?" he asked.

I rose imbued by a calm that surprised me.

"Messer Cosimo has left something out of his narrative," said I. "When he says that I violently invested his palace here in Piacenza on the night of his marriage, and dragged thence the Lady Bianca, others abetting me, he would do well to add in the interests of justice, the names of those who were my abettors."

Cosimo rose again. "Does it matter to this Court and to the affair at issue what caitiffs he employed?" he asked haughtily.

"If they were caitiffs it would not matter," said I. "But they were not. Indeed, to say that it was I who invested his palace is to say too much. The leader of that expedition was Monna Bianca's own father, who, having discovered the truth of the nefarious traffic in which Messer Cosimo was engaged, hastened to rescue his daughter from an infamy."

Cosimo shrugged. "These are mere words," he said.

"The lady herself is present, and can bear witness to their truth," I cried.

"A prejudiced witness, indeed!" said Cosimo with confidence; and Gonzaga nodded, whereupon my heart sank.

"Will Messer Agostino give us the names of any of the braves who were with him?" quoth Cosimo. "It will no doubt assist the ends of justice, for those men should be standing by him now."

He checked me no more than in time. I had been on the point of citing Falcone; and suddenly I perceived that to do so would be to ruin Falcone without helping myself.

I looked at my cousin. "In that case," said I, "I will not name them."

Falcone, however, was minded to name himself, for with a grunt he made suddenly to rise. But Galeotto stretched an arm across Bianca, and forced the equerry back into his seat.

Cosimo saw and smiled. He was very sure of himself by now.

"The only witness whose word would carry weight would be the late Lord of Pagliano," he said. "And the prisoner is more crafty than honest in naming one who is dead. Your excellency will know the precise importance to attach to that."

Again his excellency nodded. Could it indeed be that I was enmeshed? My calm deserted me.

"Will Messer Cosimo tell your excellency under what circumstances the Lord of Pagliano died?" I cried.

"It is yourself should be better able to inform the Court of that," answered Cosimo quickly, "since he died at Pagliano after you had

borne his daughter thither, as we have proof."

Gonzaga looked at him sharply. "Are you implying, sir, that there is a further crime for which Messer Agostino d'Anguissola should be indicted?" he inquired.

Cosimo shrugged and pursed his lips. "I will not go so far, since the matter of Ettore Cavalcanti's death does not immediately concern me. Besides, there is enough contained in the indictment as it stands."

The imputation was none the less terrible, and could not fail of an effect upon the minds of the Ten. I was in despair, for at every question it seemed that the tide of destruction rose higher about me. I deemed myself irrevocably lost. The witnesses I might have called were as good as gagged.

Yet there was one last question in my quiver—a question which I thought must crumple up his confidence.

"Can you tell his excellency where you were upon your marriage night?" I cried hoarsely, my temples throbbing.

Superbly Cosimo looked round at the Court; he shrugged, and shook his head as if in utter pity.

"I leave it to your excellency to say where a man should be upon his marriage night," he said, with an astounding impudence, and there were some who tittered in the crowd behind me. "Let me again beg your excellency and your worthinesses to pass to judgment, and so conclude this foolish comedy."

Gonzaga nodded gravely, as if entirely approving, whilst with a fat jewelled hand he stroked his ample chin.

"I, too, think that it is time," he said, whereupon Cosimo, with a sigh of relief, would have resumed his seat but that I stayed him with the

last thing I had to say.

"My lord," I cried, appealing to Gonzaga, "the true events of that night are set forth in a memorial of which two copies were drawn up, one for the Pope and the other for your excellency, as the Emperor's vicegerent. Shall I recite its contents—that Messer Cosimo may be examined upon them.

"It is not necessary," came Gonzaga's icy voice. "The memorial is here before me." And he tapped a document upon the table. Then he fixed his prominent eyes upon Cosimo. "You are aware of its contents?" he asked.

Cosimo bowed, and Galeotto moved at last, for the first time since the trial's inception.

Until now he had sat like a carved image, save when he had thrust out a hand to restrain Falcone, and his attitude had filled me with an unspeakable dread. But at this moment he leaned forward turning an ear towards Cosimo, as if anxious not to miss a single word that the man might utter. And Cosimo, intent as he was, did not observe the movement.

"I saw its fellow at the Vatican," said my cousin, "and since the Pope in his wisdom and goodness judged worthless the witnesses whose signatures it bears, his holiness thought well to issue the brief upon which your excellency has acted in summoning Agostino d'Anguissola before you here.

"Thus is that memorial disposed of as a false and lying document."

"And yet," said Gonzaga thoughtfully, his heavy lip between thumb and forefinger, "it bears, amongst others, the signature of the Lord of Pagliano's confessor."

"Without violation of the seal of the confessional, it is impossible for

that friar to testify," was the answer. "And the Holy Father cannot grant him dispensation for so much. His signature, therefore, stands for nothing."

There followed a moment's silence. The Ten whispered among themselves. But Gonzaga never consulted them by so much as a glance. They appeared to serve none but a decorative office in that Court of his, for they bore no share in the dispensing of a justice of which he constituted himself the sole arbiter.

At last the Governor spoke.

"It seems, indeed, that there is no more to say and the Court has a clear course before it, since the Emperor cannot contravene the mandates of the Holy See. Nothing remains, then, but to deliver sentence; unless..."

He paused, and his eyes singularly sly, his lips pursed almost humorously, he turned his glance upon Galeotto.

"Ser Cosimo," he said, "has pronounced this memorial a false and lying document. Is there anything that you, Messer Galeotto, as its author, can have to tell the Court?"

Instantly the condottiero rose, his great scarred face very solemn, his eyes brooding. He advanced almost to the very centre of the table, so that he all but stood immediately before Gonzaga, yet sideways, so that I had him in profile, whilst he fully faced Cosimo.

Cosimo at least had ceased to smile. His handsome white face had lost some of its supercilious confidence. Here was something unexpected, something upon which he had not reckoned, against which he had not provided.

"What has Ser Galeotto to do with this?" he demanded harshly.

"That, sir, no doubt he will tell us, if you will have patience,"

Gonzaga answered, so sweetly and deferentially that of a certainty some of Cosimo's uneasiness must have been dissipated.

I leaned forward now, scarce daring to draw breath lest I should lose a word of what was to follow. The blood that had earlier surged to my face had now all receded again, and my pulses throbbed like hammers.

Then Galeotto spoke, his voice very calm and level.

"Will your excellency first permit me to see the papal brief upon which you acted in summoning hither the accused?"

Silently Gonzaga delivered a parchment into Galeotto's hands. The condottiero studied it, frowning. Then he smote it sharply with his right hand.

"This document is not in order," he announced.

"How?" quoth Cosimo, and he smiled again, reassured completely by now, convinced that here was no more than a minor quibble of the law.

"You are here described as Cosimo d'Anguissola, Lord of Mondolfo and Carmina. These titles are not yours."

The blood stirred faintly in Cosimo's cheeks.

"Those fiefs were conferred upon me by our late lord, Duke Pier Luigi," he replied.

Gonzaga spoke. "The confiscations effected by the late usurping Duke, and the awards made out of such confiscations, have been cancelled by Imperial decree. All lands so confiscated are by this decree revertible to their original holders upon their taking oath of allegiance to Caesar."

Cosimo continued to smile. "This is no matter of a confiscation effected by Duke Pier Luigi," he said. "The confiscation and my own investiture in the confiscated fiefs are a consequence of Agostino d'Anguissola's recreancy—at least, it is in such terms that my investiture is expressly announced in the papal bull that has been granted me and in the brief which lies before your excellency. Nor was such express announcement necessary, for since I was next heir after Ser Agostino to the Tyranny of Mondolfo, it follows that upon his being outlawed and his life forfeit I enter upon my succession."

Here, thought I, were we finally checkmated. But Galeotto showed no sign of defeat.

"Where is this bull you speak of?" he demanded, as though he were the judge himself.

Cosimo haughtily looked past him at Gonzaga. "Does your excellency ask to see it?"

"Assuredly," said Gonzaga shortly. "I may not take your word for its existence."

Cosimo plucked a parchment from the breast of his brown satin doublet, unfolded it, and advanced to lay it before Gonzaga, so that he stood near Galeotto—not more than an arm's length between them.

The Governor conned it; then passed it to Galeotto. "It seems in order," he said.

Nevertheless, Galeotto studied it awhile; and then, still holding it, he looked at Cosimo, and the scarred face that hitherto had been so sombre now wore a smile.

"It is as irregular as the other," he said. "It is entirely worthless."

"Worthless?" quoth Cosimo, in an amazement that was almost

scornful. "But have I not already explained..."

"It sets forth here," cut in Galeotto with assurance, "that the fief of Mondolfo and Carmina are confiscated from Agostino d'Anguissola. Now I submit to your excellency, and to your worthinesses," he added, turning aside, "that this confiscation is grotesque and impossible, since Mondolfo and Carmina never were the property of Agostino d'Anguissola, and could no more be taken from him than can a coat be taken from the back of a naked man—unless," he added, sneering, "a papal bull is capable of miracles."

Cosimo stared at him with round eyes, and I stared too, no glimmer of the enormous truth breaking yet upon my bewildered mind. In the court the silence was deathly until Gonzaga spoke.

"Do you say that Mondolfo and Carmina did not belong—that they never were the fiefs of Agostino d'Anguissola?" he asked.

"That is what I say," returned Galeotto, towering there, immense and formidable in his gleaming armour.

"To whom, then, did they belong?"

"They did and do belong to Giovanni d'Anguissola—Agostino's father."

Cosimo shrugged at this, and some of the dismay passed from his countenance.

"What folly is this?" he cried. "Giovanni d'Anguissola died at Perugia eight years ago."

"That is what is generally believed, and what Giovanni d'Anguissola has left all to believe, even to his own priest-ridden wife, even to his own son, sitting there, lest had the world known the truth whilst Pier Luigi lived such a confiscation as this should, indeed, have been

perpetrated.

"But he did not die at Perugia. At Perugia, Ser Cosimo, he took this scar which for thirteen years has served him for a mask." And he pointed to his own face.

I came to my feet, scarce believing what I heard. Galeotto was Giovanni d'Anguissola—my father! And my heart had never told me so!

In a flash I saw things that hitherto had been obscure, things that should have guided me to the truth had I but heeded their indications.

How, for instance, had I assumed that the Anguissola whom he had mentioned as one of the heads of the conspiracy against Pier Luigi could have been myself?

I stood swaying there, whilst his voice boomed out again.

"Now that I have sworn fealty to the Emperor in my true name, upon the hands of my Lord Gonzaga here; now that the Imperial aegis protects me from Pope and Pope's bastards; now that I have accomplished my life's work, and broken the Pontifical sway in this Piacenza, I can stand forth again and resume the state that is my own.

"There stands my foster-brother, who has borne witness to my true identity; there Falcone, who has been my equerry these thirty years; and there are the brothers Pallavicini, who tended me and sheltered me when I lay at the point of death from the wounds that disfigured me at Perugia."

"So, my Lord Cosimo, ere you can proceed further in this matter against my son, you will need to take your brief and your bull back to Rome and get them amended, for there is in Italy no Lord of Mondolfo and Carmina other than myself."

Cosimo fell back before him limp and trembling, his spirit broken

by this shattering blow.

And then Gonzaga uttered words that might have heartened him. But after being hurled from what he accounted the pinnacle of success, he mistrusted now the crafty Lieutenant, saw that he had been played with as a mouse by this Imperial cat with the soft, deadly paws.

"We might waive the formalities in the interests of justice," purred the Lieutenant. "There is this memorial, my lord," he said, and tapped the document, his eyes upon my father.

"Since your excellency wishes the matter to be disposed of out of hand, it can, I think, be done," he said, and he looked again at Cosimo.

"You have said that this memorial is false, because the witnesses whose names are here cannot be admitted to testify."

Cosimo braced himself for a last effort. "Do you defy the Pope?" he thundered.

"If necessary," was the answer. "I have done so all my life."

Cosimo turned to Gonzaga. "It is not I who have branded this memorial false," he said, "but the Holy Father himself."

"The Emperor," said my father, "may opine that in this matter the Holy Father has been deluded by liars. There are other witnesses. There is myself, for one. This memorial contains nothing but what was imparted to me by the Lord of Pagliano on his death-bed, in the presence of his confessor."

"We cannot admit the confessor," Gonzaga thrust in.

"Give me leave, your excellency. It was not in his quality as confessor that Fra Gervasio heard the dying man depone.

Cavalcanti's confession followed upon that. And there was in addition present the seneschal of Pagliano who is present here. Sufficient to establish this memorial alike before the Imperial and the Pontifical Courts.

"And I swear to God, as I stand here in His sight," he continued in a ringing voice, "that every word there set down is as spoken by Ettore Cavalcanti, Lord of Pagliano, some hours before he died; and so will those others swear. And I charge your excellency, as Caesar's vicegerent, to accept that memorial as an indictment of that caitiff Cosimo d'Anguissola, who lent himself to so foul and sacrilegious a deed—for it involved the defilement of the Sacrament of Marriage."

"In that you lie!" screamed Cosimo, crimson now with rage, the veins at his throat and brow swelling like ropes.

A silence followed. My father turned to Falcone, and held out his hand. Falcone sprang to give him a heavy iron gauntlet. Holding this by the fingers, my father took a step towards Cosimo, and he was smiling, very calm again after his late furious mood.

"Be it so," he said. "Since you say that I lie, I do here challenge you to prove it upon my body."

And he crashed the iron glove straight into Cosimo's face so that the skin was broken, and blood flowed about the mouth, leaving the lower half of the visage crimson, the upper dead-white.

Gonzaga sat on, entirely unmoved, and waited, indifferent to the stir there was amid the Ten. For by the ancient laws of chivalry—however much they might be falling now into desuetude—if Cosimo took up the glove, the matter passed beyond the jurisdiction of the Court, and all men must abide by the issue of the trial by battle.

For a long moment Cosimo hesitated. Then he saw ruin all about him. He—who had come to this court so confidently—had walked into

a trap. He saw it now, and saw that the only loophole was the chance this combat offered him. He played the man in the end. He stooped and took up the glove.

"Upon your body, then—God helping me," he said.

Unable longer to control myself, I sprang to my father's side. I caught his arm.

"Let me! Father, let me!"

He looked into my face and smiled, and the steel-coloured eyes seemed moist and singularly soft.

"My son!" he said, and his voice was gentle and soothing as a woman's caress.

"My father!" I answered him, a knot in my throat.

"Alas, that I must deny you the first thing you ask me by that name," he said. "But the challenge is given and accepted. Do you take Bianca to the Duomo and pray that right may be done and God's will prevail. Gervasio shall go with you."

And then came an interruption from Gonzaga.

"My lord," he said, "will you determine when and where this battle is to be fought?"

"Upon the instant," answered my father, "on the banks of Po with a score of lances to keep the lists."

Gonzaga looked at Cosimo. "Do you agree to this?"

"It cannot be too soon for me," replied the quivering Cosimo, black hatred in his glance.

"Be it so, then," said the Governor, and he rose, the Court rising

with him.

My father pressed my hand again. "To the Duomo, Agostino, till I come," he said, and on that we parted.

My sword was returned to me by Gonzaga's orders. In so far as it concerned myself the trial was at an end, and I was free.

At Gonzaga's invitation, very gladly I there and then swore fealty to the Emperor upon his hands, and then, with Bianca and Gervasio, I made my way through the cheering crowd and came out into the sunshine, where my lances, who had already heard the news, set up a great shout at sight of me.

Thus we crossed the square, and went to the Duomo, to render thanks. We knelt at the altar-rail, and Gervasio knelt above us upon the altar's lowest step.

Somewhere behind us knelt Bianca's women, who had followed us to the church.

Thus we waited for close upon two hours that were as an eternity.

And kneeling there, the eyes of my soul conned closely the scroll of my young life as it had been unfolded hitherto. I reviewed its beginnings in the greyness of Mondolfo, under the tutelage of my poor, dolorous mother who had striven so fiercely to set my feet upon the ways of sanctity. But my ways had been errant ways, even though, myself, I had sought to walk as she directed. I had strayed and blundered, veered and veered again, a very mockery of what she strove to make me—a strolling saint, indeed, as Cosimo had dubbed me, a wandering mummer when I sought after holiness.

But my strolling, my errantry ended here at last at the steps of this altar, as I knew.

Deeply had I sinned. But deeply and strenuously had I expiated,

and the heaviest burden of my expiation had been that endured in the past year at Pagliano beside my gentle Bianca who was another's wedded wife. That cross of penitence—so singularly condign to my sin—I had borne with fortitude, heartened by the confidence that thus should I win to pardon and that the burden would be mercifully lifted when the expiation was complete. In the lifting of that burden from me I should see a sign that pardon was mine at last, that at last I was accounted worthy of this pure maid through whom I should have won to grace, through whom I had come to learn that Love—God's greatest gift—is the great sanctifier of man.

That the stroke of that ardently awaited hour was even now impending I did not for a moment doubt.

Behind us, the door opened and steps clanked upon the granite floor.

Fra Gervasio rose very tall and gaunt, his gaze anxious.

He looked, and the anxiety passed. Thankfulness overspread his face. He smiled serenely, tears in his deep-set eyes. Seeing this, I, too, dared to look at last.

Up the aisle came my father very erect and solemn, and behind him followed Falcone with eyes a-twinkle in his weather-beaten face.

"Let the will of Heaven be done," said my father. And Gervasio came down to pronounce the nuptial blessing over us.

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THE SUITORS OF YVONNE

Being a Portion of the Memoirs of the Sieur Gaston de Luynes

By Rafael Sabatini

Contents

<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	OF HOW A BOY DRANK TOO MUCH WINE, AND WHAT CAME OF IT
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	THE FRUIT OF INDISCRETION
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	THE FIGHT IN THE HORSE-MARKET
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	FAIR RESCUERS
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	MAZARIN, THE MATCH-MAKER
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	OF HOW ANDREA BECAME LOVE-SICK
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	THE CHÂTEAU DE CANAPLES
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	THE FORESHADOW OF DISASTER
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	OF HOW A WHIP PROVED A BETTER ARGUMENT THAN A TONGUE
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	THE CONSCIENCE OF MALPERTUIS
<u>CHAPTER XI.</u>	OF A WOMAN'S OBSTINACY
<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	THE RESCUE
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	THE HAND OF YVONNE
<u>CHAPTER</u>	OF WHAT REELED AT DEATH

XIV.	OF WHAT BELIEF AT REAUX.
CHAPTER XV.	OF MY RESURRECTION
CHAPTER XVI.	THE WAY OF WOMAN
CHAPTER XVII.	FATHER AND SON
CHAPTER XVIII.	OF HOW I LEFT CANAPLES
CHAPTER XIX.	OF MY RETURN TO PARIS
CHAPTER XX.	OF HOW THE CHEVALIER DE CANAPLES BECAME A FRONDEUR
CHAPTER XXI.	OF THE BARGAIN THAT ST. AUBAN DROVE WITH MY LORD CARDINAL
CHAPTER XXII.	OF MY SECOND JOURNEY TO CANAPLES
CHAPTER XXIII.	OF HOW ST. AUBAN CAME TO BLOIS
CHAPTER XXIV.	OF THE PASSING OF ST. AUBAN
CHAPTER XXV.	PLAY-ACTING
CHAPTER XXVI.	REPARATION

CHAPTER I. OF HOW A BOY DRANK TOO MUCH WINE, AND WHAT CAME OF IT

Andrea de Mancini sprawled, ingloriously drunk, upon the floor. His legs were thrust under the table, and his head rested against the chair from which he had slipped; his long black hair was tossed and dishevelled; his handsome, boyish face flushed and garbed in the vacant expression of idiocy.

"I beg a thousand pardons, M. de Luynes," quoth he in the thick, monotonous voice of a man whose brain but ill controls his tongue,—"I beg a thousand pardons for the unseemly poverty of our repast. 'T is no fault of mine. My Lord Cardinal keeps a most unworthy table for me. Faugh! Uncle Giulio is a Hebrew—if not by birth, by instinct. He carries his purse-strings in a knot which it would break his heart to unfasten. But there! some day my Lord Cardinal will go to heaven—to the lap of Abraham. I shall be rich then, vastly rich, and I shall bid you to a banquet worthy of your most noble blood. The Cardinal's health—perdition have him for the niggardliest rogue unhung!"

I pushed back my chair and rose. The conversation was taking a turn that was too unhealthy to be pursued within the walls of the Palais Mazarin, where there existed, albeit the law books made no reference to it, the heinous crime of *lèse-Eminence*—a crime for which more men had been broken than it pleases me to dwell on.

"Your table, Master Andrea, needs no apology," I answered carelessly. "Your wine, for instance, is beyond praise."

"Ah, yes! The wine! But, ciel! Monsieur," he ejaculated, for a moment opening wide his heavy eyelids, "do you believe 't was Mazarin provided it? Pooh! 'T was a present made me by M. de la Motte, who seeks my interest with my Lord Cardinal to obtain for him an appointment in his Eminence's household, and thus thinks to earn my good will. He's a pestilent creature, this la Motte," he added, with a hiccough,— "a pestilent creature; but, Sangdieu! his wine is good, and I'll speak to my uncle. Help me up, De Luynes. Help me up, I say; I would drink the health of this provider of wines."

I hurried forward, but he had struggled up unaided, and stood swaying with one hand on the table and the other on the back of his chair. In vain did I remonstrate with him that already he had drunk overmuch.

"'T is a lie!" he shouted. "May not a gentleman sit upon the floor from choice?"

To emphasise his protestation he imprudently withdrew his hand from the chair and struck at the air with his open palm. That gesture cost him his balance. He staggered, toppled backward, and clutched madly at the tablecloth as he fell, dragging glasses, bottles, dishes, tapers, and a score of other things besides, with a deafening crash on to the floor.

Then, as I stood aghast and alarmed, wondering who might have overheard the thunder of his fall, the fool sat up amidst the ruins, and filled the room with his shrieks of drunken laughter.

"Silence, boy!" I thundered, springing towards him. "Silence! or we shall have the whole house about our ears."

And truly were my fears well grounded, for, before I could assist him to rise, I heard the door behind me open. Apprehensively I turned, and sickened to see that that which I had dreaded most was come to

pass. A tall, imposing figure in scarlet robes stood erect and scowling on the threshold, and behind him his valet, Bernouin, bearing a lighted taper.

Mancini's laugh faded into a tremulous cackle, then died out, and with gaping mouth and glassy eyes he sat there staring at his uncle.

Thus we stayed in silence while a man might count mayhap a dozen; then the Cardinal's voice rang harsh and full of anger.

"T is thus that you fulfil your trust, M. de Luynes!" he said.

"Your Eminence—" I began, scarce knowing what I should say, when he cut me short.

"I will deal with you presently and elsewhere." He stepped up to Andrea, and surveyed him for a moment in disgust. "Get up, sir!" he commanded. "Get up!"

The lad sought to obey him with an alacrity that merited a kinder fate. Had he been in less haste perchance he had been more successful. As it was, he had got no farther than his knees when his right leg slid from under him, and he fell prone among the shattered tableware, mumbling curses and apologies in a breath.

Mazarin stood gazing at him with an eye that was eloquent in scorn, then bending down he spoke quickly to him in Italian. What he said I know not, being ignorant of their mother tongue; but from the fierceness of his utterance I'll wager my soul 't was nothing sweet to listen to. When he had done with him, he turned to his valet.

"Bernouin," said he, "summon M. de Mancini's servant and assist him to get my nephew to bed. M. de Luynes, be good enough to take Bernouin's taper and light me back to my apartments."

Unsavory as was the task, I had no choice but to obey, and to stalk on in front of him, candle in hand, like an acolyte at Notre Dame, and

in my heart the profound conviction that I was about to have a bad quarter of an hour with his Eminence. Nor was I wrong; for no sooner had we reached his cabinet and the door had been closed than he turned upon me the full measure of his wrath.

"You miserable fool!" he snarled. "Did you think to trifle with the trust which in a misguided moment I placed in you? Think you that, when a week ago I saved you from starvation to clothe and feed you and give you a lieutenancy in my guards, I should endure so foul an abuse as this? Think you that I entrusted M. de Mancini's training in arms to you so that you might lead him into the dissolute habits which have dragged you down to what you are—to what you were before I rescued you—to what you will be to-morrow when I shall have again abandoned you?"

"Hear me, your Eminence!" I cried indignantly. "'T is no fault of mine. Some fool hath sent M. de Mancini a basket of wine and—"

"And you showed him how to abuse it," he broke in harshly. "You have taught the boy to become a sot; in time, were he to remain under your guidance, I make no doubt but that he would become a gamester and a duellist as well. I was mad, perchance, to give him into your care; but I have the good fortune to be still in time, before the mischief has sunk farther, to withdraw him from it, and to cast you back into the kennel from which I picked you."

"Your Eminence does not mean—"

"As God lives I do!" he cried. "You shall quit the Palais Royal this very night, M. de Luynes, and if ever I find you unbidden within half a mile of it, I will do that which out of a misguided sense of compassion I do not do now—I will have you flung into an oubliette of the Bastille, where better men than you have rotted before to-day. Per Dio! do you think that I am to be fooled by such a thing as you?"

"Does your Eminence dismiss me?" I cried aghast, and scarce crediting that such was indeed the extreme measure upon which he had determined.

"Have I not been plain enough?" he answered with a snarl.

I realised to the full my unenviable position, and with the realisation of it there overcame me the recklessness of him who has played his last stake at the tables and lost. That recklessness it was that caused me to shrug my shoulders with a laugh. I was a soldier of fortune—or should I say a soldier of misfortune?—as rich in vice as I was poor in virtue; a man who lived by the steel and parried the blows that came as best he might, or parried them not at all—but never quailed.

"As your Eminence pleases," I answered coolly, "albeit methinks that for one who has shed his blood for France as freely as I have done, a little clemency were not unfitting."

He raised his eyebrows, and his lips curled in a malicious sneer.

"You come of a family, M. de Luynes," he said slowly, "that is famed for having shed the blood of others for France more freely than its own. You are, I believe, the nephew of Albert de Luynes. Do you forget the Marshal d'Ancre?"

I felt the blood of anger hot in my face as I made haste to answer him:

"There are many of us, Monseigneur, who have cause to blush for the families they spring from—more cause, mayhap, than hath Gaston de Luynes."

In my words perchance there was no offensive meaning, but in my tone and in the look which I bent upon the Cardinal there was that which told him that I alluded to his own obscure and dubious origin. He grew livid, and for a moment methought he would have struck me:

had he done so, then, indeed, the history of Europe would have been other than it is to-day! He restrained himself, however, and drawing himself to the full height of his majestic figure he extended his arm towards the door.

"Go," he said, in a voice that passion rendered hoarse. "Go, Monsieur. Go quickly, while my clemency endures. Go before I summon the guard and deal with you as your temerity deserves."

I bowed—not without a taint of mockery, for I cared little what might follow; then, with head erect and the firm tread of defiance, I stalked out of his apartment, along the corridor, down the great staircase, across the courtyard, past the guard,—which, ignorant of my disgrace, saluted me,—and out into the street.

Then at last my head sank forward on my breast, and deep in thought I wended my way home, oblivious of all around me, even the chill bite of the February wind.

In my mind I reviewed my wasted life, with the fleeting pleasures and the enduring sorrows that it had brought me—or that I had drawn from it. The Cardinal said no more than truth when he spoke of having saved me from starvation. A week ago that was indeed what he had done. He had taken pity on Gaston de Luyes, the nephew of that famous Albert de Luyes who had been Constable of France in the early days of the late king's reign; he had made me lieutenant of his guards and maître d'armes to his nephews Andrea and Paolo de Mancini because he knew that a better blade than mine could not be found in France, and because he thought it well to have such swords as mine about him.

A little week ago life had been replete with fresh promises, the gates of the road to fame (and perchance fortune) had been opened to me anew, and now—before I had fairly passed that gate I had been thrust rudely back, and it had been slammed in my face because it

pleased a fool to become a sot whilst in my company.

There is a subtle poetry in the contemplation of ruin. With ruin itself, howbeit, there comes a prosaic dispelling of all idle dreams—a hard, a grim, a vile reality.

Ruin! 'T is an ugly word. A fitting one to carve upon the tombstone of a reckless, godless, dissolute life such as mine had been.

Back, Gaston de Luynes! back, to the kennel whence the Cardinal's hand did for a moment pluck you; back, from the morning of hope to the night of despair; back, to choose between starvation and the earning of a pauper's fee as a master of fence!

CHAPTER II. THE FRUIT OF INDISCRETION

Despite the dejection to which I had become a prey, I slept no less soundly that night than was my wont, and indeed it was not until late next morning when someone knocked at my door that I awakened.

I sat up in bed, and my first thought as I looked round the handsome room—which I had rented a week ago upon receiving the lieutenancy in the Cardinal's guards—was for the position that I had lost and of the need that there would be ere long to seek a lodging more humble and better suited to my straitened circumstances. It was not without regret that such a thought came to me, for my tastes had never been modest, and the house was a fine one, situated in the Rue St. Antoine at a hundred paces or so from the Jesuit convent.

I had no time, however, to indulge the sorry mood that threatened to beset me, for the knocking at my chamber door continued, until at length I answered it with a command to enter.

It was my servant Michelot, a grizzled veteran of huge frame and strength, who had fought beside me at Rocroi, and who had thereafter become so enamoured of my person—for some trivial service he swore I had rendered him—that he had attached himself to me and my luckless fortunes.

He came to inform me that M. de Mancini was below and craved immediate speech with me. He had scarce done speaking, however, when Andrea himself, having doubtless grown tired of waiting, appeared in the doorway. He wore a sickly look, the result of his last night's debauch; but, more than that, there was stamped upon his

face a look of latent passion which made me think at first that he was come to upbraid me.

"Ah, still abed, Luyes?" was his greeting as he came forward.

His cloak was wet and his boots splashed, which told me both that he had come afoot and that it rained.

"There are no duties that bid me rise," I answered sourly.

He frowned at that, then, divesting himself of his cloak, he gave it to Michelot, who, at a sign from me, withdrew. No sooner was the door closed than the boy's whole manner changed. The simmering passion of which I had detected signs welled up and seemed to choke him as he poured forth the story that he had come to tell.

"I have been insulted," he gasped. "Grossly insulted by a vile creature of Monsieur d'Orleans's household. An hour ago in the ante-chamber at the Palais Royal I was spoken of in my hearing as the besotted nephew of the Italian adventurer."

I sat up in bed tingling with excitement at the developments which already I saw arising from his last night's imprudence.

"Calmly, Andrea," I begged of him, "tell me calmly."

"Mortdieu! How can I be calm? Ough! The thought of it chokes me. I was a fool last night—a sot. For that, perchance, men have some right to censure me. But, Sangdieu! that a ruffler of the stamp of Eugène de Canaples should speak of it—should call me the nephew of an Italian adventurer, should draw down upon me the cynical smile of a crowd of courtly apes—pah! I am sick at the memory of it!"

"Did you answer him?"

"Pardieu! I should be worthy of the title he bestowed upon me had I not done so. Oh, I answered him—not in words. I threw my hat in his

face."

"That was a passing eloquent reply!"

"So eloquent that it left him speechless with amazement. He thought to bully with impunity, and see me slink into hiding like a whipped dog, terrified by his blustering tongue and dangerous reputation. But there!" he broke off, "a meeting has been arranged for four o'clock at St. Germain."

"A meeting!" I exclaimed.

"What else? Do you think the affront left any alternative?"

"But—"

"Yes, yes, I know," he interrupted, tossing his head. "I am going to be killed. Verville has sworn that there shall be one less of the Italian brood. That is why I have come to you, Luynes—to ask you to be my second. I don't deserve it, perhaps. In my folly last night I did you an ill turn. I unwittingly caused you to be stripped of your commission. But if I were on my death-bed now, and begged a favour of you, you would not refuse it. And what difference is there 'twixt me and one who is on his death-bed? Am I not about to die?"

"Peste! I hope not," I made answer with more lightness than I felt. "But I'll stand by you with all my heart, Andrea."

"And you'll avenge me?" he cried savagely, his Southern blood a-boiling. "You'll not let him leave the ground alive?"

"Not unless my opponent commits the indiscretion of killing me first. Who seconds M. de Canaples?"

"The Marquis de St. Auban and M. de Montmédy."

"And who is the third in our party?"

"I have none. I thought that perhaps you had a friend."

"! A friend?" I laughed bitterly. "Pshaw, Andrea! beggars have no friends. But stay; find Stanislas de Gouville. There is no better blade in Paris. If he will join us in this frolic, and you can hold off Canaples until either St. Auban or Montmédy is disposed of, we may yet leave the three of them on the field of battle. Courage, Andrea! Dum spiramus, speramus."

My words seemed to cheer him, and when presently he left me to seek out the redoubtable Gouville, the poor lad's face was brighter by far than when he had entered my room.

Down in my heart, however, I was less hopeful than I had led him to believe, and as I dressed after he had gone, 't was not without some uneasiness that I turned the matter over in my mind. I had, during the short period of our association, grown fond of Andrea de Mancini. Indeed the wonted sweetness of the lad's temper, and the gentleness of his disposition, were such as to breed affection in all who came in contact with him. In a way, too, methought he had grown fond of me, and I had known so few friends in life,—truth to tell I fear me that I had few of the qualities that engender friendship,—that I was naturally prone to appreciate a gift that from its rareness became doubly valuable.

Hence was it that I trembled for the boy. He had shown aptitude with the foils, and derived great profit from my tuition, yet he was too raw by far to be pitted against so cunning a swordsman as Canaples.

I had but finished dressing when a coach rumbled down the street and halted by my door. Naturally I supposed that someone came to visit Coupri, the apothecary,—to whom belonged this house in which I had my lodging,—and did not give the matter a second thought until Michelot rushed in, with eyes wide open, to announce that his Eminence, Cardinal Mazarin, commanded my presence in the

adjoining room.

Amazed and deeply marvelling what so extraordinary a visit might portend, I hastened to wait upon his Eminence.

I found him standing by the window, and received from him a greeting that was passing curt and cavalier.

"Has M. de Mancini been here?" he inquired peremptorily, disregarding the chair I offered him.

"He has but left me, Monseigneur."

"Then you know, sir, of the harvest which he has already reaped from the indiscretion into which you led him last night?"

"If Monseigneur alludes to the affront put upon M. de Mancini touching his last night's indiscretion, by a bully of the Court, I am informed of it."

"Pish, Monsieur! I do not follow your fine distinctions—possibly this is due to my imperfect knowledge of the language of France, possibly to your own imperfect acquaintance with the language of truth."

"Monseigneur!"

"Faugh!" he cried, half scornfully, half peevishly. "I came not here to talk of you, but of my nephew. Why did he visit you?"

"To do me the honour of asking me to second him at St. Germain this evening."

"And so you think that this duel is to be fought?—that my nephew is to be murdered?"

"We will endeavour to prevent his being—as your Eminence daintily puts it—murdered. But for the rest, the duel, methinks, cannot be avoided."

"Cannot!" he blazed. "Do you say cannot, M. de Luynes? Mark me well, sir: I will use no dissimulation with you. My position in France is already a sufficiently difficult one. Already we are threatened with a second Fronde. It needs but such events as these to bring my family into prominence and make it the butt for the ridicule that malcontents but wait an opportunity to slur it with. This affair of Andrea's will lend itself to a score or so of lampoons and pasquinades, all of which will cast an injurious reflection upon my person and position. That, Monsieur, is, methinks, sufficient evil to suffer at your hands. The late Cardinal would have had you broken on the wheel for less. I have gone no farther than to dismiss you from my service—a clemency for which you should be grateful. But I shall not suffer that, in addition to the harm already done, Andrea shall be murdered by Canaples."

"I shall do my best to render him assistance."

"You still misapprehend me. This duel, sir, must not take place."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"How does your Eminence propose to frustrate it? Will you arrest Canaples?"

"Upon what plea, Monsieur? Think you I am anxious to have the whole of Paris howling in my ears?"

"Then possibly it is your good purpose to enforce the late king's edict against duelling, and send your guards to St. Germain to arrest the men before they engage?"

"Benone!" he sneered. "And what will Paris say if I now enforce a law that for ten years has been disregarded? That I feared for my nephew's skin and took this means of saving him. A pretty story to have on Paris's lips, would it not be?"

"Indeed, Monseigneur, you are right, but I doubt me the duel will

needs be fought."

"Have I not already said that it shall not be fought?"

Again I shrugged my shoulders. Mazarin grew tiresome with his repetitions.

"How can it be avoided, your Eminence?"

"Ah, Monsieur, that is your affair."

"My affair?"

"Assuredly. 'T was through your evil agency he was dragged into this business, and through your agency he must be extricated from it."

"Your Eminence jests!"

"Undoubtedly,—'t is a jesting matter," he answered with terrible irony. "Oh, I jest! Per Dio! yes. But I'll carry my jest so far as to have you hanged if this duel be fought—aye, whether my nephew suffers hurt or not. Now, sir, you know what fate awaits you; fight it—turn it aside—I have shown you the way. The door, M. de Luynes."

CHAPTER III. THE FIGHT IN THE HORSE-MARKET

I let him go without a word. There was that in his voice, in his eye, and in the gesture wherewith he bade me hold the door for him, that cleared my mind of any doubts touching the irrevocable character of his determination. To plead was never an accomplishment of mine; to argue, I saw, would be to waste the Cardinal's time to no purpose.

And so I let him go,—and my curse with him,—and from my window I watched his coach drive away in the drizzling rain, scattering the crowd of awe-stricken loiterers who had collected at the rumour of his presence.

With a fervent prayer that his patron saint, the devil, might see fit to overset his coach and break his neck before he reached the Palace, I turned from the window, and called Michelot.

He was quick to answer my summons, bringing me the frugal measure of bread and wine wherewith it was my custom to break my fast. Then, whilst I munched my crust, I strode to and fro in the little chamber and exercised my wits to their utmost for a solution to the puzzle his Eminence had set me.

One solution there was, and an easy one—flight. But I had promised Andrea de Mancini that I would stand beside him at St. Germain; there was a slender chance of saving him if I went, whilst, if I stayed away, there would be nothing left for his Eminence to do but to offer up prayers for the rest of his nephew's soul.

Another idea I had, but it was desperate—and yet, so persistently

did my thoughts revert to it that in the end I determined to accept it.

I drank a cup of Armagnac, cheered myself with an oath or two, and again I called Michelot. When he came, I asked him if he were acquainted with M. de Canaples, to which he replied that he was, having seen the gentleman in my company.

"Then," I said, "you will repair to M. de Canaples's lodging in the Rue des Gesvres, and ascertain discreetly whether he be at home. If he is, you will watch the house until he comes forth, then follow him, and bring me word thereafter where he is to be found. Should he be already abroad before you reach the Rue des Gesvres, endeavour to ascertain whither he has gone, and return forthwith. But be discreet, Michelot. You understand?"

He assured me that he did, and left me to nurse my unpleasant thoughts for half an hour, returning at the end of that time with the information that M. de Canaples was seated at dinner in the "Auberge du Soleil."

Naught could have been more attuned to my purpose, and straightway I drew on my boots, girt on my sword, and taking my hat and cloak, I sallied out into the rain, and wended my way at a sharp pace towards the Rue St. Honoré.

One o'clock was striking as I crossed the threshold of the "Soleil" and flung my dripping cloak to the first servant I chanced upon.

I glanced round the well-filled room, and at one of the tables I espied my quarry in company with St. Auban and Montmédy—the very gentlemen who were to fight beside him that evening—and one Vilmorin, as arrant a coxcomb and poltroon as could be found in France. With my beaver cocked at the back of my head, and a general bearing that for aggressiveness would be hard to surpass, I strode up to their table, and stood for a moment surveying them with

an insolent stare that made them pause in their conversation. They raised their noble heads and bestowed upon me a look of haughty and disdainful wonder,—such a look as one might bestow upon a misbehaving lackey,—all save Vilmorin, who, with a coward's keen nose for danger, turned slightly pale and fidgeted in his chair. I was well known to all of them, but my attitude forbade all greeting.

"Has M. de Luynes lost anything?" St. Auban inquired icily.

"His wits, mayhap," quoth Canaples with a contemptuous shrug.

He was a tall, powerfully built man, this Canaples, with a swart, cruel face that was nevertheless not ill-favoured, and a profusion of black hair.

"There is a temerity in M. de Canaples's rejoinder that I had not looked for," I said banteringly.

Canaples's brow was puckered in a frown.

"Ha! And why not, Monsieur?"

"Why not? Because it is not to be expected that one who fastens quarrels upon schoolboys would evince the courage to beard Gaston de Luynes."

"Monsieur!" the four of them cried in chorus, so loudly that the hum of voices in the tavern became hushed, and all eyes were turned in our direction.

"M. de Canaples," I said calmly, "permit me to say that I can find no more fitting expression for the contempt I hold you in than this."

As I spoke I seized a corner of the tablecloth, and with a sudden tug I swept it, with all it held, on to the floor.

Dame! what a scene there was! In an instant the four of them were

on their feet,—as were half the occupants of the room, besides,—whilst poor Vilmorin, who stood trembling like a maid who for the first time hears words of love, raised his quavering voice to cry soothingly, "Messieurs, Messieurs!"

Canaples was livid with passion, but otherwise the calmest in that room, saving perhaps myself. With a gesture he restrained Montmédy and St. Auban.

"I shall be happy to give Master de Luyne all the proof of my courage that he may desire, and more, I warrant, than he will relish."

"Bravely answered!" I cried, with an approving nod and a beaming smile. "Be good enough to lead the way to a convenient spot."

"I have other business at the moment," he answered calmly. "Let us say to-morrow at—"

"Faugh!" I broke in scornfully. "I knew it! Confess, Monsieur, that you dare not light me now lest you should be unable to keep your appointments for this evening."

"Mille diables!" exclaimed St. Auban, "this insolence passes all bounds."

"Each man in his turn if you please, gentlemen," I replied. "My present affair is with M. de Canaples."

There was a hot answer burning on St. Auban's lips, but Canaples was beforehand with him.

"Par la mort Dieu!" he cried; "you go too far, sir, with your 'dare' and 'dare not.' Is a broken gamester, a penniless adventurer, to tell Eugène de Canaples what he dares? Come, sir; since you are eager for the taste of steel, follow me, and say your prayers as you go."

With that we left the inn, amidst a prodigious hubbub, and made our

way to the horse-market behind the Hôtel Vendôme. It was not to be expected, albeit the place we had chosen was usually deserted at such an hour, that after the fracas at the "Soleil" our meeting would go unattended. When we faced each other—Canaples and I—there were at least some twenty persons present, who came, despite the rain, to watch what they thought was like to prove a pretty fight. Men of position were they for the most part, gentlemen of the Court with here and there a soldier, and from the manner in which they eyed me methought they favoured me but little.

Our preparations were brief. The absence of seconds disposed of all formalities, the rain made us impatient to be done, and in virtue of it Canaples pompously announced that he would not risk a cold by stripping. With interest did I grimly answer that he need fear no cold when I had done with him. Then casting aside my cloak, I drew, and, professing myself also disposed to retain my doublet, we forthwith engaged.

He was no mean swordsman, this Canaples. Indeed, his reputation was already widespread, and in the first shock of our meeting blades I felt that rumour had been just for once. But I was strangely dispossessed of any doubts touching the outcome; this being due perchance to a vain confidence in my own skill, perchance to the spirit of contemptuous raillery wherewith I had from the outset treated the affair, and which had so taken root in my heart that even when we engaged I still, almost unwittingly, persisted in it.

In my face and attitude there was the reflection of this bantering, flippant mood; it was to be read in the mocking disdain of my glance, in the scornful curl of my lip, and even in the turn of my wrist as I put aside my opponent's passes. All this, Canaples must have noted, and it was not without effect upon his nerves. Moreover, there is in steel a subtle magnetism which is the index of one's antagonist; and from the moment that our blades slithered one against the other I make no

doubt but that Canaples grew aware of the confident, almost exultant mood in which I met him, and which told him that I was his master. Add to this the fact that whilst Canaples's nerves were unstrung by passion mine were held in check by a mind as calm and cool as though our swords were baited, and consider with what advantages I took my ground.

He led the attack fiercely and furiously, as if I were a boy whose guard was to be borne down by sheer weight of blows. I contented myself with tapping his blade aside, and when at length, after essaying every trick in his catalogue, he fell back baffled, I laughed a low laugh of derision that drove him pale with fury.

Again he came at me, almost before I was prepared for him, and his point, parried with a downward stroke and narrowly averted, scratched my thigh, but did more damage to my breeches than my skin, in exchange I touched him playfully on the shoulder, and the sting of it drove him back a second time. He was breathing hard by then, and would fain have paused awhile for breath, but I saw no reason to be merciful.

"Now, sir," I cried, saluting him as though our combat were but on the point of starting—"to me! Guard yourself!"

Again our swords clashed, and my blows now fell as swift on his blade as his had done awhile ago on mine. So hard did I press him that he was forced to give way before me. Back I drove him pace by pace, his wrist growing weaker at each parry, each parry growing wider, and the perspiration streaming down his ashen face. Panting he went, in that backward flight before my onslaught, defending himself as best he could, never thinking of a riposte—beaten already. Back, and yet back he went, until he reached the railings and could back no farther, and so broken was his spirit then that a groan escaped him. I answered with a laugh—my mood was lusty and cruel—and thrust at him. Then, eluding his guard, I thrust again, beneath it,

and took him fairly in the middle of his doublet.

He staggered, dropped his rapier, and caught at the railings, where for a moment he hung swaying and gasping. Then his head fell forward, his grip relaxed, and swooning he sank down into a heap.

A dozen sprang to his aid, foremost amongst them being St. Aubar and Montmédy, whilst I drew back, suddenly realising my own spent condition, to which the heat of the combat had hitherto rendered me insensible. I mastered myself as best I might, and, dissembling my hard breathing, I wiped my blade with a kerchief, an act which looked so calm and callous that it drew from the crowd—for a crowd it had become by then—an angry growl. 'T is thus with the vulgar; they are ever ready to sympathise with the vanquished without ever pausing to ask themselves if his chastisement may not be merited.

In answer to the growl I tossed my head, and sheathing my sword I flung the bloodstained kerchief into their very midst. The audacity of the gesture left them breathless, and they growled no more, but stared.

Then that outrageous fop, Vilmorin, who had been bending over Canaples, started up and coming towards me with a face that was whiter than that of the prostrate man, he proved himself so utterly bereft of wit by terror that for once he had the temerity to usurp the words and actions of a brave man.

"You have murdered him!" he cried in a strident voice, and thrusting his clenched fist within an inch of my face. "Do you hear me, you knave? You have murdered him!"

Now, as may be well conceived, I was in no mood to endure such words from any man, so was but natural that for answer I caught the dainty Vicomte a buffet that knocked him into the arms of the nearest bystander, and brought him to his senses.

"Fool," I snarled at him, "must I make another example before you believe that Gaston de Luynes wears a sword?"

"In the name of Heaven—" he began, putting forth his hands in a beseeching gesture; but what more he said was drowned by the roar of anger that burst from the onlookers, and it was like to have gone ill with me had not St. Auban come to my aid at that most critical juncture.

"Messieurs!" he cried, thrusting himself before me, and raising his hand to crave silence, "hear me. I, a friend of M. de Canaples, tell you that you wrong M. de Luynes. 'T was a fair fight—how the quarrel arose is no concern of yours."

Despite his words they still snarled and growled like the misbegotten curs they were. But St. Auban was famous for the regal supper parties he gave, to which all were eager to be bidden, and amidst that crowd, as I have said, there were a score or so of gentlemen of the Court, who—with scant regard for the right or wrong of the case and every regard to conciliate this giver of suppers—came to range themselves beside and around us, and thus protected me from the murderous designs of that rabble.

Seeing how the gentlemen took my part, and deeming—in their blessed ignorance—that what gentlemen did must be perforce well done, they grew calm in the twinkling of an eye. Thereupon St. Auban, turning to me, counselled me in a whisper to be gone, whilst the tide of opinion flowed in my favour. Intent to act upon this good advice, I took a step towards the little knot that had collected round Canaples, and with natural curiosity inquired into the nature of his hurt.

'T was Montmédy who answered me, scowling as he did so:

"He may die of it, Monsieur. If he does not, his recovery will be at least slow and difficult."

I had been wise had I held my peace and gone; but, like a fool, I must needs give utterance to what was in my mind.

"Ah! At least there will be no duel at St. Germain this evening."

Scarce had the words fallen from my lips when I saw in the faces of Montmédy and St. Auban and half a dozen others the evidence of their rashness.

"So!" cried St. Auban in a voice that shook with rage. "That was your object, eh? That you had fallen low, Master de Luynes, I knew, but I dreamt not that in your fall you had come so low as this."

"You dare?"

"Pardieu! I dare more, Monsieur; I dare tell you—you, Gaston de Luynes, spy and bravo of the Cardinal—that your object shall be defeated. That, as God lives, this duel shall still be fought—by me instead of Canaples."

"And I tell you, sir, that as God lives it shall not," I answered with a vehemence not a whit less than his own. "To you and to what other fools may think to follow in your footsteps, I say this: that not to-night nor to-morrow nor the next day shall that duel be fought. Cowards and poltroons you are, who seek to murder a beardless boy who has injured none of you! But, by my soul! every man who sends a challenge to that boy will I at once seek out and deal with as I have dealt with Eugène de Canaples. Let those who are eager to try another world make the attempt. Adieu, Messieurs!"

And with a flourish of my sodden beaver, I turned and left them before they had recovered from the vehemence of my words.

CHAPTER IV. FAIR RESCUERS

Like the calm of the heavens when pregnant with thunder was the calm of that crowd. And as brief it was; for scarce had I taken a dozen steps when my ears were assailed by a rumble of angry voices and a rush of feet. One glance over my shoulder, one second's hesitation whether I should stay and beard them, then the thought of Andrea de Mancini and of what would befall him did this canaille vent its wrath upon me decided my course and sent me hotfoot down the Rue Monarque. Howling and bellowing that rabble followed in my wake, stumbling over one another in their indecent haste to reach me.

But I was fleet of foot, and behind me there was that that would lend wings to the most deliberate, so that when I turned into the open space before the Hôtel Vendôme I had set a good fifty yards betwixt myself and the foremost of my hunters.

A coach was passing at that moment. I shouted, and the knave who drove glanced at me, then up the Rue Monarque at my pursuers, whereupon, shaking his head, he would have left me to my fate. But I was of another mind. I dashed towards the vehicle, and as it passed me I caught at the window, which luckily was open, and drawing up my legs I hung there despite the shower of mud which the revolving wheels deposited upon me.

From the bowels of the coach I was greeted by a woman's scream; a pale face, and a profusion of fair hair flashed before my eyes.

"Fear not, Madame," I shouted. "I am no assassin, but rather one who stands in imminent peril of assassination, and who craves your protection."

More I would have said, but at that juncture the lash of the coachman's whip curled itself about my shoulders, and stung me vilely.

"Get down, you rascal," he bellowed; "get down or I'll draw rein!"

To obey him would have been madness. The crowd surged behind with hoots and yells, and had I let go I must perforce have fallen into their hands. So, instead of getting down as he inconsiderately counselled, I drew myself farther up by a mighty effort, and thrust half my body into the coach, whereupon the fair lady screamed again, and the whip caressed my legs. But within the coach sat another woman, dark of hair and exquisite of face, who eyed my advent with a disdainful glance. Her proud countenance bore the stamp of courage, and to her it was that I directed my appeal.

"Madame, permit me, I pray, to seek shelter in your carriage, and suffer me to journey a little way with you. Quick, Madame! Your coachman is drawing rein, and I shall of a certainty be murdered under your very nose unless you bid him change his mind. To be murdered in itself is a trifling matter, I avow, but it is not nice to behold, and I would not, for all the world, offend your eyes with the spectacle of it."

I had judged her rightly, and my tone of flippant recklessness won me her sympathy and aid. Quickly thrusting her head through the other window:

"Drive on, Louis," she commanded. "Faster!" Then turning to me, "You may bring your legs into the coach if you choose, sir," she said.

"Your words, Madame, are the sweetest music I have heard for months," I answered drily, as I obeyed her. Then leaning out of the carriage again I waved my hat gallantly to the mob which—now realising the futility of further pursuit—had suddenly come to a halt.

"Au plaisir de vous revoir, Messieurs," I shouted. "Come to me one by one, and I'll keep the devil busy finding lodgings for you."

They answered me with a yell, and I sat down content, and laughed.

"You are not a coward, Monsieur," said the dark lady.

"I have been accounted many unsavoury things, Madame, but my bitterest enemies never dubbed me that."

"Why, then, did you run away?"

"Why? Ma foi! because in the excessive humility of my soul I recognised myself unfit to die."

She bit her lip and her tiny foot beat impatiently upon the floor.

"You are trifling with me, Monsieur. Where do you wish to alight?"

"Pray let that give you no concern; I can assure you that I am in no haste."

"You become impertinent, sir," she cried angrily. "Answer me, where are you going?"

"Where am I going? Oh, ah—to the Palais Royal."

Her eyes opened very wide at that, and wandered over me with a look that was passing eloquent. Indeed, I was a sorry spectacle for any woman's eyes—particularly a pretty one's. Splashed from head to foot with mud, my doublet saturated and my beaver dripping, with the feather hanging limp and broken, whilst there was a rent in my breeches that had been made by Canaples's sword, I take it that I had not the air of a courtier, and that when I said that I went to the Palais Royal she might have justly held me to be the adventurous lover of some kitchen wench. But unto the Palais Royal go others besides courtiers and lovers—spies of the Cardinal, for instance, and in her

sudden coldness and the next question that fell from her beauteous lips I read that she had guessed me one of these.

"Why did the mob pursue you, Monsieur?"

There was in her voice and gesture when she asked a question the imperiousness of one accustomed to command replies. This pretty queenliness it was that drove me to answer—as I had done before—in a bantering strain.

"Why did the mob pursue me? Hum! Why does the mob pursue great men? Because it loves their company."

Her matchless eyes flashed an angry glance, and the faint smile on my lips must have tried her temper sorely.

"What did you do to deserve this affection?"

"A mere nothing—I killed a man," I answered coolly. "Or, at least, I left him started on the road to—Paradise."

The little flaxen-haired doll uttered a cry of horror, and covered her face with her small white hands. My inquisitor, however, sat rigid and unaffected. My answer had confirmed her suspicions.

"Why did you kill him?"

"Ma foi!" I replied, encouraging her thoughts, "because he sought to kill me."

"Ah! And why did he seek to kill you?"

"Because I disturbed him at dinner."

"Have a care how you trifle, sir!" she retorted, her eyes kindling again.

"Upon my honour, 't was no more than that. I pulled the cloth from

the table whilst he ate. He was a quick-tempered gentleman, and my helpfulness offended him. That is all."

Doubt appeared in her eyes, and it may have entered her mind that perchance her judgment had been over-hasty.

"Do you mean, sir, that you provoked a duel?"

"Alas, Madame! It had become necessary. You see, M. de Canaples—"

"Who?" Her voice rang sharp as the crack of a pistol.

"Eh? M. de Canaples."

"Was it he whom you killed?"

From her tone, and the eager, strained expression of her face, it was not difficult to read that some mighty interest of hers was involved in my reply. It needed not the low moan that burst from her companion to tell me so.

"As I have said, Madame, it is possible that he is not dead—nay, even that he will not die. For the rest, since you ask the question, my opponent was, indeed, M. de Canaples—Eugène de Canaples."

Her face went deadly white, and she sank back in her seat as if every nerve in her body had of a sudden been bereft of power, whilst she of the fair hair burst into tears.

A pretty position was this for me!—luckily it endured not. The girl roused herself from her momentary weakness, and, seizing the cord, she tugged it violently. The coach drew up.

"Alight, sir," she hissed—"go! I wish to Heaven that I had left you to the vengeance of the people."

Not so did I; nevertheless, as I alighted: "I am sorry, Madame, that

you did not," I answered. "Adieu!"

The coach moved away, and I was left standing at the corner of the Rue St. Honoré and the Rue des Bons Enfants, in the sorriest frame of mind conceivable. The lady in the coach had saved my life, and for that I was more grateful perchance than my life was worth. Out of gratitude sprang a regret for the pain that I had undoubtedly caused her, and the sorrow which it might have been my fate to cast over her life.

Still, regret, albeit an admirable sentiment, was one whose existence was usually brief in my bosom. Dame! Had I been a man of regrets I might have spent the remainder of my days weeping over my past life. But the gods, who had given me a character calculated to lead a man into misfortune, had given me a stout heart wherewith to fight that misfortune, and an armour of recklessness against which remorse, regrets, aye, and conscience itself, rained blows in vain.

And so it befell that presently I laughed myself out of the puerile humour that was besetting me, and, finding myself chilled by inaction in my wet clothes, I set off for the Palais Royal at a pace that was first cousin to a run.

Ten minutes later I stood in the presence of the most feared and hated man in France.

"Cospetto!" cried Mazarin as I entered his cabinet. "Have you swum the Seine in your clothes?"

"No, your Eminence, but I have been serving you in the rain for the past hour."

He smiled that peculiar smile of his that rendered hateful his otherwise not ill-favoured countenance. It was a smile of the lips in which the eyes had no part.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I have heard of your achievements."

"You have heard?" I ejaculated, amazed by the powers which this man wielded.

"Yes, I have heard. You are a brave man, M. de Luynes."

"Pshaw, your Eminence!" I deprecated; "the poor are always brave. They have naught to lose but their life, and that is not so sweet to them that they lay much store by it. Howbeit, Monseigneur, your wishes have been carried out. There will be no duel at St. Germain this evening."

"Will there not? Hum! I am not so confident. You are a brave man, M. de Luynes, but you lack that great auxiliary of valour—discretion. What need to fling into the teeth of those fine gentlemen the reason you had for spitting Canaples, eh? You have provoked a dozen enemies for Andrea where only one existed."

"I will answer for all of them," I retorted boastfully.

"Fine words, M. de Luynes; but to support them how many men will you have to kill? Pah! What if some fine morning there comes one who, despite your vaunted swordsmanship, proves your master? What will become of that fool, my nephew, eh?"

And his uncanny smile again beamed on me. "Andrea is now packing his valise. In an hour he will have left Paris secretly. He goes—but what does it signify where he goes? He is compelled by your indiscretion to withdraw from Court. Had you kept a close tongue in your foolish head—but there! you did not, and so by a thoughtless word you undid all that you had done so well. You may go, M. de Luynes. I have no further need of you—and thank Heaven that you leave the Palais Royal free to go whither your fancy takes you, and not to journey to the Bastille or to Vincennes. I am merciful, M. de Luynes—as merciful as you are brave; more merciful than you are prudent.

One word of warning, M. de Luynes: do not let me learn that you are in my nephew's company, if you would not make me regret my clemency and repair the error of it by having you hanged. And now, adieu!"

I stood aghast. Was I indeed dismissed? Albeit naught had been said, I had not doubted, since my interview with him that morning, that did I succeed in saving Andrea my rank in his guards—and thereby a means of livelihood—would be restored to me. And now matters were no better than they had been before. He dismissed me with the assurance that he was merciful. As God lives, it would have been as merciful to have hanged me!

He met my astonished look with an eye that seemed to ask me why I lingered. Then reading mayhap what was passing in my thoughts, he raised a little silver whistle to his lips and blew softly upon it.

"Bernouin," said he to his valet, who entered in answer to the summons, "reconduct M. de Luynes."

I remember drawing down upon my bedraggled person the curious gaze of the numerous clients who thronged the Cardinal's ante-chamber, as I followed Bernouin to the door which opened on to the corridor, and which he held for me. And thus, for the second time within twenty-four hours, did I leave the Palais Royal to wend my way home to the Rue St. Antoine with grim despondency in my heart.

I found Michelot on the point of setting out in search of me, with a note which had been brought to my lodging half an hour ago, and which its bearer had said was urgent. I took the letter, and bidding Michelot prepare me fresh raiment that I might exchange for my wet clothes, I broke the seal and read:

"A thousand thanks, dear friend, for the service you have rendered me and of which his Eminence, my uncle, has informed me. I fear that you have made many enemies for yourself through an action which

will likely go unrewarded, and that Paris is therefore as little suited at present to your health as it is to mine. I am setting out for Blois on a mission of exceeding delicacy wherein your advice and guidance would be of infinite value to me. I shall remain at Choisy until to-morrow morning, and should there be no ties to hold you in Paris, and you be minded to bear me company, join me there at the Hôtel du Connétable where I shall lie to-night. Your grateful and devoted

"ANDRE."

So! There was one at least who desired my company! I had not thought it. "If there be no ties to hold you in Paris," he wrote. Dame! A change of air would suit me vastly. I was resolved—a fig for the Cardinal's threat to hang me if I were found in his nephew's company!

"My suit of buff, Michelot," I shouted, springing to my feet, "and my leather jerkin."

He gazed at me in surprise.

"Is Monsieur going a journey?"

I answered him that I was, and as I spoke I began to divest myself of the clothes I wore. "Pack my suit of pearl grey in the valise, with what changes of linen I possess; then call Master Coupri that I may settle with him. It may be some time before we return."

In less than half an hour I was ready for the journey, spurred and booted, with my rapier at my side, and in the pocket of my haut-dechausses a purse containing some fifty pistoles—best part of which I had won from Vilmorin at lansquenet some nights before, and which moderate sum represented all the moneys that I possessed.

Our horses were ready, my pistols holstered, and my valise strapped to Michelot's saddle. Despite the desperate outlook of my fortunes, of which I had made him fully cognisant, he insisted upon

clinging to me, reminding me that at Rocroi I had saved his life and that he would leave me only when I bade him go.

As four o'clock was striking at Nôtre Dame we crossed the Pont Neuf, and going by the Quai des Augustins and the Rue de la Harpe, we quitted Paris by the St. Michel Gate and took the road to Choisy. The rain had ceased, but the air was keen and cold, and the wind cut like a sword-edge.

CHAPTER V. MAZARIN, THE MATCH-MAKER

Twixt Paris and Choisy there lies but a distance of some two leagues, which, given a fair horse, one may cover with ease in little more than half an hour. So that as the twilight was deepening into night we drew rein before the hostelry of the Connétable, in the only square the little township boasts, and from the landlord I had that obsequious reception which is ever accorded to him who travels with a body-servant.

I found Andrea installed in a fair-sized and comfortable apartment, to the original decoration of which he added not a little by bestowing his boots in the centre of the floor, his hat, sword, and baldrick on the table, his cloak on one chair, and his doublet on another. He himself sat toasting his feet before the blazing logs, which cast a warm, reddish glow upon his sable hair and dainty shirt of cambric.

He sprang up as I entered, and came towards me with a look of pleasure on his handsome, high-bred face, that did me good to see.

"So, you have come, De Luynes," he cried, putting forth his hand. "I did not dare to hope that you would."

"No," I answered. "Truly it was not to be expected that I could be easily lured from Paris just as my fortunes are nearing a high tide, and his Eminence proposing to make me a Marshal of France and create me Duke. As you say, you had scant grounds for hoping that my love for you would suffice to make me renounce all these fine things for the mere sake of accompanying you on your jaunt to Blois."

He laughed, then fell to thanking me for having rid him of Canaples. I cut him short at last, and in answer to his questions told him what had passed 'twixt his Eminence and me that afternoon. Then as the waiter entered to spread our supper, the conversation assumed a less delicate character, until we were again alone with the table and its steaming viands between us.

"You have not told me yet, Andrea, what takes you to Blois," quoth I then.

"You shall learn. Little do you dream how closely interwoven are our morning adventures with this journey of mine. To begin with, I go to Blois to pay my *dévoirs* to the lady whom his Eminence has selected for my future wife."

"You were then right in describing this as a mission of great delicacy."

"More than you think—I have never seen the lady."

"Never seen her? And you go a-wooing a woman you have never seen?"

"It is so. I have never seen her; but his Eminence has, and 't is he who arranges the affair. Ah, the Cardinal is the greatest matchmaker in France! My cousin Anna Martinozzi is destined for the Prince de Conti, my sisters Olympia and Marianne he also hopes to marry to princes of the blood, whilst I dare wager that he has thoughts of seating either Maria or Hortensia upon the throne of France as the wife of Louis XIV., as soon as his Majesty shall have reached a marriageable age. You may laugh, De Luynes, nevertheless all this may come to pass, for my uncle has great ambitions for his family, and it is even possible that should that poor, wandering youth, Charles II. of England, ever return to the throne of his fathers he may also become my brother-in-law. I am likely to become well connected,

De Luynes, so make a friend of me whilst I am humble. So much for Mazarin's nieces. His nephews are too young for alliances just yet, saving myself; and for me his Eminence has chosen one of the greatest heiresses in France—Yvonne St. Albaret de Canaples."

"Whom?" I shouted.

He smiled.

"Curious, is it not? She is the sister of the man whom I quarrelled with this morning, and whom you fought with this afternoon. Now you will understand my uncle's reasons for so strenuously desiring to prevent the duel at St. Germain. It appears that the old Chevalier de Canaples is as eager as the Cardinal to see his daughter wed to me, for his Eminence has promised to create me Duke for a wedding gift. 'T will cost him little, and 't will please these Canaples mightily. Naturally, had Eugène de Canaples and I crossed swords, matters would have been rendered difficult."

"When did you learn all this?" I inquired.

"To-day, after the duel, and when it was known what St. Auban and Montmédy had threatened me with. My uncle thought it well that I should withdraw from Paris. He sent for me and told me what I have told you, adding that I had best seize the opportunity, whilst my presence at Court was undesirable, to repair to Blois and get my wooing done. I in part agreed with him. The lady is very rich, and I am told that she is beautiful. I shall see her, and if she pleases me, I'll woo her. If not, I'll return to Paris."

"But her brother will oppose you."

"Her brother? Pooh! If he doesn't die of the sword-thrust you gave him, which I am told is in the region of the lung and passing dangerous, he will at least be abed for a couple of months to come."

"But I, mon cher André? What rôle do you reserve for me, that you have desired me to go with you?"

"The rôle of Mentor if you will. Methought you would prove a merry comrade to help one o'er a tedious journey, and knowing that there was little to hold you to Paris, and probably sound reasons why you should desire to quit it, meseemed that perhaps you would consent to bear me company. Who knows, my knight errant, what adventures may await you and what fortunes? If the heiress displeases me, it may be that she will please you—or mayhap there is another heiress at Blois who will fall enamoured of those fierce moustachios."

I laughed with him at the improbability of such things befalling. I carried in my bosom too large a heart, and one that was the property of every wench I met—for just so long as I chanced to be in her company.

It was no more than in harmony with this habit of mine, that when, next morning in the common-room of the Connétable, I espied Jeanneton, the landlord's daughter, and remarked that she was winsome and shapely, with a complexion that would not have dishonoured a rose-petal, I permitted myself to pinch her dainty cheek. She slapped mine in return, and in this pleasant manner we became acquainted.

"Sweet Jeanneton," quoth I with a laugh, "that was mightily ill-done! I did but pinch your cheek as one may pinch a sweet-smelling bud, so that the perfume of it may cling to one's fingers."

"And I, sir," was the pert rejoinder, "did but slap yours as one may slap a misbehaving urchin's; so that he may learn better manners."

Nevertheless she was pleased with my courtly speech, and perchance also with my moustachios, for a smile took the place of the frown wherewith she had at first confronted me. Now, if I had uttered

glib pleasantries in answer to her frowns, how many more did not her smiles wring from me! I discoursed to her in the very courtliest fashion of cows and pullets and such other matters as interesting to her as they were mysterious to me. I questioned her in a breath touching her father's pigs and the swain she loved best in that little township, to all of which she answered me with a charming wit, which would greatly divert you did I but recall her words sufficiently to set them down. In five minutes we had become the best friends in the world, which was attested by the protecting arm that I slipped around her waist, as I asked her whether she loved that village swain of hers better than she loved me, and refused to believe her when she answered that she did.

Outside two men were talking, one calling for a farrier, and when informed that the only one in the village was absent and not likely to return till noon, demanding relays of horses. The other—probably the hostler—answered him that the Connétable was not a post-house and that no horses were to be had there. Then a woman's voice, sweet yet commanding, rose above theirs.

"Very well, Guilbert," it said. "We will await this farrier's return."

"Let me go, Monsieur!" cried Jeanneton. "Some one comes."

Now for myself I cared little who might come, but methought that it was likely to do poor Jeanneton's fair name no benefit, if the arm of Gaston de Luynes were seen about her waist. And so I obeyed her, but not quickly enough; for already a shadow lay athwart the threshold, and in the doorway stood a woman, whose eye took in the situation before we had altered it sufficiently to avert suspicion. To my amazement I beheld the lady of the coach—she who had saved me from the mob in Place Vendôme, and touching whose identity I could have hazarded a shrewd guess.

In her eyes also I saw the light of recognition which swiftly changed

to one of scorn. Then they passed from me to the vanishing Jeanneton, and methought that she was about to call her back. She paused, however, and, turning to the lackey who followed at her heels.

"Guilbert," she said, "be good enough to call the landlord, and bid him provide me with an apartment for the time that we may be forced to spend here."

But at this juncture the host himself came hurrying forward with many bows and endless rubbing of hands, which argued untold deference. He regretted that the hostelry of the Connétable, being but a poor inn, seldom honoured as it was at that moment, possessed but one suite of private apartments, and that was now occupied by a most noble gentleman. The lady tapped her foot, and as at that moment her companion (who was none other than the fair-haired doll I had seen with her on the previous day) entered the room, she turned to speak with her, whilst I moved away towards the window.

"Will this gentleman," she inquired, "lend me one of his rooms, think you?"

"Hélas, Mademoiselle, he has but two, a bedroom and an ante-chamber, and he is still abed."

"Oh!" she cried in pretty anger, "this is insufferable! 'T is your fault, Guilbert, you fool. Am I, then, to spend the day here in the common-room?"

"No, no, Mademoiselle," exclaimed the host in his most soothing accents. "Only for an hour, or less, perhaps, until this very noble lord is risen, when assuredly—for he is young and very gallant—he will resign one or both of his rooms to you."

More was said between them, but my attention was suddenly drawn elsewhere. Michelot burst into the room, disaster written on his face.

"Monsieur," he cried, in great alarm, "the Marquis de St. Auban is riding down the street with the Vicomte de Vilmorin and another gentleman."

I rapped out an oath at the news; they had got scent of Andrea's whereabouts, and were after him like sleuth-hounds on a trail.

"Remain here, Michelot," I answered in a low voice. "Tell them that M. de Mancini is not here, that the only occupant of the inn is your master, a gentleman from Normandy, or Picardy, or where you will. See that they do not guess our presence—the landlord fortunately is ignorant of M. de Mancini's name."

There was a clatter of horses' hoofs without, and I was barely in time to escape by the door leading to the staircase, when St. Auban's heavy voice rang out, calling the landlord.

"I am in search of a gentleman named Andrea de Mancini," he said. "I am told that he has journeyed hither, and that he is here at present. Am I rightly informed?"

I determined to remain where I was, and hear that conversation to the end.

"There is a gentleman here," answered the host, "but I am ignorant of his name. I will inquire."

"You may spare yourself the trouble," Michelot interposed. "That is not the gentleman's name. I am his servant."

There was a moment's pause, then came Vilmorin's shrill voice.

"You lie, knave! M. de Mancini is here. You are M. de Luynes's lackey, and where the one is, there shall we find the other."

"M. de Luynes?" came a voice unknown to me. "That is Mancini's sword-blade of a friend, is it not? Well, why does he hide himself?"

Where is he? Where is your master, rascal?"

"I am here, Messieurs," I answered, throwing wide the door, and appearing, grim and arrogant, upon the threshold.

Mort de ma vie! Had they beheld the Devil, St. Auban and Vilmorin could not have looked less pleased than they did when their eyes lighted upon me, standing there surveying them with a sardonic grin.

St. Auban muttered an oath, Vilmorin stifled a cry, whilst he who had so loudly called to know where I hid myself—a frail little fellow, in the uniform of the gardes du corps—now stood silent and abashed.

The two women, who had withdrawn into a dark and retired corner of the apartment, stood gazing with interest upon this pretty scene.

"Well, gentlemen?" I asked in a tone of persiflage, as I took a step towards them. "Have you naught to say to me, now that I have answered your imperious summons? What! All dumb?"

"Our affair is not with you," said St. Auban, curtly.

"Pardon! Why, then, did you inquire where I was?"

"Messieurs," exclaimed Vilmorin, whose face assumed the pallor usual to it in moments of peril, "meseems we have been misinformed, and that M. de Mancini is not here. Let us seek elsewhere."

"Most excellent advice, gentlemen," I commented,—"*seek elsewhere.*"

"Monsieur," cried the little officer, turning purple, "it occurs to me that you are mocking us."

"Mocking you! Mocking you? Mocking a gentleman who has been tied to so huge a sword as yours. Surely—surely, sir, you do not think —"

"I'll not endure it," he broke in. "You shall answer to me for this."

"Have a care, sir," I cried in alarm as he rushed forward. "Have a care, sir, lest you trip over your sword."

He halted, drew himself up, and, with a magnificent gesture: "I am Armand de Malpertuis, lieutenant of his Majesty's guards," he announced, "and I shall be grateful if you will do me the honour of taking a turn with me, outside."

"I am flattered beyond measure, M. Malappris—"

"Mal-per-tuis," he corrected furiously.

"Malpertuis," I echoed. "I am honoured beyond words, but I do not wish to take a turn."

"Mille diables, sir! Don't you understand? We must fight."

"Must we, indeed? Again I am honoured; but, Monsieur, I don't fight sparrows."

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" cried St. Auban, thrusting himself between us. "Malpertuis, have the goodness to wait until one affair is concluded before you create a second one. Now, M. de Luynes, will you tell me whether M. de Mancini is here or not?"

"What if he should be?"

"You will be wise to withdraw—we shall be three to two."

"Three to two! Surely, Marquis, your reckoning is at fault. You cannot count the Vicomte there as one; his knees are knocking together; at best he is but a woman in man's clothes. As for your other friend, unless his height misleads me, he is but a boy. Therefore, Monsieur, you see that the advantage is with us. We are two men opposed to a man, a woman, and a child, so that—"

"In Heaven's name, sir," cried St Auban, again interposing himself betwixt me and the bellicose Malpertuis, "will you cease this foolishness? A word with you in private, M. de Luynes."

I permitted him to take me by the sleeve, and lead me aside, wondering the while what curb it was that he was setting upon his temper, and what wily motives he might have for adopting so conciliatory a tone.

With many generations to come, the name of César de St. Auban must perforce be familiar as that of one of the greatest roysterers and most courtly libertines of the early days of Louis XIV., as well as that of a rabid anti-cardinalist and frondeur, and one of the earliest of that new cabal of nobility known as the *petits-maîtres*, whose leader the Prince de Condé was destined to become a few years later. He was a man of about my own age, that is to say, between thirty-two and thirty-three, and of my own frame, tall, spare, and active. On his florid, *débonnair* countenance was stamped his character of *bon-viveur*. In dress he was courtly in the extreme. His doublet and *haut-de-chausses* were of wine-coloured velvet, richly laced, and he still affected the hanging sleeves of a fast-disappearing fashion. Valuable lace filled the tops of his black boots, a valuable jewel glistened here and there upon his person, and one must needs have pronounced him a fop but for the strength and resoluteness of his bearing, and the long rapier that hung from his gold-embroidered baldrick. Such in brief is a portrait of the man who now confronted me, his fine blue eyes fixed upon my face, wherein methinks he read but little, search though he might.

"M. de Luynes," he murmured at last, "you appear to find entertainment in making enemies, and you do it wantonly."

"Have you brought me aside to instruct me in the art of making friends?"

"Possibly, M. de Luynes; and without intending an offence, permit me to remark that you need them."

"Mayhap. But I do not seek them."

"I have it in my heart to wish that you did; for I, M. de Luynes, seek to make a friend of you. Nay, do not smile in that unbelieving fashion. I have long esteemed you for those very qualities of dauntlessness and defiance which have brought you so rich a crop of hatred. If you doubt my words, perhaps you will recall my attitude towards you in the horse-market yesterday, and let that speak. Without wishing to remind you of a service done, I may yet mention that I stood betwixt you and the mob that sought to avenge my friend Canaples. He was my friend; you stood there, as indeed you have always stood, in the attitude of a foe. You wounded Canaples, maltreated Vilmorin, defied me; and yet but for my intervention, mille diables sir, you had been torn to pieces."

"All this I grant is very true, Monsieur," I made reply, with deep suspicion in my soul. "Yet, pardon me, if I confess that to me it proves no more than that you acted as a generous enemy. Pardon my bluntness also—but what profit do you look to make from gaining my friendship?"

"You are frank, Monsieur," he said, colouring slightly, "I will be none the less so. I am a frondeur, an anti-cardinalist. In a word, I am a gentleman and a Frenchman. An interloping foreigner, miserly, mean-souled, and Jesuitical, springs up, wins himself into the graces of a foolish, impetuous, wilful queen, and climbs the ladder which she holds for him to the highest position in France. I allude to Mazarin; this Cardinal who is not a priest; this minister of France who is not a Frenchman; this belittler of nobles who is not a gentleman."

"Mort Dieu, Monsieur—"

"One moment, M. de Luynes. This adventurer, not content with the

millions which his avaricious talons have dragged from the people for his own benefit, seeks, by means of illustrious alliances, to enrich a pack of beggarly nieces and nephews that he has rescued from the squalor of their Sicilian homes to bring hither. His nieces, the Mancinis and Martinozzis, he is marrying to Dukes and Princes. 'T is not nice to witness, but 't is the affair of the men who wed them. In seeking, however, to marry his nephew Andrea to one of the greatest heiresses in France, he goes too far. Yvonne de Canaples is for some noble countryman of her own—there are many suitors to her hand—and for no nephew of Giulio Mazarini. Her brother Eugène, himself, thinks thus, and therein, M. de Luynes, you have the real motive of the quarrel which he provoked with Andrea, and which, had you not interfered, could have had but one ending."

"Why do you tell me all this, Monsieur?" I inquired coldly, betraying none of the amazement his last words gave birth to.

"So that you may know the true position of affairs, and, knowing it, see the course which the name you bear must bid you follow. Because Canaples failed am I here to-day. I had not counted upon meeting you, but since I have met you, I have set the truth before you, confident that you will now withdraw from an affair to which no real interest can bind you, leaving matters to pursue their course."

He eyed me, methought, almost anxiously from under his brows, as he awaited my reply. It was briefer than he looked for.

"You have wasted time, Monsieur."

"How? You persist?"

"Yes. I persist. Yet for the Cardinal I care nothing. Mazarin has dismissed me from his service unjustly and unpaid. He has forbidden me his nephew's company. In fact, did he know of my presence here with M. de Mancini, he would probably carry out his threat to hang

me."

"Ciel!" cried St. Auban, "you are mad, if that be so. France is divided into two parties, cardinalists and anti-cardinalists. You, sir, without belonging to either, stand alone, an enemy to both. Your attitude is preposterous!"

"Nay, sir, not alone. There is Andrea de Mancini. The boy is my only friend in a world of enemies. I am growing fond of him, Monsieur, and I will stand by him, while my arm can wield a sword, in all that may advance his fortunes and his happiness. That, Monsieur, is my last word."

"Do not forget, M. de Luynes," he said—his suaveness all departed of a sudden, and his tone full of menace and acidity—"do not forget that when a wall may not be scaled it may be broken through."

"Aye, Monsieur, but many of those who break through stand in danger of being crushed by the falling stones," I answered, entering into the spirit of his allegory.

"There are many ways of striking," he said.

"And many ways of being struck," I retorted with a sneer.

Our words grew sinister, our eyes waxed fiery, and more might have followed had not the door leading to the staircase opened at that moment to admit Andrea himself. He came, elegant in dress and figure, with a smile upon his handsome young face, whose noble features gave the lie to St. Auban's assertion that he had been drawn from a squalid Sicilian home. Such faces are not bred in squalor.

In utter ignorance of the cabal against him, he greeted St. Auban—who was well known to him—with a graceful bow, and also Vilmorin, who stood in the doorway with Malpertuis, and who at the sight of Mancini grew visibly ill at ease. In coming to Choisy, the Vicomte had

clearly expected to do no more than second St. Auban in the duel which he thought to see forced upon Andrea. He now realised that if a fight there was, he might, by my presence, be forced into it. Malpertuis looked fierce and tugged at his moustachios, whilst his companions returned Andrea's salutation—St. Auban gravely, and Vilmorin hesitatingly.

"Ha, Gaston," said the boy, advancing towards me, "our host tells me that two ladies who have been shipwrecked here wish to do me the honour of occupying my apartments for an hour or so. Ha, there they are," he added, as the two girls came suddenly forward. Then bowing—"Mesdames, I am enchanted to set the poor room at your disposal for as long as it may please you to honour it."

As the ladies—of whose presence St. Auban had been unaware—appeared before us, I shot a glance at the Marquis, and, from the start he gave upon beholding them, I saw that things were as I had suspected.

Before they could reply to Andrea, St. Auban suddenly advanced:

"Mesdemoiselles," quoth he, "forgive me if in this miserable light I did not earlier discover your presence and offer you my services. I do so now, with the hope that you will honour me by making use of them."

"Merci, M. de St. Auban," replied the dark-haired one—whom I guessed to be none other than Yvonne de Canaples herself—"but, since this gentleman so gallantly cedes his apartments to us, all our needs are satisfied. It would be churlish to refuse that which is so graciously proffered."

Her tone was cold in the extreme, as also was the inclination of her head wherewith she favoured the Marquis. In arrant contrast were the pretty words of thanks she addressed to Andrea, who stood by, blushing like a girl, and a damnable scowl did this contrast draw from

St. Auban, a scowl that lasted until, escorted by the landlord, the two ladies had withdrawn.

There was an awkward pause when they were gone, and methought from the look on St. Auban's face that he was about to provoke a fight after all. Not so, however, for, after staring at us like a clown whilst one might tell a dozen, he turned and strode to the door, calling for his horse and those of his companions.

"Au révoir, M. de Luynes," he said significantly as he got into the saddle.

"Au révoir, M. de Luynes," said also Malpertuis, coming close up to me. "We shall meet again, believe me."

"Pray God that we may not, if you would die in your bed," I answered mockingly. "Adieu!"

CHAPTER VI. OF HOW ANDREA BECAME LOVE-SICK

With what fictions I could call to mind I put off Andrea's questions touching the peculiar fashion of St. Auban's leave-taking. Tell him the truth and expose to him the situation whereof he was himself the unconscious centre I dared not, lest his high-spirited impetuosity should cause him to take into his own hands the reins of the affair, and thus drive himself into irreparable disaster.

Andrea himself showed scant concern, however, and was luckily content with my hurriedly invented explanations; his thoughts had suddenly found occupation in another and a gentler theme than the ill-humour of men, and presently his tongue betrayed them when he drew the conversation to the ladies to whom he had resigned his apartments.

"Pardieu! Gaston," he burst out, "she is a lovely maid—saw you ever a bonnier?"

"Indeed she is very beautiful," I answered, laughing to myself at the thought of how little he dreamt that it was of Yvonne St. Albaret de Canaples that he spoke, and not minded for the while to enlighten him.

"If she be as kind and gentle as she is beautiful, Gaston, well—Uncle Giulio's plans are likely to suffer shipwreck. I shall not leave Choisy until I have spoken to her; in fact, I shall not leave until she leaves."

"Nevertheless, we shall still be able to set out, as we had projected,

after dining, for in an hour, or two at most, they will proceed on their journey."

He was silent for some moments, then:

"To the devil with the Cardinal's plans!" quoth he, banging his fist on the table. "I shall not go to Blois."

"Pooh! Why not?"

"Why not?" He halted for a moment, then in a meandering tone—"You have read perchance in story-books," he said, "of love being born from the first meeting of two pairs of eyes, as a spark is born of flint and steel, and you may have laughed at the conceit, as I have laughed at it. But laugh no more, Gaston; for I who stand before you am one who has experienced this thing which poets tell of, and which hitherto I have held in ridicule. I will not go to Blois because—because—enfin, because I intend to go where she goes."

"Then, mon cher, you will go to Blois. You will go to Blois, if not as a dutiful nephew, resigned to obey his reverend uncle's wishes, at least because fate forces you to follow a pair of eyes that have—hum, what was it you said they did?"

"Do you say that she is going to Blois? How do you know?"

"Eh? How do I know? Oh, I heard her servant speaking with the hostler."

"So much the better, then; for thus if his Eminence gets news of my whereabouts, the news will not awaken his ever-ready suspicions. Ciel! How beautiful she is! Noted you her eyes, her skin, and what hair, mon Dieu! Like threads of gold!"

"Like threads of gold?" I echoed. "You are dreaming, boy. Oh, St. Gris! I understand; you are speaking of the fair-haired chit that was with her."

He eyed me in amazement.

"'T is you whose thoughts are wandering to that lanky, nose-in-the-air Madame who accompanied her."

I began a laugh that I broke off suddenly as I realised that it was not Yvonne after all who had imprisoned his wits. The Cardinal's plans were, indeed, likely to miscarry if he persisted thus.

"But 't was the nose-in-the-air Madame, as you call her, with whom you spoke!"

"Aye, but it was the golden-haired lady that held my gaze. Pshaw! Who would mention them in a breath?"

"Who, indeed?" said I, but with a different meaning.

Thereafter, seeing him listless, I suggested a turn in the village to stretch our limbs before dining. But he would have none of it, and when I pressed the point with sound reasoning touching the benefits which health may cull from exercise, he grew petulant as a wayward child. She might descend whilst he was absent. Indeed, she might require some slight service that lay, perchance, in his power to render her. What an opportunity would he not lose were he abroad? She might even depart before we returned; and than that no greater calamity could just then befall him. No, he would not stir a foot from the inn. A fig for exercise! to the devil with health! who sought an appetite? Not he. He wished for no appetite—could contrive no base and vulgar appetite for food, whilst his soul, he swore, was being consumed by the overwhelming, all-effacing appetite to behold her.

Such meandering fools are most of us at nineteen, when the heart is young—a flawless mirror ready to hold the image of the first fair maid that looks into it through our eyes, and as ready—Heaven knows!—to relinquish it when the substance is withdrawn.

But I, who was not nineteen, and the mirror of whose heart—to pursue my metaphor—was dulled, warped, and cracked with much illusage, grew sick of the boy's enthusiasm and the monotony of a conversation which I could divert into no other channel from that upon which it had been started by a little slip of a girl with hair of gold and sapphire eyes—I use Andrea's words. And so I rose, and bidding him take root in the tavern, if so it pleased his fancy, I left him there.

Wrapped in my cloak, for the air was raw and damp, I strode aimlessly along, revolving in my mind what had befallen at the Connétable that morning, and speculating upon the issue that this quaint affair might have. In matters of love, or rather, of matrimony—which is not quite the same thing—opposition is common enough. But the opposers are usually members of either of the interested families. Now the families—that is to say, the heads of the families—being agreed and even anxious to bring about the union of Yvonne de Canaples and Andrea de Mancini, it was something new to have a cabal of persons who, from motives of principle—as St. Auban had it—should oppose the alliance so relentlessly as to even resort to violence if no other means occurred to them. It seemed vastly probable that Andrea would be disposed of by a knife in the back, and more than probable that a like fate would be reserved for me, since I had constituted myself his guardian angel. For my own part, however, I had a pronounced distaste to ending my days in so unostentatious a fashion. I had also a notion that I should prove an exceedingly difficult person to assassinate, and that those who sought to slip a knife into me would find my hide peculiarly tough, and my hand peculiarly ready to return the compliment.

So deeply did I sink into ponderings of this character that it was not until two hours afterwards that I again found myself drawing near the Connétable.

I reached the inn to find by the door a coach, and by that coach

Andrea; he stood bareheaded, despite the cold, conversing, with all outward semblances of profound respect, with those within it.

So engrossed was he and so ecstatic, that my approach was unheeded, and when presently I noted that the coach was Mademoiselle de Canaples's, I ceased to wonder at the boy's unconsciousness of what took place around him.

Clearly the farrier had been found at last, and the horse shod afresh during my absence. Loath to interrupt so pretty a scene, I waited, aloof, until these adieux should be concluded, and whilst I waited there came to me from the carriage a sweet, musical voice that was not Yvonne's.

"May we not learn at least, Monsieur, the name of the gentleman to whose courtesy we are indebted for having spent the past two hours without discomfort?"

"My name, Mademoiselle, is Andrea de Mancini, that of the humblest of your servants, and one to whom your thanks are a more than lavish payment for the trivial service he may have been fortunate enough to render you."

Dame! What glibness doth a tongue acquire at Court!

"M. Andrea de Mancini?" came Yvonne's voice in answer. "Surely a relative of the Lord Cardinal?"

"His nephew, Mademoiselle."

"Ah! My father, sir, is a great admirer of your uncle."

From the half-caressing tone, as much as from the very words she uttered, I inferred that she was in ignorance of the compact into which his Eminence had entered with her father—a bargain whereof she was herself a part.

"I am rejoiced, indeed, Mademoiselle," replied Andrea with a bow, as though the compliment had been paid to him. "Am I indiscreet in asking the name of Monsieur your father?"

"Indiscreet! Nay, Monsieur. You have a right to learn the name of those who are under an obligation to you. My father is the Chevalier de Canaples, of whom it is possible that you may have heard. I am Yvonne de Canaples, of whom it is unlikely that you should have heard, and this is my sister Geneviève, whom a like obscurity envelops."

The boy's lips moved, but no sound came from them, whilst his cheeks went white and red by turns. His courtliness of a moment ago had vanished, and he stood sheepish and gauche as a clown. At length he so far mastered himself as to bow and make a sign to the coachman, who thereupon gathered up his reins.

"You are going presumably to Blois?" he stammered with a nervous laugh, as if the journey were a humorous proceeding.

"Yes, Monsieur," answered Geneviève, "we are going home."

"Why, then, it is possible that we shall meet again. I, too, am travelling in that direction. A bientôt, Mesdemoiselles!"

The whip cracked, the coach began to move, and the creaking of its wheels drowned, so far as I was concerned, the female voices that answered his farewell. The coachman roused his horses into an amble; the amble became a trot, and the vehicle vanished round a corner. Some few idlers stopped to gaze stupidly after it, but not half so stupidly as did my poor Andrea, standing bareheaded where the coach had left him.

I drew near, and laid my hand on his shoulder; at the touch he started like one awakened suddenly, and looked up.

"Ah—you are returned, Gaston."

"To find that you have made a discovery, and are overwhelmed by your error."

"My error?"

"Yes—that of falling in love with the wrong one. Hélas, it is but one of those ironical jests wherewith Fate amuses herself at every step of our lives. Had you fallen in love with Yvonne—and it passes my understanding why you did not—everything would have gone smoothly with your wooing. Unfortunately, you have a preference for fair hair—"

"Have done," he interrupted peevishly. "What does it signify? To the devil with Mazarin's plans!"

"So you said this morning."

"Yes, when I did not even dream her name was Canaples."

"Nevertheless, she is the wrong Canaples."

"For my uncle—but, mille diables! sir, 't is I who am to wed, and I shall wed as my heart bids me."

"Hum! And Mazarin?"

"Faugh!" he answered, with an expressive shrug.

"Well, since you are resolved, let us dine."

"I have no appetite."

"Let us dine notwithstanding. Eat you must if you would live; and unless you live—think of it!—you'll never reach Blois."

"Gaston, you are laughing at me! I do not wish to eat."

I surveyed him gravely, with my arms akimbo.

"Can love so expand the heart of man that it fills even his stomach? Well, well, if you will not eat, at least have the grace to bear me company at table. Come, Andrea," and I took his arm, "let us ascend to that chamber which she has but just quitted. Who can tell but that we shall find there some token of her recent presence? If nothing more, at least the air will be pervaded by the perfume she affected, and since you scorn the humble food of man, you can dine on that."

He smiled despite himself as I drew him towards the staircase.

"Scoffer!" quoth he. "Your callous soul knows naught of love."

"Whereas you have had three hours' experience. Pardieu! You shall instruct me in the gentle art."

Alas, for those perfumes upon which I had proposed that he should feast himself. If any the beautiful Geneviève had left behind her, they had been smothered in the vulgar yet appetising odour of the steaming ragoût that occupied the table.

I prevailed at length upon the love-lorn boy to take some food, but I could lead him to talk of naught save Geneviève de Canaples. Presently he took to chiding me for the deliberateness wherewith I ate, and betrayed thereby his impatience to be in the saddle and after her. I argued that whilst she saw him not she might think of him. But the argument, though sound, availed me little, and in the end I was forced—for all that I am a man accustomed to please myself—to hurriedly end my repast, and pronounce myself ready to start.

As Andrea had with him some store of baggage—since his sojourn at Blois was likely to be of some duration—he travelled in a coach. Into this coach, then, we climbed—he and I. His valet, Silvio, occupied the seat beside the coachman, whilst my stalwart Michelot rode behind leading my horse by the bridle. In this fashion we set out, and ere long the silence of my thoughtful companion, the monotonous

rumbling of the vehicle, and, most important of all factors, the good dinner that I had consumed, bred in me a torpor that soon became a sleep.

From a dream that, bound hand and foot, I was being dragged by St. Auban and Malpertuis before the Cardinal, I awakened with a start to find that we were clattering already through the streets of Etrechy, so that whilst I had slept we had covered some six leagues. Twilight had already set in, and Andrea lay back idly in the carriage, holding a book which it was growing too dark to read, and between the leaves of which he had slipped his forefinger to mark the place where he had paused.

His eyes met mine as I looked round, and he smiled. "I should not have thought, Gaston," he said, "that a man with so seared a conscience could have slept thus soundly."

"I have not slept soundly," I grumbled, recalling my dream.

"Pardieu! you have slept long, at least."

"Out of self-protection; so that I might not hear the name of Geneviève de Canaples. 'T is a sweet name, but you render it monotonous."

He laughed good-humouredly.

"Have you never loved, Gaston?"

"Often."

"Ah—but I mean did you never conceive a great passion?"

"Hundreds, boy."

"But never such a one as mine!"

"Assuredly not; for the world has never seen its fellow. Be good

enough to pull the cord, you Cupid incarnate. I wish to alight."

"You wish to alight! Why?"

"Because I am sick of love. I am going to ride awhile with Michelot whilst you dream of her coral lips, her sapphire eyes, and what other gems constitute her wondrous personality."

Two minutes later I was in the saddle riding with Michelot in the wake of the carriage. As I have already sought to indicate in these pages, Michelot was as much my friend as my servant. It was therefore no more than natural that I should communicate to him my fears touching what might come of the machinations of St. Auban, Vilmorin, and even, perchance, of that little firebrand, Malpertuis.

Night fell while we talked, and at last the lights of Étampes, where we proposed to lie, peeped at us from a distance, and food and warmth.

It was eight o'clock when we reached the town, and a few moments later we rattled into the courtyard of the Hôtel de l'Épée.

Andrea was out of temper to learn that Mesdemoiselles de Canaples had reached the place two hours earlier, taken fresh horses, and proceeded on their journey, intending to reach Monnerville that night. He was even mad enough to propose that we should follow their example, but my sober arguments prevailed, and at Étampes we stayed till morning.

Andrea withdrew early. But I, having chanced upon a certain M. de la Vrillière, a courtier of Vilmorin's stamp, with whom I had some slight acquaintance, and his purse being heavier than his wits, I spent a passing profitable evening in his company. This pretty gentleman hailed my advent with a delight that amazed me, and suggested that we should throw a main together to kill time. The dice were found, and so clumsily did he use them that in half an hour, playing for beggarly

crowns, he had lost twenty pistoles. Next he lost his temper, and with an oath pitched the cubes into the fire, swearing that they were toys for children and that I must grant him his *révanche* with cards. The cards were furnished us, and with a fortune that varied little we played *lansquenet* until long past midnight. The fire died out in the grate, and the air grew chill, until at last, with a violent sneeze, La Vrillière protested that he would play no more.

Cursing himself for the unluckiest being alive, the fool bade me good-night, and left me seventy pistoles richer than when I had met him.

CHAPTER VII. THE CHÂTEAU DE CANAPLES

Despite the strenuous efforts which Andrea compelled us to put forth, we did not again come up with Mesdemoiselles de Canaples, who in truth must have travelled with greater speed than ladies are wont to.

This circumstance bred much discomfort in Andrea's bosom; for in it he read that his Geneviève thought not of him as he of her, else, knowing that he followed the same road, she would have retarded their progress so that he might overtake them. Thus argued he when on the following night, which was that of Friday, we lay at Orleans. But when towards noon on Saturday our journey ended with our arrival at Blois, he went so far as to conclude that she had hastened on expressly to avoid him. Now, from what I had seen of Mademoiselle Yvonne, methought I might hazard a guess that she it was who commanded in these—and haply, too, in other—matters, and that the manner of their journey had been such as was best to her wishes.

With such an argument did I strive to appease Andrea's doubts; but all in vain—which is indeed no matter for astonishment, for to reason with a man in love is to reason with one who knows no reason.

After a brief halt at the Lys de France—at which hostelry I hired myself a room—we set out for the Château de Canaples, which is situated on the left bank of the Loire, at a distance of about half a league from Blois in the direction of Tours.

We cut a brave enough figure as we rode down the Rue Vieille attended by our servants, and many a rustic Blaisois stopped to gape

at us, to nudge his companion, and point us out, whispering the word "Paris."

I had donned my grey velvet doublet—deeming the occasion worthy of it—whilst Andrea wore a handsome suit of black, with gold lace, which for elegance it would have been difficult to surpass. An air of pensiveness added interest to his handsome face and courtly figure, and methought that Geneviève must be hard to please if she fell not a victim to his wooing.

We proceeded along the road bordering the Loire, a road of rare beauty at any other season of the year, but now bare of foliage, grey, bleak, and sullen as the clouds overhead, and as cold to the eye as was the sharp wind to the flesh. As we rode I fell to thinking of what my reception at the Château de Canaples was likely to be, and almost to regret that I had permitted Andrea to persuade me to accompany him. Long ago I had known the Chevalier de Canaples, and for all the disparity in our ages—for he counted twice my years—we had been friends and comrades. That, however, was ten years ago, in the old days when I owned something more than the name of Luynes. To-day I appeared before him as a ruined adventurer, a soldier of fortune, a ruffler, a duellist who had almost slain his son in a brawl, whose details might be known to him, but not its origin. Seeing me in the company of Andrea de Mancini he might—who could say?—even deem me one of those parasites who cling to young men of fortune so that they may live at their expense. That the daughter would have formed such a conceit of me I was assured; it but remained to see with what countenance the father would greet me.

From such speculations I was at length aroused by our arrival at the gates of the Canaples park. Seeing them wide open, we rode between the two massive columns of granite (each surmounted by a couchant lion holding the escutcheon of the Canaples) and proceeded at an ambling pace up the avenue. Through the naked

trees the château became discernible—a brave old castle that once had been the stronghold of a feudal race long dead. Grey it was, and attuned, that day, to the rest of the grey landscape. But at its base the ivy grew thick and green, and here and there long streaks of it crept up almost to the battlements, whilst in one place it had gone higher yet and clothed one of the quaint old turrets. A moat there had once been, but this was now filled up and arranged into little mounds that became flower-beds in summer.

Resigning our horses to the keeping of our servants, we followed the grave maître d'hôtel who had received us. He led us across the spacious hall, which had all the appearance of an armoury, and up the regal staircase of polished oak on to a landing wide and lofty. Here, turning to the left, he opened a door and desired us to give ourselves the trouble of awaiting the Chevalier. We entered a handsome room, hung in costly Dutch tapestry, and richly furnished, yet with a sobriety of colour almost puritanical. The long windows overlooked a broad terrace, enclosed in a grey stone balustrade, from which some half-dozen steps led to a garden below. Beyond that ran the swift waters of the Loire, and beyond that again, in the distance, we beheld the famous Château de Chambord, built in the days of the first Francis.

I had but remarked these details when the door again opened, to admit a short, slender man in whose black hair and beard the hand of time had scattered but little of that white dust that marks its passage. His face was pale, thin, and wrinkled, and his grey eyes had a nervous, restless look that dwelt not long on anything. He was dressed in black, with simple elegance, and his deep collar and ruffles were of the finest point.

"Welcome to Canaples, M. de Mancini!" he exclaimed, as he hurried forward, with a smile so winning that his countenance appeared transfigured by it. "Welcome most cordially! We had not hoped that you would arrive so soon, but fortunately my daughters, to

whom you appear to have been of service at Choisy, warned me that you were journeying hither. Your apartments, therefore, are prepared for you, and we hope that you will honour Canaples by long remaining its guest."

Andrea thanked him becomingly.

"In truth," he added, "my departure from Paris was somewhat sudden, but I have a letter here from Monseigneur my uncle, which explains the matter."

"No explanation is needed, my dear Andrea," replied the old nobleman, abandoning the formalities that had marked his welcoming speech. "How left you my Lord Cardinal?" he asked, as he took the letter.

"In excellent health, but somewhat harassed, I fear, by the affairs of State."

"Ah, yes, yes. But stay. You are not alone." And Canaples's grey eyes shot an almost furtive glance of inquiry in my direction. A second glance followed the first and the Chevalier's brows were knit. Then he came a step nearer, scanning my face.

"Surely, surely, Monsieur," he exclaimed before Andrea had time to answer him. "Were you not at Rocroi?"

"Your memory flatters me, Monsieur," I replied with a laugh. "I was indeed at Rocroi—captain in the regiment of chevaux-légers whereof you were Mestre de Champ."

"His name," said Andrea, "is Gaston de Luynes, my very dear friend, counsellor, and, I might almost say, protector."

"Pardieu, yes! Gaston de Luynes!" he ejaculated, seizing my hand in an affectionate grip. "But how have you fared since Rocroi was fought? For a soldier of such promise, one might have predicted

great things in ten years."

"Hélas, Monsieur! I was dismissed the service after Senlac."

"Dismissed the service!"

"Pah!" I laughed, not without bitterness, "'t is a long story and an ugly one, divided 'twixt the dice-box, the bottle, and the scabbard. Ten years ago I was a promising young captain, ardent and ambitious; to-day I am a broken ruffler, unrecognised by my family—a man without hope, without ambition, almost without honour."

I know not what it was that impelled me to speak thus. Haply the wish that since he must soon learn to what depths Gaston de Luynes had sunk, he should at least learn it from my own lips at the outset.

He shuddered at my concluding words, and had not Andrea at that moment put his arm affectionately upon my shoulder, and declared me the bravest fellow and truest friend in all the world, it is possible that the Chevalier de Canaples would have sought an excuse to be rid of me. Such men as he seek not the acquaintance of such men as I.

To please Andrea was, however, of chief importance in his plans, and to that motive I owe it that he pressed me to remain a guest at the château. I declined the honour with the best grace I could command, determined that whilst Andrea remained at Canaples I would lodge at the Lys de France in Blois, independent and free to come or go as my fancy bade me. His invitation that I should at least dine at Canaples I accepted; but with the condition that he should repeat his invitation after he had heard something that I wished to tell him. He assented with a puzzled look, and when presently Andrea repaired to his apartments, and we were alone, I began.

"You have doubtlessly received news, Monsieur, of a certain affair in which your son had recently the misfortune to be dangerously

wounded?"

We were standing by the great marble fireplace, and Canaples was resting one of his feet upon the huge brass andirons. He made a gesture of impatience as I spoke.

"My son, sir, is a fool! A good-for-nothing fool! Oh, I have heard of this affair, a vulgar tavern brawl, the fifth in which his name has been involved and besmirched. I had news this morning by a courier dispatched me by my friend St. Simon, who imagines that I am deeply concerned in that young profligate. I learn that he is out of danger, and that in a month or so, he will be about again and ready to disgrace the name of Canaples afresh. But there, sir; I crave your pardon for the interruption."

I bowed, and when in answer to my questions he told me that he was in ignorance of the details of the affair of which I spoke, I set about laying those details before him. Beginning with the original provocation in the Palais Royal and ending with the fight in the horse-market, I related the whole story to him, but in an impersonal manner, and keeping my own name out of my narrative. When I had done, Canaples muttered an oath of the days of the fourth Henry.

"Ventre St. Gris! Does the dog carry his audacity so far as to dare come betwixt me and my wishes, and to strive against them? He sought to kill Mancini, eh? Would to Heaven he had died by the hand of this fellow who shielded the lad!"

"Monsieur!" I cried, aghast at so unnatural an expression.

"Pah!" he cried harshly. "He is my son in name alone, filial he never was."

"Nevertheless, Monsieur, he is still your son, your heir."

"My heir? And what, pray, does he inherit? A title—a barren,

landless title! By his shameful conduct he alienated the affection of his uncle, and his uncle has disinherited him in favour of Yvonne. 'T is she who will be mistress of this château with its acres of land reaching from here to Blois, and three times as far on the other side. My brother, sir, was the rich Canaples, the owner of all this, and by his testament I am his heir during my lifetime, the estates going to Yvonne at my death. So that you see I have naught to leave; but if I had, not a *dénier* should go to my worthless son!"

He spread his thin hands before the blaze, and for a moment there was silence. Then I proceeded to tell him of the cabal which had been formed against Mancini, and of the part played by St. Auban. At the mention of that name he started as if I had stung him.

"What!" he thundered. "Is that ruffian also in the affair? Sangdieu! His motives are not far to seek. He is a suitor—an unfavoured suitor—for the hand of Yvonne, that seemingly still hopes. But you have not told me, Monsieur, the name of this man who has stood betwixt Andrea and his assassins."

"Can you not guess, Monsieur?" quoth I, looking him squarely in the face. "Did you not hear Andrea call me, even now, his protector."

"You? And with what motive, pray?"

"At first, as I have told you, because the Cardinal gave me no choice in the matter touching your son. Since then my motive has lain in my friendship for the boy. He has been kind and affectionate to one who has known little kindness or affection in life. I seek to repay him by advancing his interests and his happiness. That, Monsieur, is why I am here to-day—to shield him from St. Auban and his fellows should they appear again, as I believe they will."

The old man stood up and eyed me for a moment as steadily as his vacillating glance would permit him, then he held out his hand.

"I trust, Monsieur," he said, "that you will do me the honour to dine with us, and that whilst you are at Blois we shall see you at Canaples as often as it may please you to cross its threshold."

I took his hand, but without enthusiasm, for I understood that his words sprang from no warmth of heart for me, but merely from the fact that he beheld in me a likely ally to his designs of raising his daughter to the rank of Duchess.

Eugène de Canaples may have been a good-for-nothing knave; still, methought his character scarce justified the callous indifference manifested by this selfish, weak-minded old man towards his own son.

There was a knock at the door, and a lackey—the same Guilbert whom I had seen at Choisy in Mademoiselle's company—appeared with the announcement that the Chevalier was served.

CHAPTER VIII. THE FORESHADOW OF DISASTER

In the spacious dining salon of the Château de Canaples I found the two daughters of my host awaiting us—those same two ladies of the coach in Place Vendôme and of the hostelry at Choisy, the dark and stately icicle, Yvonne, and the fair, playful doll, Geneviève.

I bowed my best bow as the Chevalier presented me, and from the corner of my eye, with inward malice, I watched them as I did so. Geneviève curtsied with a puzzled air and a sidelong glance at her sister. Yvonne accorded me the faintest, the coldest, inclination of her head, whilst her cheeks assumed a colour that was unwonted.

"We have met before, I think, Monsieur," she said disdainfully.

"True, Mademoiselle—once," I answered, thinking only of the coach.

"Twice, Monsieur," she corrected, whereupon I recalled how she had surprised me with my arm about the waist of the inn-keeper's daughter, and had Heaven given me shame I might have blushed. But if sweet Yvonne thought to bring Gaston de Luynes to task for profiting by the good things which God's providence sent his way, she was led by vanity into a prodigious error.

"Twice, indeed, Mademoiselle. But the service which you rendered me upon the first occasion was so present to my mind just now that it eclipsed the memory of our second meeting. I have ever since desired, Mademoiselle, that an opportunity might be mine wherein to thank you for the preservation of my life. I do so now, and at your

service do I lay that life which you preserved, and which is therefore as much yours as mine."

Strive as I might I could not rid my tone of an ironical inflection. I was goaded to it by her attitude, by the scornful turn of her lip and the disdainful glance of her grey eyes—she had her father's eyes, saving that her gaze was as steadfast as his was furtive.

"What is this?" quoth Canaples. "You owe your life to my daughter? Pray tell me of it."

"With all my heart," I made haste to answer before Mademoiselle could speak. "A week ago, I disagreed upon a question of great delicacy with a certain gentleman who shall be nameless. The obvious result attended our disagreement, and we fought 'neath the eyes of a vast company of spectators. Right was on my side, and the gentleman hurt himself upon my sword. Well, sir, the crowd snarled at me as though it were my fault that this had so befallen, and I flouted the crowd in answer. They were a hundred opposed to one, and so confident did this circumstance render them of their superiority, that for once those whelps displayed sufficient valour to attack me. I fled, and as a coach chanced to come that way, I clutched at the window and hung there. Within the coach there were two ladies, and one of them, taking compassion upon me, invited me to enter and thus rescued me. That lady, sir," I ended with a bow, "was Mademoiselle your daughter."

In his eyes I read it that he had guessed the name of my nameless gentleman.

The ladies were struck dumb by my apparent effrontery. Yvonne at last recovered sufficiently to ask if my presence at the château arose from my being attached to M. de Mancini. Now, "attached" is an unpleasant word. A courtier is attached to the King; a soldier to the army; there is humiliation in neither of these. But to a private

gentleman, a man may be only attached as his secretary, his valet, or, possibly, as his bravo. Therein lay the sting of her carefully chosen word.

"I am M. de Mancini's friend," I answered with simple dignity.

For all reply she raised her eyebrows in token of surprise. Canaples looked askance; I bit my lip, and an awkward silence followed, which, luckily, was quickly ended by the appearance of Andrea.

The ladies received him graciously, and a faint blush might, to searching eyes, have been perceived upon Geneviève's cheek.

There came a delicate exchange of compliments, after which we got to table, and for my part I did ample justice to the viands.

I sat beside Geneviève, and vis-à-vis with Andrea, who occupied the place of the honoured guest, at the host's right hand, with Yvonne beside him. Me it concerned little where I sat, since the repast was all that I could look for; not so the others. Andrea scowled at me because I was nearer to Geneviève than he, and Yvonne frowned at me for other reasons. By Geneviève I was utterly disregarded, and my endeavours to converse were sorely unsuccessful—for one may not converse alone.

I clearly saw that Yvonne only awaited an opportunity to unmask me, and denounce me to her father as the man who had sought his son's life.

This opportunity, however, came not until the moment of my departure from the château, that evening. I was crossing the hail with the Chevalier de Canaples, and we had stopped for a moment to admire a piece of old chain armour of the days of the Crusaders. Andrea and Geneviève had preceded us, and passed out through the open doorway, whilst Yvonne lingered upon the threshold looking

back.

"I trust, M. de Luynes," said Canaples, as we moved towards her, "that you will remember my invitation, and that whilst you remain at Biois we shall see you here as often as you may be pleased to come; indeed, I trust that you will be a daily visitor."

Before I could utter a reply—"Father," exclaimed Mademoiselle, coming forward, "do you know to whom you are offering the hospitality of Canaples?"

"Why that question, child? To M. de Luynes, M. de Mancini's friend."

"And the would-be murderer of Eugène," she added fiercely.

Canaples started.

"Surely such affairs are not for women to meddle with," he cried. "Moreover, M. de Luynes has already given me all details of the affair."

Her eyes grew very wide at that.

"He has told you? Yet you invite him hither?" she exclaimed.

"M. de Luynes has naught wherewith to reproach himself, nor have I. Those details which he has given me I may not impart to you; suffice it, however, that I am satisfied that his conduct could not have been other than it was, whereas that of my son reflects but little credit upon his name."

She stamped her foot, and her eyes, blazing with anger, passed from one to the other of us.

"And you—you believe this man's story?"

"Yvonne!"

"Possibly," I interposed, coolly, "Mademoiselle may have received some false account of it that justifies her evident unbelief in what I may have told you."

It is not easy to give a lie unless you can prove it a lie. I made her realise this, and she bit her lip in vexation. Dame! What a pretty viper I thought her at that moment!

"Let me add, Yvonne," said her father, "that M. de Luynes and I are old comrades in arms." Then turning to me—"My daughter, sir, is but a child, and therefore hasty to pass judgment upon matters beyond her understanding. Forget this foolish outburst, and remember only my assurance of an ever cordial welcome."

"With all my heart," I answered, after a moment's deliberation, during which I had argued that for once I must stifle pride if I would serve Andrea.

"Ough!" was all Mademoiselle's comment as she turned her back upon me. Nevertheless, I bowed and flourished my beaver to her retreating figure.

Clearly Mademoiselle entertained for me exactly that degree of fondness which a pious hermit feels for the devil, and if I might draw conclusions from what evidences I had had of the strength of her character and the weakness of her father's, our sojourn at Blois promised to afford me little delectation. In fact, I foresaw many difficulties that might lead to disaster should our Paris friends appear upon the scene—a contingency this that seemed over-imminent.

It was not my wont, howbeit, to brood over the evils that the future might hold, and to this I owe it that I slept soundly that night in my room at the Lys de France.

It was a pleasant enough chamber on the first floor, overlooking the

street, and having an alcove attached to it which served for Michelot.

Next day I visited the Château de Canaples early in the afternoon. The weather was milder, and the glow of the sun heralded at last the near approach of spring and brightened wondrously a landscape that had yesterday worn so forbidding a look.

This change it must have been that drew the ladies, and Andrea with them, to walk in the park, where I came upon them as I rode up. Their laughter rippled merrily and they appeared upon the best of terms until they espied me. My advent was like a cloud that foretells a storm, and drove Mesdemoiselles away, when they had accorded me a greeting that contained scant graciousness.

All unruffled by this act, from which I gathered that Yvonne the strong had tutored Geneviève the frail concerning me, I consigned my horse to a groom of the château, and linked arms with Andrea.

"Well, boy," quoth I, "what progress?"

He smiled radiantly.

"My hopes are all surpassed. It exceeds belief that so poor a thing as I should find favour in her eyes—what eyes, Gaston!" He broke off with a sigh of rapture.

"Peste, you have lost no time. And so, already you know that you find favour, eh! How know you that?"

"How? Need a man be told such things? There is an inexpressible —"

"My good Andrea, seek not to express it, therefore," I interrupted hastily. "Let it suffice that the inexpressible exists, and makes you happy. His Eminence will doubtless share your joy! Have you written to him?"

The mirth faded from the lad's face at the words, as the blossom fades 'neath the blighting touch of frost. What he said was so undutiful from a nephew touching his uncle—particularly when that uncle is a prelate—that I refrain from penning it.

We were joined just then by the Chevalier, and together we strolled round to the rose-garden—now, alas! naught but black and naked bushes—and down to the edge of the Loire, yellow and swollen by the recent rains.

"How lovely must be this place in summer," I mused, looking across the water towards Chambord. "And, Dame," I cried, suddenly changing my meditations, "what an ideal fencing ground is this even turf!"

"The swordsman's instinct," laughed Canaples.

And with that our talk shifted to swords, swordsmen, and sword-play, until I suggested to Andrea that he should resume his practice, whereupon the Chevalier offered to set a room at our disposal.

"Nay, if you will pardon me, Monsieur, 't is not a room we want," I answered. "A room is well enough at the outset, but it is the common error of fencing-masters to continue their tutoring on a wooden floor. It results from this that when the neophyte handles a real sword, and defends his life upon the turf, the ground has a new feeling; its elasticity or even its slipperiness discomposes him, and sets him at a disadvantage."

He agreed with me, whilst Andrea expressed a wish to try the turf. Foils were brought, and we whiled away best part of an half-hour. In the end, the Chevalier, who had watched my play intently, offered to try a bout with me. And so amazed was he with the result, that he had not done talking of it when I left Canaples a few hours later—a homage this that earned me some more than ordinarily unfriendly

glances from Yvonne. No doubt since the accomplishment was mine it became in her eyes characteristic of a bully and a ruffler.

During the week that followed I visited the château with regularity, and with equal regularity did Andrea receive his fencing lessons. The object of his presence at Canaples, however, was being frustrated more and more each day, so far as the Cardinal and the Chevalier were concerned.

He raved to me of Geneviève, the one perfect woman in all the world and brought into it by a kind Providence for his own particular delectation. In truth, love is like a rabid dog—whom it bites it renders mad; so open grew his wooing, and so ardent, that one evening I thought well to take him aside and caution him.

"My dear Andrea," said I, "if you will love Geneviève, you will, and there's an end of it. But if you would not have the Chevalier pack you back to Paris and the anger of my Lord Cardinal, be circumspect, and at least when M. de Canaples is by divide your homage equally betwixt the two. 'T were well if you dissembled even a slight preference for Yvonne—she will not be misled by it, seeing how unmistakable at all other seasons must be your wooing of Geneviève."

He was forced to avow the wisdom of my counsel, and to be guided by it.

Nevertheless, I rode back to my hostelry in no pleasant frame of mind. It was more than likely that a short shrift and a length of hemp would be the acknowledgment I should anon receive from Mazarin for my participation in the miscarriage of his desires.

I felt that disaster was on the wing. Call it a premonition; call it what you will. I know but this; that as I rode into the courtyard of the Lys de France, at dusk, the first man my eyes alighted on was the Marquis

César de St. Auban, and, in conversation with him, six of the most arrant-looking ruffians that ever came out of Paris.

CHAPTER IX. OF HOW A WHIP PROVED A BETTER ARGUMENT THAN A TONGUE

"I crave Monsieur's pardon, but there is a gentleman below who desires to speak with you immediately."

"How does this gentleman call himself, M. l'Hôte?"

"M. le Marquis de St. Auban," answered the landlord, still standing in the doorway.

It wanted an hour or so to noon on the day following that of St. Auban's arrival at Blois, and I was on the point of setting out for the château on an errand of warning.

It occurred to me to refuse to see the Marquis, but remembering betimes that from your enemy's speech you may sometimes learn where to look for his next attack, I thought better of it and bade my host admit him.

I strode over to the fire, and stirring the burning logs, I put my back to the blaze, and waited.

Steps sounded on the stairs; there was the shuffling of the landlord's slippered feet and the firm tread of my visitor, accompanied by the jingle of spurs and the clank of his scabbard as it struck the balustrade. Then my door was again opened, and St. Auban, as superbly dressed as ever, was admitted.

We bowed formally, as men bow who are about to cross swords,

and whilst I waited for him to speak I noted that his face was pale and bore the impress of suppressed anger.

"So, M. de Luynes, again we meet."

"By your seeking, M. le Marquis."

"You are not polite."

"You are not opportune."

He smiled dangerously.

"I learn, Monsieur, that you are a daily visitor at the Château de Canaples."

"Well, sir, what of it?"

"This. I have been to Canaples this morning and, knowing that you will learn anon, from that old dotard, what passed between us, I prefer that you shall hear it first from me."

I bowed to conceal a smile.

"Thanks to you, M. de Luynes, I was ordered from the house. I—César de St. Auban—have been ordered from the house of a provincial upstart! Thanks to the calumnies which you poured into his ears."

"Calumnies! Was that the word?"

"I choose the word that suits me best," he answered, and the rage that was in him at the affront he had suffered at the hands of the Chevalier de Canaples was fast rising to the surface. "I warned you at Choisy of what would befall. Your opposition and your alliance with M. de Mancini are futile. You think to have gained a victory by winning over to your side an old fool who will sacrifice his honour to see his daughter a duchess, but I tell you, sir—"

"That you hope to see her a marchioness," I put in calmly. "You see, M. de St. Auban, I have learned something since I came to Blois."

He grew livid with passion.

"You shall learn more ere you quit it, you meddler! You shall be taught to keep that long nose of yours out of matters that concern you not."

I laughed.

"Loud threats!" I answered jeeringly.

"Never fear," he cried, "there is more to follow. To your cost shall you learn it. By God, sir! do you think that I am to suffer a Sicilian adventurer and a broken tavern ruffler to interfere with my designs?"

Still I kept my temper.

"So!" I said in a bantering tone. "You confess that you have designs. Good! But what says the lady, eh? I am told that she is not yet outrageously enamoured of you, for all your beauty!"

Beside himself with passion, his hand sought his sword. But the gesture was spasmodic.

"Knave!" he snarled.

"Knave to me? Have a care, St. Auban, or I'll find you a shroud for a wedding garment."

"Knave!" he repeated with a snarl. "What price are you paid by that boy?"

"Pardieu, St. Auban! You shall answer to me for this."

"Answer for it? To you!" And he laughed harshly. "You are mad, my

master. When did a St. Auban cross swords with a man of your stamp?"

"M. le Marquis," I said, with a calmness that came of a stupendous effort, "at Choisy you sought my friendship with high-sounding talk of principles that opposed you to the proposed alliance, twixt the houses of Mancini and Canaples. Since then I have learned that your motives were purely personal. From my discovery I hold you to be a liar."

"Monsieur!"

"I have not yet done. You refuse to cross swords with me on the pretext that you do not fight men of my stamp. I am no saint, sir, I confess. But my sins cannot wash out my name—the name of a family accounted as good as that of St. Auban, and one from which a Constable of France has sprung, whereas yours has never yet bred aught but profligates and debauchees. You are little better than I am, Marquis; indeed, you do many things that I would not do, that I have never done. For instance, whilst refusing to cross blades with me, who am a soldier and a man of the sword, you seek to pick a fight with a beardless boy who hardly knows the use of a rapier, and who—wittingly at least—has done you no wrong. Now, my master, you may call me profligate, ruffler, gamester, duellist—what you will; but there are two viler things you cannot dub me, and which, methinks, I have proven you to be—liar and craven."

And as I spoke the burning words, I stood close up to him and tapped his breast as if to drive the epithets into his very heart.

Rage he felt, indeed, and his distorted countenance was a sight fearful to behold.

"Now, my master," I added, setting my arms akimbo and laughing brutally in his face, "will you fight?"

For a moment he wavered, and surely meseemed that I had drawn

him. Then:

"No," he cried passionately. "I will not do dishonour to my sword." And turning he made for the door, leaving me baffled.

"Go, sir," I shouted, "but fame shall stalk fast behind you. Liar and craven will I dub you throughout the whole of France."

He stopped 'neath the lintel, and faced me again.

"Fool," he sneered. "You'll need dispatch to spread my fame so far. By this time to-morrow you'll be arrested. In three days you will be in the Bastille, and there shall you lie until you rot to carrion."

"Loud threats again!" I laughed, hoping by the taunt to learn more.

"Loud perchance, but not empty. Learn that the Cardinal has knowledge of your association with Mancini, and means to separate you. An officer of the guards is on his way to Blois. He is at Meung by now. He bears a warrant for your arrest and delivery to the governor of the Bastille. Thereafter, none may say what will betide." And with a coarse burst of laughter he left me, banging the door as he passed out.

For a moment I stood there stricken by his parting words. He had sought to wound me, and in this he had succeeded. But at what cost to himself? In his blind rage, the fool had shown me that which he should have zealously concealed, and what to him was but a stinging threat was to me a timely warning. I saw the necessity for immediate action. Two things must I do; kill St. Auban first, then fly the Cardinal's warrant as best I could. I cast about me for means to carry out the first of these intentions. My eye fell upon my riding-whip, lying on a chair close to my hand, and the sight of it brought me the idea I sought. Seizing it, I bounded out of the room and down the stairs, three steps at a stride.

Along the corridor I sped and into the common-room, which at the moment was tolerably full. As I entered by one door, the Marquis was within three paces of the other, leading to the courtyard.

My whip in the air, I sprang after him; and he, hearing the rush of my onslaught, turned, then uttered a cry of pain as I brought the lash caressingly about his shoulders.

"Now, master craven," I shouted, "will that change your mind?"

With an almost inarticulate cry, he sought to draw there and then, but those about flung themselves upon us, and held us apart—I, passive and unresisting; the Marquis, bellowing, struggling, and foaming at the mouth.

"To meet you now would be to murder you, Marquis," I said coolly. "Send your friends to me to appoint the time."

"Soit!" he cried, his eyes blazing with a hate unspeakable. "At eight to-morrow morning I shall await you on the green behind the castle of Blois."

"At eight o'clock I shall be there," I answered. "And now, gentlemen, if you will unhand me, I will return to my apartments."

They let me go, but with many a growl and angry look, for in their eyes I was no more than a coarse aggressor, whilst their sympathy was all for St. Auban.

CHAPTER X. THE CONSCIENCE OF MALPERTUIS

And so back to my room I went, my task accomplished, and so pleased was I with what had passed that as I drew on my boots—preparing to set out to Canaples—I laughed softly to myself.

St. Auban I would dispose of in the morning. As for the other members of the cabal, I deemed neither Vilmorin nor Malpertuis sufficiently formidable to inspire uneasiness. St. Auban gone, they too would vanish. There remained then Eugène de Canaples. Him, however, I thought no great evil was to be feared from. In Paris he might be as loud-voiced as he pleased, but in his father's château—from what I had learned—it was unlikely he would so much as show himself. Moreover, he was wounded, and before he had sufficiently recovered to offer interference it was more than probable that Andrea would have married one or the other of Mesdemoiselles de Canaples—though I had a shrewd suspicion that it would be the wrong one, and there again I feared trouble.

As I stood up, booted and ready to descend, there came a gentle tap at my door, and, in answer to my "Enter," there stood before me a very dainty and foppish figure. I stared hard at the effeminate face and the long fair locks of my visitor, thinking that I had become the dupe of my eyes.

"M. de Vilmorin!" I murmured in astonishment, as he came forward, having closed the door. "You here?"

In answer, he bowed and greeted me with cold ceremoniousness.

"I have been in Blois since yesterday, Monsieur."

"In truth I might have guessed it, Vicomte. Your visit flatters me, for, of course, I take it, you are come to pay me your respects," I said ironically. "A glass of wine, Vicomte?"

"A thousand thanks, Monsieur—no," he answered coldly in his mincing tones. "It is concerning your affair with M. le Marquis de St. Auban that I am come." And drawing forth a dainty kerchief, which filled the room with the scent of ambregris, he tapped his lips with it affectedly.

"Do you come as friend or—in some other capacity?"

"I come as mediator."

"Mediator!" I echoed, and my brow grew dark. "Sdeath! Has St. Auban's courage lasted just so long as the sting of my whip?"

He raised his eyebrows after a supercilious fashion that made me thirst to strike the chair from under him.

"You misapprehend me; M. de St. Auban has no desire to avert the duel. On the contrary, he will not rest until the affront you have put upon him be washed out—"

"It will be, I'll answer for it."

"Your answer, sir, is characteristic of a fanfarron. He who promises most does not always fulfil most."

I stared at him in amazement.

"Shall I promise you something, Vicomte? Mortdieu! If you seek to pick a quarrel with me—"

"God forbid!" he ejaculated, turning colour. And his suddenly awakened apprehensions swept aside the affectation that hitherto

had marked his speech and manner.

"Then, Monsieur, be brief and state the sum of this mediation."

"It is this, Monsieur. In the heat of the moment, M. le Marquis gave you, in the hearing of half a score of people, an assignation for to-morrow morning. News of the affair will spread rapidly through Blois, and it is likely there will be no lack of spectators on the green to witness the encounter. Therefore, as my friend thinks this will be as unpalatable to you as it is to him, he has sent me to suggest a fresh rendezvous."

"Pooh, sir," I answered lightly. "I care not, for myself, who comes. I am accustomed to a crowd. Still, since M. de St. Auban finds it discomposing, let us arrange otherwise."

"There is yet another point. M. de St. Auban spoke to you, I believe, of an officer who is coming hither charged with your arrest. It is probable that he may reach Blois before morning, so that the Marquis thinks that to make certain you might consent to meet him to-night."

"Ma foi. St. Auban is indeed in earnest then! Convey to him my expressions of admiration at this suddenly awakened courage. Be good enough, Vicomte, to name the rendezvous."

"Do you know the chapel of St. Sulpice des Reaux?"

"What! Beyond the Loire?"

"Precisely, Monsieur. About a league from Chambord by the river side."

"I can find the place."

"Will you meet us there at nine o'clock tonight?"

I looked askance at him.

"But why cross the river? This side affords many likely spots!"

"Very true, Monsieur. But the Marquis has business at Chambord this evening, after which there will be no reason—indeed, it will inconvenience him exceedingly—to return to Blois."

"What!" I cried, more and more astonished. "St. Auban is leaving Blois?"

"This evening, sir."

"But, voyons, Vicomte, why make an assignation in such a place and at night, when at any hour of the day I can meet the Marquis on this side, without suffering the inconvenience of crossing the river?"

"There will be a bright moon, well up by nine o'clock. Moreover, remember that you cannot, as you say, meet St. Auban on this side at any time he may appoint, since to-night or to-morrow the officer who is in search of you will arrive."

I pondered for a moment. Then:

"M. le Vicomte," I said, "in this matter of ground 't is I who have the first voice."

"How so?"

"Because the Marquis is the affronted one."

"Therefore he has a right to choose."

"A right, yes. But that is not enough. The necessity to fight is on his side. His honour is hurt, not mine; I have whipped him; I am content. Now let him come to me."

"Assuredly you will not be so ungenerous."

"I do not care about journeying to Reaux to afford him satisfaction."

"Does Monsieur fear anything?"

"Vicomte, you go too far!" I cried, my pride gaining the mastery. "Since it is asked of me,—I will go."

"M. le Marquis will be grateful to you."

"A fig for his gratitude," I answered, whereupon the Vicomte shrugged his narrow shoulders, and, his errand done, took his leave of me.

When he was gone I called Michelot, to tell him of the journey I must go that night, so that he might hold himself in readiness.

"Why—if Monsieur will pardon me," quoth he, "do you go to meet the Marquis de St. Auban at St. Sulpice des Reaux by night?"

"Precisely what I asked Vilmorin. The Marquis desires it, and—what will you?—since I am going to kill the man, I can scarce do less than kill him on a spot of his own choosing."

Michelot screwed up his face and scratched at his grey beard with his huge hand.

"Does no suspicion of foul play cross your mind, Monsieur?" he inquired timidly.

"Shame on you, Michelot," I returned with some heat. "You do not yet understand the ways of gentlemen. Think you that M. de St. Auban would stoop to such a deed as that? He would be shamed for ever! Pooh, I would as soon suspect my Lord Cardinal of stealing the chalices from Nôtre Dame. Go, see to my horse. I am riding to Canaples."

As I rode out towards the château I fell to thinking, and my thoughts turning to Vilmorin, I marvelled at the part he was playing in this little comedy of a cabal against Andrea de Mancini. His tastes and

instincts were of the boudoir, the ante-chamber, and the table. He wore a sword because it was so ordained by fashion, and because the hilt was convenient for the display of a jewel or two. Certainly 't was not for utility that it hung beside him, and no man had ever seen it drawn. Nature had made him the most pitiable coward begotten. Why then should he involve himself in an affair which promised bloodshed and which must be attended by many a risk for him? There was in all this some mystery that I could not fathom.

From the course into which they had slipped, my thoughts were diverted, when I was within half a mile of the château, by the sight of a horseman stationed, motionless, among the trees that bordered the road. It occurred to me that men take not such a position without purpose—usually an evil one. I slackened speed somewhat and rode on, watching him sharply. As I came up, he walked his horse forward to meet me, and I beheld a man in the uniform of the gardes du corps, in whom presently I recognised the little sparrow Malpertuis, with whom I had exchanged witticisms at Choisy. He was the one man wanting to complete the trinity that had come upon us at the inn of the Connétable.

It flashed across my mind that he might be the officer charged with my arrest, and that he had arrived sooner than had been expected. If so, it was likely to go ill with him, for I was not minded to be taken until St. Auban's soul sped hellwards.

He hailed me as I advanced, and indeed rode forward to meet me.

"You are come at last, M. de Luynes," was his greeting. "I have waited for you this hour past."

"How knew you I should ride this way?"

"I learnt that you would visit Canaples before noon. Be good enough to quit the road, and pass under those trees with me. I have

something to say to you, but it were not well that we should be seen together."

"For the sake of your character or mine, M. Malappris?"

"Malpertuis!" he snapped.

"Malpertuis," I corrected. "You were saying that we should not be seen together."

"St. Auban might hear of it."

"Ah! And therefore?"

"You shall learn." We were now under the trees, which albeit leafless yet screened us partly from the road. He drew rein, and I followed his example.

"M. de Luynes," he began, "I am or was a member of the cabal formed against Mazarin's aims in the matter of the marriage of Mademoiselle de Canaples to his nephew. I joined hands with St. Auban, lured by his protestations that it is not meet that such an heiress as Yvonne de Canaples should be forced to marry a foreigner of no birth and less distinction, whilst France holds so many noble suitors to her hand. This motive, by which I know that even Eugène de Canaples was actuated, was, St. Auban gave me to understand, his only one for embarking upon this business, as it was also Vilmorin's. Now, M. de Luynes, I have today discovered that I had been duped by St. Auban and his dupe, Vilmorin. St. Auban lied to me; another motive brings him into the affair. He seeks himself, by any means that may present themselves, to marry Yvonne—and her estates; whilst the girl, I am told, loathes him beyond expression. Vilmorin again is actuated by no less a purpose. And so, what think you these two knaves—this master knave and his dupe—have determined? To carry off Mademoiselle by force!"

"Sangdieu!" I burst out, and would have added more, but his gesture silenced me, and he continued:

"Vilmorin believes that St. Auban is helping him in this, whereas St. Auban is but fooling him with ambiguous speeches until they have the lady safe. Then might will assert itself, and St. Auban need but show his fangs to drive the sneaking coward away from the prize he fondly dreams is to be his."

"When do these gentlemen propose to carry out their plan? Have they determined that?" I inquired breathlessly.

"Aye, they have. They hope to accomplish it this very day. Mademoiselle de Canaples has received a letter wherein she is asked to meet her anonymous writer in the coppice yonder, at the Angelus this evening, if she would learn news of great importance to her touching a conspiracy against her father."

"Faugh!" I sneered. "'T is too poor a bait to lure her with."

"Say you so? Believe me that unless she be dissuaded she will comply with the invitation, so cunningly was the letter couched. A closed carriage will be waiting at this very spot. Into this St. Auban, Vilmorin, and their bravos will thrust the girl, then away through Blois and beyond it, for a mile or so, in the direction of Meung, thereby misleading any chance pursuers. There they will quit the coach and take a boat that is to be in waiting for them and which will bear them back with the stream to Chambord. Thereafter, God pity the poor lady if they get thus far without mishap."

"Mort de ma vie!" I cried, slapping my thigh, "I understand!" And to myself I thought of the assignation at St. Sulpice des Reaux, and the reason for this, as also St. Auban's resolution to so suddenly quit Blois, grew of a sudden clear to me. Also did I recall the riddle touching Vilmorin's conduct which a few moments ago I had puzzled

over, and of which methought that I now held the solution.

"What do you understand?" asked Malpertuis.

"Something that was told me this morning," I made answer, then spoke of gratitude, wherein he cut me short.

"I ask no thanks," he said curtly. "You owe me none. What I have done is not for love of you or Mancini—for I love neither of you. It is done because noblesse m'oblige. I told St. Auban that I would have no part in this outrage. But that is not enough; I owe it to my honour to attempt the frustration of so dastardly a plan. You, M. de Luynes, appear to be the most likely person to encompass this, in the interests of your friend Mancini; I leave the matter, therefore, in your hands. Goodday!"

And with this abrupt leave-taking, the little fellow doffed his hat to me, and wheeling his horse he set spurs in its flanks, and was gone before a word of mine could have stayed him.

CHAPTER XI. OF A WOMAN'S OBSTINACY

"M. de Luynes is a wizard," quoth Andrea, laughing, in answer to something that had been said.

It was afternoon. We had dined, and the bright sunshine and spring-like mildness of the weather had lured us out upon the terrace. Yvonne and Geneviève occupied the stone seat. Andrea had perched himself upon the granite balustrade, and facing them he sat, swinging his shapely legs to and fro as he chatted merrily, whilst on either side of him stood the Chevalier de Canaples and I.

"If M. de Luynes be as great a wizard in other things as with the sword, then, pardieu, he is a fearful magician," said Canaples.

I bowed, yet not so low but that I detected a sneer on Yvonne's lips.

"So, pretty lady," said I to myself, "we shall see if presently your lip will curl when I show you something of my wizard's art."

And presently my chance came. M. de Canaples found reason to leave us, and no sooner was he gone than Geneviève remembered that she had that day discovered a budding leaf upon one of the rose bushes in the garden below. Andrea naturally caused an argument by asserting that she was the victim of her fancy, as it was by far too early in the year. By that means these two found the plea they sought for quitting us, since neither could rest until the other was convinced.

So down they went into that rose garden which methought was like to prove their fool's paradise, and Yvonne and I were left alone. Then

she also rose, but as she was on the point of quitting me:

"Mademoiselle," I ventured, "will you honour me by remaining for a moment? There is something that I would say to you."

With raised eyebrows she gave me a glance mingled with that superciliousness which she was for ever bestowing upon me, and which, from the monotony of it alone, grew irksome.

"What can you have to say to me, M. de Luyne?"

"Will you not be seated? I shall not long detain you, nevertheless—"

"If I stand, perchance you will be more brief. I am waiting, Monsieur."

I shrugged my shoulders rudely. Why, indeed, be courteous where so little courtesy was met with?

"A little while ago, Mademoiselle, when M. de Mancini dubbed me a wizard you were good enough to sneer. Now, a sneer, Mademoiselle, implies unbelief, and I would convince you that you were wrong to disbelieve."

"If you have no other motive for detaining me, suffer me to depart," she interrupted with some warmth. "Whether you be a wizard or not is of no moment to me."

"And yet I dare swear that you will be of a different mind within five minutes. A wizard is one who discloses things unknown to his fellow-men. I am about to convince you that I can do this, and by convincing you I am about to serve you."

"I seek neither conviction nor service at your hands," she answered.

"Your courtesy dumfounds me, Mademoiselle!"

"No less than does your insolence dumfound me," she retorted,

with crimson cheeks. "Do you forget, sir, that I know you for what you are—a gamester, a libertine, a duellist, the murderer of my brother?"

"That your brother lives, Mademoiselle, is, methinks, sufficient proof that I have not murdered him."

"You willed his death if you did not encompass it; so 't is all one. Do you not understand that it is because my father receives you here, thanks to M. de Mancini, your friend—a friendship easily understood from the advantages you must derive from it—that I consent to endure your presence and the insult of your glance? Is it not enough that I should do this, and have you not wit enough to discern it, without adding to my shame by your insolent call upon my courtesy?"

Her words cut me as no words that I ever heard, and, more than her words, her tone of loathing and disgust unspeakable. For half that speech I should have killed a man—indeed, I had killed men for less than half. And yet, for all the passion that raged in my soul, I preserved upon my countenance a smiling mask. That smile exhausted her patience and increased her loathing, for with a contemptuous exclamation she turned away.

"Tarry but a moment, Mademoiselle," I cried, with a sudden note of command. "Or, if you will go, go then; but take with you my assurance that before nightfall you will weep bitterly for it."

My words arrested her. The mystery of them awakened her curiosity.

"You speak in riddles, Monsieur."

"Like a true wizard, Mademoiselle. You received a letter this morning in a handwriting unknown, and bearing no signature."

She wheeled round and faced me again with a little gasp of astonishment.

"How know you that? Ah! I understand; you wrote it!"

"What shrewdness, Mademoiselle!" I laughed, ironically. "Come; think again. What need have I to bid you meet me in the coppice yonder? May I not speak freely with you here?"

"You know the purport of that letter?"

"I do, Mademoiselle, and I know more. I know that this hinted conspiracy against your father is a trumped-up lie to lure you to the coppice."

"And for what purpose, pray?"

"An evil one,—your abduction. Shall I tell you who penned that note, and who awaits you? The Marquis César de St. Auban."

She shuddered as I pronounced the name, then, looking me straight between the eyes—"How come you to know these things?" she inquired.

"What does it signify, since I know them?"

"This, Monsieur, that unless I learn how, I can attach no credit to your preposterous story."

"Not credit it!" I cried. "Let me assure you that I have spoken the truth; let me swear it. Go to the coppice at the appointed time, and things will fall out as I have predicted."

"Again, Monsieur, how know you this?" she persisted, as women will.

"I may not tell you."

We stood close together, and her clear grey eyes met mine, her lip curling in disdain.

"You may not tell me? You need not. I can guess." And she tossed her shapely head and laughed. "Seek some likelier story, Monsieur. Had you not spoken of it, 't is likely I should have left the letter unheeded. But your disinterested warning has determined me to go to this rendezvous. Shall I tell you what I have guessed? That this conspiracy against my father, the details of which you would not have me learn, is some evil of your own devising. Ah! You change colour!" she cried, pointing to my face. Then with a laugh of disdain she left me before I had sufficiently recovered from my amazement to bid her stay.

"Ciel!" I cried, as I watched the tall, lissom figure vanish through the portals of the château. "Did ever God create so crass and obstinate a thing as woman?"

It occurred to me to tell Andrea, and bid him warn her. But then she would guess that I had prompted him. Naught remained but to lay the matter before the Chevalier de Canaples. Already I had informed him of my fracas with St. Auban, and of the duel that was to be fought that night, and he, in his turn, had given me the details of his stormy interview with the Marquis, which had culminated in St. Auban's dismissal from Canaples. I had not hitherto deemed it necessary to alarm him with the news imparted to me by Malpertuis, imagining that did I inform Mademoiselle that would suffice.

Now, however, as I have said, no other course was left me but to tell him of it. Accordingly, I went within and inquired of Guilbert, whom I met in the hall, where I might find the Chevalier. He answered me that M. de Canaples was not in the château. It was believed that he had gone with M. Louis, the intendant of the estates, to visit the vineyards at Montcroix.

The news made me choke with impatience. Already it was close upon five o'clock, and in another hour the sun would set and the Angelus would toll the knell of Mademoiselle's preposterous

suspicions, unless in the meantime I had speech with Canaples, and led him to employ a father's authority to keep his daughter indoors.

Fuming at the contretemps I called for my horse and set out at a brisk trot for Montcroix. But my ride was fruitless. The vineyard peasants had not seen the Chevalier for over a week.

Now, 'twixt Montcroix and the château there lies a good league, and to make matters worse, as I galloped furiously back to Canaples, an evil chance led me to mistake the way and pursue a track that brought me out on the very banks of the river, with a strong belt of trees screening the château from sight, and defying me to repair my error by going straight ahead.

I was forced to retrace my steps, and before I had regained the point where I had gone astray a precious quarter of an hour was wasted, and the sun already hung, a dull red globe, on the brink of the horizon.

Clenching my teeth, I tore at my horse's flanks, and with a bloody heel I drove the maddened brute along at a pace that might have cost us both dearly. I dashed, at last, into the quadrangle, and, throwing the reins to a gaping groom, I sprang up the steps.

"Has the Chevalier returned?" I gasped breathlessly.

"Not yet, Monsieur," answered Guilbert with a tranquillity that made me desire to strangle him. "Is Mademoiselle in the château?" was my next question, mechanically asked.

"I saw her on the terrace some moments ago. She has not since come within."

Like one possessed I flew across the intervening room and out on to the terrace. Geneviève and Andrea were walking there, deep in conversation. At another time I might have cursed their lack of

prudence. At the moment I did not so much as remark it.

"Where is Mademoiselle de Canaples?" I burst out.

They gazed at me, as much astounded by my question and the abruptness of it as by my apparent agitation.

"Has anything happened?" inquired Geneviève, her blue eyes wide open.

"Yes—no; naught has happened. Tell me where she is. I must speak to her."

"She was here a while ago," said Andrea, "but she left us to stroll along the river bank."

"How long is it since she left you?"

"A quarter of an hour, perhaps."

"Something has happened!" cried Geneviève, and added more, maybe, but I waited not to hear.

Muttering curses as I ran—for 't was my way to curse where pious souls might pray—I sped back to the quadrangle and my horse.

"Follow me," I shouted to the groom, "you and as many of your fellows as you can find. Follow me at once—at once, mark you—to the coppice by the river." And without waiting for his answer, I sent my horse thundering down the avenue. The sun was gone, leaving naught but a roseate streak to tell of its passage, and at that moment a distant bell tinkled forth the Angelus.

With whip, spur, and imprecations I plied my steed, a prey to such excitement as I had never known until that moment—not even in the carnage of battle.

I had no plan. My mind was a chaos of thought without a single

clear idea to light it, and I never so much as bethought me that single-handed I was about to attempt to wrest Yvonne from the hands of perchance half a dozen men. To save time I did not far pursue the road, but, clearing a hedge, I galloped ventre-à-terre across the meadow towards the little coppice by the waterside. As I rode I saw no sign of any moving thing. No sound disturbed the evening stillness save the dull thump of my horse's hoofs upon the turf, and a great fear arose in my heart that I might come too late.

At last I reached the belt of trees, and my fears grew into certainty. The place was deserted.

Then a fresh hope sprang up. Perchance, thinking of my warning, she had seen the emptiness of her suspicions towards me, and had pursued that walk of hers in another direction.

But when I had penetrated to the little open space within that cluster of naked trees, I had proof overwhelming that the worst had befallen. Not only on the moist ground was stamped the impress of struggling feet, but on a branch I found a strip of torn green velvet, and, remembering the dress she had worn that day, I understood to the full the significance of that rag, and, understanding it, I groaned aloud.

CHAPTER XII. THE RESCUE

Some precious moments did I waste standing with that green rag betwixt my fingers, and I grew sick and numb in body and in mind. She was gone! Carried off by a man I had reason to believe she hated, and whom God send she might have no motive to hate more deeply hereafter!

The ugly thought swelled until it blotted out all others, and in its train there came a fury upon me that drove me to do by instinct that which earlier I should have done by reason. I climbed back into the saddle, and away across the meadow I went, journeying at an angle with the road, my horse's head turned in the direction of Blois. That road at last was gained, and on I thundered at a stretched gallop, praying that my hard-used beast might last until the town was reached.

Now, as I have already said, I am not a man who easily falls a prey to excitement. It may have beset me in the heat of battle, when the fearsome lust of blood and death makes of every man a raving maniac, thrilled with mad joy at every stab he deals, and laughing with fierce passion at every blow he takes, though in the taking of it his course be run. But, saving at such wild times, never until then could I recall having been so little master of myself. There was a fever in me; all hell was in my blood, and, stranger still, and hitherto unknown at any season, there was a sickly fear that mastered me, and drew out great beads of sweat upon my brow. Fear for myself I have never known, for at no time has life so pampered me that the thought of parting company with it concerned me greatly. Fear for another I had not known till then—saving perchance the uneasiness that at times I had felt touching Andrea—because never yet had I sufficiently cared.

Thus far my thoughts took me, as I rode, and where I have halted did they halt, and stupidly I went over their ground again, like one who gropes for something in the dark,—because never yet had I sufficiently cared—I had never cared.

And then, ah Dieu! As I turned the thought over I understood, and, understanding, I pursued the sentence where I had left off.

But, caring at last, I was sick with fear of what might befall the one I cared for! There lay the reason of the frenzied excitement whereof I had become the slave. That it was that had brought the moisture to my brow and curses to my lips; that it was that had caused me instinctively to thrust the rag of green velvet within my doublet.

Ciel! It was strange—aye, monstrous strange, and a right good jest for fate to laugh at—that I, Gaston de Luyes, vile ruffler and worthless spadassin, should have come to such a pass; I, whose forefinger had for the past ten years uptilted the chin of every tavern wench I had chanced upon; I, whose lips had never known the touch of other than the lips of these; I, who had thought my heart long dead to tenderness and devotion, or to any fondness save the animal one for my ignoble self. Yet there I rode as if the Devil had me for a quarry,—panting, sweating, cursing, and well-nigh sobbing with rage at a fear that I might come too late,—all because of a proud lady who knew me for what I was and held me in contempt because of her knowledge; all for a lady who had not the kindness for me that one might spare a dog—who looked on me as something not good to see.

Since there was no one to whom I might tell my story that he might mock me, I mocked myself—with a laugh that startled passers-by and which, coupled with the crazy pace at which I dashed into Blois, caused them, I doubt not, to think me mad. Nor were they wrong, for mad indeed I deemed myself.

That I trampled no one underfoot in my furious progress through the

streets is a miracle that passes my understanding.

In the courtyard of the Lys de France I drew rein at last with a tug that brought my shuddering brute on to his haunches and sent those who stood about flying into the shelter of the doorways.

"Another horse!" I shouted as I sprang to the ground. "Another horse at once!"

Then as I turned to inquire for Michelot, I espied him leaning stolidly against the portecochère.

"How long have you been there, Michelot?" I asked.

"Half an hour, mayhap."

"Saw you a closed carriage pass?"

"Ten minutes ago I saw one go by, followed by M. de St. Auban and a gentleman who greatly resembled M. de Vilmorin, besides an escort of four of the most villainous knaves—"

"That is the one," I broke in. "Quick, Michelot! Arm yourself and get your horse; I have need of you. Come, knave, move yourself!"

At the end of a few minutes we set out at a sharp trot, leaving the curious ones whom my loud-voiced commands had assembled, to speculate upon the meaning of so much bustle. Once clear of the township we gave the reins to our horses, and our trot became a gallop as we travelled along the road to Meung, with the Loire on our right. And as we went I briefly told Michelot what was afoot, interlarding my explanations with prayers that we might come upon the kidnappers before they crossed the river, and curses at the flying pace of our mounts, which to my anxious mind seemed slow.

At about a mile from Blois the road runs over an undulation of the ground that is almost a hill. From the moment that I had left Canaples

as the Angelus was ringing, until the moment when our panting horses gained the brow of that little eminence, only half an hour had sped. Still in that half-hour the tints had all but faded from the sky, and the twilight shadows grew thicker around us with every moment. Yet not so thick had they become but that I could see a coach at a standstill in the hollow, some three hundred yards beneath us, and, by it, half a dozen horses, of which four were riderless and held by the two men who were still mounted. Then, breathlessly scanning the field between the road and the river, I espied five persons, half way across, and at the same distance from the water that we were from the coach. Two men, whom I supposed to be St. Auban and Vilmorin, were forcing along a woman, whose struggles, feeble though they appeared—yet retarded their progress in some measure. Behind them walked two others, musket on shoulder.

I pointed them out to Michelot with a soft cry of joy. We were in time!

Following with my eyes the course they appeared to be pursuing I saw by the bank a boat, in which two men were waiting. Again I pointed, this time to the boat.

"Over the hedge, Michelot!" I cried. "We must ride in a straight line for the water and so intercept them. Follow me."

Over the hedge we went, and down the gentle slope at as round a pace as the soft ground would with safety allow. I had reckoned upon being opposed to six or even eight men, whereas there were but four, one of whom I knew was hardly to be reckoned. Doubtless St. Auban had imagined himself safe from pursuit when he left two of his bravos with the horses, probably to take them on to Meung, and there cross with them and rejoin him. Two more, I doubted not, were those seated at the oars.

I laughed to myself as I took in all this, but, even as I laughed, those

in the field stood still, and sent up a shout that told me we had been perceived.

"On, Michelot, on!" I shouted, spurring my horse forward. Then, in answer to their master's call, the two ruffians who had been doing duty as grooms came pounding into the field.

"Ride to meet them, Michelot!" I cried. Obediently he wheeled to the left, and I caught the swish of his sword as it left the scabbard.

St. Auban was now hurrying towards the river with his party. Already they were but fifty yards from the boat, and a hundred still lay between him and me. Furiously I pressed onward, and presently but half the distance separated us, whilst they were still some thirty yards from their goal.

Then his two bravos faced round to meet me, and one, standing some fifty paces in advance of the other, levelled his musket and fired. But in his haste he aimed too high; the bullet carried away my hat, and before the smoke had cleared I was upon him. I had drawn a pistol from my holster, but it was not needed; my horse passed over him before he could save himself from my fearful charge.

In the fast-fading light a second musket barrel shone, and I saw the second ruffian taking aim at me with not a dozen yards between us. With the old soldier's instinct I wrenched at the reins till I brought my horse on to his haunches. It was high time, for simultaneously with my action the fellow blazed at me, and the scream of pain that broke from my steed told me that the poor brute had taken the bullet. With a bound that carried me forward some six paces, the animal sank, quivering, to the ground. I disengaged my feet from the stirrups as he fell, but the shock of it sent me rolling on the ground, and the ruffian, seeing me fallen, sprang forward, swinging his musket up above his head. I dodged the murderous downward stroke, and as the stock buried itself close beside me in the soft earth I rose on one knee and

with a grim laugh I raised my pistol. I brought the muzzle within a hand's breadth of his face, then fired and shot him through the head. Perchance you'll say it was a murderous, cruel stroke: mayhap it was, but at such seasons men stay not to unravel niceties, but strike ere they themselves be stricken.

Leaping over the twitching corpse, I got out my sword and sprang after St. Auban, who, with Vilmorin and Yvonne, careless of what might betide his followers, was now within ten paces of the boat.

Pistol shots cracked behind me, and I wondered how Michelot was faring, but dared not pause to look.

The twain in the boat stood up, wielding their great oars, and methought them on the point of coming to their master's aid, in which case my battle had truly been a lost one. But that craven Vilmorin did me good service then, for with a cry of fear at my approach, he abandoned his hold of Yvonne, whose struggles were keeping both the men back; thus freed, he fled towards the boat, and jumping in, he shouted to the men in his shrill, quavering voice, to put off. Albeit they disobeyed him contemptuously and waited for the Marquis; still they did not leave the boat, fearing, no doubt, that if they did so the coward would put off alone.

As for St. Auban, Vilmorin's flight left him unequal to the task of dragging the girl along. She dug her heels into the ground, and, tug as he might, for all that he set both hands to work, he could not move her. In this plight I came upon him, and challenged him to stand and face me.

With a bunch of oaths he got out his sword, but in doing so he was forced to remove one of his hands from the girl's arm. Seizing the opportunity with a ready wit and courage seldom found in women of her quality, she twisted herself from the grip of his left hand, and came staggering towards me for protection, holding up her pinioned wrists.

With my blade I severed the cord, whereupon she plucked the gag from her mouth, and sank against my side, her struggles having left her weak indeed.

As I set my arm about her waist to support her, my heart seemed to swell within me, and strange melodies shaped themselves within my soul.

St. Auban bore down upon me with a raucous oath, but the glittering point of my rapier danced before his eyes and drove him back again.

"To me, Vilmorin, you cowardly cur!" he shouted. "To me, you dogs!"

He let fly at them a volley of blood-curdling oaths, then, without waiting to see if they obeyed him, he came at me again, and our swords met.

"Courage, Mademoiselle," I whispered, as a sigh that was almost a groan escaped her. "Have no fear."

But that fight was not destined to be fought, for, as again we engaged, there came the fall of running feet behind me. It flashed across my mind that Michelot had been worsted, and that my back was about to be assailed. But in St. Auban's face I saw, as in a mirror, that he who came was Michelot.

"Mort de Christ!" snarled the Marquis, springing back beyond my reach. "What can a man do with naught but fools and poltroons to serve him? Faugh! We will continue our sword-play at St. Sulpice des Reaux to-night. Au revoir, M. de Luynes!"

Turning, he sheathed his sword, and, running down to the river, bounded into the boat, where I heard him reviling Vilmorin with every foul name he could call to mind.

My blood was aflame, and I was not minded to wait for our meeting at Reaux. Consigning Mademoiselle to the care of Michelot, who stood panting and bleeding from a wound in his shoulder, I turned back to my dead horse, and plucking the remaining pistol from the holster I ran down to the very edge of the water. The boat was not ten yards from shore, and my action had been unheeded by St. Auban who was standing in the stern.

Kneeling I took careful aim at him, and as God lives, I would have saved much trouble that was to follow had I been allowed to fire. But at that moment a hand was laid upon my arm, and Yvonne's sweet voice murmured in my ear:

"You have fought a brave and gallant fight, M. de Luynes, and you have done a deed of which the knights of old might have been proud. Do not mar it by an act of murder."

"Murder, Mademoiselle!" I gasped, letting my hand fall. "Surely there is no murder in this!"

"A suspicion of it, I think, and so brave a man should have clean hands."

CHAPTER XIII. THE HAND OF YVONNE

We did not long remain upon the field of battle. Indeed, if we lingered at all it was but so that Mademoiselle might bandage Michelot's wound. And whilst she did so, my stout henchman related to us how it had fared with him, and how, having taken the two ruffians separately, he had been wounded by the first, whom he repaid by splitting his skull, whereupon the second one had discharged his pistol without effect, then made off towards the road, whilst Michelot, remembering that I might need assistance, had let him go.

"There, good Michelot," quoth Mademoiselle, completing her task, "I have done what little I can. And now, M. de Luynes, let us go."

It was close upon seven o'clock, and night was at hand. Already the moon was showing her large, full face above the tree-tops by Chambord, and casting a silver streak athwart the stream. The splash of oars from the Marquis's boat was waxing indistinct despite the stillness, whilst by the eye the boat itself was no longer to be distinguished.

As I turned, my glance fell upon the bravo whom I had shot. He lay stiff and stark upon his back, his sightless eyes wide open and staring heavenwards, his face all blood-smeared and ghastly to behold.

Mademoiselle shuddered. "Let us go," she repeated in a faint whisper; her eye had also fallen on that thing, and her voice was full of awe. She laid her hand upon my sleeve and 'neath the suasion of her touch I moved away.

To our surprise and joy we found St. Auban's coach where we had left it, with two saddled horses tethered close by. The others had doubtless been taken by the coachman and the bravo who had escaped Michelot, both of whom had fled. These animals we looked upon as the spoils of war, and accordingly when we set out in the coach,—Mademoiselle having desired me to ride beside her therein,—Michelot wielding the reins, it was with those two horses tethered behind.

"Monsieur de Luynes," said my companion softly, "I fear that I have done you a great injustice. Indeed, I know not how to crave your forgiveness, how to thank you, or how to hide my shame at those words I spoke to you this afternoon at Canaples."

"Not another word on that score, Mademoiselle!"

And to myself I thought of what recompense already had been mine. To me it had been given to have her lean trustingly upon me, my arm about her waist, whilst, sword in hand, I had fought for her. Dieu! Was that not something to have lived for?—aye, and to have died for, methought.

"I deserved, Monsieur," she continued presently, "that you should have left me to my fate for all the odious things I uttered when you warned me of my peril,—for the manner in which I have treated you since your coming to Blois."

"You have but treated me, Mademoiselle, in the only manner in which you could treat one so far beneath you, one who is utterly unworthy that you should bestow a single regret upon him."

"You are strangely humble to-night, Monsieur. It is unwonted in you, and for once you wrong yourself. You have not said that I am forgiven."

"I have naught to forgive."

"Hélas! you have—indeed you have!"

"Eh, bien!" quoth I, with a return of my old tone of banter, "I forgive then."

Thereafter we travelled on in silence for some little while, my heart full of joy at being so near to her, and the friendliness which she evinced for me, and my mind casting o'er my joyous heart a cloud of some indefinable evil presage.

"You are a brave man, M. de Luynes," she murmured presently, "and I have been taught that brave men are ever honourable and true."

"Had they who taught you that known Gaston de Luynes, they would have told you instead that it is possible for a vile man to have the one redeeming virtue of courage, even as it is possible for a liar to have a countenance that is sweet and innocent."

"There speaks that humble mood you are affecting, and which sits upon you as my father's clothes might do. Nay, Monsieur, I shall believe in my first teaching, and be deaf to yours."

Again there was a spell of silence. At last—"I have been thinking, Monsieur," she said, "of that other occasion on which you rode with me. I remember that you said you had killed a man, and when I asked you why, you said that you had done it because he sought to kill you. Was that the truth?"

"Assuredly, Mademoiselle. We fought a duel, and it is customary in a duel for each to seek to kill the other."

"But why was this duel fought?" she cried, with some petulance.

"I fear me, Mademoiselle, that I may not answer you," I said, recalling the exact motives, and thinking how futile appeared the

quarrel which Eugène de Canaples had sought with Andrea when viewed in the light of what had since befallen.

"Was the quarrel of your seeking?"

"In a measure it was, Mademoiselle."

"In a measure!" she echoed. Then persisting, as women will—"Will you not tell me what this measure was?"

"Tenez, Mademoiselle," I answered in despair; "I will tell you just so much as I may. Your brother had occasion to be opposed to certain projects that were being formed in Paris by persons high in power around a beardless boy. Himself of too small importance to dare wage war against those powerful ones who would have crushed him, your brother sought to gain his ends by sending a challenge to this boy. The lad was high-spirited and consented to meet M. de Canaples, by whom he would assuredly have been murdered—'t is the only word, Mademoiselle—had I not intervened as I did."

She was silent for a moment. Then—"I believe you, Monsieur," she said simply. "You fought, then, to shield another—but why?"

"For three reasons, Mademoiselle. Firstly, those persons high in power chose to think it my fault that the quarrel had arisen, and threatened to hang me if the duel took place and the boy were harmed. Secondly, I myself felt a kindness for the boy. Thirdly, because, whatever sins Heaven may record against me, it has at least ever been my way to side against men who, confident of their superiority, seek, with the cowardly courage of the strong, to harm the weak. It is, Mademoiselle, the courage of the man who knows no fear when he strikes a woman, yet who will shake with a palsy when another man but threatens him."

"Why did you not tell me all this before?" she whispered, after a pause. And methought I caught a quaver in her voice.

I laughed for answer, and she read my laugh aright; presently she pursued her questions and asked me the name of the boy I had defended. But I evaded her, telling her that she must need no further details to believe me.

"It is not that, Monsieur! I do believe you; I do indeed, but—"

"Hark, Mademoiselle!" I cried suddenly, as the clatter of many hoofs sounded near at hand. "What is that?"

A shout rang out at that moment. "Halt! Who goes there?"

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed Mademoiselle, drawing close up to me, and again the voice sounded, this time more sinister.

"Halt, I say—in the King's name!"

The coach came to a standstill, and through the window I beheld the shadowy forms of several mounted men, and the feeble glare of a lantern.

"Who travels in the carriage, knave?" came the voice again.

"Mademoiselle de Canaples," answered Michelot; then, like a fool, he must needs add: "Have a care whom you knave, my master, if you would grow old."

"Pardieu! let us behold this Mademoiselle de Canaples who owns so fearful a warrior for a coachman."

The door was flung rudely open, and the man bearing the lantern—whose rays shone upon a uniform of the Cardinal's guards—confronted us.

With a chuckle he flashed the light in my face, then suddenly grew serious.

"Peste! Is it indeed you, M. de Luynes?" quoth he; adding, with stern politeness, "It grieves me to disturb you, but I have a warrant for your arrest."

He was fumbling in his doublet as he spoke, and during the time I had leisure to scan his countenance, recognising, to my surprise, a young lieutenant of the guards who had but recently served with me, and with whom I had been on terms almost of friendship. His words, "I have a warrant for your arrest," came like a bolt from the blue to enlighten me, and to remind me of what St. Auban had that morning told me, and which for the nonce I had all but forgotten.

Upon hearing those same words, Yvonne, methought, grew pale, and her eyes were bent upon me with a look of surprise and pity.

"Upon what charge am I arrested?" I enquired, with forced composure.

"My warrant mentions none, M. de Luynes. It is here." And he thrust before me a paper, whose purport I could have read in its shape and seals. Idly my eye ran along the words:

"By these presents I charge and empower my lieutenant, Jean de Montrésor, to seize where'er he may be found, hold, and conduct to Paris the Sieur Gaston de Luynes—"

And so further, until the Cardinal's signature ended the legal verbiage.

"In the King's name, M. de Luynes," said Montrésor, firmly yet deferentially, "your sword!"

It would have been madness to do aught but comply with his request, and so I surrendered my rapier, which he in his turn delivered to one of his followers. Next I stepped down from the coach and turned to take leave of Mademoiselle, whereupon Montrésor, thinking

that peradventure matters were as they appeared to be between us, and, being a man of fine feelings, signed to his men to fall back, whilst he himself withdrew a few paces.

"Adieu, Mademoiselle!" I said simply. "I shall carry with me for consolation the memory that I have been of service to you, and I shall ever—during the little time that may be left me—be grateful to Heaven for the opportunity that it has afforded me of causing you—perchance without sufficient reason—to think better of me. Adieu, Mademoiselle! God guard you!"

It was too dark to see her face, but my heart bounded with joy to catch in her voice a quaver that argued, methought, regret for me.

"What does it mean, M. de Luynes? Why are they taking you?"

"Because I have displeased my Lord Cardinal, albeit, Mademoiselle, I swear to you that I have no cause for shame at the reasons for which I am being arrested."

"My father is Monseigneur de Mazarin's friend," she cried. "He is also yours. He shall exert for you what influence he possesses."

"'T were useless, Mademoiselle. Besides, what does it signify? Again, adieu!"

She spoke no answering word, but silently held out her hand. Silently I took it in mine, and for a moment I hesitated, thinking of what I was—of what she was. At last, moved by some power that was greater than my will, I stooped and pressed those shapely fingers to my lips. Then I stepped suddenly back and closed the carriage door, oppressed by a feeling akin to that of having done an evil deed.

"Have I your permission to say a word to my servant, M. le Lieutenant?" I inquired.

He bowed assent, whereat, stepping close up to the horror-stricken

Michelot—

"Drive straight to the Château de Canaples," I said in a low voice. "Thereafter return to the Lys de France and there wait until you hear from me. Here, take my purse; there are some fifty pistoles in it."

"Speak but the word, Monsieur," he growled, "and I'll pistol a couple of these dogs."

"Pah! You grow childish," I laughed, "or can you not see that fellow's musket?"

"Pardieu! I'll risk his aim! I never yet saw one of these curs shoot straight."

"No, no, obey me, Michelot. Think of Mademoiselle. Go! Adieu! If we should not meet again, mon brave," I finished, as I seized his loyal hand, "what few things of mine are at the hostelry shall belong to you, as well as what may be left of this money. It is little enough payment, Michelot, for all your faithfulness—"

"Monsieur, Monsieur!" he cried.

"Diable!" I muttered, "we are becoming women! Be off, you knave! Adieu!"

The peremptoriness of my tone ended our leave-taking and caused him to grip his reins and bring down his whip. The coach moved on. A white face, on which the moonlight fell, glanced at me from the window, then to my staring eyes naught was left but the back of the retreating vehicle, with one of the two saddle-horses that had been tethered to it still ambling in its wake.

"M. de Montrésor," I said, thrusting my bullet-pierced hat upon my head, "I am at your service."

CHAPTER XIV. OF WHAT BEFELL AT REAUX.

At my captor's bidding I mounted the horse which they had untethered from the carriage, and we started off along the road which the coach itself had disappeared upon a moment before. But we travelled at a gentle trot, which, after that evening's furious riding, was welcome to me.

With bitterness I reflected as I rode that the very moment at which Mademoiselle de Canaples had brought herself to think better of me was like to prove the last we should spend together. Yet not altogether bitter was that reflection; for with it came also the consolation—whereof I had told her—that I had not been taken before she had had cause to change her mind concerning me.

That she should care for me was too preposterous an idea to be nourished, and, indeed, it was better—much better—that M. de Montrésor had come before I, grown sanguine as lovers will, had again earned her scorn by showing her what my heart contained. Much better was it that I should pass for ever out of her life—as, indeed, methought I was like to pass out of all life—whilst I could leave in her mind a kind remembrance and a grateful regret, free from the stain that a subsequent possible presumption of mine might have cast o'er it.

Then my thoughts shifted to Andrea. St. Auban would hear of my removal, and I cared not to think of what profit he might derive from it. To Yvonne also his presence must hereafter be a menace, and in that wherein tonight he had failed, he might, again, succeed. It was at this

junction of my reverie that M. de Montrésor's pleasant young voice aroused me.

"You appear downcast, M. de Luynes."

"I, downcast!" I echoed, throwing back my head and laughing. "Nay. I was but thinking.

"Believe me, M. de Luynes," he said kindly, "when I tell you that it grieves me to be charged with this matter. I have done my best to capture you. That was my duty. But I should have rejoiced had I failed with the consciousness of having done all in my power."

"Thanks, Montrésor," I murmured, and silence followed.

"I have been thinking, Monsieur," he went on presently, "that possibly the absence of your sword causes you discomfort."

"Eh? Discomfort? It does, most damnably!"

"Give me your parole d'honneur that you will attempt no escape, and not only shall your sword be returned to you, but you shall travel to Paris with all comfort and dignity."

Now, so amazed was I that I paused to stare at the officer who was young enough to make such a proposal to a man of my reputation. He turned his face towards me, and in the moonlight I could make out his questioning glance.

"Eh, bien, Monsieur?"

"I am more than grateful to you, M. de Montrésor," I replied, "and I freely give you my word of honour to seek no means of eluding you, nor to avail myself of any that may be presented to me."

I said this loud enough for those behind to hear, so that no surprise was evinced when the lieutenant bade the man who bore my sword

return it to me.

If he who may chance to read these simple pages shall have gathered aught of my character from their perusal, he will marvel, perchance, that I should give the lieutenant my parole, instead rather of watching for an opportunity to—at least—attempt an escape. Preeminent in my thoughts, however, stood at that moment the necessity to remove St. Auban, and methought that by acting as I did I saw a way by which, haply, I might accomplish this. What might thereafter befall me seemed of little moment.

"M. de Montrésor," I said presently, "your kindness impels me to set a further tax upon your generosity."

"That is, Monsieur?"

"Bid your men fall back a little, and I will tell you."

He made a sign to his troopers, and when the distance between us had been sufficiently widened, I began:

"There is a man at present across the river, yonder, who has done me no little injury, and with whom I have a rendezvous at nine o'clock to-night at St. Sulpice des Reaux, where our swords are to determine the difference between us. I crave, Monsieur, your permission to keep that appointment."

"Impossible!" he answered curtly.

I took a deep breath like a man who is about to jump an obstacle in his path.

"Why impossible, Monsieur?"

"Because you are a prisoner, and therefore no longer under obligation to keep appointments."

"How would you feel, Montrésor, if, burning to be avenged upon a man who had done you irreparable wrong, you were arrested an hour before the time at which you were to meet this man, sword in hand, and your captor—whose leave you craved to keep the assignation—answered you with the word 'impossible'?"

"Yes, yes, Monsieur," he replied impatiently. "But you forget my position. Let us suppose that I allow you to go to St. Sulpice des Reaux. What if you do not return?"

"You mistrust me?" I exclaimed, my hopes melting.

"You misapprehend me. I mean, what if you are killed?"

"I do not think that I shall be."

"Ah! But what if you are? What shall I say to my Lord Cardinal?"

"Dame! That I am dead, and that he is saved the trouble of hanging me. The most he can want of me is my life. Let us suppose that you had come an hour later. You would have been forced to wait until after the encounter, and, did I fall, matters would be no different."

The young man fell to thinking, but I, knowing that it is not well to let the young ponder overlong if you would bend them to your wishes, broke in upon his reflections—"See, Montrésor, yonder are the lights of Blois; by eight o'clock we shall be in the town. Come; grant me leave to cross the Loire, and by ten o'clock, or half-past at the latest, I shall return to sup with you or I shall be dead. I swear it."

"Were I in your position," he answered musingly, "I know how I would be treated, and, pardieu! come what may I shall deal with you accordingly. You may go to your assignation, M. de Luynes, and may God prosper you."

And thus it came to pass that shortly after eight o'clock, albeit a prisoner, I rode into the courtyard of the Lys de France, and, alighting,

I stepped across the threshold of the inn, and strode up to a table at which I had espied Michelot. He sat nursing a huge measure of wine, into the depths of which he was gazing pensively, with an expression so glum upon his weather-beaten countenance that it defies depicting. So deep was he in his meditations, that albeit I stood by the table surveying him for a full minute, he took no heed of me.

"Allons, Michelot!" I said at length. "Wake up."

He started up with a cry of amazement; surprise chased away the grief that had been on his face, and a moment later joy unfeigned, and good to see, took the place of surprise.

"You have escaped, Monsieur!" he cried, and albeit caution made him utter the words beneath his breath, a shout seemed to lurk somewhere in the whisper.

Pressing his hand I sat down and briefly told him how matters stood, and how I came to be for the moment free. And when I had done I bade him, since his wound had not proved serious, to get his hat and cloak and go with me to find a boat.

He obeyed me, and a quarter of an hour after we had quitted the hostelry he was rowing me across the stream, whilst, wrapped in my cloak, I sat in the stern, thinking of Yvonne.

"Monsieur," said Michelot, "observe how swift is the stream. If I were to let the boat drift we should be at Tours to-morrow, and from there it would be easy to defy pursuit. We have enough money to reach Spain. What say you, Monsieur?"

"Say, you rascal? Why, bend your back to the work and set me ashore by St. Sulpice in a quarter of an hour, or I'll forget that you have been my friend. Would you see me dishonoured?"

"Sooner than see you dead," he grumbled as he resumed his task.

Thereafter, whilst he rowed, Michelot entertained me with some quaint ideas touching that which fine gentlemen call honour, and to what sorry passes it was wont to bring them, concluding by thanking God that he was no gentleman and had no honour to lead him into mischief.

At last, however, our journey came to an end, and I sprang ashore some five hundred paces from the little chapel, and almost exactly opposite the Château de Canaples. I stood for a moment gazing across the water at the lighted windows of the château, wondering which of those eyes that looked out upon the night might be that of Yvonne's chamber.

Then, bidding Michelot await me, or follow did I not return in half an hour, I turned and moved away towards the chapel.

There is a clearing in front of the little white edifice—which rather than a temple is but a monument to the martyr who is said to have perished on that spot in the days before Clovis.

As I advanced into the centre of this open patch of ground, and stood clear of the black silhouettes of the trees, cast about me by the moon, two men appeared to detach themselves from the side wall of the chapel, and advanced to meet me.

Albeit they were wrapped in their cloaks—uptilted behind by their protruding scabbards—it was not difficult to tell the tall figure and stately bearing of St. Auban and the mincing gait of Vilmorin.

I doffed my hat in a grave salutation, which was courteously returned.

"I trust, Messieurs, that I have not kept you waiting?"

"I was on the point of expressing that very hope, Monsieur," returned St. Auban. "We have but arrived. Do you come alone?"

"As you perceive."

"Hum! M. le Vicomte, then, will act for both of us."

I bowed in token of my satisfaction, and without more ado cast aside my cloak, pleased to see that the affair was to be conducted with decency and politeness, as such matters should ever be conducted, albeit impoliteness may have marked their origin.

The Marquis, having followed my example and divested himself of his cloak and hat, unsheathed his rapier and delivered it to Vilmorin, who came across with it to where I stood. When he was close to me I saw that he was deadly pale; his teeth chattered, and the hand that held the weapon shook as with a palsy.

"Mu—Monsieur," he stammered, "will it please you to lend me your sword that I may mu-measure it?"

"What formalities!" I exclaimed with an amused smile, as I complied with his request. "I am afraid you have caught a chill, Vicomte. The night air is little suited to health so delicate."

He answered me with a baleful glance, as silently he took my sword and set it—point to hilt—with St. Auban's. He appeared to have found some slight difference in the length, for he took two steps away from me, holding the weapons well in the light, where for a moment he surveyed them attentively. His hands shook so that the blades clattered one against the other the while. But, of a sudden, taking both rapiers by the hilt, he struck the blades together with a ringing clash, then flung them both behind him as far as he could contrive, leaving me thunderstruck with amazement, and marvelling whether fear had robbed him of his wits.

Not until I perceived that the trees around me appeared to spring into life did it occur to me that that clashing of blades was a signal, and that I was trapped. With the realisation of it I was upon Vilmorin in

a bound, and with both hands I had caught the dog by the throat before he thought of flight. The violence of my onslaught bore him to the ground, and I, not to release my choking grip, went with him.

For a moment we lay together where we had fallen, his slender body twisting and writhing under me, his swelling face upturned and his protruding, horror-stricken eyes gazing into mine that were fierce and pitiless. Voices rang above me; someone stooped and strove to pluck me from my victim; then below the left shoulder I felt a sting of pain, first cold then hot, and I knew that I had been stabbed.

Again I felt the blade thrust in, lower down and driven deeper; then, as the knife was for the second time withdrawn, and my flesh sucked at the steel,—the pain of it sending a shudder through me,—the instinct of preservation overcame the sweet lust to strangle Vilmorin. I let him go and, staggering to my feet, I turned to face those murderers who struck a defenceless man behind.

Swords gleamed around me: one, two, three, four, five, six, I counted, and stood weak and dazed from loss of blood, gazing stupidly at the white blades. Had I but had my sword I should have laid about me, and gone down beneath their blows as befits a soldier. But the absence of that trusty friend left me limp and helpless—cowed for the first time since I had borne arms.

Of a sudden I became aware that St. Auban stood opposite to me, hand on hip, surveying me with a malicious leer. As our eyes met—"So, master meddler," quoth he mockingly, "you crow less lustily than is your wont."

"Hound!" I gasped, choking with rage, "if you are a man, if there be a spark of pride or honour left in your lying, cowardly soul, order your assassins to give me my sword, and, wounded though I be, I'll fight with you this duel that you lured me here to fight."

He laughed harshly.

"I told you but this morning, Master de Luynes, that a St. Auban does not fight men of your stamp. You forced a rendezvous upon me; you shall reap the consequences."

Despite the weakness arising from loss of blood, I sprang towards him, beside myself with fury. But ere I had covered half the distance that lay between us my arms were gripped from behind, and in my spent condition I was held there, powerless, at the Marquis's mercy. He came slowly forward until we were but some two feet apart. For a second he stood leering at me, then, raising his hand, he struck me—struck a man whose arms another held!—full upon the face. Passion for the moment lent me strength, and in that moment I had wrenched my right arm free and returned his blow with interest.

With an oath he got out a dagger that hung from his baldrick.

"Sang du Christ! Take that, you dog!" he snarled, burying the blade in my breast as he spoke.

"My God! You are murdering me!" I gasped.

"Have you discovered it? What penetration!" he retorted, and those about him laughed at his indecent jest!

He made a sign, and the man who had held me withdrew his hands. I staggered forward, deprived of his support, then a crashing blow took me across the head.

I swayed for an instant, and with arms upheld I clutched at the air, as if I sought, by hanging to it, to save myself from falling; then the moon appeared to go dark, a noise as of the sea beating upon its shore filled my ears, and I seemed to be falling—falling—falling.

A voice that buzzed and vibrated oddly, growing more distant at each word, reached me as I sank.

"Come," it said. "Fling that carrion into the river."

Then nothingness engulfed me.

CHAPTER XV. OF MY RESURRECTION

Even as the blow which had plunged me into senselessness had imparted to me the sinking sensation which I have feebly endeavoured to depict, so did the first dim ray of returning consciousness bring with it the feeling that I was again being buoyed upwards through the thick waters that had enveloped me, to their surface, where intelligence and wakefulness awaited.

And as I felt myself borne up and up in that effortless ascension, my senses awake and my reason still half-dormant, an exquisite sense of languor pervaded my whole being. Presently meseemed that the surface was gained at last, and an instinct impelled me to open my eyes upon the light, of which, through closed lids, I had become conscious.

I beheld a fair-sized room superbly furnished, and flooded with amber sunlight suggestive in itself of warmth and luxury, the vision of which heightened the delicious torpor that held me in thrall. The bed I lay upon was such, I told myself, as would not have disgraced a royal sleeper. It was upheld by great pillars of black oak, carved with a score of fantastic figures, and all around it, descending from the dome above, hung curtains of rich damask, drawn back at the side that looked upon the window. Near at hand stood a table laden with phials and such utensils as one sees by the bedside of the wealthy sick. All this I beheld in a languid, unreasoning fashion through my half-open lids, and albeit the luxury of the room and the fine linen of my bed told me that this was neither my Paris lodging in the Rue St. Antoine, nor yet my chamber at the hostelry of the Lys de France, still I

taxed not my brain with any questions touching my whereabouts.

I closed my eyes, and I must have slept again: when next I opened them a burly figure stood in the deep bay of the latticed window, looking out through the leaded panes.

I recognised the stalwart frame of Michelot, and at last I asked myself where I might be. It did not seem to occur to me that I had but to call him to receive an answer to that question. Instead, I closed my eyes again, and essayed to think. But just then there came a gentle scratching at the door, and I could hear Michelot tiptoeing across the room; next he and the one he had admitted tiptoed back towards my bedside, and as they came I caught a whisper in a voice that seemed to drag me to full consciousness.

"How fares the poor invalid this morning?"

"The fever is gone, Mademoiselle, and he may wake at any moment; indeed, it is strange that he should sleep so long."

"He will be the better for it when he does awaken. I will remain here while you rest, Michelot. My poor fellow, you are almost as worn with your vigils as he is with the fever."

"Pooh! I am strong enough, Mademoiselle," he answered. "I will get a mouthful of food and return, for I would be by when he wakes."

Then their voices sank so low that as they withdrew I caught not what was said. The door closed softly and for a space there was silence, broken at last by a sigh above my head. With an answering sigh I opened wide my eyes and feasted them upon the lovely face of Yvonne de Canaples, as she bent over me with a look of tenderness and pity that at once recalled to me our parting when I was arrested.

But suddenly meeting the stare of my gaze, she drew back with a half-stifled cry, whose meaning my dull wits sought not to interpret, but

methought I caught from her lips the words, "Thank God!"

"Where am I, Mademoiselle?" I inquired, and the faintness of my voice amazed me.

"You know me!" she exclaimed, as though the thing were a miracle. Then coming forward again, and setting her cool, sweet hand upon my forehead,

"Hush," she murmured in the accents one might use to soothe a child. "You are at Canaples, among friends. Now sleep."

"At Canaples!" I echoed. "How came I here? I am a prisoner, am I not?"

"A prisoner!" she exclaimed. "No, no, you are not a prisoner. You are among friends."

"Did I then but dream that Montrésor arrested me yesterday on the road to Meung? Ah! I recollect! M. de Montrésor gave me leave on parole to go to Reaux."

Then, like an avalanche, remembrance swept down upon me, and my memory drew a vivid picture of the happenings at St. Sulpice.

"My God!" I cried. "Am I not dead, then?" And I sought to struggle up into a sitting posture, but that gentle hand upon my forehead restrained and robbed me of all will that was not hers.

"Hush, Monsieur!" she said softly. "Lie still. By a miracle and the faithfulness of Michelot you live. Be thankful, be content, and sleep."

"But my wounds, Mademoiselle?" I inquired feebly.

"They are healed."

"Healed?" quoth I, and in my amazement my voice sounded louder than it had yet done since my awakening. "Healed! Three such

wounds as I took last night, to say naught of a broken head, healed?"

"T was not last night, Monsieur."

"Not last night? Was it not last night that I went to Reaux?"

"It is nearly a month since that took place," she answered with a smile. "For nearly a month have you lain unconscious upon that bed, with the angel of Death at your pillow. You have fought and won a silent battle. Now sleep, Monsieur, and ask no more questions until next you awaken, when Michelot shall tell you all that took place."

She held a glass to my lips from which I drank gratefully, then, with the submissiveness of a babe, I obeyed her and slept.

As she had promised, it was Michelot who greeted me when next I opened my eyes, on the following day. There were tears in his eyes—eyes that had looked grim and unmoved upon the horrors of the battlefield.

From him I learned how, after they had flung me into the river, deeming me dead already, St. Auban and his men had made off. The swift stream swirled me along towards the spot where, in the boat, Michelot awaited my return all unconscious of what was taking place. He had heard the splash, and had suddenly stood up, on the point of going ashore, when my body rose within a few feet of him. He spoke of the agony of mind wherewith he had suddenly stretched forth and clutched me by my doublet, fearing that I was indeed dead. He had lifted me into the boat to find that my heart still beat and that the blood flowed from my wounds. These he had there and then bound up in the only rude fashion he was master of, and forthwith, thinking of Andrea and the Chevalier de Canaples, who were my friends, and of Mademoiselle, who was my debtor, also seeing that the château was the nearest place, he had rowed straight across to Canaples, and there I had lain during the four weeks that had elapsed, nursed by

Mademoiselle, Andrea, and himself, and thus won back to life.

Ah, Dieu! How good it was to know that someone there was still who cared for worthless Gaston de Luynes a little—enough to watch beside him and withhold his soul from the grim claws of Death.

"What of M. de St. Auban?" I inquired presently.

"He has not been seen since that night. Probably he feared that did he come to Blois, the Chevalier would find means of punishing him for the attempted abduction of Mademoiselle."

"Ah, then Andrea is safe?"

As if in answer to my question, the lad entered at that moment, and upon seeing me sitting up, talking to Michelot, he uttered an exclamation of joy, and hurried forward to my bedside.

"Gaston, dear friend!" he cried, as he took my hand—and a thin, withered hand it was.

We talked long together,—we three,—and anon we were joined by the Chevalier de Canaples, who offered me also, in his hesitating manner, his felicitations. And with me they lingered until Yvonne came to drive them with protestations from my bedside.

Such, in brief, was the manner of my resurrection. For a week or so I still kept my chamber; then one day towards the middle of April, the weather being warm and the sun bright, Michelot assisted me to don my clothes, which hung strangely empty upon my gaunt, emaciated frame, and, leaning heavily upon my faithful henchman, I made my way below.

In the salon I found the Chevalier de Canaples with Mesdemoiselles and Andrea awaiting me, and the kindness wherewith they overwhelmed me, as I sat propped up with pillows, was such that I asked myself again and again if, indeed, I was that

same Gaston de Luyes who but a little while ago had held himself as destitute of friends as he was of fortune. I was the pampered hero of the hour, and even little Geneviève had a sunny smile and a kind word for me.

Thereafter my recovery progressed with great strides, and gradually, day by day, I felt more like my old vigorous self. They were happy days, for Mademoiselle was often at my side, and ever kind to me; so kind was she that presently, as my strength grew, there fell a great cloud athwart my happiness—the thought that soon I must leave Canaples never to return there,—leave Mademoiselle's presence never to come into it again.

I was Monsieur de Montrésor's prisoner. I had learned that in common with all others, save those at Canaples, he deemed me dead, and that, informed of it by a message from St. Auban, he had returned to Paris on the day following that of my journey to Reaux. Nevertheless, since I lived, he had my parole, and it was my duty as soon as I had regained sufficient strength, to journey to Paris and deliver myself into his hands.

Nearer and nearer drew the dreaded hour in which I felt that I must leave Canaples. On the last day of April I essayed a fencing bout with Andrea, and so strong and supple did I prove myself that I was forced to realise that the time was come. On the morrow I would go.

As I was on the point of returning indoors with the foils under my arm, Andrea called me back.

"Gaston, I have something of importance to say to you. Will you take a turn with me down yonder by the river?"

There was a serious, almost nervous look on his comely face, which arrested my attention. I dropped the foils, and taking his arm I went with him as he bade me. We seated ourselves on the grass by

the edge of the gurgling waters, and he began:

"It is now two months since we came to Blois: I, to pay my court to the wealthy Mademoiselle de Canaples; you, to watch over and protect me—nay, you need not interrupt me. Michelot has told me what St. Auban sought here, and the true motives of your journey to St. Sulpice. Never shall I be able to sufficiently prove my gratitude to you, my poor Gaston. But tell me, dear friend, you who from the outset saw how matters stood, why did you not inform St. Auban that he had no cause to hunt me down since I intended not to come between him and Yvonne?"

"Mon Dieu!" I exclaimed, "that little fair-haired coquette has—"

"Gaston," he interrupted, "you go too fast. I love Geneviève de Canaples. I have loved her, I think, since the moment I beheld her in the inn at Choisy, and, what is more, she loves me."

"So that—?" I asked with an ill-repressed sneer.

"We have plighted our troth, and with her father's sanction, or without it, she will do me the honour to become my wife."

"Admirable!" I exclaimed. "And my Lord Cardinal?"

"May hang himself on his stole for aught I care."

"Ah! Truly a dutiful expression for a nephew who has thwarted his uncle's plans!"

"My uncle's plans are like himself, cold and selfish in their ambition."

"Andrea, Andrea! Whatever your uncle may be, to those of your blood, at least, he was never selfish."

"Not selfish!" he cried. "Think you that he is enriching and

contracting great alliances for us because he loves us? No, no. Our uncle seeks to gain our support and with it the support of those noble houses to which he is allying us. The nobility opposes him, therefore he seeks to find relatives among noblemen, so that he may weather the storm of which his far-seeing eyes have already detected the first dim clouds. What to him are my feelings, my inclinations, my affections? Things of no moment, to be sacrificed so that I may serve him in the manner that will bring him the most profit. Yet you call him not selfish! Were he not selfish, I should go to him and say: 'I love Geneviève de Canaples. Create me Duke as you would do, did I wed her sister, and the Chevalier de Canaples will not withstand our union.' What think you would be his answer?"

"I have a shrewd idea what his answer would be," I replied slowly. "Also I have a shrewd idea of what he will say when he learns in what manner you have defied his wishes."

"He can but order me away from Court, or, at most, banish me from France."

"And then what will become of you—of you and your wife?"

"What is to become of us?" he cried in a tone that was almost that of anger. "Think you that I am a pauper dependent upon my uncle's bounty? I have an estate near Palermo, which, for all that it does not yield riches, is yet sufficient to enable us to live with dignity and comfort. I have told Geneviève, and she is content."

I looked at his flushed face and laughed.

"Well, well!" said I. "If you are resolved upon it, it is ended."

He appeared to meditate for a moment, then—"We have decided to be married by the Curé of St. Innocent on the day after to-morrow."

"Crédieu!" I answered, with a whistle, "you have wasted no time in

determining your plans. Does Yvonne know of it?"

"We have dared tell nobody," he replied; and a moment later he added hesitatingly, "You, I know, will not betray us."

"Do you know me so little that you doubt me on that score? Have no fear, Andrea, I shall not speak. Besides, to-morrow, or the next day at latest, I leave Canaples."

"You do not mean that you are returning to the Lys de France!"

"No. I am going farther than that. I am going to Paris."

"To Paris?"

"To Paris, to deliver myself up to M. de Montrésor, who gave me leave to go to Reaux some seven weeks ago."

"But it is madness, Gaston!" he ejaculated.

"All virtue is madness in a world so sinful; nevertheless I go. In a measure I am glad that things have fallen out with you as they have done, for when the news goes abroad that you have married Geneviève de Canaples and left the heiress free, your enemies will vanish, and you will have no further need of me. New enemies you will have perchance, but in your strife with them I could lend you no help, were I by."

He sat in silence casting pebbles into the stream, and watching the ripples they made upon the face of the waters.

"Have you told Mademoiselle?" he asked at length.

"Not yet. I shall tell her to-day. You also, Andrea, must take her into your confidence touching your approaching marriage. That she will prove a good friend to you I am assured."

"But what reason shall I give for my secrecy?" he inquired, and

inwardly I smiled to see how the selfishness which love begets in us had caused him already to forget my affairs, and how the thought of his own approaching union effaced all thought of me and the doom to which I went.

"Give no reason," I answered. "Let Genevieve tell her of what you contemplate, and if a reason she must have, let Geneviève bid her come to me. This much will I do for you in the matter; indeed, Andrea, it is the last service I am like to render you."

"Sh! Here comes the Chevalier. She shall be told to-day."

CHAPTER XVI. THE WAY OF WOMAN

For all that I realised that this love of mine for Yvonne was as a child still-born—a thing that had no existence save in the heart that had begotten it—I rejoiced meanly at the thought that she was not destined to become Andrea's wife. For since I understood that this woman—who to me was like no other of her sex—was not for so poor a thing as Gaston de Luynes, like the dog in the fable I wished that no other might possess her. Inevitable it seemed that sooner or later one must come who would woo and win her. But ere that befell, my Lord Cardinal would have meted out justice to me—the justice of the rope meseemed—and I should not be by to gnash my teeth in jealousy.

That evening, when the Chevalier de Canaples had gone to pay a visit to his vineyard,—the thing that, next to himself, he loved most in this world,—and whilst Geneviève and Andrea were vowing a deathless love to each other in the rose garden, their favourite haunt when the Chevalier was absent, I seized the opportunity for making my adieux to Yvonne.

We were leaning together upon the balustrade of the terrace, and our faces were turned towards the river and the wooded shores beyond—a landscape this that was as alive and beautiful now as it had been dead and grey when first I came to Canaples two months ago.

Scarce were my first words spoken when she turned towards me, and methought—but I was mad, I told myself—that there was a catch in her voice as she exclaimed, "You are leaving us, Monsieur?"

"To-morrow morning I shall crave Monsieur your father's permission to quit Canaples."

"But why, Monsieur? Have we not made you happy here?"

"So happy, Mademoiselle," I answered with fervour, "that at times it passes my belief that I am indeed Gaston de Luynes. But go I must. My honour demands of me this sacrifice."

And in answer to the look of astonishment that filled her wondrous eyes, I told her what I had told Andrea touching my parole to Montrésor, and the necessity of its redemption. As Andrea had done, she also dubbed it madness, but her glance was, nevertheless, so full of admiration, that methought to have earned it was worth the immolation of liberty—of life perchance; who could say?

"Before I go, Mademoiselle," I pursued, looking straight before me as I spoke, and dimly conscious that her glance was bent upon my face—"before I go, I fain would thank you for all that you have done for me here. Your care has saved my life, Mademoiselle; your kindness, methinks, has saved my soul. For it seems to me that I am no longer the same man whom Michelot fished out of the Loire that night two months ago. I would thank you, Mademoiselle, for the happiness that has been mine during the past few days—a happiness such as for years has not fallen to my lot. To another and worthier man, the task of thanking you might be an easy one; but to me, who know myself to be so far beneath you, the obligation is so overwhelming that I know of no words to fitly express it."

"Monsieur, Monsieur, I beseech you! Already you have said overmuch."

"Nay, Mademoiselle; not half enough."

"Have you forgotten, then, what you did for me? Our trivial service to you is but unseemly recompense. What other man would have

come to my rescue as you came, with such odds against you—and forgetting the affronting words wherewith that very day I had met your warning? Tell me, Monsieur, who would have done that?"

"Why, any man who deemed himself a gentleman, and who possessed such knowledge as I had."

She laughed a laugh of unbelief.

"You are mistaken, sir," she answered. "The deed was worthy of one of those preux chevaliers we read of, and I have never known but one man capable of accomplishing it."

Those words and the tone wherein they were uttered set my brain on fire. I turned towards her; our glances met, and her eyes—those eyes that but a while ago had never looked on me without avowing the disdain wherein she had held me—were now filled with a light of kindness, of sympathy, of tenderness that seemed more than I could endure.

Already my hand was thrust into the bosom of my doublet, and my fingers were about to drag forth that little shred of green velvet that I had found in the coppice on the day of her abduction, and that I had kept ever since as one keeps the relic of a departed saint. Another moment and I should have poured out the story of the mad, hopeless passion that filled my heart to bursting, when of a sudden—"Yvonne, Yvonne!" came Geneviève's fresh voice from the other end of the terrace. The spell of that moment was broken.

Methought Mademoiselle made a little gesture of impatience as she answered her sister's call; then, with a word of apology, she left me.

Half dazed by the emotions that had made sport of me, I leaned over the balustrade, and with my elbows on the stone and my chin on my palms, I stared stupidly before me, thanking God for having sent

Geneviève in time to save me from again earning Mademoiselle's scorn. For as I grew sober I did not doubt that with scorn she would have met the wild words that already trembled on my lips.

I laughed harshly and aloud, such a laugh as those in Hell may vent. "Gaston, Gaston!" I muttered, "at thirty-two you are more a fool than ever you were at twenty."

I told myself then that my fancy had vested her tone and look with a kindliness far beyond that which they contained, and as I thought of how I had deemed impatient the little gesture wherewith she had greeted Geneviève's interruption I laughed again.

From the reverie into which, naturally enough, I lapsed, it was Mademoiselle who aroused me. She stood beside me with an unrest of manner so unusual in her, that straightway I guessed the substance of her talk with Geneviève.

"So, Mademoiselle," I said, without waiting for her to speak, "you have learned what is afoot?"

"I have," she answered. "That they love each other is no news to me. That they intend to wed does not surprise me. But that they should contemplate a secret marriage passes my comprehension."

I cleared my throat as men will when about to embark upon a perilous subject with no starting-point determined.

"It is time, Mademoiselle," I began, "that you should learn the true cause of M. de Mancini's presence at Canaples. It will enlighten you touching his motives for a secret wedding. Had things fallen out as was intended by those who planned his visit—Monsieur your father and my Lord Cardinal—it is improbable that you would ever have heard that which it now becomes necessary that I should tell you. I trust, Mademoiselle," I continued, "that you will hear me in a neutral spirit, without permitting your personal feelings to enter into your

consideration of that which I shall unfold."

"So long a preface augurs anything but well," she interposed, looking monstrous serious.

"Not ill, at least, I hope. Hear me then. Your father and his Eminence are friends; the one has a daughter who is said to be very wealthy and whom he, with fond ambition, desires to see wedded to a man who can give her an illustrious name; the other possesses a nephew whom he can ennoble by the highest title that a man may bear who is not a prince of the blood,—and borne indeed by few who are not,—and whom he desires to see contract an alliance that will bring him enough of riches to enable him to bear his title with becoming dignity." I glanced at Mademoiselle, whose cheeks were growing an ominous red.

"Well, Mademoiselle," I continued, "your father and Monseigneur de Mazarin appear to have bared their heart's desire to each other, and M. de Mancini was sent to Canaples to woo and win your father's elder daughter."

A long pause followed, during which she stood with face aflame, averted eyes, and heaving bosom, betraying the feelings that stormed within her at the disclosure of the bargain whereof she had been a part. At length—"Oh, Monsieur!" she exclaimed in a choking voice, and clenching her shapely hands, "to think—"

"I beseech you not to think, Mademoiselle," I interrupted calmly, for, having taken the first plunge, I was now master of myself. "The ironical little god, whom the ancients painted with bandaged eyes, has led M. de Mancini by the nose in this matter, and things have gone awry for the plotters. There, Mademoiselle, you have the reason for a clandestine union. Did Monsieur your father guess how Andrea's affections have"—I caught the word "miscarried" betimes, and substituted—"gone against his wishes, his opposition is not a thing to

be doubted."

"Are you sure there is no mistake?" she inquired after a pause. "Is all this really true, Monsieur?"

"It is, indeed."

"But how comes it that my father has seen naught of what has been so plain to me—that M. de Mancini was ever at my sister's side?"

"Your father, Mademoiselle, is much engrossed in his vineyard. Moreover, when the Chevalier has been at hand he has been careful to show no greater regard for the one than for the other of you. I instructed him in this duplicity many weeks ago."

She looked at me for a moment.

"Oh, Monsieur," she cried passionately, "how deep is my humiliation! To think that I was made a part of so vile a bargain! Oh, I am glad that M. de Mancini has proved above the sordid task to which they set him—glad that he will dupe the Cardinal and my father."

"So am not I, Mademoiselle," I exclaimed. She vouchsafed me a stare of ineffable surprise.

"How?"

"Diable!" I answered. "I am M. de Mancini's friend. It was to shield him that I fought your brother; again, because of my attitude towards him was it that I went perilously near assassination at Reaux. Enemies sprang up about him when the Cardinal's matrimonial projects became known. Your brother picked a quarrel with him, and when I had dealt with your brother, St. Auban appeared, and after St. Auban there were others. When it is known that he has played this trick upon 'Uncle Giulio' his enemies will disappear; but, on the other hand, his prospects will all be blighted, and for that I am sorry."

"So that was the motive of your duel with Eugène!"

"At last you learn it."

"And," she added in a curious voice, "you would have been better pleased had M. de Mancini carried out his uncle's wishes?"

"It matters little what I would think, Mademoiselle," I answered guardedly, for I could not read that curious tone of hers.

"Nevertheless, I am curious to hear your answer."

What answer could I make? The truth—that for all my fine talk, I was at heart and in a sense right glad that she was not to become Andrea's wife—would have seemed ungallant. Moreover, I must have added the explanation that I desired to see her no man's wife, so that I might not seem to contradict myself. Therefore—

"In truth, Mademoiselle," I answered, lying glibly, "it would have given me more pleasure had Andrea chosen to obey his Eminence."

Her manner froze upon the instant.

"In the consideration of your friend's advancement," she replied, half contemptuously, "you forget, M. de Luynes, to consider me. Am I, then, a thing to be bartered into the hands of the first fortune-hunter who woos me because he has been bidden so to do, and who is to marry me for political purposes? Pshaw, M. de Luynes!" she added, with a scornful laugh, "after all, I was a fool to expect aught else from —"

She checked herself abruptly, and a sudden access of mercy left the stinging "you" unuttered. I stood by, dumb and sheepish, not understanding how the words that I had deemed gallant could have brought this tempest down upon my head. Before I could say aught that might have righted matters, or perchance made them worse

—"Since you leave Canaples to-morrow," quoth she, "I will say 'Adieu,' Monsieur, for it is unlikely that we shall meet again."

With a slight inclination of her head, and withholding her hand intentionally, she moved away, whilst I stood, as only a fool or a statue would stand, and watched her go.

Once she paused, and, indeed, half turned, whereupon hope knocked at my heart again; but before I had admitted it, she had resumed her walk towards the house. Hungrily I followed her graceful, lissom figure with my eyes until she had crossed the threshold. Then, with a dull ache in my breast, I flung myself upon a stone seat, and, addressing myself to the setting sun for want of a better audience, I roundly cursed her sex for the knottiest puzzle that had ever plagued the mind of man in the unravelling.

CHAPTER XVII. FATHER AND SON

"Gaston," quoth Andrea next morning, "you will remain at Canaples until to-morrow? You must, for to-morrow I am to be wed, and I would fain have your good wishes ere you go."

"Nice hands, mine, to seek a benediction at," I grumbled.

"But you will remain? Come, Gaston, we have been good friends, you and I, and who knows when next we shall meet? Believe me, I shall value your 'God speed' above all others."

"Likely enough, since it will be the only one you'll hear."

But for all my sneers he was not to be put off. He talked and coaxed so winningly that in the end—albeit I am a man not easily turned from the course he has set himself—the affectionate pleading in his fresh young voice and the affectionate look in his dark eyes won me to his way.

Forthwith I went in quest of the Chevalier, whom, at the indication of a lackey, I discovered in the room it pleased him to call his study—that same room into which we had been ushered on the day of our arrival at Canaples. I told him that on the morrow I must set out for Paris, and albeit he at first expressed a polite regret, yet when I had shown him how my honour was involved in my speedy return thither, he did not urge me to put off my departure.

"It grieves me, sir, that you must go, and I deeply regret the motive that is taking you. Yet I hope that his Eminence, in recognition of the

services you have rendered his nephew, will see fit to forget what cause for resentment he may have against you, and render you your liberty. If you will give me leave, Monsieur, I will write to his Eminence in this strain, and you shall be the bearer of my letter."

I thanked him, with a smile of deprecation, as I thought of the true cause of Mazarin's resentment, which was precisely that of the plea upon which M. de Canaples sought to obtain for me my liberation.

"And now, Monsieur," he pursued nervously, "touching Andrea and his visit here, I would say a word to you who are his friend, and may haply know something of his mind. It is over two months since he came here, and yet the—er—affair which we had hoped to bring about seems no nearer its conclusion than when first he came. Of late I have watched him and I have watched Yvonne; they are certainly good friends, yet not even the frail barrier of formality appears overcome betwixt them, and I am beginning to fear that Andrea is not only lukewarm in this matter, but is forgetful of his uncle's wishes and selfishly indifferent to Monseigneur's projects and mine, which, as he well knows, are the reason of his sojourn at my château. What think you of this, M. de Luyne?"

He shot a furtive glance at me as he spoke, and with his long, lean forefinger he combed his beard in a nervous fashion.

I gave a short laugh to cover my embarrassment at the question.

"What do I think, Monsieur?" I echoed to gain time. Then, thinking that a sententious answer would be the most fitting,—"*Ma foi!* Love is as the spark that lies latent in flint and steel: for days and weeks these two may be as close together as you please, and naught will come of it; but one fine day, a hand—the hand of chance—will strike the one against the other, and lo!—the spark is born!"

"You speak in parables, Monsieur," was his caustic comment.

"T is in parables that all religions are preached," I returned, "and love, methinks, is a great religion in this world."

"Love, sir, love!" he cried petulantly. "The word makes me sick! What has love to do with this union? Love, sir, is a pretty theme for poets, romancers, and fools. The imagination of such a sentiment—for it is a sentiment that does not live save in the imagination—may serve to draw peasants and other lowbred clods into wedlock. With such as we—with gentlemen—it has naught to do. So let that be, Monsieur. Andrea de Mancini came hither to wed my daughter."

"And I am certain, Monsieur," I answered stoutly, "that Andrea will wed your daughter."

"You speak with confidence."

"I know Andrea well. Signs that may be hidden to you are clear to me, and I have faith in my prophecy."

He looked at me, and fell a victim to my confidence of manner. The petulancy died out of his face.

"Well, well! We will hope. My Lord Cardinal is to create him Duke, and he will assume as title his wife's estate, becoming known to history as Andrea de Mancini, Duke of Canaples. Thus shall a great house be founded that will bear our name. You see the importance of it?"

"Clearly."

"And how reasonable is my anxiety?"

"Assuredly."

"And you are in sympathy with me?"

"Pardieu! Why else did I go so near to killing your son?"

"True," he mused. Then suddenly he added, "Apropos, have you heard that Eugène has become one of the leaders of these frondeur madmen?"

"Ah! Then he is quite recovered?"

"Unfortunately," he assented with a grimace, and thus our interview ended.

That day wore slowly to its close. I wandered hither and thither in the château and the grounds, hungering throughout the long hours for a word with Mademoiselle—a glimpse of her, at least.

But all day long she kept her chamber, the pretext being that she was beset by a migraine. By accident I came upon her that evening, at last, in the salon; yet my advent was the signal for her departure, and all the words she had for me were:

"Still at Canaples, Monsieur? I thought you were to have left this morning." She looked paler than her wont, and her eyes were somewhat red.

"I am remaining until to-morrow," said I awkwardly.

"Vraiment!" was all she answered, and she was gone.

Next morning the Chevalier and I breakfasted alone. Mademoiselle's migraine was worse. Geneviève was nursing, so her maid brought word—whilst Andrea had gone out an hour before and had not returned.

The Chevalier shot me an apologetic glance across the board.

"'T is a poor 'God speed' to you, M. de Luynes."

I made light of it and turned the conversation into an indifferent channel, wherein it abided until, filling himself a bumper of Anjou, the

Chevalier solemnly drank to my safe journey and good fortune in Paris.

At that moment Andrea entered by the door abutting on the terrace balcony. He was flushed, and his eyes sparkled with a joyous fever. Profuse was he in his apologies, which, howbeit, were passing vague in character, and which he brought to a close by pledging me as the Chevalier had done already.

As we rose, Geneviève appeared with the news that Yvonne was somewhat better, adding that she had come to take leave of me. Her composure surprised me gladly, for albeit in her eyes there was also a telltale light, the lids, demurely downcast as was her wont, amply screened it from the vulgar gaze.

Andrea would tell his father-in-law of the marriage later in the day; and for all I am not a chicken-hearted man, still I had no stomach to be at hand when the storm broke.

The moment having come for my departure, and Michelot awaiting me already with the horses in the courtyard, M. de Canaples left us to seek the letter which I was to carry to his Eminence. So soon as the door had closed upon him, Andrea came forward, leading his bride by the hand, and asked me to wish them happiness.

"With all my heart," I answered; "and if happiness be accorded you in a measure with the fervency of my wishes then shall you, indeed, be happy. Each of you I congratulate upon the companion in life you have chosen. Cherish him, Mademoi—Madame, for he is loyal and true—and such are rare in this world."

It is possible that I might have said more in this benign and fatherly strain—for it seemed to me that this new role I had assumed suited me wondrous well—but a shadow that drew our eyes towards the nearest window interrupted me. And what we saw there drew a cry

from Andrea, a shudder from Geneviève, and from me a gasp that was half amazement, half dismay. For, leaning upon the sill, surveying us with a sardonic, evil grin, we beheld Eugène de Canaples, the man whom I had left with a sword-thrust through his middle behind the Hôtel Vendôme two months ago. Whence was he sprung, and why came he thus to his father's house?

He started as I faced him, for doubtless St. Auban had boasted to him that he had killed me in a duel. For a moment he remained at the window, then he disappeared, and we could hear the ring of his spurred heel as he walked along the balcony towards the door.

And simultaneously came the quick, hurrying steps of the Chevalier de Canaples, as he crossed the hall, returning with the letter he had gone to fetch.

Geneviève shuddered again, and looked fearfully from one door to the other; Andrea drew a sharp breath like a man in pain, whilst I rapped out an oath to brace my nerves for the scene which we all three foresaw. Then in silence we waited, some subtle instinct warning us of the disaster that impended.

The steps on the balcony halted, and a second later those in the hall; and then, as though the thing had been rehearsed and timed so that the spectators might derive the utmost effect from it, the doors opened together, and on the opposing thresholds, with the width of the room betwixt them, stood father and son confronted.

CHAPTER XVIII. OF HOW I LEFT CANAPLES

Whilst a man might tell a dozen did those two remain motionless, the one eyeing the other. But their bearing was as widely different as their figures; Eugène's stalwart frame stood firm and erect, insolence in every line of it, reflected perchance from the smile that lurked about the corners of his thinlipped mouth.

The hat, which he had not had the grace to doff, set jauntily upon his straight black hair, the jerkin of leather which he wore, and the stout sword which hung from the plainest of belts, all served to give him the air of a ruffler, or tavern knight.

The Chevalier, on the other hand, stood as if turned to stone. From his enervated fingers the letter fluttered to the ground, and on his pale, thin face was to be read a displeasure mixed with fear.

At length, with an oath, the old man broke the silence.

"What seek you at Canaples?" he asked in a quivering voice, as he advanced into the room. "Are you so dead to shame that you dare present yourself with such effrontery? Off with your hat, sir!" he blazed, stamping his foot, and going from pale to crimson. "Off with your hat, or Mortdieu, I'll have you flung out of doors by my grooms."

This show of vehemence, as sudden as it was unexpected, drew from Eugène a meek obedience that I had not looked for. Nevertheless, the young man's lip curled as he uncovered.

"How fatherly is your greeting!" he sneered. The Chevalier's eyes

flashed a glance that lacked no venom at his son.

"What manner of greeting did you look for?" he returned hotly. "Did you expect me to set a ring upon your finger, and have the fattened calf killed in honour of your return? Sangdieu, sir! Have you come hither to show me how a father should welcome the profligate son who has dishonoured his name? Why are you here, unbidden? Answer me, sir!"

A deep flush overspread Eugène's cheeks.

"I had thought when I crossed the threshold that this was the Château de Canaples, or else that my name was Canaples—I know not which. Clearly I was mistaken, for here is a lady who has no word either of greeting or intercession for me, and who, therefore, cannot be my sister, and yonder a man whom I should never look to find in my father's house."

I took a step forward, a hot answer on my lips, when from the doorway at my back came Yvonne's sweet voice.

"Eugène! You here?"

"As you see, Sister. Though had you delayed your coming 't is probable you would no longer have found me, for your father welcomes me with oaths and threatens me with his grooms."

She cast a reproachful glance upon the Chevalier, 'neath which the anger seemed to die out of him; then she went forward with hands outstretched and a sad smile upon her lips.

"Yvonne!" The Chevalier's voice rang out sharp and sudden.

She stopped.

"I forbid you to approach that man!"

For a moment she appeared to hesitate; then, leisurely pursuing her way, she set her hands upon her brother's shoulders and embraced him.

The Chevalier swore through set teeth; Geneviève trembled, Andrea looked askance, and I laughed softly at the Chevalier's discomfiture. Eugène flung his hat and cloak into a corner and strode across the room to where his father stood.

"And now, Monsieur, since I have travelled all the way from Paris to save my house from a step that will bring it into the contempt of all France, I shall not go until you have heard me."

The Chevalier shrugged his shoulders and made as if to turn away. Yvonne's greeting of her brother appeared to have quenched the spark of spirit that for a moment had glimmered in the little man's breast.

"Monsieur," cried Eugène, "believe me that what I have to say is of the utmost consequence, and say it I will—whether before these strangers or in your private ear shall be as you elect."

The old man glanced about him like one who seeks a way of escape. At last—"If say it you must," he growled, "say it here and now. And when you have said it, go."

Eugène scowled at me, and from me to Andrea. To pay him for that scowl, I had it in my mind to stay; but, overcoming the clownish thought, I took Andrea by the arm.

"Come, Andrea," I said, "we will take a turn outside while these family matters are in discussion."

I had a shrewd idea what was the substance of Eugène's mission to Canaples—to expostulate with his father touching the proposed marriage of Yvonne to the Cardinal's nephew.

Nor was I wrong, for when, some moments later, the Chevalier recalled us from the terrace, where we were strolling—"What think you he has come hither to tell me?" he inquired as we entered. He pointed to his son as he spoke, and passion shook his slender frame as the breeze shakes a leaf. Mademoiselle and Geneviève sat hand in hand—Yvonne deadly pale, Geneviève weeping.

"What think you he has the effrontery to say? Têtedieu! it seems that he has profited little by the lesson you read him in the horse-market about meddling in matters which concern him not. He has come hither to tell me that he will not permit his sister to wed the Cardinal's nephew; that he will not have the estates of Canaples pass into the hands of a foreign upstart. He, forsooth—he! he! he!" And at each utterance of the pronoun he lunged with his forefinger in the direction of his son. "This he is not ashamed to utter before Yvonne herself!"

"You compelled me to do so," cried Eugène angrily.

"I?" ejaculated the Chevalier. "Did I compel you to come hither with your 'I will' and 'I will not'? Who are you, that you should give laws at Canaples? And he adds, sir," quoth the old knight excitedly, "that sooner than allow this marriage to take place he will kill M. de Mancini."

"I shall be happy to afford him the opportunity!" shouted Andrea, bounding forward.

Eugène looked up quickly and gave a short laugh. Thereupon followed a wild hubbub; everyone rushed forward and everyone talked; even little Geneviève—louder than all the rest.

"You shall not fight! You shall not fight!" she cried, and her voice was so laden with command that all others grew silent and all eyes were turned upon her.

"What affair is this of yours, little one?" quoth Eugène.

"T is this," she answered, panting, "that you need fear no marriage 'twixt my sister and Andrea."

In her eagerness she had cast caution to the winds of heaven. Her father and brother stared askance at her; I gave an inward groan.

"Andrea!" echoed Eugène at last. "What is this man to you that you speak thus of him?"

The girl flung herself upon her father's breast.

"Father," she sobbed, "dear father, forgive!"

The Chevalier's brow grew dark; roughly he seized her by the arms and, holding her at arm's length, scanned her face.

"What must I forgive?" he inquired in a thick voice. "What is M. de Mancini to you?"

Some sinister note in her father's voice caused the girl to grow of a sudden calm and to assume a rigidity that reminded me of her sister.

"He is my husband!" she answered. And there was a note of pride—almost of triumph—in her voice.

An awful silence followed the launching of that thunderbolt. Eugène stood with open mouth, staring now at Geneviève, now at his father. Andrea set his arm about his bride's waist, and her fair head was laid trustingly upon his shoulder. The Chevalier's eyes rolled ominously. At length he spoke in a dangerously calm voice.

"How long is it—how long have you been wed?"

"We were wed in Blois an hour ago," answered Geneviève.

Something that was like a grunt escaped the Chevalier, then his

eye fastened upon me, and his anger boiled up.

"You knew of this?" he asked, coming towards me.

"I knew of it."

"Then you lied to me yesterday."

I drew myself up, stiff as a broomstick.

"I do not understand," I answered coldly.

"Did you not give me your assurance that M. de Mancini would marry Yvonne?"

"I did not, Monsieur. I did but tell you that he would wed your daughter. And, ma foi! your daughter he has wed."

"You have fooled me, scélérat!" he blazed out. "You, who have been sheltered by—"

"Father!" Yvonne interrupted, taking his arm. "M. de Luynes has behaved no worse than have I, or any one of us, in this matter."

"No!" he cried, and pointed to Andrea. "'T is you who have wrought this infamy. Eugène," he exclaimed, turning of a sudden to his son, "you have a sword; wipe out this shame."

"Shame!" echoed Geneviève. "Oh, father, where is the shame? If it were no shame for Andrea to marry Yvonne, surely—"

"Silence!" he thundered. "Eugène—"

But Eugène answered him with a contemptuous laugh.

"You are quick enough to call upon my sword, now that things have not fallen out as you would have them. Where are your grooms now, Monsieur?"

"Insolent hound!" cried his father indignantly. Then, letting fall his arms with something that was near akin to a sob—"Is there no one left to do aught but mock me?" he groaned.

But this weakness was no more than momentary.

"Out of my house, sir!" he blazed, turning upon Andrea, and for a moment methought he would have struck him. "Out of my house—you and this wife of yours!"

"Father!" sobbed Geneviève, with hands outstretched in entreaty.

"Out of my house," he repeated, "and you also, M. de Luynes. Away with you! Go with the master you have served so well." And, turning on his heel, he strode towards the door.

"Father—dear father!" cried Geneviève, following him: he slammed the door in her face for answer.

With a moan she sank down upon her knees, her frail body shaken by convulsive sobs—Dieu! what a bridal morn was hers!

Andrea and Yvonne raised her and led her to a chair. Eugène watched them with a cynical eye, then laughed brutally, and, gathering up his hat and cloak, he moved towards the balcony door and vanished.

"Is M. de Luynes still there?" quoth Geneviève presently.

"I am here, Madame."

"You had best set out, Monsieur," she said. "We shall follow soon—very soon."

I took Andrea aside and asked him whither it was his intention to take his wife. He replied that they would go to Chambord, where they would remain for some weeks in the hope that the Chevalier might

relent sufficiently to forgive them. Thereafter it was his purpose to take his bride home to his Sicilian demesne.

Our farewells were soon spoken; yet none the less warm, for all its brevity, was my leave-taking of Andrea, and our wishes for each other's happiness were as fervent as the human heart can shape. We little thought that we were not destined to meet again for years.

Yvonne's adieu was cold and formal—so cold and formal that it seemed to rob the sunshine of its glory for me as I stepped out into the open air.

After all, what mattered it? I was a fool to have entertained a single tender thought concerning her.

CHAPTER XIX. OF MY RETURN TO PARIS

Scant cause is there for me to tarry over the details of my return to Paris. A sad enough journey was it; as sad for my poor Michelot as for myself, since he rode with one so dejected as I.

Things had gone ill, and I feared that when the Cardinal heard the story things would go worse, for Mazarin was never a tolerant man, nor one to be led by the gospel of mercy and forgiveness. For myself I foresaw the rope—possibly even the wheel; and a hundred times a day I dubbed myself a fool for obeying the voice of honour with such punctiliousness when so grim a reward awaited me. What mood was on me—me, Gaston de Luynes, whose honour had been long since besmirched and tattered until no outward semblance of honour was left?

But swift in the footsteps of that question would come the answer—Yvonne. Ay, truly enough, it was because in my heart I had dared to hold a sentiment of love for her, the purest—nay, the only pure—thing my heart had held for many a year, that I would set nothing vile to keep company with that sentiment; that until my sun should set—and already it dropped swiftly towards life's horizon—my actions should be the actions of such a man as might win Yvonne's affections.

But let that be. This idle retrospective mood can interest you but little; nor can you profit from it, unless, indeed, it be by noting how holy and cleansing to the heart of man is the love—albeit unrequited—that he bears a good woman.

As we drew near Meung—where we lay on that first night of our

journey—a light travelling chaise, going in the same direction, passed us at a gallop. As it flashed by, I caught a glimpse of Eugène de Canaples's swart face through the window. Whether the recognition was mutual I cannot say—nor does it signify.

When we reached the Hôtel de la Couronne, half an hour later, we saw that same chaise disappearing round a corner of the street, whilst through the porte-cochère the hostler was leading a pair of horses, foam-flecked and steaming with sweat.

Whither went Master Canaples at such a rate, and in a haste that caused him to travel day and night? To a goal he little looked for—or rather, which, in the madness of his headlong rush, he could not see. So I was to learn ere long.

Next day I awoke betimes, and setting my window wide to let in the fresh, clean-smelling air of that May morning I made shift to dress. Save for the cackle of the poultry which had strayed into the courtyard, and the noisy yawns and sleep-laden ejaculations of the stable-boy, who was drawing water for the horses, all was still, for it had not yet gone five o'clock.

But of a sudden a door opened somewhere, and a step rang out, accompanied by the jangle of spurs, and with it came a sharp, unpleasant voice calling for its owner's horse. There was a familiar sound in those shrill accents that caused me to thrust my head through the casement. But I was quick to withdraw it, as I recognised in the gaily dressed little fellow below my old friend Malpertuis.

I know not what impulse made me draw back so suddenly. The action was as much the child of instinct as of the lately acquired habit of concealing my face from the gaze of all who were likely to spread abroad the news that I still lived.

From behind my curtains I watched Malpertuis ride out of the yard,

saying, in answer to a parting question of the landlord, who had come upon the scene, that he would breakfast at Beaugency.

Then, as he rode down the street, he of a sudden raised his discordant voice and sang to the accompaniment of his horse's hoofs. And the burden of his song ran thus:

A frondeur wind
Got up to-day,
'Gainst Mazarin
It blows, they say.

I listened in amazement to his raven's voice.

Whither was he bound, I asked myself, and whence a haste that made him set out fasting, with an anti-cardinalist ditty on his lips, and ride two leagues to seek a breakfast in a village that did not hold an inn where a dog might be housed in comfort?

Like Eugène de Canaples, he also travelled towards a goal that he little dreamt of. And so albeit the one went south and the other north, these two men were, between them, drawing together the thread of this narrative of mine, as anon you shall learn.

We reached Paris at dusk three days later, and we went straight to my old lodging in the Rue St. Antoine.

Coupri started and gasped upon beholding me, and not until I had cursed him for a fool in a voice that was passing human would he believe that I was no ghost. He too had heard the rumour of my death.

I dispatched Michelot to the Palais Royal, where—without permitting his motive to transpire—he was to ascertain for me whether M. de Montrésor was in Paris, whether he still dwelt at the Hôtel des Cloches, and at what hour he could be found there.

Whilst he was away I went up to my room, and there I found a letter

which Coupri informed me had been left by a lackey a month ago—before the report that I had been killed had reached Paris—and since I am forgotten. It was a delicate note, to which still hung the ghost of a perfume; there were no arms on the seal, but the writing I took to be that of my aunt, the Duchesse de Chevreuse, and vaguely marvelling what motive she could have had for communicating with me, I cut the silk.

It was, indeed, from the Duchesse, but it contained no more than a request that I should visit her at her hôtel on the day following upon that on which she had written, adding that she had pleasing news for me.

I thrust the note into my pocket with a sigh. Of what could it avail me now to present myself at her hôtel? Her invitation was for a month ago. Since then she would likely enough have heard the rumour that had been current, and would have ceased to expect me.

I caught myself wondering whether the news might have caused her a pang of regret, and somehow methought this possible. For of all my relatives, Madame de Chevreuse was the only one—and she was but my aunt by marriage—who of late years had shown me any kindness, or even recognition. I marvelled what her pleasing news could be, and I concluded that probably she had heard of my difficulties, and wished once again to help me out of them. Well, my purse was hollow, indeed, at the moment, but I need not trouble her, since I was going somewhere where purses are not needed—on a journey to which no expenses are attached.

In my heart, nevertheless, I blessed the gracious lady, who, for all the lies that the world may have told of her, was the kindest woman I had known, and the best—save one other.

I was still musing when Michelot returned with the information that M. de Montrésor was to be found at the Hôtel des Cloches, whither he

had gone to sup a few minutes before. Straightway I set out, bidding him attend me, and, muffled in my cloak, I proceeded at a brisk pace to the Rue des Fosses St. Germain, where the lieutenant's auberge was situated.

I left Michelot in the common-room, and, preceded by the plump little woman who owned the house, I ascended to Montrésor's chamber. I found the young soldier at table, and, fortunately, alone. He rose as I entered, and as the hostess, retreating, closed the door, I doffed my hat, and letting fall my cloak revealed myself. His lips parted, and I heard the hiss of an indrawn breath as his astonished eyes fell upon my countenance. My laugh dispelled his doubts that I might be other than flesh and blood—yet not his doubts touching my identity. He caught up a taper and, coming forward, he cast the light on my face for a moment, then setting the candle back upon the table, he vented his surprise in an oath or two, which was natural enough in one of his calling.

"'T is clear, Lieutenant," quoth I, as I detached my sword from the baldrick, "that you believed me dead. Fate willed, however, that I should be restored to life, and so soon as I had recovered sufficient strength to undertake the journey to Paris, I set out. I arrived an hour ago, and here I am, to redeem my word of honour, and surrender the sword and liberty which you but lent me."

I placed my rapier on the table and waited for him to speak. Instead, however, he continued to stare at me for some moments, and when at last he did break the silence, it was to burst into a laugh that poured from his throat in rich, mellow peals, as he lay back in his chair.

My wrath arose. Had I travelled from Blois, and done what I deemed the most honourable deed of my life, to be laughed at for my pains by a foppish young jackanapes of his Eminence's guards? Something of my displeasure must he have seen reflected on my

face, for of a sudden he checked his mirth.

"Forgive me, M. de Luynes," he gasped. "Pardieu, 't is no matter for laughter, and albeit I laughed with more zest than courtesy, I give you my word that my admiration for you vastly exceeds my amusement. M. de Luynes," he added, rising and holding out his hand to me, "there are liars in Paris who give you an evil name—men who laughed at me when they heard that I had given you leave to go on parole to St. Sulpice des Reaux that night, trusting to your word of honour that you would return if you lived. His Eminence dubbed me a fool and went near to dismissing me from his service, and yet I have now the proof that my confidence was not misplaced, since even though you were believed to be dead, you did not hesitate to bring me your sword."

"Monsieur, spare me!" I exclaimed, for in truth his compliments waxed as irksome as had been his whilom merriment.

He continued, however, his laudatory address, and when it was at last ended, and he paused exhausted alike in breath and brain, it was to take up my sword and return it to me with my parole, pronouncing me a free man, and advising me to let men continue to think me dead, and to withdraw from France. He cut short my half-protesting thanks, and calling the hostess bade her set another cover, whilst me he invited to share his supper. And as we ate he again urged upon me the advice that I should go abroad.

"For by Heaven," he added, "Mazarin has been as a raging beast since the news was brought him yesterday of his nephew's marriage."

"How?" I cried. "He has heard already?"

"He has, indeed; and should he learn that your flesh still walks the earth, methinks it would go worse with you than it went even with Eugène de Canaples."

In answer to the questions with which I excitedly plied him, I drew from him the story of how Eugène had arrived the day before in Paris, and gone straight to the Palais Royal. M. de Montrésor had been on guard in the ante-chamber, and in virtue of an excitement noticeable in Canaples's bearing, coupled with the ill-odour wherein already he was held by Mazarin, the lieutenant's presence had been commanded in the Cardinal's closet during the interview—for his Eminence was never like to acquire fame for valour.

In his exultation at what had chanced, and at the manner in which Mazarin's Château en Espagne had been dispelled, Canaples used little caution, or even discretion, in what he said. In fact, from what Montrésor told me, I gathered that the fool's eagerness to be the first to bear the tidings to Mazarin sprang from a rash desire to gloat over the Cardinal's discomfiture. He had told his story insolently—almost derisively—and Mazarin's fury, driven beyond bounds already by what he had heard, became a very tempest of passion 'neath the lash of Canaples's impertinences. And, naturally enough, that tempest had burst upon the only head available—Eugène de Canaples's—and the Cardinal had answered his jibes with interest by calling upon Montrésor to arrest the fellow and bear him to the Bastille.

When the astonished and sobered Canaples had indignantly asked upon what charge he was being robbed of his liberty, the Cardinal had laughed at him, and answered with his never-failing axiom that "He who sings, pays."

"You sang lustily enough just now," his Eminence had added, "and you shall pay by lodging awhile in an oubliette of the Bastille, where you may lift up your voice to sing the *De profundis*."

"Was my name not mentioned?" I anxiously inquired when Montrésor had finished.

"Not once. You may depend that I should have remarked it. After I

had taken Canaples away, the Cardinal, I am told, sat down, and, still trembling with rage, wrote a letter which he straightway dispatched to the Chevalier Armand de Canaples, at Blois.

"No doubt," I mused, "he attributes much blame to me for what has come to pass."

"Not a doubt of it. This morning he said to me that it was a pity your wings had not been clipped before you left Paris, and that his misplaced clemency had helped to bring him great misfortunes. You see, therefore, M. de Luynes, that your sojourn in France will be attended with great peril. I advise you to try Spain; 't is a martial country where a man of the sword may find honourable and even profitable employment."

His counsel I deemed sound. But how follow it? Then of a sudden I bethought me of Madame de Chevreuse's friendly letter. Doubtless she would assist me once again, and in such an extremity as this. And with the conception of the thought came the resolution to visit her on the morrow. That formed, I gave myself up to the task of drinking M. de Montrésor under the table with an abandon which had not been mine for months. In each goblet that I drained, methought I saw Yvonne's sweet face floating on the surface of the red Armagnac; it looked now sad, now reproachful, still I drank on, and in each cup I pledged her.

CHAPTER XX. OF HOW THE CHEVALIER DE CANAPLES BECAME A FRONDEUR

It wanted an hour or so to noon next day as I drove across the Pont Neuf in a closed carriage, and was borne down the Rue St. Dominique to the portals of that splendid palace, facing the Jacobins, which bears the title of the "Hôtel de Luynes," and over the portals of which is carved the escutcheon of our house.

Michelot—in obedience to the orders I had given him—got down only to be informed that Madame la Duchesse was in the country. The lackey who was summoned did not know where the lady might be found, nor when she might return to Paris. And so I was compelled to drive back almost despairingly to the Rue St. Antoine, and there lie concealed, nursing my impatience, until my aunt should return.

Daily I sent Michelot to the Hôtel de Luynes to make the same inquiry, and to return daily with the same dispiriting reply—that there was no news of Madame la Duchesse.

In this fashion some three weeks wore themselves out, during which period I lay in my concealment, a prey to weariness unutterable. I might not venture forth save at night, unless I wore a mask; and as masks were no longer to be worn without attracting notice—as during the late king's reign—I dared not indulge the practice.

Certainly my ennui was greatly relieved by the visits of Montrésor, which grew very frequent, the lad appearing to have conceived a kindness for me; and during those three weeks our fellowship at

nights over a bottle or two engendered naturally enough a friendship and an intimacy between us.

I had written to Andrea on the morrow of my return to Paris, to tell him how kindly Montrésor had dealt with me, and some ten days later the following letter was brought me by the lieutenant—to whom, for safety, it had been forwarded:

"MY VERY DEAR GASTON:

I have no words wherewith to express my joy at the good news you send me, which terminates the anxiety that has been mine since you left us on the disastrous morning of our nuptials.

The uncertainty touching your fate, the fear that the worst might have befallen you, and the realisation that I—for whom you have done so much—might do naught for you in your hour of need, has been the one cloud to mar the sunshine of my own bliss.

That cloud your letter has dispelled, and the knowledge of your safety renders my happiness complete.

The Chevalier maintains his unforgiving mood, as no doubt doth also my Lord Cardinal. But what to me are the frowns of either, so that my lady smile? My little Geneviève is yet somewhat vexed in spirit at all this, but I am teaching her to have faith in Time, the patron saint of all lovers who follow not the course their parents set them. And so that time may be allowed to intercede and appeal to the parent heart with the potent prayer of a daughter's absence, I shall take my lady from Chambord some three days hence. We shall travel by easy stages to Marseilles, and there take ship for Palermo.

And so, dear, trusty friend, until we meet again, fare you well and may God hold you safe from the wickedness of man, devil, and my Lord Cardinal.

For all that you have done for me, no words of mine can thank you, but should you determine to quit this France of yours, and journey to Palermo after me, you shall never want a roof to shelter you or a board to sit at, so long as roof and board are owned by him who signs himself, in love at least, your brother—

"ANDREA DE MANCINI."

With a sigh I set the letter down. A sigh of love and gratitude it was; a sigh also of regret for the bright, happy boy who had been the source alike of my recent joys and sorrows, and whom methought I was not likely to see again for many a day, since the peaceful vegetation of his Sicilian home held little attraction for me, a man of action.

It was on the evening of the last Sunday in May, whilst the bell of the Jesuits, close by, was tinkling out its summons to vespers, that Montrésor burst suddenly into my room with the request that I should get my hat and cloak and go with him to pay a visit. In reply to my questions—"Monseigneur's letter to Armand de Canaples," he said, "has borne fruit already. Come with me and you shall learn how."

He led me past the Bastille and up the Rue des Tournelles to the door of an unpretentious house, upon which he knocked. We were admitted by an old woman to whom Montrésor appeared to be known, for, after exchanging a word or two with her, he himself led the way upstairs and opened the door of a room for me.

By the melancholy light of a single taper burning upon the table I beheld a fair-sized room containing a curtained bed.

My companion took up the candle, and stepping to the bedside, he drew apart the curtains.

Lying there I beheld a man whose countenance, despite its pallor and the bloody bandages about his brow, I recognised for that of the

little spitfire Malpertuis.

As the light fell upon his face, the little fellow opened his eyes, and upon beholding me at his side he made a sudden movement which wrung from him a cry of pain.

"Lie still, Monsieur," said Montrésor quietly.

But for all the lieutenant's remonstrances, he struggled up into a sitting posture, requesting Montrésor to set the pillows at his back.

"Thank God you are here, M. de Luynes!" he said. "I learnt at Canaples that you were not dead."

"You have been to Canaples?"

"I was a guest of the Chevalier for twelve days. I arrived there on the day after your departure."

"You!" I ejaculated. "Pray what took you to Canaples?"

"What took me there?" he echoed, turning his feverish eyes upon me, almost with fierceness. "The same motive that led me to join hands with that ruffian St. Auban, when he spoke of waging war against Mancini; the same motive that led me to break with him when I saw through his plans, and when the abduction of Mademoiselle was on foot; the same motive that made me come to you and tell you of the proposed abduction so that you might interfere if you had the power, or cause others to do so if you had not."

I lay back in my chair and stared at him. Was this, then, another suitor of Yvonne de Canaples, and were all men mad with love of her?

Presently he continued:

"When I heard that St. Auban was in Paris, having apparently abandoned all hope in connection with Mademoiselle, I obtained a

letter from M. de la Rochefoucauld—who is an intimate friend of mine—and armed with this I set out. As luck would have it I got embroiled in the streets of Blois with a couple of cardinalist gentlemen, who chose to be offended by lampoon of the Fronde that I was humming. I am not a patient man, and I am even indiscreet in moments of choler. I ended by crying, 'Down with Mazarin and all his creatures,' and I would of a certainty have had my throat slit, had not a slight and elegant gentleman interposed, and, exercising a wonderful influence over my assailants, extricated me from my predicament. This gentleman was the Chevalier de Canaples. He was strangely enough in a mood to be pleased by an anti-cardinalist ditty, for his rage against Andrea de Mancini—which he took no pains to conceal—had extended already to the Cardinal, and from morn till night he did little else but revile the whole Italian brood—as he chose to dub the Cardinal's family."

I recognised the old knight's weak, vacillating character in this, a creature of moods that, like the vane on a steeple, turns this way or that, as the wind blows.

"I crave your patience, M. de Luynes," he continued, "and beg of you to hear my story so that you may determine whether you will save the Canaples from the danger that threatens them. I only ask that you dispatch a reliable messenger to Blois. But hear me out first. In virtue as much of La Rochefoucauld's letters as of the sentiments which the Chevalier heard me express, I became the honoured guest at his château. Three days after my arrival I sustained a shock by the unexpected appearance at Canaples of St. Auban. The Chevalier, however, refused him admittance, and, baffled, the Marquis was forced to withdraw. But he went no farther than Blois, where he hired himself a room at the Lys de France. The Chevalier hated him as a mad dog hates water—almost as much as he hated you. He spoke often of you, and always bitterly."

Before I knew what I had said—

"And Mademoiselle?" I burst out. "Did she ever mention my name?"

Malpertuis looked up quickly at the question, and a wan smile flickered round his lips.

"Once she spoke of you to me—pityingly, as one might speak of a dead man whose life had not been good."

"Yes, yes," I broke in. "It matters little. Your story, M. Malpertuis."

"After I had been at the château ten days, we learnt that Eugène de Canaples had been sent to the Bastille. The news came in a letter penned by his Eminence himself—a bitter, viperish letter, with a covert threat in every line. The Chevalier's anger went white hot as he read the disappointed Cardinal's epistle. His Eminence accused Eugène of being a frondeur; M. de Canaples, whose politics had grown sadly rusted in the country, asked me the meaning of the word. I explained to him the petty squabbles between Court and Parliament, in consequence of the extortionate imposts and of Mazarin's avariciousness. I avowed myself a partisan of the Fronde, and within three days the Chevalier—who but a little time before had sought an alliance with the Cardinal's family—had become as rabid a frondeur as M. de Gondi, as fierce an anticardinalist as M. de Beaufort.

"I humoured him in his new madness, with the result that ere long from being a frondeur in heart, he thirsted to become a frondeur in deeds, and he ended by begging me to bear a letter from him to the Coadjutor of Paris, wherein he offered to place at M. de Gondi's disposal, towards the expenses of the civil war which he believed to be imminent,—as, indeed, it is,—the sum of sixty thousand livres.

"Now albeit I had gone to Canaples for purposes of my own, and not as an agent of M. le Coadjuteur's, still for many reasons I saw fit to

undertake the Chevalier's commission. And so, bearing the letter in question, which was hot and unguarded, and charged with endless treasonable matter, I set out four days later for Paris, arriving here yesterday.

"I little knew that I had been followed by St. Auban. His suspicions must have been awakened, I know not how, and clearly they were confirmed when I stopped before the Coadjutor's house last night. I was about to mount the steps, when of a sudden I was seized from behind by half a dozen hands and dragged into a side street. I got free for a moment and attempted to defend myself, but besides St. Auban there were two others. They broke my sword and attempted to break my skull, in which they went perilously near succeeding, as you see. Albeit half-swooning, I had yet sufficient consciousness left to realise that my pockets were being emptied, and that at last they had torn open my doublet and withdrawn the treasonable letter from the breast of it.

"I was left bleeding in the kennel, and there I lay for nigh upon an hour until a passer-by succoured me and carried out my request to be brought hither and put to bed."

He ceased, and for some moments there was silence, broken only by the wounded man's laboured breathing, which argued that his narrative had left him fatigued. At last I sprang up.

"The Chevalier de Canaples must be warned," I exclaimed.

"'T is an ugly business," muttered Montrésor. "I'll wager a hundred that Mazarin will hang the Chevalier if he catches him just now."

"He would not dare!" cried Malpertuis.

"Not dare?" echoed the lieutenant. "The man who imprisoned the Princes of Condé and Conti, and the Duke of Beaufort, not dare hang a provincial knight with never a friend at Court! Pah, Monsieur, you do

not know Cardinal Mazarin."

I realised to the full how likely Montrésor's prophecy was to be fulfilled, and before I left Malpertuis I assured him that he had not poured his story into the ears of an indifferent listener, and that I would straightway find means of communicating with Canaples.

CHAPTER XXI. OF THE BARGAIN THAT ST. AUBAN DROVE WITH MY LORD CARDINAL

From the wounded man's bedside I wended my steps back to the Rue St. Antoine, resolved to start for Blois that very night; and beside me walked Montrésor, with bent head, like a man deep in thought.

At my door I paused to take my leave of the lieutenant, for I was in haste to have my preparations made, and to be gone. But Montrésor appeared not minded to be dismissed thus easily.

"What plan have you formed?" he asked.

"The only plan there is to form—to set out for Canaples at once."

"Hum!" he grunted, and again was silent. Then, suddenly throwing back his head, "Par la mort Dieu!" he cried, "I care not what comes of it; I'll tell you what I know. Lead the way to your chamber, M. de Luynes, and delay your departure until you have heard me."

Surprised as much by his words as by the tone in which he uttered them, which was that of a man who is angry with himself, I passively did as I was bidden.

Once within my little ante-chamber, he turned the key with his own hands, and pointing to the door of my bedroom—"In there, Monsieur," quoth he, "we shall be safe from listeners."

Deeper grew my astonishment at all this mystery, as we passed into the room beyond.

"Now, M. de Luynes," he cried, flinging down his hat, "for no apparent reason I am about to commit treason; I am about to betray the hand that pays me."

"If no reason exists, why do so evil a deed?" I inquired calmly. "I have learnt during our association to wish you well, Montrésor; if by telling me that which your tongue burns to tell, you shall have cause for shame, the door is yonder. Go before harm is done, and leave me alone to fight my battle out."

He stood up, and for a moment he seemed to waver, then dismissing his doubts with an abrupt gesture, he sat down again.

"There is no wrong in what I do. Right is with you, M. de Luynes, and if I break faith with the might I serve, it is because that might is an unjust one; I do but betray the false to the true, and there can be little shame in such an act. Moreover, I have a reason—but let that be."

He was silent for a moment, then he resumed:

"Most of that which you have learnt from Malpertuis to-night, I myself could have told you. Yes; St. Auban has carried Canaples's letter to the Cardinal already. I heard from his lips to-day—for I was present at the interview—how the document had been wrested from Malpertuis. For your sake, so that you might learn all he knew, I sought the fellow out, and having found him in the Rue des Tournelles, I took you thither."

In a very fever of excitement I listened.

"To take up the thread of the story where Malpertuis left off, let me tell you that St. Auban sought an audience with Mazarin this morning, and by virtue of a note which he desired an usher to deliver to his

Eminence, he was admitted, the first of all the clients that for hours had thronged the ante-room. As in the instance of the audience to Eugène de Canaples, so upon this occasion did it chance that the Cardinal's fears touching St. Auban's purpose had been roused, for he bade me stand behind the curtains in his cabinet.

"The Marquis spoke bluntly enough, and with rude candour he stated that since Mazarin had failed to bring the Canaples estates into his family by marriage, he came to set before his Eminence a proof so utter of Canaples's treason that it would enable him to snatch the estates by confiscation. The Cardinal may have been staggered by St. Auban's bluntness, but his avaricious instincts led him to stifle his feelings and bid the Marquis to set this proof before him. But St. Auban had a bargain to drive—a preposterous one methought. He demanded that in return for his delivering into the hands of Mazarin the person of Armand de Canaples together with an incontestable proof that the Chevalier was in league with the frondeurs, and had offered to place a large sum of money at their disposal, he was to receive as recompense the demesne of Canaples on the outskirts of Blois, together with one third of the confiscated estates. At first Mazarin gasped at his audacity, then laughed at him, whereupon St. Auban politely craved his Eminence's permission to withdraw. This the Cardinal, however, refused him, and bidding him remain, he sought to bargain with him. But the Marquis replied that he was unversed in the ways of trade and barter, and that he had no mind to enter into them. From bargaining the Cardinal passed on to threatening and from threatening to whining, and so on until the end—St. Auban preserving a firm demeanour—the comedy was played out and Mazarin fell in with his proposal and his terms.

"Mille diables!" I cried. "And has St. Auban set out?"

"He starts to-morrow, and I go with him. When finally the Cardinal had consented, the Marquis demanded and obtained from him a

promise in writing, signed and sealed by Mazarin, that he should receive a third of the Canaples estates and the demesne on the outskirts of Blois, in exchange for the body of Armand de Canaples, dead or alive, and a proof of treason sufficient to warrant his arrest and the confiscation of his estates. Next, seeing in what regard the Seigneur is held by the people of Blois, and fearing that his arrest might be opposed by many of his adherents, the Marquis has demanded a troop of twenty men. This Mazarin has also granted him, entrusting the command of the troop to me, under St. Auban. Further, the Marquis has stipulated that the greatest secrecy is to be observed, and has expressed his purpose of going upon this enterprise disguised and masked, for—as he rightly opines—when months hence he enters into possession of the demesne of Canaples in the character of purchaser, did the Blaisois recognise in him the man who sold the Chevalier, his life would stand in hourly peril."

I heard him through patiently enough; yet when he stopped, my pent-up feelings burst all bonds, and I resolved there and then to go in quest of that Judas, St. Auban, and make an end of his plotting, for all time. But Montrésor restrained me, showing me how futile such a course must prove, and how I risked losing all chance of aiding those at Canaples.

He was right. First I must warn the Chevalier—afterwards I would deal with St. Auban.

Someone knocked at that moment, and with the entrance of Michelot, my talk with Montrésor came perforce to an end. For Michelot brought me the news that for days I had been awaiting; Madame de Chevreuse had returned to Paris at last.

But for Montrésor's remonstrances it is likely that I should have set out forthwith to wait upon her. I permitted myself, however, to be persuaded that the lateness of the hour would render my visit unwelcome, and so I determined in the end—albeit grudgingly—to put

off my departure for Blois until the morrow.

Noon had but struck from Nôtre Dame, next day, as I mounted the steps of the Hôtel de Luynes. My swagger, and that brave suit of pearl grey velvet with its silver lace, bore me unchallenged past the gorgeous suisse, who stood, majestic, in the doorway.

But, for the first mincing lackey I chanced upon, more was needed to gain me an audience. And so, as I did not choose to speak my name, I drew a ring from my finger and bade him bear it to the Duchesse.

He obeyed me in this, and presently returning, he bowed low and begged of me to follow him, for, as I had thought, albeit Madame de Chevreuse might not know to whom that ring belonged, yet the arms of Luynes carved upon the stone had sufficed to ensure an interview.

I was ushered into a pretty boudoir, hung in blue and gold, which overlooked the garden, and wherein, reclining upon a couch, with a book of Bois Robert's verses in her white and slender hand, I found my beautiful aunt.

Of this famous lady, who was the cherished friend and more than sister of Anne of Austria, much has been written; much that is good, and more—far more—that is ill, for those who have a queen for friend shall never lack for enemies. But those who have praised and those who have censured have at least been at one touching her marvellous beauty. At the time whereof I write it is not possible that she could be less than forty-six, and yet her figure was slender and shapely and still endowed with the grace of girlhood; her face delicate of tint, and little marked by time—or even by the sufferings to which, in the late king's reign, Cardinal de Richelieu had subjected her; her eyes were blue and peaceful as a summer sky; her hair was the colour of ripe corn. He would be a hardy guesser who set her age at so much as thirty.

My appearance she greeted by letting fall her book, and lifting up her hands—the loveliest in France—she uttered a little cry of surprise.

"Is it really you, Gaston?" she asked.

Albeit it was growing wearisome to be thus greeted by all to whom I showed myself, yet I studied courtesy in my reply, and then, 'neath the suasion of her kindness, I related all that had befallen me since first I had journeyed to Blois, in Andrea de Mancini's company, withholding, however, all allusions to my feelings towards Yvonne. Why betray them when they were doomed to be stifled in the breast that begat them? But Madame de Chevreuse had not been born a woman and lived six and forty years to no purpose.

"And this maid with as many suitors as Penelope, is she very beautiful?" she inquired slyly.

"France does not hold her equal," I answered, falling like a simpleton into the trap she had set me.

"This to me?" quoth she archly. "Fi donc, Gaston! Your evil ways have taught you as little gallantry as dissimulation." And her merry ripple of laughter showed me how in six words I had betrayed that which I had been at such pains to hide.

But before I could, by protestations, plunge deeper than I stood already, the Duchesse turned the conversation adroitly to the matter of that letter of hers, wherein she had bidden me wait upon her.

A cousin of mine—one Marion de Luynes, who, like myself, had, through the evil of his ways, become an outcast from his family—was lately dead. Unlike me, however, he was no adventurous soldier of fortune, but a man of peace, with an estate in Provence that had a rent-roll of five thousand livres a year. On his death-bed he had cast about him for an heir, unwilling that his estate should swell the fortunes of the family that in life had disowned him. Into his ear some kindly

angel had whispered my name, and the memory that I shared with him the frowns of our house, and that my plight must be passing pitiful, had set up a bond of sympathy between us, which had led him to will his lands to me. Of Madame de Chevreuse—who clearly was the patron saint of those of her first husband's nephews who chanced to tread ungodly ways—my cousin Marion had besought that she should see to the fulfilment of his last wishes.

My brain reeled beneath the first shock of that unlooked-for news. Already I saw myself transformed from a needy adventurer into a gentleman of fortune, and methought my road to Yvonne lay open, all obstacles removed. But swiftly there followed the thought of my own position, and truly it seemed that a cruel irony lay in the manner wherein things had fallen out, since did I declare myself to be alive and claim the Provence estates, the Cardinal's claws would be quick to seize me.

Thus much I told Madame de Chevreuse, but her answer cheered me, and said much for my late cousin's prudence.

"Nay," she cried. "Marion was ever shrewd. Knowing that men who live by the sword, as you have lived, are often wont to die by the sword,—and that suddenly at times,—he has made provision that in the event of your being dead his estates shall come to me, who have been the most indulgent of his relatives. This, my dear Gaston, has already taken place, for we believed you dead; and therein fortune has been kind to you, for now, while receiving the revenues of your lands—which the world will look upon as mine—I shall contrive that they reach you wherever you may be, until such a time as you may elect to come to life again."

Now but for the respect in which I held her, I could have taken the pretty Duchesse in my arms and kissed her.

Restraining myself, however, I contented myself by kissing her

hand, and told her of the journey I was going, then craved another boon of her. No matter what the issue of that journey, and whether I went alone or accompanied, I was determined to quit France and repair to Spain. There I would abide until the Parliament, the Court, or the knife of some chance assassin, or even Nature herself should strip Mazarin of his power.

Now, at the Court of Spain it was well known that my aunt's influence was vast, and so, the boon I craved was that she should aid me to a position in the Spanish service that would allow me during my exile to find occupation and perchance renown. To this my aunt most graciously acceded, and when at length I took my leave—with such gratitude in my heart that what words I could think of seemed but clumsily to express it—I bore in the breast of my doublet a letter to Don Juan de Cordova—a noble of great prominence at the Spanish Court—and in the pocket of my haut-de-chausses a rouleau of two hundred gold pistoles, as welcome as they were heavy.

CHAPTER XXII. OF MY SECOND JOURNEY TO CANAPLES

An hour after I had quitted the Hôtel de Luynes, Michelot and I left Paris by the barrier St. Michel and took the Orleans road. How different it looked in the bright June sunshine, to the picture which it had presented to our eyes on that February evening, four months ago, when last we had set out upon that same journey!

Not only in nature had a change been wrought, but in my very self. My journey then had been aimless, and I had scarcely known whither I was bound nor had I fostered any great concern thereon. Now I rode in hot haste with a determined purpose, a man of altered fortunes and altered character.

Into Choisy we clattered at a brisk pace, but at the sight of the inn of the Connétable such memories surged up that I was forced to draw rein and call for a cup of Anjou, which I drank in the saddle. Thereafter we rode without interruption through Longjumeau, Arpajon, and Etrechy, and so well did we use our horses that as night fell we reached Étampes.

From inquiries that Michelot had made on the road, we learned that no troop such as that which rode with St. Auban had lately passed that way, so that 't was clear we were in front of them.

But scarce had we finished supper in the little room which I had hired at the Gros Paon, when, from below, a stamping of hoofs, the jangle of arms, and the shouts of many men told me that we were

overtaken.

Clearly I did not burn with a desire to linger, but rather it seemed to me that although night had closed in, black and moonless, we must set out again, and push on to Monnerville, albeit our beasts were worn and the distance a good three leagues.

With due precaution we effected our departure, and thereafter had a spur been needed to speed us on our way that spur we had in the knowledge that St. Auban came close upon our heels. At Monnerville we slept, and next morning we were early afoot; by four o'clock in the afternoon we had reached Orleans, whence—with fresh horses—we pursued our journey as far as Meung, where we lay that night.

There we were joined by a sturdy rascal whom Michelot enlisted into my service, seeing that not only did my means allow, but the enterprise upon which I went might perchance demand another body servant. This recruit was a swart, powerfully built man of about my own age; trusty, and a lover of hard knocks, as Michelot—who had long counted him among his friends—assured me. He owned the euphonious name of Abdon.

I spent twenty pistoles in suitable raiment and a horse for him, and as we left Meung next day the knave cut a brave enough figure that added not a little to my importance to have at my heels.

This, however, so retarded our departure, that night had fallen by the time we reached Blois. Still our journey had been a passing swift one. We had left Paris on a Monday, the fourth of June—I have good cause to remember, since on that day I entered both upon my thirty-second year and my altered fortunes; on the evening of Wednesday we reached Blois, having covered a distance of forty-three leagues in less than three days.

Bidding Michelot carry my valise to the hostelry of the Vigne d'Or,

and there await my coming, I called to Abdon to attend me, and rode on, jaded and travel-stained though I was, to Canaples, realising fully that there was no time to lose.

Old Guilbert, who came in answer to my knock at the door of the château, looked askance when he beheld me, and when I bade him carry my compliments to the Chevalier, with the message that I desired immediate speech of him on a matter of the gravest moment, he shook his grey head and protested that it would be futile to obey me. Yet, in the end, when I had insisted, he went upon my errand, but only to return with a disturbed countenance, to tell me that the Chevalier refused to see me.

"But I must speak to him, Guilbert," I exclaimed, setting foot upon the top step. "I have travelled expressly from Paris."

The man stood firm and again shook his head.

"I beseech you not to insist, Monsieur. M. le Chevalier has sworn to dismiss me if I permit you to set foot within the château."

"Mille diables! This is madness! I seek to serve him," I cried, my temper rising fast. "At least, Guilbert, will you tell Mademoiselle that I am here, and that I—"

"I may carry no more messages for you, Monsieur," he broke in. "Listen! There is M. le Chevalier."

In reality I could hear the old knight's voice, loud and shrill with anger, and a moment later Louis, his intendant, came across the hall.

"Guilbert," he commanded harshly, "close the door. The night air is keen."

My cheeks aflame with anger, I still made one last attempt to gain an audience.

"Master Louis," I exclaimed, "will you do me the favour to tell M. de Canaples—"

"You are wasting time, Monsieur," he interrupted. "M. de Canaples will not see you. He bids you close the door, Guilbert."

"Pardieu! he shall see me!"

"The door, Guilbert!"

I took a step forward, but before I could gain the threshold, the door was slammed in my face, and as I stood there, quivering with anger and disappointment, I heard the bolts being shot within.

I turned with an oath.

"Come, Abdon," I growled, as I climbed once more into the saddle, "let us leave the fool to the fate he has chosen."

CHAPTER XXIII. OF HOW ST. AUBAN CAME TO BLOIS

In silence we rode back to Blois. Not that I lacked matter for conversation. Anger and chagrin at the thought that I had come upon this journey to earn naught but an insult and to have a door slammed in my face made my gorge rise until it went near to choking me. I burned to revile Canaples aloud, but Abdon's was not the ear into which I might pour the hot words that welled up to my lips.

Yet if silent, the curses that I heaped upon the Chevalier's crassness were none the less fervent, and to myself I thought with grim relish of how soon and how dearly he would pay for the affront he had put upon me.

That satisfaction, however, endured not long; for presently I bethought me of how heavily the punishment would fall upon Yvonne—and yet, of how she would be left to the mercy of St. Auban, whose warrant from Mazarin would invest with almost any and every power at Canaples.

I ground my teeth at the sudden thought, and for a moment I was on the point of going back and forcing my way into the château at the sword point if necessary, to warn and save the Chevalier in spite of himself and unthanked.

It was not in such a fashion that I had thought to see my mission to Canaples accomplished; I had dreamt of gratitude, and gratitude unbars the door to much. Nevertheless, whether or not I earned it, I must return, and succeed where for want of insistence I had failed awhile ago.

Of a certainty I should have acted thus, but that at the very moment upon which I formed the resolution Abdou drew my attention to a dark shadow by the roadside not twenty paces in front of us. This proved to be the motionless figure of a horseman.

As soon as I was assured of it, I reined in my horse, and taking a pistol from the holster, I levelled it at the shadow, accompanying the act by a sonorous—

"Who goes there?"

The shadow stirred, and Michelot's voice answered me:

"'T is I, Monsieur. They have arrived. I came to warn you."

"Who has arrived?" I shouted.

"The soldiers. They are lodged at the Lys de France."

An oath was the only comment I made as I turned the news over in my mind. I must return to Canaples.

Then another thought occurred to me. The Chevalier was capable of going to extremes to keep me from entering his house; he might for instance greet me with a blunderbuss. It was not the fear of that that deterred me, but the fear that did a charge of lead get mixed with my poor brains before I had said what I went to say, matters would be no better, and there would be one poor knave the less to adorn the world.

"What shall we do, Michelot?" I groaned, appealing in my despair to my henchman.

"Might it not be well to seek speech with M. de Montrésor?" quoth he.

I shrugged my shoulders. Nevertheless, after a moment's deliberation I determined to make the attempt; if I succeeded

something might come of it.

And so I pushed on to Blois with my knaves close at my heels.

Up the Rue Vieille we proceeded with caution, for the hostelry of the Vigne d'Or, where Michelot had hired me a room, fortunately overlooking the street, fronted the Lys de France, where St. Auban and his men were housed.

I gained that room of mine without mishap, and my first action was to deal summarily with a fat and well-roasted capon which the landlord set before me—for an empty stomach is a poor comrade in a desperate situation. That meal, washed down with the best part of a bottle of red Anjou, did much to restore me alike in body and in mind.

From my open window I gazed across the street at the Lys de France. The door of the common-room, opening upon the street, was set wide, and across the threshold came a flood of light in which there flitted the black figures of maybe a dozen amazed rustics, drawn thither for all the world as bats are drawn to a glare.

And there they hovered with open mouths and stupid eyes, hearkening to the din of voices that floated out on the tranquil air, the snatches of ribald songs, the raucous bursts of laughter, the clink of glasses, the clank of steel, the rattle of dice, and the strange soldier oaths that fell with every throw, and which to them must have sounded almost as words of some foreign tongue.

Whilst I stood by my window, the landlord entered my room, and coming up to me—

"Thank Heaven they are not housed at the Vigne d'Or," he said. "It will take Maître Bernard a week to rid his house of the stench of leather. They are part of a stray company that is on its way to fight the Spaniards," he informed me. "But methinks they will be forced to spend two or three days at Blois; their horses are sadly jaded and will

need that rest before they can take the road again, thanks to the pace at which their boy of an officer must have led them. There is a gentleman with them who wears a mask. 'T is whispered that he is a prince of the blood who has made a vow not to uncover his face until this war be ended, in expiation of some sin committed in mad Paris."

I heard him in silence, and when he had done I thanked him for his information. So! This was the story that the crafty St. Auban had spread abroad to lull suspicion touching the real nature of their presence until their horses should be fit to undertake the return journey to Paris, or until he should have secured the person of M. de Canaples.

Towards eleven o'clock, as the lights in the hostelry opposite were burning low, I descended, and made my way out into the now deserted street. The troopers had apparently seen fit—or else been ordered—to seek their beds, for the place had grown silent, and a servant was in the act of making fast the door for the night. The portecochère was half closed, and a man carrying a lantern was making fast the bolt, whistling aimlessly to himself. Through the half of the door that was yet open, I beheld a window from which the light fell upon a distant corner of the courtyard.

I drew near the fellow with the lantern, in whom I recognised René, the hostler, and as I approached he flashed the light upon my face; then with a gasp—"M. de Luynes," he exclaimed, remembering me from the time when I had lodged at the Lys de France, three months ago.

"Sh!" I whispered, pressing a louis d'or into his hand. "Whose window is that, René?" And I pointed towards the light.

"That," he replied, "is the room of the lieutenant and the gentleman in the mask."

"I must take a look at them, René, and whilst I am looking I shall search my pocket for another louis. Now let me in."

"I dare not, Monsieur. Maître Bernard may call me, and if the doors are not closed—"

"Dame!" I broke in. "I shall stay but a moment."

"But—"

"And you will have easily earned a louis d'or. If Bernard calls you—peste, tell him that you have let fall something, and that you are seeking it. There, let me pass."

I got past him at last, and made my way swiftly towards the other end of the quadrangle.

As I approached, the sound of voices smote my ear, for the lighted window stood open. I stopped within half a dozen paces of it, and climbed on to the step of a coach that stood there. Thence I could look straight into the room, whilst the darkness hid me from the eyes of those I watched.

Three men there were; Montrésor, the sergeant of his troop, and a tall man dressed in black, and wearing a black silk mask. This I concluded to be St. Auban, despite the profusion of fair locks that fell upon his shoulders, concealing—I rightly guessed—his natural hair, which was as black as my own. It was a cunning addition to his disguise, and one well calculated to lead people on to the wrong scent hereafter.

Presently, as I watched them, St. Auban spoke, and his voice was that of a man whose gums are toothless, or else whose nether lip is drawn in over his teeth whilst he speaks. Here again the dissimulation was as effective as it was simple.

"So; that is concluded," were the words that reached me. "To—

morrow we will install our men at the château, for while we remain here it is preposterous to lodge them at an inn. On the following day I hope that we may be able to set out again."

"If we could obtain fresh horses—" began the sergeant, when he of the mask interrupted him.

"Sangdieu! Think you my purse is bottomless? We return as we came, with the Cardinal's horses. What signify a day or two, after all? Come—call the landlord to light me to my room."

I had heard enough. But more than that, whilst I listened, an idea had of a sudden sprung up in my mind which did away with the necessity of gaining speech with Montresor—a contingency, moreover, that now presented insuperable difficulties.

So I got down softly from my perch and made my way out of the yard, and, after fulfilling my part of the bargain with René, across to the Vigne d'Or and to my room, there to sit and mature the plan that of a sudden I had conceived.

CHAPTER XXIV. OF THE PASSING OF ST. AUBAN

Dame! What an ado there was next day in Blois, when the news came that the troopers had installed themselves at the Château de Canaples and that the Chevalier had been arrested for treason by order of the Lord Cardinal, and that he would be taken to Paris, and—probably—the scaffold.

Men gathered in little knots at street corners, and with sullen brows and threatening gestures they talked of the affair; and the more they talked, the more clouded grew their looks, and more than one anti-cardinalist pasquinade was heard in Blois that day.

Given a leader those men would have laid hands upon pikes and muskets, and gone to the Chevalier's rescue. As I observed them, the thought did cross my mind that I might contrive a pretty fight in the rose garden of Canaples were I so inclined. And so inclined I should, indeed, have been but for the plan that had come to me like an inspiration from above, and which methought would prove safer in the end.

To carry out this plan of mine, I quitted Blois at nightfall, with my two knaves, having paid my reckoning at the Lys de France, and given out that we were journeying to Tours. We followed the road that leads to Canaples, until we reached the first trees bordering the park. There I dismounted, and, leaving Abdon to guard the horses, I made my way on foot, accompanied by Michelot, towards the garden.

We gained this, and were on the point of quitting the shadow of the trees, when of a sudden, by the light of the crescent moon, I beheld a

man walking in one of the alleys, not a hundred paces from where we stood. I had but time to seize Michelot by the collar of his pourpoint and draw him towards me. But as he trod precipitately backwards a twig snapped 'neath his foot with a report that in the surrounding stillness was like a pistol shot.

I caught my breath as he who walked in the garden stood still, his face, wrapped in the shadows of his hat, turned towards us.

"Who goes there?" he shouted. Then getting no reply he came resolutely forward, whilst I drew a pistol wherewith to welcome him did he come too near.

On he came, and already I had brought my pistol to a level with his head, when fortunately he repeated his question, "Who goes there?"—and this time I recognised the voice of Montrésor, the very man I could then most wish to meet.

"Hist! Montrésor!" I called softly. "'T is I—Luynes."

"So!" he exclaimed, coming close up to me. "You have reached Canaples at last!"

"At last?" I echoed.

"Whom have you there?" he inquired abruptly.

"Only Michelot."

"Bid him fall behind a little."

When Michelot had complied with this request, "You see, M. de Luynes," quoth the officer, "that you have arrived too late."

There was a certain coldness in his tone that made me seek by my reply to sound him.

"Indeed, I trust not, my friend. With your assistance I hope to get M.

de Canaples from the clutches of St. Auban."

He shook his head.

"It is impossible that I should help you," he replied with increasing coldness. "Already once for your sake have I broken faith to those who pay me, by setting you in a position to forestall St. Auban and get M. de Canaples away before his arrival. Unfortunately, you have dallied on the road, M. de Luynes, and Canaples is already a prisoner—a doomed one, I fear."

"Is that your last word, Montrésor?" I inquired sadly.

"I am sorry," he answered in softened tones, "but you must see that I cannot do otherwise. I warned you; more you cannot expect of me."

I sighed, and stood musing for an instant. Then—"You are right, Montrésor. Nevertheless, I am still grateful to you for the warning you gave me in Paris. God pity and help Canaples! Adieu, Montrésor. I do not think that you will see me again."

He took my hand, but as he did so he pushed me back into the shadow from which I had stepped to proffer it him.

"Peste!" he ejaculated. "The moon was full upon your face, and did St. Auban chance to look out, he must have seen you."

I followed the indication of his thumb, and noted the lighted window to which he pointed. A moment later he was gone, and as I joined Michelot, I chuckled softly to myself.

For two hours and more I sat in the shrubbery, conversing in whispers with Michelot, and watching the lights in the château die out one by one, until St. Auban's window, which opened on to the terrace balcony, was the only one that was not wrapt in darkness.

I waited a little while longer, then rising I cautiously made a tour of

inspection. Peace reigned everywhere, and the only sign of life was the sentry, who with musket on shoulder paced in front of the main entrance, a silent testimony of St. Auban's mistrust of the Blaisois and of his fears of a possible surprise.

Satisfied that everyone slept I retraced my steps to the shrubbery where Michelot awaited me, watching the square of light, and after exchanging word with him, I again stepped forth.

When I was half way across the intervening space of garden, treading with infinite precaution, a dark shadow obscured the window, which a second later was thrown open. Crouching hastily behind a boxwood hedge, I watched St. Auban—for I guessed that he it was—as he leaned out and gazed skywards.

For a little while he remained there, then he withdrew, leaving the casement open, and presently I caught the grating of a chair on the parquet floor within. If ever the gods favoured mortal, they favoured me at that moment.

Stealthily as a cat I sprang towards the terrace, the steps to which I climbed on hands and knees. Stooping, I sped silently across it until I had gained the flower-bed immediately below the window that had drawn me to it. Crouching there—for did I stand upright my chin would be on a level with the sill—I paused to listen for some moments. The only sound I caught was a rustle, as of paper. Emboldened, I took a deep breath, and standing up I gazed straight into the chamber.

By the light of four tapers in heavy silver sconces, I beheld St. Auban seated at a table littered with parchments, over which he was intently poring. His back was towards me, and his long black hair hung straight upon his shoulders. On the table, amid the papers, lay his golden wig and black mask, and on the floor in the centre of the room, his back and breast of blackened steel and his sword.

It needed but little shrewdness to guess those parchments before him to be legal documents touching the Canaples estates, and his occupation that of casting up exactly what profit he would reap from his infamous work of betrayal.

So intent was the hound upon his calculations that my cautious movements passed unheeded by him as I got astride of the window ledge. It was only when I swung my right leg into the room that he turned his head, but before his eyes reached me I was standing upright and motionless within the chamber.

I have seen fear of many sorts writ large upon the faces of men of many conditions—from the awe that blanches the cheek of the boy soldier when first he hears the cannon thundering to the terror that glazes the eye of the vanquished swordsman who at every moment expects the deadly point in his heart. But never had I gazed upon a countenance filled with such abject ghastly terror as that which came over St. Auban's when his eyes met mine that night.

He sprang up with an inarticulate cry that sank into something that I can but liken to the rattle which issues from the throat of expiring men. For a second he stood where he had risen, then terror loosened his knees, and he sank back into his chair. His mouth fell open, and the trembling lips were drawn down at the corners like those of a sobbing child; his cheeks turned whiter than the lawn collar at his throat, and his eyes, wide open in a horrid stare, were fixed on mine and, powerless to avert them, he met my gaze—cold, stern, and implacable.

For a moment we remained thus, and I marvelled greatly to see a man whose heart, if full of evil, I had yet deemed stout enough, stricken by fear into so parlous and pitiful a condition.

Then I had the explanation of it as he lifted his right hand and made the sign of the cross, first upon himself, then in the air, whilst his lips

moved, and I guessed that to himself he was muttering some prayer of exorcising purport. There was the solution of the terror—sweat that stood out in beads upon his brow—he had deemed me a spectre; the spectre of a man he believed to have foully done to death on a spot across the Loire visible from the window at my back.

At last he sufficiently mastered himself to break the awful silence.

"What do you want?" he whispered; then, his voice gaining power as he used it—"Speak," he commanded. "Man or devil, speak!"

I laughed for answer, harshly, mockingly; for never had I known a fiercer, crueller mood. At the sound of that laugh, satanical though may have been its ring, he sprang up again, and unsheathing a dagger he took a step towards me.

"We shall see of what you are made," he cried. "If you blast me in the act, I'll strike you!"

I laughed again, and raising my arm I gave him the nozzle of a pistol to contemplate.

"Stand where you are, St. Auban, or, by the God above us, I'll send your ghost a-wandering," quoth I coolly.

My voice, which I take it had nothing ghostly in it, and still more the levelled pistol, which of all implements is the most unghostly, dispelled his dread. The colour crept slowly back to his cheeks, and his mouth closed with a snap of determination.

"Is it, indeed, you, master meddler?" he said. "Peste! I thought you dead these three months."

"And you are overcome with joy to find that you were in error, eh, Marquis? We Luyes die hard."

"It seems so, indeed," he answered with a cool effrontery past

crediting in one who but a moment ago had looked so pitiful. "What do you seek at Canaples?"

"Many things, Marquis. You among others."

"You have come to murder me," he cried, and again alarm overspread his countenance.

"Hoity, toity, Marquis! We do not all follow the same trade. Who talks of murder? Faugh!"

Again he took a step towards me, but again the nozzle of my pistol drove him back. To have pistoled him there and then as he deserved would have brought the household about my ears, and that would have defeated my object. To have fallen upon him and slain him with silent steel would have equally embarrassed me, as you shall understand anon.

"You and I had a rendezvous at St. Sulpice des Reaux," I said calmly, "to which you came with a band of hired assassins. For this you deserve to be shot like the dog you are. But I have it in my heart to be generous to you," I added in a tone of irony. "Come, take up your sword."

"To what purpose?"

"Do you question me? Take up your sword, man, and do my bidding; thus shall you have a slender chance of life. Refuse and I pistol you without compunction. So now put on that wig and mask."

When he obeyed me in this—"Now listen, St. Auban," I said. "You and I are going together to that willow copse whither three months ago you lured Yvonne de Canaples for the purpose of abducting her. On that spot you and I shall presently face each other sword in hand, with none other to witness our meeting save God, in whose hands the issue lies. That is your chance; at the first sign that you meditate

playing me any tricks, that chance is lost to you." And I tapped my pistol significantly. "Now climb out through that window."

When he had done so, I bade him stand six paces away whilst I followed, and to discourage any foolish indiscretion on his part I again showed him my pistol.

He answered me with an impatient gesture, and by the light that fell on his face I saw him sneer.

"Come on, you fool," he snarled, "and have done threatening. I'll talk to you in the copse. And tread softly lest you arouse the sentry on the other side."

Rejoiced to see the man so wide awake in him, I followed him closely across the terrace, and through the rose garden to the bank of the river. This we followed until we came at last to the belt of willows, where, having found a suitable patch of even and springy turf, I drew my sword and invited him to make ready.

"Will you not strip?" he inquired sullenly.

"I do not think so," I answered. "The night air is sharp. Nevertheless, do you make ready as best you deem fit, and that speedily, Monsieur."

With an exclamation of contempt, he divested himself of his wig, mask, and doublet, then drawing his sword, he came forward, and announced himself at my disposal.

As well you may conceive, we wasted no time in compliments, but straightway went to work, and that with a zest that drew sparks from our rapiers at the first contact.

The Marquis attacked me furiously, and therein lay his only chance; for a fierce, rude sword-play that is easily dealt with in broad daylight is vastly discomposing in such pale moonshine as lighted us. I

defended myself warily, for of a sudden I had grown conscious of the danger that I ran did he once by luck or strength get past my guard with that point of his which in the spare light I could not follow closely enough to feel secure.

'Neath the fury of his onslaught I was compelled to break ground more than once, and each time he was so swift to follow up his advantage that I had ne'er a chance to retaliate.

Still fear or doubt of the issue I had none. I needed but to wait until the Marquis's fury was spent by want of breath, to make an end of it. And presently that which I waited for came about. His attack began to lag in vigour, and the pressure of his blade to need less resistance, whilst his breathing grew noisy as that of a broken-winded horse. Then with the rage of a gambler who loses at every throw, he cursed and reviled me with every thrust or lunge that I turned aside.

My turn was come; yet I held back, and let him spend his strength to the utmost drop, whilst with my elbow close against my side and by an easy play of wrist, I diverted each murderous stroke of his point that came again and again for my heart.

When at last he had wasted in blasphemies what little breath his wild exertions had left him, I let him feel on his blade the twist that heralded my first riposte. He caught the thrust, and retreated a step, his blasphemous tongue silenced, and his livid face bathed in perspiration.

Cruelly I toyed with him then, and with every disengagement I made him realise that he was mastered, and that if I withheld the coup de grâce it was but to prolong his agony. And to add to the bitterness of that agony of his, I derided him whilst I fenced; with a recitation of his many sins I mocked him, showing him how ripe he was for hell, and asking him how it felt to die unshriven with such a load upon his soul.

Goaded to rage by my bitter words, he grit his teeth, and gathered what rags of strength were left him for a final effort, And before I knew what he was about, he had dropped on to his left knee, and with his body thrown forward and supported within a foot of the ground by his left arm, he came, like a snake, under my guard with his point directed upwards.

So swift had been this movement and so unlooked-for, that had I not sprung backwards in the very nick of time, this narrative of mine had ne'er been written. With a jeering laugh I knocked aside his sword, but even as I disengaged, to thrust at him, he knelt up and caught my blade in his left hand, and for all that it ate its way through the flesh to the very bones of his fingers, he clung to it with that fierce strength and blind courage that is born of despair.

Then raising himself on his knees again, he struck at me wildly. I swung aside, and as his sword, missing its goal, shot past me, I caught his wrist in a grip from which I contemptuously invited him to free himself. With that began a fierce tugging and panting on both sides, which, however, was of short duration, for presently, my blade, having severed the last sinew of his fingers, was set free. Simultaneously I let go his wrist, pushing his arm from me so violently that in his exhausted condition it caused him to fall over on his side.

In an instant, however, he was up and at me again. Again our swords clashed—but once only. It was time to finish. With a vigorous disengagement I got past his feeble guard and sent my blade into him full in the middle of his chest and out again at his back until a foot or so of glittering steel protruded.

A shudder ran through him, and his mouth worked oddly, whilst spasmodically he still sought, without avail, to raise his sword; then as I recovered my blade, a half-stifled cry broke from his lips, and throwing up his arms, he staggered and fell in a heap.

As I turned him over to see if he were dead, his eyes met mine, and were full of piteous entreaty; his lips moved, and presently I caught the words:

"I am sped, Luynes." Then struggling up, and in a louder voice: "A priest!" he gasped. "Get me a priest, Luynes. Jesu! Have mer—"

A rush of blood choked him and cut short his utterance. He writhed and twitched for a moment, then his chin sank forward and he fell back, death starkening his limbs and glazing the eyes which stared hideously upwards at the cold, pitiless moon.

Such was the passing of the Marquis César de St. Auban.

CHAPTER XXV. PLAY-ACTING

For a little while I stood gazing down at my work, my mind full of the unsolvable mysteries of life and death; then I bethought me that time stood not still for me, and that something yet remained to be accomplished ere my evening's task were done.

And forthwith I made shift to do a thing at the memory of which my blood is chilled and my soul is filled with loathing even now—albeit the gulf of many years separates me from that June night at Canaples.

To pass succinctly o'er an episode on which I have scant heart to tarry, suffice it you to know that using my sash as a rope I bound a heavy stone to St. Auban's ankle; then lifting the body in my arms, I half dragged, half bore it across the little stretch of intervening sward to the water's edge, and flung it in.

As I write I have the hideous picture in my mind, and again I can see St. Auban's ghastly face grinning up at me through the moonlit waters, until at last it was mercifully swallowed up in their black depths, and naught but a circling wavelet that spread swiftly across the stream was left to tell of what had chanced.

I dare not dwell upon the feelings that assailed me as I stooped to rinse the blood from my hands, nor yet of the feverish haste wherewith I tore my blood-stained doublet from my back, and hurled it wide into the stream. For all my callousness I was sick and unmanned by that which had befallen.

No time, however, did I waste in mawkish sentiment, but setting my teeth hard, I turned away from the river, and back to the trampled ground of our recent conflict. There, with no other witness save the

moon, I clad myself in the Marquis's doublet of black velvet; I set his mask of silk upon my face, his golden wig upon my head, and over that his sable hat with its drooping feather. Next I buckled on his sword belt, wherefrom hung his rapier that I had sheathed.

In Blois that day I had taken the precaution—knowing the errand upon which I came—to procure myself haut-de-chausses of black velvet, and black leather boots with gilt spurs that closely resembled those which St. Auban had worn in life.

Now, as I have already written, St. Auban and I were of much the same build and stature, and so methought with confidence that he would have shrewd eyes, indeed, who could infer from my appearance that I was other than the same masked gentleman who had that very day ridden into Canaples at the head of a troop of his Eminence's guards.

I made my way swiftly back along the path that St. Auban and I had together trodden but a little while ago, and past the château until I came to the shrubbery where Michelot—faithful to the orders I had given him—awaited my return. From his concealment he had seen me leave the château with the Marquis, and as I suddenly loomed up before him now, he took me for the man whose clothes I wore, and naturally enough assumed that ill had befallen Gaston de Luyes. Of a certainty I had been pistolled by him had I not spoken in time. I lingered but to give him certain necessary orders; then, whilst he went off to join Abdon and see to their fulfilment, I made my way stealthily, with eyes keeping watch around me, across the terrace, and through the window into the room that St. Auban had left to follow me to his death.

The tapers still burned, and in all respects the chamber was as it had been; the back and breast pieces still lay upon the floor, and on the table the littered documents. The door I ascertained had been locked on the inside, a precaution which St. Auban had no doubt

taken so that none might spy upon the work that busied him.

I closed and made fast the window, then I bethought me that, being in ignorance of the whereabouts of St. Auban's bed-chamber, I must perforce spend the night as best I could within that very room.

And so I sat me down and pondered deeply o'er the work that was to come, the part I was about to play, and the details of its playing. In this manner did I while away perchance an hour; through the next one I must have slept, for I awakened with a start to find three tapers spent and the last one spluttering, and in the sky the streaks that heralded the summer dawn.

Again I fell to thinking; again I slept, and woke again to find the night gone and the sunlight on my face. Someone knocked at the door, and that knocking vibrated through my brain and set me wide-awake, indeed. It was as the signal to uplift the curtain and let my play-acting commence.

Hastily I rose and shot a glance at the mirror to see that my wig hung straight and that my mask was rightly adjusted. I started at my own reflection, for methought that from the glass 't was St. Auban who looked at me, as I had seen him look the night before when he had donned those things at my command.

"Holà there, within!" came Montrésor's voice. "Monsieur le Capitaine!" A fresh shower of blows descended on the oak panels.

I yawned with prodigious sonority, and overturned a chair with my foot. Then bracing myself for the ordeal, through which I looked to what scant information I possessed and my own mother wit, to bear me successfully, I strode across to admit my visitor.

Muffling my voice, as I had heard St. Auban do at the inn, by drawing my nether lip over my teeth—

"Pardieu!" quoth I, as I opened the door, "it seems, Lieutenant, that I must have fallen asleep over those musty documents."

I trembled as I watched him, waiting for his reply, and I thanked Heaven that in the rôle I had assumed a mask was worn, not only because it hid my features, but because it hid the emotions which these might have betrayed.

"I was beginning to fear," he replied coldly, and without so much as looking at me, "that worse had befallen you."

I breathed again.

"You mean—?"

"Pooh, nothing," said he half contemptuously. "Only methinks 't were well whilst we remain at Canaples that you do not spend your nights in a room within such easy access of the terrace."

"Your advice no doubt is sound, but as I shall not spend another night at Canaples, it comes too late."

"You mean, Monsieur—?"

"That we set out for Paris to-day."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, ça! I have just visited the stables, and there are not four horses fit for the journey. So that unless you have in mind the purchase of fresh animals—"

"Pish! My purse is not bottomless," I broke in, repeating the very words that I heard St. Auban utter.

"So you said once before, Monsieur. Still, unless you are prepared to take that course, the only alternative is to remain here until the horses are sufficiently recovered. But perhaps you think of walking?"

he added with a sniff.

"Such is your opinion, your time being worthless and it being of little moment where you spend it. I have conceived a plan."

"Ah!"

"Has it not occurred to you that the danger which threatens us and which calls for the protection of a troop is only on this side of the Loire, where the Blaisois might be minded to attempt a rescue of the Chevalier? But over yonder, Chevalier, on the Chambord side, who cares a fig for the Lord of Canaples or his fate? None; is it not so?"

He made an assenting gesture, whereupon I continued:

"This being so, I have bethought me that it will suffice if I take but three or four men and the sergeant as an escort, and cross the river with our prisoner after nightfall, travelling along the opposite shore until we reach Orleans. What think you, Lieutenant?"

He shrugged his shoulders again.

"T is you who command here," he answered with apathy, "not I."

"Nevertheless, do you not think the plan a safe one, as well as one that will allay his Eminence's very natural impatience?"

"Oh, it is safe enough, I doubt not," he replied coldly.

"Your enthusiasm determines me," quoth I, with an irony that made him wince. "And we will follow the plan, since you agree with me touching its excellence. But keep the matter to yourself until an hour or so after sunset."

He bowed, so utterly my dupe that I could have laughed at him. Then—"There is a little matter that I would mention," he said. "Mademoiselle de Canaples has expressed a wish to accompany her

father to Paris and has asked me whether this will be permitted her."

My heart leaped. Surely the gods fought on my side!

"I cannot permit it," I answered icily.

"Monsieur, you are pitiless," he protested in a tone of indignation for which I would gladly have embraced him.

I feigned to ponder.

"The matter needs consideration. Tell Mademoiselle that I will discuss it with her at noon, if she will condescend to await me on the terrace; I will then give her my definite reply. And now, Lieutenant, let us breakfast."

As completely as I had duped Montrésor did I presently dupe those of the troopers with whom I came in contact, among others the sergeant—and anon the Chevalier himself.

From the brief interview that I had with him I discovered that whilst he but vaguely suspected me to be St. Auban—and when I say "he suspected me" I mean he suspected him whose place I had taken—he was, nevertheless, aware of the profit which his captor, whoever he might be, derived from this business. It soon grew clear to me from what he said that St. Auban had mocked him with it whilst concealing his identity; that he had told him how he had obtained from Malpertuis the treasonable letter, and of the bargain which it had enabled him to strike with Mazarin. I did not long remain in his company, and, deeming the time not yet ripe for disclosures, I said little in answer to his lengthy tirades, which had, I guessed, for scope to trap me into betraying the identity he but suspected.

It wanted a few minutes to noon as I left the room in which the old nobleman was confined, and by the door of which a trooper was stationed, musket on shoulder. With every pulse a-throbbing at the

thought of my approaching interview with Mademoiselle, I made my way below and out into the bright sunshine, the soldiers I chanced to meet saluting me as I passed them.

On the terrace I found Mademoiselle already awaiting me. She was standing, as often I had seen her stand, with her back turned towards me and her elbows resting upon the balustrade. But as my step sounded behind her, she turned, and stood gazing at me with a face so grief-stricken and pale that I burned to unmask and set her torturing fears at rest. I doffed my hat and greeted her with a silent bow, which she contemptuously disregarded.

"My lieutenant tells me, Mademoiselle," said I in my counterfeited voice, "that it is your desire to bear Monsieur your father company upon this journey of his to Paris."

"With your permission, sir," she answered in a choking voice.

"It is a matter for consideration, Mademoiselle," I pursued. "There are in it many features that may have escaped you, and which I shall discuss with you if you will honour me by stepping into the garden below."

"Why will not the terrace serve?"

"Because I may have that to say which I would not have overheard."

She knit her brows and stared at me as though she would penetrate the black cloth that hid my face. At last she shrugged her shoulders, and letting her arms fall to her side in a gesture of helplessness and resignation—

"Soit; I will go with you," was all she said.

Side by side we went down the steps as a pair of lovers might have gone, save that her face was white and drawn, and that her eyes looked straight before her, and never once, until we reached the

gravel path below, at her companion. Side by side we walked along one of the rose-bordered alleys, until at length I stopped.

"Mademoiselle," I said, speaking in the natural tones of that good-for-naught Gaston de Luynes, "I have already decided, and you have my permission to accompany your father."

At the sound of my voice she started, and with her left hand clutching at the region of her heart, she stood, her head thrust forward, and on her face the look of one who is confronted with some awful doubt. That look was brief, however, and swift to replace it was one of hideous revelation.

"In God's name, who are you?" she cried in accents that bespoke internal agony.

"Already you have guessed it, Mademoiselle," I answered, and I would have added that which should have brought comfort to her distraught mind, when—

"You!" she gasped in a voice of profound horror. "You! You, the Judas who has sold my father to the Cardinal for a paltry share in our estates. And I believed that mask of yours to hide the face of St. Auban!"

Her words froze me into a stony mass of insensibility. There was no logic in my attitude; I see it now. Appearances were all against me, and her belief no more than justified. I overlooked all this, and instead of saving time by recounting how I came to be there and thus delivering her from the anguish that was torturing her, I stood, dumb and cruel, cut to the quick by her scorn and her suspicions that I was capable of such a thing as she imputed, and listening to the dictates of an empty pride that prompted me to make her pay full penalty.

"Oh, God pity me!" she wailed. "Have you naught to say?"

Still I maintained my mad, resentful silence. And presently, as one who muses—

"You!" she said again. "You, whom I—" She stopped short. "Oh! The shame of it!" she moaned.

Reason at last came uppermost, and as in my mind I completed her broken sentence, my heart gave a great throb and I was thawed to a gentler purpose.

"Mademoiselle!" I exclaimed.

But even as I spoke, she turned, and sweeping aside her gown that it might not touch me, she moved rapidly towards the steps we had just descended. Full of remorse, I sprang after her.

"Mademoiselle! Hear me," I cried, and put forth my hand to stay her. Thereat she wheeled round and faced me, a blaze of fury in her grey eyes.

"Dare not to touch me," she panted. "You thief, you hound!"

I recoiled, and, like one turned to stone, I stood and watched her mount the steps, my feelings swaying violently between anger and sorrow. Then my eye fell upon Montrésor standing on the topmost step, and on his face there was a sneering, insolent smile which told me that he had heard the epithets she had bestowed upon me.

Albeit I sought that day another interview with Yvonne, I did not gain it, and so I was forced to sun myself in solitude upon the terrace. But I cherished for my consolation that broken sentence of hers, whereby I read that the coldness which she had evinced for me before I left Canaples had only been assumed.

And presently as I recalled what talks we had had, and one in particular from which it now appeared to me that her coldness had sprung, a light seemed suddenly to break upon my mind, as

perchance it hath long ago broken upon the minds of those who may happen upon these pages, and whose wits in matters amorous are of a keener temper than were mine.

I who in all things had been arrogant, presumptuous, and self-satisfied, had methought erred for once through over-humility.

And, indeed, even as I sat and pondered on that June day, it seemed to me a thing incredible that she whom I accounted the most queenly and superb of women should have deigned to grant a tender thought to one so mean, so far beneath her as I had ever held myself to be.

CHAPTER XXVI. REPARATION

Things came to pass that night as I had planned, and the fates which of late had smiled upon me were kind unto the end.

Soon after ten, and before the moon had risen, a silent procession wended its way from the château to the river. First went Montrésor and two of his men; next came the Chevalier with Mademoiselle, and on either side of them a trooper; whilst I, in head-piece and back and breast of steel, went last with Mathurin, the sergeant—who warmly praised the plan I had devised for the conveyance of M. de Canaples to Paris without further loss of time.

Two boats which I had caused to be secretly procured were in readiness, and by these a couple of soldiers awaited us, holding the bridles of eight horses, one of which was equipped with a lady's saddle. Five of these belonged—or had belonged—to the Chevalier, whilst the others were three of those that had brought the troop from Paris, and which I, in the teeth of all protestations, had adjudged sufficiently recovered for the return journey.

The embarkation was safely effected, M. de Canaples and Mademoiselle in one boat with Montrésor, Mathurin, and myself; the sergeant took the oars; Montrésor and I kept watch over our prisoner. In the other boat came the four troopers, who were to accompany us, and one other who was to take the boats, and Montrésor in them, back to Canaples. For the lieutenant was returning, so that he might, with the remainder of the troop, follow us to Paris so soon as the condition of the horses would permit it.

The beasts we took with us were swimming the stream, guided and upheld by the men in the other boat.

Just as the moon began to show her face our bow grated on the shore at the very point where I had intended that we should land. I sprang out and turned to assist Mademoiselle.

But, disdaining my proffered hand, she stepped ashore unaided. The Chevalier came next, and after him Montrésor and Mathurin.

Awhile we waited until the troopers brought their boat to land, then when they had got the snorting animals safely ashore, I bade them look to the prisoner, and requested Montrésor and Mathurin to step aside with me, as I had something to communicate to them.

Walking between the pair, I drew them some twenty paces away from the group by the water, towards a certain thicket in which I had bidden Michelot await me.

"It has occurred to me, Messieurs," I began, speaking slowly and deliberately as we paced along,—*"it has occurred to me that despite all the precautions taken to carry out my Lord Cardinal's wishes—a work at least in which you, yourselves, have evinced a degree of zeal that I cannot too highly commend to his Eminence—the possibility yet remains of some mistake of trivial appearance, of some slight flaw that might yet cause the miscarriage of those wishes."*

They turned towards me, and although I could not make out the expressions of their faces, in the gloom, yet I doubted not but that they were puzzled ones at that lengthy and apparently meaningless harangue.

The sergeant was the first to speak, albeit I am certain that he understood the less.

"I venture, M. le Capitaine, to think that your fears, though very natural, are groundless."

"Say you so?" quoth I, with a backward glance to assure myself that

we were screened by the trees from the eyes of those behind us. "Say you so? Well, well, mayhap you are right, though you speak of my fears being groundless. I alluded to some possible mistake of yours—yours and M. de Montrésor's—not of mine. And, by Heaven, a monstrous flaw there is in this business, for if either of you so much as whisper I'll blow your brains out!"

And to emphasise these words, as sinister as they were unlooked-for, I raised both hands suddenly from beneath my cloak, and clapped the cold nose of a pistol to the head of each of them.

I was obeyed as men are obeyed who thus uncompromisingly prove the force of their commands. Seeing them resigned, I whistled softly, and in answer there was a rustle from among the neighbouring trees, and presently two shadows emerged from the thicket. In less time than it takes me to relate it, Montrésor and his sergeant found themselves gagged, and each securely bound to a tree.

Then, with Michelot and Abdon following a short distance behind me, I made my way back to the troopers, and, feigning to stumble as I approached, I hurtled so violently against two of them that I knocked the pair headlong into the stream.

Scarce was it done, and almost before the remaining three had realised it, there was a pistol at the head of each of them and sweet promises of an eternal hereafter being whispered in their ears. They bore themselves with charming discretion, and like lambs we led them each to a tree and dealt with them as we had dealt with their officers, whilst the Chevalier and his daughter watched us, bewildered and dumfounded at what they saw.

As soon as the other two had crawled—all unconscious of the fates of their comrades—out of the river, we served them also in a like manner.

Bidding Abdon and Michelot lead the horses, and still speaking in my assumed voice, I desired Mademoiselle and the Chevalier—who had not yet sufficiently recovered from his bewilderment to have found his tongue—to follow me. I led the way up the gentle slope to the spot where our first victims were pinioned.

Montrésor's comely young face looked monstrous wicked in the moonlight, and his eyes rolled curiously as he beheld me. Stepping up to him I freed him of his gag—an act which I had almost regretted a moment later, for he cleared his throat with so lusty a torrent of profanity that methought the heavens must have fallen on us. At last when he was done with that—"Before you leave me in this plight, M. de St. Auban," quoth he, "perchance you will satisfy me with an explanation of your unfathomable deeds and of this violence."

"St. Auban!" exclaimed the Chevalier.

"St. Auban!" cried Yvonne.

And albeit wonder rang in both their voices, yet their minds I knew went different ways.

"No, not St. Auban," I answered with a laugh and putting aside all counterfeit of speech.

"Par la mort Dieu! I know that voice," cried Montrésor.

"Mayhap, indeed! And know you not this face?" And as I spoke I whipped away my wig and mask, and thrust my countenance close up to his.

"Thunder of God!" ejaculated the boy. Then—"Pardieu," he added, "there is Michelot! How came I not to recognise him?"

"Since you would not assist me, Montrésor, you see I was forced to do without you."

"But St. Auban?" he gasped. "Where is he?"

"In heaven, I hope—but I doubt it sadly."

"You have killed him?"

There and then, as briefly as I might, I told him, whilst the others stood by to listen, how I had come upon the Marquis in the château the night before and what had passed thereafter.

"And now," I said, as I cut his bonds, "it grieves me to charge you with an impolite errand to his Eminence, but—"

"I'll not return to him," he burst out. "I dare not. Mon Dieu, you have ruined me, Luyes!"

"Then come with me, and I'll build your fortunes anew and on a sounder foundation. I have an influential letter in my pocket that should procure us fortune in the service of the King of Spain."

He needed little pressing to fall in with my invitation, so we set the sergeant free, and him instead I charged with a message that must have given Mazarin endless pleasure when it was delivered to him. But he had the Canaples estates wherewith to console himself and his never-failing maxim that "chi canta, paga." Touching the Canaples estates, however, he did not long enjoy them, for when he went into exile, two years later, the Parliament returned them to their rightful owner.

The Chevalier de Canaples approached me timidly.

"Monsieur," quoth he, "I have wronged you very deeply. And this generous rescue of one who has so little merited your aid truly puts me to so much shame that I know not what thanks to offer you."

"Then offer none, Monsieur," I answered, taking his proffered hand. "Moreover, time presses and we have a possible pursuit to baffle. So

to horse, Monsieus."

I assisted Mademoiselle to mount, and she passively suffered me to do her this office, having no word for me, and keeping her face averted from my earnest gaze.

I sighed as I turned to mount the horse Michelot held for me; but methinks 't was more a sigh of satisfaction than of pain.

.

All that night we travelled and all next day until Tours was reached towards evening. There we halted for a sorely needed rest and for fresh horses.

Three days later we arrived at Nantes, and a week from the night of the Chevalier's rescue we took ship from that port to Santander.

That same evening, as I leaned upon the taffrail watching the distant coast line of my beloved France, whose soil meseemed I was not like to tread again for years, Yvonne came softly up behind me.

"Monsieur," she said in a voice that trembled somewhat, "I have, indeed, misjudged you. The shame of it has made me hold aloof from you since we left Blois. I cannot tell you, Monsieur, how deep that shame has been, or with what sorrow I have been beset for the words I uttered at Canaples. Had I but paused to think—"

"Nay, nay, Mademoiselle, 't was all my fault, I swear. I left you overlong the dupe of appearances."

"But I should not have believed them so easily. Say that I am forgiven, Monsieur," she pleaded; "tell me what reparation I can make."

"There is one reparation that you can make if you are so minded," I

answered, "but 'tis a life-long reparation."

They were bold words, indeed, but my voice played the coward and shook so vilely that it bereft them of half their boldness. But, ah, Dieu, what joy, what ecstasy was mine to see how they were read by her; to remark the rich, warm blood dyeing her cheeks in a bewitching blush; to behold the sparkle that brightened her matchless eyes as they met mine!

"Yvonne!"

"Gaston!"

She was in my arms at last, and the work of reparation was begun whilst together we gazed across the sun-gilt sea towards the fading shores of France.

If you be curious to learn how, guided by the gentle hand of her who plucked me from the vile ways that in my old life I had trodden, I have since achieved greatness, honour, and renown, History will tell you.

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THE TAVERN KNIGHT

By Rafael Sabatini

Contents

THE TAVERN KNIGHT

<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	ON THE MARCH
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	ARCADES AMBO
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	THE LETTER
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	AT THE SIGN OF THE MITRE
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	AFTER WORCESTER FIELD
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	COMPANIONS IN MISFORTUNE
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	THE TAVERN KNIGHT'S STORY
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	THE TWISTED BAR
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	THE BARGAIN
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	THE ESCAPE
<u>CHAPTER XI.</u>	THE ASHBURNS
<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	THE HOUSE THAT WAS ROLAND MARLEIGH'S
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	THE METAMORPHOSIS OF KENNETH
<u>CHAPTER XIV.</u>	THE HEART OF CYNTHIA ASHBURN
<u>CHAPTER XV.</u>	JOSEPH'S RETURN
<u>CHAPTER XVI.</u>	THE RECKONING
<u>CHAPTER XVII.</u>	JOSEPH DRIVES A BARGAIN
<u>CHAPTER XVIII.</u>	COUNTER-PLOT
<u>CHAPTER XIX.</u>	THE INTERRUPTED JOURNEY
<u>CHAPTER XX.</u>	THE CONVERTED HOGAN

CHAPTER XXI.	THE MESSAGE KENNETH BORE
CHAPTER XXII.	SIR CRISPIN'S UNDERTAKING
CHAPTER XXIII.	GREGORY'S ATTRITION
CHAPTER XXIV.	THE WOOING OF CYNTHIA
CHAPTER XXV.	CYNTHIA'S FLIGHT
CHAPTER XXVI.	TO FRANCE
CHAPTER XXVII.	THE AUBERGE DU SOLEIL

THE TAVERN KNIGHT

CHAPTER I. ON THE MARCH

He whom they called the Tavern Knight laughed an evil laugh—such a laugh as might fall from the lips of Satan in a sardonic moment.

He sat within the halo of yellow light shed by two tallow candles, whose sconces were two empty bottles, and contemptuously he eyed the youth in black, standing with white face and quivering lip in a corner of the mean chamber. Then he laughed again, and in a hoarse voice, sorely suggestive of the bottle, he broke into song. He lay back in his chair, his long, spare legs outstretched, his spurs jingling to the lilt of his ditty whose burden ran:

On the lip so red of the wench that's sped
His passionate kiss burns, still-O!
For 'tis April time, and of love and wine
Youth's way is to take its fill-O!
Down, down, derry-do!

So his cup he drains and he shakes his reins,
And rides his rake-helly way-O!
She was sweet to woo and most comely, too,
But that was all yesterday-O!
Down, down, derry-do!

The lad started forward with something akin to a shiver.

"Have done," he cried, in a voice of loathing, "or, if croak you must, choose a ditty less foul!"

"Eh?" The ruffler shook back the matted hair from his lean, harsh face, and a pair of eyes that of a sudden seemed ablaze glared at his companion; then the lids drooped until those eyes became two narrow slits—catlike and cunning—and again he laughed.

"Gad's life, Master Stewart, you have a temerity that should save you from grey hairs! What is't to you what ditty my fancy seizes on? 'Swounds, man, for three weary months have I curbed my moods, and worn my throat dry in praising the Lord; for three months have I been a living monument of Covenanting zeal and godliness; and now that at last I have shaken the dust of your beggarly Scotland from my heels you—the veriest milksop that ever ran tottering from its mother's lap would chide me because, yon bottle being done, I sing to keep me from waxing sad in the contemplation of its emptiness!"

There was scorn unutterable on the lad's face as he turned aside.

"When I joined Middleton's horse and accepted service under you, I held you to be at least a gentleman," was his daring rejoinder.

For an instant that dangerous light gleamed again from his companion's eye. Then, as before, the lids drooped, and, as before, he laughed.

"Gentleman!" he mocked. "On my soul, that's good! And what may you know of gentlemen, Sir Scot? Think you a gentleman is a Jack Presbyter, or a droning member of your kirk committee, strutting it like a crow in the gutter? Gadswounds, boy, when I was your age, and George Villiers lived—"

"Oh, have done!" broke in the youth impetuously. "Suffer me to leave you, Sir Crispin, to your bottle, your croaking, and your memories."

"Aye, go your ways, sir; you'd be sorry company for a dead man—the sorriest ever my evil star led me into. The door is yonder, and should you chance to break your saintly neck on the stairs, it is like to be well for both of us."

And with that Sir Crispin Galliard lay back in his chair once more, and took up the thread of his interrupted song

But, heigh-o! she cried, at the Christmas-tide,
That dead she would rather be-O!
Pale and wan she crept out of sight, and wept

'Tis a sorry—

A loud knock that echoed ominously through the mean chamber, fell
in that instant upon the door. And with it came a panting cry of—

"Open, Cris! Open, for the love of God!"

Sir Crispin's ballad broke off short, whilst the lad paused in the act
of quitting the room, and turned to look to him for direction.

"Well, my master," quoth Galliard, "for what do you wait?"

"To learn your wishes, sir," was the answer sullenly delivered.

"My wishes! Rat me, there's one without whose wishes brook less
waiting! Open, fool!"

Thus rudely enjoined, the lad lifted the latch and set wide the door,
which opened immediately upon the street. Into the apartment
stumbled a roughly clad man of huge frame. He was breathing hard,
and fear was writ large upon his rugged face. An instant he paused to
close the door after him, then turning to Galliard, who had risen and
who stood eyeing him in astonishment—

"Hide me somewhere, Cris," he panted—his accent proclaiming
his Irish origin. "My God, hide me, or I'm a dead man this night!"

"Slife, Hogan! What is toward? Has Cromwell overtaken us?"

"Cromwell, quotha? Would to Heaven 'twere no worse! I've killed a
man!"

"If he's dead, why run?"

The Irishman made an impatient gesture.

"A party of Montgomery's foot is on my heels. They've raised the whole of Penrith over the affair, and if I'm taken, soul of my body, 'twill be a short shrift they'll give me. The King will serve me as poor Wrycraft was served two days ago at Kendal. Mother of Mercy!" he broke off, as his ear caught the clatter of feet and the murmur of voices from without. "Have you a hole I can creep into?"

"Up those stairs and into my room with you!" said Crispin shortly. "I will try to head them off. Come, man, stir yourself; they are here."

Then, as with nimble alacrity Hogan obeyed him and slipped from the room, he turned to the lad, who had been a silent spectator of what had passed. From the pocket of his threadbare doublet he drew a pack of greasy playing cards.

"To table," he said laconically.

But the boy, comprehending what was required of him, drew back at sight of those cards as one might shrink from a thing unclean.

"Never!" he began. "I'll not defile—"

"To table, fool!" thundered Crispin, with a vehemence few men could have withstood. "Is this a time for Presbyterian scruples? To table, and help a me play this game, or, by the living God, I'll—" Without completing his threat he leaned forward until Kenneth felt his hot, wine-laden breath upon his cheek. Cowed by his words, his gesture, and above all, his glance, the lad drew up a chair, mumbling in explanation—intended as an excuse to himself for his weakness—that he submitted since a man's life was at stake.

Opposite him Galliard resumed his seat with a mocking smile that made him wince. Taking up the cards, he flung a portion of them to the boy, whilst those he retained he spread fanwise in his hand as if

about to play. Silently Kenneth copied his actions.

Nearer and louder grew the sounds of the approach, lights flashed before the window, and the two men, feigning to play, sat on and waited.

"Have a care, Master Stewart," growled Crispin sourly, then in a louder voice—for his quick eye had caught a glimpse of a face that watched them from the window—"I play the King of Spades!" he cried, with meaning look.

A blow was struck upon the door, and with it came the command to "Open in the King's name!" Softly Sir Crispin rapped out an oath. Then he rose, and with a last look of warning to Kenneth, he went to open. And as he had greeted Hogan he now greeted the crowd mainly of soldiers—that surged about the threshold.

"Sirs, why this ado? Hath the Sultan Oliver descended upon us?"

In one hand he still held his cards, the other he rested upon the edge of the open door. It was a young ensign who stood forward to answer him.

"One of Lord Middleton's officers hath done a man to death not half an hour ago; he is an Irishman Captain Hogan by name."

"Hogan—Hogan?" repeated Crispin, after the manner of one who fumbles in his memory. "Ah, yes—an Irishman with a grey head and a hot temper. And he is dead, you say?"

"Nay, he has done the killing."

"That I can better understand. 'Tis not the first time, I'll be sworn."

"But it will be the last, Sir Crispin."

"Like enough. The King is severe since we crossed the Border."

Then in a briskertone: "I thank you for bringing me this news," said he, "and I regret that in my poor house there be naught I can offer you wherein to drink His Majesty's health ere you proceed upon your search. Give you good night, sir." And by drawing back a pace he signified his wish to close the door and be quit of them.

"We thought," faltered the young officer, "that—that perchance you would assist us by—"

"Assist you!" roared Crispin, with a fine assumption of anger. "Assist you take a man? Sink me, sir, I would have you know I am a soldier, not a tipstaff!"

The ensign's cheeks grew crimson under the sting of that veiled insult.

"There are some, Sir Crispin, that have yet another name for you."

"Like enough—when I am not by," sneered Crispin. "The world is full of foul tongues in craven heads. But, sirs, the night air is chill and you are come inopportunately, for, as you'll perceive, I was at play. Haply you'll suffer me to close the door."

"A moment, Sir Crispin. We must search this house. He is believed to have come this way."

Crispin yawned. "I will spare you the trouble. You may take it from me that he could not be here without my knowledge. I have been in this room these two hours past."

"Twill not suffice," returned the officer doggedly. "We must satisfy ourselves."

"Satisfy yourselves?" echoed the other, in tones of deep amazement. "What better satisfaction can I afford you than my word? 'Swounds, sir jackanapes," he added, in a roar that sent the lieutenant back a pace as though he had been struck, "am I to take it that your

errand is a trumped-up business to affront me? First you invite me to turn tipstaff, then you add your cursed innuendoes of what people say of me, and now you end by doubting me! You must satisfy yourself!" he thundered, waxing fiercer at every word. "Linger another moment on that threshold, and d——n me, sir, I'll give you satisfaction of another flavour! Be off!"

Before that hurricane of passion the ensign recoiled, despite himself.

"I will appeal to General Montgomery," he threatened.

"Appeal to the devil! Had you come hither with your errand in a seemly fashion you had found my door thrown wide in welcome, and I had received you courteously. As it is, sir, the cause for complaint is on my side, and complain I will. We shall see whether the King permits an old soldier who has followed the fortunes of his family these eighteen years to be flouted by a malapert bantam of yesterday's brood!"

The subaltern paused in dismay. Some demur there was in the gathered crowd. Then the officer fell back a pace, and consulted an elderly trooper at his elbow. The trooper was of opinion that the fugitive must have gone farther. Moreover, he could not think, from what Sir Crispin had said, that it would have been possible for Hogan to have entered the house. With this, and realizing that much trouble and possible loss of time must result from Sir Crispin's obstinacy, did they attempt to force a way into the house, and bethinking himself, also, maybe, how well this rascally ruffler stood with Lord Middleton, the ensign determined to withdraw, and to seek elsewhere.

And so he took his leave with a venomous glance, and a parting threat to bring the matter to the King's ears, upon which Galliard slammed the door before he had finished.

There was a curious smile on Crispin's face as he walked slowly to the table, and resumed his seat.

"Master Stewart," he whispered, as he spread his cards anew, "the comedy is not yet played out. There is a face glued to the window at this moment, and I make little doubt that for the next hour or so we shall be spied upon. That pretty fellow was born to be a thief-taker."

The boy turned a glance of sour reproof upon his companion. He had not stirred from his chair while Crispin had been at the door.

"You lied to them," he said at last.

"Sh! Not so loud, sweet youth," was the answer that lost nothing of menace by being subdued. "Tomorrow, if you please, I will account to you for offending your delicate soul by suggesting a falsehood in your presence. To-night we have a man's life to save, and that, I think, is work enough. Come, Master Stewart, we are being watched. Let us resume our game."

His eye, fixed in cold command upon the boy, compelled obedience. And the lad, more out of awe of that glance than out of any desire to contribute to the saving of Hogan, mutely consented to keep up this pretence. But in his soul he rebelled. He had been reared in an atmosphere of honourable and religious bigotry. Hogan was to him a coarse ruffler; an evil man of the sword; such a man as he abhorred and accounted a disgrace to any army—particularly to an army launched upon England under the auspices of the Solemn League and Covenant.

Hogan had been guilty of an act of brutality; he had killed a man; and Kenneth deemed himself little better, since he assisted in harbouring instead of discovering him, as he held to be his duty. But 'neath the suasion of Galliard's inexorable eye he sat limp and docile, vowing to himself that on the morrow he would lay the matter before

Lord Middleton, and thus not only endeavour to make amends for his present guilty silence, but rid himself also of the companionship of this ruffianly Sir Crispin, to whom no doubt a hempen justice would be meted.

Meanwhile, he sat on and left his companion's occasional sallies unanswered. In the street men stirred and lanthorns gleamed fitfully, whilst ever and anon a face surmounted by a morion would be pressed against the leaded panes of the window.

Thus an hour wore itself out during which poor Hogan sat above, alone with his anxiety and unsavoury thoughts.

CHAPTER II. ARCADES AMBO

Towards midnight at last Sir Crispin flung down his cards and rose. It was close upon an hour and a half since Hogan's advent. In the streets the sounds had gradually died down, and peace seemed to reign again in Penrith. Yet was Sir Crispin cautious—for to be cautious and mistrustful of appearances was the lesson life had taught him.

"Master Stewart," said he, "it grows late, and I doubt me you would be abed. Give you good night!"

The lad rose. A moment he paused, hesitating, then—

"To-morrow, Sir Crispin—" he began. But Crispin cut him short.

"Leave to-morrow till it dawn, my friend. Give you good night. Take one of those noisome tapers with you, and go."

In sullen silence the boy took up one of the candle-bearing bottles and passed out through the door leading to the stairs.

For a moment Crispin remained standing by the table, and in that moment the expression of his face was softened. A momentary regret of his treatment of the boy stirred in him. Master Stewart might be a milksop, but Crispin accounted him leastways honest, and had a kindness for him in spite of all. He crossed to the window, and throwing it wide he leaned out, as if to breathe the cool night air, what time he hummed the refrain of 'Rub-a-dub-dub' for the edification of any chance listeners.

For a half-hour he lingered there, and for all that he used the occasion to let his mind stray over many a theme, his eyes were alert

for the least movement among the shadows of the street. Reassured at last that the house was no longer being watched, he drew back, and closed the lattice.

Upstairs he found the Irishman seated in dejection upon his bed, awaiting him.

"Soul of my body!" cried Hogan ruefully, "I was never nearer being afraid in my life."

Crispin laughed softly for answer, and besought of him the tale of what had passed.

"Tis simple enough, faith," said Hogan coolly. "The landlord of The Angel hath a daughter maybe 'twas after her he named his inn—who owns a pair of the most seductive eyes that ever a man saw perdition in. She hath, moreover, a taste for dalliance, and my brave looks and martial trappings did for her what her bold eyes had done for me. We were becoming the sweetest friends, when, like an incarnate fiend, that loutish clown, her lover, sweeps down upon us, and, with more jealousy than wit, struck me—struck me, Harry Hogan! Soul of my body, think of it, Cris!" And he grew red with anger at the recollection. "I took him by the collar of his mean smock and flung him into the kennel—the fittest bed he ever lay in. Had he remained there it had been well for him; but the fool, accounting himself affronted, came up to demand satisfaction. I gave it him, and plague on it—he's dead!"

"An ugly tale," was Crispin's sour comment.

"Ugly, maybe," returned Hogan, spreading out his palms, "but what choice had I? The fool came at me, bilbo in hand, and I was forced to draw."

"But not to slay, Hogan!"

"Twas an accident. Sink me, it was! I sought his sword-arm; but the

light was bad, and my point went through his chest instead."

For a moment Crispin stood frowning, then his brow cleared, as though he had put the matter from him.

"Well, well—since he's dead, there's an end to it."

"Heaven rest his soul!" muttered the Irishman, crossing himself piously. And with that he dismissed the subject of the great wrong that through folly he had wrought—the wanton destruction of a man's life, and the poisoning of a woman's with a remorse that might be everlasting.

"It will tax our wits to get you out of Penrith," said Crispin. Then, turning and looking into the Irishman's great, good-humoured face—"I am sorry you leave us, Hogan," he added.

"Not so am I," quoth Hogan with a shrug. "Such a march as this is little to my taste. Bah! Charles Stuart or Oliver Cromwell, 'tis all one to me. What care I whether King or Commonwealth prevail? Shall Harry Hogan be the better or the richer under one than under the other? Oddslife, Cris, I have trailed a pike or handled a sword in well-nigh every army in Europe. I know more of the great art of war than all the King's generals rolled into one. Think you, then, I can rest content with a miserable company of horse when plunder is forbidden, and even our beggarly pay doubtful? Whilst, should things go ill—as well they may, faith, with an army ruled by parsons—the wage will be a swift death on field or gallows, or a lingering one in the plantations, as fell to the lot of those poor wretches Noll drove into England after Dunbar. Soul of my body, it is not thus that I had looked to fare when I took service at Perth. I had looked for plunder, rich and plentiful plunder, according to the usages of warfare, as a fitting reward for a toilsome march and the perils gone through.

"Thus I know war, and for this have I followed the trade these twenty

years. Instead, we have thirty thousand men, marching to battle as prim and orderly as a parcel of acolytes in a Corpus-Christi procession. 'Twas not so bad in Scotland haply because the country holds naught a man may profitably plunder—but since we have crossed the Border, 'slife, they'll hang you if you steal so much as a kiss from a wench in passing."

"Why, true," laughed Crispin, "the Second Charles hath an over-tender stomach. He will not allow that we are marching through an enemy's country; he insists that England is his kingdom, forgetting that he has yet to conquer it, and—"

"Was it not also his father's kingdom?" broke in the impetuous Hogan. "Yet times are sorely changed since we followed the fortunes of the Martyr. In those days you might help yourself to a capon, a horse, a wench, or any other trifle of the enemy's, without ever a word of censure or a question asked. Why, man, it is but two days since His Majesty had a poor devil hanged at Kendal for laying violent hands upon a pullet. Pox on it, Cris, my gorge rises at the thought! When I saw that wretch strung up, I swore to fall behind at the earliest opportunity, and to-night's affair makes this imperative."

"And what may your plans be?" asked Crispin.

"War is my trade, not a diversion, as it is with Wilmot and Buckingham and the other pretty gentlemen of our train. And since the King's army is like to yield me no profit, faith, I'll turn me to the Parliament's. If I get out of Penrith with my life, I'll shave my beard and cut my hair to a comely and godly length; don a cuckoldy steeple hat and a black coat, and carry my sword to Cromwell with a line of text."

Sir Crispin fell to pondering. Noting this, and imagining that he guessed aright the reason:

"I take it, Cris," he put in, keenly glancing at the other, "that you are

much of my mind?"

"Maybe I am," replied Crispin carelessly.

"Why, then," cried Hogan, "need we part company?"

There was a sudden eagerness in his tone, born of the admiration in which this rough soldier of fortune held one whom he accounted his better in that same harsh trade. But Galliard answered coldly:

"You forget, Harry."

"Not so! Surely on Cromwell's side your object—"

"T'sh! I have well considered. My fortunes are bound up with the King's. In his victory alone lies profit for me; not the profit of pillage, Hogan, but the profit of those broad lands that for nigh upon twenty years have been in usurping hands. The profit I look for, Hogan, is my restoration to Castle Marleigh, and of this my only hope lies in the restoration of King Charles. If the King doth not prevail—which God forfend!—why, then, I can but die. I shall have naught left to hope for from life. So you see, good Hogan," he ended with a regretful smile, "my going with you is not to be dreamed of."

Still the Irishman urged him, and a good half-hour did he devote to it, but in vain. Realizing at last the futility of his endeavours, he sighed and moved uneasily in his chair, whilst the broad, tanned face was clouded with regret. Crispin saw this, and approaching him, he laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"I had counted upon your help to clear the Ashburns from Castle Marleigh and to aid me in my grim work when the time is ripe. But if you go—"

"Faith, I may aid you yet. Who shall say?" Then of a sudden there crept into the voice of this hardened pike-trader a note of soft concern. "Think you there be danger to yourself in remaining?" he

inquired.

"Danger? To me?" echoed Crispin.

"Aye—for having harboured me. That whelp of Montgomery's Foot suspects you."

"Suspects? Am I a man of straw to be overset by a breath of suspicion?"

"There is your lieutenant, Kenneth Stewart."

"Who has been a party to your escape, and whose only course is therefore silence, lest he set a noose about his own neck. Come, Harry," he added, briskly, changing his manner, "the night wears on, and we have your safety to think of."

Hogan rose with a sigh.

"Give me a horse," said he, "and by God's grace tomorrow shall find me in Cromwell's camp. Heaven prosper and reward you, Cris."

"We must find you clothes more fitting than these—a coat more staid and better attuned to the Puritan part you are to play."

"Where have you such a coat?"

"My lieutenant has. He affects the godly black, from a habit taken in that Presbyterian Scotland of his."

"But I am twice his bulk!"

"Better a tight coat to your back than a tight rope to your neck, Harry. Wait."

Taking a taper, he left the room, to return a moment later with the coat that Kenneth had worn that day, and which he had abstracted from the sleeping lad's chamber.

"Off with your doublet," he commanded, and as he spoke he set himself to empty the pocket of Kenneth's garment; a handkerchief and a few papers he found in them, and these he tossed carelessly on the bed. Next he assisted the Irishman to struggle into the stolen coat.

"May the Lord forgive my sins," groaned Hogan, as he felt the cloth straining upon his back and cramping his limbs. "May He forgive me, and see me safely out of Penrith and into Cromwell's camp, and never again will I resent the resentment of a clown whose sweetheart I have made too free with."

"Pluck that feather from your hat," said Crispin.

Hogan obeyed him with a sigh.

"Truly it is written in Scripture that man in his time plays many parts. Who would have thought to see Harry Hogan playing the Puritan?"

"Unless you improve your acquaintance with Scripture you are not like to play it long," laughed Crispin, as he surveyed him. "There, man, you'll do well enough. Your coat is somewhat tight in the back, somewhat short in the skirt; but neither so tight nor so short but that it may be preferred to a winding-sheet, and that is the alternative, Harry."

Hogan replied by roundly cursing the coat and his own lucklessness. That done—and in no measured terms—he pronounced himself ready to set out, whereupon Crispin led the way below once more, and out into a hut that did service as a stable.

By the light of a lanthorn he saddled one of the two nags that stood there, and led it into the yard. Opening the door that abutted on to a field beyond, he bade Hogan mount. He held his stirrup for him, and cutting short the Irishman's voluble expressions of gratitude, he gave him "God speed," and urged him to use all dispatch in setting as great a distance as possible betwixt himself and Penrith before the

dawn.

CHAPTER III. THE LETTER

It was with a countenance sadly dejected that Crispin returned to his chamber and sate himself wearily upon the bed. With elbows on his knees and chin in his palms he stared straight before him, the usual steely brightness of his grey eyes dulled by the despondency that sat upon his face and drew deep furrows down his fine brow.

With a sigh he rose at last and idly fingered the papers he had taken from the pocket of Kenneth's coat. As he did so his glance was arrested by the signature at the foot of one. "Gregory Ashburn" was the name he read.

Ashen grew his cheeks as his eyes fastened upon that name, whilst the hand, to which no peril ever brought a tremor, shook now like an aspen. Feverishly he spread the letter on his knee, and with a glance, from dull that it had been, grown of a sudden fierce and cruel, he read the contents.

DEAR KENNETH,

Again I write in the hope that I may prevail upon you to quit Scotland and your attachment to a king, whose fortunes prosper not, nor can prosper. Cynthia is pining, and if you tarry longer from Castle Marleigh she must perforce think you but a laggard lover. Than this I have no more powerful argument wherewith to draw you from Perth to Sheringham, but this I think should prevail where others have failed me. We await you then, and whilst we wait we daily drink your health. Cynthia commends herself to your memory as doth my brother, and soon we hope to welcome you at Castle Marleigh. Believe, my dear Kenneth, that whilst I am, I am yours in affection.

Twice Crispin read the letter through. Then with set teeth and straining eyes he sat lost in thought.

Here indeed was a strange chance! This boy whom he had met at Perth, and enrolled in his company, was a friend of Ashburn's—the lover of Cynthia. Who might this Cynthia be?

Long and deep were his ponderings upon the unfathomable ways of Fate—for Fate he now believed was here at work to help him, revealing herself by means of this sign even at the very moment when he decried his luck. In memory he reviewed his meeting with the lad in the yard of Perth Castle a fortnight ago. Something in the boy's bearing, in his air, had caught Crispin's eye. He had looked him over, then approached, and bluntly asked his name and on what business he was come there. The youth had answered him civilly enough that he was Kenneth Stewart of Bailienochy, and that he was come to offer his sword to the King. Thereupon he had interested himself in the lad's behalf and had gained him a lieutenancy in his own company. Why he was attracted to a youth on whom never before had he set eyes was a matter that puzzled him not a little. Now he held, he thought, the explanation of it. It was the way of Fate.

This boy was sent into his life by a Heaven that at last showed compassion for the deep wrongs he had suffered; sent him as a key wherewith, should the need occur, to open him the gates of Castle Marleigh.

In long strides he paced the chamber, turning the matter over in his mind. Aye, he would use the lad should the need arise. Why scruple? Had he ever received aught but disdain and scorn at the hands of Kenneth.

Day was breaking ere he sought his bed, and already the sun was

up when at length he fell into a troubled sleep, vowing that he would mend his wild ways and seek to gain the boy's favour against the time when he might have need of him.

When later he restored the papers to Kenneth, explaining to what use he had put the coat, he refrained from questioning him concerning Gregory Ashburn. The docility of his mood on that occasion came as a surprise to Kenneth, who set it down to Sir Crispin's desire to conciliate him into silence touching the harbouring of Hogan. In that same connexion Crispin showed him calmly and clearly that he could not now inform without involving himself to an equally dangerous extent. And partly through the fear of this, partly won over by Crispin's persuasions, the lad determined to hold his peace.

Nor had he cause to regret it thereafter, for throughout that tedious march he found his roystering companion singularly meek and kindly. Indeed he seemed a different man. His old swagger and roaring bluster disappeared; he drank less, diced less, blasphemed less, and stormed less than in the old days before the halt at Penrith; but rode, a silent, thoughtful figure, so self-contained and of so godly a mien as would have rejoiced the heart of the sourest Puritan. The wild tantivy boy had vanished, and the sobriquet of "Tavern Knight" was fast becoming a misnomer.

Kenneth felt drawn more towards him, deeming him a penitent that had seen at last the error of his ways. And thus things prevailed until the almost triumphal entry into the city of Worcester on the twenty-third of August.

CHAPTER IV. AT THE SIGN OF THE MITRE

For a week after the coming of the King to Worcester, Crispin's relations with Kenneth steadily improved. By an evil chance, however, there befell on the eve of the battle that which renewed with heightened intensity the enmity which the lad had fostered for him, but which lately he had almost overcome.

The scene of this happening—leastways of that which led to it—was The Mitre Inn, in the High Street of Worcester.

In the common-room one day sat as merry a company of carousers as ever gladdened the soul of an old tantivy boy. Youthful ensigns of Lesley's Scottish horse—caring never a fig for the Solemn League and Covenant—rubbed shoulders with beribboned Cavaliers of Lord Talbot's company; gay young lairds of Pitscottie's Highlanders, unmindful of the Kirk's harsh commandments of sobriety, sat cheek by jowl with rakehelly officers of Dalzell's Brigade, and pledged the King in many a stoup of canary and many a can of stout March ale.

On every hand spirits ran high and laughter filled the chamber, the mirth of some having its source in a neighbour's quip, that of others having no source at all save in the wine they had taken.

At one table sat a gentleman of the name of Faversham, who had ridden on the previous night in that ill-fated camisado that should have resulted in the capture of Cromwell at Spetchley, but which, owing to a betrayal—when was a Stuart not betrayed and sold?—miscarried. He was relating to the group about him the details of that disaster.

"Oddslife, gentlemen," he was exclaiming, "I tell you that, but for that roaring dog, Sir Crispin Galliard, the whole of Middleton's regiment had been cut to pieces. There we stood on Red Hill, trapped as ever fish in a net, with the whole of Lilburne's men rising out of the ground to enclose and destroy us. A living wall of steel it was, and on every hand the call to surrender. There was dismay in my heart, as I'll swear there was dismay in the heart of every man of us, and I make little doubt, gentlemen, that with but scant pressing we had thrown down our arms, so disheartened were we by that ambush. Then of a sudden there arose above the clatter of steel and Puritan cries, a loud, clear, defiant shout of 'Hey for Cavaliers!'"

"I turned, and there in his stirrups stood that madman Galliard, waving his sword and holding his company together with the power of his will, his courage, and his voice. The sight of him was like wine to our blood. 'Into them, gentlemen; follow me!' he roared. And then, with a hurricane of oaths, he hurled his company against the pike-men. The blow was irresistible, and above the din of it came that voice of his again: 'Up, Cavaliers! Slash the cuckolds to ribbons, gentlemen!' The cropears gave way, and like a river that has burst its dam, we poured through the opening in their ranks and headed back for Worcester."

There was a roar of voices as Faversham ended, and around that table "The Tavern Knight" was for some minutes the only toast.

Meanwhile half a dozen merry-makers at a table hard by, having drunk themselves out of all sense of fitness, were occupied in baiting a pale-faced lad, sombrely attired, who seemed sadly out of place in that wild company—indeed, he had been better advised to have avoided it.

The matter had been set afoot by a pleasantry of Ensign Tyler's, of Massey's dragoons, with a playful allusion to a letter in a feminine hand which Kenneth had let fall, and which Tyler had restored to him.

Quip had followed quip until in their jests they transcended all bounds. Livid with passion and unable to endure more, Kenneth had sprung up.

"Damnation!" he blazed, bringing his clenched hand down upon the table. "One more of your foul jests and he that utters it shall answer to me!"

The suddenness of his action and the fierceness of his tone and gesture—a fierceness so grotesquely ill-attuned to his slender frame and clerkly attire left the company for a moment speechless with amazement. Then a mighty burst of laughter greeted him, above which sounded the shrill voice of Tyler, who held his sides, and down whose crimson cheeks two tears of mirth were trickling.

"Oh, fie, fie, good Master Stewart!" he gasped. "What think you would the reverend elders say to this bellicose attitude and this profane tongue of yours?"

"And what think you would the King say to this drunken poltroonery of yours?" was the hot unguarded answer. "Poltroonery, I say," he repeated, embracing the whole company in his glance.

The laughter died down as Kenneth's insult penetrated their befuddled minds. An instant's lull there was, like the lull in nature that precedes a clap of thunder. Then, as with one accord, a dozen of them bore down upon him.

It was a vile thing they did, perhaps; but then they had drunk deep, and Kenneth Stewart counted no friend amongst them. In an instant they had him, kicking and biting, on the floor; his doublet was torn rudely open, and from his breast Tyler plucked the letter whose existence had led to this shameless scene.

But ere he could so much as unfold it, a voice rang harsh and imperative:

"Hold!"

Pausing, they turned to confront a tall, gaunt man in a leather jerkin and a broad hat decked by goose-quill, who came slowly forward.

"The Tavern Knight," cried one, and the shout of "A rouse for the hero of Red Hill!" was taken up on every hand. For despite his sour visage and ungracious ways there was not a roysterer in the Royal army to whom he was not dear.

But as he now advanced, the coldness of his bearing and the forbidding set of his face froze them into silence.

"Give me that letter," he demanded sternly of Tyler.

Taken aback, Tyler hesitated for a second, whilst Crispin waited with hand outstretched. Vainly did he look round for sign or word of help or counsel. None was afforded him by his fellow-revellers, who one and all hung back in silence.

Seeing himself thus unsupported, and far from wishing to try conclusions with Galliard, Tyler with an ill grace surrendered the paper; and, with a pleasant bow and a word of thanks, delivered with never so slight a saturnine smile, Crispin turned on his heel and left the tavern as abruptly as he had entered it.

The din it was that had attracted him as he passed by on his way to the Episcopal Palace where a part of his company was on guard duty. Thither he now pursued his way, bearing with him the letter which so opportunely he had become possessed of, and which he hoped might throw further light upon Kenneth's relations with the Ashburns.

But as he reached the palace there was a quick step behind him, and a hand fell upon his arm. He turned.

"Ah, 'tis you, Kenneth," he muttered, and would have passed on, but

the boy's hand took him by the sleeve.

"Sir Crispin," said he, "I came to thank you."

"I have done nothing to deserve your thanks. Give you good evening." And he made shift to mount the steps when again Kenneth detained him.

"You are forgetting the letter, Sir Crispin," he ventured, and he held out his hand to receive it.

Galliard saw the gesture, and for a moment it crossed his mind in self-reproach that the part he chose to play was that of a bully. A second he hesitated. Should he surrender the letter unread, and fight on without the aid of the information it might bring him? Then the thought of Ashburn and of his own deep wrongs that cried out for vengeance, overcame and stifled the generous impulse. His manner grew yet more frozen as he made answer:

"There has been too much ado about this letter to warrant my so lightly parting with it. First I will satisfy myself that I have been no unconscious abettor of treason. You shall have your letter tomorrow, Master Stewart."

"Treason!" echoed Kenneth. And before that cold rebuff of Crispin's his mood changed from conciliatory to resentful—resentful towards the fates that made him this man's debtor.

"I assure you, on my honour," said he, mastering his feelings, "that this is but a letter from the lady I hope to make my wife. Assuredly, sir, you will not now insist upon reading it."

"Assuredly I shall."

"But, sir—"

"Master Stewart, I am resolved, and were you to talk from now till

doomsday, you would not turn me from my purpose. So good night to you."

"Sir Crispin," cried the boy, his voice quavering with passion, "while I live you shall not read that letter!"

"Hoity-toity, sir! What words! What heroics! And yet you would have me believe this paper innocent?"

"As innocent as the hand that penned it, and if I so oppose your reading it, it is because thus much I owe her. Believe me, sir," he added, his accents returning to a beseeching key, "when again I swear that it is no more than such a letter any maid may write her lover. I thought that you had understood all this when you rescued me from those bullies at The Mitre. I thought that what you did was a noble and generous deed. Instead—" The lad paused.

"Continue, sir," Galliard requested coldly. "Instead?"

"There can be no instead, Sir Crispin. You will not mar so good an action now. You will give me my letter, will you not?"

Callous though he was, Crispin winced. The breeding of earlier days—so sadly warped, alas!—cried out within him against the lie that he was acting by pretending to suspect treason in that woman's pothooks. Instincts of gentility and generosity long dead took life again, resuscitated by that call of conscience. He was conquered.

"There, take your letter, boy, and plague me no more," he growled, as he held it out to Kenneth. And without waiting for reply or acknowledgment, he turned on his heel, and entered the palace. But he had yielded overlate to leave a good impression and, as Kenneth turned away, it was with a curse upon Galliard, for whom his detestation seemed to increase at every step.

CHAPTER V. AFTER WORCESTER FIELD

The morn of the third of September—that date so propitious to Cromwell, so disastrous to Charles—found Crispin the centre of a company of gentlemen in battle-harness, assembled at The Mitre Inn. For a toast he gave them "The damnation of all crop-ears."

"Sirs," quoth he, "a fair beginning to a fair day. God send the evening find us as merry."

It was not to be his good fortune, however, to be in the earlier work of the day. Until afternoon he was kept within the walls of Worcester, chafing to be where hard knocks were being dealt—with Montgomery at Powick Bridge, or with Pittscottie on Bunn's Hill. But he was forced to hold his mood in curb, and wait until Charles and his advisers should elect to make the general attack.

It came at last, and with it came the disastrous news that Montgomery was routed, and Pittscottie in full retreat, whilst Dalzell had surrendered, and Keith was taken. Then was it that the main body of the Royal army formed up at the Sidbury Gate, and Crispin found himself in the centre, which was commanded by the King in person. In the brilliant charge that followed there was no more conspicuous figure, no voice rang louder in encouragement to the men. For the first time that day Cromwell's Ironsides gave back before the Royalists, who in that fierce, irresistible charge, swept all before them until they had reached the battery on Perry Wood, and driven the Roundheads from it hell-to-leather.

It was a glorious moment, a moment in which the fortunes of the day

hung in the balance; the turn of the tide it seemed to them at last.

Crispin was among the first to reach the guns, and with a great shout of "Hurrah for Cavaliers!" he had cut down two gunners that yet lingered. His cry lacked not an echo, and a deafening cheer broke upon the clamorous air as the Royalists found themselves masters of the position. Up the hill on either side pressed the Duke of Hamilton and the Earl of Derby to support the King. It but remained for Lesley's Scottish horse to follow and complete the rout of the Parliamentary forces. Had they moved at that supreme moment who shall say what had been the issue of Worcester field? But they never stirred, and the Royalists waiting on Perry Wood cursed Lesley for a foul traitor who had sold his King.

With bitterness did they then realize that their great effort was to be barren, their gallant charge in vain. Unsupported, their position grew fast untenable.

And presently, when Cromwell had gathered his scattered Ironsides, that gallant host was driven fighting, down the hill and back to the shelter of Worcester. With the Roundheads pressing hotly upon them they gained at last the Sidbury Gate, but only to find that an overset ammunition wagon blocked the entrance. In this plight, and without attempting to move it, they faced about to make a last stand against the Puritan onslaught.

Charles had flung himself from his charger and climbed the obstruction, and in this he was presently followed by others, amongst whom was Crispin.

In the High Street Galliard came upon the King, mounted on a fresh horse, addressing a Scottish regiment of foot. The soldiers had thrown down their arms and stood sullenly before him, refusing to obey his command to take them up again and help him attempt, even at that late hour, to retrieve the fortunes of the day. Crispin looked on

in scorn and loathing. His passions awakened at the sight of Lesley's inaction needed but this last breath to fan it into a very blaze of wrath. And what he said to them touching themselves, their country, and the Kirk Committee that had made sheep of them, was so bitter and contemptuous that none but men in the most parlous and pitiable of conditions could have suffered it.

He was still hurling vituperations at them when Colonel Pride with a troop of Parliamentary horse—having completely overcome the resistance at the Sidbury Gate—rode into the town. At the news of this, Crispin made a last appeal to the infantry.

"Afoot, you Scottish curs!" he thundered. "Would you rather be cut to pieces as you stand? Up, you dogs, and since you know not how to live, die at least without shame!"

But in vain did he rail. In sullen quiet they remained, their weapons on the ground before them. And then, as Crispin was turning away to see to his own safety, the King rode up again, and again he sought to revive the courage that was dead in those Scottish hearts. If they would not stand by him, he cried at last, let them slay him there, sooner than that he should be taken captive to perish on the scaffold.

While he was still urging them, Crispin unceremoniously seized his bridle.

"Will you stand here until you are taken, sire?" he cried. "Leave them, and look to your safety."

Charles turned a wondering eye upon the resolute, battle-grimed face of the man that thus addressed him. A faint, sad smile parted his lips.

"You are right, sir," he made answer. "Attend me." And turning about he rode down a side street with Galliard following closely in his wake.

With the intention of doffing his armour and changing his apparel, he made for the house in New Street where he had been residing. As they drew up before the door, Crispin, chancing to look over his shoulder, rapped out an oath.

"Hasten, sire," he exclaimed, "here is a portion of Colonel's Pride's troop."

The King looked round, and at sight of the Parliamentarians, "It is ended," he muttered despairingly. But already Crispin had sprung from his horse.

"Dismount, sire," he roared, and he assisted him so vigorously as to appear to drag him out of the saddle.

"Which way?" demanded Charles, looking helplessly from left to right. "Which way?"

But Crispin's quick mind had already shaped a plan. Seizing the royal arm—for who in such straits would deal ceremoniously?—he thrust the King across the threshold, and, following, closed the door and shot its only bolt. But the shout set up by the Puritans announced to them that their movement had been detected.

The King turned upon Sir Crispin, and in the half-light of the passage wherein they stood Galliard made out the frown that bent the royal brows.

"And now?" demanded Charles, a note almost of reproach in his voice.

"And now begone, sire," returned the knight. "Begone ere they come."

"Begone?" echoed Charles, in amazement. "But whither, sir? Whither and how?"

His last words were almost drowned in the din without, as the Roundheads pulled up before the house.

"By the back, sire," was the impatient answer. "Through door or window—as best you can. The back must overlook the Corn-Market; that is your way. But hasten—in God's name hasten!—ere they bethink them of it and cut off your retreat."

As he spoke a violent blow shook the door.

"Quick, Your Majesty," he implored, in a frenzy.

Charles moved to depart, then paused. "But you, sir? Do you not come with me?"

Crispin stamped his foot, and turned a face livid with impatience upon his King. In that moment all distinction of rank lay forgotten.

"I must remain," he answered, speaking quickly. "That crazy door will not hold for a second once a stout man sets his shoulder to it. After the door they will find me, and for your sake I trust I may prove of stouter stuff. Fare you well, sire," he ended in a softer tone. "God guard Your Majesty and send you happier days."

And, bending his knee, Crispin brushed the royal hand with his hot lips.

A shower of blows clattered upon the timbers of the door, and one of its panels was splintered by a musket-shot. Charles saw it, and with a muttered word that was not caught by Crispin, he obeyed the knight, and fled.

Scarce had he disappeared down that narrow passage, when the door gave way completely and with a mighty crash fell in. Over the ruins of it sprang a young Puritan-scarce more than a boy—shouting: "The Lord of Hosts!"

But ere he had taken three strides the point of Crispin's tuck-sword gave him pause.

"Halt! You cannot pass this way."

"Back, son of Moab!" was the Roundhead's retort. "Hinder me not, at your peril."

Behind him, in the doorway, pressed others, who cried out to him to cut down the Amalekite that stood between them and the young man Charles Stuart. But Crispin laughed grimly for answer, and kept the officer in check with his point.

"Back, or I cut you down," threatened the Roundhead. "I am seeking the malignant Stuart."

"If by those blasphemous words you mean his sacred Majesty, learn that he is where you will never be—in God's keeping."

"Presumptuous hound," stormed the lad, "giveway!"

Their swords met, and for a moment they ground one against the other; then Crispin's blade darted out, swift as a lightning flash, and took his opponent in the throat.

"You would have it so, rash fool," he deprecated.

The boy hurtled back into the arms of those behind, and as he fell he dropped his rapier, which rolled almost to Crispin's feet. The knight stooped, and when again he stood erect, confronting the rebels in that narrow passage, he held a sword in either hand.

There was a momentary pause in the onslaught, then to his dismay Crispin saw the barrel of a musket pointed at him over the shoulder of one of his foremost assailants. He set his teeth for what was to come, and braced himself with the hope that the King might already have made good his escape.

The end was at hand, he thought, and a fitting end, since his last hope of redress was gone—destroyed by that fatal day's defeat.

But of a sudden a cry rang out in a voice wherein rage and anguish were blended fearfully, and simultaneously the musket barrel was dashed aside.

"Take him alive!" was the cry of that voice. "Take him alive!" It was Colonel Pride himself, who having pushed his way forward, now beheld the bleeding body of the youth Crispin had slain. "Take him alive!" roared the old man. Then his voice changing to one of exquisite agony—"My son, my boy," he moaned.

At a glance Crispin caught the situation; but the old Puritan's grief left him unmoved.

"You must have me alive?" he laughed grimly. "Gadslife, but the honour is like to cost you dear. Well, sirs? Who will be next to court the distinction of dying by the sword of a gentleman?" he mocked them. "Come on, you sons of dogs!"

His answer was an angry growl, and straightway two men sprang forward. More than two could not attack him at once by virtue of the narrowness of the passage. Again steel clashed on steel. Crispin—lithe as a panther crouched low, and took one of their swords on each of his.

A disengage and a double he foiled with ease, then by a turn of the wrist he held for a second one opponent's blade; and before the fellow could disengage again, he had brought his right-hand sword across, and stabbed him in the neck. Simultaneously his other opponent had rushed in and thrust. It was a risk Crispin was forced to take, trusting to his armour to protect him. It did him the service he hoped from it; the trooper's sword glanced harmlessly aside, whilst the fellow himself, overbalanced by the fury of his onslaught,

staggered helplessly forward. Ere he could recover, Crispin had spitted him from side to side betwixt the straps that held his back and breast together.

As the two men went down, one after the other, the watching troopers set up a shout of rage, and pressed forward in a body. But the Tavern Knight stood his ground, and his points danced dangerously before the eyes of the two foremost. Alarmed, they shouted to those behind to give them room to handle their swords; but too late. Crispin had seen the advantage, and taken it. Twice he had thrust, and another two sank bleeding to the ground.

At that there came a pause, and somewhere in the street a knot of them expostulated with Colonel Pride, and begged to be allowed to pick off that murderous malignant with their pistols. But the grief-stricken father was obdurate. He would have the Amalekite alive that he might cause him to die a hundred deaths in one.

And so two more were sent in to try conclusions with the indomitable Galliard. They went to work more warily. He on the left parried Crispin's stroke, then knocking up the knight's blade, he rushed in and seized his wrist, shouting to those behind to follow up. But even as he did so, Crispin sent back his other antagonist, howling and writhing with the pain of a transfixed sword-arm, and turned his full attention upon the foe that clung to him. Not a second did he waste in thought. To have done so would have been fatal. Instinctively he knew that whilst he shortened his blade, others would rush in; so, turning his wrist, he caught the man a crushing blow full in the face with the pommel of his disengaged sword.

Fulminated by that terrific stroke, the man reeled back into the arms of another who advanced.

Again there fell a pause. Then silently a Roundhead charged Sir Crispin with a pike. He leapt nimbly aside, and the murderous lunge

shot past him; as he did so he dropped his left-hand sword and caught at the halberd. Exerting his whole strength in a mighty pull, he brought the fellow that wielded it toppling forward, and received him on his outstretched blade.

Covered with blood—the blood of others—Crispin stood before them now. He was breathing hard and sweating at every pore, but still grim and defiant. His strength, he realized, was ebbing fast. Yet he shook himself, and asked them with a glibing laugh did they not think that they had better shoot him.

The Roundheads paused again. The fight had lasted but a few moments, and already five of them were stretched upon the ground, and a sixth disabled. There was something in the Tavern Knight's attitude and terrific, blood-bespattered appearance that deterred them. From out of his powder-blackened face his eyes flashed fiercely, and a mocking diabolical smile played round the corners of his mouth. What manner of man, they asked themselves, was this who could laugh in such an extremity? Superstition quickened their alarm as they gazed upon his undaunted front, and told themselves this was no man they fought against, but the foul fiend himself.

"Well, sirs," he mocked them presently. "How long am I to await your pleasure?"

They snarled for answer, yet hung back until Colonel Pride's voice shook them into action. In a body they charged him now, so suddenly and violently that he was forced to give way. Cunningly did he ply his sword before them, but ineffectually. They had adopted fresh tactics, and engaging his blade they acted cautiously and defensively, advancing steadily, and compelling him to fall back.

Sir Crispin guessed their scheme at last, and vainly did he try to hold his ground; his retreat slackened perhaps, but it was still a retreat, and their defensive action gave him no opening. Vainly, yet by

every trick of fence he was master of, did he seek to lure the two foremost into attacking him; stolidly they pursued the adopted plan, and steadily they impelled him backward.

At last he reached the staircase, and he realized that did he allow himself to go farther he was lost irretrievably. Yet farther was he driven; despite the strenuous efforts he put forth, until on his right there was room for a man to slip on to the stairs and take him in the flank. Twice one of his opponents essayed it, and twice did Galliard's deadly point repel him. But at the third attempt the man got through, another stepped into his place in front, and thus from two, Crispin's immediate assailants became increased to three.

He realized that the end was at hand, and wildly did he lay about him, but to no purpose. And presently, he who had gained the stairs leaped suddenly upon him sideways, and clung to his swordarm. Before he could make a move to shake himself free, the two that faced him had caught at his other arm.

Like one possessed he struggled then, for the sheer lust of striving; but they that held him gripped effectively.

Thrice they bore him struggling to the ground, and thrice he rose again and sought to shake them from him as a bull shakes off a pack of dogs. But they held fast, and again they forced him down; others sprang to their aid, and the Tavern Knight could rise no more.

"Disarm the dog!" cried Pride. "Disarm and truss him hand and foot."

"Sirs, you need not," he answered, gasping. "I yield me. Take my sword. I'll do your bidding."

The fight was fought and lost, but it had been a great Homeric struggle, and he rejoiced almost that upon so worthy a scene of his life was the curtain to fall, and again to hope that, thanks to the stand

he had made, the King should have succeeded in effecting his escape.

CHAPTER VI. COMPANIONS IN MISFORTUNE

Through the streets of Worcester the Roundheads dragged Sir Crispin, and for all that he was as hard and callous a man as any that ever buckled on a cuirass, the horrors that in going he beheld caused him more than once to shudder.

The place was become a shambles, and the very kennels ran with blood. The Royalist defeat was by now complete, and Cromwell's fanatic butchers overran the town, vying to outdo one another in savage cruelty and murder. Houses were being broken into and plundered, and their inmates—resisting or unresisting; armed or unarmed; men, women and children alike were pitilessly being put to the sword. Charged was the air of Worcester with the din of that fierce massacre. The crashing of shivered timbers, as doors were beaten in, mingled with the clatter and grind of sword on sword, the crack of musket and pistol, the clank of armour, and the stamping of men and horses in that troubled hour.

And above all rang out the fierce, raucous blasphemy of the slayers, and the shrieks of agony, the groans, the prayers, and curses of their victims.

All this Sir Crispin saw and heard, and in the misery of it all, he for the while forgot his own sorry condition, and left unheeded the pike-butt wherewith the Puritan at his heels was urging him along.

They paused at length in a quarter unknown to him before a tolerably large house. Its doors hung wide, and across the threshold, in and out, moved two continuous streams of officers and men.

A while Crispin and his captors stood in the spacious hall; then they ushered him roughly into one of the abutting rooms. Here he was brought face to face with a man of middle height, red and coarse of countenance and large of nose, who stood fully armed in the centre of the chamber. His head was uncovered, and on the table at his side stood the morion he had doffed. He looked up as they entered, and for a few seconds rested his glance sourly upon the lank, bold-eyed prisoner, who coldly returned his stare.

"Whom have we here?" he inquired at length, his scrutiny having told him nothing.

"One whose offence is too heinous to have earned him a soldier's death, my lord," answered Pride.

"Therein you lie, you damned rebel!" cried Crispin. "If accuse you must, announce the truth. Tell Master Cromwell"—for he had guessed the man's identity—"that single-handed I held my own against you and a score of you curs, and that not until I had cut down seven of them was I taken. Tell him that, master psalm-singer, and let him judge whether you lied or not. Tell him, too, that you, who—"

"Have done!" cried Cromwell at length, stamping his foot. "Peace, or I'll have you gagged. Now, Colonel, let us hear your accusation."

At great length, and with endless interlarding of proverbs did Pride relate how this impious malignant had been the means of the young man, Charles Stuart, making good his escape when otherwise he must have fallen into their hands. He accused him also of the murder of his son and of four other stout, God-fearing troopers, and urged Cromwell to let him deal with the malignant as he deserved.

The Lord General's answer took expression in a form that was little puritanical. Then, checking himself:

"He is the second they have brought me within ten minutes charged with the same offence," said he. "The other one is a young fool who gave Charles Stuart his horse at Saint Martin's Gate. But for him again the young man had been taken."

"So he has escaped!" cried Crispin. "Now, God be praised!"

Cromwell stared at him blankly for a moment, then:

"You will do well, sir," he muttered sourly, "to address the Lord on your own behalf. As for that young man of Baal, your master, rejoice not yet in his escape. By the same crowning mercy in which the Lord hath vouchsafed us victory to-day shall He also deliver the malignant youth into my hands. For your share in retarding his capture your life, sir, shall pay forfeit. You shall hang at daybreak together with that other malignant who assisted Charles at the Saint Martin's Gate."

"I shall at least hang in good company," said Crispin pleasantly, "and for that, sir, I give you thanks."

"You will pass the night with that other fool," Cromwell continued, without heeding the interruption, "and I pray that you may spend it in such meditation as shall fit you for your end. Take him away."

"But, my lord," exclaimed Pride, advancing.

"What now?"

Crispin caught not his answer, but his half-whispered words were earnest and pleading. Cromwell shook his head.

"I cannot sanction it. Let it satisfy you that he dies. I condole with you in your bereavement, but it is the fortune of war. Let the thought that your son died in a godly cause be of comfort to you. Bear in mind, Colonel Pride, that Abraham hesitated not to offer up his child to the Lord. And so, fare you well."

Colonel Pride's face worked oddly, and his eyes rested for a second upon the stern, unmoved figure of the Tavern Knight in malice and vindictiveness. Then, shrugging his shoulders in token of unwilling resignation, he withdrew, whilst Crispin was led out.

In the hall again they kept him waiting for some moments, until at length an officer came up, and bidding him follow, led the way to the guardroom. Here they stripped him of his back-and-breast, and when that was done the officer again led the way, and Crispin followed between two troopers. They made him mount three flights of stairs, and hurried him along a passage to a door by which a soldier stood mounting guard. At a word from the officer the sentry turned, and unfastening the heavy bolts, he opened the door. Roughly the officer bade Sir Crispin enter, and stood aside that he might pass.

Crispin obeyed him silently, and crossed the threshold to find himself within a mean, gloomy chamber, and to hear the heavy door closed and made fast again behind him. His stout heart sank a little as he realized that that closed door shut out to him the world for ever; but once again would he cross that threshold, and that would be the preface to the crossing of the greater threshold of eternity.

Then something stirred in one of that room's dark corners, and he started, to see that he was not alone, remembering that Cromwell had said he was to have a companion in his last hours.

"Who are you?" came a dull voice—a voice that was eloquent of misery.

"Master Stewart!" he exclaimed, recognizing his companion. "So it was you gave the King your horse at the Saint Martin's Gate! May Heaven reward you. Gadswounds," he added, "I had little thought to meet you again this side the grave."

"Would to Heaven you had not!" was the doleful answer. "What

make you here?"

"By your good leave and with your help I'll make as merry as a man may whose sands are all but run. The Lord General—whom the devil roast in his time will make a pendulum of me at daybreak, and gives me the night in which to prepare."

The lad came forward into the light, and eyed Sir Crispin sorrowfully.

"We are companions in misfortune, then."

"Were we ever companions in aught else? Come, sir, be of better cheer. Since it is to be our last night in this poor world, let us spend it as pleasantly as may be."

"Pleasantly?"

"Twill clearly be difficult," answered Crispin, with a laugh. "Were we in Christian hands they'd not deny us a black jack over which to relish our last jest, and to warm us against the night air, which must be chill in this garret. But these crop-ears..." He paused to peer into the pitcher on the table. "Water! Pah! A scurvy lot, these psalm-mongers!"

"Merciful Heaven! Have you no thought for your end?"

"Every thought, good youth, every thought, and I would fain prepare me for the morning's dance in a more jovial and hearty fashion than Old Noll will afford me—damn him!"

Kenneth drew back in horror. His old dislike for Crispin was all aroused by this indecent flippancy at such a time. Just then the thought of spending the night in his company almost effaced the horror of the gallows whereof he had been a prey.

Noting the movement, Crispin laughed disdainfully, and walked

towards the window. It was a small opening, by which two iron bars, set crosswise, defied escape. Moreover, as Crispin looked out, he realized that a more effective barrier lay in the height of the window itself. The house overlooked the river on that side; it was built upon an embankment some thirty feet high; around this, at the base of the edifice, and some forty feet below the window, ran a narrow pathway protected by an iron railing. But so narrow was it, that had a man sprung from the casement of Crispin's prison, it was odds he would have fallen into the river some seventy feet below. Crispin turned away with a sigh. He had approached the window almost in hope; he quitted it in absolute despair.

"Ah, well," said he, "we will hang, and there's the end of it."

Kenneth had resumed his seat in the corner, and, wrapped in his cloak, he sat steeped in meditation, his comely young face seared with lines of pain. As Crispin looked upon him then, his heart softened and went out to the lad—went out as it had done on the night when first he had beheld him in the courtyard of Perth Castle.

He recalled the details of that meeting; he remembered the sympathy that had drawn him to the boy, and how Kenneth had at first appeared to reciprocate that feeling, until he came to know him for the rakehell, godless ruffler that he was. He thought of the gulf that gradually had opened up between them. The lad was righteous and God-fearing, truthful and sober, filled with stern ideals by which he sought to shape his life. He had taxed Crispin with his dissoluteness, and Crispin, despising him for a milksop, had returned to his disgust with mockery, and had found a fiendish pleasure in arousing that disgust at every turn.

To-night, as Crispin eyed the youth, and remembered that at dawn he was to die in his company, he realized that he had used him ill, that his behaviour towards him had been that of the dissolute ruffler he was become, rather than of the gentleman he had once accounted

himself.

"Kenneth," he said at length, and his voice bore so unusually mild a ring that the lad looked up in surprise. "I have heard tell that it is no uncommon thing for men upon the threshold of eternity to seek to repair some of the evil they may have done in life."

Kenneth shuddered. Crispin's words reminded him again of his approaching end. The ruffler paused a moment, as if awaiting a reply or a word of encouragement. Then, as none came, he continued:

"I am not one of your repentant sinners, Kenneth. I have lived my life—God, what a life!—and as I have lived I shall die, unflinching and unchanged. Dare one to presume that a few hours spent in whining prayers shall atone for years of reckless dissoluteness? 'Tis a doctrine of cravens, who, having lacked in life the strength to live as conscience bade them, lack in death the courage to stand by that life's deeds. I am no such traitor to myself. If my life has been vile my temptations have been sore, and the rest is in God's hands. But in my course I have sinned against many men; many a tall fellow's life have I wantonly wrecked; some, indeed, I have even taken in wantonness or anger. They are not by, nor, were they, could I now make amends. But you at least are here, and what little reparation may lie in asking pardon I can make. When I first saw you at Perth it was my wish to make you my friend—a feeling I have not had these twenty years towards any man. I failed. How else could it have been? The dove may not nest with the carrion bird."

"Say no more, sir," cried Kenneth, genuinely moved, and still more amazed by this curious humility in one whom he had never known other than arrogant and mocking. "I beseech you, say no more. For what trifling wrongs you may have done me I forgive you as freely as I would be forgiven. Is it not written that it shall be so?" And he held out his hand.

"A little more I must say, Kenneth," answered the other, leaving the outstretched hand unheeded. "The feeling that was born in me towards you at Perth Castle is on me again. I seek not to account for it. Perchance it springs from my recognition of the difference betwixt us; perchance I see in you a reflection of what once I was myself—honourable and true. But let that be. The sun is setting over yonder, and you and I will behold it no more. That to me is a small thing. I am weary. Hope is dead; and when that is dead what does it signify that the body die also? Yet in these last hours that we shall spend together I would at least have your esteem. I would have you forget my past harshness and the wrongs that I may have done you down to that miserable affair of your sweetheart's letter, yesterday. I would have you realize that if I am vile, I am but such as a vile world hath made me. And tomorrow when we go forth together, I would have you see in me at least a man in whose company you are not ashamed to die."

Again the lad shuddered.

"Shall I tell you my story, Kenneth? I have a strong desire to go over this poor life of mine again in memory, and by giving my thoughts utterance it may be that they will take more vivid shape. For the rest my tale may wile away a little of the time that's left, and when you have heard me you shall judge me, Kenneth. What say you?"

Despite the parlous condition whereunto the fear of the morrow had reduced him, this new tone of Galliard's so wrought upon him then that he was almost eager in his request that Sir Crispin should unfold his story. And this the Tavern Knight then set himself to do.

CHAPTER VII. THE TAVERN KNIGHT'S STORY

Sir Crispin walked from the window by which he had been standing, to the rough bed, and flung himself full length upon it. The only chair that dismal room contained was occupied by Kenneth. Galliard heaved a sigh of physical satisfaction.

"Fore George, I knew not I was so tired," he murmured. And with that he lapsed for some moments into silence, his brows contracted in the frown of one who collects his thoughts. At length he began, speaking in calm, unemotional tones that held perchance deeper pathos than a more passionate utterance could have endowed them with:

"Long ago—twenty years ago—I was, as I have said, an honourable lad, to whom the world was a fair garden, a place of rosebuds, fragrant with hope. Those, Kenneth, were my illusions. They are the illusions of youth; they are youth itself, for when our illusions are gone we are no longer young no matter what years we count. Keep your illusions, Kenneth; treasure them, hoard them jealously for as long as you may."

"I dare swear, sir," answered the lad, with bitter humour, "that such illusions as I have I shall treasure all my life. You forget, Sir Crispin."

"Slife, I had indeed forgotten. For the moment I had gone back twenty years, and to-morrow was none so near." He laughed softly, as though his lapse of memory amused him. Then he resumed:

"I was the only son, Kenneth, of the noblest gentleman that ever

lived—the heir to an ancient, honoured name, and to a castle as proud and lands as fair and broad as any in England.

"They lie who say that from the dawn we may foretell the day. Never was there a brighter dawn than that of my life; never a day so wasted; never an evening so dark. But let that be.

"Our lands were touched upon the northern side by those of a house with which we had been at feud for two hundred years and more. Puritans they were, stern and haughty in their ungodly righteousness. They held us dissolute because we enjoyed the life that God had given us, and there I am told the hatred first began.

"When I was a lad of your years, Kenneth, the hall—ours was the castle, theirs the hall—was occupied by two young sparks who made little shift to keep up the pious reputation of their house. They dwelt there with their mother—a woman too weak to check their ways, and holding, mayhap, herself, views not altogether puritanical. They discarded the sober black their forbears had worn for generations, and donned gay Cavalier garments. They let their love-locks grow; set plumes in their castors and jewels in their ears; they drank deep, ruffled it with the boldest and decked their utterance with great oaths—for to none doth blasphemy come more readily than to lips that in youth have been overmuch shaped in unwilling prayer.

"Me they avoided as they would a plague, and when at times we met, our salutations were grave as those of, men on the point of crossing swords. I despised them for their coarse, ruffling apostasy more than ever my father had despised their father for a bigot, and they guessing or knowing by instinct what was in my mind held me in deeper rancour even than their ancestors had done mine. And more galling still and yet a sharper spur to their hatred did those whelps find in the realization that all the countryside held, as it had held for ages, us to be their betters. A hard blow to their pride was that, but their revenge was not long in coming.

"It chanced they had a cousin—a maid as sweet and fair and pure as they were hideous and foul. We met in the meads—she and I. Spring was the time—God! It seems but yesterday!—and each in our bearing towards the other forgot the traditions of the names we bore. And as at first we had met by chance, so did we meet later by contrivance, not once or twice, but many times. God, how sweet she was! How sweet was all the world! How sweet it was to live and to be young! We loved. How else could it have been? What to us were traditions, what to us the hatred that for centuries had held our families asunder? In us it lay to set aside all that.

"And so I sought my father. He cursed me at first for an unnatural son who left unheeded the dictates of our blood. But anon, when on my knees I had urged my cause with all the eloquent fervour that is but of youth—youth that loves—my father cursed no more. His thoughts went back maybe to the days of his own youth, and he bade me rise and go a-wooing as I listed. Nay, more than that he did. The first of our name was he out of ten generations to set foot across the threshold of the hall; he went on my behalf to sue for their cousin's hand.

"Then was their hour. To them that had been taught the humiliating lesson that we were their betters, one of us came suing. They from whom the countryside looked for silence when one of us spoke, had it in their hands at length to say us nay. And they said it. What answer my father made them, Kenneth, I know not, but very white was his face when I met him on the castle steps on his return. In burning words he told me of the insult they had put upon him, then silently he pointed to the Toledo that two years before he had brought me out of Spain, and left me. But I had understood. Softly I unsheathed that virgin blade and read the Spanish inscription, that through my tears of rage and shame seemed blurred; a proud inscription was it, instinct with the punctilio of proud Spain—'Draw me not without motive, sheathe me not without

honour.' Motive there was and to spare; honour I swore there should be; and with that oath, and that brave sword girt to me, I set out to my first combat."

Sir Crispin paused and a sigh escaped him, followed by a laugh of bitterness.

"I lost that sword years ago," said he musingly. "The sword and I have been close friends in life, but my companion has been a blade of coarser make, carrying no inscriptions to prick at a man's conscience and make a craven of him."

He laughed again, and again he fell a-musing, till Kenneth's voice aroused him.

"Your story, sir."

Twilight shadows were gathering in their garret, and as he turned his face towards the youth, he was unable to make out his features; but his tone had been eager, and Crispin noted that he sat with head bent forward and that his eyes shone feverishly.

"It interests you, eh? Ah, well—hot foot I went to the hall, and with burning words I called upon those dogs to render satisfaction for the dishonour they had put upon my house. Will you believe, Kenneth, that they denied me? They sheltered their craven lives behind a shield of mock valour. They would not fight a boy, they said, and bade me get my beard grown when haply they would give ear to my grievance.

"And so, a shame and rage a hundredfold more bitter than that which I had borne thither did I carry thence. My father bade me treasure up the memory of it against the time when my riper years should compel them to attend me, and this, by my every hope of heaven, I swore to do. He bade me further efface for ever from my mind all thought or hope of union with their cousin, and though I made him no answer at the time, yet in my heart I promised to obey him in

that, too. But I was young—scarce twenty. A week without sight of my mistress and I grew sick with despair. Then at length I came upon her, pale and tearful, one evening, and in an agony of passion and hopelessness I flung myself at her feet, and implored her to keep true to me and wait, and she, poor maid, to her undoing swore that she would. You are yourself a lover, Kenneth, and you may guess something of the impatience that anon beset me. How could I wait? I asked her this.

"Some fifty miles from the castle there was a little farm, in the very heart of the country, which had been left me by a sister of my mother's. Thither I now implored her to repair with me. I would find a priest to wed us, and there we should live a while in happiness, in solitude, and in love. An alluring picture did I draw with all a lover's cunning, and to the charms of it she fell a victim. We fled three days later.

"We were wed in the village that pays allegiance to the castle, and thereafter we travelled swiftly and undisturbed to that little homestead. There in solitude, with but two servants—a man and a maid whom I could trust—we lived and loved, and for a season, brief as all happiness is doomed to be, we were happy. Her cousins had no knowledge of that farm of mine, and though they searched the country for many a mile around, they searched in vain. My father knew—as I learned afterwards—but deeming that what was done might not be undone, he held his peace. In the following spring a babe was born to us, and our bliss made heaven of that cottage.

"Twas a month or so after the birth of our child that the blow descended. I was away, enjoying alone the pleasures of the chase; my man was gone a journey to the nearest town, whence he would not return until the morrow. Oft have I cursed the folly that led me to take my gun and go forth into the woods, leaving no protector for my wife but one weak woman.

"I returned earlier than I had thought to do, led mayhap by some angel that sought to have me back in time. But I came too late. At my gate I found two freshly ridden horses tethered, and it was with a dull foreboding in my heart that I sprang through the open door. Within—O God, the anguish of it!—stretched on the floor I beheld my love, a gaping sword-wound in her side, and the ground all bloody about her. For a moment I stood dumb in the spell of that horror, then a movement beyond, against the wall, aroused me, and I beheld her murderers cowering there, one with a naked sword in his hand.

"In that fell hour, Kenneth, my whole nature changed, and one who had ever been gentle was transformed into the violent, passionate man that you have known. As my eye encountered then her cousins, my blood seemed on the instant curdled in my veins; my teeth were set hard; my nerves and sinews knotted; my hands instinctively shifted to the barrel of my fowling-piece and clutched it with the fierceness that was in me—the fierceness of the beast about to spring upon those that have brought it to bay.

"For a moment I stood swaying there, my eyes upon them, and holding their craven glances fascinated. Then with a roar I leapt forward, the stock of my fowling-piece swung high above my head. And, as God lives, Kenneth, I had sent them straight to hell ere they could have raised a hand or made a cry to stay me. But as I sprang my foot slipped in the blood of my beloved, and in my fall I came close to her where she lay. The fowling-piece had escaped my grasp and crashed against the wall.

"I scarce knew what I did, but as I lay beside her it came to me that I did not wish to rise again—that already I had lived overlong. It came to me that, seeing me fallen, haply those cowards would seize the chance to make an end of me as I lay. I wished it so in that moment's frenzy, for I made no attempt to rise or to defend myself; instead I set my arms about my poor murdered love, and against her cold cheek I

set my face that was well-nigh as cold.

"And thus I lay, nor did they keep me long. A sword was passed through me from back to breast, whilst he who did it cursed me with a foul oath. The room grew dim; methought it swayed and that the walls were tottering; there was a buzz of sound in my ears, then a piercing cry in a baby voice. At the sound of it I vaguely wished for the strength to rise. As in the distance, I heard one of those butchers cry, "Haste, man; slit me that squalling bastard's throat!" And then I must have swooned."

Kenneth shuddered.

"My God, how horrible!" he cried. "But you were avenged, Sir Crispin," he added eagerly; "you were avenged?"

"When I regained consciousness," Crispin continued, as if he had not heard Kenneth's exclamation, "the cottage was in flames, set alight by them to burn the evidence of their foul deed. What I did I know not. I have tried to urge my memory along from the point of my awakening, but in vain. By what miracle I crawled forth, I cannot tell; but in the morning I was found by my man lying prone in the garden, half a dozen paces from the blackened ruins of the cottage, as near death as man may go and live.

"God willed that I should not die, but it was close upon a year before I was restored to any semblance of my former self, and then I was so changed that I was hardly to be recognized as that same joyous, vigorous lad, who had set out, fowling-piece on shoulder, one fine morning a year ago. There was grey in my hair, as much as there is now, though I was but twenty-one; my face was seared and marked as that of a man who had lived twice my years. It was to my faithful servant that I owed my life, though I ask myself to-night whether I have cause for gratitude towards him on that score.

"So soon as I had regained sufficient strength, I went secretly home, wishing that men might continue to believe me dead. My father I found much aged by grief, but he was kind and tender with me beyond all words. From him I had it that our enemies were gone to France; it would seem they had thought it better to remain absent for a while. He had learnt that they were in Paris, and hither I determined forthwith to follow them. Vainly did my father remonstrate with me; vainly did he urge me rather: to bear my story to the King at Whitehall and seek for justice. I had been well advised had I obeyed this counsel, but I burned to take my vengeance with my own hands, and with this purpose I repaired to France.

"Two nights after my arrival in Paris it was my ill-fortune to be embroiled in a rough-and-tumble in the streets, and by an ill-chance I killed a man—the first was he of several that I have sent whither I am going to-morrow. The affair was like to have cost me my life, but by another of those miracles which have prolonged it, I was sent instead to the galleys on the Mediterranean. It was only wanting that, after all that already I had endured, I should become a galley-slave!

"For twelve long years I toiled at an oar, and waited. If I lived I would return to England; and if I returned, woe unto those that had wrecked my life—my body and my soul. I did live, and I did return. The Civil War had broken out, and I came to throw my sword into the balance on the King's side: I came, too, to be avenged, but that would wait.

"Meanwhile, the score had grown heavier. I went home to find the castle in usurping hands—in the hands of my enemies. My father was dead; he died a few months after I had gone to France; and those murderers had advanced a claim that through my marriage with their cousin, since dead, and through my own death, there being no next of kin, they were the heirs-at-law. The Parliament allowed their claim, and they were installed. But when I came they were away, following the fortunes of the Parliament that had served them so well. And so I

determined to let my vengeance wait until the war were ended and the Parliament destroyed. In a hundred engagements did I distinguish myself by my recklessness even as at other seasons I distinguished myself by my debaucheries.

"Ah, Kenneth, you have been hard upon me for my vices, for my abuses of the cup, and all the rest. But can you be hard upon me still, knowing what I had suffered, and what a weight of misery I bore with me? I, whose life was wrecked beyond salvation; who only lived that I might slit the throats of those that had so irreparably wronged me. Think you still that it was so vicious a thing, so unpardonable an offence to seek the blessed repentance of the wine-cup, the heavenly forgetfulness that its abuses brought me? Is it strange that I became known as the wildest ranting boy that rode with the King? What else had I?"

"In all truth your trials were sore," said the lad in a voice that contained a note of sympathy. And yet there was a certain restraint that caught the Tavern Knight's ear. He turned his head and bent his eyes in the lad's direction, but it was quite dark by now, and he failed to make out his companion's face.

"My tale is told, Kenneth. The rest you can guess. The King did not prevail and I was forced to fly from England with those others who escaped from the butchers that had made a martyr of Charles. I took service in France under the great Conde, and I saw some mighty battles. At length came the council of Breda and the invitation to Charles the Second to receive the crown of Scotland. I set out again to follow his fortunes as I had followed his father's, realizing that by so doing I followed my own, and that did he prevail I should have the redress and vengeance so long awaited. To-day has dashed my last hope; to-morrow at this hour it will not signify. And yet much would I give to have my fingers on the throats of those two hounds before the hangman's close around my own."

There was a spell of silence as the two men sat, both breathing heavily in the gloom that enveloped them. At length:

"You have heard my story, Kenneth," said Crispin.

"I have heard, Sir Crispin, and God knows I pity you."

That was all, and Galliard felt that it was not enough. He had lacerated his soul with those grim memories to earn a yet kinder word. He had looked even to hear the lad suing for pardon for the harsh opinions wherein he had held him. Strange was this yearning of his for the boy's sympathy. He who for twenty years had gone unloving and unloved, sought now in his extremity affection from a fellow-man.

And so in the gloom he waited for a kinder word that came not; then—so urgent was his need—he set himself to beg it.

"Can you not understand now, Kenneth, how I came to fall so low? Can you not understand this dissoluteness of mine, which led them to dub me the Tavern Knight after the King conferred upon me the honour of knighthood for that stand of mine in Fifeshire? You must understand, Kenneth," he insisted almost piteously, "and knowing all, you must judge me more mercifully than hitherto."

"It is not mine to judge, Sir Crispin. I pity you with all my heart," the lad replied, not ungently.

Still the knight was dissatisfied. "Yours it is to judge as every man may judge his fellowman. You mean it is not yours to sentence. But if yours it were, Kenneth, what then?"

The lad paused a moment ere he answered. His bigoted Presbyterian training was strong within him, and although, as he said, he pitied Galliard, yet to him whose mind was stuffed with life's precepts, and who knew naught of the trials it brings to some and the temptations to which they were not human did they not succumb—it

seemed that vice was not to be excused by misfortune. Out of mercy then he paused, and for a moment he had it even in his mind to cheer his fellow-captive with a lie. Then, remembering that he was to die upon the morrow, and that at such a time it was not well to risk the perdition of his soul by an untruth, however merciful, he answered slowly:

"Were I to judge you, since you ask me, sir, I should be merciful because of your misfortunes. And yet, Sir Crispin, your profligacy and the evil you have wrought in life must weigh heavily against you." Had this immaculate bigot, this churlish milksop been as candid with himself as he was with Crispin, he must have recognized that it was mainly Crispin's offences towards himself that his mind now dwelt on in deeper rancour than became one so well acquainted with the Lord's Prayer.

"You had not cause enough," he added impressively, "to defile your soul and risk its eternal damnation because the evil of others had wrecked your life."

Crispin drew breath with the sharp hiss of one in pain, and for a moment after all was still. Then a bitter laugh broke from him.

"Bravely answered, reverend sir," he cried with biting scorn. "I marvel only that you left your pulpit to gird on a sword; that you doffed your cassock to don a cuirass. Here is a text for you who deal in texts, my brave Jack Presbyter—'Judge you your neighbour as you would yourself be judged; be merciful as you would hope for mercy.' Chew you the cud of that until the hangman's coming in the morning. Good night to you."

And throwing himself back upon the bed, Crispin sought comfort in sleep. His limbs were heavy and his heart was sick.

"You misapprehend me, Sir Crispin," cried the lad, stung almost to

shame by Galliard's reproach, and also mayhap into some fear that hereafter he should find little mercy for his own lack of it towards a poor fellow-sinner. "I spoke not as I would judge, but as the Church teaches."

"If the Church teaches no better I rejoice that I was no churchman," grunted Crispin.

"For myself," the lad pursued, heeding not the irreverent interruption, "as I have said, I pity you with all my heart. More than that, so deeply do I feel, so great a loathing and indignation has your story sown in my heart, that were our liberty now restored us I would willingly join hands with you in wreaking vengeance on these evildoers."

Sir Crispin laughed. He judged the tone rather than the words, and it rang hollow.

"Where are your wits, O casuist?" he cried mockingly. "Where are your doctrines? 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!' Pah!"

And with that final ejaculation, pregnant with contempt and bitterness, he composed himself to sleep.

He was accursed he told himself. He must die alone, as he had lived.

CHAPTER VIII. THE TWISTED BAR

Nature asserted herself, and, despite his condition, Crispin slept. Kenneth sat huddled on his chair, and in awe and amazement he listened to his companion's regular breathing. He had not Galliard's nerves nor Galliard's indifference to death, so that neither could he follow his example, nor yet so much as realize how one should slumber upon the very brink of eternity.

For a moment his wonder stood perilously near to admiration; then his religious training swayed him, and his righteousness almost drew from him a contempt of this man's apathy. There was much of the Pharisee's attitude towards the publican in his mood.

Anon that regular breathing grew irritating to him; it drew so marked a contrast 'twixt Crispin's frame of mind and his own. Whilst Crispin had related his story, the interest it awakened had served to banish the spectre of fear which the thought of the morrow conjured up. Now that Crispin was silent and asleep, that spectre returned, and the lad grew numb and sick with the horror of his position.

Thought followed thought as he sat huddled there with sunken head and hands clasped tight between his knees, and they were mostly of his dull uneventful days in Scotland, and ever and anon of Cynthia, his beloved. Would she hear of his end? Would she weep for him?—as though it mattered! And every train of thought that he embarked upon brought him to the same issue—to-morrow! Shuddering he would clench his hands still tighter, and the perspiration would stand' out in beads upon his callow brow.

At length he flung himself upon his knees to address not so much a prayer as a maudlin grievance to his Creator. He felt himself a craven—doubly so by virtue of the peaceful breathing of that sinner he despised—and he told himself that it was not in fear a gentleman should meet his end.

"But I shall be brave to-morrow. I shall be brave," he muttered, and knew not that it was vanity begat the thought, and vanity that might uphold him on the morrow when there were others by, however broken might be his spirit now.

Meanwhile Crispin slept. When he awakened the light of a lanthorn was on his face, and holding it stood beside him a tall black figure in a cloak and a slouched hat whose broad brim left the features unrevealed.

Still half asleep, and blinking like an owl, he sat up.

"I have always held burnt sack to be well enough, but—"

He stopped short, fully awake at last, and, suddenly remembering his condition and thinking they were come for him, he drew a sharp breath and in a voice as indifferent as he could make it:

"What's o'clock?" he asked.

"Past midnight, miserable wretch," was the answer delivered in a deep droning voice. "Hast entered upon thy last day of life—a day whose sun thou'lt never see. But five hours more are left thee."

"And it is to tell me this that you have awakened me?" demanded Galliard in such a voice that he of the cloak recoiled a step, as if he thought a blow must follow. "Out on you for an unmannerly cur to break upon a gentleman's repose."

"I come," returned the other in his droning voice, "to call upon thee to repent."

"Plague me not," answered Crispin, with a yawn. "I would sleep."

"Soundly enough shalt thou sleep in a few hours' time. Bethink thee, miserable sinner, of thy soul."

"Sir," cried the Tavern Knight, "I am a man of marvellous short endurance. But mark you this your ways to heaven are not my ways. Indeed, if heaven be peopled by such croaking things as you, I shall be thankful to escape it. So go, my friend, ere I become discourteous."

The minister stood in silence for a moment; then setting his lanthorn upon the table, he raised his hands and eyes towards the low ceiling of the chamber.

"Vouchsafe, O Lord," he prayed, "to touch yet the callous heart of this obdurate, incorrigible sinner, this wicked, perjured and blasphemous malignant, whose—"

He got no further. Crispin was upon his feet, his harsh countenance thrust into the very face of the minister; his eyes ablaze.

"Out!" he thundered, pointing to the door. "Out! Begone! I would not be guilty at the end of my life of striking a man in petticoats. But go whilst I can bethink me of it! Go—take your prayers to hell."

The minister fell back before that blaze of passion. For a second he appeared to hesitate, then he turned towards Kenneth, who stood behind in silence. But the lad's Presbyterian rearing had taught him to hate a sectarian as he would a papist or as he would the devil, and he did no more than echo Galliard's words—though in a gentler key.

"I pray you go," he said. "But if you would perform an act of charity, leave your lanthorn. It will be dark enough hereafter."

The minister looked keenly at the boy, and won over by the humility

of his tone, he set the lanthorn on the table. Then moving towards the door, he stopped and addressed himself to Crispin.

"I go since you oppose with violence my ministrations. But I shall pray for you, and I will return anon, when perchance your heart shall be softened by the near imminence of your end."

"Sir," quoth Crispin wearily, "you would outtalk a woman."

"I've done, I've done," he cried in trepidation, making shift to depart. On the threshold he paused again. "I leave you the lanthorn," he said. "May it light you to a godlier frame of mind. I shall return at daybreak." And with that he went.

Crispin yawned noisily when he was gone, and stretched himself. Then pointing to the pallet:

"Come, lad, 'tis your turn," said he.

Kenneth shivered. "I could not sleep," he cried. "I could not."

"As you will." And shrugging his shoulders, Crispin sat down on the edge of the bed.

"For cold comforters commend me to these cropeared cuckolds," he grumbled. "They are all thought for a man's soul, but for his body they care nothing. Here am I who for the last ten hours have had neither meat nor drink. Not that I mind the meat so much, but, 'slife, my throat is dry as one of their sermons, and I would cheerfully give four of my five hours of life for a posset of sack. A paltry lot are they, Kenneth, holding that because a man must die at dawn he need not sup to-night. Heigho! Some liar hath said that he who sleeps dines, and if I sleep perchance I shall forget my thirst."

He stretched himself upon the bed, and presently he slept again.

It was Kenneth who next awakened him. He opened his eyes to find

the lad shivering as with an ague. His face was ashen.

"Now, what's amiss? Oddslife, what ails you?" he cried.

"Is there no way, Sir Crispin? Is there naught you can do?" wailed the youth.

Instantly Galliard sat up.

"Poor lad, does the thought of the rope affright you?"

Kenneth bowed his head in silence.

"Tis a scurvy death, I own. Look you, Kenneth, there is a dagger in my boot. If you would rather have cold steel, 'tis done. It is the last service I may render you, and I'll be as gentle as a mistress. Just there, over the heart, and you'll know no more until you are in Paradise."

Turning down the leather of his right boot, he thrust his hand down the side of his leg. But Kenneth sprang back with a cry.

"No, no," he cried, covering his face with his hands. "Not that! You don't understand. It is death itself I would cheat. What odds to exchange one form for another? Is there no way out of this? Is there no way, Sir Crispin?" he demanded with clenched hands.

"The approach of death makes you maudlin, sir," quoth the other, in whom this pitiful show of fear produced a profound disgust. "Is there no way; say you? There is the window, but 'tis seventy feet above the river; and there is the door, but it is locked, and there is a sentry on the other side."

"I might have known it. I might have known that you would mock me. What is death to you, to whom life offers nothing? For you the prospect of it has no terrors. But for me—bethink you, sir, I am scarce eighteen years of age," he added brokenly, "and life was full of

promise for me. O God, pity me!"

"True, lad, true," the knight returned in softened tones. "I had forgotten that death is not to you the blessed release that it is to me. And yet, and yet," he mused, "do I not die leaving a task unfulfilled—a task of vengeance? And by my soul, I know no greater spur to make a man cling to life. Ah," he sighed wistfully, "if indeed I could find a way."

"Think, Sir Crispin, think," cried the boy feverishly.

"To what purpose? There is the window. But even if the bars were moved, which I see no manner of accomplishing, the drop to the river is seventy feet at least. I measured it with my eyes when first we entered here. We have no rope. Your cloak rent in two and the pieces tied together would scarce yield us ten feet. Would you care to jump the remaining sixty?"

At the very thought of it the lad trembled, noting which Sir Crispin laughed softly.

"There. And yet, boy, it would be taking a risk which if successful would mean life—if otherwise, a speedier end than even the rope will afford you. Oddslife," he cried, suddenly springing to his feet, and seizing the lanthorn. "Let us look at these bars."

He stepped across to the window, and held the light so that its rays fell full upon the base of the vertical iron that barred the square.

"It is much worn by rust, Kenneth," he muttered. "The removal of this single piece of iron," and he touched the lower arm of the cross, "should afford us passage. Who knows? Hum!"

He walked back to the table and set the lanthorn down. In a tremble, Kenneth watched his every movement, but spoke no word.

"He who throws a main," said Galliard, "must set a stake upon the board. I set my life—a stake that is already forfeit—and I throw for

liberty. If I win, I win all; if I lose, I lose naught. 'Slife, I have thrown many a main with Fate, but never one wherein the odds were more generous. Come, Kenneth, it is the only way, and we will attempt it if we can but move the bar."

"You mean to leap?" gasped the lad.

"Into the river. It is the only way."

"O God, I dare not. It is a fearsome drop."

"Longer, I confess, than they'll give you in an hour's time, if you remain; but it may lead elsewhere."

The boy's mouth was parched. His eyes burned in their sockets, and yet his limbs shook with cold—but not the cold of that September night.

"I'll try it," he muttered with a gulp. Then suddenly clutching Galliard's arm, he pointed to the window.

"What ails you now?" quoth Crispin testily.

"The dawn, Sir Crispin. The dawn."

Crispin looked, and there, like a gash in the blackness of the heavens, he beheld a streak of grey.

"Quick, Sir Crispin; there is no time to lose. The minister said he would return at daybreak."

"Let him come," answered Galliard grimly, as he moved towards the casement.

He gripped the lower bar with his lean, sinewy hands, and setting his knee against the masonry beneath it, he exerted the whole of his huge strength—that awful strength acquired during those years of toil as a galley-slave, which even his debaucheries had not undermined.

He felt his sinews straining until it seemed that they must crack; the sweat stood out upon his brow; his breathing grew stertorous.

"It gives," he panted at last. "It gives."

He paused in his efforts, and withdrew his hands.

"I must breathe a while. One other effort such as that, and it is done. 'Fore George," he laughed, "it is the first time water has stood my friend, for the rains have sadly rusted that iron."

Without, their sentry was pacing before the door; his steps came nearer, passed, and receded; turned, came nigh again, and again passed on. As once more they grew faint, Crispin seized the bar and renewed his attempt. This time it was easier. Gradually it ceded to the strain Galliard set upon it.

Nearer came the sentry's footsteps, but they went unheeded by him who toiled, and by him who watched with bated breath and beating heart. He felt it giving—giving—giving. Crack!

With a report that rang through the room like a pistol shot, it broke off in its socket. Both men caught their breath, and stood for a second crouching, with straining ears. The sentry had stopped at their door.

Galliard was a man of quick action, swift to think, and as swift to execute the thought. To thrust Kenneth into a corner, to extinguish the light, and to fling himself upon the bed was all the work of an instant.

The key grated in the lock, and Crispin answered it with a resounding snore. The door opened, and on the threshold stood the Roundhead trooper, holding aloft a lanthorn whose rays were flashed back by his polished cuirass. He beheld Crispin on the bed with closed eyes and open mouth, and he heard his reassuring and melodious snore. He saw Kenneth seated peacefully upon the floor, with his back against the wall, and for a moment he was puzzled.

"Heard you aught?" he asked.

"Aye," answered Kenneth, in a strangled voice, "I heard something like a shot out there."

The gesture with which he accompanied the words was fatal. Instinctively he had jerked his thumb towards the window, thereby drawing the soldier's eyes in that direction. The fellow's glance fell upon the twisted bar, and a sharp exclamation of surprise escaped him.

Had he been aught but a fool he must have guessed at once how it came so, and having guessed it, he must have thought twice ere he ventured within reach of a man who could so handle iron. But he was a slow-reasoning clod, and so far, thought had not yet taken the place of surprise. He stepped into, the chamber and across to the window, that he might more closely view that broken bar.

With eyes that were full of terror and despair, Kenneth watched him; their last hope had failed them. Then, as he looked, it seemed to him that in one great leap from his recumbent position on the bed, Crispin had fallen upon the soldier.

The lanthorn was dashed from the fellow's hand, and rolled to Kenneth's feet. The fellow had begun a cry, which broke off suddenly into a gurgle as Galliard's fingers closed about his windpipe. He was a big fellow, and in his mad struggles he carried: Crispin hither and thither about the room. Together: they hurtled against the table, which would have: gone crashing over had not Kenneth caught it and drawn it softly to the wall.

Both men were now upon the bed. Crispin had guessed the soldier's intent to fling himself upon the ground so that the ring of his armour might be heard, and perchance bring others to his aid. To avoid this, Galliard had swung him towards the bed, and hurled him

on to it. There he pinned him with his knee, and with his fingers he gripped the Roundhead's throat, pressing the apple inwards with his thumb.

"The door, Kenneth!" he commanded, in a whisper. "Close the door!"

Vain were the trooper's struggles to free himself from that throttling grip. Already his efforts grew his face was purple; his veins stood out in ropes upon his brow till they seemed upon the point of bursting; his eyes protruded like a lobster's and there was a horrible grin upon his mouth; still his heels beat the bed, and still he struggled. With his fingers he plucked madly at the throttling hands on his neck, and tore at them with his nails until the blood streamed from them. Still Galliard held him firmly, and with a smile—a diabolical smile it seemed to the poor, half-strangled wretch—he gazed upon his choking victim.

"Someone comes!" gasped Kenneth suddenly. "Someone comes, Sir Crispin!" he repeated, shaking his hands in a frenzy.

Galliard listened. Steps were approaching. The soldier heard them also, and renewed his efforts. Then Crispin spoke.

"Why stand you there like a fool?" he growled. "Quench the light—stay, we may want it! Cast your cloak over it! Quick, man, quick!"

The steps came nearer. The lad had obeyed him, and they were in darkness.

"Stand by the door," whispered Crispin. "Fall upon him as he enters, and see that no cry escapes him. Take him by the throat, and as you love your life, do not let him get away."

The footsteps halted. Kenneth crawled softly to his post. The soldier's struggles grew of a sudden still, and Crispin released his throat at last. Then calmly drawing the fellow's dagger, he felt for the

straps of his cuirass, and these he proceeded to cut. As he did so the door was opened.

By the light of the lamp burning in the passage they beheld silhouetted upon the threshold a black figure crowned by a steeple hat. Then the droning voice of the Puritan minister greeted them.

"Your hour is at hand!" he announced.

"Is it time?" asked Galliard from the bed. And as he put the question he softly thrust aside the trooper's breastplate, and set his hand to the fellow's heart. It still beat faintly.

"In another hour they will come for you," answered the minister. And Crispin marvelled anxiously what Kenneth was about. "Repent then, miserable sinners, whilst yet—"

He broke off abruptly, awaking out of his religious zeal to a sense of strangeness at the darkness and the absence of the sentry, which hitherto he had not remarked.

"What hath—" he began. Then Galliard heard a gasp, followed by the noise of a fall, and two struggling men came rolling across the chamber floor.

"Bravely done, boy!" he cried, almost mirthfully. "Cling to him, Kenneth; cling to him a second yet!"

He leapt from the bed, and guided by the faint light coming through the door, he sprang across the intervening space and softly closed it. Then he groped his way along the wall to the spot where he had seen the lanthorn stand when Kenneth had flung his cloak over it. As he went, the two striving men came up against him.

"Hold fast, lad," he cried, encouraging Kenneth, "hold him yet a moment, and I will relieve you!"

He reached the lanthorn at last, and pulling aside the cloak, he lifted the light and set it upon the table.

CHAPTER IX. THE BARGAIN

By the lanthorn's yellow glare Crispin beheld the two men—a mass of writhing bodies and a bunch of waving legs—upon the ground. Kenneth, who was uppermost, clung purposefully to the parson's throat. The faces of both were alike distorted, but whilst the lad's breath came in gasping hisses, the other's came not at all.

Going over to the bed, Crispin drew the unconscious trooper's tuck-sword. He paused for a moment to bend over the man's face; his breath came faintly, and Crispin knew that ere many moments were sped he would regain consciousness. He smiled grimly to see how well he had performed his work of suffocation without yet utterly destroying life.

Sword in hand, he returned to Kenneth and the parson. The Puritan's struggles were already becoming mere spasmodic twitchings; his face was as ghastly as the trooper's had been a while ago.

"Release him, Kenneth," said Crispin shortly.

"He struggles still."

"Release him, I say," Galliard repeated, and stooping he caught the lad's wrist and compelled him to abandon his hold.

"He will cry out," exclaimed Kenneth, in apprehension.

"Not he," laughed Crispin. "Leastways, not yet awhile. Observe the wretch."

With mouth wide agape, the minister lay gasping like a fish newly

taken from the water. Even now that his throat was free he appeared to struggle for a moment before he could draw breath. Then he took it in panting gulps until it seemed that he must choke in his gluttony of air.

"Fore George," quoth Crispin, "I was no more than in time. Another second, and we should have had him, too, unconscious. There, he is recovering."

The blood was receding from the swollen veins of the parson's head, and his cheeks were paling to their normal hue. Anon they went yet paler than their wont, as Galliard rested the point of his sword against the fellow's neck.

"Make sound or movement," said Crispin coldly, "and I'll pin you to the floor like a beetle. Obey me, and no harm shall come to you."

"I will obey you," the fellow answered, in a wheezing whisper. "I swear I will. But of your charity, good sir, I beseech you remove your sword. Your hand might slip, sir," he whined, a wild terror in his eyes.

Where now was the deep bass of his whilom accents? Where now the grotesque majesty of his bearing, and the impressive gestures that erstwhile had accompanied his words of denunciation?

"Your hand might slip, sir," he whined again.

"It might—and, by Gad, it shall if I hear more from you. So that you are discreet and obedient, have no fear of my hand." Then, still keeping his eye upon the fellow: "Kenneth," he said, "attend to the crop-ear yonder, he will be recovering. Truss him with the bedclothes, and gag him with his scarf. See to it, Kenneth, and do it well, but leave his nostrils free that he may breathe."

Kenneth carried out Galliard's orders swiftly and effectively, what time Crispin remained standing over the recumbent minister. At

length, when Kenneth announced that it was done, he bade the Puritan rise.

"But have a care," he added, "or you shall taste the joys of the Paradise you preach of. Come, sir parson; afoot!"

A prey to a fear that compelled unquestioning obedience, the fellow rose with alacrity.

"Stand there, sir. So," commanded Crispin, his point within an inch of the man's Geneva bands. "Take your kerchief, Kenneth, and pinion his wrists behind him."

That done, Crispin bade the lad unbuckle and remove the parson's belt. Next he ordered that man of texts to be seated upon their only chair, and with that same belt he commanded Kenneth to strap him to it. When at length the Puritan was safely bound, Crispin lowered his rapier, and seated himself upon the table edge beside him.

"Now, sir parson," quoth he, "let us talk a while. At your first outcry I shall hurry you into that future world whither it is your mission to guide the souls of others. Maybe you'll find it a better world to preach of than to inhabit, and so, for your own sake, I make no doubt you will obey me. To your honour, to your good sense and a parson's natural horror of a lie, I look for truth in answer to what questions I may set you. Should I find you deceiving me, sir, I shall see that your falsehood overtakes you." And eloquently raising his blade, he intimated the exact course he would adopt. "Now, sir, attend to me. How soon are our friends likely to discover this topsy-turvydom?"

"When they come for you," answered the parson meekly.

"And how soon, O prophet, will they come?"

"In an hour's time, or thereabout," replied the Puritan, glancing towards the window as he spoke. Galliard followed his glance, and

observed that the light was growing perceptibly stronger.

"Aye," he commented, "in an hour's time there should be light enough to hang us by. Is there no chance of anyone coming sooner?"

"None that I can imagine. The only other occupants of the house are a party of half a dozen troopers in the guardroom below."

"Where is the Lord General?"

"Away—I know not where. But he will be here at sunrise."

"And the sentry that was at our door—is he not to a changed 'twixt this and hanging-time?"

"I cannot say for sure, but I think not. The guard was relieved just before I came."

"And the men in the guardroom—answer me truthfully, O Elijah—what manner of watch are they keeping?"

"Alas, sir, they have drunk enough this night to put a rakehelly Cavalier to shame. I was but exhorting them."

When Kenneth had removed the Puritan's girdle, a small Bible—such as men of his calling were wont to carry—had dropped out. This Kenneth had placed upon the table. Galliard now took it up, and, holding it before the Puritan's eyes, he watched him narrowly the while.

"Will you swear by this book that you have answered nothing but the truth?"

Without a moment's hesitation the parson pledged his oath, that, to the best of his belief, he had answered accurately.

"That is well, sir. And now, though it grieve me to cause you some slight discomfort, I must ensure your silence, my friend."

And, placing his sword upon the table, he passed behind the Puritan, and taking the man's own scarf, he effectively gagged him with it.

"Now, Kenneth," said he, turning to the lad. Then he stopped abruptly as if smitten by a sudden thought. Presently—"Kenneth," he continued in a different tone, "a while ago I mind me you said that were your liberty restored you, you would join hands with me in punishing the evildoers who wrecked my life."

"I did, Sir Crispin."

For a moment the knight paused. It was a vile thing that he was about to do, he told himself, and as he realized how vile, his impulse was to say no more; to abandon the suddenly formed project and to trust to his own unaided wits and hands. But as again he thought of the vast use this lad would be to him—this lad who was the betrothed of Cynthia Ashburn—he saw that the matter was not one hastily to be judged and dismissed. Carefully he weighed it in the balance of his mind. On the one hand was the knowledge that did they succeed in making good their escape, Kenneth would naturally fly for shelter to his friends the Ashburns—the usurpers of Castle Marleigh. What then more natural than his taking with him the man who had helped him to escape, and who shared his own danger of recapture? And with so plausible a motive for admission to Castle Marleigh, how easy would not his vengeance become? He might at first wean himself into their good graces, and afterwards—

Before his mental eyes there unfolded itself the vista of a great revenge; one that should be worthy of him, and commensurate with the foul deed that called for it.

In the other scale the treacherous flavour of this method weighed heavily. He proposed to bind the lad to a promise, the shape of

whose fulfilment he would withhold—a promise the lad would readily give, and yet, one that he must sooner die than enter into, did he but know what manner of fulfilment would be exacted. It amounted to betraying the lad into a betrayal of his friends—the people of his future wife. Whatever the issue for Crispin, 'twas odds Kenneth's prospect of wedding this Cynthia would be blighted for all time by the action into which Galliard proposed to thrust him all unconscious.

So stood the case in Galliard's mind, and the scales fell now on one side, now on the other. But against his scruples rose the memory of the treatment which the lad had meted out to him that night; the harshness of the boy's judgment; the irrevocable contempt wherein he had clearly seen that he was held by this fatuous milksop. All this aroused his rancour now, and steeled his heart against the voice of honour. What was this boy to him, he asked himself, that he should forego for him the accomplishing of his designs? How had this lad earned any consideration from him? What did he owe him? Naught! Still, he would not decide in haste.

It was characteristic of the man whom Kenneth held to be destitute of all honourable principles, to stand thus in the midst of perils, when every second that sped lessened their chances of escape, turning over in his mind calmly and collectedly a point of conduct. It was in his passions only that Crispin was ungovernable, in violence only that he was swift—in all things else was he deliberate.

Of this Kenneth had now a proof that set him quaking with impatient fear. Anxiously, his hands clenched and his face pale, he watched his companion, who stood with brows knit in thought, and his grey eyes staring at the ground. At length he could brook that, to him, incomprehensible and mad delay no longer.

"Sir Crispin," he whispered, plucking at his sleeve; "Sir Crispin."

The knight flashed him a glance that was almost of anger. Then the

fire died out of his eyes; he sighed and spoke. In that second's glance he had seen the lad's face; the fear and impatience written on it had disgusted him, and caused the scales to fall suddenly and definitely against the boy.

"I was thinking how it might be accomplished," he said.

"There is but one way," cried the lad.

"On the contrary, there are two, and I wish to choose carefully."

"If you delay your choice much longer, none will be left you," cried Kenneth impatiently.

Noting the lad's growing fears, and resolved now upon his course, Galliard set himself to play upon them until terror should render the boy as wax in his hands.

"There speaks your callow inexperience," said he, with a pitying smile. "When you shall have lived as long as I have done, and endured as much; when you shall have set your wits to the saving of your life as often as have I—you will have learnt that haste is fatal to all enterprises. Failure means the forfeiture of something; tonight it would mean the forfeiture of our lives, and it were a pity to let such good efforts as these"—and with a wave of the hand he indicated their two captors—"go wasted."

"Sir," exclaimed Kenneth, well-nigh beside himself, "if you come not with me, I go alone!"

"Whither?" asked Crispin dryly.

"Out of this."

Galliard bowed slightly.

"Fare you well, sir. I'll not detain you. Your way is clear, and it is for

you to choose between the door and the window."

And with that Crispin turned his back upon his companion and crossed to the bed, where the trooper lay glaring in mute anger. He stooped, and unbuckling the soldier's swordbelt—to which the scabbard was attached—he girt himself with it. Without raising his eyes, and keeping his back to Kenneth, who stood between him and the door, he went next to the table, and, taking up the sword that he had left there, he restored it to the sheath. As the hilt clicked against the mouth of the scabbard:

"Come, Sir Crispin!" cried the lad. "Are you ready?"

Galliard wheeled sharply round.

"How? Not gone yet?" said he sardonically.

"I dare not," the lad confessed. "I dare not go alone."

Galliard laughed softly; then suddenly waxed grave.

"Ere we go, Master Kenneth, I would again remind you of your assurance that were we to regain our liberty you would aid me in the task of vengeance that lies before me."

"Once already have I answered you that it is so."

"And pray, are you still of the same mind?"

"I am, I am! Anything, Sir Crispin; anything so that you come away!"

"Not so fast, Kenneth. The promise that I shall ask of you is not to be so lightly given. If we escape I may fairly claim to have saved your life, 'twixt what I have done and what I may yet do. Is it not so?"

"Oh, I acknowledge it!"

"Then, sir, in payment I shall expect your aid hereafter to help me in

that which I must accomplish, that which the hope of accomplishing is the only spur to my own escape."

"You have my promise!" cried the lad.

"Do not give it lightly, Kenneth," said Crispin gravely. "It may cause you much discomfort, and may be fraught with danger even to your life."

"I promise."

Galliard bowed his head; then, turning, he took the Bible from the table.

"With your hand upon this book, by your honour, your faith, and your every hope of salvation, swear that if I bear you alive out of this house you will devote yourself to me and to my task of vengeance until it shall be accomplished or until I perish; swear that you will set aside all personal matters and inclinations of your own, to serve me when I shall call upon you. Swear that, and, in return, I will give my life if need be to save yours to-night, in which case you will be released from your oath without more ado."

The lad paused a moment. Crispin was so impressive, the oath he imposed so solemn, that for an instant the boy hesitated. His cautious, timid nature whispered to him that perchance he should know more of this matter ere he bound himself so irrevocably. But Crispin, noting the hesitation, stifled it by appealing to the lad's fears.

"Resolve yourself," he exclaimed abruptly. "It grows light, and the time for haste is come."

"I swear!" answered Kenneth, overcome by his impatience. "I swear, by my honour, my faith, and my every hope of heaven to lend you my aid, when and how you may demand it, until your task be accomplished."

Crispin took the Bible from the boy's hands, and replaced it on the table. His lips were pressed tight, and he avoided the lad's eyes.

"You shall not find me wanting in my part of the bargain," he muttered, as he took up the soldier's cloak and hat. "Come, take that parson's steeple hat and his cloak, and let us be going."

He crossed to the door, and opening it he peered down the passage. A moment he stood listening. All was still. Then he turned again. In the chamber the steely light of the breaking day was rendering more yellow still the lanthorn's yellow flame.

"Fare you well, sir parson," he said. "Forgive me the discomfort I have been forced to put upon you, and pray for the success of our escape. Commend me to Oliver of the ruby nose. Fare you well, sir. Come, Kenneth."

He held the door for the lad to pass out. As they stood in the dimly lighted passage he closed it softly after them, and turned the key in the lock.

"Come," he said again, and led the way to the stairs, Kenneth tiptoeing after him with wildly beating heart.

CHAPTER X. THE ESCAPE

Treading softly, and with ears straining for the slightest sound, the two men descended to the first floor of the house. They heard nothing to alarm them as they crept down, and not until they paused on the first landing to reconnoitre did they even catch the murmur of voices issuing from the guardroom below. So muffled was the sound that Crispin guessed how matters stood even before he had looked over the balusters into the hall beneath. The faint grey of the dawn was the only light that penetrated the gloom of that pit.

"The Fates are kind, Kenneth," he whispered. "Those fools sit with closed doors. Come."

But Kenneth laid his hand upon Galliard's sleeve. "What if the door should open as we pass?"

"Someone will die," muttered Crispin back. "But pray God that it may not. We must run the risk."

"Is there no other way?"

"Why, yes," returned Galliard sardonically, "we can linger here until we are taken. But, oddslife, I'm not so minded. Come."

And as he spoke he drew the lad along.

His foot was upon the topmost stair of the flight, when of a sudden the stillness of the house was broken by a loud knock upon the street door. Instantly—as though they had been awaiting it there was a stir of feet below and the bang of an overturned chair; then a shaft of yellow light fell athwart the darkness of the hall as the guardroom door was opened.

"Back!" growled Galliard. "Back, man!"

They were but in time. Peering over the balusters they saw two troopers pass out of the guardroom, and cross the hall to the door. A bolt was drawn and a chain rattled, then followed the creak of hinges, and on the stone flags rang the footsteps and the jingling of spurs of those that entered.

"Is all well?" came a voice, which Crispin recognized as Colonel Pride's, followed by an affirmative reply from one of the soldiers.

"Hath a minister visited the malignants?"

"Master Toneleigh is with them even now."

In the hall Crispin could now make out the figures of Colonel Pride and of three men who came with him. But he had scant leisure to survey them, for the colonel was in haste.

"Come, sirs," he heard him say, "light me to their garret. I would see them—leastways, one of them, before he dies. They are to hang where the Moabites hanged Givens yesterday. Had I my way... But, there lead on, fellow."

"Oh, God!" gasped Kenneth, as the soldier set foot upon the stairs. Under his breath Crispin swore a terrific oath. For an instant it seemed to him there was naught left but to stand there and await recapture. Through his mind it flashed that they were five, and he but one; for his companion was unarmed.

With that swiftness which thought alone can compass did he weigh the odds, and judge his chances. He realized how desperate they were did he remain, and even as he thought he glanced sharply round.

Dim indeed was the light, but his sight was keen, and quickened by

the imminence of danger. Partly his eyes and partly his instinct told him that not six paces behind him there must be a door, and if Heaven pleased it should be unlocked, behind it they must look for shelter. It even crossed his mind in that second of crowding, galloping thought, that perchance the room might be occupied. That was a risk he must take—the lesser risk of the two, the choice of one of which was forced upon him. He had determined all this ere the soldier's foot was upon the third step of the staircase, and before the colonel had commenced the ascent. Kenneth stood palsied with fear, gazing like one fascinated at the approaching peril.

Then upon his ear fell the fierce whisper: "Come with me, and tread lightly as you love your life."

In three long strides, and by steps that were softer than a cat's, Crispin crossed to the door which he had rather guessed than seen. He ran his hand along until he caught the latch. Softly he tried it; it gave, and the door opened. Kenneth was by then beside him. He paused to look back.

On the opposite wall the light of the trooper's lanthorn fell brightly. Another moment and the fellow would have reached and turned the corner of the stairs, and his light must reveal them to him. But ere that instant was passed Crispin had drawn his companion through, and closed the door as softly as he had opened it. The chamber was untenanted and almost bare of furniture, at which discovery Crispin breathed more freely.

They stood there, and heard the ascending footsteps, and the clank-clank of a sword against the stair-rail. A bar of yellow light came under the door that sheltered them. Stronger it grew and farther it crept along the floor; then stopped and receded again, as he who bore the lanthorn turned and began to climb to the second floor. An instant later and the light had vanished, eclipsed by those who followed in the fellow's wake.

"The window, Sir Crispin," cried Kenneth, in an excited whisper—"the window!"

"No," answered Crispin calmly. "The drop is a long one, and we should but light in the streets, and be little better than we are here. Wait."

He listened. The footsteps had turned the corner leading to the floor above. He opened the door, partly at first, then wide. For an instant he stood listening again. The steps were well overhead by now; soon they would mount the last flight, and then discovery must be swift to follow.

"Now," was all Crispin said, and, drawing his sword he led the way swiftly, yet cautiously, to the stairs once more. In passing he glanced over the rails. The guardroom door stood ajar, and he caught the murmurs of subdued conversation. But he did not pause. Had the door stood wide he would not have paused then. There was not a second to be lost; to wait was to increase the already overwhelming danger. Cautiously, and leaning well upon the stout baluster, he began the descent. Kenneth followed him mechanically, with white face and a feeling of suffocation in his throat.

They gained the corner, and turning, they began what was truly the perilous part of their journey. Not more than a dozen steps were there; but at the bottom stood the guardroom door, and through the chink of its opening a shaft of light fell upon the nethermost step. Once a stair creaked, and to their quickened senses it sounded like a pistol-shot. As loud to Crispin sounded the indrawn breath of apprehension from Kenneth that followed it. He had almost paused to curse the lad when, thinking him of how time pressed, he went on.

Within three steps of the bottom were they, and they could almost distinguish what was being said in the room, when Crispin stopped, and turning his head to attract Kenneth's attention, he pointed straight

across the hall to a dimly visible door. It was that of the chamber wherein he had been brought before Cromwell. Its position had occurred to him some moments before, and he had determined then upon going that way.

The lad followed the indication of his finger, and signified by a nod that he understood. Another step Galliard descended; then from the guardroom came a loud yawn, to send the boy cowering against the wall. It was followed by the sound of someone rising; a chair grated upon the floor, and there was a movement of feet within the chamber. Had Kenneth been alone, of a certainty terror would have frozen him to the wall.

But the calm, unmovable Crispin proceeded as if naught had chanced; he argued that even if he who had risen were coming towards the door, there was nothing to be gained by standing still. Their only chance lay now in passing before it might be opened.

They that walk through perils in a brave man's company cannot but gain confidence from the calm of his demeanour. So was it now with Kenneth. The steady onward march of that tall, lank figure before him drew him irresistibly after it despite his tremors. And well it was for him that this was so. They gained the bottom of the staircase at length; they stood beside the door of the guardroom, they passed it in safety. Then slowly—painfully slowly—to avoid their steps from ringing upon the stone floor, they crept across towards the door that meant safety to Sir Crispin. Slowly, step by step, they moved, and with every stride Crispin looked behind him, prepared to rush the moment he had sign they were discovered. But it was not needed. In silence and in safety they were permitted to reach the door. To Crispin's joy it was unfastened. Quietly he opened it, then with calm gallantry he motioned to his companion to go first, holding it for him as he passed in, and keeping watch with eye and ear the while.

Scarce had Kenneth entered the chamber when from above came

the sound of loud and excited voices, announcing to them that their flight was at last discovered. It was responded to by a rush of feet in the guardroom, and Crispin had but time to dart in after his companion and close the door ere the troopers poured out into the hall and up the stairs, with confused shouts that something must be amiss.

Within the room that sheltered him Crispin chuckled, as he ran his hand along the edge of the door until he found the bolt, and softly shot it home.

"Slife," he muttered, "'twas a close thing! Aye, shout, you cuckolds," he went on. "Yell yourselves hoarse as the crows you are! You'll hang us where Givies are hanged, will you?"

Kenneth tugged at the skirts of his doublet. "What now?" he inquired.

"Now," said Crispin, "we'll leave by the window, if it please you."

They crossed the room, and a moment or two later they had dropped on to the narrow railed pathway overlooking the river, which Crispin had observed from their prison window the evening before. He had observed, too, that a small boat was moored at some steps about a hundred yards farther down the stream, and towards that spot he now sped along the footpath, followed closely by Kenneth. The path sloped in that direction, so that by the time the spot was reached the water flowed not more than six feet or so beneath them. Half a dozen steps took them down this to the moorings of that boat, which fortunately had not been removed.

"Get in, Kenneth," Crispin commanded. "There, I'll take the oars, and I'll keep under shelter of the bank lest those blunderers should bethink them of looking out of our prison window. Oddsounds, Kenneth, I am hungry as a wolf, and as dry—ough, as dry as Dives

when he begged for a sup of water. Heaven send we come upon some good malignant homestead ere we go far, where a Christian may find a meal and a stoup of ale. 'Tis a miracle I had strength enough to crawl downstairs. Swounds, but an empty stomach is a craven comrade in a desperate enterprise. Hey! Have a care, boy. Now, sink me if this milksop hasn't fainted!"

CHAPTER XI. THE ASHBURNS

Gregory Ashburn pushed back his chair and made shift to rise from the table at which he and his brother had but dined.

He was a tall, heavily built man, with a coarse, florid countenance set in a frame of reddish hair that hung straight and limp. In the colour of their hair lay the only point of resemblance between the brothers. For the rest Joseph was spare and of middle weight, pale of face, thin-lipped, and owning a cunning expression that was rendered very evil by virtue of the slight cast in his colourless eyes.

In earlier life Gregory had not been unhandsome; debauchery and sloth had puffed and coarsened him. Joseph, on the other hand, had never been aught but ill-favoured.

"Tis a week since Worcester field was fought," grumbled Gregory, looking lazily sideways at the mullioned windows as he spoke, "and never a word from the lad."

Joseph shrugged his narrow shoulders and sneered. It was Joseph's habit to sneer when he spoke, and his words were wont to fit the sneer.

"Doth the lack of news trouble you?" he asked, glancing across the table at his brother.

Gregory rose without meeting that glance.

"Truth to tell it does trouble me," he muttered.

"And yet," quoth Joseph, "tis a natural thing enough. When battles are fought it is not uncommon for men to die."

Gregory crossed slowly to the window, and stared out at the trees of the park which autumn was fast stripping.

"If he were among the fallen—if he were dead then indeed the matter would be at an end."

"Aye, and well ended."

"You forget Cynthia," Gregory reproved him.

"Forget her? Not I, man. Listen." And he jerked his thumb in the direction of the wainscot.

To the two men in that rich chamber of Castle Marleigh was borne the sound—softened by distance of a girlish voice merrily singing.

Joseph laughed a cackle of contempt.

"Is that the song of a maid whose lover comes not back from the wars?" he asked.

"But bethink you, Joseph, the child suspects not the possibility of his having fallen."

"Gadswounds, sir, did your daughter give the fellow a thought she must be anxious. A week yesterday since the battle, and no word from him. I dare swear, Gregory, there's little in that to warrant his mistress singing."

"Cynthia is young—a child. She reasons not as you and I, nor seeks to account for his absence."

"Troubles not to account for it," Joseph amended.

"Be that as it may," returned Gregory irritably, "I would I knew."

"That which we do not know we may sometimes infer. I infer him to be dead, and there's the end of it."

"What if he should not be?"

"Then, my good fool, he would be here."

"It is unlike you, Joseph, to argue so loosely. What if he should be a prisoner?"

"Why, then, the plantations will do that which the battle hath left undone. So that, dead or captive, you see it is all one."

And, lifting his glass to the light, he closed one eye, the better to survey with the other the rich colour of the wine. Not that Joseph was curious touching that colour, but he was a juggler in gestures, and at that moment he could think of no other whereby he might so naturally convey the utter indifference of his feelings in the matter.

"Joseph, you are wrong," said Gregory, turning his back upon the window and facing his brother. "It is not all one. What if he return some day?"

"Oh, what if—what if—what if!" cried Joseph testily. "Gregory, what a casuist you might have been had not nature made you a villain! You are as full of "what if s" as an egg of meat. Well what if some day he should return? I fling your question back—what if?"

"God only knows."

"Then leave it to Him," was the flippant answer; and Joseph drained his glass.

"Nay, brother, 'twere too great a risk. I must and I will know whether Kenneth were slain or not. If he is a prisoner, then we must exert ourselves to win his freedom."

"Plague take it," Joseph burst out. "Why all this ado? Why did you ever loose that graceless whelp from his Scottish moor?"

Gregory sighed with an air of resigned patience.

"I have more reasons than one," he answered slowly. "If you need that I recite them to you, I pity your wits. Look you, Joseph, you have more influence with Cromwell; more—far more—than have I, and if you are minded to do so, you can serve me in this."

"I wait but to learn how."

"Then go to Cromwell, at Windsor or wherever he may be, and seek to learn from him if Kenneth is a prisoner. If he is not, then clearly he is dead."

Joseph made a gesture of impatience.

"Can you not leave Fate alone?"

"Think you I have no conscience, Joseph?" cried the other with sudden vigour.

"Pish! you are womanish."

"Nay, Joseph, I am old. I am in the autumn of my days, and I would see these two wed before I die."

"And are damned for a croaking, maudlin' craven," added Joseph. "Pah! You make me sick."

There was a moment's silence, during which the brothers eyed each other, Gregory with a sternness before which Joseph's mocking eye was forced at length to fall.

"Joseph, you shall go to the Lord General."

"Well," said Joseph weakly, "we will say that I go. But if Kenneth be a prisoner, what then?"

"You must beg his liberty from Cromwell. He will not refuse you."

"Will he not? I am none so confident."

"But you can make the attempt, and leastways we shall have some definite knowledge of what has befallen the boy."

"The which definite knowledge seems to me none so necessary. Moreover, Gregory, bethink you; there has been a change, and the wind carries an edge that will arouse every devil of rheumatism in my bones. I am not a lad, Gregory, and travelling at this season is no small matter for a man of fifty."

Gregory approached the table, and leaning his hand upon it:

"Will you go?" he asked, squarely eyeing his brother.

Joseph fell a-pondering. He knew Gregory to be a man of fixed ideas, and he bethought him that were he now to refuse he would be hourly plagued by Gregory's speculations touching the boy's fate and recriminations touching his own selfishness. On the other hand, however, the journey daunted him. He was not a man to sacrifice his creature comforts, and to be asked to sacrifice them to a mere whim, a shadow, added weight to his inclination to refuse the undertaking.

"Since you have the matter so much at heart," said he at length, "does it not occur to you that you could plead with greater fervour, and be the likelier to succeed?"

"You know that Cromwell will lend a more willing ear to you than to me—perchance because you know so well upon occasion how to weave your stock of texts into your discourse," he added with a sneer. "Will you go, Joseph?"

"Bethink you that we know not where he is. I may have to wander for weeks o'er the face of England."

"Will you go?" Gregory repeated.

"Oh, a pox on it," broke out Joseph, rising suddenly. "I'll go since naught else will quiet you. I'll start to-morrow."

"Joseph, I am grateful. I shall be more grateful yet if you will start to-day."

"No, sink me, no."

"Yes, sink me, yes," returned Gregory. "You must, Joseph."

Joseph spoke of the wind again; the sky, he urged, was heavy with rain. "What signifies a day?" he whined.

But Gregory stood his ground until almost out of self-protection the other consented to do his bidding and set out as soon as he could make ready.

This being determined, Joseph left his brother, and cursing Master Stewart for the amount of discomfort which he was about to endure on his behalf, he went to prepare for the journey.

Gregory lingered still in the chamber where they had dined, and sat staring moodily before him at the table-linen. Anon, with a half-laugh of contempt, he filled a glass of muscadine, and drained it. As he set down the glass the door opened, and on the threshold stood a very dainty girl, whose age could not be more than twenty. Gregory looked on the fresh, oval face, with its wealth of brown hair crowning the low, broad forehead, and told himself that in his daughter he had just cause for pride. He looked again, and told himself that his brother was right; she had not the air of a maid whose lover returns not from the wars. Her lips were smiling, and the eyes—low-lidded and blue as the heavens—were bright with mirth.

"Why sit you there so glum," she cried, "whilst my uncle, they tell me, is going on a journey?"

Gregory was minded to put her feelings to the test.

"Kenneth," he replied with significant emphasis, watching her closely.

The mirth faded from her eyes, and they took on a grave expression that added to their charm. But Gregory had looked for fear, leastways deep concern, and in this he was disappointed.

"What of him, father?" she asked, approaching.

"Naught, and that's the rub. It is time we had news, and as none comes, your uncle goes to seek it."

"Think you that ill can have befallen him?"

Gregory was silent a moment, weighing his answer. Then

"We hope not, sweetheart," said he. "He may be a prisoner. We last had news of him from Worcester, and 'tis a week and more since the battle was fought there. Should he be a captive, your uncle has sufficient influence to obtain his enlargement."

Cynthia sighed, and moved towards the window.

"Poor Kenneth," she murmured gently. "He may be wounded."

"We shall soon learn," he answered. His disappointment grew keener; where he had looked for grief he found no more than an expression of pitying concern. Nor was his disappointment lessened when, after a spell of thoughtful silence, she began to comment upon the condition of the trees in the park below. Gregory had it in his mind to chide her for this lack of interest in the fate of her intended husband, but he let the impulse pass unheeded. After all, if Kenneth lived she should marry him. Hitherto she had been docile and willing enough to be guided by him; she had even displayed a kindness for Kenneth; no doubt she would do so again when Joseph returned with him—unless he were among the Worcester slain, in which case,

perhaps, it would prove best that his fate was not to cause her any prostration of grief.

"The sky is heavy, father," said Cynthia from the window. "Poor uncle! He will have rough weather for his journey."

"I rejoice that someone wastes pity on poor uncle," growled Joseph, who re-entered, "this uncle whom your father drives out of doors in all weathers to look for his daughter's truant lover."

Cynthia smiled upon him.

"It is heroic of you, uncle."

"There, there," he grumbled, "I shall do my best to find the laggard, lest those pretty eyes should weep away their beauty."

Gregory's glance reproved this sneer of Joseph's, whereupon Joseph drew close to him:

"Broken-hearted, is she not?" he muttered, to which Gregory returned no answer.

An hour later, as Joseph climbed into his saddle, he turned to his brother again, and directing his eyes upon the girl, who stood patting the glossy neck of his nag:

"Come, now," said he, "you see that matters are as I said."

"And yet," replied Gregory sternly, "I hope to see you return with the boy. It will be better so."

Joseph shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. Then, taking leave of his brother and his niece, he rode out with two grooms at his heels, and took the road South.

CHAPTER XII. THE HOUSE THAT WAS ROLAND MARLEIGH'S

It was high noon next day, and Gregory Ashburn was taking the air upon the noble terrace of Castle Marleigh, when the beat of hoofs, rapidly approaching up the avenue, arrested his attention. He stopped in his walk, and, turning, sought to discover who came. His first thought was of his brother; his second, of Kenneth. Through the half-denuded trees he made out two mounted figures, riding side by side; and from the fact of there being two, he adduced that this could not be Joseph returning.

Even as he waited he was joined by Cynthia, who took her stand beside him, and voiced the inquiry that was in his mind. But her father could no more than answer that he hoped it might be Kenneth.

Then the horsemen passed from behind the screen of trees and came into the clearing before the terrace, and unto the waiting glances of Ashburn and his daughter was revealed a curiously bedraggled and ill-assorted pair. The one riding slightly in advance looked like a Puritan of the meaner sort, in his battered steeple-hat and cloak of rusty black. The other was closely wrapped in a red mantle, uptilted behind by a sword of prodigious length, and for all that his broad, grey hat was unadorned by any feather, it was set at a rakish, ruffling, damn-me angle that pronounced him no likely comrade for the piously clad youth beside him.

But beneath that brave red cloak—alack!—as was presently seen

when they dismounted, that gentleman was in a sorry plight. He wore a leather jerkin, so cut and soiled that any groom might have disdained it; a pair of green breeches, frayed to their utmost; and coarse boots of untanned leather, adorned by rusty spurs.

On the terrace Gregory paused a moment to call his groom to attend the new-comers, then he passed down the steps to greet Kenneth with boisterous effusion. Behind him, slow and stately as a woman of twice her years, came Cynthia. Calm was her greeting of her lover, contained in courteous expressions of pleasure at beholding him safe, and suffering him to kiss her hand.

In the background, his sable locks uncovered out of deference to the lady, stood Sir Crispin, his face pale and haggard, his lips parted, and his grey eyes burning as they fell again, after the lapse of years, upon the stones of this his home—the castle to which he was now come, hat in hand, to beg for shelter.

Gregory was speaking, his hands resting upon Kenneth's shoulder.

"We have been much exercised concerning you, lad," he was saying. "We almost feared the worst, and yesterday Joseph left us to seek news of you at Cromwell's hands. Where have you tarried?"

"Anon, sir; you shall learn anon. The story is a long one."

"True; you will be tired, and perchance you would first rest a while. Cynthia will see to it. But what scarecrow have you there? What tatterdemalion is this?" he cried, pointing to Galliard. He had imagined him a servant, but the dull flush that overspread Sir Crispin's face told him of his error.

"I would have you know, sir," Crispin began, with some heat, when Kenneth interrupted him.

"Tis to this gentleman, sir, that I owe my presence here. He was my

fellow-prisoner, and but for his quick wit and stout arm I should be stiff by now. Anon, sir, you shall hear the story of it, and I dare swear it will divert you. This gentleman is Sir Crispin Galliard, lately a captain of horse with whom I served in Middleton's Brigade."

Crispin bowed low, conscious of the keen scrutiny in which Gregory's eyes were bent upon him. In his heart there arose a fear that, haply after all, the years that were sped had not wrought sufficient change in him.

"Sir Crispin Galliard," Ashburn was saying, after the manner of one who is searching his memory. "Galliard, Galliard—not he whom they called 'Rakehelly Galliard,' and who gave us such trouble in the late King's time?"

Crispin breathed once more. Ashburn's scrutiny was explained.

"The same, sir," he answered, with a smile and a fresh bow. "Your servant, sir; and yours, madam."

Cynthia looked with interest at the lank, soldierly figure. She, too, had heard—as who had not?—wild stories of this man's achievements. But of no feat of his had she been told that could rival that of his escape from Worcester; and when, that same evening, Kenneth related it, as they supped, her low-lidded eyes grew very wide, and as they fell on Crispin, admiration had taken now the place of interest.

Romance swayed as great a portion of her heart as it does of most women's. She loved the poets and their songs of great deeds; and here was one who, in the light of that which they related of him, was like an incarnation of some hero out of a romancer's ballad.

Kenneth she never yet had held in over high esteem; but of a sudden, in the presence of this harsh-featured dog of war, this grim, fierce-eyed ruffler, he seemed to fade, despite his comeliness of face

and form, into a poor and puny insignificance. And when, presently, he unwisely related how, when in the boat he had fainted, the maiden laughed outright for very scorn.

At this plain expression of contempt, her father shot her a quick, uneasy glance. Kenneth stopped short, bringing his narrative abruptly to a close. Reproachfully he looked at her, turning first red, then white, as anger chased annoyance through his soul. Galliard looked on with quiet relish; her laugh had contained that which for days he had carried in his heart. He drained his bumper slowly, and made no attempt to relieve the awkward silence that sat upon the company.

Truth to tell, there was emotion enough in the soul of him who was wont to be the life of every board he sat at to hold him silent and even moody.

Here, after eighteen years, was he again in his ancestral home of Marleigh. But how was he returned? As one who came under a feigned name, to seek from usurping hands a shelter 'neath his own roof; a beggar of that from others which it should have been his to grant or to deny those others. As an avenger he came. For justice he came, and armed with retribution; the flame of a hate unspeakable burning in his heart, and demanding the lives—no less—of those that had destroyed him and his. Yet was he forced to sit a mendicant almost at that board whose head was his by every right; forced to sit and curb his mood, giving no outward sign of the volcano that boiled and raged within his soul as his eye fell upon the florid, smiling face and portly, well-fed frame of Gregory Ashburn. For the time was not yet. He must wait; wait until Joseph's return, so that he might spend his vengeance upon both together.

Patient had he been for eighteen years, confident that ere he died, a just and merciful God would give him this for which he lived and waited. Yet now that the season was at hand; now upon the very eve of that for which he had so long been patient, a frenzy of impatience

fretted him.

He drank deep that night, and through deep drinking his manner thawed—for in his cups it was not his to be churlish to friend or foe. Anon Cynthia withdrew; next Kenneth, who went in quest of her. Still Crispin sat on, and drank his host's health above his breath, and his perdition under it, till in the end Gregory, who never yet had found his master at the bottle, grew numb and drowsy, and sat blinking at the tapers.

Until midnight they remained at table, talking of this and that, and each understanding little of what the other said. As the last hour of night boomed out through the great hall, Gregory spoke of bed.

"Where do I lie to-night?" asked Crispin.

"In the northern wing," answered Gregory with a hiccough.

"Nay, sir, I protest," cried Galliard, struggling to his feet, and swaying somewhat as he stood. "I'll sleep in the King's chamber, none other."

"The King's chamber?" echoed Gregory, and his face showed the confused struggles of his brain. "What know you of the King's chamber?"

"That it faces the east and the sea, and that it is the chamber I love best."

"What can you know of it since, I take it, you have never seen it!"

"Have I not?" he began, in a voice that was awful in its threatening calm. Then, recollecting himself, and shaking some of the drunkenness from him: "In the old days, when the Marleights were masters here," he mumbled, "I was often within these walls. Roland Marleigh was my friend. The King's chamber was ever accorded me, and there, for old time's sake, I'll lay these old bones of mine to-night."

"You were Roland Marleigh's friend?" gasped Gregory. He was very white now, and there was a sheen of moisture on his face. The sound of that name had well-nigh sobered him. It was almost as if the ghost of Roland Marleigh stood before him. His knees were loosened, and he sank back into the chair from which he had but risen.

"Aye, I was his friend!" assented Crispin. "Poor Roland! He married your sister, did he not, and it was thus that, having no issue and the family being extinct, Castle Marleigh passed to you?"

"He married our cousin," Gregory amended. "They were an ill-fated family."

"Ill-fated, indeed, on all accounts be true," returned Crispin in a maudlin voice. "Poor Roland! Well, for old time's sake, I'll sleep in the King's chamber, Master Ashburn."

"You shall sleep where you list, sir," answered Gregory, and they rose.

"Do you look to honour us long at Castle Marleigh, Sir Crispin?" was Gregory's last question before separating from his guest.

"Nay, sir, 'tis likely I shall go hence to-morrow," answered Crispin, unmindful of what he said.

"I trust not," said Gregory, in accents of relief that belied him. "A friend of Roland Marleigh's must ever be welcome in the house that was Roland Marleigh's."

"The house that was Roland Marleigh's," Crispin muttered. "Heigho! Life is precarious as the fall of a die at best an ephemeral business. To-night you say the house that was Roland Marleigh's; presently men will be saying the house that the Ashburns lived—aye,

and died—in. Give you good night, Master Ashburn."

He staggered off, and stumbled up the broad staircase at the head of which a servant now awaited, taper in hand, to conduct him to the chamber he demanded.

Gregory followed him with a dull, frightened eye. Galliard's halting, thickly uttered words had sounded like a prophecy in his ears.

CHAPTER XIII. THE METAMORPHOSIS OF KENNETH

When the morrow came, however, Sir Crispin showed no signs of carrying out his proposal of the night before, and departing from Castle Marleigh. Nor, indeed, did he so much as touch upon the subject, bearing himself rather as one whose sojourn there was to be indefinite.

Gregory offered no comment upon this; through what he had done for Kenneth they were under a debt to Galliard, and whilst he was a fugitive from the Parliament's justice it would ill become Gregory to hasten his departure. Moreover, Gregory recalled little or nothing of the words that had passed between them in their cups, save a vague memory that Crispin had said that he had once known Roland Marleigh.

Kenneth was content that Galliard should lie idle, and not call upon him to go forth again to lend him the aid he had pledged himself to render when Crispin should demand it. He marvelled, as the days wore on, that Galliard should appear to have forgotten that task of his, and that he should make no shift to set about it. For the rest, however, it troubled him but little; enough preoccupation did he find in Cynthia's daily increasing coldness. Upon all the fine speeches that he made her she turned an idle ear, or if she replied at all it was but petulantly to interrupt them, to call him a man of great words and small deeds. All that he did she found ill done, and told him of it. His sober, godly garments of sombre hue afforded her the first weapon of scorn

wherewith to wound him. A crow, she dubbed him; a canting, psalm-chanting hypocrite; a Scripture-monger, and every other contumelious epithet of like import that she should call to mind. He heard her in amazement.

"Is it for you, Cynthia," he cried out in his surprise, "the child of a God-fearing house, to mock the outward symbols of my faith?"

"A faith," she laughed, "that is all outward symbols and naught besides; all texts and mournings and nose-twangings."

"Cynthia!" he exclaimed, in horror.

"Go your ways, sir," she answered, half in jest, half in earnest. "What need hath a true faith of outward symbols? It is a matter that lies between your God and yourself, and it is your heart He will look at, not your coat. Why, then, without becoming more acceptable in His eyes, shall you but render yourself unsightly in the eyes of man?"

Kenneth's cheeks were flushed with anger. From the terrace where they walked he let his glance roam towards the avenue that split the park in twain. Up this at that moment, with the least suspicion of a swagger in his gait, Sir Crispin Galliard was approaching leisurely; he wore a claret-coloured doublet edged with silver lace, and a grey hat decked with a drooping red feather—which garments, together with the rest of his apparel, he had drawn from the wardrobe of Gregory Ashburn. His advent afforded Kenneth the retort he needed. Pointing him out to Cynthia:

"Would you rather," he cried hotly, "have me such a man as that?"

"And, pray, why not?" she taunted him. "Leastways, you would then be a man."

"If, madam, a debauchee, a drunkard, a profligate, a brawler be your conception of a man, I would in faith you did not account me

one."

"And what, sir, would you sooner elect to be accounted?"

"A gentleman, madam," he answered pompously.

"I think," said she quietly, "that you are in as little danger of becoming the one as the other. A gentleman does not slander a man behind his back, particularly when he owes that man his life. Kenneth, I am ashamed of you."

"I do not slander," he insisted hotly. "You yourself know of the drunken excess wherewith three nights ago he celebrated his coming to Castle Marleigh. Nor do I forget what I owe him, and payment is to be made in a manner you little know of. If I said of him what I did, it was but in answer to your taunts. Think you I could endure comparison with such a man as that? Know you what name the Royalists give him? They call him the Tavern Knight."

She looked him over with an eye of quiet scorn.

"And how, sir, do they call you? The pulpit knight? Or is it the knight of the white feather? Mr. Stewart, you weary me. I would have a man who with a man's failings hath also a man's redeeming virtues of honesty, chivalry, and courage, and a record of brave deeds, rather than one who has nothing of the man save the coat—that outward symbol you lay such store by."

His handsome, weak face was red with fury.

"Since that is so, madam," he choked, "I leave you to your swaggering, ruffling Cavalier."

And, without so much as a bow, he swung round on his heel and left her. It was her turn to grow angry now, and well it was for him that he had not tarried. She dwelt with scorn upon his parting taunt, bethinking herself that in truth she had exaggerated her opinions of

Galliard's merits. Her feelings towards that ungodly gentleman were rather of pity than aught else. A brave, ready-witted man she knew him for, as much from the story of his escape from Worcester as for the air that clung to him despite his swagger, and she deplored that one possessing these ennobling virtues should have fallen notwithstanding upon such evil ways as those which Crispin trod. Some day, perchance, when she should come to be better acquainted with him, she would seek to induce him to mend his course.

Such root did this thought take in her mind that soon thereafter—and without having waited for that riper acquaintance which at first she had held necessary—she sought to lead their talk into the channels of this delicate subject. But he as sedulously confined it to trivial matter whenever she approached him in this mood, fencing himself about with a wall of cold reserve that was not lightly to be overthrown. In this his conscience was at work. Cynthia was the flaw in the satisfaction he might have drawn from the contemplation of the vengeance he was there to wreak. He beheld her so pure, so sweet and fresh, that he marvelled how she came to be the daughter of Gregory Ashburn. His heart smote him at the thought of how she—the innocent—must suffer with the guilty, and at the contemplation of the sorrow which he must visit upon her. Out of this sprang a constraint when in her company, for other than stiff and formal he dared not be lest he should deem himself no better than the Iscariot.

During the first days he had pent at Marleigh, he had been impatient for Joseph Ashburn's return. Now he found himself hoping each morning that Joseph might not come that day.

A courier reached Gregory from Windsor with a letter wherein his brother told him that the Lord General, not being at the castle, he was gone on to London in quest of him. And Gregory, lacking the means to inform him that the missing Kenneth was already returned, was

forced to possess his soul in patience until his brother, having learnt what was to be learnt of Cromwell, should journey home.

And so the days sped on, and a week wore itself out in peace at Castle Marleigh, none dreaming of the volcano on which they stood. Each night Crispin and Gregory sat together at the board after Kenneth and Cynthia had withdrawn, and both drank deep—the one for the vice of it, the other (as he had always done) to seek forgetfulness.

He needed it now more than ever, for he feared that the consideration of Cynthia might yet unman him. Had she scorned and avoided him and having such evidences of his ways of life he marvelled that she did not—he might have allowed his considerations of her to weigh less heavily. As it was, she sought him out, nor seemed rebuffed at his efforts to evade her, and in every way she manifested a kindliness that drove him almost to the point of despair, and well-nigh to hating her.

Kenneth, knowing naught of the womanly purpose that actuated her, and seeing but the outward signs, which, with ready jealousy, he misconstrued and magnified, grew sullen and churlish to her, to Galliard, and even to Gregory.

For hours he would mope alone, nursing his jealous mood, as though in this clownish fashion matters were to be mended. Did Cynthia but speak to Crispin, he scowled; did Crispin answer her, he grit his teeth at the covert meaning wherewith his fancy invested Crispin's tones; whilst did they chance to laugh together—a contingency that fortunately for his sanity was rare—he writhed in fury. He was a man transformed, and at times there was murder in his heart. Had he been a swordsman of more than moderate skill and dared to pit himself against the Tavern Knight, blood would have been shed in Marleigh Park betwixt them.

It seemed at last as if with his insensate jealousy all the evil humours that had lain dormant in the boy were brought to the surface, to overwhelm his erstwhile virtues—if qualities that have bigotry for a parent may truly be accounted virtues.

He cast off, not abruptly, but piecemeal, those outward symbols—his sombre clothes. First 'twas his hat he exchanged for a feather trimmed beaver of more sightly hue; then those stiff white bands that reeked of sanctity and cant for a collar of fine point; next it was his coat that took on a worldly edge of silver lace. And so, little by little, step by step, was the metamorphosis effected, until by the end of the week he came forth a very butterfly of fashion—a gallant, dazzling Cavalier. Out of a stern, forbidding Covenantanter he was transformed in a few days into a most outrageous fop. He walked in an atmosphere of musk that he himself exhaled; his fair hair—that a while ago had hung so straight and limp—was now twisted into monstrous curls, a bunch of which were gathered by his right ear in a ribbon of pale blue silk.

Galliard noted the change in amazement, yet, knowing to what follies youth is driven when it woos, he accounted Cynthia responsible for it, and laughed in his sardonic way, whereat the boy would blush and scowl in one. Gregory, too, looked on and laughed, setting it down to the same cause. Even Cynthia smiled, whereat the Tavern Knight was driven to ponder.

With a courtier's raiment Kenneth put on, too, a courtier's ways; he grew mincing and affected in his speech, and he—whose utterance a while ago had been marked by a scriptural flavour—now set it off with some of Galliard's less unseemly oaths.

Since it was a ruffling gallant Cynthia required, he swore that a ruffling gallant should she find him; nor had he wit enough to see that his ribbons, his fopperies, and his capers served but to make him ridiculous in her eyes. He did indeed perceive, however, that in spite

of this wondrous transformation, he made no progress in her favour.

"What signify these fripperies?" she asked him, one day, "any more than did your coat of decent black? Are these also outward symbols?"

"You may take them for such, madam," he answered sulkily. "You liked me not as I was—"

"And I like you less as you are," she broke in.

"Cynthia, you mock me," he cried angrily.

"Now, Heaven forbid! I do but mark the change," she answered airily. "These scented clothes are but a masquerade, even as your coat of black and your cant were a masquerade. Then you simulated godliness; now you simulate Heaven knows what. But now, as then, it is no more than a simulation, a pretence of something that you are not."

He left her in a pet, and went in search of Gregory, into whose ear he poured the story of his woes that had their source in Cynthia's unkindness. From this resulted a stormy interview 'twixt Cynthia and her father, in which Cynthia at last declared that she would not be wedded to a fop.

Gregory shrugged his shoulders and laughed cynically, replying that it was the way of young men to be fools, and that through folly lay the road to wisdom.

"Be that as it may," she answered him with spirit, "this folly transcends all bounds. Master Stewart may return to his Scottish heather; at Castle Marleigh he is wasting time."

"Cynthia!" he cried.

"Father," she pleaded, "why be angry? You would not have me

marry against the inclinations of my heart? You would not have me wedded to a man whom I despise?"

"By what right do you despise him?" he demanded, his brow dark.

"By the right of the freedom of my thoughts—the only freedom that a woman knows. For the rest it seems she is but a chattel; of no more consideration to a man than his ox or his ass with which the Scriptures rank her—a thing to be given or taken, bought or sold, as others shall decree."

"Child, child, what know you of these things?" he cried. "You are overwrought, sweetheart." And with the promise to wait until a calmer frame of mind in her should be more propitious to what he wished to say further on this score, he left her.

She went out of doors in quest of solitude among the naked trees of the park; instead she found Sir Crispin, seated deep in thought upon a fallen trunk.

Through the trees she espied him as she approached, whilst the rustle of her gown announced to him her coming. He rose as she drew nigh, and, doffing his hat, made shift to pass on.

"Sir Crispin," she called, detaining him. He turned.

"Your servant, Mistress Cynthia."

"Are you afraid of me, Sir Crispin?"

"Beauty, madam, is wont to inspire courage rather than fear," he answered, with a smile.

"That, sir, is an evasion, not an answer."

"If read aright, Mistress Cynthia, it is also an answer."

"That you do not fear me?"

"It is not a habit of mine."

"Why, then, have you avoided me these three days past?"

Despite himself Crispin felt his breath quickening—quickening with a pleasure that he sought not to account for—at the thought that she should have marked his absence from her side.

"Because perhaps if I did not," he answered slowly, "you might come to avoid me. I am a proud man, Mistress Cynthia."

"Satan, sir, was proud, but his pride led him to perdition."

"So indeed may mine," he answered readily, "since it leads me from you."

"Nay, sir," she laughed, "you go from me willingly enough."

"Not willingly, Cynthia. Oh, not willingly," he began. Then of a sudden he checked his tongue, and asked himself what he was saying. With a half-laugh and a courtier manner, he continued, "Of two evils, madam, we must choose the lesser one."

"Madam," she echoed, disregarding all else that he had said. "It is an ugly word, and but a moment back you called me Cynthia."

"Twas a liberty that methought my grey hairs warranted, and for which you should have reproved me."

"You have not grey hairs enough to warrant it, Sir Crispin," she answered archly. "But what if even so I account it no liberty?"

The heavy lids were lifted from her eyes, and as their glance, frank and kindly, met his, he trembled. Then, with a polite smile, he bowed.

"I thank you for the honour."

For a moment she looked at him in a puzzled way, then moved past him, and as he stood, stiffly erect, watching her graceful figure, he thought that she was about to leave him, and was glad of it. But ere she had taken half a dozen steps:

"Sir Crispin," said she, looking back at him over her shoulder, "I am walking to the cliffs."

Never was a man more plainly invited to become an escort; but he ignored it. A sad smile crept into his harsh face.

"I shall tell Kenneth if I see him," said he.

At that she frowned.

"But I do not want him," she protested. "Sooner would I go alone."

"Why, then, madam, I'll tell nobody."

Was ever man so dull? she asked herself.

"There is a fine view from the cliffs," said she.

"I have always thought so," he agreed.

She inclined to call him a fool; yet she restrained herself. She had an impulse to go her way without him; but, then, she desired his company, and Cynthia was unused to having her desires frustrated. So finding him impervious to suggestion:

"Will you not come with me?" she asked at last, point-blank.

"Why, yes, if you wish it," he answered without alacrity.

"You may remain, sir."

Her offended tone aroused him now to the understanding that he was impolite. Contrite he stood beside her in a moment.

"With your permission, mistress, I will go with you. I am a dull fellow, and to-day I know not what mood is on me. So sorry a one that I feared I should be poor company. Still, if you'll endure me, I'll do my best to prove entertaining."

"By no means," she answered coldly. "I seek not the company of dull fellows." And she was gone.

He stood where she had left him, and breathed a most ungallant prayer of thanks. Next he laughed softly to himself, a laugh that was woeful with bitterness.

"Fore George!" he muttered, "it is all that was wanting!"

He reseated himself upon the fallen tree, and there he set himself to reflect, and to realize that he, war-worn and callous, come to Castle Marleigh on such an errand as was his, should wax sick at the very thought of it for the sake of a chit of a maid, with a mind to make a mock and a toy of him. Into his mind there entered even the possibility of flight, forgetful of the wrongs he had suffered, abandoning the vengeance he had sworn. Then with an oath he stemmed his thoughts.

"God in heaven, am I a boy, beardless and green?" he asked himself. "Am I turned seventeen again, that to look into a pair of eyes should make me forget all things but their existence?" Then in a burst of passion: "Would to Heaven," he muttered, "they had left me stark on Worcester Field!"

He rose abruptly, and set out to walk aimlessly along, until suddenly a turn in the path brought him face to face with Cynthia. She hailed him with a laugh.

"Sir laggard, I knew that willy-nilly you would follow me," she cried. And he, taken aback, could not but smile in answer, and profess that she had conjectured rightly.

CHAPTER XIV. THE HEART OF CYNTHIA ASHBURN

Side by side stepped that oddly assorted pair along—the maiden whose soul was as pure and fresh as the breeze that blew upon them from the sea, and the man whose life years ago had been marred by a sorrow, the quest of whose forgetfulness had led him through the mire of untold sin; the girl upon the threshold of womanhood, her life all before her and seeming to her untainted mind a joyous, wholesome business; the man midway on his ill-starred career, his every hope blighted save the one odious hope of vengeance, which made him cling to a life he had proved worthless and ugly, and that otherwise he had likely enough cast from him. And as they walked:

"Sir Crispin," she ventured timidly, "you are unhappy, are you not?"

Startled by her words and the tone of them, Galliard turned his head that he might observe her.

"I, unhappy?" he laughed; and it was a laugh calculated to acknowledge the fitness of her question, rather than to refute it as he intended. "Am I a clown, Cynthia, to own myself unhappy at such a season and while you honour me with your company?"

She made a wry face in protest that he fenced with her.

"You are happy, then?" she challenged him.

"What is happiness?" quoth he, much as Pilate may have questioned what was truth. Then before she could reply he hastened to add: "I have not been quite so happy these many years."

"It is not of the present moment that I speak," she answered reprovingly, for she scented no more than a compliment in his words, "but of your life."

Now either was he imbued with a sense of modesty touching the deeds of that life of his, or else did he wisely realize that no theme could there be less suited to discourse upon with an innocent maid.

"Mistress Cynthia," said he as though he had not heard her question, "I would say a word to you concerning Kenneth."

At that she turned upon him with a pout.

"But it is concerning yourself that I would have you talk. It is not nice to disobey a lady. Besides, I have little interest in Master Stewart."

"To have little interest in a future husband augurs ill for the time when he shall come to be your husband."

"I thought that you, at least, understood me. Kenneth will never be husband of mine, Sir Crispin."

"Cynthia!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, lackaday! Am I to wed a doll?" she demanded. "Is he—is he a man a maid may love, Sir Crispin?"

"Indeed, had you but seen the half of life that I have seen," said he unthinkingly, "it might amaze you what manner of man a maid may love—or at least may marry. Come, Cynthia, what fault do you find with him?"

"Why, every fault."

He laughed in unbelief.

"And whom are we to blame for all these faults that have turned you so against him?"

"Whom?"

"Yourself, Cynthia. You use him ill, child. If his behaviour has been extravagant, you are to blame. You are severe with him, and he, in his rash endeavours to present himself in a guise that shall render him commendable in your eyes, has overstepped discretion."

"Has my father bidden you to tell me this?"

"Since when have I enjoyed your father's confidence to that degree? No, no, Cynthia. I plead the boy's cause to you because—I know not because of what."

"It is ill to plead without knowing why. Let us forget the valiant Kenneth. They tell me, Sir Crispin"—and she turned her glorious eyes upon him in a manner that must have witched a statue into answering her—"that in the Royal army you were known as the Tavern Knight."

"They tell you truly. What of that?"

"Well, what of it? Do you blush at the very thought?"

"I blush?" He blinked, and his eyes were full of humour as they met her grave—almost sorrowing glance. Then a full-hearted peal of laughter broke from him, and scared a flight of gulls from the rocks of Sheringham Hithe below.

"Oh, Cynthia! You'll kill me!" he gasped. "Picture to yourself this Crispin Galliard blushing and giggling like a schoolgirl beset by her first lover. Picture it, I say! As well and as easily might you picture old Lucifer warbling a litany for the edification of a Nonconformist parson."

Her eyes were severe in their reproach.

"It is always so with you. You laugh and jest and make a mock of

everything. Such I doubt not has been your way from the commencement, and 'tis thus that you are come to this condition."

Again he laughed, but this time it was in bitterness.

"Nay, sweet mistress, you are wrong—you are very wrong; it was not always thus. Time was—" He paused. "Bah! 'Tis the coward cries 'time was'! Leave me the past, Cynthia. It is dead, and of the dead we should speak no ill," he jested.

"What is there in your past?" she insisted, despite his words. "What is there in it so to have warped a character that I am assured was once—is, indeed, still—of lofty and noble purpose? What is it has brought you to the level you occupy—you who were born to lead; you who—"

"Have done, child. Have done," he begged.

"Nay, tell me. Let us sit here." And taking hold of his sleeve, she sat herself upon a mound, and made room for him beside her on the grass. With a half-laugh and a sigh he obeyed her, and there, on the cliff, in the glow of the September sun, he took his seat at her side.

A silence prevailed about them, emphasized rather than broken by the droning chant of a fisherman mending his nets on the beach below, the intermittent splash of the waves on the shingle, and the scream of the gulls that circled overhead. Before the eyes of his flesh was stretched a wide desert of sky and water, and before the eyes of his mind the hopeless desert of his thirty-eight years.

He was almost tempted to speak. The note of sympathy in her voice allured him, and sympathy was to him as drink to one who perishes of thirst. A passionate, indefinable longing impelled him to pour out the story that in Worcester he had related unto Kenneth, and thus to set himself better in her eyes; to have her realize indeed that if he was come so low it was more the fault of others than his own. The

temptation drew him at a headlong pace, to be checked at last by the memory that those others who had brought him to so sorry a condition were her own people. The humour passed. He laughed softly, and shook his head.

"There is nothing that I can tell you, child. Let us rather talk of Kenneth."

"I do not wish to talk of Kenneth."

"Nay, but you must. Willy-nilly must you. Think you it is only a war-worn, hard-drinking, swashbuckling ruffler that can sin? Does it not also occur to you that even a frail and tender little maid may do wrong as well?"

"What wrong have I done?" she cried in consternation.

"A grievous wrong to this poor lad. Can you not realize how the only desire that governs him is the laudable one of appearing favourably in your eyes?"

"That desire gives rise, then, to curious manifestations."

"He is mistaken in the means he adopts, that is all. In his heart his one aim is to win your esteem, and, after all, it is the sentiment that matters, not its manifestation. Why, then, are you unkind to him?"

"But I am not unkind. Or is it unkindness to let him see that I dislike his capers? Would it not be vastly more unkind to ignore them and encourage him to pursue their indulgence? I have no patience with him."

"As for those capers, I am endeavouring to show you that you yourself have driven him to them."

"Sir Crispin," she cried out, "you grow tiresome."

"Aye," said he, "I grow tiresome. I grow tiresome because I preach of duty. Marry, it is in truth a tiresome topic."

"How duty? Of what do you talk?" And a flush of incipient anger spread now on her fair cheek.

"I will be clearer," said he imperturbably. "This lad is your betrothed. He is at heart a good lad, an honourable and honest lad—at times haply over-honest and over-honourable; but let that be. To please a whim, a caprice, you set yourself to flout him, as is the way of your sex when you behold a man your utter slave. From this—being all unversed in the obliquity of woman—he conceives, poor boy, that he no longer finds favour in your eyes, and to win back this, the only thing that in the world he values, he behaves foolishly. You flout him anew, and because of it. He is as jealous with you as a hen with her brood."

"Jealous?" echoed Cynthia.

"Why, yes, jealous; and so far does he go as to be jealous even of me," he cried, with infinitely derisive relish. "Think of it—he is jealous of me! Jealous of him they call the Tavern Knight!"

She did think of it as he bade her. And by thinking she stumbled upon a discovery that left her breathless.

Strange how we may bear a sentiment in our hearts without so much as suspecting its existence, until suddenly a chance word shall so urge it into life that it reveals itself with unmistakable distinctness. With her the revelation began in a vague wonder at the scorn with which Crispin invested the notion that Kenneth should have cause for jealousy on his score. Was it, she asked herself, so monstrously unnatural? Then in a flash the answer came—and it was, that far from being a matter for derision, such an attitude in Kenneth lacked not for foundation.

In that moment she knew that it was because of Crispin; because of

this man who spoke with such very scorn of self, that Kenneth had become in her eyes so mean and unworthy a creature. Loved him she haply never had, but leastways she had tolerated—been even flattered by—his wooing. By contrasting him now with Crispin she had grown to despise him. His weakness, his pusillanimity, his meannesses of soul, stood out in sharp relief by contrast with the masterful strength and the high spirit of Sir Crispin.

So easily may our ideals change that the very graces of face and form that a while ago had pleased her in Kenneth, seemed now effeminate attributes, well-attuned to a vacillating, purposeless mind. Far greater beauty did her eyes behold in this grimfaced soldier of fortune; the man as firm of purpose as he was upright of carriage; gloomy, proud, and reckless; still young, yet past the callow age of adolescence. Since the day of his coming to Castle Marleigh she had brought herself to look upon him as a hero stepped from the romancers' tales that in secret she had read. The mystery that seemed to envelop him; those hints at a past that was not good—but the measure of whose evil in her pure innocence she could not guess; his very melancholy, his misfortunes, and the deeds she had heard assigned to him, all had served to fire her fancy and more besides, although, until that moment, she knew it not.

Subconsciously all this had long dwelt in her mind. And now of a sudden that self-deriding speech of Crispin's had made her aware of its presence and its meaning.

She loved him. That men said his life had not been nice, that he was a soldier of fortune, little better than an adventurer, a man of no worldly weight, were matters of no moment then to her. She loved him. She knew it now because he had mockingly bidden her to think whether Kenneth had cause to be jealous of him, and because upon thinking of it, she found that did Kenneth know what was in her heart, he must have more than cause.

She loved him with that rare love that will urge a woman to the last sacrifice a man may ask; a love that gives and gives, and seeks nothing in return; that impels a woman to follow the man at his bidding, be his way through the world cast in places never so rugged; cleaving to him where all besides shall have abandoned him; and, however dire his lot, asking of God no greater blessing than that of sharing it.

And to such a love as this Crispin was blind—blind to the very possibility of its existence; so blind that he laughed to scorn the idea of a puny milksop being jealous of him. And so, while she sat, her soul all mastered by her discovery, her face white and still for very awe of it, he to whom this wealth was given, pursued the odious task of wooing her for another.

"You have observed—you must have observed this insensate jealousy," he was saying, "and how do you allay it? You do not. On the contrary, you excite it at every turn. You are exciting it now by having—and I dare swear for no other purpose—lured me to walk with you, to sit here with you and preach your duty to you. And when, through jealousy, he shall have flown to fresh absurdities, shall you regret your conduct and the fruits it has borne? Shall you pity the lad, and by kindness induce him to be wiser? No. You will mock and taunt him into yet worse displays. And through these displays, which are—though you may not have bethought you of it—of your own contriving, you will conclude that he is no fit mate for you, and there will be heart-burnings, and years hence perhaps another Tavern Knight, whose name will not be Crispin Galliard."

She had listened with bent head; indeed, so deeply rapt by her discovery, that she had but heard the half of what he said. Now, of a sudden, she looked up, and meeting his glance:

"Is—is it a woman's fault that you are as you are?"

"No, it is not. But how does that concern the case of Kenneth?"

"It does not. I was but curious. I was not thinking of Kenneth."

He stared at her, dumfounded. Had he been talking of Kenneth to her with such eloquence and such fervour, that she should calmly tell him as he paused that it was not of Kenneth she had been thinking?

"You will think of him, Cynthia?" he begged. "You will bethink you too of what I have said, and by being kinder and more indulgent with this youth you shall make him grow into a man you may take pride in. Deal fairly with him, child, and if anon you find you cannot truly love him, then tell him so. But tell him kindly and frankly, instead of using him as you are doing."

She was silent a moment, and in their poignancy her feelings went very near to anger. Presently:

"I would, Sir Crispin, you could hear him talk of you," said she.

"He talks ill, not a doubt of it, and like enough he has good cause."

"Yet you saved his life."

The words awoke Crispin, the philosopher of love, to realities. He recalled the circumstances of his saving Kenneth, and the price the boy was to pay for that service; and it suddenly came to him that it was wasted breath to plead Kenneth's cause with Cynthia, when by his own future actions he was, himself, more than likely to destroy the boy's every hope of wedding her. The irony of his attitude smote him hard, and he rose abruptly. The sun hung now a round, red globe upon the very brink of the sea.

"Hereafter he may have little cause to thank me," muttered he. "Come, Mistress Cynthia, it grows late."

She rose in mechanical obedience, and together they retraced

their steps in silence, save for the stray word exchanged at intervals touching matters of no moment.

But he had not advocated Kenneth's cause in vain, for all that he little recked what his real argument had been, what influences he had evoked to urge her to make her peace with the lad. A melancholy listlessness of mind possessed her now. Crispin did not see, never would see, what was in her heart, and it might not be hers to show him. The life that might have signified was not to be lived, and since that was so it seemed to matter little what befell.

It was thus that when on the morrow her father returned to the subject, she showed herself tractable and docile out of her indifference, and to Gregory she appeared not averse to listen to what he had to advance in the boy's favour. Anon Kenneth's own humble pleading, allied to his contrite and sorrowful appearance, were received by her with that same indifference, as also with indifference did she allow him later to kiss her hand and assume the flattering belief that he was rehabilitated in her favour.

But pale grew Mistress Cynthia's cheeks, and sad her soul. Wistful she waxed, sighing at every turn, until it seemed to her—as haply it hath seemed to many a maid—that all her life must she waste in vain sighs over a man who gave no single thought to her.

CHAPTER XV. JOSEPH'S RETURN

On his side Kenneth strove hard during the days that followed to right himself in her eyes. But so headlong was he in the attempt, and so misguided, that presently he overshot his mark by dropping an unflattering word concerning Crispin, whereby he attributed to the Tavern Knight's influence and example the degenerate change that had of late been wrought in him.

Cynthia's eyes grew hard as he spoke, and had he been wise he had better served his cause by talking in another vein. But love and jealousy had so addled what poor brains the Lord had bestowed upon him, that he floundered on, unmindful of any warning that took not the blunt shape of words. At length, however, she stemmed the flow of invective that his lips poured forth.

"Have I not told you already, Kenneth, that it better becomes a gentleman not to slander the man to whom he owes his life? In fact, that a gentleman would scorn such an action?"

As he had protested before, so did he protest now, that what he had uttered was no slander. And in his rage and mortification at the way she used him, and for which he now bitterly upbraided her, he was very near the point of tears, like the blubbing schoolboy that at heart he was.

"And as for the debt, madam," he cried, striking the oaken table of the hall with his clenched hand, "it is a debt that shall be paid, a debt which this gentleman whom you defend would not permit me to contract until I had promised payment—aye, 'fore George!—and with

interest, for in the payment I may risk my very life."

"I see no interest in that, since you risk nothing more than what you owe him," she answered, with a disdain that brought the impending tears to his eyes. But if he lacked the manliness to restrain them, he possessed at least the shame to turn his back and hide them from her. "But tell me, sir," she added, her curiosity awakened, "if I am to judge, what was the nature of this bargain?"

He was silent for a moment, and took a turn in the hall—mastering himself to speak—his hands clasped behind his back, and his eyes bent towards the polished floor which the evening sunlight, filtered through the gules of the leaded windows, splashed here and there with a crimson stain. She sat in the great leathern chair at the head of the board, and, watching him, waited.

He was debating whether he was bound to secrecy in the matter, and in the end he resolved that he was not. Thereupon, pausing before her, he succinctly told the story Crispin had related to him that night in Worcester—the story of a great wrong, that none but a craven could have left unavenged. He added nothing to it, subtracted nothing from it, but told the tale as it had been told to him on that dreadful night, the memory of which had still power to draw a shudder from him.

Cynthia sat with parted lips and eager eyes, drinking in that touching narrative of suffering that was rather as some romancer's fabrication than a true account of what a living man had undergone. Now with sorrow and pity in her heart and countenance, now with anger and loathing, she listened until he had done, and even when he ceased speaking, and flung himself into the nearest chair, she sat on in silence for a spell.

Then of a sudden she turned a pair of flashing eyes upon the boy, and in tones charged with a scorn ineffable:

"You dare," she cried, "to speak of that man as you do, knowing all this? Knowing what he has suffered, you dare to rail in his absence against those sins to which his misfortunes have driven him? How, think you, would it have fared with you, you fool, had you stood in the shoes of this unfortunate? Had you fallen on your craven knees, and thanked the Lord for allowing you to keep your miserable life? Had you succumbed to the blows of fate with a whine of texts upon your lips? Who are you?" she went on, rising, breathless in her wrath, which caused him to recoil in sheer affright before her. "Who are you, and what are you, that knowing what you know of this man's life, you dare to sit in judgment upon his actions and condemn them? Answer me, you fool!"

But never a word had he wherewith to meet that hail of angry, contemptuous questions. The answer that had been so ready to his lips that night at Worcester, when, in a milder form the Tavern Knight had set him the same question, he dared not proffer now. The retort that Sir Crispin had not cause enough in the evil of others, which had wrecked his life, to risk the eternal damnation of his soul, he dared no longer utter. Glibly enough had he said to that stern man that which he dared not say now to this sterner beauty. Perhaps it was fear of her that made him dumb, perhaps that at last he knew himself for what he was by contrast with the man whose vices he had so heartily despised a while ago.

Shrinking back before her anger, he racked his shallow mind in vain for a fitting answer. But ere he had found one, a heavy step sounded in the gallery that overlooked the hall, and a moment later Gregory Ashburn descended. His face was ghastly white, and a heavy frown furrowed the space betwixt his brows.

In the fleeting glance she bestowed upon her father, she remarked not the disorder of his countenance; whilst as for Kenneth, he had enough to hold his attention for the time.

Gregory's advent set an awkward constraint upon them, nor had he any word to say as he came heavily up the hall.

At the lower end of the long table he paused, and resting his hand upon the board, he seemed on the point of speaking when of a sudden a sound reached him that caused him to draw a sharp breath: it was the rumble of wheels and the crack of a whip.

"It is Joseph!" he cried, in a voice the relief of which was so marked that Cynthia noticed it. And with that exclamation he flung past them, and out through the doorway to meet his brother so opportunely returned.

He reached the terrace steps as the coach pulled up, and the lean figure of Joseph Ashburn emerged from it.

"So, Gregory," he grumbled for greeting, "it was on a fool's errand you sent me, after all. That knave, your messenger, found me in London at last when I had outworn my welcome at Whitehall. But, 'swounds, man," he cried, remarking the pallor, of his brother's face, "what ails thee?"

"I have news for you, Joseph," answered Gregory, in a voice that shook.

"It is not Cynthia?" he inquired. "Nay, for there she stands-and her pretty lover by her side. 'Slife, what a coxcomb the lad's grown."

And with that he hastened forward to kiss his niece, and congratulate Kenneth upon being restored to her.

"I heard of it, lad, in London," quoth he, a leer upon his sallow face—"the story of how a fire-eater named Galliard befriended you, trussed a parson and a trooper, and dragged you out of jail a short hour before hanging-time."

Kenneth flushed. He felt the sneer in Joseph's, words like a stab. The man's tone implied that another had done for him that which he would not have dared do for himself, and Kenneth felt that this was so said in Cynthia's presence with malicious, purpose.

He was right. Partly it was Joseph's way to be spiteful and venomous whenever chance afforded him the opportunity. Partly he had been particularly soured at present by his recent discomforts, suffered in a cause wherewith he had no, sympathy—that of the union Gregory desired 'twixt Cynthia and Kenneth.

There was an evil smile on his thin lips, and his crooked eyes rested tormentingly upon the young man. A fresh taunt trembled on his viperish tongue, when Gregory plucked at the skirts of his coat, and drew him aside. They entered the chamber where they had held their last interview before Joseph had set out for news of Kenneth. With an air of mystery Gregory closed the door, then turned to face his brother. He stayed him in the act of unbuckling his sword-belt.

"Wait, Joseph!" he cried dramatically. "This is no time to disarm. Keep your sword on your thigh, man; you will need it as you never yet have needed it." He paused, took a deep breath, and hurled the news at his brother. "Roland Marleigh is here." And he sat down like a man exhausted.

Joseph did not start; he did not cry out; he did not so much as change countenance. A slight quiver of the eyelids was the only outward sign he gave of the shock that his brother's announcement had occasioned. The hand that had rested on the buckle of his sword-belt slipped quietly to his side, and he deliberately stepped up to Gregory, his eyes set searchingly upon the pale, flabby face before him. A sudden suspicion darting through his mind, he took his brother by the shoulders and shook him vigorously.

"Gregory, you fool, you have drunk overdeep in my absence."

"I have, I have," wailed Gregory, "and, my God, 'twas he was my table-fellow, and set me the example."

"Like enough, like enough," returned Joseph, with a contemptuous laugh. "My poor Gregory, the wine has so fouled your worthless wits at last, that they conjure up phantoms to sit at the table with you. Come, man, what petticoat business is this? Bestir yourself, fool."

At that Gregory caught the drift of Joseph's suspicions.

"Tis you are the fool," he retorted angrily, springing to his feet, and towering above his brother.

"It was no ghost sat with me, but Roland Marleigh, himself, in the flesh, and strangely changed by time. So changed that I knew him not, nor should I know him now but for that which, not ten minutes ago, I overheard."

His earnestness was too impressive, his sanity too obvious, and Joseph's suspicions were all scattered before it.

He caught Gregory's wrist in a grip that made him wince, and forced him back into his seat.

"Gadslife, man, what is it you mean?" he demanded through set teeth. "Tell me."

And forthwith Gregory told him of the manner of Kenneth's coming to Sheringham and to Castle Marleigh, accompanied by one Crispin Galliard, the same that had been known for his mad exploits in the late wars as "rakehelly Galliard," and that was now known to the malignants as "The Tavern Knight" for his debauched habits. Crispin's mention of Roland Marleigh on the night of his arrival now returned vividly to Gregory's mind, and he repeated it, ending with the story that that very evening he had overheard Kenneth telling Cynthia.

"And this Galliard, then, is none other than that pup of insolence, Roland Marleigh, grown into a dog of war?" quoth Joseph.

He was calm—singularly calm for one who had heard such news.

"There remains no doubt of it."

"And you saw this man day by day, sat with him night by night over your damned sack, and knew him not? Oddswounds, man, where were your eyes?"

"I may have been blind. But he is greatly changed. I would defy you, Joseph, to have recognized him."

Joseph sneered, and the flash of his eyes told of the contempt wherein he held his brother's judgment and opinions.

"Think not that, Gregory. I have cause enough to remember him," said Joseph, with an unpleasant laugh. Then as suddenly changing his tone for one of eager anxiety:

"But the lad, Gregory, does he suspect, think you?"

"Not a whit. In that lies this fellow's diabolical cunning. Learning of Kenneth's relations with us, he seized the opportunity Fate offered him that night at Worcester, and bound the lad on oath to help him when he should demand it, without disclosing the names of those against whom he should require his services. The boy expects at any moment to be bidden to go forth with him upon his mission of revenge, little dreaming that it is here that that tragedy is to be played out."

"This comes of your fine matrimonial projects for Cynthia," muttered Joseph acridly. He laughed his unpleasant laugh again, and for a spell there was silence.

"To think, Gregory," he broke out at last, "that for a fortnight he

be should have been beneath this roof, and you should have found no means of doing more effectively that which was done too carelessly eighteen years ago."

He spoke as coldly as though the matter were a trivial one. Gregory shuddered and looked at his brother in alarm.

"What now, fool?" cried Joseph, scowling. "Are you as cowardly as you are blind? Damn me, sir, it seems well that I am returned. I'll have no Marleigh plague my old age for me." He paused a moment, then continued in a quieter voice, but one whose ring was sinister beyond words: "Tomorrow I shall find a way to draw this your dog of war to some secluded ground. I have some skill," he pursued, tapping his hilt as he spoke, "besides, you shall be there, Gregory." And he smiled darkly. "Is there no other way?" asked Gregory, in distress.

"There was," answered Joseph. "There was in Parliament. At Whitehall I met a man—one Colonel Pride—a bloodthirsty old Puritan soldier, who would give his right hand to see this Galliard hanged. Galliard, it seems, slew the fellow's son at Worcester. Had I but known," he added regretfully—"had your wits been keener, and you had discovered it and sent me word, I had found means to help Colonel Pride to his revenge. As it is"—he shrugged his shoulders—"there is not time."

"It may be—" began Gregory, then stopped abruptly with an exclamation that caused Joseph to wheel sharply round. The door had opened, and on the threshold Sir Crispin Galliard stood, deferentially, hat in hand.

Joseph's astonished glance played rapidly over him for a second. Then:

"Who the devil may you be?" he blurted out.

Despite his anxiety, Gregory chuckled at the question. The Tavern

Knight came forward. "I am Sir Crispin Galliard, at your service," said he, bowing. "I was told that the master of Marleigh was returned, and that I should find you here, and I hasten, sir, to proffer you my thanks for the generous shelter this house has given me this fortnight past."

Whilst he spoke he measured Joseph with his eyes, and his glance was as hateful as his words were civil. Joseph was lost in amazement. Little trace was there in this fellow of the Roland Marleigh he had known. Moreover, he had looked to find an older man, forgetting that Roland's age could not exceed thirty-eight. Then, again, the fading light, whilst revealing the straight, supple lines of his lank figure, softened the haggardness of the face and made him appear yet younger than the light of day would have shown him.

In an instant Joseph had recovered from his surprise, and for all that his mind misgave him tortured by a desire to learn whether Crispin was aware of their knowledge concerning him—his smile was serene, and his tones level and pleasant, as he made answer:

"Sir, you are very welcome. You have valiantly served one dear to us, and the entertainment of our poor house for as long as you may deign to honour it is but the paltriest of returns."

CHAPTER XVI. THE RECKONING

Sir Crispin had heard naught of what was being said as he entered the room wherein the brothers plotted against him, and he little dreamt that his identity was discovered. He had but hastened to perform that which, under ordinary circumstances, would have been a natural enough duty towards the master of the house. He had been actuated also by an impatience again to behold this Joseph Ashburn—the man who had dealt him that murderous sword-thrust eighteen years ago. He watched him attentively, and gathering from his scrutiny that here was a dangerous, subtle man, different, indeed, to his dull-witted brother, he had determined to act at once.

And so when he appeared in the hall at suppertime, he came armed and booted, and equipped as for a journey.

Joseph was standing alone by the huge fire-place, his face to the burning logs, and his foot resting upon one of the andirons. Gregory and his daughter were talking together in the embrasure of a window. By the other window, across the hall, stood Kenneth, alone and disconsolate, gazing out at the drizzling rain that had begun to fall.

As Galliard descended, Joseph turned his head, and his eyebrows shot up and wrinkled his forehead at beholding the knight's equipment.

"How is this, Sir Crispin?" said he. "You are going a journey?"

"Too long already have I imposed myself upon the hospitality of Castle Marleigh," Crispin answered politely as he came and stood

before the blazing logs. "To-night, Mr. Ashburn, I go hence."

A curious expression flitted across Joseph's face. The next moment, his brows still knit as he sought to fathom his sudden action, he was muttering the formal regrets that courtesy dictated. But Crispin had remarked that singular expression on Joseph's face—fleeting though it had been—and it flashed across his mind that Joseph knew him. And as he moved away towards Cynthia and her father, he thanked Heaven that he had taken such measures as he had thought wise and prudent for the carrying out of his resolve.

Following him with a glance, Joseph asked himself whether Crispin had discovered that he was recognized, and had determined to withdraw, leaving his vengeance for another and more propitious season. In answer—little knowing the measure of the man he dealt with—he told himself it must be so, and having arrived at that conclusion, he there and then determined that Crispin should not depart free to return and plague them when he listed. Since Galliard shrank from forcing matters to an issue, he himself would do it that very night, and thereby settle for all time his business. And so ere he sat down to sup Joseph looked to it that his sword lay at hand behind his chair at the table-head.

The meal was a quiet one enough. Kenneth was sulking 'neath the fresh ill-usage—as he deemed it—that he had suffered at Cynthia's hands. Cynthia, in her turn, was grave and silent. That story of Sir Crispin's sufferings gave her much to think of, as did also his departure, and more than once did Galliard find her eyes fixed upon him with a look half of pity, half of some other feeling that he was at a loss to interpret. Gregory's big voice was little heard. The sinister glitter in his brother's eye made him apprehensive and ill at ease. For him the hour was indeed in travail and like to bring forth strange doings—but not half so much as it was for Crispin and Joseph, each bent upon forcing matters to a head ere they quitted that board. And

yet but for these two the meal would have passed off in dismal silence. Joseph was at pains to keep suspicion from his guest, and with that intent he talked gaily of this and that, told of slight matters that had befallen him on his recent journey and of the doings that in London he had witnessed, investing each trifling incident with a garb of wit that rendered it entertaining.

And Galliard—actuated by the same motives grew reminiscent whenever Joseph paused and let his nimble tongue—even nimblest at a table amuse those present, or seem to amuse them, by a score of drolleries.

He drank deeply too, and this Joseph observed with satisfaction. But here again he misjudged his man. Kenneth, who ate but little, seemed also to have developed an enormous thirst, and Crispin grew at length alarmed at that ever empty goblet so often filled. He would have need of Kenneth ere the hour was out, and he rightly feared that did matters thus continue, the lad's aid was not to be reckoned with. Had Kenneth sat beside him he might have whispered a word of restraint in his ear, but the lad was on the other side of the board.

At one moment Crispin fancied that a look of intelligence passed from Joseph to Gregory, and when presently Gregory set himself to ply both him and the boy with wine, his suspicions became certainties, and he grew watchful and wary.

Anon Cynthia rose. Upon the instant Galliard was also on his feet. He escorted her to the foot of the staircase, and there:

"Permit me, Mistress Cynthia," said he, "to take my leave of you. In an hour or so I shall be riding away from Castle Marleigh."

Her eyes sought the ground, and had he been observant of her he might have noticed that she paled slightly.

"Fare you well, sir," said she in a low voice. "May happiness attend

you."

"Madam, I thank you. Fare you well."

He bowed low. She dropped him a slight curtsey, and ascended the stairs. Once as she reached the gallery above she turned. He had resumed his seat at table, and was in the act of filling his glass. The servants had withdrawn, and for half an hour thereafter they sat on, sipping their wine, and making conversation—while Crispin drained bumper after bumper and grew every instant more boisterous, until at length his boisterousness passed into incoherence. His eyelids drooped heavily, and his chin kept ever and anon sinking forward on to his breast.

Kenneth, flushed with wine, yet master of his wits, watched him with contempt. This was the man Cynthia preferred to him! Contempt was there also in Joseph Ashburn's eye, mingled with satisfaction. He had not looked to find the task so easy. At length he deemed the season ripe.

"My brother tells me that you were once acquainted with Roland Marleigh," said he.

"Aye," he answered thickly. "I knew the dog—a merry, reckless soul, d—n me. 'Twas his recklessness killed him, poor devil—that and your hand, Mr. Ashburn, so the story goes."

"What story?"

"What story?" echoed Crispin. "The story that I heard. Do you say I lie?" And, swaying in his chair, he sought to assume an air of defiance.

Joseph laughed in a fashion that made Kenneth's blood run cold.

"Why, no, I don't deny it. It was in fair fight he fell. Moreover, he brought the duel upon himself."

Crispin spoke no word in answer, but rose unsteadily to his feet, so unsteadily that his chair was overset and fell with a crash behind him. For a moment he surveyed it with a drunken leer, then went lurching across the hall towards the door that led to the servants' quarters. The three men sat on, watching his antics in contempt, curiosity, and amusement. They saw him gain the heavy oaken door and close it. They heard the bolts rasp as he shot them home, and the lock click; and they saw him withdraw the key and slip it into his pocket.

The cold smile still played round Joseph's lips as Crispin turned to face them again, and on Joseph's lips did that same smile freeze as he saw him standing there, erect and firm, his drunkenness all vanished, and his eyes keen and fierce; as he heard the ring of his metallic voice:

"You lie, Joseph Ashburn. It was no fair fight. It was no duel. It was a foul, murderous stroke you dealt him in the back, thinking to butcher him as you butchered his wife and his babe. But there is a God, Master Ashburn," he went on in an ever-swelling voice, "and I lived. Like a salamander I came through the flames in which you sought to destroy all trace of your vile deed. I lived, and I, Crispin Galliard, the debauched Tavern Knight that was once Roland Marleigh, am here to demand a reckoning."

The very incarnation was he then of an avenger, as he stood towering before them, his grim face livid with the passion into which he had lashed himself as he spoke, his blazing eyes watching them in that cunning, half-closed way that was his when his mood was dangerous. And yet the only one that quailed was Kenneth, his ally, upon whom comprehension burst with stunning swiftness.

Joseph recovered quickly from the surprise of Crispin's suddenly reassumed sobriety. He understood the trick that Galliard had played upon them so that he might cut off their retreat in the only direction in

which they might have sought assistance, and he cursed himself for not having foreseen it. Still, anxiety he felt none; his sword was to his hand, and Gregory was armed; at the very worst they were two calm and able men opposed to a half-intoxicated boy, and a man whom fury, he thought, must strip of half his power. Probably, indeed, the lad would side with them, despite his plighted word. Again, he had but to raise his voice, and, though the door that Crispin had fastened was a stout one, he never doubted but that his call would penetrate it and bring his servants to his rescue.

And so, a smile of cynical unconcern returned to his lips and his answer was delivered in a cold, incisive voice.

"The reckoning you have come to demand shall be paid you, sir. Rakehelly Galliard is the hero of many a reckless deed, but my judgment is much at fault if this prove not his crowning recklessness and his last one. Gadswounds, sir, are you mad to come hither single-handed to beard the lion in his den?"

"Rather the cur in his kennel," sneered Crispin back. "Blood and wounds, Master Joseph, think you to affright me with words?"

Still Joseph smiled, deeming himself master of the situation.

"Were help needed, the raising of my voice would bring it me. But it is not. We are three to one."

"You reckon wrongly. Mr. Stewart belongs to me to-night—bound by an oath that 'twould damn his soul to break, to help me when and where I may call upon him; and I call upon him now. Kenneth, draw your sword."

Kenneth groaned as he stood by, clasping and unclasping his hands.

"God's curse on you," he burst out. "You have tricked me, you have

cheated me."

"Bear your oath in mind," was the cold answer. "If you deem yourself wronged by me, hereafter you shall have what satisfaction you demand. But first fulfil me what you have sworn. Out with your blade, man."

Still Kenneth hesitated, and but for Gregory's rash action at that critical juncture, it is possible that he would have elected to break his plighted word. But Gregory fearing that he might determine otherwise, resolved there and then to remove the chance of it. Whipping out his sword, he made a vicious pass at the lad's breast. Kenneth avoided it by leaping backwards, but in an instant Gregory had sprung after him, and seeing himself thus beset, Kenneth was forced to draw that he might protect himself.

They stood in the space between the table and that part of the hall that abutted on to the terrace; opposite to them, by the door which he had closed, stood Crispin. At the table-head Joseph still sat cool, self-contained, even amused.

He realized the rashness of Gregory's attack upon one that might yet have been won over to their side; but he never doubted that a few passes would dispose of the lad's opposition, and he sought not to interfere. Then he saw Crispin advancing towards him slowly, his rapier naked in his hand, and he was forced to look to himself. He caught at the sword that stood behind him, and leaping to his feet he sprang forward to meet his grim antagonist. Galliard's eyes flashed out a look of joy, he raised his rapier, and their blades met.

To the clash of their meeting came an echoing clash from beyond the table.

"Hold, sir!" Kenneth had cried, as Gregory bore down upon him. But Gregory's answer had been a lunge which the boy had been

forced to parry. Taking that crossing of blades for a sign of opposition, Gregory thrust again more viciously. Kenneth parried narrowly, his blade pointing straight at his aggressor. He saw the opening, and both instinct and the desire to repel Gregory's onslaught drew him into attempting a riposte, which drove Gregory back until his shoulders touched the panels of the wall. Simultaneously the boy's foot struck the back of the chair which in rising Crispin had overset, and he stumbled. How it happened he scarcely knew, but as he hurtled forward his blade slid along his opponent's, and entering Gregory's right shoulder pinned him to the wainscot.

Joseph heard the tinkle of a falling blade, and assumed it to be Kenneth's. For the rest he was just then too busy to dare withdraw for a second his eyes from Crispin's. Until that hour Joseph Ashburn had accounted himself something of a swordsman, and more than a match for most masters of the weapon. But in Crispin he found a fencer of a quality such as he had never yet encountered. Every feint, every botte in his catalogue had he paraded in quick succession, yet ever with the same result—his point was foiled and put aside with ease.

Desperately he fought now, darting that point of his hither and thither in and out whenever the slightest opening offered; yet ever did it meet the gentle averting pressure of Crispin's blade. He fought on and marvelled as the seconds went by that Gregory came not to his aid. Then the sickening thought that perhaps Gregory was overcome occurred to him. In such a case he must reckon upon himself alone. He cursed the over-confidence that had led him into that ever-fatal error of underestimating his adversary. He might have known that one who had acquired Sir Crispin's fame was no ordinary man, but one accustomed to face great odds and master them. He might call for help.

He marvelled as the thought occurred to him that the clatter of their

blades had not drawn his servants from their quarters. Fencing still, he raised his voice:

"Ho, there! John, Stephen!"

"Spare your breath," growled the knight. "I dare swear you'll have need of it. None will hear you, call as you will. I gave your four henchmen a flagon of wine wherein to drink to my safe journey hence. They have emptied it ere this, I make no doubt, and a single glass of it would set the hardest toper asleep for the round of the clock."

An oath was Joseph's only answer—a curse it was upon his own folly and assurance. A little while ago he had thought to have drawn so tight a net about this ruler, and here was he now taken in its very toils, well-nigh exhausted and in his enemy's power.

It occurred to him then that Crispin stayed his hand. That he fenced only on the defensive, and he wondered what might his motive be. He realized that he was mastered, and that at any moment Galliard might send home his blade. He was bathed from head to foot in a sweat that was at once of exertion and despair. A frenzy seized him. Might he not yet turn to advantage this hesitancy of Crispin's to strike the final blow?

He braced himself for a supreme effort, and turning his wrist from a simulated thrust in the first position, he doubled, and stretching out, lunged vigorously in quarte. As he lengthened his arm in the stroke there came a sudden twitch at his wrist; the weapon was twisted from his grasp, and he stood disarmed at Crispin's mercy.

A gurgling cry broke despite him from his lips, and his eyes grew wide in a sickly terror as they encountered the knight's sinister glance. Not three paces behind him was the wall, and on it, within the hand's easy reach, hung many a trophied weapon that might have served him then. But the fascination of fear was upon him, benumbing his

wits and paralysing his limbs, with the thought that the next pulsation of his tumultuous heart would prove its last. The calm, unflinching courage that had been Joseph's only virtue was shattered, and his iron will that had unscrupulously held hitherto his very conscience in bondage was turned to water now that he stood face to face with death.

Eons of time it seemed to him were sped since the sword was wrenched from his hand, and still the stroke he awaited came not; still Crispin stood, sinister and silent before him, watching him with magnetic, fascinating eyes—as the snake watches the bird—eyes from which Joseph could not withdraw his own, and yet before which it seemed to him that he quaked and shrivelled.

The candles were burning low in their sconces, and the corners of that ample, gloomy hall were filled with mysterious shadows that formed a setting well attuned to the grim picture made by those two figures—the one towering stern and vengeful, the other crouching palsied and livid.

Beyond the table, and with the wounded Gregory—lying unconscious and bleeding—at his feet, stood Kenneth looking on in silence, in wonder and in some horror too.

To him also, as he watched, the seconds seemed minutes from the time when Crispin had disarmed his opponent until with a laugh—short and sudden as a stab—he dropped his sword and caught his victim by the throat.

However fierce the passion that had actuated Crispin, it had been held hitherto in strong subjection. But now at last it suddenly welled up and mastered him, causing him to cast all restraint to the winds, to abandon reason, and to give way to the lust of rage that rendered ungovernable his mood.

Like a burst of flame from embers that have been smouldering was the upheaping of his madness, transfiguring his face and transforming his whole being. A new, unconquerable strength possessed him; his pulses throbbed swiftly and madly with the quickened coursing of his blood, and his soul was filled with the cruel elation that attends a lust about to be indulged the elation of the beast about to rend its prey.

He was pervaded by the desire to wreak slowly and with his hands the destruction of his broken enemy. To have passed his sword through him would have been too swiftly done; the man would have died, and Crispin would have known nothing of his sufferings. But to take him thus by the throat; slowly to choke the life's breath out of him; to feel his desperate, writhing struggles; to be conscious of every agonized twitch of his sinews, to watch the purpling face, the swelling veins, the protruding eyes filled with the dumb horror of his agony; to hold him thus—each second becoming a distinct, appreciable division of time—and thus to take what payment he could for all the blighted years that lay behind him—this he felt would be something like revenge.

Meanwhile the shock of surprise at the unlooked-for movement had awakened again the man in Joseph. For a second even Hope knocked at his heart. He was sinewy and active, and perchance he might yet make Galliard repent that he had discarded his rapier. The knight's reason for doing so he thought he had in Crispin's contemptuous words:

"Good steel were too great an honour for you, Mr. Ashburn."

And as he spoke, his lean, nervous fingers tightened about Joseph's throat in a grip that crushed the breath from him, and with it the new-born hope of proving master in his fresh combat. He had not reckoned with this galley-weaned strength of Crispin's, a strength that was a revelation to Joseph as he felt himself almost lifted from the ground, and swung this way and that, like a babe in the hands of a

grown man. Vain were his struggles. His strength ebbed fast; the blood, held overlong in his head, was already obscuring his vision, when at last the grip relaxed, and his breathing was freed. As his sight cleared again he found himself back in his chair at the table-head, and beside him Sir Crispin, his left hand resting upon the board, his right grasping once more the sword, and his eyes bent mockingly and evilly upon his victim.

Kenneth, looking on, could not repress a shudder. He had known Crispin for a tempestuous man quickly moved to wrath, and he had oftentimes seen anger make terrible his face and glance. But never had he seen aught in him to rival this present frenzy; it rendered satanical the baleful glance of his eyes and the awful smile of hate and mockery with which he gazed at last upon the helpless quarry that he had waited eighteen years to bring to earth. "I would," said Crispin, in a harsh, deliberate voice, "that you had a score of lives, Master Joseph. As it is I have done what I could. Two agonies have you undergone already, and I am inclined to mercy. The end is at hand. If you have prayers to say, say them, Master Ashburn, though I doubt me it will be wasted breath—you are over-ripe for hell."

"You mean to kill me," he gasped, growing yet a shade more livid.

"Does the suspicion of it but occur to you?" laughed Crispin, "and yet twice already have I given you a foretaste of death. Think you I but jested?"

Joseph's teeth clicked together in a snap of determination. That sneer of Crispin's acted upon him as a blow—but as a blow that arouses the desire to retaliate rather than lays low. He braced himself for fresh resistance; not of action, for that he realized was futile, but of argument.

"It is murder that you do," he cried.

"No; it is justice. It has been long on the way, but it has come at last."

"Bethink you, Mr. Marleigh—"

"Call me not by that name," cried the other harshly, fearfully. "I have not borne it these eighteen years, and thanks to what you have made me, it is not meet that I should bear it now." There was a pause. Then Joseph spoke again with great calm and earnestness.

"Bethink you, Sir Crispin, of what you are about to do. It can benefit you in naught."

"Oddslife, think you it cannot? Think you it will benefit me naught to see you earn at last your reward?"

"You may have dearly to pay for what at best must prove a fleeting satisfaction."

"Not a fleeting one, Joseph," he laughed. "But one the memory of which shall send me rejoicing through what years or days of life be left me. A satisfaction that for eighteen years I have been waiting to experience; though the moment after it be mine find me stark and cold."

"Sir Crispin, you are in enmity with the Parliament—an outlaw almost. I have some influence much influence. By exerting it—"

"Have done, sir!" cried Crispin angrily. "You talk in vain. What to me is life, or aught that life can give? If I have so long endured the burden of it, it has been so that I might draw from it this hour. Do you think there is any bribe you could offer would turn me from my purpose?"

A groan from Gregory, who was regaining consciousness, drew his attention aside.

"Truss him up, Kenneth," he commanded, pointing to the

recumbent figure. "How? Do you hesitate? Now, as God lives, I'll be obeyed; or you shall have an unpleasant reminder of the oath you swore me!"

With a look of loathing the lad dropped on his knees to do as he was bidden. Then of a sudden:

"I have not the means," he announced.

"Fool, does he not wear a sword-belt and a sash? Come, attend to it!"

"Why do you force me to do this?" the lad still protested passionately. "You have tricked and cheated me, yet I have kept my oath and rendered you the assistance you required. They are in your power now, can you not do the rest yourself?"

"On my soul, Master Stewart, I am over-patient with you! Are we to wrangle at every step before you'll take it? I will have your assistance through this matter as you swore to give it. Come, truss me that fellow, and have done with words."

His fierceness overthrew the boy's outburst of resistance. Kenneth had wit enough to see that his mood was not one to brook much opposition, and so, with an oath and a groan, he went to work to pinion Gregory.

Then Joseph spoke again. "Weigh well this act of yours, Sir Crispin," he cried. "You are still young; much of life lies yet before you. Do not wantonly destroy it by an act that cannot repair the past."

"But it can avenge it, Joseph. As for my life, you destroyed it years ago. The future has naught to offer me; the present has this." And he drew back his sword to strike.

CHAPTER XVII. JOSEPH DRIVES A BARGAIN

A new terror leapt into Joseph's eyes at that movement of Crispin's, and for the third time that night did he taste the agony that is Death's forerunner. Yet Galliard delayed the stroke. He held his sword poised, the point aimed at Joseph's breast, and holding, he watched him, marking each phase of the terror reflected upon his livid countenance. He was loth to strike, for to strike would mean to end this exquisite torture of horror to which he was subjecting him.

Broken Joseph had been before and passive; now of a sudden he grew violent again, but in a different way. He flung himself upon his knees before Sir Crispin, and passionately he pleaded for the sparing of his miserable life.

Crispin looked on with an eye both of scorn and of cold relish. It was thus he wished to see him, broken and agonized, suffering thus something of all that which he himself had suffered through despair in the years that were sped. With satisfaction then he watched his victim's agony; he watched it too with scorn and some loathing—for a craven was in his eyes an ugly sight, and Joseph in that moment was truly become as vile a coward as ever man beheld. His parchment-like face was grey and mottled, his brow bedewed with sweat; his lips were blue and quivering, his eyes bloodshot and almost threatening tears.

In the silence of one who waits stood Crispin, listening, calm and unmoved, as though he heard not, until Joseph's whining prayers culminated in an offer to make reparation. Then Crispin broke in at

length with an impatient gesture.

"What reparation can you make, you murderer? Can you restore to me the wife and child you butchered eighteen years ago?"

"I can restore your child at least," returned the other. "I can and will restore him to you if you but stay your hand. That and much more will do to repair the past."

Unconsciously Crispin lowered his sword-arm, and for a full minute he stood and stared at Joseph. His jaw was fallen and the grim firmness all gone from his face, and replaced by amazement, then unbelief followed by inquiry; then unbelief again. The pallor of his cheeks seemed to intensify. At last, however, he broke into a hard laugh.

"What lie is this you offer me? Zounds, man, are you not afraid?"

"It is no lie," Joseph cried, in accents so earnest that some of the unbelief passed again from Galliard's face. "It is the truth-God's truth. Your son lives."

"Hell-hound, it is a lie! On that fell night, as I swooned under your cowardly thrust, I heard you calling to your brother to slit the squalling bastard's throat. Those were your very words, Master Joseph."

"I own I bade him do it, but I was not obeyed. He swore we should give the babe a chance of life. It should never know whose son it was, he said, and I agreed. We took the boy away. He has lived and thrived."

The knight sank on to a chair as though bereft of strength. He sought to think, but thinking coherently he could not. At last:

"How shall I know that you are not lying? What proof can you advance?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I swear that what I have told you is true. I swear it by the cross of our Redeemer!" he protested, with a solemnity that was not without effect upon Crispin. Nevertheless, he sneered.

"I ask for proofs, man, not oaths. What proofs can you afford me?"

"There are the man and the woman whom the lad was reared by."

"And where shall I find them?"

Joseph opened his lips to answer, then closed them again. In his eagerness he had almost parted with the information which he now proposed to make the price of his life. He regained confidence at Crispin's tone and questions, gathering from both that the knight was willing to believe if proof were set before him. He rose to his feet, and when next he spoke his voice had won back much of its habitual calm deliberateness.

"That," said he, "I will tell you when you have promised to go hence, leaving Gregory and me unharmed. I will supply you with what money you may need, and I will give you a letter to those people, so couched that what they tell you by virtue of it shall be a corroboration of my words."

His elbow resting upon the table, and his hand to his brow so that it shaded his eyes, sat Crispin long in thought, swayed by emotions and doubts, the like of which he had never yet known in the whole of his chequered life. Was Joseph lying to him?

That was the question that repeatedly arose, and oddly enough, for all his mistrust of the man, he was inclined to account true the ring of his words. Joseph watched him with much anxiety and some hope.

At length Crispin withdrew his hands from eyes that were grown haggard, and rose.

"Let us see the letter that you will write," said he. "There you have

pen, ink, and paper. Write."

"You promise?" asked Joseph.

"I will tell you when you have written."

In a hand that shook somewhat, Joseph wrote a few lines, then handed Crispin the sheet, whereon he read:

The bearer of this is Sir Crispin Galliard, who is intimately interested in the matter that lies betwixt us, and whom I pray you answer fully and accurately the questions he may put you in that connexion.

"I understand," said Crispin slowly. "Yes, it will serve. Now the superscription." And he returned the paper.

Ashburn was himself again by now. He realized the advantage he had gained, and he would not easily relinquish it.

"I shall add the superscription," said he calmly, "when you swear to depart without further molesting us."

Crispin paused a moment, weighing the position well in his mind. If Joseph lied to him now, he would find means to return, he told himself, and so he took the oath demanded.

Joseph dipped his pen, and paused meditatively to watch a drop of ink, wherewith it was overladen, fall back into the horn. The briefest of pauses was it, yet it was not the accident it appeared to be. Hitherto Joseph had been as sincere as he had been earnest, intent alone upon saving his life at all costs, and forgetting in his fear of the present the dangers that the future might hold for him were Crispin Galliard still at large. But in that second of dipping his quill, assured that the peril of the moment was overcome, and that Crispin would go forth as he said, the devil whispered in his ear a cunning and vile

suggestion. As he watched the drop of ink roll from his pen-point, he remembered that in London there dwelt at the sign of the Anchor, in Thames Street, one Colonel Pride, whose son this Galliard had slain, and who, did he once lay hands upon him, was not like to let him go again. In a second was the thought conceived and the determination taken, and as he folded the letter and set upon it the superscription Joseph felt that he could have cried out in his exultation at the cunning manner in which he was outwitting his enemy.

Crispin took the package, and read thereon:

This is to Mr. Henry Lane, at the sign of the Anchor, Thames Street, London.

The name was a fictitious one—one that Joseph had set down upon the spur of the moment, his intention being to send a messenger that should outstrip Sir Crispin, and warn Colonel Pride of his coming.

"It is well," was Crispin's only comment. He, too, was grown calm again and fully master of himself. He placed the letter carefully within the breast of his doublet.

"If you have lied to me, if this is but a shift to win your miserable life, rest assured, Master Ashburn, that you have but put off the day for a very little while."

It was on Joseph's lips to answer that none of us are immortal, but he bethought him that the pleasantry might be ill-timed, and bowed in silence.

Galliard took his hat and cloak from the chair on which he had placed them upon descending that evening. Then he turned again to Joseph.

"You spoke of money a moment ago," he said, in the tones of one demanding what is his own the tones of a gentleman speaking to his

steward. "I will take two hundred Caroluses. More I cannot carry in comfort."

Joseph gasped at the amount. For a second it even entered his mind to resist the demand. Then he remembered that there was a brace of pistols in his study; if he could get those he would settle matters there and then without the aid of Colonel Pride.

"I will fetch the money," said he, betraying his purpose by his alacrity.

"By your leave, Master Ashburn, I will come with you."

Joseph's eyes flashed him a quick look of baffled hate.

"As you will," said he, with an ill grace.

As they passed out, Crispin turned to Kenneth.

"Remember, sir, you are still in my service. See that you keep good watch."

Kenneth bent his head without replying. But Master Gregory required little watching. He lay a helpless, half-swooning heap upon the floor, which he had smeared with the blood oozing from his wounded shoulder. Even were he untrussed, there was little to be feared from him.

During the brief while they were alone together, Kenneth did not so much as attempt to speak to him. He sat himself down upon the nearest chair, and with his chin in his hands and his elbows on his knees he pondered over the miserable predicament into which Sir Crispin had got him, and more bitter than ever it had been was his enmity at that moment towards the knight. That Galliard should be upon the eve of finding his son, and a sequel to the story he had heard from him that night in Worcester, was to Kenneth a thing of no interest or moment. Galliard had ruined him with these Ashburns. He

could never now hope to win the hand of Cynthia, to achieve which he had been willing to turn both fool and knave—aye, had turned both. There was naught left him but to return him to the paltry Scottish estate of his fathers, there to meet the sneers of those who no doubt had heard that he was gone South to marry a great English heiress.

That at such a season he could think of this but serves to prove the shallow nature of his feelings. A love was his that had gain and vanity for its foundation—in fact, it was no love at all. For what he accounted love for Cynthia was but the love of himself, which through Cynthia he sought to indulge.

He cursed the ill-luck that had brought Crispin into his life. He cursed Crispin for the evil he had suffered from him, forgetting that but for Crispin he would have been carrion a month ago and more.

Deep at his bitter musings was he when the door opened again to admit Joseph, followed by Galliard. The knight came across the hall and stooped to look at Gregory.

"You may untruss him, Kenneth, when I am gone," said he. "And in a quarter of an hour from now you are released from your oath to me. Fare you well," he added with unusual gentleness, and turning a glance that was almost regretful upon the lad. "We are not like to meet again, but should we, I trust it may be in happier times. If I have harmed you in this business, remember that my need was great. Fare you well." And he held out his hand.

"Take yourself to hell, sir!" answered Kenneth, turning his back upon him. The ghost of an evil smile played round Joseph Ashburn's lips as he watched them.

CHAPTER XVIII. COUNTER- PLOT

So soon as Sir Crispin had taken his departure, and whilst yet the beat of his horse's hoofs was to be distinguished above the driving storm of rain and wind without, Joseph hastened across the hall to the servants' quarters. There he found his four grooms slumbering deeply, their faces white and clammy, and their limbs twisted into odd, helpless attitudes. Vainly did he rain down upon them kicks and curses; arouse them he could not from the stupor in whose thrall they lay.

And so, seizing a lanthorn, he passed out to the stables, whence Crispin had lately taken his best nag, and with his own hands he saddled a horse. His lips were screwed into a curious smile—a smile that still lingered upon them when presently he retraced his steps to the room where his brother sat with Kenneth.

In his absence the lad had dressed Gregory's wound; he had induced him to take a little wine, and had set him upon a chair, in which he now lay back, white and exhausted.

"The quarter of an hour is passed, sir," said Joseph coldly, as he entered.

Kenneth made no sign that he heard. He sat on like a man in a dream. His eyes that saw nothing were bent upon Gregory's pale, flabby face.

"The quarter of an hour is passed, sir," Joseph repeated in a louder voice.

Kenneth looked up, then rose and sighed, passing his hand wearily across his forehead.

"I understand, sir," he replied in a low voice. "You mean that I must go?"

Joseph waited a moment before replying. Then:

"It is past midnight," he said slowly, "and the weather is wild. You may lie here until morning, if you are so minded. But go you must then," he added sternly. "I need scarce say, sir, that you must have no speech with Mistress Cynthia, nor that never again must you set foot within Castle Marleigh."

"I understand, sir; I understand. But you deal hardly with me."

Joseph raised his eyebrows in questioning surprise.

"I was the victim of my oath, given when I knew not against whom my hand was to be lifted. Oh, sir, am I to suffer all my life for a fault that was not my own? You, Master Gregory," he cried, turning passionately to Cynthia's father, "you are perchance more merciful? You understand my position—how I was forced into it."

Gregory opened his heavy eyes.

"A plague on you, Master Stewart," he groaned. "I understand that you have given me a wound that will take a month to heal."

"It was an accident, sir. I swear it was an accident!"

"To swear this and that appears to be your chief diversion in life," growled Gregory for answer. "You had best go; we are not likely to listen to excuses."

"Did you rather suggest a remedy," Joseph put in quietly, "we might hear you."

Kenneth swung round and faced him, hope brightening his eyes.

"What remedy is there? How can I undo what I have done? Show me but the way, and I'll follow it, no matter where it leads!"

Such protestations had Joseph looked to hear, and he was hard put to it to dissemble his satisfaction. For a while he was silent, making pretence to ponder. At length:

"Kenneth," he said, "you may in some measure repair the evil you have done, and if you are ready to undergo some slight discomfort, I shall be willing on my side to forget this night."

"Tell me how, sir, and whatever the cost I will perform it!"

He gave no thought to the fact that Crispin's grievance against the Ashburns was well-founded; that they had wrecked his life even as they had sought to destroy it; even as eighteen years ago they had destroyed his wife's. His only thought was Cynthia; his only wish was to possess her. Besides that, justice and honour itself were of small account.

"It is but a slight matter," answered Joseph. "A matter that I might entrust to one of my grooms."

That whilst his grooms lay drugged the matter was so pressing that his messenger must set out that very night, Joseph did not think of adding.

"I would, sir," answered the boy, "that the task were great and difficult."

"Yes, yes," answered Joseph with biting sarcasm, "we are acquainted with both your courage and your resource." He sat silent and thoughtful for some moments, then with a sudden sharp glance at the lad:

"You shall have this chance of setting yourself right with us," he said. Then abruptly he added.

"Go make ready for a journey. You must set out within the hour for London. Take what you may require and arm yourself; then return to me here."

Gregory, who, despite his sluggish wits, divined—partly, at least—what was afoot, made shift to speak. But his brother silenced him with a glance.

"Go," Joseph said to the boy. And, without comment, Kenneth rose and left them.

"What would you do?" asked Gregory when the door had closed.

"Make doubly sure of that ruffian," answered Joseph coldly. "Colonel Pride might be absent when he arrives, and he might learn that none of the name of Lane dwells at the Anchor in Thames Street. It would be fatal to awaken his suspicions and bring him back to us."

"But surely Richard or Stephen might carry your errand?"

"They might were they not so drugged that they cannot be aroused. I might even go myself, but it is better so." He laughed softly. "There is even comedy in it. Kenneth shall outride our bloodthirsty knight to warn Pride of his coming, and when he comes he will walk into the hands of the hangman. It will be a surprise for him. For the rest I shall keep my promise concerning his son. He shall have news of him from Pride—but when too late to be of service."

Gregory shuddered.

"Fore God, Joseph, 'tis a foul thing you do," he cried. "Sooner would I never set eyes on the lad again. Let him go his ways as you intended."

"I never did intend it. What trustier messenger could I find now that I have lent him zest by fright? To win Cynthia, we may rely upon him safely to do that in which another might fail."

"Joseph, you will roast in hell for it."

Joseph laughed him to scorn.

"To bed with you, you canting hypocrite; your wound makes you light-headed."

It was a half-hour ere Kenneth returned, booted, cloaked, and ready for his journey. He found Joseph alone, busily writing, and in obedience to a sign he sat him down to wait.

A few minutes passed, then, with a final scratch and splutter Joseph flung down his pen. With the sandbox tilted in the air, like a dicier about to make his throw, he looked at the lad.

"You will spare neither whip nor spur until you arrive in London, Master Kenneth. You must ride night and day; the matter is of the greatest urgency."

Kenneth nodded that he understood, and Joseph sprinkled the sand over the written page.

"I know not when you should reach London so that you may be in time, but," he continued, and as he spoke he creased the paper and poured the superfluous sand back into the box, "I should say that by midnight to-morrow your message should be delivered. Aye," he continued, in answer to the lad's gasp of surprise, "it is hard riding, I know, but if you would win Cynthia you must do it. Spare neither money nor horseflesh, and keep to the saddle until you are in Thames Street."

He folded the letter, sealed it, and wrote the superscription: "This to Colonel Pride, at the sign of the Anchor in Thames Street."

He rose and handed the package to Kenneth, to whom the superscription meant nothing, since he had not seen that borne by the letter which Crispin had received.

"You will deliver this intact, and with your own hands, to Colonel Pride in person—none other. Should he be absent from Thames Street upon your arrival, seek him out instantly, wherever he may be, and give him this. Upon your faithful observance of these conditions remember that your future depends. If you are in time, as indeed I trust and think you will be, you may account yourself Cynthia's husband. Fail and—well, you need not return here."

"I shall not fail, sir," cried Kenneth. "What man can do to accomplish the journey within twenty-four hours, I will do."

He would have stopped to thank Joseph for the signal favour of this chance of rehabilitation, but Joseph cut him short.

"Take this purse," he cried impatiently. "You will find a horse ready saddled in the stables. Ride it hard. It will bear you to Norton at least. There get you a fresh one, and when that is done, another. Now be off."

CHAPTER XIX. THE INTERRUPTED JOURNEY

When the Tavern Knight left the gates of Marleigh Park behind him on that wild October night, he drove deep the rowels of his spurs, and set his horse at a perilous gallop along the road to Norwich. The action was of instinct rather than of thought. In the turbulent sea of his mind, one clear current there was, and one only—the knowledge that he was bound for London for news of this son of his whom Joseph told him lived. He paused not even to speculate what manner of man his child was grown, nor yet what walk of life he had been reared to tread. He lived: he was somewhere in the world; that for the time sufficed him. The Ashburns had not, it seemed, destroyed quite everything that made his life worth enduring—the life that so often and so wantonly he had exposed.

His son lived, and in London he should have news of him. To London then must he get himself with all dispatch, and he swore to take no rest until he reached it. And with that firm resolve to urge him, he ploughed his horse's flanks, and sped on through the night. The rain beat in his face, yet he scarce remarked it, as again more by instinct than by reason—he buried his face to the eyes in the folds of his cloak.

Later the rain ceased, and clearer grew the line of light betwixt the hedgerows, by which his horse had steered its desperate career. Fitfully a crescent moon peered out from among the wind-driven clouds. The poor ruffler was fallen into meditation, and noted not that his nag did no more than amble. He roused himself of a sudden when half-way down a gentle slope some five miles from Norwich, and out

of temper at discovering the sluggishness of the pace, he again gave the horse a taste of the spurs. The action was fatal. The incline was become a bed of sodden clay, and he had not noticed with what misgivings his horse pursued the treacherous footing. The sting of the spur made the animal bound forward, and the next instant a raucous oath broke from Crispin as the nag floundered and dropped on its knees. Like a stone from a catapult Galliard flew over its head and rolled down the few remaining yards of the slope into a very lake of slimy water at the bottom.

Down this same hill, some twenty minutes later, came Kenneth Stewart with infinite precaution. He was in haste—a haste more desperate far than even Crispin's. But his character held none of Galliard's recklessness, nor were his wits fogged by such news as Crispin had heard that night. He realized that to be swift he must be cautious in his night-riding. And so, carefully he came, with a firm hand on the reins, yet leaving it to his horse to find safe footing.

He had reached the level ground in safety, and was about to put his nag to a smarter pace, when of a sudden from the darkness of the hedge he was hailed by a harsh, metallic voice, the sound of which sent a tremor through him.

"Sir, you are choicely met, whoever you may be. I have suffered a mischance down that cursed hill, and my horse has gone lame."

Kenneth kept his cloak over his mouth, trusting that the muffling would sufficiently disguise his accents as he made answer.

"I am in haste, my master. What is your will?"

"Why, marry, so am I in haste. My will is your horse, sir. Oh, I'm no robber. I'll pay you for it, and handsomely. But have it I must. 'Twill be no great discomfort for you to walk to Norwich. You may do it in an hour."

"My horse, sir, is not for sale," was Kenneth's brief answer. "Give you good night."

"Hold, man! Blood and hell, stop! If you'll not sell the worthless beast to serve a gentleman, I'll shoot it under you. Make your choice."

Kenneth caught the gleam of a pistol-barrel pointed at him from the hedge, and he shivered. What was he to do? Every instant was precious to him. As in a flash it came to him that perchance Sir Crispin also rode to London, and that it was expected of him to arrive there first if he were to be in time. Swiftly he weighed the odds in his mind, and took the determination to dash past Sir Crispin, risking his aim and trusting to the dark to befriend him.

But even as he determined thus, what moon there was became unveiled, and the light of it fell upon his face, which was turned towards Galliard. An exclamation of surprise escaped Sir Crispin.

"Slife, Master Stewart, I knew not your voice. Whither do you ride?"

"What is it to you? Have you not wrought enough of evil for me? Am I never to be rid of you? Castle Marleigh," he added, with well-feigned anger, "has closed its doors upon me. What does it signify to you whither I ride? Suffer me leastways to pass unmolested, and to leave you."

Kenneth's passionate reproaches cut Galliard keenly. He held himself at that moment a very knave for having dragged this boy into his work of vengeance, and thereby cast a blight upon his life. He sought for words wherein to give expression to something of what he felt, then realizing how futile and effete all words must prove, he waved his hand in the direction of the road.

"Go, Master Stewart," he muttered. "Your way is clear."

And Kenneth, waiting for no second invitation, rode on and left him.

He rode with gratitude in his heart to the Providence that had caused him so easily to overcome an obstacle that at first he had held impassable. Stronger grew in his mind the conviction that to fulfil the mission Joseph required of him, he must reach London before Sir Crispin. The knowledge that he was ahead of him, and that he must derive an ample start from Galliard's mishap, warmed him like wine.

His mind thus relieved from its weight of anxiety, he little recked fatigue, and such excellent use did he make of his horse that he reached Newmarket on it an hour before the morrow's moon.

An hour he rested there, and broke his fast. Then on a fresh horse—a powerful and willing animal he set out once more.

By half-past two he was at Newport. But so hard had he ridden that man and beast alike were in a lather of sweat, and whilst he himself felt sick and tired, the horse was utterly unfit to bear him farther. For half an hour he rested there, and made a meal whose chief constituent was brandy. Then on a third horse he started upon the last stage of his journey.

The wind was damp and penetrating; the roads veritable morasses of mud, and overhead gloomy banks of dark, grey clouds moved sluggishly, the light that was filtered through them giving the landscape a bleak and dreary aspect. In his jaded condition Kenneth soon became a prey to the depression of it. His lightness of heart of some dozen hours ago was now all gone, and not even the knowledge that his mission was well-nigh accomplished sufficed to cheer him. To add to his discomfort a fine rain set in towards four o'clock, and when a couple of hours later he clattered along the road cut through a wooded slope in the direction of Waltham, he was become a very limp and lifeless individual.

He noticed not the horsemen moving cautiously among the closely-set trees on either side of the road. It was growing prematurely dark,

and objects were none too distinct. And thus it befell that when from the reverie of dejection into which he had fallen he was suddenly aroused by the thud of hoofs, he looked up to find two mounted men barring the road some ten yards in front of him. Their attitude was unmistakable, and it crossed poor Kenneth's mind that he was beset by robbers. But a second glance showed him their red cloaks and military steel caps, and he knew them for soldiers of the Commonwealth.

Hearing the beat of hoofs behind him, he looked over his shoulder to see four other troopers closing rapidly down upon him. Clearly he was the object of their attention. He had been a fool not to have perceived this earlier, and his heart misgave him, for all that had he paused to think he must have realized that he had naught to fear, and that in this some mistake must lie.

"Halt!" thundered the deep voice of the sergeant, who, with a trooper, held the road in front.

Kenneth drew up within a yard of them, conscious that the man's dark eyes were scanning him sharply from beneath his morion.

"Who are you, sir?" the bass voice demanded.

Alas for the vanity of poor human mites! Even Kenneth, who never yet had achieved aught for the cause he served, grew of a sudden chill to think that perchance this sergeant might recognize his name for one that he had heard before associated with deeds performed on the King's behalf.

For a second he hesitated; then:

"Blount," he stammered, "Jasper Blount."

He little thought how that fruit of his vanity was to prove his undoing thereafter.

"Verily," sneered the sergeant, "it almost seemed you had forgotten it." And from that sneer Kenneth gathered with fresh dread that the fellow mistrusted him.

"Whence are you, Master Blount?"

Again Kenneth hesitated. Then recalling Ashburn's high favour with the Parliament, and seeing that it could but advance his cause to state the true sum of his journey:

"From Castle Marleigh," he replied.

"Verily, sir, you seem yet in some doubt. Whither do you go?"

"To London."

"On what errand?" The sergeant's questions fell swift as sword-strokes.

"With letters for Colonel Pride."

The reply, delivered more boldly than Kenneth had spoken hitherto, was not without its effect.

"From whom are these letters?"

"From Mr. Joseph Ashburn, of Castle Marleigh."

"Produce them."

With trembling fingers Kenneth complied. This the sergeant observed as he took the package.

"What ails you, man?" quoth he.

"Naught, sir 'tis the cold."

The sergeant scanned the package and its seal. In a measure it was a passport, and he was forced to the conclusion that this man

was indeed the messenger he represented himself. Certainly he had not the air nor the bearing of him for whom they waited, nor did the sergeant think that their quarry would have armed himself with a dummy package against such a strait. And yet the sergeant was not master after all, and did he let this fellow pursue his journey, he might reap trouble for it hereafter; whilst likewise if he detained him, Colonel Pride, he knew, was not an over-patient man. He was still debating what course to take, and had turned to his companion with the muttered question: "What think you, Peter?" when by his precipitancy Kenneth ruined his slender chance of being permitted to depart.

"I pray you, sir, now that you know my errand, suffer me to pass on."

There was an eager tremor in his voice that the sergeant mistook for fear. He noted it, and remembering the boy's hesitancy in answering his earlier questions, he decided upon his course of action.

"We shall not delay your journey, sir," he answered, eyeing Kenneth sharply, "and as your way must lie through Waltham, I will but ask you to suffer us to ride with you thus far, so that there you may answer any questions our captain may have to ask ere you proceed."

"But, sir—"

"No more, master courier," snarled the sergeant. Then, beckoning a trooper to his side, he whispered an order in his ear.

As the man withdrew they wheeled their horses, and at a sharp word of command Kenneth rode on towards Waltham between the sergeant and a trooper.

CHAPTER XX. THE CONVERTED HOGAN

Night black and impenetrable had set in ere Kenneth and his escort clattered over the greasy stones of Waltham's High Street, and drew up in front of the Crusader Inn.

The door stood wide and hospitable, and a warm shaft of light fell from it and set a glitter upon the wet street. Avoiding the common-room, the sergeant led Kenneth through the inn-yard, and into the hostelry by a side entrance. He urged the youth along a dimly-lighted passage. On a door at the end of this he knocked, then, lifting the latch, he ushered Kenneth into a roomy, oak-panelled chamber.

At the far end a huge fire burnt cheerfully, and with his back to it, his feet planted wide apart upon the hearth, stood a powerfully built man of medium height, whose youthful face and uprightness of carriage assorted ill with the grey of his hair, pronouncing that greyness premature. He seemed all clad in leather, for where his jerkin stopped his boots began. A cuirass and feathered headpiece lay in a corner, whilst on the table Kenneth espied a broad-brimmed hat, a huge sword, and a brace of pistols.

As the boy's eyes came back to the burly figure on the hearth, he was puzzled by a familiar, intangible something in the fellow's face.

He was racking his mind to recall where last he had seen it, when with slightly elevated eyebrows and a look of recognition in his somewhat prominent blue eyes.

"Soul of my body," exclaimed the man in surprise, "Master Stewart,

as I live."

"Stuart!" cried both sergeant and trooper in a gasp, starting forward to scan their prisoner's face.

At that the burly captain broke into a laugh.

"Not the young man Charles Stuart," said he; "no, no. Your captive is none so precious. It is only Master Kenneth Stewart, of Bailienochy."

"Then it is not even our man," grumbled the soldier.

"But Stewart is not the name he gave," cried the sergeant. "Jasper Blount he told me he was called. It seems that after all we have captured a malignant, and that I was well advised to bring him to you."

The captain made a gesture of disdain. In that moment Kenneth recognized him. He was Harry Hogan—the man whose life Galliard had saved in Penrith.

"Bah, a worthless capture, Beddoes," he said.

"I know not that," retorted the sergeant. "He carries papers which he states are from Joseph Ashburn, of Castle Marleigh, to Colonel Pride. Colonel Pride's name is on the package, but may not that be a subterfuge? Why else did he say he was called Blount?"

Hogan's brows were of a sudden knit.

"Faith, Beddoes, you are right. Remove his sword and search him."

Calmly Kenneth suffered them to carry out this order. Inwardly he boiled at the delay, and cursed himself for having so needlessly given the name of Blount. But for that, it was likely Hogan would have straightway dismissed him. He cheered himself with the thought that after all they would not long detain him. Their search made, and

finding nothing upon him but Ashburn's letter, surely they would release him.

But their search was very thorough. They drew off his boots, and well-nigh stripped him naked, submitting each article of his apparel to a careful examination. At length it was over, and Hogan held Ashburn's package, turning it over in his hands with a thoughtful expression.

"Surely, sir, you will now allow me to proceed," cried Kenneth. "I assure you the matter is of the greatest urgency, and unless I am in London by midnight I shall be too late."

"Too late for what?" asked Hogan.

"I—I don't know."

"Oh?" The Irishman laughed unpleasantly. Colonel Pride and he were on anything but the best of terms. The colonel knew him for a godless soldier of fortune bound to the Parliament's cause by no interest beyond that of gain; and, himself a zealot, Colonel Pride had with distasteful frequency shown Hogan the quality of his feelings towards him. That Hogan was not afraid of him, was because it was not in Hogan's nature to be afraid of anyone. But he realized at least that he had cause to be, and at the present moment it occurred to him that it would be passing sweet to find a flaw in the old Puritan's armour. If the package were harmless his having opened it was still a matter that the discharge of his duty would sanction. Thus he reasoned; and he resolved to break the seal and make himself master of the contents of that letter.

Hogan's unpleasant laugh startled Kenneth. It suggested to him that perhaps, after all, his delay was by no means at an end; that Hogan suspected him of something—he could not think of what.

Then in a flash an idea came to him.

"May I speak to you privately for a moment, Captain Hogan?" he inquired in such a tone of importance—imperiousness, almost—that the Irishman was impressed by it. He scented disclosure.

"Faith, you may if you have aught to tell me," and he signed to Beddoes and his companion to withdraw.

"Now, Master Hogan," Kenneth began resolutely as soon as they were alone, "I ask you to let me go my way unmolested. Too long already has the stupidity of your followers detained me here unjustly. That I reach London by midnight is to me a matter of the gravest moment, and you shall let me."

"Soul of my body, Mr. Stewart, what a spirit you have acquired since last we met."

"In your place I should leave our last meeting unmentioned, master turncoat."

The Irishman's eyebrows shot up.

"By the Mass, young cockerel, I mislike your tone—"

"You'll have cause to dislike it more if you detain me." He was desperate now. "What would your saintly, crop-eared friends say if they knew as much of your past history as I do?"

"Tis a matter for conjecture," said Hogan, humouring him.

"How think you would they welcome the story of the roystering rake and debauchee who deserted the army of King Charles because they were about to hang him for murder?"

"Ah! how, indeed?" sighed Hogan.

"What manner of reputation, think you, that for a captain of the godly army of the Commonwealth?"

"A vile one, truly," murmured Hogan with humility.

"And now, Mr. Hogan," he wound up loftily, "you had best return me that package, and be rid of me before I sow mischief enough to bring you a crop of hemp."

Hogan stared at the lad's flushed face with a look of whimsical astonishment, and for a brief spell there was silence between them. Slowly then, with his eyes still fixed upon Kenneth's, the captain unsheathed a dagger. The boy drew back, with a sudden cry of alarm. Hogan vented a horse-laugh, and ran the blade under the seal of Ashburn's letter.

"Be not afraid, my man of threats," he said pleasantly. "I have no thought of hurting you—leastways, not yet." He paused in the act of breaking the seal. "Lest you should treasure uncomfortable delusions, dear Master Stewart, let me remind you that I am an Irishman—not a fool. Do you conceive my fame to be so narrow a thing that when I left the beggarly army of King Charles for that of the Commonwealth, I did not realize how at any moment I might come face to face with someone who had heard of my old exploits, and would denounce me? You do not find me masquerading under an assumed name. I am here, sir, as Harry Hogan, a sometime dissolute follower of the Egyptian Pharaoh, Charles Stuart; an erstwhile besotted, blinded soldier in the army of the Amalekite, a whilom erring malignant, but converted by a crowning mercy into a zealous, faithful servant of Israel. There were vouchsafings and upliftings, and the devil knows what else, when this stray lamb was gathered to the fold."

He uttered the words with a nasal intonation, and a whimsical look at Kenneth.

"Now, Mr. Stewart, tell them what you will, and they will tell you yet more in return, to show you how signally the light of grace hath been shed over me."

He laughed again, and broke the seal. Kenneth, crestfallen and abashed, watched him, without attempting further interference. Of what avail?

"You had been better advised, young sir, had you been less hasty and anxious. It is a fatal fault of youth's, and one of which nothing but time—if, indeed, you live—will cure you. Your anxiety touching this package determines me to open it."

Kenneth sneered at the man's conclusions, and, shrugging his shoulders, turned slightly aside.

"Perchance, master wiseacres, when you have read it, you will appreciate how egotism may also lead men into fatal errors. Haply, too, you will be able to afford Colonel Pride some satisfactory reason for tampering with his correspondence."

But Hogan heard him not. He had unfolded the letter, and at the first words he beheld, a frown contracted his brows. As he read on the frown deepened, and when he had done, an oath broke from his lips. "God's life!" he cried, then again was silent, and so stood a moment with bent head. At last he raised his eyes, and let them rest long and searchingly upon Kenneth, who now observed him in alarm.

"What—what is it?" the lad asked, with hesitancy.

But Hogan never answered. He strode past him to the door, and flung it wide.

"Beddoes!" he called. A step sounded in the passage, and the sergeant appeared. "Have you a trooper there?"

"There is Peter, who rode with me."

"Let him look to this fellow. Tell him to set him under lock and bolt here in the inn until I shall want him, and tell him that he shall answer

for him with his neck."

Kenneth drew back in alarm.

"Sir—Captain Hogan—will you explain?"

"Marry, you shall have explanations to spare before morning, else I'm a fool. But have no fear, for we intend you no hurt," he added more softly. "Take him away, Beddoes; then return to me here."

When Beddoes came back from consigning Kenneth into the hands of his trooper, he found Hogan seated in the leathern arm-chair, with Ashburn's letter spread before him on the table.

"I was right in my suspicions, eh?" ventured Beddoes complacently.

"You were more than right, Beddoes, you were Heaven-inspired. It is no State matter that you have chanced upon, but one that touches a man in whom I am interested very nearly."

The sergeant's eyes were full of questions, but Hogan enlightened him no further.

"You will ride back to your post at once, Beddoes," he commanded. "Should Lord Oriel fall into your hands, as we hope, you will send him to me. But you will continue to patrol the road, and demand the business of all comers. I wish one Crispin Galliard, who should pass this way ere long, detained, and brought to me. He is a tall, lank man—"

"I know him, sir," Beddoes interrupted. "The Tavern Knight they called him in the malignant army—a rakehelly, dissolute brawler. I saw him in Worcester when he was taken after the fight."

Hogan frowned. The righteous Beddoes knew overmuch. "That is the man," he answered calmly. "Go now, and see that he does not ride past you. I have great and urgent need of him."

Beddoes' eyes were opened in surprise.

"He is possessed of valuable information," Hogan explained. "Away with you, man."

When alone, Harry Hogan turned his arm-chair sideways towards the fire. Then, filling himself a pipe—for in his foreign campaigning he had acquired the habit of tobacco-smoking—he stretched his sinewy legs across a second chair, and composed himself for meditation. An hour went by; the host looked in to see if the captain required anything. Another hour sped on, and the captain dozed.

He awoke with a start. The fire had burned low, and the hands of the huge clock in the corner pointed to midnight. From the passage came to him the sound of steps and angry voices.

Before Hogan could rise, the door was flung wide, and a tall, gaunt man was hustled across the threshold by two soldiers. His head was bare, and his hair wet and dishevelled. His doublet was torn and his shoulder bleeding, whilst his empty scabbard hung like a lambent tail behind him.

"We have brought him, captain," one of the men announced.

"Aye, you crop-eared, psalm-whining cuckolds, you've brought me, d—n you," growled Sir Crispin, whose eyes rolled fiercely.

As his angry glance lighted upon Hogan's impressive face, he abruptly stemmed the flow of invective that rushed to his lips.

The Irishman rose, and looked past him at the troopers. "Leave us," he commanded shortly.

He remained standing by the hearth until the footsteps of his men had died away, then he crossed the chamber, passed Crispin without a word, and quietly locked the door. That done, he turned a friendly

smile on his tanned face—and holding out his hand:

"At last, Cris, it is mine to thank you and to repay you in some measure for the service you rendered me that night at Penrith."

CHAPTER XXI. THE MESSAGE

KENNETH BORE

In bewilderment Crispin took the outstretched hand of his old fellow-roysterer.

"Oddslife," he growled, "if to have me waylaid, dragged from my horse and wounded by those sons of dogs, your myrmidons, be your manner of expressing gratitude, I'd as lief you had let me go unthanked."

"And yet, Cris, I dare swear you'll thank me before another hour is sped. Ough, man, how cold you are! There's a bottle of strong waters yonder—"

Then, without completing his sentence, Hogan had seized the black jack and poured half a glass of its contents, which he handed Crispin.

"Drink, man," he said briefly, and Crispin, nothing loath, obeyed him.

Next Hogan drew the torn and sodden doublet from his guest's back, pushed a chair over to the table, and bade him sit. Again, nothing loath, Crispin did as he was bidden. He was stiff from long riding, and so with a sigh of satisfaction he settled himself down and stretched out his long legs.

Hogan slowly took the seat opposite to him, and coughed. He was at a loss how to open the parlous subject, how to communicate to Crispin the amazing news upon which he had stumbled.

"Slife' Hogan," laughed Crispin dreamily, "I little thought it was to

you those crop-ears carried me with such violence. I little thought, indeed, ever to see you again. But you have prospered, you knave, since that night you left Penrith."

And he turned his head the better to survey the Irishman.

"Aye, I have prospered," Hogan assented. "My life is a sort of parable of the fatted son and the prodigal calf. They tell me there is greater joy in heaven over the repentance of a sinner than—than—Plague on it! How does it go?"

"Than over the downfall of a saint?" suggested Crispin.

"I'll swear that's not the text, but any of my troopers could quote it to you; every man of them is an incarnate Church militant." He paused, and Crispin laughed softly. Then abruptly: "And so you were riding to London?" said he.

"How know you that?"

"Faith, I know more—much more. I can even tell you to what house you rode, and on what errand. You were for the sign of the Anchor in Thames Street, for news of your son, whom Joseph Ashburn hath told you lives."

Crispin sat bolt upright, a look of mingled wonder and suspicion on his face.

"You are well informed, you gentlemen of the Parliament," he said.

"On the matter of your errand," the Irishman returned quietly, "I am much better informed than are you. Shall I tell you who lives at the sign of the Anchor—not whom you have been told lives there, but who really does occupy the house?" Hogan paused a second as though awaiting some reply; then softly he answered his own question: "Colonel Pride." And he sat back to await results.

There were none. For the moment the name awoke no recollections, conveyed no meaning to Crispin.

"Who may Colonel Pride be?" he asked, after a pause.

Hogan was visibly disappointed.

"A certain powerful and vindictive member of the Rump, whose son you killed at Worcester."

This time the shaft went home. Galliard sprang out of the chair, his brows darkening, and his cheeks pale beyond their wont.

"Zounds, Hogan, do you mean that Joseph Ashburn was betraying me into this man's hands?"

"You have said it."

"But—"

Crispin stopped short. The pallor of his face increased; it became ashen, and his eyes glittered as though a fever consumed him. He sank back into his chair, and setting both hands upon the table before him, he looked straight at Hogan.

"But my son, Hogan, my son?" he pleaded, and his voice was broken as no man had heard it yet. "Oh, God in heaven!" he cried in a sudden frenzy. "What hell's work is this?"

Behind his blue lips his teeth were chattering now. His hands shook as he held them, still clenched, before him. Then, in a dull, concentrated voice:

"Hogan," he vowed, "I'll kill him for it. Fool, blind, pitiful fool that I am."

Then—his face distorted by passion—he broke into a torrent of imprecations that was at length stemmed by Hogan.

"Wait, Cris," said he, laying his hand upon the other's arm. "It is not all false. Joseph Ashburn sought, it is true, to betray you into the hands of Colonel Pride, sending you to the sign of the Anchor with the assurance that there you should have news of your son. That was false; yet not all false. Your son does live, and at the sign of the Anchor it is likely you would have had the news of him you sought. But that news would have come when too late to have been of value to you."

Crispin tried to speak, but failed. Then, mastering himself by an effort, and in a voice that was oddly shaken:

"Hogan," he cried, "you are torturing me! What is the sum of your knowledge?"

At last the Irishman produced Ashburn's letter to Colonel Pride.

"My men," said he, "are patrolling the roads in wait for a malignant that has incurred the Parliament's displeasure. We have news that he is making for Harwich, where a vessel lies waiting to carry him to France, and we expect that he will ride this way. Three hours ago a young man unable clearly to account for himself rode into our net, and was brought to me. He was the bearer of a letter to Colonel Pride from Joseph Ashburn. He had given my sergeant a wrong name, and betrayed such anxiety to be gone that I deemed his errand a suspicious one, and broke the seal of that letter. You may thank God, Galliard, every night of your life that I did so."

"Was this youth Kenneth Stewart?" asked Crispin.

"You have guessed it."

"D—n the lad," he began furiously. Then repressing himself, he sighed, and in an altered tone, "No, no," said he. "I have grievously wronged him! have wrecked his life—or at least he thinks so now. I

can hardly blame him for seeking to be quits with me."

"The lad," returned Hogan, "must be himself a dupe. He can have had no suspicion of the message he carried. Let me read it to you; it will make all clear."

Hogan drew a taper nearer, and spreading the paper upon the table, he smoothed it out, and read:

HONOURED SIR,

The bearer of the present should, if he rides well, outstrip another messenger I have dispatched to you upon a fool's errand, with a letter addressed to one Mr. Lane at the sign of the Anchor. The bearer of that is none other than the notorious malignant, Sir Crispin Galliard, by whose hand your son was slain under your very eyes at Worcester, whose capture I know that you warmly desire and with whom I doubt not you will know how to deal. To us he has been a source of no little molestation; his liberty, in fact, is a perpetual menace to our lives. For some eighteen years this Galliard has believed dead a son that my cousin bore him. News of this son, whom I have just informed him lives—as indeed he does—is the bait wherewith I have lured him to your address. Forewarned by the present, I make no doubt you will prepare to receive him fittingly. But ere that justice he escaped at Worcester be meted out to him at Tyburn or on Tower Hill, I would have you give him that news touching his son which I am sending him to you to receive. Inform him, sir, that his son, Jocelyn Marleigh...

Hogan paused, and shot a furtive glance at Galliard. The knight was leaning forward now, his eyes strained, his forehead beaded with perspiration, and his breathing heavy.

"Read on," he begged hoarsely.

His son, Jocelyn Marleigh, is the bearer of this letter, the man whom he has injured and who detests him, the youth with whom he has, by a

curious chance, been in much close association, and whom he has known as Kenneth Stewart.

"God!" gasped Crispin. Then with sudden vigour, "Oh, 'tis a lie," he cried, "a fresh invention of that lying brain to torture me."

Hogan held up his hand.

"There is a little more," he said, and continued:

Should he doubt this, bid him look closely into the lad's face, and ask him, after he has scrutinized it, what image it evokes. Should he still doubt thereafter, thinking the likeness to which he has been singularly blind to be no more than accidental, bid them strip the lad's right foot. It bears a mark that I think should convince him. For the rest, honoured sir, I beg you to keep all information touching his parentage from the boy himself, wherein I have weighty ends to serve. Within a few days of your receipt of this letter, I look to have the honour of waiting upon you. In the meanwhile, honoured sir, believe that while I am, I am your obedient servant,

JOSEPH ASHBURN

Across the narrow table the two men's glances met—Hogan's full of concern and pity, Crispin's charged with amazement and horror. A little while they sat thus, then Crispin rose slowly to his feet, and with steps uncertain as a drunkard's he crossed to the window. He pushed it open, and let the icy wind upon his face and head, unconscious of its sting. Moments passed, during which the knight went over the last few months of his turbulent life since his first meeting at Perth with Kenneth Stewart. He recalled how strangely and unaccountably he had been drawn to the boy when first he beheld him in the castle yard, and how, owing to a feeling for which he could not account, since the lad's character had little that might commend him to such a man as Crispin, he had contrived that Kenneth should serve in his company.

He recalled how at first—aye, and often afterwards even—he had sought to win the boy's affection, despite the fact that there was naught in the boy that he truly admired, and much that he despised. Was it possible that these his feelings were dictated by Nature to his unconscious mind? It must indeed be so, and the written words of Joseph Ashburn to Colonel Pride were true. Kenneth was indeed his son; the conviction was upon him. He conjured up the lad's face, and a cry of discovery escaped him. How blind he had been not to have seen before the likeness of Alice—his poor, butchered girl-wife of eighteen years ago. How dull never before to have realized that that likeness it was had drawn him to the boy.

He was calm by now, and in his calm he sought to analyse his thoughts, and he was shocked to find that they were not joyous. He yearned—as he had yearned that night in Worcester—for the lad's affection, and yet, for all his yearning, he realized that with the conviction that Kenneth was his offspring came a dull sense of disappointment. He was not such a son as the rakehell knight would have had him. Swiftly he put the thought from him. The craven hands that had reared the lad had warped his nature; he would guide it henceforth; he would straighten it out into a nobler shape.

Then he smiled bitterly to himself. What manner of man was he to train a youth to loftiness and honour?—he, a debauched ruler with a nickname for which, had he any sense of shame, he would have blushed! Again he remembered the lad's disposition towards himself; but these, he thought, he hoped, he knew that he would now be able to overcome.

He closed the window, and turned to face his companion. He was himself again, and calm, for all that his face was haggard beyond its wont.

"Hogan, where is the boy?"

"I have detained him in the inn. Will you see him now?"

"At once, Hogan. I am convinced."

The Irishman crossed the chamber, and opening the door he called an order to the trooper waiting in the passage.

Some minutes they waited, standing, with no word uttered between them. At last steps sounded in the corridor, and a moment later Kenneth was rudely thrust into the room. Hogan signed to the trooper, who closed the door and withdrew.

As Kenneth entered, Crispin advanced a step and paused, his eyes devouring the lad and receiving in exchange a glance that was full of malevolence.

"I might have known, sir, that you were not far away," he exclaimed bitterly, forgetting for the moment how he had left Crispin behind him on the previous night. "I might have guessed that my detention was your work."

"Why so?" asked Crispin quietly, his eyes ever scanning the lad's face with a pathetic look.

"Because it is your way, I know not why, to work my ruin in all things. Not satisfied with involving me in that business at Castle Marleigh, you must needs cross my path again when I am about to make amends, and so blight my last chance. My God, sir, am I never to be rid of you? What harm have I done you?"

A spasm of pain, like a ripple over water, crossed the knight's swart face.

"If you but consider, Kenneth," he said, speaking very quietly, "you must see the injustice of your words. Since when has Crispin Galliard served the Parliament, that Roundhead troopers should do his bidding as you suggest? And touching that business at Sheringham

you are over-hard with me. It was a compact you made, and but for which, you forget that you had been carried these three weeks."

"Would to Heaven that I had been," the boy burst out, "sooner than pay such a price for keeping my life!"

"As for my presence here," Crispin continued, leaving the outbursts unheeded, "it has naught to do with your detention."

"You lie!"

Hogan caught his breath with a sharp hiss, and a dead silence followed. That silence struck terror into Kenneth's heart. He encountered Crispin's eye bent upon him with a look he could not fathom, and much would he now have given to recall the two words that had burst from him in the heat of his rage. He bethought him of the unscrupulous, deadly character attributed to the man to whom he had addressed them, and in his coward's fancy he saw already payment demanded. Already he pictured himself lying cold and stark in the streets of Waltham with a sword-wound through his middle. His face went grey and his lips trembled.

Then Galliard spoke at last, and the mildness of his tone filled Kenneth with a new dread. In his experience of Crispin's ways he had come to look upon mildness as the man's most dangerous phase:

"You are mistaken," Crispin said. "I spoke the truth; it is a habit of mine—haply the only gentlemanly habit left me. I repeat, I have had naught to do with your detention. I arrived here half an hour ago, as the captain will inform you, and I was conducted hither by force, having been seized by his men, even as you were seized. No," he added, with a sigh, "it was not my hand that detained you; it was the hand of Fate." Then suddenly changing his voice to a more vehement key, "Know you on what errand you rode to London?" he demanded. "To betray your father into the hands of his enemies; to deliver him up

to the hangman."

Kenneth's eyes grew wide; his mouth fell open, and a frown of perplexity drew his brows together. Dully, uncomprehendingly he met Sir Crispin's sad gaze.

"My father," he gasped at last. "'Sdeath, sir, what is it you mean? My father has been dead these ten years. I scarce remember him."

Crispin's lips moved, but no word did he utter. Then with a sudden gesture of despair he turned to Hogan, who stood apart, a silent witness.

"My God, Hogan," he cried. "How shall I tell him?"

In answer to the appeal, the Irishman turned to Kenneth.

"You have been in error, sir, touching your parentage," quoth he bluntly. "Alan Stewart, of Bailienochy, was not your father."

Kenneth looked from one to the other of them.

"Sirs, is this a jest?" he cried, reddening. Then, remarking at length the solemnity of their countenances, he stopped short. Crispin came close up to him, and placed a hand upon his shoulder. The boy shrank visibly beneath the touch, and again an expression of pain crossed the poor ruffler's face.

"Do you recall, Kenneth," he said slowly, almost sorrowfully, "the story that I told you that night in Worcester, when we sat waiting for dawn and the hangman?"

The lad nodded vacantly.

"Do you remember the details? Do you remember I told you how, when I swooned beneath the stroke of Joseph Ashburn's sword, the last words I heard were those in which he bade his brother slit the

throat of the babe in the cradle? You were, yourself, present yesternight at Castle Marleigh when Joseph Ashburn told me Gregory had been mercifully inclined; that my child had not died; that if I gave him his life he would restore him to me. You remember?"

Again Kenneth nodded. A vague, numbing fear was creeping round his heart, and his blood seemed chilled by it and stagnant. With fascinated eyes he watched the knight's face—drawn and haggard.

"It was a trap that Joseph Ashburn set for me. Yet he did not altogether lie. The child Gregory had indeed spared, and it seems from what I have learned within the last half-hour that he had entrusted his rearing to Alan Stewart, of Bailienochy, seeking afterwards—I take it—to wed him to his daughter, so that should the King come to his own again, they should have the protection of a Marleigh who had served his King."

"You mean," the lad almost whispered, and his accents were unmistakably of horror, "you mean that I am your—Oh, God, I'll not believe it!" he cried out, with such sudden loathing and passion that Crispin recoiled as though he had been struck. A dull flush crept into his cheeks to fade upon the instant and give place to a pallor, if possible, intenser than before.

"I'll not believe it! I'll not believe it!" the boy repeated, as if seeking by that reiteration to shut out a conviction by which he was beset. "I'll not believe it!" he cried again; and now his voice had lost its passionate vehemence, and was sunk almost to a moan.

"I found it hard to believe myself," was Crispin's answer, and his voice was not free from bitterness. "But I have a proof here that seems incontestable, even had I not the proof of your face to which I have been blind these months. Blind with the eyes of my body, at least. The eyes of my soul saw and recognized you when first they fell on you in Perth. The voice of the blood ordered me then to your side,

and though I heard its call, I understood not what it meant. Read this letter, boy—the letter that you were to have carried to Colonel Pride."

With his eyes still fixed in a gaze of stupefaction upon Galliard's face, Kenneth took the paper. Then slowly, involuntarily almost it seemed, he dropped his glance to it, and read. He was long in reading, as though the writing presented difficulties, and his two companions watched him the while, and waited. At last he turned the paper over, and examined seal and superscription as if suspicious that he held a forgery.

But in some subtle, mysterious way—that voice of the blood perchance to which Crispin had alluded—he felt conviction stealing down upon his soul. Mechanically he moved across to the table, and sat down. Without a word, and still holding the crumpled letter in his clenched hand, he set his elbows on the table, and, pressing his temples to his palms, he sat there dumb. Within him a very volcano raged, and its fires were fed with loathing—loathing for this man whom he had ever hated, yet never as he hated him now, knowing him to be his father. It seemed as if to all the wrongs which Crispin had done him during the months of their acquaintanceship he had now added a fresh and culminating wrong by discovering this parentage.

He sat and thought, and his soul grew sick. He probed for some flaw, sought for some mistake that might have been made. And yet the more he thought, the more he dwelt upon his youth in Scotland, the more convinced was he that Crispin had told him the truth. Pre-eminent argument of conviction to him was the desire of the Ashburns that he should marry Cynthia. Oft he had marvelled that they, wealthy, and even powerful, selfish and ambitious, should have selected him, the scion of an obscure and impoverished Scottish house, as a bridegroom for their daughter. The news now before him made their motives clear; indeed, no other motive could exist, no other

explanation could there be. He was the heir of Castle Marleigh, and the usurpers sought to provide against the day when another revolution might oust them and restore the rightful owners.

Some elation his shallow nature felt at realizing this, but that elation was short-lived, and dashed by the thought that this ruler, this debauchee, this drunken, swearing, roaring tavern knight was his father; dashed by the knowledge that meanwhile the Parliament was master, and that whilst matters stood so, the Ashburns could defy—could even destroy him, did they learn how much he knew; dashed by the memory that Cynthia, whom in his selfish way—out of his love for himself—he loved, was lost to him for all time.

And here, swinging in a circle, his thoughts reverted to the cause of this—Crispin Galliard, the man who had betrayed him into yesternight's foul business and destroyed his every chance of happiness; the man whom he hated, and whom, had he possessed the courage as he was possessed by the desire, he had risen up and slain; the man that now announced himself his father.

And thinking thus, he sat on in silent, resentful vexation. He started to feel a hand upon his shoulder, and to hear the voice of Galliard evidently addressing him, yet using a name that was new to him.

"Jocelyn, my boy," the voice trembled. "You have thought, and you have realized—is it not so? I too thought, and thought brought me conviction that what that paper tells is true."

Vaguely then the boy remembered that Jocelyn was the name the letter gave him. He rose abruptly, and brushed the caressing hand from his shoulder. His voice was hard—possibly the knowledge that he had gained told him that he had nothing to fear from this man, and in that assurance his craven soul grew brave and bold and arrogant.

"I have realized naught beyond the fact that I owe you nothing but

unhappiness and ruin. By a trick, by a low fraud, you enlisted me into a service that has proved my undoing. Once a cheat always a cheat. What credit in the face of that can I give this paper?" he cried, talking wildly. "To me it is incredible, nor do I wish to credit it, for though it were true, what then? What then?" he repeated, raising his voice into accents of defiance.

Grief and amazement were blended in Galliard's glance, and also, maybe, some reproach.

Hogan, standing squarely upon the hearth, was beset by the desire to kick Master Kenneth, or Master Jocelyn, into the street. His lip curled into a sneer of ineffable contempt, for his shrewd eyes read to the bottom of the lad's mean soul and saw there clearly writ the confidence that emboldened him to voice that insult to the man he must know for his father. Standing there, he compared the two, marvelling deeply how they came to be father and son. A likeness he saw now between them, yet a likeness that seemed but to mark the difference. The one harsh, resolute, and manly, for all his reckless living and his misfortunes; the other mild, effeminate, hypocritical and shifty. He read it not on their countenances alone, but in every line of their figures as they stood, and in his heart he cursed himself for having been the instrument to disclose the relationship in which they stood.

The youth's insolent question was followed by a spell of silence. Crispin could not believe that he had heard aright. At last he stretched out his hands in a gesture of supplication—he who throughout his thirty-eight years of life, and despite the misfortunes that had been his, had never yet stooped to plead from any man.

"Jocelyn," he cried, and the pain in his voice must have melted a heart of steel, "you are hard. Have you forgotten the story of my miserable life, the story that I told you in Worcester? Can you not understand how suffering may destroy all that is lofty in a man; how

the forgetfulness of the winecup may come to be his only consolation; the hope of vengeance his only motive for living on, withholding him from self-destruction? Can you not picture such a life, and can you not pity and forgive much of the wreck that it may make of a man once virtuous and honourable?"

Pleadingly he looked into the lad's face. It remained cold and unmoved.

"I understand," he continued brokenly, "that I am not such a man as any lad might welcome for a father. But you who know what my life has been, Jocelyn, you can surely find it in your heart to pity. I had naught that was good or wholesome to live for, Jocelyn; naught to curb the evil moods that sent me along evil ways to seek forgetfulness and reparation.

"But from to-night, Jocelyn, my life in you must find a new interest, a new motive. I will abandon my old ways. For your sake, Jocelyn, I will seek again to become what I was, and you shall have no cause to blush for your father."

Still the lad stood silent.

"Jocelyn! My God, do I talk in vain?" cried the wretched man. "Have you no heart, no pity, boy?"

At last the youth spoke. He was not moved. The agony of this strong man, the broken pleading of one whom he had ever known arrogant and strong had no power to touch his mean, selfish mind, consumed as it was by the contemplation of his undoing—magnified a hundredfold—which this man had wrought.

"You have ruined my life," was all he said.

"I will rebuild it, Jocelyn," cried Galliard eagerly. "I have friends in France—friends high in power who lack neither the means nor the will

to aid me. You are a soldier, Jocelyn."

"As much a soldier as I'm a saint," sneered Hogan to himself.

"Together we will find service in the armies of Louis," Crispin pursued. "I promise it. Service wherein you shall gain honour and renown. There we will abide until this England shakes herself out of her rebellious nightmare. Then, when the King shall come to his own, Castle Marleigh will be ours again. Trust in me, Jocelyn." Again his arms went out appealingly: "Jocelyn my son!"

But the boy made no move to take the outstretched hands, gave no sign of relenting. His mind nurtured its resentment—cherished it indeed.

"And Cynthia?" he asked coldly.

Crispin's hands fell to his sides; they grew clenched, and his eyes lighted of a sudden.

"Forgive me, Jocelyn. I had forgotten! I understand you now. Yes, I dealt sorely with you there, and you are right to be resentful. What, after all, am I to you what can I be to you compared with her whose image fills your soul? What is aught in the world to a man, compared with the woman on whom his heart is set? Do I not know it? Have I not suffered for it?

"But mark me, Jocelyn"—and he straightened himself suddenly—"even in this, that which I have done I will undo. As I have robbed you of your mistress, so will I win her back for you. I swear it. And when that is done, when thus every harm I have caused you is repaired, then, Jocelyn, perhaps you will come to look with less repugnance upon your father, and to feel less resentment towards him."

"You promise much, sir," quoth the boy, with an illrepressed sneer.

"How will you accomplish it?"

Hogan grunted audibly. Crispin drew himself up, erect, lithe and supple—a figure to inspire confidence in the most despairing. He placed a hand, nervous, and strong as steel, upon the boy's shoulder, and the clutch of his fingers made Jocelyn wince.

"Low though your father be fallen," said he sternly, "he has never yet broken his word. I have pledged you mine, and to-morrow I shall set out to perform what I have promised. I shall see you ere I start. You will sleep here, will you not?"

Jocelyn shrugged his shoulders.

"It signifies little where I lie."

Crispin smiled sadly, and sighed.

"You have no faith in me yet. But I shall earn it, or"—and his voice fell suddenly—"or rid you of a loathsome parent. Hogan, can you find him quarters?"

Hogan replied that there was the room he had already been confined in, and that he could lie in it. And deeming that there was nothing to be gained by waiting, he thereupon led the youth from the room and down the passage. At the foot of the stairs the Irishman paused in the act of descending, and raised the taper aloft so that its light might fall full upon the face of his companion.

"Were I your father," said he grimly, "I would kick you from one end of Waltham to the other by way of teaching you filial piety! And were you not his son, I would this night read you a lesson you'd never live to practise. I would set you to sleep a last long sleep in the kennels of Waltham streets. But since you are—marvellous though it seem—his offspring, and since I love him and may not therefore hurt you, I must rest content with telling you that you are the vilest thing that breathes.

You despise him for a roysterer, for a man of loose ways. Let me, who have seen something of men, and who read you to-night to the very dregs of your contemptible soul, tell you that compared with you he is a very god. Come, you white-livered cur!" he ended abruptly. "I will light you to your chamber."

When presently Hogan returned to Crispin he found the Tavern Knight—that man of iron in whom none had ever seen a trace of fear or weakness seated with his arms before him on the table, and his face buried in them, sobbing like a poor, weak woman.

CHAPTER XXII. SIR CRISPIN'S UNDERTAKING

Through the long October night Crispin and Hogan sat on, and neither sought his bed. Crispin's quick wits his burst of grief once over—had been swift to fasten on a plan to accomplish that which he had undertaken.

One difficulty confronted him, and until he had mentioned it to Hogan seemed unsurmountable he had need of a ship. But in this the Irishman could assist him. He knew of a vessel then at Greenwich, whose master was in his debt, which should suit the purpose. Money, however, would be needed. But when Crispin announced that he was master of some two hundred Caroluses, Hogan, with a wave of the hand, declared the matter settled. Less than half that sum would hire the man he knew of. That determined, Crispin unfolded his project to Hogan, who laughed at the simplicity of it, for all that inwardly he cursed the risk Sir Crispin must run for the sake of one so unworthy.

"If the maid loves him, the thing is as good as done."

"The maid does not love him; leastways, I fear not."

Hogan was not surprised.

"Why, then it will be difficult, well-nigh impossible." And the Irishman became grave.

But Crispin laughed unpleasantly. Years and misfortune had made him cynical.

"What is the love of a maid?" quoth he derisively. "A caprice, a

fancy, a thing that may be guided, overcome or compelled as the occasion shall demand. Opportunity is love's parent, Hogan, and given that, any maid may love any man. Cynthia shall love my son."

"But if she prove rebellious? If she say nay to your proposals? There are such women."

"How then? Am I not the stronger? In such a case it shall be mine to compel her, and as I find her, so shall I carry her away. It will be none so poor a vengeance on the Ashburns after all." His brow grew clouded. "But not what I had dreamed of; what I should have taken had he not cheated me. To forgo it now—after all these years of waiting—is another sacrifice I make to Jocelyn. To serve him in this matter I must proceed cautiously. Cynthia may fret and fume and stamp, but willy-nilly I shall carry her away. Once she is in France, friendless, alone, I make no doubt that she will see the convenience of loving Jocelyn—leastways of wedding him and thus shall I have more than repaired the injuries I have done him."

The Irishman's broad face was very grave; his reckless merry eye fixed Galliard with a look of sorrow, and this grey-haired, sinning soldier of fortune, who had never known a conscience, muttered softly:

"It is not a nice thing you contemplate, Cris."

Despite himself, Galliard winced, and his glance fell before Hogan's. For a moment he saw the business in its true light, and he wavered in his purpose. Then, with a short bark of laughter:

"Gadso, you are sentimental, Harry!" said he, to add, more gravely: "There is my son, and in this lies the only way to his heart."

Hogan stretched a hand across the table, and set it upon Crispin's arm.

"Is he worth such a stain upon your honour, Crispin?"

There was a pause.

"Is it not late in the day, Hogan, for you and me to prate of honour?" asked Crispin bitterly, yet with averted gaze. "God knows my honour is as like honour as a beggar's rags are like unto a cloak of ermine. What signifies another splash, another rent in that which is tattered beyond all semblance of its original condition?"

"I asked you," the Irishman persisted, "whether your son was worth the sacrifice that the vile deed you contemplate entails?"

Crispin shook his arm from the other's grip, and rose abruptly. He crossed to the window, and drew back the curtain.

"Day is breaking," said he gruffly. Then turning, and facing Hogan across the room, "I have pledged my word to Jocelyn," he said. "The way I have chosen is the only one, and I shall follow it. But if your conscience cries out against it, Hogan, I give you back your promise of assistance, and I shall shift alone. I have done so all my life."

Hogan shrugged his massive shoulders, and reached out for the bottle of strong waters.

"If you are resolved, there is an end to it. My conscience shall not trouble me, and upon what aid I have promised and what more I can give, you may depend. I drink to the success of your undertaking."

Thereafter they discussed the matter of the vessel that Crispin would require, and it was arranged between them that Hogan should send a message to the skipper, bidding him come to Harwich, and there await and place himself at the command of Sir Crispin Galliard. For fifty pounds Hogan thought that he would undertake to land Sir Crispin in France. The messenger might be dispatched forthwith, and the Lady Jane should be at Harwich, two days later.

By the time they had determined upon this, the inmates of the hostelry were astir, and from the innyard came to them the noise of bustle and preparation for the day.

Presently they left the chamber where they had sat so long, and at the yard pump the Tavern Knight performed a rude morning toilet. Thereafter, on a simple fare of herrings and brown ale, they broke their fast; and ere that meal was done, Kenneth, pale and worn, with dark circles round his eyes, entered the common room, and sat moodily apart. But when later Hogan went to see to the dispatching of his messenger, Crispin rose and approached the youth.

Kenneth watched him furtively, without pausing in his meal. He had spent a very miserable night pondering over the future, which looked gloomy enough, and debating whether—forgetting and ignoring what had passed—he should return to the genteel poverty of his Scottish home, or accept the proffered service of this man who announced himself—and whom he now believed—to be his father. He had thought, but he was far from having chosen between Scotland and France, when Crispin now greeted him, not without constraint.

"Jocelyn," he said, speaking slowly, almost humbly. "In an hour's time I shall set out to return to Marleigh to fulfil my last night's promise to you. How I shall accomplish it I scarce know as yet; but accomplish it I shall. I have arranged to have a vessel awaiting me, and within three days—or four at the most—I look to cross to France, bearing your bride with me."

He paused for some reply, but none came. The boy sat on with an impassive face, his eyes glued to the table, but his mind busy enough upon that which his father was pouring into his ear. Presently Crispin continued:

"You cannot refuse to do as I suggest, Jocelyn. I shall make you the fullest amends for the harm that I have done you, if you but obey my

directions. You must quit this place as soon as possible, and proceed on your way to London. There you must find a boat to carry you to France, and you will await me at the Auberge du Soleil at Calais. You are agreed, Jocelyn?"

There was a slight pause, and Jocelyn took his resolution. Yet there was still a sullen look in the eyes he lifted to his father's face.

"I have little choice, sir," he made answer, "and so I must agree. If you accomplish what you promise, I own that you will have made amends, and I shall crave your pardon for my yesternight's want of faith. I shall await you at Calais."

Crispin sighed, and for a second his face hardened. It was not the answer to which he held himself entitled, and for a moment it rose to the lips of this man of fierce and sudden moods to draw back and let the son, whom at the moment he began to detest, go his own way, which assuredly would lead him to perdition. But a second's thought sufficed to quell that mood of his.

"I shall not fail you," he said coldly. "Have you money for the journey?"

The boy flushed as he remembered that little was left of what Joseph Ashburn had given him. Crispin saw the flush, and reading aright its meaning, he drew from his pocket a purse that he had been fingering, and placed it quietly upon the table. "There are fifty Caroluses in that bag. That should suffice to carry you to France. Fare you well until we meet at Calais."

And without giving the boy time to utter thanks that might be unwilling, he quickly left the room.

Within the hour he was in the saddle, and his horse's head was turned northwards once more.

He rode through Newport some three hours later without drawing rein. By the door of the Raven Inn stood a travelling carriage, upon which he did not so much as bestow a look.

By the merest thread hangs at times the whole of a man's future life, the destinies even of men as yet unborn. So much may depend indeed upon a glance, that had not Crispin kept his eyes that morning upon the grey road before him, had he chanced to look sideways as he passed the Raven Inn at Newport, and seen the Ashburn arms displayed upon the panels of that coach, he would of a certainty have paused. And had he done so, his whole destiny would assuredly have shaped a different course from that which he was unconsciously steering.

CHAPTER XXIII. GREGORY'S ATTRITION

Joseph's journey to London was occasioned by his very natural anxiety to assure himself that Crispin was caught in the toils of the net he had so cunningly baited for him, and that at Castle Marleigh he would trouble them no more. To this end he quitted Sheringham on the day after Crispin's departure.

Not a little perplexed was Cynthia at the topsy-turvydom in which that morning she had found her father's house. Kenneth was gone; he had left in the dead of night, and seemingly in haste and suddenness, since on the previous evening there had been no talk of his departing. Her father was abed with a wound that made him feverish. Their grooms were all sick, and wandered in a dazed and witless fashion about the castle, their faces deadly pale and their eyes lustreless. In the hall she had found a chaotic disorder upon descending, and one of the panels of the wainscot she saw was freshly cracked.

Slowly the idea forced itself upon her mind that there had been brawling the night before, yet was she far from surmising the motives that could have led to it. The conclusion she came to in the end was that the men had drunk deep, that in their cups they had waxed quarrelsome, and that swords had been drawn.

Of Joseph then she sought enlightenment, and Joseph lied right handsomely, like the ready-witted knave he was. A wondrously plausible story had he for her ear; a story that played cunningly upon her knowledge of the compact that existed between Kenneth and Sir Crispin.

"You may not know," said he—full well aware that she did know—"that when Galliard saved Kenneth's life at Worcester he exacted from the lad the promise that in return Kenneth should aid him in some vengeful business he had on hand."

Cynthia nodded that she understood or that she knew, and glibly Joseph pursued:

"Last night, when on the point of departing, Crispin, who had drunk over-freely, as is his custom, reminded Kenneth of his plighted word, and demanded of the boy that he should upon the instant go forth with him. Kenneth replied that the hour was overlate to be setting out upon a journey, and he requested Galliard to wait until to-day, when he would be ready to fulfil what he had promised. But Crispin retorted that Kenneth was bound by his oath to go with him when he should require it, and again he bade the boy make ready at once. Words ensued between them, the boy insisting upon waiting until to-day, and Crispin insisting upon his getting his boots and cloak and coming with him there and then. More heated grew the argument, till in the end Galliard, being put out of temper, snatched at his sword, and would assuredly have spitted the boy had not your father interposed, thereby getting himself wounded. Thereafter, in his drunken lust Sir Crispin went the length of wantonly cracking that panel with his sword by way of showing Kenneth what he had to expect unless he obeyed him. At that I intervened, and using my influence, I prevailed upon Kenneth to go with Galliard as he demanded. To this, for all his reluctance, Kenneth ended by consenting, and so they are gone."

By that most glib and specious explanation Cynthia was convinced. True, she added a question touching the amazing condition of the grooms, in reply to which Joseph afforded her a part of the truth.

"Sir Crispin sent them some wine, and they drank to his departure so heartily that they are not rightly sober yet."

Satisfied with this explanation Cynthia repaired to her father.

Now Gregory had not agreed with Joseph what narrative they were to offer Cynthia, for it had never crossed his dull mind that the disorder of the hall and the absence of Kenneth might cause her astonishment. And so when she touched upon the matter of his wound, like the blundering fool he was, he must needs let his tongue wag upon a tale which, if no less imaginative than Joseph's, was vastly its inferior in plausibility and had yet the quality of differing from it totally in substance.

"Plague on that dog, your lover, Cynthia," he growled from the mountain of pillows that propped him. "If he should come to wed my daughter after pinning me to the wainscot of my own hall may I be for ever damned."

"How?" quoth she. "Do you say that Kenneth did it?"

"Aye, did he. He ran at me ere I could draw, like the coward he is, sink him, and had me through the shoulder in the twinkling of an eye."

Here was something beyond her understanding. What were they concealing from her? She set her wits to the discovery and plied her father with another question.

"How came you to quarrel?"

"How? 'Twas—'twas concerning you, child," replied Gregory at random, and unable to think of a likelier motive.

"How, concerning me?"

"Leave me, Cynthia," he groaned in despair. "Go, child. I am grievously wounded. I have the fever, girl. Go; let me sleep."

"But tell me, father, what passed."

"Unnatural child," whined Gregory feebly, "will you plague a sick man with questions? Would you keep him from the sleep that may mean recovery to him?"

"Father, dear," she murmured softly, "if I thought it was as you say, I would leave you. But you know that you are but attempting to conceal something from me something that I should know, that I must know. Bethink you that it is of my lover that you have spoken."

By a stupendous effort Gregory shaped a story that to him seemed likely.

"Well, then, since know you must," he answered, "this is what befell: we had all drunk over-deep to our shame do I confess it—and growing tenderhearted for you, and bethinking me of your professed distaste to Kenneth's suit, I told him that for all the results that were likely to attend his sojourn at Castle Marleigh, he might as well bear Crispin company in his departure. He flared up at that, and demanded of me that I should read him my riddle. Faith, I did by telling him that we were like to have snow on midsummer's day ere he 'became your husband. That speech of mine so angered him, being as he was all addled with wine and ripe for any madness, that he sprang up and drew on me there and then. The others sought to get between us, but he was over-quick, and before I could do more than rise from the table his sword was through my shoulder and into the wainscot at my back. After that it was clear he could not remain here, and I demanded that he should leave upon the instant. Himself he was nothing loath, for he realized his folly, and he misliked the gleam of Joseph's eye—which can be wondrous wicked upon occasion. Indeed, but for my intercession Joseph had laid him stark."

That both her uncle and her father had lied to her—the one cunningly, the other stupidly—she had never a doubt, and vaguely uneasy was Cynthia to learn the truth. Later that day the castle was busy with the bustle of Joseph's departure, and this again was a

matter that puzzled her.

"Whither do you journey, uncle?" she asked of him as he was in the act of stepping out to enter the waiting carriage.

"To London, sweet cousin," was his brisk reply. "I am, it seems, becoming a very vagrant in my old age. Have you commands for me?"

"What is it you look to do in London?"

"There, child, let that be for the present. I will tell you perhaps when I return. The door, Stephen."

She watched his departure with uneasy eyes and uneasy heart. A fear pervaded her that in all that had befallen, in all that was befalling still—what ever it might be—some evil was at work, and an evil that had Crispin for its scope. She had neither reason nor evidence from which to draw this inference. It was no more than the instinct whose voice cries out to us at times a presage of ill, and oftentimes compels our attention in a degree far higher than any evidence could command.

The fear that was in her urged her to seek what information she could on every hand, but without success. From none could she cull the merest scrap of evidence to assist her.

But on the morrow she had information as prodigal as it was unlooked-for, and from the unlikeliest of sources—her father himself. Chafing at his inaction and lured into indiscretions by the subsiding of the pain of his wound, Gregory quitted his bed and came below that night to sup with his daughter. As his wont had been for years, he drank freely. That done, alive to the voice of his conscience, and seeking to drown its loud-tongued cry, he drank more freely still, so that in the end his henchman, Stephen, was forced to carry him to bed.

This Stephen had grown grey in the service of the Ashburns, and amongst much valuable knowledge that he had amassed, was a skill in dealing with wounds and a wide understanding of the ways to go about healing them. This knowledge made him realize how unwise at such a season was Gregory's debauch, and sorrowfully did he wag his head over his master's condition of stupor.

Stephen had grave fears concerning him, and these fears were realized when upon the morrow Gregory awoke on fire with the fever. They summoned a leech from Sheringham, and this cunning knave, with a view to adding importance to the cure he was come to effect, and which in reality presented no alarming difficulty, shook his head with ominous gravity, and whilst promising to do "all that his skill permitted," he spoke of a clergyman to help Gregory make his peace with God. For the leech had no cause to suspect that the whole of the Sacred College might have found the task beyond its powers.

A wild fear took Gregory in its grip. How could he die with such a load as that which he now carried upon his soul? And the leech, seeing how the matter preyed upon his patient's mind, made shift—but too late—to tranquillize him with assurances that he was not really like to die, and that he had but mentioned a parson so that Gregory in any case should be prepared.

The storm once raised, however, was not so easily to be allayed, and the conviction remained with Gregory that his sands were well-nigh run, and that the end could be but a matter of days in coming.

Realizing as he did how richly he had earned damnation, a frantic terror was upon him, and all that day he tossed and turned, now blaspheming, now praying, now weeping. His life had been indeed one protracted course of wrong-doing, and many had suffered by Gregory's evil ways—many a man and many a woman. But as the stars pale and fade when the sun mounts the sky, so too were the

lesser wrongs that marked his earthly pilgrimage of sin rendered pale or blotted into insignificance by the greater wrong he had done Ronald Marleigh—a wrong which was not ended yet, but whose completion Joseph was even then working to effect. If only he could save Crispin even now in the eleventh hour; if by some means he could warn him not to repair to the sign of the Anchor in Thames Street. His disordered mind took no account of the fact that in the time that was sped since Galliard's departure, the knight should already have reached London.

And so it came about that, consumed at once by the desire to make confession to whomsoever it might be, and the wish to attempt yet to avert the crowning evil of whose planning he was partly guilty inasmuch as he had tacitly consented to Joseph's schemes, Gregory called for his daughter. She came readily enough, hoping for exactly that which was about to take place, yet fearing sorely that her hopes would suffer frustration, and that she would learn nothing from her father.

"Cynthia," he cried, in mingled dread and sorrow, "Cynthia, my child, I am about to die."

She knew both from Stephen and from the leech that this was far from being his condition. Nevertheless her filial piety was at that moment a touching sight. She smoothed his pillows with a gentle grace that was in itself a soothing caress, even as her soft sympathetic voice was a caress. She took his hand, and spoke to him endearingly, seeking to relieve the sombre mood whose prey he was become, assuring him that the leech had told her his danger was none so imminent, and that with quiet and a little care he would be up and about again ere many days were sped. But Gregory rejected hopelessly all efforts at consolation.

"I am on my death-bed, Cynthia," he insisted, "and when I am gone I know not whom there may be to cheer and comfort your lot in life.

Your lover is away on an errand of Joseph's, and it may well betide that he will never again cross the threshold of Castle Marleigh. Unnatural though I may seem, sweetheart, my dying wish is that this may be so."

She looked up in some surprise.

"Father, if that be all that grieves you, I can reassure you. I do not love Kenneth."

"You apprehend me amiss," said he tartly. "Do you recall the story of Sir Crispin Galliard's life that you had from Kenneth on the night of Joseph's return?" His voice shook as he put the question.

"Why, yes. I am not like to forget it, and nightly do I pray," she went on, her tongue outrunning discretion and betraying her feelings for Galliard, "that God may punish those murderers who wrecked his existence."

"Hush, girl," he whispered in a quavering voice. "You know not what you say."

"Indeed I do; and as there is a just God my prayer shall be answered."

"Cynthia," he wailed. His eyes were wild, and the hand that rested in hers trembled violently. "Do you know that it is against your father and your father's brother that you invoke God's vengeance?"

She had been kneeling at his bedside; but now, when he pronounced those words, she rose slowly and stood silent for a spell, her eyes seeking his with an awful look that he dared not meet. At last:

"Oh, you rave," she protested, "it is the fever."

"Nay, child, my mind is clear, and what I have said is true."

"True?" she echoed, no louder than a whisper, and her eyes grew round with horror. "True that you and my uncle are the butchers who slew their cousin, this man's wife, and sought to murder him as well—leaving him for dead? True that you are the thieves who claiming kinship by virtue of that very marriage have usurped his estates and this his castle during all these years, whilst he himself went an outcast, homeless and destitute? Is that what you ask me to believe?"

"Even so," he assented, with a feeble sob.

Her face was pale—white to the very lips, and her blue eyes smouldered behind the shelter of her drooping lids. She put her hand to her breast, then to her brow, pushing back the brown hair by a mechanical gesture that was pathetic in the tale of pain it told. For support she was leaning now against the wall by the head of his couch. In silence she stood so while you might count to twenty; then with a sudden vehemence revealing the passion of anger and grief that swayed her:

"Why," she cried, "why in God's name do you tell me this?"

"Why?" His utterance was thick, and his eyes, that were grown dull as a snake's, stared straight before him, daring not to meet his daughter's glance. "I tell it you," he said, "because I am a dying man." And he hoped that the consideration of that momentous fact might melt her, and might by pity win her back to him—that she was lost to him he realized.

"I tell you because I am a dying man," he repeated. "I tell it you because in such an hour I fain would make confession and repent, that God may have mercy upon my soul. I tell it you, too, because the tragedy begun eighteen years ago is not yet played out, and it may yet be mine to avert the end we had prepared—Joseph and I. Thus perhaps a merciful God will place it in my power to make some reparation. Listen, child. It was against us, as you will have guessed,

that Galliard enlisted Kenneth's services, and here on the night of Joseph's return he called upon the boy to fulfil him what he had sworn. The lad had no choice but to obey; indeed, I forced him to it by attacking him and compelling him to draw, which is how I came by this wound.

"Crispin had of a certainty killed Joseph but that your uncle bethought him of telling him that his son lived."

"He saved his life by a lie! That was worthy of him," said Cynthia scornfully.

"Nay, child, he spoke the truth, and when Joseph offered to restore the boy to him, he had every intention of so doing. But in the moment of writing the superscription to the letter Crispin was to bear to those that had reared the child, Joseph bethought him of a foul scheme for Galliard's final destruction. And so he has sent him to London instead, to a house in Thames Street, where dwells one Colonel Pride, who bears Sir Crispin a heavy grudge, and into whose hands he will be thus delivered. Can aught be done, Cynthia, to arrest this—to save Sir Crispin from Joseph's snare?"

"As well might you seek to restore the breath to a dead man," she answered, and her voice was so oddly calm, so cold and bare of expression, that Gregory shuddered to hear it.

"Do not delude yourself," she added. "Sir Crispin will have reached London long ere this, and by now Joseph will be well on his way to see that there is no mistake made, and that the life you ruined hopelessly years ago is plucked at last from this unfortunate man. Merciful God! am I truly your daughter?" she cried. "Is my name indeed Ashburn, and have I been reared upon the estates that by crime you gained possession of? Estates that by crime you hold—for they are his; every stone, every stick that goes to make the place belongs to him, and now he has gone to his death by your contriving."

A moan escaped her, and she covered her face with her hands. A moment she stood rocking there—a fair, lissom plant swept by a gale of ineffable emotion. Then the breath seemed to go all out of her in one great sigh, and Gregory, who dared not look her way, heard the swish of her gown, followed by a thud as she collapsed and lay swooning on the ground.

So disturbed at that was Gregory's spirit that, forgetting his wound, his fever, and the death which he had believed impending, he leapt from his couch, and throwing wide the door, bellowed lustily for Stephen. In frightened haste came his henchman to answer the petulant summons, and in obedience to Gregory's commands he went off again as quickly in quest of Catherine—Cynthia's woman.

Between them they bore the unconscious girl to her chamber, leaving Gregory to curse himself for having been lured into a confession that it now seemed to him had been unnecessary, since in his newly found vitality he realized that death was none so near a thing as that scoundrelly fool of a leech had led him to believe.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE WOOING OF CYNTHIA

Cynthia's swoon was after all but brief. Upon recovering consciousness her first act was to dismiss her woman. She had need to be alone—the need of the animal that is wounded to creep into its lair and hide itself. And so alone with her sorrow she sat through that long day.

That her father's condition was grievous she knew to be untrue, so that concerning him there was not even that pity that she might have felt had she believed—as he would have had her believe that he was dying.

As she pondered the monstrous disclosure he had made, her heart hardened against him, and even as she had asked him whether indeed she was his daughter, so now she vowed to herself that she would be his daughter no longer. She would leave Castle Marleigh, never again to set eyes upon her father, and she hoped that during the little time she must yet remain there—a day, or two at most—she might be spared the ordeal of again meeting a parent for whom respect was dead, and who inspired her with just that feeling of horror she must have for any man who confessed himself a murderer and a thief.

She resolved to repair to London to a sister of her mother's, where for her dead mother's sake she would find a haven extended readily.

At eventide she came at last from her chamber.

She had need of air, need of the balm that nature alone can offer in

solitude to poor wounded human souls.

It was a mild and sunny evening, worthy rather of August than of October, and aimlessly Mistress Cynthia wandered towards the cliffs overlooking Sheringham Hithe. There she sate herself in sad dejection upon the grass, and gazed wistfully seaward, her mind straying now from the sorry theme that had held dominion in it, to the memories that very spot evoked.

It was there, sitting as she sat now, her eyes upon the shimmering waste of sea, and the gulls circling overhead, that she had awakened to the knowledge of her love for Crispin. And so to him strayed now her thoughts, and to the fate her father had sent him to; and thus back again to her father and the evil he had wrought. It is matter for conjecture whether her loathing for Gregory would have been as intense as it was, had another than Crispin Galliard been his victim.

Her life seemed at an end as she sat that October evening on the cliffs. No single interest linked her to existence; nothing, it seemed, was left her to hope for till the end should come—and no doubt it would be long in coming, for time moves slowly when we wait.

Wistful she sat and thought, and every thought begat a sigh, and then of a sudden—surely her ears had tricked her, enslaved by her imagination—a crisp, metallic voice rang out close behind her.

"Why are we pensive, Mistress Cynthia?"

There was a catch in her breath as she turned her head. Her cheeks took fire, and for a second were aflame. Then they went deadly white, and it seemed that time and life and the very world had paused in its relentless progress towards eternity. For there stood the object of her thoughts and sighs, sudden and unexpected, as though the earth had cast him up on to her surface.

His thin lips were parted in a smile that softened wondrously the

harshness of his face, and his eyes seemed then to her alight with kindness. A moment's pause there was, during which she sought her voice, and when she had found it, all that she could falter was:

"Sir, how came you here? They told me that you rode to London."

"Why, so I did. But on the road I chanced to halt, and having halted discovered reason why I should return."

He had discovered a reason. She asked herself breathlessly what might that reason be, and finding herself no answer to the question, she put it next to him.

He drew near to her before replying. "May I sit with you awhile, Cynthia?"

She moved aside to make room for him, as though the broad cliff had been a narrow ledge, and with the sigh of a weary man finding a resting-place at last, he sank down beside her.

There was a tenderness in his voice that set her pulses stirring wildly. Did she guess aright the reason that had caused him to break his journey and return? That he had done so—no matter what the reason—she thanked God from her inmost heart, as for a miracle that had saved him from the doom awaiting him in London town.

"Am I presumptuous, child, to think that haply the meditation in which I found you rapt was for one, unworthy though he be, who went hence but some few days since?"

The ambiguous question drove every thought from her mind, filling it to overflowing with the supreme good of his presence, and the frantic hope that she had read aright the reason of it.

"Have I conjectured rightly?" he asked, since she kept silence.

"Mayhap you have," she whispered in return, and then, marvelling at

her boldness, blushed. He glanced sharply at her from narrowing eyes. It was not the answer he had looked to hear.

As a father might have done he took the slender hand that rested upon the grass beside him, and she, poor child, mistaking the promptings of that action, suffered it to lie in his strong grasp. With averted head she gazed upon the sea below, until a mist of tears rose up to blot it out. The breeze seemed full of melody and gladness. God was very good to her, and sent her in her hour of need this great consolation—a consolation indeed that must have served to efface whatever sorrow could have beset her.

"Why then, sweet lady, is my task that I had feared to find all fraught with difficulty, grown easy indeed."

And hearing him pause:

"What task is that, Sir Crispin?" she asked, intent on helping him.

He did not reply at once. He found it difficult to devise an answer. To tell her brutally that he was come to bear her away, willing or unwilling, on behalf of another, was not easy. Indeed, it was impossible, and he was glad that inclinations in her which he had little dreamt of, put the necessity aside.

"My task, Mistress Cynthia, is to bear you hence. To ask you to resign this peaceful life, this quiet home in a little corner of the world, and to go forth to bear life's hardships with one who, whatever be his shortcomings, has the all-redeeming virtue of loving you beyond aught else in life."

He gazed intently at her as he spoke, and her eyes fell before his glance. He noted the warm, red blood suffusing her cheeks, her brow, her very neck; and he could have laughed aloud for joy at finding so simple that which he had feared would prove so hard. Some pity, too, crept unaccountably into his stern heart, fathered by the little faith

which in his inmost soul he reposed in Jocelyn. And where, had she resisted him, he would have grown harsh and violent, her acquiescence struck the weapons from his hands, and he caught himself well-nigh warning her against accompanying him.

"It is much to ask," he said. "But love is selfish, and love asks much."

"No, no," she protested softly, "it is not much to ask. Rather is it much to offer."

At that he was aghast. Yet he continued:

"Bethink you, Mistress Cynthia, I have ridden back to Sheringham to ask you to come with me into France, where my son awaits us?"

He forgot for the moment that she was in ignorance of his relationship to him he looked upon as her lover, whilst she gave this mention of his son, of whose existence she had already heard from her; father, little thought at that moment. The hour was too full of other things that touched her more nearly.

"I ask you to abandon the ease and peace of Sheringham for a life as a soldier's bride that may be rough and precarious for a while, though, truth to tell, I have some influence at the Luxembourg, and friends upon whose assistance I can safely count, to find your husband honourable employment, and set him on the road to more. And how, guided by so sweet a saint, can he but mount to fame and honour?"

She spoke no word, but the hand resting in his entwined his fingers in an answering pressure.

"Dare I then ask so much?" cried he. And as if the ambiguity which had marked his speech were not enough, he must needs, as he put this question, bend in his eagerness towards her until her brown

tresses touched his swart cheek. Was it then strange that the eagerness wherewith he urged another's suit should have been by her interpreted as her heart would have had it?

She set her hands upon his shoulders, and meeting his eager gaze with the frank glance of the maid who, out of trust, is fearless in her surrender:

"Throughout my life I shall thank God that you have dared it," she made answer softly.

A strange reply he deemed it, yet, pondering, he took her meaning to be that since Jocelyn had lacked the courage to woo boldly, she was glad that he had sent an ambassador less timid.

A pause followed, and for a spell they sat silent, he thinking of how to frame his next words; she happy and content to sit beside him without speech.

She marvelled somewhat at the strangeness of his wooing, which was like unto no wooing her romancer's tales had told her of, but then she reflected how unlike he was to other men, and therein she saw the explanation.

"I wish," he mused, "that matters were easier; that it might be mine to boldly sue your hand from your father, but it may not be. Even had events not fallen out as they have done, it had been difficult; as it is, it is impossible."

Again his meaning was obscure, and when he spoke of suing for her hand from her father, he did not think of adding that he would have sued it for his son.

"I have no father," she replied. "This very day have I disowned him." And observing the inquiry with which his eyes were of a sudden charged: "Would you have me own a thief, a murderer, my father?"

she demanded, with a fierceness of defiant shame.

"You know, then?" he ejaculated.

"Yes," she answered sorrowfully, "I know all there is to be known. I learnt it all this morning. All day have I pondered it in my shame to end in the resolve to leave Sheringham. I had intended going to London to my mother's sister. You are very opportunely come." She smiled up at him through the tears that were glistening in her eyes. "You come even as I was despairing—nay, when already I had despaired."

Sir Crispin was no longer puzzled by the readiness of her acquiescence. Here was the explanation of it. Forced by the honesty of her pure soul to abandon the house of a father she knew at last for what he was, the refuge Crispin now offered her was very welcome. She had determined before he came to quit Castle Marleigh, and timely indeed was his offer of the means of escape from a life that was grown impossible. A great pity filled his heart. She was selling herself, he thought; accepting the proposal which, on his son's behalf, he made, and from which at any other season, he feared, she would have shrunk in detestation.

That pity was reflected on his countenance now, and noting its solemnity, and misconstruing it, she laughed outright, despite herself. He did not ask her why she laughed, he did not notice it; his thoughts were busy already upon another matter.

When next he spoke, it was to describe to her the hollow of the road where on the night of his departure from the castle he had been flung from his horse. She knew the spot, she told him, and there at dusk upon the following day she would come to him. Her woman must accompany her, and for all that he feared such an addition to the party might retard their flight, yet he could not gainsay her resolution. Her uncle, he learnt from her, was absent from Sheringham; he had set out four days ago for London. For her father she would leave a letter,

and in this matter Crispin urged her to observe circumspection, giving no indication of the direction of her journey.

In all he said, now that matters were arranged he was calm, practical, and unloverlike, and for all that she would he had been less self-possessed, her faith in him caused her, upon reflection, even to admire this which she conceived to be restraint. Yet, when at parting he did no more than courteously bend before her, and kiss her hand as any simpering gallant might have done, she was all but vexed, and not to be outdone in coldness, she grew frigid. But it was lost upon him. He had not a lover's discernment, quickened by anxious eyes that watch for each flitting change upon his mistress's face.

They parted thus, and into the heart of Mistress Cynthia there crept that night a doubt that banished sleep. Was she wise in entrusting herself so utterly to a man of whom she knew but little, and that learnt from rumours which had not been good? But scarcely was it because of that that doubts assailed her. Rather was it because of his cool deliberateness which argued not the great love wherewith she fain would fancy him inspired.

For consolation she recalled a line that had it great fires were soon burnt out, and she sought to reassure herself that the flame of his love, if not all-consuming, would at least burn bright and steadfastly until the end of life. And so she fell asleep, betwixt hope and fear, yet no longer with any hesitancy touching the morrow's course.

In the morning she took her woman into her confidence, and scared her with it out of what little sense the creature owned. Yet to such purpose did she talk, that when that evening, as Crispin waited by the coach he had taken, in the hollow of the road, he saw approaching him a portly, middle-aged dame with a valise. This was Cynthia's woman, and Cynthia herself was not long in following, muffled in a long, black cloak.

He greeted her warmly—affectionately almost yet with none of the rapture to which she held herself entitled as some little recompense for all that on his behalf she left behind.

Urbanely he handed her into the coach, and, after her, her woman. Then seeing that he made shift to close the door:

"How is this?" she cried. "Do you not ride with us?"

He pointed to a saddled horse standing by the roadside, and which she had not noticed.

"It will be better so. You will be at more comfort in the carriage without me. Moreover, it will travel the lighter and the swifter, and speed will prove our best friend."

He closed the door, and stepped back with a word of command to the driver. The whip cracked, and Cynthia flung herself back almost in a pet. What manner of lover, she asked herself, was thin and what manner of woman she, to let herself be borne away by one who made so little use of the arts and wiles of sweet persuasion? To carry her off, and yet not so much as sit beside her, was worthy only of a man who described such a journey as tedious. She marvelled greatly at it, yet more she marvelled at herself that she did not abandon this mad undertaking.

The coach moved on and the flight from Sheringham was begun.

CHAPTER XXV. CYNTHIA'S FLIGHT

Throughout the night they went rumbling on their way at a pace whose sluggishness elicited many an oath from Crispin as he rode a few yards in the rear, ever watchful of the possibility of pursuit. But there was none, nor none need he have feared, since whilst he rode through the cold night, Gregory Ashburn slept as peacefully as a man may with the fever and an evil conscience, and imagined his dutiful daughter safely abed.

With the first streaks of steely light came a thin rain to heighten Crispin's discomfort, for of late he had been overmuch in the saddle, and strong though he was, he was yet flesh and blood, and subject to its ills. Towards ten o'clock they passed through Denham. When they were clear of it Cynthia put her head from the window. She had slept well, and her mood was lighter and happier. As Crispin rode a yard or so behind, he caught sight of her fresh, smiling face, and it affected him curiously. The tenderness that two days ago had been his as he talked to her upon the cliffs was again upon him, and the thought that anon she would be linked to him by the ties of relationship, was pleasurable. She gave him good morrow prettily, and he, spurring his horse to the carriage door, was solicitous to know of her comfort. Nor did he again fall behind until Stafford was reached at noon. Here, at the sign of the Suffolk Arms, he called a halt, and they broke their fast on the best the house could give them.

Cynthia was gay, and so indeed was Crispin, yet she noted in him that coolness which she accounted restraint, and gradually her spirits sank again before it.

To Crispin's chagrin there were no horses to be had. Someone in great haste had ridden through before them, and taken what relays the hostelry could give, leaving four jaded beasts in the stable. It seemed, indeed, that they must remain there until the morrow, and in coming to that conclusion, Sir Crispin's temper suffered sorely.

"Why need it put you so about," cried Cynthia, in arch reproach, "since I am with you?"

"Blood and fire, madam," roared Galliard, "it is precisely for that reason that I am exercised. What if your father came upon us here?"

"My father, sir, is abed with a sword-wound and a fever," she replied, and he remembered then how Kenneth had spitted Gregory through the shoulder.

"Still," he returned, "he will have discovered your flight, and I dare swear we shall have his myrmidons upon our heels. Should they come up with us we shall hardly find them more gentle than he would be."

She paled at that, and for a second there was silence. Then her hand stole forth upon his arm, and she looked at him with tightened lips and a defiant air.

"What, indeed, if they do? Are you not with me?" A king had praised his daring, and for his valour had dubbed him knight upon a field of stricken battle; yet the honour of it had not brought him the elation those words—expressive of her utter faith in him and his prowess—begat in his heart. Upon the instant the delay ceased to fret him.

"Madam," he laughed, "since you put it so, I care not who comes. The Lord Protector himself shall not drag you from me."

It was the nearest he had gone to a passionate speech since they had left Sheringham, and it pleased her; yet in uttering it he had stood

a full two yards away, and in that she had taken no pleasure.

Bidding her remain and get what rest she might, he left her, and she, following his straight, lank figure—so eloquent of strength—and the familiar poise of his left hand upon the pommel of his sword, felt proud indeed that he belonged to her, and secure in his protection. She sat herself at the window when he was gone, and whilst she awaited his return, she hummed a gay measure softly to herself. Her eyes were bright, and there was a flush upon her cheeks. Not even in the wet, greasy street could she find any unsightliness that afternoon. But as she waited, and the minutes grew to hours, that flush faded, and the sparkle died gradually from her eyes. The measure that she had hummed was silenced, and her shapely mouth took on a pout of impatience, which anon grew into a tighter mould, as he continued absent.

A frown drew her brows together, and Mistress Cynthia's thoughts were much as they had been the night before she left Castle Marleigh. Where was he? Why came he not? She took up a book of plays that lay upon the table, and sought to while away the time by reading. The afternoon faded into dusk, and still he did not come. Her woman appeared, to ask whether she should call for lights and at that Cynthia became almost violent.

"Where is Sir Crispin?" she demanded. And to the dame's quavering answer that she knew not, she angrily bade her go ascertain.

In a pet, Cynthia paced the chamber whilst Catherine was gone upon that errand. Did this man account her a toy to while away the hours for which he could find no more profitable diversion, and to leave her to die of ennui when aught else offered? Was it a small thing that he had asked of her, to go with him into a strange land, that he should show himself so little sensible of the honour done him?

With such questions did she plague herself, and finding them either unanswerable, or answerable only by affirmatives, she had well-nigh resolved upon leaving the inn, and making her way back to London to seek out her aunt, when the door opened and her woman reappeared.

"Well?" cried Cynthia, seeing her alone. "Where is Sir Crispin?"

"Below, madam."

"Below?" echoed she. "And what, pray, doth he below?"

"He is at dice with a gentleman from London."

In the dim light of the October twilight the woman saw not the sudden pallor of her mistress's cheeks, but she heard the gasp of pain that was almost a cry. In her mortification, Cynthia could have wept had she given way to her feelings. The man who had induced her to elope with him sat at dice with a gentleman from London! Oh, it was monstrous! At the thought of it she broke into a laugh that appalled her tiring-woman; then mastering her hysteria, she took a sudden determination.

"Call me the host," she cried, and the frightened Catherine obeyed her at a run.

When the landlord came, bearing lights, and bending his aged back obsequiously:

"Have you a pillion?" she asked abruptly. "Well, fool, why do you stare? Have you a pillion?"

"I have, madam."

"And a knave to ride with me, and a couple more as escort?"

"I might procure them, but—"

"How soon?"

"Within half an hour, but—"

"Then go see to it," she broke in, her foot beating the ground impatiently.

"But, madam—"

"Go, go, go!" she cried, her voice rising at each utterance of that imperative.

"But, madam," the host persisted despairingly, and speaking quickly so that he might get the words out, "I have no horses fit to travel ten miles."

"I need to go but five," she retorted quickly, her only thought being to get the beasts, no matter what their condition. "Now, go, and come not back until all is ready. Use dispatch and I will pay you well, and above all, not a word to the gentleman who came hither with me."

The sorely-puzzled host withdrew to do her bidding, won to it by her promise of good payment.

Alone she sat for half an hour, vainly fostering the hope that ere the landlord returned to announce the conclusion of his preparations, Crispin might have remembered her and come. But he did not appear, and in her solitude this poor little maid was very miserable, and shed some tears that had still more of anger than sorrow in their source. At length the landlord came. She summoned her woman, and bade her follow by post on the morrow. The landlord she rewarded with a ring worth twenty times the value of the service, and was led by him through a side door into the innyard.

Here she found three horses, one equipped with the pillion on which she was to ride behind a burly stableboy. The other two were mounted by a couple of stalwart and well-armed men, one of whom

carried a funnel-mouthed musketoon with a swagger that promised prodigies of valour.

Wrapped in her cloak, she mounted behind the stable-boy, and bade him set out and take the road to Denham. Her dream was at an end.

Master Quinn, the landlord, watched her departure with eyes that were charged with doubt and concern. As he made fast the door of the stableyard after she had passed out, he ominously shook his hoary head and muttered to himself humble, hostelry-flavoured philosophies touching the strange ways of men with women, and the stranger ways of women with men. Then, taking up his lanthorn, he slowly retraced his steps to the buttery where his wife was awaiting him.

With sleeves rolled high above her pink and deeply-dimpled elbows stood Mistress Quinn at work upon the fashioning of a pastry, when her husband entered and set down his lanthorn with a sigh.

"To be so plagued," he growled. "To be browbeaten by a slip of a wench—a fine gentleman's baggage with the airs and vapours of a lady of quality. Am I not a fool to have endured it?"

"Certainly you are a fool," his wife agreed, kneading diligently, "whatever you may have endured. What now?"

His fat face was puckered into a thousand wrinkles. His little eyes gazed at her with long-suffering malice.

"You are my wife," he answered pregnantly, as who would say: Thus is my folly clearly proven! and seeing that the assertion was not one that admitted of dispute, Mistress Quinn was silent.

"Oh, 'tis ill done!" he broke out a moment later. "Shame on me for it; it is ill done!"

"If you have done it 'tis sure to be ill done, and shame on you in good sooth—but for what?" put in his wife.

"For sending those poor jaded beasts upon the road."

"What beasts?"

"What beasts? Do I keep turtles? My horses, woman."

"And whither have you sent them?"

"To Denham with the baggage that came hither this morning in the company of that very fierce gentleman who was in such a pet because we had no horses."

"Where is he?" inquired the hostess.

"At dice with those other gallants from town."

"At dice quotha? And she's gone, you say?" asked Mrs. Quinn, pausing in her labours squarely to face her husband.

"Aye," said he.

"Stupid!" rejoined his docile spouse, vexed by his laconic assent. "Do you mean she has run away?"

"Tis what anyone might take from what I have told you," he answered sweetly.

"And you have lent her horses and helped her to get away, and you leave her husband at play in there?"

"You have seen her marriage lines, I make no doubt," he sneered irrelevantly.

"You dolt! If the gentleman horsewhips you, you will have richly earned it."

"Eh? What?" gasped he, and his rubicund cheeks lost something of their high colour, for here was a possibility that had not entered into his calculations. But Mistress Quinn stayed not to answer him. Already she was making for the door, wiping the dough from her hands on to her apron as she went. A suspicion of her purpose flashed through her husband's mind.

"What would you do?" he inquired nervously.

"Tell the gentleman what has taken place."

"Nay," he cried, resolutely barring her way. "Nay. That you shall not. Would you—would you ruin me?"

She gave him a look of contempt, and dodging his grasp she gained the door and was half-way down the passage towards the common room before he had overtaken her and caught her round the middle.

"Are you mad, woman?" he shouted. "Will you undo me?"

"Do you undo me," she bade him, snatching at his hands. But he clutched with the tightness of despair.

"You shall not go," he swore. "Come back and leave the gentleman to make the discovery for himself. I dare swear it will not afflict him overmuch. He has abandoned her sorely since they came; not a doubt of it but that he is weary of her. At least he need not know I lent her horses. Let him think she fled a-foot, when he discovers her departure."

"I will go," she answered stubbornly, dragging him with her a yard or two nearer the door. "The gentleman shall be warned. Is a woman to run away from her husband in my house, and the husband never be warned of it?"

"I promised her," he began.

"What care I for your promises?" she asked. "I will tell him, so that he may yet go after her and bring her back."

"You shall not," he insisted, gripping her more closely. But at that moment a delicately mocking voice greeted their ears.

"Marry, 'tis vastly diverting to hear you," it said. They looked round, to find one of the party of town sparks that had halted at the inn standing arms akimbo in the narrow passage, clearly waiting for them to make room. "A touching sight, sir," said he sardonically to the landlord. "A wondrous touching sight to behold a man of your years playing the turtle-dove to his good wife like the merest fledgeling. It grieves me to intrude myself so harshly upon your cooing, though if you'll but let me pass you may resume your chaste embrace without uneasiness, for I give you my word I'll never look behind me."

Abashed, the landlord and his dame fell apart. Then, ere the gentleman could pass her, Mistress Quinn, like a true opportunist, sped swiftly down the passage and into the common room before her husband could again detain her.

Now, within the common room of the Suffolk Arms Sir Crispin sat face to face with a very pretty fellow, all musk and ribbons, and surrounded by some half-dozen gentlemen on their way to London who had halted to rest at Stafford.

The pretty gentleman swore lustily, affected a monstrous wicked look, assured that he was impressing all who stood about with some conceit of the rakehelly ways he pursued in town.

A game started with crowns to while away the tedium of the enforced sojourn at the inn had grown to monstrous proportions. Fortune had favoured the youth at first, but as the stakes grew her favours to him diminished, and at the moment that Cynthia rode out of the inn-yard, Mr. Harry Foster flung his last gold piece with an oath

upon the table.

"Rat me," he groaned, "there's the end of a hundred."

He toyed sorrowfully with the red ribbon in his black hair, and Crispin, seeing that no fresh stake was forthcoming, made shift to rise. But the coxcomb detained him.

"Tarry, sir," he cried, "I've not yet done. 'Slife, we'll make a night of it."

He drew a ring from his finger, and with a superb gesture of disdain pushed it across the board.

"What'll ye stake?" And, in the same breath, "Boy, another stoup," he cried.

Crispin eyed the gem carelessly.

"Twenty Caroluses," he muttered.

"Rat me, sir, that nose of yours proclaims you a jew, without more. Say twenty-five, and I'll cast."

With a tolerant smile, and the shrug of a man to whom twenty-five or a hundred are of like account, Crispin consented. They threw; Crispin passed and won.

"What'll ye stake?" cried Mr. Foster, and a second ring followed the first.

Before Crispin could reply, the door leading to the interior of the inn was flung open, and Mrs. Quinn, breathless with exertion and excitement, came scurrying across the room. In the doorway stood the host in hesitancy and fear. Bending to Crispin's ear, Mrs. Quinn delivered her message in a whisper that was heard by most of those who were about.

"Gone!" cried Crispin in consternation.

The woman pointed to her husband, and Crispin, understanding from this that she referred him to the host, called to him.

"What know you, landlord?" he shouted. "Come hither, and tell me whither is she gone!"

"I know not," replied the quaking host, adding the particulars of Cynthia's departure, and the information that the lady seemed in great anger.

"Saddle me a horse," cried Crispin, leaping to his feet, and pitching Mr. Foster's trinket upon the table as though it were a thing of no value. "Towards Denham you say they rode? Quick, man!" And as the host departed he swept the gold and the ring he had won into his pockets preparing to depart.

"Hoity toity!" cried Mr. Foster. "What sudden haste is this?"

"I am sorry, sir, that Fortune has been unkind to you, but I must go. Circumstances have arisen which—"

"D—n your circumstances!" roared Foster, getting on his feet. "You'll not leave me thus!"

"With your permission, sir, I will."

"But you shall not have my permission!"

"Then I shall be so unfortunate as to go without it. But I shall return."

"Sir, 'tis an old legend, that!"

Crispin turned about in despair. To be embroiled now might ruin everything, and by a miracle he kept his temper. He had a moment to spare while his horse was being saddled.

"Sir," he said, "if you have upon your pretty person trinkets to half the value of what I have won from you, I'll stake the whole against them on one throw, after which, no matter what the result, I take my departure. Are you agreed?"

There was a murmur of admiration from those present at the recklessness and the generosity of the proposal, and Foster was forced to accept it. Two more rings he drew forth, a diamond from the ruffles at his throat, and a pearl that he wore in his ear. The lot he set upon the board, and Crispin threw the winning cast as the host entered to say that his horse was ready.

He gathered the trinkets up, and with a polite word of regret he was gone, leaving Mr. Harry Foster to meditate upon the pledging of one of his horses to the landlord in discharge of his lodging.

And so it fell out that before Cynthia had gone six miles along the road to Denham, one of her attendants caught a rapid beat of hoofs behind them, and drew her attention to it, suggesting that they were being followed. Faster Cynthia bade them travel, but the pursuer gained upon them at every stride. Again the man drew her attention to it, and proposed that they should halt and face him who followed. The possession of the musketoon gave him confidence touching the issue. But Cynthia shuddered at the thought, and again, with promises of rich reward, urged them to go faster. Another mile they went, but every moment brought the pursuing hoof-beats nearer and nearer, until at last a hoarse challenge rang out behind them, and they knew that to go farther would be vain; within the next half-mile, ride as they might, their pursuer would be upon them.

The night was moonless, yet sufficiently clear for objects to be perceived against the sky, and presently the black shadow of him who rode behind loomed up upon the road, not a hundred paces off.

Despite Cynthia's orders not to fire, he of the musketoon raised his

weapon under cover of the darkness and blazed at the approaching shadow.

Cynthia cried out—a shriek of dismay it was; the horses plunged, and Sir Crispin laughed aloud as he bore down upon them. He of the musketoon heard the swish of a sword being drawn, and saw the glitter of the blade in the dark. A second later there was a shock as Crispin's horse dashed into his, and a crushing blow across the forehead, which Galliard delivered with the hilt of his rapier, sent him hurtling from the saddle. His comrade clapped spurs to his horse at that and was running a race with the night wind in the direction of Denham.

Before Cynthia quite knew what had happened the seat on the pillion in front of her was empty, and she was riding back to Stafford with Crispin beside her, his hand upon the bridle of her horse.

"You little fool!" he said half-angrily, half-gibingly; and thereafter they rode in silence—she too mortified with shame and anger to venture upon words.

That journey back to Stafford was a speedy one, and soon they stood again in the inn-yard out of which she had ridden but an hour ago. Avoiding the common room, Crispin ushered her through the side door by which she had quitted the house. The landlord met them in the passage, and looking at Crispin's face the pallor and fierceness of it drove him back without a word.

Together they ascended to the chamber where in solitude she had spent the day. Her feelings were those of a child caught in an act of disobedience, and she was angry with herself and her weakness that it should be so. Yet within the room she stood with bent head, never glancing at her companion, in whose eyes there was a look of blended anger and amazement as he observed her. At length in calm, level tones:

"Why did you run away?" he asked.

The question was to her anger as a gust of wind to a smouldering fire. She threw back her head defiantly, and fixed him with a glance as fierce as his own.

"I will tell you," she cried, and suddenly stopped short. The fire died from her eyes, and they grew wide in wonder—in fascinated wonder—to see a deep stain overspreading one side of his grey doublet, from the left shoulder downwards. Her wonder turned to horror as she realized the nature of that stain and remembered that one of her men had fired upon him.

"You are wounded?" she faltered.

A sickly smile came into his face, and seemed to accentuate its pallor. He made a deprecatory gesture. Then, as if in that gesture he had expended his last grain of strength, he swayed suddenly as he stood. He made as if to reach a chair, but at the second step he stumbled, and without further warning he fell prone at her feet, his left hand upon his heart, his right outstretched straight from the shoulder. The loss of blood he had sustained, following upon the fatigue and sleeplessness that had been his of late, had demanded its due from him, man of iron though he was.

Upon the instant her anger vanished. A great fear that he was dead descended upon her, and to heighten the horror of it came the thought that he had received his death-wound through her agency. With a moan of anguish she went down upon her knees beside him. She raised his head and pillowed it in her lap, calling to him by name, as though her voice alone must suffice to bring him back to life and consciousness. Instinctively she unfastened his doublet at the neck, and sought to draw it away that she might see the nature of his hurt and staunch the wound if possible, but her strength ebbed away from her, and she abandoned her task, unable to do more than murmur his

name.

"Crispin, Crispin, Crispin!"

She stooped and kissed the white, clammy forehead, then his lips, and as she did so a tremor ran through her, and he opened his eyes. A moment they looked dull and lifeless, then they waxed questioning.

A second ago these two had stood in anger with the width of the room betwixt them; now, in a flash, he found his head on her lap, her lips on his. How came he there? What meant it?

"Crispin, Crispin," she cried, "thank God you did but swoon!"

Then the awakening of his soul came swift upon the awakening of his body. He lay there, oblivious of his wound, oblivious of his mission, oblivious of his son. He lay with senses still half dormant and comprehension dulled, but with a soul alert he lay, and was supremely happy with a happiness such as he had never known in all his ill-starred life.

In a feeble voice he asked:

"Why did you run away?"

"Let us forget it," she answered softly.

"Nay—tell me first."

"I thought—I thought—" she stammered; then, gathering courage, "I thought you did not really care, that you made a toy of me," said she. "When they told me that you sat at dice with a gentleman from London I was angry at your neglect. If you loved me, I told myself, you would not have used me so, and left me to mope alone."

For a moment Crispin let his grey eyes devour her blushing face. Then he closed them and pondered what she had said, realization

breaking upon him now like a great flood. The light came to him in one blinding yet all-illuminating flash. A hundred things that had puzzled him in the last two days grew of a sudden clear, and filled him with a joy unspeakable. He dared scarce believe that he was awake, and Cynthia by him—that he had indeed heard aright what she had said. How blind he had been, how nescient of himself!

Then, as his thoughts travelled on to the source of the misapprehension he remembered his son, and the memory was like an icy hand upon his temples that chilled him through and through. Lying there with eyes still closed he groaned. Happiness was within his grasp at last. Love might be his again did he but ask it, and the love of as pure and sweet a creature as ever God sent to chasten a man's life. A great tenderness possessed him. A burning temptation to cast to the winds his plighted word, to make a mock of faith, to deride honour, and to seize this woman for his own. She loved him he knew it now; he loved her—the knowledge had come as suddenly upon him. Compared with this what could his faith, his word, his honour give him? What to him, in the face of this, was that paltry fellow, his son, who had spurned him!

The hardest fight he ever fought, he fought it there, lying supine upon the ground, his head in her lap.

Had he fought it out with closed eyes, perchance honour and his plighted word had won the day; but he opened them, and they met Cynthia's.

A while they stayed thus; the hungry glance of his grey eyes peering into the clear blue depths of hers; and in those depths his soul was drowned, his honour stifled.

"Cynthia," he cried, "God pity me, I love you!" And he swooned again.

CHAPTER XXVI. TO FRANCE

That cry, which she but half understood, was still ringing in her ears when the door was of a sudden flung open, and across the threshold a very daintily arrayed young gentleman stepped briskly, the expostulating landlord following close upon his heels.

"I tell thee, lying dog," he cried, "I saw him ride into the yard, and, 'fore George, he shall give me the chance of mending my losses. Be off to your father, you Devil's natural."

Cynthia looked up in alarm, whereupon that merry blood catching sight of her, halted in some confusion at what he saw.

"Rat me, madam," he cried, "I did not know—I had not looked to—" He stopped, and remembering at last his manners he made her a low bow.

"Your servant, madam," said he, "your servant Harry Foster."

She gazed at him, her eyes full of inquiry, but said nothing, whereat the pretty gentleman plucked awkwardly at his ruffles and wished himself elsewhere.

"I did not know, madam, that your husband was hurt."

"He is not my husband, sir," she answered, scarce knowing what she said.

"Gadso!" he ejaculated. "Yet you ran away from him?"

Her cheeks grew crimson.

"The door, sir, is behind you."

"So, madam, is that thief the landlord," he made answer, no whit abashed. "Come hither, you bladder of fat, the gentleman is hurt."

Thus courteously summoned, the landlord shuffled forward, and Mr. Foster begged Cynthia to allow him with the fellow's aid to see to the gentleman's wound. Between them they laid Crispin on a couch, and the town spark went to work with a dexterity little to have been expected from his flippant exterior. He dressed the wound, which was in the shoulder and not in itself of a dangerous character, the loss of blood it being that had brought some gravity to the knight's condition. They propped his head upon a pillow, and presently he sighed and, opening his eyes, complained of thirst, and was manifestly surprised at seeing the coxcomb turned leech.

"I came in search of you to pursue our game," Foster explained when they had ministered to him, "and, 'fore George, I am vastly grieved to find you in this condition."

"Pish, sir, my condition is none so grievous—a scratch, no more, and were my heart itself pierced the knowledge that I have gained—" He stopped short. "But there, sir," he added presently, "I am grateful beyond words for your timely ministration, and if to my debt you will add that of leaving me awhile to rest, I shall appreciate it."

His glance met Cynthia's and he smiled. The host coughed significantly, and shuffled towards the door. But Master Foster made no shift to move; but stood instead beside Galliard, though in apparent hesitation.

"I should like a word with you ere I go," he said at length. Then turning and perceiving the landlord standing by the door in an attitude of eloquent waiting: "Take yourself off," he cried to him. "Crush me, may not one gentleman say a word to another without being forced to speak into your inquisitive ears as well? You will forgive my heat, madam, but, God a'mercy, that greasy rascal tries me sorely."

"Now, sir," he resumed, when the host was gone. "I stand thus: I have lost to you to-day a sum of money which, though some might account considerable, is in itself no more than a trifle.

"I am, however, greatly exercised at the loss of certain trinkets which have to me a peculiar value, and which, to be frank, I staked in a moment of desperation. I had hoped, sir, to retrieve my losses o'er a friendly main this evening, for I have still to stake a coach and four horses—as noble a set of beasts as you'll find in England, aye rat me. Your wound, sir, renders it impossible for me to ask you to give yourself the fatigue of obliging me. I come, then, to propose that you return me those trinkets against my note of hand for the amount that was staked on them. I am well known in town, sir," he added hurriedly, "and you need have no anxiety."

Crispin stopped him with a wave of the hand.

"I have none, sir, in that connexion, and I am willing to do as you suggest." He thrust his hand into his pocket, and drew forth the rings, the brooch and the ear-ring he had won. "Here, sir, are your trinkets."

"Sir," cried Mr. Foster, thrown into some confusion by Galliard's unquestioning generosity, "I am indebted to you. Rat me, sir, I am indeed. You shall have my note of hand on the instant. How much shall we say?"

"One moment, Mr. Foster," said Crispin, an idea suddenly occurring to him. "You mentioned horses. Are they fresh?"

"As June roses."

"And you are returning to London, are you not?"

"I am."

"When do you wish to proceed?"

"To-morrow."

"Why, then, sir, I have a proposal to make which will remove the need of your note of hand. Lend me your horses, sir, to reach Harwich. I wish to set out at once!"

"But your wound?" cried Cynthia. "You are still faint."

"Faint! Not I. I am awake and strong. My wound is no wound, for a scratch may not be given that name. So there, sweetheart." He laughed, and drawing down her head, he whispered the words: "Your father." Then turning again to Foster. "Now, sir," he continued, "there are four tolerable posthorses of mine below, on which you can follow tomorrow to Harwich, there exchanging them again for your own, which you shall find awaiting you, stabled at the Garter Inn. For this service, to me of immeasurable value, I will willingly cede those gewgaws to you."

"But, rat me, sir," cried Foster in bewilderment, "'tis too generous—'pon honour it is. I can't consent to it. No, rat me, I can't."

"I have told you how great a boon you will confer. Believe me, sir, to me it is worth twice, a hundred times the value of those trinkets."

"You shall have my horses, sir, and my note of hand as well," said Foster firmly.

"Your note of hand is of no value to me, sir. I look to leave England to-morrow, and I know not when I may return."

Thus in the end it came about that the bargain was concluded. Cynthia's maid was awakened and bidden to rise. The horses were harnessed to Crispin's coach, and Crispin, leaning upon Harry Foster's arm, descended and took his place within the carriage.

Leaving the London blood at the door of the Suffolk Arms, crushing,

burning, damning and rattling himself at Crispin's magnificence, they rolled away through the night in the direction of Ipswich.

Ten o'clock in the morning beheld them at the door of the Garter Inn at Harwich. But the jolting of the coach had so hardly used Crispin that he had to be carried into the hostelry. He was much exercised touching the Lady Jane and his inability to go down to the quay in quest of her, when he was accosted by a burly, red-faced individual who bluntly asked him was he called Sir Crispin Galliard. Ere he could frame an answer the man had added that he was Thomas Jackson, master of the Lady Jane—at which piece of good news Crispin felt like to shout for joy.

But his reflection upon his present position, when at last he lay in the schooner's cabin, brought him the bitter reverse of pleasure. He had set out to bring Cynthia to his son; he had pledged his honour to accomplish it. How was he fulfilling his trust? In his despondency, during a moment when alone, he cursed the knave that had wounded him for his clumsiness in not having taken a lower aim when he fired, and thus solved him this ugly riddle of life for all time.

Vainly did he strive to console himself and endeavour to palliate the wrong he had done with the consideration that he was the man Cynthia loved, and not his son; that his son was nothing to her, and that she would never have accompanied him had she dreamt that he wooed her for another.

No. The deed was foul, and rendered fouler still by virtue of those other wrongs in whose extenuation it had been undertaken. For a moment he grew almost a coward. He was on the point of bidding Master Jackson avoid Calais and make some other port along the coast. But in a moment he had scorned the craven argument of flight, and determined that come what might he would face his son, and lay the truth before him, leaving him to judge how strong fate had been. As he lay feverish and fretful in the vessel's cabin, he came well-nigh

to hating Kenneth; he remembered him only as a poor, mean creature, now a bigot, now a fop, now a psalm-monger, now a roysterer, but ever a hypocrite, ever a coward, and never such a man as he could have taken pride in presenting as his offspring.

They had a fair wind, and towards evening Cynthia, who had been absent from his side a little while, came to tell him that the coast of France grew nigh.

His answer was a sigh, and when she chid him for it, he essayed a smile that was yet more melancholy. For a second he was tempted to confide in her; to tell her of the position in which he found himself and to lighten his load by sharing it with her. But this he dared not do. Cynthia must never know.

CHAPTER XXVII. THE AUBERGE DU SOLEIL

In a room of the first floor of the Auberge du Soleil, at Calais, the host inquired of Crispin if he were milord Galliard. At that question Crispin caught his breath in apprehension, and felt himself turn pale. What it portended, he guessed; and it stifled the hope that had been rising in him since his arrival, and because he had not found his son awaiting him either on the jetty or at the inn. He dared ask no questions, fearing that the reply would quench that hope, which rose despite himself, and begotten of a desire of which he was hardly conscious.

He sighed before replying, and passing his brown, nervous hand across his brow, he found it moist.

"My name, M. l'hote, is Crispin Galliard. What news have you for me?"

"A gentleman—a countryman of milord's—has been here these three days awaiting him."

For a little while Crispin sat quite still, stripped of his last rag of hope. Then suddenly bracing himself, he sprang up, despite his weakness.

"Bring him to me. I will see him at once."

"Tout-a-l'heure, monsieur," replied the landlord. "At the moment he is absent. He went out to take the air a couple of hours ago, and is not yet returned."

"Heaven send he has walked into the sea!" Crispin broke out passionately. Then as passionately he checked himself. "No, no, my God—not that! I meant not that."

"Monsieur will sup?"

"At once, and let me have lights." The host withdrew, to return a moment later with a couple of lighted tapers, which he set upon the table.

As he was retiring, a heavy step sounded on the stair, accompanied by the clank of a scabbard against the baluster.

"Here comes milord's countryman," the landlord announced.

And Crispin, looking up in apprehension, saw framed in the doorway the burly form of Harry Hogan.

He sat bolt upright, staring as though he beheld an apparition. With a sad smile, Hogan advanced, and set his hand affectionately upon Galliard's shoulder.

"Welcome to France, Crispin," said he. "If not him whom you looked to find, you have at least a loyal friend to greet you."

"Hogan!" gasped the knight. "What make you here? How came you here? Where is Jocelyn?"

The Irishman looked at him gravely for a moment, then sighed and sank down upon a chair. "You have brought the lady?" he asked.

"She is here. She will be with us presently."

Hogan groaned and shook his grey head sorrowfully.

"But where is Jocelyn?" cried Galliard again, and his haggard face looked very wan and white as he turned it inquiringly upon his companion. "Why is he not here?"

"I have bad news."

"Bad news?" muttered Crispin, as though he understood not the meaning of the words. "Bad news?" he repeated musingly. Then bracing himself, "What is this news?"

"And you have brought the lady too!" Hogan complained. "Faith, I had hoped that you had failed in that at least."

"Sdeath, Harry," Crispin exclaimed. "Will you tell me the news?"

Hogan pondered a moment. Then:

"I will relate the story from the very beginning," said he. "Some four hours after your departure from Waltham) my men brought in the malignant we were hunting. I dispatched my sergeant and the troop forthwith to London with the prisoner, keeping just two troopers with me. An hour or so later a coach clattered into the yard, and out of it stepped a short, lean man in black, with a very evil face and a crooked eye, who bawled out that he was Joseph Ashburn of Castle Marleigh, a friend of the Lord General's, and that he must have horses on the instant to proceed upon his journey to London. I was in the yard at the time, and hearing the full announcement I guessed what his business in London was. He entered the inn to refresh himself and I followed him. In the common room the first man his eyes lighted on was your son. He gasped at sight of him, and when he had recovered his breath he let fly as round a volley of blasphemy as ever I heard from the lips of a Puritan. When that was over, "Fool," he yells, "what make you here?" The lad stammered and grew confused. At last—"I was detained here," says he. "Detained!" thunders the other, "and by whom?" "By my father, you murdering villain!" was the hot answer.

"At that Master Ashburn grows very white and very evil-looking. "So," he says, in a playful voice, "you have learnt that, have you? Well, by God! the lesson shall profit neither you nor that rascal your father.

"But I'll begin with you, you cur." And with that he seizes a jug of ale that stood on the table, and empties it over the boy's face. Soul of my body! The lad showed such spirit then as I had never looked to find in him. "Outside," yells he, tugging at his sword with one hand, and pointing to the door with the other. "Outside, you hound, where I can kill you!" Ashburn laughed and cursed him, and together they flung past me into the yard. The place was empty at the moment, and there, before the clash of their blades had drawn interference, the thing was over—and Ashburn had sent his sword through Jocelyn's heart."

Hogan paused, and Crispin sat very still and white, his soul in torment.

"And Ashburn?" he asked presently, in a voice that was singularly hoarse and low. "What became of him? Was he not arrested?"

"No," said Hogan grimly, "he was not arrested. He was buried. Before he had wiped his blade I had stepped up to him and accused him of murdering a beardless boy. I remembered the reckoning he owed you, I remembered that he had sought to send you to your death; I saw the boy's body still warm and bleeding upon the ground, and I struck him with my knuckles on the mouth. Like the cowardly ruffian he was, he made a pass at me with his sword before I had got mine out. I avoided it narrowly, and we set to work.

"People rushed in and would have stopped us, but I cursed them so whilst I fenced, swearing to kill any man that came between us, that they held off and waited. I didn't keep them overlong. I was no raw youngster fresh from the hills of Scotland. I put the point of my sword through Joseph Ashburn's throat within a minute of our engaging.

"It was then as I stood in that shambles and looked down upon my handiwork that I recalled in what favour Master Ashburn was held by the Parliament, and I grew sick to think of what the consequences might be. To avoid them I got me there and then to horse, and rode in

a straight line for Greenwich, hoping to find the Lady Jane still there. But my messenger had already sent her to Harwich for you. I was well ahead of possible pursuit, and so I pushed on to Dover, and thence I crossed, arriving here three days ago."

Crispin rose and stepped up to Hogan. "The last time you came to me after killing a man, Harry, I was of some service to you. You shall find me no less useful now. You will come to Paris with me?"

"But the lady?" gasped Hogan, amazed at Crispin's lack of thought for her.

"I hear her step upon the stairs. Leave me now, Harry, but as you go, desire the landlord to send for a priest. The lady remains."

One look of utter bewilderment did Hogan bestow upon Sir Crispin, and for once his glib, Irish tongue could shape no other words than:

"Soul of my body!"

He wrung Crispin's hand, and in a state of ineffable perplexity he hurried from the room to do what was required of him.

For a moment Crispin stood by the window, and looking out into the night he thanked God from his heart for his solution of the monstrous riddle that had been set him.

Then the rustle of a gown drew his attention, and he swung round to find Cynthia smiling upon him from the threshold.

He advanced to meet her, and setting his hands upon her shoulders, he held her at arm's length, looking down into her eyes.

"Cynthia, my Cynthia!" he cried. And she, breaking past the barrier of his grasp, nestled up to him with a sigh of sweet and unalloyed content.

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BARDELYS THE MAGNIFICENT ***

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BARDELYS THE MAGNIFICENT

Being an Account of the Strange Wooing
pursued by the Sieur Marcel de Saint-Pol;

Marquis of Bardelys, and of the things that
in the course of it befell him in
Languedoc, in the year of the Rebellion

By Rafael Sabatini

Contents

BARDELYS THE MAGNIFICENT

CHAPTER I.	THE WAGER
CHAPTER II.	THE KING'S WISHES
CHAPTER III.	RENE DE LESPERON
CHAPTER IV.	A MAID IN THE MOONLIGHT
CHAPTER V.	THE VICOMTE DE LAVEDAN
CHAPTER VI.	IN CONVALESCENCE
CHAPTER VII.	THE HOSTILITY OF SAINT-EUSTACHE
CHAPTER VIII.	THE PORTRAIT
CHAPTER IX.	A NIGHT ALARM
CHAPTER X.	THE RISEN DEAD
CHAPTER XI.	THE KING'S COMMISSIONER
CHAPTER XII.	THE TRIBUNAL OF TOULOUSE
CHAPTER XIII.	THE ELEVENTH HOUR
CHAPTER XIV.	EAVESDROPPING
CHAPTER XV.	MONSIEUR DE CHATELLERAULT IS ANGRY
CHAPTER XVI.	SWORDS!
CHAPTER XVII.	THE BABBLING OF GANYMEDE
CHAPTER XVIII.	SAINT-EUSTACHE IS OBSTINATE
CHAPTER XIX.	THE FLINT AND THE STEEL
CHAPTER XX.	THE "BRAVI" AT BLAGNAC

[CHAPTER XXI.](#)

LOUIS THE JUST

[CHAPTER XXII.](#)

WE UNSADDLE



BARDELYS THE MAGNIFICENT

CHAPTER I. THE WAGER

"Speak of the Devil," whispered La Fosse in my ear, and, moved by the words and by the significance of his glance, I turned in my chair.

The door had opened, and under the lintel stood the thick-set figure of the Comte de Chatellerault. Before him a lacquey in my escutcheoned livery of red-and-gold was receiving, with back obsequiously bent, his hat and cloak.

A sudden hush fell upon the assembly where a moment ago this very man had been the subject of our talk, and silenced were the wits that but an instant since had been making free with his name and turning the Languedoc courtship—from which he was newly returned with the shame of defeat—into a subject for heartless mockery and jest. Surprise was in the air for we had heard that Chatellerault was crushed by his ill-fortune in the lists of Cupid, and we had not looked to see him joining so soon a board at which—or so at least I boasted—mirth presided.

And so for a little space the Count stood pausing on my threshold whilst we craned our necks to contemplate him as though he had been an object for inquisitive inspection. Then a smothered laugh from the brainless La Fosse seemed to break the spell. I frowned. It was a climax of discourtesy whose impression I must at all costs efface.

I leapt to my feet, with a suddenness that sent my chair gliding a full half-yard along the glimmering parquet of the floor, and in two strides I had reached the Count and put forth my hand to bid him welcome. He took it with a leisureliness that argued sorrow. He advanced into the full blaze of the candlelight, and fetched a dismal sigh from the depths

of his portly bulk.

"You are surprised to see me, Monsieur le Marquis," said he, and his tone seemed to convey an apology for his coming—for his very existence almost.

Now Nature had made my Lord of Chatellerault as proud and arrogant as Lucifer—some resemblance to which illustrious personage his downtrodden retainers were said to detect in the lineaments of his swarthy face. Environment had added to that store of insolence wherewith Nature had equipped him, and the King's favour—in which he was my rival—had gone yet further to mould the peacock attributes of his vain soul. So that this wondrous humble tone of his gave me pause; for to me it seemed that not even a courtship gone awry could account for it in such a man.

"I had not thought to find so many here," said he. And his next words contained the cause of his dejected air. "The King, Monsieur de Bardelys, has refused to see me; and when the sun is gone, we lesser bodies of the courtly firmament must needs turn for light and comfort to the moon." And he made me a sweeping bow.

"Meaning that I rule the night?" quoth I, and laughed. "The figure is more playful than exact, for whilst the moon is cold and cheerless, me you shall find ever warm and cordial. I could have wished, Monsieur de Chatellerault, that your gracing my board were due to a circumstance less untoward than His Majesty's displeasure."

"It is not for nothing that they call you the Magnificent," he answered, with a fresh bow, insensible to the sting in the tail of my honeyed words.

I laughed, and, setting compliments to rest with that, I led him to the table.

"Ganymede, a place here for Monsieur le Comte. Gilles, Antoine, see

to Monsieur de Chatellerault. Basile, wine for Monsieur le Comte. Bestir there!"

In a moment he was become the centre of a very turmoil of attention. My lacqueys flitted about him buzzing and insistent as bees about a rose. Would Monsieur taste of this capon a la casserole, or of this truffled peacock? Would a slice of this juicy ham a l'anglaise tempt Monsieur le Comte, or would he give himself the pain of trying this turkey aux olives? Here was a salad whose secret Monsieur le Marquis's cook had learnt in Italy, and here a vol-au-vent that was invented by Quelon himself.

Basile urged his wines upon him, accompanied by a page who bore a silver tray laden with beakers and Wagons. Would Monsieur le Comte take white Armagnac or red Anjou? This was a Burgundy of which Monsieur le Marquis thought highly, and this a delicate Lombardy wine that His Majesty had oft commended. Or perhaps Monsieur de Chatellerault would prefer to taste the last vintage of Bardelys?

And so they plagued him and bewildered him until his choice was made; and even then a couple of them held themselves in readiness behind his chair to forestall his slightest want. Indeed, had he been the very King himself, no greater honour could we have shown him at the Hotel de Bardelys.

But the restraint that his coming had brought with it hung still upon the company, for Chatellerault was little loved, and his presence there was much as that of the skull at an Egyptian banquet.

For of all these fair-weather friends that sat about my table—amongst whom there were few that had not felt his power—I feared there might be scarcely one would have the grace to dissemble his contempt of the fallen favourite. That he was fallen, as much his words as what already we had known, had told us.

Yet in my house I would strive that he should have no foretaste of that coldness that to-morrow all Paris would be showing him, and to this end I played the host with all the graciousness that role may bear, and overwhelmed him with my cordiality, whilst to thaw all iciness from the bearing of my other guests, I set the wines to flow more freely still. My dignity would permit no less of me, else would it have seemed that I rejoiced in a rival's downfall and took satisfaction from the circumstance that his disfavour with the King was like to result in my own further exaltation.

My efforts were not wasted. Slowly the mellowing influence of the grape pronounced itself. To this influence I added that of such wit as Heaven has graced me with, and by a word here and another there I set myself to lash their mood back into the joviality out of which his coming had for the moment driven it.

And so, presently, Good-Humour spread her mantle over us anew, and quip and jest and laughter decked our speech, until the noise of our merry-making drifting out through the open windows must have been borne upon the breeze of that August night down the rue Saint-Dominique, across the rue de l'Enfer, to the very ears perhaps of those within the Luxembourg, telling them that Bardelys and his friends kept another of those revels which were become a byword in Paris, and had contributed not a little to the sobriquet of "Magnificent" which men gave me.

But, later, as the toasts grew wild and were pledged less for the sake of the toasted than for that of the wine itself, wits grew more barbed and less restrained by caution; recklessness hung a moment, like a bird of prey, above us, then swooped abruptly down in the words of that fool La Fosse.

"Messieurs," he lisped, with that fatuousness he affected, and with his eye fixed coldly upon Chatellerault, "I have a toast for you." He rose carefully to his feet—he had arrived at that condition in which to move

with care is of the first importance. He shifted his eye from the Count to his glass, which stood half empty. He signed to a lacquey to fill it. "To the brim, gentlemen," he commanded. Then, in the silence that ensued, he attempted to stand with one foot on the ground and one on his chair; but encountering difficulties of balance, he remained upright—safer if less picturesque.

"Messieurs, I give you the most peerless, the most beautiful, the most difficult and cold lady in all France. I drink to those her thousand graces, of which Fame has told us, and to that greatest and most vexing charm of all—her cold indifference to man. I pledge you, too, the swain whose good fortune it maybe to play Endymion to this Diana.

"It will need," pursued La Fosse, who dealt much in mythology and classic lore—"it will need an Adonis in beauty, a Mars in valour, an Apollo in song, and a very Eros in love to accomplish it. And I fear me," he hiccupped, "that it will go unaccomplished, since the one man in all France on whom we have based our hopes has failed. Gentlemen, to your feet! I give you the matchless Roxalanne de Lavedan!"

Such amusement as I felt was tempered by apprehension. I shot a swift glance at Chatellerault to mark how he took this pleasantry and this pledging of the lady whom the King had sent him to woo, but whom he had failed to win. He had risen with the others at La Fosse's bidding, either unsuspecting or else deeming suspicion too flimsy a thing by which to steer conduct. Yet at the mention of her name a scowl darkened his ponderous countenance. He set down his glass with such sudden force that its slender stem was snapped and a red stream of wine streaked the white tablecloth and spread around a silver flowerbowl. The sight of that stain recalled him to himself and to the manners he had allowed himself for a moment to forget.

"Bardelys, a thousand apologies for my clumsiness," he muttered.

"Spilt wine," I laughed, "is a good omen."

And for once I accepted that belief, since but for the shedding of that wine and its sudden effect upon him, it is likely we had witnessed a shedding of blood. Thus, was the ill-timed pleasantry of my feather-brained La Fosse tided over in comparative safety. But the topic being raised was not so easily abandoned. Mademoiselle de Lavedan grew to be openly discussed, and even the Count's courtship of her came to be hinted at, at first vaguely, then pointedly, with a lack of delicacy for which I can but blame the wine with which these gentlemen had made a salad of their senses. In growing alarm I watched the Count. But he showed no further sign of irritation. He sat and listened as though no jot concerned. There were moments when he even smiled at some lively sally, and at last he went so far as to join in that merry combat of wits, and defend himself from their attacks, which were made with a good-humour that but thinly veiled the dislike he was held in and the satisfaction that was culled from his late discomfiture.

For a while I hung back and took no share in the banter that was toward. But in the end—lured perhaps by the spirit in which I have shown that Chatellerault accepted it, and lulled by the wine which in common with my guests I may have abused—I came to utter words but for which this story never had been written.

"Chatellerault," I laughed, "abandon these defensive subterfuges; confess that you are but uttering excuses, and acknowledge that you have conducted this affair with a clumsiness unpardonable in one equipped with your advantages of courtly rearing."

A flush overspread his face, the first sign of anger since he had spilled his wine.

"Your successes, Bardelys, render you vain, and of vanity is

presumption born," he replied contemptuously.

"See!" I cried, appealing to the company. "Observe how he seeks to evade replying! Nay, but you shall confess your clumsiness."

"A clumsiness," murmured La Fosse drowsily, "as signal as that which attended Pan's wooing of the Queen of Lydia."

"I have no clumsiness to confess," he answered hotly, raising his voice. "It is a fine thing to sit here in Paris, among the languid, dull, and nerveless beauties of the Court, whose favours are easily won because they look on dalliance as the best pastime offered them, and are eager for such opportunities of it as you fleeing coxcombs will afford them. But this Mademoiselle de Lavedan is of a vastly different mettle. She is a woman; not a doll. She is flesh and blood; not sawdust, powder, and vermilion. She has a heart and a will; not a spirit corrupted by vanity and licence."

La Fosse burst into a laugh.

"Hark! O, hark!" he cried, "to the apostle of the chaste!"

"Saint Gris!" exclaimed another. "This good Chatellerault has lost both heart and head to her."

Chatellerault glanced at the speaker with an eye in which anger smouldered.

"You have said it," I agreed. "He has fallen her victim, and so his vanity translates her into a compound of perfections. Does such a woman as you have described exist, Comte? Bah! In a lover's mind, perhaps, or in the pages of some crack-brained poet's fancies; but nowhere else in this dull world of ours."

He made a gesture of impatience.

"You have been clumsy, Chatellerault," I insisted.

"You have lacked address. The woman does not live that is not to be won by any man who sets his mind to do it, if only he be of her station and have the means to maintain her in it or raise her to a better. A woman's love, sir, is a tree whose root is vanity. Your attentions flatter her, and predispose her to capitulate. Then, if you but wisely choose your time to deliver the attack, and do so with the necessary adroitness—nor is overmuch demanded—the battle is won with ease, and she surrenders. Believe me, Chatellerault, I am a younger man than you by full five years, yet in experience I am a generation older, and I talk of what I know."

He sneered heavily. "If to have begun your career of dalliance at the age of eighteen with an amour that resulted in a scandal be your title to experience, I agree," said he. "But for the rest, Bardelys, for all your fine talk of conquering women, believe me when I tell you that in all your life you have never met a woman, for I deny the claim of these Court creatures to that title. If you would know a woman, go to Lavedan, Monsieur le Marquis. If you would have your army of amorous wiles suffer a defeat at last, go employ it against the citadel of Roxalanne de Lavedan's heart. If you would be humbled in your pride, betake yourself to Lavedan."

"A challenge!" roared a dozen voices. "A challenge, Bardelys!"

"Mais voyons," I deprecated, with a laugh, "would you have me journey into Languedoc and play at wooing this embodiment of all the marvels of womanhood for the sake of making good my argument? Of your charity, gentlemen, insist no further."

"The never-failing excuse of the boaster," sneered Chatellerault, "when desired to make good his boast."

"Monsieur conceives that I have made a boast?" quoth I, keeping my temper.

"Your words suggested one—else I do not know the meaning of words. They suggested that where I have failed you could succeed, if you had a mind to try. I have challenged you, Bardelys. I challenge you again. Go about this wooing as you will; dazzle the lady with your wealth and your magnificence, with your servants, your horses, your equipages; and all the splendours you can command; yet I make bold to say that not a year of your scented attentions and most insidious wiles will bear you fruit. Are you sufficiently challenged?"

"But this is rank frenzy!" I protested. "Why should I undertake this thing?"

"To prove me wrong," he taunted me. "To prove me clumsy. Come, Bardelys, what of your spirit?"

"I confess I would do much to afford you the proof you ask. But to take a wife! Pardi! That is much indeed!"

"Bah!" he sneered. "You do well to draw back You are wise to avoid discomfiture. This lady is not for you. When she is won, it will be by some bold and gallant gentleman, and by no mincing squire of dames, no courtly coxcomb, no fop of the Luxembourg, be his experiences of dalliance never so vast."

"Po' Cap de Dieu!" growled Cazalet, who was a Gascon captain in the Guards, and who swore strange, southern oaths. "Up, Bardelys! Afoot! Prove your boldness and your gallantry, or be forever shamed; a squire of dames, a courtly coxcomb, a fop of the Luxembourg! Mordemondieu! I have given a man a bellyful of steel for the half of those titles!"

I heeded him little, and as little the other noisy babblers, who now on their feet—those that could stand—were spurring me excitedly to accept the challenge, until from being one of the baiters it seemed that of a sudden the tables were turned and I was become the baited.

I sat in thought, revolving the business in my mind, and frankly liking it but little. Doubts of the issue, were I to undertake it, I had none.

My views of the other sex were neither more nor less than my words to the Count had been calculated to convey. It may be—I know now that it was that the women I had known fitted Chatellerault's description, and were not over-difficult to win. Hence, such successes as I had had with them in such comedies of love as I had been engaged upon had given me a false impression. But such at least was not my opinion that night. I was satisfied that Chatellerault talked wildly, and that no such woman lived as he depicted. Cynical and soured you may account me. Such I know I was accounted in Paris; a man satiated with all that wealth and youth and the King's favour could give him; stripped of illusions, of faith and of zest, the very magnificence—so envied—of my existence affording me more disgust than satisfaction. Since already I had gauged its shallows.

Is it strange, therefore, that in this challenge flung at me with such insistence, a business that at first I disliked grew presently to beckon me with its novelty and its promise of new sensations?

"Is your spirit dead, Monsieur de Bardelys?" Chatellerault was gibing, when my silence had endured some moments. "Is the cock that lately crowed so lustily now dumb? Look you, Monsieur le Marquis, you are accounted here a reckless gamester. Will a wager induce you to this undertaking?"

I leapt to my feet at that. His derision cut me like a whip. If what I did was the act of a braggart, yet it almost seems I could do no less to bolster up my former boasting—or what into boasting they had translated.

"You'll lay a wager, will you, Chatellerault?" I cried, giving him back defiance for defiance. A breathless silence fell. "Then have it so. Listen, gentlemen, that you may be witnesses. I do here pledge my

castle of Bardelys, and my estates in Picardy, with every stick and stone and blade of grass that stands upon them, that I shall woo and win Roxalanne de Lavedan to be the Marquise of Bardelys. Does the stake satisfy you, Monsieur le Comte? You may set all you have against it," I added coarsely, "and yet, I swear, the odds will be heavily in your favour."

I remember it was Mironsaac who first found his tongue, and sought even at that late hour to set restraint upon us and to bring judgment to our aid.

"Messieurs, messieurs!" he besought us. "In Heaven's name, bethink you what you do. Bardelys, your wager is a madness. Monsieur de Chatellerault, you'll not accept it. You'll—"

"Be silent," I rebuked him, with some asperity. "What has Monsieur de Chatellerault to say?"

He was staring at the tablecloth and the stain of the wine that he had spilled when first Mademoiselle de Lavedan's name was mentioned. His head had been bent so that his long black hair had tumbled forward and partly veiled his face. At my question he suddenly looked up. The ghost of a smile hung on his sensuous lips, for all that excitement had paled his countenance beyond its habit.

"Monsieur le Marquis." said he rising, "I take your wager, and I pledge my lands in Normandy against yours of Bardelys. Should you lose, they will no longer call you the Magnificent; should I lose—I shall be a beggar. It is a momentous wager, Bardelys, and spells ruin for one of us."

"A madness!" groaned Mironsaac.

"Mordieux!" swore Cazalet. Whilst La Fosse, who had been the original cause of all this trouble, vented his excitement in a gibber of imbecile laughter.

"How long do you give me, Chatellerault?" I asked, as quietly as I might.

"What time shall you require?"

"I should prefer that you name the limit," I answered.

He pondered a moment. Then "Will three months suffice you?" he asked.

"If it is not done in three months, I will pay," said I.

And then Chatellerault did what after all was, I suppose, the only thing that a gentleman might do under the circumstances. He rose to his feet, and, bidding the company charge their glasses, he gave them a parting toast.

"Messieurs, drink with me to Monsieur le Marquis de Bardelys's safe journey into Languedoc, and to the prospering of his undertaking."

In answer, a great shout went up from throats that suspense had lately held in leash. Men leapt on to their chairs, and, holding their glasses on high, they acclaimed me as thunderously as though I had been the hero of some noble exploit, instead of the main figure in a somewhat questionable wager.

"Bardelys!" was the shout with which the house reechoed. "Bardelys! Bardelys the Magnificent! Vive Bardelys!"

CHAPTER II. THE KING'S WISHES

It was daybreak ere the last of them had left me, for a dozen or so had lingered to play lansquenet after the others had departed. With those that remained my wager had soon faded into insignificance, as their minds became engrossed in the fluctuations of their own fortunes.

I did not play myself; I was not in the mood, and for one night, at least, of sufficient weight already I thought the game upon which I was launched.

I was out on the balcony as the first lines of dawn were scoring the east, and in a moody, thoughtful condition I had riveted my eyes upon the palace of the Luxembourg, which loomed a black pile against the lightening sky, when Mironsaac came out to join me. A gentle, lovable lad was Mironsaac, not twenty years of age, and with the face and manners of a woman. That he was attached to me I knew.

"Monsieur le Marquis," said he softly, "I am desolated at this wager into which they have forced you."

"Forced me?" I echoed. "No, no; they did not force me. And yet," I reflected, with a sigh, "perhaps they did."

"I have been thinking, monsieur, that if the King were to hear of it the evil might be mended."

"But the King must not hear of it, Armand," I answered quickly. "Even if he did, matters would be no better—much worse, possibly."

"But, monsieur, this thing done in the heat of wine—"

"Is none the less done, Armand," I concluded. "And I for one do not wish it undone."

"But have you no thought for the lady?" he cried.

I laughed at him. "Were I still eighteen, boy, the thought might trouble me. Had I my illusions, I might imagine that my wife must be some woman of whom I should be enamoured. As it is, I have grown to the age of twenty-eight unwed. Marriage becomes desirable. I must think of an heir to all the wealth of Bardelys. And so I go to Languedoc. If the lady be but half the saint that fool Chatellerault has painted her, so much the better for my children; if not, so much the worse. There is the dawn, Mironzac, and it is time we were abed. Let us drive these plaguy gamesters home."

When the last of them had staggered down my steps, and I had bidden a drowsy lacquey extinguish the candles, I called Ganymede to light me to bed and aid me to undress. His true name was Rodenard; but my friend La Fosse, of mythological fancy, had named him Ganymede, after the cup-bearer of the gods, and the name had clung to him. He was a man of some forty years of age, born into my father's service, and since become my intendant, factotum, majordomo, and generalissimo of my regiment of servants and my establishments both in Paris and at Bardelys.

We had been to the wars together ere I had cut my wisdom teeth, and thus had he come to love me. There was nothing this invaluable servant could not do. At baiting or shoeing a horse, at healing a wound, at roasting a capon, or at mending a doublet, he was alike a master, besides possessing a score of other accomplishments that do not now occur to me, which in his campaigning he had acquired. Of late the easy life in Paris had made him incline to corpulency, and his face was of a pale, unhealthy fullness.

To-night, as he assisted me to undress, it wore an expression of

supreme woe.

"Monseigneur is going into Languedoc?" he inquired sorrowfully. He always called me his "seigneur," as did the other of my servants born at Bardelys.

"Knave, you have been listening," said I.

"But, monseigneur," he explained, "when Monsieur le Comte de Chatellerault laid his wager—"

"And have I not told you, Ganymede, that when you chance to be among my friends you should hear nothing but the words addressed to you, see nothing but the glasses that need replenishing? But, there! We are going into Languedoc. What of it?"

"They say that war may break out at any moment," he groaned; "that Monsieur le Duc de Montmorency is receiving reenforcements from Spain, and that he intends to uphold the standard of Monsieur and the rights of the province against the encroachments of His Eminence the Cardinal."

"So! We are becoming politicians, eh, Ganymede? And how shall all this concern us? Had you listened more attentively, you had learnt that we go to Languedoc to seek a wife, and not to concern ourselves with Cardinals and Dukes. Now let me sleep ere the sun rises."

On the morrow I attended the levee, and I applied to His Majesty for leave to absent myself. But upon hearing that it was into Languedoc I went, he frowned inquiry. Trouble enough was his brother already making in that province. I explained that I went to seek a wife, and deeming all subterfuge dangerous, since it might only serve to provoke him when later he came to learn the lady's name, I told him— withholding yet all mention of the wager—that I fostered the hope of making Mademoiselle de Lavedan my marquise.

Deeper came the line between his brows at that, and blacker grew the scowl. He was not wont to bestow on me such looks as I now met in his weary eyes, for Louis XIII had much affection for me.

"You know this lady?" he demanded sharply.

"Only by name, Your Majesty."

At that his brows went up in astonishment.

"Only by name? And you would wed her? But, Marcel, my friend, you are a rich man one of the richest in France. You cannot be a fortune hunter."

"Sire," I answered, "Fame sings loudly the praises of this lady, her beauty and her virtue—praises that lead me to opine she would make me an excellent chatelaine. I am come to an age when it is well to wed; indeed, Your Majesty has often told me so. And it seems to me that all France does not hold a lady more desirable. Heaven send she will agree to my suit!"

In that tired way of his that was so pathetic: "Do you love me a little, Marcel?" he asked.

"Sire," I exclaimed, wondering whither all this was leading us, "need I protest it?"

"No," he answered dryly; "you can prove it. Prove it by abandoning this Languedoc quest. I have motives—sound motives, motives of political import. I desire another wedding for Mademoiselle de Lavedan. I wish it so, Bardelys, and I look to be obeyed."

For a moment temptation had me by the throat. Here was an unlooked-for chance to shake from me a business which reflection was already rendering odious. I had but to call together my friends of yesternight, and with them the Comte de Chatellerault, and inform them that by the King was I forbidden to go wooing Roxalanne de

Lavedan. So should my wager be dissolved. And then in a flash I saw how they would sneer one and all, and how they would think that I had caught avidly at this opportunity of freeing myself from an undertaking into which a boastful mood had lured me. The fear of that swept aside my momentary hesitation.

"Sire," I answered, bending my head contritely, "I am desolated that my inclinations should run counter to your wishes, but to your wonted kindness and clemency I must look for forgiveness if these same inclinations drive me so relentlessly that I may not now turn back."

He caught me viciously by the arm and looked sharply into my face.

"You defy me, Bardelys?" he asked, in a voice of anger.

"God forbid, Sire!" I answered quickly. "I do but pursue my destiny."

He took a turn in silence, like a man who is mastering himself before he will speak. Many an eye, I knew, was upon us, and not a few may have been marvelling whether already Bardelys were about to share the fate that yesterday had overtaken his rival Chatellerault. At last he halted at my side again.

"Marcel," said he, but though he used that name his voice was harsh, "go home and ponder what I have said. If you value my favour, if you desire my love, you will abandon this journey and the suit you contemplate. If, on the other hand, you persist in going—you need not return. The Court of France has no room for gentlemen who are but lip-servers, no place for courtiers who disobey their King."

That was his last word. He waited for no reply, but swung round on his heel, and an instant later I beheld him deep in conversation with the Duke of Saint-Simon. Of such a quality is the love of princes—vain, capricious, and wilful. Indulge it ever and at any cost, else you forfeit it.

I turned away with a sigh, for in spite of all his weaknesses and

meannesses I loved this cardinal-ridden king, and would have died for him had the need occurred, as well he knew. But in this matter—well, I accounted my honour involved, and there was now no turning back save by the payment of my wager and the acknowledgment of defeat.

CHAPTER III. RENE DE LESPERON

That very day I set out. For since the King was opposed to the affair, and knowing the drastic measures by which he was wont to enforce what he desired, I realized that did I linger he might find a way definitely to prevent my going.

I travelled in a coach, attended by two lacqueys and a score of men-at-arms in my own livery, all commanded by Ganymede. My intendant himself came in another coach with my wardrobe and travelling necessities. We were a fine and almost regal cortege as we passed down the rue de l'Enfer and quitted Paris by the Orleans gate, taking the road south. So fine a cortege, indeed, that it entered my mind. His Majesty would come to hear of it, and, knowing my destination, send after me to bring me back. To evade such a possibility, I ordered a divergence to be made, and we struck east and into Touraine. At Pont-le-Duc, near Tours, I had a cousin in the Vicomte d'Amaral, and at his chateau I arrived on the third day after quitting Paris.

Since that was the last place where they would seek me, if to seek me they were inclined, I elected to remain my cousin's guest for fifteen days. And whilst I was there we had news of trouble in the South and of a rising in Languedoc under the Duc de Montmorency. Thus was it that when I came to take my leave of Amaral, he, knowing that Languedoc was my destination, sought ardently to keep me with him until we should learn that peace and order were restored in the province. But I held the trouble lightly, and insisted upon going.

Resolutely, then, if by slow stages, we pursued our journey, and came

at last to Montauban. There we lay a night at the Auberge de Navarre, intending to push on to Lavedan upon the morrow. My father had been on more than friendly terms with the Vicomte de Lavedan, and upon this I built my hopes of a cordial welcome and an invitation to delay for a few days the journey to Toulouse, upon which I should represent myself as bound.

Thus, then, stood my plans. And they remained unaltered for all that upon the morrow there were wild rumours in the air of Montauban. There were tellings of a battle fought the day before at Castelnaudary, of the defeat of Monsieur's partisans, of the utter rout of Gonzalo de Cordova's Spanish tatterdemalions, and of the capture of Montmorency, who was sorely wounded—some said with twenty and some with thirty wounds—and little like to live. Sorrow and discontent stalked abroad in Languedoc that day, for they believed that it was against the Cardinal, who sought to strip them of so many privileges, that Gaston d'Orleans had set up his standard.

That those rumours of battle and defeat were true we had ample proof some few hours later, when a company of dragoons in buff and steel rode into the courtyard of the Auberge de Navarre, headed by a young spark of an officer, who confirmed the rumour and set the number of Montmorency's wounds at seventeen. He was lying, the officer told us, at Castelnaudary, and his duchess was hastening to him from Beziers. Poor woman! She was destined to nurse him back to life and vigour only that he might take his trial at Toulouse and pay with his head the price of his rebellion.

Ganymede who, through the luxurious habits of his more recent years had—for all his fine swagger—developed a marked distaste for warfare and excitement, besought me to take thought for my safety and to lie quietly at Montauban until the province should be more settled.

"The place is a hotbed of rebellion," he urged. "If these Chouans but

learn that we are from Paris and of the King's party, we shall have our throats slit, as I live. There is not a peasant in all this countryside indeed, scarce a man of any sort but is a red-hot Orleanist, anti-Cardinalist, and friend of the Devil. Bethink you, monseigneur, to push on at the present is to court murder."

"Why, then, we will court murder," said I coldly. "Give the word to saddle."

I asked him at the moment of setting out did he know the road to Lavedan, to which the lying poltroon made answer that he did. In his youth he may have known it, and the countryside may have undergone since then such changes as bewildered him. Or it may be that fear dulled his wits, and lured him into taking what may have seemed the safer rather than the likelier road. But this I know, that as night was falling my carriage halted with a lurch, and as I put forth my head I was confronted by my trembling intendant, his great fat face gleaming whitely in the gloom above the lawn collar on his doublet.

"Why do we halt, Ganymede?" quoth I.

"Monseigneur," he faltered, his trembling increasing as he spoke, and his eyes meeting mine in a look of pitiful contrition, "I fear we are lost."

"Lost?" I echoed. "Of what do you talk? Am I to sleep in the coach?"

"Alas, monseigneur, I have done my best—"

"Why, then, God keep us from your worst," I snapped. "Open me this door."

I stepped down and looked about me, and, by my faith, a more desolate spot to lose us in my henchman could not have contrived had he been at pains to do so. A bleak, barren landscape—such as I could hardly have credited was to be found in all that fair province—unfolded itself, looking now more bleak, perhaps, by virtue of the dim

evening mist that hovered over it. Yonder, to the right, a dull russet patch of sky marked the west, and then in front of us I made out the hazy outline of the Pyrenees. At sight of them, I swung round and gripped my henchman by the shoulder.

"A fine trusty servant thou!" I cried. "Boaster! Had you told us that age and fat living had so stunted your wits as to have extinguished memory, I had taken a guide at Montauban to show us the way. Yet, here, with the sun and the Pyrenees to guide you, even had you no other knowledge, you lose yourself!"

"Monseigneur," he whimpered, "I was choosing my way by the sun and the mountains, and it was thus that I came to this impasse. For you may see, yourself, that the road ends here abruptly."

"Ganymede," said I slowly, "when we return to Paris—if you do not die of fright 'twixt this and then—I'll find a place for you in the kitchens. God send you may make a better scullion than a follower!" Then, vaulting over the wall, "Attend me, some half-dozen of you," I commanded, and stepped out briskly towards the barn.

As the weather-beaten old door creaked upon its rusty hinges, we were greeted by a groan from within, and with it the soft rustle of straw that is being moved. Surprised, I halted, and waited whilst one of my men kindled a light in the lanthorn that he carried.

By its rays we beheld a pitiable sight in a corner of that building. A man, quite young and of a tall and vigorous frame, lay stretched upon the straw. He was fully dressed even to his great riding-boots, and from the loose manner in which his back-and-breast hung now upon him, it would seem as if he had been making shift to divest himself of his armour, but had lacked the strength to complete the task. Beside him lay a feathered headpiece and a sword attached to a richly broided baldrick. All about him the straw was clotted with brown, viscous patches of blood. The doublet which had been of sky-blue

velvet was all sodden and stained, and inspection showed us that he had been wounded in the right side, between the straps of his breastplate.

As we stood about him now, a silent, pitying group, appearing fantastic, perhaps, by the dim light of that single lanthorn, he attempted to raise his head, and then with a groan he dropped it back upon the straw that pillowed it. From out of a face white, as in death, and drawn with haggard lines of pain, a pair of great lustrous blue eyes were turned upon us, abject and pitiful as the gaze of a dumb beast that is stricken mortally.

It needed no acuteness to apprehend that we had before us one of yesterday's defeated warriors; one who had spent his last strength in creeping hither to get his dying done in peace. Lest our presence should add fear to the agony already upon him, I knelt beside him in the blood-smeared straw, and, raising his head, I pillowed it upon my arm.

"Have no fear," said I reassuringly. "We are friends. Do you understand?"

The faint smile that played for a second on his lips and lighted his countenance would have told me that he understood, even had I not caught his words, faint as a sigh "Merci, monsieur." He nestled his head into the crook of my arm. "Water—for the love of God!" he gasped, to add in a groan, "Je me meurs, monsieur."

Assisted by a couple of knaves, Ganymede went about attending to the rebel at once. Handling him as carefully as might be, to avoid giving him unnecessary pain they removed his back-and-breast, which was flung with a clatter into one of the corners of the barn. Then, whilst one of them gently drew off his boots, Rodenard, with the lanthorn close beside him, cut away the fellow's doublet, and laid bare the oozing sword-wound that gaped in his mangled side. He

whispered an order to Gilles, who went swiftly off to the coach in quest of something that he had asked for; then he sat on his heels and waited, his hand upon the man's pulse, his eyes on his face.

I stooped until my lips were on a level with my intendant's ear.

"How is it with him?" I inquired.

"Dying," whispered Rodenard in answer. "He has lost too much blood, and he is probably bleeding inwardly as well. There is no hope of his life, but he may linger thus some little while, sinking gradually, and we can at least mitigate the suffering of his last moments."

When presently the men returned with the things that Ganymede had asked for, he mixed some pungent liquid with water, and, whilst a servant held the bowl, he carefully sponged the rebel's wound. This and a cordial that he had given him to drink seemed to revive him and to afford him ease. His breathing was no longer marked by any rasping sound, and his eyes seemed to burn more intelligently.

"I am dying—is it not so?" he asked, and Ganymede bowed his head in silence. The poor fellow sighed. "Raise me," he begged, and when this service had been done him, his eyes wandered round until they found me. Then "Monsieur," he said, "will you do me a last favour?"

"Assuredly, my poor friend," I answered, going down on my knees beside him.

"You—you were not for the Duke?" he inquired, eyeing me more keenly.

"No, monsieur. But do not let that disturb you; I have no interest in this rising and I have taken no side. I am from Paris, on a journey of—of pleasure. My name is Bardelys—Marcel de Bardelys."

"Bardelys the Magnificent?" he questioned, and I could not repress a smile.

"I am that overrated man."

"But then you are for the King!" And a note of disappointment crept into his voice. Before I could make him any answer, he had resumed. "No matter; Marcel de Bardelys is a gentleman, and party signifies little when a man is dying. I am Rene de Lesperon, of Lesperon in Gascony," he pursued. "Will you send word to my sister afterwards?"

I bowed my head without speaking.

"She is the only relative I have, monsieur. But"—and his tone grew wistful—"there is one other to whom I would have you bear a message." He raised his hand by a painful effort to the level of his breast. Strength failed him, and he sank back. "I cannot, monsieur," he said in a tone of pathetic apology. "See; there is a chain about my neck with a locket. Take it from me. Take it now, monsieur. There are some papers also, monsieur. Take all. I want to see them safely in your keeping."

I did his bidding, and from the breast of his doublet I drew some loose letters and a locket which held the miniature of a woman's face.

"I want you to deliver all to her, monsieur."

"It shall be done," I answered, deeply moved.

"Hold it—hold it up," he begged, his voice weakening. "Let me behold the face."

Long his eyes rested on the likeness I held before him. At last, as one in a dream—

"Well-beloved," he sighed. "Bien aimee!" And down his grey, haggard cheeks the tears came slowly. "Forgive this weakness, monsieur," he whispered brokenly. "We were to have been wed in a month, had I lived." He ended with a sob, and when next he spoke it

was more labouredly, as though that sob had robbed him of the half of what vitality remained. "Tell her, monsieur, that my dying thoughts were of her. Tell—tell her—!"

"Her name?" I cried, fearing he would sink before I learned it. "Tell me her name."

He looked at me with eyes that were growing glassy and vacant. Then he seemed to brace himself and to rally for a second.

"Her name?" he mused, in a far-off manner. "She is—Ma-de-moiselle de ——"

His head rolled on the suddenly relaxed neck. He collapsed into Rodenard's arms.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

Rodenard nodded in silence.

CHAPTER IV. A MAID IN THE MOONLIGHT

I do not know whether it was the influence of that thing lying in a corner of the barn under the cloak that Rodenard had flung over it, or whether other influences of destiny were at work to impel me to rise at the end of a half-hour and announce my determination to set out on horseback and find myself quarters more congenial.

"To-morrow," I instructed Ganymede, as I stood ready to mount, "you will retrace your steps with the others, and, finding the road to Lavedan, you will follow me to the chateau."

"But you cannot hope to reach it to-night, monseigneur, through a country that is unknown to you," he protested.

"I do not hope to reach it to-night. I will ride south until I come upon some hamlet that will afford me shelter and, in the morning, direction."

I left him with that, and set out at a brisk trot. Night had now fallen, but the sky was clear, and a crescent moon came opportunely if feebly to dispel the gloom.

I quitted the field, and went back until I gained a crossroad, where, turning to the right, I set my face to the Pyrenees, and rode briskly amain. That I had chosen wisely was proved when some twenty minutes later. I clattered into the hamlet of Mirepoix, and drew up before an inn flaunting the sign of a peacock—as if in irony of its humbleness, for it was no better than a wayside tavern. Neither stable-boy nor ostler was here, and the unclean, overgrown urchin to whom I entrusted my horse could not say whether indeed Pere Abdon

the landlord would be able to find me a room to sleep in. I thirsted, however; and so I determined to alight, if it were only to drink a can of wine and obtain information of my whereabouts.

As I was entering the hostelry there was a clatter of hoofs in the street, and four dragoons headed by a sergeant rode up and halted at the door of the Paon. They seemed to have ridden hard and some distance, for their horses were jaded almost to the last point of endurance.

Within, I called the host, and having obtained a flagon of the best vintage—Heaven fortify those that must be content with his worst!—I passed on to make inquiries touching my whereabouts and the way to Lavedan. This I learnt was but some three or four miles distant. About the other table—there were but two within the room—stood the dragoons in a whispered consultation, of which it had been well had I taken heed, for it concerned me more closely than I could have dreamt.

"He answers the description," said the sergeant, and though I heard the words I took no thought that it was of me they spoke.

"Padrieu," swore one of his companions, "I'll wager it is our man."

And then, just as I was noticing that Master Abdon, who had also overheard the conversation, was eyeing me curiously, the sergeant stepped up to me, and—

"What is your name, monsieur?" quoth he.

I vouchsafed him a stare of surprise before asking in my turn "How may that concern you?"

"Your pardon, my master, but we are on the King's business."

I remembered then that he had said I answered some description. With that it flashed through my mind that they had been sent after me

by His Majesty to enforce my obedience to his wishes and to hinder me from reaching Lavedan. At once came the dominant desire to conceal my identity that I might go unhindered. The first name that occurred to me was that of the poor wretch I had left in the barn half an hour ago, and so—

"I am," said I, "Monsieur de Lesperon, at your service."

Too late I saw the mistake that I had made. I own it was a blunder that no man of ordinary intelligence should have permitted himself to have committed. Remembering the unrest of the province, I should rather have concluded that their business was more like to be in that connection.

"He is bold, at least," cried one of the troopers, with a burst of laughter. Then came the sergeant's voice, cold and formal, "In the King's name, Monsieur de Lesperon, I arrest you."

He had whipped out his sword, and the point was within an inch of my breast. But his arm, I observed, was stretched to its fullest extent, which forbade his making a sudden thrust. To hamper him in the lunge there was the table between us.

So, my mind working quickly in this desperate situation, and realizing how dire and urgent the need to attempt an escape, I leapt suddenly back to find myself in the arms of his followers. But in moving I had caught up by one of its legs the stool on which I had been sitting. As I raised it, I eluded the pinioning grip of the troopers. I twisted in their grasp, and brought the stool down upon the head of one of them with a force that drove him to his knees. Up went that three-legged stool again, to descend like a thunderbolt upon the head of another. That freed me. The sergeant was coming up behind, but another flourish of my improvised battle-axe sent the two remaining soldiers apart to look to their swords. Ere they could draw, I had darted like a hare between them and out into the street. The sergeant, cursing them with

horrid volubility, followed closely upon my heels.

Leaping as far into the roadway as I could, I turned to meet the fellow's onslaught. Using the stool as a buckler, I caught his thrust upon it. So violently was it delivered that the point buried itself in the wood and the blade snapped, leaving him a hilt and a stump of steel. I wasted no time in thought. Charging him wildly, I knocked him over just as the two unhurt dragoons came stumbling out of the tavern.

I gained my horse and vaulted into the saddle. Tearing the reins from the urchin that held them, and driving my spurs into the beast's flanks, I went careering down the street at a gallop, gripping tightly with my knees, whilst the stirrups, which I had had no time to step into, flew wildly about my legs.

A pistol cracked behind me; then another, and a sharp, stinging pain in the shoulder warned me that I was hit. But I took no heed of it then. The wound could not be serious, else I had already been out of the saddle, and it would be time enough to look to it when I had outdistanced my pursuers. I say my pursuers, for already there were hoofbeats behind me, and I knew that those gentlemen had taken to their horses. But, as you may recall, I had on their arrival noted the jaded condition of their cattle, whilst I bestrode a horse that was comparatively fresh, so that pursuit had but small terrors for me. Nevertheless, they held out longer, and gave me more to do than I had imagined would be the case. For nigh upon a half-hour I rode, before I could be said to have got clear of them, and then for aught I knew they were still following, resolved to hound me down by the aid of such information as they might cull upon their way.

I was come by then to the Garonne. I drew rein beside the swiftly flowing stream, winding itself like a flood of glittering silver between the black shadows of its banks. A little while I sat there listening, and surveying the stately, turreted chateau that loomed, a grey, noble pile, beyond the water. I speculated what demesne this might be, and I

realized that it was probably Lavedan.

I pondered what I had best do, and in the end I took the resolve to swim the river and knock at the gates. If it were indeed Lavedan, I had but to announce myself, and to one of my name surely its hospitalities would be spread. If it were some other household, even then the name of Marcel de Bardelys should suffice to ensure me a welcome.

By spurring and coaxing, I lured my steed into the river. There is a proverb having it that though you may lead a horse to the water you cannot make him drink. It would have now applied to my case, for although I had brought mine to the water I could not make him swim; or, at least, I could not make him breast the rush of the stream. Vainly did I urge him and try to hold him; he plunged frantically, snorted, coughed, and struggled gamely, but the current was bearing us swiftly away, and his efforts brought us no nearer to the opposite shore. At last I slipped from his back, and set myself to swim beside him, leading him by the bridle. But even thus he proved unequal to the task of resisting the current, so that in the end I let him go, and swam ashore alone, hoping that he would land farther down, and that I might then recapture him. When, however, I had reached the opposite bank, and stood under the shadow of the chateau, I discovered that the cowardly beast had turned back, and, having scrambled out, was now trotting away along the path by which we had come. Having no mind to go after him, I resigned myself to the loss, and turned my attention to the mansion now before me.

Some two hundred yards from the river it raised its great square bulk against the background of black, star-flecked sky. From the facade before me down to the spot where I stood by the water, came a flight of half a dozen terraces, each balustraded in white marble, ending in square, flat-topped pillars of Florentine design. What moon there was revealed the quaint architecture of that stately edifice and glittered upon the mullioned windows. But within nothing stirred; no yellow

glimmer came to clash with the white purity of the moonlight; no sound of man or beast broke the stillness of the night, for all that the hour was early. The air of the place was as that of some gigantic sepulchre. A little daunted by this all-enveloping stillness, I skirted the terraces and approached the house on the eastern side. Here I found an old-world drawbridge—now naturally in disuse—spanning a ditch fed from the main river for the erstwhile purposes of a moat. I crossed the bridge, and entered an imposing courtyard. Within this quadrangle the same silence dwelt, and there was the same obscurity in the windows that overlooked it. I paused, at a loss how to proceed, and I leaned against a buttress of the portcullis, what time I considered.

I was weak from fasting, worn with hard riding, and faint from the wound in my shoulder, which had been the cause at least of my losing some blood. In addition to all this, I was shivering with the cold of my wet garments, and generally I must have looked as little like that Bardelys they called the Magnificent as you might well conceive. How, then, if I were to knock, should I prevail in persuading these people—whoever they might be—of my identity? Infinitely more had I the air of some fugitive rebel, and it was more than probable that I should be kept in durance to be handed over to my friends the dragoons, if later they came to ride that way. I was separated from those who knew me, and as things now stood—unless this were, indeed, Lavedan—it might be days before they found me again.

I was beginning to deplore my folly at having cut myself adrift from my followers in the first place, and having embroiled myself with the soldiers in the second; I was beginning to contemplate the wisdom of seeking some outhouse of this mansion wherein to lie until morning, when of a sudden a broad shaft of light, coming from one of the windows on the first floor, fell athwart the courtyard. Instinctively I crouched back into the shadow of my friendly buttress, and looked up.

That sudden shaft of light resulted from the withdrawal of the curtains that masked a window. At this window, which opened outward on to a balcony; I now beheld—and to me it was as the vision of Beatrice may have been to Dante—the white figure of a woman. The moonlight bathed her, as in her white robe she leaned upon the parapet gazing upward into the empyrean. A sweet, delicate face I saw, not endowed, perhaps, with that exquisite balance and proportion of feature wherein they tell us beauty lies, but blessed with a wondrously dainty beauty all its own; a beauty, perhaps, as much of expression as of form; for in that gentle countenance was mirrored every tender grace of girlhood, all that is fresh and pure and virginal.

I held my breath, I think, as I stood in ravished contemplation of that white vision. If this were Lavedan, and that the cold Roxalanne who had sent my bold Chatellerault back to Paris empty-handed then were my task a very welcome one.

How little it had weighed with me that I was come to Languedoc to woo a woman bearing the name of Roxalanne de Lavedan I have already shown. But here in this same Languedoc I beheld to-night a woman whom it seemed I might have loved, for not in ten years—not, indeed, in all my life—had any face so wrought upon me and called to my nature with so strong a voice.

I gazed at that child, and I thought of the women that I had known—the bold, bedizened beauties of a Court said to be the first in Europe. And then it came to me that this was no demoiselle of Lavedan, no demoiselle at all in fact, for the noblesse of France owned no such faces. Candour and purity were not to be looked for in the high-bred countenances of our great families; they were sometimes found in the faces of the children of their retainers. Yes; I had it now. This child was the daughter of some custodian of the demesne before me.

Suddenly, as she stood there in the moonlight, a song, sung at half-voice, floated down on the calm air. It was a ditty of old Provence, a

melody I knew and loved, and if aught had been wanting to heighten the enchantment that already ravished me, that soft melodious voice had done it. Singing still, she turned and reentered the room, leaving wide the windows, so that faintly, as from a distance, her voice still reached me after she was gone from sight.

It was in that hour that it came to me to cast myself upon this fair creature's mercy. Surely one so sweet and saintly to behold would take compassion on an unfortunate! Haply my wound and all the rest that I had that night endured made me dull-witted and warped my reason.

With what strength I still possessed I went to work to scale her balcony. The task was easy even for one in my spent condition. The wall was thick with ivy, and, moreover, a window beneath afforded some support, for by standing on the heavy coping I could with my fingers touch the sill of the balcony above. Thus I hoisted myself, and presently I threw an arm over the parapet. Already I was astride of that same Parapet before she became aware of my presence.

The song died suddenly on her lips, and her eyes, blue as forget-me-nots, were wide now with the fear that the sight of me occasioned. Another second and there had been an outcry that would have brought the house about our ears, when, stepping to the threshold of the room, "Mademoiselle," I entreated, "for the love of God, be silent! I mean you no harm. I am a fugitive. I am pursued."

This was no considered speech. There had been no preparing of words; I had uttered them mechanically almost—perhaps by inspiration, for they were surely the best calculated to enlist this lady's sympathy. And so far as went the words themselves, they were rigorously true.

With eyes wide open still, she confronted me, and I now observed that she was not so tall as from below I had imagined. She was, in fact, of

a short stature rather, but of proportions so exquisite that she conveyed an impression of some height. In her hand she held a taper by whose light she had been surveying herself in her mirror at the moment of my advent. Her unbound hair of brown fell like a mantle about her shoulders, and this fact it was drew me to notice that she was in her night-rail, and that this room to which I had penetrated was her chamber.

"Who are you?" she asked breathlessly, as though in such a pass my identity were a thing that signified.

I had almost answered her, as I had answered the troopers at Mirepoix, that I was Lesperon. Then, bethinking me that there was no need for such equivocation here, I was on the point of giving her my name. But noting my hesitation, and misconstruing it, she forestalled me.

"I understand, monsieur," said she more composedly. "And you need have no fear. You are among friends."

Her eyes had travelled over my sodden clothes, the haggard pallor of my face, and the blood that stained my doublet from the shoulder downward. From all this she had drawn her conclusions that I was a hunted rebel. She drew me into the room, and, closing the window, she dragged the heavy curtain across it, thereby giving me a proof of confidence that smote me hard—impostor that I was.

"I crave your pardon, mademoiselle, for having startled you by the rude manner of my coming," said I, and never in my life had I felt less at ease than then. "But I was exhausted and desperate. I am wounded, I have ridden hard, and I swam the river."

The latter piece of information was vastly unnecessary, seeing that the water from my clothes was forming a pool about my feet. "I saw you from below; mademoiselle, and surely, I thought, so sweet a lady

would have pity on an unfortunate." She observed that my eyes were upon her, and in an act of instinctive maidenliness she bore her hand to her throat to draw the draperies together and screen the beauties of her neck from my unwarranted glance, as though her daily gown did not reveal as much and more of them.

That act, however, served to arouse me to a sense of my position. What did I there? It was a profanity—a defiling, I swore; from which you'll see, that Bardelys was grown of a sudden very nice.

"Monsieur," she was saying, "you are exhausted."

"But that I rode hard," I laughed, "it is likely they had taken me to Toulouse, were I might have lost my head before my friends could have found and claimed me. I hope you'll see it is too comely a head to be so lightly parted with."

"For that," said she, half seriously, half whimsically, "the ugliest head would be too comely."

I laughed softly, amusedly; then of a sudden, without warning, a faintness took me, and I was forced to brace myself against the wall, breathing heavily the while. At that she gave a little cry of alarm.

"Monsieur, I beseech you to be seated. I will summon my father, and we will find a bed for you. You must not retain those clothes."

"Angel of goodness!" I muttered gratefully, and being still half dazed, I brought some of my Court tricks into that chamber by taking her hand and carrying it towards my lips. But ere I had imprinted the intended kiss upon her fingers—and by some miracle they were not withdrawn—my eyes encountered hers again. I paused as one may pause who contemplates a sacrilege. For a moment she held my glance with hers; then I fell abashed, and released her hand.

The innocence peeping out of that child's eyes it was that had in that

moment daunted me, and made me tremble to think of being found there, and of the vile thing it would be to have her name coupled with mine. That thought lent me strength. I cast my weariness from me as though it were a garment, and, straightening myself, I stepped of a sudden to the window. Without a word, I made shift to draw back the curtain when her hand, falling on my sodden sleeve, arrested me.

"What will you do, monsieur?" she cried in alarm. "You may be seen."

My mind was now possessed by the thing I should have thought of before. I climbed to her balcony, and my one resolve was to get me thence as quickly as might be.

"I had not the right to enter here," I muttered. "I—" I stopped short; to explain would only be to sully, and so, "Good-night! Adieu!" I ended brusquely.

"But, monsieur—" she began.

"Let me go," I commanded almost roughly, as I shook my arm free of her grasp.

"Bethink you that you are exhausted. If you go forth now, monsieur, you will assuredly be taken. You must not go."

I laughed softly, and with some bitterness, too, for I was angry with myself.

"Hush, child," I said. "Better so, if it is to be."

And with that I drew aside the curtains and pushed the leaves of the window apart. She remained standing in the room, watching me, her face pale, and hex eyes pained and puzzled.

One last glance I gave her as I bestrode the rail of her balcony. Then I lowered myself as I had ascended. I was hanging by my hands, seeking with my foot for the coping of the window beneath me, when,

suddenly, there came a buzzing in my ears. I had a fleeting vision of a white figure leaning on the balcony above me; then a veil seemed drawn over my eyes; there came a sense of falling; a rush as of a tempestuous wind; then—nothing.

CHAPTER V. THE VICOMTE DE LAVEDAN

When next I awakened, it was to find myself abed in an elegant apartment, spacious and sunlit, that was utterly strange to me. For some seconds I was content to lie and take no count of my whereabouts. My eyes travelled idly over the handsome furnishings of that choicely appointed chamber, and rested at last upon the lean, crooked figure of a man whose back was towards me and who was busy with some phials at a table not far distant. Then recollection awakened also in me, and I set my wits to work to grapple with my surroundings. I looked through the open window, but from my position on the bed no more was visible than the blue sky and a faint haze of distant hills.

I taxed my memory, and the events of yesternight recurred to me. I remembered the girl, the balcony, and my flight ending in my giddiness and my fall. Had they brought me into that same chateau, or—Or what? No other possibility came to suggest itself, and, seeing scant need to tax my brains with speculation, since there was one there of whom I might ask the question—

"Hola, my master!" I called to him, and as I did so I essayed to move. The act wrung a sharp cry of pain from me. My left shoulder was numb and sore, but in my right foot that sudden movement had roused a sharper pang.

At my cry that little wizened old man swung suddenly round. He had the face of a bird of prey, yellow as a louis d'or with a great hooked nose, and a pair of beady black eyes that observed me solemnly. The

mouth alone was the redeeming feature in a countenance that had otherwise been evil; it was instinct with good-humour. But I had small leisure to observe him then, for simultaneously with his turning there had been another movement at my bedside, which drew my eyes elsewhere. A gentleman, richly dressed, and of an imposing height, approached me.

"You are awake, monsieur?" he said in a half interrogative tone.

"Will you do me the favour to tell me where I am, monsieur?" quoth I.

"You do not know? You are at Lavedan. I am the Vicomte de Lavedan—at your service."

Although it was no more than I might have expected, yet a dull wonder filled me, to which presently I gave expression by asking stupidly—

"At Lavedan? But how came I hither?"

"How you came is more than I can tell," he laughed. "But I'll swear the King's dragoons were not far behind you. We found you in the courtyard last night; in a swoon of exhaustion, wounded in the shoulder, and with a sprained foot. It was my daughter who gave the alarm and called us to your assistance. You were lying under her widow." Then, seeing the growing wonder in my eyes and misconstruing it into alarm: "Nay, have no fear, monsieur," he cried. "You were very well advised in coming to us. You have fallen among friends. We are Orleanists too,—at Lavedan, for all that I was not in the fight at Castelnaudary. That was no fault of mine. His Grace's messenger reached me overlate, and for all that I set out with a company of my men, I put back when I had reached Lautrec upon hearing that already a decisive battle had been fought and that our side had suffered a crushing defeat." He uttered a weary sigh.

"God help us, monsieur! Monseigneur de Richelieu is likely to have his way with us. But let that be for the present. You are here, and you

are safe. As yet no suspicion rests on Lavedan. I was, as I have said, too late for the fight, and so I came quietly back to save my skin, that I might serve the Cause in whatever other way might offer still. In sheltering you I am serving Gaston d'Orleans, and, that I may continue so to do, I pray that suspicion may continue to ignore me. If they were to learn of it at Toulouse or of how with money and in other ways I have helped this rebellion—I make no doubt that my head would be the forfeit I should be asked to pay."

I was aghast at the freedom of treasonable speech with which this very debonnaire gentleman ventured to address an utter stranger.

"But tell me, Monsieur de Lesperon," resumed my host, "how is it with you?"

I started in fresh astonishment.

"How—how do you know that I am Lesperon?" I asked.

"Ma foi!" he laughed, "do you imagine I had spoken so unreservedly to a man of whom I knew nothing? Think better of me, monsieur, I beseech you. I found these letters in your pocket last night, and their superscription gave me your identity. Your name is well known to me," he added. "My friend Monsieur de Marsac has often spoken of you and of your devotion to the Cause, and it affords me no little satisfaction to be of some service to one whom by repute I have already learned to esteem."

I lay back on my pillows, and I groaned. Here was a predicament! Mistaking me for that miserable rebel I had succoured at Mirepoix, and whose letters I bore upon me that I might restore them to some one whose name he had failed to give me at the last moment, the Vicomte de Lavedan had poured the damning story of his treason into my ears.

What if I were now to enlighten him? What if I were to tell him that I

was not Lesperon—no rebel at all in fact—but Marcel de Bardelys, the King's favourite? That he would account me a spy I hardly thought; but assuredly he would see that my life must be a danger to his own; he must fear betrayal from me; and to protect himself he would be justified in taking extreme measures. Rebels were not addicted to an excess of niceness in their methods, and it was more likely that I should rise no more from the luxurious bed on which his hospitality had laid me. But even if I had exaggerated matters, and the Vicomte were not quite so bloodthirsty as was usual with his order, even if he chose to accept my promise that I would forget what he had said, he must nevertheless—in view of his indiscretion—demand my instant withdrawal from Lavedan. And what, then, of my wager with Chatellerault?

Then, in thinking of my wager, I came to think of Roxalanne herself—that dainty, sweet-faced child into whose chamber I had penetrated on the previous night. And would you believe it that I—the satiated, cynical, unbelieving Bardelys—experienced dismay at the very thought of leaving Lavedan for no other reason than because it involved seeing no more of that provincial damsel?

My unwillingness to be driven from her presence determined me to stay. I had come to Lavedan as Lesperon, a fugitive rebel. In that character I had all but announced myself last night to Mademoiselle. In that character I had been welcomed by her father. In that character, then, I must remain, that I might be near her, that I might woo and win her, and thus—though this, I swear, had now become a minor consideration with me—make good my boast and win the wager that must otherwise involve my ruin.

As I lay back with closed eyes and gave myself over to pondering the situation, I took a pleasure oddly sweet in the prospect of urging my suit under such circumstances. Chatellerault had given me a free hand. I was to go about the wooing of Mademoiselle de Lavedan as I

chose. But he had cast it at me in defiance that not with all my magnificence, not with all my retinue and all my state to dazzle her, should I succeed in melting the coldest heart in France.

And now, behold! I had cast from me all these outward embellishments; I came without pomp, denuded of every emblem of wealth, of every sign of power; as a poor fugitive gentleman, I came, hunted, proscribed, and penniless—for Lesperon's estate would assuredly suffer sequestration. To win her thus would, by my faith, be an exploit I might take pride in, a worthy achievement to encompass.

And so I left things as they were, and since I offered no denial to the identity that was thrust upon me, as Lesperon I continued to be known to the Vicomte and to his family.

Presently he called the old man to my bedside and I heard them talking of my condition.

"You think, then, Anatole," he said in the end, "that in three or four days Monsieur de Lesperon may be able to rise?"

"I am assured of it," replied the old servant.

Whereupon, turning to me, "Be therefore of good courage, monsieur," said Lavedan, "for your hurt is none so grievous after all."

I was muttering my thanks and my assurances that I was in excellent spirits, when we were suddenly disturbed by a rumbling noise as of distant thunder.

"Mort Dieu!" swore the Vicomte, a look of alarm coming into his face. With a bent head, he stood in a listening attitude.

"What is it?" I inquired.

"Horsemen—on the drawbridge," he answered shortly. "A troop, by the sound."

And then, in confirmation of these words, followed a stamping and rattle of hoofs on the flags of the courtyard below. The old servant stood wringing his hands in helpless terror, and wailing, "Monsieur, monsieur!"

But the Vicomte crossed rapidly to the window and looked out. Then he laughed with intense relief; and in a wondering voice "They are not troopers," he announced. "They have more the air of a company of servants in private livery; and there is a carriage—pardieu, two carriages!"

At once the memory of Rodenard and my followers occurred to me, and I thanked Heaven that I was abed where he might not see me, and that thus he would probably be sent forth empty-handed with the news that his master was neither arrived nor expected.

But in that surmise I went too fast. Ganymede was of a tenacious mettle, and of this he now afforded proof. Upon learning that naught was known of the Marquis de Bardelys at Lavedan, my faithful henchman announced his intention to remain there and await me, since that was, he assured the Vicomte, my destination.

"My first impulse," said Lavedan, when later he came to tell me of it, "was incontinently to order his departure. But upon considering the matter and remembering how high in power and in the King's favour stands that monstrous libertine Bardelys, I deemed it wiser to afford shelter to this outrageous retinue. His steward—a flabby, insolent creature—says that Bardelys left them last night near Mirepoix, to ride hither, bidding them follow to-day. Curious that we should have no news of him! That he should have fallen into the Garonne and drowned himself were too great a good fortune to be hoped for."

The bitterness with which he spoke of me afforded me ample cause for congratulation that I had resolved to accept the role of Lesperon. Yet, remembering that my father and he had been good friends, his

manner left me nonplussed. What cause could he have for this animosity to the son? Could it be merely my position at Court that made me seem in his rebel eyes a natural enemy?

"You are acquainted with this Bardelys?" I inquired, by way of drawing him.

"I knew his father," he answered gruffly. "An honest, upright gentleman."

"And the son," I inquired timidly, "has he none of these virtues?"

"I know not what virtues he may have; his vices are known to all the world. He is a libertine, a gambler, a rake, a spendthrift. They say he is one of the King's favourites, and that his monstrous extravagances have earned for him the title of 'Magnificent'." He uttered a short laugh. "A fit servant for such a master as Louis the Just!"

"Monsieur le Vicomte," said I, warming in my own defence, "I swear you do him injustice. He is extravagant, but then he is rich; he is a libertine, but then he is young, and he has been reared among libertines; he is a gamester, but punctiliously honourable at play. Believe me, monsieur, I have some acquaintance with Marcel de Bardelys, and his vices are hardly so black as is generally believed; whilst in his favour I think the same may be said that you have just said of his father—he is an honest, upright gentleman."

"And that disgraceful affair with the Duchesse de Bourgogne?" inquired Lavedan, with the air of a man setting an unanswerable question.

"Mon Dieu!" I cried, "will the world never forget that indiscretion? An indiscretion of youth, no doubt much exaggerated outside Court circles."

The Vicomte eyed me in some astonishment for a moment.

"Monsieur de Lesperon," he said at length, "you appear to hold this Bardelys in high esteem. He has a staunch supporter in you and a stout advocate. Yet me you cannot convince." And he shook his head solemnly. "Even if I did not hold him to be such a man as I have pronounced him, but were to account him a paragon of all the virtues, his coming hither remains an act that I must resent."

"But why, Monsieur le Vicomte?"

"Because I know the errand that brings him to Lavedan. He comes to woo my daughter."

Had he flung a bomb into my bed he could not more effectively have startled me.

"It astonishes you, eh?" he laughed bitterly. "But I can assure you that it is so. A month ago I was visited by the Comte de Chatellerault—another of His Majesty's fine favourites. He came unbidden; offered no reason for his coming, save that he was making a tour of the province for his amusement. His acquaintance with me was of the slightest, and I had no desire that it should increase; yet here he installed himself with a couple of servants, and bade fair to take a long stay.

"I was surprised, but on the morrow I had an explanation. A courier, arriving from an old friend of mine at Court, bore me a letter with the information that Monsieur de Chatellerault was come to Lavedan at the King's instigation to sue for my daughter's hand in marriage. The reasons were not far to seek. The King, who loves him, would enrich him; the easiest way is by a wealthy alliance, and Roxalanne is accounted an heiress. In addition to that, my own power in the province is known, whilst my defection from the Cardinalist party is feared. What better link wherewith to attach me again to the fortunes of the Crown—for Crown and Mitre have grown to be synonymous in this topsy-turvy France—than to wed my daughter to one of the King's

favourites?

"But for that timely warning, God knows what mischief had been wrought. As it was, Monsieur de Chatellerault had but seen my daughter upon two occasions. On the very day that I received the tidings I speak of, I sent her to Auch to the care of some relatives of her mother's. Chatellerault remained a week. Then, growing restive, he asked when my daughter would return. 'When you depart, monsieur,' I answered him, and, being pressed for reasons, I dealt so frankly with him that within twenty-four hours he was on his way back to Paris."

The Vicomte paused and took a turn in the apartment, whilst I pondered his words, which were bringing me a curious revelation. Presently he resumed.

"And now, Chatellerault having failed in his purpose, the King chooses a more dangerous person for the gratifying of his desires. He sends the Marquis, Marcel de Bardelys to Lavedan on the same business. No doubt he attributes Chatellerault's failure to clumsiness, and he has decided this time to choose a man famed for courtly address and gifted with such arts of dalliance that he cannot fail but enmesh my daughter in them. It is a great compliment that he pays us in sending hither the handsomest and most accomplished gentleman of all his Court—so fame has it—yet it is a compliment of whose flattery I am not sensible. Bardelys goes hence as empty-handed as went Chatellerault. Let him but show his face, and my daughter journeys to Auch again. Am I not well advised, Monsieur de Lesperon?"

"Why, yes," I answered slowly, after the manner of one who deliberates, "if you are persuaded that your conclusions touching Bardelys are correct."

"I am more than persuaded. What other business could bring him to

Lavedan?"

It was a question that I did not attempt to answer. Haply he did not expect me to answer it. He left me free to ponder another issue of this same business of which my mind was become very full. Chatellerault had not dealt fairly with me. Often, since I had left Paris, had I marvelled that he came to be so rash as to risk his fortune upon a matter that turned upon a woman's whim. That I possessed undeniable advantages of person, of birth, and of wealth, Chatellerault could not have disregarded. Yet these, and the possibility that they might suffice to engage this lady's affections, he appeared to have set at naught when he plunged into that rash wager.

He must have realized that because he had failed was no reason to presume that I must also fail. There was no consequence in such an argument, and often, as I have said, had I marvelled during the past days at the readiness with which Chatellerault had flung down the gage. Now I held the explanation of it. He counted upon the Vicomte de Lavedan to reason precisely as he was reasoning, and he was confident that no opportunities would be afforded me of so much as seeing this beautiful and cold Roxalanne.

It was a wily trap he had set me, worthy only of a trickster.

Fate, however, had taken a hand in the game, and the cards were redealt since I had left Paris. The terms of the wager permitted me to choose any line of action that I considered desirable; but Destiny, it seemed, had chosen for me, and set me in a line that should at least suffice to overcome the parental resistance—that breastwork upon which Chatellerault had so confidently depended.

As the rebel Rene de Lesperon I was sheltered at Lavedan and made welcome by my fellow-rebel the Vicomte, who already seemed much taken with me, and who had esteemed me before seeing me from the much that Monsieur de Marsac—whoever he might be—had told him

of me. As Rene de Lesperon I must remain, and turn to best account my sojourn, praying God meanwhile that this same Monsieur de Marsac might be pleased to refrain from visiting Lavedan whilst I was there.

CHAPTER VI. IN CONVALESCENCE

Of the week that followed my coming to Lavedan I find some difficulty in writing. It was for me a time very crowded with events—events that appeared to be moulding my character anew and making of me a person different, indeed, from that Marcel de Bardelys whom in Paris they called the Magnificent. Yet these events, although significant in their total, were of so vague and slight a nature in their detail, that when I come to write of them I find really little that I may set down.

Rodenard and his companions remained for two days at the chateau, and to me his sojourn there was a source of perpetual anxiety, for I knew not how far the fool might see fit to prolong it. It was well for me that this anxiety of mine was shared by Monsieur de Lavedan, who disliked at such a time the presence of men attached to one who was so notoriously of the King's party. He came at last to consult me as to what measures might be taken to remove them, and I—nothing loath to conspire with him to so desirable end—bade him suggest to Rodenard that perhaps evil had befallen Monsieur de Bardelys, and that, instead of wasting his time at Lavedan, he were better advised to be searching the province for his master.

This counsel the Vicomte adopted, and with such excellent results that that very day—within the hour, in fact—Ganymede, aroused to a sense of his proper duty, set out in quest of me, not a little disturbed in mind—for with all his shortcomings the rascal loved me very faithfully.

That was on the third day of my sojourn at Lavedan. On the morrow I rose, my foot being sufficiently recovered to permit it. I felt a little weak

from loss of blood, but Anatole—who, for all his evil countenance, was a kindly and gentle—servant was confident that a few days—a week at most—would see me completely restored.

Of leaving Lavedan I said nothing. But the Vicomte, who was one of the most generous and noble hearted men that it has ever been my good fortune to meet, forestalled any mention of my departure by urging that I should remain at the chateau until my recovery were completed, and, for that matter, as long thereafter as should suit my inclinations.

"At Lavedan you will be safe, my friend," he assured me; "for, as I have told you, we are under no suspicion. Let me urge you to remain until the King shall have desisted from further persecuting us."

And when I protested and spoke of trespassing, he waived the point with a brusqueness that amounted almost to anger.

"Believe, monsieur, that I am pleased and honoured at serving one who has so stoutly served the Cause and sacrificed so much to it."

At that, being not altogether dead to shame, I winced, and told myself that my behaviour was unworthy, and that I was practising a detestable deception. Yet some indulgence I may justly claim in consideration of how far I was victim of circumstance. Did I tell him that I was Bardelys, I was convinced that I should never leave the chateau alive. Very noble-hearted was the Vicomte, and no man have I known more averse to bloodthirstiness, but he had told me much during the days that I had lain abed, and many lives would be jeopardized did I proclaim what I had learned from him. Hence I argued that any disclosure of my identity must perforce drive him to extreme measures for the sake of the friends he had unwittingly betrayed.

On the day after Rodenard's departure I dined with the family, and met

again Mademoiselle de Lavedan, whom I had not seen since the balcony adventure of some nights ago. The Vicomtesse was also present, a lady of very austere and noble appearance—lean as a pike and with a most formidable nose—but, as I was soon to discover, with a mind inclining overmuch to scandal and the high-seasoned talk of the Courts in which her girlhood had been spent.

From her lips I heard that day the old, scandalous story of Monseigneur de Richelieu's early passion for Anne of Austria. With much unction did she tell us how the Queen had lured His Eminence to dress himself in the motley of a jester that she might make a mock of him in the eyes of the courtiers she had concealed behind the arras of her chamber.

This anecdote she gave us with much wealth of discreditable detail and scant regard for either her daughter's presence or for the blushes that suffused the poor child's cheeks. In every way she was a pattern of the class of women amongst whom my youth had been spent, a class which had done so much towards shattering my faith and lowering my estimate of her sex. Lavedan had married her and brought her into Languedoc, and here she spent her years lamenting the scenes of her youth, and prone, it would seem, to make them matter for conversation whenever a newcomer chanced to present himself at the chateau.

Looking from her to her daughter, I thanked Heaven that Roxalanne was no reproduction of the mother. She had inherited as little of her character as of her appearance. Both in feature and in soul Mademoiselle de Lavedan was a copy of that noble, gallant gentleman, her father.

One other was present at that meal, of whom I shall have more to say hereafter. This was a young man of good presence, save, perhaps, a too obtrusive foppishness, whom Monsieur de Lavedan presented to me as a distant kinsman of theirs, one Chevalier de Saint-Eustache.

He was very tall—of fully my own height—and of an excellent shape, although extremely young. But his head if anything was too small for his body, and his good-natured mouth was of a weakness that was confirmed by the significance of his chin, whilst his eyes were too closely set to augur frankness.

He was a pleasant fellow, seemingly of that negative pleasantness that lies in inoffensiveness, but otherwise dull and of an untutored mind—rustic, as might be expected in one the greater part of whose life had been spent in his native province, and of a rusticity rendered all the more flagrant by the very efforts he exerted to dissemble it.

It was after madame had related that unsavoury anecdote touching the Cardinal that he turned to ask me whether I was well acquainted with the Court. I was near to committing the egregious blunder of laughing in his face, but, recollecting myself betimes, I answered vaguely that I had some knowledge of it, whereupon he all but caused me to bound from my chair by asking me had I ever met the Magnificent Bardelys.

"I—I am acquainted with him," I answered warily. "Why do you ask?"

"I was reminded of him by the fact that his servants have been here for two days. You were expecting the Marquis himself, were you not, Monsieur le Vicomte?"

Lavedan raised his head suddenly, after the manner of a man who has received an affront.

"I was not, Chevalier," he answered, with emphasis. "His intendant, an insolent knave of the name of Rodenard, informed me that this Bardelys projected visiting me. He has not come, and I devoutly hope that he may not come. Trouble enough had I to rid myself of his servants, and but for Monsieur de Lesperon's well-conceived suggestion they might still be here."

"You have never met him, monsieur?" inquired the Chevalier.

"Never," replied our host in such a way that any but a fool must have understood that he desired nothing less than such a meeting.

"A delightful fellow," murmured Saint-Eustache—"a brilliant, dazzling personality."

"You—you are acquainted with him?" I asked.

"Acquainted?" echoed that boastful liar. "We were as brothers."

"How you interest me! And why have you never told us?" quoth madame, her eyes turned enviously upon the young man—as enviously as were Lavedan's turned in disgust. "It is a thousand pities that Monsieur de Bardelys has altered his plans and is no longer coming to us. To meet such a man is to breathe again the air of the grand monde. You remember, Monsieur de Lesperon, that affair with the Duchess de Bourgogne?" And she smiled wickedly in my direction.

"I have some recollection of it," I answered coldly. "But I think that rumour exaggerates. When tongues wag, a little rivulet is often described as a mountain torrent."

"You would not say so did you but know what I know," she informed me roguishly. "Often, I confess, rumour may swell the importance of such an affaire, but in this case I do not think that rumour does it justice."

I made a deprecatory gesture, and I would have had the subject changed, but ere I could make an effort to that end, the fool Saint-Eustache was babbling again.

"You remember the duel that was fought in consequence, Monsieur de Lesperon?"

"Yes," I assented wearily.

"And in which a poor young fellow lost his life," growled the Vicomte. "It was practically a murder."

"Nay, monsieur," I cried, with a sudden heat that set them staring at me; "there you do him wrong. Monsieur de Bardelys was opposed to the best blade in France. The man's reputation as a swordsman was of such a quality that for a twelvemonth he had been living upon it, doing all manner of unseemly things immune from punishment by the fear in which he was universally held. His behaviour in the unfortunate affair we are discussing was of a particularly shameful character. Oh, I know the details, messieurs, I can assure you. He thought to impose his reputation upon Bardelys as he had imposed it upon a hundred others, but Bardelys was over-tough for his teeth. He sent that notorious young gentleman a challenge, and on the following morning he left him dead in the horsemarket behind the Hotel Vendome. But far from a murder, monsieur, it was an act of justice, and the most richly earned punishment with which ever man was visited."

"Even if so," cried the Vicomte in some surprise, "why all this heat to defend a brawler?"

"A brawler?" I repeated after him. "Oh, no. That is a charge his worst enemies cannot make against Bardelys. He is no brawler. The duel in question was his first affair of the kind, and it has been his last, for unto him has clung the reputation that had belonged until then to La Vertoile, and there is none in France bold enough to send a challenge to him." And, seeing what surprise I was provoking, I thought it well to involve another with me in his defence. So, turning to the Chevalier, "I am sure," said I, "that Monsieur de Saint-Eustache will confirm my words."

Thereupon, his vanity being all aroused, the Chevalier set himself to paraphrase all that I had said with a heat that cast mine into a

miserable insignificance.

"At least," laughed the Vicomte at length, "he lacks not for champions. For my own part, I am content to pray Heaven that he come not to Lavedan, as he intended."

"Mais voyons, Gaston," the Vicomtesse protested, "why harbour prejudice? Wait at least until you have seen him, that you may judge him for yourself."

"Already have I judged him; I pray that I may never see him."

"They tell me he is a very handsome man," said she, appealing to me for confirmation. Lavedan shot her a sudden glance of alarm, at which I could have laughed. Hitherto his sole concern had been his daughter, but it suddenly occurred to him that perhaps not even her years might set the Vicomtesse in safety from imprudences with this devourer of hearts, should he still chance to come that way.

"Madame," I answered, "he is accounted not ill-favored." And with a deprecatory smile I added, "I am said somewhat to resemble him."

"Say you so?" she exclaimed, raising her eyebrows, and looking at me more closely than hitherto. And then it seemed to me that into her face crept a shade of disappointment. If this Bardelys were not more beautiful than I, then he was not nearly so beautiful a man as she had imagined. She turned to Saint-Eustache.

"It is indeed so, Chevalier?" she inquired. "Do you note the resemblance?"

"Vanitas, vanitate," murmured the youth, who had some scraps of Latin and a taste for airing them. "I can see no likeness—no trace of one. Monsieur de Lesperon is well enough, I should say. But Bardelys!" He cast his eyes to the ceiling. "There is but one Bardelys in France."

"Enfin," I laughed, "you are no doubt well qualified to judge, Chevalier. I had flattered myself that some likeness did exist, but probably you have seen the Marquis more frequently than have I, and probably you know him better. Nevertheless, should he come his way, I will ask you to look at us side by side and be the judge of the resemblance."

"Should I happen to be here," he said, with a sudden constraint not difficult to understand, "I shall be happy to act as arbiter."

"Should you happen to be here?" I echoed questioningly. "But surely, should you hear that Monsieur de Bardelys is about to arrive, you will postpone any departure you may be on the point of making, so that you may renew this great friendship that you tell us you do the Marquis the honour of entertaining for him?"

The Chevalier eyed me with the air of a man looking down from a great height upon another. The Vicomte smiled quietly to himself as he combed his fair beard with his forefinger in a meditative fashion, whilst even Roxalanne—who had sat silently listening to a conversation that she was at times mercifully spared from following too minutely—flashed me a humorous glance. To the Vicomtesse alone who in common with women of her type was of a singular obtuseness—was the situation without significance.

Saint-Eustache, to defend himself against my delicate imputation, and to show how well acquainted he was with Bardelys, plunged at once into a thousand details of that gentleman's magnificence. He described his suppers, his retinue, his equipages, his houses, his chateaux, his favour with the King, his successes with the fair sex, and I know not what besides—in all of which I confess that even to me there was a certain degree of novelty. Roxalanne listened with an air of amusement that showed how well she read him. Later, when I found myself alone with her by the river, whither we had gone after the repast and the Chevalier's reminiscences were at an end, she reverted to that conversation.

"Is not my cousin a great fanfarron, monsieur," she asked.

"Surely you know your cousin better than I," I answered cautiously.
"Why question me upon his character?"

"I was hardly questioning; I was commenting. He spent a fortnight in Paris once, and he accounts himself, or would have us account him, intimate with every courtier at the Luxembourg. Oh, he is very amusing, this good cousin, but tiresome too." She laughed, and there was the faintest note of scorn in her amusement. "Now, touching this Marquis de Bardelys, it is very plain that the Chevalier boasted when he said that they were as brothers—he and the Marquis—is it not? He grew ill at ease when you reminded him of the possibility of the Marquis's visit to Lavedan." And she laughed quaintly to herself. "Do you think that he so much as knows Bardelys?" she asked me suddenly.

"Not so much as by sight," I answered. "He is full of information concerning that unworthy gentleman, but it is only information that the meanest scullion in Paris might afford you, and just as inaccurate."

"Why do you speak of him as unworthy? Are you of the same opinion as my father?"

"Aye, and with better cause."

"You know him well?"

"Know him? Pardieu, he is my worst enemy. A worn-out libertine; a sneering, cynical misogynist; a nauseated reveller; a hateful egotist. There is no more unworthy person, I'll swear, in all France. Peste! The very memory of the fellow makes me sick. Let us talk of other things."

But although I urged it with the best will and the best intentions in the world, I was not to have my way. The air became suddenly heavy with the scent of musk, and the Chevalier de Saint-Eustache stood before

us, and forced the conversation once more upon the odious topic of Monsieur de Bardelys.

The poor fool came with a plan of campaign carefully considered, bent now upon overthrowing me with the knowledge he would exhibit, and whereby he looked to encompass my humiliation before his cousin.

"Speaking of Bardelys, Monsieur de Lesperon—"

"My dear Chevalier, we were no longer speaking of him."

He smiled darkly. "Let us speak of him, then."

"But are there not a thousand more interesting things that we might speak of?"

This he took for a fresh sign of fear, and so he pressed what he accounted his advantage.

"Yet have patience; there is a point on which perhaps you can give me some information."

"Impossible," said I.

"Are you acquainted with the Duchesse de Bourgogne?"

"I was," I answered casually, and as casually I added, "Are you?"

"Excellently well," he replied unhesitatingly. "I was in Paris at the time of the scandal with Bardelys."

I looked up quickly.

"Was it then that you met her?" I inquired in an idle sort of way.

"Yes. I was in the confidence of Bardelys, and one night after we had supped at his hotel—one of those suppers graced by every wit in

Paris—he asked me if I were minded to accompany him to the Louvre. We went. A masque was in progress."

"Ah," said I, after the manner of one who suddenly takes in the entire situation; "and it was at this masque that you met the Duchesse?"

"You have guessed it. Ah, monsieur, if I were to tell you of the things that I witnessed that night, they would amaze you," said he, with a great air and a casual glance at Mademoiselle to see into what depth of wonder these glimpses into his wicked past were plunging her.

"I doubt it not," said I, thinking that if his imagination were as fertile in that connection as it had been in mine he was likely, indeed, to have some amazing things to tell. "But do I understand you to say that that was the time of the scandal you have touched upon?"

"The scandal burst three days after that masque. It came as a surprise to most people. As for me—from what Bardelys had told me—I expected nothing less."

"Pardon, Chevalier, but how old do you happen to be?"

"A curious question that," said he, knitting his brows.

"Perhaps. But will you not answer it?"

"I am twenty-one," said he. "What of it?"

"You are twenty, mon cousin," Roxalanne corrected him.

He looked at her a second with an injured air.

"Why, true—twenty! That is so," he acquiesced; and again, "what of it?" he demanded.

"What of it, monsieur?" I echoed. "Will you forgive me if I express amazement at your precocity, and congratulate you upon it?"

His brows went if possible closer together and his face grew very red. He knew that somewhere a pitfall awaited him, yet hardly where.

"I do not understand you."

"Bethink you, Chevalier. Ten years have flown since this scandal you refer to. So that at the time of your supping with Bardelys and the wits of Paris, at the time of his making a confidant of you and carrying you off to a masque at the Louvre, at the time of his presenting you to the Duchesse de Bourgogne, you were just ten years of age. I never had cause to think over-well of Bardelys, but had you not told me yourself, I should have hesitated to believe him so vile a despoiler of innocence, such a perverter of youth."

He crimsoned to the very roots of his hair.

Roxalanne broke into a laugh. "My cousin, my cousin," she cried, "they that would become masters should begin early, is it not so?"

"Monsieur de Lesperon," said he, in a very formal voice, "do you wish me to apprehend that you have put me through this catechism for the purpose of casting a doubt upon what I have said?"

"But have I done that? Have I cast a doubt?" I asked, with the utmost meekness.

"So I apprehend."

"Then you apprehend amiss. Your words, I assure you, admit of no doubt whatever. And now, monsieur, if you will have mercy upon me, we will talk of other things. I am so weary of this unfortunate Bardelys and his affairs. He may be the fashion of Paris and at Court, but down here his very name befouls the air. Mademoiselle," I said, turning to Roxalanne, "you promised me a lesson in the lore of flowers."

"Come, then," said she, and, being an exceedingly wise child, she plunged straightway into the history of the shrubs about us.

Thus did we avert a storm that for a moment was very imminent. Yet some mischief was done, and some good, too, perhaps. For if I made an enemy of the Chevalier de Saint-Eustache by humbling him in the eyes of the one woman before whom he sought to shine, I established a bond 'twixt Roxalanne and myself by that same humiliation of a foolish coxcomb, whose boastfulness had long wearied her.

CHAPTER VII. THE HOSTILITY OF SAINT-EUSTACHE

In the days that followed I saw much of the Chevalier de Saint-Eustache. He was a very constant visitor at Lavedan, and the reason of it was not far to seek. For my own part, I disliked him—I had done so from the moment when first I had set eyes on him—and since hatred, like affection, is often a matter of reciprocity, the Chevalier was not slow to return my dislike. Our manner gradually, by almost imperceptible stages, grew more distant, until by the end of a week it had become so hostile that Lavedan found occasion to comment upon it.

"Beware of Saint-Eustache," he warned me. "You are becoming very manifestly distasteful to each other, and I would urge you to have a care. I don't trust him. His attachment to our Cause is of a lukewarm character, and he gives me uneasiness, for he may do much harm if he is so inclined. It is on this account that I tolerate his presence at Lavedan. Frankly, I fear him, and I would counsel you to do no less. The man is a liar, even if but a boastful liar and liars are never long out of mischief."

The wisdom of the words was unquestionable, but the advice in them was not easily followed, particularly by one whose position was so peculiar as my own. In a way I had little cause to fear the harm the Chevalier might do me, but I was impelled to consider the harm that at the same time he might do the Vicomte.

Despite our growing enmity, the Chevalier and I were very frequently thrown together. The reason for this was, of course, that wherever

Roxalanne was to be found there, generally, were we both to be found also. Yet had I advantages that must have gone to swell a rancour based as much upon jealousy as any other sentiment, for whilst he was but a daily visitor at Lavedan, I was established there indefinitely.

Of the use that I made of that time I find it difficult to speak. From the first moment that I had beheld Roxalanne I had realized the truth of Chatellerault's assertion that I had never known a woman. He was right. Those that I had met and by whom I had judged the sex had, by contrast with this child, little claim to the title. Virtue I had accounted a shadow without substance; innocence, a synonym for ignorance; love, a fable, a fairy tale for the delectation of overgrown children.

In the company of Roxalanne de Lavedan all those old, cynical beliefs, built up upon a youth of undesirable experiences, were shattered and the error of them exposed. Swiftly was I becoming a convert to the faith which so long I had sneered at, and as lovesick as any unfledged youth in his first amour.

Damn! It was something for a man who had lived as I had lived to have his pulses quicken and his colour change at a maid's approach; to find himself colouring under her smile and paling under her disdain; to have his mind running on rhymes, and his soul so enslaved that, if she is not to be won, chagrin will dislodge it from his body.

Here was a fine mood for a man who had entered upon his business by pledging himself to win and wed this girl in cold and supreme indifference to her personality. And that pledge, how I cursed it during those days at Lavedan! How I cursed Chatellerault, cunning, subtle trickster that he was! How I cursed myself for my lack of chivalry and honour in having been lured so easily into so damnable a business! For when the memory of that wager rose before me it brought despair in its train. Had I found Roxalanne the sort of woman that I had looked to find—the only sort that I had ever known—then matters had been easy. I had set myself in cold blood, and by such wiles as I knew, to

win such affection as might be hers to bestow; and I would have married her in much the same spirit as a man performs any other of the necessary acts of his lifetime and station. I would have told her that I was Bardelys, and to the woman that I had expected to find there had been no difficulty in making the confession. But to Roxalanne! Had there been no wager, I might have confessed my identity. As it was, I found it impossible to avow the one without the other. For the sweet innocence that invested her gentle, trusting soul must have given pause to any but the most abandoned of men before committing a vileness in connection with her.

We were much together during that week, and just as day by day, hour by hour, my passion grew and grew until it absorbed me utterly, so, too, did it seem to me that it awakened in her a responsive note. There was an odd light at times in her soft eyes; I came upon her more than once with snatches of love-songs on her lips, and when she smiled upon me there was a sweet tenderness in her smile, which, had things been different, would have gladdened my soul beyond all else; but which, things being as they were, was rather wont to heighten my despair. I was no coxcomb; I had had experiences, and I knew these signs. But something, too, I guessed of the heart of such a one as Roxalanne. To the full I realized the pain and shame I should inflict upon her when my confession came; I realized, too, how the love of this dear child, so honourable and high of mind, must turn to contempt and scorn when I plucked away my mask, and let her see how poor a countenance I wore beneath.

And yet I drifted with the tide of things. It was my habit so to drift, and the habit of a lifetime is not to be set at naught in a day by a resolve, however firm. A score of times was I reminded that an evil is but increased by being ignored. A score of times confession trembled on my lips, and I burned to tell her everything from its inception—the environment that had erstwhile warped me, the honesty by which I was now inspired—and so cast myself upon the mercy of her belief.

She might accept my story, and, attaching credit to it, forgive me the deception I had practised, and recognize the great truth that must ring out in the avowal of my love. But, on the other hand, she might not accept it; she might deem my confession a shrewd part of my scheme, and the dread of that kept me silent day by day.

Fully did I see how with every hour that sped confession became more and more difficult. The sooner the thing were done, the greater the likelihood of my being believed; the later I left it, the more probable was it that I should be discredited. Alas! Bardelys, it seemed, had added cowardice to his other short-comings.

As for the coldness of Roxalanne, that was a pretty fable of Chatellerault's; or else no more than an assumption, an invention of the imaginative La Fosse. Far, indeed, from it, I found no arrogance or coldness in her. All unversed in the artifices of her sex, all unacquainted with the wiles of coquetry, she was the very incarnation of naturalness and maidenly simplicity. To the tales that—with many expurgations—I told her of Court life, to the pictures that I drew of Paris, the Luxembourg, the Louvre, the Palais Cardinal, and the courtiers that thronged those historic palaces, she listened avidly and enthralled; and much as Othello won the heart of Desdemona by a recital of the perils he had endured, so it seemed to me was I winning the heart of Roxalanne by telling her of the things that I had seen.

Once or twice she expressed wonder at the depth and intimacy of the knowledge of such matters exhibited by a simple Gascon gentleman, whereupon I would urge, in explanation, the appointment in the Guards that Lesperon had held some few years ago, a position that will reveal much to an observant man.

The Vicomte noted our growing intimacy, yet set no restraint upon it. Down in his heart I believe that noble gentleman would have been well pleased had matters gone to extremes between us, for however

impoverished he might deem me; Lesperon's estates in Gascony being, as I have said, likely to suffer sequestration in view of his treason—he remembered the causes of this and the deep devotion of the man I impersonated to the affairs of Gaston d'Orleans.

Again, he feared the very obvious courtship of the Chevalier de Saint-Eustache, and he would have welcomed a turn of events that would effectually have frustrated it. That he did not himself interfere so far as the Chevalier's wooing was concerned, I could but set down to the mistrust of Saint-Eustache—amounting almost to fear—of which he had spoken.

As for the Vicomtesse, the same causes that had won me some of the daughter's regard gained me also no little of the mother's.

She had been attached to the Chevalier until my coming. But what did the Chevalier know of the great world compared with what I could tell? Her love of scandal drew her to me with inquiries upon this person and that person, many of them but names to her.

My knowledge and wealth of detail—for all that I curbed it lest I should seem to know too much—delighted her prurient soul. Had she been more motherly, this same knowledge that I exhibited should have made her ponder what manner of life I had led, and should have inspired her to account me no fit companion for her daughter. But a selfish woman, little inclined to be plagued by the concerns of another—even when that other was her daughter—she left things to the destructive course that they were shaping.

And so everything—if we except perhaps the Chevalier de Saint-Eustache—conspired to the advancement of my suit, in a manner that must have made Chatellerault grind his teeth in rage if he could have witnessed it, but which made me grind mine in despair when I pondered the situation in detail.

One evening—I had been ten days at the chateau—we went a half-league or so up the Garonne in a boat, she and I. As we were returning, drifting with the stream, the oars idle in my hand, I spoke of leaving Lavedan.

She looked up quickly; her expression was almost of alarm, and her eyes dilated as they met mine—for, as I have said, she was all unversed in the ways of her sex, and by nature too guileless to attempt to disguise her feelings or dissemble them.

"But why must you go so soon?" she asked. "You are safe at Lavedan, and abroad you may be in danger. It was but two days ago that they took a poor young gentleman of these parts at Pau; so that you see the persecution is not yet ended. Are you"—and her voice trembled ever so slightly—"are you weary of us, monsieur?"

I shook my head at that, and smiled wistfully.

"Weary?" I echoed. "Surely, mademoiselle, you do not think it? Surely your heart must tell you something very different?"

She dropped her eyes before the passion of my gaze. And when presently she answered me, there was no guile in her words; there were the dictates of the intuitions of her sex, and nothing more.

"But it is possible, monsieur. You are accustomed to the great world —"

"The great world of Lesperon, in Gascony?" I interrupted.

"No, no; the great world you have inhabited at Paris and elsewhere. I can understand that at Lavedan you should find little of interest, and—and that your inactivity should render you impatient to be gone."

"If there were so little to interest me then it might be as you say. But, oh, mademoiselle—" I ceased abruptly. Fool! I had almost fallen a prey to the seductions that the time afforded me. The balmy,

languorous eventide, the broad, smooth river down which we glided, the foliage, the shadows on the water, her presence, and our isolation amid such surroundings, had almost blotted out the matter of the wager and of my duplicity.

She laughed a little nervous laugh, and—maybe to ease the tension that my sudden silence had begotten—"You see," she said, "how your imagination deserts you when you seek to draw upon it for proof of what you protest. You were about to tell me of—of the interests that hold you at Lavedan, and when you come to ponder them, you find that you can think of nothing. Is it—is it not so?" She put the question very timidly, as if half afraid of the answer she might provoke.

"No; it is not so," I said.

I paused a moment, and in that moment I wrestled with myself. Confession and avowal—confession of what I had undertaken, and avowal of the love that had so unexpectedly come to me—trembled upon my lips, to be driven shuddering away in fear.

Have I not said that this Bardelys was become a coward? Then my cowardice suggested a course to me—flight. I would leave Lavedan. I would return to Paris and to Chatellerault, owning defeat and paying my wager. It was the only course open to me. My honour, so tardily aroused, demanded no less. Yet, not so much because of that as because it was suddenly revealed to me as the easier course, did I determine to pursue it. What thereafter might become of me I did not know, nor in that hour of my heart's agony did it seem to matter overmuch.

"There is much, mademoiselle, much, indeed, to hold me firmly at Lavedan," I pursued at last. "But my—my obligations demand of me that I depart."

"You mean the Cause," she cried. "But, believe me, you can do

nothing. To sacrifice yourself cannot profit it. Infinitely better you can serve the Duke by waiting until the time is ripe for another blow. And how can you better preserve your life than by remaining at Lavedan until the persecutions are at an end?"

"I was not thinking of the Cause, mademoiselle, but of myself alone—of my own personal honour. I would that I could explain; but I am afraid," I ended lamely.

"Afraid?" she echoed, now raising her eyes in wonder.

"Aye, afraid. Afraid of your contempt, of your scorn."

The wonder in her glance increased and asked a question that I could not answer. I stretched forward, and caught one of the hands lying idle in her lap.

"Roxalanne," I murmured very gently, and my tone, my touch, and the use of her name drove her eyes for refuge behind their lids again. A flush spread upon the ivory pallor of her face, to fade as swiftly, leaving it very white. Her bosom rose and fell in agitation, and the little hand I held trembled in my grasp. There was a moment's silence. Not that I had need to think or choose my words. But there was a lump in my throat—aye, I take no shame in confessing it, for this was the first time that a good and true emotion had been vouchsafed me since the Duchesse de Bourgogne had shattered my illusions ten years ago.

"Roxalanne," I resumed presently, when I was more master of myself, "we have been good friends, you and I, since that night when I climbed for shelter to your chamber, have we not?"

"But yes, monsieur," she faltered.

"Ten days ago it is. Think of it—no more than ten days. And it seems as if I had been months at Lavedan, so well have we become acquainted. In these ten days we have formed opinions of each other.

But with this difference, that whilst mine are right, yours are wrong. I have come to know you for the sweetest, gentlest saint in all this world. Would to God I had known you earlier! It might have been very different; I might have been—I would have been—different, and I would not have done what I have done. You have come to know me for an unfortunate but honest gentleman. Such am I not. I am under false colours here, mademoiselle. Unfortunate I may be—at least, or late I seem to have become so. Honest I am not—I have not been. There, child, I can tell you no more. I am too great a coward. But when later you shall come to hear the truth—when, after I am gone, they may tell you a strange story touching this fellow Lesperon who sought the hospitality of your father's house—bethink you of my restraint in this hour; bethink you of my departure. You will understand these things perhaps afterwards. But bethink you of them, and you will unriddle them for yourself, perhaps. Be merciful upon me then; judge me not over-harshly."

I paused, and for a moment we were silent. Then suddenly she looked up; her fingers tightened upon mine.

"Monsieur de Lesperon," she pleaded, "of what do speak? You are torturing me, monsieur."

"Look in my face, Roxalanne. Can you see nothing there of how I am torturing myself?"

"Then tell me, monsieur," she begged, her voice a very caress of suppliant softness,—*"tell me what vexes you and sets a curb upon your tongue. You exaggerate, I am assured. You could do nothing dishonourable, nothing vile."*

"Child," I cried, "I thank God that you are right! I cannot do what is dishonourable, and I will not, for all that a month ago I pledged myself to do it!"

A sudden horror, a doubt, a suspicion flashed into her glance.

"You—you do not mean that you are a spy?" she asked; and from my heart a prayer of thanks went up to Heaven that this at least it was mine frankly to deny.

"No, no—not that. I am no spy."

Her face cleared again, and she sighed.

"It is, I think, the only thing I could not forgive. Since it is not that, will you not tell me what it is?"

For a moment the temptation to confess, to tell her everything, was again upon me. But the futility of it appalled me.

"Don't ask me," I besought her; "you will learn it soon enough." For I was confident that once my wager was paid, the news of it and of the ruin of Bardelys would spread across the face of France like a ripple over water. Presently—

"Forgive me for having come into your life, Roxalanne!" I implored her, and then I sighed again. "Helas! Had I but known you earlier! I did not dream such women lived in this worn-out France."

"I will not pry, monsieur, since your resolve appears to be so firm. But if—if after I have heard this thing you speak of," she said presently, speaking with averted eyes, "and if, having heard it, I judge you more mercifully than you judge yourself, and I send for you, will you—will you come back to Lavedan?"

My heart gave a great bound—a great, a sudden throb of hope. But as sudden and as great was the rebound into despair.

"You will not send for me, be assured of that," I said with finality; and we spoke no more.

I took the oars and plied them vigorously. I was in haste to end the situation. Tomorrow I must think of my departure, and, as I rowed, I pondered the words that had passed between us. Not one word of love had there been, and yet, in the very omission of it, avowal had lain on either side. A strange wooing had been mine—a wooing that precluded the possibility of winning, and yet a wooing that had won. Aye, it had won; but it might not take. I made fine distinctions and quaint paradoxes as I tugged at my oars, for the human mind is a curiously complex thing, and with some of us there is no such spur to humour as the sting of pain.

Roxalanne sat white and very thoughtful, but with veiled eyes, so that I might guess nothing of what passed within her mind.

At last we reached the chateau, and as I brought the boat to the terrace steps, it was Saint-Eustache who came forward to offer his wrist to Mademoiselle.

He noted the pallor of her face, and darted me a quick, suspicion-laden glance. As we were walking towards the chateau—

"Monsieur de Lesperon," said he in a curious tone, "do you know that a rumour of your death is current in the province?"

"I had hoped that such a rumour might get abroad when I disappeared," I answered calmly.

"And you have taken no single step to contradict it?"

"Why should I, since in that rumour may be said to lie my safety?"

"Nevertheless, monsieur, voyons. Surely you might at least relieve the anxieties the affliction, I might almost say—of those who are mourning you."

"Ah!" said I. "And who may these be?"

He shrugged his shoulders and pursed his lips in a curiously deprecatory smile. With a sidelong glance at Mademoiselle—

"Do you need that I name Mademoiselle de Marsac?" he sneered.

I stood still, my wits busily working, my face impassive under his scrutinizing glance. In a flash it came to me that this must be the writer of some of the letters Lesperon had given me, the original of the miniature I carried.

As I was silent, I grew suddenly conscious of another pair of eyes observing me, Mademoiselle's. She remembered what I had said, she may have remembered how I had cried out the wish that I had met her earlier, and she may not have been slow to find an interpretation for my words. I could have groaned in my rage at such a misinterpretation. I could have taken the Chevalier round to the other side of the chateau and killed him with the greatest relish in the world. But I restrained myself, I resigned myself to be misunderstood. What choice had I?

"Monsieur de Saint-Eustache," said I very coldly, and looking him straight between his close-set eyes, "I have permitted you many liberties, but there is one that I cannot permit any one—and, much as I honour you, I can make no exception in your favour. That is to interfere in my concerns and presume to dictate to me the manner in which I shall conduct them. Be good enough to bear that in your memory."

In a moment he was all servility. The sneer passed out of his face, the arrogance out of his demeanour. He became as full of smiles and capers as the meanest sycophant.

"You will forgive me, monsieur!" he cried, spreading his hands, and with the humblest smile in the world. "I perceive that I have taken a great liberty, yet you have misunderstood its purport. I sought to sound you touching the wisdom of a step upon which I have ventured."

"That is, monsieur?" I asked, throwing back my head, with the scent of danger breast high.

"I took it upon myself to-day to mention the fact that you are alive and well to one who had a right, I thought, to know of it, and who is coming hither tomorrow."

"That was a presumption you may regret," said I between my teeth. "To whom do you impart this information?"

"To your friend, Monsieur de Marsac," he answered, and through his mask of humility the sneer was again growing apparent. "He will be here tomorrow," he repeated.

Marsac was that friend of Lesperon's to whose warm commendation of the Gascon rebel I owed the courtesy and kindness that the Vicomte de Lavedan had meted out to me since my coming.

Is it wonderful that I stood as if frozen, my wits refusing to work and my countenance wearing, I doubt not, a very stricken look? Here was one coming to Lavedan who knew Lesperon—one who would unmask me and say that I was an impostor. What would happen then? A spy they would of a certainty account me, and that they would make short work of me I never doubted. But that was something that troubled me less than the opinion Mademoiselle must form. How would she interpret what I had said that day? In what light would she view me hereafter?

Such questions sped like swift arrows through my mind, and in their train came a dull anger with myself that I had not told her everything that afternoon. It was too late now. The confession would come no longer of my own free will, as it might have done an hour ago, but would be forced from me by the circumstances that impended. Thus it would no longer have any virtue to recommend it to her mercy.

"The news seems hardly welcome, Monsieur de Lesperon," said Roxalanne in a voice that was inscrutable. Her tone stirred me, for it

betokened suspicion already. Something might yet chance to aid me, and in the mean while I might spoil all did I yield to this dread of the morrow. By an effort I mastered myself, and in tones calm and level, that betrayed nothing of the tempest in my soul—

"It is not welcome, mademoiselle," I answered. "I have excellent reasons for not desiring to meet Monsieur de Marsac."

"Excellent, indeed, are they!" lisped Saint-Eustache, with an ugly droop at the corners of his mouth. "I doubt not you'll find it hard to offer a plausible reason for having left him and his sister without news that you were alive."

"Monsieur," said I at random, "why will you drag in his sister's name?"

"Why?" he echoed, and he eyed me with undisguised amusement. He was standing erect, his head thrown back, his right arm outstretched from the shoulder, and his hand resting lightly upon the gold mount of his beribboned cane. He let his eyes wander from me to Roxalanne, then back again to me. At last: "Is it wonderful that I should drag in the name of your betrothed?" said he. "But perhaps you will deny that Mademoiselle de Marsac is that to you?" he suggested.

And I, forgetting for the moment the part I played and the man whose identity I had put on, made answer hotly: "I do deny it."

"Why, then, you lie," said he, and shrugged his shoulders with insolent contempt.

In all my life I do not think it could be said of me that I had ever given way to rage. Rude, untutored minds may fall a prey to passion, but a gentleman, I hold, is never angry. Nor was I then, so far as the outward signs of anger count. I doffed my hat with a sweep to Roxalanne, who stood by with fear and wonder blending in her glance.

"Mademoiselle, you will forgive that I find it necessary to birch this babbling schoolboy in your presence."

Then, with the pleasantest manner in the world, I stepped aside, and plucked the cane from the Chevalier's hand before he had so much as guessed what I was about. I bowed before him with the utmost politeness, as if craving his leave and tolerance for what I was about to do, and then, before he had recovered from his astonishment, I had laid that cane three times in quick succession across his shoulders. With a cry at once of pain and of mortification, he sprang back, and his hand dropped to his hilt.

"Monsieur," Roxalanne cried to him, "do you not see that he is unarmed?"

But he saw nothing, or, if he saw, thanked Heaven that things were in such case, and got his sword out. Thereupon Roxalanne would have stepped between us, but with arm outstretched I restrained her.

"Have no fear, mademoiselle," said I very quietly; for if the wrist that had overcome La Vertoile were not with a stick a match for a couple of such swords as this coxcomb's, then was I forever shamed.

He bore down upon me furiously, his point coming straight for my throat. I took the blade on the cane; then, as he disengaged and came at me lower, I made counter-parry, and pursuing the circle after I had caught his steel, I carried it out of his hand. It whirled an instant, a shimmering wheel of light, then it clattered against the marble balustrade half a dozen yards away. With his sword it seemed that his courage, too, departed, and he stood at my mercy, a curious picture of foolishness, surprise, and fear.

Now the Chevalier de Saint-Eustache was a young man, and in the young we can forgive much. But to forgive such an act as he had been guilty of—that of drawing his sword upon a man who carried no

weapons—would have been not only a ridiculous toleration, but an utter neglect of duty. As an older man it behoved me to read the Chevalier a lesson in manners and gentlemanly feeling. So, quite dispassionately, and purely for his own future good, I went about the task, and administered him a thrashing that for thoroughness it would be hard to better. I was not discriminating. I brought my cane down with a rhythmical precision, and whether it took him on the head, the back, or the shoulders, I held to be more his affair than mine. I had a moral to inculcate, and the injuries he might receive in the course of it were inconsiderable details so that the lesson was borne in upon his soul. Two or three times he sought to close with me, but I eluded him; I had no mind to descend to a vulgar exchange of blows. My object was not to brawl, but to administer chastisement, and this object I may claim to have accomplished with a fair degree of success.

At last Roxalanne interfered; but only when one blow a little more violent, perhaps, than its precursors resulted in the sudden snapping of the cane and Monsieur de Eustache's utter collapse into a moaning heap.

"I deplore, mademoiselle, to have offended your sight with such a spectacle, but unless these lessons are administered upon the instant their effect is not half so salutary."

"He deserved it, monsieur," said she, with a note almost of fierceness in her voice. And of such poor mettle are we that her resentment against that groaning mass of fopperies and wheals sent a thrill of pleasure through me. I walked over to the spot where his sword had fallen, and picked it up.

"Monsieur de Saint-Eustache," said I, "you have so dishonoured this blade that I do not think you would care to wear it again." Saying which, I snapped it across my knee, and flung it far out into the river, for all that the hilt was a costly one, richly wrought in bronze and gold.

He raised his livid countenance, and his eyes blazed impotent fury.

"Par la mort Dieu!" he cried hoarsely, "you shall give me satisfaction for this!"

"If you account yourself still unsatisfied, I am at your service when you will," said I courteously.

Then, before more could be said, I saw Monsieur de Lavedan and the Vicomtesse approaching hurriedly across the parterre. The Vicomte's brow was black with what might have appeared anger, but which I rightly construed into apprehension.

"What has taken place? What have you done?" he asked of me.

"He has brutally assaulted the Chevalier," cried Madame shrilly, her eyes malevolently set upon me. "He is only a child, this poor Saint-Eustache," she reproached me. "I saw it all from my window, Monsieur de Lesperon. It was brutal; it was cowardly. So to beat a boy! Shame! If you had a quarrel with him, are there not prescribed methods for their adjustment between gentlemen? Pardieu, could you not have given him proper satisfaction?"

"If madame will give herself the trouble of attentively examining this poor Saint-Eustache," said I, with a sarcasm which her virulence prompted, "you will agree, I think, that I have given him very proper and very thorough satisfaction. I would have met him sword in hand, but the Chevalier has the fault of the very young—he is precipitate; he was in too great a haste, and he could not wait until I got a sword. So I was forced to do what I could with a cane."

"But you provoked him," she flashed back.

"Whoever told you so has misinformed you, madame. On the contrary, he provoked me. He gave me the lie. I struck him—could I do less?—and he drew. I defended myself, and I supplemented my

defence by a caning, so that this poor Saint-Eustache might realize the unworthiness of what he had done. That is all, madame."

But she was not so easily to be appeased, not even when Mademoiselle and the Vicomte joined their voices to mine in extenuation of my conduct. It was like Lavedan. For all that he was full of dread of the result and of the vengeance Saint-Eustache might wreak—boy though he was—he expressed himself freely touching the Chevalier's behaviour and the fittingness of the punishment that had overtaken him.

The Vicomtesse stood in small awe of her husband, but his judgment upon a point of honour was a matter that she would not dare contest. She was ministering to the still prostrate Chevalier who, I think, remained prostrate now that he might continue to make appeal to her sympathy—when suddenly she cut in upon Roxalanne's defence of me.

"Where have you been?" she demanded suddenly.

"When, my mother?"

"This afternoon," answered the Vicomtesse impatiently. "The Chevalier was waiting two hours for you."

Roxalanne coloured to the roots of her hair. The Vicomte frowned.

"Waiting for me, my mother? But why for me?"

"Answer my question—where have you been?"

"I was with Monsieur de Lesperon," she answered simply.

"Alone?" the Vicomtesse almost shrieked.

"But yes." The poor child's tones were laden with wonder at this catechism.

"God's death!" she snapped. "It seems that my daughter is no better than—"

Heaven knows what may have been coming, for she had the most virulent, scandalous tongue that I have ever known in a woman's head—which is much for one who has lived at Court to say. But the Vicomte, sharing my fears, perhaps, and wishing to spare the child's ears, interposed quickly "Come, madame, what airs are these? What sudden assumption of graces that we do not affect? We are not in Paris. This is not the Luxembourg. En province comme en province, and here we are simple folk—"

"Simple folk?" she interrupted, gasping. "By God, am I married to a ploughman? Am I Vicomtesse of Lavedan, or the wife of a boor of the countryside? And is the honour of your daughter a matter—"

"The honour of my daughter is not in question, madame," he interrupted in his turn, and with a sudden sternness that spent the fire of her indignation as a spark that is trampled underfoot. Then, in a calm, level voice: "Ah, here are the servants," said he.

"Permit them, madame, to take charge of Monsieur de Saint-Eustache. Anatole, you had better order the carriage for Monsieur le Chevalier. I do not think that he will be able to ride home."

Anatole peered at the pale young gentleman on the ground, then he turned his little wizened face upon me, and grinned in a singularly solemn fashion. Monsieur de Saint-Eustache was little loved, it seemed.

Leaning heavily upon the arm of one of the lacqueys, the Chevalier moved painfully towards the courtyard, where the carriage was being prepared for him. At the last moment he turned and beckoned the Vicomte to his side.

"As God lives, Monsieur de Lavedan," he swore, breathing heavily in

the fury that beset him, "you shall bitterly regret having taken sides to-day with that Gascon bully. Remember me, both of you, when you are journeying to Toulouse."

The Vicomte stood beside him, impassive and unmoved by that grim threat, for all that to him it must have sounded like a death-sentence.

"Adieu, monsieur—a speedy recovery," was all he answered.

But I stepped up to them. "Do you not think, Vicomte, that it were better to detain him?" I asked.

"Pshaw!" he ejaculated. "Let him go."

The Chevalier's eyes met mine in a look of terror. Perhaps already that young man repented him of his menace, and he realized the folly of threatening one in whose power he still chanced to be.

"Bethink you, monsieur," I cried. "Yours is a noble and useful life. Mine is not without value, either. Shall we suffer these lives—aye, and the happiness of your wife and daughter—to be destroyed by this vermin?"

"Let him go, monsieur; let him go. I am not afraid."

I bowed and stepped back, motioning to the lacquey to take the fellow away, much as I should have motioned him to remove some uncleanness from before me.

The Vicomtesse withdrew in high dudgeon to her chamber, and I did not see her again that evening. Mademoiselle I saw once, for a moment, and she employed that moment to question me touching the origin of my quarrel with Saint-Eustache.

"Did he really lie, Monsieur de Lesperon?" she asked.

"Upon my honour, mademoiselle," I answered solemnly, "I have

plighted my troth to no living woman." Then my chin sank to my breast as I bethought me of how tomorrow she must opine me the vilest liar living—for I was resolved to be gone before Marsac arrived—since the real Lesperon I did not doubt was, indeed, betrothed to Mademoiselle de Marsac.

"I shall leave Lavedan betimes to-morrow, mademoiselle," I pursued presently. "What has happened to-day makes my departure all the more urgent. Delay may have its dangers. You will hear strange things of me, as already I have warned you. But be merciful. Much will be true, much false; yet the truth itself is very vile, and—" I stopped short, in despair of explaining or even tempering what had to come. I shrugged my shoulders in my abandonment of hope, and I turned towards the window. She crossed the room and came to stand beside me.

"Will you not tell me? Have you no faith in me? Ah, Monsieur de Lesperon—"

"Sh! child, I cannot. It is too late to tell you now."

"Oh, not too late! From what you say they will tell me, I should think, perhaps, worse of you than you deserve. What is this thing you hide? What is this mystery? Tell me, monsieur. Tell me."

Did ever woman more plainly tell a man she loved him, and that loving him she would find all excuses for him? Was ever woman in better case to hear a confession from the man that loved her, and of whose love she was assured by every instinct that her sex possesses in such matters? Those two questions leapt into my mind, and in resolving them I all but determined to speak even now in the eleventh hour.

And then—I know not how—a fresh barrier seemed to arise. It was not merely a matter of telling her of the wager I was embarked upon; not merely a matter of telling her of the duplicity that I had practised, of

the impostures by which I had gained admittance to her father's confidence and trust; not merely a matter of confessing that I was not Lesperon. There would still be the necessity of saying who I was. Even if she forgave all else, could she forgive me for being Bardelys the notorious Bardelys, the libertine, the rake, some of whose exploits she had heard of from her mother, painted a hundred times blacker than they really were? Might she not shrink from me when I told her I was that man? In her pure innocence she deemed, no doubt, that the life of every man who accounted himself a gentleman was moderately clean. She would not see in me—as did her mother—no more than a type of the best class in France, and having no more than the vices of my order. As a monster of profligacy might she behold me, and that—ah, Dieu!—I could not endure that she should do whilst I was by.

It may be—indeed, now, as I look back, I know that I exaggerated my case. I imagined she would see it as I saw it then. For would you credit it? With this great love that was now come to me, it seemed the ideals of my boyhood were returned, and I abhorred the man that I had been. The life I had led now filled me with disgust and loathing; the notions I had formed seemed to me now all vicious and distorted, my cynicism shallow and unjust.

"Monsieur de Lesperon," she called softly to me, noting my silence.

I turned to her. I set my hand lightly upon her arm; I let my gaze encounter the upward glance of her eyes—blue as forget-me-nots.

"You suffer!" she murmured, with sweet compassion.

"Worse, Roxalanne! I have sown in your heart too the seed of suffering. Oh, I am too unworthy!" I cried out; "and when you come to discover how unworthy it will hurt you; it will sting your pride to think how kind you were to me." She smiled incredulously, in denial of my words. "No, child; I cannot tell you."

She sighed, and then before more could be said there was a sound at the door, and we started away from each other. The Vicomte entered, and my last chance of confessing, of perhaps averting much of what followed, was lost to me.

CHAPTER VIII. THE PORTRAIT

Into the mind of every thoughtful man must come at times with bitterness the reflection of how utterly we are at the mercy of Fate, the victims of her every whim and caprice. We may set out with the loftiest, the sternest resolutions to steer our lives along a well-considered course, yet the slightest of fortuitous circumstances will suffice to force us into a direction that we had no thought of taking.

Now, had it pleased Monsieur de Marsac to have come to Lavedan at any reasonable hour of the day, I should have been already upon the road to Paris, intent to own defeat and pay my wager. A night of thought, besides strengthening my determination to follow such a course, had brought the reflection that I might thereafter return to Roxalanne, a poor man, it is true, but one at least whose intentions might not be misconstrued.

And so, when at last I sank into sleep, my mind was happier than it had been for many days. Of Roxalanne's love I was assured, and it seemed that I might win her, after all, once I removed the barrier of shame that now deterred me. It may be that those thoughts kept me awake until a late hour, and that to this I owe it that when on the morrow I awakened the morning was well advanced. The sun was flooding my chamber, and at my bedside stood Anatole.

"What's o'clock?" I inquired, sitting bolt upright.

"Past ten," said he, with stern disapproval.

"And you have let me sleep?" I cried.

"We do little else at Lavedan even when we are awake," he

grumbled. "There was no reason why monsieur should rise." Then, holding out a paper, "Monsieur Stanislas de Marsac was here betimes this morning with Mademoiselle his sister. He left this letter for you, monsieur."

Amaze and apprehension were quickly followed by relief, since Anatole's words suggested that Marsac had not remained. I took the letter, nevertheless, with some misgivings, and whilst I turned it over in my hands I questioned the old servant.

"He stayed an hour at the chateau, monsieur," Anatole informed me. "Monsieur le Vicomte would have had you roused, but he would not hear of it. 'If what Monsieur de Saint-Eustache has told me touching your guest should prove to be true,' said he, 'I would prefer not to meet him under your roof, monsieur.' 'Monsieur de Saint-Eustache,' my master replied, 'is not a person whose word should have weight with any man of honour.' But in spite of that, Monsieur de Marsac held to his resolve, and although he would offer no explanation in answer to my master's many questions, you were not aroused.

"At the end of a half-hour his sister entered with Mademoiselle. They had been walking together on the terrace, and Mademoiselle de Marsac appeared very angry. 'Affairs are exactly as Monsieur de Saint-Eustache has represented them,' said she to her brother. At that he swore a most villainous oath, and called for writing materials. At the moment of his departure he desired me to deliver this letter to you, and then rode away in a fury, and, seemingly, not on the best of terms with Monsieur le Vicomte."

"And his sister?" I asked quickly.

"She went with him. A fine pair, as I live!" he added, casting his eyes to the ceiling.

At least I could breathe freely. They were gone, and whatever damage

they may have done to the character of poor Rene de Lesperon ere they departed, they were not there, at all events, to denounce me for an impostor. With a mental apology to the shade of the departed Lesperon for all the discredit I was bringing down upon his name, I broke the seal of that momentous epistle, which enclosed a length of some thirty-two inches of string.

Monsieur [I read], wherever I may chance to meet you it shall be my duty to kill you.

A rich beginning, in all faith! If he could but maintain that uncompromising dramatic flavour to the end, his epistle should be worth the trouble of deciphering, for he penned a vile scrawl of pothooks.

It is because of this [the letter proceeded] that I have refrained from coming face to face with you this morning. The times are too troublous and the province is in too dangerous a condition to admit of an act that might draw the eyes of the Keeper of the Seals upon Lavedan. To my respect, then, to Monsieur le Vicomte and to my own devotion to the Cause we mutually serve do you owe it that you still live. I am on my way to Spain to seek shelter there from the King's vengeance.

To save myself is a duty that I owe as much to myself as to the Cause. But there is another duty, one that I owe my sister, whom you have so outrageously slighted, and this duty, by God's grace, I will perform before I leave. Of your honour, monsieur, we will not speak, for reasons into which I need not enter, and I make no appeal to it. But if you have a spark of manhood left, if you are not an utter craven as well as a knave, I shall expect you on the day after tomorrow, at any hour before noon, at the Auberge de la Couronne at Grenade. There, monsieur, if you please, we will adjust our differences. That you may come prepared, and so that no time need be wasted when we meet, I send you the length of my sword.

Thus ended that angry, fire-breathing epistle. I refolded it thoughtfully, then, having taken my resolve, I leapt from the bed and desired Anatole to assist me to dress.

I found the Vicomte much exercised in mind as to the meaning of Marsac's extraordinary behaviour, and I was relieved to see that he at least, could conjecture no cause for it. In reply to the questions with which he very naturally assailed me, I assured him that it was no more than a matter of a misunderstanding; that Monsieur de Marsac had asked me to meet him at Grenade in two days' time, and that I should then, no doubt, be able to make all clear.

Meanwhile, I regretted the incident, since it necessitated my remaining and encroaching for two days longer upon the Vicomte's hospitality. To all this, however, he made the reply that I expected, concluding with the remark that for the present at least it would seem as if the Chevalier de Saint-Eustache had been satisfied with creating this trouble betwixt myself and Marsac.

From what Anatole had said, I had already concluded that Marsac had exercised the greatest reticence. But the interview between his sister and Roxalanne filled me with the gravest anxiety. Women are not wont to practise the restraint of men under such circumstances, and for all that Mademoiselle de Marsac may not have expressed it in so many words that I was her faithless lover, yet women are quick to detect and interpret the signs of disorders springing from such causes, and I had every fear that Roxalanne was come to the conclusion that I had lied to her yesternight. With an uneasy spirit, then, I went in quest of her, and I found her walking in the old rose garden behind the chateau.

She did not at first remark my approach, and I had leisure for some moments to observe her and to note the sadness that dwelt in her profile and the listlessness of her movements. This, then, was my

work—mine, and that of Monsieur de Chatterault, and those other merry gentlemen who had sat at my table in Paris night upon a month ago.

I moved, and the gravel crunched under my foot, whereupon she turned, and, at sight of me advancing towards her, she started. The blood mounted to her face, to ebb again upon the instant, leaving it paler than it had been. She made as if to depart; then she appeared to check herself, and stood immovable and outwardly calm, awaiting my approach.

But her eyes were averted, and her bosom rose and fell too swiftly to lend colour to that mask of indifference she hurriedly put on. Yet, as I drew nigh, she was the first to speak, and the triviality of her words came as a shock to me, and for all my knowledge of woman's way caused me to doubt for a moment whether perhaps her calm were not real, after all.

"You are a laggard this morning, Monsieur de Lesperon." And, with a half laugh, she turned aside to break a rose from its stem.

"True," I answered stupidly; "I slept over-late."

"A thousand pities, since thus you missed seeing Mademoiselle de Marsac. Have they told you that she was here?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. Stanislas de Marsac left a letter for me."

"You will regret not having seen them, no doubt?" quoth she.

I evaded the interrogative note in her voice. "That is their fault. They appear to have preferred to avoid me."

"Is it matter for wonder?" she flashed, with a sudden gleam of fury which she as suddenly controlled. With the old indifference, she added, "You do not seem perturbed, monsieur?"

"On the contrary, mademoiselle; I am very deeply perturbed."

"At not having seen your betrothed?" she asked, and now for the first time her eyes were raised, and they met mine with a look that was a stab.

"Mademoiselle, I had the honour of telling you yesterday that I had plighted my troth to no living woman."

At that reminder of yesterday she winced, and I was sorry that I had uttered it, for it must have set the wound in her pride a-bleeding again. Yesterday I had as much as told her that I loved her, and yesterday she had as much as answered me that she loved me, for yesterday I had sworn that Saint-Eustache's story of my betrothal was a lie. To-day she had had assurance of the truth from the very woman to whom Lesperon's faith was plighted, and I could imagine something of her shame.

"Yesterday, monsieur," she answered contemptuously, "you lied in many things."

"Nay, I spoke the truth in all. Oh, God in heaven, mademoiselle," I exclaimed in sudden passion, "will you not believe me? Will you not accept my word for what I say, and have a little patience until I shall have discharged such obligations as will permit me to explain?"

"Explain?" quoth she, with withering disdain.

"There is a hideous misunderstanding in all this. I am the victim of a miserable chain of circumstances. Oh, I can say no more! These Marsacs I shall easily pacify. I am to meet Monsieur de Marsac at Grenade on the day after to-morrow. In my pocket I have a letter from this living sword-blade, in which he tells me that he will give himself the pleasure of killing me then. Yet—"

"I hope he does, monsieur!" she cut in, with a fierceness before which

I fell dumb and left my sentence unfinished. "I shall pray God that he may!" she added. "You deserve it as no man deserved it yet!"

For a moment I stood stricken, indeed, by her words. Then, my reason grasping the motive of that fierceness, a sudden joy pervaded me. It was a fierceness breathing that hatred that is a part of love, than which, it is true, no hatred can be more deadly. And yet so eloquently did it tell me of those very feelings which she sought jealously to conceal, that, moved by a sudden impulse, I stepped close up to her.

"Roxalanne," I said fervently, "you do not hope for it. What would your life be if I were dead? Child, child, you love me even as I love you." I caught her suddenly to me with infinite tenderness, with reverence almost. "Can you lend no ear to the voice of this love? Can you not have faith in me a little? Can you not think that if I were quite as unworthy as you make-believe to your very self, this love could have no place?"

"It has no place!" she cried. "You lie—as in all things else. I do not love you. I hate you. Dieu! How I hate you!"

She had lain in my arms until then, with upturned face and piteous, frightened eyes—like a bird that feels itself within the toils of a snake, yet whose horror is blent with a certain fascination. Now, as she spoke, her will seemed to reassert itself, and she struggled to break from me. But as her fierceness of hatred grew, so did my fierceness of resolve gain strength, and I held her tightly.

"Why do you hate me?" I asked steadily. "Ask yourself, Roxalanne, and tell me what answer your heart makes. Does it not answer that indeed you do not hate me—that you love me?"

"Oh, God, to be so insulted!" she cried out. "Will you not release me, miserable? Must I call for help? Oh, you shall suffer for this! As there

is a Heaven, you shall be punished!"

But in my passion I held her, despite entreaties, threats, and struggles. I was brutal, if you will. Yet think of what was in my soul at being so misjudged, at finding myself in this position, and deal not over harshly with me. The courage to confess which I had lacked for days, came to me then. I must tell her. Let the result be what it might, it could not be worse than this, and this I could endure no longer.

"Listen, Roxalanne!"

"I will not listen! Enough of insults have I heard already. Let me go!"

"Nay, but you shall hear me. I am not Rene de Lesperon. Had these Marsacs been less impetuous and foolish, had they waited to have seen me this morning, they would have told you so."

She paused for a second in her struggles to regard me. Then, with a sudden contemptuous laugh, she renewed her efforts more vigorously than before.

"What fresh lies do you offer me? Release me, I will hear no more!"

"As Heaven is my witness, I have told you the truth. I know how wild a sound it has, and that is partly why I did not tell you earlier. But your disdain I cannot suffer. That you should deem me a liar in professing to love you—"

Her struggles were grown so frantic that I was forced to relax my grip. But this I did with a suddenness that threw her out of balance, and she was in danger of falling backwards. To save herself, she caught at my doublet, which was torn open under the strain.

We stood some few feet apart, and, white and palpitating in her anger, she confronted me. Her eyes lashed me with their scorn, but under my steady, unflinching gaze they fell at last. When next she raised them there was a smile of quiet but unutterable contempt upon

her lips.

"Will you swear," said she, "that you are not Rene de Lesperon? That Mademoiselle de Marsac is not your betrothed?"

"Yes—by my every hope of Heaven!" I cried passionately.

She continued to survey me with that quiet smile of mocking scorn.

"I have heard it said," quoth she, "that the greatest liars are ever those that are readiest to take oath." Then, with a sudden gasp of loathing, "I think you have dropped something, monsieur," said she, pointing to the ground. And without waiting for more, she swung round and left me.

Face upwards at my feet lay the miniature that poor Lesperon had entrusted to me in his dying moments. It had dropped from my doublet in the struggle, and I never doubted now but that the picture it contained was that of Mademoiselle de Marsac.

CHAPTER IX. A NIGHT ALARM

I was returning that same afternoon from a long walk that I had taken—for my mood was of that unenviable sort that impels a man to be moving—when I found a travelling-chaise drawn up in the quadrangle as if ready for a journey. As I mounted the steps of the chateau I came face to face with mademoiselle, descending. I drew aside that she might pass; and this she did with her chin in the air, and her petticoat drawn to her that it might not touch me.

I would have spoken to her, but her eyes looked straight before her with a glance that was too forbidding; besides which there was the gaze of a half-dozen grooms upon us. So, bowing before her—the plume of my doffed hat sweeping the ground—I let her go. Yet I remained standing where she had passed me, and watched her enter the coach. I looked after the vehicle as it wheeled round and rattled out over the drawbridge, to raise a cloud of dust on the white, dry road beyond.

In that hour I experienced a sense of desolation and a pain to which I find it difficult to give expression. It seemed to me as if she had gone out of my life for all time—as if no reparation that I could ever make would suffice to win her back after what had passed between us that morning. Already wounded in her pride by what Mademoiselle de Marsac had told her of our relations, my behaviour in the rose garden had completed the work of turning into hatred the tender feelings that but yesterday she had all but confessed for me. That she hated me now, I was well assured. My reflections as I walked had borne it in upon me how rash, how mad had been my desperate action, and with bitterness I realized that I had destroyed the last chance of ever mending matters.

Not even the payment of my wager and my return in my true character could avail me now. The payment of my wager, forsooth! Even that lost what virtue it might have contained. Where was the heroism of such an act? Had I not failed, indeed? And was not, therefore, the payment of my wager become inevitable?

Fool! fool! Why had I not profited that gentle mood of hers when we had drifted down the stream together? Why had I not told her then of the whole business from its ugly inception down to the pass to which things were come, adding that to repair the evil I was going back to Paris to pay my wager, and that when that was done, I would return to ask her to become my wife? That was the course a man of sense would have adopted. He would have seen the dangers that beset him in my false position, and would have been quick to have forestalled them in the only manner possible.

Heigh-ho! It was done. The game was at an end, and I had bungled my part of it like any fool. One task remained me—that of meeting Marsac at Grenade and doing justice to the memory of poor Lesperon. What might betide thereafter mattered little. I should be ruined when I had settled with Chatellerault, and Marcel de Saint-Pol, de Bardelys, that brilliant star in the firmament of the Court of France, would suffer an abrupt eclipse, would be quenched for all time. But this weighed little with me then. I had lost everything that I might have valued—everything that might have brought fresh zest to a jaded, satiated life.

Later that day I was told by the Vicomte that there was a rumour current to the effect that the Marquis de Bardelys was dead. Idly I inquired how the rumour had been spread, and he told me that a riderless horse, which had been captured a few days ago by some peasants, had been recognized by Monsieur de Bardelys's servants as belonging to their master, and that as nothing had been seen or heard of him for a fortnight, it was believed that he must have met with

some mischance. Not even that piece of information served to arouse my interest. Let them believe me dead if they would. To him that is suffering worse than death to be accounted dead is a small matter.

The next day passed without incident. Mademoiselle's absence continued and I would have questioned the Vicomte concerning it, but a not unnatural hesitancy beset me, and I refrained.

On the morrow I was to leave Lavedan, but there were no preparations to be made, no packing to be done, for during my sojourn there I had been indebted to the generous hospitality of the Vicomte for my very apparel. We supped quietly together that night the Vicomte and I—for the Vicomtesse was keeping her room.

I withdrew early to my chamber, and long I lay awake, revolving a gloomy future in my mind. I had given no thought to what I should do after having offered my explanation to Monsieur de Marsac on the morrow, nor could I now bring myself to consider it with any degree of interest. I would communicate with Chatellerault to inform him that I accounted my wager lost. I would send him my note of hand, making over to him my Picardy estates, and I would request him to pay off and disband my servants both in Paris and at Bardelys.

As for myself, I did not know, and, as I have hinted, I cared but little, in what places my future life might lie. I had still a little property by Beaugency, but scant inclination to withdraw to it. To Paris I would not return; that much I was determined upon; but upon no more. I had thoughts of going to Spain. Yet that course seemed no less futile than any other of which I could bethink me. I fell asleep at last, vowing that it would be a mercy and a fine solution to the puzzle of how to dispose of the future if I were to awaken no more.

I was, however, destined to be roused again just as the veil of night was being lifted and the chill breath of dawn was upon the world. There was a loud knocking at the gates of Lavedan, confused noises

of voices, of pattering feet, of doors opening and closing within the chateau.

There was a rapping at my chamber door, and when I went to open, I found the Vicomte on the threshold, nightcapped, in his shirt, and bearing a lighted taper.

"There are troopers at the gate!" he exclaimed as he entered the room. "That dog Saint-Eustache has already been at work!"

For all the agitation that must have been besetting him, his manner was serene as ever. "What are we to do?" he asked.

"You are admitting them—naturally?" said I, inquiry in my voice.

"Why, yes"; and he shrugged his shoulders. "What could it avail us to resist them? Even had I been prepared for it, it would be futile to attempt to suffer a siege."

I wrapped a dressing-gown about me, for the morning air was chill.

"Monsieur le Vicomte," said I gravely, "I heartily deplore that Monsieur de Marsac's affairs should have detained me here. But for him, I had left Lavedan two days ago. As it is, I tremble for you, but we may at least hope that my being taken in your house will draw down no ill results upon you. I shall never forgive myself if through my having taken refuge here I should have encompassed your destruction."

"There is no question of that," he replied, with the quick generosity characteristic of the man. "This is the work of Saint-Eustache. Sooner or later I always feared that it would happen, for sooner or later he and I must have come to enmity over my daughter. That knave had me in his power. He knew—being himself outwardly one of us—to what extent I was involved in the late rebellion, and I knew enough of him to be assured that if some day he should wish to do me ill, he would never scruple to turn traitor. I am afraid, Monsieur de Lesperon, that it

is not for you alone—perhaps not for you at all—that the soldiers have come, but for me."

Then, before I could answer him, the door was flung wide, and into the room, in nightcap and hastily donned robe—looking a very meagre in that disfiguring deshabelle—swept the Vicomtesse.

"See," she cried to her husband, her strident voice raised in reproach—"see to what a pass you have brought us!"

"Anne, Anne!" he exclaimed, approaching her and seeking to soothe her; "be calm, my poor child, and be brave."

But, evading him, she towered, lean and malevolent as a fury.

"Calm?" she echoed contemptuously. "Brave?" Then a short laugh broke from her—a despairing, mocking, mirthless expression of anger. "By God, do you add effrontery to your other failings? Dare you bid me be calm and brave in such an hour? Have I been warning you fruitlessly these twelve months past, that, after disregarding me and deriding my warnings, you should bid me be calm now that my fears are realized?"

There was a sound of creaking gates below. The Vicomte heard it.

"Madame," he said, putting aside his erstwhile tender manner, and speaking with a lofty dignity, "the troopers have been admitted. Let me entreat you to retire. It is not befitting our station—"

"What is our station?" she interrupted harshly. "Rebels—proscribed, houseless beggars. That is our station, thanks to you and your insane meddling with treason. What is to become of us, fool? What is to become of Roxalanne and me when they shall have hanged you and have driven us from Lavedan? By God's death, a fine season this to talk of the dignity of our station! Did I not warn you, malheureux, to leave party faction alone? You laughed at me."

"Madame, your memory does me an injustice," he answered in a strangled voice. "I never laughed at you in all my life."

"You did as much, at least. Did you not bid me busy myself with women's affairs? Did you not bid me leave you to follow your own judgment? You have followed it—to a pretty purpose, as God lives! These gentlemen of the King's will cause you to follow it a little farther," she pursued, with heartless, loathsome sarcasm. "You will follow it as far as the scaffold at Toulouse. That, you will tell me, is your own affair. But what provision have you made for your wife and daughter? Did you marry me and get her to leave us to perish of starvation? Or are we to turn kitchen wenches or sempstresses for our livelihood?"

With a groan, the Vicomte sank down upon the bed, and covered his face with his hands.

"God pity me!" he cried, in a voice of agony—an agony such as the fear of death could never have infused into his brave soul; an agony born of the heartlessness of this woman who for twenty years had shared his bed and board, and who now in the hour of his adversity failed him so cruelly—so tragically.

"Aye," she mocked in her bitterness, "call upon God to pity you, for I shall not."

She paced the room now, like a caged lioness, her face livid with the fury that possessed her. She no longer asked questions; she no longer addressed him; oath followed oath from her thin lips, and the hideousness of this woman's blasphemy made me shudder. At last there were heavy steps upon the stairs, and, moved by a sudden impulse "Madame," I cried, "let me prevail upon you to restrain yourself."

She swung round to face me, her dose-set eyes ablaze with anger.

"Sangdieu! By what right do you—" she began but this was no time to let a woman's tongue go babbling on; no time for ceremony; no season for making a leg and addressing her with a simper. I caught her viciously by the wrist, and with my face close up to hers "Folle!" I cried, and I'll swear no man had ever used the word to her before. She gasped and choked in her surprise and rage. Then lowering my voice lest it should reach the approaching soldiers: "Would you ruin the Vicomte and yourself?" I muttered. Her eyes asked me a question, and I answered it. "How do you know that the soldiers have come for your husband? It may be that they are seeking me—and only me. They may know nothing of the Vicomte's defection. Shall you, then, be the one to inform them of it by your unbridled rantings and your accusations?"

Her jaw fell open in astonishment. This was a side of the question she had not considered.

"Let me prevail upon you, madame, to withdraw and to be of good courage. It is more than likely that you alarm yourself without cause."

She continued to stare at me in her amazement and the confusion that was congenital with it, and if there was not time for her to withdraw, at least the possibility I had suggested acted as a timely warning.

In that moment the door opened again, and on the threshold appeared a young man in a plumed hat and corselet, carrying a naked sword in one hand and a lanthorn in the other. Behind him I caught the gleam of steel from the troopers at his heels.

"Which of you is Monsieur Rene de Lesperon?" he inquired politely, his utterance flavoured by a strong Gascon accent.

I stood forward. "I am known by that name, Monsieur le Capitaine," said I.

He looked at me wistfully, apologetically almost, then "In the King's name, Monsieur de Lesperon, I call upon you to yield!" said he.

"I have been expecting you. My sword is yonder, monsieur," I replied suavely. "If you will allow me to dress, I shall be ready to accompany you in a few minutes."

He bowed, and it at once became clear that his business at Lavedan was—as I had suggested to the Vicomtesse might be possible—with me alone.

"I am grateful for the readiness of your submission," said this very polite gentleman. He was a comely lad, with blue eyes and a good-humoured mouth, to which a pair of bristling moustaches sought vainly to impart an expression of ferocity.

"Before you proceed to dress, monsieur, I have another duty to discharge."

"Discharge your duty, monsieur," I answered. Whereupon he made a sign to his men, and in a moment they were ransacking my garments and effects. While this was taking place, he turned to the Vicomte and Vicomtesse, and offered them a thousand apologies for having interrupted their slumbers, and for so rudely depriving them of their guest. He advanced in his excuse the troublous nature of the times, and threw in a bunch of malisons at the circumstances which forced upon soldiers the odious duties of the tipstaff, hoping that we would think him none the less a gentleman for the unsavoury business upon which he was engaged.

From my clothes they took the letters addressed to Lesperon which that poor gentleman had entrusted to me on the night of his death; and among these there was one from the Duc d'Orleans himself, which would alone have sufficed to have hanged a regiment. Besides these, they took Monsieur de Marsac's letter of two days ago, and the

locket containing the picture of Mademoiselle de Marsac.

The papers and the portrait they delivered to the Captain, who took them with the same air of deprecation tainted with disgust that coloured all his actions in connection with my arrest.

To this same repugnance for his catchpoll work do I owe it that at the moment of setting out he offered to let me ride without the annoyance of an escort if I would pass him my parole not to attempt an escape.

We were standing, then, in the hall of the chateau. His men were already in the courtyard, and there were only present Monsieur le Vicomte and Anatole—the latter reflecting the look of sorrow that haunted his master's face. The Captain's generosity was certainly leading him beyond the bounds of his authority, and it touched me.

"Monsieur is very generous," said I.

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Cap de Dieu!" he cried—he had a way of swearing that reminded me of my friend Cazalet. "It is no generosity, monsieur. It is a desire to make this obscene work more congenial to the spirit of a gentleman, which, devil take me, I cannot stifle, not for the King himself. And then, Monsieur de Lesperon, are we not fellow-countrymen? Are we not Gascons both? Pardieu, there is no more respected a name in the whole of Gascony than that of Lesperon, and that you belong to so honourable a family is alone more than sufficient to warrant such slight favours as it may be in my power to show you."

"You have my parole that I will attempt no escape, Monsieur le Capitaine," I answered, bowing in acknowledgment of his compliments.

"I am Mironzac de Castelroux, of Chateau Rouge in Gascony," he informed me, returning my bow. My faith, had he not made a pretty

soldier he would have made an admirable master of deportment.

My leave-taking of Monsieur de Lavedan was brief but cordial; apologetic on my part, intensely sympathetic on his. And so I went out alone with Castelroux upon the road to Toulouse, his men being ordered to follow in half an hour's time and to travel at their leisure.

As we cantered along—Castelroux and I—we talked of many things, and I found him an amusing and agreeable companion. Had my mood been other than despairing, the news he gave me might have occasioned me some concern; for it seemed that prisoners arraigned for treason and participation in the late rising were being very summarily treated. Many were never so much as heard in their own defence, the evidence collected of their defection being submitted to the Tribunal, and judgment being forthwith passed upon them by judges who had no ears for anything they might advance in their own favour.

The evidence of my identity was complete: there was my own admission to Castelroux; the evidence of the treason of Lesperon was none the less complete; in fact, it was notorious; and there was the Duke's letter found amongst my effects. If the judges refused to lend an ear to my assurances that I was not Lesperon at all, but the missing Bardelys, my troubles were likely to receive a very summary solution. The fear of it, however, weighed not over-heavily upon me. I was supremely indifferent. Life was at an end so far as I was concerned. I had ruined the one chance of real happiness that had ever been held out to me, and if the gentlemen of the courts of Toulouse were pleased to send me unheeded to the scaffold, what should it signify?

But there was another matter that did interest me, and that was my interview with Marsac. Touching this, I spoke to my captor.

"There is a gentleman I wish to see at Grenade this morning. You

have amongst the papers taken from me a letter making this assignation, Monsieur le Capitaine, and I should be indeed grateful if you would determine that we shall break our fast there, so that I may have an opportunity of seeing him. The matter is to me of the highest importance."

"It concerns—?" he asked.

"A lady," I answered.

"Ah, yes! But the letter is of the nature of a challenge, is it not? Naturally, I cannot permit you to endanger your life."

"Lest we disappoint the headsman at Toulouse?" I laughed. "Have no fear. There shall be no duel!"

"Then I am content, monsieur, and you shall see your friend."

I thanked him, and we talked of other things thereafter as we rode in the early morning along the Toulouse road. Our conversation found its way, I scarce know how, to the topic of Paris and the Court, and when I casually mentioned, in passing, that I was well acquainted with the Luxembourg, he inquired whether I had ever chanced to meet a young spark of the name of Mironzac.

"Mironzac?" I echoed. "Why, yes." And I was on the point of adding that I knew the youth intimately, and what a kindness I had for him, when, deeming it imprudent, I contented myself with asking, "You know him?"

"Pardieu!" he swore. "The fellow is my cousin. We are both Mironzacs; he is Mironzac of Castelvart, whilst I, as you may remember I told you, am Mironzac of Castelroux. To distinguish us, he is always known as Mironzac, and I as Castelroux. Peste! It is not the only distinction, for while he basks in the sunshine of the great world of Paris—they are wealthy, the Mironzacs of Castelvart—I, a poor

devil of a Gascony cadet, am playing the catchpoll in Languedoc!"

I looked at him with fresh interest, for the mention of that dear lad Mironsac brought back to my mind the night in Paris on which my ill-starred wager had been laid, and I was reminded of how that high-minded youth had sought—when it was too late to reason me out of the undertaking by alluding to the dishonour with which in his honest eyes it must be fraught.

We spoke of his cousin—Castelroux and I—and I went so far now as to confess that I had some love for the youth, whom I praised in unmistakable terms. This inclined to increase the friendliness which my young Captain had manifested since my arrest, and I was presently emboldened by it to beg of him to add to the many favours that I already owed him by returning to me the portrait which his men had subtracted from my pocket. It was my wish to return this to Marsac, whilst at the same time it would afford corroboration of my story.

To this Castelroux made no difficulty.

"Why, yes," said he, and he produced it. "I crave your pardon for not having done the thing of my own accord. What can the Keeper of the Seals want with that picture?"

I thanked him, and pocketed the locket.

"Poor lady!" he sighed, a note of compassion in his voice. "By my soul, Monsieur de Lesperon, fine work this for soldiers, is it not? Diable! It is enough to turn a gentleman's stomach sour for life, and make him go hide himself from the eyes of honest men. Had I known that soldiering meant such business, I had thought twice before I adopted it as a career for a man of honour. I had remained in Gascony and tilled the earth sooner than have lent myself to this!"

"My good young friend," I laughed, "what you do, you do in the King's

name."

"So does every tipstaff," he answered impatiently, his moustaches bristling as the result of the scornful twist he gave his lips. "To think that I should have a hand in bringing tears to the eyes of that sweet lady! Quelle besogne! Bon Dieu, quelle besogne!"

I laughed at the distress vented in that whimsical Gascon tongue of his, whereupon he eyed me in a wonder that was tempered with admiration. For to his brave soul a gentleman so stoical as to laugh under such parlous circumstances was very properly a gentleman to be admired.

CHAPTER X. THE RISEN DEAD

It was close upon ten o'clock as we rode into the yard of the imposing Hotel de la Couronne at Grenade.

Castelroux engaged a private room on the first floor—a handsome chamber overlooking the courtyard—and in answer to the inquiries that I made I was informed by the landlord that Monsieur de Marsac was not yet arrived.

"My assignation was 'before noon,' Monsieur de Castelroux," said I. "With your permission, I would wait until noon."

He made no difficulty. Two hours were of no account. We had all risen very early, and he was, himself, he said, entitled to some rest.

Whilst I stood by the window it came to pass that a very tall, indifferently appressed gentleman issued from the hostelry and halted for some moments in conversation with the ostler below. He walked with an enfeebled step, and leaned heavily for support upon a stout cane. As he turned to reenter the inn I had a glimpse of a face woefully pale, about which, as about the man's whole figure, there was a something that was familiar—a something that puzzled me, and on which my mind was still dwelling when presently I sat down to breakfast with Castelroux.

It may have been a half-hour later, and, our meal being at an end, we were sitting talking—I growing impatient the while that this Monsieur de Marsac should keep me waiting so—when of a sudden the rattle of hoofs drew me once more to the window. A gentleman, riding very recklessly, had just dashed through the porte-cochere, and was in the act of pulling up his horse. He was a lean, active man, very richly

dressed, and with a face that by its swarthiness of skin and the sable hue of beard and hair looked almost black.

"Ah, you are there!" he cried, with something between a snarl and a laugh, and addressing somebody within the shelter of the porch. "Par la mort Dieu, I had hardly looked to find you!"

From the recess of the doorway I heard a gasp of amazement and a cry of "Marsac! You here?"

So this was the gentleman I was to see! A stable boy had taken his reins, and he leapt nimbly to the ground. Into my range of vision hobbled now the enfeebled gentleman whom earlier I had noticed.

"My dear Stanislas!" he cried, "I cannot tell you how rejoiced I am to see you!" and he approached Marsac with arms that were opened as if to embrace him.

The newcomer surveyed him a moment in wonder, with eyes grown dull. Then abruptly raising his hand, he struck the fellow on the breast, and thrust him back so violently that but for the stable-boy's intervention he had of a certainty fallen. With a look of startled amazement on his haggard face, the invalid regarded his assailant.

As for Marsac, he stepped close up to him.

"What is this?" he cried harshly. "What is this make-believe feebleness? That you are pale, poltroon, I do not wonder! But why these tottering limbs? Why this assumption of weakness? Do you look to trick me by these signs?"

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" exclaimed the other, a note of responsive anger sounding in his voice. "Have you gone mad, Stanislas?"

"Abandon this pretence," was the contemptuous answer. "Two days ago at Lavedan, my friend, they informed me how complete was your

recovery; from what they told us, it was easy to guess why you tarried there and left us without news of you. That was my reason, as you may have surmised, for writing to you. My sister has mourned you for dead—was mourning you for dead whilst you sat at the feet of your Roxalanne and made love to her among the roses of Lavedan."

"Lavedan?" echoed the other slowly. Then, raising his voice, "what the devil are you saying?" he blazed. "What do I know of Lavedan?"

In a flash it had come to me who that enfeebled gentleman was. Rodenard, the blunderer, had been at fault when he had said that Lesperon had expired. Clearly he could have no more than swooned; for here, in the flesh, was Lesperon himself, the man I had left for dead in that barn by Mirepoix.

How or where he had recovered were things that at the moment did not exercise my mind—nor have I since been at any pains to unravel the mystery of it; but there he was, and for the moment that fact was all-sufficing. What complications would come of his presence Heaven alone could foretell.

"Put an end to this play-acting!" roared the savage Marsac. "It will avail you nothing. My sister's tears may have weighed lightly with you, but you shall pay the price of them, and of the slight you have put upon her."

"My God, Marsac!" cried the other, roused to an equal fierceness. "Will you explain?"

"Aye," snarled Marsac, and his sword flashed from his scabbard, "I'll explain. As God lives, I'll explain—with this!" And he whirled his blade under the eyes of the invalid. "Come, my master, the comedy's played out. Cast aside that crutch and draw; draw, man, or, sangdieu, I'll run you through as you stand!"

There was a commotion below. The landlord and a posse of his

satellites—waiters, ostlers, and stableboys—rushed between them, and sought to restrain the bloodthirsty Marsac. But he shook them off as a bull shakes off a pack of dogs, and like an angry bull, too, did he stand his ground and bellow. In a moment his sweeping sword had cleared a circle about him. In its lightning dartings hither and thither at random, it had stung a waiter in the calf, and when the fellow saw the blood staining his hose, he added to the general din his shrieks that he was murdered. Marsac swore and threatened in a breath, and a kitchen wench, from a point of vantage on the steps, called shame upon him and abused him roundly for a cowardly assassin to assail a poor sufferer who could hardly stand upright.

"Po' Cap de Dieu!" swore Castelroux at my elbow. "Saw you ever such an ado? What has chanced?"

But I never stayed to answer him. Unless I acted quickly blood would assuredly be shed. I was the one man who could explain matters, and it was a mercy for Lesperon that I should have been at hand in the hour of his meeting that fire-eater Marsac. I forgot the circumstances in which I stood to Castelroux; I forgot everything but the imminent necessity that I should intervene. Some seven feet below our window was the roof of the porch; from that to the ground it might be some eight feet more. Before my Gascon captain knew what I was about, I had swung myself down from the window on to the projecting porch. A second later, I created a diversion by landing in the midst of the courtyard fray, with the alarmed Castelroux—who imagined that I was escaping—following by the same unusual road, and shouting as he came "Monsieur de Lesperon! Hi! Monsieur de Lesperon! Mordieu! Remember your parole, Monsieur de Lesperon!"

Nothing could have been better calculated to stem Marsac's fury; nothing could have so predisposed him to lend an ear to what I had to say, for it was very evident that Castelroux's words were addressed to me, and that it was I whom he called by the name of Lesperon. In an

instant I was at Marsac's side. But before I could utter a word, "What the devil does this mean?" he asked, eyeing me with fierce suspicion.

"It means, monsieur, that there are more Lesperons than one in France. I am the Lesperon who was at Lavedan. If you doubt me, ask this gentleman, who arrested me there last night. Ask him, too, why we have halted here. Ask him, if you will, to show you the letter that you left at Lavedan making an assignation here before noon to-day, which letter I received."

The suspicion faded from Marsac's eyes, and they grew round with wonder as he listened to this prodigious array of evidence. Lesperon looked on in no less amazement, yet I am sure from the manner of his glance that he did not recognize in me the man that had succoured him at Mirepoix. That, after all, was natural enough; for the minds of men in such reduced conditions as had been his upon that night are not prone to receive very clear impressions, and still less prone to retain such impressions as they do receive.

Before Marsac could answer me, Castelroux was at my side.

"A thousand apologies!" he laughed. "A fool might have guessed the errand that took you so quickly through that window, and none but a fool would have suspected you of seeking to escape. It was unworthy in me, Monsieur de Lesperon."

I turned to him while those others still stood gaping, and led him aside.

"Monsieur le Capitaine," said I, "you find it troublesome enough to reconcile your conscience with such arrests as you are charged to make, is it not so.

"Mordieu!" he cried, by way of emphatically assenting.

"Now, if you should chance to overhear words betraying to you certain

people whom otherwise you would never suspect of being rebels, your soldier's duty would, nevertheless, compel you to apprehend them, would it not?"

"Why, true. I am afraid it would," he answered, with a grimace.

"But, if forewarned that by being present in a certain place you should overhear such words, what course would you pursue?"

"Avoid it like a pestilence, monsieur," he answered promptly.

"Then, Monsieur le Capitaine, may I trespass upon your generosity to beseech you to let me take these litigants to our room upstairs, and to leave us alone there for a half-hour?"

Frankness was my best friend in dealing with Castelroux—frankness and his distaste for the business they had charged him with. As for Marsac and Lesperon, they were both eager enough to have the mystery explained, and when Castelroux having consented—I invited them to my chamber, they came readily enough.

Since Monsieur de Lesperon did not recognize me, there was no reason why I should enlighten him touching my identity, and every reason why I should not. As soon as they were seated, I went to the heart of the matter at once and without preamble.

"A fortnight ago, gentlemen," said I, "I was driven by a pack of dragoons across the Garonne. I was wounded in the shoulder and very exhausted, and I knocked at the gates of Lavedan to crave shelter. That shelter, gentlemen, was afforded me, and when I had announced myself as Monsieur de Lesperon, it was all the more cordially because one Monsieur de Marsac, who was a friend of the Vicomte de Lavedan, and a partisan in the lost cause of Orleans, happened often to have spoken of a certain Monsieur de Lesperon as his very dear friend. I have no doubt, gentlemen, that you will think harshly of me because I did not enlighten the Vicomte. But there were

reasons for which I trust you will not press me, since I shall find it difficult to answer you with truth."

"But is your name Lesperon?" cried Lesperon.

"That, monsieur, is a small matter. Whether my name is Lesperon or not, I confess to having practised a duplicity upon the Vicomte and his family, since I am certainly not the Lesperon whose identity I accepted. But if I accepted that identity, monsieur, I also accepted your liabilities, and so I think that you should find it in your heart to extend me some measure of forgiveness. As Rene de Lesperon, of Lesperon in Gascony, I was arrested last night at Lavedan, and, as you may observe, I am being taken to Toulouse to stand the charge of high treason. I have not demurred; I have not denied in the hour of trouble the identity that served me in my hour of need. I am taking the bitter with the sweet, and I assure you, gentlemen, that the bitter predominates in a very marked degree."

"But this must not be," cried Lesperon, rising. "I know not what use you may have made of my name, but I have no reason to think that you can have brought discredit upon it, and so—"

"I thank you, monsieur, but—"

"And so I cannot submit that you shall go to Toulouse in my stead. Where is this officer whose prisoner you are? Pray summon him, monsieur, and let us set the matter right."

"This is very generous," I answered calmly. "But I have crimes enough upon my head, and so, if the worst should befall me, I am simply atoning in one person for the errors of two."

"But that is no concern of mine!" he cried.

"It is so much your concern that if you commit so egregious a blunder as to denounce yourself, you will have ruined yourself, without

materially benefitting me."

He still objected, but in this strain I argued for some time, and to such good purpose that in the end I made him realize that by betraying himself he would not save me, but only join me on the journey to the scaffold.

"Besides, gentlemen," I pursued, "my case is far from hopeless. I have every confidence that, as matters stand, by putting forth my hand at the right moment, by announcing my identity at the proper season, I can, if I am so inclined, save my neck from the headsman."

"If you are so inclined?" they both cried, their looks charged with inquiry.

"Let that be," I answered; "it does not at present concern us. What I desire you to understand, Monsieur de Lesperon, is that if I go to Toulouse alone, when the time comes to proclaim myself, and it is found that I am not Rene de Lesperon, of Lesperon in Gascony, they will assume that you are dead, and there will be no count against me.

"But if you come with me, and thereby afford proof that you are alive, my impersonation of you may cause me trouble. They may opine that I have been an abettor of treason, that I have attempted to circumvent the ends of justice, and that I may have impersonated you in order to render possible your escape. For that, you may rest assured, they will punish me.

"You will see, therefore, that my own safety rests on your passing quietly out of France and leaving the belief behind you that you are dead—a belief that will quickly spread once I shall have cast off your identity. You apprehend me?"

"Vaguely, monsieur; and perhaps you are right. What do you say, Stanislas?"

"Say?" cried the fiery Marsac. "I am weighed down with shame, my poor Rene, for having so misjudged you."

More he would have said in the same strain, but Lesperon cut him short and bade him attend to the issue now before him. They discussed it at some length, but always under the cloud in which my mysteriousness enveloped it, and, in the end, encouraged by my renewed assurances that I could best save myself if Lesperon were not taken with me, the Gascon consented to my proposals.

Marsac was on his way to Spain. His sister, he told us, awaited him at Carcassonne. Lesperon should set out with him at once, and in forty-eight hours they would be beyond the reach of the King's anger.

"I have a favour to ask of you, Monsieur de Marsac," said I, rising; for our business was at an end. "It is that if you should have an opportunity of communicating with Mademoiselle de Lavedan, you will let her know that I am not—not the Lesperon that is betrothed to your sister."

"I will inform her of it, monsieur," he answered readily; and then, of a sudden, a look of understanding and of infinite pity came into his eyes. "My God!" he cried.

"What is it, monsieur?" I asked, staggered by that sudden outcry.

"Do not ask me, monsieur, do not ask me. I had forgotten for the moment, in the excitement of all these revelations. But—" He stopped short.

"Well, monsieur?"

He seemed to ponder a moment, then looking at me again with that same compassionate glance, "You had better know," said he. "And yet—it is a difficult thing to tell you. I understand now much that I had not dreamt of. You—you have no suspicion of how you came to be

arrested?"

"For my alleged participation in the late rebellion?"

"Yes, yes. But who gave the information of your whereabouts? Who told the Keeper of the Seals where you were to be found?"

"Oh, that?" I answered easily. "Why, I never doubted it. It was the coxcomb Saint-Eustache. I whipped him—"

I stopped short. There was something in Marsac's black face, something in his glance, that forced the unspoken truth upon my mind.

"Mother in heaven!" I cried. "Do you mean that it was Mademoiselle de Lavedan?"

He bowed his head in silence. Did she hate me, then, so much as that? Would nothing less than my death appease her, and had I utterly crushed the love that for a little while she had borne me, that she could bring herself to hand me over to the headsman?

God! What a stab was that! It turned me sick with grief—aye, and with some rage not against her, oh, not against her; against the fates that had brought such things to pass.

I controlled myself while their eyes were yet upon me. I went to the door and held it open for them, and they, perceiving something of my disorder, were courteous enough to omit the protracted leave-takings that under other auspices there might have been. Marsac paused a moment on the threshold as if he would have offered me some word of comfort. Then, perceiving, perhaps, how banal must be all comfort that was of words alone, and how it might but increase the anger of the wound it was meant to balm, he sighed a simple "Adieu, monsieur!" and went his way.

When they were gone, I returned to the table, and, sitting down, I buried my head in my arms, and there I lay, a prey to the most

poignant grief that in all my easy, fortunate life I had ever known. That she should have done this thing! That the woman I loved, the pure, sweet, innocent girl that I had wooed so ardently in my unworthiness at Lavedan, should have stooped to such an act of betrayal! To what had I not reduced her, since such things could be!

Then, out of my despair grew comfort, slowly at first, and more vigorously anon. The sudden shock of the news had robbed me of some of my wit, and had warped my reasoning. Later, as the pain of the blow grew duller, I came to reflect that what she had done was but a proof—an overwhelming proof—of how deeply she had cared. Such hatred as this can be but born of a great love; reaction is ever to be measured by the action that occasions it, and a great revulsion can only come of a great affection. Had she been indifferent to me, or had she but entertained for me a passing liking, she would not have suffered so.

And so I came to realize how cruel must have been the pang that had driven her to this. But she had loved me; aye, and she loved me still, for all that she thought she hated, and for all that she had acted as if she hated. But even if I were wrong—even if she did hate me—what a fresh revulsion would not be hers when anon she learnt that—whatever my sins—I had not played lightly with her love; that I was not, as she had imagined, the betrothed of another woman!

The thought fired me like wine. I was no longer listless—no longer indifferent as to whether I lived or died. I must live. I must enlighten the Keeper of the Seals and the judges at Toulouse concerning my identity. Why, indeed, had I ever wavered? Bardelys the Magnificent must come to life again, and then—What then?

As suddenly as I had been exalted was I cast down. There was a rumour abroad that Bardelys was dead. In the wake of that rumour I shrewdly guessed that the report of the wager that had brought him into Languedoc would not be slow to follow. What then? Would she

love me any the better? Would she hate me any the less? If now she was wounded by the belief that I had made sport of her love, would not that same belief be with her again when she came to know the truth?

Aye, the tangle was a grievous one. Yet I took heart. My old resolve returned to me, and I saw the need for urgency—in that alone could lie now my redemption in her eyes. My wager must be paid before I again repaired to her, for all that it should leave me poor indeed. In the mean while, I prayed God that she might not hear of it ere I returned to tell her.

CHAPTER XI. THE KING'S COMMISSIONER

For that most amiable of Gascon cadets, Monsieur de Castelroux, I have naught but the highest praise. In his every dealing with me he revealed himself so very gallant, generous, and high-minded a gentleman that it was little short of a pleasure to be his prisoner. He made no inquiries touching the nature of my interview with those two gentlemen at the Hotel de la Couronne, and when at the moment of leaving I requested him to deliver a packet to the taller of those same two he did so without comment or question. That packet contained the portrait of Mademoiselle de Marsac, but on the inner wrapper was a note requesting Lesperon not to open it until he should be in Spain.

Neither Marsac nor Lesperon did I see again before we resumed our journey to Toulouse.

At the moment of setting out a curious incident occurred. Castelroux's company of dragoons had ridden into the courtyard as we were mounting. They lined up under their lieutenant's command, to allow us to pass; but as we reached the porte-cochere we were delayed for a moment by a travelling-carriage, entering for relays, and coming, apparently, from Toulouse. Castelroux and I backed our horses until we were in the midst of the dragoons, and so we stood while the vehicle passed in. As it went by, one of the leather curtains was drawn back, and my heart was quickened by the sight of a pale girl face, with eyes of blue, and brown curls lying upon the slender neck. Her glance lighted on me, swordless and in the midst of that company of troopers, and I bowed low upon the withers of my horse, doffing my hat in distant salutation.

The curtain dropped again, and eclipsed the face of the woman that had betrayed me. With my mind full of wild surmisings as to what emotions might have awakened in her upon beholding me, I rode away in silence at Monsieur de Castelroux's side. Had she experienced any remorse? Any shame? Whether or not such feelings had been aroused at sight of me, it certainly would not be long ere she experienced them, for at the Hotel de la Couronne were those who would enlighten her.

The contemplation of the remorseful grief that might anon beset her when she came to ponder the truth of matters, and, with that truth, those things that at Lavedan I had uttered, filled me presently with regret and pity. I grew impatient to reach Toulouse and tell the judges of the mistake that there had been. My name could not be unknown to them, and the very mention of it, I thought, should suffice to give them pause and lead them to make inquiries before sending me to the scaffold. Yet I was not without uneasiness, for the summariness with which Castelroux had informed me they were in the habit of dealing with those accused of high treason occasioned me some apprehensive pangs.

This apprehension led me to converse with my captor touching those trials, seeking to gather from him who were the judges. I learnt then that besides the ordinary Tribunal, a Commissioner had been dispatched by His Majesty, and was hourly expected to arrive at Toulouse. It would be his mission to supervise and direct the inquiries that were taking place. It was said, he added, that the King himself was on his way thither, to be present at the trial of Monsieur le Duc de Montmorency. But he was travelling by easy stages, and was not yet expected for some days. My heart, which had leapt at the news, as suddenly sank again with the consideration that I should probably be disposed of before the King's arrival. It would behoove me, therefore, to look elsewhere for help and for some one to swear to my identity.

"Do you know the name of this King's Commissioner?" I asked.

"It is a certain Comte de Chatellerault, a gentleman man said to stand very high in His Majesty's favour."

"Chatellerault!" I cried in wondering joy.

"You know him?"

"Most excellently!" I laughed. "We are very intimately acquainted."

"Why, then, monsieur, I augur you this gentleman's friendship, and that it may pilot you through your trouble. Although—" Being mercifully minded, he stopped short.

But I laughed easily. "Indeed, my dear Captain, I think it will," said I; "although friendship in this world is a thing of which the unfortunate know little."

But I rejoiced too soon, as you shall hear.

We rode diligently on, our way lying along the fertile banks of the Garonne, now yellow with the rustling corn. Towards evening we made our last halt at Fenouillet, whence a couple of hours' riding should bring us to Toulouse.

At the post-house we overtook a carriage that seemingly had halted for relays, but upon which I scarce bestowed a glance as I alighted.

Whilst Castelroux went to arrange for fresh horses, I strode into the common room, and there for some moments I stood discussing the viands with our host. When at last I had resolved that a cold pasty and a bottle of Armagnac would satisfy our wants, I looked about me to take survey of those in the room. One group in a remote corner suddenly riveted my attention to such a degree that I remained deaf to the voice of Castelroux, who had just entered, and who stood now beside me. In the centre of this group was the Comte de Chatellerault

himself, a thick-set, sombre figure, dressed with that funereal magnificence he affected.

But it was not the sight of him that filled me with amazement. For that, Castelroux's information had prepared me, and I well understood in what capacity he was there. My surprise sprang rather from the fact that amongst the half-dozen gentlemen about him—and evidently in attendance—I beheld the Chevalier de Saint-Eustache. Now, knowing as I did, the Chevalier's treasonable leanings, there was ample cause for my astonishment at finding him in such company. Apparently, too, he was on very intimate terms with the Count, for in raising my glance I had caught him in the act of leaning over to whisper familiarly in Chatellerault's ear.

Their eyes—indeed, for that matter the eyes of the entire company—were turned in my direction.

Perhaps it was not a surprising thing that Chatellerault should gaze upon me in that curious fashion, for was it not probable that he had heard that I was dead? Besides, the fact that I was without a sword, and that at my side stood a King's officer, afforded evidence enough of my condition, and well might Chatellerault stare at beholding me so manifestly a prisoner.

Even as I watched him, he appeared to start at something that Saint-Eustache was saying, and a curious change spread over his face. Its wonted expression had been rather one of dismay; for, having believed me dead, he no doubt accounted his wager won, whereas seeing me alive had destroyed that pleasant conviction. But now it took on a look of relief and of something that suggested malicious cunning.

"That," said Castelroux in my ear, "is the King's commissioner."

Did I not know it? I never waited to answer him, but, striding across

the room, I held out my hand over the table—to Chatellerault.

"My dear Comte," I cried, "you are most choicely met."

I would have added more, but there was something in his attitude that silenced me. He had turned half from me, and stood now, hand on hip, his great head thrown back and tilted towards his shoulder, his expression one of freezing and disdainful wonder.

Now, if his attitude filled me with astonishment and apprehension, consider how these feelings were heightened by his words.

"Monsieur de Lesperon, I can but express amazement at your effrontery. If we have been acquainted in the past, do you think that is a sufficient reason for me to take your hand now that you have placed yourself in a position which renders it impossible for His Majesty's loyal servants to know you?"

I fell back a pace, my mind scarce grasping yet the depths of this inexplicable attitude.

"This to me, Chatellerault?" I gasped.

"To you?" he blazed, stirred to a sudden passion. "What else did you expect, Monsieur de Lesperon?"

I had it in me to give him the lie, to denounce him then for a low, swindling trickster. I understood all at once the meaning of this wondrous make-believe. From Saint-Eustache he had gathered the mistake there was, and for his wager's sake he would let the error prevail, and hurry me to the scaffold. What else might I have expected from the man that had lured me into such a wager—a wager which the knowledge he possessed had made him certain of winning? Would he who had cheated at the dealing of the cards neglect an opportunity to cheat again during the progress of the game?

As I have said, I had it in my mind to cry out that he lied—that I was not

Lesperon; that he knew I was Bardelys. But the futility of such an outcry came to me simultaneously with the thought of it. And, I fear me, I stood before him and his satellites—the mocking Saint-Eustache amongst them—a very foolish figure.

"There is no more to be said," I murmured at last.

"But there is!" he retorted. "There is much more to be said. You shall render yet an account of your treason, and I am afraid, my poor rebel, that your comely head will part company with your shapely body. You and I will meet at Toulouse. What more is to be said will be said in the Tribunal there."

A chill encompassed me. I was doomed, it seemed. This man, ruling the province pending the King's arrival, would see to it that none came forward to recognize me. He would expedite the comedy of my trial, and close it with the tragedy of my execution. My professions of a mistake of identity—if I wasted breath upon them would be treated with disdain and disregarded utterly. God! What a position had I got myself into, and what a vein of comedy ran through it—grim, tragic comedy, if you will, yet comedy to all faith. The very woman whom I had wagered to wed had betrayed me into the hands of the very man with whom I laid my wager.

But there was more in it than that. As I had told Mironzac that night in Paris, when the thing had been initiated, it was a duel that was being fought betwixt Chatellerault and me—a duel for supremacy in the King's good graces. We were rivals, and he desired my removal from the Court. To this end had he lured me into a bargain that should result in my financial ruin, thereby compelling me to withdraw from the costly life of the Luxembourg, and leaving him supreme, the sole and uncontested recipient of our master's favour. Now into his hand Fate had thrust a stouter weapon and a deadlier: a weapon which not only should make him master of the wealth that I had pledged, but one whereby he might remove me for all time, a thousandfold more

effectively than the mere encompassing of my ruin would have done.

I was doomed. I realized it fully and very bitterly.

I was to go out of the ways of men unnoticed and unmourned; as a rebel, under the obscure name of another and bearing another's sins upon my shoulders, I was to pass almost unheeded to the gallows Bardelys the Magnificent—the Marquis Marcel Saint-Pol de Bardelys, whose splendour had been a byword in France—was to go out like a guttering candle.

The thought filled me with the awful frenzy that so often goes with impotency, such a frenzy as the damned in hell may know. I forgot in that hour my precept that under no conditions should a gentleman give way to anger. In a blind access of fury I flung myself across the table and caught that villainous cheat by the throat, before any there could put out a hand to stop me.

He was a heavy man, if a short one, and the strength of his thick-set frame was a thing abnormal. Yet at that moment such nervous power did I gather from my rage, that I swung him from his feet as though he had been the puniest weakling. I dragged him down on to the table, and there I ground his face with a most excellent good-will and relish.

"You liar, you cheat, you thief!" I snarled like any cross-grained mongrel. "The King shall hear of this, you knave! By God, he shall!"

They dragged me from him at last—those lapdogs that attended him—and with much rough handling they sent me sprawling among the sawdust on the floor. It is more than likely that but for Castelroux's intervention they had made short work of me there and then.

But with a bunch of Mordieus, Sangdieus, and Po' Cap de Dieus, the little Gascon flung himself before my prostrate figure, and bade them in the King's name, and at their peril, to stand back.

Chatellerault, sorely shaken, his face purple, and with blood streaming from his nostrils, had sunk into a chair. He rose now, and his first words were incoherent, raging gasps.

"What is your name, sir?" he bellowed at last, addressing the Captain.

"Amedee de Mironzac de Castelroux, of Chateau Rouge in Gascony," answered my captor, with a grand manner and a flourish, and added, "Your servant."

"What authority have you to allow your prisoners this degree of freedom?"

"I do not need authority, monsieur," replied the Gascon.

"Do you not?" blazed the Count. "We shall see. Wait until I am in Toulouse, my malapert friend."

Castelroux drew himself up, straight as a rapier, his face slightly flushed and his glance angry, yet he had the presence of mind to restrain himself, partly at least.

"I have my orders from the Keeper of the Seals, to effect the apprehension of Monsieur de Lesperon; and to deliver him up, alive or dead, at Toulouse. So that I do this, the manner of it is my own affair, and who presumes to criticize my methods censoriously impugns my honour and affronts me. And who affronts me, monsieur, be he whosoever he may be, renders me satisfaction. I beg that you will bear that circumstance in mind."

His moustaches bristled as he spoke, and altogether his air was very fierce and truculent. For a moment I trembled for him. But the Count evidently thought better of it than to provoke a quarrel, particularly one in which he would be manifestly in the wrong, King's Commissioner though he might be. There was an exchange of questionable

compliments betwixt the officer and the Count, whereafter, to avoid further unpleasantness, Castelroux conducted me to a private room, where we took our meal in gloomy silence.

It was not until an hour later, when we were again in the saddle and upon the last stage of our journey, that I offered Castelroux an explanation of my seemingly mad attack upon Chatellerault.

"You have done a very rash and unwise thing, monsieur," he had commented regretfully, and it was in answer to this that I poured out the whole story. I had determined upon this course while we were supping, for Castelroux was now my only hope, and as we rode beneath the stars of that September night I made known to him my true identity.

I told him that Chatellerault knew me, and I informed him that a wager lay between us—withholding the particulars of its nature—which had brought me into Languedoc and into the position wherein he had found and arrested me. At first he hesitated to believe me, but when at last I had convinced him by the vehemence of my assurances as much as by the assurances themselves, he expressed such opinions of the Comte de Chatellerault as made my heart go out to him.

"You see, my dear Castelroux, that you are now my last hope," I said.

"A forlorn one, my poor gentleman!" he groaned.

"Nay, that need not be. My intendant Rodenard and some twenty of my servants should be somewhere betwixt this and Paris. Let them be sought for monsieur, and let us pray God that they be still in Languedoc and may be found in time."

"It shall be done, monsieur, I promise you," he answered me solemnly. "But I implore you not to hope too much from it. Chatellerault has it in his power to act promptly, and you may depend that he will waste no time after what has passed."

"Still, we may have two or three days, and in those days you must do what you can, my friend."

"You may depend upon me," he promised.

"And meanwhile, Castelroux," said I, "you will say no word of this to any one."

That assurance also he gave me, and presently the lights of our destination gleamed out to greet us.

That night I lay in a dank and gloomy cell of the prison of Toulouse, with never a hope to bear company during those dark, wakeful hours.

A dull rage was in my soul as I thought of my position, for it had not needed Castelroux's recommendation to restrain me from building false hopes upon his chances of finding Rodenard and my followers in time to save me. Some little ray of consolation I culled, perhaps, from my thoughts of Roxalanne. Out of the gloom of my cell my fancy fashioned her sweet girl face and stamped it with a look of gentle pity, of infinite sorrow for me and for the hand she had had in bringing me to this.

That she loved me I was assured, and I swore that if I lived I would win her yet, in spite of every obstacle that I myself had raised for my undoing.

CHAPTER XII. THE TRIBUNAL OF TOULOUSE

I had hoped to lie some days in prison before being brought to trial, and that during those days Castelroux might have succeeded in discovering those who could witness to my identity. Conceive, therefore, something of my dismay when on the morrow I was summoned an hour before noon to go present myself to my judges.

From the prison to the Palace I was taken in chains like any thief—for the law demanded this indignity to be borne by one charged with the crimes they imputed to me. The distance was but short, yet I found it over-long, which is not wonderful considering that the people stopped to line up as I went by and to cast upon me a shower of opprobrious derision—for Toulouse was a very faithful and loyal city. It was within some two hundred yards of the Palace steps that I suddenly beheld a face in the crowd, at the sight of which I stood still in my amazement. This earned me a stab in the back from the butt-end of the pike of one of my guards.

"What ails you now?" quoth the man irritably. "Forward, Monsieur le traite!"

I moved on, scarce remarking the fellow's roughness; my eyes were still upon that face—the white, piteous face of Roxalanne. I smiled reassurance and encouragement, but even as I smiled the horror in her countenance seemed to increase. Then, as I passed on, she vanished from my sight, and I was left to conjecture the motives that had occasioned her return to Toulouse. Had the message that Marsac would yesterday have conveyed to her caused her to retrace

her steps that she might be near me in my extremity; or had some weightier reason influenced her return? Did she hope to undo some of the evil she had done? Alas, poor child! If such were her hopes, I sorely feared me they would prove very idle.

Of my trial I should say but little did not the exigencies of my story render it necessary to say much. Even now, across the gap of years, my gorge rises at the mockery which, in the King's name, those gentlemen made of justice. I can allow for the troubled conditions of the times, and I can realize how in cases of civil disturbances and rebellion it may be expedient to deal summarily with traitors, yet not all the allowances that I can think of would suffice to condone the methods of that tribunal.

The trial was conducted in private by the Keeper of the Seals—a lean, wizened individual, with an air as musty and dry as that of the parchments among which he had spent his days. He was supported by six judges, and on his right sat the King's Commissioner, Monsieur de Chatellerault—the bruised condition of whose countenance still advertised the fact that we had met but yesterday.

Upon being asked my name and place of abode, I created some commotion by answering boldly "I am the Sieur Marcel de Saint-Pol, Marquis of Bardelys, of Bardelys in Picardy."

The President—that is to say, the Keeper of the Seals—turned inquiringly to Chatellerault. The Count, however, did no more than smile and point to something written on a paper that lay spread upon the table. The President nodded.

"Monsieur Rene de Lesperon," said he, "the Court may perhaps not be able to discriminate whether this statement of yours is a deliberate attempt to misguide or frustrate the ends of justice, or whether, either in consequence of your wounds or as a visitation of God for your treason, you are the victim of a deplorable hallucination. But the Court

wishes you to understand that it is satisfied of your identity. The papers found upon your person at the time of your arrest, besides other evidence in our power, remove all possibility of doubt in that connection. Therefore, in your own interests, we implore you to abandon these false statements, if so be that you are master of your wits. Your only hope of saving your head must lie in your truthfully answering our questions, and even then, Monsieur de Lesperon, the hope that we hold out to you is so slight as to be no hope at all."

There was a pause, during which the other judges nodded their heads in sage approval of their President's words. For myself, I kept silent, perceiving how little it could avail me to continue to protest, and awaited his next question.

"You were arrested, monsieur, at the Chateau de Lavedan two nights ago by a company of dragoons under the command of Captain de Castelroux. Is that so?"

"It is so, monsieur."

"And at the time of your arrest, upon being apprehended as Rene de Lesperon, you offered no repudiation of the identity; on the contrary, when Monsieur de Castelroux called for Monsieur de Lesperon, you stepped forward and acknowledged that you were he."

"Pardon, monsieur. What I acknowledged was that I was known by that name."

The President chuckled evilly, and his satellites smiled in polite reflection of his mood.

"This acute differentiating is peculiar, Monsieur de Lesperon, to persons of unsound mental condition," said he. "I am afraid that it will serve little purpose. A man is generally known by his name, is he not?" I did not answer him. "Shall we call Monsieur de Castelroux to confirm what I have said?"

"It is not necessary. Since you allow that I may have said I was known by the name, but refuse to recognize the distinction between that and a statement that 'Lesperon' is my name, it would serve no purpose to summon the Captain."

The President nodded, and with that the point was dismissed, and he proceeded as calmly as though there never had been any question of my identity.

"You are charged, Monsieur de Lesperon, with high treason in its most virulent and malignant form. You are accused of having borne arms against His Majesty. Have you anything to say?"

"I have to say that it is false, monsieur; that His Majesty has no more faithful or loving subject than am I."

The President shrugged his shoulders, and a shade of annoyance crossed his face.

"If you are come here for no other purpose than to deny the statements that I make, I am afraid that we are but wasting time," he cried testily. "If you desire it, I can summon Monsieur de Castelroux to swear that at the time of your arrest and upon being charged with the crime you made no repudiation of that charge."

"Naturally not, monsieur," I cried, somewhat heated by this seemingly studied ignoring of important facts, "because I realized that it was Monsieur de Castelroux's mission to arrest and not to judge me. Monsieur de Castelroux was an officer, not a Tribunal, and to have denied this or that to him would have been so much waste of breath."

"Ah! Very nimble; very nimble, in truth, Monsieur de Lesperon, but scarcely convincing. We will proceed. You are charged with having taken part in several of the skirmishes against the armies of Marshals de Schomberg and La Force, and finally, with having been in close

attendance upon Monsieur de Montmorency at the battle of Castelnaudary. What have you to say?"

"That it is utterly untrue."

"Yet your name, monsieur, is on a list found among the papers in the captured baggage of Monsieur le Duc de Montmorency."

"No, monsieur," I denied stoutly, "it is not."

The President smote the table a blow that scattered a flight of papers.

"Par la mort Dieu!" he roared, with a most indecent exhibition of temper in one so placed. "I have had enough of your contradictions. You forget, monsieur, your position—"

"At least," I broke in harshly, "no less than you forget yours."

The Keeper of the Seals gasped for breath at that, and his fellow judges murmured angrily amongst themselves. Chatellerault maintained his sardonic smile, but permitted himself to utter no word.

"I would, gentlemen," I cried, addressing them all, "that His Majesty were here to see how you conduct your trials and defile his Courts. As for you, Monsieur le President, you violate the sanctity of your office in giving way to anger; it is a thing unpardonable in a judge. I have told you in plain terms, gentlemen, that I am not this Rene de Lesperon with whose crimes you charge me. Yet, in spite of my denials, ignoring them, or setting them down either to a futile attempt at defence or to an hallucination of which you suppose me the victim, you proceed to lay those crimes to my charge, and when I deny your charges you speak of proofs that can only apply to another.

"How shall the name of Lesperon having been found among the Duke of Montmorency's papers convict me of treason, since I tell you that I am not Lesperon? Had you the slightest, the remotest sense of your high duty, messieurs, you would ask me rather to explain how, if what I

state be true, I come to be confounded with Lesperon and arrested in his place. Then, messieurs, you might seek to test the accuracy of what statements I may make; but to proceed as you are proceeding is not to judge but to murder. Justice is represented as a virtuous woman with bandaged eyes, holding impartial scales; in your hands, gentlemen, by my soul, she is become a very harlot clutching a veil."

Chatellerault's cynical smile grew broader as my speech proceeded and stirred up the rancour in the hearts of those august gentlemen. The Keeper of the Seals went white and red by turns, and when I paused there was an impressive silence that lasted for some moments. At last the President leant over to confer in a whisper with Chatellerault. Then, in a voice forcedly calm—like the calm of Nature when thunder is brewing—he asked me, "Who do you insist that you are, monsieur?"

"Once already have I told you, and I venture to think that mine is a name not easily forgotten. I am the Sieur Marcel de Saint-Pol, Marquis of Bardelys, of Bardelys in Picardy."

A cunning grin parted his thin lips.

"Have you any witnesses to identify you?"

"Hundreds, monsieur!" I answered eagerly, seeing salvation already within my grasp.

"Name some of them."

"I will name one—one whose word you will not dare to doubt."

"That is?"

"His Majesty the King. I am told that he is on his way to Toulouse, and I but ask, messieurs, that you await his arrival before going further with my trial."

"Is there no other witness of whom you can think, monsieur? Some witness that might be produced more readily. For if you can, indeed, establish the identity you claim, why should you languish in prison for some weeks?"

His voice was soft and oily. The anger had all departed out of it, which I—like a fool—imagined to be due to my mention of the King.

"My friends, Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, are all either in Paris or in His Majesty's train, and so not likely to be here before him. There is my intendant, Rodenard, and there are my servants—some twenty of them—who may perhaps be still in Languedoc, and for whom I would entreat you to seek. Them you might succeed in finding within a few days if they have not yet determined to return to Paris in the belief that I am dead."

He stroked his chin meditatively, his eyes raised to the sunlit dome of glass overhead.

"Ah-h!" he gasped. It was a long-drawn sigh of regret, of conclusion, or of weary impatience. "There is no one in Toulouse who will swear to your identity monsieur?" he asked.

"I am afraid there is not," I replied. "I know of no one."

As I uttered those words the President's countenance changed as abruptly as if he had flung off a mask. From soft and cat-like that he had been during the past few moments, he grew of a sudden savage as a tiger. He leapt to his feet, his face crimson, his eyes seeming to blaze, and the words he spoke came now in a hot, confused, and almost incoherent torrent.

"Miserable!" he roared, "out of your own mouth have you convicted yourself. And to think that you should have stood there and wasted the time of this Court—His Majesty's time—with your damnable falsehoods! What purpose did you think to serve by delaying your

doom? Did you imagine that haply, whilst we sent to Paris for your witnesses, the King might grow weary of justice, and in some fit of clemency announce a general pardon? Such things have been known, and it may be that in your cunning you played for such a gain based upon such a hope. But justice, fool, is not to be cozened. Had you, indeed, been Bardelys, you had seen that here in this court sits a gentleman who is very intimate with him. He is there, monsieur; that is Monsieur le Comte de Chatellerault, of whom perhaps you may have heard. Yet, when I ask you whether in Toulouse there is any one who can bear witness to your identity, you answer me that you know of no one. I will waste no more time with you, I promise you."

He flung himself back into his chair like a man exhausted, and mopped his brow with a great kerchief which he had drawn from his robes. His fellow judges laid their heads together, and with smiles and nods, winks and leers, they discussed and admired the miraculous subtlety and acumen of this Solomon. Chatellerault sat, calmly smiling, in solemn mockery.

For a spell I was too thunderstruck to speak, aghast at this catastrophe. Like a fool, indeed, I had tumbled into the pit that had been dug for me by Chatellerault for I never doubted that it was of his contriving. At last, "My masters," said I, "these conclusions may appear to you most plausible, but, believe me, they are fallacious. I am perfectly acquainted with Monsieur de Chatellerault, and he with me, and if he were to speak the truth and play the man and the gentleman for once, he would tell you that I am, indeed, Bardelys. But Monsieur le Comte has ends of his own to serve in sending me to my doom. It is in a sense through his agency that I am at present in this position, and that I have been confounded with Lesperon. What, then, could it have availed me to have made appeal to him? And yet, Monsieur le President, he was born a gentleman, and he may still retain some notion of honour. Ask him, sir—ask him point-blank, whether I am or not Marcel de Bardelys."

The firmness of my tones created some impression upon those feeble minds. Indeed, the President went so far as to turn an interrogative glance upon the Count. But Chatellerault, supremely master of the situation, shrugged his shoulders, and smiled a pitying, long-suffering smile.

"Must I really answer such a question, Monsieur le President?" he inquired in a voice and with a manner that clearly implied how low would be his estimate of the President's intelligence if he were, indeed, constrained to do so.

"But no, Monsieur le Comte," replied the President with sudden haste, and in scornful rejection of the idea. "There is no necessity that you should answer."

"But the question, Monsieur le President!" I thundered, my hand outstretched towards Chatellerault. "Ask him—if you have any sense of your duty—ask him am I not Marcel de Bardelys."

"Silence!" blazed the President back at me. "You shall not fool us any longer, you nimble-witted liar!"

My head drooped. This coward had, indeed, shattered my last hope.

"Some day, monsieur," I said very quietly, "I promise you that your behaviour and these gratuitous insults shall cost you your position. Pray God they do not cost you also your head!"

My words they treated as one might treat the threats of a child. That I should have had the temerity to utter them did but serve finally to decide my doom, if, indeed, anything had been wanting.

With many epithets of opprobrium, such as are applied to malefactors of the lowest degree, they passed sentence of death upon me, and with drooping spirits, giving myself up for lost and assured that I should be led to the block before many hours were sped, I permitted

them to reconduct me through the streets of Toulouse to my prison.

I could entertain you at length upon my sensations as I walked between my guards, a man on the threshold of eternity, with hundreds of men and women gazing at me—men and women who would live for years to gaze upon many another wretch in my position. The sun shone with a brilliance that to such eyes as mine was a very mockery. Thus would it shine on through centuries, and light many another unfortunate to the scaffold. The very sky seemed pitiless in the intensity of its cobalt. Unfeeling I deemed the note that everywhere was struck by man and Nature, so discordant was it with my gloomy outlook. If you would have food for reflection upon the evanescent quality of life, upon the nothingness of man, upon the empty, heartless egoism implicit in human nature, get yourselves sentenced to death, and then look around you. With such a force was all this borne in upon me, and with such sufficiency, that after the first pang was spent I went near to rejoicing that things were as they were, and that I was to die, haply before sunset. It was become such a world as did not seem worth a man's while to live in: a world of vainness, of hollowness, of meanness, of nothing but illusions. The knowledge that I was about to die, that I was about to quit all this, seemed to have torn some veil from my eyes, and to have permitted me to recognize the worthless quality of what I left. Well may it be that such are but the thoughts of a man's dying moments, whispered into his soul by a merciful God to predispose him for the wrench and agony of his passing.

I had been a half-hour in my cell when the door was opened to admit Castelroux, whom I had not seen since the night before. He came to condole with me in my extremity, and yet to bid me not utterly lose hope.

"It is too late to-day to carry out the sentence," said he, "and as to-morrow will be Sunday, you will have until the day after. By then much may betide, monsieur. My agents are everywhere scouring the

province for your servants, and let us pray Heaven that they may succeed in their search."

"It is a forlorn hope, Monsieur de Castelroux," I sighed, "and I will pin no faith to it lest I suffer a disappointment that will embitter my last moments, and perhaps rob me of some of the fortitude I shall have need of."

He answered me, nevertheless, with words of encouragement. No effort was being spared, and if Rodenard and my men were still in Languedoc then was every likelihood that they would be brought to Toulouse in time. Then he added that that, however, was not the sole object of his visit. A lady had obtained permission of the Keeper of the Seals to visit me, and she was waiting to be admitted.

"A lady?" I exclaimed, and the thought of Roxalanne flitted through my mind. "Mademoiselle de Lavedan?" I inquired.

He nodded. "Yes," said he; then added, "She seems in sore affliction, monsieur."

I besought him to admit her forthwith, and presently she came. Castelroux closed the door as he withdrew, and we were left alone together. As she put aside her cloak, and disclosed to me the pallor of her face and the disfiguring red about her gentle eyes, telling of tears and sleeplessness, all my own trouble seemed to vanish in the contemplation of her affliction.

We stood a moment confronting each other with no word spoken. Then, dropping her glance, and advancing a step, in a faltering, hesitating manner "Monsieur, monsieur," she murmured in a suffocating voice.

In a bound I was beside her, and I had gathered her in my arms, her little brown head against my shoulder.

"Roxalanne!" I whispered as soothingly as I might—"Roxalanne!"

But she struggled to be free of my embrace.

"Let me go, monsieur," she pleaded, a curious shrinking in her very voice. "Do not touch me, monsieur. You do not know—you do not know."

For answer, I enfolded her more tightly still.

"But I do know, little one," I whispered; "and I even understand."

At that, her struggles ceased upon the instant, and she seemed to lie limp and helpless in my arms.

"You know, monsieur," she questioned me—"you know that I betrayed you?"

"Yes," I answered simply.

"And you can forgive me? I am sending you to your death and you have no reproaches for me! Oh, monsieur, it will kill me!"

"Hush, child!" I whispered. "What reproaches can I have for you? I know the motives that impelled you."

"Not altogether, monsieur; you cannot know them. I loved you, monsieur. I do love you, monsieur. Oh! this is not a time to consider words. If I am bold and unmaidenly, I—I—"

"Neither bold nor unmaidenly, but—oh, the sweetest damsel in all France, my Roxalanne!" I broke in, coming to her aid. "Mine was a leprous, sinful soul, child, when I came into Languedoc. I had no faith in any human good, and I looked as little for an honest man or a virtuous woman as one looks for honey in a nettle. I was soured, and my life had hardly been such a life as it was meet to bring into contact with your own. Then, among the roses at Lavedan, in your dear

company, Roxalanne, it seemed that some of the good, some of the sweetness, some of the purity about you were infused anew into my heart. I became young again, and I seemed oddly cleansed. In that hour of my rejuvenation I loved you, Roxalanne."

Her face had been raised to mine as I spoke. There came now a flutter of the eyelids, a curious smile about the lips. Then her head drooped again and was laid against my breast; a sigh escaped her, and she began to weep softly.

"Nay, Roxalanne, do not fret. Come, child, it is not your way to be weak."

"I have betrayed you!" she moaned. "I am sending you to your death!"

"I understand, I understand," I answered, smoothing her brown hair.

"Not quite, monsieur. I loved you so, monsieur, that you can have no thought of how I suffered that morning when Mademoiselle de Marsac came to Lavedan.

"At first it was but the pain of thinking that—that I was about to lose you; that you were to go out of my life, and that I should see you no more—you whom I had enshrined so in my heart.

"I called myself a little fool that morning for having dreamed that you had come to care for me; my vanity I thought had deluded me into imagining that your manner towards me had a tenderness that spoke of affection. I was bitter with myself, and I suffered oh, so much! Then later, when I was in the rose garden, you came to me.

"You remember how you seized me, and how by your manner you showed me that it was not vanity alone had misled me. You had fooled me, I thought; even in that hour I imagined you were fooling me; you made light of me; and my sufferings were naught to you so that I might give you some amusement to pass the leisure and monotony of

your sojourn with us."

"Roxalanne—my poor Roxalanne!" I whispered.

"Then my bitterness and sorrow all turned to anger against you. You had broken my heart, and I thought that you had done it wantonly. For that I burned to punish you. Ah! and not only that, perhaps. I think, too, that some jealousy drove me on. You had wooed and slighted me, yet you had made me love you, and if you were not for me I swore you should be for no other. And so, while my madness endured, I quitted Lavedan, and telling my father that I was going to Auch, to his sister's house, I came to Toulouse and betrayed you to the Keeper of the Seals.

"Scarce was the thing done than I beheld the horror of it, and I hated myself. In my despair, I abandoned all idea of pursuing the journey to Auch, but turned and made my way back in haste, hoping that I might still come to warn you. But at Grenade I met you already in charge of the soldiers. At Grenade, too I learnt the truth—that you were not Lesperon. Can you not guess something of my anguish then? Already loathing my act, and beside myself for having betrayed you, think into what despair I was plunged by Monsieur de Marsac's intimation.

"Then I understood that for reasons of your own you had concealed your identity. You were not perhaps, betrothed; indeed, I remembered then how, solemnly you had sworn that you were not; and so I bethought me that your vows to me may have been sincere and such as a maid might honourably listen to."

"They were, Roxalanne! they were!" I cried.

But she continued "That you had Mademoiselle de Marsac's portrait was something that I could not explain; but then I hear that you had also Lesperon's papers upon you; so that you may have become possessed of the one with the others. And now, monsieur—"

She ceased, and there against my breast she lay weeping and weeping in her bitter passion of regret, until it seemed to me she would never regain her self-control.

"It has been all my fault, Roxalanne," said I, "and if I am to pay the price they are exacting, it will be none too high. I embarked upon a dastardly business; which brought me to Languedoc under false colours. I wish, indeed, that I had told you when first the impulse to tell you came upon me. Afterwards it grew impossible."

"Tell me now," she begged. "Tell me who you are."

Sorely was I tempted to respond. Almost was I on the point of doing so, when suddenly the thought of how she might shrink from me, of how, even then, she might come to think that I had but simulated love for her for infamous purposes of gain, restrained and silenced me. During the few hours of life that might be left me I would at least be lord and master of her heart. When I was dead—for I had little hope of Castelroux's efforts—it would matter less, and perhaps because I was dead she would be merciful.

"I cannot, Roxalanne. Not even now. It is too vile! If—if they carry out the sentence on Monday, I shall leave a letter for you, telling you everything."

She shuddered, and a sob escaped her. From my identity her mind fled back to the more important matter of my fate.

"They will not carry it out, monsieur! Oh, they till not! Say that you can defend yourself, that you are not the man they believe you to be!"

"We are in God's hands, child. It may be that I shall save myself yet. If I do, I shall come straight to you, and you shall know all that there is to know. But, remember, child"—and raising her face in my hands, I looked down into the blue of her tearful eyes—"remember, little one, that in one thing I have been true and honourable, and influenced by

nothing but my heart—in my wooing of you. I love you, Roxalanne, with all my soul, and if I should die you are the only thing in all this world that I experience a regret at leaving."

"I do believe it; I do, indeed. Nothing can ever alter my belief again. Will you not, then, tell me who you are, and what is this thing, which you call dishonourable, that brought you into Languedoc?"

A moment again I pondered. Then I shook my head.

"Wait, child," said I; and she, obedient to my wishes, asked no more.

It was the second time that I neglected a favourable opportunity of making that confession, and as I had regretted having allowed the first occasion to pass unprofited, so was I, and still more poignantly, to regret this second silence.

A little while she stayed with me yet, and I sought to instil some measure of comfort into her soul. I spoke of the hopes that I based upon Castelroux's finding friends to recognize me—hopes that were passing slender. And she, poor child, sought also to cheer me and give me courage.

"If only the King were here!" she sighed. "I would go to him, and on my knees I would plead for your enlargement. But they say he is no nearer than Lyons; and I could not hope to get there and back by Monday. I will go to the Keeper of the Seals again, monsieur, and I will beg him to be merciful, and at least to delay the sentence."

I did not discourage her; I did not speak of the futility of such a step. But I begged her to remain in Toulouse until Monday, that she might visit me again before the end, if the end were to become inevitable.

Then Castelroux came to reconduct her, and we parted. But she left me a great consolation, a great strengthening comfort. If I were destined, indeed, to walk to the scaffold, it seemed that I could do it

with a better grace and a gladder courage now.

CHAPTER XIII. THE ELEVENTH HOUR

Castelroux visited me upon the following morning, but he brought no news that might be accounted encouraging. None of his messengers were yet returned, nor had any sent word that they were upon the trail of my followers. My heart sank a little, and such hope as I still fostered was fast perishing. Indeed, so imminent did my doom appear and so unavoidable, that later in the day I asked for pen and paper that I might make an attempt at setting my earthly affairs to rights. Yet when the writing materials were brought me, I wrote not. I sat instead with the feathered end of my quill between my teeth, and thus pondered the matter of the disposal of my Picardy estates.

Coldly I weighed the wording of the wager and the events that had transpired, and I came at length to the conclusion that Chatellerault could not be held to have the least claim upon my lands. That he had cheated at the very outset, as I have earlier shown, was of less account than that he had been instrumental in violently hindering me.

I took at last the resolve to indite a full memoir of the transaction, and to request Castelroux to see that it was delivered to the King himself. Thus not only would justice be done, but I should—though tardily—be even with the Count. No doubt he relied upon his power to make a thorough search for such papers as I might leave, and to destroy everything that might afford indication of my true identity. But he had not counted upon the good feeling that had sprung up betwixt the little Gascon captain and me, nor yet upon my having contrived to convince the latter that I was, indeed, Bardelys, and he little dreamt of such a step as I was about to take to ensure his punishment hereafter.

Resolved at last, I was commencing to write when my attention was arrested by an unusual sound. It was at first no more than a murmuring noise, as of at sea breaking upon its shore. Gradually it grew its volume and assumed the shape of human voices raised in lusty clamour. Then, above the din of the populace, a gun boomed out, then another, and another.

I sprang up at that, and, wondering what might be toward, I crossed to my barred window and stood there listening. I overlooked the courtyard of the jail, and I could see some commotion below, in sympathy, as it were, with the greater commotion without.

Presently, as the populace drew nearer, it seemed to me that the shouting was of acclamation. Next I caught a blare of trumpets, and, lastly, I was able to distinguish above the noise, which had now grown to monstrous proportions, the clattering hoofs of some cavalcade that was riding past the prison doors.

It was borne in upon me that some great personage was arriving in Toulouse, and my first thought was of the King. At the idea of such a possibility my brain whirled and I grew dizzy with hope. The next moment I recalled that but last night Roxalanne had told me that he was no nearer than Lyons, and so I put the thought from me, and the hope with it, for, travelling in that leisurely, indolent fashion that was characteristic of his every action, it would be a miracle if His Majesty should reach Toulouse before the week was out, and this but Sunday.

The populace passed on, then seemed to halt, and at last the shouts died down on the noontide air. I went back to my writing, and to wait until from my jailer, when next he should chance to appear, I might learn the meaning of that uproar.

An hour perhaps went by, and I had made some progress with my memoir, when my door was opened and the cheery voice of Castelroux greeted me from the threshold.

"Monsieur, I have brought a friend to see you."

I turned in my chair, and one glance at the gentle, comely face and the fair hair of the young man standing beside Castelroux was enough to bring me of a sudden to my feet.

"Mironsac!" I shouted, and sprang towards him with hands outstretched.

But though my joy was great and my surprise profound, greater still was the bewilderment that in Mironsac's face I saw depicted.

"Monsieur de Bardelys!" he exclaimed, and a hundred questions were contained in his astonished eyes.

"Po' Cap de Dieu!" growled his cousin, "I was well advised, it seems, to have brought you."

"But," Mironsac asked his cousin, as he took my hands in his own, "why did you not tell me, Amedee, that it was to Monsieur le Marquis de Bardelys that you were conducting me?"

"Would you have had me spoil so pleasant a surprise?" his cousin demanded.

"Armand," said I, "never was a man more welcome than are you. You are but come in time to save my life."

And then, in answer to his questions, I told him briefly of all that had befallen me since that night in Paris when the wager had been laid, and of how, through the cunning silence of Chatellerault, I was now upon the very threshold of the scaffold. His wrath burst forth at that, and what he said of the Count did me good to hear. At last I stemmed his invective.

"Let that be for the present, Mironsac," I laughed. "You are here, and

you can thwart all Chatellerault's designs by witnessing to my identity before the Keeper of the Seals."

And then of a sudden a doubt closed like a cold hand upon my brain. I turned to Castelroux.

"Mon Dieu!" I cried. "What if they were to deny me a fresh trial?"

"Deny it you!" he laughed. "They will not be asked to grant you one."

"There will be no need," added Mironzac. "I have but to tell the King —"

"But, my friend," I exclaimed impatiently, "I am to die in the morning!"

"And the King shall be told to-day—now, at once. I will go to him."

I stared askance a moment; then the thought of the uproar that I had heard recurring to me, "Has the King arrived already?" I exclaimed.

"Naturally, monsieur. How else do I come to be here? I am in His Majesty's train."

At that I grew again impatient. I thought of Roxalanne and of how she must be suffering, and I bethought me that every moment Mironzac now remained in my cell was another moment of torture for that poor child. So I urged him to be gone at once and carry news of my confinement to His Majesty. He obeyed me, and I was left alone once more, to pace up and down in my narrow cell, a prey to an excitement such as I should have thought I had outlived.

At the end of a half-hour Castelroux returned alone.

"Well?" I cried the moment the door opened, and without giving him so much as time to enter. "What news?"

"Mironzac tells me that His Majesty is more overwrought than he has ever seen him. You are to come to the Palace at once. I have an order

here from the King."

We went in a coach, and with all privacy, for he informed me that His Majesty desired the affair to be kept secret, having ends of his own to serve thereby.

I was left to wait some moments in an ante-chamber, whilst Castelroux announced me to the King; then I was ushered into a small apartment, furnished very sumptuously in crimson and gold, and evidently set apart for His Majesty's studies or devotions. As I entered, Louis's back was towards me. He was standing—a tall, spare figure in black—leaning against the frame of a window, his head supported on his raised left arm and his eyes intent upon the gardens below.

He remained so until Castelroux had withdrawn and the door had closed again; then, turning suddenly, he confronted me, his back to the light, so that his face was in a shadow that heightened its gloom and wonted weariness.

"Voila, Monsieur de Bardelys!" was his greeting, and unfriendly. "See the pass to which your disobedience of my commands has brought you."

"I would submit, Sire," I answered, "that I have been brought to it by the incompetence of Your Majesty's judges and the ill-will of others whom Your Majesty honours with too great a confidence, rather than by this same disobedience of mine."

"The one and the other, perhaps," he said more softly. "Though, after all, they appear to have had a very keen nose for a traitor. Come, Bardelys, confess yourself that."

"I? A traitor?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and laughed without any conspicuous

mirth.

"Is not a traitor one who runs counter to the wishes; of his King? And are you not, therefore, a traitor, whether they call you Lesperon or Bardelys? But there," he ended more softly still, and flinging himself into a chair as he spoke, "I have been so wearied since you left me, Marcel. They have the best intentions in the world, these dullards, and some of them love me even; but they are tiresome all. Even Chatellerault, when he has a fancy for a jest—as in your case perpetrates it with the grace of a bear, the sprightliness of an elephant."

"Jest?" said I.

"You find it no jest, Marcel? Pardieu, who shall blame you? He would be a man of unhealthy humour that could relish such a pleasantry as that of being sentenced to death. But tell me of it. The whole story, Marcel. I have not heard a story worth the listening to since—since you left us."

"Would it please you, Sire, to send for the Comte de Chatellerault ere I begin?" I asked.

"Chatellerault? No, no." He shook his head whimsically. "Chatellerault has had his laugh already, and, like the ill-mannered dog he is, he has kept it to himself. I think, Marcel, that it is our turn now. I have purposely sent Chatellerault away that he may gain no notion of the catastrophic jest we are preparing him in return."

The words set me in the very best of humours, and to that it may be due that presently, as I warmed to my narrative, I lent it a vigour that drew His Majesty out of his wonted apathy and listlessness. He leaned forward when I told him of my encounter with the dragoons at Mirepoix, and how first I had committed the false step of representing myself to be Lesperon.

Encouraged by his interest, I proceeded, and I told my story with as much piquancy as I was master of, repressing only those slight matters which might reflect upon Monsieur de Lavedan's loyalty, but otherwise dealing frankly with His Majesty, even down to the genuineness of the feelings I entertained for Roxalanne. Often he laughed, more often still he nodded approvingly, in understanding and sympathy, whilst now and then he purred his applause. But towards the end, when I came to the matter of the Tribunal of Toulouse, of how my trial was conducted, and of the part played in it by Chatellerault, his face grew set and hard.

"It is true—all this that you tell me?" he cried harshly.

"As true as the Gospels. If you deem an oath necessary, Sire, I swear by my honour that I have uttered nothing that is false, and that, in connection with Monsieur de Chatellerault, even as I have suppressed nothing, so also have I exaggerated nothing."

"The dastard!" he snapped. "But we will avenge you, Marcel. Never fear it."

Then the trend of his thoughts being changed, he smiled wearily.

"By my faith, you may thank God every night of your worthless life that I came so opportunely to Toulouse, and so may that fair child whose beauty you have limned with such a lover's ardour. Nay, never redden, Marcel. What? At your age, and with such a heavy score of affaires to your credit, has it been left for a simple Languedoc maiden to call a blush to your callous cheek? Ma foi, they say truly that love is a great regenerator, a great rejuvenator!"

I made him no answer other than a sigh, for his words set me thinking, and with thought came a tempering of the gay humour that had pervaded me. Remarking this, and misreading it, he laughed outright.

"There, Marcel, never fear. We will not be rigorous. You have won

both the maid and the wager, and, by the Mass, you shall enjoy both."

"Helas, Sire," I sighed again, "when the lady comes to know of the wager—"

"Waste no time in telling her, Marcel, and cast yourself upon her mercy. Nay, go not with so gloomy a face, my friend. When woman loves, she can be very merciful; leastways, they tell me so."

Then, his thoughts shifting ground once more, he grew stern again.

"But first we have Chatellerault to deal with. What shall we do with him?"

"It is for Your Majesty to decide."

"For me?" he cried, his voice resuming the harshness that was never far from it. "I have a fancy for having gentlemen about me. Think you I will set eyes again upon that dastard? I am already resolved concerning him, but it entered my mind that it might please you to be the instrument of the law for me."

"Me, Sire?"

"Aye, and why not? They say you can play a very deadly sword upon necessity. This is an occasion that demands an exception from our edict. You have my sanction to send the Comte de Chatellerault a challenge. And see that you kill him, Bardelys!" he continued viciously. "For, by the Mass, if you don't, I will! If he escapes your sword, or if he survives such hurt as you may do him, the headsman shall have him. Mordieu! is it for nothing that I am called Louis the Just?"

I stood in thought for a moment. Then—

"If I do this thing, Sire," I ventured, "the world will say of me that I did so to escape the payment I had incurred."

"Fool, you have not incurred it. When a man cheats, does he not forfeit all his rights?"

"That is very true. But the world—"

"Peste!" he snapped impatiently, "you are beginning to weary me, Marcel—and all the world does that so excellently that it needs no your collaboration. Go your ways, man, and do as you elect. But take my sanction to slay this fellow Chatellerault, and I shall be the better pleased if you avail yourself of it. He is lodged at the Auberge Royale, where probably you will find him at present. Now, go. I have more justice to dispense in this rebellious province."

I paused a moment.

"Shall I not resume my duties near Your Majesty?"

He pondered a moment, then he smiled in his weary way.

"It would please me to have you, for these creatures are so dismally dull, all of them. Je m'ennuie tellement, Marcel!" he sighed. "Ough! But, no, my friend, I do not doubt you would be as dull as any of them at present. A man in love is the weariest and most futile thing in all this weary, futile world. What shall I do with your body what time your soul is at Lavedan? I doubt me you are in haste to get you there. So go, Marcel. Get you wed, and live out your amorous intoxication; marriage is the best antidote. When that is done, return to me."

"That will be never, Sire," I answered slyly.

"Say you so, Master Cupid Bardelys?" And he combed his beard reflectively. "Be not too sure. There have been other passions—aye, as great as yours—yet have they staled. But you waste my time. Go, Marcel; you are excused your duties by me for as long as your own affairs shall hold you elsewhere—for as long as you please. We are here upon a gloomy business—as you know. There are my cousin

Montmorency and the others to be dealt with, and we are holding no levees, countenancing no revels. But come to me when you will, and I will see you. Adieu!"

I murmured my thanks, and very deep and sincere were they. Then, having kissed his hand, I left him.

Louis XIII is a man who lacks not maligners. Of how history may come to speak of him it is not mine to hazard. But this I can say, that I, at least, did never find him other than a just and kindly master, an upright gentleman, capricious at times and wilful, as must inevitably be the case with such spoilt children of fortune as are princes, but of lofty ideals and high principles. It was his worst fault that he was always tired, and through that everlasting weariness he came to entrust the determining of most affairs to His Eminence. Hence has it resulted that the censure for many questionable acts of his reign, which were the work of my Lord Cardinal, has recoiled upon my august master's head.

But to me, with all the faults that may be assigned him, he was ever Louis the Just, and wherever his name be mentioned in my hearing, I bare my head.

CHAPTER XIV.

EAVESDROPPING

I turned it over in my mind, after I had left the King's presence, whether or not I should visit with my own hands upon Chatellerault the punishment he had so fully earned. That I would have gone about the task rejoicing you may readily imagine; but there was that accursed wager, and—to restrain me—the thought of how such an action might be construed into an evasion of its consequences. Better a thousand times that His Majesty should order his arrest and deal with him for his attempted perversion of justice to the service of his own vile ends. The charge of having abused his trust as King's commissioner to the extent of seeking to do murder through the channels of the Tribunal was one that could not fail to have fatal results for him—as, indeed, the King had sworn.

That was the position of affairs as it concerned Chatellerault, the world, and me. But the position must also be considered as it concerned Roxalanne, and deeply, indeed, did I so consider it. Much pondering brought me again to the conclusion that until I had made the only atonement in my power, the only atonement that would leave me with clean hands, I must not again approach her.

Whether Chatellerault had cheated or not could not affect the question as it concerned Mademoiselle and me. If I paid the wager—whether in honour bound to do so or not—I might then go to her, impoverished, it is true, but at least with no suspicion attaching to my suit of any ulterior object other than that of winning Roxalanne herself.

I could then make confession, and surely the fact that I had paid where

clearly there was no longer any need to pay must earn me forgiveness and afford proof of the sincerity of my passion.

Upon such a course, then, did I decide, and, with this end in view, I took my way towards the Auberge Royale, where His Majesty had told me that the Count was lodged. It was my purpose to show myself fully aware of the treacherous and unworthy part he had played at the very inception of the affair, and that if I chose to consider the wager lost it was that I might the more honestly win the lady.

Upon inquiring at the hostelry for Monsieur de Chatellerault I was informed by the servant I addressed that he was within, but that at the moment he had a visitor. I replied that I would wait, and demanded a private room, since I desired to avoid meeting any Court acquaintances who might chance into the auberge before I had seen the Count.

My apparel at the moment may not have been all that could have been desired, but when a gentleman's rearing has taken place amid an army of servitors to minister to his every wish, he is likely to have acquired an air that is wont to win him obedience. With all celerity was I ushered into a small chamber, opening on the one side upon the common room, and being divided on the other by the thinnest of wooden partitions from the adjoining apartment.

Here, the landlord having left me, I disposed myself to wait, and here I did a thing I would not have believed myself capable of doing, a thing I cannot think of without blushing to this very day. In short, I played the eavesdropper—I, Marcel Saint-Pol de Bardelys. Yet, if you who read and are nice-minded, shudder at this confession, or, worse still, shrug your shoulders in contempt, with the reflection that such former conduct of mine as I have avowed had already partly disposed you against surprise at this I do but ask that you measure my sin by my temptation, and think honestly whether in my position you might not yourselves have fallen. Aye—be you never so noble and high-

principled—I make bold to say that you had done no less, for the voice that penetrated to my ears was that of Roxalanne de Lavedan.

"I sought an audience with the King," she was saying, "but I could not gain his presence. They told me that he was holding no levees, and that he refused to see any one not introduced by one of those having the private entree."

"And so," answered the voice of Chatellerault, in tones that were perfectly colourless, "you come to me that I may present you to his Majesty?"

"You have guessed it, Monsieur le Comte. You are the only gentleman of His Majesty's suite, with whom I can claim acquaintance—however slight—and, moreover, it is well known how high you stand in his royal favour. I was told that they that have a boon to crave can find no better sponsor."

"Had you gone to the King, mademoiselle," said he, "had you gained audience, he would have directed you to make your appeal to me. I am his Commissioner in Languedoc, and the prisoners attainted with high treason are my property."

"Why then, monsieur," she cried in an eager voice, that set my pulses throbbing, "you'll not deny me the boon I crave? You'll not deny me his life?"

There was a short laugh from Chatellerault, and I could hear the deliberate fall of his feet as he paced the chamber.

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle, you must not overrate my powers. You must not forget that I am the slave of Justice. You may be asking more than is in my power to grant. What can you advance to show that I should be justified in proceeding as you wish?"

"Helas, monsieur, I can advance nothing but my prayers and the

assurance that a hideous mistake is being made."

"What is your interest in this Monsieur de Lesperon?"

"He is not Monsieur de Lesperon," she cried.

"But, since you cannot tell me who he is, you must be content that we speak of him at least as Lesperon," said he, and I could imagine the evil grin with which he would accompany the words.

The better that you may appreciate that which followed, let me here impart to you the suspicions which were already sinking into my mind, to be changed later into absolute convictions touching the course the Count intended to pursue concerning me. The sudden arrival of the King had thrown him into some measure of panic, and no longer daring to carry out his plans concerning me, it was his object, I made no doubt, to set me at liberty that very evening. Ere he did so, however, and presuming upon my ignorance of His Majesty's presence in Toulouse, Chatellerault would of a certainty have bound me down by solemn promise—making that promise the price of my liberty and my life—to breathe no word of my captivity and trial. No doubt, his cunning brain would have advanced me plausible and convincing reasons so to engage myself.

He had not calculated upon Castelroux, nor that the King should already have heard of my detention. Now that Roxalanne came to entreat him to do that which already he saw himself forced to do, he turned his attention to the profit that he might derive from her interestedness on my behalf. I could guess also something of the jealous rage that must fill him at this signal proof of my success with her, and already I anticipated, I think, the bargain that he would drive.

"Tell me, then," he was repeating, "what is your interest in this gentleman?"

There was a silence. I could imagine her gentle face clouded with the

trouble that sprang from devising an' answer to that question; I could picture her innocent eyes cast down, her delicate cheeks pinked by some measure of shame, as at last, in a low, stifled voice, the four words broke from her "I love him, monsieur."

Ah, Dieu! To hear her confess it so! If yesternight it had stirred me to the very depths of my poor, sinful soul to have her say so much to me, how infinitely more did it not affect me to overhear this frank avowal of it to another! And to think that she was undergoing all this to the end that she might save me!

From Chatellerault there came an impatient snort in answer, and his feet again smote the floor as he resumed the pacing that for a moment he had suspended. Then followed a pause, a long silence, broken only by the Count's restless walking to and fro. At last "Why are you silent, monsieur?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Helas, mademoiselle, I can do nothing. I had feared that it might be thus with you; and, if I put the question, it was in the hope that I was wrong."

"But he, monsieur?" she exclaimed in anguish. "What of him?"

"Believe me, mademoiselle, if it lay in my power I would save him were he never so guilty, if only that I might spare you sorrow."

He spoke with tender regret, foul hypocrite that he was!

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, and her voice was of horror and despair. "You do not mean that—" She stopped short; and then, after a pause, it was the Count who finished the sentence for her.

"I mean, mademoiselle, that this Lesperon must die!"

You will marvel that I let her suffer so, that I did not break down the partition with my hands and strike that supple gentleman dead at her feet in atonement for the anguish he was causing her. But I had a

mind to see how far he would drive this game he was engaged upon.

Again there was a spell of silence, and at last, when Mademoiselle spoke, I was amazed at the calm voice in which she addressed him, marvelling at the strength and courage of one so frail and childlike to behold.

"Is your determination, indeed, irrevocable, monsieur? If you have any pity, will you not at least let me bear my prayers and my tears to the King?"

"It would avail you nothing. As I have said, the Languedoc rebels are in my hands." He paused as if to let those words sink well into her understanding; then, "If I were to set him at liberty, mademoiselle, if I were to spirit him out of prison in the night, bribing his jailers to keep silent and binding him by oath to quit France at once and never to betray me, I should be, myself, guilty of high treason. Thus alone could the thing be done, and you will see, mademoiselle, that by doing it I should be endangering my neck."

There was an ineffable undercurrent of meaning in his words—an intangible suggestion that he might be bribed to do all this to which he so vaguely alluded.

"I understand, monsieur," she answered, choking—"I understand that it would be too much to ask of you."

"It would be much, mademoiselle," he returned quickly, and his voice was now subdued and invested with an odd quiver. "But nothing that your lips might ask of me and that it might lie in the power of mortal man to do, would be too much!"

"You mean?" she cried, a catch in her breath. Had she guessed—as I, without sight of her face, had guessed—what was to follow? My gorge was rising fast. I clenched my hands, and by an effort I restrained myself to learn that I had guessed aright.

"Some two months ago," he said, "I journeyed to Lavedan, as you may remember. I saw you, mademoiselle—for a brief while only, it is true—and ever since I have seen nothing else but you." His voice went a shade lower, and passion throbbed in his words.

She, too, perceived it, for the grating of a chair informed me that she had risen.

"Not now, monsieur—not now!" she exclaimed. "This is not the season. I beg of you think of my desolation."

"I do, mademoiselle, and I respect your grief, and, with all my heart, believe me, I share it. Yet this is the season, and if you have this man's interests at heart, you will hear me to the end."

Through all the imperiousness of his tone an odd note of respect—real or assumed—was sounding.

"If you suffer, mademoiselle, believe me that I suffer also, and if I make you suffer more by what I say, I beg that you will think how what you have said, how the very motive of your presence here, has made me suffer. Do you know, mademoiselle, what it is to be torn by jealousy? Can you imagine it? If you can, you can imagine also something of the torture I endured when you confessed to me that you loved this Lesperon, when you interceded for his life. Mademoiselle, I love you—with all my heart and soul I love you. I have loved you, I think, since the first moment of our meeting at Lavedan, and to win you there is no risk that I would not take, no danger that I would not brave."

"Monsieur, I implore you—"

"Hear me out, mademoiselle!" he cried. Then in quieter voice he proceeded: "At present you love this Monsieur de Lesperon—"

"I shall always love him! Always, monsieur!"

"Wait, wait, wait!" he exclaimed, annoyed by her interruption. "If he were to live, and you were to wed him and be daily in his company, I make no doubt your love might endure. But if he were to die, or if he were to pass into banishment and you were to see him no more, you would mourn him for a little while, and then—Helas! it is the way of men and women—time would heal first your sorrow, then your heart."

"Never, monsieur—oh, never!"

"I am older, child, than you are. I know. At present you are anxious to save his life anxious because you love him, and also because you betrayed him, and you would not have his death upon your conscience." He paused a moment; then raising his voice, "Mademoiselle," said he, "I offer you your lover's life."

"Monsieur, monsieur!" cried the poor child, "I knew you were good! I knew—"

"A moment! Do not misapprehend me. I do not say that I give it—I offer it."

"But the difference?"

"That if you would have it, mademoiselle, you must buy it. I have said that for you I would brave all dangers. To save your lover, I brave the scaffold. If I am betrayed, or if the story transpire, my head will assuredly fall in the place of Lesperon's. This I will risk, mademoiselle—I will do it gladly—if you will promise to become my wife when it is done."

There was a moan from Roxalanne, then silence; then—"Oh, monsieur, you are pitiless! What bargain is this that you offer me?"

"A fair one, surely," said that son of hell—"a very fair one. The risk of my life against your hand in marriage."

"If you—if you truly loved me as you say, monsieur," she reasoned,

"you would serve me without asking guerdon."

"In any other thing I would. But is it fair to ask a man who is racked by love of you to place another in your arms, and that at the risk of his own life? Ah, mademoiselle, I am but a man, and I am subject to human weaknesses. If you will consent, this Lesperon shall go free. but you must see him no more; and I will carry my consideration so far as to give you six months in which to overcome your sorrow, ere I present myself to you again to urge my suit."

"And if I refuse, monsieur?"

He sighed.

"To the value which I set upon my life you must add my very human jealousy. From such a combination what can you hope for?"

"You mean, in short, that he must die?"

"To-morrow," was that infernal cheat's laconic answer.

They were silent a little while, then she fell a-sobbing.

"Be pitiful, monsieur! Have mercy if you, indeed, love me. Oh, he must not die! I cannot, I dare not, let him die! Save him, monsieur, and I will pray for you every night of my life; I will pray for you to our Holy Mother as I am now praying to you for him."

Lived there the man to resist that innocent, devout appeal? Lived there one who in answer to such gentle words of love and grief could obtrude his own coarse passions? It seems there did, for all he answered was "You know the price, child."

"And God pity me! I must pay it. I must, for if he dies I shall have his blood upon my conscience!" Then she checked her grief, and her voice grew almost stern in the restraint she set upon herself. "If I give you my promise to wed you hereafter—say in six months' time—what

proof will you afford me that he who is detained under the name of Lesperon shall go free?"

I caught the sound of something very like a gasp from the Count.

"Remain in Toulouse until to-morrow, and to-night ere he departs he shall come to take his leave of you. Are you content?"

"Be it so, monsieur," she answered.

Then at last I leapt to my feet. I could endure no more. You may marvel that I had had the heart to endure so much, and to have so let her suffer that I might satisfy myself how far this scoundrel Chatellerault would drive his trickster's bargain.

A more impetuous man would have beaten down the partition, or shouted to her through it the consolation that Chatellerault's bargain was no bargain at all, since I was already at large. And that is where a more impetuous man would have acted upon instinct more wisely than did I upon reason. Instead, I opened the door, and, crossing the common room, I flung myself down a passage that I thought must lead to the chamber in which they were closeted. But in this I was at fault, and ere I had come upon a waiter and been redirected some precious moments were lost. He led me back through the common room to a door opening upon another corridor. He pushed it wide, and I came suddenly face to face with Chatellerault, still flushed from his recent contest.

"You here!" he gasped, his jaw falling, and his cheeks turning pale, as well they might; for all that he could not dream I had overheard his bargaining.

"We will go back, if you please, Monsieur le Comte." said I.

"Back where?" he asked stupidly.

"Back to Mademoiselle. Back to the room you have just quitted." And

none too gently I pushed him into the corridor again, and so, in the gloom, I missed the expression of his face.

"She is not there," said he.

I laughed shortly.

"Nevertheless, we will go back," I insisted.

And so I had my way, and we gained the room where his infamous traffic had been held. Yet for once he spoke the truth. She was no longer there.

"Where is she?" I demanded angrily.

"Gone," he answered; and when I protested that I had not met her, "You would not have a lady go by way of the public room, would you?" he demanded insolently. "She left by the side door into the courtyard."

"That being so, Monsieur le Comte," said I quietly, "I will have a little talk with you before going after her." And I carefully closed the door.

CHAPTER XV. MONSIEUR DE CHATELLERAULT IS ANGRY

Within the room Chatellerault and I faced each other in silence. And how vastly changed were the circumstances since our last meeting!

The disorder that had stamped itself upon his countenance when first he had beheld me still prevailed. There was a lowering, sullen look in his eyes and a certain displacement of their symmetry which was peculiar to them when troubled.

Although a cunning plotter and a scheming intriguer in his own interests, Chatellerault, as I have said before, was not by nature a quick man. His wits worked slowly, and he needed leisure to consider a situation and his actions therein ere he was in a position to engage with it.

"Monsieur le Comte," quoth I ironically, "I make you my compliments upon your astuteness and the depth of your schemes, and my condolences upon the little accident owing to which I am here, and in consequence of which your pretty plans are likely to miscarry."

He threw back his great head like a horse that feels the curb, and his smouldering eyes looked up at me balefully. Then his sensuous lips parted in scorn.

"How much do you know?" he demanded with sullen contempt.

"I have been in that room for the half of an hour," I answered, rapping the partition with my knuckles.

"The dividing wall, as you will observe, is thin, and I heard everything

that passed between you and Mademoiselle de Lavedan."

"So that Bardelys, known as the Magnificent; Bardelys the mirror of chivalry; Bardelys the arbiter elegantiarum of the Court of France, is no better, it seems, than a vulgar spy."

If he sought by that word to anger me, he failed.

"Lord Count," I answered him very quietly, "you are of an age to know that the truth alone has power to wound. I was in that room by accident, and when the first words of your conversation reached me I had not been human had I not remained and strained my ears to catch every syllable you uttered. For the rest, let me ask you, my dear Chatellerault, since when have you become so nice that you dare cast it at a man that he has been eavesdropping?"

"You are obscure, monsieur. What is it that you suggest?"

"I am signifying that when a man stands unmasked for a cheat, a liar, and a thief, his own character should give him concern enough to restrain him from strictures upon that of another."

A red flush showed through the tan of his skin, then faded and left him livid—a very evil sight, as God lives. He flung his heavily-feathered hat upon the table, and carried his hand to his hilt.

"God's blood!" he cried. "You shall answer me for this."

I shook my head and smiled; but I made no sign of drawing.

"Monsieur, we must talk a while. I think that you had better."

He raised his sullen eyes to mine. Perhaps the earnest impressiveness of my tones prevailed. Be that as it may, his half-drawn sword was thrust back with a click, and "What have you to say?" he asked.

"Be seated." I motioned him to a chair by the table and when he had taken it I sat down opposite to him. Taking up a quill, I dipped it in the ink-horn that stood by, and drew towards me a sheet of paper.

"When you lured me into the wager touching Mademoiselle de Lavedan," said I calmly, "you did so, counting upon certain circumstances, of which you alone had knowledge, that should render impossible the urging of my suit. That, Monsieur le Comte, was undeniably the action of a cheat. Was it not?"

"Damnation!" he roared, and would have risen, but, my hand upon his arm, I restrained him and pressed him back into his chair.

"By a sequence of fortuitous circumstances," I pursued, "it became possible for me to circumvent the obstacle upon which you had based your calculations. Those same circumstances led later to my being arrested in error and in place of another man. You discovered how I had contravened the influence upon which you counted; you trembled to see how the unexpected had befriended me, and you began to fear for your wager.

"What did you do? Seeing me arraigned before you in your quality as King's Commissioner, you pretended to no knowledge of me; you became blind to my being any but Lesperon the rebel, and you sentenced me to death in his place, so that being thus definitely removed I should be unable to carry out my undertaking, and my lands should consequently pass into your possession. That, monsieur, was at once the act of a thief and a murderer. Wait, monsieur; restrain yourself until I shall have done. To-day again fortune comes to my rescue. Again you see me slipping from your grasp, and you are in despair. Then, in the eleventh hour, Mademoiselle de Lavedan comes to you to plead for my life. By that act she gives you the most ample proof that your wager is lost. What would a gentleman, a man of honour, have done under these circumstances? What did you do? You seized that last chance; you turned it to the best account; you

made this poor girl buy something from you; you made her sell herself to you for nothing—pretending that your nothing was a something of great value. What term shall we apply to that? To say that you cheated again seems hardly adequate."

"By God, Bardelys!"

"Wait!" I thundered, looking him straight between the eyes, so that again he sank back cowed. Then resuming the calm with which hitherto I had addressed him, "Your cupidity," said I, "your greed for the estates of Bardelys, and your jealousy and thirst to see me impoverished and so ousted from my position at Court, to leave you supreme in His Majesty's favour, have put you to strange shifts for a gentleman, Chatellerault. Yet, wait."

And, dipping my pen in the ink-horn, I began to write. I was conscious of his eyes upon me, and I could imagine his surmisings and bewildered speculations as my pen scratched rapidly across the paper. In a few moments it was done, and I tossed the pen aside. I took up the sandbox.

"When a man cheats, Monsieur le Comte, and is detected, he is invariably adjudged the loser of his stakes. On that count alone everything that you have is now mine by rights." Again I had to quell an interruption. "But if we wave that point, and proceed upon the supposition that you have dealt fairly and honourably with me, why, then, monsieur, you have still sufficient evidence—the word of Mademoiselle, herself, in fact—that I have won my wager. And so, if we take this, the most lenient view of the case"—I paused to sprinkle the sand over my writing—"your estates are still lost to you, and pass to be my property."

"Do they, by God?" he roared, unable longer to restrain himself, and leaping to his feet. "You have done, have you not? You have said all that you can call to mind? You have flung insults and epithets at me

enough to earn the cutting of a dozen throats. You have dubbed me cheat and thief"—he choked in his passion—"until you have had your fill—is it not so? Now, listen to me, Master Bardelys, master spy, master buffoon, master masquerader! What manner of proceeding was yours to go to Lavedan under a false name? How call you that? Was that, perhaps, not cheating?"

"No, monsieur, it was not," I answered quietly. "It was in the terms of your challenge that I was free to go to Lavedan in what guise I listed, employing what wiles I pleased. But let that be," I ended, and, creasing the paper, I poured the sand back into the box, and dusted the document. "The point is hardly worth discussing at this time of day. If not one way, why, then, in another, your wager is lost."

"Is it?" He set his arms akimbo and eyed me derisively, his thick-set frame planted squarely before me. "You are satisfied that it is so? Quite satisfied, eh?" He leered in my face. "Why, then, Monsieur le Marquis, we will see whether a few inches of steel will win it back for me." And once more his hand flew to his hilt.

Rising, I flung the document I had accomplished upon the table. "Glance first at that," said I.

He stopped to look at me in inquiry, my manner sowing so great a curiosity in him that his passion was all scattered before it. Then he stepped up to the table and lifted the paper. As he read, his hand shook, amazement dilated his eyes and furrowed his brow.

"What—what does it signify?" he gasped.

"It signifies that, although fully conscious of having won, I prefer to acknowledge that I have lost. I make over to you thus my estates of Bardelys, because, monsieur, I have come to realize that that wager was an infamous one—one in which a gentleman should have had no part—and the only atonement I can make to myself, my honour, and

the lady whom we insulted—is that."

"I do not understand," he complained.

"I apprehend your difficulty, Comte. The point is a nice one. But understand at least that my Picardy estates are yours. Only, monsieur, you will be well advised to make your will forthwith, for you are not destined, yourself, to enjoy them."

He looked at me, his glance charged with inquiry.

"His Majesty," I continued, in answer to his glance, "is ordering your arrest for betraying the trust he had reposed in you and for perverting the ends of justice to do your own private murdering."

"Mon Dieu!" he cried, falling of a sudden unto a most pitiful affright. "The King knows?"

"Knows?" I laughed. "In the excitement of these other matters you have forgotten to ask how I come to be at liberty. I have been to the King, monsieur, and I have told him what has taken place here at Toulouse, and how I was to have gone to the block tomorrow!"

"Scelerat!" he cried. "You have ruined me!" Rage and grief were blent in his accents. He stood before me, livid of face and with hands clenching and unclenching at his sides.

"Did you expect me to keep such a matter silent? Even had I been so inclined it had not been easy, for His Majesty had questions to ask me. From what the King said, monsieur, you may count upon mounting the scaffold in my stead. So be advised, and make your will without delay, if you would have your heirs enjoy my Picardy chateau."

I have seen terror and anger distort men's countenances, but never have I seen aught to compare with the disorder of Chatellerault at that moment. He stamped and raved and fumed. He poured forth a thousand ordures of speech in his frenzy; he heaped insults upon me

and imprecations upon the King, whose lapdog he pronounced me. His short, stout frame was quivering with passion and fear, his broad face distorted by his hideous grimaces of rage. And then, while yet his ravings were in full flow, the door opened, and in stepped the airy Chevalier de Saint-Eustache.

He stood still, amazed, beneath the lintel—marvelling to see all this anger, and abashed at beholding me. His sudden appearance reminded me that I had last seen him at Grenade in the Count's company, on the day of my arrest. The surprise it had occasioned me now returned upon seeing him so obviously and intimately seeking Chatellerault.

The Count turned on him in his anger.

"Well, popinjay?" he roared. "What do you want with me?"

"Monsieur le Comte!" cried the other, in blent indignation and reproach.

"You will perceive that you are come inopportunately," I put in. "Monsieur de Chatellerault is not quite himself."

But my speech again drew his attention to my presence; and the wonder grew in his eyes at finding me there, for to him I was still Lesperon the rebel, and he marvelled naturally that I should be at large.

Then in the corridor there was a sound of steps and voices, and as I turned I beheld in the doorway, behind Saint-Eustache, the faces of Castelroux, Mironzac, and my old acquaintance, the babbling, irresponsible buffoon, La Fosse. From Mironzac he had heard of my presence in Toulouse, and, piloted by Castelroux, they were both come to seek me out. I'll swear it was not thus they had looked to find me.

They pushed their way into the room, impelling Saint-Eustache forward, and there were greetings exchanged and felicitations, whilst Chatellerault, curbing his disorder, drew the Chevalier into a corner of the room, and stood there listening to him.

At length I heard the Count exclaim—

"Do as you please, Chevalier. If you have interests of your own to serve, serve them. As for myself—I am past being interested."

"But why, monsieur?" the chevalier inquired.

"Why?" echoed Chatellerault, his ferocity welling up again. Then, swinging round, he came straight at me, as a bull makes a charge.

"Monsieur de Bardelys!" he blazed.

"Bardelys!" gasped Saint-Eustache in the background.

"What now?" I inquired coldly, turning from my friends.

"All that you said may be true, and I may be doomed, but I swear before God that you shall not go unpunished."

"I think, monsieur, that you run a grave risk of perjuring yourself!" I laughed.

"You shall render me satisfaction ere we part!" he cried.

"If you do not deem that paper satisfaction enough, then, monsieur, forgive me, but your greed transcends all possibility of being ever satisfied."

"The devil take your paper and your estates! What shall they profit me when I am dead?"

"They may profit your heirs," I suggested.

"How shall that profit me?"

"That is a riddle that I cannot pretend to elucidate."

"You laugh, you knave!" he snorted. Then, with an abrupt change of manner, "You do not lack for friends," said he. "Beg one of these gentlemen to act for you, and if you are a man of honour let us step out into the yard and settle the matter."

I shook my head.

"I am so much a man of honour as to be careful with whom I cross steel. I prefer to leave you to His Majesty's vengeance; his headsman may be less particular than am I. No, monsieur, on the whole, I do not think that I can fight you."

His face grew a shade paler. It became grey; the jaw was set, and the eyes were more out of symmetry than I had ever seen them. Their glance approached what is known in Italy as the mal'occhio, and to protect themselves against the baneful influences of which men carry charms. A moment he stood so, eyeing me. Then, coming a step nearer—

"You do not think that you can fight me, eh? You do not think it? Pardieu! How shall I make you change your mind? To the insult of words you appear impervious. You imagine your courage above dispute because by a lucky accident you killed La Vertoile some years ago and the fame of it has attached to you." In the intensity of his anger he was breathing heavily, like a man overburdened. "You have been living ever since by the reputation which that accident gave you. Let us see if you can die by it, Monsieur de Bardelys." And, leaning forward, he struck me on the breast, so suddenly and so powerfully—for he was a man of abnormal

strength—that I must have fallen but that La Fosse caught me in his arms.

"Kill him!" lisped the classic-minded fool. "Play Theseus to this bull of Marathon."

Chatellerault stood back, his hands on his hips, his head inclined towards his right shoulder, and an insolent leer of expectancy upon his face.

"Will that resolve you?" he sneered.

"I will meet you," I answered, when I had recovered breath. "But I swear that I shall not help you to escape the headsman."

He laughed harshly.

"Do I not know it?" he mocked. "How shall killing you help me to escape? Come, messieurs, sortons. At once!"

"Sor," I answered shortly; and thereupon we crowded from the room, and went pele-mele down the passage to the courtyard at the back.

CHAPTER XVI. SWORDS!

La Fosse led the way with me, his arm through mine, swearing that he would be my second. He had such a stomach for a fight, had this irresponsible, irrepressible rhymester, that it mounted to the heights of passion with him, and when I mentioned, in answer to a hint dropped in connection with the edict, that I had the King's sanction for this combat, he was nearly mad with joy.

"Blood of La Fosse!" was his oath. "The honour to stand by you shall be mine, my Bardelys! You owe it me, for am I not in part to blame for all this ado? Nay, you'll not deny me. That gentleman yonder, with the wild-cat moustaches and a name like a Gascon oath—that cousin of Mironsac's, I mean—has the flair of a fight in his nostrils, and a craving to be in it. But you'll grant me the honour, will you not? Pardieu! It will earn me a place in history."

"Or the graveyard," quoth I, by way of cooling his ardour.

"Peste! What an augury!" Then, with a laugh: "But," he added, indicating Saint-Eustache, "that long, lean saint—I forget of what he is patron—hardly wears a murderous air."

To win peace from him, I promised that he should stand by me. But the favour lost much of its value in his eyes when presently I added that I did not wish the seconds to engage, since the matter was of so very personal a character.

Mironsac and Castelroux, assisted by Saint-Eustache, closed the heavy portecochere, and so shut us in from the observation of passers-by. The clanging of those gates brought the landlord and a couple of his knaves, and we were subjected to the prayers and

intercessions, to the stormings and ravings that are ever the prelude of a stable-yard fight, but which invariably end, as these ended, in the landlord's withdrawal to run for help to the nearest corps-de-garde.

"Now, my myrmillones," cried La Fosse in bloodthirsty jubilation, "to work before the host returns."

"Po' Cap de Dieu!" growled Castelroux, "is this a time for jests, master joker?"

"Jests?" I heard him retorting, as he assisted me to doff my doublet. "Do I jest? Diable! you Gascons are a slow-witted folk! I have a taste for allegory, my friend, but that never yet was accounted so low a thing as jesting."

At last we were ready, and I shifted the whole of my attention to the short, powerful figure of Chatellerault as he advanced upon me, stripped to the waist, his face set and his eyes full of stern resolve. Despite his low stature, and the breadth of frame which argue sluggish motion, there was something very formidable about the Count. His bared arms were great masses of muscular flesh, and if his wrist were but half as supple as it looked powerful, that alone should render him a dangerous antagonist.

Yet I had no qualm of fear, no doubt, even, touching the issue. Not that I was an habitual ferrailleur. As I have indicated, I had fought but one man in all my life. Nor yet am I of those who are said to know no fear under any circumstances. Such men are not truly brave; they are stupid and unimaginative, in proof of which I will advance the fact that you may incite a timid man to deeds of reckless valour by drugging him with wine. But this is by the way. It may be that the very regular fencing practice that in Paris I was wont to take may so have ordered my mind that the fact of meeting unbaited steel had little power to move me.

Be that as it may, I engaged the Count without a tremor either of the flesh or of the spirit. I was resolved to wait and let him open the play, that I might have an opportunity of measuring his power and seeing how best I might dispose of him. I was determined to do him no hurt, and to leave him, as I had sworn, to the headsman; and so, either by pressure or by seizure, it was my aim to disarm him.

But on his side also he entered upon the duel with all caution and wariness. From his rage I had hoped for a wild, angry rush that should afford me an easy opportunity of gaining my ends with him. Not so, however. Now that he came with steel to defend his life and to seek mine, he appeared to have realized the importance of having keen wits to guide his hand; and so he put his anger from him, and emerged calm and determined from his whilom disorder.

Some preliminary passes we made from the first engagement in the lines of tierce, each playing warily for an opening, yet neither of us giving ground or betraying haste or excitement. Now his blade slithered on mine with a ceaseless tremor; his eyes watched mine from under lowering brows, and with knees bent he crouched like a cat making ready for a spring. Then it came. Sudden as lightning was his disengage; he darted under my guard, then over it, then back and under it again, and stretching out in the lunge—his double-feint completed—he straightened his arm to drive home the botte.

But with a flying point I cleared his blade out of the line of my body. There had been two sharp tinkles of our meeting swords, and now Chatellerault stood at his fullest stretch, the half of his steel past and behind me, for just a fraction of time completely at my mercy. Yet I was content to stand, and never move my blade from his until he had recovered and we were back in our first position once again.

I heard the deep bass of Castelroux's "Mordieux!" the sharp gasp of fear from Saint-Eustache, who already in imagination beheld his friend stretched lifeless on the ground, and the cry of mortification

from La Fosse as the Count recovered. But I heeded these things little. As I have said, to kill the Count was not my object. It had been wise, perhaps, in Chatellerault to have appreciated that fact; but he did not. From the manner in which he now proceeded to press me, I was assured that he set his having recovered guard to slowness on my part, never thinking of the speed that had been necessary to win myself such an opening as I had obtained.

My failure to run him through in that moment of jeopardy inspired him with a contempt of my swordplay. This he now made plain by the recklessness with which he fenced, in his haste to have done ere we might chance to be interrupted. Of this recklessness I suddenly availed myself to make an attempt at disarming him. I turned aside a vicious thrust by a close—a dangerously close—parry, and whilst in the act of encircling his blade I sought by pressure to carry it out of his hand. I was within an ace of succeeding, yet he avoided me, and doubled back.

He realized then, perhaps, that I was not quite so contemptible an antagonist as he had been imagining, and he went back to his earlier and more cautious tactics. Then I changed my plans. I simulated an attack, and drove him hard for some moments. Strong he was, but there were advantages of reach and suppleness with me, and even these advantages apart, had I aimed at his life, I could have made short work of him. But the game I played was fraught with perils to myself, and once I was in deadly danger, and as near death from the sword as a man may go and live. My attack had lured him, as I desired that it should, into making a riposte. He did so, and as his blade twisted round mine and came slithering at me, I again carried it off by encircling it, and again I exerted pressure to deprive him of it. But this time I was farther from success than before. He laughed at the attempt, as with a suddenness that I had been far from expecting he disengaged again, and his point darted like a snake upwards at my throat.

I parried that thrust, but I only parried it when it was within some three inches of my neck, and even as I turned it aside it missed me as narrowly as it might without tearing my skin. The imminence of the peril had been such that, as we mutually recovered, I found a cold sweat bathing me.

After that, I resolved to abandon the attempt to disarm him by pressure, and I turned my attention to drawing him into a position that might lend itself to seizure. But even as I was making up my mind to this—we were engaged in sixte at the time—I saw a sudden chance. His point was held low while he watched me; so low that his arm was uncovered and my point was in line with it. To see the opening, to estimate it, and to take my resolve was all the work of a fraction of a second. The next instant I had straightened my elbow, my blade shot out in a lightning stroke and transfixed his sword-arm.

There was a yell of pain, followed by a deep growl of fury, as, wounded but not vanquished, the enraged Count caught his falling sword in his left hand, and whilst my own blade was held tight in the bone of his right arm, he sought to run me through. I leapt quickly aside, and then, before he could renew the attempt, my friends had fallen upon him and wrenched his sword from his hand and mine from his arm.

It would ill have become me to taunt a man in his sorry condition, else might I now have explained to him what I had meant when I had promised to leave him for the headsman even though I did consent to fight him.

Mironsac, Castelroux, and La Fosse stood babbling around me, but I paid no heed either to Castelroux's patois or to La Fosse's misquotations of classic authors. The combat had been protracted, and the methods I had pursued had been of a very exhausting nature. I leaned now against the porte-cochere, and mopped myself

vigorously. Then Saint-Eustache, who was engaged in binding up his principal's arm, called to La Fosse.

I followed my second with my eyes as he went across to Chatellerault. The Count stood white, his lips compressed, no doubt from the pain his arm was causing him. Then his voice floated across to me as he addressed La Fosse.

"You will do me the favour, monsieur, to inform your friend that this was no first blood combat, but one a outrance. I fence as well with my left arm as with my right, and if Monsieur de Bardelys will do me the honour to engage again, I shall esteem it."

La Fosse bowed and came over with the message that already we had heard.

"I fought," said I in answer, "in a spirit very different from that by which Monsieur de Chatellerault appears to have been actuated. He made it incumbent upon me to afford proof of my courage. That proof I have afforded; I decline to do more. Moreover, as Monsieur de Chatellerault himself must perceive, the light is failing us, and in a few minutes it will be too dark for sword-play."

"In a few minutes there will be need for none, monsieur," shouted Chatellerault, to save time. He was boastful to the end.

"Here, monsieur, in any case, come those who will resolve the question," I answered, pointing to the door of the inn.

As I spoke, the landlord stepped into the yard, followed by an officer and a half-dozen soldiers. These were no ordinary keepers of the peace, but musketeers of the guard, and at sight of them I knew that their business was not to interrupt a duel, but to arrest my erstwhile opponent upon a much graver charge.

The officer advanced straight to Chatellerault.

"In the King's name, Monsieur le Comte," said he. "I demand your sword."

It may be that at bottom I was still a man of soft heart, unfeeling cynic though they accounted me; for upon remarking the misery and gloom that spread upon Chatellerault's face I was sorry for him, notwithstanding the much that he had schemed against me. Of what his fate would be he could have no shadow of doubt. He knew—none better—how truly the King loved me, and how he would punish such an attempt as had been made upon my life, to say nothing of the prostitution of justice of which he had been guilty, and for which alone he had earned the penalty of death.

He stood a moment with bent head, the pain of his arm possibly forgotten in the agony of his spirit. Then, straightening himself suddenly, with a proud, half scornful air, he looked the officer straight between the eyes.

"You desire my sword, monsieur?" he inquired.

The musketeer bowed respectfully.

"Saint-Eustache, will you do me the favour to give it to me?"

And while the Chevalier picked up the rapier from the ground where it had been flung, that man waited with an outward calm for which at the moment I admired him, as we must ever admire a tranquil bearing in one smitten by a great adversity. And than this I can conceive few greater. He had played for much, and he had lost everything. Ignominy, degradation, and the block were all that impended for him in this world, and they were very imminent.

He took the sword from the Chevalier. He held it for a second by the hilt, like one in thought, like one who is resolving upon something, whilst the musketeer awaited his good pleasure with that deference which all gentle minds must accord to the unfortunate.

Still holding his rapier, he raised his eyes for a second and let them rest on me with a grim malevolence. Then he uttered a short laugh, and, shrugging his shoulders, he transferred his grip to the blade, as if about to offer the hilt to the officer. Holding it so, halfway betwixt point and quillons, he stepped suddenly back, and before any there could put forth a hand to stay him, he had set the pommel on the ground and the point at his breast, and so dropped upon it and impaled himself.

A cry went up from every throat, and we sprang towards him. He rolled over on his side, and with a grin of exquisite pain, yet in words of unconquerable derision "You may have my sword now, Monsieur l'Officier," he said, and sank back, swooning.

With an oath, the musketeer stepped forward. He obeyed Chatellerault to the letter, by kneeling beside him and carefully withdrawing the sword. Then he ordered a couple of his men to take up the body.

"Is he dead?" asked some one; and some one else replied, "Not yet, but he soon will be."

Two of the musketeers bore him into the inn and laid him on the floor of the very room in which, an hour or so ago, he had driven a bargain with Roxalanne. A cloak rolled into a pillow was thrust under his head, and there we left him in charge of his captors, the landlord, Saint-Eustache, and La Fosse the latter inspired, I doubt not, by that morbidity which is so often a feature of the poetic mind, and which impelled him now to witness the death-agony of my Lord of Chatellerault.

Myself, having resumed my garments, I disposed myself to repair at once to the Hotel de l'Epee, there to seek Roxalanne, that I might set her fears and sorrows at rest, and that I might at last make my confession.

As we stepped out into the street, where the dusk was now thickening, I turned to Castelnou to inquire how Saint-Eustache came into Chatellerault's company.

"He is of the family of the Iscariot, I should opine," answered the Gascon. "As soon as he had news that Chatellerault was come to Languedoc as the King's Commissioner, he repaired to him to offer his services in the work of bringing rebels to justice. He urged that his thorough acquaintance with the province should render him of value to the King, as also that he had had particular opportunities of becoming acquainted with many treasonable dealings on the part of men whom the State was far from suspecting."

"Mort Dieu!" I cried, "I had suspected something of such a nature. You do well to call him of the family of the Iscariot. He is more so than you imagine: I have knowledge of this—ample knowledge. He was until lately a rebel himself, and himself a follower of Gaston d'Orleans—though of a lukewarm quality. What reasons have driven him to such work, do you know?"

"The same reason that impelled his forefather, Judas of old. The desire to enrich himself. For every hitherto unsuspected rebel that shall be brought to justice and whose treason shall be proven by his agency, he claims the half of that rebel's confiscated estates."

"Diable!" I exclaimed. "And does the Keeper of the Seals sanction this?"

"Sanction it? Saint-Eustache holds a commission, has a free hand and a company of horse to follow him in his rebel-hunting."

"Has he done much so far?" was my next question.

"He has reduced half a dozen noblemen and their families. The wealth he must thereby have amassed should be very considerable, indeed."

"To-morrow, Castelroux, I will see the King in connection with this pretty gentleman, and not only shall we find him a dungeon deep and dank, but we shall see that he disgorges his blood-money."

"If you can prove his treason you will be doing blessed work," returned Castelroux. "Until tomorrow, then, for here is the Hotel de l'Epee."

From the broad doorway of an imposing building a warm glow of light issued out and spread itself fanwise across the ill-paved street. In this—like bats about a lamp—flitted the black figures of gaping urchins and other stragglers, and into this I now passed, having taken leave of my companions.

I mounted the steps and I was about to cross the threshold, when suddenly above a burst of laughter that greeted my ears I caught the sound of a singularly familiar voice. This seemed raised at present to address such company as might be within. One moment of doubt had I—for it was a month since last I had heard those soft, unctuous accents. Then I was assured that the voice I heard was, indeed, the voice of my steward Ganymede. Castelroux's messenger had found him at last, it seemed, and had brought him to Toulouse.

I was moved to spring into the room and greet that old retainer for whom, despite the gross and sensuous ways that with advancing years were claiming him more and more, I had a deep attachment. But even as I was on the point of entering, not only his voice, but the very words that he was uttering floated out to my ears, and they were of a quality that held me there to play the hidden listener for the second time in my life in one and the same day.

CHAPTER XVII. THE BABBLING OF GANYMEDE

Never until that hour, as I stood in the porch of the Hotel de l'Epee, hearkening to my henchman's narrative and to the bursts of laughter which ever and anon it provoked from his numerous listeners, had I dreamed of the raconteur talents which Rodenard might boast. Yet was I very far from being appreciative now that I discovered them, for the story that he told was of how one Marcel Saint-Pol, Marquis de Bardelys, had laid a wager with the Comte de Chatellerault that he would woo and win Mademoiselle de Lavedan to wife within three months. Nor did he stop there. Rodenard, it would seem, was well informed; he had drawn all knowledge of the state of things from Castelroux's messenger, and later—I know not from whom—at Toulouse, since his arrival.

He regaled the company, therefore, with a recital of our finding the dying Lesperon, and of how I had gone off alone, and evidently assumed the name and role of that proscribed rebel, and thus conducted my wooing under sympathy inspiring circumstances at Lavedan. Then came, he announced, the very cream of the jest, when I was arrested as Lesperon and brought to Toulouse and to trial in Lesperon's stead; he told them how I had been sentenced to death in the other man's place, and he assured them that I would certainly have been beheaded upon the morrow but that news had been borne to him—Rodenard—of my plight, and he was come to deliver me.

My first impulse upon hearing him tell of the wager had been to stride into the room and silence him by my coming. That I did not obey that impulse was something that presently I was very bitterly to regret. How

it came that I did not I scarcely know. I was tempted, perhaps, to see how far this henchman whom for years I had trusted was unworthy of that trust. And so, there in the porch, I stayed until he had ended by telling the company that he was on his way to inform the King—who by great good chance was that day arrived in Toulouse—of the mistake that had been made, and thus obtain my immediate enlargement and earn my undying gratitude.

Again I was on the point of entering to administer a very stern reproof to that talkative rogue, when of a sudden there was a commotion within. I caught a scraping of chairs, a dropping of voices, and then suddenly I found myself confronted by Roxalanne de Lavedan herself, issuing with a page and a woman in attendance.

For just a second her eyes rested on me, and the light coming through the doorway at her back boldly revealed my countenance. And a very startled countenance it must have been, for in that fraction of time I knew that she had heard all that Rodenard had been relating. Under that instant's glance of her eyes I felt myself turn pale; a shiver ran through me, and the sweat started cold upon my brow. Then her gaze passed from me, and looked beyond into the street, as though she had not known me; whether in her turn she paled or reddened I cannot say, for the light was too uncertain. Next followed what seemed to me an interminable pause, although, indeed, it can have been no more than a matter of seconds—aye, and of but few. Then, her gown drawn well aside, she passed me in that same irrerecognizing way, whilst I, abashed, shrank back into the shadows of the porch, burning with shame and rage and humiliation.

From under her brows her woman glanced at me inquisitively; her liveried page, his nose in the air, eyed me so pertly that I was hard put to it not to hasten with my foot his descent of the steps.

At last they were gone, and from the outside the shrill voice of her page was wafted to me. He was calling to the ostler for her carriage.

Standing, in my deep mortification, where she had passed me, I conjectured from that demand that she was journeying to Lavedan.

She knew now how she had been cheated on every hand, first by me and later, that very afternoon, by Chatellerault, and her resolve to quit Toulouse could but signify that she was done with me for good. That it had surprised her to find me at large already, I fancied I had seen in her momentary glance, but her pride had been quick to conquer and stifle all signs of that surprise.

I remained where she had passed me until her coach had rumbled away into the night, and during the moments that elapsed I had stood arguing with myself and resolving upon my course of action. But despair was fastening upon me.

I had come to the Hotel de l'Epee, exulting, joyous, and confident of victory. I had come to confess everything to her, and by virtue of what I had done that confession was rendered easy. I could have said to her: "The woman whom I wagered to win was not you, Roxalanne, but a certain Mademoiselle de Lavedan. Your love I have won, but that you may foster no doubts of my intentions, I have paid my wager and acknowledge defeat. I have made over to Chatellerault and to his heirs for all time my estates of Bardelys."

Oh, I had rehearsed it in my mind, and I was confident—I knew—that I should win her. And now—the disclosure of that shameful traffic coming from other lips than mine had ruined everything by forestalling my avowal.

Rodenard should pay for it—by God, he should! Once again did I become a prey to the passion of anger which I have ever held to be unworthy in a gentleman, but to which it would seem that I was growing accustomed to give way. The ostler was mounting the steps at the moment. He carried in his hand a stout horsewhip with a long knotted thong. Hastily muttering a "By your leave," I snatched it from

him and sprang into the room.

My intendant was still talking of me. The room was crowded, for Rodenard alone had brought with him my twenty followers. One of these looked up as I brushed past him, and uttered a cry of surprise upon recognizing me. But Rodenard talked on, engrossed in his theme to the exclusion of all else.

"Monsieur le Marquis," he was saying, "is a gentleman whom it is, indeed, an honour to serve—"

A scream burst from him with the last word, for the lash of my whip had burnt a wheal upon his well-fed sides.

"It is an honour that shall be yours no more, you dog!" I cried.

He leapt high into the air as my whip cut him again. He swung round, his face twisted with pain, his flabby cheeks white with fear, and his eyes wild with anger, for as yet the full force of the situation had not been borne in upon him. Then, seeing me there, and catching something of the awful passion that must have been stamped upon my face, he dropped on his knees and cried out something that I did not understand for I was past understanding much just then.

The lash whistled through the air again and caught him about the shoulders. He writhed and roared in his anguish of both flesh and spirit. But I was pitiless. He had ruined my life for me with his talking, and, as God lived, he should pay the only price that it lay in his power to pay—the price of physical suffering. Again and again my whip hissed about his head and cut into his soft white flesh, whilst roaring for mercy he moved and rocked on his knees before me. Instinctively he approached me to hamper my movements, whilst I moved back to give my lash the better play. He held out his arms and joined his fat hands in supplication, but the lash caught them in its sinuous tormenting embrace, and started a red wheal across their whiteness.

He tucked them into his armpits with a scream, and fell prone upon the ground.

Then I remember that some of my men essayed to restrain me, which to my passion was as the wind to a blaze. I cracked my whip about their heads, commanding them to keep their distance lest they were minded to share his castigation. And so fearful an air must I have worn, that, daunted, they hung back and watched their leader's punishment in silence.

When I think of it now, I take no little shame at the memory of how I beat him. It is, indeed, with deep reluctance and yet deeper shame that I have brought myself to write of it. If I offend you with this account of that horsewhipping, let necessity be my apology; for the horsewhipping itself I have, unfortunately, no apology, save the blind fury that obsessed me—which is no apology at all.

Upon the morrow I repented me already with much bitterness. But in that hour I knew no reason. I was mad, and of my madness was born this harsh brutality.

"You would talk of me and my affairs in a tavern, you hound!" I cried, out of breath both by virtue of my passion and my exertions. "Let the memory of this act as a curb upon your poisonous tongue in future."

"Monseigneur!" he screamed. "Misericorde, monseigneur!"

"Aye, you shall have mercy—just so much mercy as you deserve. Have I trusted you all these years, and did my father trust you before me, for this? Have you grown sleek and fat and smug in my service that you should requite me thus? Sangdieu, Rodenard! My father had hanged you for the half of the talking that you have done this night. You dog! You miserable knave!"

"Monseigneur," he shrieked again, "forgive! For your sainted mother's sake, forgive! Monseigneur, I did not know—"

"But you are learning, cur; you are learning by the pain of your fat carcase; is it not so, carrion?"

He sank down, his strength exhausted, a limp, moaning, bleeding mass of flesh, into which my whip still cut relentlessly.

I have a picture in my mind of that ill-lighted room, of the startled faces on which the flickering glimmer of the candles shed odd shadows; of the humming and cracking of my whip; of my own voice raised in oaths and epithets of contempt; of Rodenard's screams; of the cries raised here and there in remonstrance or in entreaty, and of some more bold that called shame upon me. Then others took up that cry of "Shame!" so that at last I paused and stood there drawn up to my full height, as if in challenge. Towering above the heads of any in that room, I held my whip menacingly. I was unused to criticism, and their expressions of condemnation roused me.

"Who questions my right?" I demanded arrogantly, whereupon they one and all fell silent. "If any here be bold enough to step out, he shall have my answer." Then, as none responded, I signified my contempt for them by a laugh.

"Monseigneur!" wailed Rodenard at my feet, his voice growing feeble.

By way of answer, I gave him a final cut, then I flung the whip—which had grown ragged in the fray—back to the ostler from whom I had borrowed it.

"Let that suffice you, Rodenard," I said, touching him with my foot. "See that I never set eyes upon you again, if you cherish your miserable life!"

"Not that, monseigneur." groaned the wretch. "Oh, not that! You have punished me; you have whipped me until I cannot stand; forgive me,

monseigneur, forgive me now!"

"I have forgiven you, but I never wish to see you again, lest I should forget that I have forgiven you. Take him away, some of you," I bade my men, and in swift, silent obedience two of them stepped forward and bore the groaning, sobbing fellow from the room. When that was done "Host," I commanded, "prepare me a room. Attend me, a couple of you."

I gave orders thereafter for the disposal of my baggage, some of which my lacqueys brought up to the chamber that the landlord had in haste made ready for me. In that chamber I sat until very late; a prey to the utmost misery and despair. My rage being spent, I might have taken some thought for poor Ganymede and his condition, but my own affairs crowded over-heavily upon my mind, and sat the undisputed rulers of my thoughts that night.

At one moment I considered journeying to Lavedan, only to dismiss the idea the next. What could it avail me now? Would Roxalanne believe the tale I had to tell? Would she not think, naturally enough, that I was but making the best of the situation, and that my avowal of the truth of a story which it was not in my power to deny was not spontaneous, but forced from me by circumstances? No, there was nothing more to be done. A score of amours had claimed my attention in the past and received it; yet there was not one of those affairs whose miscarriage would have afforded me the slightest concern or mortification. It seemed like an irony, like a Dies ire, that it should have been left to this first true passion of my life to have gone awry.

I slept ill when at last I sought my bed, and through the night I nursed my bitter grief, huddling to me the corpse of the love she had borne me as a mother may the corpse of her first-born.

On the morrow I resolved to leave Toulouse—to quit this province

wherein so much had befallen me and repair to Beaugency, there to grow old in misanthropical seclusion. I had done with Courts, I had done with love and with women; I had done, it seemed to me, with life itself. Prodigal had it been in gifts that I had not sought of it. It had spread my table with the richest offerings, but they had been little to my palate, and I had nauseated quickly. And now, when here in this remote corner of France it had shown me the one prize I coveted, it had been swift to place it beyond my reach, thereby sowing everlasting discontent and misery in my hitherto pampered heart.

I saw Castelroux that day, but I said no word to him of my affliction. He brought me news of Chatellerault. The Count was lying in a dangerous condition at the Auberge Royale, and might not be moved. The physician attending him all but despaired of his life.

"He is asking to see you," said Castelroux.

But I was not minded to respond. For all that he had deeply wronged me, for all that I despised him very cordially, the sight of him in his present condition might arouse my pity, and I was in no mood to waste upon such a one as Chatellerault even on his deathbed—a quality of which I had so dire a need just then for my own case.

"I will not go," said I, after deliberation. "Tell him from me that I forgive him freely if it be that he seeks my forgiveness; tell him that I bear him no rancour, and—that he had better make his will, to save me trouble hereafter, if he should chance to die."

I said this because I had no mind, if he should perish intestate, to go in quest of his next heirs and advise them that my late Picardy estates were now their property.

Castelroux sought yet to persuade me to visit the Count, but I held firmly to my resolve.

"I am leaving Toulouse to-day," I announced.

"Whither do you go?"

"To hell, or to Beaugency—I scarce know which, nor does it matter."

He looked at me in surprise, but, being a man of breeding, asked no questions upon matters that he accounted secret.

"But the King?" he ventured presently.

"His Majesty has already dispensed me from my duties by him."

Nevertheless, I did not go that day. I maintained the intention until sunset; then, seeing that it was too late, I postponed my departure until the morrow. I can assign no reason for my dallying mood. Perhaps it sprang from the inertness that pervaded me, perhaps some mysterious hand detained me. Be that as it may, that I remained another night at the Hotel de l'Epee was one of those contingencies which, though slight and seemingly inconsequential in themselves, lead to great issues. Had I departed that day for Beaugency, it is likely that you had never heard of me—leastways, not from my own pen—for in what so far I have told you, without that which is to follow, there is haply little that was worth the labour of setting down.

In the morning, then, I set out; but having started late, we got no farther than Grenade, where we lay the night once more at the Hotel de la Couronne. And so, through having delayed my departure by a single day, did it come to pass that a message reached me before it might have been too late.

It was high noon of the morrow. Our horses stood saddled; indeed, some of my men were already mounted—for I was not minded to disband them until Beaugency was reached—and my two coaches were both ready for the journey. The habits of a lifetime are not so easy to abandon even when Necessity raises her compelling voice.

I was in the act of settling my score with the landlord when of a sudden there were quick steps in the passage, the clank of a rapier against the wall, and a voice—the voice of Castelroux—calling excitedly "Bardelys! Monsieur de Bardelys!"

"What brings you here?" I cried in greeting, as he stepped into the room.

"Are you still for Beaugency?" he asked sharply, throwing back his head.

"Why, yes," I answered, wondering at this excitement.

"Then you have seen nothing of Saint-Eustache and his men?"

"Nothing."

"Yet they must have passed this way not many hours ago." Then tossing his hat on the table and speaking with sudden vehemence: "If you have any interest in the family of Lavedan, you will return upon the instant to Toulouse."

The mention of Lavedan was enough to quicken my pulses. Yet in the past two days I had mastered resignation, and in doing that we school ourselves to much restraint. I turned slowly, and surveyed the little Captain attentively. His black eyes sparkled, and his moustaches bristled with excitement. Clearly he had news of import. I turned to the landlord.

"Leave us, Monsieur l'Hôte," said I shortly; and when he had departed, "What of the Lavedan family, Castelroux?" I inquired as calmly as I might.

"The Chevalier de Saint-Eustache left Toulouse at six o'clock this morning for Lavedan."

Swift the suspicion of his errand broke upon my mind.

"He has betrayed the Vicomte?" I half inquired, half asserted.

Castelroux nodded. "He has obtained a warrant for his apprehension from the Keeper of the Seals, and is gone to execute it. In the course of a few days Lavedan will be in danger of being no more than a name. This Saint-Eustache is driving a brisk trade, by God, and some fine prizes have already fallen to his lot. But if you add them all together, they are not likely to yield as much as this his latest expedition. Unless you intervene, Bardelys, the Vicomte de Lavedan is doomed and his family houseless."

"I will intervene," I cried. "By God, I will! And as for Saint-Eustache—he was born under a propitious star, indeed, if he escapes the gallows. He little dreams that I am still to be reckoned with. There, Castelroux, I will start for Lavedan at once."

Already I was striding to the door, when the Gascon called me back.

"What good will that do?" he asked. "Were it not better first to return to Toulouse and obtain a counter-warrant from the King?"

There was wisdom in his words—much wisdom. But my blood was afire, and I was in too hot a haste to reason.

"Return to Toulouse?" I echoed scornfully. "A waste of time, Captain. No, I will go straight to Lavedan. I need no counter-warrant. I know too much of this Chevalier's affairs, and my very presence should be enough to stay his hand. He is as foul a traitor as you'll find in France; but for the moment God bless him for a very opportune knave. Gilles!" I called, throwing wide the door. "Gilles!"

"Monseigneur," he answered, hastening to me.

"Put back the carriages and saddle me a horse," I commanded. "And bid your fellows mount at once and await me in the courtyard. We are not going to Beaugency, Gilles. We ride north—to Lavedan."

CHAPTER XVIII. SAINT-EUSTACHE IS OBSTINATE

On the occasion of my first visit to Lavedan I had disregarded—or, rather, Fate had contrived that I should disregard—Chatellerault's suggestion that I should go with all the panoply of power—with my followers, my liveries, and my equipages to compose the magnificence all France had come to associate with my name, and thus dazzle by my brilliant lustre the lady I was come to win. As you may remember, I had crept into the chateau like a thief in the night,—wounded, bedraggled, and of miserable aspect, seeking to provoke compassion rather than admiration.

Not so now that I made my second visit. I availed myself of all the splendour to which I owed my title of "Magnificent," and rode into the courtyard of the Chateau de Lavedan preceded by twenty well-mounted knaves wearing the gorgeous Saint-Pol liveries of scarlet and gold, with the Bardelys escutcheon broidered on the breasts of their doublets—on a field or a bar azure surcharged by three lilies of the field. They were armed with swords and musketoons, and had more the air of a royal bodyguard than of a company of attendant servants.

Our coming was in a way well timed. I doubt if we could have stayed the execution of Saint-Eustache's warrant even had we arrived earlier. But for effect—to produce a striking coup de theatre—we could not have come more opportunely.

A coach stood in the quadrangle, at the foot of the chateau steps: down these the Vicomte was descending, with the Vicomtesse—grim

and blasphemant as ever, on one side, and his daughter, white of face and with tightly compressed lips, on the other. Between these two women—his wife and his child—as different in body as they were different in soul, came Lavedan with a firm step, a good colour, and a look of well-bred, lofty indifference to his fate.

He disposed himself to enter the carriage which was to bear him to prison with much the same air he would have assumed had his destination been a royal levee.

Around the coach were grouped a score of men of Saint-Eustache's company—half soldiers, half ploughboys—ill-garbed and indifferently accoutred in dull breastplates and steel caps, many of which were rusted. By the carriage door stood the long, lank figure of the Chevalier himself, dressed with his wonted care, and perfumed, curled, and beribboned beyond belief. His weak, boyish face sought by scowls and by the adoption of a grim smile to assume an air of martial ferocity.

Such was the grouping in the quadrangle when my men, with Gilles at their head, thundered across the drawbridge, giving pause to those within, and drawing upon themselves the eyes of all, as they rode, two by two, under the old-world arch of the keep into the courtyard. And Gilles, who knew our errand, and who was as ready-witted a rogue as ever rode with me, took in the situation at a glance. Knowing how much I desired to make a goodly show, he whispered an order. This resulted in the couples dividing at the gateway, one going to the left and one to the right, so that as they came they spread themselves in a crescent, and drawing rein, they faced forward, confronting and half surrounding the Chevalier's company.

As each couple appeared, the curiosity—the uneasiness, probably—of Saint-Eustache and his men, had increased, and their expectancy was on tiptoe to see what lord it was went abroad with such regal pomp, when I appeared in the gateway and advanced at the trot into

the middle of the quadrangle. There I drew rein and doffed my hat to them as they stood, open-mouthed and gaping one and all. If it was a theatrical display, a parade worthy of a tilt-ground, it was yet a noble and imposing advent, and their gaping told me that it was not without effect. The men looked uneasily at the Chevalier; the Chevalier looked uneasily at his men; mademoiselle, very pale, lowered her eyes and pressed her lips yet more tightly; the Vicomtesse uttered an oath of astonishment; whilst Lavedan, too dignified to manifest surprise, greeted me with a sober bow.

Behind them on the steps I caught sight of a group of domestics, old Anatole standing slightly in advance of his fellows, and wondering, no doubt, whether this were, indeed, the bedraggled Lesperon of a little while ago—for if I had thought of pomp in the display of my lacqueys, no less had I considered it in the decking of my own person. Without any of the ribbons and fopperies that mark the coxcomb, yet was I clad, plumed, and armed with a magnificence such as I'll swear had not been seen within the grey walls of that old castle in the lifetime of any of those that were now present.

Gilles leapt from his horse as I drew rein, and hastened to hold my stirrup, with a murmured "Monsieur," which title drew a fresh astonishment into the eyes of the beholders.

I advanced leisurely towards Saint-Eustache, and addressed him with such condescension as I might a groom, to impress and quell a man of this type your best weapon is the arrogance that a nobler spirit would resent.

"A world of odd meetings this, Saint-Eustache," I smiled disdainfully. "A world of strange comings and goings, and of strange transformations. The last time we were here we stood mutually as guests of Monsieur le Vicomte; at present you appear to be officiating as a—a tipstaff."

"Monsieur!" He coloured, and he uttered the word in accents of awakening resentment. I looked into his eyes, coldly, impassively, as if waiting to hear what he might have to add, and so I stayed until his glance fell and his spirit was frozen in him. He knew me, and he knew how much I was to be feared. A word from me to the King might send him to the wheel. It was upon this I played. Presently, as his eye fell "Is your business with me, Monsieur de Bardelys?" he asked, and at that utterance of my name there was a commotion on the steps, whilst the Vicomte started, and his eyes frowned upon me, and the Vicomtesse looked up suddenly to scan me with a fresh interest. She beheld at last in the flesh the gentleman who had played so notorious a part, ten years ago, in that scandal connected with the Duchesse de Bourgogne, of which she never tired of reciting the details. And think that she had sat at table with him day by day and been unconscious of that momentous fact! Such, I make no doubt, was what passed through her mind at the moment, and, to judge from her expression, I should say that the excitement of beholding the Magnificent Bardelys had for the nonce eclipsed beholding even her husband's condition and the imminent sequestration of Lavedan.

"My business is with you, Chevalier," said I. "It relates to your mission here."

His jaw fell. "You wish—?"

"To desire you to withdraw your men and quit Lavedan at once, abandoning the execution of your warrant."

He flashed me a look of impotent hate. "You know of the existence of my warrant, Monsieur de Bardelys, and you must therefore realize that a royal mandate alone can exempt me from delivering Monsieur de Lavedan to the Keeper of the Seals."

"My only warrant," I answered, somewhat baffled, but far from abandoning hope, "is my word. You shall say to the Garde des

Sceaux that you have done this upon the authority of the Marquis de Bardelys, and you have my promise that His Majesty shall confirm my action."

In saying that I said too much, as I was quickly to realize.

"His Majesty will confirm it, monsieur?" he said interrogatively, and he shook his head. "That is a risk I dare not run. My warrant sets me under imperative obligations which I must discharge—you will see the justice of what I state."

His tone was all humility, all subservience, nevertheless it was firm to the point of being hard. But my last card, the card upon which I was depending, was yet to be played.

"Will you do me the honour to step aside with me, Chevalier?" I commanded rather than besought.

"At your service, sir," said he; and I drew him out of earshot of those others.

"Now, Saint-Eustache, we can talk," said I, with an abrupt change of manner from the coldly arrogant to the coldly menacing. "I marvel greatly at your temerity in pursuing this Iscariot business after learning who I am, at Toulouse two nights ago."

He clenched his hands, and his weak face hardened.

"I would beg you to consider your expressions, monsieur, and to control them," said he in a thick voice.

I vouchsafed him a stare of freezing amazement. "You will no doubt remember in what capacity I find you employed. Nay, keep your hands still, Saint-Eustache. I don't fight catchpolls, and if you give me trouble my men are yonder." And I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "And now to business. I am not minded to talk all day. I was saying that I marvel at your temerity, and more particularly at your having laid

information against Monsieur de Lavedan, and having come here to arrest him, knowing, as you must know, that I am interested in the Vicomte."

"I have heard of that interest, monsieur," said he, with a sneer for which I could have struck him.

"This act of yours," I pursued, ignoring his interpolation, "savours very much of flying in the face of Destiny. It almost seems to me as if you were defying me."

His lip trembled, and his eyes shunned my glance.

"Indeed—indeed, monsieur—" he was protesting, when I cut him short.

"You cannot be so great a fool but that you must realize that if I tell the King what I know of you, you will be stripped of your ill-gotten gains, and broken on the wheel for a double traitor—a betrayer of your fellow-rebels."

"But you will not do that, monsieur?" he cried. "It would be unworthy in you."

At that I laughed in his face. "Heart of God! Are you to be what you please, and do you still expect that men shall be nice in dealing with you? I would do this thing, and, by my faith, Monsieur de Eustache, I will do it, if you compel me!"

He reddened and moved his foot uneasily. Perhaps I did not take the best way with him, after all. I might have confined myself to sowing fear in his heart; that alone might have had the effect I desired; by visiting upon him at the same time the insults I could not repress, I may have aroused his resistance, and excited his desire above all else to thwart me.

"What do you want of me?" he demanded, with a sudden arrogance which almost cast mine into the shade.

"I want you," said I, deeming the time ripe to make a plain tale of it, "to withdraw your men, and to ride back to Toulouse without Monsieur de Lavedan, there to confess to the Keeper of the Seals that your suspicions were unfounded, and that you have culled evidence that the Vicomte has had no relations with Monsieur the King's brother."

He looked at me in amazement—amusedly, almost.

"A likely story that to bear to the astute gentlemen in Toulouse," said he.

"Aye, ma foi, a most likely story," said I. "When they come to consider the profit that you are losing by not apprehending the Vicomte, and can think of none that you are making, they will have little difficulty in believing you."

"But what of this evidence you refer to?"

"You have, I take it, discovered no incriminating evidence—no documents that will tell against the Vicomte?"

"No, monsieur, it is true that I have not—"

He stopped and bit his lip, my smile making him aware of his indiscretion.

"Very well, then, you must invent some evidence to prove that he was in no way, associated with the rebellion."

"Monsieur de Bardelys," said he very insolently, "we waste time in idle words. If you think that I will imperil my neck for the sake of serving you or the Vicomte, you are most prodigiously at fault."

"I have never thought so. But I have thought that you might be induced

to imperil your neck—as you have it—for its own sake, and to the end that you might save it."

He moved away. "Monsieur, you talk in vain. You have no royal warrant to supersede mine. Do what you will when you come to Toulouse," and he smiled darkly. "Meanwhile, the Vicomte goes with me."

"You have no evidence against him!" I cried, scarce believing that he would dare to defy me and that I had failed.

"I have the evidence of my word. I am ready to swear to what I know—that, whilst I was here at Lavedan, some weeks ago, I discovered his connection with the rebels."

"And what think you, miserable fool, shall your word weigh against mine?" I cried. "Never fear, Monsieur le Chevalier, I shall be in Toulouse to give you the lie by showing that your word is a word to which no man may attach faith, and by exposing to the King your past conduct. If you think that, after I have spoken, King Louis whom they name the just will suffer the trial of the Vicomte to go further on your instigation, or if you think that you will be able to slip your own neck from the noose I shall have set about it, you are an infinitely greater fool than I deem you."

He stood and looked at me over his shoulder, his face crimson, and his brows black as a thundercloud.

"All this may betide when you come to Toulouse, Monsieur de Bardelys," said he darkly, "but from here to Toulouse it is a matter of some twenty leagues."

With that, he turned on his heel and left me, baffled and angry, to puzzle out the inner meaning of his parting words.

He gave his men the order to mount, and bade Monsieur de Lavedan

enter the coach, whereupon Gilles shot me a glance of inquiry. For a second, as I stepped slowly after the Chevalier, I was minded to try armed resistance, and to convert that grey courtyard into a shambles. Then I saw betimes the futility of such a step, and I shrugged my shoulders in answer to my servant's glance.

I would have spoken to the Vicomte ere he departed, but I was too deeply chagrined and humiliated by my defeat. So much so that I had no room in my thoughts even for the very natural conjecture of what Lavedan must be thinking of me. I repented me then of my rashness in coming to Lavedan without having seen the King—as Castelroux had counselled me. I had come indulging vain dreams of a splendid overthrow of Saint-Eustache. I had thought to shine heroically in Mademoiselle's eyes, and thus I had hoped that both gratitude for having saved her father and admiration at the manner in which I had achieved it would predispose her to grant me a hearing in which I might plead my rehabilitation. Once that were accorded me, I did not doubt I should prevail.

Now my dream was all dispelled, and my pride had suffered just such a humiliating fall as the moralists tell us pride must ever suffer. There seemed little left me but to go hence with lambent tail, like a dog that has been whipped—my dazzling escort become a mockery but that it served the more loudly to advertise my true impotency.

As I approached the carriage, the Vicomtesse swept suddenly down the steps and came towards me with a friendly smile. "Monsieur de Bardelys," said she, "we are grateful for your intervention in the cause of that rebel my husband."

"Madame," I besought her, under my breath, "if you would not totally destroy him, I beseech you to be cautious. By your leave, I will have my men refreshed, and thereafter I shall take the road to Toulouse again. I can only hope that my intervention with the King may bear better fruit."

Although I spoke in a subdued key, Saint-Eustache, who stood near us, overheard me, as his face very clearly testified.

"Remain here, sir," she replied, with some effusion, "and follow us when you are rested."

"Follow you?" I inquired. "Do you then go with Monsieur de Lavedan?"

"No, Anne," said the Vicomte politely from the carriage. "It will be tiring you unnecessarily. You were better advised to remain here until my return."

I doubt not that the poor Vicomte was more concerned with how she would tire him than with how the journey might tire her. But the Vicomtesse was not to be gainsaid. The Chevalier had sneered when the Vicomte spoke of returning. Madame had caught that sneer, and she swung round upon him now with the vehement fury of a virago.

"He'll not return, you think, you Judas!" she snarled at him, her lean, swarthy face growing very evil to see. "But he shall—by God, he shall! And look to your skin when he does, monsieur the catchpoll, for, on my honour, you shall have a foretaste of hell for your trouble in this matter."

The Chevalier smiled with much restraint. "A woman's tongue," said he, "does no injury."

"Will a woman's arm, think you?" demanded that warlike matron. "You musk-stinking tipstaff, I'll—"

"Anne, my love," implored the Vicomte soothingly, "I beg that you will control yourself."

"Shall I submit to the insolence of this misbegotten vassal? Shall I—"

"Remember rather that it does not become the dignity of your station to address the fellow. We avoid venomous reptiles, but we do not pause to reproach them with their venom. God made them so."

Saint-Eustache coloured to the roots of his hair, then, turning hastily to the driver, he bade him start. He would have closed the door with that, but that madame thrust herself forward.

That was the Chevalier's chance to be avenged. "You cannot go," said he.

"Cannot?" Her cheeks reddened. "Why not, monsieur Lesperon?"

"I have no reasons to afford you," he answered brutally. "You cannot go."

"Your pardon, Chevalier," I interposed. "You go beyond your rights in seeking to prevent her. Monsieur le Vicomte is not yet convicted. Do not, I beseech you, transcend the already odious character of your work."

And without more ado I shouldered him aside, and held the door that she might enter. She rewarded me with a smile—half vicious, half whimsical, and mounted the step. Saint-Eustache would have interfered. He came at me as if resenting that shoulder-thrust of mine, and for a second I almost thought he would have committed the madness of striking me.

"Take care, Saint-Eustache," I said very quietly, my eyes fixed on his. And much as dead Caesar's ghost may have threatened Brutus with Philippi "We meet at Toulouse, Chevalier," said I, and closing the carriage door I stepped back.

There was a flutter of skirts behind me. It was mademoiselle. So brave and outwardly so calm until now, the moment of actual separation—and added thereunto perhaps her mother's going and

the loneliness that for herself she foresaw—proved more than she could endure. I stepped aside, and she swept past me and caught at the leather curtain of the coach.

"Father!" she sobbed.

There are some things that a man of breeding may not witness—some things to look upon which is near akin to eavesdropping or reading the letters of another. Such a scene did I now account the present one, and, turning, I moved away. But Saint-Eustache cut it short, for scarce had I taken three paces when his voice rang out the command to move. The driver hesitated, for the girl was still hanging at the window. But a second command, accompanied by a vigorous oath, overcame his hesitation. He gathered up his reins, cracked his whip, and the lumbering wheels began to move.

"Have a care, child!" I heard the Vicomte cry, "have a care! Adieu, mon enfant!"

She sprang back, sobbing, and assuredly she would have fallen, thrown out of balance by the movement of the coach, but that I put forth my hands and caught her.

I do not think she knew whose were the arms that held her for that brief space, so desolated was she by the grief so long repressed. At last she realized that it was this worthless Bardelys against whom she rested; this man who had wagered that he would win and wed her; this impostor who had come to her under an assumed name; this knave who had lied to her as no gentleman could have lied, swearing to love her, whilst, in reality, he did no more than seek to win a wager. When all this she realized, she shuddered a second, then moved abruptly from my grasp, and, without so much as a glance at me, she left me, and, ascending the steps of the chateau, she passed from my sight.

I gave the order to dismount as the last of Saint-Eustache's followers vanished under the portcullis.

CHAPTER XIX. THE FLINT AND THE STEEL

"Mademoiselle will see you, monsieur," said Anatole at last.

Twice already had he carried unavailingly my request that Roxalanne should accord me an interview ere I departed. On this the third occasion I had bidden him say that I would not stir from Lavedan until she had done me the honour of hearing me. Seemingly that threat had prevailed where entreaties had been scorned.

I followed Anatole from the half-light of the hall in which I had been pacing into the salon overlooking the terraces and the river, where Roxalanne awaited me. She was standing at the farther end of the room by one of the long windows, which was open, for, although we were already in the first week of October, the air of Languedoc was as warm and balmy as that of Paris or Picardy is in summer.

I advanced to the centre of the chamber, and there I paused and waited until it should please her to acknowledge my presence and turn to face me. I was no fledgling. I had seen much, I had learnt much and been in many places, and my bearing was wont to convey it. Never in my life had I been gauche, for which I thank my parents, and if years ago—long years ago—a certain timidity had marked my first introductions to the Louvre and the Luxembourg, that timidity was something from which I had long since parted company. And yet it seemed to me, as I stood in that pretty, sunlit room awaiting the pleasure of that child, scarce out of her teens, that some of the awkwardness I had escaped in earlier years, some of the timidity of long ago, came to me then. I shifted the weight of my body from one

leg to the other; I fingered the table by which I stood; I pulled at the hat I held; my colour came and went; I looked at her furtively from under bent brows, and I thanked God that her back being towards me she might not see the clown I must have seemed.

At length, unable longer to brook that discomposing silence—

"Mademoiselle!" I called softly. The sound of my own voice seemed to invigorate me, to strip me of my awkwardness and self-consciousness. It broke the spell that for a moment had been over me, and brought me back to myself—to the vain, self-confident, flamboyant Bardelys that perhaps you have pictured from my writings.

"I hope, monsieur," she answered, without turning, "that what you may have to say may justify in some measure your very importunate insistence."

On my life, this was not encouraging. But now that I was master of myself, I was not again so easily to be disconcerted. My eyes rested upon her as she stood almost framed in the opening of that long window. How straight and supple she was, yet how dainty and slight withal! She was far from being a tall woman, but her clean length of limb, her very slightness, and the high-bred poise of her shapely head, conveyed an illusion of height unless you stood beside her. The illusion did not sway me then. I saw only a child; but a child with a great spirit, with a great soul that seemed to accentuate her physical helplessness. That helplessness, which I felt rather than saw, wove into the warp of my love. She was in grief just then—in grief at the arrest of her father, and at the dark fate that threatened him; in grief at the unworthiness of a lover. Of the two which might be the more bitter it was not mine to judge, but I burned to gather her to me, to comfort and cherish her, to make her one with me, and thus, whilst giving her something of my man's height and strength, cull from her something of that pure, noble spirit, and thus sanctify my own.

I had a moment's weakness when she spoke. I was within an ace of advancing and casting myself upon my knees like any Lenten penitent, to sue forgiveness. But I set the inclination down betimes. Such expedients would not avail me here.

"What I have to say, mademoiselle," I answered after a pause, "would justify a saint descending into, hell; or, rather, to make my metaphor more apt, would warrant a sinner's intrusion into heaven."

I spoke solemnly, yet not too solemnly; the least slur of a sardonic humour was in my tones.

She moved her head upon the white column of her neck, and with the gesture one of her brown curls became disordered. I could fancy the upward tilt of her delicate nose, the scornful curve of her lip as she answered shortly "Then say it quickly, monsieur."

And, being thus bidden, I said quickly "I love you, Roxalanne."

Her heel beat the shimmering parquet of the floor; she half turned towards me, her cheek flushed, her lip tremulous with anger.

"Will you say what you have to say, monsieur?" she demanded in a concentrated voice, "and having said it, will you go?"

"Mademoiselle, I have already said it," I answered, with a wistful smile.

"Oh!" she gasped. Then suddenly facing round upon me, a world of anger in her blue eyes—eyes that I had known dreamy, but which were now very wide awake. "Was it to offer me this last insult you forced your presence upon me? Was it to mock me with those words, me—a woman, with no man about me to punish you? Shame, sir! Yet it is no more than I might look for in you."

"Mademoiselle, you do me grievous wrong—" I began.

"I do you no wrong," she answered hotly, then stopped, unwilling haply to be drawn into contention with me. "Enfin, since you have said what you came to say will you go?" And she pointed to the door.

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle—" I began in a voice of earnest intercession.

"Go!" she interrupted angrily, and for a second the violence of her voice and gesture almost reminded me of the Vicomtesse. "I will hear no more from you."

"Mademoiselle, you shall," I answered no whit less firmly.

"I will not listen to you. Talk if you will. You shall have the walls for audience." And she moved towards the door, but I barred her passage. I was courteous to the last degree; I bowed low before her as I put myself in her way.

"It is all that was wanting—that you should offer me violence!" she exclaimed.

"God forbid!" said I.

"Then let me pass."

"Aye, when you have heard me."

"I do not wish to hear you. Nothing that you may say can matter to me. Oh, monsieur, if you have any instincts of gentility, if you have any pretension to be accounted anything but a mauvais sujet, I beg of you to respect my grief. You witnessed, yourself, the arrest of my father. This is no season for such a scene as you are creating."

"Pardon! It is in such a season as this that you need the comfort and support that the man you love alone can give you."

"The man I love?" she echoed, and from flushed that they had been,

her cheeks went very pale. Her eyes fell for an instant, then—they were raised again, and their blue depths were offered me. "I think, sir," she said, through her teeth, "that your insolence transcends all belief."

"Can you deny it?" I cried. "Can you deny that you love me? If you can—why, then, you lied to me three nights ago at Toulouse!"

That smote her hard—so hard that she forgot her assurance that she would not listen to me—her promise to herself that she would stoop to no contention with me.

"If, in a momentary weakness, in my nescience of you as you truly are, I did make some such admission, I did entertain such feelings for you, things have come to my knowledge since then, monsieur, that have revealed you to me as another man; I have learnt something that has utterly withered such love as I then confessed. Now, monsieur, are you satisfied, and will you let me pass?" She said the last words with a return of her imperiousness, already angry at having been drawn so far.

"I am satisfied, mademoiselle," I answered brutally, "that you did not speak the truth three nights ago. You never loved me. It was pity that deluded you, shame that urged you—shame at the Delilah part you had played and at your betrayal of me. Now, mademoiselle, you may pass," said I.

And I stood aside, assured that as she was a woman she would not pass me now. Nor did she. She recoiled a step instead. Her lip quivered. Then she recovered quickly. Her mother might have told her that she was a fool for engaging herself in such a duel with me—me, the veteran of a hundred amorous combats. Yet though I doubt not it was her first assault-at-arms of this description, she was more than a match for me, as her next words proved.

"Monsieur, I thank you for enlightening me. I cannot, indeed, have spoken the truth three nights ago. You are right, I do not doubt it now, and you lift from me a load of shame."

Dieu! It was like a thrust in the high lines, and its hurtful violence staggered me. I was finished, it seemed. The victory was hers, and she but a child with no practice of Cupid's art of fence!

"Now, monsieur," she added, "now that you are satisfied that you did wrong to say I loved you, now that we have disposed of that question—adieu!"

"A moment yet!" I cried. "We have disposed of that, but there was another point, an earlier one, which for the moment we have disregarded. We have—you have disproved the love I was so presumptuous as to believe you fostered for me. We have yet to reckon with the love I bear you, mademoiselle, and of that we shall not be able to dispose so readily."

With a gesture of weariness or of impatience, she turned aside. "What is it you want? What do you seek to gain by thus provoking me? To win your wager?" Her voice was cold. Who to have looked upon that childlike face, upon those meek, pondering eyes, could have believed her capable of so much cruelty?

"There can no longer be any question of my wager; I have lost and paid it," said I.

She looked up suddenly. Her brows met in a frown of bewilderment. Clearly this interested her. Again was she drawn.

"How?" she asked. "You have lost and paid it?"

"Even so. That odious, cursed, infamous wager, was the something which I hinted at so often as standing between you and me. The confession that so often I was on the point of making—that so often

you urged me to make—concerned that wager. Would to God, Roxalanne, that I had told you!" I cried, and it seemed to me that the sincerity ringing in my voice drove some of the harshness from her countenance, some of the coldness from her glance.

"Unfortunately," I pursued, "it always seemed to me either not yet time, or already too late. Yet so soon as I regained my liberty, my first thought was of that. While the wager existed I might not ask you to become my wife, lest I should seem to be carrying out the original intention which embarked me upon the business of wooing you, and brought me here to Languedoc. And so my first step was to seek out Chatellerault and deliver him my note of hand for my Picardy possessions, the bulk—by far the greater bulk—of all my fortune. My second step was to repair to you at the Hotel de l'Epee.

"At last I could approach you with clean hands; I could confess what I had done; and since it seemed to me that I had made the utmost atonement, I was confident of success. Alas! I came too late. In the porch of the auberge I met you as you came forth. From my talkative intendant you had learnt already the story of that bargain into which Bardelys had entered. You had learnt who I was, and you thought that you had learnt why I wooed you. Accordingly you could but despise me."

She had sunk into a chair. Her hands were folded in a listless manner in her lap, and her eyes were lowered, her cheeks pale. But the swift heave of her bosom told me that my words were not without effect. "Do you know nothing of the bargain that I made with Chatellerault?" she asked in a voice that held, I thought, some trace of misery.

"Chatellerault was a cheat!" I cried. "No man of honour in France would have accounted himself under obligation to pay that wager. I paid it, not because I thought the payment due, but that by its payment I might offer you a culminating proof of my sincerity."

"Be that as it may," said she, "I passed him my word to—to marry him, if he set you at liberty."

"The promise does not hold, for when you made it I was at liberty already. Besides, Chatellerault is dead by now—or very near it."

"Dead?" she echoed, looking up.

"Yes, dead. We fought—" The ghost of a smile, of sudden, of scornful understanding, passed like a ray of light across her face. "Pardieu!" I cried, "you do me a wrong there. It was not by my hands that he fell. It was not by me that the duel was instigated."

And with that I gave her the whole details of the affair, including the information that Chatellerault had been no party to my release, and that for his attempted judicial murder of me the King would have dealt very hardly with him had he not saved the King the trouble by throwing himself upon his sword:

There was a silence when I had done. Roxalanne sat on, and seemed to ponder. To let all that I had said sink in and advocate my cause, as to me was very clear it must, I turned aside and moved to one of the windows.

"Why did you not tell me before?" she asked suddenly. "Why—oh, why—did you not confess to me the whole infamous affair as soon as you came to love me, as you say you did?"

"As I say I did?" I repeated after her. "Do you doubt it? Can you doubt it in the face of what I have done?"

"Oh, I don't know what to believe!" she cried, a sob in her voice. "You have deceived me so far, so often. Why did you not tell me that night on the river? Or later, when I pressed you in this very house? Or again, the other night in the prison of Toulouse?"

"You ask me why. Can you not answer the question for yourself? Can

you not conceive the fear that was in me that you should shrink away from me in loathing? The fear that if you cared a little, I might for all time stifle such affection as you bore me? The fear that I must ruin your trust in me? Oh, mademoiselle, can you not see how my only hope lay in first owning defeat to Chatellerault, in first paying the wager?"

"How could you have lent yourself to such a bargain?" was her next question.

"How, indeed?" I asked in my turn. "From your mother you have heard something of the reputation that attaches to Bardelys. I was a man of careless ways, satiated with all the splendours life could give me, nauseated by all its luxuries. Was it wonderful that I allowed myself to be lured into this affair? It promised some excitement, a certain novelty, difficulties in a path that I had—alas!—ever found all too smooth—for Chatellerault had made your reputed coldness the chief bolster of his opinion that I should not win.

"Again, I was not given to over-nice scruples. I make no secret of my infirmities, but do not blame me too much. If you could see the fine demoiselles we have in Paris, if you could listen to their tenets and take a deep look into their lives, you would not marvel at me. I had never known any but these. On the night of my coming to Lavedan, your sweetness, your pure innocence, your almost childish virtue, dazed me by their novelty. From that first moment I became your slave. Then I was in your garden day by day. And here, in this old Languedoc garden with you and your roses, during the languorous days of my convalescence, is it wonderful that some of the purity, some of the sweetness that was of you and of your roses, should have crept into my heart and cleansed it a little? Ah, mademoiselle!" I cried—and, coming close to her, I would have bent my knee in intercession but that she restrained me.

"Monsieur," she interrupted, "we harass ourselves in vain. This can

have but one ending."

Her tones were cold, but the coldness I knew was forced—else had she not said "we harass ourselves." Instead of quelling my ardour, it gave it fuel.

"True, mademoiselle," I cried, almost exultantly. "It can end but one way!"

She caught my meaning, and her frown deepened. I went too fast, it seemed.

"It had better end now, monsieur. There is too much between us. You wagered to win me to wife." She shuddered. "I could never forget it."

"Mademoiselle," I denied stoutly, "I did not."

"How?" She caught her breath. "You did not?"

"No," I pursued boldly. "I did not wager to win you. I wagered to win a certain Mademoiselle de Lavedan, who was unknown to me—but not you, not you."

She smiled, with never so slight a touch of scorn.

"Your distinctions are very fine—too fine for me, monsieur."

"I implore you to be reasonable. Think reasonably."

"Am I not reasonable? Do I not think? But there is so much to think of!" she sighed. "You carried your deception so far. You came here, for instance, as Monsieur de Lesperon. Why that duplicity?"

"Again, mademoiselle, I did not," said I.

She glanced at me with pathetic disdain.

"Indeed, indeed, monsieur, you deny things very bravely."

"Did I tell you that my name was Lesperon? Did I present myself to monsieur your father as Lesperon?"

"Surely—yes."

"Surely no; a thousand times no. I was the victim of circumstances in that, and if I turned them to my own account after they had been forced upon me, shall I be blamed and accounted a cheat? Whilst I was unconscious, your father, seeking for a clue to my identity, made an inspection of my clothes.

"In the pocket of my doublet they found some papers addressed to Rene de Lesperon—some love letters, a communication from the Duc d'Orleans, and a woman's portrait. From all of this it was assumed that I was that Lesperon. Upon my return to consciousness your father greeted me effusively, whereat I wondered; he passed on to discuss—nay, to tell me of—the state of the province and of his own connection with the rebels, until I lay gasping at his egregious temerity. Then, when he greeted me as Monsieur de Lesperon, I had the explanation of it, but too late. Could I deny the identity then? Could I tell him that I was Bardelys, the favourite of the King himself? What would have occurred? I ask you, mademoiselle. Would I not have been accounted a spy, and would they not have made short work of me here at your chateau?"

"No, no; they would have done no murder."

"Perhaps not, but I could not be sure just then. Most men situated as your father was would have despatched me. Ah, mademoiselle, have you not proofs enough? Do you not believe me now?"

"Yes, monsieur," she answered simply, "I believe you."

"Will you not believe, then, in the sincerity of my love?"

She made no reply. Her face was averted, but from her silence I took

heart. I drew close to her. I set my hand upon the tall back of her chair, and, leaning towards her, I spoke with passionate heat as must have melted, I thought, any woman who had not a loathing for me.

"Mademoiselle; I am a poor man now," I ended. "I am no longer that magnificent gentleman whose wealth and splendour were a byword. Yet am I no needy adventurer. I have a little property at Beaugency—a very spot for happiness, mademoiselle. Paris shall know me no more. At Beaugency I shall live at peace, in seclusion, and, so that you come with me, in such joy as in all my life I have done nothing to deserve. I have no longer an army of retainers. A couple of men and a maid or two shall constitute our household. Yet I shall account my wealth well lost if for love's sake you'll share with me the peace of my obscurity. I am poor, mademoiselle yet no poorer even now than that Gascon gentleman, Rene de Lesperon, for whom you held me, and on whom you bestowed the priceless treasure of your heart."

"Oh, might it have pleased God that you had remained that poor Gascon gentleman!" she cried.

"In what am I different, Roxalanne?"

"In that he had laid no wager," she answered, rising suddenly.

My hopes were withering. She was not angry. She was pale, and her gentle face was troubled—dear God! how sorely troubled! To me it almost seemed that I had lost.

She flashed me a glance of her blue eyes, and I thought that tears impended.

"Roxalanne!" I supplicated.

But she recovered the control that for a moment she had appeared upon the verge of losing. She put forth her hand.

"Adieu, monsieur!" said she.

I glanced from her hand to her face. Her attitude began to anger me, for I saw that she was not only resisting me, but resisting herself. In her heart the insidious canker of doubt persisted. She knew—or should have known—that it no longer should have any place there, yet obstinately she refrained from plucking it out. There was that wager. But for that same obstinacy she must have realized the reason of my arguments, the irrefutable logic of my payment. She denied me, and in denying me she denied herself, for that she had loved me she had herself told me, and that she could love me again I was assured, if she would but see the thing in the light of reason and of justice.

"Roxalanne, I did not come to Lavedan to say 'Good-bye' to you. I seek from you a welcome, not a dismissal."

"Yet my dismissal is all that I can give. Will you not take my hand? May we not part in friendly spirit?"

"No, we may not; for we do not part at all."

It was as the steel of my determination striking upon the flint of hers. She looked up to my face for an instant; she raised her eyebrows in deprecation; she sighed, shrugged one shoulder, and, turning on her heel, moved towards the door.

"Anatole shall bring you refreshment ere you go," she said in a very polite and formal voice.

Then I played my last card. Was it for nothing that I had flung away my wealth? If she would not give herself, by God, I would compel her to sell herself. And I took no shame in doing it, for by doing it I was saving her and saving myself from a life of unhappiness.

"Roxalanne!" I cried. The imperiousness of my voice arrested and compelled her perhaps against her very will.

"Monsieur?" said she, as demurely as you please.

"Do you know what you are doing?"

"But yes—perfectly."

"Pardieu, you do not. I will tell you. You are sending your father to the scaffold."

She turned livid, her step faltered, and she leant against the frame of the doorway for support. Then she stared at me, wide-eyed in horror.

"That is not true," she pleaded, yet without conviction. "He is not in danger of his life. They can prove nothing against him. Monsieur de Saint-Eustache could find no evidence here—nothing."

"Yet there is Monsieur de Saint-Eustache's word; there is the fact—the significant fact—that your father did not take up arms for the King, to afford the Chevalier's accusation some measure of corroboration. At Toulouse in these times they are not particular. Remember how it had fared with me but for the King's timely arrival."

That smote home. The last shred of her strength fell from her. A great sob shook her, then covering her face with her hands "Mother in heaven, have pity on me!" she cried. "Oh, it cannot be, it cannot be!"

Her distress touched me sorely. I would have consoled her, I would have bidden her have no fear, assuring her that I would save her father. But for my own ends, I curbed the mood. I would use this as a cudgel to shatter her obstinacy, and I prayed that God might forgive me if I did aught that a gentleman should account unworthy. My need was urgent, my love all-engrossing; winning her meant winning life and happiness, and already I had sacrificed so much. Her cry rang still in my ears, "It cannot be, it cannot be!"

I trampled my nascent tenderness underfoot, and in its room I set a harshness that I did not feel—a harshness of defiance and menace.

"It can be, it will be, and, as God lives, it shall be, if you persist in your unreasonable attitude."

"Monsieur, have mercy!"

"Yes, when you shall be pleased to show me the way to it by having mercy upon me. If I have sinned, I have atoned. But that is a closed question now; to reopen it were futile. Take heed of this, Roxalanne: there is one thing—one only in all France can save your father."

"That is, monsieur?" she inquired breathlessly.

"My word against that of Saint-Eustache. My indication to His Majesty that your father's treason is not to be accepted on the accusation of Saint-Eustache. My information to the King of what I know touching this gentleman."

"You will go, monsieur?" she implored me. "Oh, you will save him! Mon Dieu, to think of the time that we have wasted here, you and I, whilst he is being carried to the scaffold! Oh, I did not dream it was so perilous with him! I was desolated by his arrest; I thought of some months' imprisonment, perhaps. But that he should die—! Monsieur de Bardelys, you will save him! Say that you will do this for me!"

She was on her knees to me now, her arms clasping my boots, her eyes raised in entreaty—God, what entreaty!—to my own.

"Rise, mademoiselle, I beseech you," I said, with a quiet I was far from feeling. "There is no need for this. Let us be calm. The danger to your father is not so imminent. We may have some days yet—three or four, perhaps."

I lifted her gently and led her to a chair. I was hard put to it not to hold her supported in my arms. But I might not cull that advantage from her distress. A singular niceness, you will say, perhaps, as in your scorn

you laugh at me. Perhaps you are right to laugh—yet are you not altogether right.

"You will go to Toulouse, monsieur?" she begged.

I took a turn in the room, then halting before her "Yes," I answered, "I will go."

The gratitude that leapt to her eyes smote me hard, for my sentence was unfinished.

"I will go," I continued quickly, "when you shall have promised to become my wife."

The joy passed from her face. She glanced at me a moment as if without understanding.

"I came to Lavedan to win you, Roxalanne, and from Lavedan I shall not stir until I have accomplished my design," I said very quietly. "You will therefore see that it rests with you how soon I may set out."

She fell to weeping softly, but answered nothing. At last I turned from her and moved towards the door.

"Where are you going?" she cried.

"To take the air, mademoiselle. If upon deliberation you can bring yourself to marry me, send me word by Anatole or one of the others, and I shall set out at once for Toulouse."

"Stop!" she cried. Obediently I stopped, my hand already upon the doorknob. "You are cruel, monsieur!" she complained.

"I love you," said I, by way of explaining it. "To be cruel seems to be the way of love. You have been cruel to me."

"Would you—would you take what is not freely given?"

"I have the hope that when you see that you must give, you will give freely."

"If—if I make you this promise—"

"Yes?" I was growing white with eagerness.

"You will fulfil your part of the bargain?"

"It is a habit of mine, mademoiselle—as witnesses the case of Chatellerault." She shivered at the mention of his name. It reminded her of precisely such another bargain that three nights ago she had made. Precisely, did I say? Well, not quite precisely.

"I—I promise to marry you, then," said she in a choking voice, "whenever you choose, after my father shall have been set at liberty."

I bowed. "I shall start at once," said I.

And perhaps out of shame, perhaps out of—who shall say what sentiments?—I turned without another word and left her.

CHAPTER XX. THE "BRAVI" AT BLAGNAC

I was glad to be in the open once more—glad of the movement, as I rode at the head of my brave company along the bank of the Garonne and in the shade of the golden, autumn-tinted trees.

I was in a measure angry with myself that I had driven such a bargain with Roxalanne, in a measure angry with her that she had forced me to it by her obstinacy. A fine gentleman I, on my soul, to have dubbed Chatellerault a cheat for having done no worse than I had now brought myself to do! Yet, was it so? No, I assured myself, it was not. A thousand times no! What I had done I had done as much to win Roxalanne to me as to win her from her own unreasonableness. In the days to come she should thank me for my harshness, for that which now she perhaps accounted my unfairness.

Then, again, would I ask myself, was I very sure of this? And so the two questions were flung the one against the other; my conscience divided itself into two parties, and they waged a war that filled me with a depressing uncertainty.

In the end shame was overthrown, and I flung back my head with a snort of assurance. I was doing no wrong. On the contrary, I was doing right—both by myself and by Roxalanne. What matter that I was really cheating her? What matter that I had said I would not leave Lavedan until I had her promise, whilst in reality I had hurled my threat at Saint-Eustache that I would meet him at Toulouse, and passed my word to the Vicomtesse that I would succour her husband?

I gave no thought to the hidden threat with which Saint-Eustache had

retorted that from Lavedan to Toulouse was a distance of some twenty leagues. Had he been a man of sterner purposes I might have been uneasy and on my guard. But Saint-Eustache pshaw!

It is ill to underestimate an enemy, be he never so contemptible, and for my disdain of the Chevalier I might have paid dearly had not Fortune—which of late had been practising singular jests upon me after seemingly abandoning me, returned to my aid at the last moment.

It was Saint-Eustache's purpose that I should never reach Toulouse alive, for in all the world I was the one man he feared, the one man who would encompass his undoing and destruction by a word. And so he had resolved and disposed that I should be removed, and to accomplish this he had left a line of bravi along the road I was to pass.

He had counted upon my lying the night in one of the intervening towns, for the journey was over-long to be accomplished at a stretch, and wherever I might chance to lie, there I should have to reckon with his assassins. The nearer Toulouse—although I knew not this—the thicker grew my danger. Into the very thick of it I rode; in the very thick of it I lay, and all that came of it was that I obtained possession of one more and overwhelming piece of evidence against my murderous Chevalier. But I outran my story.

It had been my purpose to change horses at Grenade, and so push on and reach Toulouse that very night or in the early hours of the following morning. At Grenade, however, there were no horses to be obtained, at least not more than three, and so, leaving the greater portion of my company behind, I set out, escorted only by Gilles and Antoine. Night had fallen long before we reached Lespinasse, and with it came foul weather. The wind rose from the west, grew to the violence of a hurricane, and brought with it such a deluge of cold, cutting rain as never had it been my ill-chance to ride through. From

Lespinasse to Fenouillet the road dips frequently, and wherever this occurred it seemed to us that we were riding in a torrent, our horses fetlock-deep in mud.

Antoine complained in groans; Gilles growled openly, and went the length of begging me, as we rode through the ill-paved, flooded streets of Fenouillet, to go no farther. But I was adamant in my resolve. Soaked to the skin, my clothes hanging sodden about me, and chilled to the marrow though I was, I set my chattering teeth, and swore that we should not sleep until we reached Toulouse.

"My God," he groaned, "and we but halfway!"

"Forward!" was all I answered; and so as midnight chimed we left Fenouillet behind us, and dashed on into the open country and the full fury of the tempest.

My servants came after me upon their stumbling horses, whining and cursing by turns, and forgetting in their misery the respect that they were accustomed to pay me. I think now that it was a providence that guided me. Had I halted at Fenouillet, as they would have had me do, it is odds that this chronicle would never have been penned, for likely enough I had had my throat cut as I slept. A providence was it also that brought my horse down within a half-mile of Blagnac, and so badly did it founder that it might not be ridden farther.

The beasts my men bestrode were in little better condition, and so, with infinite chagrin, I was forced to acknowledge defeat and to determine that at Blagnac we should lie for the remainder of the night. After all, it mattered little. A couple of hours' riding in the morning would bring us to Toulouse, and we would start betimes.

I bade Gilles dismount—he had been the louder in his complainings—and follow us afoot, bringing my horse to the Auberge de l'Etoile at Blagnac, where he would await him. Then I mounted his jaded beast,

and, accompanied by Antoine—the last of my retainers—I rode into Blagnac, and pulled up at the sign of the "Star."

With my whip I smote the door, and I had need to smite hard if I would be heard above the wind that shrieked and howled under the eaves of that narrow street. Yet it almost seemed as if some one were expected, for scarce had my knocking ceased when the door was opened, and the landlord stood there, shading a taper with his hand. For a moment I saw the glow of its light on his rosy, white-bearded face, then a gust of wind extinguished it.

"Diable!" he swore, "an ugly night for travelling"; adding as an afterthought, "You ride late, monsieur."

"You are a man of supreme discernment, Monsieur l'Hôte," said I testily, as I pushed him aside and stepped into the passage. "Will you keep me in the rain till daylight whilst you perpend how late I ride? Is your ostler abed? See to those beasts yourself, then. Afterwards get me food—for me and for my man and beds for both of us."

"I have but one room, monsieur," he answered respectfully. "You shall have that, and your servant shall sleep in the hayloft."

"My servant sleeps in my room, if you have but one. Set a mattress on the floor for him. Is this a night to leave a dog to sleep in a hayloft? I have another servant following. He will be here in a few minutes. You must find room for him also—in the passage outside my door, if no other accommodation be possible."

"But, monsieur—" he began in a tone of protest, which I set down to the way a landlord has of making difficulties that he shall be the better paid for such lodging as he finds us.

"See to it," I ordered peremptorily. "You shall be well paid. Now go tend those horses."

On the wall of the passage fell a warm, reddish glow from the common room, which argued a fire, and this was too alluring to admit of my remaining longer in discussion with him. I strode forward, therefore. The Auberge de l'Etoile was not an imposing hostelry, nor one at which from choice I had made a halt. This common room stank most vilely of oil, of burning tallow—from the smoky tapers—and of I know not what other noisome unsavourinesses.

As I entered, I was greeted by a resonant snore from a man seated in a corner by the fire. His head had fallen back, displaying the brown, sinewy neck, and he slept—or seemed to sleep—with mouth wide open. Full length on the hearth and in the red glare of the burning logs lay what at first glance I took to be a heap of rags, but which closer scrutiny showed me to be another man, seemingly asleep also.

I flung my sodden castor on the table; I dropped my drenched cloak on the ground, and stepped with heavy tread and a noisy rattle of spurs across the floor. Yet my ragged gentleman slept on. I touched him lightly with my whip.

"Hold, mon bonhomme!" I cried to him. Still he did not move, whereat I lost patience and caught him a kick full in the side, so choicely aimed that first it doubled him up, then brought him into a sitting posture, with the snarl of a cross-grained dog that has been rudely aroused.

From out of an evil, dirty countenance a pair of gloomy, bloodshot eyes scowled threateningly upon me. The man on the chair awoke at the same instant, and sat forward.

"Eh bien?" said I to my friend on the hearth: "Will you stir yourself?"

"For whom?" he growled. "Is not the Etoile as much for me as for you, whoever you may be?"

"We have paid our lodging, pardieu!" swore he of the chair.

"My masters," said I grimly, "if you have not eyes to see my sodden condition, and if you therefore have not the grace to move that I may approach the fire; I'll see to it that you spend the night not only a l'Etoile, but a la belle etoile." With which pleasantry, and a touch of the foot, I moved my friend aside. My tone was not nice, nor do I generally have the air of promising more than I can fulfil.

They were growling together in a corner when Antoine came to draw off my doublet and my boots. They were still growling when Gilles joined us presently, although at his coming they paused to take his measure with their eyes. For Gilles was something of a giant, and men were wont to turn their heads—aye, and women too—to admire his fine proportions. We supped—so vilely that I have not the heart to tell you what we ate—and, having supped, I bade my host light me to my chamber. As for my men, I had determined that they should spend the night in the common room, where there was a fire, and where— notwithstanding the company of those two ruffians, into whose presence I had not troubled to inquire—they would doubtless be better than elsewhere in that poor hostelry.

In gathering up my cloak and doublet and other effects to bear them off to the kitchen, the host would have possessed himself also of my sword. But with a laugh I took it from him, remarking that it required no drying.

As we mounted the stairs, I heard something above me that sounded like the creaking of a door. The host heard it also, for he stood suddenly still, his glance very questioning.

"What was that?" said he.

"The wind, I should say," I answered idly; and my answer seemed to reassure him, for with a "Ah, yes—the wind," he went on.

Now, for all that I am far from being a man of tremors or unwarranted

fears, to tell the truth the hostility of the "Star" was beginning to fret my nerves. I could scarce have told you why had you asked me, as I sat upon the bed after mine host had left me, and turned my thoughts to it. It was none of the trivial incidents that had marked my coming; but it was, I think, the combination of them all. First there was the host's desire to separate me from my men by suggesting that they should sleep in the hayloft. Clearly unnecessary, when he was not averse to turning his common room into a dormitory. There was his very evident relief when, after announcing that I would have them sleep one in my room and one in the passage by my door, I consented to their spending the night below; there was the presence of those two very ill-looking cut-throats; there was the attempt to carry off my sword; and, lastly, there was that creaking door and the host's note of alarm.

What was that?

I stood up suddenly. Had my fancy, dwelling upon that very incident, tricked me into believing that a door had creaked again? I listened, but a silence followed, broken only by a drone of voices ascending from the common room. As I had assured the host upon the stairs, so I now assured myself that it was the wind, the signboard of the inn, perhaps, swaying in the storm.

And then, when I had almost dismissed my doubts, and was about to divest myself of my remaining clothes, I saw something at which I thanked Heaven that I had not allowed the landlord to carry off my rapier. My eyes were on the door, and, as I gazed, I beheld the slow raising of the latch. It was no delusion; my wits were keen and my eyes sharp; there was no fear to make me see things that were not. Softly I stepped to the bed-rail where I had hung my sword by the baldric, and as softly I unsheathed it. The door was pushed open, and I caught the advance of a stealthy step. A naked foot shot past the edge of the door into my room, and for a second I thought of pinning it to the ground with my rapier; then came a leg, then a half-

dressed body surmounted by a face—the face of Rodenard!

At sight of it, amazement and a hundred suspicions crossed my mind. How, in God's name, came he here, and for what purpose did he steal so into my chamber?

But my suspicions perished even as they were begotten. There was so momentous, so alarmingly warning a look on his face as he whispered the one word "Monseigneur!" that clearly if danger there was to me it was not from him.

"What the devil—" I began.

But at the sound of my voice the alarm grew in his eyes.

"Sh!" he whispered, his finger on his lips. "Be silent, monseigneur, for Heaven's sake!"

Very softly he closed the door; softly, yet painfully, he hobbled forward to my side.

"There is a plot to murder you, monseigneur," he whispered.

"What! Here at Blagnac?"

He nodded fearfully.

"Bah!" I laughed. "You rave, man. Who was to know that I was to come this way? And who is there to plot against my life?"

"Monsieur de Saint-Eustache," he answered.

"And for the rest, as to expecting you here, they did not, but they were prepared against the remote chance of your coming. From what I have gathered, there is not a hostility betwixt this and Lavedan at which the Chevalier has not left his cutthroats with the promise of enormous reward to the men who shall kill you."

I caught my breath at that. My doubts vanished.

"Tell me what you know," said I. "Be brief."

Thereupon this faithful dog, whom I had so sorely beaten but four nights ago, told me how, upon finding himself able to walk once more, he had gone to seek me out, that he might implore me to forgive him and not cast him off altogether, after a lifetime spent in the service of my father and of myself.

He had discovered from Monsieur de Castelroux that I was gone to Lavedan, and he determined to follow me thither. He had no horse and little money, and so he had set out afoot that very day, and dragged himself as far as Blagnac, where, however, his strength had given out, and he was forced to halt. A providence it seemed that this had so befallen. For here at the Etoile he had that evening overheard Saint-Eustache in conversation with those two bravi below stairs. It would seem from what he had said that at every hostelry from Grenade to Toulouse—at which it was conceivable that I might spend the night—the Chevalier had made a similar provision.

At Blagnac, if I got so far without halting, I must arrive very late, and therefore the Chevalier had bidden his men await me until daylight. He did not believe, however, that I should travel so far, for he had seen to it that I should find no horses at the posthouses. But it was just possible that I might, nevertheless, push on, and Saint-Eustache would let no possibility be overlooked. Here at Blagnac the landlord, Rodenard informed me, was also in Saint-Eustache's pay. Their intention was to stab me as I slept.

"Monseigneur," he ended, "knowing what danger awaited you along the road, I have sat up all night, praying God and His saints that you might come this far, and that thus I might warn you. Had I been less bruised and sore, I had got myself a horse and ridden out to meet you; as it was, I could but hope and pray that you would reach

Blagnac, and that—"

I gathered him into my arms at that, but my embrace drew a groan from him, for the poor, faithful knave was very sore.

"My poor Ganymede!" I murmured, and I was more truly moved to sympathy, I think, than ever I had been in all my selfish life. Hearing his sobriquet, a look of hope gleamed suddenly in his eye.

"You will take me back, monseigneur?" he pleaded. "You will take me back, will you not? I swear that I will never let my tongue—"

"Sh, my good Ganymede. Not only will I take you back, but I shall strive to make amends for my brutality. Come, my friend, you shall have twenty golden Louis to buy unguents for your poor shoulders."

"Monseigneur is very good," he murmured, whereupon I would have embraced him again but that he shivered and drew back.

"No, no, monseigneur," he whispered fearfully. "It is a great honour, but it—it pains me to be touched."

"Then take the will for the deed. And now for these gentlemen below stairs." I rose and moved to the door.

"Order Gilles to beat their brains out," was Ganymede's merciful suggestion.

I shook my head. "We might be detained for doing murder. We have no proof yet of their intentions—I think—" An idea flashed suddenly across my mind. "Go back to your room, Ganymede," I bade him. "Lock yourself in, and do not stir until I call you. I do not wish their suspicions aroused."

I opened the door, and as Ganymede obediently slipped past me and vanished down the passage "Monsieur l'Hôte," I called. "Ho, there, Gilles!"

"Monsieur," answered the landlord.

"Monseigneur," replied Gilles; and there came a stir below.

"Is aught amiss?" the landlord questioned, a note of concern in his voice.

"Amiss?" I echoed peevishly, mincing my words as I uttered them. "Pardi! Must I be put to it to undress myself, whilst those two lazy dogs of mine are snoring beneath me? Come up this instant, Gilles. And," I added as an afterthought, "you had best sleep here in my room."

"At once, monseigneur," answered he, but I caught the faintest tinge of surprise in his accents, for never yet had it fallen to the lot of sturdy, clumsy Gilles to assist me at my toilet.

The landlord muttered something, and I heard Gilles whispering his reply. Then the stairs creaked under his heavy tread.

In my room I told him in half a dozen words what was afoot. For answer, he swore a great oath that the landlord had mulled a stoup of wine for him, which he never doubted now was drugged. I bade him go below and fetch the wine, telling the landlord that I, too had a fancy for it.

"But what of Antoine?" he asked. "They will drug him."

"Let them. We can manage this affair, you and I, without his help. If they did not drug him, they might haply stab him. So that in being drugged lies his safety."

As I bade him so he did, and presently he returned with a great steaming measure. This I emptied into a ewer, then returned it to him that he might take it back to the host with my thanks and our appreciation. Thus should we give them confidence that the way was clear and smooth for them.

Thereafter there befell precisely that which already you will be expecting, and nothing that you cannot guess. It was perhaps at the end of an hour's silent waiting that one of them came. We had left the door unbarred so that his entrance was unhampered. But scarce was he within when out of the dark, on either side of him, rose Gilles and I. Before he had realized it, he was lifted off his feet and deposited upon the bed without a cry; the only sound being the tinkle of the knife that dropped from his suddenly unnerved hand.

On the bed, with Gilles's great knee in his stomach, and Gilles's hands at his throat, he was assured in unequivocal terms that at his slightest outcry we would make an end of him. I kindled a light. We trussed him hand and foot with the bedclothes, and then, whilst he lay impotent and silent in his terror, I proceeded to discuss the situation with him.

I pointed out that we knew that what he had done he had done at Saint-Eustache's instigation, therefore the true guilt was Saint-Eustache's and upon him alone the punishment should fall. But ere this could come to pass, he himself must add his testimony to ours—mine and Rodenard's. If he would come to Toulouse and do that make a full confession of how he had been set to do this murdering—the Chevalier de Saint-Eustache, who was the real culprit, should be the only one to suffer the penalty of the law. If he would not do that, why, then, he must stand the consequences himself—and the consequences would be the hangman. But in either case he was coming to Toulouse in the morning.

It goes without saying that he was reasonable. I never for a moment held his judgment in doubt; there is no loyalty about a cut-throat, and it is not the way of his calling to take unnecessary risk.

We had just settled the matter in a mutually agreeable manner when the door opened again, and his confederate—rendered uneasy, no doubt, by his long absence—came to see what could be occasioning

this unconscionable delay in the slitting of the throats of a pair of sleeping men.

Beholding us there in friendly conclave, and no doubt considering that under the circumstances his intrusion was nothing short of an impertinence, that polite gentleman uttered a cry—which I should like to think was an apology for having disturbed us and turned to go with most indecorous precipitancy.

But Gilles took him by the nape of his dirty neck and haled him back into the room. In less time than it takes me to tell of it, he lay beside his colleague, and was being asked whether he did not think that he might also come to take the same view of the situation. Overjoyed that we intended no worse by him, he swore by every saint in the calendar that he would do our will, that he had reluctantly undertaken the Chevalier's business, that he was no cut-throat, but a poor man with a wife and children to provide for.

And that, in short, was how it came to pass that the Chevalier de Saint-Eustache himself, by disposing for my destruction, disposed only for his own. With these two witnesses, and Rodenard to swear how Saint-Eustache had bribed them to cut my throat, with myself and Gilles to swear how the attempt had been made and frustrated, I could now go to His Majesty with a very full confidence, not only of having the Chevalier's accusations, against whomsoever they might be, discredited, but also of sending the Chevalier himself to the gallows he had so richly earned.

CHAPTER XXI. LOUIS THE JUST

"For me," said the King, "these depositions were not necessary. Your word, my dear Marcel, would have sufficed. For the courts, however, perhaps it is well that you have had them taken; moreover, they form a valuable corroboration of the treason which you lay to the charge of Monsieur de Saint-Eustache."

We were standing—at least, La Fosse and I were standing, Louis XIII sat—in a room, of the Palace of Toulouse, where I had had the honour of being brought before His Majesty. La Fosse was there, because it would seem that the King had grown fond of him, and could not be without him since his coming to Toulouse.

His Majesty was, as usual, so dull and weary—not even roused by the approaching trial of Montmorency, which was the main business that had brought him South that even the company of this vapid, shallow, but irrepressibly good-humoured La Fosse, with his everlasting mythology, proved a thing desirable.

"I will see," said Louis, "that your friend the Chevalier is placed under arrest at once, and as much for his attempt upon your life as for the unstable quality of his political opinions, the law shall deal with him—conclusively." He sighed. "It always pains me to proceed to extremes against a man of his stamp. To deprive a fool of his head seems a work of supererogation."

I inclined my head, and smiled at his pleasantry. Louis the just rarely permitted himself to jest, and when he did his humour was as like unto humour as water is like unto wine. Still, when a monarch jests, if you

are wise, if you have a favour to sue, or a position at Court to seek or to maintain, you smile, for all that the ineptitude of his witless wit be rather provocative of sorrow.

"Nature needs meddling with at times," hazarded La Fosse, from behind His Majesty's chair. "This Saint-Eustache is a sort of Pandora's box, which it is well to close ere—"

"Go to the devil," said the King shortly. "We are not jesting. We have to do justice."

"Ah! Justice," murmured La Fosse; "I have seen pictures of the lady. She covers her eyes with a bandage, but is less discreet where the other beauties of her figure are in question."

His Majesty blushed. He was above all things a chaste-minded man, modest as a nun. To the immodesty rampant about him he was in the habit of closing his eyes and his ears, until the flagrancy or the noise of it grew to proportions to which he might remain neither blind nor deaf.

"Monsieur de la Fosse," said he in an austere voice, "you weary me, and when people weary me I send them away—which is one of the reasons why I am usually so much alone. I beg that you will glance at that hunting-book, so that when I have done with Monsieur de Bardelys you may give me your impressions of it."

La Fosse fell back, obedient but unabashed, and, moving to a table by the window, he opened the book Louis had pointed out.

"Now, Marcel, while that buffoon prepares to inform me that the book has been inspired by Diana herself, tell me what else you have to tell."

"Naught else, Sire."

"How naught? What of this Vicomte de Lavedan?"

"Surely Your Majesty is satisfied that there is no charge—no heedful charge against him?"

"Aye, but there is a charge—a very heedful one. And so far you have afforded me no proofs of his innocence to warrant my sanctioning his enlargement."

"I had thought, Sire, that it would be unnecessary to advance proofs of his innocence until there were proofs of his guilt to be refuted. It is unusual, Your Majesty, to apprehend a gentleman so that he may show cause why he did not deserve such apprehension. The more usual course is to arrest him because there are proofs of his guilt to be preferred against him."

Louis combed his beard pensively, and his melancholy eyes grew thoughtful.

"A nice point, Marcel," said he, and he yawned. "A nice point. You should have been a lawyer." Then, with an abrupt change of manner, "Do you give me your word of honour that he is innocent?" he asked sharply.

"If Your Majesty's judges offer proof of his guilt, I give you my word that I will tear that proof to pieces."

"That is not an answer. Do you swear his innocence?"

"Do I know what he carries in his conscience?" quoth I still fencing with the question. "How can I give my word in such a matter? Ah, Sire, it is not for nothing that they call you Louis the Just," I pursued, adopting cajolery and presenting him with his own favourite phrase. "You will never allow a man against whom there is no shred of evidence to be confined in prison."

"Is there not?" he questioned. Yet his tone grew gentler. History, he had promised himself, should know him as Louis the Just, and he

"How could you do naught that might jeopardize his claim to that proud title. There is the evidence of this Saint-Eustache!"

"Would Your Majesty hang a dog upon the word of that double traitor?"

"Hum! You are a great advocate, Marcel. You avoid answering questions; you turn questions aside by counter-questions." He seemed to be talking more to himself than to me. "You are a much better advocate than the Vicomte's wife, for instance. She answers questions and has a temper—Ciel! what a temper!"

"You have seen the Vicomtesse?" I exclaimed, and I grew cold with apprehension, knowing as I did the licence of that woman's tongue.

"Seen her?" he echoed whimsically. "I have seen her, heard her, well-nigh felt her. The air of this room is still disturbed as a consequence of her presence. She was here an hour ago."

"And it seemed," lisped La Fosse, turning from his hunting-book, "as if the three daughters of Acheron had quitted the domain of Pluto to take embodiment in a single woman."

"I would not have seen her," the King resumed as though La Fosse had not spoken, "but she would not be denied. I heard her voice blaspheming in the antechamber when I refused to receive her; there was a commotion at my door; it was dashed open, and the Swiss who held it was hurled into my room here as though he had been a mannikin. Dieu! Since I have reigned in France I have not been the centre of so much commotion. She is a strong woman, Marcel the saints defend you hereafter, when she shall come to be your mother-in-law. In all France, I'll swear, her tongue is the only stouter thing than her arm. But she's a fool."

"What did she say, Sire?" I asked in my anxiety.

"Say? She swore—Ciel! how she did swear! Not a saint in the calendar would she let rest in peace; she dragged them all by turns from their chapter-rolls to bear witness to the truth of what she said."

"That was—"

"That her husband was the foulest traitor out of hell. But that he was a fool with no wit of his own to make him accountable for what he did, and that out of folly he had gone astray. Upon those grounds she besought me to forgive him and let him go. When I told her that he must stand his trial, and that I could offer her but little hope of his acquittal, she told me things about myself, which in my conceit, and thanks to you flatterers who have surrounded me, I had never dreamed.

"She told me I was ugly, sour-faced, and malformed; that I was priest-ridden and a fool; unlike my brother, who, she assured me, is a mirror of chivalry and manly perfections. She promised me that Heaven should never receive my soul, though I told my beads from now till Doomsday, and she prophesied for me a welcome among the damned when my time comes. What more she might have foretold I cannot say. She wearied me at last, for all her novelty, and I dismissed her—that is to say," he amended, "I ordered four musketeers to carry her out. God pity you, Marcel, when you become her daughter's husband!"

But I had no heart to enter into his jocularly. This woman with her ungovernable passion and her rash tongue had destroyed everything.

"I see no likelihood of being her daughter's husband," I answered mournfully.

The King looked up, and laughed. "Down on your knees, then," said he, "and render thanks to Heaven."

But I shook my head very soberly. "To Your Majesty it is a pleasing

comedy," said I, "but to me, *helas!* it is nearer far to tragedy."

"Come, Marcel," said he, "may I not laugh a little? One grows so sad with being King of France! Tell me what vexes you."

"Mademoiselle de Lavedan has promised that she will marry me only when I have saved her father from the scaffold. I came to do it, very full of hope, Sire. But his wife has forestalled me and, seemingly, doomed him irrevocably."

His glance fell; his countenance resumed its habitual gloom. Then he looked up again, and in the melancholy depths of his eyes I saw a gleam of something that was very like affection.

"You know that I love you, Marcel," he said gently. "Were you my own son I could not love you more. You are a profligate, dissolute knave, and your scandals have rung in my ears more than once; yet you are different from these other fools, and at least you have never wearied me. To have done that is to have done something. I would not lose you, Marcel; as lose you I shall if you marry this rose of Languedoc, for I take it that she is too sweet a flower to let wither in the stale atmosphere of Courts. This man, this Vicomte de Lavedan, has earned his death. Why should I not let him die, since if he dies you will not wed?"

"Do you ask me why, Sire?" said I. "Because they call you Louis the Just, and because no king was ever more deserving of the title."

He winced; he pursed his lips, and shot a glance at La Fosse, who was deep in the mysteries of his volume. Then he drew towards him a sheet of paper, and, taking a quill, he sat toying with it.

"Because they call me the Just, I must let justice take its course," he answered presently.

"But," I objected, with a sudden hope, "the course of justice cannot

lead to the headsman in the case of the Vicomte de Lavedan."

"Why not?" And his solemn eyes met mine across the table.

"Because he took no active part in the revolt. If he was a traitor, he was no more than a traitor at heart, and until a man commits a crime in deed he is not amenable to the law's rigour. His wife has made his defection clear; but it were unfair to punish him in the same measure as you punish those who bore arms against you, Sire."

"Ah!" he pondered. "Well? What more?"

"Is that not enough, Sire?" I cried. My heart beat quickly, and my pulses throbbed with the suspense of that portentous moment.

He bent his head, dipped his pen and began to write.

"What punishment would you have me mete out to him?" he asked as he wrote. "Come, Marcel, deal fairly with me, and deal fairly with him—for as you deal with him, so shall I deal with you through him."

I felt myself paling in my excitement. "There is banishment, Sire—it is usual in cases of treason that are not sufficiently flagrant to be punished by death."

"Yes!" He wrote busily. "Banishment for how long, Marcel? For his lifetime?"

"Nay, Sire. That were too long."

"For my lifetime, then?"

"Again that were too long."

He raised his eyes and smiled. "Ah! You turn prophet? Well, for how long, then? Come, man."

"I should think five years—"

"Five years be it. Say no more."

He wrote on for a few moments; then he raised the sandbox and sprinkled the document.

"Tiens!" he cried, as he dusted it and held it out to me. "There is my warrant for the disposal of Monsieur le Vicomte Leon de Lavedan. He is to go into banishment for five years, but his estates shall suffer no sequestration, and at the end of that period he may return and enjoy them—we hope with better loyalty than in the past. Get them to execute that warrant at once, and see that the Vicomte starts to-day under escort for Spain. It will also be your warrant to Mademoiselle de Lavedan, and will afford proof to her that your mission has been successful."

"Sire!" I cried. And in my gratitude I could say no more, but I sank on my knee before him and raised his hand to my lips.

"There," said he in a fatherly voice. "Go now, and be happy."

As I rose, he suddenly put up his hand.

"Ma foi, I had all but forgotten, so much has Monsieur de Lavedan's fate preoccupied us." He picked up another paper from his table, and tossed it to me. It was my note of hand to Chatellerault for my Picardy estates.

"Chatellerault died this morning," the King pursued. "He had been asking to see you, but when he was told that you had left Toulouse, he dictated a long confession of his misdeeds, which he sent to me together with this note of yours. He could not, he wrote, permit his heirs to enjoy your estates; he had not won them; he had really forfeited his own stakes, since he had broken the rules of play. He has left me to deliver judgment in the matter of his own lands passing into your possession. What do you say to it, Marcel?"

It was almost with reluctance that I took up that scrap of paper. It had been so fine and heroic a thing to have cast my wealth to the winds of heaven for love's sake, that on my soul I was loath to see myself master of more than Beaugency. Then a compromise suggested itself.

"The wager, Sire," said I, "is one that I take shame in having entered upon; that shame made me eager to pay it, although fully conscious that I had not lost. But even now, I cannot, in any case, accept the forfeit Chatellerault was willing to suffer. Shall we—shall we forget that the wager was ever laid?"

"The decision does you honour. It was what I had hoped from you. Go now, Marcel. I doubt me you are eager. When your love-sickness wanes a little we shall hope to see you at Court again."

I sighed. "Helas, Sire, that would be never."

"So you said once before, monsieur. It is a foolish spirit upon which to enter into matrimony; yet—like many follies—a fine one. Adieu, Marcel!"

"Adieu, Sire!"

I had kissed his hands; I had poured forth my thanks; I had reached the door already, and he was in the act of turning to La Fosse, when it came into my head to glance at the warrant he had given me. He noticed this and my sudden halt.

"Is aught amiss?" he asked.

"You—you have omitted something, Sire," I ventured, and I returned to the table. "I am already so grateful that I hesitate to ask an additional favour. Yet it is but troubling you to add a few strokes of the pen, and it will not materially affect the sentence itself."

He glanced at me, and his brows drew together as he sought to

guess my meaning.

"Well, man, what is it?" he demanded impatiently.

"It has occurred to me that this poor Vicomte, in a strange land, alone, among strange faces, missing the loved ones that for so many years he has seen daily by his side, will be pitifully lonely."

The King's glance was lifted suddenly to my face. "Must I then banish his family as well?"

"All of it will not be necessary, Your Majesty."

For once his eyes lost their melancholy, and as hearty a burst of laughter as ever I heard from that poor, weary gentleman he vented then.

"Ciel! what a jester you are! Ah, but I shall miss you!" he cried, as, seizing the pen, he added the word I craved of him.

"Are you content at last?" he asked, returning the paper to me.

I glanced at it. The warrant now stipulated that Madame la Vicomtesse de Lavedan should bear her husband company in his exile.

"Sire, you are too good!" I murmured.

"Tell the officer to whom you entrust the execution of this warrant that he will find the lady in the guardroom below, where she is being detained, pending my pleasure. Did she but know that it was your pleasure she has been waiting upon, I should tremble for your future when the five years expire."

CHAPTER XXII. WE UNSADDLE

Mademoiselle held the royal warrant of her father's banishment in her hand. She was pale, and her greeting of me had been timid. I stood before her, and by the door stood Rodenard, whom I had bidden attend me.

As I had approached Lavedan that day, I had been taken with a great, an overwhelming shame at the bargain I had driven. I had pondered, and it had come to me that she had been right to suggest that in matters of love what is not freely given it is not worth while to take. And out of my shame and that conclusion had sprung a new resolve. So that nothing might weaken it, and lest, after all, the sight of Roxalanne should bring me so to desire her that I might be tempted to override my purpose, I had deemed it well to have the restraint of a witness at our last interview. To this end had I bidden Ganymede follow me into the very salon.

She read the document to the very end, then her glance was raised timidly again to mine, and from me it shifted to Ganymede, stiff at his post by the door.

"This was the best that you could do, monsieur?" she asked at last.

"The very best, mademoiselle," I answered calmly. "I do not wish to magnify my service, but it was that or the scaffold. Madame your mother had, unfortunately, seen the King before me, and she had prejudiced your father's case by admitting him to be a traitor. There was a moment when in view of that I was almost led to despair. I am glad, however, mademoiselle, that I was so fortunate as to persuade the King to just so much clemency."

"And for five years, then, I shall not see my parents." She sighed, and her distress was very touching.

"That need not be. Though they may not come to France, it still remains possible for you to visit them in Spain."

"True," she mused; "that will be something—will it not?"

"Assuredly something; under the circumstances, much."

She sighed again, and for a moment there was silence.

"Will you not sit, monsieur?" said she at last. She was very quiet to-day, this little maid—very quiet and very wondrously subdued.

"There is scarce the need," I answered softly; whereupon her eyes were raised to ask a hundred questions. "You are satisfied with my efforts, mademoiselle?" I inquired.

"Yes, I am satisfied, monsieur."

That was the end, I told myself, and involuntarily I also sighed. Still, I made no shift to go.

"You are satisfied that I—that I have fulfilled what I promised?"

Her eyes were again cast down, and she took a step in the direction of the window.

"But yes. Your promise was to save my father from the scaffold. You have done so, and I make no doubt you have done as much to reduce the term of his banishment as lay within your power. Yes, monsieur, I am satisfied that your promise has been well fulfilled."

Heigho! The resolve that I had formed in coming whispered it in my ear that nothing remained but to withdraw and go my way. Yet not for all that resolve—not for a hundred such resolves—could I have gone thus. One kindly word, one kindly glance at least would I take to

comfort me. I would tell her in plain words of my purpose, and she should see that there was still some good, some sense of honour in me, and thus should esteem me after I was gone.

"Ganymede." said I.

"Monseigneur?"

"Bid the men mount."

At that she turned, wonder opening her eyes very wide, and her glance travelled from me to Rodenard with its unspoken question. But even as she looked at him he bowed and, turning to do my bidding, left the room. We heard his steps pass with a jingle of spurs across the hall and out into the courtyard. We heard his raucous voice utter a word of command, and there was a stamping of hoofs, a cramping of harness, and all the bustle of preparation.

"Why have you ordered your men to mount?" she asked at last.

"Because my business here is ended, and we are going."

"Going?" said she. Her eyes were lowered now, but a frown suggested their expression to me. "Going whither?"

"Hence," I answered. "That for the moment is all that signifies." I paused to swallow something that hindered a clear utterance. Then, "Adieu!" said I, and I abruptly put forth my hand.

Her glance met mine fearlessly, if puzzled.

"Do you mean, monsieur, that you are leaving Lavedan—thus?"

"So that I leave, what signifies the manner of my going?"

"But"—the trouble grew in her eyes; her cheeks seemed to wax paler than they had been—"but I thought that—that we made a bargain."

"Sh! mademoiselle, I implore you," I cried. "I take shame at the memory of it. Almost as much shame as I take at the memory of that other bargain which first brought me to Lavedan. The shame of the former one I have wiped out—although, perchance, you think it not. I am wiping out the shame of the latter one. It was unworthy in me, mademoiselle, but I loved you so dearly that it seemed to me that no matter how I came by you, I should rest content if I but won you. I have since seen the error if it, the injustice of it. I will not take what is not freely given. And so, farewell."

"I see, I see," she murmured, and ignored the hand that I held out. "I am very glad of it, monsieur."

I withdrew my hand sharply. I took up my hat from the chair on which I had cast it. She might have spared me that, I thought. She need not have professed joy. At least she might have taken my hand and parted in kindness.

"Adieu, mademoiselle!" I said again, as stiffly as might be, and I turned towards the door.

"Monsieur!" she called after me. I halted.

"Mademoiselle?"

She stood demurely, with eyes downcast and hands folded. "I shall be so lonely here."

I stood still. I seemed to stiffen. My heart gave a mad throb of hope, then seemed to stop. What did she mean? I faced her fully once more, and, I doubt not, I was very pale. Yet lest vanity should befool me, I dared not act upon suspicions. And so "True, mademoiselle," said I. "You will be lonely. I regret it."

As silence followed, I turned again to the door, and my hopes sank with each step in that direction.

"Monsieur!"

Her voice arrested me upon the very threshold.

"What shall a poor girl do with this great estate upon her hands? It will go to ruin without a man to govern it."

"You must not attempt the task. You must employ an intendant."

I caught something that sounded oddly like a sob. Could it be? Dieu! could it be, after all? Yet I would not presume. I half turned again, but her voice detained me. It came petulantly now.

"Monsieur de Bardelys, you have kept your promise nobly. Will you ask no payment?"

"No, mademoiselle," I answered very softly; "I can take no payment."

Her eyes were lifted for a second. Their blue depths seemed dim. Then they fell again.

"Oh, why will you not help me?" she burst out, to add more softly: "I shall never be happy without you!"

"You mean?" I gasped, retracing a step, and flinging my hat in a corner.

"That I love you, Marcel—that I want you!"

"And you can forgive—you can forgive?" I cried, as I caught her.

Her answer was a laugh that bespoke her scorn of everything—of everything save us two, of everything save our love. That and the pout of her red lips was her answer. And if the temptation of those lips—But there! I grow indiscreet.

Still holding her, I raised my voice.

"Ganymede!" I called.

"Monseigneur?" came his answer through the open window.

"Bid those knaves dismount and unsaddle."

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THE LION'S SKIN

By Rafael Sabatini

Contents

THE LION'S SKIN

<u>CHAPTER I.</u>	THE FANATIC
<u>CHAPTER II.</u>	AT THE "ADAM AND EVE"
<u>CHAPTER III.</u>	THE WITNESS
<u>CHAPTER IV.</u>	Mr. GREEN
<u>CHAPTER V.</u>	MOONSHINE
<u>CHAPTER VI.</u>	HORTENSIA'S RETURN
<u>CHAPTER VII.</u>	FATHER AND SON
<u>CHAPTER VIII.</u>	TEMPTATION
<u>CHAPTER IX.</u>	THE CHAMPION
<u>CHAPTER X.</u>	SPURS TO THE RELUCTANT
<u>CHAPTER XI.</u>	THE ASSAULT-AT-ARMS
<u>CHAPTER XII.</u>	SUNSHINE AND SHADOW
<u>CHAPTER XIII.</u>	THE FORLORN HOPE
<u>CHAPTER XIV.</u>	LADY OSTERMORE
<u>CHAPTER XV.</u>	LOVE AND RAGE
<u>CHAPTER XVI.</u>	MR. GREEN EXECUTES HIS WARRANT
<u>CHAPTER XVII.</u>	AMID THE GRAVES
<u>CHAPTER XVIII.</u>	THE GHOST OF THE PAST
<u>CHAPTER XIX.</u>	THE END OF LORD OSTERMORE
<u>CHAPTER XX.</u>	Mr. CARYLL'S IDENTITY

[CHAPTER XXI.](#) THE LION'S SKIN

[CHAPTER XXII.](#) THE HUNTERS

[CHAPTER XXIII.](#) THE LION

THE LION'S SKIN

CHAPTER I. THE FANATIC

Mr. Caryll, lately from Rome, stood by the window, looking out over the rainswept, steaming quays to Notre Dame on the island yonder. Overhead rolled and crackled the artillery of an April thunderstorm, and Mr. Caryll, looking out upon Paris in her shroud of rain, under her pall of thundercloud, felt himself at harmony with Nature. Over his heart, too, the gloom of storm was lowering, just as in his heart it was still little more than April time.

Behind him, in that chamber furnished in dark oak and leather of a reign or two ago, sat Sir Richard Everard at a vast writing-table all alitter with books and papers; and Sir Richard watched his adoptive son with fierce, melancholy eyes, watched him until he grew impatient of this pause.

"Well?" demanded the old baronet harshly. "Will you undertake it, Justin, now that the chance has come?" And he added: "You'll never hesitate if you are the man I have sought to make you."

Mr. Caryll turned slowly. "It is because I am the man that you—that God and you—have made me that I do hesitate."

His voice was quiet and pleasantly modulated, and he spoke English with the faintest slur—perceptible, perhaps, only to the keenest ear—of a French accent. To ears less keen it would merely seem that he articulated with a precision so singular as to verge on pedantry.

The light falling full upon his profile revealed the rather singular countenance that was his own. It was not in any remarkable beauty that its distinction lay, for by the canons of beauty that prevail it was

not beautiful. The features were irregular and inclined to harshness, the nose was too abruptly arched, the chin too long and square, the complexion too pallid. Yet a certain dignity haunted that youthful face, of such a quality as to stamp it upon the memory of the merest passer-by. The mouth was difficult to read and full of contradictions; the lips were full and red, and you would declare them the lips of a sensualist but for the line of stern, almost grim, determination in which they met; and yet, somewhere behind that grimness, there appeared to lurk a haunting whimsicality; a smile seemed ever to impend, but whether sweet or bitter none could have told until it broke. The eyes were as remarkable; wide-set and slow-moving, as becomes the eyes of an observant man, they were of an almost greenish color, and so level in their ordinary glance as to seem imbued with an uncanny penetration. His hair—he dared to wear his own, and clubbed it in a broad ribbon of watered silk—was almost of the hue of bronze, with here and there a glint of gold, and as luxuriant as any wig.

For the rest, he was scarcely above the middle height, of an almost frail but very graceful slenderness, and very graceful, too, in all his movements. In dress he was supremely elegant, with the elegance of France, that in England would be accounted foppishness. He wore a suit of dark blue cloth, with white satin linings that were revealed when he moved; it was heavily laced with gold, and a ramiform pattern broidered in gold thread ran up the sides of his silk stockings of a paler blue. Jewels gleamed in the Brussels at his throat, and there were diamond buckles on his lacquered, red-heeled shoes.

Sir Richard considered him with anxiety and some chagrin. "Justin!" he cried, a world of reproach in his voice. "What can you need to ponder?"

"Whatever it may be," said Mr. Caryll, "it will be better that I ponder it now than after I have pledged myself."

"But what is it? What?" demanded the baronet.

"I am marvelling, for one thing, that you should have waited thirty years."

Sir Richard's fingers stirred the papers before him in an idle, absent manner. Into his brooding eyes there leapt the glitter to be seen in the eyes of the fevered of body or of mind.

"Vengeance," said he slowly, "is a dish best relished when 'tis eaten cold." He paused an instant; then continued: "I might have crossed to England at the time, and slain him. Should that have satisfied me? What is death but peace and rest?"

"There is a hell, we are told," Mr. Caryl reminded him.

"Ay," was the answer, "we are told. But I durstn't risk its being false where Ostermore is concerned. So I preferred to wait until I could brew him such a cup of bitterness as no man ever drank ere he was glad to die." In a quieter, retrospective voice he continued: "Had we prevailed in the '15, I might have found a way to punish him that had been worthy of the crime that calls for it. We did not prevail. Moreover, I was taken, and transported.

"What think you, Justin, gave me courage to endure the rigors of the plantations, cunning and energy to escape after five such years of it as had assuredly killed a stronger man less strong of purpose? What but the task that was awaiting me? It imported that I should live and be free to call a reckoning in full with my Lord Ostermore before I go to my own account.

"Opportunity has gone lame upon this journey. But it has arrived at last. Unless—" He paused, his voice sank from the high note of exaltation to which it had soared; it became charged with dread, as did the fierce eyes with which he raked his companion's face. "Unless you prove false to the duty that awaits you. And that I'll not believe! You are your mother's son, Justin."

"And my father's, too," answered Justin in a thick voice; "and the Earl of Ostermore is that same father."

"The more sweetly shall your mother be avenged," cried the other, and again his eyes blazed with that unhealthy, fanatical light. "What fitter than the hand of that poor lady's son to pull your father down in ruins?" He laughed short and fiercely. "It seldom chances in this world that justice is done so nicely."

"You hate him very deeply," said Mr. Caryl pensively, and the look in his eyes betrayed the trend of his thoughts; they were of pity—but of pity at the futility of such strong emotions.

"As deeply as I loved your mother, Justin." The sharp, rugged features of that seared old face seemed of a sudden transfigured and softened. The wild eyes lost some of their glitter in a look of wistfulness, as he pondered a moment the one sweet memory in a wasted life, a life wrecked over thirty years ago—wrecked wantonly by that same Ostermore of whom they spoke, who had been his friend.

A groan broke from his lips. He took his head in his hands, and, elbows on the table, he sat very still a moment, reviewing as in a flash the events of thirty and more years ago, when he and Viscount Rotherby—as Ostermore was then—had been young men at the St. Germain's Court of James II.

It was on an excursion into Normandy that they had met Mademoiselle de Maligny, the daughter of an impoverished gentleman of the chetive noblesse of that province. Both had loved her. She had preferred—as women will—the outward handsomeness of Viscount Rotherby to the sounder heart and brain that were Dick Everard's. As bold and dominant as any ruffler of them all where men and perils were concerned, young Everard was timid, bashful and without assertiveness with women. He had withdrawn from the contest

ere it was well lost, leaving an easy victory to his friend.

And how had that friend used it? Most foully, as you shall learn.

Leaving Rotherby in Normandy, Everard had returned to Paris. The affairs of his king gave him cause to cross at once to Ireland. For three years he abode there, working secretly in his master's interest to little purpose be it confessed. At the end of that time he returned to Paris. Rotherby was gone. It appeared that his father, Lord Ostermore, had prevailed upon Bentinck to use his influence with William on the errant youth's behalf. Rotherby had been pardoned his loyalty to the fallen dynasty. A deserter in every sense, he had abandoned the fortunes of King James—which in Everard's eyes was bad enough—and he had abandoned the sweet lady he had fetched out of Normandy six months before his going, of whom it seemed that in his lordly way he was grown tired.

From the beginning it would appear they were ill-matched. It was her beauty had made appeal to him, even as his beauty had enamoured her. Elementals had brought about their union; and when these elementals shrank with habit, as elementals will, they found themselves without a tie of sympathy or common interest to link them each to the other. She was by nature blythe; a thing of sunshine, flowers and music, who craved a very poet for her lover; and by "a poet" I mean not your mere rhymers. He was downright stolid and stupid under his fine exterior; the worst type of Briton, without the saving grace of a Briton's honor. And so she had wearied him, who saw in her no more than a sweet loveliness that had cloyed him presently. And when the chance was offered him by Bentinck and his father, he took it and went his ways, and this sweet flower that he had plucked from its Normandy garden to adorn him for a brief summer's day was left to wilt, discarded.

The tale that greeted Everard on his return from Ireland was that, broken-hearted, she had died—crushed neath her load of shame. For

it was said that there had been no marriage.

The rumor of her death had gone abroad, and it had been carried to England and my Lord Rotherby by a cousin of hers—the last living Maligny—who crossed the channel to demand of that stolid gentleman satisfaction for the dishonor put upon his house. All the satisfaction the poor fellow got was a foot or so of steel through the lungs, of which he died; and there, may it have seemed to Rotherby, the matter ended.

But Everard remained—Everard, who had loved her with a great and almost sacred love; Everard, who swore black ruin for my Lord Rotherby—the rumor of which may also have been carried to his lordship and stimulated his activities in having Everard hunted down after the Braemar fiasco of 1715.

But before that came to pass Everard had discovered that the rumor of her death was false—put about, no doubt, out of fear of that same cousin who had made himself champion and avenger of her honor. Everard sought her out, and found her perishing of want in an attic in the Cour des Miracles some four months later—eight months after Rotherby's desertion.

In that sordid, wind-swept chamber of Paris' most abandoned haunt, a son had been born to Antoinette de Maligny two days before Everard had come upon her. Both were dying; both had assuredly died within the week but that he came so timely to her aid. And that aid he rendered like the noble-hearted gentleman he was. He had contrived to save his fortune from the wreck of James' kingship, and this was safely invested in France, in Holland and elsewhere abroad. With a portion of it he repurchased the chateau and estates of Maligny, which on the death of Antoinette's father had been seized upon by creditors.

Thither he sent her and her child—Rotherby's child—making that

noble domain a christening-gift to the boy, for whom he had stood sponsor at the font. And he did his work of love in the background. He was the god in the machine; no more. No single opportunity of thanking him did he afford her. He effaced himself that she might not see the sorrow she occasioned him, lest it should increase her own.

For two years she dwelt at Maligny in such peace as the broken hearted may know, the little of life that was left her irradiated by Everard's noble friendship. He wrote to her from time to time, now from Italy, now from Holland. But he never came to visit her. A delicacy, which may or may not have been false, restrained him. And she, respecting what instinctively she knew to be his feelings, never bade him come to her. In their letters they never spoke of Rotherby; not once did his name pass between them; it was as if he had never lived or never crossed their lives. Meanwhile she weakened and faded day by day, despite all the care with which she was surrounded. That winter of cold and want in the Cour des Miracles had sown its seeds, and Death was sharpening his scythe against the harvest.

When the end was come she sent urgently for Everard. He came at once in answer to her summons; but he came too late. She died the evening before he arrived. But she had left a letter, written days before, against the chance of his not reaching her before the end. That letter, in her fine French hand, was before him now.

"I will not try to thank you, dearest friend," she wrote. "For the thing that you have done, what payment is there in poor thanks? Oh, Everard, Everard! Had it but pleased God to have helped me to a wiser choice when it was mine to choose!" she cried to him from that letter, and poor Everard deemed that the thin ray of joy her words sent through his anguished soul was payment more than enough for the little that he had done. "God's will be done!" she continued. "It is His will. He knows why it is best so, though we discern it not. But there is the boy; there is Justin. I bequeath him to you who already have done

so much for him. Love him a little for my sake; cherish and rear him as your own, and make of him such a gentleman as are you. His father does not so much as know of his existence. That, too, is best so, for I would not have him claim my boy. Never let him learn that Justin exists, unless it be to punish him by the knowledge for his cruel desertion of me."

Choking, the writing blurred by tears that he accounted no disgrace to his young manhood, Everard had sworn in that hour that Justin should be as a son to him. He would do her will, and he set upon it a more definite meaning than she intended. Rotherby should remain in ignorance of his son's existence until such season as should make the knowledge a very anguish to him. He would rear Justin in bitter hatred of the foul villain who had been his father; and with the boy's help, when the time should be ripe, he would lay my Lord Rotherby in ruins. Thus should my lord's sin come to find him out.

This Everard had sworn, and this he had done. He had told Justin the story almost as soon as Justin was of an age to understand it. He had repeated it at very frequent intervals, and as the lad grew, Everard watched in him—fostering it by every means in his power—the growth of his execration for the author of his days, and of his reverence for the sweet, departed saint that had been his mother.

For the rest, he had lavished Justin nobly for his mother's sake. The repurchased estates of Maligny, with their handsome rent roll, remained Justin's own, administered by Sir Richard during the lad's minority and vastly enriched by the care of that administration. He had sent the lad to Oxford, and afterwards—the more thoroughly to complete his education—on a two years' tour of Europe; and on his return, a grown and cultured man, he had attached him to the court in Rome of the Pretender, whose agent he was himself in Paris.

He had done his duty by the boy as he understood his duty, always with that grim purpose of revenge for his horizon. And the result had

been a stranger compound than even Everard knew, for all that he knew the lad exceedingly well. For he had scarcely reckoned sufficiently upon Justin's mixed nationality and the circumstance that in soul and mind he was entirely his mother's child, with nothing—or an imperceptible little—of his father. As his mother's nature had been, so was Justin's—joyous. But Everard's training of him had suppressed all inborn vivacity. The mirth and diablerie that were his birthright had been overlaid with British phlegm, until in their stead, and through the blend, a certain sardonic humor had developed, an ironical attitude toward all things whether sacred or profane. This had been helped on by culture, and—in a still greater measure—by the odd training in worldliness which he had from Everard. His illusions were shattered ere he had cut his wisdom teeth, thanks to the tutelage of Sir Richard, who in giving him the ugly story of his own existence, taught him the misanthropical lesson that all men are knaves, all women fools. He developed, as a consequence, that sardonic outlook upon the world. He sought to take *vos non vobis* for his motto, affected to a spectator in the theatre of Life, with the obvious result that he became the greatest actor of them all.

So we find him even now, his main emotion pity for Sir Richard, who sat silent for some moments, reviewing that thirty-year dead past, until the tears scalded his old eyes. The baronet made a queer noise in his throat, something between a snarl and a sob, and he flung himself suddenly back in his chair.

Justin sat down, a becoming gravity in his countenance. "Tell me all," he begged his adoptive father. "Tell me how matters stand precisely—how you propose to act."

"With all my heart," the baronet assented. "Lord Ostermore, having turned his coat once for profit, is ready now to turn it again for the same end. From the information that reaches me from England, it would appear that in the rage of speculation that has been toward in

London, his lordship has suffered heavily. How heavily I am not prepared to say. But heavily enough, I dare swear, to have caused this offer to return to his king; for he looks, no doubt, to sell his services at a price that will help him mend the wreckage of his fortunes. A week ago a gentleman who goes between his majesty's court at Rome and his friends here in Paris brought me word from his majesty that Ostermore had signified to him his willingness to rejoin the Stuart cause.

"Together with that information, this messenger brought me letters from his majesty to several of his friends, which I was to send to England by a safe hand at the first opportunity. Now, amongst these letters—delivered to me unsealed—is one to my Lord Ostermore, making him certain advantageous proposals which he is sure to accept if his circumstances be as crippled as I am given to understand. Atterbury and his friends, it seems, have already tampered with my lord's loyalty to Dutch George to some purpose, and there is little doubt but that this letter"—and he tapped a document before him—"will do what else is to be done.

"But, since these letters were left with me, come you with his majesty's fresh injunctions that I am to suppress them and cross to England at once myself, to prevail upon Atterbury and his associates to abandon the undertaking."

Mr. Caryll nodded. "Because, as I have told you," said he, "King James in Rome has received positive information that in London the plot is already suspected, little though Atterbury may dream it. But what has this to do with my Lord Ostermore?"

"This," said Everard slowly, leaning across toward Justin, and laying a hand upon his sleeve. "I am to counsel the Bishop to stay his hand against a more favorable opportunity. There is no reason why you should not do the very opposite with Ostermore."

Mr. Caryll knit his brows, his eyes intent upon the other's face; but he said no word.

"It is," urged Everard, "an opportunity such as there may never be another. We destroy Ostermore. By a turn of the hand we bring him to the gallows." He chuckled over the word with a joy almost diabolical.

"But how—how do we destroy him?" quoth Justin, who suspected yet dared not encourage his suspicions.

"How? Do you ask how? Is't not plain?" snapped Sir Richard, and what he avoided putting into words, his eloquent glance made clear to his companion.

Mr. Caryll rose a thought quickly, a faint flush stirring in his cheeks, and he threw off Everard's grasp with a gesture that was almost of repugnance. "You mean that I am to enmesh him...."

Sir Richard smiled grimly. "As his majesty's accredited agent," he explained. "I will equip you with papers. Word shall go ahead of you to Ostermore by a safe hand to bid him look for the coming of a messenger bearing his own family name. No more than that; nothing that can betray us; yet enough to whet his lordship's appetite. You shall be the ambassador to bear him the tempting offers from the king. You will obtain his answers—accepting. Those you will deliver to me, and I shall do the trifle that may still be needed to set the rope about his neck."

A little while there was silence. Outside, the rain, driven by gusts, smote the window as with a scourge. The thunder was grumbling in the distance now. Mr. Caryll resumed his chair. He sat very thoughtful, but with no emotion showing in his face. British stolidity was in the ascendant with him then. He felt that he had the need of it.

"It is... ugly," he said at last slowly.

"It is God's own will," was the hot answer, and Sir Richard smote the table.

"Has God taken you into His confidence?" wondered Mr. Caryl.

"I know that God is justice."

"Yet is it not written that 'vengeance is His own'?"

"Aye, but He needs human instruments to execute it. Such instruments are we. Can you—Oh, can you hesitate?"

Mr. Caryl clenched his hands hard. "Do it," he answered through set teeth. "Do it! I shall approve it when 'tis done. But find other hands for the work, Sir Richard. He is my father."

Sir Richard remained cool. "That is the argument I employ for insisting upon the task being yours," he replied. Then, in a blaze of passion, he—who had schooled his adoptive son so ably in self-control—marshalled once more his arguments. "It is your duty to your mother to forget that he is your father. Think of him only as the man who wronged your mother; the man to whom her ruined life, her early death are due—her murderer and worse. Consider that. Your father, you say!" He mocked almost. "Your father! In what is he your father? You have never seen him; he does not know that you exist, that you ever existed. Is that to be a father? Father, you say! A word, a name—no more than that; a name that gives rise to a sentiment, and a sentiment is to stand between you and your clear duty; a sentiment is to set a protecting shield over the man who killed your mother!

"I think I shall despise you, Justin, if you fail me in this. I have lived for it," he ran on tempestuously. "I have reared you for it, and you shall not fail me!"

Then his voice dropped again, and in quieter tones

"You hate the very name of John Caryl, Earl of Ostermore," said

he, "as must every decent man who knows the truth of what the life of that satyr holds. If I have suffered you to bear his name, it is to the end that it should remind you daily that you have no right to it, that you have no right to any name."

When he said that he thrust his finger consciously into a raw wound. He saw Justin wince, and with pitiless cunning he continued to prod that tender place until he had aggravated the smart of it into a very agony.

"That is what you owe your father; that is the full extent of what lies between you—that you are of those at whom the world is given to sneer and point scorn's ready finger."

"None has ever dared," said Mr. Caryll.

"Because none has ever known. We have kept the secret well. You display no coat of arms that no bar sinister may be displayed. But the time may come when the secret must out. You might, for instance, think of marrying a lady of quality, a lady of your own supposed station. What shall you tell her of yourself? That you have no name to offer her; that the name you bear is yours by assumption only? Ah! That brings home your own wrongs to you, Justin! Consider them; have them ever present in your mind, together with your mother's blighted life, that you may not shrink when the hour strikes to punish the evildoer."

He flung himself back in his chair again, and watched the younger man with brooding eye. Mr. Caryll was plainly moved. He had paled a little, and he sat now with brows contracted and set teeth.

Sir Richard pushed back his chair and rose, recapitulating. "He is your mother's destroyer," he said, with a sad sternness. "Is the ruin of that fair life to go unpunished? Is it, Justin?"

Mr. Caryll's Gallic spirit burst abruptly through its British glaze. He

crushed fist into palm, and swore: "No, by God! It shall not, Sir Richard!"

Sir Richard held out his hands, and there was a fierce joy in his gloomy eyes at last. "You'll cross to England with me, Justin?"

But Mr. Caryll's soul fell once more into travail. "Wait!" he cried "Ah, wait!" His level glance met Sir Richard's in earnestness and entreaty. "Answer me the truth upon your soul and conscience: Do you in your heart believe that it is what my mother would have had me do?"

There was an instant's pause. Then Everard, the fanatic of vengeance, the man whose mind upon that one subject was become unsound with excess of brooding, answered with conviction: "As I have a soul to be saved, Justin, I do believe it. More—I know it. Here!" Trembling hands took up the old letter from the table and proffered it to Justin. "Here is her own message to you. Read it again."

And what time the young man's eyes rested upon that fine, pointed writing, Sir Richard recited aloud the words he knew by heart, the words that had been ringing in his ears since that day when he had seen her lowered to rest: "'Never let him learn that Justin exists unless it be to punish him by the knowledge for his cruel desertion of me.' It is your mother's voice speaking to you from the grave," the fanatic pursued, and so infected Justin at last with something of his fanaticism.

The green eyes flashed uncannily, the white young face grew cruelly sardonic. "You believe it?" he asked, and the eagerness that now invested his voice showed how it really was with him.

"As I have a soul to be saved," Sir Richard repeated.

"Then gladly will I set my hand to it." Fire stirred through Justin now, a fire of righteous passion. "An idea—no more than an idea—"

daunted me. You have shown me that. I cross to England with you, Sir Richard, and let my Lord Ostermore look to himself, for my name—I who have no right to any name—my name is judgment!"

The exaltation fell from him as suddenly as it had mounted. He dropped into a chair, thoughtful again and slightly ashamed of his sudden outburst.

Sir Richard Everard watched with an eye of gloomy joy the man whom he had been at such pains to school in self-control.

Overhead there was a sudden crackle of thunder, sharp and staccato as a peal of demoniac laughter.

CHAPTER II. AT THE "ADAM AND EVE"

Mr. Caryll, alighted from his traveling chaise in the yard of the "Adam and Eve," at Maidstone, on a sunny afternoon in May. Landed at Dover the night before, he had parted company with Sir Richard Everard that morning. His adoptive father had turned aside toward Rochester, to discharge his king's business with plotting Bishop Atterbury, what time Justin was to push on toward town as King James' ambassador to the Earl of Ostermore, who, advised of his coming, was expecting him.

Here at Maidstone it was Mr. Caryll's intent to dine, resuming his journey in the cool of the evening, when he hoped to get at least as far as Farnborough ere he slept.

Landlady, chamberlain, ostler and a posse of underlings hastened to give welcome to so fine a gentleman, and a private room above-stairs was placed at his disposal. Before ascending, however, Mr. Caryll sauntered into the bar for a whetting glass to give him an appetite, and further for the purpose of bespeaking in detail his dinner with the hostess. It was one of his traits that he gave the greatest attention to detail, and held that the man who left the ordering of his edibles to his servants was no better than an animal who saw no more than nourishment in food. Nor was the matter one to be settled summarily; it asked thought and time. So he sipped his Hock, listening to the landlady's proposals, and amending them where necessary with suggestions of his own, and what time he was so engaged, there ambled into the inn yard a sturdy cob bearing a sturdy little man in snuff-colored clothes that had seen some wear.

The newcomer threw his reins to the stable-boy—a person of all the importance necessary to receive so indifferent a guest. He got down nimbly from his horse, produced an enormous handkerchief of many colors, and removed his three-cornered hat that he might the better mop his brow and youthful, almost cherubic face. What time he did so, a pair of bright little blue eyes were very busy with Mr. Caryll's carriage, from which Leduc, Mr. Caryll's valet, was in the act of removing a portmanteau. His mobile mouth fell into lines of satisfaction.

Still mopping himself, he entered the inn, and, guided by the drone of voices, sauntered into the bar. At sight of Mr. Caryll leaning there, his little eyes beamed an instant, as do the eyes of one who espies a friend, or—apter figure—the eyes of the hunter when they sight the quarry.

He advanced to the bar, bowing to Mr. Caryll with an air almost apologetic, and to the landlady with an air scarcely less so, as he asked for a nipperkin of ale to wash the dust of the road from his throat. The hostess called a drawer to serve him, and departed herself upon the momentous business of Mr. Caryll's dinner.

"A warm day, sir," said the chubby man.

Mr. Caryll agreed with him politely, and finished his glass, the other sipping meanwhile at his ale.

"A fine brew, sir," said he. "A prodigious fine brew! With all respect, sir, your honor should try a whet of our English ale."

Mr. Caryll, setting down his glass, looked languidly at the man. "Why do you exclude me, sir, from the nation of this beverage?" he inquired.

The chubby man's face expressed astonishment. "Ye're English, sir! Ecod! I had thought ye French!"

"It is an honor, sir, that you should have thought me anything."

The other abased himself. "'Twas an unwarrantable presumption, Codso! which I hope your honor'll pardon." Then he smiled again, his little eyes twinkling humorously. "An ye would try the ale, I dare swear your honor would forgive me. I know ale, ecod! I am a brewer myself. Green is my name, sir—Tom Green—your very obedient servant, sir." And he drank as if pledging that same service he professed.

Mr. Caryl observed him calmly and a thought indifferently. "Ye're determined to honor me," said he. "I am your debtor for your reflections upon whetting glasses; but ale, sir, is a beverage I don't affect, nor shall while there are vines in France."

"Ah!" sighed Mr. Green rapturously. "'Tis a great country, France; is it not, sir?"

"'Tis not the general opinion here at present. But I make no doubt that it deserves your praise."

"And Paris, now," persisted Mr. Green. "They tell me 'tis a great city; a marvel o' th' ages. There be those, ecod! that say London's but a kennel to't."

"Be there so?" quoth Mr. Caryl indifferently.

"Ye don't agree with them, belike?" asked Mr. Green, with eagerness.

"Pooh! Men will say anything," Mr. Caryl replied, and added pointedly: "Men will talk, ye see."

"Not always," was the retort in a sly tone. "I've known men to be prodigious short when they had aught to hide."

"Have ye so? Ye seem to have had a wide experience." And Mr. Caryl sauntered out, humming a French air through closed lips.

Mr. Green looked after him with hardened eyes. He turned to the drawer who stood by. "He's mighty close," said he. "Mighty close!"

"Ye're not perhaps quite the company he cares for," the drawer suggested candidly.

Mr. Green looked at him. "Very like," he snapped. "How long does he stay here?"

"Ye lost a rare chance of finding out when ye let him go without inquiring," said the drawer.

Mr. Green's face lost some of its chubbiness. "When d'ye look to marry the landlady?" was his next question.

The man stared. "Cod!" said he. "Marry the—Are ye daft?"

Mr. Green affected surprise. "I'm mistook, it seems. Ye misled me by your pertness. Get me another nipperkin."

Meanwhile Mr. Caryl had taken his way above stairs to the room set apart for him. He dined to his satisfaction, and thereafter, his shapely, silk-clad legs thrown over a second chair, his waistcoat all unbuttoned, for the day was of an almost midsummer warmth—he sat mightily at his ease, a decanter of sherry at his elbow, a pipe in one hand and a book of Mr. Gay's poems in the other. But the ease went no further than the body, as witnessed the circumstances that his pipe was cold, the decanter tolerably full, and Mr. Gay's pleasant rhymes and quaint conceits of fancy all unheeded. The light, mercurial spirit which he had from nature and his unfortunate mother, and which he had retained in spite of the stern training he had received at his adoptive father's hands, was heavy-fettered now.

The mild fatigue of his journey through the heat of the day had led him to look forward to a voluptuous hour of indolence following upon dinner, with pipe and book and glass. The hour was come, the

elements were there, but since he could not abandon himself to their dominion the voluptuousness was wanting. The task before him haunted him with anticipatory remorse. It hung upon his spirit like a sick man's dream. It obtruded itself upon his constant thought, and the more he pondered it the more did he sicken at what lay before him.

Wrought upon by Everard's fanaticism that day in Paris some three weeks ago, infected for the time being by something of his adoptive father's fever, he had set his hands to the task in a glow of passionate exaltation. But with the hour, the exaltation went, and reaction started in his soul. And yet draw back he dared not; too long and sedulously had Everard trained his spirit to look upon the avenging of his mother as a duty. Believing that it was his duty, he thirsted on the one hand to fulfill it, whilst, on the other, he recoiled in horror at the thought that the man upon whom he was to wreak that vengeance was his father—albeit a father whom he did not know, who had never seen him, who was not so much as aware of his existence.

He sought forgetfulness in Mr. Gay. He had the delicate-minded man's inherent taste for verse, a quick ear for the melody of words, the aesthete's love of beauty in phrase as of beauty in all else; and culture had quickened his perceptions, developed his capacity for appreciation. For the tenth time he called Leduc to light his pipe; and, that done, he set his eye to the page once more. But it was like harnessing a bullock to a cart; unmindful of the way it went and over what it travelled, his eye ambled heavily along the lines, and when he came to turn the page he realized with a start that he had no impression of what he had read upon it.

In sheer disgust he tossed the book aside, and kicking away the second chair, rose lythely. He crossed to the window, and stood there gazing out at nothing, nor conscious of the incense that came to him from garden, from orchard, and from meadow.

It needed a clatter of hoofs and a cloud of dust approaching from

the north to draw his mind from its obsessing thoughts. He watched the yellow body of the coach as it came furiously onward, its four horses stretched to the gallop, postillion lusty of lungs and whip, and the great trail of dust left behind it spreading to right and left over the flowering hedge-rows to lose itself above the gold-flecked meadowland. On it came, to draw up there, at the very entrance to Maidstone, at the sign of the "Adam and Eve."

Mr. Caryl, leaning on the sill of his window, looked down with interest to see what manner of travellers were these that went at so red-hot a pace. From the rumble a lackey swung himself to the rough cobbles of the yard. From within the inn came again landlady and chamberlain, and from the stable ostler and boy, obsequious all and of no interest to Mr. Caryl.

Then the door of the coach was opened, the steps were let down, and there emerged—his hand upon the shoulder of the servant—a very ferret of a man in black, with a parson's bands and neckcloth, a coal-black full-bottomed wig, and under this a white face, rather drawn and haggard, and thin lips perpetually agrin to flaunt two rows of yellow teeth disproportionately large. After him, and the more remarkable by contrast, came a tall, black-faced fellow, very brave in buff-colored cloth, with a fortune in lace at wrist and throat, and a heavily powdered tie-wig.

Lackey, chamberlain and parson attended his alighting, and then he joined their ranks to attend in his turn—hat under arm—the last of these odd travellers.

The interest grew. Mr. Caryl felt that the climax was about to be presented, and he leaned farther forward that he might obtain a better view of the awaited personage. In the silence he caught a rustle of silk. A flowered petticoat appeared—as much of it as may be seen from the knee downwards—and from beneath this the daintiest foot conceivable was seen to grope an instant for the step. Another

second and the rest of her emerged.

Mr. Caryll observed—and be it known that he had the very shrewdest eye for a woman, as became one of the race from which on his mother's side he sprang—that she was middling tall, chastely slender, having, as he judged from her high waist, a fine, clean length of limb. All this he observed and approved, and prayed for a glimpse of the face which her silken hood obscured and screened from his desiring gaze. She raised it at that moment—raised it in a timid, frightened fashion, as one who looks fearfully about to see that she is not remarked—and Mr. Caryll had a glimpse of an oval face, pale with a warm pallor—like the pallor of the peach, he thought, and touched, like the peach, with a faint hint of pink in either cheek. A pair of eyes, large, brown, and gentle as a saint's, met his, and Mr. Caryll realized that she was beautiful and that it might be good to look into those eyes at closer quarters.

Seeing him, a faint exclamation escaped her, and she turned away in sudden haste to enter the inn. The fine gentleman looked up and scowled; the parson looked up and trembled; the ostler and his boy looked up and grinned. Then all swept forward and were screened by the porch from the wondering eyes of Mr. Caryll.

He turned from the window with a sigh, and stepped back to the table for the tinder-box, that for the eleventh time he might relight his pipe. He sat down, blew a cloud of smoke to the ceiling, and considered. His nature triumphed now over his recent preoccupation; the matter of the moment, which concerned him not at all, engrossed him beyond any other matter of his life. He was intrigued to know in what relation one to the other stood the three so oddly assorted travellers he had seen arrive. He bethought him that, after all, the odd assortment arose from the presence of the parson; and he wondered what the plague should any Christian—and seemingly a gentleman at that—be doing travelling with a parson. Then there was the wild

speed at which they had come.

The matter absorbed and vexed him. I fear he was inquisitive by nature. There came a moment when he went so far as to consider making his way below to pursue his investigations in situ. It would have been at great cost to his dignity, and this he was destined to be spared.

A knock fell upon his door, and the landlady came in. She was genial, buxom and apple-faced, as becomes a landlady.

"There is a gentleman below—" she was beginning, when Mr. Caryl interrupted her.

"I would rather that you told me of the lady," said

"La, sir!" she cried, displaying ivory teeth, her eyes cast upwards, hands upraised in gentle, mirthful protest. "La, sir! But I come from the lady, too."

He looked at her. "A good ambassador," said he, "should begin with the best news; not add it as an afterthought. But proceed, I beg. You give me hope, mistress."

"They send their compliments, and would be prodigiously obliged if you was to give yourself the trouble of stepping below."

"Of stepping below?" he inquired, head on one side, solemn eyes upon the hostess. "Would it be impertinent to inquire what they may want with me?"

"I think they want you for a witness, sir."

"For a witness? Am I to testify to the lady's perfection of face and shape, to the heaven that sits in her eyes, to the miracle she calls her ankle? Are these and other things besides of the same kind what I am required to witness? If so, they could not have sent for one more

qualified. I am an expert, ma'am."

"Oh, sir, nay!" she laughed. "'Tis a marriage they need you for."

Mr. Caryll opened his queer eyes a little wider. "Soho!" said he. "The parson is explained." Then he fell thoughtful, his tone lost its note of flippancy. "This gentleman who sends his compliments, does he send his name?"

"He does not, sir; but I overheard it."

"Confide in me," Mr. Caryll invited her.

"He is a great gentleman," she prepared him.

"No matter. I love great gentlemen."

"They call him Lord Rotherby."

At that sudden and utterly unexpected mention of his half-brother's name—his unknown half-brother—Mr. Caryll came to his feet with an alacrity which a more shrewd observer would have set down to some cause other than mere respect for a viscount. The hostess was shrewd, but not shrewd enough, and if Mr. Caryll's expression changed for an instant, it resumed its habitual half-scornful calm so swiftly that it would have needed eyes of an exceptional quickness to have read it.

"Enough!" he said. "Who could deny his lordship?"

"Shall I tell them you are coming?" she inquired, her hand already upon the door.

"A moment," he begged, detaining her. "'Tis a runaway marriage this, eh?"

Her full-hearted smile beamed on him again; she was a very woman, with a taste for the romantic, loving love. "What else, sir?"

she laughed.

"And why, mistress," he inquired, eying her, his fingers plucking at his nether lip, "do they desire my testimony?"

"His lordship's own man will stand witness, for one; but they'll need another," she explained, her voice reflecting astonishment at his question.

"True. But why do they need me?" he pressed her. "Heard you no reason given why they should prefer me to your chamberlain, your ostler or your drawer?"

She knit her brows and shrugged impatient shoulders. Here was a deal of pother about a trifling affair. "His lordship saw you as he entered, sir, and inquired of me who you might be."

"His lordship flatters me by this interest. My looks pleased him, let us hope. And you answered him—what?"

"That your honor is a gentleman newly crossed from France."

"You are well-informed, mistress," said Mr. Caryll, a thought tartly, for if his speech was tainted with a French accent it was in so slight a degree as surely to be imperceptible to the vulgar.

"Your clothes, sir," the landlady explained, and he bethought him, then, that the greater elegance and refinement of his French apparel must indeed proclaim his origin to one who had so many occasions of seeing travelers from Gaul. That might even account for Mr. Green's attempts to talk to him of France. His mind returned to the matter of the bridal pair below.

"You told him that, eh?" said he. "And what said his lordship then?"

"He turned to the parson. 'The very man for us, Jenkins,' says he."

"And the parson—this Jenkins—what answer did he make?"

"'Excellently thought,' he says, grinning."

"Hum! And you yourself, mistress, what inference did you draw?"

"Inference, sir?"

"Aye, inference, ma'am. Did you not gather that this was not only a runaway match, but a clandestine one? My lord can depend upon the discretion of his servant, no doubt; for other witness he would prefer some passer-by, some stranger who will go his ways to-morrow, and not be like to be heard of again."

"Lard, sir!" cried the landlady, her eyes wide with astonishment.

Mr. Caryl smiled enigmatically. "'Tis so, I assure ye, ma'am. My Lord Rotherby is of a family singularly cautious in the unions it contracts. In entering matrimony he prefers, no doubt, to leave a back door open for quiet retreat should he repent him later."

"Your honor has his lordship's acquaintance, then?" quoth the landlady.

"It is a misfortune from which Heaven has hitherto preserved me, but which the devil, it seems, now thrusts upon me. It will, nevertheless, interest me to see him at close quarters. Come, ma'am."

As they were going out, Mr. Caryl checked suddenly. "Why, what's o'clock?" said he.

She stared, so abruptly came the question. "Past four, sir," she answered.

He uttered a short laugh. "Decidedly," said he, "his lordship must be viewed at closer quarters." And he led the way downstairs.

In the passage he waited for her to come up with him. "You had best announce me by name," he suggested. "It is Caryll."

She nodded, and, going forward, threw open a door, inviting him to enter.

"Mr. Caryll," she announced, obedient to his injunction, and as he went in she closed the door behind him.

From the group of three that had been sitting about the polished walnut table, the tall gentleman in buff and silver rose swiftly, and advanced to the newcomer; what time Mr. Caryll made a rapid observation of this brother whom he was meeting under circumstances so odd and by a chance so peculiar.

He beheld a man of twenty-five, or perhaps a little more, tall and well made, if already inclining to heaviness, with a swarthy face, full-lipped, big-nosed, black-eyed, an obstinate chin, and a deplorable brow. At sight, by instinct, he disliked his brother. He wondered vaguely was Lord Rotherby in appearance at all like their common father; but beyond that he gave little thought to the tie that bound them. Indeed, he has placed it upon record that, saving in such moments of high stress as followed in their later connection, he never could remember that they were the sons of the same parent.

"I thought," was Rotherby's greeting, a note almost of irritation in his voice, "that the woman said you were from France."

It was an odd welcome, but its oddness at the moment went unheeded. His swift scrutiny of his brother over, Mr. Caryll's glance passed on to become riveted upon the face of the lady at the table's head. In addition to the beauties which from above he had descried, he now perceived that her mouth was sensitive and kindly, her whole expression one of gentle wistfulness, exceeding sweet to contemplate. What did she in this galley, he wondered; and he has

confessed that just as at sight he had disliked his brother, so from that hour—from the very instant of his eyes' alighting on her there—he loved the lady whom his brother was to wed, felt a surpassing need of her, conceived that in the meeting of their eyes their very souls had met, so that it was to him as if he had known her since he had known anything. Meanwhile there was his lordship's question to be answered. He answered it mechanically, his eyes upon the lady, and she returning the gaze of those queer, greenish eyes with a sweetness that gave place to no confusion.

"I am from France, sir."

"But not French?" his lordship continued.

Mr. Caryll fetched his eyes from the lady's to meet Lord Rotherby's. "More than half French," he replied, the French taint in his accent growing slightly more pronounced. "It was but an accident that my father was an Englishman."

Rotherby laughed softly, a thought contemptuously. Foreigners were things which in his untraveled, unlettered ignorance he despised. The difference between a Frenchman and a South Sea Islander was a thing never quite appreciated by his lordship. Some subtle difference he had no doubt existed; but for him it was enough to know that both were foreigners; therefore, it logically followed, both were kin.

"Your words, sir, might be oddly interpreted. 'Pon honor, they might!" said he, and laughed softly again with singular insolence.

"If they have amused your lordship I am happy," said Mr. Caryll in such a tone that Rotherby looked to see whether he was being roasted. "You wanted me, I think. I beg that you'll not thank me for having descended. It was an honor."

It occurred to Rotherby that this was a veiled reproof for the ill

manners of the omission. Again he looked sharply at this man who was scanning him with such interest, but he detected in the calm, high-bred face nothing to suggest that any mockery was intended. Belatedly he fell to doing the very thing that Mr. Caryll had begged him to leave undone: he fell to thanking him. As for Mr. Caryll himself, not even the queer position into which he had been thrust could repress his characteristics. What time his lordship thanked him, he looked about him at the other occupants of the room, and found that, besides the parson, sitting pale and wide-eyed at the table, there was present in the background his lordship's man—a quiet fellow, quietly garbed in gray, with a shrewd face and shrewd, shifty eyes. Mr. Caryll saw, and registered, for future use, the reflection that eyes that are overshrewd are seldom wont to look out of honest heads.

"You are desired," his lordship informed him, "to be witness to a marriage."

"So much the landlady had made known to me."

"It is not, I trust, a task that will occasion you any scruples."

"None. On the contrary, it is the absence of the marriage might do that." The smooth, easy tone so masked the inner meaning of the answer that his lordship scarce attended to the words.

"Then we had best get on. We are in haste."

"'Tis the characteristic rashness of folk about to enter wedlock," said Mr. Caryll, as he approached the table with his lordship, his eyes as he spoke turning full upon the bride.

My lord laughed, musically enough, but overloud for a man of brains or breeding. "Marry in haste, eh?" quoth he.

"You are penetration itself," Mr. Caryll praised him.

"'Twill take a shrewd rogue to better me," his lordship agreed.

"Yet an honest man might worst you. One never knows. But the lady's patience is being taxed."

It was as well he added that, for his lordship had turned with intent to ask him what he meant.

"Aye! Come, Jenkins. Get on with your patter. Gaskell," he called to his man, "stand forward here." Then he took his place beside the lady, who had risen, and stood pale, with eyes cast down and—as Mr. Caryll alone saw—the faintest quiver at the corners of her lips. This served to increase Mr. Caryll's already considerable cogitations.

The parson faced them, fumbling at his book, Mr. Caryll's eyes watching him with that cold, level glance of theirs. The parson looked up, met that uncanny gaze, displayed his teeth in a grin of terror, fell to trembling, and dropped the book in his confusion. Mr. Caryll, smiling sardonically, stooped to restore it him.

There followed a fresh pause. Mr. Jenkins, having lost his place, seemed at some pains to find it again—amazing, indeed, in one whose profession should have rendered him so familiar with its pages.

Mr. Caryll continued to watch him, in silence, and—as an observer might have thought, as, indeed, Gaskell did think, though he said nothing at the time—with wicked relish.

CHAPTER III. THE WITNESS

At last the page was found again by Mr. Jenkins. Having found it he hesitated still a moment, then cleared his throat, and in the manner of one hurling himself forward upon a desperate venture, he began to read.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God," he read, and on in a nasal, whining voice, which not only was the very voice you would have expected from such a man, but in accordance, too, with sound clerical convention. The bridal pair stood before him, the groom with a slight flush on his cheeks and a bright glitter in his black eyes, which were not nice to see; the bride with bowed head and bosom heaving as in response to inward tumult.

The cleric came to the end of his exordium, paused a moment, and whether because he gathered confidence, whether because he realized the impressive character of the fresh matter upon which he entered, he proceeded now in a firmer, more sonorous voice: "I require and charge you both as ye will answer on the dreadful day of judgment."

"Ye've forgot something," Mr. Caryl interrupted blandly.

His lordship swung round with an impatient gesture and an impatient snort; the lady, too, looked up suddenly, whilst Mr. Jenkins seemed to fall into an utter panic.

"Wha—what?" he stammered. "What have I forgot?"

"To read the directions, I think."

His lordship scowled darkly upon Mr. Caryl, who heeded him not at

all, but watched the lady sideways.

Mr. Jenkins turned first scarlet, then paler than he had been before, and bent his eyes to the book to read in a slightly puzzled voice the italicized words above the period he had embarked upon. "And also speaking unto the persons that shall be married, he shall say:" he read, and looked up in inquiry, his faintly-colored, prominent eyes endeavoring to sustain Mr. Caryl's steady glance, but failing miserably.

"Tis farther back," Mr. Caryl informed him in answer to that mute question; and as the fellow moistened his thumb to turn back the pages, Mr. Caryl saved him the trouble. "It says, I think, that the man should be on your right hand and the woman on your left. Ye seem to have reversed matters, Mr. Jenkins. But perhaps ye're left-handed."

"Stab me!" was Mr. Jenkins' most uncanonical comment. "I vow I am over-flustered. Your lordship is so impatient with me. This gentleman is right. But that I was so flustered. Will you not change places with his lordship, ma'am?"

They changed places, after the viscount had thanked Mr. Caryl shortly and cursed the parson with circumstance and fervor. It was well done on his lordship's part, but the lady did not seem convinced by it. Her face looked whiter, and her eyes had an alarmed, half-suspicious expression.

"We must begin again," said Mr. Jenkins. And he began again.

Mr. Caryl listened and watched, and he began to enjoy himself exceedingly. He had not reckoned upon so rich an entertainment when he had consented to come down to witness this odd ceremony. His sense of humor conquered every other consideration, and the circumstance that Lord Rotherby was his brother, if remembered at all, served but to add a spice to the situation.

Out of sheer devilry he waited until Mr. Jenkins had labored for a second time through the opening periods. Again he allowed him to get as far as "I charge and require you both-," before again he interrupted him.

"There is something else ye've forgot," said he in that sweet, quiet voice of his.

This was too much for Rotherby. "Damn you!" he swore, turning a livid face upon Mr. Caryll, and failed to observe that at the sound of that harsh oath and at the sight of his furious face, the lady recoiled from him, the suspicion lately in her face turning first to conviction and then to absolute horror.

"I do not think you are civil," said Mr. Caryll critically. "It was in your interests that I spoke."

"Then I'll thank you, in my interests, to hold your tongue!" his lordship stormed.

"In that case," said Mr. Caryll, "I must still speak in the interests of the lady. Since you've desired me to be a witness, I'll do my duty by you both and see you properly wed."

"Now, what the devil may you mean by that?" demanded his lordship, betraying himself more and more at every word.

Mr. Jenkins, in a spasm of terror, sought to pour oil upon these waters. "My lord," he bleated, teeth and eyeballs protruding from his pallid face. "My lord! Perhaps the gentleman is right. Perhaps—Perhaps—" He gulped, and turned to Mr. Caryll. "What is't ye think we have forgot now?" he asked.

"The time of day," Mr. Caryll replied, and watched the puzzled look that came into both their faces.

"Do ye deal in riddles with us?" quoth his lordship. "What have we

to do with the time of day?"

"Best ask the parson," suggested Mr. Caryll.

Rotherby swung round again to Jenkins. Jenkins spread his hands in mute bewilderment and distress. Mr. Caryll laughed silently.

"I'll not be married! I'll not be married!"

It was the lady who spoke, and those odd words were the first that Mr. Caryll heard from her lips. They made an excellent impression upon him, bearing witness to her good sense and judgment—although belatedly aroused—and informing him, although the pitch was strained just now; that the rich contralto of her voice was full of music. He was a judge of voices, as of much else besides.

"Hoity-toity!" quoth his lordship, between petulance and simulated amusement. "What's all the pother? Hortensia, dear—"

"I'll not be married!" she repeated firmly, her wide brown eyes meeting his in absolute defiance, head thrown back, face pale but fearless.

"I don't believe," ventured Mr. Caryll, "that you could be if you desired it. Leastways not here and now and by this." And he jerked a contemptuous thumb sideways at Mr. Jenkins, toward whom he had turned his shoulder. "Perhaps you have realized it for yourself."

A shudder ran through her; color flooded into her face and out again, leaving it paler than before; yet she maintained a brave front that moved Mr. Caryll profoundly to an even greater admiration of her.

Rotherby, his great jaw set, his hands clenched and eyes blazing, stood irresolute between her and Mr. Caryll. Jenkins, in sheer terror, now sank limply to a chair, whilst Gaskell looked on—a perfect servant—as immovable outwardly and unconcerned as if he had been

a piece of furniture. Then his lordship turned again to Caryl.

"You take a deal upon yourself, sir," said he menacingly.

"A deal of what?" wondered Mr. Caryl blandly.

The question nonplussed Rotherby. He swore ferociously. "By God!" he fumed, "I'll have you make good your insinuations. You shall disabuse this lady's mind. You shall—damn you!—or I'll compel you!"

Mr. Caryl smiled very engagingly. The matter was speeding excellently—a comedy the like of which he did not remember to have played a part in since his student days at Oxford, ten years and more ago.

"I had thought," said he, "that the woman who summoned me to be a witness of this—this—ah wedding"—there was a whole volume of criticism in his utterance of the word—"was the landlady of the 'Adam and Eve.' I begin to think that she was this lady's good angel; Fate, clothed, for once, matronly and benign." Then he dropped the easy, bantering manner with a suddenness that was startling. Gallic fire blazed up through British training. "Let us speak plainly, my Lord Rotherby. This marriage is no marriage. It is a mockery and a villainy. And that scoundrel—worthy servant of his master—is no parson; no, not so much as a hedge-parson is he. Madame," he proceeded, turning now to the frightened lady, "you have been grossly abused by these villains."

"Sir!" blazed Rotherby at last, breaking in upon his denunciation, hand clapped to sword. "Do ye dare use such words to me?"

Mr. Jenkins got to his feet, in a slow, foolish fashion. He put out a hand to stay his lordship. The lady, in the background, looked on with wide eyes, very breathless, one hand to her bosom as if to control its heave.

Mr. Caryll proceeded, undismayed, to make good his accusation. He had dropped back into his slightly listless air of thinly veiled persiflage, and he appeared to address the lady, to explain the situation to her, rather than to justify the charge he had made.

"A blind man could have perceived, from the rustling of his prayer book when he fumbled at it, that the contents were strange to him. And observe the volume," he continued, picking it up and flaunting it aloft. "Fire-new; not a thumbmark anywhere; purchased expressly for this foul venture. Is there aught else so clean and fresh about the scurvy thief?"

"You shall moderate your tones, sir—" began his lordship in a snarl.

"He sets you each on the wrong side of him," continued Mr. Caryll, all imperturbable, "lacking even the sense to read the directions which the book contains, and he has no thought for the circumstance that the time of day is uncanonical. Is more needed, madame?"

"So much was not needed," said she, "though I am your debtor, sir."

Her voice was marvelously steady, ice-cold with scorn, a royal anger increasing the glory of her eyes.

Rotherby's hand fell away from his sword. He realized that bluster was not the most convenient weapon here. He addressed Mr. Caryll very haughtily. "You are from France, sir, and something may be excused you. But not quite all. You have used expressions that are not to be offered to a person of my quality. I fear you scarcely apprehend it."

"As well, no doubt, as those who avoid you, sir," answered Mr. Caryll, with cool contempt, his dislike of the man and of the business in which he had found him engaged mounting above every other consideration.

His lordship frowned inquiry. "And who may those be?"

"Most decent folk, I should conceive, if this be an example of your ways."

"By God, sir! You are a thought too pert. We'll mend that presently. I will first convince you of your error, and you, Hortensia."

"It will be interesting," said Mr. Caryll, and meant it.

Rotherby turned from him, keeping a tight rein upon his anger; and so much restraint in so tempestuous a man was little short of wonderful. "Hortensia," he said, "this is fool's talk. What object could I seek to serve?" She drew back another step, contempt and loathing in her face. "This man," he continued, flinging a hand toward Jenkins, and checked upon the word. He swung round upon the fellow. "Have you fooled me, knave?" he bawled. "Is it true what this man says of you—that ye're no parson at all?"

Jenkins quailed and shriveled. Here was a move for which he was all unprepared, and knew not how to play to it. On the bridegroom's part it was excellently acted; yet it came too late to be convincing.

"You'll have the license in your pocket, no doubt, my lord," put in Mr. Caryll. "It will help to convince the lady of the honesty of your intentions. It will show her that ye were abused by this thief for the sake of the guinea ye were to pay him."

That was checkmate, and Lord Rotherby realized it. There remained him nothing but violence, and in violence he was exceedingly at home—being a member of the Hell Fire Club and having served in the Bold Bucks under his Grace of Wharton.

"You damned, infernal marplot! You blasted meddler!" he swore, and some other things besides, froth on his lips, the veins of his brow congested. "What affair was this of yours?"

"I thought you desired me for a witness," Mr. Caryll reminded him.

"I did, let me perish!" said Rotherby. "And I wish to the devil I had bit my tongue out first."

"The loss to eloquence had been irreparable," sighed Mr. Caryll, his eyes upon a beam of the ceiling.

Rotherby stared and choked. "Is there no sense in you, you gibbering parrot?" he inquired. "What are you—an actor or a fool?"

"A gentleman, I hope," said Mr. Caryll urbanely. "What are you?"

"I'll learn you," said his lordship, and plucked at his sword.

"I see," said Mr. Caryll in the same quiet voice that thinly veiled his inward laughter—"a bully!"

With more oaths, my lord heaved himself forward. Mr. Caryll was without weapons. He had left his sword above-stairs, not deeming that he would be needing it at a wedding. He never moved hand or foot as Rotherby bore down upon him, but his greenish eyes grew keen and very watchful. He began to wonder had he indulged his amusement overlong, and imperceptibly he adjusted his balance for a spring.

Rotherby stretched out to lunge, murder in his inflamed eyes. "I'll silence you, you—"

There was a swift rustle behind him. His hand—drawn back to thrust—was suddenly caught, and ere he realized it the sword was wrenched from fingers that held it lightly, unprepared for this.

"You dog!" said the lady's voice, strident now with anger and disdain. She had his sword.

He faced about with a horrible oath. Mr. Caryll conceived that he

was becoming a thought disgusting.

Hoofs and wheels ground on the cobbles of the yard and came to a halt outside, but went unheeded in the excitement of the moment. Rotherby stood facing her, she facing him, the sword in her hand and a look in her eyes that promised she would use it upon him did he urge her.

A moment thus—of utter, breathless silence. Then, as if her passion mounted and swept all aside, she raised the sword, and using it as a whip, she lashed him with it until at the third blow it rebounded to the table and was snapped. Instinctively his lordship had put up his hands to save his face, and across one of them a red line grew and grew and oozed forth blood which spread to envelop it.

Gaskell advanced with a sharp cry of concern. But Rotherby waved him back, and the gesture shook blood from his hand like raindrops. His face was livid; his eyes were upon the woman he had gone so near betraying with a look that none might read. Jenkins swayed, sickly, against the table, whilst Mr. Caryll observed all with a critical eye and came to the conclusion that she must have loved this villain.

The hilt and stump of sword clattered in the fireplace, whither she hurled it. A moment she caught her face in her hands, and a sob shook her almost fiercely. Then she came past his lordship, across the room to Mr. Caryll, Rotherby making no shift to detain her.

"Take me away, sir! Take me away," she begged him.

Mr. Caryll's gloomy face lightened suddenly. "Your servant, ma'am," said he, and made her a bow. "I think you are very well advised," he added cheerfully and offered her his arm. She took it, and moved a step or two toward the door. It opened at that moment, and a burly, elderly man came in heavily.

The lady halted, a cry escaped her—a cry of pain almost—and she

fell to weeping there and then. Mr. Caryl was very mystified.

The newcomer paused at the sight that met him, considered it with a dull blue eye, and, for all that he looked stupid, it seemed he had wit enough to take in the situation.

"So!" said he, with heavy mockery. "I might have spared myself the trouble of coming after you. For it seems that she has found you out in time, you villain!"

Rotherby turned sharply at that voice. He fell back a step, his brow seeming to grow blacker than it had been. "Father!" he exclaimed; but there was little that was filial in the accent.

Mr. Caryl staggered and recovered himself. It had been indeed a staggering shock; for here, of course, was his own father, too.

CHAPTER IV. Mr. GREEN

There was a quick patter of feet, the rustle of a hooped petticoat and the lady was in the arms of my Lord Ostermore.

"Forgive me, my lord!" she was crying. "Oh, forgive me! I was a little fool, and I have been punished enough already!"

To Mr. Caryll this was a surprising development. The earl, whose arms seemed to have opened readily enough to receive her, was patting her soothingly upon the shoulder. "Pish! What's this? What's this?" he grumbled; yet his voice, Mr. Caryll noticed, was if anything kindly; but it must be confessed that it was a dull, gruff voice, seldom indicating any shade of emotion, unless—as sometimes happened—it was raised in anger. He was frowning now upon his son over the girl's head, his bushy, grizzled brows contracted.

Mr. Caryll observed—and with what interest you should well imagine—that Lord Ostermore was still in a general way a handsome man. Of a good height, but slightly excessive bulk, he had a face that still retained a fair shape. Short-necked, florid and plethoric, he had the air of the man who seldom makes a long illness at the end. His eyes were very blue, and the lids were puffed and heavy, whilst the mouth, Mr. Caryll remarked in a critical, detached spirit, was stupid rather than sensuous. He made his survey swiftly, and the result left him wondering.

Meanwhile the earl was addressing his son, whose hand was being bandaged by Gaskell. There was little variety in his invective. "You villain!" he bawled at him. "You damned villain!" Then he patted the girl's head. "You found the scoundrel out before you married him," said he. "I am glad on't; glad on't!"

"Tis such a reversing of the usual order of things that it calls for wonder," said Mr. Caryll.

"Eh?" quoth his lordship. "Who the devil are you? One of his friends?"

"Your lordship overwhelms me," said Mr. Caryll gravely, making a bow. He observed the bewilderment in Ostermore's eyes, and began to realize at that early stage of their acquaintance that to speak ironically to the Earl of Ostermore was not to speak at all.

It was Hortensia—a very tearful Hortensia now who explained. "This gentleman saved me, my lord," she said.

"Saved you?" quoth he dully. "How did he come to save you?"

"He discovered the parson," she explained.

The earl looked more and more bewildered. "Just so," said Mr. Caryll. "It was my privilege to discover that the parson is no parson."

"The parson is no parson?" echoed his lordship, scowling more and more. "Then what the devil is the parson?"

Hortensia freed herself from his protecting arms. "He is a villain," she said, "who was hired by my Lord Rotherby to come here and pretend to be a parson." Her eyes flamed, her cheeks were scarlet. "God help me for a fool, my lord, to have put my faith in that man! Oh!" she choked. "The shame—the burning shame of it! I would I had a brother to punish him!"

Lord Ostermore was crimson, too, with indignation. Mr. Caryll was relieved to see that he was capable of so much emotion. "Did I not warn you against him, Hortensia?" said he. "Could you not have trusted that I knew him—I, his father, to my everlasting shame?" Then he swung upon Rotherby. "You dog!" he began, and there—being a

man of little invention—words failed him, and wrath alone remained, very intense, but entirely inarticulate.

Rotherby moved forward till he reached the table, then stood leaning upon it, scowling at the company from under his black brows. "'Tis your lordship alone is to blame for this," he informed his father, with a vain pretence at composure.

"I am to blame!" gurgled his lordship, veins swelling at his brow. "I am to blame that you should have carried her off thus? And—by God!—had you meant to marry her honestly and fittingly, I might find it in my heart to forgive you. But to practice such villainy! To attempt to put this foul trick upon the child!"

Mr. Caryll thought for an instant of another child whose child he was, and a passion of angry mockery at the forgetfulness of age welled up from the bitter soul of him. Outwardly he remained a very mirror for placidity.

"Your lordship had threatened to disinherit me if I married her," said Rotherby.

"'Twas to save her from you," Ostermore explained, entirely unnecessarily. "And you thought to—to—By God! sir, I marvel you have the courage to confront me. I marvel!"

"Take me away, my lord," Hortensia begged him, touching his arm.

"Aye, we were best away," said the earl, drawing her to him. Then he flung a hand out at Rotherby in a gesture of repudiation, of anathema. "But 'tis not the end on't for you, you knave! What I threatened, I will perform. I'll disinherit you. Not a penny of mine shall come to you. Ye shall starve for aught I care; starve, and—and—the world be well rid of a villain. I—disown you. Ye're no son of mine. I'll take oath ye're no son of mine!"

Mr. Caryl thought that, on the contrary, Rotherby was very much his father's son, and he added to his observations upon human nature the reflection that sinners are oddly blessed with short memories. He was entirely dispassionate again by now.

As for Rotherby, he received his father's anger with a scornful smile and a curling lip. "You'll disinherit me?" quoth he in mockery. "And of what, pray? If report speaks true, you'll be needing to inherit something yourself to bear you through your present straitness." He shrugged and produced his snuff-box with an offensive simulation of nonchalance. "Ye cannot cut the entail," he reminded his almost apoplectic sire, and took snuff delicately, sauntering windowwards.

"Cut the entail? The entail?" cried the earl, and laughed in a manner that seemed to bode no good. "Have you ever troubled to ascertain what it amounts to? You fool, it wouldn't keep you in—in—in snuff!"

Lord Rotherby halted in his stride, half-turned and looked at his father over his shoulder. The sneering mask was wiped from his face, which became blank. "My lord—" he began.

The earl waved a silencing hand, and turned with dignity to Hortensia.

"Come, child," said he. Then he remembered something. "Gad!" he exclaimed. "I had forgot the parson. I'll have him gaoled! I'll have him hanged if the law will help me. Come forth, man!"

Ignoring the invitation, Mr. Jenkins scuttled, ratlike, across the room, mounted the window-seat, and was gone in a flash through the open window. He dropped plump upon Mr. Green, who was crouching underneath. The pair rolled over together in the mould of a flowerbed; then Mr. Green clutched Mr. Jenkins, and Mr. Jenkins squealed like a trapped rabbit. Mr. Green thrust his fist carefully into the

mockparson's mouth.

"Sh! You blubbering fool!" he snapped in his ear. "My business is not with you. Lie still!"

Within the room all stood at gaze, following the sudden flight of Mr. Jenkins. Then Lord Ostermore made as if to approach the winnow but Hortensia restrained him.

"Let the wretch go," she said. "The blame is not his. What is he but my lord's tool?" And her eyes scorched Rotherby with such a glance of scorn as must have killed any but a shameless man. Then turning to the demurely observant gentleman who had done her such good service, "Mr. Caryl" she said, "I want to thank you. I want my lord, here, to thank you."

Mr. Caryl bowed to her. "I beg that you will not think of it," said he. "It is I who will remain in your debt."

"Is your name Caryl, sir?" quoth the earl. He had a trick of fastening upon the inconsequent, though that was scarcely the case now.

"That, my lord, is my name. I believe I have the honor of sharing it with your lordship."

"Ye'll belong to some younger branch of the family," the earl supposed.

"Like enough—some outlying branch," answered the imperturbable Caryl—a jest which only himself could appreciate, and that bitterly.

"And how came you into this?"

Rotherby sneered audibly—in self-mockery, no doubt, as he came to reflect that it was he, himself, had had him fetched.

"They needed another witness," said Mr. Caryl, "and hearing there

was at the inn a gentleman newly crossed from France, his lordship no doubt opined that a traveller, here to-day and gone for good tomorrow, would be just the witness that he needed for the business he proposed. That circumstance aroused my suspicions, and—"

But the earl, as usual, seemed to have fastened upon the minor point, although again it was not so. "You are newly crossed from France?" said he. "Ay, and your name is the same as mine. 'Twas what I was advised."

Mr. Caryl flashed a sidelong glance at Rotherby, who had turned to stare at his father, and in his heart he cursed the stupidity of my Lord Ostermore. If this proposed to be a member of a conspiracy, Heaven help that same conspiracy!

"Were you, by any chance, going to seek me in town, Mr. Caryl?"

Mr. Caryl suppressed a desire to laugh. Here was a way to deal with State secrets. "I, my lord?" he inquired, with an assumed air of surprise.

The earl looked at him, and from him to Rotherby, bethought himself, and started so overtly that Rotherby's eyes grew narrow, the lines of his mouth tightened. "Nay, of course not; of course not," he blustered clumsily.

But Rotherby laughed aloud. "Now what a plague is all this mystery?" he inquired.

"Mystery?" quoth my lord. "What mystery should there be?"

"'Tis what I would fain be informed," he answered in a voice that showed he meant to gain the information. He sauntered forward towards Caryl, his eye playing mockingly over this gentleman from France. "Now, sir," said he, "whose messenger may you be, eh? What's all this—"

"Rotherby!" the earl interrupted in a voice intended to be compelling. "Come away, Mr. Caryll," he added quickly. "I'll not have any gentleman who has shown himself a friend to my ward, here, affronted by that rascal. Come away, sir!"

"Not so fast! Not so fast, ecod!"

It was another voice that broke in upon them. Rotherby started round. Gaskell, in the shadows of the cowed fireplace jumped in sheer alarm. All stared at the window whence the voice proceeded.

They beheld a plump, chubby-faced little man, astride the sill, a pistol displayed with ostentation in his hand.

Mr. Caryll was the only one with the presence of mind to welcome him. "Ha!" said he, smiling engagingly. "My little friend, the brewer of ale."

"Let no one leave this room," said Mr. Green with a great dignity. Then, with rather less dignity, he whistled shrilly through his fingers, and got down lightly into the room.

"Sir," blustered the earl, "this is an intrusion; an impertinence. What do you want?"

"The papers this gentleman carries," said Mr. Green, indicating Caryll with the hand that held the pistol. The earl looked alarmed, which was foolish in him, thought Mr. Caryll. Rotherby covered his mouth with his hand, after the fashion of one who masks a smile.

"Ye're rightly served for meddling," said he with relish.

"Out with them," the chubby man demanded. "Ye'll gain nothing by resistance. So don't be obstinate, now."

"I could be nothing so discourteous," said Mr. Caryll. "Would it be prying on my part to inquire what may be your interest in my papers?"

His serenity lessened the earl's anxieties, but bewildered him; and it took the edge off the malicious pleasure which Rotherby was beginning to experience.

"I am obeying the orders of my Lord Carteret, the Secretary of State," said Mr. Green. "I was to watch for a gentleman from France with letters for my Lord Ostermore. He had a messenger a week ago to tell him to look for such a visitor. He took the messenger, if you must know, and—well, we induced him to tell us what was the message he had carried. There is so much mystery in all this that my Lord Carteret desires more knowledge on the subject. I think you are the gentleman I am looking for."

Mr. Caryll looked him over with an amused eye, and laughed. "It distresses me," said he, "to see so much good thought wasted."

Mr. Green was abashed a moment. But he recovered quickly; no doubt he had met the cool type before. "Come, come!" said he. "No blustering. Out with your papers, my fine fellow."

The door opened, and a couple of men came in; over their shoulders, ere the door closed again, Mr. Caryll had a glimpse of the landlady's rosy face, alarm in her glance. The newcomers were dirty rogues; tipstaves, recognizable at a glance. One of them wore a ragged bob-wig—the cast-off, no doubt, of some gentleman's gentleman, fished out of the sixpenny tub in Rosemary Lane; it was ill-fitting, and wisps of the fellow's own unkempt hair hung out in places. The other wore no wig at all; his yellow thatch fell in streaks from under his shabby hat, which he had the ill-manners to retain until Lord Ostermore knocked it from his head with a blow of his cane. Both were fierily bottle-nosed, and neither appeared to have shaved for a week or so.

"Now," quoth Mr. Green, "will you hand them over of your own accord, or must I have you searched?" And a wave of the hand

towards the advancing myrmidons indicated the searchers.

"You go too far, sir," blustered the earl.

"Ay, surely," put in Mr. Caryll. "You are mad to think a gentleman is to submit to being searched by any knave that comes to him with a cock-and-bull tale about the Secretary of State."

Mr. Green leered again, and produced a paper. "There," said he, "is my Lord Carteret's warrant, signed and sealed."

Mr. Caryll glanced over it with a disdainful eye. "It is in blank," said he.

"Just so," agreed Mr. Green. "Carte blanche, as you say over the water. If you insist," he offered obligingly, "I'll fill in your name before we proceed."

Mr. Caryll shrugged his shoulders. "It might be well," said he, "if you are to search me at all."

Mr. Green advanced to the table. The writing implements provided for the wedding were still there. He took up a pen, scrawled a name across the blank, dusted it with sand, and presented it again to Mr. Caryll. The latter nodded.

"I'll not trouble you to search me," said he. "I would as soon not have these noblemen of yours for my valets." He thrust his hands into the pockets of his fine coat, and brought forth several papers. These he proffered to Mr. Green, who took them between satisfaction and amazement. Ostermore stared, too stricken for words at this meek surrender; and well was it for Mr. Caryll that he was so stricken, for had he spoken he had assuredly betrayed himself.

Hortensia, Mr. Caryll observed, watched his cowardly yielding with an eye of stern contempt. Rotherby looked on with a dark face that betrayed nothing.

Meanwhile Mr. Green was running through the papers, and as fast as he ran through them he permitted himself certain comments that passed for humor with his followers. There could be no doubt that in his own social stratum Mr. Green must have been accounted something of a wag.

"Ha! What's this? A bill! A bill for snuff! My Lord Carteret'll snuff you, sir. He'll tobacco you, ecod! He'll smoke you first, and snuff you afterwards." He flung the bill aside. "Phew!" he whistled. "Verses! 'To Theocritus upon sailing for Albion.' That's mighty choice! D'ye write verses, sir?"

"Heyday! 'Tis an occupation to which I have succumbed in moments of weakness. I crave your indulgence, Mr. Green."

Mr. Green perceived that here was a weak attempt at irony, and went on with his investigations. He came to the last of the papers Mr. Caryll had handed him, glanced at it, swore coarsely, and dropped it.

"D'ye think ye can bubble me?" he cried, red in the face.

Lord Ostermore heaved a sigh of relief; the hard look had faded from Hortensia's eyes.

"What is't ye mean, giving me this rubbish?"

"I offer you my excuses for the contents of my pockets," said Mr. Caryll. "Ye see, I did not expect to be honored by your inquisition. Had I but known—"

Mr. Green struck an attitude. "Now attend to me, sir! I am a servant of His Majesty's Government."

"His Majesty's Government cannot be sufficiently congratulated," said Mr. Caryll, the irrepressible.

Mr. Green banged the table. "Are ye rallying me, ecod!"

"You have upset the ink," Mr. Caryll pointed out to him.

"Damn the ink!" swore the spy. "And damn you for a Tom o' Bedlam! I ask you again—what d'ye mean, giving me this rubbish?"

"You asked me to turn out my pockets."

"I asked you for the letter ye have brought Lord Ostermore."

"I am sorry," said Mr. Caryll, and eyed the other sympathetically. "I am sorry to disappoint you. But, then, you assumed too much when you assumed that I had such a letter. I have obliged you to the fullest extent in my power. I do not think you show a becoming gratitude."

Mr. Green eyed him blankly a moment; then exploded. "Ecod, sir! You are cool."

"It is a condition we do not appear to share."

"D'ye say ye've brought his lordship no letter from France?" thundered the spy. "What else ha' ye come to England for?"

"To study manners, sir," said Mr. Caryll, bowing.

That was the last drop in the cup of Mr. Green's endurance. He waved his men towards the gentleman from France. "Find it," he bade them shortly.

Mr. Caryll drew himself up with a great dignity, and waved the bailiffs back, his white face set, an unpleasant glimmer in his eyes. "A moment!" he cried. "You have no authority to go to such extremes. I make no objection to being searched; but every objection to being soiled, and I'll not have the fingers of these scavengers about my person."

"And you are right, egad!" cried Lord Ostermore, advancing.

"Harkee, you dirty spy, this is no way to deal with gentlemen. Be off, now, and take your carrion-crows with you, or I'll have my grooms in with their whips to you."

"To me?" roared Green. "I represent the Secretary of State."

"Ye'll represent a side of raw venison if you tarry here," the earl promised him. "D'ye dare look me in the eye? D'ye dare, ye rogue? D'ye know who I am? And don't wag that pistol, my fine fellow! Be off, now! Away with you!"

Mr. Green looked his name. The rosiness was all departed from his cheeks; he quivered with suppressed wrath. "If I go—giving way to constraint—what shall you say to my Lord Carteret?" he asked.

"What concern may that be of yours, sirrah?"

"It will be some concern of yours, my lord."

Mr. Caryll interposed. "The knave is right," said he. "It were to implicate your lordship. It were to give color to his silly suspicions. Let him make his search. But be so good as to summon my valet. He shall hand you my garments that you may do your will upon them. But unless you justify yourself by finding the letter you are seeking, you shall have to reckon with the consequences of discomposing a gentleman for nothing. Now, sir! Is it a bargain?" Mr. Green looked him over, and if he was shaken by the calm assurance of Mr. Caryll's tone and manner, he concealed it very effectively. "We'll make no bargains," said he. "I have my duty to do." He signed to one of the bailiffs. "Fetch the gentleman's servant," said he.

"So be it," said Mr. Caryll. "But you take too much upon yourself, sir. Your duty, I think, would have been to arrest me and carry me to Lord Carteret's, there to be searched if his lordship considered it necessary."

"I have no cause to arrest you until I find it," Mr. Green snapped impatiently.

"Your logic is faultless."

"I am following my Lord Carteret's orders to the letter. I am to effect no arrest until I have positive evidence."

"Yet you are detaining me. What does this amount to but an arrest?"

Mr. Green disdained to answer. Leduc entered, and Mr. Caryll turned to Lord Ostermore.

"There is no reason why I should detain your lordship," said he, "and these operations—The lady—" He waved an expressive hand, bent an expressive eye upon the earl.

Lord Ostermore seemed to waver. He was not—he had never been—a man to think for others. But Hortensia cut in before he could reply.

"We will wait," she said. "Since you are travelling to town, I am sure his lordship will be glad of your company, sir."

Mr. Caryll looked deep into those great brown eyes, and bowed his thanks. "If it will not discompose your lordship—"

"No, no," said Ostermore, gruff of voice and manner. "We will wait. I shall be honored, sir, if you will journey with us afterwards."

Mr. Caryll bowed again, and went to hold the door for them, Mr. Green's eyes keenly alert for an attempt at evasion. But there was none. When his lordship and his ward had departed, Mr. Caryll turned to Rotherby, who had taken a chair, his man Gaskell behind him. He looked from the viscount to Mr. Green.

"Do we require this gentleman?" he asked the spy.

A smile broke over Rotherby's swam face. "By your leave, sir, I'll remain to see fair play. You may find me useful, Mr. Green. I have no cause to wish this marplot well," he explained.

Mr. Caryll turned his back upon him, took off his coat and waistcoat. He sat down while Mr. Green spread the garments upon the table, emptied out the pockets, turned down the cuffs, ripped up the satin linings. He did it in a consummate fashion, very thoroughly. Yet, though he parted the linings from the cloth, he did so in such a manner as to leave the garments easily repairable.

Mr. Caryll watched him with interest and appreciation, and what time he watched he was wondering might it not be better straightway to place the spy in possession of the letter, and thus destroy himself and Lord Ostermore, at the same time—and have done with the task on which he was come to England. It seemed almost an easy way out of the affair. His betrayal of the earl would be less ugly if he, himself, were to share the consequences of that betrayal.

Then he checked his thoughts. What manner of mood was this? Besides, his inclination was all to become better acquainted with this odd family upon which he had stumbled in so extraordinary a manner. Down in his heart of hearts he had a feeling that the thing he was come to do would never be done—leastways, not by him. It was in vain that he might attempt to steel himself to the task. It repelled him. It went not with a nature such as his.

He thought of Everard, afire with the idea of vengeance and to such an extent that he had succeeded in infecting Justin himself with a spark of it. He thought of him with pity almost; pity that a man should obsess his life by such a phantasm as this same vengeance must have been to him. Was it worth while? Was anything worth while, he wondered.

Lord Rotherby approached the table, and took up the garments

upon which Mr. Green had finished. He turned them over and supplemented Mr. Green's search.

"Ye're welcome to all that ye can find," sneered Mr. Green, and turned to Mr. Caryll. "Let us have your shoes, sir."

Mr. Caryll removed his shoes, in silence, and Mr. Green proceeded to examine them in a manner that provoked Mr. Caryll's profound admiration. He separated the lining from the Spanish leather, and probed slowly and carefully in the space between. He examined the heels very closely, going over to the window for the purpose. That done, he dropped them.

"Your breeches now," said he laconically.

Meanwhile Leduc had taken up the coat, and with a needle and thread wherewith he had equipped himself he was industriously restoring the stitches that Mr. Green had taken out.

Mr. Caryll surrendered his breeches. His fine Holland shirt went next, his stockings and what other trifles he wore, until he stood as naked as Adam before the fall. Yet all in vain.

His garments were restored to him, one by one, and one by one, with Leduc's aid, he resumed them. Mr. Green was looking crestfallen.

"Are you satisfied?" inquired Mr. Caryll pleasantly, his good temper inexhaustible.

The spy looked at him with a moody eye, plucking thoughtfully at his lip with thumb and forefinger. Then he brightened suddenly. "There's your man," said he, flashing a quick eye upon Leduc, who looked up with a quiet smile.

"True," said Mr. Caryll, "and there's my portmanteau above-stairs, and my saddle on my horse in the stables. It is even possible, for

aught you know, that there may be a hollow tooth or two in my head. Pray let your search be thorough."

Mr. Green considered him again. "If you had it, it would be upon your person."

"Yet consider," Mr. Caryll begged him, holding out his foot that Leduc might put on his shoe again, "I might have supposed that you would suppose that, and disposed accordingly. You had better investigate to the bitter end."

Mr. Green's small eyes continued to scrutinize Leduc at intervals. The valet was a silent, serious-faced fellow. "I'll search your servant, leastways," the spy announced.

"By all means. Leduc, I beg that you will place yourself at this interesting gentleman's disposal."

What time Mr. Caryll, unaided now, completed the resumption of his garments, Leduc, silent and expressionless, submitted to being searched.

"You will observe, Leduc," said Mr. Caryll, "that we have not come to this country in vain. We are undergoing experiences that would be interesting if they were not quite so dull, amusing if they entailed less discomfort to ourselves. Assuredly, it was worth while to cross to England to study manners. And there are sights for you that you will never see in France. You would not, for instance, had you not come hither, have had an opportunity of observing a member of the noblesse seconding and assisting a tipstaff in the discharge of his duty. And doing it just as a hog wallows in foulness—for the love of it.

"The gentlemen in your country, Leduc, are too fastidious to enjoy life as it should be enjoyed; they are too prone to adhere to the amusements of their class. You have here an opportunity of perceiving how deeply they are mistaken, what relish may lie in

setting one's rank on one side, in forgetting at times that by an accident—a sheer, incredible accident, I assure you, Leduc—one may have been born to a gentleman's estate."

Rotherby had drawn himself up, his dark face crimsoning.

"D'ye talk at me, sir?" he demanded. "D'ye dare discuss me with your lackey?"

"But why not, since you search me with my tipstaff! If you can perceive a difference, you are too subtle for me, sir."

Rotherby advanced a step; then checked. He inherited mental sluggishness from his father. "You are insolent!" he charged Caryl. "You insult me."

"Indeed! Ha! I am working miracles."

Rotherby governed his anger by an effort. "There was enough between us without this," said he.

"There could not be too much between us—too much space, I mean."

The viscount looked at him furiously. "I shall discuss this further with you," said he. "The present is not the time nor place. But I shall know where to look for you."

"Leduc, I am sure, will always be pleased to see you. He, too, is studying manner's."

Rotherby ignored the insult. "We shall see, then, whether you can do anything more than talk."

"I hope that your lordship, too, is master of other accomplishments. As a talker, I do not find you very gifted. But perhaps Leduc will be less exigent than I."

"Bah!" his lordship flung at him, and went out, cursing him profusely, Gaskell following at his master's heels.

CHAPTER V. MOONSHINE

My Lord Ostermore, though puzzled, entertained no tormenting anxiety on the score of the search to which Mr. Caryl was to be submitted. He assured himself from that gentleman's confident, easy manner—being a man who always drew from things the inference that was obvious—that either he carried no such letter as my lord expected, or else he had so disposed of it as to baffle search.

So, for the moment, he dismissed the subject from his mind. With Hortensia he entered the parlor across the stone-flagged passage, to which the landlady ushered them, and turned whole-heartedly to the matter of his ward's elopement with his son.

"Hortensia," said he, when they were alone. "You have been foolish; very foolish." He had a trick of repeating himself, conceiving, no doubt, that the commonplace achieves distinction by repetition.

Hortensia sat in an arm-chair by the window, and sighed, looking out over the downs. "Do I not know it?" she cried, and the eyes which were averted from his lordship were charred with tears—tears of hot anger, shame and mortification. "God help all women!" she added bitterly, after a moment, as many another woman under similar and worse circumstances has cried before and since.

A more feeling man might have conceived that this was a moment in which to leave her to herself and her own thoughts, and in that it is possible that a more feeling man had been mistaken. Ostermore, stolid and unimaginative, but not altogether without sympathy for his ward, of whom he was reasonably fond—as fond, no doubt, as it was his capacity to be for any other than himself—approached her and set a plump hand upon the back of her chair.

"What was it drove you to this?"

She turned upon him almost fiercely. "My Lady Ostermore," she answered him.

His lordship frowned, and his eyes shifted uneasily from her face. In his heart he disliked his wife excessively, disliked her because she was the one person in the world who governed him, who rode roughshod over his feelings and desires; because, perhaps, she was the mother of his unfeeling, detestable son. She may not have been the only person living to despise Lord Ostermore; but she was certainly the only one with the courage to manifest her contempt, and that in no circumscribed terms. And yet, disliking her as he did, returning with interest her contempt of him, he veiled it, and was loyal to his termagant, never suffering himself to utter a complaint of her to others, never suffering others to censure her within his hearing. This loyalty may have had its roots in pride—indeed, no other soil can be assigned to them—a pride that would allow no strangers to pry into the sore places of his being. He frowned now to hear Hortensia's angry mention of her ladyship's name; and if his blue eyes moved uneasily under his beetling brows, it was because the situation irked him. How should he stand as judge between Mistress Winthrop—towards whom, as we have seen, he had a kindness—and his wife, whom he hated, yet towards whom he would not be disloyal?

He wished the subject dropped, since, did he ask the obvious question—in what my Lady Ostermore could have been the cause of Hortensia's flight—he would provoke, he knew, a storm of censure from his wife. Therefore he fell silent.

Hortensia, however, felt that she had said too much not to say more.

"Her ladyship has never failed to make me feel my position—my—

my poverty," she pursued. "There is no slight her ladyship has not put upon me, until not even your servants use me with the respect that is due to my father's daughter. And my father," she added, with a reproachful glance, "was your friend, my lord."

He shifted uncomfortably on his feet, deploring now the question with which he had fired the train of feminine complaint. "Pish, pish!" he deprecated, "'tis fancy, child—pure fancy!"

"So her Ladyship would say, did you tax her with it. Yet your lordship knows I am not fanciful in other things. Should I, then, be fanciful in this?"

"But what has her ladyship ever done, child?" he demanded, thinking thus to baffle her—since he was acquainted with the subtlety of her ladyship's methods.

"A thousand things," replied Hortensia hotly, "and yet not one upon which I may fasten. 'Tis thus she works: by words, half-words, looks, sneers, shrugs, and sometimes foul abuse entirely disproportionate to the little cause I may unwittingly have given."

"Her ladyship is a little hot," the earl admitted, "but a good heart; 'tis an excellent heart, Hortensia."

"For hating-ay, my lord."

"Nay, plague on't! That's womanish in you. 'Pon honor it is! Womanish!"

"What else would you have a woman? Mannish and raffish, like my Lady Ostermore?"

"I'll not listen to you," he said. "Ye're not just, Hortensia. Ye're heated; heated! I'll not listen to you. Besides, when all is said, what reasons be these for the folly ye've committed?"

"Reasons?" she echoed scornfully. "Reasons and to spare! Her ladyship has made my life so hard, has so shamed and crushed me, put such indignities upon me, that existence grew unbearable under your roof. It could not continue, my lord," she pursued, rising under the sway of her indignation. "It could not continue. I am not of the stuff that goes to making martyrs. I am weak, and—and—as your lordship has said—womanish."

"Indeed, you talk a deal," said his lordship peevishly. But she did not heed the sarcasm.

"Lord Rotherby," she continued, "offered me the means to escape. He urged me to elope with him. His reason was that you would never consent to our marriage; but that if we took the matter into our hands, and were married first, we might depend upon your sanction afterwards; that you had too great a kindness for me to withhold your pardon. I was weak, my lord—womanish," (she threw the word at him again) "and it happened—God help me for a fool!—that I thought I loved Lord Rotherby. And so—and so—"

She sat down again, weakly, miserably, averting her face that she might hide her tears. He was touched, and he even went so far as to show something of his sympathy. He approached her again, and laid a benign hand lightly upon her shoulder.

"But—but—in that case—Oh, the damned villain!—why this mock-parson?"

"Does your lordship not perceive? Must I die of shame? Do you not see?"

"See? No!" He was thoughtful a second; then repeated, "No!"

"I understood," she informed him, a smile—a cruelly bitter smile—lifting and steadying the corner of her lately quivering lip, "when he alluded to your lordship's straitened circumstances. He has no

disinheritance to fear because he has no inheritance to look for beyond the entail, of which you cannot disinherit him. My Lord Rotherby sets a high value upon himself. He may—I do not know—he may have been in love with me—though not as I know love, which is all sacrifice, all self-denial. But by his lights he may have cared for me; he must have done, by his lights. Had I been a lady of fortune, not a doubt but he would have made me his wife; as it was, he must aim at a more profitable marriage, and meanwhile, to gratify his love for me—base as it was—he would—he would—O God! I cannot say it. You understand, my lord."

My lord swore strenuously. "There is a punishment for such a crime as this."

"Ay, my lord—and a way to avoid punishment for a gentleman in your son's position, even did I flaunt my shame in some vain endeavor to have justice—a thing he knew I never could have done."

My lord swore again. "He shall be punished," he declared emphatically.

"No doubt. God will see to that," she said, a world of faith in her quivering voice.

My lord's eyes expressed his doubt of divine intervention. He preferred to speak for himself. "I'll disown the dog. He shall not enter my house again. You shall not be reminded of what has happened here. Gad! You were shrewd to have smoked his motives so!" he cried in a burst of admiration for her insight. "Gad, child! Shouldst have been a lawyer! A lawyer!"

"If it had not been for Mr. Caryll—" she began, but to what else she said he lent no ear, being suddenly brought back to his fears at the mention of that gentleman's name.

"Mr. Caryll! Save us! What is keeping him?" he cried. "Can they—"

can they—"

The door opened, and Mr. Caryl walked in, ushered by the hostess. Both turned to confront him, Hortensia's eyes swollen from her weeping.

"Well?" quoth his lordship. "Did they find nothing?"

Mr. Caryl advanced with the easy, graceful carriage that was one of his main charms, his clothes so skilfully restored by Leduc that none could have guessed the severity of the examination they had undergone.

"Since I am here, and alone, your lordship may conclude such to be the case. Mr. Green is preparing for departure. He is very abject; very chap-fallen. I am almost sorry for Mr. Green. I am by nature sympathetic. I have promised to make my complaint to my Lord Carteret. And so, I trust there is an end to a tiresome matter."

"But then, sir?" quoth his lordship. "But then—are you the bearer of no letter?"

Mr. Caryl shot a swift glance over his shoulder at the door. He deliberately winked at the earl. "Did your lordship expect letters?" he inquired. "That was scarcely reason enough to suppose me a courier. There is some mistake, I imagine."

Between the wink and the words his lordship was bewildered.

Mr. Caryl turned to the lady, bowing. Then he waved a hand over the downs. "A fine view," said he airily, and she stared at him. "I shall treasure sweet memories of Maidstone." Her stare grew stonier. Did he mean the landscape or some other matter? His tone was difficult to read—a feature peculiar to his tone.

"Not so shall I, sir," she made answer. "I shall never think of it other than with burning cheeks—unless it be with gratitude to your

shrewdness which saved me."

"No more, I beg. It is a matter painful to you to dwell on. Let me exhort you to forget it. I have already done so."

"That is a sweet courtesy in you."

"I am compounded of sweet courtesy," he informed her modestly.

His lordship spoke of departure, renewing his offer to carry Mr. Caryll to town in his chaise. Meanwhile, Mr. Caryll was behaving curiously. He was tiptoeing towards the door, along the wall, where he was out of line with the keyhole. He reached it suddenly, and abruptly pulled it open. There was a squeal, and Mr. Green rolled forward into the room. Mr. Caryll kicked him out again before he could rise, and called Leduc to throw him outside. And that was the last they saw of Mr. Green at Maidstone.

They set out soon afterwards, Mr. Caryll travelling in his lordship's chaise, and Leduc following in his master's.

It was an hour or so after candle-lighting time when they reached Croydon, the country lying all white under a full moon that sailed in a clear, calm sky. His lordship swore that he would go no farther that night. The travelling fatigued him; indeed, for the last few miles of the journey he had been dozing in his corner of the carriage, conversation having long since been abandoned as too great an effort on so bad a road, which shook and jolted them beyond endurance. His lordship's chaise was of an old-fashioned pattern, and the springs far from what might have been desired or expected in a nobleman's conveyance.

They alighted at the "Bells." His lordship bespoke supper, invited Mr. Caryll to join them, and, what time the meal was preparing, went into a noisy doze in the parlor's best chair.

Mistress Winthrop sauntered out into the garden. The calm and

fragrance of the night invited her. Alone with her thoughts, she paced the lawn a while, until her solitude was disturbed by the advent of Mr. Caryl. He, too, had need to think, and he had come out into the peace of the night to indulge his need. Seeing her, he made as if to withdraw again; but she perceived him, and called him to her side. He went most readily. Yet when he stood before her in an attitude of courteous deference, she was at a loss what she should say to him, or, rather, what words she should employ. At last, with a half-laugh of nervousness, "I am by nature very inquisitive, sir," she prefaced.

"I had already judged you to be an exceptional woman," Mr. Caryl commented softly.

She mused an instant. "Are you never serious?" she asked him.

"Is it worth while?" he counter-questioned, and, whether intent or accident, he let her see something of himself. "Is it even amusing—to be serious?"

"Is there in life nothing but amusement?"

"Oh, yes—but nothing so vital. I speak with knowledge. The gift of laughter has been my salvation."

"From what, sir?"

"Ah—who shall say that? My history and my rearing have been such that had I bowed before them, I had become the most gloomy, melancholy man that steps this gloomy, melancholy world. By now I might have found existence insupportable, and so—who knows? I might have set a term to it. But I had the wisdom to prefer laughter. Humanity is a delectable spectacle if we but have the gift to observe it in a dispassionate spirit. Such a gift have I cultivated. The squirming of the human worm is interesting to observe, and the practice of observing it has this advantage, that while we observe it we forget to squirm ourselves."

"The bitterness of your words belies their purport."

He shrugged and smiled. "But proves my contention. That I might explain myself, you made me for a moment serious, set me squirming in my turn."

She moved a little, and he fell into step beside her. A little while there was silence.

Presently—"You find me, no doubt, as amusing as any other of your human worms," said she.

"God forbid!" he answered soberly.

She laughed. "You make an exception in my case, then. That is a subtle flattery!"

"Have I not said that I had judged you to be an exceptional woman?"

"Exceptionally foolish, not a doubt."

"Exceptionally beautiful; exceptionally admirable," he corrected.

"A clumsy compliment, devoid of wit!"

"When we grow truthful, it may be forgiven us if we fall short of wit."

"That were an argument in favor of avoiding truth."

"Were it necessary," said he. "For truth is seldom so intrusive as to need avoiding. But we are straying. There was a score upon which you were inquisitive, you said; from which I take it that you sought knowledge at my hands. Pray seek it; I am a well, of knowledge."

"I desired to know—Nay, but I have asked you already. I desired to know did you deem me a very pitiful little fool?"

They had reached the privet hedge, and turned. They paused now before resuming their walk. He paused, also, before replying. Then:

"I should judge you wise in most things," he answered slowly, critically. "But in the matter to which I owe the blessing of having served you, I do not think you wise. Did you—do you love Lord Rotherby?"

"What if so?"

"After what you have learned, I should account you still less wise."

"You are impertinent, sir," she reproved him.

"Nay, most pertinent. Did you not ask me to sit in judgment upon this matter? And unless you confess to me, how am I to absolve you?"

"I did not crave your absolution. You take too much upon yourself."

"So said Lord Rotherby. You seem to have something in common when all is said."

She bit her lip in chagrin. They paced in silence to the lawn's end, and turned again. Then: "You treat me like a fool," she reproved him.

"How is that possible, when, already I think I love you."

She started from him, and stared at him for a long moment. "You insult me!" she cried angrily, conceiving that she understood his mind. "Do you think that because I may have committed a folly I have forfeited all claim to be respected—that I am a subject for insolent speeches?"

"You are illogical," said Mr. Caryll, the imperturbable. "I have told you that I love you. Should I insult the woman I have said I love?"

"You love me?" She looked at him, her face very white in the white moonlight, her lips parted, a kindling anger in her eyes. "Are you

mad?"

"I a'n't sure. There have been moments when I have almost feared it. This is not one of them."

"You wish me to think you serious?" She laughed a thought stridently in her indignation. "I have known you just four hours," said she.

"Precisely the time I think I have loved you."

"You think?" she echoed scornfully. "Oh, you make that reservation! You are not quite sure?"

"Can we be sure of anything?" he deprecated.

"Of some things," she answered icily. "And I am sure of one—that I am beginning to understand you."

"I envy you. Since that is so, help me—of your charity!—to understand myself."

"Then understand yourself for an impudent, fleeing coxcomb," she flung at him, and turned to leave him.

"That is not explanation," said Mr. Caryl thoughtfully. "It is mere abuse."

"What else do you deserve?" she asked him over her shoulder. "That you should have dared!" she withered him.

"To love you quite so suddenly?" he inquired, and misquoted: "'Whoever loved at all, that loved not at first sight?' Hortensia!"

"You have not the right to my name, sir."

"Yet I offer you the right to mine," he answered, with humble reproach.

"You shall be punished," she promised him, and in high dudgeon left him.

"Punished? Oh, cruel! Can you then be—

"'Unsoft to him who's smooth to thee?
Tigers and bears, I've heard some say,
For proffered love will love repay.'"

But she was gone. He looked up at the moon, and took it into his confidence to reproach it. "'Twas your white face beglamored me," he told it aloud. "See, how execrable a beginning I've made, and, therefore, how excellent!" And he laughed, but entirely without mirth.

He remained pacing in the moonlight, very thoughtful, and, for once, it seemed, not at all amused. His life appeared to be tangling itself beyond unravelling, and his vaunted habit of laughter scarce served at present to show him the way out.

CHAPTER VI. HORTENSIA'S RETURN

Mr. Caryll needs explaining as he walks there in the moonlight; that is, if we are at all to understand him—a matter by no means easy, considering that he has confessed he did not understand himself. Did ever man make a sincere declaration of sudden passion as flippantly as he had done, or in terms-better calculated to alienate the regard he sought to win? Did ever man choose his time with less discrimination, or his words with less discretion? Assuredly not. To suppose that Mr. Caryll was unaware of this, would be to suppose him a fool, and that he most certainly was not.

His mood was extremely complex; its analysis, I fear, may baffle us. It must have seemed to you—as it certainly seemed to Mistress Winthrop—that he made a mock of her; that in truth he was the impudent, fleeing coxcomb she pronounced him, and nothing more. Not so. Mock he most certainly did; but his mockery was all aimed to strike himself on the recoil—himself and the sentiments which had sprung to being in his soul, and to which—nameless as he was, pledged as he was to a task that would most likely involve his ruin—he conceived that he had no right. He gave expression to his feelings, yet chose for them the expression best calculated to render them barren of all consequence where Mistress Winthrop was concerned. Where another would have hidden those emotions, Mr. Caryll elected to flaunt them half-derisively, that Hortensia might trample them under foot in sheer disgust.

It was, perhaps, the knowledge that did he wait, and come to her as an honest, devout lover, he must in honesty tell her all there was to

know of his odd history and of his bastardy, and thus set up between them a barrier insurmountable. Better, he may have thought, to make from the outset a mockery of a passion for which there could be no hope. And so, under that mocking, impertinent exterior, I hope you catch some glimpse of the real, suffering man—the man who boasted that he had the gift of laughter.

He continued a while to pace the dewy lawn after she had left him, and a deep despondency descended upon the spirit of this man who accounted seriousness a folly. Hitherto his rancor against his father had been a theoretical rancor, a thing educated into him by Everard, and accepted by him as we accept a proposition in Euclid that is proved to us. In its way it had been a make-believe rancor, a rancor on principle, for he had been made to see that unless he was inflamed by it, he was not worthy to be his mother's son. Tonight had changed all this. No longer was his grievance sentimental, theoretical or abstract. It was suddenly become real and very bitter. It was no longer a question of the wrong done his mother thirty years ago; it became the question of a wrong done himself in casting him nameless upon the world, a thing of scorn to cruel, unjust humanity. Could Mistress Winthrop have guessed the bitter self-derision with which he had, in apparent levity, offered her his name, she might have felt some pity for him who had no pity for himself.

And so, to-night he felt—as once for a moment Everard had made him feel—that he had a very real wrong of his own to avenge upon his father; and the task before him lost much of the repugnance that it had held for him hitherto.

All this because four hours ago he had looked into the brown depths of Mistress Winthrop's eyes. He sighed, and declaimed a line of Congreve's:

"Woman is a fair image in a pool; who leaps at it is sunk."

The landlord came to bid him in to supper. He excused himself. Sent his lordship word that he was over-tired, and went off to bed.

They met at breakfast, at an early hour upon the morrow, Mistress Winthrop cool and distant; his lordship grumpy and mute; Mr. Caryll airy and talkative as was his habit. They set out soon afterwards. But matters were nowise improved. His lordship dozed in a corner of the carriage, while Mistress Winthrop found more interest in the flowering hedgerows than in Mr. Caryll, ignored him when he talked, and did not answer him when he set questions; till, in the end, he, too, lapsed into silence, and as a solatium for his soreness assured himself by lengthy, wordless arguments that matters were best so.

They entered the outlying parts of London some two hours later, and it still wanted an hour or so to noon when the chaise brought up inside the railings before the earl's house in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

There came a rush of footmen, a bustle of service, amid which they alighted and entered the splendid residence that was part of the little that remained Lord Ostermore from the wreck his fortunes had suffered on the shoals of the South Sea.

Mr. Caryll paused a moment to dismiss Leduc to the address in Old Palace Yard where he had hired a lodging. That done, he followed his lordship and Hortensia within doors.

From the inner hall a footman ushered him across an ante-chamber to a room on the right, which proved to be the library, and was his lordship's habitual retreat. It was a spacious, pillared chamber, very richly panelled in damask silk, and very richly furnished, having long French windows that opened on a terrace above the garden.

As they entered there came a swift rustle of petticoats at their heels, and Mr. Caryll stood aside, bowing, to give passage to a tall lady who swept by with no more regard for him than had he been one

of the house's lackeys. She was, he observed, of middle-age, lean and aquiline-featured, with an exaggerated chin, that ended squarely as boot. Her sallow cheeks were raddled to a hectic color, a monstrous head-dress—like that of some horse in a lord mayor's show—coiffed her, and her dress was a mixture of extravagance and incongruity, the petticoat absurdly hooped.

She swept into the room like a battleship into action, and let fly her first broadside at Mistress Winthrop from the threshold.

"Codso!" she shrilled. "You have come back! And for what have you come back? Am I to live in the same house with you, you shameless madam—that have no more thought for your reputation than a slut in a smock-race?"

Hortensia raised indignant eyes from out of a face that was very pale. Her lips were tightly pressed—in resolution, thought Mr. Caryl, who was very observant of her—not to answer her ladyship; for Mr. Caryl had little doubt as to the identity of this dragon.

"My love—my dear—" began his lordship, advancing a step, his tone a very salve. Then, seeking to create a diversion, he waved a hand towards Mr. Caryl. "Let me present—"

"Did I speak to you?" she turned to bombard him. "Have you not done harm enough? Had you been aught but a fool—had you respected me as a husband should—you had left well alone and let her go her ways."

"There was my duty to her father, to say aught of—"

"And what of your duty to me?" she blazed, her eyes puckering most malignantly. She reminded Mr. Caryl of nothing so much as a vulture. "Had ye forgotten that? Have ye no thought for decency—no respect for your wife?"

Her strident voice was echoing through the house and drawing a little crowd of gaping servants to the hall. To spare Mistress Winthrop, Mr. Caryll took it upon himself to close the door. The countess turned at the sound.

"Who is this?" she asked, measuring the elegant figure with an evil eye. And Mr. Caryll felt it in his bones that she had done him the honor to dislike him at sight.

"It is a gentleman who—who—" His lordship thought it better, apparently, not to explain the exact circumstances under which he had met the gentleman. He shifted ground. "I was about to present him, my love. It is Mr. Caryll—Mr. Justin Caryll. This, sir, is my Lady Ostermore."

Mr. Caryll made her a profound bow. Her ladyship retorted with a sniff.

"Is it a kinsman of yours, my lord?" and the contempt of the question was laden with a suggestion that smote Mr. Caryll hard. What she implied in wanton offensive mockery was no more than he alone present knew to be the exact and hideous truth.

"Some remote kinsman, I make no doubt," the earl explained. "Until yesterday I had not the honor of his acquaintance. Mr. Caryll is from France."

"Ye'll be a Jacobite, no doubt, then," were her first, uncompromising words to the guest.

Mr. Caryll made her another bow. "If I were, I should make no secret of it with your ladyship," he answered with that irritating suavity in which he clothed his most obvious sarcasms.

Her ladyship opened her eyes a little wider. Here was a tone she was unused to. "And what may your business with his lordship be?"

"His lordship's business, I think," answered Mr. Caryl in a tone of such exquisite politeness and deference that the words seemed purged of all their rudeness.

"Will you answer me so, sir?" she demanded, nevertheless, her voice quivering.

"My love!" interpolated his lordship hurriedly, his florid face aflush. "We are vastly indebted to Mr. Caryl, as you shall learn. It was he who saved Hortensia."

"Saved the drab, did he? And from what, pray?"

"Madam!" It was Hortensia who spoke. She had risen, pale with anger, and she made appeal now to her guardian. "My lord, I'll not remain to be so spoken of. Suffer me to go. That her ladyship should so speak of me to my face—and to a stranger!"

"Stranger!" crowed her ladyship. "Lard! And what d'ye suppose will happen? Are you so nice about a stranger hearing what I may have to say of you—you that will be the talk of the whole lewd town for this fine escapade? And what'll the town say of you?"

"My love!" his lordship sought again to soothe her. "Sylvia, let me implore you! A little moderation! A little charity! Hortensia has been foolish. She confesses so much, herself. Yet, when all is said, 'tis not she is to blame."

"Am I?"

"My love! Was it suggested?"

"I marvel it was not. Indeed, I marvel! Oh, Hortensia is not to blame, the sweet, pure dove! What is she, then?"

"To be pitied, ma'am," said his lordship, stirred to sudden anger, "that she should have lent an ear to your disreputable son."

"My son? My son?" cried her ladyship, her voice more and more strident, her face flushing till the rouge upon it was put to shame, revealed in all its unnatural hideousness. "And is he not your son, my lord?"

"There are moments," he answered hardily, "when I find it difficult to believe."

It was much for him to say, and to her ladyship, of all people. It was pure mutiny. She gasped for air; pumped her brain for words. Meantime, his lordship continued with an eloquence entirely unusual in him and prompted entirely by his strong feelings in the matter of his son. "He is a disgrace to his name! He always has been. When a boy, he was a liar and a thief, and had he had his deserts he had been lodged in Newgate long ago—or worse. Now that he's a man, he's an abandoned profligate, a brawler, a drunkard, a rakehell. So much I have long known him for; but to-day he has shown himself for something even worse. I had thought that my ward, at least, had been sacred from his villainy. That is the last drop. I'll not condone it. Damn me! I can't condone it. I'll disown him. He shall not set foot in house of mine again. Let him keep the company of his Grace of Wharton and his other abandoned friends of the Hell Fire Club; he keeps not mine. He keeps not mine, I say!"

Her ladyship swallowed hard. From red that she had been, she was now ashen under her rouge. "And, is this wanton baggage to keep mine? Is she to disgrace a household that has grown too nice to contain your son?"

"My lord! Oh, my lord, give me leave to go," Hortensia entreated.

"Ay, go," sneered her ladyship. "Go! You had best go—back to him. What for did ye leave him? Did ye dream there could be aught to return to?"

Hortensia turned to her guardian again appealingly. But her ladyship bore down upon her, incensed by this ignoring; she caught the girl's wrist in her claw-like hand. "Answer me, you drab! What for did you return? What is to be done with you now that y' are soiled goods? Where shall we find a husband for you?"

"I do not want a husband, madam," answered Hortensia.

"Will ye lead apes in hell, then? Bah! 'Tis not what ye want, my fine madam; 'tis what we can get you; and where shall we find you a husband now?"

Her eye fell upon Mr. Caryl, standing by one of the windows, a look of profound disgust overplaying the usually immobile face. "Perhaps the gentleman from France—the gentleman who saved you," she sneered, "will propose to take the office."

"With all my heart, ma'am," Mr. Caryl startled them and himself by answering. Then, perceiving that he had spoken too much upon impulse—given utterance to what was passing in his mind—"I but mention it to show your ladyship how mistaken are your conclusions," he added.

The countess loosed her hold of Hortensia's wrist in her amazement, and looked the gentleman from France up and down in a mighty scornful manner. "Codso!" she swore, "I may take it, then, that your saving her—as ye call it—was no accident."

"Indeed it was, ma'am—and a most fortunate accident for your son."

"For my son? As how?"

"It saved him from hanging, ma'am," Mr. Caryl informed her, and gave her something other than the baiting of Hortensia to occupy her mind.

"Hang?" she gasped. "Are you speaking of Lord Rotherby?"

"Ay, of Lord Rotherby—and not a word more than is true," put in the earl. "Do you know—but you do not—the extent of your precious son's villainy? At Maidstone, where I overtook them—at the Adam and Eve—he had a make-believe parson, and he was luring this poor child into a mock-marriage."

Her ladyship stared. "Mock-marriage?" she echoed. "Marriage? La!" And again she vented her unpleasant laugh. "Did she insist on that, the prude? Y' amaze me!"

"Surely, my love, you do not apprehend. Had Lord Rotherby's parson not been detected and unmasked by Mr. Caryl, here—"

"Would you ha' me believe she did not know the fellow was no parson?"

"Oh!" cried Hortensia. "Your ladyship has a very wicked soul. May God forgive you!"

"And who is to forgive you?" snapped the countess.

"I need no forgiveness, for I have done no wrong. A folly, I confess to. I was mad to have heeded such a villain."

Her ladyship gathered forces for a fresh assault. But Mr. Caryl anticipated it. It was no doubt a great impertinence in him; but he saw Hortensia's urgent need, and he felt, moreover, that not even Lord Ostermore would resent his crossing swords a moment with her ladyship.

"You would do well, ma'am, to remember," said he, in his singularly precise voice, "that Lord Rotherby even now—and as things have fallen out—is by no means quit of all danger."

She looked at this smooth gentleman, and his words burned

themselves into her brain. She quivered with mingling fear and anger.

"Wha'—what is't ye mean?" quoth she.

"That even at this hour, if the matter were put about, his lordship might be brought to account for it, and it might fare very ill with him. The law of England deals heavily with an offense such as Lord Rotherby's, and the attempt at a mock-marriage, of which there is no lack of evidence, would so aggravate the crime of abduction, if he were informed against, that it might go very hard with him."

Her jaw fell. She caught more than an admonition in his words. It almost seemed to her that he was threatening.

"Who—who is to inform?" she asked point-blank, her tone a challenge; and yet the odd change in it from its recent aggressiveness was almost ludicrous.

"Ah—who?" said Mr. Caryll, raising his eyes and fetching a sigh. "It would appear that a messenger from the Secretary of State—on another matter—was at the Adam and Eve at the time with two of his catchpolls, and he was a witness of the whole affair. Then again," and he waved a hand doorwards, "servants are servants. I make no doubt they are listening, and your ladyship's voice has scarce been controlled. You can never say when a servant may cease to be a servant, and become an active enemy."

"Damn the servants!" she swore, dismissing them from consideration. "Who is this messenger of the secretary's? Who is he?"

"He was named Green. 'Tis all I know."

"And where may he be found?"

"I cannot say."

She turned to Lord Ostermore. "Where is Rotherby?" she inquired. She was a thought breathless.

"I do not know," said he, in a voice that signified how little he cared.

"He must be found. This fellow's silence must be bought. I'll not have my son disgraced, and gaoled, perhaps. He must be found."

Her alarm was very real now. She moved towards the door, then paused, and turned again. "Meantime, let your lordship consider what dispositions you are to make for this wretched girl who is the cause of all this garboil."

And she swept out, slamming the door violently after her.

CHAPTER VII. FATHER AND SON

Mr. Caryll stayed to dine at Stretton House. Although they had journeyed but from Croydon that morning, he would have preferred to have gone first to his lodging to have made—fastidious as he was—a suitable change in his apparel. But the urgency that his task dictated caused him to waive the point.

He had a half-hour or so to himself after the stormy scene with her ladyship, in which he had played again—though in a lesser degree—the part of savior to Mistress Winthrop, a matter for which the lady had rewarded him, ere withdrawing, with a friendly smile, which caused him to think her disposed to forgive him his yesternight's folly.

In that half-hour he gave himself again very seriously to the contemplation of his position. He had no illusions on the score of Lord Ostermore, and he rated his father no higher than he deserved. But he was just and shrewd in his judgment, and he was forced to confess that he had found this father of his vastly different from the man he had been led to expect. He had looked to find a debauched old rake, a vile creature steeped in vice and wickedness. Instead, he found a weak, easy-natured, commonplace fellow, whose worst sin seemed to be the selfishness that is usually inseparable from those other characteristics. If Ostermore was not a man of the type that inspires strong affection, neither was he of the type that provokes strong dislike. His colorless nature left one indifferent to him.

Mr. Caryll, somewhat to his dismay, found himself inclined to extend the man some sympathy; caught himself upon the verge of pitying him

for being burdened with so very unfilial a son and so very cursed a wife. It was one of his cherished beliefs that the evil that men do has a trick of finding them out in this life, and here, he believed, as shrew-ridden husband and despised father, the Earl of Ostermore was being made to expiate that sin of his early years.

Another of Mr. Caryll's philosophies was that, when all is said, man is little of a free agent. His viciousness or sanctity is temperamental; and not the man, but his nature—which is not self-imbued—must bear the responsibility of a man's deeds, be they good or bad.

In the abstract such beliefs are well enough; they are excellent standards by which to judge where other sufferers than ourselves are concerned. But when we ourselves are touched, they are discounted by the measure in which a man's deeds or misdeeds may affect us. And although to an extent this might be the case now with Mr. Caryll, yet, in spite of it, he found himself excusing his father on the score of the man's weakness and stupidity, until he caught himself up with the reflection that this was a disloyalty to Everard, to his training, and to his mother. And yet—he reverted—in such a man as Ostermore, sheer stupidity, a lack of imagination, of insight into things as they really are, a lack of feeling that would disable him from appreciating the extent of any wrong he did, seemed to Mr. Caryll to be extenuating circumstances.

He conceived that he was amazingly dispassionate in his judgment, and he wondered was he right or wrong so to be. Then the thought of his task arose in his mind, and it bathed him in a sweat of horror. Over in France he had allowed himself to be persuaded, and had pledged himself to do this thing. Everard, the relentless, unforgiving fanatic of vengeance, had—as we have seen—trained him to believe that the avenging of his mother's wrongs was the only thing that could justify his own existence. Besides, it had all seemed remote then, and easy as remote things are apt to seem. But now—

now that he had met in the flesh this man who was his father—his hesitation was turned to very horror. It was not that he did not conceive, in spite of his odd ideas upon temperament and its responsibilities, that his mother's wrongs cried out for vengeance, and that the avenging of them would be a righteous, fitting deed; but it was that he conceived that his own was not the hand to do the work of the executioner upon one who—after all—was still his own father. It was hideously unnatural.

He sat in the library, awaiting his lordship and the announcement of dinner. There was a book before him; but his eyes were upon the window, the smooth lawns beyond, all drenched in summer sunshine, and his thoughts were introspective. He looked into his shuddering soul, and saw that he could not—that he would not—do the thing which he was come to do. He would await the coming of Everard, to tell him so. There would be a storm to face, he knew. But sooner than carry this vile thing through. It was vile—most damnably vile—he now opined.

The decision taken, he rose and crossed to the window. His mind had been in travail; his soul had known the pangs of labor. But now that this strong resolve had been brought forth, an ease and peace were his that seemed to prove to him how right he was, how wrong must aught else have been.

Lord Ostermore came in. He announced that they would be dining alone together. "Her ladyship," he explained, "has gone forth in person to seek Lord Rotherby. She believes that she knows where to find him—in some disreputable haunt, no doubt, whither her ladyship would have been better advised to have sent a servant. But women are wayward cattle—wayward, headstrong cattle! Have you not found them so, Mr. Caryll?"

"I have found that the opinion is common to most husbands," said Mr. Caryll, then added a question touching Mistress Winthrop, and

wondered would she not be joining them at table.

"The poor child keeps her chamber," said the earl. "She is overwrought—overwrought! I am afraid her ladyship—" He broke off abruptly, and coughed. "She is overwrought," he repeated in conclusion. "So that we dine alone."

And alone they dined. Ostermore, despite the havoc suffered by his fortunes, kept an excellent table and a clever cook, and Mr. Caryll was glad to discover in his sire this one commendable trait.

The conversation was desultory throughout the repast; but when the cloth was raised and the table cleared of all but the dishes of fruit and the decanters of Oporto, Canary and Madeira, there came a moment of expansion.

Mr. Caryll was leaning back in his chair, fingering the stem of his wine-glass, watching the play of sunlight through the ruddy amber of the wine, and considering the extraordinarily odd position of a man sitting at table, by the merest chance, almost, with a father who was not aware that he had begotten him. A question from his lordship came to stir him partially from the reverie into which he was beginning to lapse.

"Do you look to make a long sojourn in England, Mr. Caryll?"

"It will depend," was the vague and half-unconscious answer, "upon the success of the matter I am come to transact."

There ensued a brief pause, during which Mr. Caryll fell again into his abstraction.

"Where do you dwell when in France, sir?" inquired my lord, as if to make polite conversation.

Mr. Caryll lulled by his musings into carelessness, answered truthfully, "At Maligny, in Normandy."

The next moment there was a tinkle of breaking glass, and Mr. Caryll realized his indiscretion and turned cold.

Lord Ostermore, who had been in the act of raising his glass, fetched it down again so suddenly that the stem broke in his fingers, and the mahogany was flooded with the liquor. A servant hastened forward, and set a fresh glass for his lordship. That done, Ostermore signed to the man to withdraw. The fellow went, closing the door, and leaving those two alone.

The pause had been sufficient to enable Mr. Caryll to recover, and for all that his pulses throbbed more quickly than their habit, outwardly he maintained his lazily indifferent pose, as if entirely unconscious that what he had said had occasioned his father the least disturbance.

"You—you dwelt at Maligny?" said his lordship, the usual high color all vanished from his face. And again: "You dwelt at Maligny, and—and—your name is Caryll."

Mr. Caryll looked up quickly, as if suddenly aware that his lordship was expressing surprise. "Why, yes," said he. "What is there odd in that?"

"How does it happen that you come to live there? Are you at all connected with the family of Maligny? On your mother's side, perhaps?"

Mr. Caryll took up his wine-glass. "I take it," said he easily, "that there was some such family at some time. But it is clear it must have fallen upon evil days." He sipped at his wine. "There are none left now," he explained, as he set down his glass. "The last of them died, I believe, in England." His eyes turned full upon the earl, but their glance seemed entirely idle. "It was in consequence of that that my father was enabled to purchase the estate."

Mr. Caryll accounted it no lie that he suppressed the fact that the father to whom he referred was but his father by adoption.

Relief spread instantly upon Lord Ostermore's countenance. Clearly, he saw, here was pure coincidence, and nothing more. Indeed, what else should there have been? What was it that he had feared? He did not know. Still he accounted it an odd matter, and said so.

"What is odd?" inquired Mr. Caryll. "Does it happen that your lordship was acquainted at any time with that vanished family?"

"I was, sir—slightly acquainted—at one time with one or two of its members. 'Tis that that is odd. You see, sir, my name, too, happens to be Caryll."

"True—yet I see nothing so oddly coincident in the matter, particularly if your acquaintance with these Malignys was but slight."

"Indeed, you are right. You are right. There is no such great coincidence, when all is said. The name reminded me of a—a folly of my youth. 'Twas that that made impression."

"A folly?" quoth Mr. Caryll, his eyebrows raised.

"Ay, a folly—a folly that went near undoing me, for had it come to my father's ears, he had broke me without mercy. He was a hard man, my father; a puritan in his ideas."

"A greater than your lordship?" inquired Mr. Caryll blandly, masking the rage that seethed in him.

His lordship laughed. "Ye're a wag, Mr. Caryll—a damned wag!" Then reverting to the matter that was uppermost in his mind. "'Tis a fact, though—'pon honor. My father would ha' broke me. Luckily she died."

"Who died?" asked Mr. Caryll, with a show of interest.

"The girl. Did I not tell you there was a girl? 'Twas she was the folly—Antoinette de Maligny. But she died—most opportunely, egad! 'Twas a very damned mercy that she did. It—cut the—the—what d'ye call it—knot?"

"The Gordian knot?" suggested Mr. Caryll.

"Ay—the Gordian knot. Had she lived and had my father smoked the affair—Gad! he would ha' broke me; he would so!" he repeated, and emptied his glass.

Mr. Caryll, white to the lips, sat very still a moment. Then he did a curious thing; did it with a curious suddenness. He took a knife from the table, and hacked off the lowest button from his coat. This he pushed across the board to his father.

"To turn to other matters," said he; "there is the letter you were expecting from abroad."

"Eh? What?" Lord Ostermore took up the button. It was of silk, interwoven with gold thread. He turned it over in his fingers, looking at it with a heavy eye, and then at his guest. "Eh? Letter?" he muttered, puzzled.

"If your lordship will cut that open, you will see what his majesty has to propose." He mentioned the king in a voice charged with suggestion, so that no doubt could linger on the score of the king he meant.

"Gad!" cried his lordship. "Gad! 'Twas thus ye bubbled Mr. Green? Shrewd, on my soul. And you are the messenger, then?"

"I am the messenger," answered Mr. Caryll coldly.

"And why did you not say so before?"

For the fraction of a second Mr. Caryll hesitated. Then: "Because I did not judge that the time was come," said he.

CHAPTER VIII. TEMPTATION

His lordship ripped away the silk covering of the button with a penknife, and disembowelled it of a small packet, which consisted of a sheet of fine and very closely-folded and tightly-compressed paper. This he spread, cast an eye over, and then looked up at his companion, who was watching him with simulated indolence.

His lordship had paled a little, and there was about the lines of his mouth a look of preternatural gravity. He looked furtively towards the door, his heavy eyebrows lowering.

"I think," he said, "that we shall be more snug in the library. Will you bear me company, Mr. Caryll?"

Mr. Caryll rose instantly. The earl folded the letter, and turned to go. His companion paused to pick up the fragments of the button and slip them into his pocket. He performed the office with a smile on his lips that was half pity, half contempt. It did not seem to him that there would be the least need to betray Lord Ostermore once his lordship was wedded to the Stuart faction. He would not fail to betray himself through some act of thoughtless stupidity such as this.

In the library—the door, and that of the ante-room beyond it, carefully closed—his lordship unlocked a secretaire of walnut, very handsomely inlaid, and, drawing up a chair, he sat down to the perusal of the king's letter. When he had read it through, he remained lost in thought a while. At length he looked up and across towards Mr. Caryll, who was standing by one of the windows.

"You are no doubt a confidential agent, sir," said he. "And you will be fully aware of the contents of this letter that you have brought me."

"Fully, my lord," answered Mr. Caryll, "and I venture to hope that his majesty's promises will overcome any hesitation that you may feel."

"His majesty's promises?" said my lord thoughtfully. "His majesty may never have a chance of fulfilling them."

"Very true, sir. But who gambles must set a stake upon the board. Your lordship has been something of a gamester already, and—or so I gather—with little profit. Here is a chance to play another game that may mend the evil fortunes of the last."

The earl scanned him in surprise. "You are excellent well informed," said he, between surprise and irony.

"My trade demands it. Knowledge is my buckler."

His lordship nodded slowly, and fell very thoughtful, the letter before him, his eyes wandering ever and anon to con again some portion of it. "It is a game in which I stake my head," he muttered presently.

"Has your lordship anything else to stake?" inquired Mr. Caryll.

The earl looked at him again with a gloomy eye, and sighed, but said nothing. Mr. Caryll resumed. "It is for your lordship to declare," he said quite coolly, "whether his majesty has covered your stake. If you think not, it is even possible that he may be induced to improve his offer. Though if you think not, for my own part I consider that you set too high a value on that same head of yours."

Touched in his vanity, Ostermore looked up at him with a sudden frown. "You take a bold tone, sir," said he, "a very bold tone!"

"Boldness is the attribute next to knowledge most essential to my calling," Mr. Caryll reminded him.

His lordship's eye fell before the other's cold glance, and again he lapsed into thoughtfulness, his cheek now upon his hand. Suddenly he

looked up again. "Tell me," said he. "Who else is in this thing? Men say that Atterbury is not above suspicion. Is it—"

Mr. Caryll bent forward to tap the king's letter with a rigid forefinger. "When your lordship tells me that you are ready to concert upon embarking your fortunes in this bottom, you shall find me disposed, perhaps, to answer questions concerning others. Meanwhile, our concern is with yourself."

"Dons and the devil!" swore his lordship angrily. "Is this a way to speak to me?" He scowled at the agent. "Tell me, my fine fellow, what would happen if I were to lay this letter you have brought me before the nearest justice?"

"I cannot say for sure," answered Mr. Caryll quietly, "but it is very probable it would help your lordship to the gallows. For if you will give yourself the trouble of reading it again—and more carefully—you will see that it makes acknowledgment of the offer of services you wrote his majesty a month or so ago."

His lordship's eyes dropped to the letter again. He caught his breath in sudden fear.

"Were I your lordship, I should leave the nearest justice to enjoy his dinner in peace," said Mr. Caryll, smiling.

His lordship laughed in a sickly manner. He felt foolish—a rare condition in him, as in most fools. "Well, well," said he gruffly. "The matter needs reflection. It needs reflection."

Behind them the door opened noiselessly, and her ladyship appeared in cloak and wimple. She paused there, unperceived by either, arrested by the words she had caught, and waiting in the hope of hearing more.

"I must sleep on't, at least," his lordship was continuing. "'Tis too

grave a matter to be determined thus in haste."

A faint sound caught the keen ears of Mr. Caryl. He turned with a leisureliness that bore witness to his miraculous self-control. Perceiving the countess, he bowed, and casually put his lordship on his guard.

"Ah!" said he. "Here is her ladyship returned."

Lord Ostermore gasped audibly and swung round in an alarm than which nothing could have betrayed him more effectively. "My—my love!" he cried, stammering, and by his wild haste to conceal the letter that he held, drew her attention to it.

Mr. Caryl stepped between them, his back to his lordship, that he might act as a screen under cover of which to dispose safely of that dangerous document. But he was too late. Her ladyship's quick eyes had flashed to it, and if the distance precluded the possibility of her discovering anything that might be written upon it, she, nevertheless, could see the curious nature of the paper, which was of the flimsiest tissue of a sort extremely uncommon.

"What is't ye hide?" said she, as she came forward. "Why, we are very close, surely! What mischief is't ye hatch, my lord?"

"Mis—mischief, my love?" He smiled propitiatingly—hating her more than ever in that moment. He had stuffed the letter into an inner pocket of his coat, and but that she had another matter to concern her at the moment she would not have allowed the question she had asked to be so put aside. But this other matter upon her mind touched her very closely.

"Devil take it, whatever it may be! Rotherby is here."

"Rotherby?" His demeanor changed; from conciliating it was of a sudden transformed to indignant. "What makes he here?" he

demanded. "Did I not forbid him my house?"

"I brought him," she answered pregnantly.

But for once he was not to be put down. "Then you may take him hence again," said he. "I'll not have him under my roof—under the same roof with that poor child he used so infamously. I'll not suffer it!"

The Gorgon cannot have looked more coldly wicked than her ladyship just then. "Have a care, my lord!" she muttered threateningly. "Oh, have a care, I do beseech you. I am not so to be crossed!"

"Nor am I, ma'am," he rejoined, and then, before more could be said, Mr. Caryll stepped forward to remind them of his presence—which they seemed to stand in danger of forgetting.

"I fear that I intrude, my lord," said he, and bowed in leave-taking. "I shall wait upon your lordship later. Your most devoted. Ma'am, your very humble servant." And he bowed himself out.

In the ante-room he came upon Lord Rotherby, striding to and fro, his brow all furrowed with care. At sight of Mr. Caryll, the viscount's scowl grew blacker. "Oons and the devil!" he cried. "What make you here?"

"That," said Mr. Caryll pleasantly, "is the very question your father is asking her ladyship concerning yourself. Your servant, sir." And airy, graceful, smiling that damnable close smile of his, he was gone, leaving Rotherby very hot and angry.

Outside Mr. Caryll hailed a chair, and had himself carried to his lodging in Old Palace Yard, where Leduc awaited him. As his bearers swung briskly along, Mr. Caryll sat back and gave himself up to thought.

Lord Ostermore interested him vastly. For a moment that day the earl had aroused his anger, as you may have judged from the sudden

resolve upon which he had acted when he delivered him that letter, thus embarking at the eleventh hour upon a task which he had already determined to abandon. He knew not now whether to rejoice or deplore that he had acted upon that angry impulse. He knew not, indeed, whether to pity or despise this man who was swayed by no such high motives as must have affected most of those who were faithful to the exiled James. Those motives—motives of chivalry and romanticism in most cases—Lord Ostermore would have despised if he could have understood them; for he was a man of the type that despises all things that are not essentially practical, whose results are not immediately obvious. Being all but ruined by his association with the South Sea Company, he was willing for the sake of profit to turn traitor to the king de facto, even as thirty years ago, actuated by similar motives, he had turned traitor to the king de jure.

What was one to make of such a man, wondered Mr. Caryll. If he were equipped with wit enough to apprehend the baseness of his conduct, he would be easily understood and it would be easy to despise him. But Mr. Caryll perceived that he was dealing with one who never probed into the depths of anything—himself and his own conduct least of all—and that a deplorable lack of perception, of understanding almost, deprived his lordship of the power to feel as most men feel, to judge as most men judge. And hence was it that Mr. Caryll thought him a subject for pity rather than contempt. Even in that other thirty-year-old matter that so closely touched Mr. Caryll, the latter was sure that the same pitiful shortcomings might be urged in the man's excuse.

Meanwhile, behind him at Stretton House, Mr. Caryll had left a scene of strife between Lady Ostermore and her son on one side and Lord Ostermore on the other. Weak and vacillating as he was in most things, it seemed that the earl could be strong in his dislike of his son, and firm in his determination not to condone the infamy of his behavior toward Hortensia Winthrop.

"The fault is yours," Rotherby sought to excuse himself again—employing the old argument, and in an angry, contemptuous tone that was entirely unfilial. "I'd ha' married the girl in earnest, but for your threats to disinherit me."

"You fool!" his father stormed at him, "did you suppose that if I should disinherit you for marrying her, I should be likely to do less for your luring her into a mock marriage? I've done with you! Go your ways for a damned profligate—a scandal to the very name of gentleman. I've done with you!"

And to that the earl adhered in spite of all that Rotherby and his mother could urge. He stamped out of the library with a final command to his son to quit his house and never disgrace it again by his presence. Rotherby looked ruefully at his mother.

"He means it," said he. "He never loved me. He was never a father to me."

"Were you ever greatly a son to him?" asked her ladyship.

"As much as he would ha' me be," he answered, his black face very sullen. "Oh, 'sdeath! I am damnably used by him." He paced the chamber, storming. "All this garboil about nothing!", he complained. "Was he never young himself? And when all is said, there's no harm done. The girl's been fetched home again."

"Pshaw! Ye're a fool, Rotherby—a fool, and there's an end on't," said his mother. "I sometimes wonder which is the greater fool—you or your father. And yet he can marvel that you are his son. What do ye think would have happened if you had had your way with that bread-and-butter miss? It had been matter enough to hang you."

"Pooh!" said the viscount, dropping into a chair and staring sullenly at the carpet. Then sullenly he added: "His lordship would have been

glad on't—so some one would have been pleased. As it is—"

"As it is, ye'd better find the man Green who was at Maidstone, and stop his mouth with guineas. He is aware of what passed."

"Bah! Green was there on other business." And he told her of the suspicions the messenger entertained against Mr. Caryl.

It set her ladyship thinking. "Why," she said presently, "'twill be that!"

"'Twill be what, ma'am?" asked Rotherby, looking up.

"Why, this fellow Caryl must ha' bubbled the messenger in spite of the search he may have made. I found the popinjay here with your father, the pair as thick as thieves—and your father with a paper in his hand as fine as a cobweb. 'Sdeath! I'll be sworn he's a damned Jacobite."

Rotherby was on his feet in an instant. He remembered suddenly all that he had overheard at Maidstone. "Oho!" he crowed. "What cause have ye to think that?"

"Cause? Why, what I have seen. Besides, I feel it in my bones. My every instinct tells me 'tis so."

"If you should prove right! Oh, if you should prove right! Death! I'd find a way to settle the score of that pert fellow from France, and to dictate terms to his lordship at the same time."

Her ladyship stared at him. "Ye're an unnatural hound, Rotherby. Would ye betray your own father?"

"Betray him? No! But I'll set a term to his plotting. Egad! Has he not lost enough in the South Sea Bubble, without sinking the little that is left in some wild-goose Jacobite plot?"

"How shall it matter to you, since he's sworn to disinherit you?"

"How, madam?" Rotherby laughed cunningly. "I'll prevent the one and the other—and pay off Mr. Caryll at the same time. Three birds with one stone, let me perish!" He reached for his hat. "I must find this fellow Green."

"What will you do?" she asked, a slight anxiety trembling in her voice.

"Stir up his suspicions of Caryll. He'll be ready enough to act after his discomfiture at Maidstone. I'll warrant he's smarting under it. If once we can find cause to lay Caryll by the heels, the fear of the consequences should bring his lordship to his senses. 'Twill be my turn then."

"But you'll do nothing that—that will hurt your father?" she enjoined him, her hand upon his shoulder.

"Trust me," he laughed, and added cynically: "It would hardly sort with my interests to involve him. It will serve me best to frighten him into reason and a sense of his paternal duty."

CHAPTER IX. THE CHAMPION

Mr. Caryll was well and handsomely housed, as became the man of fashion, in the lodging he had taken in Old Palace Yard. Knowing him from abroad, it was not impossible that the government—fearful of sedition since the disturbance caused by the South Sea distress, and aware of an undercurrent of Jacobitism—might for a time, at least, keep an eye upon him. It behooved him, therefore, to appear neither more nor less than a loungeur, a gentleman of pleasure who had come to London in quest of diversion. To support this appearance, Mr. Caryll had sought out some friends of his in town. There were Stapleton and Collis, who had been at Oxford with him, and with whom he had ever since maintained a correspondence and a friendship. He sought them out on the very evening of his arrival—after his interview with Lord Ostermore. He had the satisfaction of being handsomely welcomed by them, and was plunged under their guidance into the gaieties that the town afforded liberally for people of quality.

Mr. Caryll was—as I hope you have gathered—an agreeable fellow, very free, moreover, with the contents of his well-equipped purse; and so you may conceive that the town showed him a very friendly, cordial countenance. He fell into the habits of the men whose company he frequented; his days were as idle as theirs, and spent at the parade, the Ring, the play, the coffeehouse and the ordinary.

But under the gay exterior he affected he carried a spirit of most vile unrest. The anger which had prompted his impulse to execute, after all, the business on which he was come, and to deliver his father the letter that was to work his ruin, was all spent. He had cooled, and cool it was idle for him to tell himself that Lord Ostermore, by his

heartless allusion to the crime of his early years, had proved himself worthy of nothing but the pit Mr. Caryll had been sent to dig for him. There were moments when he sought to compel himself so to think, to steel himself against all other considerations. But it was idle. The reflection that the task before him was unnatural came ever to revolt him. To gain ease, the most that he could do—and he had the faculty of it developed in a preternatural degree—was to put the business from him for the time, endeavor to forget it. And he had another matter to consider and to plague him—the matter of Hortensia Winthrop. He thought of her a great deal more than was good for his peace of mind, for all that he pretended to a gladness that things were as they were. Each morning that he lounged at the parade in St. James's Park, each evening that he visited the Ring, it was in the hope of catching some glimpse of her among the fashionable women that went abroad to see and to be seen. And on the third morning after his arrival the thing he hoped for came to pass.

It had happened that my lady had ordered her carriage that morning, dressed herself with the habitual splendor, which but set off the shortcomings of her lean and angular person, egregiously coiffed, pulvilled and topknotted, and she had sent a message amounting to a command to Mistress Winthrop that she should drive in the park with her.

Poor Hortensia, whose one desire was to hide her face from the town's uncharitable sight just then, fearing, indeed, that Rumor's unscrupulous tongue would be as busy about her reputation as her ladyship had represented, attempted to assert herself by refusing to obey the command. It was in vain. Her ladyship dispensed with ambassadors, and went in person to convey her orders to her husband's ward, and to enforce them.

"What's this I am told?" quoth she, as she sailed into Hortensia's room. "Do my wishes count for nothing, that you send me pert

answers by my woman?"

Hortensia rose. She had been sitting by the window, a book in her lap. "Not so, indeed, madam. Not pert, I trust. I am none so well, and I fear the sun."

"'Tis little wonder," laughed her ladyship; "and I'm glad on't, for it shows ye have a conscience somewhere. But 'tis no matter for that. I am tender for your reputation, mistress, and I'll not have you shunning daylight like the guilty thing ye know yourself to be."

"'Tis false, madam," said Hortensia, with indignation. "Your ladyship knows it to be false."

"Harkee, ninny, if you'd have the town believe it false, you'll show yourself—show that ye have no cause for shame, no cause to hide you from the eyes of honest folk. Come, girl; bid your woman get your hood and tippet. The carriage stays for us."

To Hortensia her ladyship's seemed, after all, a good argument. Did she hide, what must the town think but that it confirmed the talk that she made no doubt was going round already. Better to go forth and brave it, and surely it should disarm the backbiters if she showed herself in the park with Lord Rotherby's own mother.

It never occurred to her that this seeming tenderness for her reputation might be but wanton cruelty on her ladyship's part; a gratifying of her spleen against the girl by setting her in the pillory of public sight to the end that she should experience the insult of supercilious glances and lips that smile with an ostentation of furtiveness; a desire to put down her pride and break the spirit which my lady accounted insolent and stubborn.

Suspecting naught of this, she consented, and drove out with her ladyship as she was desired to do. But understanding of her ladyship's cruel motives, and repentance of her own acquiescence,

were not long in following. Soon—very soon—she realized that anything would have been better than the ordeal she was forced to undergo.

It was a warm, sunny morning, and the park was crowded with fashionable loungers. Lady Ostermore left her carriage at the gates, and entered the enclosure on foot, accompanied by Hortensia and followed at a respectful distance by a footman. Her arrival proved something of a sensation. Hats were swept off to her ladyship, sly glances flashed at her companion, who went pale, but apparently serene, eyes looking straight before her; and there was an obvious concealing of smiles at first, which later grew to be all unconcealed, and, later still, became supplemented by remarks that all might hear, remarks which did not escape—as they were meant not to escape—her ladyship and Mistress Winthrop.

"Madam," murmured the girl, in her agony of shame, "we were not well-advised to come. Will not your ladyship turn back?"

Her ladyship displayed a vinegary smile, and looked at her companion over the top of her slowly moving fan. "Why? Is't not pleasant here?" quoth she. "'Twill be more agreeable under the trees yonder. The sun will not reach you there, child."

"'Tis not the sun I mind, madam," said Hortensia, but received no answer. Perforce she must pace on beside her ladyship.

Lord Rotherby came by, arm in arm with his friend, the Duke of Wharton. It was a one-sided friendship. Lord Rotherby was but one of the many of his type who furnished a court, a valetaille, to the gay, dissolute, handsome, witty duke, who might have been great had he not preferred his vices to his worthier parts.

As they went by, Lord Rotherby bared his head and bowed, as did his companion. Her ladyship smiled upon him, but Hortensia's eyes

looked rigidly ahead, her face a stone. She heard his grace's insolent laugh as they passed on; she heard his voice—nowise subdued, for he was a man who loved to let the world hear what he might have to say.

"Gad! Rotherby, the wind has changed! Your Dulcinea flies with you o' Wednesday, and has ne'er a glance for you o' Saturday! I' faith! ye deserve no better. Art a clumsy gallant to have been overtaken, and the maid's in the right on't to resent your clumsiness."

Rotherby's reply was lost in a splutter of laughter from a group of sycophants who had overheard his grace's criticism and were but too ready to laugh at aught his grace might deign to utter. Her cheeks burned; it was by an effort that she suppressed the tears that anger was forcing to her eyes.

The duke, 'twas plain, had set the fashion. Emulators were not wanting. Stray words she caught; by instinct was she conscious of the ogings, the fluttering of fans from the women, the flashing of quizzing-glasses from the men. And everywhere was there a suppressed laugh, a stifled exclamation of surprise at her appearance in public—yet not so stifled but that it reached her, as it was intended that it should.

In the shadow of a great elm, around which there was a seat, a little group had gathered, of which the centre was the sometime toast of the town and queen of many Wells, the Lady Mary Deller, still beautiful and still unwed—as is so often the way of reigning toasts—but already past her pristine freshness, already leaning upon the support of art to maintain the endowments she had had from nature. She was accounted witty by the witless, and by some others.

Of the group that paid its court to her and her companions—two giggling cousins in their first season were Mr. Caryl and his friends, Sir Harry Collis and Mr. Edward Stapleton, the former of whom—he

was the lady's brother-in-law—had just presented him. Mr. Caryl was dressed with even more than his ordinary magnificence. He was in dove-colored cloth, his coat very richly laced with gold, his waistcoat—of white brocade with jeweled buttons, the flower-pattern outlined in finest gold thread—descended midway to his knees, whilst the ruffles at his wrists and the Steinkirk at his throat were of the finest point. He cut a figure of supremest elegance, as he stood there, his chestnut head slightly bowed in deference as my Lady Mary spoke, his hat tucked under his arm, his right hand outstretched beside him to rest upon the gold head of his clouded-amber cane.

To the general he was a stranger still in town, and of the sort that draws the eye and provokes inquiry. Lady Mary, the only goal of whose shallow existence was the attention of the sterner sex, who loved to break hearts as a child breaks toys, for the fun of seeing how they look when broken—and who, because of that, had succeeded in breaking far fewer than she fondly imagined—looked up into his face with the "most perditionously alluring" eyes in England—so Mr. Craske, the poet, who stood at her elbow now, had described them in the dedicatory sonnet of his last book of poems. (Wherefore, in parenthesis be it observed, she had rewarded him with twenty guineas, as he had calculated that she would.)

There was a sudden stir in the group. Mr. Craske had caught sight of Lady Ostermore and Mistress Winthrop, and he fell to giggling, a flimsy handkerchief to his painted lips. "Oh, 'Sbud!" he bleated. "Let me die! The audaciousness of the creature! And behold me the port and glance of her! Cold as a vestal, let me perish!"

Lady Mary turned with the others to look in the direction he was pointing—pointing openly, with no thought of dissembling.

Mr. Caryl's eyes fell upon Mistress Winthrop, and his glance was oddly perceptive. He observed those matters of which Mr. Craske had seemed to make sardonic comment: the erect stiffness of her

carriage, the eyes that looked neither to right nor left, and the pallor of her face. He observed, too, the complacent air with which her ladyship advanced beside her husband's ward, her fan moving languidly, her head nodding to her acquaintance, as in supreme unconcern of the stir her coming had effected.

Mr. Caryll had been dull indeed, knowing what he knew, had he not understood to the full the humiliation to which Mistress Hortensia was being of purpose set submitted.

And just then Rotherby, who had turned, with Wharton and another now, came by them again. This time he halted, and his companions with him, for just a moment, to address his mother. She turned; there was an exchange of greetings, in which Mistress Hortensia standing rigid as stone—took no part. A silence fell about; quizzing-glasses went up; all eyes were focussed upon the group. Then Rotherby and his friends resumed their way.

"The dog!" said Mr. Caryll, between his teeth, but went unheard by any, for in that moment Dorothy Deller—the younger of the Lady Mary's cousins—gave expression to the generous and as yet unsullied little heart that was her own.

"Oh, 'tis shameful!" she cried. "Will you not go speak with her, Molly?"

The Lady Mary stiffened. She looked at the company about her with an apologetic smile. "I beg that ye'll not heed the child," said she. "'Tis not that she is without morals—but without knowledge. An innocent little fool; no worse."

"'Tis bad enough, I vow," laughed an old beau, who sought fame as a man of a cynical turn of humor.

"But fortunately rare," said Mr. Caryll dryly. "Like charity, almost unknown in this Babylon."

His tone was not quite nice, although perhaps the Lady Mary was the only one to perceive the note of challenge in it. But Mr. Craske, the poet, diverted attention to himself by a prolonged, malicious chuckle. Rotherby was just moving away from his mother at that moment.

"They've never a word for each other to-day!" he cried. "Oh, 'Sbud! not so much as the mercy of a glance will the lady afford him." And he burst into the ballad of King Francis:

"Souvent femme varie,
Bien, fol est qui s'y fie!"

and laughed his prodigious delight at the aptness of his quotation.

Mr. Caryl put up his gold-rimmed quizzing-glass, and directed through that powerful weapon of offence an eye of supreme displeasure upon the singer. He could not contain his rage, yet from his languid tone none would have suspected it. "Sir," said he, "ye've a singular unpleasant voice."

Mr. Craske, thrown out of countenance by so much directness, could only stare; the same did the others, though some few tittered, for Mr. Craske, when all was said, was held in no great esteem by the discriminant.

Mr. Caryl lowered his glass. "I've heard it said by the uncharitable that ye were a lackey before ye became a plagiarist. 'Tis a rumor I shall contradict in future; 'tis plainly a lie, for your voice betrays you to have been a chairman."

"Sir—sir—" spluttered the poetaster, crimson with anger and mortification. "Is this—is this—seemly—between gentlemen?"

"Between gentlemen it would not be seemly," Mr. Caryl agreed.

Mr. Craske, quivering, yet controlling himself, bowed stiffly. "I have

too much respect for myself—" he gasped.

"Ye'll be singular in that, no doubt," said Mr. Caryl, and turned his shoulder upon him.

Again Mr. Craske appeared to make an effort at self-control; again he bowed. "I know—I hope—what is due to the Lady Mary Deller, to— to answer you as—as befits. But you shall hear from me, sir. You shall hear from me."

He bowed a third time—a bow that took in the entire company—and withdrew in high dudgeon and with a great show of dignity. A pause ensued, and then the Lady Mary reproved Mr. Caryl.

"Oh, 'twas cruel in you, sir," she cried. "Poor Mr. Craske! And to dub him plagiarist! 'Twas the unkindest cut of all!"

"Truth, madam, is never kind."

"Oh, fie! You make bad worse!" she cried.

"He'll put you in the pillory of his verse for this," laughed Collis. "Ye'll be most scurvily lampooned for't."

"Poor Mr. Craske!" sighed the Lady Mary again.

"Poor, indeed; but not in the sense to deserve pity. An upstart impostor such as that to soil a lady with his criticism!"

Lady Mary's brows went up. "You use a singular severity, sir," she opined, "and I think it unwise in you to grow so hot in the defence of a reputation whose owner has so little care for it herself."

Mr. Caryl looked at her out of his level gray-green eyes; a hot answer quivered on his tongue, an answer that had crushed her venom for some time and had probably left him with a quarrel on his hands. Yet his smile, as he considered her, was very sweet, so sweet

that her ladyship, guessing nothing of the bitterness it was used to cover, went as near a smirk as it was possible for one so elegant. He was, she judged, another victim ripe for immolation on the altar of her goddessship. And Mr. Caryll, who had taken her measure very thoroughly, seeing something of how her thoughts were running, bethought him of a sweeter vengeance.

"Lady Mary," he cried, a soft reproach in his voice, "I have been sore mistook in you if you are one to be guided by the rabble." And he waved a hand toward the modish throng.

She knit her fine brows, bewildered.

"Ah!" he cried, interpreting her glance to suit his ends, "perish the thought, indeed! I knew that I could not be wrong. I knew that one so peerless in all else must be peerless, too, in her opinions; judging for herself, and standing firm upon her judgment in disdain of meaner souls—mere sheep to follow their bell-wether."

She opened her mouth to speak, but said nothing, being too intrigued by this sudden and most sweet flattery. Her mere beauty had oft been praised, and in terms that glowed like fire. But what was that compared with this fine appreciation of her less obvious mental parts—and that from one who had seen the world?

Mr. Caryll was bending over her. "What a chance is here," he was murmuring, "to mark your lofty detachment—to show how utter is your indifference to what the common herd may think."

"As—as how?" she asked, blinking up at him.

The others stood at gaze, scarce yet suspecting the drift of so much talk.

"There is a poor lady yonder, of whose fair name a bubble is being blown and pricked. I dare swear there's not a woman here durst

speak to her. Yet what a chance for one that dared! How fine a triumph would be hers!" He sighed. "Heigho! I almost wish I were a woman, that I might make that triumph mine and mark my superiority to these painted dolls that have neither wit nor courage."

The Lady Mary rose, a faint color in her cheeks, a sparkle in her fine eyes. A great joy flashed into Mr. Caryl's in quick response; a joy, in her—she thought with ready vanity—and a heightening admiration.

"Will you make it yours, as it should be—as it must ever be—to lead and not to follow?" he cried, flattering incredibility trembling in his voice.

"And why not, sir?" she demanded, now thoroughly aroused.

"Why not, indeed—since you are you?" quoth he. "It is what I had hoped in you, and yet—and yet what I had almost feared to hope."

She frowned upon him now, so excellently had he done his work. "Why should you have feared that?"

"Alas! I am a man of little faith—unworthy, indeed, your good opinion since I entertained a doubt. It was a blasphemy."

She smiled again. "You acknowledge your faults with such a grace," said she, "that we must needs forgive them. And now to show you how much you need forgiveness. Come, children," she bade her cousins—for whose innocence she had made apology but a moment back. "Your arm, Harry," she begged her brother-in-law.

Sir Harry obeyed her readily, but without eagerness. In his heart he cursed his friend Caryl for having set her on to this.

Mr. Caryl himself hung upon her other side, his eyes toward Lady Ostermore and Hortensia, who, whilst being observed by all, were being approached by few; and these few confined themselves to an exchange of greetings with her ladyship, which constituted a worse

offence to Mistress Winthrop than had they stayed away.

Suddenly, as if drawn by his ardent gaze, Hortensia's eyes moved at last from their forward fixity. Her glance met Mr. Caryl's across the intervening space. Instantly he swept off his hat, and bowed profoundly. The action drew attention to himself. All eyes were focussed upon him, and between many a pair there was a frown for one who should dare thus to run counter to the general attitude.

But there was more to follow. The Lady Mary accepted Mr. Caryl's salutation of Hortensia as a signal. She led the way promptly, and the little band swept forward, straight for its goal, raked by the volleys from a thousand eyes, under which the Lady Mary already began to giggle excitedly.

Thus they reached the countess, the countess standing very rigid in her amazement, to receive them.

"I hope I see your ladyship well," said Lady Mary.

"I hope your ladyship does," answered the countess tartly.

Mistress Winthrop's eyes were lowered; her cheeks were scarlet. Her distress was plain, born of her doubt of the Lady Mary's purpose, and suspense as to what might follow.

"I have not the honor of your ward's acquaintance, Lady Ostermore," said Lady Mary, whilst the men were bowing, and her cousins curtsying to the countess and her companion collectively.

The countess gasped, recovered, and eyed the speaker without any sign of affection. "My husband's ward, ma'am," she corrected, in a voice that seemed to discourage further mention of Hortensia.

"'Tis but a distinction," put in Mr. Caryl suggestively.

"Indeed, yes. Will not your ladyship present me?" The countess'

malevolent eyes turned a moment upon Mr. Caryl, smiling demurely at Lady Mary's elbow. In his face—as well as in the four words he had uttered—she saw that here was work of his, and he gained nothing in her favor by it. Meanwhile there were no grounds—other than such as must have been wantonly offensive to the Lady Mary, and so not to be dreamed of—upon which to refuse her request. The countess braced herself, and with an ill grace performed the brief ceremony of presentation.

Mistress Winthrop looked up an instant, then down again; it was a piteous, almost a pleading glance.

Lady Mary, leaving the countess to Sir Harry Stapleton, Caryl and the others, moved to Hortensia's side for a moment she was at loss what to say, and took refuge in a commonplace.

"I have long desired the pleasure of your acquaintance," said she.

"I am honored, madam," replied Hortensia, with downcast eyes. Then lifting them with almost disconcerting suddenness. "Your ladyship has chosen an odd season in which to gratify this desire with which you honor me."

Lady Mary laughed, as much at the remark as for the benefit of those whose eyes were upon her. She knew there would not be wanting many who would condemn her; but these should be far outnumbered by those who would be lost in admiration of her daring, that she could so fly in the face of public opinion; and she was grateful to Mr. Caryl for having suggested to her a course of such distinction.

"I could have chosen no better season," she replied, "to mark my scorn of evil tongues and backbiters."

Color stained Hortensia's cheek again; gratitude glowed in her eyes. "You are very noble, madam," she answered with flattering earnestness.

"La!" said the Lady Mary. "Is nobility, then, so easily achieved?" And thereafter they talked of inconsequent trifles, until Mr. Caryl moved towards them, and Lady Mary turned aside to speak to the countess.

At Mr. Caryl's approach Hortensia's eyes had been lowered again and she made no offer to address him as he stood before her now, hat under arm, leaning easily upon his amber cane.

"Oh, heart of stone!" said he at last. "Am I not yet forgiven?"

She misread his meaning—perhaps already the suspicion she now voiced had been in her mind. She looked up at him sharply. "Was it—was it you who fetched the Lady Mary to me?" she inquired.

"Lo!" said he. "You have a voice! Now Heaven be praised! I was fearing it was lost for me—that you had made some awful vow never again to rejoice my ears with the music of it."

"You have not answered my question," she reminded him.

"Nor you mine," said he. "I asked you am I not yet forgiven."

"Forgiven what?"

"For being born an impudent, fleering coxcomb—twas that you called me, I think."

She flushed deeply. "If you would win forgiveness, you should not remind me of the offence," she answered low.

"Nay," he rejoined, "that is to confound forgiveness with forgetfulness. I want you to forgive and yet to remember."

"That were to condone."

"What else? 'Tis nothing less will satisfy me."

"You expect too much," she answered, with a touch that was almost of sternness.

He shrugged and smiled whimsically. "It is my way," he said apologetically. "Nature has made me expectant, and life, whilst showing me the folly of it, has not yet cured me."

She looked at him, and repeated her earlier question. "Was it at your bidding that Lady Mary came to speak with me?"

"Fie!" he cried. "What insinuations do you make against her?"

"Insinuations?"

"What else? That she should do things at my bidding!"

She smiled understanding. "You have a talent, sir, for crooked answers."

"'Tis to conceal the rectitude of my behavior."

"It fails of its object, then," said she, "for it deludes no one." She paused and laughed at his look of assumed blankness. "I am deeply beholden to you," she whispered quickly, breathing at once gratitude and confusion.

"Though I don't descry the cause," said he, "'twill be something to comfort me."

More he might have added then, for the mad mood was upon him, awakened by those soft brown eyes of hers. But in that moment the others of that little party crowded upon them to take their leave of Mistress Winthrop.

Mr. Caryl felt satisfied that enough had been done to curb the slander concerning Hortensia. But he was not long in learning how profound was his mistake. On every side he continued to hear her

discussed, and in such terms as made his ears tingle and his hands itch to be at work in her defence; for, with smirks and sneers and innuendoes, her escapade with Lord Rotherby continued to furnish a topic for the town as her ladyship had sworn it would. Yet by what right could he espouse her cause with any one of her defamers without bringing her fair name into still more odious notoriety?

And meanwhile he knew that he was under strict surveillance from Mr. Green; knew that he was watched wherever he went; and nothing but his confidence that no evidence could be produced against him allowed him to remain, as he did, all unconcerned of this.

Leduc had more than once seen Mr. Green about Old Palace Yard, besides a couple of his underlings, one or the other of whom was never absent from the place, no doubt with intent to observe who came and went at Mr. Caryll's. Once, indeed, during the absence of master and servant, Mr. Caryll's lodging was broken into, and on Leduc's return he found a confusion which told him how thoroughly the place had been ransacked.

If Mr. Caryll had had anything to hide, this would have given him the hint to take his precautions; but as he had nothing that was in the least degree in incriminating, he went his ways in supremest unconcern of the vigilance exerted over him. He used, however, a greater discretion in the resorts he frequented. And if upon occasion he visited such Tory meeting-places as the Bell Tavern in King Street or the Cocoa-Tree in Pall Mall, he was still more often to be found at White's, that ultra-Whig resort.

It was at this latter house, one evening three or four days after his meeting with Hortensia in the park, that the chance was afforded him at last of vindicating her honor in a manner that need not add to the scandal that was already abroad, nor serve to couple his name with hers unduly. And it was Lord Rotherby himself who afforded him the opportunity.

The thing fell out in this wise: Mr. Caryll was at cards with Harry Collis and Stapleton and Major Gascoigne, in a room above-stairs. There were at least a dozen others present, some also at play, others merely lounging. Of the latter was his Grace of Wharton. He was a slender, graceful gentleman, whose face, if slightly effeminate and markedly dissipated, was nevertheless of considerable beauty. He was very splendid in a suit of green camlett and silver lace, and he wore a flaxen periwig without powder.

He was awaiting Rotherby, with whom—as he told the company—he was for a frolic at Drury Lane, where a ridotto was following the play. He spoke, as usual, in a loud voice that all might hear, and his talk was loose and heavily salted as became the talk of a rake of his exalted rank. It was chiefly concerned with airing his bitter grievance against Mrs. Girdlebank, of the Theatre Royal, of whom he announced himself "devilishly enamoured."

He inveighed against her that she should have the gross vulgarity to love her husband, and against her husband that he should have the audacity to play the watchdog over her, and bark and growl at the duke's approach.

"A plague on all husbands, say I," ended the worthy president of the Bold Bucks.

"Nay, now, but I'm a husband myself, gad!" protested Mr. Sidney, who was quite the most delicate, mincing man of fashion about town, and one of that valetaille that hovered about his Grace of Wharton's heels.

"'Tis no matter in your case," said the duke, with that contempt he used towards his followers. "Your wife's too ugly to be looked at." And Mr. Sidney's fresh protest was drowned in the roar of laughter that went up to applaud that brutal frankness. Mr. Caryll turned to the fop, who happened to be standing at his elbow.

"Never repine, man," said he. "In the company you keep, such a wife makes for peace of mind. To have that is to have much."

Wharton resumed his railings at the Girdlebanks, and was still at them when Rotherby came in.

"At last, Charles!" the duke hailed him, rising. "Another minute, and I had gone without you."

But Rotherby scarce looked at him, and answered with unwonted shortness. His eyes had discovered Mr. Caryll. It was the first time he had run against him since that day, over a week ago, at Stretton House, and at sight of him now all Rotherby's spleen was moved. He stood and stared, his dark eyes narrowing, his cheeks flushing slightly under their tan. Wharton, who had approached him, observing his sudden halt, his sudden look of concentration, asked him shortly what might ail him.

"I have seen someone I did not expect to find in a resort of gentlemen," said Rotherby, his eyes ever on Mr. Caryll, who—engrossed in his game—was all unconscious of his lordship's advent.

Wharton followed the direction of his companion's gaze, and giving now attention himself to Mr. Caryll, he fell to appraising his genteel appearance, negligent of the insinuation in what Rotherby had said.

"Sdeath!" swore the duke. "'Tis a man of taste—a travelled gentleman by his air. Behold me the grace of that shoulder-knot, Charles, and the set of that most admirable coat. Fifty guineas wouldn't buy his Steinkirk. Who is this beau?"

"I'll present him to your grace," said Rotherby shortly. He had pretensions at being a beau himself; but his grace—supreme arbiter in such matters—had never yet remarked it.

They moved across the room, greetings passing as they went. At their approach, Mr. Caryll looked up. Rotherby made him a leg with an excessive show of deference, arguing irony. "'Tis an unlooked-for pleasure to meet you here, sir," said he in a tone that drew the attention of all present.

"No pleasures are so sweet as the unexpected," answered Mr. Caryll, with casual amiability, and since he perceived at once the errand upon which Lord Rotherby was come to him, he went half-way to meet him. "Has your lordship been contracting any marriages of late?" he inquired.

The viscount smiled icily. "You have quick wits, sir," said he, "which is as it should be in one who lives by them."

"Let your lordship be thankful that such is not your own case," returned Mr. Caryll, with imperturbable good humor, and sent a titter round the room.

"A hit! A shrewd hit, 'pon honor!" cried Wharton, tapping his snuff-box. "I vow to Gad, Ye're undone, Charles. Ye'd better play at repartee with Gascoigne, there. Ye're more of a weight."

"Your grace," cried Rotherby, suppressing at great cost his passion, "'tis not to be borne that a fellow of this condition should sit among men of quality." And with that he swung round and addressed the company in general. "Gentlemen, do you know who this fellow is? He has the effrontery to take my name, and call himself Caryll."

Mr. Caryll looked a moment at his brother in the silence that followed. Then, as in a flash, he saw his chance of vindicating Mistress Winthrop, and he seized it.

"And do you know, gentlemen, who this fellow is?" he inquired, with an air of sly amusement. "He is—Nay, you shall judge for yourselves. You shall hear the story of how we met; it is the story of his abduction

of a lady whose name need not be mentioned; the story of his dastardly attempt to cozen her into a mock-marriage."

"Mock—mock-marriage?" cried the duke and a dozen others with him, some in surprise, but most in an unbelief that was already faintly tinged with horror—which argued ill for my Lord Rotherby when the story should be told.

"You damned rogue—" began his lordship, and would have flung himself upon Caryll, but that Collis and Stapleton, and Wharton himself, put forth hands to stay him by main force.

Others, too, had risen. But Mr. Caryll sat quietly in his chair, idly fingering the cards before him, and smiling gently, between amusement and irony. He was much mistaken if he did not make Lord Rotherby bitterly regret the initiative he had taken in their quarrel.

"Gently, my lord," the duke admonished the viscount. "This—this gentleman has said that which touches your honor. He shall say more. He shall make good his words, or eat them. But the matter cannot rest thus."

"It shall not, by God!" swore Rotherby, purple now. "It shall not. I'll kill him like a dog for what he has said."

"But before I die, gentlemen," said Mr. Caryll, "it were well that you should have the full story of that sorry adventure from an eye-witness."

"An eye-witness? Were ye present?" cried two or three in a breath.

"I desire to lay before you all the story of how we met my lord there and I. It is so closely enmeshed with the story of that abduction and mock-marriage that the one is scarce to be distinguished from the other."

Rotherby writhed to shake off those who held him.

"Will ye listen to this fellow?" he roared. "He's a spy, I tell you—a Jacobite spy!" He was beside himself with anger and apprehension, and he never paused to weigh the words he uttered. It was with him a question of stopping his accuser's mouth with whatever mud came under his hands. "He has no right here. It is not to be borne. I know not by what means he has thrust himself among you, but—"

"That is a knowledge I can afford your lordship," came Stapleton's steady voice to interrupt the speaker. "Mr. Caryll is here by my invitation."

"And by mine and Gascoigne's here," added Sir Harry Collis, "and I will answer for his quality to any man who doubts it."

Rotherby glared at Mr. Caryll's sponsors, struck dumb by this sudden and unexpected refutation of the charge he had leveled.

Wharton, who had stepped aside, knit his brows and flashed his quizzing-glass—through sheer force of habit—upon Lord Rotherby. Then:

"You'll pardon me, Harry," said he, "but you'll see, I hope, that the question is not impertinent; that I put it to the end that we may clearly know with whom we have to deal and what consideration to extend him, what credit to attach to the communication he is to make us touching my lord here. Under what circumstances did you become acquainted with Mr. Caryll?"

"I have known him these twelve years," answered Collis promptly; "so has Stapleton, so has Gascoigne, so have a dozen other gentlemen who could be produced, and who, like ourselves, were at Oxford with him. For myself and Stapleton, I can say that our acquaintance—indeed, I should say our friendship—with Mr. Caryll has been continuous since then, and that we have visited him on several occasions at his estate of Maligny in Normandy. That he

habitually inhabits the country of his birth is the reason why Mr. Caryl has not hitherto had the advantage of your grace's acquaintance. Need I say more to efface the false statement made by my Lord Rotherby?"

"False? Do you dare give me the lie, sir?" roared Rotherby.

But the duke soothed him. Under his profligate exterior his Grace of Wharton concealed—indeed, wasted—a deal of shrewdness, ability and inherent strength. "One thing at a time, my lord," said the president of the Bold Bucks. "Let us attend to the matter of Mr. Caryl."

"Dons and the devil! Does your grace take sides with him?"

"I take no sides. But I owe it to myself—we all owe it to ourselves—that this matter should be cleared."

Rotherby leered at him, his lip trembling with anger. "Does the president of the Bold Bucks pretend to administrate a court of honor?" he sneered heavily.

"Your lordship will gain little by this," Wharton admonished him, so coldly that Rotherby belatedly came to some portion of his senses again. The duke turned to Caryl. "Mr. Caryl," said he, "Sir Harry has given you very handsome credentials, which would seem to prove you worthy the hospitality of White's. You have, however, permitted yourself certain expressions concerning his lordship here, which we cannot allow to remain where you have left them. You must retract, sir, or make them good." His gravity, and the preciseness of his diction now, sorted most oddly with his foppish airs.

Mr. Caryl closed his snuff-box with a snap. A hush fell instantly upon the company, which by now was all crowding about the little table at which sat Mr. Caryl and his three friends. A footman who entered at the moment to snuff the candles and see what the gentlemen might be

requiring, was dismissed the room. When the door had closed, Mr. Caryl began to speak.

One more attempt was made by Rotherby to interfere, but this attempt was disposed of by Wharton, who had constituted himself entirely master of the proceedings.

"If you will not allow Mr. Caryl to speak, we shall infer that you fear what he may have to say; you will compel us to hear him in your absence, and I cannot think that you would prefer that, my lord."

My lord fell silent. He was breathing heavily, and his face was pale, his eyes angry beyond words, what time Mr. Caryl, in amiable, musical voice, with its precise and at moments slightly foreign enunciation, unfolded the shameful story of the affair at the "Adam and Eve," at Maidstone. He told a plain, straightforward tale, making little attempt to reproduce any of its color, giving his audience purely and simply the facts that had taken place. He told how he himself had been chosen as a witness when my lord had heard that there was a traveller from France in the house, and showed how that slight circumstance had first awakened his suspicions of foul play. He provoked some amusement when he dealt with his detection and exposure of the sham parson. But in the main he was heard with a stern and ominous attention—ominous for Lord Rotherby.

Rakes these men admittedly were with but few exceptions. No ordinary tale of gallantry could have shocked them, or provoked them to aught but a contemptuous mirth at the expense of the victim, male or female. They would have thought little the worse of a man for running off with the wife, say, of one of his acquaintance; they would have thought nothing of his running off with a sister or a daughter—so long as it was not of their own. All these were fair game, and if the husband, father or brother could not protect the wife, sister or daughter that was his, the more shame to him. But though they might be fair game, the game had its rules—anomalous as it may seem.

These rules Lord Rotherby—if the tale Mr. Caryll told was true—had violated. He had practiced a cheat, the more dastardly because the poor lady who had so narrowly escaped being his victim had neither father nor brother to avenge her. And in every eye that was upon him Lord Rotherby might have read, had he had the wit to do so, the very sternest condemnation.

"A pretty story, as I've a soul!" was his grace's comment, when Mr. Caryll had done. "A pretty story, my Lord Rotherby. I have a stomach for strong meat myself. But—odds my life!—this is too nauseous!"

Rotherby glared at him. "'Slife! your grace is grown very nice on a sudden!" he sneered. "The president of the Bold Bucks, the master of the Hell Fire Club, is most oddly squeamish where the diversions of another are concerned."

"Diversions?" said his grace, his eyebrows raised until they all but vanished under the golden curls of his peruke. "Diversions? Ha! I observe that you make no attempt to deny the story. You admit it, then?"

There was a stir in the group, a drawing back from his lordship. He observed it, trembling between chagrin and rage. "What's here?" he cried, and laughed contemptuously. "Oh, ah! You'll follow where his grace leads you! Ye've followed him so long in lewdness that now ye'll follow him in conversion! But as for you, sir," and he swung fiercely upon Caryll, "you and your precious story—will you maintain it sword in hand?"

"I can do better," answered Mr. Caryll, "if any doubts my word."

"As how?"

"I can prove it categorically, by witnesses."

"Well said, Caryll," Stapleton approved him.

"And if I say that you lie—you and your witnesses?"

"T is you will be liar," said Mr. Caryll.

"Besides, it is a little late for that," cut in the duke.

"Your grace," cried Rotherby, "is this affair yours?"

"No, I thank Heaven!" said his grace, and sat down.

Rotherby scowled at the man who until ten minutes ago had been his friend and boon companion, and there was more of contempt than anger in his eyes. He turned again to Mr. Caryll, who was watching him with a gleam of amusement—that infernally irritating amusement of his—in his gray-green eyes.

"Well?" he demanded foolishly, "have you naught to say?"

"I had thought," returned Mr. Caryll, "that I had said enough." And the duke laughed aloud.

Rotherby's lip was curled. "Ha! You don't think, now, that you may have said too much?"

Mr. Caryll stifled a yawn. "Do you?" he inquired blandly.

"Ay, by God! Too much for a gentleman to leave unpunished."

"Possibly. But what gentleman is concerned in this?"

"I am!" thundered Rotherby.

"I see. And how do you conceive that you answer the description?"

Rotherby swore at him with great choice and variety. "You shall learn," he promised him. "My friends shall wait on you to-night."

"I wonder who will carry his message?" ventured Collis to the ceiling. Rotherby turned on him, fierce as a rat. "It is a matter you may

discover to your cost, Sir Harry," he snarled.

"I think," put in his grace very languidly, "that you are troubling the harmony that is wont to reign here."

His lordship stood still a moment. Then, quite suddenly, he snatched up a candlestick to hurl at Mr. Caryll. But he had it wrenched from his hands ere he could launch it.

He stood a moment, discomfited, glowering upon his brother. "My friends shall wait on you to-night," he repeated.

"You said so before," Mr. Caryll replied wearily. "I shall endeavor to make them welcome."

His lordship nodded stupidly, and strode to the door. His departure was observed in silence. On every face he read his sentence. These men—rakes though they were, professedly—would own him no more for their associate; and what these men thought to-night not a gentleman in town but would be thinking the same tomorrow. He had the stupidity to lay it all to the score of Mr. Caryll, not perceiving that he had brought it upon himself by his own aggressiveness. He paused, his hand upon the doorknob, and turned to loose a last shaft at them.

"As for you others, that follow your bell-wether there," and he indicated his grace, whose shoulder was towards him, "this matter ends not here."

And with that general threat he passed out, and that snug room at White's knew him no more.

Major Gascoigne was gathering up the cards that had been flung down when first the storm arose. Mr. Caryll bent to assist him. And the last voice Lord Rotherby heard as he departed was Mr. Caryll's, and the words it uttered were: "Come, Ned; the deal is with you."

His lordship swore through his teeth, and went downstairs heavily.

CHAPTER X. SPURS TO THE RELUCTANT

Before Mr. Caryll left White's—which he did at a comparatively early hour, that he might be at home to receive Lord Rotherby's friends—not a man present but had offered him his services in the affair he had upon his hands. Wharton, indeed, was not to be denied for one; and for the other Mr. Caryll desired Gascoigne to do him the honor of representing him.

It was a fine, dry night, and feeling the need for exercise, Mr. Caryll set out to walk the short distance from St. James's Street to his lodging, with a link-boy, preceding him, for only attendant. Arrived home, he was met by Leduc with the information that Sir Richard Everard was awaiting him. He went in, and the next moment he was in the arms of his adoptive father.

Greetings and minor courtesies disposed of, Sir Richard came straight to the affair which he had at heart. "Well? How speeds the matter?"

Mr. Caryll's face became overcast. He sat down, a thought wearily.

"So far as Lord Ostermore is concerned, it speeds—as you would wish it. So far as I am concerned"—he paused and sighed—"I would that it sped not at all, or that I was out of it."

Sir Richard looked at him with searching eyes. "How?" he asked. "What would you have me understand?"

"That in spite of all that has been said between us, in spite of all the

arguments you have employed, and with which once, for a little while, you convinced me, this task is loathsome to me in the last degree. Ostermore is my father, and I can't forget it."

"And your mother?" Sir Richard's tone was sad, rather than indignant; it spoke of a bitter disappointment, not at the events, but at this man whom he loved with all a father's love.

"It were idle to go over it all again. I know everything that you would—that you could—say. I have said it all to myself again and again, in a vain endeavor to steel myself to the business to which you plighted me. Had Ostermore been different, perhaps it had been easier. I cannot say. As it is, I see in him a weakling, a man of inferior intellect, who does not judge things as you and I judge them, whose life cannot have been guided by the rules that serve for men of stronger purpose."

"You find excuses for him? For his deed?" cried Sir Richard, and his voice was full of horror now; he stared askance at his adoptive son.

"No, no! Oh, I don't know. On my soul and conscience, I don't know!" cried Mr. Caryll, like one in pain. He rose and moved restlessly about the room. "No," he pursued more calmly, "I don't excuse him. I blame him—more bitterly than you can think; perhaps more bitterly even than do you, for I have had a look into his mind and see the exact place held there by my mother's memory. I can judge and condemn him; but I can't execute him; I can't betray him. I don't think I could do it even if he were not my father."

He paused, and leaning his hands upon the table at which Sir Richard sat, he faced him, and spoke in a voice of earnest pleading. "Sir Richard, this was not the task to give me; or, if you had planned to give it me, you should have reared me differently; you should not have sought to make of me a gentleman. You have brought me up to

principles of honor, and you ask me now to outrage them, to cast them off, and to become a very Judas. Is't wonderful I should rebel?"

They were hurtful words to Sir Richard—the poor fanatic whose mind was all unsound on this one point, who had lived in contemplation of his vengeance as a fasting monk lives through Lent in contemplation of the Easter plenty. The lines of sorrow deepened in his face.

"Justin," he said slowly, "you forget one thing. Honor is to be used with men of honor; but he who allows his honor to stand a barrier between himself and the man who has wronged him by dishonor, is no better than a fool. You speak of yourself; you think of yourself. And what of me, Justin? The things you say of yourself apply in a like degree—nay, even more—to me."

"Ah, but you are not his son. Oh, believe me, I speak not hastily or lightly. I have been torn this way and that in these past days, until at moments the burden has been heavier than I could bear. Once, for a little while, I thought I could do all and more than you expect of me—the moment, indeed, in which I took the first step, and delivered him the letter. But it was a moment of wild heat. I cooled, and reflection followed, and since then, because so much was done, I have not known an instant's peace of mind; I have endeavored to forget the position in which I am placed; but I have failed. I cannot. And if I go through with this thing, I shall not know another hour in life that is not poisoned by remorse."

"Remorse?" echoed Sir Richard, between consternation and anger. "Remorse?" He laughed bitterly. "What ails thee, boy? Do you pretend that Lord Ostermore should go unpunished? Do you go so far as that?"

"Not so. He has made others suffer, and it is just—as we understand justice—that he should suffer in his turn. Though, when all

is said, he is but a poor egotist, too dull-witted to understand the full vileness of his sin. He is suffering, as it is—cursed in his son; for 'the father of a fool hath no joy.' He hates this son of his, and his son despises him. His wife is a shrew, a termagant, who embitters every hour of his existence. Thus he drags out his life, unloving and unloved, a thing to evoke pity."

"Pity?" cried Sir Richard in a voice of thunder. "Pity? Ha! As I've a soul, Justin, he shall be more pitiful yet ere I have done with him."

"Be it so, then. But—if you love me—find some other hand to do the work."

"If I love you, Justin?" echoed the other, and his voice softened, his eyes looked reproachfully upon his adoptive child. "Needs there an 'if' to that? Are you not all I have—my son, indeed?"

He held out his hands, and Justin took them affectionately and pressed them in his own.

"You'll put these weak notions from your mind, Justin, and prove worthy the noble lady who was your mother?"

Mr. Caryll moved aside again, hanging his head, his face pale and troubled. Where Everard's arguments must fail, his own affection for Everard was like to conquer him. It was very weak in him, he told himself; but then his love for Everard was strong, and he would fain spare Everard the pain he knew he must be occasioning him. Still he did battle, his repugnance up in arms.

"I would you could see the matter as I see it," he sighed. "This man grown old, and reaping in his old age the fruits of the egotism he has sown. I do not believe that in all the world there is a single soul would weep his lordship's death—if we except, perhaps, Mistress Winthrop."

"And do you pity him for that?" quoth Sir Richard coldly. "What right has he to expect aught else? Who sows for himself, reaps for himself. I marvel, indeed, that there should be even one to bewail him—to spare him a kind thought."

"And even there," mused Mr. Caryl, "it is perhaps gratitude rather than affection that inspires the kindness."

"Who is Mistress Winthrop?"

"His ward. As sweet a lady, I think, as I have ever seen," said Mr. Caryl, incautious enthusiasm assailing him. Sir Richard's eyes narrowed.

"You have some acquaintance with her?" he suggested.

Very briefly Mr. Caryl sketched for the second time that evening the circumstances of his first meeting with Rotherby.

Sir Richard nodded sardonically. "Hum! He is his father's son, not a doubt of that. 'Twill be a most worthy successor to my Lord Ostermore. But the lady? Tell me of the lady. How comes she linked with them?"

"I scarce know, save from the scraps that I have heard. Her father, it would seem, was Ostermore's friend, and, dying, he appointed Ostermore her guardian. Her fortune, I take it, is very slender. Nevertheless, Ostermore, whatever he may have done by other people, appears in this case to have discharged his trust with zeal and with affection. But, indeed, who could have done other where that sweet lady was concerned? You should see her, Sir Richard!" He was pacing the room now as he spoke, and as he spoke he warmed to his subject more and more. "She is middling tall, of a most dainty slenderness, dark-haired, with a so sweet and saintly beauty of face that it must be seen to be believed. And eyes—Lord! the glory of her eyes! They are eyes that would lead a man into hell and make him

believe it heaven,

"'Love doth to her eyes repair
To help him of his blindness.'"

Sir Richard watched him, displeasure growing in his face. "So!" he said at last. "Is that the reason?"

"The reason of what?" quoth Mr. Caryll, recalled from his sweet rapture.

"The reason of these fresh qualms of yours. The reason of all this sympathy for Ostermore; this unwillingness to perform the sacred duty that is yours."

"Nay—on my soul, you do me wrong!" cried Mr. Caryll indignantly. "If aught had been needed to spur me on, it had been my meeting with this lady. It needed that to make me realize to the bitter full the wrong my Lord Ostermore has done me in getting me; to make me realize that I am a man without a name to offer any woman."

But Sir Richard, watching him intently, shook his head and fetched a sigh of sorrow and disdain. "Pshaw, Justin! How we befool ourselves! You think it is not so; you try to think it is not so; but to me it is very plain. A woman has arisen in your life, and this woman, seen but once or twice, unknown a week or so ago, suffices to eclipse the memory of your mother and turns your aim in life—the avenging of her bitter wrongs—to water. Oh, Justin, Justin! I had thought you stronger."

"Your conclusions are all wrong. I swear they are wrong!"

Sir Richard considered him sombrely. "Are you sure—quite, quite sure?"

Mr. Caryll's eyes fell, as the doubt now entered his mind for the first

time that it might be indeed as Sir Richard was suggesting. He was not quite sure.

"Prove it to me, Justin," Everard pleaded. "Prove it by abandoning this weakness where my Lord Ostermore is concerned. Remember only the wrong he has done. You are the incarnation of that wrong, and by your hand must he be destroyed." He rose, and caught the younger man's hands again in his own, forced Mr. Caryll to confront him. "He shall know when the time comes whose hand it was that pulled him down; he shall know the Nemesis that has lain in wait for him these thirty years to smite him at the end. And he shall taste hell in this world before he goes to it in the next. It is God's own justice, boy! Will you be false to the duty that lies before you? Will you forget your mother and her sufferings because you have looked into the eyes of this girl, who—"

"No, no! Say no more!" cried Mr. Caryll, his voice trembling.

"You will do it," said Sir Richard, between question and assertion.

"If Heaven lends me strength of purpose. But it asks much," was the gloomy answer. "I am to see Lord Ostermore to-morrow to obtain his answer to King James' letter."

Sir Richard's eyes gleamed. He released the other's hands, and turned slowly to his chair again. "It is well," he said slowly. "The thing asks dispatch, or else some of his majesty's real friends may be involved."

He proceeded to explain his words. "I have talked in vain with Atterbury. He will not abandon the enterprise even at King James' commands. He urges that his majesty can have no conception of how the matter is advanced; that he has been laboring like Hercules, and that the party is being swelled by men of weight and substance every day; that it is too late to go back, and that he will go forward with the

king's consent or without it. Should he or his agents approach Ostermore, in the meantime, it will be too late for us to take such measures as we have concerted. For to deliver up Ostermore then would entail the betrayal of others, which is not to be dreamt of. So you'll use dispatch."

"If I do the thing at all, it shall be done to-morrow," answered Mr. Caryl.

"If at all?" cried Sir Richard, frowning again. "If at all?"

Caryl turned to him. He crossed to the table, and leaning across it, until his face was quite close to his adoptive father's. "Sir Richard," he begged, "let us say no more to-night. My will is all to do the thing. It is my—my instincts that rebel. I think that the day will be carried by my will. I shall strive to that end, believe me. But let us say no more now."

Sir Richard, looking deep into Mr. Caryl's eyes, was touched by something that he saw. "My poor Justin!" he said gently. Then, checking the sympathy as swiftly as it rose: "So be it, then," he said briskly. "You'll come to me to-morrow after you have seen his lordship?"

"Will you not remain here?"

"You have not the room. Besides, Sir Richard Everard—is too well known for a Jacobite to be observed sharing your lodging. I have no right at all in England, and there is always the chance of my being discovered. I would not pull you down with me. I am lodged at the corner of Maiden Lane, next door to the sign of Golden Flich. Come to me there to-morrow after you have seen Lord Ostermore." He hesitated a moment. He was impelled to recapitulate his injunctions; but he forbore. He put out his hand abruptly. "Good-night, Justin."

Justin took the hand and pressed it. The door opened, and Leduc entered.

"Captain Mainwaring and Mr. Falgate are here, sir, and would speak with you," he announced.

Mr. Caryl knit his brows a moment. His acquaintance with both men was of the slightest, and it was only upon reflection that he bethought him they would, no doubt, be come in the matter of his affair with Rotherby, which in the stress of his interview with Sir Richard had been quite forgotten. He nodded.

"Wait upon Sir Richard to the door, Leduc," he bade his man. "Then introduce these gentlemen."

Sir Richard had drawn back a step. "I trust neither of these gentlemen knows me," he said. "I would not be seen here by any that did. It might compromise you."

But Mr. Caryl belittled Sir Richard's fears. "Pooh! 'Tis very unlike," said he; whereupon Sir Richard, seeing no help for it, went out quickly, Leduc in attendance.

Lord Rotherby's friends in the ante-room paid little heed to him as he passed briskly through. Surveillance came rather from an entirely unsuspected quarter. As he left the house and crossed the square, a figure detached itself from the shadow of the wall, and set out to follow. It hung in his rear through the filthy, labyrinthine streets which Sir Richard took to Charing Cross, followed him along the Strand and up Bedford Street, and took note of the house he entered at the corner of Maiden Lane.

CHAPTER XI. THE ASSAULT-AT-ARMS

The meeting was appointed by my Lord Rotherby for seven o'clock next morning in Lincoln's Inn Fields. It is true that Lincoln's Inn Fields at an early hour of the day was accounted a convenient spot for the transaction of such business as this; yet, considering that it was in the immediate neighborhood of Stretton House, overlooked, indeed, by the windows of that mansion, it is not easy to rid the mind of a suspicion that Rotherby appointed that place of purpose set, and with intent to mark his contempt and defiance of his father, with whom he supposed Mr. Caryl to be in some league.

Accompanied by the Duke of Wharton and Major Gascoigne, Mr. Caryl entered the enclosure promptly as seven was striking from St. Clement Danes. They had come in a coach, which they had left in waiting at the corner of Portugal Row.

As they penetrated beyond the belt of trees they found that they were the first in the field, and his grace proceeded with the major to inspect the ground, so that time might be saved against the coming of the other party.

Mr. Caryl stood apart, breathing the freshness of the sunlit morning, but supremely indifferent to its glory. He was gloomy and preoccupied. He had slept ill that night after his interview with Sir Richard, tormented by the odious choice that lay before him of either breaking with the adoptive father to whom he owed obedience and affection, or betraying his natural father whom he had every reason to hate, yet who remained his father. He had been able to arrive at no

solution. Duty seemed to point one way; instinct the other. Down in his heart he felt that when the moment came it would be the behests of instinct that he would obey, and, in obeying them, play false to Sir Richard and to the memory of his mother. It was the only course that went with honor; and yet it was a course that must lead to a break with the one friend he had in the world—the one man who stood to him for family and kin.

And now, as if that were not enough to plague him, there was this quarrel with Rotherby which he had upon his hands. That, too, he had been considering during the wakeful hours of that summer night. Had he reflected he must have seen that no other result could have followed his narrative at White's last night; and yet it was a case in which reflection would not have stayed him. Hortensia Winthrop's fair name was to be cleansed of the smirch that had been cast upon it, and Justin was the only man in whose power it had lain to do it. More than that—if more were needed—it was Rotherby himself, by his aggressiveness, who had thrust Mr. Caryl into a position which almost made it necessary for him to explain himself; and that he could scarcely have done by any other than the means which he had adopted. Under ordinary circumstances the matter would have troubled him not at all; this meeting with such a man as Rotherby would not have robbed him of a moment's sleep. But there came the reflection—belatedly—that Rotherby was his brother, his father's son, and he experienced just the same degree of repugnance at the prospect of crossing swords with him as he did at the prospect of betraying Lord Ostermore. Sir Richard would force upon him a parricide's task; Fate a fratricide's. Truly, he thought, it was an enviable position, his.

Pacing the turf, on which the dew still gleamed and sparkled diamond-like, he pondered his course, and wondered now, at the last moment, was there no way to avert this meeting. Could not the matter be arranged? He was stirred out of his musings by Gascoigne's

voice, raised to curse the tardiness of Lord Rotherby.

"Slife! Where does the fellow tarry? Was he so drunk last night that he's not yet slept himself sober?"

"The streets are astir," put in Wharton, helping himself to snuff. And, indeed, the cries of the morning hawkers reached them now from the four sides of the square. "If his lordship does not come soon, I doubt if we may stay for him. We shall have half the town for spectators."

"Who are these?" quoth Gascoigne, stepping aside and craning his neck to get a better view. "Ah! Here they come." And he indicated a group of three that had that moment passed the palings.

Gascoigne and Wharton went to meet the newcomers. Lord Rotherby was attended by Mainwaring, a militia captain—a great, burly, scarred bully of a man—and a Mr. Falgate, an extravagant young buck of his acquaintance. An odder pair of sponsors he could not have found had he been at pains to choose them so.

"Adso!" swore Mr. Falgate, in his shrill, affected voice. "I vow 'tis a most ungenteeled hour, this, for men of quality to be abroad. I had my beauty sleep broke into to be here in time. Lard! I shall be dozing all day for't!" He took off his hat and delicately mopped his brow with a square of lace he called a handkerchief.

"Shall we come to business, gentlemen?" quoth Mainwaring gruffly.

"With all my heart," answered Wharton. "It is growing late."

"Late! La, my dears!" clucked Mr. Falgate in horror. "Has your grace not been to bed yet?"

"To save time," said Gascoigne, "we have made an inspection of the ground, and we think that under the trees yonder is a spot not to be bettered."

Mainwaring flashed a critical and experienced eye over the place. "The sun is—So?" he said, looking up. "Yes; it should serve well enough, I—"

"It will not serve at all," cried Rotherby, who stood a pace or two apart. "A little to the right, there, the turf is better."

"But there is no protection," put in the duke. "You will be under observation from that side of the square, including Stretton House."

"What odds?" quoth Rotherby. "Do I care who overlooks us?" And he laughed unpleasantly. "Or is your grace ashamed of being seen in your friend's company?"

Wharton looked him steadily in the face a moment, then turned to his lordship's seconds. "If Mr. Caryll is of the same mind as his lordship, we had best get to work at once," he said; and bowing to them, withdrew with Gascoigne.

"See to the swords, Mainwaring," said Rotherby shortly. "Here, Fanny!" This to Falgate, whose name was Francis, and who delighted in the feminine diminutive which his intimates used toward him. "Come help me with my clothes."

"I vow to Gad," protested Mr. Falgate, advancing to the task. "I make but an indifferent valet, my dear."

Mr. Caryll stood thoughtful a moment when Rotherby's wishes had been made known to him. The odd irony of the situation—the key to which he was the only one to hold—was borne in upon him. He fetched a sigh of utter weariness.

"I have," said he, "the greatest repugnance to meeting his lordship."

"'Tis little wonder," returned his grace contemptuously. "But since 'tis forced upon you, I hope you'll give him the lesson in manners that

he needs."

"Is it—is it unavoidable?" quoth Mr. Caryll.

"Unavoidable?" Wharton looked at him in stern wonder.

Gascoigne, too, swung round to stare. "Unavoidable? What can you mean, Caryll?"

"I mean is the matter not to be arranged in any way? Must the duel take place?"

His Grace of Wharton stroked his chin contemplatively, his eye ironical, his lip curling never so slightly. "Why," said he, at length, "you may beg my Lord Rotherby's pardon for having given him the lie. You may retract, and brand yourself a liar and your version of the Maidstone affair a silly invention which ye have not the courage to maintain. You may do that, Mr. Caryll. For my own sake, let me add, I hope you will not do it."

"I am not thinking of your grace at all," said Mr. Caryll, slightly piqued by the tone the other took with him. "But to relieve your mind of such doubts as I see you entertain, I can assure you that it is out of no motives of weakness that I boggle at this combat. Though I confess that I am no ferrailleux, and that I abhor the duel as a means of settling a difference just as I abhor all things that are stupid and insensate, yet I am not the man to shirk an encounter where an encounter is forced upon me. But in this affair—" he paused, then ended—"there is more than meets your grace's eye, or, indeed, anyone's."

He was so calm, so master of himself, that Wharton perceived how groundless must have been his first notion. Whatever might be Mr. Caryll's motives, it was plain from his most perfect composure that they were not motives of fear. His grace's half-contemptuous smile was dissipated.

"This is mere trifling, Mr. Caryll," he reminded his principal, "and time is speeding. Your withdrawal now would not only be damaging to yourself; it would be damaging to the lady of whose fair name you have made yourself the champion. You must see that it is too late for doubts on the score of this meeting."

"Ay—by God!" swore Gascoigne hotly. "What a pox ails you, Caryll?"

Mr. Caryll took off his hat and flung it on the ground behind him. "We must go on, then," said he. "Gascoigne, see to the swords with his lordship's friend there."

With a relieved look, the major went forward to make the final preparations, whilst Mr. Caryll, attended by Wharton, rapidly divested himself of coat and waistcoat, then kicked off his light shoes, and stood ready, a slight, lithe, graceful figure in white Holland shirt and pearl-colored small clothes.

A moment later the adversaries were face to face—Rotherby, divested of his wig and with a kerchief bound about his close-cropped head, all a trembling eagerness; Mr. Caryll with a reluctance lightly masked by a dangerous composure.

There was a perfunctory salute—a mere presenting of arms—and the blades swept round in a half-circle to their first meeting. But Rotherby, without so much as allowing his steel to touch his opponent's, as the laws of courtesy demanded, swirled it away again into the higher lines and lunged. It was almost like a foul attempt to take his adversary unawares and unprepared, and for a second it looked as if it must succeed. It must have succeeded but for the miraculous quickness of Mr. Caryll. Swinging round on the ball of his right foot, lightly and gracefully as a dancing master, and with no sign of haste or fear in his amazing speed, he let the other's hard-driven blade glance past him, to meet nothing but the empty air.

As a result, by the very force of the stroke, Rotherby found himself over-reached and carried beyond his point of aim; while Mr. Caryll's sideward movement brought him not only nearer his opponent, but entirely within his guard.

It was seen by them all, and by none with such panic as Rotherby himself, that, as a consequence of his quasi-foul stroke, the viscount was thrown entirely at the mercy of his opponent thus at the very outset of the encounter, before their blades had so much as touched each other. A straightening of the arm on the part of Mr. Caryll, and the engagement would have been at an end.

Mr. Caryll, however, did not straighten his arm. He was observed to smile as he broke ground and waited for his lordship to recover.

Falgate turned pale. Mainwaring swore softly under his breath, in fear for his principal; Gascoigne did the same in vexation at the opportunity Mr. Caryll had so wantonly wasted. Wharton looked on with tight-pressed lips, and wondered.

Rotherby recovered, and for a moment the two men stood apart, seeming to feel each other with their eyes before resuming. Then his lordship renewed the attack with vigor.

Mr. Caryll parried lightly and closely, plying a beautiful weapon in the best manner of the French school, and opposing to the ponderous force of his antagonist a delicate frustrating science. Rotherby, a fine swordsman in his way, soon saw that here was need for all his skill, and he exerted it. But the prodigious rapidity of his blade broke as upon a cuirass against the other's light, impenetrable guard.

His lordship broke ground, breathed heavily, and sweated under the glare of the morning sun, cursing this swordsman who, so cool and deliberate, husbanded his strength and scarcely seemed to move, yet by sheer skill and address more than neutralized his

lordship's advantages of greater strength and length of reach.

"You cursed French dog!" swore the viscount presently, between his teeth, and as he spoke he made a ringing parade, feinted, beat the ground with his foot to draw off the other's attention, and went in again with a full-length lunge. "Parry that, you damned maitre-d'armes" he roared.

Mr. Caryll answered nothing; he parried; parried again; delivered a riposte whenever the opportunity offered, or whenever his lordship grew too pressing, and it became expedient to drive him back; but never once did he stretch out to lunge in his turn. The seconds were so lost in wonder at the beauty of this close play of his that they paid no heed to what was taking place in the square about them. They never observed the opening windows and the spectators gathering at them—as Wharton had feared. Amongst these, had either of the combatants looked up, he would have seen his own father on the balcony of Stretton House. A moment the earl stood there, Lady Ostermore at his side; then he vanished into the house again, to reappear almost at once in the street, with a couple of footmen hurrying after him.

Meanwhile the combat went on. Once Lord Rotherby had attempted to fall back for a respite, realizing that he was winded. But Mr. Caryll denied him this, attacking now for the first time, and the rapidity of his play was such that Rotherby opined—the end to be at hand, appreciated to the full his peril. In a last desperate effort, gathering up what shreds of strength remained him, he repulsed Mr. Caryll by a vigorous counter attack. He saw an opening, feinted to enlarge it, and drove in quickly, throwing his last ounce of strength into the effort. This time it could not be said to have been parried. Something else happened. His blade, coming foible on forte against Mr. Caryll's, was suddenly enveloped. It was as if a tentacle had been thrust out to seize it. For the barest fraction of a second was it held so

by Mr. Caryll's sword; then, easily but irresistibly, it was lifted out of Rotherby's hand, and dropped on the turf a half-yard or so from his lordship's stockinged feet.

A cold sweat of terror broke upon him. He caught his breath with a half-shuddering sob of fear, his eyes dilating wildly—for Mr. Caryll's point was coming straight as an arrow at his throat. On it came and on, until it was within perhaps three inches of the flesh.

There it was suddenly arrested, and for a long moment it was held there poised, death itself, menacing and imminent. And Lord Rotherby, not daring to move, rooted where he stood, looked with fascinated eyes along that shimmering blade into two gleaming eyes behind it that seemed to watch him with a solemnity that was grim to the point of mockery.

Time and the world stood still, or were annihilated in that moment for the man who waited.

High in the blue overhead a lark was pouring out its song; but his lordship heard it not. He heard nothing, he was conscious of nothing but that gleaming sword and those gleaming eyes behind it.

Then a voice—the voice of his antagonist—broke the silence. "Is more needed?" it asked, and without waiting for a reply, Mr. Caryll lowered his blade and drew himself upright. "Let this suffice," he said. "To take your life would be to deprive you of the means of profiting by this lesson."

It seemed to Rotherby as if he were awaking from a trance. The world resumed its way. He breathed again, and straightened himself, too, from the arrested attitude of his last lunge. Rage welled up from his black soul; a crimson flood swept into his pallid cheeks; his eyes rolled and blazed with the fury of the mad.

Mr. Caryll moved away. In that quiet voice of his: "Take up your

sword," he said to the vanquished, over his shoulder.

Wharton and Gascoigne moved towards him, without words to express the amazement that still held Rotherby glared an instant longer without moving. Then, doing as Mr. Caryll had bidden him, he stooped to recover his blade. A moment he held it, looking after his departing adversary; then with swift, silent stealth he sprang to follow. His fell intent was written on his face.

Falgate gasped—a helpless fool—while Mainwaring hurled himself forward to prevent the thing he saw impended. Too late. Even as he flung out his hands to grapple with his lordship, Rotherby's arm drove straight before him and sent his sword through the undefended back of Mr. Caryll.

All that Mr. Caryll realized at first was that he had been struck a blow between the shoulder blades; and then, ere he could turn to inquire into the cause, he was amazed to see some three inches of steel come through his shirt in front. The next instant an exquisite, burning, searing pain went through and through him as the blade was being withdrawn. He coughed and swayed, then hurtled sideways into the arms of Major Gascoigne. His senses swam. The turf heaved and rolled as if an earthquake moved it; the houses fronting the square and the trees immediately before him leaped and danced as if suddenly launched into grotesque animation, while about him swirled a wild, incoherent noise of voices, rising and falling, now loud, now silent, and reaching him through a murmuring hum that surged about his ears until it shut out all else and consciousness deserted him.

Around him, meanwhile, a wild scene was toward.

His Grace of Wharton had wrenched away the sword from Rotherby, and mastered by an effort his own impulse to use it upon the murderer. Captain Mainwaring—Rotherby's own second, a man of quick, fierce passions—utterly unable to control himself, fell upon

his lordship and beat him to the ground with his hands, cursing him and heaping abuse upon him with every blow; whilst delicate Mr. Falgate, in the background, sick to the point of faintness, stood dabbing his lips with his handkerchief and swearing that he would rot before he allowed himself again to be dragged into an affair of honor.

"Ye damned cutthroat!" swore the militia captain, standing over the man he had felled. "D'ye know what'll be the fruits of this? Ye'll swing at Tyburn like the dirty thief y' are. God help me! I'd give a hundred guineas sooner than be mixed in this filthy business."

"Tis no matter for that now," said the duke, touching him on the shoulder and drawing him away from his lordship. "Get up, Rotherby."

Heavily, mechanically, Rotherby got to his feet. Now that the fit of rage was over, he was himself all stricken at the thing he had done. He looked at the limp figure on the turf, huddled against the knee of Major Gascoigne; looked at the white face, the closed eyes and the stain of blood oozing farther and farther across the Holland shirt, and, as white himself as the stricken man, he shuddered and his mouth was drawn wide with horror.

But pitiful though he looked, he inspired no pity in the Duke of Wharton, who considered him with an eye of unspeakable severity. "If Mr. Caryl dies," said he coldly, "I shall see to it that you hang, my lord. I'll not rest until I bring you to the gallows."

And then, before more could be said, there came a sound of running steps and labored breathing, and his grace swore softly to himself as he beheld no other than Lord Ostermore advancing rapidly, all out of breath and apoplectic of face, a couple of footmen pressing close upon his heels, and, behind these, a score of sightseers who had followed them.

"What's here?" cried the earl, without glancing at his son. "Is he

dead? Is he dead?"

Gascoigne, who was busily endeavoring to stanch the bleeding, answered without looking up: "It is in God's hands. I think he is very like to die."

Ostermore swung round upon Rotherby. He had paled suddenly and his mouth trembled. He raised his clenched hand, and it seemed that he was about to strike his son; then he let it fall again. "You villain!" he panted, breathless from running and from rage. "I saw it! I saw it all. It was murder, and, as God's my life, if Mr. Caryll dies, I shall see to it that you hang—I, your own father."

Thus assailed on every side, some of the cowering, shrinking manner left the viscount. His antagonism to his father spurred him to a prouder carriage. He shrugged indifferently. "So be it," he said. "I have been told that already. I don't greatly care."

Mainwaring, who had been stooping over Mr. Caryll, and who had perhaps more knowledge of wounds than any present, shook his head ominously.

"'Twould be dangerous to move him far," said he. "'Twill increase the hemorrhage."

"My men shall carry him across to Stretton House," said Lord Ostermore. "Lend a hand here, you gaping oafs."

The footmen advanced. The crowd, which was growing rapidly and was watching almost in silence, awed, pressed as close as it dared upon these gentlemen. Mainwaring procured a couple of cloaks and improvised a stretcher with them. Of this he took one corner himself, Gascoigne another, and the footmen the remaining two. Thus, as gently as might be, they bore the wounded man from the enclosure, through the crowd that had by now assembled in the street, and over the threshold of Stretton House.

A groom had been dispatched for a doctor, and his Grace of Wharton had compelled Rotherby to accompany them into his father's house, sternly threatening to hand him over to a constable at once if he refused.

Within the cool hall of Stretton House they were met by her ladyship and Mistress Winthrop, both pale, but the eyes of each wearing a vastly different expression.

"What's this?" demanded her ladyship, as they trooped in. "Why do you bring him here?"

"Because, madam," answered Ostermore in a voice as hard as iron, "it imports to save his life; for if he dies, your son dies as surely—and on the scaffold."

Her ladyship staggered and flung a hand to her breast. But her recovery was almost immediate. "'Twas a duel—" she began stoutly.

"'Twas murder," his lordship corrected, interrupting—"murder, as any of these gentlemen can and will bear witness. Rotherby ran Mr. Caryll through the back after Mr. Caryll had spared his life."

"'Tis a lie!" screamed her ladyship, her lips ashen. She turned to Rotherby, who stood there in shirt and breeches and shoeless, as he had fought. "Why don't you say that it is a lie?" she demanded.

Rotherby endeavored to master himself. "Madam," he said, "here is no place for you."

"But is it true? Is it true what is being said?"

He half-turned from her, with a despairing movement, and caught the sharp hiss of her indrawn breath. Then she swept past him to the side of the wounded man, who had been laid on a settle. "What is his hurt?" she inquired wildly, looking about her. But no one spoke.

Tragedy—more far than the tragedy of that man's possible death—was in the air, and struck them all silent. "Will no one answer me?" she insisted. "Is it mortal? Is it?"

His Grace of Wharton turned to her with an unusual gravity in his blue eyes. "We hope not, ma'am," he said. "But it is as God wills."

Her limbs seemed to fail her, and she sank down on her knees beside the settle. "We must save him," she muttered fearfully. "We must save his life. Where is the doctor? He won't die! Oh, he must not die!"

They stood grouped about, looking on in silence, Rotherby in the background. Behind him again, on the topmost of the three steps that led up into the inner hall, stood Mistress Winthrop, white of face, a wild horror in the eyes she riveted upon the wounded and unconscious man. She realized that he was like to die. There was an infinite pity in her soul—and, maybe, something more. Her impulse was to go to him; her every instinct urged her. But her reason held her back.

Then, as she looked, she saw with a feeling almost of terror that his eyes were suddenly wide open.

"Wha—what?" came in feeble accents from his lips.

There was a stir about him.

"Never move, Justin," said Gascoigne, who stood by his head. "You are hurt. Lie still. The doctor has been summoned."

"Ah!" It was a sigh. The wounded man closed his eyes a moment, then re-opened them. "I remember. I remember," he said feebly. "It is—it is grave?" he inquired. "It went right through me. I remember!" He surveyed himself. "There's been a deal of blood lost. I am like to die, I take it."

"Nay, sir, we hope not—we hope not!" It was the countess who spoke.

A wry smile twisted his lips. "Your ladyship is very good," said he. "I had not thought you quite so much my well-wisher. I—I have done you a wrong, madam." He paused for breath, and it was not plain whether he spoke in sincerity or in sarcasm. Then with a startling suddenness he broke into a soft laugh and to those risen, who could not think what had occasioned it, it sounded more dreadful than any plaint he could have uttered.

He had bethought him that there was no longer the need for him to come to a decision in the matter that had brought him to England, and his laugh was almost of relief. The riddle he could never have solved for himself in a manner that had not shattered his future peace of mind, was solved and well solved if this were death.

"Where—where is Rotherby?" he inquired presently.

There was a stir, and men drew back, leaving an open lane to the place where Rotherby stood. Mr. Caryll saw him, and smiled, and his smile held no tinge of mockery. "You are the best friend I ever had, Rotherby," he startled all by saying. "Let him approach," he begged.

Rotherby came forward like one who walks in his sleep. "I am sorry," he said thickly, "cursed sorry."

"There's scarce the need," said Mr. Caryll. "Lift me up, Tom," he begged Gascoigne. "There's scarce the need. You have cleared up something that was plaguing me, my lord. I am your debtor for—for that. It disposes of something I could never have disposed of had I lived." He turned to the Duke of Wharton. "It was an accident," he said significantly. "You all saw that it was an accident."

A denial rang out. "It was no accident!" cried Lord Ostermore, and swore an oath. "We all saw what it was."

"Ifaith, then, your eyes deceived you. It was an accident, I say—and who should know better than I?" He was smiling in that whimsical enigmatic way of his. Smiling still he sank back into Gascoigne's arms.

"You are talking too much," said the Major.

"What odds? I am not like to talk much longer."

The door opened to admit a gentleman in black, wearing a grizzle wig and carrying a gold-headed cane. Men moved aside to allow him to approach Mr. Caryl. The latter, not noticing him, had met at last the gaze of Hortensia's eyes. He continued to smile, but his smile was now changed to wistfulness under that pitiful regard of hers.

"It is better so," he was saying. "Better so!"

His glance was upon her, and she understood what none other there suspected—that those words were for her alone.

He closed his eyes and swooned again, as the doctor stooped to remove the temporary bandages from his wound.

Hortensia, a sob beating in her throat, turned and fled to her own room.

CHAPTER XII. SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

Mr. Caryl was almost happy.

He reclined on a long chair, supported by pillows cunningly set for him by the deft hands of Leduc, and took his ease and indulged his day-dreams in Lord Ostermore's garden. He sat within the cool, fragrant shade of a privet arbor, interlaced with flowering lilac and laburnum, and he looked out upon the long sweep of emerald lawn and the little patch of ornamental water where the water-lilies gaped their ivory chalices to the morning sun.

He looked thinner, paler and more frail than was his habit, which is not wonderful, considering that he had been four weeks abed while his wound was mending. He was dressed, again by the hands of the incomparable Leduc, in a deshabelle of some artistry. A dark-blue dressing-gown of flowered satin fell open at the waist; disclosing sky-blue breeches and pearl-colored stockings, elegant shoes of Spanish leather with red heels and diamond buckles. His chestnut hair had been dressed with as great care as though he were attending a levee, and Leduc had insisted upon placing a small round patch under his left eye, that it might—said Leduc—impart vivacity to a countenance that looked over-wan from his long confinement.

He reclined there, and, as I have said, was almost happy.

The creature of sunshine that was himself at heart, had broken through the heavy clouds that had been obscuring him. An oppressive

burden was lifted from his mind and conscience. That sword-thrust through the back a month ago had been guided, he opined, by the hand of a befriending Providence; for although he had, as you see, survived it, it had none the less solved for him that hateful problem he could never have solved for himself, that problem whose solution,—no matter which alternative he had adopted—must have brought him untold misery afterwards.

As it was, during the weeks that he had lain helpless, his life attached to him by but the merest thread, the chance of betraying Lord Ostermore was gone, nor—the circumstances being such as they were—could Sir Richard Everard blame him that he had let it pass.

Thus he knew peace; knew it as only those know it who have sustained unrest and can appreciate relief from it.

Nature had made him a voluptuary, and reclining there in an ease which the languor born of his long illness rendered the more delicious, inhaling the tepid summer air that came to him laden with a most sweet attar from the flowering rose-garden, he realized that with all its cares life may be sweet to live in youth and in the month of June.

He sighed, and smiled pensively at the water-lilies; nor was his happiness entirely and solely the essence of his material ease. This was his third morning out of doors, and on each of the two mornings that were gone Hortensia had borne him company, coming with the charitable intent of lightening his tedium by reading to him, but remaining to talk instead.

The most perfect friendliness had prevailed between them; a camaraderie which Mr. Caryl had been careful not to dispel by any return to such speeches as those which had originally offended but which seemed now mercifully forgotten.

He was awaiting her, and his expectancy heightened for him the glory of the morning, increased the meed of happiness that was his. But there was more besides. Leduc, who stood slightly behind him, fussily, busy about a little table on which were books and cordials, flowers and comfits, a pipe and a tobacco-jar, had just informed him for the first time that during the more dangerous period of his illness Mistress Winthrop had watched by his bedside for many hours together upon many occasions, and once—on the day after he had been wounded, and while his fever was at its height—Leduc, entering suddenly and quietly, had surprised her in tears.

All this was most sweet news to Mr. Caryll. He found that between himself and his half-brother there lay an even deeper debt than he had at first supposed, and already acknowledged. In the delicious contemplation of Hortensia in tears beside him stricken all but to the point of death, he forgot entirely his erstwhile scruples that being nameless he had no name to offer her. In imagination he conjured up the scene. It made, he found, a very pretty picture. He would smoke upon it.

"Leduc, if you were to fill me a pipe of Spanish—"

"Monsieur has smoked one pipe already," Leduc reminded him.

"You are inconsequent, Leduc. It is a sign of advancing age. Repress it. The pipe!" And he flicked impatient fingers.

"Monsieur is forgetting that the doctor—"

"The devil take the doctor," said Mr. Caryll with finality.

"Parfaitement!" answered the smooth Leduc. "Over the bridge we laugh at the saint. Now that we are cured, the devil take the doctor by all means."

A ripple of laughter came to applaud Leduc's excursion into irony.

The arbor had another, narrower entrance, on the left. Hortensia had approached this, all unheard on the soft turf, and stood there now, a heavenly apparition in white flimsy garments, head slightly a-tilt, eyes mocking, lips laughing, a heavy curl of her dark hair falling caressingly into the hollow where white neck sprang from whiter shoulder.

"You make too rapid a recovery, sir," said she.

"It comes of learning how well I have been nursed," he answered, making shift to rise, and he laughed inwardly to see the red flush of confusion spread over the milk-white skin, the reproachful shaft her eyes let loose upon Leduc.

She came forward swiftly to check his rising; but he was already on his feet, proud of his return to strength, vain to display it. "Nay," she reproved him. "If you are so headstrong, I shall leave you."

"If you do, ma'am. I vow here, as I am, I hope, a gentleman, that I shall go home to-day, and on foot."

"You would kill yourself," she told him.

"I might kill myself for less, and yet be justified."

She looked her despair of him. "What must I do to make you reasonable?"

"Set me the example by being reasonable yourself, and let there be no more of this wild talk of leaving me the very moment you are come. Leduc, a chair for Mistress Winthrop!" he commanded, as though chairs abounded in a garden nook. But Leduc, the diplomat, had effaced himself.

She laughed at his grand air, and, herself, drew forward the stool that had been Leduc's, and sat down. Satisfied, Mr. Caryll made her a bow, and seated himself sideways on his long chair, so that he faced her. She begged that he would dispose himself more comfortably; but

he scorned the very notion.

"Unaided I walked here from the house," he informed her with a boastful air. "I had need to begin to feel my feet again. You are pampering me here, and to pamper an invalid is bad; it keeps him an invalid. Now I am an invalid no longer."

"But the doctor—" she began.

"The doctor, ma'am, is disposed of already," he assured her. "Very definitely disposed of. Ask Leduc. He will tell you."

"Not a doubt of that," she answered. "Leduc talks too much."

"You have a spite against him for the information he gave me on the score of how and by whom I was nursed. So have I. Because he did not tell me before, and because when he told me he would not tell me enough. He has no eyes, this Leduc. He is a dolt, who only sees the half of what happens, and only remembers the half of what he has seen."

"I am sure of it," said she.

He looked surprised an instant. Then he laughed. "I am glad that we agree."

"But you have yet to learn the cause. Had this Leduc used his eyes or his ears to better purpose, he had been able to tell you something of the extent to which I am in your debt."

"Ah?" said he, mystified. Then: "The news will be none the less welcome from your lips, ma'am," said he. "Is it that you are interested in the ravings of delirium, and welcomed the opportunity of observing them at first hand? I hope I raved engagingly, if so be that I did rave. Would it, perchance, be of a lady that I talked in my fevered wanderings?—of a lady pale as a lenten rose, with soft brown eyes,

and lips that—"

"Your guesses are all wild," she checked him. "My debt is of a more real kind. It concerns my—my reputation."

"Fan me, ye winds!" he ejaculated.

"Those fine ladies and gentlemen of the town had made my name a by-word," she explained in a low, tense voice, her eyelids lowered. "My foolishness in running off with my Lord Rotherby—that I might at all cost escape the tyranny of my Lady Ostermore" (Mr. Caryl's eyelids flickered suddenly at that explanation)—"had made me a butt and a jest and an object for slander. You remember, yourself, sir, the sneers and oglings, the starings and simperings in the park that day when you made your first attempt to champion my cause, inducing the Lady Mary Deller to come and speak to me."

"Nay, nay—think of these things no more. Gnats will sting; 'tis in their nature. I admit 'tis very vexing at the time; but it soon wears off if the flesh they have stung be healthy. So think no more on't."

"But you do not know what follows. Her ladyship insisted that I should drive with her a week after your hurt, when the doctor first proclaimed you out of danger, and while the town was still all agog with the affair. No doubt her ladyship thought to put a fresh and greater humiliation upon me; you would not be present to blunt the edge of the insult of those creatures' glances. She carried me to Vauxhall, where a fuller scope might be given to the pursuit of my shame and mortification. Instead, what think you happened?"

"Her ladyship, I trust, was disappointed."

"The word is too poor to describe her condition. She broke a fan, beat her black boy and dismissed a footman, that she might vent some of the spleen it moved in her. Never was such respect, never such homage shown to any woman as was shown to me that evening.

We were all but mobbed by the very people who had earlier slighted me.

"'Twas all so mysterious that I must seek the explanation of it. And I had it, at length, from his Grace of Wharton, who was at my side for most of the time we walked in the gardens. I asked him frankly to what was this change owing. And he told me, sir."

She looked at him as though no more need be said. But his brows were knit. "He told you, ma'am?" he questioned. "He told you what?"

"What you had done at White's. How to all present and to my Lord Rotherby's own face you had related the true story of what befell at Maidstone—how I had gone thither, an innocent, foolish maid, to be married to a villain, whom, like the silly child I was, I thought I loved; how that villain, taking advantage of my innocence and ignorance, intended to hoodwink me with a mock-marriage.

"That was the story that was on every lip; it had gone round the town like fire; and it says much for the town that what between that and the foul business of the duel, my Lord Rotherby was receiving on every hand the condemnation he deserves, while for me there was once more—and with heavy interest for the lapse from it—the respect which my indiscretion had forfeited, and which would have continued to be denied me but for your noble championing of my cause.

"That, sir, is the extent to which. I am in your debt. Do you think it small? It is so great that I have no words in which to attempt to express my thanks."

Mr. Caryll looked at her a moment with eyes that were very bright. Then he broke into a soft laugh that had a note of slyness.

"In my time," said he, "I have seen many attempts to change an inconvenient topic. Some have been artful; others artless; others utterly clumsy. But this, I think, is the clumsiest of them all. Mistress

Winthrop, 'tis not worthy in you."

She looked puzzled, intrigued by his mood.

"Mistress Winthrop," he resumed, with an entire change of voice. "To speak of this trifle is but a subterfuge of yours to prevent me from expressing my deep gratitude for your care of me."

"Indeed, no—" she began.

"Indeed, yes," said he. "How can this compare with what you have done for me? For I have learnt how greatly it is to you, yourself, that I owe my recovery—the saving of my life."

"Ah, but that is not true. It—"

"Let me think so, whether it be true or not," he implored her, eyes between tenderness and whimsicality intent upon her face. "Let me believe it, for the belief has brought me happiness—the greatest happiness, I think, that I have ever known. I can know but one greater, and that—"

He broke off suddenly, and she observed that the hand he had stretched out trembled a moment ere it was abruptly lowered again. It was as a man who had reached forth to grasp something that he craves, and checked his desire upon a sudden thought.

She felt oddly stirred, despite herself, and oddly constrained. It may have been to disguise this that she half turned to the table, saying: "You were about to smoke when I came." And she took up his pipe and tobacco—jar to offer them.

"Ah, but since you've come, I would not dream," he said.

She looked at him. The complete change of topic permitted it. "If I desired you so to do?" she inquired, and added: "I love the fragrance of it."

He raised his brows. "Fragrance?" quoth he. "My Lady Ostermore has another word for it." He took the pipe and jar from her. "'Tis no humoring, this, of a man you imagine sick—no silly chivalry of yours?" he questioned doubtfully. "Did I think that, I'd never smoke another pipe again."

She shook her head, and laughed at his solemnity. "I love the fragrance," she repeated.

"Ah! Why, then, I'll pleasure you," said he, with the air of one conferring favors, and filled his pipe. Presently he spoke again in a musing tone. "In a week or so, I shall be well enough to travel."

"'Tis your intent to travel?" she inquired.

He set down the jar, and reached for the tinderbox. "It is time I was returning home," he explained.

"Ah, yes. Your home is in France."

"At Maligny; the sweetest nook in Normandy. 'Twas my mother's birthplace, and 'twas there she died."

"You have felt the loss of her, I make no doubt."

"That might have been the case if I had known her," answered he. "But as it is, I never did. I was but two years old—she, herself, but twenty—when she died."

He pulled at his pipe in silence a moment or two, his face overcast and thoughtful. A shallower woman would have broken in with expressions of regret; Hortensia offered him the nobler sympathy of silence. Moreover, she had felt from his tone that there was more to come; that what he had said was but the preface to some story that he desired her to be acquainted with. And presently, as she expected, he continued.

"She died, Mistress Winthrop, of a broken heart. My father had abandoned her two years and more before she died. In those years of repining—ay, and worse, of actual want—her health was broken so that, poor soul, she died."

"O pitiful!" cried Hortensia, pain in her face.

"Pitiful, indeed—the more pitiful that her death was a source of some slight happiness to those who loved her; the only happiness they could have in her was to know that she was at rest."

"And—and your father?"

"I am coming to him. My mother had a friend—a very noble, lofty-minded gentleman who had loved her with a great and honest love before the profligate who was my father came forward as a suitor. Recognizing in the latter—as he thought in his honest heart—a man in better case to make her happy, this gentleman I speak of went his ways. He came upon her afterwards, broken and abandoned, and he gathered up the poor shards of her shattered life, and sought with tender but unavailing hands to piece them together again. And when she died he vowed to stand my friend and to make up to me for the want I had of parents. 'Tis by his bounty that to-day I am lord of Maligny that was for generations the property of my mother's people. 'Tis by his bounty and loving care that I am what I am, and not what so easily I might have become had the seed sown by my father been allowed to put out shoots."

He paused, as if bethinking himself, and looked at her with a wistful, inquiring smile. "But why plague you," he cried, "with this poor tale of yesterday that will be forgot to-morrow?"

"Nay—ah, nay," she begged, and put out a hand in impulsive sympathy to touch his own, so transparent now in its emaciation. "Tell me; tell me!"

His smile softened. He sighed gently and continued. "This gentleman who adopted me lived for one single purpose, with one single aim in view—to avenge my mother, whom he had loved, upon the man whom she had loved and who had so ill repaid her. He reared me for that purpose, as much, I think, as out of any other feeling. Thirty years have sped, and still the hand of the avenger has not fallen upon my father. It should have fallen a month ago; but I was weak; I hesitated; and then this sword-thrust put me out of all case of doing what I had crossed from France to do."

She looked at him with something of horror in her face. "Were you—were you to have been the instrument?" she inquired. "Were you to have avenged this thing upon your own father?"

He nodded slowly. "'Twas to that end that I was reared," he answered, and put aside his pipe, which had gone out. "The spirit of revenge was educated into me until I came to look upon revenge as the best and holiest of emotions; until I believed that if I failed to wreak it I must be a craven and a dastard. All this seemed so until the moment came to set my hand to the task. And then—" He shrugged.

"And then?" she questioned.

"I couldn't. The full horror of it burst upon me. I saw the thing in its true and hideous proportions, and it revolted me."

"It must have been so," she approved him.

"I told my foster-father; but I met with neither sympathy nor understanding. He renewed his old-time arguments, and again he seemed to prove to me that did I fail I should be false to my duty and to my mother's memory—a weakling, a thing of shame."

"The monster! Oh, the monster! He is an evil man for all that you have said of him."

"Not so. There is no nobler gentleman in all the world. I who know him, know that. It is through the very nobility of it that this warp has come into his nature. Sane in all things else, he is—I see it now, I understand it at last—insane on this one subject. Much brooding has made him mad upon this matter—a fanatic whose gospel is Vengeance, and, like all fanatics, he is harsh and intolerant when resisted on the point of his fanaticism. This is something I have come to realize in these past days, when I lay with naught else to do but ponder.

"In all things else he sees as deep and clear as any man; in this his vision is distorted. He has looked at nothing else for thirty years; can you wonder that his sight is blurred?"

"He is to be pitied then," she said, "deeply to be pitied."

"True. And because I pitied him, because I valued his regard—however mistaken he might be—above all else, I was hesitating again—this time between my duty to myself and my duty to him. I was so hesitating—though I scarce can doubt which had prevailed in the end—when came this sword-thrust so very opportunely to put me out of case of doing one thing or the other."

"But now that you are well again?" she asked.

"Now that I am well again—I thank Heaven that it will be too late. The opportunity that was ours is lost. His—my father should now be beyond our power."

There ensued a spell of silence. He sat with eyes averted from her face—those eyes which she had never known other than whimsical and mocking, now full of gloom and pain—riveted upon the glare of sunshine on the pond out yonder. A great sympathy welled up from her heart for this man whom she was still far from understanding, and who, nevertheless—because of it, perhaps, for there is much

fascination in that which puzzles—was already growing very dear to her. The story he had told her drew her infinitely closer to him, softening her heart for him even more perhaps than it had already been softened when she had seen him—as she had thought—upon the point of dying. A wonder flitted through her mind as to why he had told her; then another question surged. She gave it tongue.

"You have told me so much, Mr. Caryll," she said, "that I am emboldened to ask something more." His eyes invited her to put her question. "Your—your father? Was he related to Lord Ostermore?"

Not a muscle of his face moved. "Why that?" he asked.

"Because your name is Caryll," said she.

"My name?" he laughed softly and bitterly. "My name?" He reached for an ebony cane that stood beside his chair. "I had thought you understood." He heaved himself to his feet, and she forgot to caution him against exertion. "I have no right to any name," he told her. "My father was a man too full of worldly affairs to think of trifles. And so it befell that before he went his ways he forgot to marry the poor lady who was my mother. I might take what name I chose. I chose Caryll. But you will understand, Mistress Winthrop," and he looked her fully in the face, attempting in vain to dissemble the agony in his eyes—he who a little while ago had been almost happy—"that if ever it should happen that I should come to love a woman who is worthy of being loved, I who am nameless have no name to offer her."

Revelation illumined her mind as in a flash. She looked at him.

"Was—was that what you meant, that day we thought you dying, when you said to me—for it was to me you spoke, to me alone—that it was better so?"

He inclined his head. "That is what I meant," he answered.

Her lids drooped; her cheeks were very white, and he remarked the swift, agitated surge of her bosom, the fingers that were plucking at one another in her lap. Without looking up, she spoke again. "If you had the love to offer, what would the rest matter? What is a name that it should weigh so much?"

"Heyday!" He sighed, and smiled very wistfully. "You are young, child. In time you will understand what place the world assigns to such men as I. It is a place I could ask no woman to share. Such as I am, could I speak of love to any woman?"

"Yet you spoke of love once to me," she reminded him, scarcely above her breath, and stabbed him with the recollection.

"In an hour of moonshine, an hour of madness, when I was a reckless fool that must give tongue to every impulse. You reproved me then in just the terms my case deserved. Hortensia," he bent towards her, leaning on his cane, "'tis very sweet and merciful in you to recall it without reproach. Recall it no more, save to think with scorn of the fleeing coxcomb who was so lost to the respect that is due to so sweet a lady. I have told you so much of myself to-day that you may."

"Decidedly," came a shrill, ironical voice from the arbor's entrance, "I may congratulate you, sir, upon the prodigious strides of your recovery."

Mr. Caryll straightened himself from his stooping posture, turned and made Lady Ostermore a bow, his whole manner changed again to that which was habitual to him. "And no less decidedly, my lady," said he with a tight-lipped smile, "may I congratulate your ladyship's son upon that happy circumstance, which is—as I have learned—so greatly due to the steps your ladyship took—for which I shall be ever grateful—to ensure that I should be made whole again."

CHAPTER XIII. THE FORLORN HOPE

Her ladyship stood a moment, leaning upon her cane, her head thrown back, her thin lip curling, and her eyes playing over Mr. Caryl with a look of dislike that she made no attempt to dissemble.

Mr. Caryl found the situation redolent with comedy. He had a quick eye for such matters; so quick an eye that he deplored on the present occasion her ladyship's entire lack of a sense of humor. But for that lamentable shortcoming, she might have enjoyed with him the grotesqueness of her having—she, who disliked him so exceedingly—toiled and anguished, robbed herself of sleep, and hoped and prayed with more fervor, perhaps, than she had ever yet hoped and prayed for anything, that his life might be spared.

Her glance shifted presently from him to Hortensia, who had risen and who stood in deep confusion at having been so found by her ladyship, and in deep agitation still arising from the things he had said and from those which he had been hindered from adding by the coming of the countess.

The explanations that had been interrupted might never be renewed; she felt they never would be; he would account that he had said enough; since he was determined to ask for nothing. And unless the matter were broached again, what chance had she of combatting his foolish scruples; for foolish she accounted them; they were of no weight with her, unless, indeed, to heighten the warm feeling that already she had conceived for him.

Her ladyship moved forward a step or two, her fan going gently to

and fro, stirring the barbs of the white plume that formed part of her tall head-dress.

"What were you doing here, child?" she inquired, very coldly.

Mistress Winthrop looked up—a sudden, almost scared glance it was.

"I, madam? Why—I was walking in the garden, and seeing Mr. Caryll here, I came to ask him how he did; to offer to read to him if he would have me."

"And the Maidstone matter not yet cold in its grave!" commented her ladyship sourly. "As I'm a woman, it is monstrous I should be inflicted with the care of you that have no care for yourself."

Hortensia bit her lip, controlling herself bravely, a spot of red in either cheek. Mr. Caryll came promptly to her rescue.

"Your ladyship must confess that Mistress Winthrop has assisted nobly in the care of me, and so, has placed your ladyship in her debt."

"In my debt?" shrilled the countess, eyebrows aloft, head-dress nodding. "And what of yours?"

"In my clumsy way, ma'am, I have already attempted to convey my thanks to her. It might be graceful in your ladyship to follow my example."

Mentally Mr. Caryll observed that it is unwise to rouge so heavily as did Lady Ostermore when prone to anger and to paling under it. The false color looks so very false on such occasions.

Her ladyship struck the ground with her cane. "For what have I to thank her, sir? Will you tell me that, you who seem so very well informed."

"Why, for her part in saving your son's life, ma'am, if you must have it. Heaven knows," he continued in his characteristic, half-bantering manner, under which it was so difficult to catch a glimpse of his real feelings, "I am not one to throw services done in the face of folk, but here have Mistress Winthrop and I been doing our best for your son in this matter; she by so diligently nursing me; I by responding to her nursing—and your ladyship's—and so, recovering from my wound. I do not think that your ladyship shows us a becoming gratitude. It is but natural that we fellow-workers in your ladyship's and Lord Rotherby's interests, should have a word to say to each other on the score of those labors which have made us colleagues."

Her ladyship measured him with a malignant eye. "Are you quite mad, sir?" she asked him.

He shrugged and smiled. "It has been alleged against me on occasion. But I think it was pure spite." Then he waved his hand towards the long seat that stood at the back of the arbor. "Will your ladyship not sit? You will forgive that I urge it in my own interest. They tell me that it is not good for me to stand too long just yet."

It was his hope that she would depart. Not so. "I cry you mercy!" said she acidly, and rustled to the bench. "Be seated, pray." She continued to watch them with her baleful glance. "We have heard fine things from you, sir, of what you have both done for my Lord Rotherby," she giped, mocking him with the spirit of his half-jest. "Shall I tell you more precisely what 'tis he owes you?"

"Can there be more?" quoth Mr. Caryl, smiling so amiably that he must have disarmed a Gorgon.

Her ladyship ignored him. "He owes it to you both that you have estranged him from his father, set up a breach between them that is never like to be healed. 'Tis what he owes you."

"Does he not owe it, rather, to his abandoned ways?" asked Hortensia, in a calm, clear voice, bravely giving back her ladyship look for look.

"Abandoned ways?" screamed the countess. "Is't you that speak of abandoned ways, ye shameless baggage? Faith, ye may be some judge of them. Ye fooled him into running off with you. 'Twas that began all this. Just as with your airs and simpers, and prettily-played innocences you fooled this other, here, into being your champion."

"Madam, you insult me!" Hortensia was on her feet, eyes flashing, cheeks aflame.

"I am witness to that," said Lord Ostermore, coming in through the side-entrance.

Mr. Caryl was the only one who had seen him approach. The earl's face that had wont to be so florid, was now pale and careworn, and he seemed to have lost flesh during the past month. He turned to her ladyship.

"Out on you!" he said testily, "to chide the poor child so!"

"Poor child!" sneered her ladyship, eyes raised to heaven to invoke its testimony to this absurdity. "Poor child."

"Let there be an end to it, madam," he said with attempted sternness. "It is unjust and unreasonable in you."

"If it were that—which it is not—it would be but following the example that you set me. What are you but unreasonable and unjust—to treat your son as you are treating him?"

His lordship crimsoned. On the subject of his son he could be angry in earnest, even with her ladyship, as already we have seen.

"I have no son," he declared, "there is a lewd, drunken, bullying

profligate who bears my name, and who will be Lord Ostermore some day. I can't strip him of that. But I'll strip him of all else that's mine, God helping me. I beg, my lady, that you'll let me hear no more of this, I beg it. Lord Rotherby leaves my house to-day—now that Mr. Caryll is restored to health. Indeed, he has stayed longer than was necessary. He leaves to-day. He has my orders, and my servants have orders to see that he obeys them. I do not wish to see him again—never. Let him go, and let him be thankful—and be your ladyship thankful, too, since it seems you must have a kindness for him in spite of all he has done to disgrace and discredit us—that he goes not by way of Holborn Hill and Tyburn."

She looked at him, very white from suppressed fury. "I do believe you had been glad had it been so."

"Nay," he answered, "I had been sorry for Mr. Caryll's sake."

"And for his own?"

"Pshaw!"

"Are you a father?" she wondered contemptuously.

"To my eternal shame, ma'am!" he flung back at her. He seemed, indeed, a changed man in more than body since Mr. Caryll's duel with Lord Rotherby. "No more, ma'am—no more!" he cried, seeming suddenly to remember the presence of Mr. Caryll, who sat languidly drawing figures on the ground with the ferrule of his cane. He turned to ask the convalescent how he did. Her ladyship rose to withdraw, and at that moment Leduc made his appearance with a salver, on which was a bowl of soup, a flask of Hock, and a letter. Setting this down in such a manner that the letter was immediately under his master's eyes, he further proceeded to draw Mr. Caryll's attention to it. It was addressed in Sir Richard Everard's hand. Mr. Caryll took it, and slipped it into his pocket. Her ladyship's eyebrows went up.

"Will you not read your letter, Mr. Caryl?" she invited him, with an amazingly sudden change to amiability.

"It will keep, ma'am, to while away an hour that is less pleasantly engaged." And he took the napkin Leduc was proffering.

"You pay your correspondent a poor compliment," said she.

"My correspondent is not one to look for them or need them," he answered lightly, and dipped his spoon in the broth.

"Is she not?" quoth her ladyship.

Mr. Caryl laughed. "So feminine!" said he. "Ha, ha! So very feminine—to assume the sex so readily."

"'Tis an easy assumption when the superscription is writ in a woman's hand."

Mr. Caryl, the picture of amiability, smiled between spoonfuls. "Your ladyship's eyes preserve not only their beauty but a keenness beyond belief."

"How could you have seen it from that distance, Sylvia?" inquired his practical lordship.

"Then again," said her ladyship, ignoring both remarks, "there is the assiduity of this fair writer since Mr. Caryl has been in case to receive letters. Five billets in six days! Deny it if you can, Mr. Caryl."

Her playfulness, so ill-assumed, sat more awkwardly upon her than her usual and more overt malice towards him.

"To what end should I deny it?" he replied, and added in his most ingratiating manner another of his two-edged compliments. "Your ladyship is the model chatelaine. No happening in your household can escape your knowledge. His lordship is greatly to be envied."

"Yet, you see," she cried, appealing to her husband, and even to Hortensia, who sat apart, scarce heeding this trivial matter of which so much was being made, "you see that he evades the point, avoids a direct answer to the question that is raised."

"Since your ladyship perceives it, it were more merciful to spare my invention the labor of fashioning further subterfuges. I am a sick man still, and my wits are far from brisk." He took up the glass of wine Leduc had poured for him.

The countess looked at him again through narrowing eyelids, the playfulness all vanished. "You do yourself injustice, sir, as I am a woman. Your wits want nothing more in briskness." She rose, and looked down upon him engrossed in his broth. "For a dissembler, sir," she pronounced upon him acidly, "I think it would be difficult to meet your match."

He dropped his spoon into the bowl with a clatter. He looked up, the very picture of amazement and consternation.

"A dissembler, I?" quoth he in earnest protest; then laughed and quoted, adapting,

"'Tis not my talent to conceal my thoughts
Or carry smiles and sunshine in my face
Should discontent sit heavy at my heart."

She looked him over, pursing her lips. "I've often thought you might have been a player," said she contemptuously.

"I'faith," he laughed, "I'd sooner play than toil."

"Ay; but you make a toil of play, sir."

"Compassionate me, ma'am," he implored in the best of humors. "I am but a sick man. Your ladyship's too keen for me."

She moved across to the exit without answering him. "Come, child," she said to Hortensia. "We are tiring Mr. Caryll, I fear. Let us leave him to his letter, ere it sets his pocket afire."

Hortensia rose. Loath though she might be to depart, there was no reason she could urge for lingering.

"Is not your lordship coming?" said she.

"Of course he is," her ladyship commanded. "I need to speak with you yet concerning Rotherby," she informed him.

"Hem!" His lordship coughed. Plainly he was not at his ease. "I will follow soon. Do not stay for me. I have a word to say to Mr. Caryll."

"Will it not keep? What can you have to say to him that is so pressing?"

"But a word—no more."

"Why, then, we'll stay for you," said her ladyship, and threw him into confusion, hopeless dissembler that he was.

"Nay, nay! I beg that you will not."

Her ladyship's brows went up; her eyes narrowed again, and a frown came between them. "You are mighty mysterious," said she, looking from one to the other of the men, and bethinking her that it was not the first time she had found them so; bethinking her, too—jumping, woman-like, to rash conclusions—that in this mystery that linked them might lie the true secret of her husband's aversion to his son and of his oath a month ago to see that same son hang if Mr. Caryll succumbed to the wound he had taken. With some women, to suspect a thing is to believe that thing. Her ladyship was of these. She set too high value upon her acumen, upon the keenness of her instincts.

And if aught were needed to cement her present suspicions, Mr. Caryll himself afforded that cement, by seeming to betray the same eagerness to be alone with his lordship that his lordship was betraying to be alone with him; though, in truth, he no more than desired to lend assistance to the earl out of curiosity to learn what it was his lordship might have to say.

"Indeed," said he, "if you could give his lordship leave, ma'am, for a few moments, I should myself be glad on't."

"Come, Hortensia," said her ladyship shortly, and swept out, Mistress Winthrop following.

In silence they crossed the lawn together. Once only ere they reached the house, her ladyship looked back. "I would I knew what they are plotting," she said through her teeth.

"Plotting?" echoed Hortensia.

"Ay—plotting, simpleton. I said plotting. I mind me 'tis not the first time I have seen them so mysterious together. It began on the day that first Mr. Caryll set foot at Stretton House. There's a deal of mystery about that man—too much for honesty. And then these letters touching which he is so close—one a day—and his French lackey always at hand to pounce upon them the moment they arrive. I wonder what's at bottom on't! I wonder! And I'd give these ears to know," she snapped in conclusion as they went indoors.

In the arbor, meanwhile, his lordship had taken the rustic seat her ladyship had vacated. He sat down heavily, like a man who is weary in body and in mind, like a man who is bearing a load too heavy for his shoulders. Mr. Caryll, watching him, observed all this.

"A glass of Hock?" he suggested, waving his hand towards the flask. "Let me play host to you out of the contents of your own cellar."

His lordship's eye brightened at the suggestion, which confirmed the impression Mr. Caryll had formed that all was far from well with his lordship. Leduc brimmed a glass, and handed it to my lord, who emptied it at a draught. Mr. Caryll waved an impatient hand. "Away with you, Leduc. Go watch the goldfish in the pond. I'll call you if I need you."

After Leduc had departed a silence fell between them, and endured some moments. His lordship was leaning forward, elbows on knees, his face in shadow. At length he sat back, and looked at his companion across the little intervening space.

"I have hesitated to speak to you before, Mr. Caryll, upon the matter that you know of, lest your recovery should not be so far advanced that you might bear the strain and fatigue of conversing upon serious topics. I trust that that cause is now so far removed that I may put aside my scruples."

"Assuredly—I am glad to say—thanks to the great care you have had of me here at Stretton House."

"There is no debt between us on that score," answered his lordship shortly, brusquely almost. "Well, then—" He checked, and looked about him. "We might be approached without hearing any one," he said.

Mr. Caryll smiled, and shook his head. "I am not wont to neglect such details," he observed. "The eyes of Argus were not so vigilant as my Leduc's; and he understands that we are private. He will give us warning should any attempt to approach. Be assured of that, and believe, therefore, that we are more snug here than we should be even in your lordship's closet."

"That being so, sir—hem! You are receiving letters daily. Do they concern the business of King James?"

"In a measure; or, rather, they are from one concerned in it."

Ostermore's eyes were on the ground again. There fell a pause, Mr. Caryll frowning slightly and full of curiosity as to what might be coming.

"How soon, think you," asked his lordship presently, "you will be in case to travel?"

"In a week, I hope," was the reply.

"Good." The earl nodded thoughtfully. "That may be in time. I pray it may be. 'Tis now the best that we can do. You'll bear a letter for me to the king?"

Mr. Caryll passed a hand across his chin, his face very grave. "Your answer to the letter that I brought you?"

"My answer. My acceptance of his majesty's proposals."

"Ha!" Mr. Caryll seemed to be breathing hard.

"Your letters, sir—the letters that you have been receiving will have told you, perhaps, something of how his majesty's affairs are speeding here?"

"Very little; and from that little I fear that they speed none too well. I would counsel your lordship," he continued slowly—he was thinking as he went—"to wait a while before you burn your boats. From what I gather, matters are in the air just now."

The earl made a gesture, brusque and impatient. "Your information is very scant, then," said he.

Mr. Caryll looked askance at him.

"Pho, sir! While you have been abed, I have been up and doing; up and doing. Matters are being pushed forward rapidly. I have seen Atterbury. He knows my mind. There lately came an agent from the

king, it seems, to enjoin the bishop to abandon this conspiracy, telling him that the time was not yet ripe. Atterbury scorns to act upon that order. He will work in the king's interests against the king's own commands even."

"Then, 'tis possible he may work to his own undoing," said Mr. Caryll, to whom this was, after all, no news.

"Nay, nay; you have been sick; you do not know how things have sped in this past month. Atterbury holds, and he is right, I dare swear—he holds that never will there be such another opportunity. The finances of the country are still in chaos, in spite of all Walpole's efforts and fine promises. The South Sea bubble has sapped the confidence in the government of all men of weight. The very Whigs themselves are shaken. 'Tis to King James, England begins to look for salvation from this topsy-turveydom. The tide runs strongly in our favor. Strongly, sir! If we stay for the ebb, we may stay for good; for there may never be another flow within our lifetime."

"Your lordship is grown strangely hot upon this question," said Caryll, very full of wonder.

As he understood Ostermore, the earl was scarcely the sentimentalist to give way to such a passion of loyalty for a weaker side. Yet his lordship had spoken, not with the cold calm of the practical man who seeks advantage, but with all the fervor of the enthusiast.

"Such is my interest," answered his lordship. "Even as the fortunes of the country are beggared by the South Sea Company, so are my own; even as the country must look to King James for its salvation, so must I. At best 'tis but a forlorn hope, I confess; yet 'tis the only hope I see."

Mr. Caryll looked at him, smiled to himself, and nodded. So! All this

fire and enthusiasm was about the mending of his personal fortunes—the grubbing of riches for himself. Well, well! It was good matter wasted on a paltry cause. But it sorted excellently with what Mr. Caryll knew of the nature of this father of his. It never could transcend the practical; there was no imagination to carry it beyond those narrow sordid confines, and Mr. Caryll had been a fool to have supposed that any other springs were pushing here. Egotism, egotism, egotism! Its name, he thought, was surely Ostermore. And again, as once before, under the like circumstances, he found more pity than scorn awaking in his heart. The whole wasted, sterile life that lay behind this man; the unhappy, loveless home that stood about him now in his declining years were the fruits he had garnered from that consuming love of self with which the gods had cursed him.

The only ray to illumine the black desert of Ostermore's existence was the affection of his ward, Hortensia Winthrop, because in that one instance he had sunk his egotism a little, sparing a crumb of pity—for once in his life—for the child's orphanhood. Had Ostermore been other than the man he was, his existence must have proved a burden beyond his strength. It was so barren of good deeds, so sterile of affection. Yet encrusted as he was in that egotism of his—like the limpet in its shell—my lord perceived nothing of this, suffered nothing of it, understanding nothing. He was all-sufficient to himself. Giving nothing, he looked for nothing, and sought his happiness—without knowing the quest vain—in what he had. The fear of losing this had now in his declining years cast, at length, a shadow upon his existence.

Mr. Caryll looked at him almost sorrowfully. Then he put by his thoughts, and broke the silence. "All this I had understood when first I sought you out," said he. "Yet your lordship did not seem to realize it quite so keenly. Is it that Atterbury and his friends—?"

"No, no," Ostermore broke in. "Look'ee! I will be frank—quite frank

and open with you, Mr. Caryll. Things were bad when first you came to me. Yet not so bad that I was driven to a choice of evils. I had lost heavily. But enough remained to bear me through my time, though Rotherby might have found little enough left after I had gone. While that was so, I hesitated to take a risk. I am an old man. It had been different had I been young with ambitions that craved satisfying. I am an old man; and I desired peace and my comforts. Deeming these assured, I paused ere I risked their loss against the stake which in King James's name you set upon the board. But it happens to-day that these are assured no longer," he ended, his voice breaking almost, his eyes haggard. "They are assured no longer."

"You mean?" inquired Caryll.

"I mean that I am confronted by the danger of beggary, ruin, shame, and the sponging-house, at best."

Mr. Caryll was stirred out of his calm. "My lord!" he cried. "How is this possible? What can have come to pass?"

The earl was silent for a long while. It was as if he pondered how he should answer, or whether he should answer at all. At last, in a low voice, a faint tinge reddening his face, his eyes averted, he explained. It shamed him so to do, yet must he satisfy that craving of weak minds to unburden, to seek relief in confession. "Mine is the case of Craggs, the secretary of state," he said. "And Craggs, you'll remember, shot himself."

"My God," said Mr. Caryll, and opened wide his eyes. "Did you-?" He paused, not knowing what euphemism to supply for the thing his lordship must have done.

His lordship looked up, sneering almost in self-derision. "I did," he answered. "To tell you all—I accepted twenty thousand pounds' worth of South Sea stock when the company was first formed, for which I

did not pay other than by lending the scheme the support of my name at a time when such support was needed. I was of the ministry, then, you will remember."

Mr. Caryll considered him again, and wondered a moment at the confession, till he understood by intuition that the matter and its consequences were so deeply preying upon the man's mind that he could not refrain from giving vent to his fears.

"And now you know," his lordship added, "why my hopes are all in King James. Ruin stares me in the face. Ruin and shame. This forlorn Stuart hope is the only hope remaining me. Therefore, am I eager to embrace it. I have made all plain to you. You should understand now."

"Yet not quite all. You did this thing. But the inspection of the company's books is past. The danger of discovery, at least, is averted. Or is it that your conscience compels you to make restitution?"

His lordship stared and gaped. "Do you suppose me mad?" he inquired, quite seriously. "Pho! Others were overlooked at the time. We did not all go the way of Craggs and Aislabie and their fellow-sufferers. Stanhope was assailed afterward, though he was innocent. That filthy fellow, the Duke of Wharton, from being an empty fop turned himself on a sudden into a Crown attorney to prosecute the speculators. It was an easy road to fame for him, and the fool had a gift of eloquence. Stanhope's death is on his conscience—or would be if he had one. That was six months ago. When he discovered his error in the case of Stanhope and saw the fatal consequences it had, he ceased his dirty lawyer's work. But he had good grounds upon which to suspect others as highly placed as Stanhope, and had he followed his suspicions he might have turned them into certainties and discovered evidence. As it was, he let the matter lie, content with the execution he had done, and the esteem into which he had so suddenly hoisted himself—the damned profligate!"

Mr. Caryl let pass, as typical, the ludicrous want of logic in Ostermore's strictures of his Grace of Wharton, and the application by him to the duke of opprobrious terms that were no whit less applicable to himself.

"Then, that being so, what cause for these alarms some six months later?"

"Because," answered his lordship in a sudden burst of passion that brought him to his feet, empurpled his face and swelled the veins of his forehead, "because I am cursed with the filthiest fellow in England for my son."

He said it with the air of one who throws a flood of light where darkness has been hitherto, who supplies the key that must resolve at a turn a whole situation. But Mr. Caryl blinked foolishly.

"My wits are very dull, I fear," said he. "I still cannot understand."

"Then I'll make it all clear to you," said his lordship.

Leduc appeared at the arbor entrance.

"What now?" asked Mr. Caryl.

"Her ladyship is approaching, sir," answered Leduc the vigilant.

CHAPTER XIV. LADY OSTERMORE

Lord Ostermore and Mr. Caryll looked across the lawn towards the house, but failed to see any sign of her ladyship's approach.

Mr. Caryll raised questioning eyes to his servant's stolid face, and in that moment caught the faintest rustle of a gown behind the arbor. He half-turned to my lord, and nodded slightly in the direction of the sound, a smile twisting his lips. With a gesture he dismissed Leduc, who returned to the neighborhood of the pond.

His lordship frowned, angered by the interruption. Then: "If your ladyship will come inside," said he, "you will hear better and with greater comfort."

"Not to speak of dignity," said Mr. Caryll.

The stiff gown rustled again, this time without stealth. The countess appeared, no whit abashed. Mr. Caryll rose politely.

"You sit with spies to guard your approaches," said she.

"As a precaution against spies," was his lordship's curt answer.

She measured him with a cool eye. "What is't ye hide?" she asked him.

"My shame," he answered readily. Then after a moment's pause, he rose and offered her his seat. "Since you have thrust yourself in where you were not bidden, you may hear and welcome, ma'am," said he. "It may help you to understand what you term my injustice to

my son."

"Are these matters wherewith to importune a stranger—a guest?"

"I am proposing to say in your presence what I was about to say in your absence," said he, without answering her question. "Be seated, ma'am."

She sniffed, closed her fan with a clatter, and sat down. Mr. Caryl resumed his long chair, and his lordship took the stool.

"I am told," the latter resumed presently, recapitulating in part for her ladyship's better understanding, "that his Grace of Wharton is intending to reopen the South Sea scandal, as soon as he can find evidence that I was one of those who profited by the company's charter."

"Profited?" she echoed, between scorn and bitter amusement. "Profited, did ye say? I think your dotage is surely upon you—you that have sunk nigh all your fortune and all that you had with me in this thieving venture—d'ye talk of profits?"

"At the commencement I did profit, as did many others. Had I been content with my gains, had I been less of a trusting fool, it had been well. I was dazzled, maybe, by the glare of so much gold. I needed more; and so I lost all. That is evil enough. But there is worse. I may be called upon to make restitution of what I had from the company without paying for it—I may give all that's left me and barely cover the amount, and I may starve and be damned thereafter."

Her ladyship's face was ghastly. Horror stared from her pale eyes. She had known, from the beginning, of that twenty thousand pounds' worth of stock, and she had had—with his lordship—her anxious moments when the disclosures were being made six months ago that had brought the Craggses, Aislabie and a half-dozen others to shame and ruin.

His lordship looked at her a moment. "And if this shipwreck comes, as it now threatens," he continued, "it is my son I shall have to thank for't."

She found voice to ask: "How so?" courage to put the question scornfully. "Is it not rather Rotherby you have to thank that the disclosures did not come six months ago? What was it saved you but the friendship his Grace of Wharton had for Charles?"

"Why, then," stormed his lordship, "did he not see to't that he preserved that friendship? It but needed a behavior of as much decency and honor as Wharton exacts in his associates—and the Lord knows how much that is!" he sneered. "As it is, he has gone even lower than that abandoned scourer; so low that even this rakehell duke must become his enemy for his own credit's sake. He attempts mock-marriages with ladies of quality; and he attempts murder by stabbing through the back a gentleman who has spared his worthless life. Not even the president of the Hell Fire Club can countenance these things, strong stomach though he have for villainy. It is something to have contrived to come so low that even his Grace of Wharton must turn upon him, and swear his ruin. And so that he may ruin him, his grace is determined to ruin me. Now you understand, madam—and you, Mr. Caryl."

Mr. Caryl understood. He understood even more than his lordship meant him to understand; more than his lordship understood, himself. So, too, did her ladyship, if we may judge from the reply she made him.

"You fool," she railed. "You vain, blind, selfish fool! To blame Rotherby for this. Rather should Rotherby, blame you that by your damned dishonesty have set a weapon against him in his enemy's hands."

"Madam!" he roared, empurpling, and coming heavily to his feet.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Ay—and what you are, which is something you will never know. God! Was there ever so self-centered a fool? Compassionate me, Heaven!" She rose, too, and turned to Mr. Caryl. "You, sir," she said to him, "you have been dragged into this, I know not why."

She broke off suddenly, looking at him, her eyes a pair of gimlets now for penetration. "Why have you been dragged into it?" she demanded. "What is here? I demand to know. What help does my lord expect from you that he tells you this? Does he—" She paused an instant, a cunning smile breaking over her wrinkled, painted face. "Does he propose to sell himself to the king over the water, and are you a secret agent come to do the buying? Is that the answer to this riddle?"

Mr. Caryl, imperturbable outwardly, but very ill at ease within, smiled and waved the delicate hand that appeared through the heavy ruffle at his wrist. "Madam, indeed—ah—your ladyship goes very fast. You leap so at conclusions for which no grounds can exist. His lordship is so overwrought—as well he may be, alas!—that he cares not before whom he speaks. Is it not plainly so?"

She smiled very sourly. "You are a very master of evasion, sir. But your evasion gives me the answer that I lack—that and his lordship's face. I drew my bow at a venture; yet look, sir, and tell me, has my quarrel missed its mark?"

And, indeed, the sudden fear and consternation written on my lord's face was so plain that all might read it. He was—as Mr. Caryl had remarked on the first occasion that they met—the worst dissembler that ever set hand to a conspiracy. He betrayed himself at every step, if not positively, by incautious words, why then by the utter lack of control he had upon his countenance.

He made now a wild attempt to bluster. "Lies! Lies!" he protested. "Your ladyship's a-dreaming. Should I be making bad worse by plotting at my time of life? Should I? What can King James avail me, indeed?"

"Tis what I will ask Rotherby to help me to discover," she informed him.

"Rotherby?" he cried. "Would you tell that villain what you suspect? Would you arm him with another weapon for my undoing?"

"Ha!" said she. "You admit so much, then?" And she laughed disdainfully. Then with a sudden sternness, a sudden nobility almost in the motherhood which she put forward—"Rotherby is my son," she said, "and I'll not have my son the victim of your follies as well as of your injustice. We may curb the one and the other yet, my lord."

And she swept out, fan going briskly in one hand, her long ebony cane swinging as briskly in the other.

"O God!" groaned Ostermore, and sat down heavily.

Mr. Caryl helped himself copiously to snuff. "I think," said he, his voice so cool that it had an almost soothing influence, "I think your lordship has now another reason why you should go no further in this matter."

"But if I do not—what other hopes have I? Damn me! I'm a ruined man either way."

"Nay, nay," Mr. Caryl reminded him. "Assuming even that you are correctly informed, and that his Grace of Wharton is determined to move against you, it is not to be depended that he will succeed in collecting such evidence as he must need. At this date much of the evidence that may once have been available will have been dissipated. You are rash to despair so soon."

"There is that," his lordship admitted thoughtfully, a little hopefully, even; "there is that." And with the resilience of his nature—of men who form opinions on slight grounds, and, therefore, are ready to change them upon grounds as slight—"I" faith! I may have been running to meet my trouble. 'Tis but a rumor, after all, that Wharton is for mischief, and—as you say—as like as not there'll be no evidence by now. There was little enough at the time.

"Still, I'll make doubly sure. My letter to King James can do no harm. We'll talk of it again, when you are in case to travel."

It passed through Mr. Caryl's mind at the moment that Lady Ostermore and her son might between them brew such mischief as might seriously hinder him from travelling, and he was very near the truth. For already her ladyship was closeted with Rotherby in her boudoir.

The viscount was dressed for travelling, intent upon withdrawing to the country, for he was well-informed already of the feeling of the town concerning him, and had no mind to brave the slights and cold-shoulderings that would await him did he penetrate to any of the haunts of people of quality and fashion. He stood before his mother now, a tall, lank figure, his black face very gloomy, his sensual lips thrust forward in a sullen pout. She, in a gilt arm-chair before her toilet-table, was telling him the story of what had passed, his father's fear of ruin and disgrace. He swore between his teeth when he heard that the danger threatened from the Duke of Wharton.

"And your father's destitution means our destitution—yours and mine; for his gambling schemes have consumed my portion long since."

He laughed and shrugged. "I marvel I should concern myself," said he. "What can it avail me to save the rags that are left him of his fortune? He's sworn I shall never touch a penny that he may die

possessed of."

"But there's the entail," she reminded him. "If restitution is demanded, the Crown will not respect it. 'Twill be another sop to throw the whining curs that were crippled by the bubble, and who threaten to disturb the country if they are not appeased. If Wharton carries out this exposure, we're beggars—utter beggars, that may ask an alms to quiet hunger."

"'Tis Wharton's present hate of me," said he thoughtfully, and swore. "The damned puppy! He'd make a sacrifice of me upon the altar of respectability, just as he made a sacrifice of the South Sea bubble. What else was the stinking rakehell seeking but to put himself right again in the eyes of a town that was nauseated with him and his excesses? The self-seeking toad that makes virtue his profession—the virtue of others—and profligacy his recreation!" He smote fist into palm. "There's a way to silence him."

"Ah?" she looked up quickly, hopefully.

"A foot or so of steel," Rotherby explained, and struck the hilt of his sword. "I might pick a quarrel with him. 'Twould not be difficult. Come upon him unawares, say, and strike him. That should force a fight."

"Tusk, fool! He's all empanoplied in virtue where you are concerned. He'd use the matter of your affair with Caryl as a reason not to meet you, whatever you might do, and he'd set his grooms to punish any indignity you might put upon him."

"He durst not."

"Pooh! The town would all approve him in it since your running Caryl through the back. What a fool you were, Charles."

He turned away, hanging his head, full conscious, and with no little bitterness, of how great had been his folly.

"Salvation may lie for you in the same source that has brought you to the present pass—this man Caryll," said the countess presently. "I suspect him more than ever of being a Jacobite agent."

"I know him to be such."

"You know it?"

"All but; and Green is assured of it, too." He proceeded to tell her what he knew. "Ever since Green met Caryll at Maidstone has he suspected him, yet but that I kept him to the task he would have abandoned it. He's in my pay now as much as in Lord Carteret's, and if he can run Caryll to earth he receives his wages from both sides."

"Well—well? What has he discovered? Anything?"

"A little. This Caryll frequented regularly the house of one Everard, who came to town a week after Caryll's own arrival. This Everard—Sir Richard Everard is known to be a Jacobite. He is the Pretender's Paris agent. They would have laid him by the heels before, but that by precipitancy they feared to ruin their chances of discovering the business that may have brought him over. They are giving him rope at present. Meanwhile, by my cursed folly, Caryll's visits to him were interrupted. But there has been correspondence between them."

"I know," said her ladyship. "A letter was delivered him just now. I tried to smoke him concerning it. But he's too astute."

"Astute or not," replied her son, "once he leaves Stretton House it should not be long ere he betrays himself and gives us cause to lay him by the heels. But how will that help us?"

"Do you ask how? Why, if there is a plot, and we can discover it, we might make terms with the secretary of state to avoid any disclosure Wharton may intend concerning the South Sea matter."

"But that would be to discover my father for a Jacobite! What advantage should we derive from that? 'Twould be as bad as t'other matter."

"Let me die, but ye're a slow-witted clod, Charles. D'ye think we can find no way to disclose the plot and Mr. Caryl—and Everard, too, if you choose—without including your father? My lord is timidly cautious, and you may depend he'll not have put himself in their hands to any extent just yet."

The viscount paced the chamber slowly in long strides, head bent in thought, hands clasped behind him. "It will need consideration," said he. "But it may serve, and I can count upon Green. He is satisfied that Caryl befooled him at Maidstone, and that he kept the papers he carried despite the thoroughness of Green's investigations. Moreover, he was handled with some roughness by Caryl. For that and the other matter he asks redress—thirsts for it. He's a very willing tool, as I have found."

"Then see that you use him adroitly to your work," said his mother. "Best not leave town at present, Charles."

"Why, no," said he. "I'll find me a lodging somewhere at hand, since my fond sire is determined I shall pollute no longer the sacrosanctity of his dwelling. Perhaps when I have pulled him out of this quicksand, he will deign to mitigate the bitterness of his feelings for me. Though, faith, I find life endurable without the affection he should have consecrated to me."

"Ay," she said, looking up at him. "You are his son; too much his son, I fear. 'Tis why he dislikes you so intensely. He sees in you the faults to which he is blind in himself."

"Sweet mother!" said his lordship, bowing.

She scowled at him. She could deal in irony herself—and loved to

—but she detested to have it dealt to her.

He bowed again; gained the door, and would have passed out but that she detained him.

"'Tis a pity, on some scores, to dispose so utterly of this Caryl," she said. "The pestilent coxcomb has his uses, and his uses, like adversity's, are sweet."

He paused to question her with his eyes.

"He might have made a husband for Hortensia, and rid me of the company of that white-faced changeling."

"Might he so?" quoth the viscount, face and voice, expressionless.

"They were made for each other," her ladyship opined.

"Were they so?"

"Ay—were they. And faith they've discovered it. I would you had seen the turtles in the arbor an hour ago, when I surprised them."

His lordship attempted a smile, but achieved nothing more than a wry face and a change of color. His mother's eyes, observing these signs, grew on a sudden startled.

"Why, fool," quoth she, "do you hold there still? Art not yet cured of that folly?"

"What folly, ma'am?"

"This folly that already has cost you so much. 'Sdeath! As I'm a woman, if you'd so much feeling for the girl, I marvel ye did not marry her honestly and in earnest when the chance was yours."

The pallor of his face increased. He clenched his hands. "I marvel myself that I did not," he answered passionately—and went out,

slamming the door after him, and leaving her ladyship agape and angry.

CHAPTER XV. LOVE AND RAGE

Lord Rotherby, descending from that interview with his mother, espied Hortensia crossing the hall below. Forgetting his dignity, he quickened his movements, and took the remainder of the stairs two at a stride. But, then, his lordship was excited and angry, and considerations of dignity did not obtain with him at the time. For that matter, they seldom did.

"Hortensia! Hortensia!" he called to her, and at his call she paused.

Not once during the month that was past—and during which he had, for the most part, kept his room, to all intents a prisoner—had she exchanged so much as a word with him. Thus, not seeing him, she had been able, to an extent, to exclude him from her thoughts, which, naturally enough, were reluctant to entertain him for their guest.

Her calm, as she paused now in acquiescence to his bidding, was such that it almost surprised herself. She had loved him once—or thought so, a little month ago—and at a single blow he had slain that love. Now love so slain has a trick of resurrecting in the guise of hate; and so, she had thought at first had been the case with her. But this moment proved to her now that her love was dead, indeed, since of her erstwhile affection not even a recoil to hate remained. Dislike she may have felt; but it was that cold dislike that breeds a deadly indifference, and seeks no active expression, asking no more than the avoidance of its object.

Her calm, reflected in her face of a beauty almost spiritual, in every steady line of her slight, graceful figure, gave him pause a moment,

and his hot glance fell abashed before the chill indifference that met him from those brown eyes.

A man of deeper sensibilities, of keener perceptions, would have bowed and gone his way. But then a man of deeper sensibilities would never have sought this interview that the viscount was now seeking. Therefore, it was but natural that he should recover swiftly from his momentary halt, and step aside to throw open the door of a little room on the right of the hall. Bowing slightly, he invited her to enter.

"Grant me a moment ere I go, Hortensia," he said 'between command and exhortation.

She stood cogitating him an instant, with no outward sign of what might be passing in her mind; then she slightly inclined her head, and went forward as he bade her.

It was a sunny room, gay with light color and dainty furnishings, having long window-doors that opened to the garden. An Aubusson carpet of palest green, with a festoon pattern of pink roses, covered two-thirds of the blocked, polished floor. The empanelled walls were white, with here a gilt mirror, flanked on either side by a girandole in ormolu. A spinet stood open in mid-chamber, and upon it were sheets of music, a few books and a bowl of emerald-green ware, charged now with roses, whose fragrance lay heavy on the air. There were two or three small tables of very dainty, fragile make, and the chairs were in delicately-tinted tapestry illustrating the fables of La Fontaine.

It was an apartment looked upon by Hortensia as her own withdrawing-room, set apart for her own use, and as that the household—her very ladyship included—had ever recognized it.

His lordship closed the door with care. Hortensia took her seat upon the long stool that stood at the spinet, her back to the instrument,

and with hands idle in her lap—the same cold reserve upon her countenance—she awaited his communication.

He advanced until he was close beside her, and stood leaning an elbow on the corner of the spinet, a long and not ungraceful figure, with the black curls of his full-bottomed wig falling about his swarthy, big-featured face.

"I have but my farewells to make, Hortensia," said he. "I am leaving Stretton House, to-day, at last."

"I am glad," said she, in a formal, level voice, "that things should have fallen out so as to leave you free to go your ways."

"You are glad," he answered, frowning slightly, and leaning farther towards her. "Ay, and why are you glad? Why? You are glad for Mr. Caryl's sake. Do you deny it?"

She looked up at him quite calm and fearlessly. "I am glad for your own sake, too."

His dark brooding eyes looked deep into hers, which did not falter under his insistent gaze. "Am I to believe you?" he inquired.

"Why not? I do not wish your death."

"Not my death—but my absence?" he sneered. "You wish for that, do you not? You would prefer me gone? My room is better than my company just now? 'Tis what you think, eh?"

"I have not thought of it at all," she answered him with a pitiless frankness.

He laughed, soft and wickedly. "Is it so very hopeless, then? You have not thought of it at all by which you mean that you have not thought of me at all."

"Isn't not best so? You have given me no cause to think of you to your advantage. I am therefore kind to exclude you from my thoughts."

"Kind?" he mocked her. "You think it kind to put me from your mind—I who love you, Hortensia!"

She rose upon the instant, her cheeks warming faintly. "My lord," said she, "I think there is no more to be said between us."

"Ah, but there is," he cried. "A deal more yet." And he left his place by the spinet to come and stand immediately before her, barring her passage to the door. "Not only to say farewell was it that I desired to speak with you alone here." His voice softened amazingly. "I want your pardon ere I go. I want you to say that you forgive me the vile thing I would have done, Hortensia." Contrition quivered in his lowered voice. He bent a knee to her, and held out his hand. "I will not rise until you speak my pardon, child."

"Why, if that be all, I pardon you very readily," she answered, still betraying no emotion.

He frowned. "Too readily!" he cried. "Too readily for sincerity. I will not take it so."

"Indeed, my lord, for a penitent, you are very difficult to please. I pardon you with all my heart."

"You are sincere?" he cried, and sought to take her hands; but she whipped them away and behind her. "You bear me no ill-will?"

She considered him now with a calm, critical gaze, before which he was forced to lower his bold eyes. "Why should I bear you an ill-will?" she asked him.

"For the thing I did—the thing I sought to do."

"I wonder do you know all that you did?" she asked him, musingly.

"Shall I tell you, my lord? You cured me of a folly. I had been blind, and you made me see. I had foolishly thought to escape one evil, and you made me realize that I was rushing into a worse. You saved me from myself. You may have made me suffer then; but it was a healing hurt you dealt me. And should I bear you an ill-will for that?"

He had risen from his knee. He stood apart, pondering her from under bent brows with eyes that were full of angry fire.

"I do not think," she ended, "that there needs more between us. I have understood you, sir, since that day at Maidstone—I think we were strangers until then; and perhaps now you may begin to understand me. Fare you well, my lord."

She made shift to go, but he barred her passage now in earnest, his hands clenched beside him in witness of the violence he did himself to keep them there. "Not yet," he said, in a deep, concentrated voice. "Not yet. I did you a wrong, I know. And what you say—cruel as it is—is no more than I deserve. But I desire to make amends. I love you, Hortensia, and desire to make amends."

She smiled wistfully. "'Tis overlate to talk of that."

"Why?" he demanded fiercely, and caught her arms, holding her there before him. "Why is it overlate?"

"Suffer me to go," she commanded, rather than begged, and made to free herself of his grasp.

"I want you to be my wife, Hortensia—my wedded wife."

She looked at him, and laughed; a cold laugh, disdainful, yet not bitter. "You wanted that before, my lord; yet you neglected the opportunity my folly gave you. I thank you—you, after God—for that same neglect."

"Ah, do not say that!" he begged, a very suppliant again. "Do not

say that! Child, I love you. Do you understand?"

"Who could fail to understand, after the abundant proof you have afforded me of your sincerity and your devotion?"

"Do you rally me?" he demanded, letting through a flash of the anger that was mounting in him. "Am I so poor a thing that you whet your little wit upon me?"

"My lord, you are paining me. What can you look to gain by this? Suffer me to go."

A moment yet he stood, holding her wrists and looking down into her eyes with a mixture of pleading and ferocity in his. Then he made a sound in his throat, and caught her bodily to him; his arms, laced about her, held her bound and crushed against him. His dark, flushed face hovered above her own.

Fear took her at last. It mounted and grew to horror. "Let me go, my lord," she besought him, her voice trembling. "Oh, let me go!"

"I love you, Hortensia! I need you!" he cried, as if wrung by pain, and then hot upon her brow and cheeks and lips his kisses fell, and shame turned her to fire from head to foot as she fought helplessly within his crushing grasp.

"You dog!" she panted, and writhing harder, wrenched free a hand and arm. Blindly she beat upwards into that evil satyr's face. "You beast! You toad! You coward!"

They fell apart, each panting; she leaning faint against the spinet, her bosom galloping; he muttering oaths decent and other—for in the upward thrusting of her little hand one of its fingers had prodded at an eye, and the pain of it—which had caused him to relax his hold of her—stripped what little veneer remained upon the man's true nature.

"Will you go?" she asked him furiously, outraged by the vileness of his ravings. "Will you go, or must I summon help?"

He stood looking at her, straightening his wig, which had become disarranged in the struggle, and forcing himself to an outward calm. "So," he said. "You scorn me? You will not marry me? You realise the chance, eh? And why? Why?"

"I suppose it is because I am blind to the honor of the alliance," she controlled herself to answer him. "Will you go?"

He did not move. "Yet you loved me once—"

"'Tis a lie!" she blazed. "I thought I did—to my undying shame. No more than that, my lord—as I've a soul to be saved."

"You loved Me," he insisted. "And you would love me still but for this damned Caryl—this French coxcomb, who has crawled into your regard like the slimy, creeping thing he is."

"It sorts well with your ways, my lord, that you could say these things behind his back. You are practiced at stabbing men behind."

The gibe, with all the hurtful, stinging quality that only truth possesses, struck his anger from him, leaving him limp and pale. Then he recovered.

"Do you know who he is—what he is?" he asked. "I will tell you. He's a spy—a damned Jacobite spy, whom a word from me will hang."

Her eyes lashed him with her scorn. "I were a fool did I believe you," was her contemptuous answer.

"Ask him," he said, and laughed. He turned and strode to the door. Paused there, sardonic, looking back. "I shall be quits with you, ma'am. Quits! I'll hang this pretty turtle of yours at Tyburn. Tell him so

from me."

He wrenched the door open, and went out on that, leaving her cold and sick with dread.

Was it but an idle threat to terrorize her? Was it but that? Her impulse was to seek Mr. Caryl upon the instant that she might ask him and allay her fears. But what right had she? Upon what grounds could she set a question upon so secret a matter? She conceived him raising his brows in that supercilious way of his, and looking her over from head to toe as though seeking a clue to the nature of this quaint thing that asked him questions. She pictured his smile and the jest with which he would set aside her inquiry. She imagined, indeed, just what she believed would happen did she ask him; which was precisely what would not have happened. Imagining thus, she held her peace, and nursed her secret dread. And on the following day, his weakness so far overcome as to leave him no excuse to linger at Stretton House, Mr. Caryl took his departure and returned to his lodging in Old Palace Yard.

One more treasonable interview had he with Lord Ostermore in the library ere he departed. His lordship it was who reopened again the question, to repeat much of what he had said in the arbor on the previous day, and Mr. Caryl replied with much the same arguments in favor of procrastination that he had already employed.

"Wait, at least," he begged, "until I have been abroad a day or two, and felt for myself how the wind is setting."

"'Tis a prodigiously dangerous document," he declared. "I scarce see the need for so much detail."

"How can it set but one way?"

"'Tis a question I shall be in better case to answer when I have had an opportunity of judging. Meanwhile, be assured I shall not sail for

France without advising you. Time enough then to give me your letter should you still be of the same mind."

"Be it so," said the earl. "When all is said, the letter will be safer here, meantime, than in your pocket." And he tapped the secretaire. "But see what I have writ his majesty, and tell me should I alter aught."

He took out a drawer on the right—took it out bodily—then introduced his hand into the opening, running it along the inner side of the desk until, no doubt, he touched a spring; for suddenly a small trap was opened. From this cavity he fished out two documents—one the flimsy tissue on which King James' later was penned; the other on heavier material Lord Ostermore's reply. He spread the latter before him, and handed it to Mr. Caryl, who ran an eye over it.

It was indited with stupid, characteristic incaution; concealment was never once resorted to; everywhere expressions of the frankest were employed, and every line breathed the full measure of his lordship's treason and betrays the existence of a plot.

Mr. Caryl returned it. His countenance was grave.

"I desire his majesty to know how whole-heartedly I belong to him."

"'Twere best destroyed, I think. You can write another when the time comes to dispatch it."

But Ostermore was never one to take sensible advice. "Pooh! 'Twill be safe in here. 'Tis a secret known to none." He dropped it, together with King James' letter, back into the recess, snapped down the trap, and replaced the drawer. Whereupon Mr. Caryl took his leave, promising to advise his lordship of whatever he might glean, and so departed from Stretton House.

My Lord Rotherby, meanwhile, was very diligent in the business upon which he was intent. He had received in his interview with

Hortensia an added spur to such action as might be scatheful to Mr. Caryll. His lordship was lodged in Portugal Row, within a stone's throw of his father's house, and there, on that same evening of his moving thither, he had Mr. Green to see him, desiring news.

Mr. Green had little to impart, but strong hope of much to be garnered presently. His little eyes twinkling, his chubby face suffused in smiles, as though it were an excellent jest to be hunting knowledge that should hang a man, the spy assured Lord Rotherby that there was little doubt Mr. Caryll could be implicated as soon as he was about again.

"And that's the reason—after your lordship's own express wishes—why so far I have let Sir Richard Everard be. It may come to trouble for me with my Lord Carteret should it be smoked that I have been silent on the matters within my knowledge. But—"

"Oh, a plague on that!" said his lordship. "You'll be well paid for your services when you've rendered them. And, meanwhile, I understand that not another soul in London—that is, on the side of the government—is aware of Sir Richard's presence in town. So where is your danger?"

"True," said Mr. Green, plump hand caressing plumper chin. "Had it not been so, I should have been forced to apply to the secretary for a warrant before this."

"Then you'll wait," said his lordship, "and you'll act as I may direct you. It will be to your credit in the end. Wait until Caryll has enmeshed himself by frequent visits to Sir Richard's. Then get your warrant—when I give the word—and execute it one fine night when Caryll happens to be closeted with Everard. Whether we can get further evidence against him or not, that circumstance of his being found with the Pretender's agent should go some way towards hanging him. The rest we must supply."

Mr. Green smiled seraphically. "Ecod! I'd give my ears to have the slippery fellow safe. Codso! I would. He bubbled me at Maidstone, and I limped a fortnight from the kick he gave me."

"He shall do a little more kicking—with both feet," said his lordship with unction.

CHAPTER XVI. MR. GREEN EXECUTES HIS WARRANT

Five days later, Mr. Caryll—whose recovery had so far progressed that he might now be said to be his own man again—came briskly up from Charing Cross one evening at dusk, to the house at the corner of Maiden Lane where Sir Richard Everard was lodged. He observed three or four fellows lounging about the corner of Chandos street and Bedford street, but it did not occur to him that from that point they could command Sir Richard's door—nor that such could be their object—until, as he swung sharply round the corner, he hurtled violently into a man who was moving in the opposite direction without looking whither he was going. The man stepped quickly aside with a murmured word of apology, to give Mr. Caryll the wall that he might pass on. But Mr. Caryll paused.

"Ah, Mr. Green!" said he very pleasantly. "How d'ye? Have ye been searching folk of late?"

Mr. Green endeavored to dissemble his startled expression in a grin that revealed his white teeth. "Ye can't forgive me that blunder, Mr. Caryll," said he.

Mr. Caryll smiled fondly upon him. "From your manner I take it that on your side you practice a more Christian virtue. It is plain that you forgive me the sequel."

Mr. Green shrugged and spread his hands. "You were in the right, sir; you were in the right," he explained. "Those are the risks a man of my calling must run. I must suffer for my blunders."

Mr. Caryl continued to smile. But that the light was failing, the spy might have observed a certain hardening in the lines of his mouth. "Here is a very humble mood," said he. "It is like the crouch before the spring. In whom do you design to plant your claws?—yours and your friends yonder." And he pointed with his cane across the street towards the loungers he had observed.

"My friends?" quoth Mr. Green, in a voice of disgust. "Nay, your honor! No friends of mine, ecod! Indeed, no!"

"No? I am at fault, then. Yet they look as if they might be bumbailiffs. 'Tis the kind ye herd with, is't not? Give you good-even, Mr. Green." And he went on, cool and unconcerned, and turned in through the narrow doorway by the glover's shop to mount the stairs to Sir Richard's lodging.

Mr. Green stood still to watch him go. Then he swore through his teeth, and beckoned one of those whose acquaintance he had disclaimed.

"'Tis like him, ecod! to have gone in in spite of seeing me and you! He's cool! Damned cool! But he'll be cooler yet, codso!" Then, briskly questioning his satellite: "Is Sir Richard within, Jerry?"

"Ay," answered Jerry—a rough, heavily-built tatterdemalion. "He's been there these two hours."

"'Tis our chance to nab 'em both, then—our last chance, maybe. The game is up. That fine gentleman has smoked it." He was angry beyond measure. Their plans were far from ripe, and yet to delay longer now that their vigilance was detected was, perhaps, to allow Sir Richard to slip through their fingers, as well as the other. "Have ye your barkers?" he asked harshly.

Jerry tapped a heavily bulging pocket, and winked. Mr. Green thrust his three-cornered hat a-cock over one eye, and with his hands

behind the tails of his coat, stood pondering. "Ay, pox on't!" he grumbled. "It must be done to-night. I dursn't delay longer. We'll give the gentlemen time to settle comfortably; then up we go to make things merry for 'em." And he beckoned the others across.

Meanwhile Mr. Caryll had gone up with considerable misgivings. The last letter he had received from Sir Richard—that day at Stretton House—had been to apprise him that his adoptive father was on the point of leaving town but that he would be returned within the week. The business that had taken him had been again concerned with Atterbury the obstinate. Upon another vain endeavor to dissuade the bishop from a scheme his king did not approve had Sir Richard journeyed to Rochester. He had had his pains for nothing. Atterbury had kept him there, entertaining him, and seeking in his turn to engulf the agent in the business that was toward—business which was ultimately to suck down Atterbury and his associates. Sir Richard, however, was very firm. And when at last he left Rochester to return to town and his adoptive son, a coolness marked the parting of those two adherents of the Stuart dynasty.

Returned to London—whence his absence had been marked with alarm by Mr. Green—Sir Richard had sent a message to Mr. Caryll, and the latter made haste to answer it in person.

His adoptive father received him with open arms, and such a joy in his face, such a light in his old eyes as should have gladdened his visitor, yet only served sadden him the more. He sighed as Sir Richard thrust him back that he might look at him.

"Ye're pale, boy," he said, "and ye look thinner." And with that he fell to reviling the deed that was the cause of this, Rotherby and the whole brood of Ostermore.

"Let be," said Mr. Caryll, as he dropped into a chair. "Rotherby is undergoing his punishment. The town looks on him as a cut-throat

who has narrowly escaped the gallows. I marvel that he tarries here. An I were he, I think I'd travel for a year or two."

"What weakness made you spare him when ye had him at the point of your sword?"

"That which made me regret that I had him there; the reflection that he is my brother."

Sir Richard looked at him in some surprise. "I thought you of sterner stuff, Justin," he said presently, and sighed, passing a long white hand across his bony brow. "I thought I had reared you to a finer strength. But there! What of Ostermore himself?"

"What of him?"

"Have you not talked again with him of the matter of going over to King James?"

"To what end, since the chance is lost? His betrayal now would involve the betrayal of Atterbury and the others—for he has been in touch with them."

"Has he though? The bishop said naught of this."

"I have it from my lord himself—and I know the man. Were he taken they'd wring out of him whatever happened to be in him. He has no discretion. Indeed, he's but a clod, too stupid even to be aware of his own stupidity."

"Then what is to be done?" inquired Sir Richard, frowning.

"We'd best get home to France again."

"And leave matters thus?" He considered a moment, and shook his head, smiling bitterly. "Could that content you, Justin? Could you go as you have come—taking no more than you brought; leaving that

man as you found him? Could you?"

Mr. Caryll looked at the baronet, and wondered for a moment whether he should persevere in the rule of his life and deal quite frankly with him, telling him precisely what he felt. Then he realized that he would not be understood. He could not combat the fanaticism that was Sir Richard's in this matter. If he told him the truth; how he loathed the task; how he rejoiced that circumstances had now put it beyond his reach—all he would achieve would be to wound Sir Richard in his tenderest place and to no purpose.

"It is not a matter of what I would," he answered slowly, wearily almost. "It is a matter of what I must. Here in England is no more to be done. Moreover, there's danger for you in lingering, or I'm much mistaken else."

"Danger of what?" asked Sir Richard, with indifference.

"You are being spied upon."

"Pho! I am accustomed to it. I have been spied upon all my life."

"Like enough. But this time the spies are messengers from the secretary of state. I caught a glimpse of them lurking about your doorway—three or four at least—and as I entered I all but fell over a Mr. Green—a most pertinacious gentleman with whom I have already some acquaintance. He is the very man who searched me at Maidstone; he has kept his eye upon me ever since, which has not troubled me. But that he should keep an eye on you means that your identity is suspected, and if that be so—well, the sooner we are out of England the better for your health."

Sir Richard shook his head calmly. The fine-featured, lean old face showed no sign of uneasiness. "A fig for all that!" said he. "I go not thus—empty-handed as I came. After all these years of waiting."

A knock fell upon the door, and Sir Richard's man entered. His face was white, his eyes startled.

"Sir Richard," he announced, his voice lowered portentously, "there are some men here who insist upon seeing you."

Mr. Caryll wheeled in his chair. "Surely they did not ask for him by name?" he inquired in the same low key employed by the valet.

The man nodded in silence. Mr. Caryll swore through his teeth. Sir Richard rose.

"I am occupied at present," he said in a calm voice. "I can receive nobody. Desire to know their business. If it imports, bid them come again to-morrow."

"It is over-urgent for that, Sir Richard Everard," came the soft voice of Mr. Green, who thrust himself suddenly forward past the servant. Other figures were seen moving behind him in the ante-room.

"Sir," cried Sir Richard angrily. "This is a most insolent intrusion. Bentley, show this fellow the door."

Bentley set a hand on Mr. Green's shoulder. Mr. Green nimbly twisted out of it, and produced a paper. "I have here a warrant for your apprehension, Sir Richard, from my Lord Carteret, the secretary of state."

Mr. Caryll advanced menacingly upon the tipstaff. Mr. Green stepped back, and fell into a defensive attitude, balancing a short but formidable-looking life-preserver.

"Keep your distance, sir, or 'twill be the worse for you," he threatened. "Hi!" he called. "Jerry! Beattie!"

Jerry, Beattie, and two other ruffians crowded to the doorway, but advanced little beyond the threshold. Mr. Caryll turned to Sir Richard.

But Mr. Green was the first to speak.

"Sir Richard," said he, "you'll see that we are but instruments of the law. It grieves me profoundly to have you for our object. But ye'll see that 'tis no affair of ours, who have but to do the duty that we're ordered. Ye'll not give these poor fellows trouble, I trust. Ye'll surrender quietly."

Sir Richard's answer was to pull open a drawer in the writing-table, by which he was standing, and whip out a pistol.

What exactly he may have intended, he was never allowed to announce. An explosion shook the room, coming from the doorway, upon which Mr. Caryll had turned his shoulder; there was a spurt of flame, and Sir Richard collapsed forward onto the table, and slithered thence to the ground.

Jerry, taking fright at the sight of the pistol Sir Richard had produced, had forestalled what he supposed to be the baronet's intentions by firing instantly upon him, with this disastrous result.

Confusion ensued. Mr. Caryll, with no more thought for the tipstaves than he had for the smoke in his eyes or the stench of powder in his nostrils, sped to Sir Richard. In a passion of grief and anxiety, he raised his adoptive father, aided by Bentley, what time Mr. Green was abusing Jerry, and Jerry was urging in exculpation how he had acted purely in Mr. Green's interest, fearing that Sir Richard might have been on the point of shooting him.

The spy went forward to Mr. Caryll. "I am most profoundly sorry—" he began.

"Take your sorrow to hell," snarled Mr. Caryll, his face livid, his eyes blazing uncannily. "I believe ye've murdered him."

"Ecod! the fool shall smart for't if Sir Richard dies," grumbled Mr.

Green.

"What's that to me? You may hang the muckworm, and what shall that profit any one? Will it restore me Sir Richard's life? Send one of your ruffians for a doctor, man. And bid him hasten."

Mr. Green obeyed with alacrity. Apart from his regrets at this happening for its own sake, it would suit his interests not at all that Sir Richard should perish thus. Meanwhile, with the help of the valet, who was blubbering like a child—for he had been with Sir Richard for over ten years, and was attached to him as a dog to its master—they opened the wounded man's sodden waistcoat and shirt, and reached the hurt, which was on the right side of the breast.

Between them they lifted him up gently. Mr. Green would have lent a hand, but a snarl from Mr. Caryll drove him back in sheer terror, and alone those two bore the baronet into the next room and laid him on his bed. Here they did the little that they could; propping him up and stemming the bleeding, what time they waited through what seemed a century for the doctor's coming, Mr. Caryll mad—stark mad for the time—with grief and rage.

The physician arrived at last—a small, bird-like man under a great gray periwig, with pointed features and little eyes that beamed brightly behind horn-rimmed spectacles.

In the ante-room he was met by Mr. Green, who in a few words told him what had happened. Then the doctor entered the bedchamber alone, and depositing hat and cane, went forward to make his examination.

Mr. Caryll and Bentley stood aside to give place to him. He stooped, felt the pulse, examined the lips of the wound, estimating the locality and direction of the bullet, and his mouth made a clucking sound as of deprecation.

"Very deplorable, very deplorable!" he muttered. "So hale a man, too, despite his years. Very deplorable!" He looked up. "A Jacobite, ye say he is, sir?"

"Will he live?" inquired Mr. Caryl shortly, by way of recalling the man of medicine to the fact that politics was not the business on which he had been summoned.

The doctor pursed his lips, and looked at Mr. Caryl over the top of his spectacles. "He will live—"

"Thank God!" breathed Mr. Caryl.

"—perhaps an hour," the doctor concluded, and never knew how near was Mr. Caryl to striking him. He turned again to his patient, producing a probe. "Very deplorable!" Mr. Caryl heard him muttering, parrot-like.

A pause ensued, and a silence broken only by occasional cluckings from the little doctor, and Mr. Caryl stood by, a prey to an anguish more poignant than he had ever known. At last there was a groan from the wounded man. Mr. Caryl started forward.

Sir Richard's eyes were open, and he was looking about him at the doctor, the valet, and, lastly, at his adopted son. He smiled faintly at the latter. Then the doctor touched Mr. Caryl's sleeve, and drew him aside.

"I cannot reach the bullet," he said. "But 'tis no matter for that." He shook his head solemnly. "The lung has been pierced. A little time now, and—I can do nothing more."

Mr. Caryl nodded in silence, his face drawn with pain. With a gesture he dismissed the doctor, who went out with Bentley.

When the valet returned, Mr. Caryl was on his knees beside the bed, Sir Richard's hand in his, and Sir Richard was speaking in a

feeble, hoarse voice—gasping and coughing at intervals.

"Don't—don't grieve, Justin," he was saying. "I am an old man. My time must have been very near. I—I am glad that it is thus. It is much better than if they had taken me. They'd ha' shown me no mercy. 'Tis swifter thus, and—and easier."

Silently Justin wrung the hand he held.

"You'll miss me a little, Justin," the old man resumed presently. "We have been good friends, lad—good friends for thirty years."

"Father!" Justin cried, a sob in his voice.

Sir Richard smiled. "I would I were your father in more than name, Justin. Hast been a good son to me—no son could have been more than you."

Bentley drew nigh with a long glass containing a cordial the doctor had advised. Sir Richard drank avidly, and sighed content when he returned the glass. "How long yet, Justin?" he inquired.

"Not long, father," was the gloomy answer.

"It is well. I am content. I am happy, Justin. Believe me, I am happy. What has my life been? Dissipated in the pursuit of a phantom." He spoke musingly, critically calm, as one who already upon the brink of dissolution takes already but an impersonal interest in the course he has run in life.

Judging so, his judgment was clearer than it had yet been; it grew sane, and was freed at last from the hackles of fanaticism; and there was something that he saw in its true proportions. He sighed heavily.

"This is a judgment upon me," he said presently. He turned his great eyes full upon Justin, and their dance was infinitely wistful. "Do you remember, Justin, that night at your lodging—that first night on

which we talked here in London of the thing you were come to do—the thing to which I urged you? Do you recall how you upbraided me for having set you a task that was unworthy and revolting?"

"I remember," answered Justin, with an inward shudder, fearful of what might follow.

"Oh, you were right, Justin; right, and I was entirely wrong—wickedly wrong. I should have left vengeance to God. He is wreaking it. Ostermore's whole life has been a punishment; his end will be a punishment. I understand it now. We do no wrong in life, Justin, for which in this same life payment is not exacted. Ostermore has been paying. I should have been content with that. After all, he is your father in the flesh, and it was not for you to raise your hand against him. 'Tis what you have felt, and I am glad you should have felt it, for it proves your worthiness. Can you forgive me?"

"Nay, nay, father! Speak not of forgiveness."

"I have sore need of it."

"Ah, but not from me; not from me! What is there I should forgive? There is a debt between us I had hoped to repay some day when you were grown truly old. I had looked to tend you in your old age, to be the comfort of it, and the support that you were to my infancy."

"It had been sweet, Justin," sighed Sir Richard, smiling upon his adopted son, and putting forth an unsteady hand to stroke the white, drawn face. "It had been sweet. It is sweet to hear that you so proposed."

A shudder convulsed him. He sank back coughing, and there was froth and blood on his lips. Reverently Justin wiped them, and signed for the cordial to Bentley, who stood, numbed, in the background.

"It is the end," said Sir Richard feebly. "God has been good to me

beyond my deserts, and this is a crowning mercy. Consider, Justin, it might have been the gibbet and a crowd—instead of this snug bed, and you and Bentley here—just two good friends."

Bentley, losing all self-control at this mention of himself, sank weeping to his knees. Sir Richard put out a hand, and touched his head.

"You will serve Mr. Caryll, Bentley. You'll find him a good master if you are as good a servant to him as you have been to me."

Then suddenly he made the quick movement of one who bethinks himself of something. He waved Bentley away.

"There is a case in the drawer yonder," he said, when the servant was beyond earshot. "It contains papers that concern you—certificates of your birth and of your mothers death. I brought them with me as proofs of your identity, against the time when the hour of vengeance upon Ostermore should strike. They twill serve no purpose now. Burn them. They are best destroyed."

Mr. Caryll nodded understanding, and on Sir Richard's part there followed another fight for breath, another attack of coughing, during which Bentley instinctively approached again.

When the paroxysm was past, Sir Richard turned once more to Justin, who was holding him in his arms, upright, to ease his breathing. "Be good to Bentley," he murmured, his voice very faint and exhausted now. "You are my heir, Justin. All that I have—I set all in order ere I left Paris. It—it is growing dark. You have not snuffed the candles, Bentley. They are burning very low."

Suddenly he started forward, held as he was in Justin's arms. He half-raised his arms, holding out his hands toward the foot of the bed. His eyes dilated; the expression of his livid face grew first surprised, then joyous—beatific. "Antoinette!" he cried in a loud voice. "Antoi—"

And thus, abruptly, but in great happiness, he passed.

CHAPTER XVII. AMID THE GRAVES

What time Sir Richard had been dying in the inner room, Mr. Green and two of his acolytes had improved the occasion by making a thorough search in Sir Richard's writing-table and a thorough investigation of every scrap of paper found there. From which you will understand how much Mr. Green was a gentleman who set business above every other consideration.

The man who had shot Sir Richard had been ordered by Mr. Green to take himself off, and had been urged to go down on his knees, for once in a way, and pray Heaven that his rashness might not bring him to the gallows as he so richly deserved.

His fourth myrmidon Mr. Green had dispatched with a note to my Lord Rotherby, and it was entirely upon the answer he should receive that it must depend whether he proceeded or not, forthwith, to the apprehension of Mr. Caryll. Meanwhile the search went on amain, and was extended presently to the very bedroom where the dead Sir Richard lay. Every nook and cranny was ransacked; the very mattress under the dead man was removed, and investigated, and even Mr. Caryll and Bentley had to submit to being searched. But it all proved fruitless. Not a line of treasonable matter was to be found anywhere. To the certificates upon Mr. Caryll the searcher made the mistake of paying but little heed in view of their nature.

But if there were no proofs of plots and treasonable dealings, there was, at least, abundant proof of Sir Richard's identity, and Mr. Green appropriated these against any awkward inquiries touching the

manner in which the baronet had met his death.

Of such inquiries, however, there were none. It was formally sworn to Lord Carteret by Green and his men that the secretary's messenger, Jerry—the fellow owned no surname—had shot Sir Richard in self-defence, when Sir Richard had produced firearms upon being arrested on a charge of high treason, for which they held the secretary's own warrant.

At first Lord Carteret considered it a thousand pities that they should not have contrived matters better so as to take Sir Richard alive; but upon reflection he was careful not to exaggerate to himself the loss occasioned by his death, for Sir Richard, after all, was a notoriously stubborn man, not in the least likely to have made any avowals worth having. So that his trial, whilst probably resulting sterile of such results as the government could desire, would have given publicity to the matter of a plot that was hatching; and such publicity at a time of so much unrest was the last thing the government desired. Where Jacobitism was concerned, Lord Carteret had the wise discretion to proceed with the extremest caution. Publicity might serve to fan the smouldering embers into a blaze, whereas it was his cunning aim quietly to stifle them as he came upon them.

So, upon the whole, he was by no means sure but that Jerry had done the state the best possible service in disposing thus summarily of that notorious Jacobite agent, Sir Richard Everard. And his lordship saw to it that there was no inquiry and that nothing further was heard of the matter.

As for Lord Rotherby, had the affair transpired twenty-four hours earlier, he would certainly have returned Mr. Green a message to effect the arrest of Mr. Caryll upon suspicion. But as it chanced, he had that very afternoon received a visit from his mother, who came in great excitement to inform him that she had forced from Lord Ostermore an acknowledgment that he was plotting with Mr. Caryll to

go over to King James.

So, before they could move further against Mr. Caryll, it behooved them to ascertain precisely to what extent Lord Ostermore might not be incriminated, as otherwise the arrest of Caryll might lead to exposures that would ruin the earl more thoroughly than could any South Sea bubble revelations. Thus her ladyship to her son. He turned upon her.

"Why, madam," said he, "these be the very arguments I used t'other day when we talked of this; and all you answered me then was to call me a dull-witted clod, for not seeing how the thing might be done without involving my lord."

"Tcha!" snapped her ladyship, beating her knuckles impatiently with her fan. "A dull-witted clod did I call you? 'Twas flattery—sheer flattery; for I think ye're something worse. Fool, can ye not see the difference that lies betwixt your disclosing a plot to the secretary of state, and causing this Caryll to disclose it—as might happen if he were seized? First discover the plot—find out in what it may consist, and then go to Lord Carteret to make your terms."

He looked at her, out of temper by her rebuke. "I may be as dull as your ladyship says—but I do not see in what the position now is different from what it was."

"It isn't different—but we thought it was different," she explained impatiently. "We assumed that your father would not have betrayed himself, counting upon his characteristic caution. But it seems we are mistook. He has betrayed himself to Caryll. And before we can move in this matter, we must have proofs of a plot to lay before the secretary of state."

Lord Rotherby understood, and accounted himself between Scylla and Charybdis, and when that evening Green's messenger found him,

he gnashed his teeth in rage at having to allow this chance to pass, at being forced to temporize until he should be less parlously situated. He returned Mr. Green an urgent message to take no steps concerning Mr. Caryll until they should have concerted together.

Mr. Green was relieved. Mr. Caryll arrested might stir up matters against the slayer of Sir Richard, and this was a business which Mr. Green had prevision enough to see his master, Lord Carteret, would prefer should not be stirred up. He had a notion, for the rest, that if Mr. Caryll were left to go his ways, he would not be likely to give trouble touching that same matter. And he was right in this. Before his overwhelming sense of loss, Mr. Caryll had few thoughts to bestow upon the manner in which that loss had been sustained. Moreover, if he had a quarrel with any one on that account, it was with the government whose representative had issued the warrant for Sir Richard's arrest, and no more with the wretched tipstaff who had fired the pistol than with the pistol itself. Both alike were but instruments, of slightly different degrees of insensibility.

For twenty-four hours Mr. Caryll's grief was overwhelming in its poignancy. His sense of solitude was awful. Gone was the only living man who had stood to him for kith and kin. He was left alone in the world; utterly alone. That was the selfishness of his sorrow—the consideration of Sir Richard's death as it concerned himself.

Presently an alloy of consolation was supplied by the reflection of Sir Richard's own case—as Sir Richard himself had stated it upon his deathbed. His life had not been happy; it had been poisoned by a monomania, which, like a worm in the bud, had consumed the sweetness of his existence. Sir Richard was at rest. And since he had been discovered, that shot was, indeed, the most merciful end that could have been measured out to him. The alternative might have been the gibbet and the gaping crowd, and a moral torture to precede the end. Better—a thousand times better—as it was.

So much did all this weigh with him that when on the following Monday he accompanied the body to its grave, he found his erstwhile passionate grief succeeded by an odd thankfulness that things were as they were, although it must be confessed that a pang of returning anguish smote him when he heard the earth clattering down upon the wooden box that held all that remained of the man who had been father, mother, brother and all else to him.

He turned away at last, and was leaving the graveyard, when some one touched him on the arm. It was a timid touch. He turned sharply, and found himself looking into the sweet face of Hortensia Winthrop, wondering how came she there. She wore a long, dark cloak and hood, but her veil was turned back. A chair was waiting not fifty paces from them along the churchyard wall.

"I came but to tell you how much I feel for you in this great loss," she said.

He looked at her in amazement. "How did you know?" he asked her.

"I guessed," said she. "I heard that you were with him at the end, and I caught stray words from her ladyship of what had passed. Lord Rotherby had the information from the tipstaff who went to arrest Sir Richard Everard. I guessed he was your—your foster-father, as you called him; and I came to tell you how deeply I sorrow for you in your sorrow."

He caught her hands in his and bore them to his lips, reckless of who might see the act. "Ah, this is sweet and kind in you," said he.

She drew him back into the churchyard again. Along the wall there was an avenue of limes—a cool and pleasant walk wherein idlers lounged on Sundays in summer after service. Thither she drew him. He went almost mechanically. Her sympathy stirred his sorrow again,

as sympathy so often does.

"I have buried my heart yonder, I think," said he, with a wave of his hand towards that spot amid the graves where the men were toiling with their shovels. "He was the only living being that loved me."

"Ah, surely not," said she, sorrow rather than reproach in her gentle voice.

"Indeed, yes. Mine is a selfish grief. It is for myself that I sorrow, for myself and my own loneliness. It is thus with all of us. When we argue that we weep the dead, it would be more true to say that we bewail the living. For him—it is better as it is. No doubt it is better so for most men, when all is said, and we do wrong to weep their passing."

"Do not talk so," she said. "It hurts."

"Ay—it is the way of truth to hurt, which is why, hating pain, we shun truth so often." He sighed. "But, oh, it was good in you to seek me, to bring me word with your own lips of your sweet sympathy. If aught could lighten the gloom of my sorrow, surely it is that."

They stepped along in silence until they came to the end of the avenue, and turned. It was no idle silence: the silence of two beings who have naught to say. It was a grave, portentous silence, occasioned by the unutterable much in the mind of one, and by the other's apprehension of it. At last she spoke, to ask him what he meant to do.

"I shall return to France," he said. "It had perhaps been better had I never crossed to England."

"I cannot think so," she said, simply, frankly and with no touch of a coquetry that had been harshly at discord with time and place.

He shot her a swift, sidelong glance; then stopped, and turned. "I am glad on't," said he. "'Twill make my going the easier."

"I mean not that," she cried, and held out her hands to him. "I meant not what you think—you know, you know what 'twas I meant. You know—you must—what impulse brought me to you in this hour, when I knew you must need comfort. And in return how cruel, were you not—to tell me that yonder lay buried the only living being that—that loved you?"

His fingers were clenched upon her arm. "Don't—don't!" he implored hoarsely, a strange fire in his eyes, a hectic flush on either cheek. "Don't! Or I'll forget what I am, and take advantage of this midsummer folly that is upon you."

"Is it no more than folly, Justin?" she asked him, brown eyes looking up into gray-green.

"Ay, something more—stark madness. All great emotions are. It will pass, and you will be thankful that I was man enough—strong enough—to allow it the chance of passing."

She hung her head, shaking it sorrowfully. Then very softly: "Is it no more than the matter of—of that, that stands between us?" she inquired.

"No more than that," he answered, "and yet more than enough. I have no name to offer any woman."

"A name?" she echoed scornfully. "What store do you think I lay by that? When you talk so, you obey some foolish prejudice; no more."

"Obedience to prejudices is the whole art of living," he answered, sighing.

She made a gesture of impatience, and went on. "Justin, you said you loved me; and when you said so much, you gave me the right—or so I understood it—to speak to you as I am doing now. You are alone

in the world, without kith or kin. The only one you had—the one who represented all for you—lies buried there. Would you return thus, lonely and alone, to France?"

"Ah, now I understand!" he cried. "Now I understand. Pity is the impulse that has urged you—pity for my loneliness, isn't not, Hortensia?"

"I'll not deny that without the pity there might not have been the courage. Why should I—since it is a pity that gives you no offense, a pity that is rooted firmly in—in love for you, my Justin?"

He set his hands upon her shoulders, and with glowing eyes regarded her. "Ah, sweet!" said he, "you make me very, very proud."

And then his arms dropped again limply to his sides. He sighed, and shook his head drearily. "And yet—reflect. When I come to beg your hand in marriage of your guardian, what shall I answer him of the questions he will ask me of myself—touching my family, my parentage and all the rest that he will crave to know?"

She observed that he was very white again. "Need you enter into that? A man is himself; not his father or his family." And then she checked. "You make me plead too much," she said, a crimson flood in her fair cheeks. "I'll say no more than I have said. Already have I said more than I intended. And you have wanted mercy that you could drive me to it. You know my mind—my—my inmost heart. You know that I care nothing for your namelessness. It is yours to decide what you will do. Come, now; my chair is staying for me."

He bowed; he sought again to convey some sense of his appreciation of her great nobility; then led her through the gate and to her waiting chair.

"Whatever I may decide, Hortensia" was the last thing he said to her, "and I shall decide as I account best for you, rather than for

myself; and for myself there needs no thought or hesitation—whatever I may decide, believe me when I say from my soul that all my life shall be the sweeter for this hour."

CHAPTER XVIII. THE GHOST OF THE PAST

Temptation had seized Mr. Caryll in a throttling grip, and for two whole days he kept the house, shunning all company and wrestling with that same Temptation. In the end he took a whimsical resolve, entirely worthy of himself.

He would go to Lord Ostermore formally to ask in marriage the hand of Mistress Winthrop, and he would be entirely frank with the earl, stating his exact condition, but suppressing the names of his parents.

He was greatly taken with the notion. It would create a situation ironical beyond any, grotesque beyond belief; and its development should be stupendously interesting. It attracted him irresistibly. That he should leave it to his own father to say whether a man born as he was born might aspire to marry his father's ward, had in it something that savored of tragi-comedy. It was a pretty problem, that once set could not be left unsolved by a man of Mr. Caryll's temperament. And, indeed, no sooner was the idea conceived than it quickened into a resolve upon which he set out to act.

He bade Leduc call a chair, and, dressed in mourning, but with his habitual care, he had himself carried to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Engrossed as he was in his own thoughts, he paid little heed to the hum of excitement about the threshold of Stretton House. Within the railed enclosure that fronted the mansion two coaches were drawn up, and a little knot of idlers stood by one of these in busy gossip.

Paying no attention to them, Mr. Caryl mounted the steps, nor noticed the gravity of the porter's countenance as he passed within.

In the hall he found a little flock of servants gathered together, and muttering among themselves like conspirators in a tragedy; and so engrossed that they paid no heed to him as he advanced, nor until he had tapped one of them on the shoulder with his cane—and tapped him a thought peremptorily.

"How now?" said he. "Does no one wait here?"

They fell apart a little, and stood at attention, with something curious in their bearing, one and all.

"My service to his lordship, and say that I desire to speak with him."

They looked at one another in hesitation for a moment; then Humphries, the butler, came forward. "Your honor'll not have heard the news?" said he, a solemn gravity in face and tone.

"News?" quoth Mr. Caryl sharply, intrigued by so much show of mystery. "What news?"

"His lordship is very ill, sir. He had a seizure this morning when they came for him."

"A seizure?" said Mr. Caryl. And then: "When they came for him?" he echoed, struck by something odd in the man's utterance of those five words. "When who came for him?"

"The messengers, sir," replied the butler dejectedly. "Has your honor not heard?" And seeing the blank look on Mr. Caryl's face, he proceeded without waiting for an answer: "His lordship was impeached yesterday by his Grace of Wharton on a matter concerning the South Sea Company, and Lord Carteret—the secretary of state, your honor—sent this morning to arrest him."

"Sdeath!" ejaculated Mr. Caryll in his surprise, a surprise that was tempered with some dismay. "And he had a seizure, ye say?"

"An apoplexy, your honor. The doctors are with him now; Sir James, himself, is here. They're cupping him—so I hear from Mr. Tom, his lordship's man. I'd ha' thought your honor would ha' heard. 'Tis town talk, they say."

Mr. Caryll would have found it difficult to have said exactly what impression this news made upon him. In the main, however, he feared it left him cold.

"'Tis very regrettable," said he. He fell thoughtful a moment. Then: "Will you send word to Mistress Winthrop that I am here, and would speak with her, Humphries?"

Humphries conducted Mr. Caryll to the little white and gold withdrawing-room that was Hortensia's. There, in the little time that he waited, he revolved the situation as it now stood, and the temptation that had been with him for the past three days rose up now with a greater vigor. Should Lord Ostermore die, Temptation argued, he need no longer hesitate. Hortensia would be as much alone in the world as he was; worse, for life at Stretton House with her ladyship—from which even in the earl's lifetime she had been led to attempt to escape—must be a thing unbearable, and what alternative could he suggest but that she should become his wife?

She came to him presently, white-faced and with startled eyes. As she took his outstretched hands, she attempted a smile. "It is kind in you to come to me at such a time," she said.

"You mistake," said he, "as is but natural. I had not heard what had befallen. I came to ask your hand in marriage of his lordship."

Some faint color tinged her cheeks. "You had decided, then?"

"I had decided that his lordship must decide," he answered.

"And now?"

"And now it seems we must decide for ourselves if his lordship dies."

Her mind swung to the graver matter. "Sir James has every hope," she said, and added miserably: "I know not which to pray for, his recovery or his death."

"Why that?"

"Because if he survive it may be for worse. The secretary's agent is even now seeking evidence against him among his own papers. He is in the library at this moment, going through his lordship's desk."

Mr. Caryl started. That mention of Ostermore's desk brought vividly before his mind the recollection of the secret drawer wherein the earl had locked away the letter he had received from King James and his own reply, all packed as it was, with treason. If that drawer were discovered, and those papers found, then was Ostermore lost indeed, and did he survive this apoplexy, it would be to surrender his head upon the scaffold.

A moment he considered this, dispassionately. Then it broke upon his mind that were this to happen, Ostermore's blood would indirectly be upon his own head, since for the purpose of betrayal had he sought him out with that letter from the exiled Stuart—which, be it remembered, King James himself had no longer wished delivered.

It turned him cold with horror. He could not remain idle and let matters run their course. He must avert these discoveries if it lay within his power to do so, or else he must submit to a lifetime of remorse should Ostermore survive to be attainted of treason. He had made an end—a definite end—long since of his intention of working

Ostermore's ruin; he could not stand by now and see that ruin wrought as a result of the little that already he had done towards encompassing it.

"His papers must be saved," he said shortly. "I'll go to the library at once."

"But the secretary's agent is there already," she repeated.

"'Tis no matter for that," said he, moving towards the door. "His desk contains that which will cost him his head if discovered. I know it," he assured her, and left her cold with fear.

"But, then, you—you?" she cried. "Is it true that you are a Jacobite?"

"True enough," he answered.

"Lord Rotherby knows it," she informed him. "He told me it was so. If—if you interfere in this, it—it may mean your ruin." She came to him swiftly, a great fear written on her winsome face.

"Sh," said he. "I am not concerned to think of that at present. If Lord Ostermore perishes through his connection with the cause, it will mean worse than ruin for me—though not the ruin that you are thinking of."

"But what can you do?"

"That I go to learn."

"I will come with you, then."

He hesitated a moment, looking at her; then he opened the door, and held it for her, following after. He led the way across the hall to the library, and they went in together.

Lord Ostermore's secretaire stood open, and leaning over it, his

back towards them was a short, stiffly-built man in a snuff-colored coat. He turned at the sound of the closing door, and revealed the pleasant, chubby face of Mr. Green.

"Ha!" said Mr. Caryll. "Mr. Green again. I declare, sir, ye've the gift of ubiquity."

The spy stood up to regard him, and for all that his voice inclined to sharpness when he spoke, the habitual grin sat like a mask upon the mobile features. "What d'ye seek here?"

"Tis what I was about to ask you—what you are seeking; for that you seek is plain. I thought perhaps I might assist you."

"I nothing doubt you could," answered Mr. Green with a fresh leer, that contained this time something ironic. "I nothing doubt it! But by your leave, I'll pursue my quest without your assistance."

Mr. Caryll continued, nevertheless, to advance towards him, Mistress Hortensia remaining in the background, a quiet spectator, betraying nothing of the anxieties by which she was being racked.

"Ye're mighty curt this morning, Mr. Green," said Mr. Caryll, very airy. "Ye're mighty curt, and ye're entirely wrong so to be. You might find me a very useful friend."

"I've found you so before," said Mr. Green sourly.

"Ye've a nice sense of humor," said Mr. Caryll, head on one side, contemplating the spy with admiration in his glance.

"And a nicer sense of a Jacobite," answered Mr. Green.

"He will have the last word, you perceive," said Mr. Caryll to Hortensia.

"Harkee, Mr. Caryll," quoth Mr. Green, quite grimly now. "I'd ha' laid

you by the heels a month or more ago, but for certain friends o' mine who have other ends to serve."

"Sir, what you tell me shocks me. It shakes the very foundations of my faith in human nature. I have esteemed you an honest man, Mr. Green, and it seems—on your own confessing—that ye're no better than a damned rogue who neglects his duty to the state. I've a mind to see Lord Carteret, and tell him the truth of the matter."

"Ye shall have an opportunity before long, ecod!" said Mr. Green. "Good-morning to you! I've work to do." And he turned back to the desk.

"'Tis wasted labor," said Mr. Caryl, producing his snuff-box, and tapping it. "You might seek from now till the crack of doom, and not find what ye seek—not though you hack the desk to pieces. It has a secret, Mr. Green. I'll make a bargain with you for that secret."

Mr. Green turned again, and his shrewd, bright eyes scanned more closely that lean face, whose keenness was all dissembled now in an easy, languid smile. "A bargain?" grumbled the spy. "I faith, then, the secret's worthless."

"Ye think that? Pho! 'Tis not like your usual wit, Mr. Green. The letter that I carried into England, and that you were at such splendid pains to find at Maidstone, is in here." And he tapped the veneered top of the secretaire with his forefinger. "But ye'll not find it without my help. It is concealed as effectively—as effectively as it was upon my person when ye searched me. Now, sir, will ye treat with me? It'll save you a world of labor."

Mr. Green still looked at him. He licked his lips thoughtfully, cat-like. "What terms d'ye make?" he inquired, but his tone was very cold. His busy brain was endeavoring to conjecture what exactly might be Mr. Caryl's object in this frankness which Mr. Green was not fool enough

to believe sincere.

"Ah," said Mr. Caryll. "That is more the man I know." He tapped his snuff-box, and in that moment memory rather than inspiration showed him the thing he needed. "Did ye ever see 'The Constant Couple,' Mr. Green?" he inquired.

"'The Constant Couple'?" echoed Mr. Green, and though mystified, he must air his little jest. "I never saw any couple that was constant—leastways, not for long."

"Ha! Ye're a roguish wag! But 'The Constant Couple' I mean is a play."

"Oh, a play! Ay, I mind me I saw it some years ago, when 'twas first acted. But what has that to do with—"

"Ye'll understand in a moment," said Mr. Caryll, with a smile the spy did not relish. "D'ye recall a ruse of Sir Harry Wildairs to rid himself of the company of an intrusive old fool who was not wanted? D'ye remember what 'twas he did?"

Mr. Green, his head slightly on one side, was watching Mr. Caryll very closely, and not without anxiety. "I don't," said he, and dropped a hand to the pocket where a pistol lay, that he might be prepared for emergencies. "What did he do?"

"I'll show you," said Mr. Caryll. "He did this." And with a swift upward movement, he emptied his snuff-box full into the face of Mr. Green.

Mr. Green leapt back, with a scream of pain, hands to his eyes, and quite unconsciously set himself to play to the life the part of the intrusive old fellow in the comedy. Dancing wildly about the room, his eyes smarting and burning so that he could not open them, he bellowed of hell-fire and other hot things of which he was being so

intensely reminded.

"'Twill pass," Mr. Caryll consoled him. "A little water, and all will be well with you." He stepped to the door as he spoke, and flung it open. "Ho, there! Who waits?" he called.

Two or three footmen sprang to answer him. He took Mr. Green, still blind and vociferous, by the shoulders, and thrust him into their care. "This gentleman has had a most unfortunate accident. Get him water to wash his eyes—warm water. So! Take him. 'Twill pass, Mr. Green. 'Twill soon pass, I assure you."

He shut the door upon them, locked it, and turned to Hortensia, smiling grimly. Then he crossed quickly to the desk, and Hortensia followed him. He sat down, and pulled out bodily the bottom drawer on the right inside of the upper part of the desk, as he had seen Lord Ostermore do that day, a little over a week ago. He thrust his hand into the opening, and felt along the sides for some moments in vain. He went over the ground again slowly, inch by inch, exerting constant pressure, until he was suddenly rewarded by a click. The small trap disclosed itself. He pulled it up, and took some papers from the recess. He spread them before him. They were the documents he sought—the king's letter to Ostermore, and Ostermore's reply, signed and ready for dispatch. "These must be burnt," he said, "and burnt at once, for that fellow Green may return, or he may send others. Call Humphries. Get a taper from him."

She sped to the door, and did his bidding. Then she returned. She was plainly agitated. "You must go at once," she said, imploringly. "You must return to France without an instant's delay."

"Why, indeed, it would mean my ruin to remain now," he admitted. "And yet—" He held out his hands to her.

"I will follow you," she promised him. "I will follow you as soon as his

lordship is recovered, or—or at peace."

"You have well considered, sweetheart?" he asked her, holding her to him, and looking down into her gentle eyes.

"There is no happiness for me apart from you."

Again his scruples took him. "Tell Lord Ostermore—tell him all," he begged her. "Be guided by him. His decision for you will represent the decision of the world."

"What is the world to me? You are the world to me," she cried.

There was a rap upon the door. He put her from him, and went to open. It was Humphries with a lighted taper. He took it, thanked the man with a word, and shut the door in his face, ignoring the fact that the fellow was attempting to tell him something.

He returned to the desk. "Let us make quite sure that this is all," he said, and held the taper so that the light shone into the recess. It seemed empty at first; then, as the light penetrated farther, he saw something that showed white at the back of the cachette. He thrust in his hand, and drew out a small package bound with a ribbon that once might have been green but was faded now to yellow. He set it on the desk, and returned to his search. There was nothing else. The recess was empty. He closed the trap and replaced the drawer. Then he sat down again, the taper at his elbow, Mistress Winthrop looking on, facing him across the top of the secretaire, and he took up the package.

The ribbon came away easily, and some half-dozen sheets fell out and scattered upon the desk. They gave out a curious perfume, half of age, half of some essence with which years ago they had been imbued. Something took Mr. Caryl in the throat, and he could never explain whether it was that perfume or some premonitory emotion, some prophetic apprehension of what he was about to see.

He opened the first of those folded sheets, and found it to be a letter written in French and in an ink that had paled to yellow with the years that were gone since it had been penned. The fine, pointed writing was curiously familiar to Mr. Caryll. He looked at the signature at the bottom of the page. It swam before his eyes—ANTOINETTE—"Celle qui l'adore, Antoinette," he read, and the whole world seemed blotted out for him; all consciousness, his whole being, his every sense, seemed concentrated into his eyes as they gazed upon that relic of a deluded woman's dream.

He did not read. It was not for him to commit the sacrilege of reading what that girl who had been his mother had written thirty years ago to the man she loved—the man who had proved false as hell.

He turned the other letters over; opened them one by one, to make sure that they were of the same nature as the first, and what time he did so he found himself speculating upon the strangeness of Ostermore's having so treasured them. Perhaps he had thrust them into that secret recess, and there forgotten them; 'twas an explanation that sorted better with what Mr. Caryll knew of his father, than the supposition that so dull and practical and self-centered a nature could have been irradiated by a gleam of such tenderness as the hoarding of those letters might have argued.

He continued to turn them over, half-mechanically, forgetful of the urgent need to burn the treasonable documents he had secured, forgetful of everything, even Hortensia's presence. And meantime she watched him in silence, marvelling at this delay, and still more at the gray look that had crept into his face.

"What have you found?" she asked at last.

"A ghost," he answered, and his voice had a strained, metallic ring. He even vented an odd laugh. "A bundle of old love-letters."

"From her ladyship?"

"Her ladyship?" He looked up, an expression on his face which seemed to show that he could not at the moment think who her ladyship might be. Then as the picture of that bedaubed, bedizened and harsh-featured Jezebel arose in his mind to stand beside the sweet girl—image of his mother—as he knew her from the portrait that hung at Maligny—he laughed again. "No, not from her ladyship," said he. "From a woman who loved him years ago." And he turned to the seventh and last of those poor ghosts—the seventh, a fateful number.

He spread it before him; frowned down on it a moment with a sharp hiss of indrawn breath. Then he twisted oddly on his chair, and sat bolt upright, staring straight before him with unseeing eyes. Presently he passed a hand across his brow, and made a queer sound in his throat.

"What is it?" she asked.

But he did not answer; he was staring at the paper again. A while he sat thus; then with swift fevered fingers he took up once more the other letters. He unfolded one, and began to read. A few lines he read, and then—"O God!" he cried, and flung out his arms under stress of his emotions. One of them caught the taper that stood upon the desk; and swept it, extinguished, to the floor. He never heeded it, never gave a thought to the purpose for which it had been fetched, a purpose not yet served. He rose. He was white as the dead are white, and she observed that he was trembling. He took up the bundle of old letters, and thrust them into an inside pocket of his coat.

"What are you doing?" she cried, seeking at last to arouse him from the spell under which he appeared to have fallen. "Those letters —"

"I must see Lord Ostermore," he answered wildly, and made for the door, reeling like a drunkard in his walk.

CHAPTER XIX. THE END OF LORD OSTERMORE

In the ante-room communicating with Lord Ostermore's bedroom the countess was in consultation with Rotherby, who had been summoned by his mother when my lord was stricken.

Her ladyship occupied the window-seat; Rotherby stood beside her, leaning slightly against the frame of the open window. Their conversation was earnest and conducted in a low key, and one would naturally have conjectured that it had for subject the dangerous condition of the earl. And so it had—the dangerous condition of the earl's political, if not physical, affairs. To her ladyship and her son, the matter of their own future was of greater gravity than the matter of whether his lordship lived or died—which, whatever it may be, is not unreasonable. Since the impeachment of my lord and the coming of the messengers to arrest him, the danger of ruin and beggary were become more imminent—indeed, they impended, and measures must be concerted to avert these evils. By comparison with that, the earl's succumbing or surviving was a trivial matter; and the concern they had manifested in Sir James' news—when the important, well-nourished physician who had bled his lordship came to inform them that there was hope—was outward only, and assumed for pure decorum's sake.

"Whether he lives or dies," said the viscount pertinently, after the doctor had departed to return to his patient, "the measures to be taken are the same." And he repeated the substance of their earlier discussions upon this same topic. "If we can but secure the evidence of his treason with Caryl," he wound up, "I shall be able to make

terms with Lord Carteret to arrest the proceedings the government may intend, and thus avert the restitution it would otherwise enforce."

"But if he were to die," said her ladyship, as coldly, horribly calculating as though he were none of hers, "there would be an end to this danger. They could not demand restitution of the dead, nor impose fines upon him."

Rotherby shook his head. "Believe not that, madam," said he. "They can demand restitution of his heirs and impose their fines upon the estate. 'Twas done in the case of Chancellor Craggs, though he shot himself."

She raised a haggard face to his. "And do you dream that Lord Carteret would make terms with you?"

"If I can show him—by actual proof—that a conspiracy does exist, that the Stuart supporters are plotting a rising. Proof of that should be of value to Lord Carteret, of sufficient value to the government to warrant the payment of the paltry price I ask—that the impeachment against my father for his dealings with the South Sea Company shall not be allowed.

"But it might involve the worse betrayal of your father, Charles, and if he were to live—"

"Sdeath, mother, why must you harp on that? I a'n't the fool you think me," he cried. "I shall make it a further condition that my father have immunity. There will be no lack of victims once the plot is disclosed; and they may begin upon that coxcomb Caryl—the damned meddler who is at the bottom of all this garboil."

She sat bemused, her eyes upon the sunlit gardens below, where a faint breeze was stirring the shrub tops.

"There is," she said presently, "a secret drawer somewhere in his

desk. If he has papers they will, no doubt, be there. Had you not best be making search for them?"

He smiled darkly. "I have seen to that already," he replied.

"How?" excitedly. "You have got the papers?"

"No; but I have set an experienced hand to find them, and one, moreover, who has the right by virtue of his warrant—the messenger of the secretary of state."

She sat up, rigid. "Sdeath! What is't ye mean?"

"No need for alarm," he reassured her. "This fellow Green is in my pay, as well as in the secretary's, and it will profit him most to keep faith with me. He's a self-seeking dog, content to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, so that there be profit in it, and he'd sacrifice his ears to bring Mr. Caryll to the gallows. I have promised him that and a thousand pounds if we save the estates from confiscation."

She looked at him, between wonder and fear. "Can ye trust him?" she asked breathlessly.

He laughed softly and confidently. "I can trust him to earn a thousand pounds," he answered. "When he heard of the impeachment, he used such influence as he has to be entrusted with the arrest of his lordship; and having obtained his warrant, he came first to me to tell me of it. A thousand pounds is the price of him, body and soul. I bade him seek not only evidence of my lord's having received that plaguey stock, but also papers relating to this Jacobite plot into which his lordship has been drawn by our friend Caryll. He is at his work at present. And I shall hear from him when it is accomplished."

She nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "You have very well disposed, Charles," she approved him. "If your father lives, it should not be a

difficult matter—"

She checked suddenly and turned, while Rotherby, too, looked up and stepped quickly from the window-embrasure where he had stood.

The door of the bedroom had been suddenly pulled open, and Sir James came out, very pale and discomposd.

"Madam—your ladyship—my lord!" he gasped, his mouth working, his hands waving foolishly.

The countess rose to confront him, tall, severe and harsh. The viscount scowled a question. Sir James quailed before them, evidently in affliction.

"Madam—his lordship," he said, and by his eloquent gesture of dejection announced what he had some difficulty in putting into words.

She stepped forward, and took him by the wrist. "Is he dying?" she inquired.

"Have courage, madam," the doctor besought her.

The apparent irrelevancy of the request at such a moment, angered her. Her mood was dangerously testy. And had the doctor but known it, sympathy was a thing she had not borne well these many years.

"I asked you was he dying," she reminded him, with a cold sternness that beat aside all his attempts at subterfuge.

"Your ladyship—he is dead," he faltered, with lowered eyes.

"Dead?" she echoed dully, and her hand went to the region of her heart, her face turned livid under its rouge. "Dead?" she said again, and behind her, Rotherby echoed the dread word in a stupor almost equal to her own. Her lips moved to speak, but no words came. She staggered where she stood, and put her hand to her brow. Her son's

arms were quickly about her. He supported her to a chair, where she sank as if all her joints were loosened.

Sir James flew for restoratives; bathed her brow with a dampened handkerchief; held strong salts to her nostrils, and murmured words of foolish, banal consolation, whilst Rotherby, in a half-dreaming condition, stunned by the suddenness of the blow, stood beside her, mechanically lending his assistance and supporting her.

Gradually she mastered her agitation. It was odd that she should feel so much at losing what she valued so little. Leastways, it would have been odd, had it been that. It was not—it was something more. In the awful, august presence of death, stepped so suddenly into their midst, she felt herself appalled.

For nigh upon thirty years she had been bound by legal and churchly ties in a loveless union with Lord Ostermore—married for the handsome portion that had been hers, a portion which he had gamed away and squandered until, for their station, their circumstances were now absolutely straitened. They had led a harsh, discordant life, and the coming of a son, which should have bridged the loveless gulf between them, seemed but to have served to dig it wider. And the son had been just the harsh, unfeeling offspring that might be looked for from such a union. Thirty years of slavery had been her ladyship's, and in those thirty years her nature had been soured and warped, and what inherent sweetness it may once have known had long since been smothered and destroyed. She had no cause to love that man who had never loved her, never loved aught of hers beyond her jointure. And yet, there was the habit of thirty years. For thirty years they had been yoke-fellows, however detestable the yoke. But yesterday he had been alive and strong, a stupid, querulous thing maybe, but a living. And now he was so much carrion that should be given to the earth. In some such channel ran her ladyship's reflections during those few seconds in which she was recovering. For an instant

she was softened. The long-since dried-up springs of tenderness seemed like to push anew under the shock of this event. She put out a hand to take her son's.

"Charles!" she said, and surprised him by the tender note.

A moment thus; then she was herself again. "How did he die?" she asked the doctor; and the abruptness of the resumption of her usual manner startled Sir James more than aught in his experience of such scenes.

"It was most sudden, madam," answered he. "I had the best grounds for hope. I was being persuaded we should save him. And then, quite suddenly, without an instant's warning, he succumbed. He just heaved a sigh, and was gone. I could scarcely believe my senses, madam."

He would have added more particulars of his feelings and emotions—for he was of those who believe that their own impressions of a phenomenon are that phenomenon's most interesting manifestations—but her ladyship waved him peremptorily into silence.

He drew back, washing his hands in the air, an expression of polite concern upon his face. "Is there aught else I can do to be of service to your ladyship?" he inquired, solicitous.

"What else?" she asked, with a fuller return to her old self. "Ye've killed him. What more is there you can do?"

"Oh, madam—nay, madam! I am most deeply grieved that my—my —"

"His lordship will wait upon you to the door," said she, designating her son.

The eminent physician effaced himself from her ladyship's

attention. It was his boast that he could take a hint when one was given him; and so he could, provided it were broad enough, as in the present instance.

He gathered up his hat and gold-headed cane—the unfailing insignia of his order—and was gone, swiftly and silently.

Rotherby closed the door after him, and returned slowly, head bowed, to the window where his mother was still seated. They looked at each other gravely for a long moment.

"This makes matters easier for you," she said at length.

"Much easier. It does not matter now how far his complicity may be betrayed by his papers. I am glad, madam, to see you so far recovered from your weakness."

She shivered, as much perhaps at his tone as at the recollections he evoked. "You are very indifferent, Charles," said she.

He looked at her steadily, then slightly shrugged. "What need to wear a mask? Bah! Did he ever give me cause to feel for him?" he asked. "Mother, if one day I have a son of my own, I shall see to it that he loves me."

"You will be hard put to it, with your nature, Charles," she told him critically. Then she rose. "Will you go to him with me?" she asked.

He made as if to acquiesce, then halted. "No," he said, and there was repugnance in his tone and face. "Not—not now."

There came a knocking at the door, rapid, insistent. Grateful for the interruption, Rotherby went to open.

Mr. Green staggered forward with swollen eyes, his face inflamed with rage, and with something else that was not quite apparent to Rotherby.

"My lord!" he cried in a loud, angry voice.

Rotherby caught his wrist and checked him. "Sh! sir," he said gravely. "Not here." And he pushed him out again, her ladyship following them.

It was in the gallery—above the hall, in which the servants still stood idly about—that Mr. Green spattered out his wrathful tale of what had befallen in the library.

Rotherby shook him as if he had been a rat. "You cursed fool!" he cried. "You left him there—at the desk?"

"What help had I?" demanded Green with spirit. "My eyes were on fire. I couldn't see, and the pain of them made me helpless."

"Then why did ye not send word to me at once, you fool?"

"Because I was concerned only to stop my eyes from burning," answered Mr. Green, in a towering rage at finding reproof where he had come in quest of sympathy. "I have come to you at the first moment, damn you!" he burst out, in full rebellion. "And you'll use me civilly now that I am come, or—ecod!—it'll be the worse for your lordship."

Rotherby considered him through a faint mist that rage had set before his eyes. To be so spoken to—damned indeed!—by a dirty spy! Had he been alone with the man, there can be little doubt but that he would have jeopardized his very precarious future by kicking Mr. Green downstairs. But his mother saved him from that rashness. It may be that she saw something of his anger in his kindling eye, and thought it well to intervene.

She set a hand on his sleeve. "Charles!" she said to him in a voice that was dead cold with warning.

He responded to it, and chose discretion. He looked Green over, nevertheless. "I vow I'm very patient with you," said he, and Green had the discretion on his side to hold his tongue. "Come, man, while we stand talking here that knave may be destroying precious evidence."

And his lordship went quickly down the stairs, Mr. Green following hard upon his heels, and her ladyship bringing up the rear.

At the door of the library Rotherby came to a halt, and turned the handle. The door was locked. He beckoned a couple of footmen across the hall, and bade them break it open.

CHAPTER XX. Mr. CARYLL'S IDENTITY

"I must see Lord Ostermore!" had been Mr. Caryll's wild cry, as he strode to the door.

From the other side of it there came a sound of steps and voices. Some one was turning the handle.

Hortensia caught Mr. Caryll by the sleeve. "But the letters!" she cried frantically, and pointed to the incriminating papers which he had left, forgotten, upon the desk.

He stared at her a moment, and memory swept upon him in a flood. He mastered the wild agitation that had been swaying him, thrust the paper that he was carrying into his pocket, and turned to go back for the treasonable letters.

"The taper!" he exclaimed, and pointed to the extinguished candle on the floor. "What can we do?"

A sharp blow fell upon the lock of the door. He stood still, looking over his shoulder.

"Quick! Make haste!" Hortensia admonished him in her excitement. "Get them! Conceal them, at least! Do the best you can since we have not the means to burn them."

A second blow was struck, succeeded instantly by a third, and something was heard to snap. The door swung open, and Green and Rotherby sprang into the room, a brace of footmen at their heels. They were followed more leisurely by the countess; whilst a little flock

of servants brought up the rear, but checked upon the threshold, and hung there to witness events that held out such promise of being unusual.

Mr. Caryll swore through set teeth, and made a dash for the desk. But he was too late to accomplish his object. His hand had scarcely closed upon the letters, when he was, himself, seized. Rotherby and Green, on either side of him, held him in their grasp, each with one hand upon his shoulder and the other at his wrist. Thus stood he, powerless between them, and, after the first shock of it, cool and making no effort to disengage himself. His right hand was tightly clenched upon the letters.

Rotherby called a servant forward. "Take those papers from the thief's hand," he commanded.

"Stop!" cried Mr. Caryll. "Lord Rotherby, may I speak with you alone before you go further in a matter you will bitterly regret?"

"Take those papers from him," Rotherby repeated, swearing; and the servant bent to the task. But Mr. Caryll suddenly wrenched the hand away from the fellow and the wrist out of Lord Rotherby's grip.

"A moment, my lord, as you value your honor and your possessions!" he insisted. "Let me speak with Lord Ostermore first. Take me before him."

"You are before him now," said Rotherby. "Say on!"

"I demand to see Lord Ostermore."

"I am Lord Ostermore," said Rotherby.

"You? Since when?" said Mr. Caryll, not even beginning to understand.

"Since ten minutes ago," was the callous answer that first gave that

household the news of my lord's passing.

There was a movement, a muttering among the servants. Old Humphries broke through the group by the door, his heavy chops white and trembling, and in that moment Hortensia turned, awe-stricken, to ask her ladyship was this true. Her ladyship nodded in silence. Hortensia cried out, and sank to a chair as if beaten down by the news, whilst the old servant, answered, too, withdrew, wringing his hands and making foolish laments; and the tears of those were the only tears that watered the grave of John Caryll, fifth Earl of Ostermore.

As for Mr. Caryll, the shock of that announcement seemed to cast a spell upon him. He stood still, limp and almost numbed. Oh, the never-ceasing irony of things! That his father should have died at such a moment.

"Dead?" quoth he. "Dead? Is my lord dead? They told me he was recovering."

"They told you false," answered Rotherby. "So now—those papers!"

Mr. Caryll relinquished them. "Take them," he said. "Since that is so—take them."

Rotherby received them himself. "Remove his sword," he bade a footman.

Mr. Caryll looked sharply round at him. "My sword?" quoth he. "What do you mean by that? What right?"

"We mean to keep you by us, sir," said Mr. Green on his other side, "until you have explained what you were doing with those papers—what is your interest in them."

Meanwhile a servant had done his lordship's bidding, and Mr.

Caryll stood weaponless amid his enemies. He mastered himself at once. Here it was plain that he must walk with caution, for the ground, he perceived, was of a sudden grown most insecure and treacherous. Rotherby and Green in league! It gave him matter for much thought.

"There's not the need to hold me," said he quietly. "I am not likely to tire myself by violence. There's scarcely necessity for so much."

Rotherby looked up sharply. The cool, self-possessed tone had an intimidating note. But Mr. Green laughed maliciously, as he continued to mop his still watering eyes. He was acquainted with Mr. Caryll's methods, and knew that, probably, the more at ease he seemed, the less at ease he was.

Rotherby spread the letters on the desk, and scanned them with a glowing eye, Mr. Green at his elbow reading with him. The countess swept forward that she, too, might inspect this find.

"They'll serve their turn," said her son, and added to Caryll: "And they'll help to hang you."

"No doubt you find me mentioned in them," said Mr. Caryll.

"Ay, sir," snapped Green, "if not by name, at least as the messenger who is to explain that which the writers—the royal writer and the other—have out of prudence seen fit to exclude."

Hortensia looked up and across the room at that, a wild fear clutching at her heart. But Mr. Caryll laughed pleasantly, eyebrows raised as if in mild surprise. "The most excellent relations appear to prevail between you," said he, looking from Rotherby to Green. "Are you, too, my lord, in the secretary's pay?"

His lordship flushed darkly. "You'll clown it to the end," he sneered.

"And that's none so far off," snarled Mr. Green, who since the

peppering of his eyes, had flung aside his usual cherubic air. "Oh, you may sneer, sir," he mocked the prisoner. "But we have you fast. This letter was brought hither by you, and this one was to have been carried hence by you."

"The latter, sir, was a matter for the future, and you can hardly prove what a man will do; so we'll let that pass. As for the former—the letter which you say I brought—you'll remember that you searched me at Maidstone—"

"And I have your admission that the letter was upon you at the time," roared the spy, interrupting him—"your admission in the presence of that lady, as she can be made to witness."

Mistress Winthrop rose. "'Tis a lie," she said firmly. "I can not be made to witness."

Mr. Caryll smiled, and nodded across to her. "'Tis vastly kind in you, Mistress Winthrop. But the gentleman is mistook." He turned to Green. "Harkee, sirrah did I admit that I had carried that letter?"

Mr. Green shrugged. "You admitted that you carried a letter. What other letter should it have been but that?"

"Nay," smiled Mr. Caryll. "'Tis not for you to ask me. Rather is it for you to prove that the letter I admitted having carried and that letter are one and the same. 'Twill take a deal of proving, I dare swear."

"Ye'll be forsworn, then," put in her ladyship sourly. "For I can witness to the letter that you bore. Not only did I see it—a letter on that same fine paper—in my husband's hands on the day you came here and during your visit, but I have his lordship's own word for it that he was in the plot and that you were the go-between."

"Ah!" chuckled Mr. Green. "What now, sir? What now? By what fresh piece of acrobatics will you get out of that?"

"Ye're a fool," said Mr. Caryll with calm contempt, and fetched out his snuff-box. "D'ye dream that one witness will suffice to establish so grave a charge? Pah!" He opened his snuff-box to find it empty, and viciously snapped down the lid again. "Pah!" he said again, "ye've cost me a whole boxfull of Burgamot."

"Why did ye throw it in my face?" demanded Mr. Green. "What purpose did ye look to serve but one of treason? Answer me that!"

"I didn't like the way ye looked at me. 'Twas wanting respect, and I bethought me I would lessen the impudence of your expression. Have ye any other foolish questions for me?" And he looked again from Green to Rotherby, including both in his inquiry. "No?" He rose. "In that case, if you'll give me leave, and—"

"You do not leave this house," Rotherby informed him.

"I think you push hospitality too far. Will you desire your lackey to return me my sword? I have affairs elsewhere."

"Mr. Caryll, I beg that you will understand," said his lordship, with a calm that he was at some pains to maintain, "that you do not leave this house save in the care of the messengers from the secretary of state."

Mr. Caryll looked at him, and yawned in his face. "Ye're prodigiously tiresome," said he, "did ye but know how I detest disturbances. What shall the secretary of state require of me?"

"He'll require you on a charge of high treason," said Mr. Green.

"Have you a warrant to take me?"

"I have not, but—"

"Then how do you dare detain me, sir?" demanded Mr. Caryll sharply. "D'ye think I don't know the law?"

"I think you'll know a deal more of it shortly," countered Mr. Green.

"Meanwhile, sirs, I depart. Offer me violence at your peril." He moved a step, and then, at a sign from Rotherby, the lackey's hands fell on him again, and forced him back and down into his chair.

"Away with you for the warrant," said Rotherby to Green. "We'll keep him here till you return."

Mr. Green grinned at the prisoner, and was gone in great haste.

Mr. Caryll lounged back in his chair, and threw one leg over the other. "I have always endeavored," said he, "to suffer fools as gladly as a Christian should. So since you insist, I'll be patient until I have the ear of my Lord Carteret—who, I take it, is a man of sense. But if I were you, my lord, and you, my lady, I should not insist. Believe me, you'll cut poor figures. As for you, my lord, ye're in none such good odor, as it is."

"Let that be," snarled his lordship.

"If I mention it at all, I but do so in your lordship's own interests. It will be remembered that ye attempted to murder me once, and that will not be of any great help to such accusations as you may bring against me. Besides which, there is the unfortunate circumstance that it's widely known ye're not a man to be believed."

"Will you be silent?" roared his lordship, in a towering passion.

"If I trouble myself to speak at all, it is out of concern for your lordship," Mr. Caryll insisted sweetly. "And in your own interest, and your ladyship's, too, I'd counsel you to hear me a moment without witnesses."

His tone was calculatedly grave. Lord Rotherby looked at him, sneering; not so her ladyship. Less acquainted with his ways, the

absolute confidence and unconcern of his demeanor was causing her uneasiness. A man who was perilously entrammelled would not bear himself so easily, she opined. She rose, and crossed to her son's side.

"What have you to say?" she asked Mr. Caryl.

"Nay, madam," he replied, "not before these." And he indicated the servants.

"'Tis but a pretext to have them out of the room," said Rotherby.

Mr. Caryl laughed the notion to scorn. "If you think that—I give you my word of honor to attempt no violence, nor to depart until you shall give me leave," said he.

Rotherby, judging Mr. Caryl by his knowledge of himself, still hesitated. But her ladyship realized, in spite of her detestation of the man, that he was not of the temper of those whose word is to be doubted. She signed to the footmen.

"Go," she bade them. "Wait within call."

They departed, and Mr. Caryl remained seated for all that her ladyship was standing; it was as if by that he wished to show how little he was minded to move.

Her ladyship's eye fell upon Hortensia. "Do you go, too, child," she bade her.

Instead, Hortensia came forward. "I wish to remain, madam," she said.

"Did I ask you what you wished?" demanded the countess.

"My place is here," Hortensia explained. "Unless Mr. Caryl should, himself, desire me to depart."

"Nay, nay," he cried, and smiled upon her fondly—so fondly that the countess's eyes grew wider. "With all my heart, I desire you to remain. It is most fitting you should hear that which I have to say."

"What does it mean?" demanded Rotherby, thrusting himself forward, and scowling from one to the other of them. "What d'ye mean, Hortensia?"

"I am Mr. Caryll's betrothed wife," she answered quietly.

Rotherby's mouth fell open, but he made no sound. Not so her ladyship. A peal of shrill laughter broke from her. "La! What did I tell you, Charles?" Then to Hortensia: "I'm sorry for you, ma'am," said she. "I think ye've been a thought too long in making up your mind." And she laughed again.

"Lord Ostermore lies above stairs," Hortensia reminded her, and her ladyship went white at the reminder, the indecency of her laughter borne in upon her.

"Would ye lesson me, girl?" she cried, as much to cover her confusion as to vent her anger at the cause of it. "Ye've an odd daring, by God! Ye'll be well matched with his impudence, there."

Rotherby, singularly self-contained, recalled her to the occasion.

"Mr. Caryll is waiting," said he, a sneer in his voice.

"Ah, yes," she said, and flashing a last malignant glance upon Hortensia, she sank to a chair beside her, but not too near her.

Mr. Caryll sat back, his legs crossed, his elbows on his chair-arms, his finger-tips together. "The thing I have to tell you is of some gravity," he announced by way of preface.

Rotherby took a seat by the desk, his hand upon the treasonable letters. "Proceed, sir," he said, importantly. Mr. Caryll nodded, as in

acknowledgment of the invitation.

"I will admit, before going further, that in spite of the cheerful countenance I maintained before your lordship's friend, the bumbailiff, and your lackeys, I recognize that you have me in a very dangerous position."

"Ah!" from his lordship in a breath of satisfaction, and

"Ah!" from Hortensia in a gasp of apprehension.

Her ladyship retained a stony countenance, and a silence that sorted excellently with it.

"There is," Mr. Caryl proceeded, marking off the points on his fingers, "the incident at Maidstone; there is your ladyship's evidence that I was the bearer of just such a letter on the day that first I came here; there is the dangerous circumstance—of which Mr. Green, I am sure, will not fail to make a deal—of my intimacy with Sir Richard Everard, and my constant visits to his lodging, where I was, in fact, on the occasion when he met his death; there is the fact that I committed upon Mr. Green an assault with my snuff box for motives that, after all, admit of but one acceptable explanation; and, lastly, there is the circumstance that, apparently, if interrogated, I can show no good reason why I should be in England at all, where no apparent interest has called me or keeps me.

"Now, these matters are so trivial that taken separately they have no value whatever; taken conjointly, their value is not great; they do not contain evidence enough to justify the hanging of a dog. And yet, I realize that disturbed as the times are, fearful of sedition as the government finds itself in consequence of the mischief done to public credit by the South Sea disaster, and ready as the ministry is to see plots everywhere and to make examples, *pour discourager les autres*, if the accusation you intend is laid against me, backed by such

evidence as this, it is not impossible—indeed, it is not improbable—that it may—ah—tend to shorten my life."

"Sir," sneered Rotherby, "I declare you should have been a lawyer. We haven't a pleader of such parts and such lucidity at the whole bar."

Mr. Caryll nodded his thanks. "Your praise is very flattering, my lord," said he, with a wry smile, and then proceeded: "It is because I see my case to be so very nearly desperate, that I venture to hope you will not persevere in the course you are proposing to adopt."

Lord Rotherby laughed noiselessly. "Can you urge me any reasons why we should not?"

"If you could urge me any reasons why you should," said Mr. Caryll, "no doubt I should be able to show you under what misapprehensions you are laboring." He shot a keen glance at his lordship, whose face had suddenly gone blank. Mr. Caryll smiled quietly. "There is in this something that I do not understand," he resumed. "It does not satisfy me to suppose, as at first might seem, that you are acting out of sheer malice against me. You have scarcely cause to do that, my lord; and you, my lady, have none. That fool Green—patience—he conceives that he has suffered at my hands. But without your assistance Mr. Green would be powerless to hurt me. What, then, is it that is moving you?"

He paused, looking from one to the other of his declared enemies. They exchanged glances—Hortensia watching them, breathless, her own mind working, too, upon this question that Mr. Caryll had set, yet nowhere finding an answer.

"I had thought," said her ladyship at last, "that you promised to tell us something that it was in our interest to hear. Instead, you appear to be asking questions."

Mr. Caryll shifted in his chair. One glance he gave the countess,

then smiled. "I have sought at your hands the reasons why you should desire my death," said he slowly. "You withhold them. Be it so. I take it that you are ashamed of them; and so, their nature is not difficult to conjecture."

"Sir—" began Rotherby, hotly, half-starting from his seat.

"Nay, let him trundle on, Charles," said his mother. "He'll be the sooner done."

"Instead," proceeded Mr. Caryll, as if there had been no interruption, "I will now urge you my reasons why you should not so proceed."

"Ha!" snapped Rotherby. "They will need to be valid."

Mr. Caryll twisted farther round, to face his lordship more fully. "They are as valid," said he very impressively—so impressively and sternly that his hearers felt themselves turning cold under his words, filled with some mysterious apprehension. "They are as valid as were my reasons for holding my hand in the field out yonder, when I had you at the mercy of my sword, my lord. Neither more nor less. From that, you may judge them to be very valid."

"But ye don't name them," said her ladyship, attempting to conquer her uneasiness.

"I shall do so," said he, and turned again to his lordship. "I had no cause to love you that morning, nor at any time, my lord; I had no cause to think—as even you in your heart must realize, if so be that you have a heart, and the intelligence to examine it—I had no cause to think, my lord, that I should be doing other than a good deed by letting drive my blade. That such an opinion was well founded was proven by the thing you did when I turned my back upon you after sparing your useless life."

Rotherby broke in tempestuously, smiting the desk before him. "If you think to move us to mercy by such—"

"Oh, not to mercy would I move you," said Mr. Caryl, his hand raised to stay the other, "not to mercy, but to horror of the thing you contemplate." And then, in an oddly impressive manner, he launched his thunderbolt. "Know, then, that if that morning I would not spill your blood, it was because I should have been spilling the same blood that flows in my own veins; it was because you are my brother; because your father was my father. No less than that was the reason that withheld my hand."

He had announced his aim of moving them to horror; and it was plain that he had not missed it, for in frozen horror sat they all, their eyes upon him, their cheeks ashen, their mouths agape—even Hortensia, who from what already Mr. Caryl had told her, understood now more than any of them.

After a spell Rotherby spoke. "You are my brother?" he said, his voice colorless. "My brother? What are you saying?"

And then her ladyship found her voice. "Who was your mother?" she inquired, and her very tone was an insult, not to the man who sat there so much as to the memory of poor Antoinette de Maligny. He flushed to the temples, then paled again.

"I'll not name her to your ladyship," said he at, last, in a cold, imperious voice.

"I'm glad ye've so much decency," she countered.

"You mistake, I think," said he. "'Tis respect for my mother that inspires me." And his green eyes flashed upon the painted hag. She rose up a very fury.

"What are you saying?" she shrilled. "D'ye hear the filthy fellow,

Rotherby? He'll not name the wanton in my presence out of respect for her."

"For shame, madam! You are speaking of his mother," cried Hortensia, hot with indignation.

"Pshaw! 'Tis all an impudent lie—a pack of lies!" cried Rotherby. "He's crafty as all the imps of hell."

Mr. Caryll rose. "Here in the sight of God and by all that I hold most sacred, I swear that what I have said is true. I swear that Lord Ostermore—your father—was my father. I was born in France, in the year 1690, as I have papers upon me that will prove, which you may see, Rotherby."

His lordship rose. "Produce them," said he shortly.

Mr. Caryll drew from an inner pocket of his coat the small leather case that Sir Richard Everard had given him. From this he took a paper which he unfolded. It was a certificate of baptism, copied from the register of the Church of St. Antoine in Paris.

Rotherby held out his hand for it. But Mr. Caryll shook his head. "Stand here beside me, and read it," said he.

Obedying him, Rotherby went and read that authenticated copy, wherein it was declared that Sir Richard Everard had brought to the Church of St. Antoine for baptism a male child, which he had declared to be the son of John Caryll, Viscount Rotherby, and Antoinette de Maligny, and which had received in baptism the name of Justin.

Rotherby drew away again, his head sunk on his breast. Her ladyship was seated, her eyes upon her son, her fingers drumming absently at the arms of her chair. Then Rotherby swung round again.

"How do I know that you are the person designated there—this Justin Caryll?"

"You do not; but you may. Cast your mind back to that night at White's when you picked your quarrel with me, my lord. Do you remember how Stapleton and Collis spoke up for me, declared that they had known me from boyhood at Oxford, and had visited me at my chateau in France? What was the name of that chateau, my lord—do you remember?"

Rotherby looked at him, searching his memory. But he did not need to search far. At first glance the name of Maligny had seemed familiar to him. "It was Maligny," he replied, "and yet—"

"If more is needed to convince you, I can bring a hundred witnesses from France, who have known me from infancy. You may take it that I can establish my identity beyond all doubt."

"And what if you do?" demanded her ladyship suddenly. "What if you do establish your identity as my lord's bastard? What claim shall that be upon us?"

"That, ma'am," answered Mr. Caryl very gravely, "I wait to learn from my brother here."

CHAPTER XXI. THE LION'S SKIN

For a spell there was utter silence in that spacious, pillared chamber. Mr. Caryll and her ladyship had both resumed their chairs: the former spuriously calm; the latter making no attempt to conceal her agitation. Hortensia leant forward, an eager spectator, watching the three actors in this tragicomedy.

As for Rotherby, he stood with bent head and furrowed brow. It was for him to speak, and yet he was utterly at a loss for words. He was not moved at the news he had received, so much as dismayed. It dictated a course that would interfere with all his plans, and therefore a course unthinkable. So he remained puzzled how to act, how to deal with this unexpected situation.

It was her ladyship who was the first to break the silence. She had been considering Mr. Caryll through narrowing eyes, the corners of her mouth drawn down. She had caught the name of Maligny when it was uttered, and out of the knowledge which happened to be hers—though Mr. Caryll was ignorant of this—it set her thinking.

"I do not believe that you are the son of Mademoiselle de Maligny," she said at last. "I never heard that my lord had a son; I cannot believe there was so much between them."

Mr. Caryll stared, startled out of his habitual calm. Rotherby turned to her with an exclamation of surprise. "How?" he cried. "You knew, then? My father was—"

She laughed mirthlessly. "Your father would have married her had

he dared," she informed them. "'Twas to beg his father's consent that he braved his banishment and came to England. But his father was as headstrong as himself; held just such views as he, himself, held later where you were concerned. He would not hear of the match. I was to be had for the asking. My father was a man who traded in his children, and he had offered me, with a jointure that was a fortune, to the Earl of Ostermore as a wife for his son."

Mr. Caryll was listening, all ears. Some light was being shed upon much that had lain in darkness.

"And so," she proceeded, "your grandfather constrained your father to forget the woman he had left in France, and to marry me. I know not what sins I had committed that I should have been visited with such a punishment. But so it befell. Your father resisted, dallying with the matter for a whole year. Then there was a duel fought. A cousin of Mademoiselle de Maligny's crossed to England, and forced a quarrel upon your father. They met, and M. de Maligny was killed. Then a change set in in my lord's bearing, and one day, a month or so later, he gave way to his father's insistence, and we were wed. But I do not believe that my lord had left a son in France—I do not believe that had he done so, I should not have known it; I do not believe that under such circumstances, unfeeling as he was, he would have abandoned Mademoiselle de Maligny."

"You think, then," said Rotherby, "that this man has raked up this story to—"

"Consider what you are saying," cut in Mr. Caryll, with a flash of scorn. "Should I have come prepared with documents against such a happening as this?"

"Nay, but the documents might have been intended for some other purpose had my lord lived—some purpose of extortion," suggested her ladyship.

"But consider again, madam, that I am wealthy—far wealthier than was ever my Lord Ostermore, as my friends Collis, Stapleton and many another can be called to prove. What need, then, had I to extort?"

"How came you by your means, being what you say you are?" she asked him.

Briefly he told her how Sir Richard Everard had cared for him, for his mother's sake; endowed him richly upon adopting him, and since made him heir to all his wealth, which was considerable. "And for the rest, madam, and you, Rotherby, set doubts on one side. Your ladyship says that had my lord had a son you must have heard of it. But my lord, madam, never knew he had a son. Tell me—can you recall the date, the month at least, in which my lord returned to England?"

"I can, sir. It was at the end of April of '89. What then?"

Mr. Caryll produced the certificate again. He beckoned Rotherby, and held the paper under his eyes. "What date is there—the date of birth?"

Rotherby read: "The third of January of 1690."

Mr. Caryll folded the paper again. "That will help your ladyship to understand how it might happen that my lord remained in ignorance of my birth." He sighed as he replaced the case in his pocket. "I would he had known before he died," said he, almost as if speaking to himself.

And now her ladyship lost her temper. She saw Rotherby wavering, and it angered her; and angered, she committed a grave error. Wisdom lay in maintaining the attitude of repudiation; it would at least have afforded some excuse for her and Rotherby. Instead, she now recklessly flung off that armor, and went naked down into the fray.

"A fig for't all!" she cried, and snapped her fingers. She had risen, and she towered there, a lean and malevolent figure, her head-dress nodding foolishly. "What does it matter that you be what you claim to be? Is it to weigh with you, Rotherby?"

Rotherby turned grave eyes upon her. He was, it seemed, not quite rotten through and through; there was still in him—in the depths of him—a core that was in a measure sound; and that core was reached. Most of all had the story weighed with him because it afforded the only explanation of why Mr. Caryll had spared his life that morning of the duel. It was a matter that had puzzled him, as it had puzzled all who had witnessed the affront that led to the encounter.

Between that and the rest—to say nothing of the certificate he had seen, which he could not suppose a forgery—he was convinced that Mr. Caryll was the brother that he claimed to be. He gathered from his mother's sudden anger that she, too, was convinced, in spite of herself, by the answers Mr. Caryll had returned to all her arguments against the identity he claimed.

He hated Mr. Caryll no whit less for what he had learnt; if anything, he hated him more. And yet a sense of decency forbade him from persecuting him now, as he had intended, and delivering to the hangman. From ordinary murder, once in the heat of passion—as we have seen—he had not shrunk. But fratricide appeared—such is the effect of education—a far, far graver thing, even though it should be indirect fratricide of the sort that he had contemplated before learning that this man was his brother.

There seemed to be one of two only courses left him: to provide Mr. Caryll with the means of escape, or else to withhold such evidence as he intended to supply against him, and to persuade—to compel, if necessary—his mother to do the same. When all was said, his interests need not suffer very greatly. His position would not be quite

so strong, perhaps, if he but betrayed a plot without delivering up any of the plotters; still, he thought, it should be strong enough. His father dead, out of consideration of the signal loyalty his act must manifest, he thought the government would prove grateful and forbear from prosecuting a claim for restitution against the Ostermore estates.

He had, then, all but resolved upon the cleaner course, when, suddenly, something that in the stress of the moment he had gone near to overlooking, was urged upon his attention.

Hortensia had risen and had started forward at her ladyship's last words. She stood before his lordship now with pleading eyes, and hands held out. "My lord," she cried, "you cannot do this thing! You cannot do it!"

But instead of moving him to generosity, by those very words she steeled his heart against it, and proved to him that, after all, his potentialities for evil were strong enough to enable him to do the very thing she said he could not. His brow grew black as midnight; his dark eyes raked her face, and saw the agony of apprehension for her lover written there. He drew breath, hissing and audible, glanced once at Caryll; then: "A moment!" said he.

He strode to the door and called the footmen, then turned again.

"Mr. Caryll," he said in a formal voice, "will you give yourself the trouble of waiting in the ante-room? I need to consider upon this matter."

Mr. Caryll, conceiving that it was with his mother that Rotherby intended to consider, rose instantly. "I would remind you, Rotherby, that time is pressing," said he.

"I shall not keep you long," was Rotherby's cold reply, and Mr. Caryll went out.

"What now, Charles?" asked his mother. "Is this child to remain?"

"It is the child that is to remain," said his lordship. "Will your ladyship do me the honor, too, of waiting in the ante-room?" and he held the door for her.

"What folly are you considering?" she asked.

"Your ladyship is wasting time, and time, as Mr. Caryl has said, is pressing."

She crossed to the door, controlled almost despite herself by the calm air of purpose that was investing him. "You are not thinking of—"

"You shall learn very soon of what I am thinking, ma'am. I beg that you will give us leave."

She paused almost upon the threshold. "If you do a rashness, here, remember that I can still act without you," she reminded him. "You may choose to believe that that man is your brother, and so, out of that, and"—she added with a cruel sneer at Hortensia—"other considerations, you may elect to let him go. But remember that you still have me to reckon with. Whether he prove of your blood or not, he cannot prove himself of mine—thank God!"

His lordship bowed in silence, preserving an unmoved countenance, whereupon she cursed him for a fool, and passed out. He closed the door, and turned the key, Hortensia watching him in a sort of horror. "Let me go!" she found voice to cry at last, and advanced towards the door herself. But Rotherby came to meet her, his face white, his eyes glowing. She fell away before his opening arms, and he stood still, mastering himself.

"That man," he said, jerking a backward thumb at the closed door, "lives or dies, goes free or hangs, as you shall decide, Hortensia."

She looked at him, her face haggard, her heart beating high in her

throat as if to suffocate her. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"You love him!" he growled. "Pah! I see it in your eyes—in your tremors—that you do. It is for him that you are afraid, isn't not?"

"Why do you mock me with it?" she inquired with dignity.

"I do not mock you, Hortensia. Answer me! Is it true that you love him?"

"It is true," she answered steadily. "What is't to you?"

"Everything!" he answered hotly. "Everything! It is Heaven and Hell to me. Ten days ago, Hortensia, I asked you to marry me—"

"No more," she begged him, an arm thrown out to stay him.

"But there is more," he answered, advancing again. "This time I can make the offer more attractive. Marry me, and Caryl is not only free to depart, but no evidence shall be laid against him. I swear it! Refuse me, and he hangs as surely—as surely as you and I talk together here this moment."

Cold eyes scathed him with contempt. "God!" she cried. "What manner of monster are you, my lord? To speak so—to speak of marriage to me, and to speak of hanging a man who is son to that same father of yours who lies above stairs, not yet turned cold. Are you human at all?"

"Ay—and in nothing so human as in my love for you, Hortensia."

She put her hands to her face. "Give me patience!" she prayed. "The insult of it after what has passed! Let me go, sir; open that door, and let me go."

He stood regarding her a moment, with lowering brows. Then he turned, and went slowly to the door. "He dies, remember!" said he,

and the words, the sinister tone and the sinister look that was stamped upon his face, shattered her spirit as at a blow.

"No, no!" she faltered, and advanced a step or two. "Oh, have pity!"

"When you show me pity," he answered.

She was beaten. "You—you swear to let him go—to see him safely out of England—if—if I consent?"

His eyes blazed. He came back swiftly, and she stood, a frozen thing, passively awaiting him; a frozen thing, she let him take her in his arms, yielding herself in horrific surrender.

He held her close a moment, the blood surging to his face, and glowing darkly through the swarthy skin. "Have I conquered, then?" he cried. "You'll marry me, Hortensia?"

"At that price," she answered piteously, "at that price."

"Shalt find me a gentle, loving husband, ever. I swear it before Heaven!" he vowed, the ardor of his passion softening his nature, as steel is softened in the fire.

"Then be it so," she said, and her tone was less cold, for she began to glow, as it were, with the ardor of the sacrifice that she was making—began to experience the exalted ecstasy of martyrdom. "Save him, and you shall find me ever a dutiful wife to you, my lord—a dutiful wife."

"And loving?" he demanded greedily.

"Even that. I promise it," she answered.

With a hoarse cry, he stooped to kiss her; then, with an oath, he checked, and flung her from him so violently that she hurtled to a chair and sank to it, overbalanced. "No," he roared, like a mad thing now.

"Hell and damnation—no!"

A wild frenzy of jealousy had swept aside his tenderness. He was sick and faint with the passion of it of this proof of how deeply she must love that other man. He strove to control his violence. He snarled at her, in his endeavors to subdue the animal, the primitive creature that he was at heart. "If you can love him so much as that, he had better hang, I think." He laughed on a high, fierce note. "You have spoke his sentence, girl! D'ye think I'd take you so—at second hand? Oh, s'death! What d'ye deem me?"

He laughed again—in his throat now, a quivering; half-sobbing laugh of anger—and crossed to the door, her eyes following him, terrified; her mind understanding nothing of this savage. He turned the key, and flung wide the door with a violent gesture. "Bring him in!" he shouted.

They entered—Mr. Caryll with the footmen at his heels, a frown between his brows, his eyes glancing quickly and searchingly from Rotherby to Hortensia. After him came her ladyship, no less inquisitive of look. Rotherby dismissed the lackeys, and closed the door again. He flung out an arm to indicate Hortensia.

"This little fool," he said to Caryll, "would have married me to save your life."

Mr. Caryll raised his brows. The words relieved his fears. "I am glad, sir, that you perceive she would have been a fool to do so. You, I take it, have been fool enough to refuse the offer."

"Yes, you damned play-actor! Yes!" he thundered. "D'ye think I want another man's cast-offs?"

"That is an overstatement," said Mr. Caryll. "Mistress Winthrop is no cast-off of mine."

"Enough said!" snapped Rotherby. He had intended to say much, to do some mighty ranting. But before Mr. Caryll's cold half-bantering reduction of facts to their true values, he felt himself robbed of words. "You hang!" he ended shortly.

"Ye're sure of that?" questioned Mr. Caryll.

"I would I were as sure of Heaven."

"I think you may be—just about as sure," Mr. Caryll rejoined, entirely unperturbed, and he sauntered forward towards Hortensia. Rotherby and his mother watched him, exchanging glances.

Then Rotherby shrugged and sneered. "'Tis his bluster," said he. "He'll be a farceur to the end. I doubt he's half-witted."

Mr. Caryll never heeded him. He was bending beside Hortensia. He took her hand, and bore it to his lips. "Sweet," he murmured, "'twas a treason that you intended. Have you, then, no faith in me? Courage, sweetheart, they cannot hurt me."

She clutched his hands, and looked up into his eyes. "You but say that to comfort me!" she cried.

"Not so," he answered gravely. "I tell you no more than what is true. They think they hold me. They will cheat, and lie and swear falsely to the end that they may destroy me. But they shall have their pains for nothing."

"Ay—depend upon that," Rotherby mocked him. "Depend upon it—to the gallows."

Mr. Caryll's curious eyes smiled upon his brother, but his lips were contemptuous. "I am of your own blood, Rotherby—your brother," he said again, "and once already out of that consideration I have spared your life—because I would not have a brother's blood upon my hands." He sighed, and continued: "I had hoped that you had enough

humanity to do the same. I deplore that you should lack it; but I deplore it for your own sake, because, after all, you are my brother. Apart from that, it matters nothing to me."

"Will it matter nothing when you are proved a Jacobite spy?" cried her ladyship, enraged beyond endurance by this calm scorn of them. "Will it matter nothing when it is proved that you carried that letter, and would have carried that other—that you were empowered to treat in your exiled master's name? Will that matter nothing?"

He looked at her an instant, then, as if utterly disdainful to answer her, he turned again to Rotherby. "I were a fool and blind, did I not see to the bottom of this turbid little puddle upon which you think to float your argosies. You are selling me. You are to make a bargain with the government to forbear the confiscations your father has incurred out of consideration of the service you can render by disclosing this plot, and you would throw me in as something tangible—in earnest of the others that may follow. Have I sounded the depths of your intent?"

"And if you have—what then?" demanded sullen Rotherby.

"This, my lord," answered Mr. Caryll, and he quoted: "'The man that once did sell the lion's skin while the beast lived, was killed with hunting him. Remember that!'"

They looked at him, impressed by the ringing voice in which he had spoken—a voice in which the ring was of mingled mockery and exultation. Then her ladyship shook off the impression, and laughed.

"With what d'ye threaten us?" she asked contemptuously.

"I—threaten, ma'am? Nay, I am incapable of threatening. I do not threaten. I have reasoned with you, exhorted you, shown you cause why, had you one spark of decency left, you would allow me to depart and shield me from the law you have invoked to ruin me. I have hoped for your own sakes that you would be moved so to do. But since you

will not—" He paused and shrugged. "On your own heads be it."

"On our own heads be what?" demanded Rotherby.

But Mr. Caryll smiled, and shook his head. "Did you know all, it might indeed influence your decision; and I would not have that happen. You have chosen, have you not, Rotherby? You will sell me, you will hang me—me, your father's son. Poor Rotherby! From my soul I pity you!"

"Pity me? Death! You impudent rogue! Keep your pity for those that need it."

"That is why I offer it you, Rotherby," said Mr. Caryll, almost sadly. "In all my life, I have not met a man who stood more sorely in need of it, nor am I ever like to meet another."

There was a movement without, a tap at the door; and Humphries entered to announce Mr. Green's return, accompanied by Mr. Second Secretary Templeton, and without waiting for more, he ushered them into the room.

CHAPTER XXII. THE HUNTERS

To the amazement of them all, there entered a tall gentleman in a full-bottomed wig, with a long, pale face, a resolute mouth, and a pair of eyes that were keen, yet kindly. Close upon the heels of the second secretary came Mr. Green. Humphries withdrew, and closed the door.

Mr. Templeton made her ladyship a low bow.

"Madam," said he very gravely, "I offer your ladyship—and you, my lord—my profoundest condolence in the bereavement you have suffered, and my scarcely less profound excuses for this intrusion upon your grief."

Mr. Templeton may or may not have reflected that the grief upon which he deplored his intrusion was none so apparent.

"I had not ventured to do so," he continued, "but that your lordship seemed to invite my presence."

"Invited it, sir?" questioned Rotherby with deference. "I should scarcely have presumed so far as to invite it."

"Not directly, perhaps," returned the second secretary. His was a deep, rich voice, and he spoke with great deliberateness, as if considering well each word before allowing it utterance. "Not directly, perhaps; but in view of your message to Lord Carteret, his lordship has desired me to come in person to inquire into this matter for him, before proceeding farther. This fellow," indicating Green, "brought information from you that a Jacobite—an agent of James Stuart—is being detained here, and that your lordship has a communication to make to the secretary of state."

Rotherby bowed his assent. "All I desired that Mr. Green should do meanwhile," said he, "was to procure a warrant for this man's arrest. My revelations would have followed that. Has he the warrant?"

"Your lordship may not be aware," said Mr. Templeton, with an increased precision of diction, "that of late so many plots have been disclosed and have proved in the end to be no plots at all, that his lordship has resolved to proceed now with the extremest caution. For it is not held desirable by his majesty that publicity should be given to such matters until there can be no doubt that they are susceptible to proof. Talk of them is disturbing to the public quiet, and there is already disturbance enough, as it unfortunately happens. Therefore, it is deemed expedient that we should make quite sure of our ground before proceeding to arrests."

"But this plot is no sham plot," cried Rotherby, with the faintest show of heat, out of patience with the other's deliberateness. "It is a very real danger, as I can prove to his lordship."

"It is for the purpose of ascertaining that fact," resumed the second secretary, entirely unruffled, "for the purpose of ascertaining it before taking any steps that would seem to acknowledge it, that my Lord Carteret has desired me to wait upon you—that you may place me in possession of the circumstances that have come to your knowledge."

Rotherby's countenance betrayed his growing impatience. "Why, for that matter, it has come to my knowledge that a plot is being hatched by the friends of the Stuart, and that a rising is being prepared, the present moment being considered auspicious, while the people's confidence in the government is shaken by the late South Sea Company disaster."

Mr. Templeton wagged his head gently. "That, sir—if you will permit the observation—is the preface of all the disclosures that have lately been made to us. The consolation, sir, for his majesty's friends, has

been that in no case did the subsequent matter make that preface good."

"It is in that particular, then, that my disclosures shall differ from those others," said Rotherby, in a tone that caused Mr. Templeton afterwards to describe him as "a damned hot fellow."

"You have evidence?"

"Documentary evidence. A letter from the Pretender himself amongst it."

A becoming gravity overspread Mr. Templeton's clear-cut face. "That would be indeed regrettable," said he. It was plain that whatever the second secretary might display when the plot was disclosed to him, he would display none of that satisfaction upon which Rotherby had counted. "To whom, sir, let me ask, is this letter indited?"

"To my late father," answered his lordship.

Mr. Templeton made an exclamation, whose significance was not quite clear.

"I have discovered it since his death," continued Rotherby. "I was but in time to wrest it from the hands of that spy of the Pretender's, who was in the act of destroying it when I caught him. My devotion to his majesty made my course clear, sir—and I desired Mr. Green to procure a warrant for this traitor's arrest."

"Sir," said Mr. Templeton, regarding him with an eye in which astonishment was blent with admiration, "this is very loyal in you—very loyal under the—ah—peculiar circumstances of the affair. I do not think that his majesty's government, considering to whom this letter was addressed, could have censured you even had you suppressed it. You have conducted yourself, my lord—if I may venture upon a criticism of your lordship's conduct—with a patriotism worthy of the

best models of ancient Rome. And I am assured that his majesty's government will not be remiss in signifying appreciation of this very lofty loyalty of yours."

Lord Rotherby bowed low, in acknowledgment of the compliment. Her ladyship concealed a cynical smile under cover of her fan. Mr. Caryll—standing in the background beside Hortensia's chair—smiled, too, and poor Hortensia, detecting his smile, sought to take comfort in it.

"My son," interposed the countess, "is, I am sure, gratified to hear you so commend his conduct."

Mr. Templeton bowed to her with a great politeness. "I should be a stone, ma'am, did I not signify my—ah—appreciation of it."

"There is a little more to follow, sir," put in Mr. Caryll, in that quiet manner of his. "I think you will find it blunt the edge of his lordship's lofty loyalty—cause it to savor less like the patriotism of Rome, and more like that of Israel."

Mr. Templeton turned upon him a face of cold displeasure. He would have spoken, but that whilst he was seeking words of a becoming gravity, Rotherby forestalled him.

"Sir," he exclaimed, "what I did, I did though my ruin must have followed. I know what this traitor has in mind. He imagines I have a bargain to make. But you must see, sir, that in no sense is it so, for, having already surrendered the facts, it is too late now to attempt to sell them. I am ready to yield up the letters that I have found. No consideration could induce me to do other; and yet, sir, I venture to hope that in return, the government will be pleased to see that I have some claim upon my country's recognition for the signal service I am rendering her—and in rendering which I make a holocaust of my father's honor."

"Surely, surely, sir," murmured Mr. Templeton, but his countenance told of a lessening enthusiasm in his lordship's Roman patriotism. "Lord Carteret, I am sure, would never permit so much—ah—devotion to his majesty to go unrewarded."

"I only ask, sir—and I ask it for the sake of my father's name, which stands in unavoidable danger of being smirched—that no further shame be heaped upon it than that which must result from the horror with which the discovery of this plot will inspire all right-thinking subjects."

Mr. Caryll smiled and nodded. He judged in a detached spirit—a mere spectator at a play—and he was forced to admit to himself that it was subtly done of his brother, and showed an astuteness in this thing, at least, of which he had never supposed him capable.

"There is, sir," Rotherby proceeded, "the matter of my father's dealings with the South Sea Company. He is no longer alive to defend himself from the accusations—from the impeachment which has been levelled against him by our enemy, the Duke of Wharton. Therefore, it might be possible to make it appear as if his dealings were—ah—not—ah—quite such as should befit an upright gentleman. There is that, and there is this greater matter against him. Between the two, I should never again be able to look my fellow-countrymen in the face. Yet this is the more important since the safety of the kingdom is involved; whilst the other is but a personal affair, and trivial by comparison.

"I will beg, sir, that out of consideration for my disclosing this dastardly conspiracy—which I cannot do without disclosing my father's misguided share in it—I will implore, sir, that out of that consideration, Lord Carteret will see fit to dispose that the South Sea Company affair is allowed to be forgotten. It has already been paid for by my father with his life."

Mr. Templeton looked at the young man before him with eyes of real commiseration. He was entirely duped, and in his heart he regretted that for a moment he could have doubted Rotherby's integrity of purpose.

"Sir," he said, "I offer you my sympathy—my profoundest sympathy; and you, my lady.

"As for this South Sea Company affair, well—I am empowered by Lord Carteret to treat only of the other matter, and to issue or not a warrant for the apprehension of the person you are detaining, after I have investigated the grounds upon which his arrest is urged. Nevertheless, sir, I think I can say—indeed, I think I can promise—that in consideration of your readiness to deliver up these letters, and provided their nature is as serious as you represent, and also in consideration of this, your most signal proof of loyalty, Lord Carteret will not wish to increase the load which already you have to bear."

"Oh, sir!" cried Rotherby in the deepest emotion, "I have no words in which to express my thanks."

"Nor I," put in Mr. Caryl, "words in which to express my admiration. A most excellent performance, Rotherby. I had not credited you with so much ability."

Mr. Templeton frowned upon him again. "Ye betray a singular callousness, sir," said he.

"Nay, sir; not callousness. Merely the ease that springs from a tranquil conscience."

Her ladyship glanced across at him, and sneered audibly. "You hear the poisonous traitor, sir. He glories in a tranquil conscience, in spite of this murderous matter to which he stood committed."

Rotherby turned aside to take the letters from the desk. He thrust

them into Mr. Templeton's hands. "Here, sir, is a letter from King James to my father, and here is a letter from my father to King James. From their contents, you will gather how far advanced are matters, what devilries are being hatched here in his majesty's dominions."

Mr. Templeton received them, and crossed to the window that he might examine them. His countenance lengthened. Rotherby took his stand beside his mother's chair, both observing Mr. Caryll, who, in his turn, was observing Mr. Templeton, a faint smile playing round the corners of his mouth. Once they saw him stoop and whisper something in Hortensia's ear, and they caught the upward glance of her eyes, half fear, half question.

Mr. Green, by the door, stood turning his hat in his hands, furtively watching everybody, whilst drawing no attention to himself—a matter in which much practice had made him perfect.

At last Templeton turned, folding the letters. "This is very grave, my lord," said he, "and my Lord Carteret will no doubt desire to express in person his gratitude and his deep sense of the service you have done him. I think you may confidently expect to find him as generous as you hope."

He pocketed the letters, and raised a hand to point at Mr. Caryll. "This man?" he inquired laconically.

"Is a spy of King James's. He is the messenger who bore my father that letter from the Pretender, and he would no doubt have carried back the answer had my father lived."

Mr. Templeton drew a paper from his pocket, and crossed to the desk. He sat down, and took up a quill. "You can prove this, of course?" he said, testing the point of his quill upon his thumb-nail.

"Abundantly," was the ready answer. "My mother can bear witness to the fact that 'twas he brought the Pretender's letter, and there is no

lack of corroboration. Enough, I think, would be afforded by the assault made by this rogue upon Mr. Green, of which, no doubt, you are already informed, sir. His object—this proved object—was to possess himself of those papers that he might destroy them. I but caught him in time, as my servants can bear witness, as they can also bear witness to the circumstance that we were compelled to force an entrance here, and to use force to him to obtain the letters from him."

Mr. Templeton nodded. "'Tis a clear case, then," said he, and dipped his pen.

"And yet," put in Mr. Caryll, in an indolent, musing voice, "it might be made to look as clear another way."

Mr. Templeton scowled at him. "The opportunity shall be afforded you," said he. "Meanwhile—what is your name?"

Mr. Caryll looked whimsically at the secretary a moment; then flung his bomb. "I am Justin Caryll, Sixth Earl of Ostermore, and your very humble servant, Mr. Secretary."

The effect was ludicrous—from Mr. Caryll's point of view—and yet it was disappointing. Five pairs of dilating eyes confronted him, five gaping mouths. Then her ladyship broke into a laugh.

"The creature's mad—I've long suspected it." And she meant to be taken literally; his many whimsicalities were explained to her at last. He was, indeed, half-witted, as he now proved.

Mr. Templeton, recovering, smote the table angrily. He thought he had good reason to lose his self-control on this occasion, though it was a matter of pride with him that he could always preserve an unruffled calm under the most trying circumstances. "What is your name, sir?" he demanded again.

"You are hard of hearing, sir, I think. I am Lord Ostermore. Set

down that name in the warrant if you are determined to be bubbled by that fellow there and made to look foolish afterwards with my Lord Carteret."

Mr. Templeton sat back in his chair, frowning; but more from utter bewilderment now than anger.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Caryll, "if I were to explain, it would help you to see the imposture that is being practiced upon you. As for the allegations that have been made against me—that I am a Jacobite spy and an agent of the Pretender's—" He shrugged, and waved an airy hand. "I scarce think there will remain the need for me to deny them when you have heard the rest."

Rotherby took a step forward, his face purple, his hands clenched. Her ladyship thrust out a bony claw, clutched at his sleeve, and drew him back and into the chair beside her. "Pho! Charles," she said; "give the fool rope, and he'll hang himself, never doubt it—the poor, witless creature."

Mr. Caryll sauntered over to the secretaire, and leaned an elbow on the top of it, facing all in the room.

"I admit, Mr. Secretary," said he, "that I had occasion to assault Mr. Green, to the end that I might possess myself of the papers he was seeking in this desk."

"Why, then—" began Mr. Templeton.

"Patience, sir! I admit so much, but I admit no more. I do not, for instance, admit that the object—the object itself—of my search was such as has been represented."

"What then? What else?" growled Rotherby.

"Ay, sir—what else?" quoth Mr. Templeton.

"Sir," said Mr. Caryl, with a sorrowful shake of the head, "I have already startled you, it seems, by one statement. I beg that you will prepare yourself to be startled by another." Then he abruptly dropped his languor. "I should think twice, sir," he advised, "before signing that warrant, were I in your place, to do so would be to render yourself the tool of those who are plotting my ruin, and ready to bear false witness that they may accomplish it. I refer," and he waved a hand towards the countess and his brother, "to the late Lord Ostermore's mistress and his natural son, there."

In their utter stupefaction at the unexpectedness and seeming wildness of the statement, neither mother nor son could find a word to say. No more could Mr. Templeton for a moment. Then, suddenly, wrathfully: "What are you saying, sir?" he roared.

"The truth, sir."

"The truth?" echoed the secretary.

"Ay, sir—the truth. Have ye never heard of it?"

Mr. Templeton sat back again. "I begin to think," said he, surveying through narrowing eyes the slender graceful figure before him, "that her ladyship is right that you are mad; unless—unless you are mad of the same madness that beset Ulysses. You remember?"

"Let us have done," cried Rotherby in a burst of anger, leaping to his feet. "Let us have done, I say! Are we to waste the day upon this Tom o' Bedlam? Write him down as Caryl—Justin Caryl—'tis the name he's known by; and let Green see to the rest."

Mr. Templeton made an impatient sound, and poised his pen.

"Ye are not to suppose, sir," Mr. Caryl stayed him, "that I cannot support my statements. I have by me proofs—irrefragable proofs of what I say."

"Proofs?" The word seemed to come from, every member of that little assembly—if we except Mr. Green, whose face was beginning to betray his uneasiness. He was not so ready as the others to believe, that Mr. Caryll was mad. For him, the situation asked some other explanation.

"Ay—proofs," said Mr. Caryll. He had drawn the case from his pocket again. From this he took the birth-certificate, and placed it before Mr. Templeton, "Will you glance at that, sir—to begin, with?"

Mr. Templeton complied. His face became more and more grave. He looked at Mr. Caryll; then at Rotherby, who was scowling, and at her ladyship, who was breathing hard. His glance returned to Mr. Caryll.

"You are the person designated here?" he inquired.

"As I can abundantly prove," said Mr. Caryll. "I have no lack of friends in London who will bear witness to that much."

"Yet," said Mr. Templeton, frowning, perplexed, "this does not make you what you claim to be. Rather does it show you to be his late lordship's—"

"There's more to come," said Mr. Caryll, and placed another document before the secretary. It was an extract from the register of St. Etienne of Maligny, relating to his mother's death.

"Do you know, sir, in what year this lady went through a ceremony of marriage with my father—the late Lord Ostermore? It was in 1690, I think, as the lady will no doubt confirm."

"To what purpose, this?" quoth Mr. Templeton.

"The purpose will be presently apparent. Observe that date," said Mr. Caryll, and he pointed to the document in Mr. Templeton's hand.

Mr. Templeton read the date aloud—"1692"—and then the name of the deceased—"Antoinette de Beaulieu de Maligny. What of it?" he demanded.

"You will understand that when I show you the paper I took from this desk, the paper that I obtained as a consequence of my violence to Mr. Green. I think you will consider, sir, that if ever the end justified the means, it did so in this case. Here was something very different from the paltry matter of treason that is alleged against me."

And he passed the secretary a third paper.

Over Mr. Templeton's shoulder, Rotherby and his mother, who—drawn by the overpowering excitement that was mastering them—had approached in silence, were examining the document with wide-open, startled eyes, fearing by very instinct, without yet apprehending the true nature of the revelation that was to come.

"God!" shrieked her ladyship, who took in the meaning of this thing before Rotherby had begun to suspect it. "'Tis a forgery!"

"That were idle, when the original entry in the register is to be seen in, the Church of St. Antoine, madam," answered Mr. Caryll. "I rescued that document, together with some letters which my mother wrote my father when first he returned to England—and which are superfluous now—from a secret drawer in that desk, an hour ago."

"But what is it?" inquired Rotherby huskily. "What is it?"

"It is the certificate of the marriage of my father, the late Lord Ostermore, and my mother, Antoinette de Maligny, at the Church of St. Antoine in Paris, in the year 1689." He turned to Mr. Templeton. "You apprehend the matter, sir?" he demanded, and recapitulated. "In 1689 they were married; in 1692 she died; yet in 1690 his lordship went through a form of marriage with Mistress Sylvia Etheridge, there."

Mr. Templeton nodded very gravely, his eyes upon the document before him, that they might avoid meeting at that moment the eyes of the woman whom the world had always known as the Countess of Ostermore.

"Fortunate is it for me," said Mr. Caryll, "that I should have possessed myself of these proofs in time. Does it need more to show how urgent might be the need for my suppression—how little faith can be attached to an accusation levelled against me from such a quarter?"

"By God—" began Rotherby, but his mother clutched his wrist.

"Be still, fool!" she hissed in his ear. She had need to keep her wits about her, to think, to weigh each word that she might utter. An abyss had opened in her path; a false step, and she and her son were irrevocably lost—sent headlong to destruction. Rotherby, already reduced to the last stage of fear, was obedient as he had never been, and fell silent instantly.

Mr. Templeton folded the papers, rose, and proffered them to their owner. "Have you any means of proving that this was the document you sought?" he inquired.

"I can prove that it was the document he found." It was Hortensia who spoke; she had advanced to her lover's side, and she controlled her amazement to bear witness for him. "I was present in this room when he went through that desk, as all in the house know; and I can swear to his having found that paper in it."

Mr. Templeton bowed. "My lord," he said to Caryll, "your contentions appear clear. It is a matter in which I fear I can go no further; nor do I now think that the secretary of state would approve of my issuing a warrant upon such testimony as we have received. The matter is one for Lord Carteret himself."

"I shall do myself the honor of waiting upon his lordship within the hour," said the new Lord Ostermore. "As for the letter which it is alleged I brought from France—from the Pretender,"—he was smiling now, a regretful, deprecatory smile, "it is a fortunate circumstance that, being suspected by that very man Green, who stands yonder, I was subjected, upon my arrival in England, to a thorough search at Maidstone—a search, it goes without saying, that yielded nothing. I was angry at the time, at the indignity I was forced to endure. We little know what the future may hold. And to-day I am thankful to have that evidence to rebut this charge."

"Your lordship is indeed to be congratulated," Mr. Templeton agreed. "You are thus in a position to clear yourself of even a shadow of suspicion."

"You fool!" cried she who until that hour had been Countess of Ostermore, turning fiercely upon Mr. Templeton. "You fool!"

"Madam, this is not seemly," cried the second secretary, with awkward dignity.

"Seemly, idiot?" she stormed at him. "I swear, as I've a soul to be saved, that in spite of all this, I know that man to be a traitor and a Jacobite—that it was the letter from the king he sought, whatever he may pretend to have found."

Mr. Templeton looked at her in sorrow, for all that in her overwrought condition she insulted him. "Madam, you might swear and swear, and yet no one would believe you in the face of the facts that have come to light."

"Do you believe me?" she demanded angrily.

"My beliefs can matter nothing," he compromised, and made her a valedictory bow. "Your servant, ma'am," said he, from force of habit. He nodded to Rotherby, took up his hat and cane, and strode to the

door, which Mr. Green had made haste to open for him. From the threshold he bowed to Mr. Caryll. "My lord," said he, "I shall go straight to Lord Carteret. He will stay for you till you come."

"I shall not keep his lordship waiting," answered Caryll, and bowed in his turn.

The second secretary went out. Mr. Green hesitated a moment, then abruptly followed him. The game was ended here; it was played and lost, he saw, and what should such as Mr. Green be doing on the losing side?

CHAPTER XXIII. THE LION

The game was played and lost. All realized it, and none so keenly as Hortensia, who found it in her gentle heart to pity the woman who had never shown her a kindness.

She set a hand upon her lover's arm. "What will you do, Justin?" she inquired in tones that seemed to plead for mercy for those others; for she had not paused to think—as another might have thought—that there was no mercy he could show them.

Rotherby and his mother stood hand in hand; it was the woman who had clutched at her son for comfort and support in this bitter hour of retribution, this hour of the recoil upon themselves of all the evil they had plotted.

Mr. Caryl considered them a moment, his face a mask, his mind entirely detached. They interested him profoundly. This subjugation of two natures that in themselves were arrogant and cruel was a process very engrossing to observe. He tried to conjecture what they felt, what thoughts they might be harboring. And it seemed to him that a sort of paralysis had fallen on their wits. They were stunned under the shock of the blow he had dealt them. Anon there would be railings and to spare—against him, against themselves, against the dead man above stairs, against Fate, and more besides. For the present there was this horrid, almost vacuous calm.

Presently the woman stirred. Instinct—the instinct of the stricken beast to creep to hiding—moved her, while reason was still bound in lethargy. She moved to step, drawing at her son's hand. "Come, Charles," she said, in a low, hoarse voice. "Come!"

The touch and the speech awakened him to life. "No!" he cried harshly, and shook his hand free of hers. "It ends not thus."

He looked almost as he would fling himself upon his brother, his figure erect now, defiant and menacing; his face ashen, his eyes wild. "It ends not thus!" he repeated, and his voice rang sinister.

"No," Mr. Caryll agreed quietly. "It ends not thus."

He looked sadly from son to mother. "It had not even begun thus, but that you would have it so. You would have it. I sought to move you to mercy. I reminded you, my brother, of the tie that bound us, and I would have turned you from fratricide, I would have saved you from the crime you meditated—for it was a crime."

"Fratricide!" exclaimed Rotherby, and laughed angrily. "Fratricide!" It was as if he threatened it.

But Mr. Caryll continued to regard him sorrowfully. From his soul he pitied him; pitied them both—not because of their condition, but because of the soullessness behind it all. To him it was truly tragic, tragic beyond anything that he had ever known.

"You said some fine things, sir, to Mr. Templeton of your regard for your father's memory," said Mr. Caryll. "You expressed some lofty sentiments of filial piety, which almost sounded true—which sounded true, indeed, to Mr. Templeton. It was out of interest for your father that you pleaded for the suppression of his dealings with the South Sea Company; not for a moment did you consider yourself or the profit you should make from such suppression."

"Why this?" demanded the mother fiercely. "Do you rally us? Do you turn the sword in the wound now that you have us at your mercy—now that we are fallen?"

"From what are you fallen?" Mr. Caryll inquired. "Ah, but let that

pass. I do not rally, madam. Mockery is far indeed from my intention." He turned again to Rotherby. "Lord Ostermore was a father to you, which he never was to me—knew not that he was. The sentiments you so beautifully expressed to Mr. Templeton are the sentiments that actuate me now, though I shall make no attempt to express them. It is not that my heart stirs much where my Lord Ostermore is concerned. And yet, for the sake of the name that is mine now, I shall leave England as I came—Mr. Justin Caryl, neither more nor less.

"In the eyes of the world there is no slur upon my mother's name, because her history—her supposed history—was unknown. See that none ever falls on it, else shall you find me pitiless indeed. See that none ever falls on it, or I shall return and drive home the lesson that, like Antinous, you've learnt—that 'twixt the cup and lip much ill may grow'—and turn you, naked upon a contemptuous world. Needs more be said? You understand, I think."

Rotherby understood nothing. But his mother's keener wits began to perceive a glimmer of the truth. "Do you mean that—that we are to—to remain in the station that we believed our own?"

"What else?"

She stared at him. Here was a generosity so weak, it seemed to her, as almost to provoke her scorn. "You will leave your brother in possession of the title and what else there may be?"

"You think me generous, madam," said he. "Do not misapprehend me. I am not. I covet neither the title nor estates of Ostermore. Their possession would be a thorn in my flesh, a thorn of bitter memory. That is one reason why you should not think me generous, though it is not the reason why I cede them. I would have you understand me on this, perhaps the last time, that we may meet.

"Lord Ostermore, my father, married you, madam, in good faith."

She interrupted harshly. "What is't you say?" she almost screamed, quivering with rage at the very thought of what her dead lord had done.

"He married you in good faith," Mr. Caryll repeated quietly, impressively. "I will make it plain to you. He married you believing that the girl-wife he had left in France was dead. For fear it should come to his father's knowledge, he kept that marriage secret from all. He durst not own his marriage to his father."

"He was not—as you may have appreciated in the years you lived with him—a man of any profound feeling for others. For himself he had a prodigiously profound feeling, as you may also have gathered. That marriage in France was troublesome. He had come to look upon it as one of his youth's follies—as he, himself, described it to me in this house, little knowing to whom he spoke. When he received the false news of her death—for he did receive such news from the very cousin who crossed from France to avenge her, believing her dead himself—he rejoiced at his near escape from the consequences of his folly. Nor was he ever disabused of his error. For she had ceased to write to him by then. And so he married you, madam, in good faith. That is the argument I shall use with my Lord Carteret to make him understand that respect for my father's memory urges me to depart in silence—save for what I must have said to escape the impeachment with which you threatened me."

"Lord Carteret is a man of the world. He will understand the far-reaching disturbance that must result from the disclosure of the truth of this affair. He will pledge Mr. Templeton to silence, and the truth, madam, will never be disclosed. That, I think, is all, madam."

"By God, sir," cried Rotherby, "that's damned handsome of you!"

"You epitomize it beautifully," said Mr. Caryll, with a reversion to his habitual manner.

His mother, however, had no words at all. She advanced a step towards Mr. Caryl, put out her hands, and then—portent of portents!—two tears were seen to trickle down her cheeks, playing havoc, ploughing furrows in the paint that overlaid them.

Mr. Caryl stepped forward quickly. The sight of those tears, springing from that dried-up heart—withered by God alone knew what blight—washing their way down those poor bedaubed cheeks, moved him to a keener pity than anything he had ever looked upon. He took her hands, and pressed them a moment, giving way for once to an impulse he could not master.

She would have kissed his own in the abasement and gratitude of the moment. But he restrained her.

"No more, your ladyship," said he, and by thus giving her once more the title she had worn, he seemed to reinstate her in the station from which in self-defence he had pulled her down. "Promise that you'll bear no witness against me should so much be needed, and I'll cry quits with you. Without your testimony, they cannot hurt me, even though they were disposed to do so, which is scarcely likely."

"Sir—sir—" she faltered brokenly. "Could you—could you suppose —"

"Indeed, no. So no more, ma'am. You do but harass yourself. Fare you well, my lady. If I may trespass for a few moments longer upon the hospitality of Stretton House, I'll be your debtor."

"The house—and all—is yours, sir," she reminded him.

"There's but one thing in it that I'll carry off with me," said he. He held the door for her.

She looked into his face a moment. "God keep you!" said she, with a surprising fervor in one not over-fluent at her prayers. "God reward

you for showing this mercy to an old woman—who does not deserve so much."

"Fare you well, madam," he said again, bowing gravely. "And fare you well, Lord Ostermore," he added to her son.

His brother looked at him a moment; seemed on the point of speaking, and then—taking his cue, no doubt, from his mother's attitude—he held out his hand.

Mr. Caryll took it, shook it, and let it go. After all, he bethought him, the man was his brother. And if his bearing was not altogether cordial, it was, at least, a clement imitation of cordiality.

He closed the door upon them, and sighed supreme relief. He turned to face Hortensia, and a smile broke like sunshine upon his face, and dispelled the serious gloom of his expression. She sprang towards him.

"Come now, thou chattel, that I am resolved to carry with me from my father's house," said he.

She checked in her approach. "'Tis not in such words that I'll be wooed," said she.

"A fig for words!" he cried. "Art wooed and won. Confess it."

"You want nothing for self-esteem," she informed him gravely.

"One thing, Hortensia," he amended. "One thing I want—I lack—to esteem myself greater than any king that rules."

"I like that better," she laughed, and suddenly she was in tears. "Oh, why do you mock, and make-believe that your heart is on your lips and nowhere else?" she asked him. "Is it your aim to be accounted trifling and shallow—you who can do such things as you have done but now? Oh, it was noble! You made me very proud."

"Proud?" he echoed. "Ah! Then it must be that you are resolved to take this impudent, fleeing coxcomb for a husband," he said, rallying her with the words she had flung at him that night in the moonlit Croydon garden.

"How I was mistook in you!" quoth she.

He made philosophy. "'Tis ever those in whom we are mistook that are best worth knowing," he informed her. "The man or woman whom you can read at sight, is read and done with."

"Yet you were not mistook in me," said she.

"I was," he answered, "for I deemed you woman."

"What other have you found me?" she inquired.

He flung wide his arms, and bade her into them. "Here to my heart," he cried, "and in your ear I'll whisper it."

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